

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN
THE PRICE OF
FREEDOM



A. C. CRISPIN



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by A. C. CRISPIN

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Dedication

This book is dedicated with affection, respect, and gratitude to my longtime friend and fellow writer, Barbara Mertz (Elizabeth Peters).

Barbara's "Amelia Peabody" mysteries taught me to love Egypt and Kush, and it was in her adventure/mystery *The Last Camel Died at Noon* that I first read the legend of Zerzura. Two years ago, when I reread the following lines from the novel, the final pieces of my story fell into place:

"But Zerzura is mentioned in other sources; the name probably derives from the Arabic zarzar, meaning sparrow, so Zerzura is 'the place of the little birds.'" (The speaker is her renowned fictional Egyptologist, Radcliffe Emerson; the emphasis is mine.)

Acknowledgments

Few authors can write a book in a vacuum, and I'm certainly not one of them. *The Price of Freedom* was an ambitious project, three years in the creation and writing. During that time I had a lot of help. With the caveat that any mistakes contained herein are my own, I'd like to thank the following:

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rigging, darn it!). Captain Morgens explained the true meaning of the command “make fast the bunt gaskets!” and made me *promise* to use it correctly in this book. (Which I did, Cap’n!)

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The staff of the National Museum of African Art museum store, who helped me acquire a very hard-to-get book on the archeological dig in the real Kerma, which is located in what is now Sudan.

My friend Mark Fischer, who toured the USS *Constellation* with me, and provided information on eighteenth-century sailing vessels and weaponry.

The reenactors, docents, and staff of Colonial Williamsburg, Jamestown, and Yorktown for information on life in the eighteenth century, as well as letting me actually pick up and aim some period weapons.

For creating the Pirates of the Caribbean universe, I would be remiss if I did not mention Disney Studios, Jerry Bruckheimer, screenwriters Terry Rossio and Ted Elliott, as well as the hundreds of cast and crew members who helped create and film the POTC universe, bringing it all to life so vibrantly. Sometimes it’s fun to play in someone else’s sandbox, and this was a rich, flamboyant, and extremely creative “sandbox.”

Thanks also go to Hans Zimmer, for writing those rousing film scores. I played them a lot to get into the mood to write.

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I had two dedicated and talented Disney Editions editors while I worked on *The Price of Freedom*:

Jody Revenson, whose creative vision realized that POTC fans wanted “more Jack” and oversaw the conception, storyline creation, and initial launch of this “Captain Jack” prequel. Many thanks, Jody.

Jessie Ward, who brought the project to fruition, month by month, chapter by chapter, scene by scene, down and dirty in the trenches. Writers *need* editors, trust me on this! Thank you, Jessie.

Three people who are, sadly, no longer with us helped inspire much of this book: My father, Captain George A. Tickell, who taught me to sail and love the sea.

Lewis Moon, who patiently helped me develop the story and stick to my writing schedule.

Robbie Greenberger (1998–2008), son of my friends Bob and Deb Greenberger. Robbie lost his fight with leukemia in August 2008. He was a wonderful young man, with a mop of golden curls, who loved pirates and Pirates of the Caribbean. He is sorely missed by many.

Brief Historical Note

Readers who are interested in pirates, square-riggers, the early eighteenth century, and ancient Kerma may be interested to know that my instructions in writing this novel were to “stick to historical fact, unless it conflicts with established Pirates of the Caribbean continuity.” I made a faithful effort to do this.

The city of ancient Kerma really existed, located close to the third cataract of the Nile, in the country now called Sudan. The legend of Zorzura is a “real” legend, though the magical island lying off the coast of Western Africa is my own creation.

For the purposes of the story, I also created the island of New Avalon, because I needed an island in that spot, and none of the existing ones were big enough or had the rich soil needed to grow sugarcane.

For information about how real pirates lived, fought, and sailed, I recommend the following books: *The Sea Rover’s Practice* and *The Buccaneer’s Realm*, by Benerson Little, *Under the Black Flag* by David Cordingly, and *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Pirates*, by Gail Selinger with W. Thomas Smith, Jr.

At this point I have a whole shelf of pirate books, but those four were the ones I found myself using the most consistently.

—Ann C. Crispin

Prologue
Zerzura: The Lost City

THE PHARAOH AWOKE WITH THE LIGHT of the full moon shining on his face, knowing that he had just spoken with his god. His god was named Apedemak, and in the temple renderings, he had the body of a man, but the face of the king of beasts. He was the high god of the people of Kerma, Pharaoh Taharka's island kingdom...an island hidden from the outside world behind a barrier of powerful spells, cloaked in fog and illusion, lying off the coast of the continent men now called Africa.

