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Opening extract from **Vampirates – Black Heart**

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The Story So Far . . .

The story begins in the year 2505. Sea-levels have risen. Whoever controls the oceans rules the world. The seas teem with pirate ships and other, more mysterious, vessels . . .

Twins Connor and Grace Tempest have grown up with their dad, Dexter Tempest, in Crescent Moon Bay, where their father is a lighthouse keeper. Neither Connor nor Grace ever met their mother and know next to nothing about her.

When Dexter dies suddenly, the twins decide to make a new life for themselves, and sail away in their dad's old boat. They don't get very far, however, before a sudden storm strikes, throwing them overboard to fight for their lives in the cold, dark water.

But Connor and Grace are each saved – rescued by different ships, with very different crews . . .

Connor is rescued by Cheng Li – deputy captain of *The Diablo*, one of the more notorious pirate ships. Its captain is the legendary Molucco Wrathe, the oldest of three brothers who form a charismatic and powerful, but unruly, pirate dynasty. Connor joins Molucco's crew and embraces a life of piracy, marking himself out as something of a prodigy on

account of his strength, bravery and exceptional swordfighting. He grows especially close to crew-members Bart Pearce and Jez Stukeley, forming a trio affectionately known as "The Three Buccaneers".

Grace regains consciousness on board *The Nocturne* – a ship of vampire pirates (or Vampirates) which has been sailing through all eternity, largely undetected. For the early part of her stay, Grace is unsure whether she is a guest, a prisoner or a convenient parcel of blood for the crew.

Grace's dad used to sing her a shanty about the Vampirates, depicting them as "the demons of the ocean". Contrary to her expectations, though, for the most part the crew are well-disposed towards her. In particular, she forms friendships with Midshipman Lorcan Furey – the handsome Irish lad who rescued her – Darcy Flotsam – the ship's figurehead by day, who comes alive at night – and the mysterious captain, whose face is always hidden behind a mesh mask and who speaks in a strange whisper.

The Vampirates on board *The Nocturne* do not wantonly attack their victims but rather have a weekly Feast, during which each vampire feeds on the blood of their partner or "donor". But there is growing discontent among the Vampirate ranks about this system, and Lieutenant Sidorio is the first to rebel, resulting in his expulsion from *The Nocturne.*

Grace and Connor are briefly reunited but, though delighted to know that their twin is safe, new friendships and loyalties pull them in differing directions. Connor's life on board *The Diablo* takes a darker turn when Jez is killed in a duel, making Connor start to question Captain Wrathe's judgement, and his articles which he has signed up to for life. Meanwhile, Grace is drawn back into the world of the Vampirates and discovers to her horror that Lorcan has been blinded – and it may be her fault.

Sidorio is busy forging alliances and tempting Vampirates away from *The Nocturne*. His first recruit is Jez Stukeley, whom Sidorio sires to become his Vampirate lieutenant. Other rebels join their small but vicious band and together they carry out the brutal massacre of Porfirio Wrathe (younger brother of Molucco) and his pirate crew. This despicable act prompts revenge from the pirates, in an attack led by Molucco and Connor. They succeed in destroying several of the Vampirates, but both Sidorio and Stukeley return to fight another day.

Captain Barbarro Wrathe arrives to patch up a long-standing rift with Molucco, and to avenge the murder of Porfirio. Barbarro, captain of *The Typhon*, is accompanied by his wife (and deputy) Trofie – who has one hand made entirely of gold – and their teenage son, Moonshine, who holds a grudge against Connor after a previous run-in.

Grace journeys to Sanctuary – a place of healing for troubled Vampirates – with Lorcan, his donor Shanti and the Vampirate captain. They hope that Vampirate guru Mosh Zu Kamal will be able to cure Lorcan's blindness and advise the captain on the divisions emerging within the Vampirate realm. As Lorcan undergoes healing, Grace forms a new friendship with cowboy Vampirate, Johnny Desperado, who is also being treated at Sanctuary.

