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IMMORTAL ROSE

A Novel



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TEMPEST

Prologue

Days from now, when his mind dredged up the moment for the hundredth time in excruciating detail, he'd realize he'd failed before ever stepping foot in Fenwick's gleaming marble hall. Certainly before he'd clapped eyes on the old man in his leather chair beside the grand fireplace, besieged by lordlings who had flocked to him like cosseted lambs in search of a shepherd. Before, even, the man had downed his final gulp of whisky.

And damn it all if Hugh wasn't desperate for the smooth embrace of Fenwick's best after the day he'd had, stalking William Rosebourne's gleaming atrocity of a coach—the white lacquer speckled with enough carved roses to look poxed—all over town.

Hugh lifted his tumbler once more, resisting the gnawing urge to throw the drink back and be done with it. He'd been wetting his top lip with the same two fingers of whisky for the better part of an hour, each kiss of burning liquor a temptation.

But he never drank while working. That had been Uncle Giles's most sacred rule, the first of a thousand gleaming bits of wisdom dropped like polished coins into Hugh's palm: *a clear mind for a clear end*.

A thorned feeling swelled in his chest before he ruthlessly shoved it back down.

He leaned a shoulder against the emerald silk paper covering the walls, comfortably at home in the shadows fraying the edges of the card-room. Boisterous laughter erupted from a nearby game of whist, the men deep in their play. Through the swirl of cheroot and pipe smoke, cards fluttered between hands like plumed birds, inviting memories best forgotten.

None of it felt real to him. Not anymore. Not the games without real stakes, not the shallow discussions of politics, not the smirking portrait of the current home secretary gloating from the mantel in a room he'd paid lavishly to restore.

It had been an age since Hugh had been back here, and now he

If not for the traces of fairy magic in the House of Rosebourne perfumes, William Rosebourne's mortal remains would have withered to dust before he ever made it off the club's hallowed waiting list.

There was a movement at his left. Hugh tensed inwardly. *Not now, damn it.*

"Say, Foxcourt, do you mean to stand around and glower, or can I interest you in a game?"

"No cards for me tonight." Hugh gave the slurring lord a lazy grin. "A man needs to brood alone in the shadows now and then to cultivate an air of mystery."

Lord Menzies chuckled, the flush beneath his prodigious whiskers speaking to just how foxed he already was. "Right, yes, of course. Better if you don't play, in fact. My wife still hasn't forgiven me for losing the curricule to you, *ha ha!*"

Hugh's smile sharpened to a smirk. Conversation with Patricians was an exercise in patience, and as ruthlessly choreographed as any ballroom dance. Which, Hugh suspected, was why so many of them inevitably led back to horses.

As the man beside him droned on, extolling his fair daughter's virtues with the unsettling enthusiasm of a matchmaking mama, Hugh cut a quick glance toward Rosebourne, who had risen suddenly from his seat and summoned his hat, gloves, and cloak.

Finally, Hugh thought. *Blessed mercy.*

". . . we'd hoped that she might catch the eye of someone such as yourself, *ha ha!*"

"Don't let me keep you from your game, Menzies," Hugh interrupted, pushing away from the wall. "The hour's late, and I'm for home."

Menzies blinked, his soused mind slow to process that the conversation had ended and that he'd been dismissed in short order.

Rosebourne was nearly to the door, his head lowered like a bull poised to charge, by the time Hugh followed. The perfumer limped, favoring his left leg as always, his walking stick serving its actual function rather than as an ornament to trumpet his riches.

Hugh stopped only to retrieve his own belongings. He might have abandoned them in his haste to keep the man in his sight, but it would have drawn the wrong sort of attention. That was the real trick of this line of work: controlling when you wanted to be noticed.

His quick footfall echoed as he hurried down the marble steps. He spared a wary glance to the shadows caressing the columns lining the

stairs—the last, crumbling remnants of the ancient palace that had once stood on the site. Settling his topper back on his head, he nodded to the behemoth who served as the club’s porter and waited for him to drag the door open.

