

Kingdom of Dance Bonus Chapter 2

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: one month after the epilogue

Bentleigh

“Ugh.”

The grunt was loud enough to carry through the carriage’s open window, and Bentleigh reined his horse in slightly, glancing down into the vehicle with concern.

“Are you all right, Zayla?” he asked anxiously.

Crown Princess Azalea of Listernia sighed, leaning over and dangling her arm out of the window. Even from his position, Bentleigh could see the disapproving frown of the middle-aged lady sitting across from Azalea. He ignored the older woman, however, his eyes riveted on his wife’s face.

“I’m fine,” she assured him. “It’s just not especially comfortable sitting in a carriage for days on end at the best of times, let alone with...” She gestured at her engorged belly. “You know.”

“I knew it was a bad idea for you to come,” Bentleigh said, frowning. “You’ll wear yourself out.”

His wife cast him an exasperated look. “I’m offended, Ben. Can’t you trust me to know my own limits?”

“I mean, I would,” he told her reasonably. “But you don’t have a very good history with that particular skill. Besides, you’ve never had this experience before.”

“What, a multiple-day carriage ride?” Azalea quipped. “It’s been almost three years since the curse was broken, Ben. I am allowed out of my own backyard now.” She gave him a dark look. “I must say, I didn’t think when I married you that you’d take over from my parents in trying to keep me cooped up in Liss.”

Wise enough not to take offense, Bentleigh didn’t even bother to respond to the excessively unreasonable criticism.

“I was referring to pregnancy,” he clarified instead. “*That* you really have never done before, so you could be excused for not knowing your limits.”

A moment later, Azalea sighed, repenting at once, as he’d known she would.

“I’m sorry. That was a hideously unfair thing to say. I don’t know why I get so irritable lately.”

“The physician assures me it’s normal.” The new voice heralded the approach of Benteleigh’s brother. Crown Prince Rian of Bansford pulled up his horse—a large black mare—on Benteleigh’s other side, also keeping pace with the carriage. “Penny’s the same,” he added helpfully.

“Thank you, Rian.”

The faintly exasperated voice issued from the carriage as Penny leaned across Azalea and came into sight. The Bansfordian princess’s posture was identical to her sister-in-law’s, down to the hand passing smoothly back and forth over the protruding stomach.

Benteleigh couldn’t help laughing. “Really? It’s very hard to picture you being irritable, Penny.”

“Well,” Rian amended fairly, “irritable for her. Which is still barely enough to count.”

“When did you become such a romantic, Rian?” Benteleigh twitted his brother, amused by the glowing look Penny was now casting at her husband. “You’re making me look bad.”

“Impossible,” said Azalea staunchly. “The fact that you put up with my irritability so nobly is an even more romantic feat.”

“Probably true,” nodded Penny, ever agreeable.

Benteleigh grinned at his wife. He appreciated the display of loyalty even as he knew with perfect certainty that if he were so foolish as to borrow her own words and call her irritable in front of someone else—as Rian had just done to Penny—he would be in all kinds of trouble.

Azalea returned his grin, the mischievous sparkle in her eyes making it seem like she’d read his mind and was confirming his thoughts. At that moment, the carriage went over a rut in the road, and she winced, her hand tightening on her belly.

Benteleigh frowned. “Maybe we should stop at the next inn. It’s been a long day.”

“No, no,” Azalea protested, waving a hand. “The guards said we’re only a few hours away from Tola. I want to get there tonight.”

Penny nodded at this mention of their destination, Entolia’s capital city. “Me too. Then we can be done with this carriage.”

“We could hand off our horses and ride in there the rest of the way with you,” Benteleigh suggested.

“Yes, that’s a good thought,” Rian agreed quickly. His expression told Benteleigh that his brother was feeling the same guilt he did at how little he could do to alleviate his wife’s discomfort.

Azalea and Penny exchanged a meaningful look, then burst into peals of laughter.

“You know we love you, boys,” Azalea said, mopping her eyes. “But the only thing that could make this journey *more* uncomfortable would be the two of you cramming your big muscled selves into this little carriage and fussing over us all the way there.”