Molucco plans the mother of all pirate raids with Barbarro, but his nephew Moonshine endangers its success and forces Connor to make his first kill in order to save the boy. The killing shocks Connor to the core and he starts to question his allegiance to Molucco and his suitability as a pirate. He leaves the ship and heads off into the unknown, ultimately seeking out his former comrade Cheng Li, now teaching at Pirate Academy. She is preparing to become captain of her own ship and Connor decides to join her crew, if Molucco will consent. To his

surprise, Molucco agrees, burning Connor's articles and dismissing the lad he once thought of as a son.

Sidorio's ambitions increase and he lures more vampirates from both *The Nocturne* and Sanctuary, including Grace's friend, Johnny. As more of the *The Nocturne*'s crew depart to join Sidorio's rebellion, the once invincible Vampirate captain collapses.

Grace and Connor assist Mosh Zu in a healing ceremony in which, at last, the captain's mask is removed. During the healing catharsis, a succession of souls rise from the captain's body. One of them is strangely familiar. It is the twins' mother, Sally, whom they have never met . . . until now.

READ ON FOR THE NEXT UNFORGETTABLE INSTALMENT IN THE VOYAGE OF THE TEMPEST TWINS!

For a more detailed version of "the story so far" go to www.vampirates.co.uk.

The middle of the ocean.
The year 2512.

CHAPTER ONE

Intruders in the Fortress

It was a calm, clear night. *The Typhon* charted its course through the ocean, sleek and confident as a killer whale. On deck, the pirates of the night watch performed their duties with time-honoured precision. Below deck, their crewmates variously rested, ate, relaxed and prepared for the business of the next day. *The Typhon* was a well-oiled machine: from the crow's nest to the galley; from the lowliest of pirate apprentices to the captain and his deputy.

In one of the smaller – but nevertheless grand – state rooms two levels below the main deck, four people sat around a circular table. The table was covered with a red silk cloth, from which arose a structure resembling the four walls of a fortress. Each wall was composed of small tiles – half wood, half bone – stacked tightly together. But evidently this miniature fortress was not impenetrable. The walls had been ravaged. Some of the tiles had made their way onto racks placed in front of each wall while other tiles lay bone side up on the table, revealing an array of intricate coloured symbols.

"Well," said Trofie Wrathe, a golden finger tapping the wooden rack in front of her. "This is fun, isn't it?"

Opposite her, her husband, Captain Barbarro Wrathe, was silent.

"Oh yeah, big fun!" grunted Moonshine, their son, positioned to Trofie's right.

"I think it's a marvellous game," said the elderly man on Trofie's other side.

Trofie nodded encouragingly. "Thank you, Transom. I believe it's your turn now."

"Is it?" The Wrathes' trusty *majordomo* seemed confused for a moment. Then he reached forward and, with quivering fingers, removed a tile from the wall. Turning the bone side towards him, he drew it up to his eyes to examine the symbol more closely.

Moonshine sighed loudly. "Get a move on, *Grandpa*!" he hissed.

His father gave him a stern look.

"Well, really!" the boy persisted.

"Moonshine . . ." said Barbarro Wrathe, his resonant voice loaded with warning.

Transom dropped the tile onto his rack and, with a sudden burst of energy, began shuffling the other tiles around as if he was performing an elaborate conjuring trick.

"Remind me," Moonshine piped up again. "Why *exactly* are we torturing ourselves in this particularly grim fashion?"

Barbarro sighed, shook his head, and lifted a glass of honey-coloured liquid to his lips.

Trofie smiled pleasantly. "Tuesday night is family night, *min elskling*. It was my idea, as you well know. I don't feel we've been spending enough time together." There was steel in her voice as she continued. "That's all going to change now."

In response, Moonshine rolled his eyes exaggeratedly.

Trofie glared first at her son and then at her husband. "Will *you* say something to your son?"