The dark street beckoned, as drowsy and alluring as a well-sated lover. The cool summer air bit at his senses, and he was grateful for the way it cleared the lingering smoke from his chest.

A blanket of damp clung to the city, a gift from a fleet-footed storm. For a single, precious hour, the rain had driven away Linden’s notorious reek. Now the familiar blend of excrement, sweat, and other assorted filth reasserted its rightful place.

Rosebourne stood off from the small crowd of gentlemen waiting for their coaches to be brought round, a no doubt perfumed handkerchief pressed to his nose. The light of the nearby lamps drew out the few remaining sparks of red in Rosebourne’s white hair. Strange, Hugh hadn’t ever noticed it before. Well, the man had the bad luck of having his full attention now.

Hugh was the portrait of insouciance as he sidled up to Rosebourne, joining him in the shallow pool of lamplight. Palpable distaste poured from the old perfumer as he eyed Lord Feathersby blissfully swaying with his eyes screwed shut, seemingly unaware he was humming “The Black Needle” for all those gathered to enjoy.

Rosebourne noticed Hugh then and sucked a tooth in displeasure. “I should have known you’d be slithering about.”

“Of course,” Hugh said pleasantly. “I count slithering among my many varied talents.”

The perfumer snorted beneath his handkerchief. “Out with it then.”

There was much Hugh enjoyed about Rosebourne, his ruthless annihilation of his competition chief among them. His bluntness was no exception. It was rather refreshing to skip the dance and get to the point for once.

“As surprised as you are to see me this evening, Mr. Rosebourne, I’m equally wondering at your own appearance here,” Hugh said, in that same agreeable tone. “Was I not clear when I told you that my order took precedence over all else, including creature comforts?”

“And was I not clear,” Rosebourne countered, “that I would make no attempt to fulfill your order until you acquired what I asked of you? Or do these many supposed talents of yours not extend to procurement?”

Hugh’s smile tightened. *Procurement?* The man may as well have

asked him to locate a teardrop in a lake. "My task is proceeding at pace. It's yours that has a deadline."

"Hmm, yes," Rosebourne said. "A rather pressing one, wouldn't you say?"

"And yet," Hugh said, spreading his hands between them, "here you are. I hadn't realized you were so eager to discover the endlessly creative ways I have of burning your world to the ground."

The rose-tipped cane creaked under the force of the perfumer's grip. "Were you aware, my lord," Rosebourne began, "that deceit smells sour, like spoilt milk?"

It took every ounce of Hugh's force of will to school his expression as the old man's words sank in. But he remembered now. Uncle Giles had told him of this years ago—the strange second thread of the family's unnatural fairyborn gift.

"Better than some of your more recent offerings, I'm afraid," Hugh said. "Half the sitting rooms in this city stink of candied violets and some infernal cousin to lavender."

"And fear," Rosebourne continued, ignoring this. "It reeks of wet fur."

Hugh drew in a humiliatingly sharp breath, as if he, too, could smell it wafting from the folds of his limp waistcoat and shirtsleeves. All those years he'd spent learning to control every aspect of himself, to tamp down on the simmering anger in his blood, to ease any hint of feeling from his expression—it was worthless in the face of magic such as this.

His breath came lighter, quicker, as if to match the rising beat of his heart. Bloody hell.

Something else, he ordered himself, *focus on something else*. He'd kill every feeling in his body before he offered them up to the man on a silver platter. Hugh was the one in control here. Not Rosebourne.

Not anyone else.

The creak of wheels against stone and the steady clop of hooves pierced the disdain curdling between them. Rosebourne craned his head, peering down the street, only to settle back with annoyance. It wasn't his.

"I was acquainted with the last Earl of Foxcourt," Rosebourne said. "Your great-uncle, wasn't he?"

Hugh's throat tightened as the man's face flashed before his eyes. "He employed your more . . . useful perfumes."

"As do you," Rosebourne said, pointedly. "I approve *every* such order, mind you."

A warning to cap off his night. Unbelievable. Hugh despised using the perfumes in question, but necessity trumped misgiving every time.

