

Here is the fourth excerpt from *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Price of Freedom*. It is taken from Chapter One, titled “Fair Winds and Black Ships” and, as far as I know, it’s the first place in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* “mythos” where the location of Shipwreck Cove – or one of them, at any rate – is actually divulged. Enjoy!

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Shipwreck Island was naught but 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. Even 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 crew 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 each other, 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 part of Shipwreck City had its own story—though in most cases those stories were long lost to the dust of history or myth.

Shipwreck City did not live by clocks, or even by day and night. At any time, one could find taverns, brothels, pubs, gaming houses, or combinations of all three open and doing a lively business.

Three quarters of the way up the tower of ships, what had once been the Spanish treasure galleon *Our Lady of Divine Inspiration* (some witty pirate had modified this to “Our Lady of Divine Inebriation”) had been converted into a tavern that was publicly known as The Drunken

Lady. One hot afternoon in midsummer, with all of The Drunken Lady's ports opened wide to catch any possible breezes, Jack Sparrow and his companion, Christophe-Julien de Rapière, captain of the pirate vessel *La Vipère*, sat drinking rum and playing Hazard.

Jack had long ago removed his coat and battered tricorn. He blotted sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, then blew on his dice, shook them vigorously in the little cup, blew on them again and tossed them onto the table. They bounced, spun, and rolled to a stop. Jack winced. His companion laughed gleefully, while scooping up the pieces of eight. "I win again, Jacques! It is my day, not yours!"

"He who wins the day must buy the drinks," Jack said, holding out his tankard to show it was empty. "It's traditional."

His companion laughed. "Another Jack Sparrow tradition. Why is it they always involve rum?" He waved to the barkeep. "Etienne! More rum!"

The barkeep, an enormous, hulking figure of an Englishman, rolled his eyes as he poured. "Don't give me any of yer furrin' jabber, Christophe," he cautioned, moving towards his customers with the halting stride caused by his injured left leg and hip. "It's *Steve*. 'Tis a good English name, good enough for me dad, and sure as the devil, good enough for me. I'll thank ye to remember it." He plunked the tankards down on the scarred tabletop.

Christophe chortled as he raised his drink. "But Etienne rolls so beautifully off the tongue, *mon ami!*"

Jack had known Christophe de Rapière for years. The captain was the youngest man to command a pirate ship Jack had ever met. He was in his early thirties, Jack's senior by more than a decade, and he was a dashing figure of a pirate. He was taller than Jack, with curling black hair, flashing dark eyes, and a rakish moustache and beard. He was always meticulously

groomed, and a good portion of his share of *La Vipère*'s spoils went towards his wardrobe. At the moment, despite the heat, he was tricked out in a crimson coat with silver and blue embroidery, with a blue vest beneath it. His britches were also blue, and his tall boots, with their folded-over tops, were custom made from finest Spanish leather. Lace-trimmed ruffles frothed from his sleeves and throat like the whitest of seafoam. At the moment he was relaxing, so his black leather baldric with the silver buckle was slung over the back of his chair. His sword was Toledo steel, the guard and pommel chased with gold and silver.

At the moment, his handsome features were slackened slightly by the amount of rum he'd consumed, but Jack knew he could probably still defeat most of the denizens of Shipwreck City in a swordfight.

Jack envied his friend's skill with a sword. Two months ago Christophe had volunteered to give him lessons, and the younger man had been quick to accept. The older pirate proved to be a good, if exacting, instructor, and Jack could already tell his technique was better. Christophe drained his tankard, and plunked it down. "Steve!" he shouted. "More rum! And don't serve me yourself, you big lout of an Englishman, send your sweet little French wife!" Scowling, Steve Seymour collected their tankards and refilled them. For a moment Jack thought the barkeep might refuse the pirate captain's order, but Christophe was well known for being generous to an attractive serving wench. Gruffly, he called, "Marie!"

Moments later, Steve's wife appeared. Marie Seymour was as petite as Steve was large, with soft brown hair, pretty features, and a pleasant voice. In sharp contrast to the other women of Shipwreck City, she wore a gray-blue dress with a modest neckline and long sleeves. A long white apron tied at her waist accented her slender figure. Carrying the tankards over, she placed

them before Jack and Christophe with a smile. “Your drinks, *messieurs*. Will there be anything else?”