Barbarro shrugged. "Maybe he has a point. *He's* not enjoying this. *I'm* certainly not enjoying this and I can't believe that you—"

"I'm having a wonderful time," Trofie said, a wide grin immediately appearing on her face. "And so is Transom . . ."

The *majordomo* was still rearranging the tiles on his rack. As he did so, his face went through a series of contortions. Suddenly, his fingers ceased their miniature ballet. He looked up and gave a little smile.

"Mahjong!" he exclaimed, flipping forward his rack to reveal neat sets of different suits of tiles.

"Bravo!" cried Trofie, clapping her hands together. She did not make much sound since one of her hands was crafted from gold, the other of regular flesh – but her delight was plain to see. "Well played, Transom!" she said. "I think you're getting the hang of this." She glanced around the room. "Well now, shall we set up for another game?"

"No!" boomed Barbarro and Moonshine in unison. For once, they had found something to agree upon.

"All right," said Trofie, clearly deflated. "What *shall* we do next?"

"You tell us, Mum," said Moonshine. "Family night is your gig."

"If I might be so bold," Transom began, "I could have Cook prepare a light repast for you?"

"Yes," said Trofie, nodding. "That would be lovely. Perhaps some gravadlax, with cloudberries and cream to follow?"

"Very good, madam," said the ancient retainer, rising to his feet and heading towards the door.

After Transom had left, Barbarro rose and lifted a decanter, refilling first Trofie's glass then his own.

"Share the wealth, eh, Dad?" Moonshine said, grinning as he reached out for a glass.

Barbarro shook his head and put the cut-glass stopper back in the decanter.

"But it's *family* night!" Moonshine persisted. "The one night of the week where we share and share alike."

"Don't push it any further than you already have, my boy," said his father, sitting back down again. He reached for his wife's hand and tentatively caressed the golden fingers with their ruby nails. "We've given this a good go, Trofie, but what's the use in kidding ourselves? I could really do with going over those charts again. Would you mind . . ."

"Yes," said Trofie, abruptly withdrawing her hand. "Yes, *min elskling*, I would mind very much. No one is leaving this room. We're going to spend quality time as a family if it kills us." She folded her arms defiantly.

Barbarro grunted. Moonshine mimed stabbing himself in the heart and slumped, fake-dead, on his chair. And that's how they sat – in complete, suffocating, silence – until there was a knock at the door.

The relief in the room was audible. "Come in, Transom," called Trofie.

The door opened and a vast domed silver tray came into view.

"I thought you said a 'light snack'," Trofie laughed. But the smile froze on her lips as she saw that it wasn't Transom who had brought in the tray. It was carried by a tall figure, dressed in a dark cloak and hood.

"Who are you? What's going on?" Barbarro exclaimed, as the figure set the tray down on the table. Two further cloaked figures came into the cabin. They closed the door and stood like sentries on either side of it.

"I asked you a question," Barbarro boomed. "Who are you?"

In answer, the first figure threw back her hood, shook out her long dark hair and smiled at the three Wrathes. She was a strikingly beautiful woman with wide brown eyes, and razor-

sharp cheekbones. A centimetre to the side of her plump lips was a delicate beauty spot. Around her left eye was make-up – or perhaps a tattoo – in the shape of a black heart.

"Is it necessary that I ask you a third time . . ." Barbarro began.

At last the stranger spoke. "We're from the Oceanic League for the Defence of Elderly Retainers, O.L.D.E.R.," she said, in a clipped English accent. "It's high time you hired some younger staff, isn't that right ladies?"

Her two companions smiled enigmatically as they pushed back their own hoods. These two were younger women, both as strikingly beautiful as their mistress. Like her, they each had a black heart-shape inked around their eyes, though in their case it was on their right side.

"Seriously, who are you?" Barbarro persisted. "No one comes aboard *The Typhon* without invitation."

