

## Beauty Come Again

The rather twisted sequel to 'Royal Beauty Bright.' Erith catches up with Lurissa.  
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A/N: This is another short story starring Erith, the sequel to my story "Royal Beauty Bright."

### *232, Age of Newness, Early Summer*

"*Lema slela*, it was called in the Primal Tongue. Glorious destruction. Many debates have been held to determine exactly what these two words, put together, mean. Destruction is never beautiful. But, on that one day in history- the day of the Lady Izraia's sacrifice; the day when, some contend, the foundations of the silver unicorns' final defeat were laid- perhaps destruction and creation traded places, and destruction did, after all, become beautiful."

-From *Telonio Amanath Ayende, or Musings of Amanath Ayende*, published in the early years of the hundred and ninety-second century of the Age of Magic.

"Halt!"

Erith halted, and rolled his eyes upward. He smiled briefly, then brought them down again to the level of the guard's face. His fingers curled around the hilt of his sword, and he smiled teasingly. The guard snarled and crouched a little, his lips drawing back.

Erith looked at the fangs that this revealed for a moment, and then nodded. "Very pretty. Of course, I have my own set."

The darkness Elwen glared at him. "Your kind are not born with fangs," he began, in the tone of someone who had already had to put up with too much from self-important Elwens, and might attack and eat Erith's soul just on general principles.

"Oh, not on me. Above."

The zorkro looked up, and then staggered as Surl descended on him, wrapping one arm around his neck. Surl drew back the zorkro's head and laid his own fangs on the dark-skinned throat. Erith smiled more broadly and leaned forward for a closer look. Surl was pressing just hard enough that a drop of black blood, hard to see because it was almost the same color as the darkness Elwen's skin, had slipped out. But just a drop, and Surl wasn't drinking it.

"Art," said Erith reverently. "The pressure, and your self-control." He looked up into Surl's dark blue eyes, and raised his brows. "And the look on your face, of course. Just the right amount of threat."

"I'm afraid that you don't have quite enough," said the zorkro guard, his voice steady despite everything. "I can still strike at your friend and eat his soul. My bite is fatal, even if I strike at his shoulder or back."

"Oh, of course it is," said Erith, changing position so that he was looking into the zorkro's silver eyes. He admired that effect, too, the glow as of molten metal against the utter blackness, but the look of fury that twisted the guard's features spoiled it a bit. "But my acid is fatal, too. Do you feel my hand?"

The zorkro had to take a moment to concentrate, and then his face twisted a little more as he felt where Erith's hand rested.

"Yes," said Erith, and heard his own voice move into a croon. "Did you know that land Elwens who

can call acid aren't that common? Oh, no, we are not." His heart was pounding ferociously in his ears, and his hands twitched with the need to move. He controlled them, though barely. "We receive long training. We can summon acid and then make it do our will. Most often, of course, it is our will that it immediately bite into the person we are touching."

The guard flinched then. Considering where his hand was, Erith was not surprised. He leaned forward, lowering his voice and breathing out gently on the zorkro's skin. It was the only way he could prevent himself from striking at once.

"But, sometimes, when we want to, we can prevent the acid from biting at once. We leave it on the skin. It can feel like dew, or rain. Gentle as water, gentle as a caress. I knew a fellow soldier once who mingled it with the sweat on her lovers' skin. And then, when we wish to, we- let it go. Imagine that."

His voice deepened further, and Erith found that he was trembling. His own skin shuddered as though someone were trailing feathers along it. "Right now, you are prepared for pain. But imagine being unprepared, and suddenly having pain strike you like a thousand lashes, a thousand flames, a thousand small mouths biting from inside- yes, that is an idea," he said suddenly, decisively. "I think I will have you swallow the acid. Then it will act on your stomach, and-

"He's whimpering."

Erith blinked, and realized that it was Surl's voice that was speaking, somewhere from beyond the silver haze. Slowly, he came back to himself, and looked longingly at the zorkro. "You're sure?"

"I can feel the blood quaking in his veins."

Erith sighed and stepped away from the darkness Elwen. "Then let him go."