Taharka rose from his bed, his mind filled with the power of Apedemak's words, words delivered to him in a dream so vivid its images still seemed more real than the waking world. In the corner, the slave whose responsibility it was to keep the overhead frond-fan spinning, to draw in the cooler ocean breezes of the night, started in surprise, gazing questioningly at his master. Taharka shook his head at the man, wordlessly waving him back.

Moving quickly, he removed a short kilt from one of clothing chests lining the wall of his bedchamber. Donning the simple garment, the pharaoh belted it around his waist. The white linen of the kilt appeared doubly light against his mahogany skin. Taharka was nearly fifty, yet his body was as strong and muscular as it had been when he was a youth. Ignoring the elaborately beaded and braided wigs sitting on their stands, the pharaoh left his shaven head bare. He finished his abbreviated toilette by sliding his feet into everyday sandals barely trimmed with gold.

The pharaoh left the royal bedchamber, with its walls showing scenes of royal family life. He needed no light-bearer to illumine his path. The moonlight was so strong one could almost discern the vivid colors of the painted images and the lotus-topped columns.

Taharka's sandals made faint swishing sounds against the cool stone floors as he walked slowly down the hall to the first of his children's chambers. There, as he had known he would, he found his queen, Tiyy. She was sitting at the bedside of their youngest son, Prince Aniba, gently stroking his brow and murmuring to him, as the six-year-old prince's nursemaid carefully sponged the child's bared chest with cool water. Taharka winced when he saw the marks of his little son's ribs beneath his skin. The boy had fallen sick with this feverish wasting illness nearly a month ago, and he was clearly losing the battle. Last week, without telling his queen, Taharka had quietly given orders to have a small royal tomb chiseled from the cliffs behind the palace, close to the tombs already carved for himself, his queen, and his two elder children, Prince Shabako and Princess Amenirdis.

As he heard his father's soft step, the child turned his head, and his lips curved upward in a weak smile. "Father," he whispered.

Taharka bent down and kissed his son's cheek, feeling dry heat against his lips. The fever was not high, but it was relentless, and slowly, slowly, it was burning away

the young prince's life. It was not proper for a pharaoh to display despair, or for a father to show fear, so Taharka was careful not to reveal his reaction as he straightened, smiling down at his youngest. "My boy," he said softly. "Did you eat all of the soup your mother prepared with her own hands? You need your strength."

Little Prince Aniba nodded solemnly. "Almost all," he assured his father, with a quick sideways glance at his mother...a look that begged her not to reveal that he lied.

Queen Tiyy smiled lovingly at her son and nodded agreement. "He did very well, husband."

The pharaoh nodded. "Good, good," he said. "Soon you will be well, and we shall go together in my chariot to the royal preserve to see the lions. You shall ride with me, and you may help me drive my horses!"

For a second the child's wan features brightened into a genuine smile, as a flash of the real Prince Aniba showed through the wasted flesh. "Oh, yes, Father!" he said. "You will let me hold the reins? And we can see the lions?"

"You have my word as pharaoh that we will do it as soon as you are strong enough, my son," Taharka said, touching the sacred bracelet that he never removed, the broad golden wristlet that was incised with the stylized head of a lion, symbol of Apedemak and the royal house of Kerma. The pale green gems that traced the lion's head had come from the Heart of Zerzura, the sacred stone lying in the palm of the golden statue of Apedemak that stood far below the earth in the heart of the ancient labyrinth. The chamber at the heart of the labyrinth contained the island's greatest material treasures: gold, gems, and sacred texts detailing the story of their people's journey from their ancient homeland of Kush, millennia ago. But those worldly treasures paled in comparison to the Heart of Zerzura itself. Without the magical powers of the Heart, Kerma would be no more. The gem pulsed with the power imbued in it by the god himself.

Prince Aniba's dark eyes shone in the faint light cast by the oil lamps as he saw his father take this sacred oath. "I cannot wait, Father!"

"Then hurry and get well, my son," Taharka replied. "But to do that, you will need your rest. Can you close your eyes and sleep now?"

The little boy nodded. His eyelids were growing heavy; even the smallest exertion tired him. His parents and the nursemaid watched in silence as the little prince fell asleep.

Taharka glanced at his queen. "We need to talk," he said softly. "Come." Tiyy rose slowly, stiff from sitting so long and half-faint from exhaustion. Taharka caught her arm to steady her. The queen glanced worriedly at her son, clearly reluctant to leave him for even a moment. For who knew how many more moments she would have with him?

