

ESPRIT DE LA ROSE

By Kaycee Browning

First Chapter Sample

CHAPTER ONE

A decorative flourish consisting of intricate, symmetrical scrollwork and floral patterns, centered below the chapter title.

SHE CLUTCHED THE rail with white-knuckled fingers, straining every sense yet hearing only the snap of sails and rush of water. Though it was midday, the *Sister Wench*'s wake looked like spilled ink spreading beneath a veneer of broken glass. Fingers of shadow seemed to stretch toward the gray horizon, shifting beneath the water, growing angrier . . . and stronger.

Cecilia quickly turned her back to the rail and leaned against it, breathing hard as her stomach roiled. Every crewmember within view gaped at the ocean, stock-still in the midst of forgotten duties, leaning against rigging high above or kneeling on the deck with rags clutched in their motionless hands. The clouds were angry too. They seemed to be shoving and pushing each other, vying for the darkest seat in the sky in order to watch the ship below.

Cecilia was no sailor, but even she knew that something uncanny was going on. Across the quarterdeck, Captain Lester gazed out across the blackened sea, one hand limply gripping the tiller. He did not move. She opened her mouth to shout but reconsidered. Instead, holding her cap to her head, she picked her way through shrouds and rigging to approach him. "Father."

He glanced at her from the corner of a red-rimmed eye. Cecilia leaned to the side to glimpse his other hand. A nearly empty wine bottle threatened to slip from his lax hold. She shifted to stand in front of this stranger who was her father, forcing him to see her. “Why is the water black?”

“It can’t have . . .” Captain Lester murmured. He looked her full in the eyes for a moment, and his chin firmed. His hand clenched the tiller. “Mr. Walker!” he shouted. “To the quarterdeck, if you please!”

Mr. Walker, the quartermaster, stumbled onto the quarterdeck, pointing wildly at the black ocean. “Captain! Captain, why . . . ? I thought—”

“I know. Take the tiller, Mr. Walker,” Captain Lester replied. “Cecilia, come.” He strode to the companionway and descended its steep steps. Cecilia scurried after him, following her father into the captain’s quarters, wincing as he let the door slam against her. She shut it quietly.

Captain Lester stormed across the room and sat down at his desk, staring at a thick, lumpy mound of cloth on its surface. He looked as though he might be sick.

Cecilia approached the desk to get a closer look. At first she saw only cloth. Then lightning flashed outside the paned window, and something simultaneously flashed between the folds. Part of the cloth fell aside, revealing the edge of a beautiful mirror. Its glass reflected perfectly, almost too perfectly, revealing crisp and harsh images. Pear-shaped diamonds adorned its frame, glittering even in the murky light allowed by the storm clouds.

Such a mirror must be worth a fortune.

“What is this, Father?” Cecilia asked. Why had her father not sold it when they restocked in Tortuga only a week ago? They had met no ships since leaving Tortuga’s port, so he must have possessed it while they were there.

“It’s why the sea’s turning black,” Captain Lester said. “I stole this from the Fee, and now they’re coming for me. They might be coming for my whole crew. For *you*.” A light seemed to dim in his red-rimmed eyes. He turned his back to the mirror and stared out the window, watching the dark ocean begin to throb and pulse with the shifting of the shadows. “I unwrapped it only to make sure . . .” His voice trailed off into hopeless curses.

Lightning flashed again, and a myriad of colors momentarily beamed from the mirror’s diamond edge, dotting the cabin walls. When the colors vanished, the darkness seemed even deeper.

“The Fee,” Cecilia repeated. She did not know the word, but somehow the way her father spoke it filled her heart with terrible foreboding. “What are the Fee? What are you talking about?”

Captain Lester gulped. “They’re monsters. Vicious, ruthless . . . they punish those they deem wrongdoers but reward those who help them.” He glared at the mirror. “I swore I’d never get into religion, and then I go and work for them. Same thing, really. And it’s hellish.”

