
THE ROSE OF WINTER

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Chapter 1

Greenwell was Paradise.

This was a well-known fact. The jewel of its system, it was a large planet, swathed in shades of green. Broken only by the jagged grey-and-white slashes of mountains, the serpentine winding of rivers, and the occasional blue jewel of a large lake, it was renowned for its temperate climate and lush vegetation. Coveted by the rich for the vacation homes they knew they would never be able to have, as Greenwell was completely off-limits. Which, of course, made it all the more desirable. And as a result, the various agricultural goods it exported were always in high demand. Everyone wanted a piece of the veritable Eden.

Alexia hated it.

Of course, it had its perks. The open, endless plains and the lush, verdant gardens. The profusion of flora and the peaceful fauna that roamed its wilderness. But when even Paradise is a prison, one can grow to hate it. For that was what Greenwell was to the only child of its empress, no more than a gilded cage for her to be kept in. Her mother, Empress Yvonne, was a tyrant,

running her empire and her business with a titanium fist, and along with them, the life of her daughter. Alexia wanted nothing more than to explore the galaxy, venture to distant systems and see the wonders their planets held.

She was lucky if she got to set foot outside the family estate. And never alone. No, not for the precious pearl that was the empire's sovereign heir. There was no freedom, no exploration, no blasted *peace* at all. It was enough to drive even the most mild-mannered of women mad, and Alexia of Greenwell was far from mild-mannered.

"Your Highness?"

Alexia groaned as the voice of her handmaiden reached her ears. Vienne was a good girl, sweet and devoted to her mistress, and surprisingly capable of putting up with Alexia's temperamental nature. But at the moment, she was the last person Alexia wanted to see. Undoubtedly because she was one leg out of the window of her bedroom, and was now dreading the flutter her favorite attendant would go into at the sight. Thinking quickly, the heiress drew her leg back in and tried to settle lazily on the padded cushion of the window seat. To add to the illusion, she plucked up the nearest book and opened it, staring unseeing at the pages.

Vienne rounded the corner and came to a stop, peering suspiciously at her mistress. It was an expression Alexia could see even in her peripheral vision, and she glanced up from her book, piercing green eyes setting upon the other woman while pale-skinned, aristocratic features adopted a purely innocent expression.

"Yes, Vienne? What is it?" Her tone was cool, composed, a direct contrast to the unsettled twisting of her stomach. She watched Vienne's warm, earthy gaze drift from her face to the book in her hands, and glanced at it.

It was upside-down.

"Forgive me for interrupting your reading, Your Highness." Alexia's eyes snapped back to her handmaiden, narrowing at the blatant note of sarcasm in the older girl's voice, before she closed the book forcefully and dropped it to the floor. "Your lady mother has just boarded a shuttle and asked me to send her apologies that your afternoon outing must be canceled."

"Mother is *gone*? Where did she go?" The princess practically leaped from her seat, silver-blond hair swaying about her shoulders and brushing the tops of her thighs. Hurrying to the far window, she pushed open the glass and leaned forward, craning her neck in an attempt to see the landing pad on the far side of the estate. It was fruitless, although she did catch a glimpse of a speck ascending through the atmosphere's thick layer of clouds.

"Ah, to the Golden Cloud system. It would seem she has a meeting with Lord Chancellor Mallen, and...Your Highness!"

There was no disguising her excitement as the princess pushed past her handmaiden, bursting from the warm, wood-paneled suite of rooms that she called her own and into the gleaming white stone halls of the keep. Servants were bustling everywhere, chatting over data slates, carrying linens, and hurrying to their next duty. Guards could be seen standing at the junction of hallways, stark and resplendent in crisp uniforms of sage green and gunmetal grey, hands at their sides and able to grab energy pistols or plasma shields at a moment's notice.

None paid much attention to the wild streak of pale hair and lilac robe that was their princess, even when she hiked the long skirt up to her knees and took off running through the honeycomb of passages toward the eastern exit. She positively flew out of the portal as it slid open at her approach, skipping lightly across the grassy incline that led down to a lofty building of greenish stone, and finally skidded to a stop within the cool, shady confines of the royal stable. The scent of honeysweet seeds filled the air, an odd, musky-floral aroma that she associated with

freedom, entirely because they were the seeds from which Greenwell's plains grasses grew. It was the main food source of the moss-deer, a native species of the planet, and treasured as the royal family's favored mounts.

