



The Desert Lord's Bride - Throne Of Judar 2 (Harlequin comics)

By Olivia Gates

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"I promise to give you the best moment of your life," whispers a beautiful, mysterious man after a passionate kiss. Those words make Farah throw all reason out the door. Career woman Farah is actually a desert princess, and had just found out that she is to be in an arranged marriage with a prince from a neighboring kingdom. Farah has always wanted to marry the man she falls in love with, and hoped that this man, who made her crazy, would be the one. Hot passion takes her over. Please, take me now! At that moment, the man's eyes shine like a beast.

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Editorial Review

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Hot as hell, cold as the grave.

Shehab's lips thinned as he recalled the catchphrase, his eyes slicing through the sea of costumed people who impinged on his senses and turned the ballroom into a battleground of material excess and self-serving agendas.

Still no sign of the woman who'd warranted this slogan.

He played it again in his mind, unwillingly finding the rhythm to it, humming it along with the exuberant live orchestral performance of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 9.

Hot as hell, cold as the grave.

One man had even added *insatiable as death*.

Now *that* was a summation if he'd ever heard one.

The descriptions sounded like titles. Like the ones he'd been saddled with since birth. Sheikh Aal Masood. His Royal Highness. And now His Majestic Eminence the Crown Prince.

But according to common consensus, hers had been earned.

And he was expected to marry the woman.

No. He wasn't expected to. He was going to. He *had* to.

His every muscle clenched. His teeth grated against each other.

Ya Ullah. He should be resigned by now, numbed. It had been over a month since he'd known the fate he had to succumb to, to safeguard Judar's throne.

At times he could almost hate Carmen.

It was because of Farooq's overriding love for his wife that he'd thrown the burden in Shehab's lap.

Still, Shehab could have endured a fate he'd always proclaimed worse than death, an arranged marriage, if the designated bride had been anyone acceptable.

But Farah Beaumont, the illegitimate daughter of King Atef Aal Shalaan, king of Zohayd, wasn't acceptable.

Not because she'd been born out of wedlock. And not because she'd refused to acknowledge her heritage, or to be the instrument of peace. The first she had no hand in, the second could have been a temporary inability to deal with the revelations about her past, the upheavals it promised in her future.

But neither was why Farah Beaumont—whom her mother had so sneakily given an Arabic name popular in

the West—spurned her father and could afford to turn down the prospect of becoming a princess. The real reason was what made her so repulsive.

She'd been born into privilege, having been adopted by the French multimillionaire her mother had married. Then, ever since his fortune had been lost after his death, Farah had been clawing her way back to the top. She'd reached it when she'd become the right hand and mistress of world-shaper Bill Hanson, a married man almost old enough to be her grandfather.

By evidence of her actions and by everyone's testimony, Farah Beaumont was a cold, promiscuous, seriously twisted woman.

She was also crucial to a whole region's peace. But she'd refused to do her duty. Point-blank.

Now he had *his* duty. To pulverize her refusal.

He forced his teeth apart, answered the infringing stare of a couple in Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI costumes.

Instead of deflecting attention by making an appearance as a *Kel Tagelmust*, a man of the veil, a *Tuareg* Sahara warrior, Shehab was attracting nothing but. At least he remained anonymous. He couldn't risk recognition. Hence the masked ball, where he could take the masked part literally.

He exhaled, venting some tension, his breath scorching as it spread behind the indigo cotton veil/turban covering his head and face from mid-nose downward. He pivoted before the couple considered eye-contact permission to approach, only to bump into a leggy Irma La Douce who promptly fluttered her lashes in a way he was only too used to. Before flirtation spilled from her eyes to her lips, he murmured a few gentle words to make it clear he'd appreciate being left alone.

As the prostitute with the heart of gold moseyed on, tossing disappointed looks back at him, he sighed. He hoped to avoid all attention from now on. Although he'd sponsored this affair, he hadn't invited any of the acquaintances he liked and respected. Instead he had filled the room with people he either barely knew or didn't care much for, to create an anonymous, easily ignored crowd. He was here to focus on and garner the attention of only one person. Farah Beaumont.

Now if only the damned woman would make an appearance.

Suddenly, something sizzled at the back of his neck.

Tensing, he homed in on the source of the disturbance. It was emanating from the giant ballroom doors ten feet away. He turned, imbuing his movement with unconcern.

In the next second, everything lost momentum. His body. His heart. The world itself decelerated before it vanished. Nothing remained but the creature framed in the intricately gilded doorway, swathed in an ethereal gown made of every shade of green right out of his kingdom's fairy tales. The subject of a fantasy painting come to life.

