

Here's the second excerpt from *The Price of Freedom*. This excerpt takes place during the "main" plotline, when Jack Sparrow is 25 years old and working as a merchant sailor for the EITC. This excerpt is from Chapter 4, which is titled "Cutler Beckett." This chapter is told from the POV of a much younger Cutler Beckett, recently appointed as the Director of West African Affairs for the East India Trading Company. Mr. Beckett (no title yet!) has an office in Calabar, one of the major ports for the EITC. It's also one of the major slave-trading ports on Bight of Benin, also known as the "Slave Coast."

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One day, a runner arrived from the docks to inform him that an EITC vessel, the brig *Fair Wind*, had just docked. It seemed that two men, the first and second mates, had disembarked and were on their way up to the EITC offices to report in. Beckett checked his records, and saw that *Fair Wind* was listed as being under the command of one Nathaniel Bainbridge.

Slightly intrigued by this minor mystery, Beckett put aside the work he'd been doing, ordered his secretary to bring him a cup of tea, then sipped it and sat back in his padded seat in his EITC office, waiting. This office was dominated, as were all his offices, by an enormous map of the world affixed to the wall behind him.

He did not have to wait long. His secretary, Chalmers, came to the open door and said, "Mr. Beckett, sir, First Mate Jack Sparrow and Second Mate Robert Greene to see you, sir. They are crew aboard *Fair Wind*, which has just docked."

Becket regarded the skinny, sallow-faced man unsmilingly, and nodded. "Very well, Chalmers, you may show them in."

Moments later, Beckett's nostrils caught a whiff of salt air, tar, and none-too-clean human, as two men entered the office. Cutler Beckett leaned back and studied them for a moment as they doffed their tricorns and came to a halt before his big oak desk.

The first one to enter was of medium height and build, with very dark hair that was pulled back and tied with a ribbon. He moved with a confident air . . . almost too confident, Beckett decided.

The newcomer was somewhat younger than Beckett himself, perhaps in his mid-twenties. He wore a worn, dark blue coat that had seen better days, though to Cutler Beckett's observant eyes, it was clear that some effort had been made by its wearer to brush it and clean the worst of the stains. His neckcloth was of old linen, somewhat yellowed, and his snuff-colored britches were worn gray along the seams. His knee stockings made the fastidious Beckett wince inwardly, but the silver buckles on his shoes had been buffed to a dull shine. Clearly, the man had taken some pains with his appearance, after months at sea. Beckett gave him points for that.

Beckett studied the man's face for a moment, as the sailor essayed a small, tentative smile, revealing the flash of a gold tooth. *Regular features . . . a good chin. Dark, eyes, steady and clear. One might almost call him . . . good-looking. Except for the dirt, of course.*

Beckett deliberately let the moment stretch on, studying the newcomer, his stance, his reaction. The man stood still, not dropping his gaze. There was considerable intelligence in his eyes. *Nothing slow about this one*, Beckett decided. *He looks as though he can think on his feet. Confident . . . even a bit cocky? Still, there's that smile . . .* Beckett found that faint, hopeful smile rather charming . . . it belied the arrogance nicely.

Shifting his gaze to the other man, Beckett stared at him measuringly. Unlike the first chap, this one ducked his head and dropped his blue eyes, plainly nervous. He was quite young, perhaps not even twenty. He had curling golden hair tied back, and fresh, handsome young features, despite the weathering from sun and wind.

After a long pause, Beckett spoke. “Good morning, gentlemen. I am Cutler Beckett, Director of West African Imports and Exports for the East India Trading Company. And whom do I have the pleasure of welcoming today?” He kept his voice pleasant, but he saw that the faint touch of sarcasm wasn’t lost on the first man.

“Good morning, Mr. Beckett, sir,” the dark-haired man replied. “I’m First Mate Jack Sparrow, and this is my second mate, Robert Greene. We just arrived back in Calabar aboard *Fair Wind*, and knew it was our duty to come up to the office and report in.”