"Menhutep will care for him," Taharka assured his wife. "She loves him as if he were her own."

The nursemaid nodded agreement. "You need rest, Royal Lady. I shall keep watch, and will summon you at the slightest change in the prince's condition."

Tiyy's shoulders suddenly sagged, and she gave in, allowing her husband to lead her from the sick chamber. The pharaoh put an arm around her slighter form, steadying her as he guided her through the living quarters of the royal palace, faintly lit by oil lamps tended by the slaves, but even more brightly illumined by the moonlight

through the floor-to-ceiling windows designed to capture the faintest of the ocean breezes in this hot climate. As they reached the end of the private wing of the palace, he turned her, and they stepped out onto a balcony overlooking Zerzura, the Shining City. Below them lay the great harbor, with moonlight gleaming on the waves. They stood side by side, Taharka's arm still protectively around his wife's shoulders, gazing out at their domain.

Finally Queen Tiyy roused herself from her sad reverie and looked up at her husband. Tenderly he touched her cheek, his fingers brushing lightly over her tightly curled hair, cropped short into a dark aureole to facilitate wearing her royal wigs. Her eyes, enhanced with the traditional kohl, were large and the color of onyx as they searched his features intently. "Something is different about you, my king. What has happened?"

Taharka nodded. His queen was as perceptive as she was wise. Looking down at her, seeing her lovely but strained features, he summoned his courage and resolve. *It is the only way that our son might be saved...*

"I dreamed tonight," he said slowly. "And in my dream Apedemak spoke to me and told me what I must do."

Queen Tiyy's eyes widened. "Tell me this dream, husband."

Taharka closed his own eyes, the better to recall every detail. "I dreamed that I was driving my chariot along the beach. The waves rolled in and splashed my chariot wheels. My horses plunged along, their hooves flinging up sand and surf. I could taste the salt on my lips. Ra cast his golden rays down from the sky, and it seemed that the beach had no end. It was a moment of great joy."

The pharaoh took a deep breath. "Then, suddenly, in the way of dreams, everything changed. Before me there was a great wall of stone, a cliff so sheer and high there was no climbing it. I fought to slow the horses, lest we crash into it. I brought them to a halt barely in time. As I turned them, thinking to go back, I saw that there was another cliff behind me. I was hemmed in between the cliffs and the sea. There was nowhere to go. As I hesitated, trying to decide what to do, I heard Aniba calling me. 'Father...' he wailed. 'Help me!'"

Queen Tiyy's eyes filled with tears, but she did not allow them to fall. Taharka saw her blink them back, and his heart tightened in his breast. "What then?" she asked.

"I heard a sound from the cliff to my right. When I turned my head, a great golden lion came bounding down the sheer face of the stone. It was much larger than any lion I had ever seen. His mane gleamed like the sun, making a nimbus of light around his face. He leaped down from the cliff and stood before me. The horses plunged in their traces with terror. But then the lion spoke, and they fell quiet, and stood as still as the statues in the temples."

"The lion...spoke?" Her voice trembled.

"Yes. His voice was the crashing of the surf in a storm, the rumble of thunder, and the sound the earth makes when it shakes...all those sounds together. It was when I heard that voice that I knew this was no ordinary lion, but Apedemak himself. His words echo still in my mind: 'Look to the sea, Taharka. You must cross the great ocean. Only by doing so will you find the means to save what you hold dearest. It is the only way.' And when the lion finished speaking, his mane blazed up so brightly that I could no longer look, but had to shut my eyes and turn my face away. When I

opened my eyes again, I awakened to find the moonlight on my face. But I knew I had just experienced a true dream, one such as the priests describe. I knew the god had told me what I must do.”

“Cross the sea...” murmured Tiyy. When she looked up at her husband, fear shadowed her features. “Leave our island, husband? Leave your people, who need your rule, your strong hand to guide them? Go out into the world? We have been protected from outsiders for so long! Who knows what evils may be found in the outside world these days? Cannot you send General Kashta and High Priest Senkamanisken? They are strong, able men who are loyal to you. They would travel and search to the doors of death and beyond for you!”

Pharaoh Taharka shook his head. “You know I am the only one who can undertake this quest, my queen,” he said. “Surely you have not forgotten what I wear?” He held up his right arm. In the moonlight, the wide wristlet gleamed, and the gemstones glittered. Deprived of their color, they flashed like the moonlight along the wave crests. “I do not speak of it often, but recall that my bracelet is one of the Three.”

