

Kingdom of Slumber Bonus Epilogue

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: immediately after epilogue

Rian

Rian watched his brother precede him from the room, hurrying after the herald who had announced the arrival of the delegation from Listernia. Ben was almost skipping in his excitement over Azalea's arrival, but Rian refrained from mocking him, with what he considered true heroism.

He and Ben had always been close, so of course he'd known for years how his little brother felt about the princess he was betrothed to. But this wasn't like Ben's previous lovestruck mooning. Rian could see the difference. It was serious now. Ben had taken ownership of the betrothal, and from what he could make out, so had Azalea.

Rian was delighted for his brother, but he couldn't deny the dull ache that spread through him every time he remembered that Ben would now be leaving, and permanently. His visits to Listernia had been regular throughout their lives, but now it would be his home. And Rian had no idea how he was going to get on without his one true friend and ally.

Who would have his back when the expectations of his parents threatened to crush him? Who would laugh with him at the absurdities that attended royal life? There was no one else, in all the kingdoms, who Rian could safely vent to about his parents' draconian restrictions. He would have to take more care than ever not to ever betray a whisper of the doubt he sometimes felt about the wisdom—even the morality—of his parents' decision to outlaw magic. Ben had lately become more bold in expressing his skepticism, but it was different for him. His future had never been tied as intimately to his kingdom of birth as any other prince's would be. Certainly not the way Rian's was. Being the heir was a heavy weight. Unbearably heavy sometimes.

Rian sighed as he started forward at last, following Ben at a distance. This wasn't the time to dwell on his own troubles. It was Ben's moment, as he'd said. He begrudged his brother neither his happiness, nor the part he had himself played in bringing it about.

No need for Bentleigh to know the details of the methods Rian had used to help convince their parents. It wasn't like he'd made any genuine sacrifice. Giving his word that he wouldn't invoke the law that technically allowed him to choose his own bride was nothing but a show. There was no way he would have been able to withstand their pressure on such an issue anyway. They were always going to choose the future queen. If acknowledging that had helped clear the path for Ben and Azalea, then Rian was more than willing to swallow his pride.

He summoned a smile as he joined Bentleigh in the courtyard outside the castle's main entrance. Situated on top of the hill, they had an excellent view of the main thoroughfare of Bant, cutting through the heart of the city on its path to the castle. The Listernian group was almost upon

them, and a host of servants and grooms were filling the space with their bustle of preparation. Princess Azalea was easy to spot, her hair flowing untrammelled around her. Not very princess-like, but certainly a pleasant image, Rian acknowledged. He glanced sideways at Ben, and saw that his brother's eyes were riveted to Azalea's face, his features lit with a glow Rian didn't think he'd ever seen before. It took him aback a little. He'd thought he knew his brother better than anyone did. Yet another reminder that their paths were about to diverge irrevocably.

He shook off the gloomy thought, turning his eyes back to Princess Azalea. She didn't immediately greet him, or anyone else, tumbling from her horse and straight into Ben's waiting arms. Ben's eyes drank her in, the two of them sharing a silent but extremely expressive look.

It was all a little sickening, if Rian was honest, but there was no denying that Ben was happy, and for that Rian was glad.

Azalea turned at last to greet her future brother-in-law, and Rian returned her smile readily. He had always liked Azalea, although he couldn't help but be glad her impetuous exuberance wasn't destined to be his problem. He knew that Ben thought her stunningly beautiful, and he certainly didn't think her unattractive. But as he watched her greet his parents, who had appeared behind him, he found his mind involuntarily comparing her features to an entirely different face. Azalea's warm brown skin, brown eyes, and dark hair were a pleasant enough combination. But they could hardly be more different from the pale skin, fair hair, and arresting green eyes that appeared before his mind's eye.

Rian shook his head slightly, trying to dislodge the image of the girl from the marketplace, the one with the dog. He couldn't explain, even to himself, why he had been so struck by her. Why the memory of her expression, at once determined and gentle, had stayed with him ever since. He couldn't recall ever seeing anyone step in on behalf of a half-starved mongrel the way she had. It had warmed him to her instantly. Who she was, he had no idea. But she was no less beautiful for the intrigue, that was undeniable.

He sighed softly. He'd been entirely truthful when he told Bentleigh that no one in their father's court had caught his eye. Whoever this girl was, it was clear she wasn't a noblewoman. He tried to put the matter from his mind entirely. If she wasn't a noblewoman, there was absolutely no point in him thinking of her ever again. His parents would never let him so much as befriend a peasant girl.

Besides, as he had told Ben, the last thing he wanted was to fall for some pretty girl and lose a heart that wasn't actually his to give.

Nevertheless, his eyes glazed over slightly as he pictured her, wisps of pale hair tugged loose from a practical braid, brows drawn together as she inspected the produce she was on the point of purchasing. Her large aunt dog had hovered protectively by her side, or Rian would have been seriously tempted to approach her, to try to figure her out. Physically, she had seemed so insubstantial that a gust of wind might blow her over. But the keenness of her eyes belied that impression...he had gotten the sense that her air of fragility was entirely misleading.

And when she'd seen him, he could have sworn he saw a flash of fire go through her eyes. He could still feel its searing heat, even now. Perhaps he'd imagined it—she'd sunk into a stiff and unpracticed curtsy quickly enough, like the rest of the market goers who'd been nearby when he made his way through the crowd. What reason could she have to be angry at him, anyway, when they'd never met? He must have misread her look.

The produce merchant had known her, Rian mused, judging by the way the man had haggled with her. There had been a great deal of amused firmness on each side, and Rian collected that she

was a regular customer at the stall. It shouldn't be too hard to find the man, to question him and discover who she might be. Come to think of it, if she was a regular customer, he might be able to find her without involving the merchant, just by hanging around at the right time.

No. Enough. Rian shook his head harder as he followed the delegation into the castle. He needed to dislodge this nonsense altogether. There was nothing to be gained from finding this girl, and potentially a great deal to lose, for her as well as for him. He shuddered at the very thought of what his parents would do if they caught wind of him pursuing a peasant girl, even in a purely platonic sense.

And the idea of him loitering around the market day after day in the hope of glimpsing her again was utterly absurd. He didn't have the time for that, and he'd never be able to loiter. It was one of the most frustrating features of his position, that he never failed to attract an incredible amount of attention wherever he went.

No, the thing to do was to forget all about the inconsequential encounter. He should be focusing on Ben and Azalea's betrothal ball the following night. He knew his mother intended to introduce him to a few possible contenders for the role of his wife.

Somehow he couldn't muster much enthusiasm for the idea. In fact, he felt very little interest in the ball in general.

And that, of course, was caused solely by the impending desertion of his brother and one safe confidant. It had nothing to do with the fact that a certain pale-haired green-eyed peasant girl was absolutely guaranteed *not* to be there.

Nothing at all.