“Ah.” Beckett let the syllable hang in the air for a moment, and then added. “And where, pray tell, is Captain Bainbridge?”

“I’m sorry to have to inform you, sir, that the captain died while on our voyage. As first mate, I stepped in and have been acting as captain,” Sparrow said carefully, in what was obviously a rehearsed explanation.

Beckett mulled this over for another moment, before relenting. “I see . . . most distressing. Captain Bainbridge had been sailing for us for nearly ten years.” As an afterthought, he waved at two straight chairs. “Take a seat, please.”

The two men sat down. It was obvious they weren’t used to sitting on chairs in offices, but within a moment, Sparrow had made himself comfortable, unlike Greene, who perched on the edge of the chair, rigid as a post.

Beckett looked back over at Sparrow. “Obviously, I shall need to see your logbook, Mr. Sparrow.”

Sparrow promptly leaned forward and deposited a thick, grimy, leather-bound book on Beckett’s desk. “Right you are, Mr. Beckett, I figured you’d ask to see the log, so I brought it

along.” He sat back in his chair, relaxed as a cat in a patch of sunshine, and flashed another, wider, smile at his employer.

“Thank you,” Beckett said, dryly. “I shall peruse it with great interest. But first, I would like to hear the entire story of what happened from you two.” Steepling his fingers, he waited.

Moments went by. Greene glanced sideways at the first mate, but said nothing.

“Yes, well . . .” Sparrow cleared his throat. “About Captain Bainbridge, sir, what happened was that . . .”

Beckett listened as Sparrow, with occasional assistance from Greene, recounted the story of the day *Fair Wind* encountered the pirate vessel *Venganza*. The man was fairly concise, and his account of events held together. Sparrow concluded his summary by explaining that he had sailed the brig to London, and off-loaded the two-thirds of remaining rum there. Then he had given a written account of the events, plus a list of everything the pirates had taken, to officials at the London EITC office. They, in turn, had ordered him to report back to *Fair Wind*'s homeport of Calabar, and had loaded the brig with a cargo of muskets and pistols. Firearms were in great demand in Africa.

Beckett listened intently, unmoving. When Sparrow reached the end of the report, he regarded him unblinkingly. The entire story undeniably made sense, and held the ring of truth, yet . . . Cutler Beckett couldn't shake the sense that First Mate Jack Sparrow was holding something back.

After Sparrow fell silent, Beckett regarded him for a long moment, and then said, “Explain to me, if you please, Mr. Sparrow, why the pirate captain of this frigate didn't take the entire cargo of rum?”

Sparrow cleared his throat and shifted, obviously ill at ease. Beckett glanced from him to Greene, just in time to see a flash of humor in Greene's eyes, before the blond man looked back down. Beckett had a sudden feeling that if Sparrow had been a less assured man, he might have been blushing beneath that tanned skin. "Mr. Greene?" Beckett said, abruptly, "Why didn't the pirate captain take all the rum after he attacked and killed Captain Bainbridge in this swordfight?"

Greene started visibly, and flushed. "Oh, well, Mr. Beckett, sir," he said, turning his tricorne around in his big, work-roughened hands, "You see, the pirate captain was, well . . . she was a woman."

"A *woman*?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Beckett, sir. Mr. Sparrow didn't want to say nothing disparaging about Captain Bainbridge, but that's what set the captain off, and drove him to attack her. The captain couldn't stand the idea of a woman commanding a ship, even a pirate vessel. So . . . he went for her. But she didn't kill him. She just . . . played with him. You see, the captain . . . he drank. Usually just at night, but that morning, he was in his cups, Mr. Beckett, sir, to be frank about it. Between the drink and the sun . . ." he tapped the side of his forehead meaningfully, and shrugged.

"I see . . ." Beckett said. "Is this true, Mr. Sparrow?"