"I'd expect nothing less," Hugh said. "I'd only fear what might become of you, should the King no longer avert his gaze from your use of fairyborn magic."

Rosebourne barked out a laugh. "And deny himself his own yearly order? Risk the ire of his Patricians, who have grown so very fond of their scents? Perhaps he should concern himself more with what might happen should the rest of his subjects find out what they've been denied. My business would survive, boy. Would his reign?"

Hugh let his top lip curl. For a man who dabbled with oils, Rosebourne certainly enjoyed courting fire.

"*The social order must be preserved*," Rosebourne mocked. "And so, by law, the Patricians may keep their fairy relics and do with them as they please. They may purchase perfumes their *lessers* are not even permitted to know exist, as these noble, *godly* men"—he gestured to the throng of drunk lords—"can be *trusted*, having bred the tainted pagan fairy blood from their glorious lines. And all the while, fairy relics are ripped away from commonfolk, who can be sent to Fairgate Prison on the mere suspicion of using fairyborn magic."

"Where they serve at the King's pleasure," Hugh reminded him. "And now, so do you."

Rosebourne sniffed at the double entendre, dabbing at his nose with his handkerchief. Mint, Hugh noted. Had it been anyone else, he might have spared him a small measure of pity—or at least not enjoyed the man's obvious misery quite this much.

But another thought occurred to him. It *was* a misery, wasn't it? A perfumer's nose was their most prized asset, but the Rosebourne nose was something else entirely; like every strength, it could be made a weakness. Hugh would remember that. He would use it.

"You've his way—your great-uncle's." Rosebourne tapped his cane impatiently against the ground. "Smiling and smiling as you sharpen knives behind your back."

"Thank you," Hugh said.

"But blades cannot cut through poison, can they?" Rosebourne mused. "Tell me, did the air still reek of licorice when you found him?"

The familiar, sickening weight coiled in Hugh's chest. The image

painted itself in the shadows gathering at the edges of his vision. A body, twisted in on itself, forever contorted by the final throes of agony. The tracks of dried blood streaming from his eyes, his mouth, his nose, and, *God*, even his ears.

There had been so much of it, pooled on the ground beneath him like ink.

"And yet, the good people of Linden believe he sent himself on to his eternal reward," Rosebourne continued, "grateful to have the great, charitable Duke of Glenmoor succeed him as home secretary—why, you must have been thrilled the position stayed within the family. And to have him named regent in the event of the King's death . . . surely there's no greater honor."

Hugh gritted his teeth with such force he was surprised they did not crack.

"It is fortunate the customer in question did not become acquainted with *that* particular foreign scent," Rosebourne finished, just as his rolling abomination came into view. "Or else neither of us would be in the position of getting what we desire, hmm?"

Hugh shoved down the lingering sting of memory, the humiliation at having been so easily read. Down and down, into the numbing darkness he'd nurtured in his heart. "Quite."

The white coach rolled to a stop before them, and a footman, looking ruffled after a day of traipsing through the city, leapt down from his perch to open the door for his employer.

Rosebourne limped forward, seizing the young man's arm before he could move to place the steps beneath the door.

"Sir?" the footman asked, eyes widening as Rosebourne took a long, deep inhale.

Not finding whatever it was he'd been looking for, Rosebourne reared back, snapping for the coachman's attention. "What have I told you about that blasted polish? Do you mean to suffocate me before we reach the house?"

The coachman blinked owlishly at his employer. "But, sir—"

"Bah!" The old man stifled a sneeze, hauling himself into the dark heart of the coach. He held out a hand, blocking the footman from closing the door. "An update, Foxcourt. By tomorrow evening. You'll have your perfume then."

Hugh gave a sardonic bow. The unmitigated gall to give *him* an order. As the man's craggy face disappeared behind the carriage door,

Hugh heaved in a deeper breath, seeking whatever scent had so offended the man.

His brow creased. Linseed oil was hardly an assault to the senses, even for a more powerful nose. But if Rosebourne despised it . . . well.