"He threatened you," said Surl, not relinquishing his hold.

Erith raised his eyebrows. "And you fed from me not two hours ago. I know you're not hungry. You're just looking for an excuse."

Surl released the other Elwen, and hovered in the air for a moment before descending and glaring at Erith. "My lord, you agreed that I could protect you from threats. I thought that was clear." His own voice was falling into a growl, now, or at least what a growl would sound like if it were music. "If you are going to break the terms of our agreement, then-

"My lord, I will announce you to the Lady. But who are you?"

Erith looked over Surl's shoulder at the zorkro and smiled. "Erith Lothmirel, returning from an expedition to the human village of Garan," he said calmly. "The village is neutralized."

The guard straightened his dark hair and nodded. "I will tell her. My lord, if you will come with me?"

He turned and strode into the camp, trying to look as if he could walk without shaking. Erith studied him admiringly, then glanced at Surl out of the corner of his eye.

"I am ever mindful of the terms of our agreement, I assure you. But you shouldn't tear out throats."

"You were ready enough to spread late-acting acid on him, my lord."

Erith laughed. "I must admit that I went further than I had planned. And you don't need to call me by title, you know."

"I wish to."

Erith smiled and dropped to one knee in front of Surl, spreading his arms wide and throwing his head back. The Elwens who used the night for training, or who were due for guard duty in a few hours,

paused and stared at them. Erith noted the audience, but ignored them for the most part, gazing up at Surl instead.

Surl stared back. Erith's nightsight was strong enough to pick out the colors of his purple skin, his deep blue eyes, his dark and almost indigo hair. It was also strong enough to pick out the frustration that was creeping up, and of course the beauty. He would have to be blind, Erith thought, to miss the beauty.

"What are you doing?" asked Surl levelly.

"Speak the title to me now," said Erith, and his lips curled up. "Did you notice that you just didn't?"

"With all due respect, my lord- the Lady is waiting."

Erith glanced over his shoulder at the zorkro guard. "You have spoken with her by telepathy, I imagine?"

"Yes, my lord." The darkness Elwen took a step back, in what Erith thought was unintentionally funny fear. That this man, who was a soul-eater, should have some fear of him... "She is waiting."

"We must not keep the Lady waiting," said Erith to Surl, standing and brushing the grass off his knees. "It is one of the immutable laws of the universe."

Surl shook his head and started walking again. Slowly, their audience went back to polishing swords or complaining about the food or swearing vengeance against the humans. Erith noted out of the corner of his eye that Surl was waiting for that to happen, and wondered why. He began counting in his head. *Non, dai...*

"Why did you do that, my lord?" Surl asked in his ear, just as Erith's internal count reached *mon*.

Erith glanced at him. "Because it's fun. And because I wanted to. And because I wanted to show you some things."

"That I didn't give you the title when you knelt?"

"That was a later advantage."

"Then what-"

"My lord, the Lady."

Erith looked forward again. The Lady, Eleriad Deerfriend, was sitting on a chair of pale birch wood in the shade of a great gray fianda tree, with Takon, the aqua summer moon, rising almost full into the sky behind her. The stars shone on her, and the odd blue-green stripes of the moon's light shimmered here and there on her tanned face, her white hair, her silver eyes, the silver hilt of the sword she wore at her side. She stared at him, her face unmoving, her emotions as pure as ice.

Erith smiled at her. "I would appreciate the effect better if it were not clearly so contrived," he assured her.

The Lady blinked. Of course she did, Erith thought. He had always made her feel uncomfortable. He didn't really understand why. He knew he wasn't the only one who saw through her staging. Perhaps he was the only one who spoke it aloud.

"You have neutralized Garan?" she asked.

"Yes, my lady."

There was a moment of silence. The Lady looked at Erith. Erith looked at her. Surl stirred uneasily at his side. The Lady's guards, women both on this shift, edged a step nearer her chair, their hands resting on their sword-hilts. Surl snarled softly, and both of them stopped.