"Yes, sir," Sparrow said, clearly not happy having to admit the truth. "I hoped that fact wouldn't have to become public knowledge, sir, because when I docked in London, the EITC office there put me in a carriage and ordered me to go see Captain Bainbridge's family. So I could tell them . . . he was gone."

Sparrow took a breath. “I did as ordered, sir, only I just told Mistress Bainbridge that her husband had been killed in a swordfight with a pirate who was attacking his ship.”

Beckett raised an eyebrow.

“It was the truth, Mr. Beckett,” Sparrow said, and Beckett could hear a defensive note in his voice.

“Why did you give Bainbridge’s family this . . . edited . . . version of the truth, Mr. Sparrow?”

“There was no reason to tell them the whole story. I thought giving them the . . . edited . . . story would leave them with a better . . . memory . . . than having to say the captain keeled over from an apoplexy because he went mad from drink and sun and tried to attack a female pirate—who could have run him through at any moment, but chose not to.”

“I see,” Beckett murmured. He switched the full force of his gaze back to Robert Greene. “But Mr. Greene, that still doesn’t explain why this female pirate chose to steal only one third of the EITC’s rum.”

“Oh . . .” Greene said. “Well, Mr. Beckett, Jack—er, Mr. Sparrow—he talked her out of taking the whole cargo.”

“He did? That’s . . . interesting.” Beckett’s stare never wavered from the now-sweating Greene. “And what about Mr. Sparrow did this . . . woman . . . find so convincing, eh?”

Greene shrugged helplessly. “Mr. Sparrow can be very persuasive, sir. Especially with the ladies.”

By now Beckett was amused, but he didn’t let it show. “Indeed?” He shifted his attention back to Sparrow, locking eyes with the first mate. “Is this true, Mr. Sparrow?”

Jack Sparrow blinked and swallowed, but after a moment, he straightened his shoulders and met Beckett's gaze directly. "I . . . well, I believe you could say that, Mr. Beckett. I did talk to Doña Pirata, and she did agree that she really didn't need all of that rum. She mentioned that she'd recently captured a large cargo of Madeira. So I guess she figured she didn't need more spirits aboard. She told me her men had been . . . um . . . the worse for drink ever since they'd taken the cargo of wine."

"Very well," Beckett said, and finally broke their locked stare. He reached over and picked up the battered logbook, using only the tips of his fingers, and deposited it in his desk drawer, first wrapping it in a cloth so it wouldn't get the drawer dirty. "I will review your accounts, and I'll be talking to some other crew members over the new few days. For now, Mr. Sparrow, Mr. Greene, you are dismissed."

Greene was up off his chair in a moment, and Beckett could tell he was barely restraining himself from bolting out the door. Sparrow, on the other hand, walked to the door with a slow, assured gait that was perilously close to an arrogant strut. "Close the door when you leave, please," Beckett called after him. *Definitely cocky*, he decided. *This Sparrow might need taking down a peg or two . . .*

The door shut.

Beckett sat for a long moment, until he was sure they were gone, before he allowed himself to chuckle.

That afternoon, Beckett interviewed Third Mate Edward Tomlin, and, after him, two other crewmen, about what had happened on the day Bainbridge died, as well as their subsequent voyage back to Calabar. That evening, as he ate his solitary supper at his massive dining table, Beckett read Jack Sparrow's log entries about the voyage. He was particularly interested in a

page that had been carefully cut out of the logbook. The missing page had been one of the last in the book, which had many still-blank pages, but Cutler Beckett missed very little. After a moment of regarding the neatly cut edge, he ran his fingers over the blank page that would have rested beneath the missing page. There were faint indentations.

Beckett rose and went to his office, then took a box of pencils from his ebony desk. He sharpened one with his penknife. Then he returned to the logbook, and with light, sure strokes, he drew the pencil lead sideways over the page. The faint indentations left by Sparrow's quill showed white against the gray of the pencil's lead.