Taking this in good part, Benteleigh shrugged at his brother. “We tried.”

Rian chuckled. “Do you ever worry that your child is going to be excessively strong-willed, and difficult to manage?”

“All the time,” grinned Benteleigh. “But I must admit it will be satisfying to see your child—no doubt meek and sweet and lovely—following mine around and getting dragged into all kinds of scrapes.”

Rian scoffed. “Think again, little brother. My kid will definitely be the ringleader.”

Bentleigh laughed aloud. “Not a chance.” He glanced ahead. The carriage was traveling near the front of the group, and only a few guards stood between them and the open road. “Race you to that tree.”

Giving his brother no time to respond, he urged his horse forward, grinning as he heard Rian’s mount giving chase. The head guard gave a startled protest as they surged past him, but Bentleigh didn’t pull up until he’d reached the nominated finish line.

“Aren’t you a little too old and responsible to cheat?” Rian asked him with good humor, once he’d also dropped to a trot.

Bentleigh laughed. “Even at this age, I guess it goes to my head to be on a trip together without Mother and Father looking over our shoulders.”

Rian smiled. “It’s good to have longer than a few days together. I’m glad you decided to travel to Tola via Bant,” he said, naming the capital of Bansford. “I know it’s not the quickest way from Liss.”

“Worth every minute of the extra journey,” Bentleigh said sincerely. A frown creased his forehead as he glanced back at the cavalcade, which was gaining on them. “I do worry that I shouldn’t have let Zayla come, though. The physician didn’t prohibit it, but he did say it was a little late for such a long journey, with less than two months until the birth. But the moment I received the missive from Basil, I could see there was no way she was going to let herself be left behind.”

“I didn’t want Penny to come, either,” said Rian frankly. “She’s only just stopped being ill half the day. I don’t like to see her so exhausted. But while she might seem sweet—and she is,” he added hastily, “she can be just as determined as Azalea when she sets her mind on something.”

“Ah well, *I* wouldn’t want to be left behind,” Bentleigh acknowledged. “Last I heard, the only ones who aren’t coming are Crown Prince Caleb and his wife, from Mistra. Even Justin and Felicity are making the trek from Allenton, with little Prince Julian.”

“It will be quite the congregation,” Rian agreed. “But I think Basil’s right. It’s worth marking this new era.”

Bentleigh nodded absently, his thoughts back with the carriage. He was glad of the new era for Solstice, but in all honesty he was more caught up in the new season that was about to begin for him and Zayla. As much as he was looking forward to the meeting Basil had called, he’d be glad to be home in Liss again, ready to welcome their baby in a couple short months.

When they reached Tola, they were received at the castle with due fanfare, and soon discovered they were the last of the invited royals to arrive. King Basil greeted them in his usual stoic way, Queen Wren smiling a welcome. After a brief opportunity to settle into their guest suites, they were conducted to a dining hall, where they were awaited by not only the large Entolian royal family, but by the other foreign guests.

King Justin of Albury inclined his head slightly in a respectful greeting to the Listernian and Bansfordian arrivals, but his wife, Queen Felicity, didn’t immediately see them. She was bouncing her son on her lap, the boy’s laughter reaching them from across the room.

Something twisted pleasantly inside Bentleigh at the heartwarming image, and he slid his arm around Azalea, giving her a contented squeeze.

“She still has that newlywed glow, doesn’t she?” Azalea commented warmly. Following her gaze, Bentleigh saw that her eyes rested on Princess Aurelia—King Justin’s sister who had just become a princess of Fernelled through her marriage to Crown Prince Amell.

Prince Amell waved cheerfully from beside his wife, and Benteigh returned the gesture as Azalea continued.

“I’m so glad that the somewhat...eventful nature of her wedding doesn’t seem to have dimmed her happiness.”

Benteigh said nothing, the tangle of emotions from that awful day rising up as potently as if it had been a week rather than four months. He’d been so elated at Amell and Aurelia’s wedding, his own happiness at the news he and Azalea had just learned doubled by the discovery, upon arrival in Fernford, that Rian and Penny were harboring the same secret. Nothing had been further from his thoughts than the darkness of the time when he’d almost lost Zayla to evil magic.

