

# **PRINCE JAZNE'S BRIDE**

by

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## PRINCE JAZNE'S BRIDE

In a little shop dead center of the low-rent district in the city Follius, on the planet Sandar, Ketorai chomped on her third bar of double-sweet candy while shuffling pages of a gaudy tourist magazine. She was so tired, her tastebuds weren't working; she could only taste sugar. The sweeter the better, but double-sweet candy sold at a premium and drained her meager financial reserves. She needed a client, and soon.

The sugar revitalized her, though the taste of the sweet mixed with the acrid smell of the shop nauseated her. Yellow deodorizers draped in large sheets across the ceiling, emitting a nostril burning chemical that blended with and erased any street stench that seeped in when the door opened. The store clerk had spent the whole time she'd been there, scrubbing everything again and again with a noxious cleaning fluid.

Ket stared past the bustling clerk to the filthy street outside the window. Dusk had begun to settle in the corners and cracks and nocturnal people were slowly making their appearances, dragging themselves to any one of a number of nearby bars.

The denizens of this city were strangely morose. Ket could see no reason for the depressing viewpoint, but it was prevalent in everyone she'd met so far. Their grey-toned skin and black hair seemed to add to the atmosphere.

The city echoed its people: the trees were a dull green, the buildings dingy grey, and even the sky had a sullen tone to its blue. And it all reflected off her alien silver skin, turning it also dim. Depressing.

The clerk cleared his throat. Ket shifted her gaze to him and glared. The stare down lasted only a moment, before he looked away. She glanced out the window again and then back to her magazine. At the same time, she opened one of the airtight cases and reached for another candy bar. The clerk made another rude sound and Ket jerked her head up, teeth bared. The ready insults died from her lips, however, when she saw a small, furtive figure slide into view of the window and beckon her.

Ket sighed and closed the case. So far, she wasn't impressed with this prospective client, preferring someone who came right up to speak with her. She replaced the magazine, and stepped toward the door. The clerk smiled in triumph, the winner by default. She flipped the empty candy wrappers and her change at him.

Next time.

The man who met her when she stepped out the door looked no different than everyone else, just as morose, except possibly he was shorter than her, even. If she

blinked in a crowd, she doubted she'd recognize him. He said his name wasn't important; he was only an agent for his master, Prince Jazne of The Brionne Holdings.

Impressed royalty should send for her, and more than pleased that the Prince had even heard of her, she scurried after the agent.

Silently, he escorted her to a tall, dark castle, set in the middle of town, while his mind whirred on some unseen agenda, probably on thoughts of how much it would cost to secure her services. At least that's what she hoped.

He led her down several sharp halls to a private bed chamber. "The Prince will see you in the morning. The bath is hot and waiting and there are fresh garments laid out on the bed." He gave a pointed look at her clothing.

Ket stepped into the chamber, hearing the door shut behind her. It was a modest room: an oversized bed, a chair, a bath area with a tub, and a small window.

Going to the tub, she peeled her clothes and stepped in. The steam from the hot water felt good as it enveloped her and hid her sorrows from her view. Slowly, she lowered into the bath and lay back. She closed her eyes.

As always, the memories flooded in: her family's home on Idyah, her only friend and eventual lover, and her banishment from the planet.

Ket jerked her eyes open and finished washing. She didn't want to be sad. It was a good thing to be in service to a prince. She should be celebrating.

Stepping out of the tub, she dressed and crossed to the window. Try as she might, it wouldn't open. Standing in front of it, she watched the shadows of night creep across the city. Ket had intended to use this time to think, to plan her next move. Instead, she found herself lost in the soul of the depressing scene outside. Eventually, the walls began to fade in an illusion and she stood in the middle of a desert she'd created in her mind, no civilization in sight. She sank to the burning sand while the chill night wind played across her.

Awakening in the morning, she discovered herself curled under the window. Sometime during her sleep, she'd been brought a bowl of porridge-like stuff. She dunked her finger into it, pleased to find it still hot. The most she'd had to eat in the last couple days was the double-sweet candy. Her stomach growled unmercifully. She shrugged, guessing she wouldn't be seeing the Prince any time soon. Settling onto the solitary chair, she ate and waited.

She didn't have to wait long. The Prince's agent bustled into the room before she was even half finished with her breakfast. He leaned close and sniffed, then nodded with approval. "The Prince is ready for you now."

Ket followed him down the long, twisting halls, completely disoriented. It seemed to her they'd come in a different way.

The Prince awaited them in his throne room, lounging sideways across the massive chair set in the center of a wide stage. He began without preamble, not noticing or not caring that Ket wasn't finished with her curtsy. Waving his hand languidly at four robed women standing silently at the side of the stage, he said, "I am to wed one of these. You must tell me which. You will earn 50 kips for your services."

