Hi everybody, I'm Chloe Neill. I'm the author of the Chicagoland Vampires novels, the Dark Elite novels, Devil’s Isle novels, Heirs of Chicagoland, and, coming November 17th, the first Captain Kit Brightling novel, *The Bright & Breaking Sea*. So I'm going to read a little bit of that to you today. We're going to skip the prologue and go directly into Chapter One.

So this starts in 1815, in an alternate London. This is kind of like *Pride and Prejudice* with magic, a little *Pirates of the Caribbean* flair.

There was a ribbon pinned to her coat, and a dagger in her hand. And as Captain Kit Brightling stared down at the little wooden box, there was a gleam in her gray eyes.

Two months of searching between the Saxon Isles and the Continent. Two months of sailing, of storms and sun, of crazed activity and mind-dulling monotony.

They hadn't been sure what they'd find when the *Diana* set sail from New London—the seat of the Isles’ crown, named for the city rebuilt after the Great Fire’s destruction—only that they'd almost certainly find something. It had been nearly a year since the Gallic emperor Gerard Rousseau was exiled to Montgraf, since the end of the war that had spread death across the Continent like a dark plague. Gerard had finally been beaten back, his surrender and abdication just outside the Gallic capital city, Saint-Denis. The island nation of Montgraf, off the coast of Gallia, was now his prison, and a king had been installed in Gallia again.

There were reports of Gerard’s growing boredom and irritation with his exile, with the inadequacies of the island he’d been exiled to, with the failures of his replacement. There were rumors of plans, of the gathering of ships and soldiers, of missives sent across the water. Queen Charlotte had bid Kit, the only captain in the Queen’s Own Guards, to find those missives.

They'd patrolled the Narrow Sea that separated the Isles from the Continent, visiting grungy ports and gleaming cities, trading for information, or spreading coin through portside taverns when tipple loosened more tongues. Then they'd found the grimy little packet ship twenty miles off the coast, not far from Pencester. And in the captain’s stingy quarters, in a drawer cleverly concealed in his bunk, they'd found the lovely little box.

She couldn’t fault its design. Honey-colored wood, carefully hewn iron, and brass corners that gleamed even in the pale light of dawn. It was intended to hold secrets. And given its
lock—a rather lovely contraption of copper and iron gears—hadn’t yet been triggered, it still did.

Secrets, Kit thought ruefully, were the currency of both war and peace.

“You can’t touch that.”

That declaration came from the sailor in the corner.

“I believe I can,” Kit said, sliding the dagger into her belt and lifting the box from the drawer. She placed it on the desk that folded down from the worm-holed bulkhead, then glanced up. “It now belongs to Queen Charlotte.”

“It already did,” sneered the man, his teeth the same yellowed shade as his grimy shirt. His trousers were darker; the cap, which narrowed to a point that flopped over one eye, was the sickly green of week-old bread. “I’m from the Isles, same as you, and I’m to deliver that to her. You saw the flag.”

“The flag was false,” said the lanky man’s captor. Jin Takamura was tall and elegantly built, with a sweep of long dark hair pulled back at the crown. His skin was tan, his eyes dark as obsidian in an oval face marked by his narrow nose and rounded cheekbones. And his gleaming sabre was drawn and currently at the neck of the grungy sailor.

Kit thought Jin, second in command of the Diana, complimented her perfectly—his patience and canny contemplation, matched against her desire to go, to see, to do. There was no one she trusted more.

“You’ve no papers, no letters of marque,” Jin said, looking over the sailor’s dingy clothes. “And certainly no uniforms.”

“You aren’t from the Isles,” Kit concluded, “any more than this box is.” She walked toward the pair, smelling the sweat and fish and unwashed body emanating from the smuggler three feet away. Baffling, since water, salty or not, was readily available.

Kit was slender and pale-skinned, with dark hair chopped to skim the edge of her chin. Her eyes were wide and gray, her nose straight, her lips full. She clasped her hands behind her back when she reached the two men, and cocked her head. “Would you like to tell us from whom you obtained it, and to whom it will be delivered?”

“It’s for the queen,” he said again. “A private gift of some . . . unmentionables. A fine lady like you shouldn’t have to deal with that sort of thing.”

Kit’s brows lifted, and she glanced at Jin. “The queen’s unmentionables, he says. And me a fine lady.”

“Maybe we should let him return to his business,” Jin said, gaze falling to the box, heavy and full of secrets. “And avoid the impropriety.”
“Best you do,” the sailor said with a confident bob of his chin. “Don’t want no impro—whatever here.”

“Unfortunately,” Kit said, “we’re well aware that’s nonsense. You’re smugglers, running the very nice Gallic brandy in your hold, not to mention this very pretty box. But because I’m a pleasant sort, I’m going to give you one last opportunity to tell us the truth. Where did you get the box?”

