

Here's my BONUS excerpt for you! It's the first swordfight in *The Price of Freedom*, and I thought you might enjoy reading it. Only a few days left before the book is out!

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When Jack returned to the weather deck, he was just in time to see Bainbridge ascending the ladder to the quarterdeck. Quickly, he followed the captain.

When he reached Bainbridge, he found the old man with his back to the closing *Venganza*, staring out at the open sea. The flask was in his hand. "Captain," Jack said, "I've spoken to the men and reassured them. The pirates will be boarding in a few minutes. We have a white flag up. But they'll want the two of us down on the weather deck, too, so they can keep an eye on us."

Bainbridge sighed, then turned around to face his first mate. Jack felt a stir of pity when he saw how aged and beaten the old man appeared. He was still wearing his ceremonial sword, and, Jack saw, now had a pistol belt slung over his other shoulder, and his personal weapon in it. *Can't let him run around armed*, he thought. *He'll get himself killed*.

"Captain, just come below," he said, and dared to lay a hand on the old man's sleeve. "Let me lock your sword and that pistol up, with the other weapons, and perhaps they won't take them. I can handle this, if you'll just give the order. I can talk to their captain. I know how they think. I may be able to . . . negotiate."

Over Bainbridge's shoulder, he saw that in a few minutes, the frigate would be in range of the grappling hooks. Pirates lined up along the gunwales, ready to fling the lines with their hooks attached. Once the two ships were grappled together, *Venganza's* crew would be able to cross freely back and forth between the two vessels.

“Negotiate?” Bainbridge said, dully.

“You know . . . parlay with her. I may be able to convince her to take only a percentage of the cargo, instead of all of it.”

“Her?” Bainbridge blinked small, reddened eyes, then stared at Jack owlishly. “You’ll talk to the *ship*?”

Jack could have kicked himself for that slip. “Um,” he said, trying to feel his way. *Maybe I should cushion the blow a bit . . .*

“Captain, it’s possible that the commander of this pirate frigate is female,” he said. “While I was a prisoner that time, my captor spoke of female pirates.”

Bainbridge blinked, surprised out of his stupor. “What?” He gaped at Jack. “Balderdash!” he finally managed. “Impossible! No woman could captain a vessel. That would be unnatural, a violation of the laws of God and man. The . . . the Almighty would never permit it.” He leaned closer to Jack, peering at him, and sniffed loudly. “Have you been drinking, Sparrow?”

The captain’s breath was enough to knock over a carthorse. Jack stepped back, away from the blast. “No, but I wish I had been,” he mumbled, wearily. His comment was drowned out by a series of loud thumps. The deck beneath his feet rose and fell. Jack looked away from Bainbridge to see that the grappling hooks were in place, drawing the two ships together. Standing ready to board first was the figure he’d glimpsed through the spyglass.

She was still petite, but this time, instead of a dress, she wore her working garb: a loose-sleeved pale homespun shirt that laced up the front, and a metal reinforced corselet made of black leather. Her shapely legs were clad in dark trousers, with high, folded-over black boots. On her head was a broad-brimmed black hat. One side was rolled up, and a jaunty black and white plume waved in the breeze.

Doña Pirata's crew crowded in beside her and behind her, shouting with excitement as they hauled on the grappling lines, bringing the two ships together. As Jack watched, she turned to them and made a quick gesture. They stepped back and quieted immediately. Seeing that, Jack repressed a smile. He'd always known she'd be a good leader. A good pirate.

In his bemusement at seeing the famous Lady Pirate in her natural element, Jack had forgotten all about Captain Bainbridge until the older man muttered, "Damnation! By all that's holy, Sparrow! The captain *is* a female!"

Jack wheeled around to see the old man's eyes flash with righteous indignation. Bainbridge's hand rested on the hilt of his sword. Jack swallowed. "Captain, pass over those weapons. I'll take them and lock them up, but I'll have to do it fast, sir, or you'll lose them."

He reached out. Bainbridge swatted his hand aside and dodged around him, moving like a man half his age. "I'll not permit such an abomination aboard my ship!" he snarled. "She's wearing *trousers*! Heaven and Earth, I'll not abide it! No strumpet pirate will board my ship!"

Jack went after him, but the captain was moving fast, still ranting, but now he was shouting. "By heaven!" he bellowed, "Damn me for a coward if I permit some pirate slut, a mere *woman*, to plunder my ship!" He had almost reached the closest ladder leading down to the weather deck.

"Captain, no!" Jack said, finally catching up. Grabbing the older man's upper arm with both hands, he swung him around bodily. Bainbridge cursed him in terms that would have done a buccaneer proud. Jack was astonished by the old man's strength as they grappled. The pale blue eyes bulged, glaring wildly. Jack ducked and tried to protect his face as Bainbridge slammed fists and elbows into his head and body. The first mate quickly realized that he had to either fight back—which might have merited being hung for mutiny—or let go. Jack's only consolation was that at the last minute he managed to grab the firearm out of Bainbridge's pistol belt. The captain

seemed not to notice it was gone. He continued his rush for the ladder, reached it, and started down.