Long ago, when the two kingdoms of Egypt and Kush had been one, the sons and daughters of Kush had turned their faces from the old life to travel west, toward the setting sun, leaving behind all that they had known. They had acted because Apedemak had appeared to the son of their pharaoh and the chief priest to express his wishes that his chosen people should depart and found a new land to the west. To guide them on their journey, he had given them the Heart, and, acting on his orders, the priests had used tiny slivers from the Heart to fashion the three bracelets. Each endowed the wearer with certain powers. The one Taharka wore gave its wearer the power of navigation—of locating whatever it was that the wearer needed. The bracelet’s magic would guide him, anywhere in the world, to achieve his quest. It also granted him insight, a great gift for a man who must rule wisely.

The pharaoh’s thirteen-year-old son and heir, Prince Shabako, wore the one that would allow him to unlock any lock, any portal. Its power extended to unlocking hearts, both human and animal. He had never met a stranger, it seemed.

Taharka’s daughter, fifteen-year-old Princess Amenirdis, wore the wristlet that allowed the wearer to see through illusion, to lift the magical mists that cloaked the island of Kerma and to discern the portal to the sacred labyrinth. She could weave and unweave spells—and any thread she spun, any fabric she wove, was a joy to gaze upon. Her spell-weaving ability also gave her insight into the way words were woven together to produce language.

It took the power of all three bracelets used together to open the way into the labyrinth and the treasures it contained.

The queen raised a finger, but did not quite touch the magical wristlet. “Anyone with the Sight who saw that bracelet would know it for a thing of power,” she cautioned. “Greedy men would kill to possess it!”

“And greedy women, too, doubtless,” observed Taharka dryly. “Fear not, my queen. The wristlets have the power to conceal their true nature. Watch.” He touched the bracelet lightly with the fingers of his left hand, closed his eyes, and summoned its power. Tingling warmth enclosed his wrist. Taharka heard his wife gasp.

He opened his eyes, to see that his wristlet had changed. Now only a slim strip of woven grass encased his wrist, a bracelet such as a child might make in an afternoon

for amusement. In the middle of the band of grass a small, flattened, hollowed-out pebble was threaded. The pebble was a common beach stone, smoothed by waves. Scratched into it were a few crude lines that, when studied from the correct angle, resembled the head of a lion.

“I did not know your bracelet could disguise itself,” the queen said.

“They all can,” the pharaoh replied. “Magic is an intrinsic part of them. But when we are given our lessons in using their powers by the priests, we are cautioned against lightly revealing them.” Taharka looked around at the palace, which stood on a rise, the first rank of the foothills leading to a ridge of mountains that nearly bisected the island, then down at Zerzura, gleaming white in the moonlight. “Of course here, in our own land, there is no need to invoke the power of disguise the wristlets bear. But out in the world, disguise will be necessary.”

Tiyy put a hand on her husband’s arm, just above his bracelet. “How long will it take you?” she asked anxiously. “I do not know...how long...” she trailed off, but Taharka knew what she was trying to say. Aniba had his good days, or even weeks, but his strength had been declining steadily. The prince might last two or three months, perhaps. He would not last six.

“I will be as swift as may be,” Taharka assured her. “It is early summer. The winds should be good. I will purchase passage on the fastest modern ship. Or perhaps I shall purchase a ship and crew. Once I am in the world, I will make the decisions necessary.”

He looked down at her. “Never doubt my love for you, or for our son. Rule our people well while I am gone, my queen. I will think of you, and Aniba, and Amenirdis and Shabako every day. If my thoughts were birds, my queen, the skies above Zerzura would be dark with them.”

The queen managed a wan smile. “It is a brave thing you do, my husband. You are a good father.”

Taharka bent his head and kissed her, tasting salt on her lips. She responded with such fervor that it was as if he had left and just returned, victorious. When he finally pulled back, it was only to murmur endearments and reassurances as she clung to him.

When they stepped apart, at long last, Queen Tiyy’s shoulders straightened. “Fear not for our land, my husband. I will rule our people and guard our treasure until your return. This I swear.”

The pharaoh nodded. His heart was too full for words. Together, the royal couple turned and walked back into the palace, their heads high, their strides measured and steady.

Behind them, the moonlight shone down on the harbor of the Shining City. The ocean waves gleamed and glimmered, black and silver, black and silver, until they met the shore, where they curled into fists of white froth.