But those memories had been forced back upon him in the most terrifying way when he’d found himself—along with all the other wedding guests—frozen by an unknown magic, forced to watch helplessly as Princess Zinnia and her soldier fought unaided against a power darker than anything Benteigh had ever seen.

Not that it had been clear at the time what they were doing. It had truly looked like Zinnia intended to attack the bride and groom, and Benteigh’s horror had been immeasurable. But even knowing the stakes, an honest, selfish part of him had to admit that his main distress hadn’t been on behalf of Amell and his bride. He’d been more focused on his terror for his wife beside him, and the child she was carrying.

Although Benteigh had been present when Azalea was cursed at her christening—the malicious enchanter freezing everyone in the room in order to do it—he was too young to remember it. However, he remembered perfectly when they’d broken Zayla’s curse, only to have the same enchanter appear in their midst, ready to finish the job. In all the terrible memories of that terrible time, standing magically frozen, trapped in a cage of thorny vines and unable to move as he watched the enchanter prepare to kill Zayla before his eyes might be the worst. Anytime he thought about it, the remembered panic washed over his body, his limbs locking in place as he felt again what it meant to be completely powerless to protect the person who meant more to him than anything else in the world.

Of course, Zayla hadn’t been the target of the attack at Amell and Aurelia’s wedding. But when he was suddenly doused once again in that freezing magic, fear and fury had still raced through him unchecked. And his distress had only been intensified by the knowledge that danger to Zayla meant danger to their unborn child as well.

“Are you all right?” Zayla’s soft voice drew Benteigh back to the present. She was looking up at him with concern, and as he met her eyes, understanding crossed her features.

“We’re all right, Ben,” she said softly, laying a hand on her stomach. “We’re all safe, and we’re all together.”

He smiled down at her, the truth of her words dispelling the sudden and irrational surge of alarm. All was well, and that magic would never threaten his loved ones again. Its source was vanquished, gone.

He let out a long breath. “Come on,” he said, putting a hand on the small of Azalea’s back and gently leading her to their seats. “Let’s get you off your feet.”

The last of the guests were seated, and the young King Basil had risen to formally greet them all when Princess Zinnia burst into the room, followed at a more sedate pace by her new husband. Azalea chuckled appreciatively at the half-apologetic half-roguish grin the princess sent toward her brother, and Benteigh couldn’t help smiling himself. If Princess Aurelia still had a newlywed glow

from her wedding four months before, Princess Zinnia was practically on fire. She and her soldier had only been married for a month, so it wasn't surprising.

The meal was excellent, but Benteigh could soon see that Azalea was flagging, so he was glad when the final course was presented. He had no doubt their hosts would understand if the travelers retired early, after multiple days on the road, with two heavily pregnant women in the party.

When they rose to leave, Zinnia rose also, and hurried over to their table.

"You must be exhausted," she said sympathetically. "So I won't keep you. I just wanted to welcome you to Tola since I didn't have the opportunity before the meal."

"No, you didn't," said Azalea cheerfully, if not very politely. "Arriving late to your own dinner, when you live in the building! I must say, Zinnia...I've always liked you—except for that brief period when your father was attempting to marry you to Ben, of course—but I never knew we were such kindred spirits!"

Zinnia laughed, clearly delighted with the other princess's plain speaking. "Oh, it's Basil's dinner more than mine," she said airily. She grinned. "And I don't live in the building, anyway. Didn't you know?"

Azalea shook her head, and Zinnia's smile grew.

"You'll see tomorrow. I assume you're coming to our little gathering?"

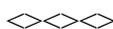
"Of course," said Azalea, sounding intrigued. Once they'd begun to move toward the corridor, she turned to Benteigh. "It sounds like she and Lieutenant Obsidian have moved elsewhere since getting married. Did you know that living outside the castle was an option?"

Benteigh gave her a rueful smile. "Somehow I doubt it's an option for a crown princess, love."

"You're probably right," Zayla acknowledged wistfully. She leaned on his arm in a way that spoke volumes about how tired she really was. "We do get our own wing since being married, though. That's pretty good."