Jack stood for a moment with the pistol in his hand, breathing hard. For a wild second, he thought about cocking and firing it. But the East India Trading Company would take a very dim view of that. And shooting a man in the back just wasn't Jack Sparrow's style. Instead, he shoved the pistol into his own belt, and went tearing after the old man.

In moments, it seemed, Bainbridge was down the ladder, racing across the weather deck. As he ran, he drew his sword, holding it high in his pudgy hand, waving it threateningly. "You'll not board my ship, pirate strumpet!" he screamed. "For God and the king!"

Doña Pirata, who had just stepped over the gap between the ships and was standing poised on the brig's gunwale, straightened as she heard Bainbridge's battle cry. Seeing the old man coming for her, brandishing his sword, she drew her boarding cutlass. Jack, who was scrambling down the ladder yelled, "No! Stop him!" But the crew, sitting obediently on the weather deck, were frozen with shock at the sight of their deranged captain.

With part of his attention he realized that Doña Pirata, with an amused smile, had motioned her own crew back, indicating that she intended to deal with this portly, panting threat herself.

"Lady! No!" Jack yelled again. "Don't hurt him!"

This time, Esmeralda heard him. Still standing poised on *Fair Wind's* gunwale, her head turned as she scanned the weather deck, searching for the source of that familiar voice.

Jack knew she couldn't see him, because *Fair Wind's* crew, recovering their ability to move, had risen *en masse* and parted before their captain's mad rush. They milled around, blocking Jack's passage. He had to shove his way through the crowd. Realizing that any moment the pirate crew would be able to see him, he spared an instant to yank his tricorne down so it shadowed his

face. *Can't let anyone recognize me . . . Teague probably posted a bounty on my head.*

When he finally emerged from the crush of excited crewmen he bounded toward Esmeralda, who was still poised on the gunwale railing, waving his arms and yelling, "Lady! Over here!" He saw her head turn, her eyes widen as she recognized the way he moved. At the same moment, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Bainbridge reach her. The captain's blade flashed in the noontime sun as he aimed a violent slash at Esmeralda's legs. Jack's breath stopped.

He needn't have worried. Doña Pirata had been schooled in fencing by her grandfather, in addition to the finest sword masters in Barcelona. She leaped nimbly into the air, over the slash, and came down lightly on *Fair Wind's* deck, behind Bainbridge.

The captain whipped around. "Shameless hussy! Trouser-wearing slattern! Get off my deck!" He came on again, and this time she parried his cut, then disengaged, dancing back. She glanced over her shoulder at Jack, her eyebrows raised inquiringly. Jack could read her question as clearly as if she'd spoken it. *Who IS this ancient lunatic?*

"Abomination!" howled the captain. "Leave my ship!"

"Señor," she spoke for the first time, her voice low and musical. She wasn't even breathing hard. "I know not who you are, but you are sadly lacking in manners. That is no way to speak to a lady. Drop your sword, and you and your crew will live."

Bainbridge came in again, slashing madly, and again she parried. She stopped retreating and began to circle, her footwork light and balanced, in contrast to the old man's lumbering steps.

"Please, señor. Stop this foolish attack. I do not wish to harm you."

Bainbridge's only reply was an epithet so vile that Jack's eyebrows rose.

"Señor!" Doña Pirata said reprovngly. "Please, such language! I must protest!" She parried another hard but clumsy lunge. "You will upset my crew, hurt their tender ears."

Bainbridge repeated the curse. She laughed. The slow, relentless circling continued. Jack edged around the perimeter of their path, keeping his head ducked so *Venganza's* crew couldn't see his face, considering his options. Should he knock the captain out with the butt of the pistol? Esmeralda was toying with Bainbridge, for the moment, and he knew she was speaking truthfully when she said she didn't want to hurt him. But if the old man managed to get in a lucky thrust, or lunge . . . or if his name calling annoyed her . . .

While Jack hesitated, Bainbridge, panting like a dog, cursed his opponent again, slashing wildly at her head. Esmeralda ducked, but as she did so, the tip of the old man's sword caught the white plume on her hat, cutting it in half.

She sprang back, saw the puff of white feather fluttering in the breeze, and her expression darkened. "You pompous old fool!" she spat, in Spanish. "I paid 20 pesos for that feather! You stop this nonsense!" And then *she* lunged.

Her form was perfect. Her sword slid in past Bainbridge's guard as smoothly as a dolphin's leap, and the tip found the fleshy upper part of the old man's sword arm. She pinked him, lightly, then disengaged, leaping backward.

Captain Bainbridge staggered back, then halted, staring aghast at his upper arm. After a few moments, a dark spot appeared, slowly spreading. Seeing his own blood, Bainbridge's eyes rolled up in his head. Like a mast toppling before the force of a gale, he swayed, then fell, to lie motionless on the deck.

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