CHAPTER ONE
Fair Winds and Black Ships

JACK SPARROW, FIRST MATE of the East India Trading Company merchant vessel *Fair Wind*, stood on the quarterdeck, glaring down at most of his hastily assembled crew. Beside him rested a large cask. It sloshed faintly as the brig glided over the topaz waters of the Caribbean Sea, three days out from Port Royal, Jamaica. Jack drummed his fingers on the top of the half-empty cask. "This rum," he said, raising his voice so he could be heard over the creaking of the sails, the slap of the sea, and the rush of the wind, "is half gone. Why is the rum gone?"

The weatherbeaten faces that had been regarding him quizzically suddenly vanished as each crewman looked down, twisting his cap in hands scored by years of hard, dangerous work at sea. The men shuffled their feet on the holystoned planks of the *Fair Wind*'s weather deck. No one ventured a reply.

Jack hadn't really expected any of the culprits to confess, and "peaching" on a mate was regarded as lowest of the low among the men, so the lack of a reply didn't surprise him. He actually sympathized with the culprits. After all, the stolen substance was *rum*. Jack liked rum as well as any man. Well, to be truthful, better than most. But this rum was not, technically speaking, rum. It was *cargo*. He let his temper, until now held in check, rise.

"I will tell you why the rum is gone," Jack roared. He thumped the top of the container. "This half-empty cask, which as of last night was full of rum bound for England, rum entrusted to this vessel to be carried in her hold until we reach our destination, rum intended to be sold to the taverns and cellars of England, to slake English thirsts, is *gone* because," he paused for effect, "several members of this crew that stands before me, this same crew of misbegotten scurvy sea dogs, crept down into the hold and *drank* it!" He slapped his hand against the side of the cask where one of the staves had been pried out of alignment with the others, leaving a long, dark stain of spilled rum down the side of the container. Jack turned to the man standing beside him. Robby Greene was five years younger than Jack himself, which made him barely twenty. He was a slender but whipcord-strong youth, with a ready smile and a mop of golden curls that he kept tied back with a black ribbon. Greene, as second mate aboard *Fair Wind*, was responsible for the ship's cargo. "Mr. Greene!" Jack said. "What, in your professional opinion, is the precise word that should be applied to the action of starting this cask and subsequently drinking half of it? Of wantonly guzzling our cargo?"

Whoever had gotten to the rum had managed to bypass the locks on the entrances leading down to the holds. They'd started the cask, siphoned off the contents, drunk their fill, then re-tied the lashings binding the cargo, no doubt hoping the damage would be attributed to the rolling of the ship. Jack had barely relieved Third Mate Edward Tomlin when Robby had appeared to show him the half-emptied cask. *Devil*

take it, Jack had thought, eyeing the damage. *And it had to happen on my watch...*

This was his and Robby's first voyage aboard *Fair Wind*, and this incident was the first real challenge to Jack's authority as first mate of the vessel. When he'd first reported for duty, minutes before sunrise, Jack had been looking forward to an uneventful watch. They'd taken on fresh provisions with their cargo, and this morning the cook had served him fresh fruit with his porridge. Savoring the last bite of pineapple, Jack had ambled onto the weather deck, pleased to see that the good weather was holding. The brig was reaching across the wind, with all plain sail set. There was nothing better than the beauty of the early morning Caribbean on a vessel that was making good time.

And then some of these misbegotten louts had to go and guzzle the EITC's rum, Jack thought, disgustedly, as he waited for the second mate's response. Greene glanced at the crew, swallowed, but replied stoutly, "I'd call that stealing, Mr. Sparrow."

"Aye! *Stealing!*" Jack repeated. "The very word I had in mind, Mr. Greene! Drinking our cargo constitutes theft! Theft!" He turned back to the crew, who were mumbling and shuffling, scarcely daring to glance at one another. "And it is my unfortunate duty to discover the thief, or, in this case, thieves."

Robby murmured, "It would take at least three men to move the cask silently, Jack. Nobody from the third watch reported hearing anything. I'll change the padlocks on the hatch leading down to the hold. We can't have this happening again."

"Agreed," Jack said, dropping his voice so only Robby could hear him. "Now to determine which of these wretched, flea-infested lummoxes did the deed."

Moving with careful dignity, Jack descended the steps leading from the quarterdeck to the weather deck. The crew stepped back, muttering amongst themselves as he neared the bottom of the ladder. "Attention, you lubbers! Assemble in ranks!" Jack ordered, in scathing tones. "Toe these lines, you mangy curs! Straighten up! I want to see these lines toed!"