“Unmentionables,” he said again. “And you don’t scare me. Trussed up in fancy duds or not, you’re still a girl.”

At four-and-twenty years, Kit was more woman than girl, but she was still one of the youngest captains in the Crown Command—the Saxon Isles’ military—and there were plenty who’d thought her too young or too female to hold her position. But she’d earned her rank on the water. At San Miguel, by finding deep magic, and reaching for the current just long enough to give her ship the gauge against a larger squadron of Frisian ships—and capture gold and munitions that Queen Charlotte was very pleased to add to her own armory. At Pointe Grise, she’d helped her captain avoid an attack by a larger Gallic privateer, and they’d captured the privateer’s ship and the coded dispatches it was carrying to Saint-Denis. At Faulkney, as a young commander, she’d found a disturbance in the current of magic, and led her own squadron to a trio of Gallic ships led by an Aligned captain that had made it through the Isles’ blockade and was racing toward Pencester to attack. Kit’s ship successfully turned back the invasion.

“Am I a trussed-up girl or fine lady?” Kit asked. “You can’t seem to make up your mind.” She glanced down at the trim navy jacket with its gold braid and long tails, the gleaming black boots that rose to her knees over buff trousers. “Personally, I enjoy the uniform. I find it affords a certain . . . authority.” She glanced at Jin, who nodded, his features drawn into utter seriousness.

“Oh, absolutely, Captain,” said Jin, whose uniform was in the same style. “Should I just slit his neck here, or haul him up with the others? August said the dragons are swarming again. Sampson is strong enough to throw him over.”

Sampson, another of Kit’s crew, nearly filled the doorway with muscles and strength. He smiled, nodded.

That was enough to prompt a response. “I’ve got information,” the smuggler said, words tumbling out.

“About what?” Kit asked. “Because I don’t want to hear any further details about the queen’s unmentionables.”

“Gods save the queen,” Jin said with a smile.

“Gods save the queen,” Kit agreed, then lifted her brows at the smuggler. “Well?”

“I’ve information about . . .” His eyes wheeled between them. “About smuggling?”
That he’d made it a question suggested to Kit he really was as oblivious as he pretended to be.

She sighed, made it as haggard as she could. “You know, while Commander Takamura is quite skilled with that sabre, and the dragons probably are swarming—it’s that time of year,” she added, and Jin nodded his agreement. “Those aren’t the things you should be really and truly worried about.”

The smuggler swallowed hard. “What do you mean?”

Kit leaned forward, until she was close enough that he could see the sincerity in her eyes. “You should be afraid of the water. It’s so dark, and it’s so cold. And sea dragons are hardly the only monsters that hunt in its depths.” She straightened up again, walked a few paces away, and pretended to look over the other furniture in the room. “Being eaten quickly—devoured by a sea dragon—would be a mercy. Because if you survive, and you sink, you’ll go into the darkness.”

She looked back at him. “I’m Aligned, you know. I can feel the sea, the rise and fall, like an echo of my heartbeat. I hear a tune just for you, ready to call you home.” She took a step closer. “Would you like to be called home?”

She wasn’t normally so poetic, or so full of nonsense, but she found getting into character useful in times like this. And it had the man swallowing hard. But he still wasn’t talking.

She glanced up at Jin, got his nod. And then he braced an arm against the hull. Behind him, Sampson did the same. They knew what was coming. Knew what she was capable of.

She had to be careful; there was a line that couldn’t be crossed, a threshold that couldn’t be breached. But before that border, there was power. Potential.

Using her magic, Kit reached out for the current, for the heat and energy, for the ley line that shimmered below them in the waters. She touched it—as carefully as a violinist pressing a string—and the Amelie shuddered around them, oak creaking in the wake.

Her trick wasn’t familiar to the prisoner. “Gods’ preserve us,” he said, stumbling forward, face gone pale. Jin caught him by the collar, kept him upright, and when he gained his footing again, his eyes had gone huge.

“More?” Kit asked pleasantly.

“I don’t know where it came from,” the man blurted out, “and that’s the gods’ truth. I’m in the—I only make the deliveries.”

“You’re a smuggler,” Kit said again, tone flat.

“If we’re not being fine about it, yes. I pick up the goods in Fort de la Mer, and I get a fee for delivering them. I don’t ask what’s in the cargo.”
Fort de la Mer was a Gallic village perched on the edge of Narrow Sea in the thin strait that ran between the Isles and Gallia. It was a busy port for merchants and smugglers alike.

“Delivered to whom?”

“I don’t know.”

Kit cast her glance to the window, to the ocean that swelled outside.