Hugh smiled darkly. He'd be more than happy—*overjoyed*, in fact—to douse himself with the stuff before standing over the perfumer's shoulder to encourage the man to blend his little oils faster. And if Rosebourne still resisted, Hugh would personally coat every inch of the man's house, every blasted piece of furniture, in the polish until it became an inescapable reminder of the task he was neglecting.

Enjoying the thought immensely, Hugh watched Rosebourne's coach depart with a snap of the ribbons.

Go after him, he heard Uncle Giles's voice whisper in his mind. *The work is not finished.*

But it was, at least for this godforsaken day. Rosebourne lived but a short drive away, and Hugh had already put eyes on Briarwood Palace. Come morning, he would be the one haunting the man's doorstep.

Hugh turned, mulling which nearby street presented the best opportunity to find a hack.

"Where are you off to, Foxcourt?" someone called.

Someone—who? He couldn't recall now. Because in that moment, between one breath and the next, between the ask and the answer, the world turned to fire.

The heat found him first, scalding the air and his vision molten gold. A tidal wave of pressure roared behind him, tossing him to the ground with bone-crushing force.

No, there had been a smaller explosion first, hadn't there? A crack like thunder. Or had that only been his skull slamming against the cobblestones?

When Hugh came to, the sky was on fire, and somehow, impossibly, he was not dead.

His consciousness rose like the whorls of dark smoke around him. A sharp ache at his temple made itself known with a piercing intensity that was almost blinding. Ash caressed his face like the hands of a worried mother.

Hugh's eyes stung, watering as he forced them open, his throat aching with an unfinished cry. Smoldering debris was scattered around him. Hugh stared, not comprehending, not recognizing any of it.

Not until he saw the golden rose still burning in the nearby gutter.

The blasted ringing in his ears was unbearable as Hugh hauled himself upright. The world lurched violently as he staggered through the heavy veil of smoke and ash.

Too late—

He pressed a trembling hand to the back of his mouth to keep from retching. The ungodly stench of burnt hair and flesh overcame him as he made his way to the fiery heart of the street.

To the remains of a coach engulfed in flames so hot they burned blue.

Too late—

Bile heaved up his throat as Hugh dropped back to his knees. Hands reached for him. Voices muted by the screaming in his ears spoke, their lips forming frantic shapes. Faces he ought to have recognized, distorted by terror.

Too late—

They lifted him, dragging him away. He let them, willing the darkness back to him. But even behind his eyelids, the fires burned, incapable.

Always too late.

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Part One

Soliflore

Chapter One



If moonlight had a scent, it would surely be something like this: Airy white flowers—jasmine, night-blooming and lush, or even luminous tuberose. The cool, powdery kiss of orris, so very different from the golden warmth of the sun. And . . . perhaps the faintest hint of incense, for when the moon had gazed down upon a world ancient and wild.

Now that the moon's face had risen above the church steeple looming behind us, the dark air had turned into a silver satin ribbon and the rain-slick cobblestones into lovely dark pearls. On most nights, the bright, ethereal glow of a full moon was a gift.

But to a Midnight Market, it was a betrayal.

"Three silvers!" the man scoffed, slamming the small bottle back down.

The plank we'd balanced over two barrels wobbled precariously, the whole endeavor on the verge of collapse. Beside me, Arabella sucked in a sharp breath as the perfume flacons chattered against one another like teeth.

"Three silvers," I confirmed. One for the cost of the bottle, another to pay back Oliver for the lavender oil, and the third for the seat on the mail coach that would carry me far, far away from here.

"Do I look like a goosecap to you?" he demanded, his face flushing beneath his hood.

No, I thought, keeping that bland smile etched onto my face. *But you, sir, reek of solicitor.*

While he'd donned the simple, coarse clothing of a common tradesman, his essence gave away the game. I'd taken it all in with a single breath: the dry woodiness of parchment, wig powder, ink, and a certain pride that carried a metallic tang not unlike the heavy pouch of coins hidden beneath his cloak. He lived near the lilac-draped homes of the storied Feygrove Square, but not within it.