The moss-deer were quadrupeds and, on average, stood roughly two meters tall at the crest of their vaguely vulpine heads, with sturdy seven-toed paws at the end of each long, slender leg. But it was there that their appearance to mammalian creatures ended, for in every other aspect, they appeared more like living plants. Their bodies were covered in fur and feathers that resembled grass more than anything, with vine-like follicles sprouting from the back of their necks and their rumps. The royal stables housed eighteen of the creatures, sixteen of which were particularly muscular beasts, with their neck-follicles bred and styled specifically to look as though they had wings. Those sixteen pulled the lev-carriages that the empress, her daughter, and their servants would occupy on the occasions when they left the main royal residence to visit other portions of Greenwell. The remaining two were the personal mounts of the empress and her heir.

Normally, Alexia would stop in to visit her mother's moss-deer, a robust and lazy specimen who preferred to spend his days dozing in his stall. But Garth was in the far corner of his box at the moment, and she wasn't going to venture in there. Not when she had a brief taste of liberty within her grasp. The rapid tread of her feet led her down to the far end of the stables, past the stalls housing the burly brutes that hauled the lev-carriages and several empty cubicles. She was still more than three meters away when a white-eared head poked over the stall door, and an eerie trill emanated from the moss-deer's throat. At that, Alexia couldn't help but grin.

"Did you sense me coming, Lella?" She reached out to pet the moss-deer as the creature lowered her head, happily nuzzling

her snout into the crook of her rider's neck and snuffling at her skin, crystal blue eyes peering at the princess from behind a thick fringe of jade green lashes. Lella was slightly shorter than most moss-deer, but she was lithe and long-limbed, with speed no other could match. She loved to run free across the plains of Greenwell—just as Alexia did. "Mother is gone. We can finally go for that long ride we've been wanting."

"Your Highness!"

Again? Alexia spun around, her jaw dropping as she saw Vienne come hurrying up, her chestnut curls in disarray and her sun-browned cheeks flushed from running. She also looked quite annoyed, a fact that had Alexia clamping her mouth shut to suppress a snigger. Vienne wasn't exactly in the best of shape, with rounded curves and a bit of extra weight, something that she had thought certain would keep the handmaiden from following her. Apparently, she'd been wrong.

"Your Highness." Wheezing the address, the handmaiden came to a stop a few paces from her princess, pressing her hands firmly into the curve of her waist as though that would support her lungs and force her breathing back to normal. When Alexia arched a brow at her, she scowled and huffed a sound that was pure annoyance. "You know your lady mother has decreed you aren't to leave the grounds unattended!"

Ah, of course. Her mother knew she was prone to bolting off into the wilderness at a moment's notice. Alexia pondered this, her lips pursing into a thoughtful frown, before an idea occurred to her.

"Certainly, Vienne. If you'll please assemble a handful of ladies, we'll leave immediately."

"Leave? Where are you intending on going, Your Highness?" Vienne was looking at her warily, as though this reasonable response were too good to be true.

"For a ride in the plains." It took everything she had not to

burst out laughing as Vienne's expression only darkened at her calmly-stated answer.

"A ride? Do you mean for the ladies to ride in the lev-carriage, then?"

"Mother would never allow that. I think a lev-pod will do. Ethan will drive." As expected, the blood drained from Vienne's face, and Alexia was forced to bite the inside of her cheek to keep a victorious grin from spreading across her face. Her master of the hunt was even more wild than she was, and his depth perception was nonexistent, thanks to an eye he'd lost when she was just a girl. Vienne would sooner throw herself from the top of the keep than ride in a lev-pod driven by Ethan.

"If you're certain, Your Highness, I'll notify Ethan and assemble the ladies. Pardon me." She'd discombobulated Vienne enough that the woman didn't even curtsy before she hurried away, and once she was out of earshot, Alexia allowed herself a giggle. Only then, did she turn back to Lella, opening the stall door and leading the moss-deer out.

"That will give us at least a fifteen minute head start, I think. Are you ready to run?"