"Very good," Benteigh agreed gravely.

He dropped a fond kiss on the top of his wife's head. In spite of her evident exhaustion, he couldn't help but be glad she'd come with him. It really didn't matter whether he slept in castle or hovel, as long as he had her beside him.



Benteigh slept like the dead in their comfortable suite, and was relieved to learn upon waking that Azalea had done so as well.

"Pays to be utterly exhausted," she told him cheerfully as he helped haul her from bed.

Benteigh wasn't surprised to discover, after they'd enjoyed a leisurely breakfast in their room, that Basil had organized for the congregating royals to meet in only a few hours' time. The young Entolian king had always been one to get to the point with a minimum of frills. But he *was* surprised to learn that the meeting wasn't to be held in the castle.

Rian and Penny, equally bewildered, joined them as they were conducted through the castle's eastern entrance and across a courtyard. The weather was a little wild, and beyond the nearby city wall, they could hear the ocean pounding against the cliffs.

"Do you think we'll get the chance to go for a sail while we're here?" Azalea asked brightly, clearly also listening to the waves.

"Definitely not," said Bentleigh, his voice flat. "Didn't you see the size of the swells through the window this morning?"

Zayla flashed him a cheeky grin. "If I fell in, Penny could probably pull me out, couldn't you, Penny? You've really perfected that trick of moving people about by tugging on their clothes."

"I probably could," Penny acknowledged. "But only if I managed to stay on the ship myself."

Rian made a noise of protest, and the girls tried unsuccessfully to stifle their giggles.

"Why did I think it was such a good thing they get on so well?" Rian asked Bentleigh plaintively.

Bentleigh shook his head ruefully, but gave no response. They were passing through a gate, and soon found themselves on a windswept hillside.

"Where is this meeting?" Rian asked. He glanced at the guards following a short way behind. "Are the girls really up to clambering over the cliffs?"

"No clambering will be required, Your Highness." The servant leading them gestured respectfully to two waiting carriages, and a well-laid path beyond them.

"So much for being done with carriages," Azalea muttered to Penny, earning another chuckle.

Fortunately, they were only in the carriages for about ten minutes before they trundled to a stop.

"Oh, how lovely!"

Bentleigh had been helping Azalea out of the carriage, but at her exclamation he glanced up to see a large cottage perched on the cliff, surrounded by a low stone wall. Saplings lined the non-ocean side, clearly freshly planted.

"That must be the most picturesque home I've ever seen," Penny commented.

"But why is King Basil hosting the meeting here?" Rian asked in bewilderment.

Azalea gave a sudden gasp of understanding. "Not Basil! Zinnia! This must be where she and Obsidian live."

"Ah." Penny nodded, sounding pleased. "That explains it."

"Explains what?" Bentleigh asked.

Penny waved an arm vaguely in the direction of the cottage. "There's a lot of magic surrounding this place. A *lot*."

"What kind of magic?" Rian asked, sounding wary. Bentleigh noticed the way his brother leaned toward his wife, the protective gesture probably unconscious.

"Protective enchantments, from what I can tell," said Penny comfortably. "Nothing sinister."

"Welcome!" The cheerful voice drew all their attention to the doorway to the cottage. Zinnia had appeared, her face split in a grin. "You four are the last to arrive. Guards at the door, please. They're not allowed in. Obsidian has our protection fully covered while we're on the property."

“Your Highness,” said Rian’s head guard warningly, but Rian shook his head.

“These are our allies. You can remain outside.”

“Not to worry,” Zinnia informed the guards kindly. “If you stay on this side of the cottage, the wind isn’t too bad. And we’ll send out some tea for you shortly.”

With that, Zinnia chivvied the four of them into the building with a surprisingly authoritative air.

“You’re certainly good at organizing people,” Azalea informed her humorously.

“Eleven younger sisters, remember?” Zinnia grinned.

Bentleigh followed his wife through the doorway, finding himself in a pleasant entryway, with several doors leading from it. Zinnia ushered them through the one directly ahead, which led into a large informal parlor with a long window that brilliantly showcased the cliff’s edge, and the churning ocean below.