So, not a toff—even the second son of a lord wouldn't survive the shame of employment—but a man who aspired to join the ranks of the Patricians all the same.

And, God, one of his yellow teeth was rotting at the root. If it wasn't giving him something to complain about, it would soon. In the meantime, the soul-curdling stink of it, braided into the burnt parchment scent of his growing annoyance, was a test to my stomach's fortitude.

"Of *course* not, sir," I told him, straining to find that tone that made men believe they'd won your fancy. "But I must sell my wares if I'm to eat. I know you understand this, being a man of trade yourself—that every coin must be precious to you."

"Not so precious," the man said quickly, unable to help himself. As always, the newer the money, the more desperate they were to flash its shine.

Arabella subtly knocked a hand against my leg, stifling a laugh with a cough.

"Chest complaint," she explained when he cut her a suspicious look. "Mayhaps yer in need of something splendid as well, being a man of means and all? Found this in the River Ternese just this week past. A right treasure, it is."

She tapped a gnarled finger on a handsome new addition to her offerings: a silver card case. After a moment's hesitation, the man took it, holding it up to the pale moonlight for closer inspection. I fought a grimace as he turned it over, revealing the crest engraved there.

He tossed it back onto the table with a noise of disgust. "The Duke of Weston threw his card case into the river, did he?"

Arabella rose to her full, diminutive height, her blue eyes piercing within the sunken contours of her face. "Probably got bored of it and wanted to use the gold one. Yer the one high in the instep, ye explain it to me—"

The man's top lip curled into a sneer as ugly as the rest of him. "You are a *thief*!"

Lovely. That drew a handful of eyes from the nearby tables.

"And yer at the *Midnight Market*," Arabella snarled. "If ye want virtue, get yerself to church."

I placed a quelling hand on her arm, my smile rigid. We were women of business now. Women of business swallowed their spleen and smiled. They did not insult the night's only potential customer, no matter how badly he deserved to be diced by a former doxy's wickedly sharp tongue.

"What she means is that the *Midnight Market* offers a variety of

goods you won't be able to find anywhere else," I said. "Including, of course, that special perfume you had your eye on."

The man's dark gaze turned appraising. I resisted the urge to shift my shawl higher. Not an ounce of the rusted scent of guilt or even tear-salted desperation. Those were the easiest emotions to play through to a sale. Instead, the man's annoyance slowly spiced with a cinnamon zest that signified nothing good. Nothing good at all.

His top lip curled again as his gaze finally drifted up over my face to my hair. My chest clenched as he took in the strips of white streaking the otherwise strawberry curls.

My resolve hardened once more. If I had paid the price for the creation of the perfumes before me, he could pay for the use of them.

"How do I know it does what you claim?" he asked. "You could be selling me a load of rotting dreams."

He couldn't smell the honeyed swirl of magic I'd blended into the rose and lavender oils, of course, or feel its warm effervescence humming within the brown glass of the apothecary bottle.

"Would you have come without being certain?" I asked, trying for flattery. "You strike me as a gentleman who goes to great pains to ensure he isn't cheated. I presume you heard about my work from another pleased client?"

I'd been too careless, that much was clear now.

"My wife was a client of Rosebourne's," he admitted after a moment. "God rest his soul."

My lips compressed into a hard, flat line. *Or roast it in the fires of hell, preferably.*

"Year after bloody year, I paid dearly for a perfume to . . . *enhance* herself, only to have the supply cut short," the man continued bitterly. "She heard of you from another lady she paid a call to."

Unexpected, that. They might not have been Patricians, but they were high enough in society to have been allowed access to the perfumes hidden at the heart of the House of Rosebourne.

"As a client of Rosebourne's, you know how rare such a perfume is then," I said. "There are so few fairborn left in the world, and fewer still who know how to harness the forbidden gifts. *Surely* your wife's happiness is worth a mere three silvers?"

"And she would only need to add a drop of her blood to ensure its . . . effects?" he asked.