"I require a report," said the Lady at last, and this time her emotions had shifted. Now, standing in front of her was like facing a wind with snow in its teeth. Erith braced himself appreciatively. It was a good thing that he could read emotions. Eleriad had a face like metal after so long in the field.

"Why?"

The emotions grew colder. Erith looked about with interest, and then smiled as he smelled a familiar scent from behind the Lady's chair.

"I would be more than happy to give that report," he said, clearly enough that people probably heard him on the other side of the camp, "if my Lady Lurissa would come out from behind the throne."

Almost three separate ripples of reaction ran through the Elwens around him. He had insulted Eleriad quite neatly, thought Erith, as he watched Lurissa step into the open, her cheeks one blaze of silver fire. He had tried to bargain with her, he had suggested that she was hiding someone on purpose, and he had implied that she was trying to set herself up as queen of Rowan instead of merely Councilmaster. Eleriad stared at him as if she didn't know even where to begin the torture.

"I thought you were dead," said Lurissa bluntly.

"You have an unfortunate habit of thinking that," Erith chided her. "I believe this was the third attempt? And yet you never stay around to see me finish them- or, them finish me, as I suppose you would hope. You should really make sure that you get your money's worth."

Surl cleared his throat.

Erith smiled at him. "Well, yes, this time you did get your money's worth," he said to Lurissa. "But I suspect that he will be of more consequence to me than he will to you."

"You have been attempting to assassinate each other?" Eleriad cut in.

Erith glanced at her. "Lurissa has been sending assassins after me, my lady. I usually use my own blade."

Eleriad rose to her feet, her long white gown tumbling around her. Erith shook his head. She couldn't fight in such a thing. She really was wearing it simply in an attempt to look impressive. Did she think anyone was fooled, or that anyone sane would really admire her without thinking about it?

"I specifically forbade such personal duels," said Eleriad harshly. "We are fighting the humans. They have sworn the destruction of all Elwens, whether land Elwen or curalli, whether viaquia or alalori." Her voice swirled and soared into a triumphal march that Erith listened to with some admiration. He really had never heard a voice as beautiful as hers, he thought. How much lovelier it would have been combined with a taste for less bloody rhetoric! "We cannot afford to fight among ourselves. The humans would see all magic destroyed, if they could. They would see our children growing up without parents, or dead in their cradles. They would make sure that our tongues are never spoken again, that no Elwen tales are ever recited, that the very memory of our deeds is destroyed! Will we let that happen?"

The roar of more than a thousand throats came from behind them. Erith glanced over his shoulder. Of course, most of the camp had stopped what they were doing and drawn near to hear Eleriad's speech. They always did.

He looked back at Eleriad, who tried to stare him down. "My lady," he said calmly into the ringing silence, "you have not proven that one duel threatens the unity of the army, which I believe was what you set out to do."

The Lady's lips compressed into a straight line. "I can make exceptions," she said softly.

"For me, or for Lurissa?" asked Erith.

The Lady smiled, but somehow she still kept her lips together, so that none of her teeth showed. "For both of you," she said. "This has been drawn out long enough. For whatever reasons that the two of you have, you must fight. So. You may duel, now, and whoever loses or dies is accounted the loser permanently. The contest ends the feud. Is that acceptable?"

"Perfectly acceptable, my lady." Lurissa unhooked the sword from her belt, her eyes hungry. She moved a step forward, and Erith smiled. Her anger was thick and rich as chocolate now.

"It is acceptable," echoed Erith. "Whoever loses this contest?"

"Yes. Begin!" said Eleriad, and sat back down on the chair that was a throne whatever she said.

Lurissa sprang forward.

Erith did not draw a weapon. He stood there, hands open, smiling, and Lurissa drew back with her sword just an inch from his chest, frowning at him.

Surl growled.

"You promised me," said Erith, not looking at the viaquia. "When I met Lurissa, she was mine. You promised me that. No matter who else you may have a right to protect me from, she is mine."

Surl rocked on his heels, but stayed put. Erith smiled the wider and bowed his head to Lurissa.

"My lady, do you remember when we first met?"