The more he explained, the more confused Cecilia felt. “I don’t understand, Father! You worked for them? Why? How? Exactly what is that thing?” She pointed at the mirror.

“It summons them. I stole it, and now they’ve been called . . .” Captain Lester ran his hand over his thinning hair, knocking his battered tricorne hat askew. Cecilia opened her mouth to ask another question, but the captain’s low murmur stopped her. “That’s what we do, Cilla. The crew and I. I’m no privateer for England; I’m a privateer for the Fee. Ah!” With this exclamation, he turned a stricken glance her way but could not meet her eyes for more than a breath. “I should’ve left the mirror on land when I had the chance! But you see, Cilla, the Fee have gold and riches, and lots of it, too . . . I had to keep it, don’t you see?”

Cecilia could only shake her head. “No, Father. I don’t see.” His ramblings made little sense, and she was too confused to decipher them.

A strangled yell broke through the silence on deck as another lightning flash illuminated the stern window. The crew’s shouts and screams echoed with the thunder. Without another glance at Cecilia, the captain rushed from his cabin.

She stepped to the window and peered upward. The ocean was completely dark, empty, like a throbbing void barely visible against the expanse of gray skies. A thorn of lightning split the sky, and once more the tiny rainbows repelled the darkness then vanished.

Cecilia felt her eyes flooding, blurring her vision of the ocean and sky until all swirled together into a dark, writhing fog. Her father had his faults—so many that he would hang if certain people caught him! But Cecilia believed that, deep down, Captain Martin Lester must be a good man. He cared for this creaky old ship and for his men. From what little she had seen and heard, he was (mostly) fair when he dealt out wages to the crew. He was even willing to ferry his impertinent daughter across the ocean to England.

Or so he said. At present, weeks after leaving Bermuda, they still sailed the Caribbean Sea. She gave her head a quick shake. No, he would not lie to her. She would not believe he was a bad person.

Blinking away tears, she again glanced at the mirror. Would the Fee—whoever and whatever they were—would they *kill* her father?

Almost without thought, she wrapped the mirror firmly in the cloth, clutched it to her chest, swung the door open, and bolted up the companionway steps, stepping on her skirts and nearly falling more than once. “Father!” Her voice could not be heard above the shouting crew. “Father, please!”

He stood beside the tiller, a spare man of medium height, feet braced, chin high. “Please, you don’t have to die!” she said, and held the wrapped mirror out to him.

Mr. Walker yelped and leaped backward, eying the lump of cloth as though it were a death sentence. Captain Lester stared blankly at the proffered mirror.

Cecilia rushed on, her words spilling out so quickly she might almost choke upon them. “Return the mirror to the Fee. Apologize. If they disapprove of wrongdoers, surely they will forgive you if you take the right course of action!”

Captain Lester shifted his feet, his brave stance crumbling. “Cilla, the Fee aren’t—”

His eyes widened, staring beyond Cecilia.

She turned. The water surrounding the ship burst upward, rushing toward the sky like an upside-down waterfall. It arced above the topmost sails to form an inverted bowl over the ship, caging the vessel in an impenetrable prison. With the sky now obscured, the ship plunged into a blue darkness, its sails hanging limp in a dead calm. Multi-colored lights began appearing inside the wall of water, human-sized, perhaps slightly larger, and level with the ship’s deck. Red, green, violet, and more—all beautiful, and all painful to look upon. Cecilia forced her eyes to keep looking. Squinting and blinking, she peered at a silver-hued glow, wondering and dreading what she might soon see. As her eyes adjusted, she beheld the head and torso of a woman, the tail of a sea creature.

They were mermaids. They were the Fee.

How beautiful they appeared, with their flashing eyes and lustrous hair! But the beauty felt strained, as though it might burst into ugliness at the slightest breath. No one spoke for nearly a minute. Cecilia struggled to breathe and risked a glance at her father.