For a moment Jack thought that Christophe would make a vulgar suggestion, but instead the captain smiled and took out a coin. “There you go, *m’ amie*,” he said. “Something for your trouble.”

The early afternoon sunlight, shining through the stern windows, picked up the gleam of gold. Marie’s eyes widened, then she took the doubloon and bobbed a curtsy. Flustered, she murmured. “*Merci beaucoup, m’ sieur*,” and curtsied again. Clutching the coin, she backed away. “*Merci, merci . . .*”

Jack gave his companion an incredulous glance. “A doubloon for a barmaid?”

Christophe laughed, his dark eyes holding a glint of mockery. “Why not?” he asked. “It pleased me to share my treasure.”

If Jack had been a fox, his ears would have pricked up. “Treasure?” He knew Christophe was baiting him, but he couldn’t sit still and let the remark pass. No decent pirate could.

The captain laughed and wagged a finger at Jack. “Do you think I will give away all my secrets? I came upon this little . . . hoard . . . of Spanish gold last month. They were old coins. Probably came from some mission along the coast where some *Padre* concealed them against attack, and died before he could reveal their whereabouts. Not a large chest, no.” He made a smallish shape with his hands. “But it was worth our trouble to acquire it, *mon ami*.”

“You got it from a Spanish vessel?”

“*Oui*. Along with a respectable take of silver ingots and some very fine tobacco.”

Christophe smiled. “They put up a good fight, those Spaniards. One must respect them for it.”

Jack nodded. He didn't much care for fighting. It was much safer, not to mention more challenging, to gain a prize by outwitting an opponent. The idea of treasure hunting had always appealed to him, and he'd had some experience at it, in his younger days. "For a moment there, I thought you'd stumbled onto the lost treasure of the Incas," he joked. "You know, the one that Pizarro, in his arrogance, lost."

Christophe didn't have Jack's knowledge of history. "Pizarro? Those Spaniards! Always losing their treasure," he said, with an impatient wave. "What I'd like to lay my hands on would be the Treasure of Cortes."

Jack managed not to roll his eyes. "You and every other buccaneer for the last hundred and fifty years," he said. "Nobody knows what happened to it. Even Captain Ward didn't record any legends concerning it."

"Who is this Captain Ward?" Christophe asked. "And what treasures did he record?"

"I'm surprised no one has translated the book," Jack said. "It was published in England about fifteen years ago. Sold very well, I gather. *My Lyfe Amonge the Pyrates*, by Capt. J. Ward. Teague gave me his copy to read when I was just a lad. In one of the chapters Captain Ward regales the reader with tales of treasures from all the pirates he encountered. Some of the legends go way back, hundreds, even a thousand or more years."

"*Sacre dieu!* I must find myself a copy of this book!" said Christophe. "Which is your favorite legend, *mon ami?*"

"Oh, I don't know," Jack mused for a moment, then brightened. "There's the one about the island that sank beneath the waves because the streets were paved with gold. Or, wait? Am I mixing them up?" He ruminated for a moment. "Actually, it's rather a nuisance when everything

turns into all one thing. One time in New Orleans, I—” Jack stopped himself just in time. It didn’t pay to babble about magical adventures.

Christophe blinked at him a bit owlishly. “I heard about that one,” he said. “They said it sank beneath the waves because it was cursed.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Of course it did. There’s always a bloody curse, isn’t there? Why do so many treasures have bloody curses associated with them, anyway?” He swirled the last of his rum in his cup and then drank, feeling the sweet fire course down his gullet.

Christophe grimaced. “Surely there are some without curses, *mon ami*?”

“Oh, sure,” Jack agreed. “Lessee . . . there was a big haul of Viking gold they say is buried up there on the coast of some land of ice.” He shivered. “Don’t much like cold, me. I’d rather stay down here in the Caribbean. And there are tales of treasures on magical isles in England and Ireland. Glastonbury, Camelot, Avalon, that sort of thing.”

“But England is a long sail away, Jacques. By the time we reached it, the leaves would have fallen, and the weather would be miserable,” Christophe pointed out. “Rain, rain, nothing but cold, wet rain. Something closer to hand would suit us. Ah, I have it! They say Henri Morgan robbed a Spanish monastery of a gold cross and chalice,” Christophe traced a pattern in spilled rum on the tabletop. “The monastery was located somewhere on the coast of Panama. We could go after that, Jacques.”