The moss-deer trilled her excitement, prancing lightly on her paws, before kneeling down to allow her rider onto her back. Alexia carefully gripped the violet follicles growing out of the moss-deer's neck and hauled herself up onto the blue-tinged back. With her hands wound through the follicles, she pressed her heels gently against the creature's sides and bent low over her neck as they sped out into the wide-open plains.

Greenwell was miserable.

It was too bright, too warm, and the blasted plants were making his nose itch.

"My lord, are you unwell?"

His pale grey eyes lifted from the data slate in his hand and darted to the steward at his elbow, who was doing his best not to look amused. Zavier, Iron King of Ironhold, scowled and, with a grumble, turned back to the data slate.

"This is why I never leave Ironhold." Even from the corner of his eye, he saw Benji's lips twitch with the urge to smile, and growled. The steward had been with him since he was barely a man, which was the only reason he didn't reach out and throttle him at that moment. Aside from the fact that Zavier wasn't actually as foul-tempered and violent as people made him out to be, of course.

"If it's any consolation, my lord, your business is nearly concluded. You have but to verify the agreement, and we can return to your ship." Accustomed to his employer's mercurial moods, Benji pointed this out casually, but there was no mistaking the iron king's reaction. He perked up a bit in his seat, skimming the data slate more swiftly, before finally reaching the bottom. It would've been perfectly acceptable for him to send an emissary to attend to this matter, but Zavier had always preferred to see exactly what he was buying firsthand and settle all business arrangements himself. Which was precisely why he pressed his thumb to the data slate's screen, allowing it to register the whorls and ridges of his fingerprint, and effectively applying his recorded signature and seal to the contract.

"There. Consider it done."

The plantation owner looked up in shock, seemingly surprised that the iron king had so readily accepted the terms, and scrambled to his feet as the iron king did, reaching out to take the offered data slate.

"Oh, I... Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Your thanks are unnecessary. Your product is superior and precisely what I require. I expect the first shipment to arrive within an Ironhold month, understood?" Zavier pinned the glorified farmer with a firm look, made all the more striking by the

contrast of his nearly translucent eyes, pale skin, angular features, and the shoulder-length black hair that hung around his face. Naturally, the plantation owner nodded and scurried back into his home. Archaic thing of wood and glass that it was, he thought with a disdainful sneer.

Spinning away, he cast a baleful glare toward the sun, which was beating down mercilessly upon the fields, and the king that stalked past them. He should've known better than to wear dark colors on such a disturbingly warm planet, but he absolutely despised brighter hues and refused to bow to the foolish whims of galactic fashion. High-necked coats with long sleeves, trousers, and sturdy boots. He would wear nothing else. Even on agricultural cesspools like Greenwell.

He barely noticed when Benji hurried up to his side, struggling to keep pace with the king's long-legged strides, and tapping fitfully at the data slate in his hand. He only glanced over when the steward began to speak, his demeanor already thunderous.

"My lord, you really should visit the empress before—"

"No."

"But, my lord—"

"I said *no*, Benji. Bad enough I have to put up with Yvonne at my brother's court once a year, I refuse to visit the harpy in her own territory." Under any other circumstances, Benji's open mouth and horrified expression would've been thoroughly amusing. As it was, Xavier just felt more disgruntled. This planet was making him absolutely boorish. But he was mere meters from his shuttle, and if he could just get aboard...

Something caught his eye. A flash of pale color streaming beneath the sun. For all his faults, admitted and otherwise, his greatest one was perhaps his curiosity. Unable to help himself, the king stopped, turning to look for the source of the visual disruption. The last thing he expected to see was a figure with streaming silvery hair galloping by on the back of one of those

bizarre creatures that only lived on Greenwell. What were they called again? Moss-deer?

As he watched, the beast and its rider veered toward the forest of ancient growth trees that bordered the plantation. Possessed by some strange compulsion he didn't quite understand, Zavier began walking again, his pace soon quickening to a trot, and finally into a full-on sprint. He ignored Benji's calls as he veered around his waiting shuttle, easily vaulted a low stone wall, and crossed the grassy span between the plantation and the forest. Within moments, he was in the cool shade of the looming trees, shade-loving ferns slapping at his arms and legs as he ran, trying to find the creature and its rider.

He didn't know why, but he *had* to find them.