This was...*her*?

He blinked, as if coming out of hypnosis.

What was he *thinking*? Of course it was her. He'd had enough close-ups of her pinned on his wall as he'd prepared for this campaign. Pictures that included several of her wrapped around her sugar daddy, flaunting

the nature of their relationship. He knew how she looked, down to the last detail.

Or so he'd thought. Her flesh-and-blood reality far transcended the composite image her photos had created.

None had come close to translating the hundred shades that spun the bronze silk of her hair. None had been faithful to the richness of the thick cream that was her skin. None had hinted at the hue and depth of her eyes. In the most revealing close-ups they'd been a mundane green. But even at this distance, they rivaled the summer meadows and emerald shores of his island put together. And her tailored features echoed no one's, her air implied an individuality so unique that must be encoded in her very genes.

Her photos had misconstrued a combination that he could only describe as...*breathtaking*.

He blinked again. *What are you thinking, you fool? She is a self-serving, gold-digging creature inhabiting a siren's body. A body she sells to the highest, most undemanding bidder.*

He gave himself a further mental shake as he watched her proceed across the ballroom, turning every head but noticing no one herself.

Yes, *there* it was, the famed frost.

Yet...maybe not.

It wasn't haughtiness he detected, the despising of all else who lived. It was something he recognized only too well. The bone-deep wish for solitude, the elemental drive to avoid crowds, loathing to be the center of attention yet knowing he was forever doomed to be in it....

There he went again! Assigning not only human traits to the woman who thought nothing of standing aside as a prosperous kingdom descended into chaos, but deeply personal ones, too.

Enough. Time to put things in motion. This was going to be hard and ugly and, if he found no way out, permanent. No reason to draw out the preliminary discomfort.

He signaled to his waiters.

He moved to intercept her, his steps long and leisurely, their steady momentum detailing his intention to bypass her on the way to the French windows leading out onto the terrace.

Five paces from their intersection point, he cast his gaze in a sweeping motion, not intending it to pause on her. The next moment his intentions scattered, along with his ordered thoughts, as his gaze locked on to hers with all the greed and willfulness of everything male in him.

E'lal jaheem. To hell with this. What was he doing deviating from the set plan?

His eyes clung to hers, disregarding his fury at the unprecedeted loss of control. Then, at the height of his frustration, he saw it. Reflected in the depths of her gemlike eyes.

Awareness. Startled, rivaling his own, surpassing it for being taken unawares.

The coolness of satisfaction spread behind his sternum.

So—the Ice Queen wasn't immune to him, eh?

With her reputation, he'd been worried she'd be the exception, forcing him to exert himself to catch and keep her attention. It seemed she just hadn't met a man who warranted it.

But she'd met him now.

So maybe she'd relent if she found out *he* was her intended groom, that she'd exchange one billionaire tycoon for another who could more than give her what she needed in bed, things her aging lover surely wasn't providing her with...

What was he thinking? No matter how magnificent she was as a female, she was immoral, heartless. He would never keep her in his bed longer than it took for her to conceive the vital heir.

Based on all he knew of her, he assumed that one factor in her adamant refusal to change her current situation was that she had no desire to lose the freedom of being in control of an older man without giving anything back, giving nothing up. Entering a marriage of state, where she'd be forever monitored and unable to mess around as she no doubt did now, must be unthinkable to her. A man in his prime, who'd keep her toeing the line and in his bed, was certainly to be avoided at all costs.

No. Disclosing his true identity to someone who was as ruthless a businesswoman as he was a businessman would only backfire.

His original plan was the only way to go.

His eyes had remained glued to hers all through his inner deliberations. Voluntarily, he insisted on telling himself, to ascertain her reaction to him.

And he was certain now. He'd never seen such a blatant confession of instant hunger in a woman's eyes. He struggled not to acknowledge the flare of equal hunger in his gut, to keep all turmoil from his eyes. Smugness, hot and triumphant, surged as she faltered to a standstill under the brunt of his approach.

Then his two accomplices collided into them.

Farah Beaumont had been roasting with mortification.

Every eye in the packed, suffocatingly opulent ballroom had turned at her entrance, the whispers rising over the orchestral music like the hissing of a thousand cobras.

Which wasn't an exaggeration, really. She felt as if she'd just stepped into a pit of snakes. But then, she'd invited their poison when she'd agreed to pose as Bill's lover. Sometimes their purposes in setting up this charade di...

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