The crewmen surged back and forth in their ranks as they hastened to obey. Jack, standing poised on the last step but one, watched them attentively. Then silently, moving with his own unique stride, Jack slowly, deliberately paced down the lines of the ranked crewmen. His sensitive nose twitched as he passed each man, inhaling the usual odors of stale sweat, unwashed human, tar, and salt. For four of the crewmen, there was another scent—one Jack recognized immediately. But he made no sign of his discovery, only continued his silent progress. When he finished, Jack beckoned to Robby Greene, who was waiting for him by the ladder leading to the quarterdeck. "Bring me a line," he ordered. "Long enough to rig a dunking harness."

"Aye, Mr. Sparrow," Robby said, and hurried away.

With great dignity, Jack turned to face his crew. "I find that this gunwale"—he gestured at the railing a few feet away—"is seriously in need of foot polishing." The crewmen turned their heads, clearly not grasping what Jack was talking about.

"Morton!" Jack snapped. "Step lively now! Walk me that gunwale!" He gestured at the railing. The "man" he addressed was barely seventeen. He was a good topman—and he was sober. Walking the gunwale would be child's play to him.

"Aye, aye, Mr. Sparrow!"

Morton leapt up onto the railing; then, bare toes curving to fit the shape of the wood, he walked along the four-inch wide surface. He didn't even bother to extend his

arms for balance. When he'd reached the end of the fifteen-foot gunwale, he jumped lithely down.

Jack nodded. "Very good, Mr. Morton! I am pleased to see that not all of the crew of the *Fair Wind* are thieves!" He clapped the crewman on the shoulder as he passed him on his way down the ranks, noting that Robby now stood by the gunwale, a coiled line and harness rigged. Morton, vindicated, grinned broadly as he stepped back into ranks.

"Mr. Farmer!" Jack said, stopping before a middle-aged sailor whose balding head gleamed in the sun. "I believe you could use a bit of a constitutional. Walk me that gunwale!" Farmer stood rooted, his look one of wary disbelief mixed with general fuddlement. "NOW!" Jack roared. "Step lively!"

Farmer shuffled over to the gunwale, casting looks back over his shoulder at several of his mates, who studiously ignored him. He barely noticed when Robby fastened the harness around his midsection, and he needed a hand up to reach the railing. Swaying to the motion of the ship, arms extended, he stood there, trying to gain his balance.

"Did I not order you to walk said gunwale, Mr. Farmer?" Jack demanded, acidly.

"Aye, shur!" slurred Farmer. Raising his foot, he took a step forward, then with a yelp and a whirl of arms and legs, he fell over the side. His yell of protest ended in a tremendous splash.

Jack casually examined his dirty fingernails, while mentally counting, slowly, to twenty. Only then did he nod at Greene. "Haul him out, Mr. Greene. Bring him up halfway, then give our ruddy sot another ablution. Even without the stink of stolen rum on his breath, he was an offense to my nose."

While the crew stood at attention, Robby did as ordered, using a block to winch the inebriated sailor part of the way up the hull, then letting him loose again. Jack stood there, covertly watching the crew's reaction, while Farmer was dunked a total of three times.

When the drunken seaman was finally hauled back up to the railing, he was gasping for breath. Robby Greene prudently waited until he'd finished spewing seawater mixed with stolen rum before pulling him back onto the deck, with the help of Morton, hastily commandeered as an assistant. By the time Farmer lay sprawled limply on the deck, half-conscious, Jack knew he wouldn't have to repeat the test.

"Morton, Phelps, take him below, lock him in the chain locker until he sobers up," Jack ordered. Then he turned to the crew. "Mr. Barton—"

"Please, no, Mr. Shparrow!" the young, redhaired crewman said, clutching his cap, almost blubbing. "Don't make me walk it! I'll fall for sure, and I could break me neck! I drank th' rum, shur, I did, please shur...I'm sorry." He turned to one of the older crewmembers, a habitual troublemaker. Jack searched his mind for the man's name. *Anderson, that's it...*

"It were his idea!" Barton said, pointing a dirt-encrusted finger. "I didn't want to, but he—"

Anderson lurched forward. "Why you dirty—"

"Stow it!" Jack ordered, his voice cutting across theirs. "Barton, Anderson, Nelson, step forward."

Sullenly, the three remaining rum thieves shuffled out of ranks to stand before

Jack. “You three and Farmer are hereby deprived of your daily rum ration for the remainder of this voyage,” Jack said, his voice low and cutting. “The cost of the damaged cask will be taken out of your pay for this voyage, plus a suitable fine, to be determined by Second Mate Greene.”