Ket could barely contain her pleasure. 50 kips would easily get her set up in another city, in a location where she would find regular high-paying clients.

Abruptly, the Prince swung his legs to the front and stood. Beckoning her to follow, he walked to the women, each beyond beautiful. As he passed each applicant, he caressed a cheek or patted an ample hip. "She must be pliant to my every wish. Quiet to a fault. Desiring to live for only me."

He stopped at the end of the line and waited.

Well, at least Ket now knew why the city outside the palace was so somber: the prince was a tyrant. She considered. Her task seemed simple enough. She didn't need to be close to the women to feel their emotions; she could do that from many miles away. But, for the kind of money she was getting, she could be a little theatrical.

She stepped in front of the first woman, a dark-haired beauty with full, red lips. Ket entered the holy stream of the Jadoua, the realm her people believed flowed through every living thing. She followed the stream with her mind and entered the emotions of the woman, seeing them as colors. White hot billowed at her: pride. She'd never bend to the Prince's will.

Ket dismissed her immediately and moved to the next woman, barely more than a girl. Shy pink met her in long streams of mist. That was a good quality in the Prince's desired mate. She sank deeper. The mists took on a mauve hue, and then plum: submission leading to fear.

This woman would do nicely for the Prince. There was no reason to continue. However, for the sake of theatrics and 50 kips, she would look at the last two women as well.

She stepped in front of the third woman, a tall dusky beauty with deep pools of intelligence in her eyes. Inside her, Ket was surrounded by determination and loyalty. Dark blue clouds of anxiety puffed at her, shooting jagged spears of red lightning. This woman was angry and, judging by the length of the lightning shards, it was much more deep-seated than than a little tiff.

Definitely not what the Prince requested. He didn't want a wife with anger issues. She might even try to kill him.

Ket moved on to the last woman in the line, another dusky woman with wide eyes and deep curves above her hips. Nothing unusual inside: compliant, eager. She'd also do well for the Prince. There was just a touch of greed, but that wasn't unforgivable in a princess.

Turning and walking back down the line, Ket stopped in front of the girl who was second. This was the one best suited to the Prince's requirements. Still, the memory of the citizens outside the castle haunted Ket. Could she help them?

Holding the gaze of the girl in front of her, she again slipped her mind into the third woman, the smart one. She delved deep, following the red lightning all the way to its roots.

There, she found the gray of grief coupled with compassion. This woman cared for the people. She could help them, but would she be able to get past her anger?

Mind made up, Ket sidestepped in front of this third of the Prince's choices and locked gazes with her, taking care to phrase her words to Prince Jazne just right, hoping her chosen woman would recognize the hidden meaning. "This one is intelligent enough to be subservient to your wishes and also to be careful to keep your lives together steady and fulfilling. She will make an excellent princess for you."

The Prince frowned and stared past her. "Not the child, then? She seems so submissive."

Ket sighed. "No, Majesty. Fear often turns to hate. She might try to kill you and that wouldn't be good for the people." She again locked gazes with the intelligent woman in front of her, giving a subtle message.

"Or me." The Prince's voice rumbled from beside her.

"Of course."

The woman's wide mouth stretched into a soft smile as understanding lit her eyes. She gave the smallest nod, shifted her gaze to the Prince, and curtsied. "Majesty."

The Prince circled her, looking her up and down, letting his fingers trail across her curves. "Yes, she'll do nicely."

He looked up at Ket. "Well done. My thanks to you."

The three remaining women were dismissed by the agent, as was Ket. As they left the throne room, the Prince's gaze lingered on the young girl, his brow creased in

thought.

The grey-toned agent led Ket to a heavily draped antechamber, assuring her he'd return as soon as he saw to the three rejected candidates. She stifled a yawn, leaning against a tapestry cushioned wall depicting hunting scenes. Though she'd slept during the night, she had much more sleep to recover.

When the short agent returned, she expected him to hand her the 50 kips and escort her off the premises, but his face was long with intent. "The Prince understands you have another talent. Projective Visual Telepathy."

She nodded slowly, already not liking the direction this was going. A cold burr settled into her stomach. "I can create illusions in a person's mind with my PVT."

"They seem real?"

For answer, she entered the man's mind and formed an illusion of a giant lava beast, nearly as tall as the ceiling, standing across the antechamber from them. She'd made the creature male, dark burgundy with a pair of thick horns sprouting from either side of the center of its long-snouted head.

The agent gasped and stumbled backwards, crashing hard against the wall. Face pale and rubbing his shoulder, he glanced at her, and then slowly walked to the shifting beast.

Ket made it grumble at the man, swinging its head, and his step faltered. Again, he glanced at her. Returning his attention to the creature in front of him, he laid his hand on its shoulder.