Jack waved his empty cup; Marie hurried forward to fill it again. “I dunno, mate. Robbing churches—that’d be tempting fate. Might as well mess with a curse, eh? No, I’d rather stick to digging up buried treasure or finding some ancient tomb or something. They say the pharaohs were all buried with heaps of gold and gems. Picture us finding some old pharaoh’s final resting place.”

“*La Vipère* has too much draft to make it up the Nile, Jacques,” Christophe pointed out, smiling and winking at Marie as she refilled his cup. He had perfect teeth, Jack noted sourly. Jack was a good dozen years younger, and already had a gold tooth. Life just wasn’t fair. “Besides . . . didn’t those Egyptian priests have magical powers? You want to talk about curses, *mon ami* . . .” Christophe trailed off and took a long swig.

“Oh, right,” Jack said. “That’s true. No Egyptian tombs, then.” He thought for a moment. “They say the Templars hid tons of treasure. They say it would take a fleet of ships to haul it all away. And they say they had several caches of it. There are hidden treasure maps and ciphers and such.” Jack sat back, ruminating. “They set traps to deter thieves. Some of those traps were mechanical. But others . . .” he ran his tongue along the edge of his cup, to catch the last drop of rum. “Other traps were unnatural. Magical guardians, undying sorcerers . . . like that.” He sighed. “I bloody well *hate* those magical undying sorcerers, mate. They can take all the fun out of a treasure quest.”

Christophe threw back his handsome head and laughed uproariously. “Listen to us! We must be drunker than usual, *mon ami*! Talking seriously of magic! Next thing you know, we’ll be discussing making love to sirens and mermaids!”

Jack managed a laugh, but it wasn’t a hearty one. He’d been exposed to magic—and mermaids, sirens, ghosts, sorcerers and sea monsters—too many times as a lad to scoff at them now. *I ought to introduce you to Tia Dalma*, he found himself thinking. *She’d set you straight, mate, and right quickly, too . . .*

But he said nothing. Tia Dalma was not someone you spoke of lightly. Jack could feel the slight bump within the waistband of his britches where he always stored the compass she’d given

him. But that, too, was something he never spoke of, much less revealed. In its own way, it, too, was a treasure.

He found himself thinking of one of his favorite legends. Pirates spoke of it sometimes, and it was mentioned in Captain Ward's book. Jack dug dirt from beneath his thumbnail, then looked up at Christophe. "Ever hear of the Legend of Zerzura? The Shining City?"

Christophe frowned slightly. "Sounds familiar, *mon ami*. Somewhere near *Afrique, non?*"

"That's right. Off the coast of Africa, they say. An island. It's one of those places that can't be seen by mortal sight. Hidden from view by magic, illusion, that sort of thing."

Christophe's brow furrowed. "Treasure?" he asked after a moment, recalling what was, after all, the most important thing.

"Indubitably," Jack said. He was proud of himself for pronouncing every syllable with perfect clarity.

"Ah!" Christophe perked up considerably. "Gold?"

"Heaps of it," Jack assured him. "But that's not the most important treasure. There's this labyrinth, y'see –"

Christophe excitedly pounded his fist onto the table, knocking over his cup. Fortunately, it was empty. "*Zut alors!* I'll bring a wheelbarrow. Or a mule. Or both!"

"Good idea," Jack said, dryly. "As I was saying, about this labyrinth...if you can get through it, through the illusions and magical pitfalls, when you reach the center, that's where the best swag is. Silver . . . gold . . . jewelry and coins...but the greatest treasure there, you could hold in your two hands." He held his hands cupped, not quite touching each other. "It's at least...er, least . . . this big."

"What is it?" Christophe demanded, his black eyes gleaming.

“The Heart of Zerzura. It’s a jewel . . . but not just a jewel. It’s a shor—er, source of tremendous magical power. It’s the source of all the power that keeps the island hidden. It rests in the hands of some heathen god, they say. An ape-god . . .” Jack frowned. “No, wait. Not an ape. A kitty cat?” He waved his hand dismissively. “Never mind that now. We’ll know it when we see it.”

