

## *Chapter 4: Alfred*

By 13:15 AM in the morning the Jubilee had ended. The guests filtered out, congratulating our families as they did. Elizabeth and I retired to our separate rooms. I was numb from the day's events. My house arrest was over and Susan was fifty kilometers away in Kings City. I had watched her disappear behind the tapestry with the man at the punch bowl. She had moved on in her life and I couldn't blame her.

Wearily I pulled off my suit and left it for the servants to take with the morning laundry. I brushed my teeth and changed for bed. As I shuffled into my bedroom the damn Jubilee Waltz still played in my head. It was the last thing in the world I wanted as ear worm.

The sheets in my bed were pulled back and rumped. I could just make out the shape of legs in between the wrinkles. The bed had been made when I was undressing.

The air crackled and the bedside lamp dimmed. With a structure as old as Castle New Haven it was bound to have some ghosts and loose wiring but I'd never experienced anything so convincing.

"What the hell?"

Shapes flickered in my peripheral vision and a man said, "Dance with me." I jumped.

Along with ozone I smelled sweat and sex. The lights went out and in my bed I saw a greenish blue aura outlining the shape of two men having sex in my bed. The one on top was clearly wearing the ring of golden plaited vines marking him as the Crown Prince. Otherwise I didn't recognize him or the man he was with.

I looked at my own hand. Yes, I was still wearing the very same ring. Dumbfounded I watched until the aura faded, not sure how to chase randy ghosts out of my bed. I didn't want to consider the possibility that I was going nuts.

The bed remained crumpled. I grabbed my pillow and comforter and curled up on the couch in the sitting room. I'd leave the bed to the ghosts in case they came back.

In the morning after having toast and juice brought to my room I took my diary up to the observatory. I needed time alone to think about the last few weeks and especially about last night.

When the lift opened I saw a man maybe in his late twenties or early thirties already sitting in the observatory. I didn't recognize him. He was reading a science fiction novel. "Hi James, you're back." He looked up from his book and his smile faded.

"Uhoh. You shouldn't be here," he said.

"Hello," I said. "Are you part of the Lesser Albion retinue?"

"No I'm not," he replied. He looked worried.

"You're not part of the castle staff," I said. "Perhaps I should call security."

"I'm not a threat to you. There's been a terrible mix up. I shouldn't be here."

He didn't look like a threat. I took the seat next to him. "Mind if we talk?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No but I might not be able to stay long."

"Do you believe in ghosts?" I asked.

He smiled. I realized he reminded me of Lord Chester except that his hair was blonder. "Yes, actually I do."

"Have you ever seen any?"

"Yes. More than I can count," he replied but he didn't elaborate.

"This James you were waiting for, who is he?" I asked.

"I'd rather not say. I doubt he's coming."

How strange that he never wanted to fully answer my questions. I noticed too that he had New Welsh accent. His Os and Ths gave him away.

"You're from New Wales," I said.

He nodded. "Originally but I live in Delphi now, most of the time anyway."

"Are you by chance related to Lord Chester?"

He nodded. "Distantly, yes. But I thought we were talking about ghosts."

"Right. Well, last night, after that wretched ball, I came back to my room to see two ghosts fucking in my bed."

"OK. That's a new one. I've never seen ghosts fuck although my..." he paused "spouse has."

"They were both men."

The man blushed.

"One of them was wearing this very ring." I held up my hand.

His blushing grew more pronounced. "Which room is yours?"

Surprised that he didn't know, I told him.

He put his hand over his eyes in embarrassment. That's when I saw it; the queen's signet. "You're married to a king. You are one of my two ghosts except now you are noticeably older. How is this possible?"

"I don't know how you saw us. We certainly didn't see you and we were alive and well at the time, I assure you. It wasn't your room at the time; it was his."

With that he faded away leaving me alone in the observatory more confused than ever. At least my mind was taken off of Susan and Elizabeth.

## *Elizabeth*

On Boxing Day the kingdoms of Greater and Lesser Albion stopped for the first royal wedding between our two countries. Prince Alfred went through the motions at the wedding with a blank expression on his gaunt face. As the youngest child with a brother set to take the throne this marriage was my only way out. Here I would some day be queen but now as I stood next to the future king, I had to wonder at what price.

Maybe marriage would allow us some amount of freedom. Prince Alfred hadn't had any since being brought home early from school. My parents had warned me about his ex-girlfriend. Apparently he'd been put under house arrest for his own protection.

For the ceremony Alfred wore a bespoke white suit embroidered with subtle vines, lions and crowns. Unfortunately the suit only emphasized his gauntness. He didn't look like a future monarch. As we have a long standing rivalry with Greater Albion I had never met my intended until the night of his Jubilee.

At the end our ceremony I had my second physical contact with my husband when Alfred chastely kissed me. Then he took me by the arm and we walked back down the aisle to the awaiting carriage. The doors were soon closed and we were alone. I was married to a stranger!

The horse drawn carriage, decorated like something from an age old fairy tale and not at all practical in this modern city slowly trundled along a route roped off from cars and lined with eager on lookers. It took a path through the historic bits of the city where it would finally meet up with the limousine that would take us to Castle New Haven.

"I hope you like Lesser Albion. It's a small but beautiful country," I said, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"Yes, I'm sure I will," Alfred replied, rubbing his fingers over his new wedding ring.

"Are you always this quiet?" I asked.

He sighed. "I'm sorry, Elizabeth. Things have gone so fast recently. I had a girlfriend," he admitted.

"I know. My parents warned me. Her name was Sally or something."

"Susan — Susanah Dinur." His voice was filled with a mixture of anger and sadness. I knew he still loved her.

"You wanted to take the Jubilee Waltz with her, didn't you?" I continued. I begun to realize that Alfred was not as assertive as his father George II. My husband could be manipulated. Although I wasn't thrilled to be married so young, I could use my situation to my advantage.

"Yes. Yes, I did," he replied, choosing to look out the window and watch the city go by than to look at me.

"I was tutored in the palace and not allowed a boyfriend. I was told I was to save myself for my future husband. This deal between our families has been in the works longer than you may realize," I said.

"That doesn't surprise me. Father does like to keep things to himself until the last minute."

"Are you going to make Susan your *maîtresse maison*?"

"No. She wouldn't go for something like that."

"Even with the chance at all that power?" I prodded.

"She's already set to inherit the title of the most influential family in the peerage. She doesn't need my help."

I tittered. "And she wouldn't want more? Don't be so naive. Everyone wants power. The more the better."

Alfred bristled at my response but remained silent.

### *Alfred:*

Of course Susan and her family weren't at the reception but I still had this irrational hope that she would be. Elizabeth, my wife, as I had to remind myself,

slipped off my arm as soon as she could and spent most of the reception with her parents and their entourage. We would honeymooning soon in her country and I would be the fish out of water then.

For a moment I thought I saw my blond headed ghost but then I realized it was Rupert Christopher Williamson, Earl of Chester. "Lord Chester, thank you for attending our reception," I said.

He smiled at me. "It's an honor your highness. Many happy returns on your marriage."

"How are you and your family?" I asked.

He blushed, reminding me again of my ghost. "I hope news my brother's exploits haven't reached you. I'd hate to —"

I shook my head. "No. I've been out of touch these last few weeks but you've piqued my interest."

He stared down at his feet for a moment. "He's run off to New Castro —"

"With a man?" I asked.

"Yes." He grimaced.

"Good for him," I said. "All the best."