"Is that so?" said the stranger. "Well, I've never been the kind of girl to wait for an invitation. The kind of girl who stays home and pines for the phone to ring." She laughed. "Not my style. I mark my own dance-card, so to speak."

Moonshine grinned. There was something decidedly cool about this woman. And though she called herself a girl, from where he was standing, she was all woman. Her two companions were just as gorgeous. Whoever they were – whatever their business – they had certainly saved family night from being a complete wash-out.

"Well," said the stranger, "it's quite an honour to make the acquaintance of the great Wrathe family at last."

"You have us at a disadvantage," said Trofie, polite but steely. "You know who *we* are but we still have no clue as to your identity."

The woman removed her gloves to reveal long, delicate fingers, each sharp nail painted black. "My name," she said, her

clipped accent somehow reminiscent of cut glass, "is Lady Lola Lockwood. And these are my crewmates, Marianne and Angelika."

"Crewmates?" said Trofie. "So you come from another ship?"

"Yes," nodded Lady Lockwood. "Not one as grand as *The Typhon*, I'll be the first to admit, but we call it home, don't we, ladies?"

Marianne and Angelika nodded. Their smiles gave little away.

Trofie moved across the room towards Lady Lockwood, her eyes never leaving the stranger. "I don't believe I've heard of you," she said with some finality.

"That doesn't surprise me," replied Lady Lockwood. "I'm a vagabond, you see. Born of high birth, some would say. Oh yes, the silver spoon was very firmly planted in my mouth . . . But really that was an awfully long time ago and it has little bearing on what I am now and how I choose to pass my time."

"Which is?" Trofie countered. Now the two women stood face to face, as if looking in a mirror, though one which utterly distorted its reflection. The women were of similar height and, each in their own way, beautiful. But Lady Lockwood was as dark as Trofie Wrathe was icily blonde.

"I'm a collector," said Lady Lockwood, her dark eyes fixed on Trofie's. "I like to acquire pretty things: jewels, *objets d'art*, rare and valuable things."

"So, in fact, you're a pirate?" persisted Trofie. "Like us?"

Lady Lockwood exchanged an amused glance with each of her comrades. "A pirate," she said. "Well, yes. That's part of it."

"Get to the point," said Barbarro, growing impatient. "It's been a long night already and I don't have the appetite for any further games."

Lady Lockwood gave a dismissive laugh. "Spoilsport," she said. "I've always rather enjoyed games. That's what comes of being an only daughter of the aristocracy, locked up in a

damp, crumbling castle for days on end with no taste for tapestry—"

"I mean it," Barbarro said. "Get to the point or *I* will." With that, he drew his rapier and extended it menacingly towards her.

"Oh dear," said Lady Lockwood, a little sadly. "And I had so hoped we were going to be friends."

She laughed once more, glancing at Marianne and Angelika. Her two colleagues joined in, as if the three of them were sharing a private joke. Their laughter grew deeper and deeper, mutating from an expression of pleasure into a darker, more predatory sound. It was then that Moonshine Wrathe noticed the curiously long, and dangerously sharp, canine teeth protruding from each of their pretty mouths.

"Are you . . .?" he asked huskily, his voice disappearing before he finished the question. "Are you . . .?" Once more words failed him.

"Are we thirsty?" asked Lady Lockwood, smiling at him pleasantly. "Yes, my darling boy, we are very, *very* thirsty. Now, what can you offer us in the way of a drink?"

Chapter Two

Flesh and Blood

"How long do you think they'll keep us waiting?"

Grace smiled at her brother. "My answer hasn't changed from the last time you asked me, three minutes ago. I just don't know."

Connor found the ante-room intensely claustrophobic. It was alien to him being in a room with no windows. Even the smallest cabins on board *The Diablo* had sported a porthole or two, giving you some glimpse of the world outside. The best this room could offer was a painting; the large, square canvas positioned as if to simulate a casement.