“Cozy, isn’t it?” Zinnia asked cheerfully.

Bentleigh nodded, struck by how homelike the space was. Nothing like a castle.

“Just think,” she continued cheekily, “if you’d married me, you could have had this lovely cottage.”

“Don’t feel special,” Amell called from where he was leaning against the mantel, chatting cheerfully with Basil. “She used the same line on me when I walked in.”

“Yes, well, my father tried to marry me off to a lot of people,” Zinnia said, unabashed.

“And yet, you missed out on all the princes, and had to settle with a mere soldier.” Obsidian entered the room from a side door, looking unperturbed by his wife’s antics.

“Most fortunately, yes,” Zinnia agreed. “It’s not true about the cottage, anyway,” she added contentedly, her smile brighter than ever as her eyes rested on her husband. “Obsidian is the one who had it built, not me.”

“Well, we’re very grateful to be invited to—oops—oh!” Queen Felicity was midway through lurching toward her son when her cry of dismay turned to a delighted exclamation. Her eyes passed from the vase the infant had just knocked over—which was suspended impossibly in the air instead of broken into a hundred pieces—to Penny, who was watching the vase with a look of great concentration.

It rose slowly upward and re-settled on a windowsill, out of little Prince Julian’s reach.

“That’s quite a trick,” said Obsidian admiringly. “I’d love you to teach me that.”

Penny colored with pleasure, ducking her head slightly. “I wish I could, but I’m not really sure how to teach it. It just sort of...comes to me. It’s my core magic.”

“Handy,” said Zinnia. “And fascinating! Obsidian’s is nothing like that.”

“What is it?” Aurelia asked curiously, her eyes on the soldier.

Bentleigh couldn’t help admiring her open friendliness toward the magic-user. Having been locked in a tower for most of her life by an enchanter, it wouldn’t have been surprising if she’d been suspicious of them as a group.

“I can tell if someone is lying,” Obsidian said. “Nothing very exciting.”

“On the contrary.” King Justin spoke up for the first time. He’d gathered his wayward son onto his lap, where the child seemed perfectly content. It was a surreal image—Bentleigh couldn’t

ever remember seeing Albury's austere young king so relaxed. "The ability to detect deception would be incredibly useful to any monarch."

"Now now, King Justin," said Basil bluntly. "Don't get any ideas."

Felicity laughed. "You're safe, Basil. Not even Justin would try to lure Obsidian away now he's married your sister."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Basil said, "since I'm about to talk him up even more."

"What?" Obsidian's eyes flashed to his brother-in-law in faint alarm.

"Nothing too embarrassing," Queen Wren assured him, looking a little amused. "But part of the reason we invited everyone here was to make sure all the kingdoms are fully aware of what happened several months ago, and how great a debt Solstice owes the two of you."

Her eyes rested on Zinnia as well, who sputtered a protest.

"Hold on, this wasn't part of the deal. No one owes me anything. I'm the one who brought Idric's attention down on us all, and almost tipped the continent into disaster."

"That's nonsense," said Basil firmly. "Idric had his sights set on Entolia before he met you, and you are not to blame for anything he did. On the contrary, your success in fighting off his magic—assisted by Obsidian, of course—is what saved us all."

Zinnia was looking uncharacteristically flustered by the end of this speech, but Queen Wren saved her from the necessity of an immediate response.

"Before we go on, let me add that I'm under instructions to represent Mistra," Wren informed the group at large. "My brother Caleb sends his greetings to you all. He and Anneliese didn't care to travel so soon after the birth of their daughter, but I've just returned from a visit to them, and have passed on everything we wish to say today."

Basil nodded in agreement. "And the first of those things is that we hope you will all believe how deeply we regret that Entolia was almost the vehicle by which war was unleashed on our land." He exchanged a glance with his wife. "Again."

Rian shifted beside Benteigh. "Speaking for Bansford, I don't for a moment blame you or your kingdom for the calamity that befell you, or for the rogue dragon's schemes."

Murmurs of agreement came from all sides, and Benteigh could see Basil relax slightly.

"You're very gracious," said the young king matter-of-factly. "I can't deny that it has kept me awake some nights to think about just how much danger was being concealed beneath my very feet, while I carried on with life as if everything was normal."