The three miscreants looked askance at each other. The penalty was stiff, but fair. Jack knew, however, that Captain Nathaniel Bainbridge, who was still reposing in his cabin, would demand even harsher penalties. Even though *Fair Wind* was a merchant vessel, it wasn't unknown for Bainbridge, a half-pay naval officer, to treat his men as though they were in the service and use the cat on their backs. Jack knew that if he didn't order a significant enough penalty, Bainbridge would have the four of them out here on the weather deck, stripped to the waist, and seized to the shrouds for flogging. Jack had no intention of ordering lashes. He knew only too well that crews had mutinied and turned pirate in these waters on far less provocation. *Dunking will serve*, Jack decided. *I'll give them all a good sluicing, and then confine them in the chain locker for the rest of the day. Bainbridge should consider that sufficient....*

Jack had just opened his mouth to begin that order, when a shout floated down from the topman poised on the foremast. “Sail ho!”

Everyone turned. Jack quickly strode forward, shading his eyes against the brilliant sun, squinting up at the topman. His heart quickened. He was back in the Caribbean—the Spanish Main. There were many pirates plying their trade in these waters. Even the infamous rogue pirates, who had been flying their red no-quarter flag for upward of six years now, tended to go after the rich pickings in the Caribbean. Jack glanced at Robby, who was standing beside him, and saw that he was thinking the same thing. Both he and Greene had history with the rogues—history they'd like to forget, but couldn't. Cupping his hands around his mouth, Jack shouted, “Where away?”

The topman, a lad of no more than sixteen, pointed and shouted, in a strong North Country accent, “Two points for'ard of the starboard beam. Almost in the wind's eye.”

Jack nodded, then turned and dashed up the ladder to the quarterdeck, heading for the binnacle. From the shelf behind it, he grabbed his spyglass in its leather carrying case, then headed back down the ladder to the foremast, the mast closest to the bow. Robby was already waiting for him, and reached out to take the spyglass case, but Jack shook his head. “I'm going aloft myself.”

In preparation for the climb, Jack took off his neat, sober tricorne hat, then his long, snuff-colored coat. Beneath it he wore a loose-sleeved shirt and a waistcoat. Leaning over, one hand bracing himself against the roll of the ship, Jack pulled off his brown shoes with the big silver buckles, then he stripped off his knee stockings. The deck planks were warm against the soles of his feet, still calloused from his days as an able seaman. He'd been a topman, working high in the rigging, making sail high above the deck. Jack bundled up his clothes and handed them to Robby. “Watch my effects, please, Mr. Greene.”

“Aye, Mr. Sparrow,” Robby said.

Slinging the spyglass case on its leather strap over his shoulder, Jack walked over to the windward gunwale on the starboard side, hopped up on the railing, then started up the ladderlike ratlines. The wind pushed gently against his back, and the lines were harsh against his feet and hands. He climbed steadily, not looking down, ignoring the

way the ratlines swayed with the roll of the ship, and gave slightly beneath his weight. He'd done this thousands of times before, in fair weather and foul. Furling sails in the teeth of a fierce squall was one of the most dangerous jobs aboard a ship.

He paused halfway to his goal to breathe, after pulling himself over the side of the "top," the small platform above the futtock shrouds. As he caught his breath, he looked out over the water. The color of the Caribbean Sea was unlike any other body of water he'd ever sailed—and he'd sailed a lot of them. The Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Mediterranean, the Adriatic, and Aegean seas, the Black Sea, the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, even the Coral Sea lapping the shores of New Holland on the opposite side of the world.

Jack had spent most of his life at sea, and he loved it. Automatically, he glanced at the eastern sky, smiling faintly to see that horizon clear of any threatening clouds. Squalls could come up with amazing speed. No matter what else they were doing, sailors kept an eye on the weather.

Leaning back, he grabbed the foretopmast shrouds and began going up hand over hand, letting his legs dangle over thin air. He was winded again by the time he reached the crossrees where the topman perched. Jack glanced over at him, searching his memory for the lad's name. *Barnes? That's not it...Bates! Yes, Bates.*

"Good sighting, Mr. Bates," Jack said, hooking a leg over the cross-trees to secure himself.

Bates flushed with pleasure. He was a stocky lad, his chin still downy, who wore a scarf wrapped around his head to protect it from the sun. "Thankee, Mr. Sparrow," he replied. "She be right over there." He pointed.