He drew a quivering breath then stepped toward the starboard rail, doffed his hat, and bowed awkwardly before the silver-haired Fee who somehow looked bigger than the others. "I'm Captain Martin Lester of the *Sister Wench*. Who might I have the honor of addressing?"

The creature regarded him with cold eyes. "We do not reveal our names to pirates."

Cecilia winced and stared at the back of the captain's head. He hated that title. *Don't be a fool, Father*, she silently pleaded with him. *It's just a word . . .*

Captain Lester thrust the cloth-wrapped mirror toward the Fee as if it were a sword. "The proper term is 'privateer,' ma'am, and you'd do good to remember that!"

Cecilia pressed her hand to her face. Oh, why did he have to be such a buffoon?

A sneer twisted the Fee's silver lips. "Indeed? Do privateers rob their employers and expect to go unpunished?"

Captain Lester lowered his arm. "No . . ."

"Well then," the Fee said, her voice weirdly prim and dreadful at the same time. "I believe punishment is in order. It's only fair. We have always seen fit to reward your spying, and now we see fit to punish your trespass."

Captain Lester donned and straightened his hat. "I accept whatever punishment you deal me."

"Your courage is admirable," the Fee said. "Return the stolen item and await justice."

Shuddering, Captain Lester uncovered the mirror and let the cloth fall to the deck. The diamonds shone in the stormy light, scattering prismatic color across the faces of the seething Fee. Thunder bellowed, and Cecilia thought she heard horrible insults in its echoes, though the cage of water muffled the full sound.

The Fee reached out her arms, the current of the water-wall forming foamy shackles around her wrists, and wrested the mirror from Captain Lester's hands. Lightning lit the ocean cage, and thunder crashed, and this time Cecilia knew she heard words.

Punishment. Punishment. Punishment.

One by one the Fee vanished, diving silently from the walls of water into the ocean outside the darkness of the dome, until only the silver Fee remained. She pointed the mirror glass at Captain Lester. Lightning flashed, and the mirror reflected a small beam of light.

A whirlpool appeared in the wall of water directly in front of Captain Lester. Nearby crew members shouted and scrambled as far from him as possible, grasping anything their hands could

find to protect themselves from the turbulence the whirlpool would certainly cause. The whirlpool widened and deepened. The ship began to pitch back and forth, side to side.

“Go in. You have no choice,” the Fee said. With a flick of her tail she swam out from behind the whirlpool, still pointing the mirror at the captain. She remained unaffected by the water’s turmoil, her face impassive.

But then she smiled. And it was a smirk of complete, cruel satisfaction.

Cecilia’s fists clenched. Slowly she edged away from the tiller. The Fee had not yet noticed her. The mirror shone starkly in the Fee’s light, casting unnaturally vivid colors across the quarterdeck: the blues too deep, the greens too bright, the reds too harsh. The Fee loosened her grip on the mirror, tilting it, and swept it to the side, its glass still facing Captain Lester. The whirlpool tilted, surging toward him, following the motion of the mirror.

The mirror controlled the whirlpool. It must, surely it must! Cecilia took another step toward the Fee. If she could take the mirror . . . If she could somehow snatch it from the Fee’s hand and shatter its glass, perhaps she could make the whirlpool disappear.

Another step. The Fee tilted the mirror again. The edge of the frame emerged through the water-wall, droplets falling from the glittering diamonds to the deck. The whirlpool surged forward.

Cecilia made a dash across the deck and grabbed the mirror with both hands. The Fee shrieked, slinging her arm backwards with unaccountable strength. Cecilia, her grip still firm upon the frame, felt her feet leave the deck, her side strike the rail.

Then she toppled and lost her hold on the mirror. For a moment she floated, suspended in the water-wall, and saw the ship’s blurry deck, her father’s ashen face . . . Then, jerked horribly to the side, she felt the world spin into a blur. Her lungs burned; water and motion and darkness were everywhere.

The whirlpool swallowed her whole.

End of Sample

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