“A kitty cat god is there? Holding a magical something? On an island that nobody can find?” Christophe was frowning and shaking his head. “That doesn’t sound—”

Before the pirate captain could finish his comment, there came a scream of rage, and the meaty sound of a punch. Jack and Christophe, moving with commendable speed for two men who had consumed as much rum as they had, sprang out of the way as a large pirate landed between them, smashing their table to flinders. Christophe barely had time to scoop the coins out of the way before the impact, while Jack saved the half-full bottle of rum.

It took Steve the barkeep several seconds to limp over to the still-upright combatant, grab him, and hoist him howling off the floor; then pivoting, the huge man pitched the brawler through the large, open port that, fortunately, overhung the cove. There followed a diminishing scream, then a faint splash. Steve stood regarding the unconscious pirate lying amid the remains of the Hazard table. “Who started it?” he asked, belatedly.

Several onlookers hastily volunteered that the aggressor had already been dealt with. Steve grunted, then matter-of-factly splashed half a bucket of seawater on the recumbent pirate, who sat up groggily. He was hauled to his feet and assisted out of the tavern by his friends.

Christophe resumed his seat, and looked at Jack over the remains of their table. “So . . . where were we?”

Jack shrugged. “Haven’t the faintest . . . oh. Yes. We were on the Lost Island of Zerzura, making our way toward the giant gemstone of power. Figuratively speaking, of course,” he added absently, looking around for his chair.

Christophe nodded. “When you described it, I remembered. There’s something in the legend about how you have to have a talisman so you can open the entrance to the labyrinth, *oui?*”

Jack nodded, impressed. Christophe often tended to be a lot smarter—and more sober—than he let on. “That’s it, mate. What I couldn’t think of earlier. Talisman. A ring??” he scowled down at the rum bottle in his hand, cogitating, then absent-mindedly righted his chair, sat down in it, and took a long pull from the bottle. He handed it to Christophe.

The rum proved a memory charm. Jack snapped his fingers. “No, not a ring. But round. A bracelet! That’s it. Yes, there’s a talisman in the shape of a bracelet. It’s got the kitty cat god’s head on it.”

“*Bien!* We shall go find this island! When shall we set sail, *mon ami?*”

Jack opened his mouth to shout “Tomorrow!” but then shut it as memory struck. Teague! Of course it would be Teague who would spoil his plans! Jack scowled.

Captain Teague had mentioned a few days ago that he expected Jack to set sail with him, and that they’d be leaving in a week. Teague wanted to sail north to investigate the rumors of rogue pirates wreaking havoc on merchant ships of all countries, both in the Atlantic and the Pacific. At first when Teague, as Keeper of the Code, had heard that the Royal Navies of several countries were beginning to escort merchant convoys to protect them against ruthless rogue pirates, he’d been inclined to dismiss the rumors.

But as time went by, the rumors continued and grew more numerous. It had been a full six months since Shipwreck Cove had first heard tales about rogue pirates callously slaughtering both crew and passengers without provocation. Only a scant handful of survivors had managed to escape death by playing dead.

The rogues were reported to fly the black skull and crossbones, plus a red flag that sported a demon's horned head. Traditionally, a red flag flown by naval vessels promised a fight to the finish in wartime. But for pirates the tradition was different. Flying a red flag signaled "no quarter" to any ship's crew that resisted, but guaranteed the safety of all aboard if the ship surrendered without a fight. But these rogues did not follow that tradition. What they wrought was wholesale butchery, wanton murder, even towards ships that surrendered without firing a shot. This behavior was in direct violation of the Code. It was Teague's responsibility, as Keeper of the Code, to investigate. And he expected to Jack to accompany him.

Heading for Africa with Christophe sounded like a much more interesting way to spend the next few months than sailing around aimlessly looking for ships sporting red demon flags. Jack sighed. "I'd love to, mate. But..." he turned his head to gaze out the open port, carefully keeping his features from betraying his thoughts. His relationship with the Keeper of the Code was . . . complicated. On one hand, Jack Sparrow longed for nothing more than to be free of Teague and his orders forever. On the other hand, he wished that before he departed forever, he could, for once, gain the captain's respect. "You really mean it? I can join your crew?"