Lurissa shook her head slowly. Comprehension was filling her dark eyes, and she didn't look as if it were pleasant. "No," she said softly, just a whisper of breath. "You cannot do this to me. You cannot." She fainted sharply with her sword, then drew back and began circling when Erith did not move.

Erith walked the circle opposite her. He owed her that much. But he kept his eyes on her face, and his voice calm and reasonable. "I heard laughter. I didn't know who was laughing. I only knew that I had never heard anything like that laughter. I walked towards the stream where I had heard it, carrying my drawn sword with me. I thought I needed a weapon unconsciously, perhaps.

"And then I knew I needed it when I saw you in the water, head cast back like a leaping dolphin, water streaming from your hair."

The silence from the people around them was complete. The only sounds were the measured tread of Erith's footsteps, the quick snap of Lurissa's, the equally swift and harsh measures of her breathing, and the distant song of a cricket somewhere near who hadn't quite heard the message that seemed to have traveled the rest of the night.

"I didn't believe it at first," said Erith softly, lowering his voice and shortening the circle a step so that Lurissa could hear him. Her sword came up warningly, but he merely stopped well short of it and began the circle again. She mimicked his movements, breathing through her nose, her emotions rioting like a stormy sea around her. "I had a dream once, you see. A dream that I always remembered, though I couldn't tell you what it was about now. It was a dream of perfect beauty. I always felt blessed to have had that dream, and to know that I, perhaps alone among Elwens, had an idea of what perfect beauty was like.

"And there you were, like this dream come again, like beauty come again. There you were." Erith shook his head, feeling the corners of his lips turn up in a gentle smile. "Do you know what it is like to look on a single face, and know that that face matches the laughter you heard?"

Lurissa's hand firmed on her sword, and she sprang forward as if she would kill him. Erith stood where

he was, and again she was reduced to slapping ineffectively at his chest.

"Do you know what it's like," said Erith, all but breathing the words now, "to know that a dream can come back for more than a single night, that you have the chance to relive that dream again and again?"

"I was never your dream," said Lurissa loudly, attempting, Erith knew, to shatter the mood he was weaving. She couldn't, of course. Her words only made the net of heaviness fall back down, and let Erith speak the next words he had prepared.

"Oh, but you were. And I came out of the bushes, and told you that I loved your face, your laughter, and your eyes. I remember that quite distinctly."

"I was a fool," said Lurissa. Erith made a face. Her bitterness was like lime on his tongue, and he had never liked the taste of limes. "You didn't say you loved *me*. Of course I should have known better than to fall in love with you."

"Yes," said Erith. "You told me that you loved me after our first night together. Do you remember our first night together, Lurissa?"

"Do not!"

She again leaped forward, and again retreated when Erith held out his hands and bowed to her, this time almost bringing his throat within range of her blade. Surl growled at that, but Erith ignored him. The *viaquia* wouldn't attack. Erith could feel the knowledge burning like a clear fire within him.

Lurissa drew back, shaking her head. "Even you could not be so cruel as to speak those words aloud."

"Our bodies were twined together on the blanket like jaguars on the hunt. A female jaguar by sunlight is what you were, even though it was night, all grace and supple muscles and lithe strength." Erith dropped his voice further, and narrowed the circle yet again, until he was barely the sword's length away from her. Lurissa held him off yet, with bared teeth and clenched hands and a wavering blade, but he knew it was only a matter of time. "I remember your heart beating. That is the strongest memory of all, better than the moment when we flew together. Your heart, beating in my ears as if it were my own after a run, beating in my mouth as if I would crush it when I bit down. I bit down, did I tell you that? I bit down, trying to shatter that heart as if it were my own and die in a kind of consuming ecstasy."

"I felt you bite," said Lurissa, eyes cold and steady. Not for long, of course. A child of three could have known that her emotions were wavering dangerously, thin ice over water so deep and dark and endless-cold it would freeze the void between the stars. "I still bear the scar."

"But you don't think about what it meant," said Erith, taking another step forward and pitching his voice lower. Her sword scraped his arm. He ignored it. "Do you? You don't think about what it meant, that we spent that night together like jaguars."