*Captain Jack Sparrow . . . Captain Jack Sparrow . . . Captain Jack Sparrow . . .*

Cutler Beckett counted. It had been written no less than twenty-three times, in various sizes and styles. Some of them were block letters, others in Sparrow's own rather nice penmanship. At least one of the names and its accompanying titles was not only in block letters, it was in all capitals. Beckett pursed his lips, then laughed softly. "Jack, Jack, Jack . . ." he said. "I've caught you, Jack. I know what you want."

Beckett took out his penknife, prepared to slice down the edge of the page, so he could remove it from the logbook. But after a second, he stopped, then, smiling, he simply closed the logbook and tied it shut, wrapping it back in the cloth. Sparrow was an arrogant fellow, if an interesting one. Wouldn't hurt him a bit to discover at some point that he'd been outsmarted by his superior.

The next day, Beckett summoned Sparrow to meet with him in the afternoon, in his private home office.

Sparrow arrived at the appointed time, and was shown in. The servant announced his presence at Beckett's office door, then stepped aside to allow him to enter.

Sparrow came into the office, dressed much as he had been the previous day. He had already doffed his hat, and held it beside him as he paused before Beckett's desk. He regarded his employer, his face blank, but his stance was definitely wary.

Cutler Beckett smiled slightly. "Thank you for coming, Mr. Sparrow. Please . . . take a seat." He waved at a leather chair he'd had brought in from the library for this purpose, figuring that Sparrow couldn't dirty the leather the way he might the damask upholstery.

Sparrow looked faintly surprised, but obediently sat down and waited expectantly. "I've been reviewing your logbook, Mr. Sparrow," Beckett said, and produced it, still wrapped in the protective cloth. He slid it across the inlaid desk, back towards the first mate. "And I have been interviewing members of your crew."

"Yes, sir." Sparrow nodded.

"I've come to the conclusion that the EITC owes you rather a debt, Mr. Sparrow," Beckett said. "You handled an uncomfortable, inherently dangerous situation with logic and personal . . . charm . . . it seems. And thus saved the company a considerable sum of money."

"Thank you, Mr. Beckett," Sparrow said, obviously pleased and more than a little relieved.

Cutler Beckett leaned forward in his ebony chair. "Generally, when EITC employees save the company money, I award them a nice bonus. Say, ten pounds."

Sparrow's wariness subsided. His expression brightened visibly.

"However," Beckett continued, "I suspect there are things you would much prefer to have rather than a monetary bonus, if I judge your character correctly." Beckett paused and saw a spark leap in Sparrow's dark eyes. "So . . . how would a promotion to captain suit you, as well as a vessel to command?"

Sparrow's eyes widened, and then he smiled. The smile slowly widened to an ecstatic grin. "Thank you! That would suit me very well indeed, Mr. Beckett! Are you talking about the *Fair Wind*?"

"No, I'm thinking of something a little . . . larger. With more cargo capacity," Bennett said. "The EITC has recently acquired a brand-new square rigger named *Marlin*." Quickly, from memory, Beckett summarized the ship's vital statistics, her "tons burthen," length, and rig. "Does that sound like something you would enjoy commanding, Captain Sparrow?"

Sparrow's grin widened as he heard his new title spoken aloud for the first time. He nodded. "It certainly would, Mr. Beckett. Where is she? When can I take her out?"

"She's here in Calabar, having refitting done. They should be done by the end of the week. Then we load up your cargo and you can set sail, Captain Sparrow." Beckett was indulging his new "acquisition," because it was so evident that hearing that those words made Sparrow want to leap up and down like a child at Christmastide.

But something wasn't right. Beckett watched as Sparrow's grin vanished, and the tense wariness reappeared. "Refitting, Mr. Beckett? I thought you said she was brand new."

"She is. But her cargo area needs to be refitted to handle her projected cargo. The shipwrights tell me she'll be able to haul nearly 300. With a cargo that size, you're sure to have at least 200 arrive in Barbados alive and ready for sale."