"But of course!" Christophe assured him, and then upended the bottle to polish off the last of the rum. "No doubt there would be many ships we could take in between here and Afrique. Ivory, gold, black gold . . . Afrique is a rich hunting ground for the wolves of the sea."

*Black gold? Jack wondered. Oh. He means slaves. I want no part of that . . .*

Jack opened his mouth, not knowing exactly what he was going to say, but was saved from having to compose a remark when his eye caught a glimpse of movement through the open window. He swung around to look. A ship was coming into the cove from the tunnel through the mountain, a good-sized frigate that was as graceful and trim as any he'd seen. Hastily, Jack beckoned Christophe to join him. Together they stood looking down, watching her arrive at the dock. Her sails hung limp in the midday heat, so she was being towed by two longboats. "I've never seen her like, except those built for the Royal Navy," Jack said, marveling. "A frigate . . . a bloody frigate! And not just any frigate, a Blackwall frigate! They can sail rings around most ships."

"*Mon dieu*, so she is! Let us go welcome this pirate who has managed to acquire for himself such a beautiful ship!"

"I'm with you," Jack said. His curiosity was fully aroused. Scooping up his effects, he followed Christophe out of The Drunken Lady, and into the crazy-angled, many-leveled passageways that connected the piled-up ships. Experienced as they were at navigating the intricate, twisting byways of Shipwreck City, it still took the pirates nearly twenty minutes to work their way down the tower of heaped ships to dock level. By the time they emerged into the sun, the frigate was being tied up at the dock. Jack strode out of the shadow of Shipwreck City, tugging his coat into place, then running a hand over his unkempt hair before clapping his tricorne on his head. Squinting in the sun after the gloom of the passageways, he saw the frigate's name painted on her bow. *Venganza*.

As Jack and Christophe started along the quay, heading for the dock where *Venganza* was now berthed, an imposing figure in a foppish coat and be-plumed hat stepped out from a knot of

onlookers ahead of them and started up the dock towards the ship. Jack hesitated, then stumbled, nearly falling. Christophe grabbed his elbow. “Too much rum, *mon ami*?”

Jack flushed, and was glad for the shadow of his hat and his deep tan. “I’m fine,” he said curtly, shaking off his friend’s grasp.

But his strides shortened. He didn’t want to meet up with Teague. Somehow, Edward Teague, Pirate Lord and Keeper of the Code, had a knack for making Jack feel young and foolish. He wasn’t sure just how Teague managed it, but he’d experienced it many times. His eyes narrowed, and he squared his shoulders. *Damn it. I’m not going to let him control where I go or what I do!*

Jack’s strides lengthened until he had almost caught up with Christophe. Ahead of them, a gangplank had been slid into place, so *Venganza*’s crew could move easily between ship and dock.

Ahead of them, Captain Teague stopped, and raised his voice to be heard over the everyday bustle of the docking area. “Ahoy, *Venganza*! “

Jack heard another voice, fainter, coming from the frigate. “Ahoy, Captain Teague! The Pirate Lord of the Caribbean presents his compliments!” Jack frowned, searching his memory. That was . . . Don Rafael. Yes. He’d seen him years ago, when he was about nine, and remembered a burly, weathered Spaniard with iron-gray hair. The Pirate Lord had been accompanied by his granddaughter, Esmeralda, a short, chubby brat six years older than Jack. One time Jack had teasingly yanked her thick black braid, and she’d pounced on him and given him a thrashing that had left him bruised for days.

Jack scowled at the memory.

He had just stepped onto the dock where *Venganza* was now moored when a heap of rags thrown against a barrel suddenly stirred, and stood up. “Jack Shparrow!” the rags exclaimed. “You owe me 14 sh-shillings! Pay up!”

Jack groaned inwardly. Christophe snickered. Jack looked closer at the rag-man and realized he knew him. “Baldy” Malone. And yes, Jack did owe him money. But, thanks to Christophe, his purse was now as empty as it had been that night at the gaming table. Jack essayed a friendly smile. “Baldy!” he exclaimed. “What a coincidence! I was just on my way to meet up with a mate that owes me twenty shillings. And the very next thing on my list was to come find you and settle up. Before you can dance a jig, mate, I’ll be back with the money.”

