

DEATH BLEEDS FLAMES

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Belle always preferred the winter solstice over the summer solstice. The winter solstice ball was always less packed due to the cold weather. No one wanted to attend in fear of their horses freezing or their carriages breaking down. But during the summer solstice, the mixture of the sun's beating gaze and everyone's natural body heat made the ballroom an ocean of sweat and body odor that not even rose scented luxury perfume from Louis XV's castle in France could cover.

But alas, King Aurthur wanted as many people as possible to be present for the announcement of his daughter, Princess Annabelle's, engagement. So, the summer solstice ball was their best bet.

Belle took a deep breath as the doors opened and the guards raised their trumpets. As their tune began to ring, Belle crossed the threshold onto the loft overlooking the ballroom. She placed her gloved hands onto the railing as she observed the people of her kingdom. It was a sea of multicolored fabric. Light pinks, deep greens, soft yellows, and some speckles of black. But not a single shade of blue. That was Belle's dress, and no one was allowed to wear the same color as the princess. When she asked why, she was told that it was because if there was an emergency, she would be easily identifiable.

The navy-blue fabric paired with her silver jewelry and platinum blonde hair allowed her to model the night sky. The atmosphere was probably as restricting to oxygen intake as her corset, too.

Belle's eyes met her fathers as he rose from his throne across the ballroom. The last note of the fanfare rang out as the guards lowered their trumpets. The doors shut behind her like an encore to a show.

"People of Westbrook," King Arthur spoke to his subjects. They all turned from Belle to look at him.

"I am overjoyed that you all have joined us this summer solstice. I hope this celebration will welcome a flourishing season for all of you!"

Usually, this statement would mark the beginning of the festivities. On any other ordinary summer solstice, a big round of applause would erupt throughout the ballroom that would eventually be drowned out by the band. Food would start disappearing from the tables, and

couples would start trading spots on the dance floor when their favorite pieces began to play. But this was not an ordinary summer solstice ball.

“Before we begin, I would like to make an announcement,” he continued. “It is my greatest honor to announce the engagement between my daughter, Princess Annabelle, and Prince Elias Stone of Port Dellmette.”

The doors opened once again, and the guards resumed their fanfare. Elias joined Belle on the loft. His suit was silver with navy blue accents, the inverse of her gown.

Belle couldn't help but smile as her fiancé greeted her with a bow, which she returned with a curtsy of her own.

Elias pulled a small box out of his pocket. Inside was her engagement ring, an oval sapphire circled with tiny diamonds. He slipped it on her finger over her glove before gently pressing his lips to her knuckles. The crowd erupted in applause.

“You look beautiful, Your Highness.” He told her with a smile.

Belle rolled her eyes, not even trying to hide her blush. Even if this marriage was arranged, she couldn't deny the fact that she was smitten with him. “You know you don't need to use formalities, Elias.”

“I didn't know a man showing respect to his future wife was a crime, love.”

Belle chuckled. “Oh, dear, it's the worst offense one could commit! I may have to call the guards.”

Elias smiled. “Will you at least come visit me in the dungeons?”

“I'll think about it, but royal duties do keep me quite busy.”

“As long as you're thinking of me.”

They both shared one more laugh before they turned back to the crowd.

Belle met her father's eyes once again and smiled. Aurthur nodded and clapped once. “Let the festivities begin!”

“Congratulations on your engagement,” A man told the couple with a bow. Elias thanked him with a nod of his head, and the man dove back into the sea of attendees.

“That makes how many congratulations now?” Belle joked.

“Thirty-seven.” Elias replied with a smile. His hand slipped to the small of her back. “The people of Westbrook are very kind.”

“Yes, they are.”

“I’m sure they model after their princess.”

Belle smiled. That’s all she ever did around Elias. Many men have tried to court her before, but none of them have ever made her as happy as Elias did. She thanked God every night for giving her the opportunity to marry him.

Elias brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. He opened his mouth to say something, but something caught the corner of his eye. His head snapped to the side, his muscles suddenly tense as he held her close.

Belle followed his gaze, but she couldn’t tell what he had seen. “Is everything alright?”

He looked back at her. His eyes softened. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, love. Everything is okay. It’s just a torch over there. It went out.” He pressed his lips to her forehead. “I need to use the restroom. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Belle nodded. “Alright.” She felt his arms fall away from her as he sauntered off.

It took five minutes for the screams to begin.