The whole of the Sanctuary compound induced feelings of claustrophia in Connor. He thought of the succession of winding corridors which marked the start of your journey underground. First the Corridor of Lights with its sickly-sweet smelling butter lamps. Then the Corridor of Discards or, as Connor had renamed it, of Junk. The walls of this corridor were lined with shelves, barely visible beneath their loads of bric-a-brac. They gave off an old, musty smell. Grace had informed him that these artefacts belonged to Vampirates who came to Sanctuary for healing. This thought made little sense to him.

Surely you either were a vampire or you weren't? And, if you *were*, there was no way to be healed.

The third corridor was the Corridor of Ribbons and as you walked along it, multicoloured strands of cloth brushed your hair and eyes. Grace had told him, rather breathlessly, that the ribbons were incredibly powerful, that they contained the emotions of the inmates here. But to Connor, they were just old, faded bits of cloth which, hanging in such close proximity to the lights, seemed something of a fire hazard.

It was strange, he thought, how he and his twin sister viewed the world so differently these days. He turned to look at her, lost in her own thoughts. She was sitting on the room's one chair. In time gone by, she would have curled her body into it like a little dormouse, her legs dangling over the side. Now, she sat with her back straight, feet on the floor and hands gently resting on her knees. Connor realised that he had left a girl at Pirate Academy and returned to find a young woman at Sanctuary. It hadn't been that long since he and Grace had last been together but experience was changing her, just as it was changing him. They were both growing up. But were they also growing apart?

Connor knew that whilst this place made him feel almost physically sick and aching to get back to the open ocean and fresh sea air, Grace seemed utterly at home here, amongst the Vampirates, their donors (the very idea of which made him decidedly nauseous) and their counsellors.

Grace suddenly looked up, evidently realising that he had been staring at her.

She gazed at him enquiringly. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

Deciding not to share the full range of his thoughts with her, he asked instead, "How can you be so calm, so patient?"

Grace shrugged, settling deeper into the chair. "Maybe I'm just enjoying having my brother back. It's been quite a while."

At this, Connor sat down on the arm of the chair and reached out his hand to her. "It's good to see you too, Grace. Not just good . . . well, I don't have to say it, do I?"

"No," she smiled, squeezing his hand. "You don't have to say anything."

"This takes me back," Connor said. "Back to when we were kids in the lighthouse."

"It was only a few months ago," said Grace. "But it feels a lifetime away, doesn't it?"

He nodded. "Sometimes . . . I wonder . . . Do you ever just feel like you want to go back? Back home?"

"I do think about going back," she said. "At least, I think about the life we had there. You, and me, and Dad. But even though it was only a few months ago, it feels like a dream. If we went back now, it wouldn't be the same. Dad wouldn't be there. The lighthouse would belong to someone else." She shivered. "To Lachlan Busby or whoever he decided to sell it on to. There might even be a new lighthouse keeper and his or her family. I don't think I could bear to see that. Could you? It would be as if we were ghosts."

Connor's eyes narrowed with pain. "No, I suppose not. And I know what you mean. The life we had before we were shipwrecked does seem like a dream, doesn't it? But it wasn't. It was real. It was our home. These days, I don't know where home is." He shook his head. "I thought that *The Diablo* could be my new home. I suppose I wanted it to be – and Molucco Wrathe to be some kind of father figure. But I was kidding myself."

"You have good friends there, though," Grace said. "Bart and Cate. Others too. I know you're angry with Molucco at the way he treated you, but maybe that *is* where you're meant to be."

"I didn't expect to hear you say that! Molucco Wrathe was never your favourite person."

"No," Grace agreed. The swaggering pirate captain had always been rather too smug and self-satisfied for her liking. "But what's right for you isn't necessarily right for me," she acknowledged now. "We're twins but we're different people."

"So we can never be together? Is that what you're saying?"

Grace shook her head. "I don't know. I wish I did. There's no one I feel closer to than you, Connor. But I never felt comfortable on *The Diablo*. And I know you could never feel at home aboard *The Nocturne* . . . or here at Sanctuary."