Baldy had obviously been sleeping off a bender, and he hadn’t slept nearly long enough to even glimpse sobriety. He stood there, swaying slightly, his already wrinkled brow wrinkling even further as he attempted to follow what Jack had told him. After several seconds, he abandoned the attempt. Fumbling in his purse, he pulled out Jack’s marker and waved it at him. “You owe me, Shpaarrow! Pay up!”

Jack glanced over at Christophe, wondering if he could get the money from his friend, but Christophe was turned away, studying the frigate’s clean lines and her graceful rigging. “Sorry, mate,” he told Baldy, “you’ll have to wait. I don’t have it at the moment.”

Baldy glared at Jack out of bloodshot eyes, then drew his dagger. “Then I’ll take it out of your hide!” He lurched towards the younger man.

Smoothly, Jack stepped back, drawing his cutlass as he did so. With a practiced flick of his wrist, he separated the dagger from its owner, and sent it soaring into the air. The weapon spun silver in the sunlight, then splashed into the water of the cove and sank with scarcely a ripple.

Baldy stood looking at his empty hand for long seconds as though he couldn't believe the weapon was gone. Jack sheathed his weapon. "Sorry, mate," he said. "Listen, I really will get you your money. Just a temporary shortage, I assure—"

He broke off as Baldy, with a howl that would have done credit to a rabid wolf, launched himself at him, hands outstretched and reaching for Jack's throat. Jack carefully clipped the old pirate on the jaw as he stepped aside, expecting him to fold up into a heap again, but he'd miscalculated the amount of rum Baldy had ingested. The man never even felt the blow. He changed the angle of his charge and came on.

*Time to end this*, Jack thought. He knew Christophe was laughing at him, and he didn't even want to think about Teague's reaction. As Baldy rushed forward, Jack punched the old pirate in the stomach—hard.

This time, Baldy folded up. Grabbing his midsection, he bent double—and spewed used rum and food all over the dock. Jack danced backwards, but he was just a fraction of a second too late to save his boots. Baldy's inundation splashed all over them.

Jack stared down at his feet in consternation as Baldy slumped to the rough wood of the dock and lay still. Christophe dissolved into laughter. Jack felt heat in his face that had nothing to do with the fierce sun beaming overhead. He stood there, looking around desperately for a handy bucket of water, but none appeared. "Ah, Jacques!" gasped Christophe, after his initial fit of hilarity had passed, "You should have seen the look on your face, *mon ami!*"

Jack scowled. For a second he was tempted to kick the unconscious Baldy into the water. "Go ahead," Christophe urged him, reading his mind. "Why not?"

Jack's mouth tightened and he shook his head. The old pirate was out cold. If he pushed him into the water, there was a good chance Malone would drown without regaining

consciousness. After a second Jack stepped over to his recumbent attacker and managed to wipe his boots off on some of the rags that served the old pirate for clothing.

When he looked back up after finishing, it was to see Christophe at the end of the dock, doffing his hat with a gallant sweep and bowing with a grace worthy of the court of King Louis. Jack recognized Don Rafael as he stepped down from the gangplank, and then turned and offered his hand to . . .

Jack blinked. She was standing there, staring straight at him and it was obvious from her expression that she'd seen the entire incident. *Esmeralda?* Jack thought, blankly. *But . . . it can't be. She's . . . beautiful.*

The young woman who stood there gazing at Jack with an amused expression was dressed in the height of fashion. Her gown and hat were of rose-colored satin trimmed with ivory lace, and the color set off her olive skin and black hair perfectly. She hadn't grown any taller; she was still petite. But her figure could no longer be termed "chubby." Her gown, though modestly cut, revealed curves that made Jack determined to go over and greet her. He watched as Don Rafael assisted his granddaughter down the gangplank. As Esmeralda stepped onto the dock, she turned her attention to Christophe, who bowed over her hand, then kissed it. Esmeralda smiled at the Frenchman. Jack scowled.

With all his being he wanted to go over there, to bow over her hand every bit as gracefully as Christophe had. But he reeked of used rum. And despite his best efforts, there were still streaks of puke on his boots.

Jack turned with a jerk and strode away, back down the dock. As he passed the unconscious Baldy Malone, he aimed a furious kick at the old pirate's bare pate, but his foot didn't . . . quite . . . connect.