“*A dead body!*” A lady began to scream. “*A dead body! A guard! He’s dead!*”

The ballroom erupted in panic. Colors blurred together as people scurried around like mice looking for peanut butter. They cried out for their significant others, gathered their children into their arms, and a few of the braver ones snatched some snacks from the buffet table before streaming toward the door.

Belle was caught in the middle of it all. Surely guards would be looking for her by now, right? She pushed through the crowd as politely as she could, eager for some sort of security.

Once she reached the edge of the ballroom where the crowd was less dense, she had realized why no guards had come to seek her out. Her stomach dropped. They were all dead. Dead bodies lined every corridor, a few littering throughout the dance floor from those who had attempted to help the attendees.

She took a careful step toward the nearest guard and gagged. It had looked like he had been burned...almost. The charred skin was purple, making the burn marks appear almost like a distant galaxy.

She took another step back, taking deep breaths. She needed to stay calm. *In through your nose, out through your mouth. In through your nose, out through your mouth.* She reminded herself.

On her third breath, she caught a faint scent of smoke. *The burn marks. There's a fire.* She looked around for any sign of where the smoke was coming from. She needed to get herself and her people as far away from the fire as possible.

But the smoke had already formed a dark blanket over the domed ceiling.

The chandelier was on fire. But these were not regular flames. This fire couldn't have started from a badly lit candle. This had to have been some sort of magic.

The flames were a deep shade of black. Almost complete shadow except for the heart of the fire, which glowed white, as bright as an angel's halo.

Nobody had noticed the fire yet. These flames did not provide warmth as regular fires do. You couldn't feel these flames physically. You felt them emotionally. Belle felt it deep within her soul. Dread. Despair. Fear. Anger. Sadness. *Everything.* As if death himself had cut open his hand and poured out his wrath onto the kingdom.

Belle stumbled at the sudden rush of emotion. She backed herself into the wall, searching for some sense of stability. But instead, she ended up hitting her head on the butt of the torch above her.

The torch held the same flame of death.

"Yes, love. Everything is okay. It's just a torch over there. It went out."

Elias. Elias had caused this tragedy.

The sound of a crack suddenly rang throughout the ballroom, pulling Belle out of her thoughts. There was only a split second for people to react before the chandelier came crashing down.

Belle didn't have time to think. She had to choose between staying and helping her people or going to stop her fiancé. She chose the latter, praying that this decision would stop any future harm.

She dashed down the corridor that Elias had traveled through moments before, but the flames were spreading quickly. They chased her through the maze of hallways, licking at her heels. Through the kitchens, they ripped pots and pans from the walls. Through the throne room, they had ripped the velvet cushions to threads. Through the offices, Belle had run into various pieces of furniture because she couldn't see through the thick smoke. It wasn't until she reached the library before the flames finally relented. She could still hear the screams of her people, but

she couldn't tell if it was her own memory or the flames were simply carrying her people's torment along with them to make it Belle's own.

Belle yanked open the grand double doors just to quickly slam them behind her once again when she was safe inside the library. She was breathing heavily, tears prickling her eyes. She didn't take her hands off of the door just in case the fire would fight against her. She wanted nothing more than to curl up into a ball right then and there. But she knew Elias was with her. Not only could she feel his presence, but there had to be a reason the flames, *his* flames, wouldn't attack this room.

"I knew you'd come looking for me," Elias observed. She could hear his footsteps slowly approach her.

She warily turned to him, putting on her best brave face despite her tears. "You just murdered all of my guards and took a bunch of my people down with them."

"It was nothing against them, truly."

"You took *innocent* lives, Elias! Why are you acting like this is okay!?"

His eyes softened, something that used to make Belle's heart melt into a puddle in his hands. He reached his hand up to wipe a stray tear from her cheek, but she pushed it aside.

He sighed. "Do you know why your father and my mother arranged our marriage, Annabelle?"

She huffed. He was avoiding her question, but she decided to play along for her people's and her own safety. "Power," she answered. "Neither of our kingdoms are as big as England or France. Our lands are quite small, we don't appear on many major maps. They thought it would be beneficial to both of our kingdoms if our families merged."

Elias's shoulders shook as he let out a silent laugh. "It's adorable that you still believe that."

Belle narrowed her eyes at him. "Excuse me?"