Sparrow looked at him, clearly understanding now what Beckett meant. Then, slowly, he shook his head. "No."

"No?" Beckett wasn't used to that word from subordinates.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Beckett. I'm not your man. I'll haul any cargo you assign me, even powder, dangerous as that can be. But I won't transport slaves." Jack Sparrow's expression was

carefully blank, and only the tightness of his jaw muscles betrayed any emotion. Still, Beckett sensed for the first time that this man had depths he hadn't begun to glimpse.

Beckett was surprised, and allowed his reaction to show. He sat back in his expensive chair, and his gray eyes locked with Sparrow's dark gaze for a long moment. "You surprise me, Mr. Sparrow," he said, finally. "This is an . . . extraordinary position for a man to take in these modern times. The slave trade isn't a pleasant business, granted, but it is extremely lucrative. It's very good business. One can't afford these days to be . . . finicky."

"I know how profitable it is, Mr. Beckett," Sparrow said. "But I'm not getting involved with it."

"Can you tell me why, Mr. Sparrow?"

Jack Sparrow shrugged, and his eyes grew distant, as if he were experiencing some vivid memory. His mouth tightened. "Mr. Beckett, did you know you can smell a slaver coming for miles, if the wind is right, on the open sea?"

"Can you?"

"Yes. The stench is enough to put a sailor off his burgoon for a whole day. So let's just say, Mr. Beckett, that I don't like the way they smell, and leave it at that."

"Very well," Beckett said. He watched, enormously intrigued, as Sparrow stood up and retrieved his logbook. Who was this man, and what was his story? He was so different from most sailors. There was something wild about him, something . . . untamed. He watched as Sparrow walked across the room, and paused by the doorway.

"Thank you, Mr. Beckett, for the offer. I'll just stay aboard *Fair Wind*, sir, as first mate, if that's agreeable to you."

*This man is actually going to turn me down, Beckett realized, and then he thought, I can't let him go. He has too much potential. He might make an excellent operative for me in foreign ports, if I can gain his complicity. He's smart and observant. If he proves trustworthy, he might be very valuable to me . . .*

“Just a moment,” Beckett said, making a sudden decision. “Come back, Sparrow. Perhaps we can make a different . . . arrangement.”

Slowly, Sparrow turned and walked back into the room. He paused before his employer's desk, but didn't sit down when Beckett waved at the leather chair. “What do you mean, Mr. Beckett?”

“I mean that for some reason, I'm inclined to indulge you, Sparrow.” Beckett shook his head. “I have another ship. It's one I actually own. It's an older ship. The shipwrights have told me that converting her hold to haul slaves would be expensive, and rather time-consuming, so I bought her for hauling other cargos.” Beckett looked up at Sparrow. “She's called the *Wicked Wench*. Would you like to sail her for me, Captain Sparrow?”

Jack Sparrow smiled. “Yes, I would, sir. I'd be pleased to do that.”

“Very well, then, Captain. Why don't we have a glass of claret to seal the bargain?”

He suspected that Sparrow would have preferred rum, the sailor's drink of choice, but Beckett didn't keep any. He considered it vulgar. Getting up, he went over to his cabinet and took out two glasses and a bottle, then poured. When he reached Sparrow to hand him his glass of wine, he found him studying the bookshelves. “Here you go,” he said.

“Thank you, Mr. Beckett.” Sparrow took the delicate glass carefully. He must have washed his hands, but they were stained with ground-in dirt. His nails were deplorable. Standing side by side, they both regarded the collection tables and bookshelves, while sipping their wine.

“I’ll fill out the paperwork to make the adjustments to your records, Captain. Your pay rate and such.” Beckett sipped his own wine, then added. “Feel free to take your friend Mr. Greene along with you, if you wish.”

Sparrow nodded. “I’d like that, Mr. Beckett. We’ve shipped out together for several voyages now. Robby is a good sailor and a good officer.” Almost absently, Sparrow reached out for the netsuke collection on the nearest shelf.