Manipulating the illusion, the massive animal shuffled forward on giant hooves the color of burnt rock, the illusionary muscles bunching under the man's hand, moving it. It lifted its massive head and swung its long snout back and forth in the air, trumpeting a warning call, maneless neck quivering with the effort. Then she let the illusion fade away.

The agent turned toward Ket, nodding. "I think the Prince will be quite pleased. He has one more task for you."

Recalling the way Prince Jazne watched the young girl, Ket shook her head. "I don't do fantasy illusions."

"The girl is well-blooded and cannot be touched now that she has been disqualified. The Prince will pay double."

"Even if you quadruple it, the answer is 'No.'"

"A thousand kips."

She didn't like the Prince. Not one bit. She wanted to get away from him as fast as possible. But, there wasn't much difference between creating a fantasy for someone and invading a person's mind, searching for secrets. It was all a service.

Ket licked her lips. She wasn't a greedy person, but life had treated her so raw lately...well, always. She could live for a long time on a thousand kips. "And the original 50."

The agent smiled for the first time. It was a thin-lipped smile of one used to outlandish requests. "Of course."

She sighed, resigned, repeating the man's words in her mind. Of course.

Ket followed the short, somber man back to her bedchamber where she sat and stared out the window at the dismal city, alone, all day. The wait did little to quell the disgust that rapidly built within her. Nor did it help her clenching stomach. She hated fantasies; she'd done a couple when she was first out on her own and she swore she'd never do one again.

But a thousand kips!

She'd never, ever, ever have to make another fantasy illusion as long as she lived. Wasn't that worth it?

Evening came and her stomach was too uptight for her to eat. She'd been too keyed up to nap during the day too. It was going to be a long, ugly night.

The door swung open and the same agent beckoned her, his grey face schooled into blankness. He escorted her down several halls to a wide stairwell fitted with narrow steps leading to an open balconied room. Gilded everything was everywhere, as were heavy tapestries, thick candles, and even thicker furniture. Centermost of the room was a massive bed atop a stepped platform. And centermost of the bed was the Prince.

She braced herself for the inevitable suggestion.

The Prince didn't disappoint. He patted the mountain of pillows beside him and smiled, but she shook her head and moved a chair to the corner of the platform. "My place is here."

Frowning, he shook his head. "How do you ...?"

"Make the illusion real? I watch. From over here." She sat solidly in the chair to confirm her words.

Still frowning, he said, "She will do what I want?"

"I can't read your wishes and hold an illusion at the same time, I'm sorry. It will be like a real person: a new experience with a few surprises."

He smirked at that and lay back on his pillow. In his mind, Ket formed the illusion of his desired girl climbing into bed, reaching for him. It wasn't a perfect likeness to her, but it didn't matter. It was close enough. His own imagination would provide the rest.

Manipulating the illusion to match the Prince's needs was easy. Watching him, as he got more and more brutal with the illusionary girl was difficult. As Ket watched him force entry and strike his fantasy girl repeatedly with a closed fist, her stomach knots tightened. By morning, she was barely able to stagger down the stairs and out of sight of the royal room before she doubled over and heaved vile stomach acid onto the floor.

Had she been wrong in telling the new Princess to not kill her betrothed? To seek other ways to accomplish her agenda? With as much determination as Ket had read in her, she wouldn't be swayed. Not even by an abusive Prince.

Wiping her mouth and straightening, Ket came face to face with the agent. Her voice came out in a quaver, matching the shaking that had taken over her body. "Is he always like that?"

He didn't answer, but the corners of his mouth gave him away in a slow downturn. "The Prince was again pleased with your performance. I wish to offer you a permanent position."

She shook her head, clutching her stomach as it kicked in violent protest. It wouldn't save the Princess, anyway. "No. I can't do that again."

He handed her the contracted kips, folded neatly in a clip. "I believe our business is concluded. My assistant will show you out." He motioned toward a man waiting nearby. Then he turned and walked away at a good pace.

Ket watched him. What could she do to help the Princess? She ran after him, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him to a stop. "You have to warn the future bride."

He hesitated, then plastered on a curt smile. "It is well-known, but not something spoken about." His eyes spoke of how tired he was of the whole mess. No doubt, he'd had to field many questions about the Prince's brutal bedding habits.

He tried to pull his arm away, but Ket held fast. She knew she'd kick herself for what she was about to do, but she couldn't abandon the woman to such a fate. Pressing her newly acquired kips into his hands, she begged. "Please. Warn her and give her the money. Help her when she needs to leave."

He glanced at his assistant, who had followed at a discreet distance. Then the agent met her gaze and gave a small nod. He slid his arm from her grip, tucked away the kips, and continued down the hall.

Ket watched him until he rounded a corner out of sight. She'd done the best she could. The rest was up to the Princess-to-be. Turning to the assistant, she sighed deeply and asked, "Do you have any suggestions of how I might find cheap or free transport out of this city?"

THE END