Jack took out his spyglass, focused it, and searched the sea to windward. He had to brace himself hard against the rolling of the ship and the movement of the sails in order to hold the brass cylinder steady, but that was second nature to him, and he wasn't even conscious that he was doing so. After a minute of searching the waves, the ship swam into his view. He adjusted his focus and studied her. He was looking at her in profile. She was heading south, not toward them.

Jack made out three masts. *A full-rigged ship...* He focused the spyglass again. "Probably eight miles away," he muttered. A frigate. Not a cargo vessel like the heavily laden *Fair Wind*. She was good-sized, probably four to five hundred tons burthen—which made her twice as large as *Fair Wind*. Frigates were built for speed, and war. This was probably a Royal Navy vessel. Black hull...that wasn't unusual. But her rigging...there was something familiar about her rig. *Bloody hell! It can't be...*

He lowered the spyglass. His heart was pounding, and not because of this climb up the rigging. He tried to reassure himself. *I must be imagining it.* He rubbed his eyes hard on the sleeve of his shirt, then raised the spyglass again. The stranger swam in his vision for a second, then he could see her, more clearly than ever. Her white sails gleamed in the sun. Her masts were strongly raked, to lend her speed. Her bowsprit was steeved almost level, giving her larger headsails.

Jack sucked in his breath. *A Blackwall frigate...Oh, no...* He looked again at the ship, trying to see if she had a red stripe just above her waterline, above and below her gunports, and red gunwales. But she was still too far away to make out those details. She wasn't flying any flag, but that wasn't unusual. *Fair Wind* wasn't flying her ensign either. Flags were expensive, and wore out quickly when exposed to the elements.

Ships usually hoisted their colors only when they expected to come alongside for a visit, to exchange news, or perhaps supplies.

Or when they're in pursuit, because they're pirates....

Pirate ships were usually much smaller than this vessel. He'd only ever known of one pirate who had "acquired" a frigate. But the more he saw her, the more certain he became. He'd seen this ship before and she was no naval vessel.

Jack Sparrow lowered his spyglass as memory rushed back, to the day he'd first seen this particular ship....

Shipwreck Island was a legend on the Spanish Main. The stories held that it had been an impregnable pirate stronghold and sanctuary for hundreds, nay, thousands of years. Most seafarers who heard of it regarded it as nothing more than the rum-soaked invention of tale-spinning pirates. A chimera...a myth.

The island was, however, quite real. Real, that is, in the sense that pirates who knew of it could usually find it...though not always. The island's position was difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint on a map. Some said that it had no fixed location, but that it...moved. Others laughed at this contention, but, on pain of torture unto death, refused to point out its coordinates.

One of the few pirate maps that bore correct (at least at some times) coordinates for Shipwreck Island showed it as lying a day's sail off the northeast coast of South America. Any ship chancing upon it could sail all the way around it, and unless the captain knew where to look, it would seem like nothing but a gigantic solid stone mountain rising out of the sea—a stubby, flattened mountain without a peak.

This mountain, however, was not solid. Long, long ago it had been a volcanic hell spewing lava up out of the sea. But the lava was long gone, and now the volcano lay dormant, its interior hollow. That hollow interior contained a quiet, sheltered freshwater cove that could be reached only by a narrow river that twisted and turned its way through the southern rock wall. The opening to the outside lay beneath a shadowed overhang of rock—difficult to spot even when a navigator knew to look for it. Many ships had passed it by, never realizing there was a way in. A small band of defenders could hold off an attack on the entrance, and there were cannons mounted on outcrops of the exterior cliffs. Even the most determined attacker learned quickly that Shipwreck Cove was basically impregnable.

Sometimes the winds would sweep along the tunnel in such a way that a ship could sail into, or out of, Shipwreck Cove. When there was no wind, captains dispatched crews in longboats to tow their vessels to the docks surrounding Shipwreck City.

Shipwreck City—the pirate sanctum—had been built on a small island in the center of the cove. No one knew precisely how old the city was, though legend had it that its foundations, now hidden, consisted of Greek triremes, Roman galleys, and dragon-prowed longships. The city was constructed of ship hulks; dozens, perhaps as many as a hundred of them, piled atop one another, rising into a ramshackle tower of both new and ancient wood. At night the lights from the ships made the unwieldy structure resemble a jagged glass tube crammed full of fireflies. Bows and sterns and ancient spars protruded, giving the city an eerie quality, as snippets of pirate chanteys rose into the still night air of the caldera. Each ship that had been chosen to become