Beckett stepped smoothly between those questing fingers and his little jade valuables. “I’d rather you didn’t,” he said, politely. “Some of them are fragile.”

“Of course,” Sparrow said, dropping his hand to his side. “Sorry, Mr. Beckett.”

Searching for a way to change the subject, Beckett gestured at the bookshelves. “You read, Captain Sparrow? I mean, for pleasure?”

Sparrow sipped more claret before replying. “Yes I do, Mr. Beckett, when I can find books to take on voyages with me.”

“What kinds of things?”

Sparrow shrugged. “Poetry, history, biography . . . I like learning about the world.”

“Shakespeare?”

“Some of his plays, most of his poetry.”

“Ah, very good,” Beckett said, surprised again. “Tell me, what do you think of my collection? I keep my favorite books close to me, though, of course, I have the entire library next door.”

“Nice collection,” Sparrow said. “I’ve read only a few of them. My favorite would be this one,” he said, pointing. “I have a copy of it. Read it many times. As a lad, it was one of my favorites.”

Beckett followed his finger (those filthy fingernails!) and his eyes widened. “You’ve read Captain Ward’s book?”

“Aye, I have.” Sparrow was relaxing a bit, to let that “aye” slip, Beckett noted. Up till now, his word choice and accent had been perfect, nearly as flawless as Beckett’s own decidedly upper class speech.

“One of my tutors gave it to me, when I was just a boy,” Beckett said. “He taught me Latin and Greek.”

“My fa-“ Sparrow hesitated, then continued, smoothly, “that’s a coincidence, sir, because the man who taught me to sail eventually gave me his copy. I suppose you could say he was one of my tutors.”

Beckett sensed there was a story behind that hesitation, but he also knew that it wasn’t one he was going to hear. Sparrow’s expression was bland as he reached over and took down *My Lyfe Amonge the Pyrates*. “I used to imagine going after the treasures mentioned in this book.”

“So did I,” Beckett said. “And here we are on the west coast of Africa.”

Sparrow caught his meaning immediately. There was nothing slow about this man. He quirked an eyebrow at his employer. “The treasure that lies at the center of the labyrinth of Zerzura,” he said. “Gold, jewels, and the Heart of Zerzura. All of it hidden on an illusion-shrouded island off the west coast of Africa.”

“Yes,” Beckett said. Reaching over, he took the volume from Sparrow, and placed it back in its slot. “Don’t think the thought of mounting a search for Zerzura hasn’t occurred to me, Captain. That was nearly the first thing I thought of, when I reached my new assignment.”

“The only problem with legends like that,” Sparrow pointed out, “is that most of them don’t include treasure maps.” His expression was perfectly serious, and it was a moment before Beckett realized that he was speaking with his tongue firmly in his cheek.

Cutler Beckett laughed. “You’re right,” he said. “That is jolly inconvenient of them, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Sparrow agreed, his dark eyes twinkling with amusement. Raising his wineglass, he finished the last sip of his claret and put the delicate crystal down on the ebony desk. “Well, Mr. Beckett, thank you again for the promotion and the drink. I’ll be off now, to find the *Wicked Wench* and take a look at her.”

Beckett nodded, then he smiled and raised his own glass in a slight salute. “Here’s to your first command, Captain.” He finished his own claret. “You’ll find your vessel at the EITC berthing docks. She’s the largest square-rigger on the southern side.”

In reply, Sparrow put his two hands together, chest-high, bobbing a slight bow. Beckett’s eyes widened. “You’ve been to the Orient?”

“Aye. Singapore. And other places.”

“I was stationed in Nippon for three years,” Beckett said.

“I can tell,” Sparrow said, blandly. “Very nice collection of netsuke.”

Turning, he walked to the doorway. “Goodbye, Mr. Beckett.”

“Goodbye, Captain Sparrow.”

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