"Not quite," Wren interjected. "You tried so hard to get to the bottom of it."

"That's right," Zinnia piped up. "You did everything you could, Bas, and I won't have you blaming yourself!"

"Yes, you're hardly the only one who was blind to the reality of what was happening," said Amell dryly. "Rekavidur all but told me a dragon was going rogue, and I still didn't figure it out!"

"I didn't invite you all to my own little seaside castle for anyone to ascribe blame," said Zinnia staunchly. She gave her brother an unyielding look. "*Especially* to themselves. We're supposed to be toasting the new era of peace and friendship, now that we're free of the constant undermining of the crowns brought about by Idric's magic."

"Yes, that too," Basil agreed.

“I’ll gladly drink to that,” Bentleigh said, taking the goblet offered him by one of the servants who’d been coming discreetly in and out of the room, bearing refreshments. “But I definitely agree that we should toast Princess Zinnia and Lieutenant Obsidian for their role in protecting us all. And I have plenty of questions I’d like to ask about everything that happened.”

“This is the place to ask them,” Basil nodded. “There’s no agenda, no expectations, no politics. We have all day if we want it. The future of Solstice is in this room, and I for one hope there can be friendship as well as peace between us.”

“Well said,” Azalea piped up. “Listernia agrees.”

“Oh yes, Fernedell considers you all friends and allies,” said Amell cheerfully, his arm now draped casually around Aurelia’s shoulders.

“Albury certainly desires both peace and good relations with all her neighbors,” said Justin solemnly.

“Yes, yes, as do Bansford, Mistra, and Entolia, no doubt,” said Zinnia, exasperated. “But the moment we start using our kingdoms’ names instead of our own is the moment we can no longer claim there’s no politics in the room.”

A general laugh passed around the group at these words, even Justin smiling in relative good humor. Amell leaned over to murmur something to the Alburian, and Bentleigh suddenly remembered that the forbidding king and the bubbly young prince were now brothers-in-law. The thought made him chuckle. A more mismatched pair of royals was hard to imagine.

His eyes passed on to Zinnia and Obsidian, both of whom had begun a conversation with Penny, their eyes alight with interest as she told them more of her magic. Felicity reclaimed her son from Justin’s lap, and in no time Wren was cooing over the child with such warmth that Bentleigh couldn’t help but wonder whether the young queen might have a secret of her own. A glance at Basil, whose eyes were especially soft as they rested on his wife, turned the guess into certainty.

Aurelia drifted across the room to greet Azalea and congratulate her on her pregnancy, not having had the opportunity the night before. A chance comment about Azalea’s journey from Liss, via Bant, drew Rian into the conversation.

Bentleigh smiled as he listened to his brother expound on the beauties of his home city, and warmly invite the princess to visit Bansford’s capital at any time.

Bentleigh felt fondness stir for his kingdom of birth. Bansford had come so far since the days when his parents’ fear had caused them to expel all magic from their midst. His gaze passed again over the gathered royals in their various conversations, landing finally on Azalea. This whole gathering was a masterful idea of Basil’s, another proof of the Entolian king’s excellent ability to cut through the politics and grasp the importance of life’s simple and profound realities. As the prince of one kingdom and the future king of another, Bentleigh understood better than most the importance of not only peace, but genuine relationship between the various crowns.

He would always love his home kingdom, but he’d known all his life that his future was in Listernia. And he’d longed most of his life for a future where his alliance with the kingdom—while important—was secondary to the intimately personal love he shared with that kingdom’s future queen. It had always been about Zayla for him, but that didn’t mean the politics didn’t matter. Zayla was Listernia’s future, and Listernia was hers. Bentleigh would never stop caring about his new kingdom or its people.

His gaze drew Azalea’s attention, and she excused herself from the conversation, returning to his side.

“What is it?” she asked softly.

He beamed down at her, snaking an arm around her waist and pulling her against him.

“Just thinking about the future, love,” he said contentedly. “Doesn’t it look beautiful?”

She leaned her head on his shoulder. “Perfectly glorious.”