"But you do feel at home? On that ship of Vampirates and here?"

She shrugged. "Not at home exactly, but as though I'm meant to be here. I'm meant to be with them."

Connor's eyes widened at that.

"I know," she said, squeezing his hand again. "It's hard to understand."

He shrugged. "I don't see why it should be. After all, our mother is here, isn't she? She was on board the ship and then she came here, travelling within the captain's body somehow. It sounds weird when you try to put it into words, but I saw it . . . saw her . . . with my own eyes."

"Yes," Grace said, her own eyes bright with the image of their mother, sitting up and smiling at her. Her beautiful mother, with her emerald-green eyes and long auburn hair, opening her arms and drawing the twins into a hug.

"She was just as I always knew she would be," Grace said. "Just like in my dreams."

Connor leaned over to rest his head against Grace's. "Maybe that's all this is. Everything you and I have been through since the shipwreck. A dream, one we're dreaming together."

Grace smiled and snuggled in closer to her brother. Shutting her eyes, she allowed herself to retreat into her memories of happy times back in the lighthouse. But it wasn't long before

her restless mind threw up a fresh thought. "How did you find the climb up the mountain last night?"

"What? Oh, that. Nothing to it," Connor said. "A bit of a hike, but you know me. Super-fit and all that. Besides, there was a full moon. It was almost like daylight out there." He turned towards her. "Why do you ask?"

"*We* had the most arduous journey up here," she said. "The captain, Lorcan, Shanti and I. It was so dark and of course we had to lead Lorcan because he couldn't see then. Shanti lost her footing and almost fell. And just when we thought it couldn't get any worse, it began to snow. The path was so steep. Didn't you think so?"

Connor shook his head. "It was like a country road. Maybe you took a different route. It's funny though, I only ever saw one path at the foot of the rock."

"Yes," Grace agreed. "Yes, but it must be like Olivier told me once. That the mountain changes. That everyone makes a different way up here."

"Who's Olivier?" Connor asked.

Grace paused, remembering Mosh Zu's former lieutenant. He had been by turns indulgent and irritated with her: his moods as changeable as the weather. And he had betrayed his master, thinking that Sidorio would give him promotion, only to find himself betrayed and rejected by the renegade Vampirate in turn. "He was no one you need to know about," she said, at last. "He's gone now."

Connor slipped off the chair and drew himself to his feet once more. "How much longer do you think we'll have to wait? We only just got to say hello to her and then they took her away."

"They have to be careful," Grace answered. "She was one of the lost souls travelling with the captain. You saw how fragile they were, how bewildered at being set free."

"*Is* she our mother, Grace, or some kind of ghost?" He looked to his sister but she didn't have any answers for him. "She reached out her arms to us. She kissed us. I didn't imagine it, did I? She was as much flesh and blood as you or I."

Grace stood up and went over to him. "I don't have any answers for you, Connor. I wish I did. All I know is that Mosh Zu will do what is best. Until then, we just have to wait."

"I'm not very good at waiting," Connor said, starting to pace once more.

"We've waited for her for fourteen years," Grace said. "What's a few more hours?"

Connor smiled. "I guess when you put it like that . . ."

As he spoke, there was a knock at the door. It opened and Mosh Zu's assistant, Dani, poked her head around it. As usual, her face was impossible to read.

"Mosh Zu asks you to join him in his meditation room," she said.

"Is our mother with him?" Connor asked. "Is she all right?"

Perhaps Dani didn't hear his question. She had already begun walking briskly along the corridor.

"She'd tell us, wouldn't she?" Connor turned to Grace. "If something was wrong, they'd tell us, right?"

Grace could hear the rising panic in her brother's voice. "Come on," she said, reaching out her hand for his.

Grace felt her own heart beginning to race. She was every bit as anxious as Connor at the thought of what lay ahead.