There was nothing better than the wind in her hair and Lella's muscles rippling beneath her. Freedom was such a precious rarity in her world, and Alexia knew it couldn't last. She had to savor it, stretch it out for as long as she possibly could. She knew there would be guards and daintily distressed handmaids behind her before long, but if she could evade them... There was no choice in the matter. She had to get out of sight.

Farms and plantations passed on either side, but her attention was firmly fixed on the forest that rose tall and untouched ahead of her. She could hide in there for a time, at least, she felt certain. They wouldn't think to look in the woods, and she could only hope none of the agriculturalists had seen her go by. Within moments, the mount and rider were beneath the shady branches, pace dropping from full tilt to a lazy canter as they made their way between the ancient trunks.

"We did it, Lella. We might be able to... Woah girl, what..."

Her praise and patting of the moss-deer's neck became anxiety when the creature began to toss her head and trill in

alarm. The last thing she expected was for her only true friend to suddenly come to a stop, rearing up on her hind legs and screaming in fear. Surprised by the uncharacteristic motion, Alexia was unable to keep her hold on the animal's follicles and went soaring through the air.

Time itself seemed to slow as she tumbled toward the ground that was too far away. For a moment, she thought she saw someone step out from behind a massive trunk. Then pain filled her world, and everything went dark.

Finding the rider had been easier than even he had anticipated. The forest was eerily quiet, save for the sounds of his own feet and those of the running quadruped. He could hear that the rapid four-beat tread of its paws had slowed to a more sedate three-beat canter, crunching through the fallen leaves and undergrowth. He was close. Close enough to hear someone speaking. The rider. She was talking to her mount, praising it, in a voice that was warm and husky. If her voice was that lovely, how would her face look?

Slowing from his mad dash, Zavier suddenly stepped around a tree, confronted by the sight of the girl on her moss-deer. He still couldn't see her face, not with the beast's head in the way, but any moment now...

He watched with a dawning sense of dismay as the animal suddenly threw itself up onto its hind legs and screamed, dislodging its rider in the process. He was already moving forward even as the girl tumbled from the creature's back, and for one glorious moment, he saw her face, shrouded by a wild tumble of silver-blond hair. Then she impacted the ground with a sickening thud and rolled to a stop.

Zavier rushed to where she'd fallen, bypassing the moss-deer that was trilling and kicking with fear, and knelt beside the

unconscious girl. His fingers pressed to her throat, and he was beyond relieved to feel her pulse, a glance downward showing him that she was still breathing, if shallowly. She didn't appear to have broken anything, no twisted limbs or jutting bone. With the utmost caution, he rolled her onto her back and gently pushed her hair away from her face.

He stopped breathing. She was beautiful. No, beautiful was too mild a word for such utter graceful loveliness. Her skin was fair like the most exotic Ureltz marble, with a bone structure that only the finest sculptors could hope to achieve. High cheekbones, a delicate, pert nose, a chin that was perfectly suited to her full, lush mouth, and wide eyes with thick lashes set beneath gracefully arched brows.

What color were her eyes? Would they be blue like the sky? Perhaps some fantastic shade of gold or amber? Maybe a hypnotizing and enigmatic violet? Regardless of their color, he knew they would be utterly captivating. Just like her voice. Just like her face.

He had to have her. He didn't know who she was, or where she'd come from, but this girl would be *his*.

Ignoring the panicked flight of the moss-deer, he carefully scooped the unconscious woman into his arms, cradling her shoulders in one and her knees with the other. Her head lolled over against his chest, and Zavier felt a wholly unfamiliar and powerful surge of possession. He moved as swiftly as he dared, a brisk walk so as not to jostle her too badly, and retraced his steps out of the woods. As he emerged into the daylight, he could see Benji standing beside the shuttle, his face filled with a questioning light.

Zavier ignored him and boarded the shuttle, laying the girl gently on the cushioned bench in the passenger bay. The nanogel within immediately conformed to the shape of her body, cradling her securely in its grasp as the shuttle's engines activated beneath the king's touch on the console. Within moments, both

Zavier and Benji were strapped into their seats, the loading bay ramp slid into place, and the shuttle rose from the ground. As it streaked through the sky, heading for the flagship hovering in orbit, the iron king silently marveled at his prize. Soon, he would know her name, and she would know that she belonged to him.