"Our marriage was a peace treaty, love." He took a step toward her. "5 years ago, your father assassinated my own. We've been in a silent war for years. Both of our families built armies, but were too scared to attack one another. My mother built her army out of fear of your father. She didn't know if she was going to be next. And your father built his army to protect himself from my mother's. He stated that he had no intentions of killing my mother, but I'm not so sure I believe him.

“But then my mother finally had enough. She wanted peace, but your father refused. He didn’t believe her. He thought she was going to backstab him. So, she proposed a trade. They would offer each other whatever they loved most in the world to prove their trustworthiness. So, if that trust was broken, they could destroy the other person’s love.

“And we, my dear, is what they love most in the world.”

She just stared at him, processing the information. She almost didn’t believe it, but it made too much sense.

“Except neither of our parents were too fond about giving their children away, so instead they arranged our marriage. We are nothing but a peace treaty. An alliance of sorts.”

“And this whole ploy was to get back at my father?” Belle guessed.

He nodded. “You’re a very smart girl, Annabelle. It’s one of the things I love most about you.” He paused for a moment before he sighed. “Y’know Belle, despite all of this, I really did fall in love with you. I still want you to be my wife.”

He took her hands in his. “Why don’t we run away together? Let this castle burn. We could go live in Port Dellmette. Rule side by side as king and queen.”

Belle let herself consider for a moment. What would life be like with him in Port Dellmette? She had never been to the Port castle. She knew it was seaside, so she would get a beautiful view of the ocean. Maybe they would have a few kids and they could go pick flowers in the meadow.

But is that what she wanted?

She took a deep breath and pulled her hands away. “No. You have hurt countless of my people, and are planning to hurt my father,” she didn’t let herself consider the fact that her father may already be gone. “I’d rather eat hot coals before ever running away with you.”

Elias’s gaze sharpened. His eyes trailed from her face down to his arm where his flames began to flicker.

“If that’s what you really want.”

He threw the flames at her, and death hit her in the chest.

Belle woke up screaming. She clawed at her nightgown as if the flames were still attacking her. Her head was pounding, and she could feel her oxygen slipping away.

The door to her room bursts open, as a few of her guards and servants poured into her bedroom.

“Your Highness? Your Highness, what is the matter?” Her lady in waiting, Marilynne, asked her as she rushed to Belle’s bedside. She pressed her hand to Belle’s forehead. “Are you sick, Your Highness?”

Another one of Belle’s servants had pulled open her curtains to let the moonlight spill into the room. Belle squinted against the sudden brightness. She focused on that feeling of the light.

She wasn’t dead. Her people were fine. Her father was well. Elias hadn’t burned down the castle.

It was all a nightmare.

She began taking deep breaths to calm her body down. “Yes, yes, I’m okay, Marilynne. Just a nightmare. I apologize for waking you.”

Marilynne shook her head. “No, no need to apologize dear.” She smoothed out Belle’s before adjusting her pillows, allowing Belle to lean back. “I’ll go get you some water. I’m sure your throat will need it. I wouldn’t be surprised if they heard you screaming down at the village!”

Belle chuckled. Marilynne always knew how to brighten her mood.

Marilynne almost ran straight into Elias when they crossed paths at the door.

“Pardon me,” he told Marilynne before dashing past her to get to Belle. “Are you alright, Love? I heard a commotion! Are you hurt?” He gently grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her close to him.

She rested against his body, finding comfort in his presence. “Just a nightmare. I’m alright.”

He let out a sigh of relief. “As long as you’re okay.”

She nodded. They stayed like that for a moment before Marilynne returned with the water.

“Here you go, dear.” She handed the cup to Belle, to which she drank it in 4 long sips.

Marilynne took the cup and left the room, the servants and guards following behind her. Elias used the opportunity to press a kiss on her forehead. “Are you sure you’re okay? Do you need me to do anything?”

She shook her head. "I'm alright, thank you."

He smiled and took her hand in his. "Then I hope you don't mind if I go back to bed. It's quite late, you should to."

She smiled back. "I don't mind at all."

"Alright." He pressed a kiss on her knuckles before standing up. "Goodnight, my love. I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight, darling."

Belle moved to lay back down, but then annoyingly grumbled when she realized the curtains were still open. She was always the type of person who couldn't sleep at the presence of even a little light. She begrudgingly got up to close the curtains, until something caught her attention. Her hand.

On her palm, there was a wound. A burn. In the shape of a heart. It was tinted purple. She tried to convince herself it was a trick of the moonlight, but she couldn't.

The door creaked open once more.

"I love you, Annabelle." Elias told her.