"Erith- I don't-"

"I will tell you what it meant. To me. What it meant to you, of course, you must decide." Erith leaned forward. Her sword cut into his arm. He felt the cut open, blood rill down his skin, and knew that it was her trembling and not any deliberate twisting of her blade that was making the wound deeper. His lips murmured at her ear, sending delicate puffs of breath into her body. "It meant that I had awakened from a dream into a dream. There was beauty, again. I was surrounded in beauty. I was beauty's lover. I held wonder in my arms, and there was starflame on my tongue. I flew like a phoenix, and I sang through it like a hylea."

Lurissa made a strangled sound.

Erith drew back, holding her eyes, and lifted a hand, brushing it along her cheek. Lurissa raised the

sword between them. Erith smiled, and leaned close, grazing her lips with his own. It was a very gentle kiss. He had given stronger kisses with his eyes.

But it broke her.

Lurissa cried out and cast her blade to the ground, then turned and ran into the darkness before anyone could stop her.

Erith stepped back, his head up and eyes peaceful, and then turned and bowed to Eleriad. "My lady, have I your leave to follow?"

The Lady opened her mouth as if to speak, and then closed it without saying anything at all. The wonder Erith had brought to pass was not so easily broken, and both of them knew it. She stared at him a moment longer, and old fears and longings and stars knew what else passed through her silvery eyes. Erith waited patiently.

Then the Lady remembered that he and she were supposed to be enemies, and lifted her head stiffly. The mood was gone. She would remember it, though, and that was all Erith really wanted. It had been supposed to do other things, as well, but not to her. "Yes. Go after her. If your personal grudge against that woman is more important to you than fighting the humans, then go after her."

Erith bowed, and walked into the night. The crowd parted for him as if he had some magical plague. Surl fell into place at his heels, and for long moments, as they walked along Lurissa's track, he said nothing.

Then he did say, "Erith?"

Erith turned around. "Yes?" he asked, his pleasure increasing as he noted that Surl had not spoken the title.

Surl shook his head slowly. His hand rose, hovered in the air as if he were not quite sure what to do with it, and then fell to his side. "I thought that you wanted me to leave her alone so that you could kill her," he said tentatively.

Erith whooped with mirth, causing a sleepy chorus of complaint among birds in the tree above them. "No," he said, when he could choke off some of his laughter. "No, I wanted you to leave me alone so that I could create wonder in her. I was afraid that you would intervene because you felt sorry for her, because you would think it incredible cruelty."

"I am envious."

Erith blinked. "Of what?"

"Of the treatment that you gave her."

Erith shook his head very slightly. "What treatment?"

"Promise me something," said Surl, and now he was the one who dropped to his knees. Embarrassed, Erith tried to clasp his hands and raise him, but Surl took the chance to grasp his hands fervently and hold them, while his eyes maintained a similar hold on Erith's face. "I will not stand up until you promise me this."

Erith sighed. "You are making me be serious. I hate being serious. It spoils art."

"That is what I would ask for," said Surl softly. "If the time comes when you must kill me, promise me that you will do for me what you did for her."

"I do not know what-"

"Promise me!"

Erith squeezed the viaquia's hands very tightly for a moment, watching Surl's face. Surl didn't flinch. Erith nodded. "I swear by the stars that I will do for you what I did for her," he said, giving the oath that could not be broken.

Surl sighed and rose to his feet. "Thank you," he said softly, then glanced behind him and stiffened. "Won't he let us go in peace?"

Erith looked back as well. The zorkro guard who had challenged them on their entrance into the camp slowed his pace, his silver eyes moving from face to face. Then he smiled weakly.

"My lord, good luck," he said to Erith.

"With what?" asked Erith, wondering if he was ever going to understand what anyone said to him tonight.

"I have never seen anyone-" The guard faltered as though under the pressure of some great emotion, then continued, "I have never seen anyone eat someone's soul without the benefit of fangs before." He bowed, still staring Erith in the eye. "My lord, that was true. That was magic, and beauty, and power. That was art."

Erith smiled a little. This he understood. "Yes, it was, wasn't it?"

"I hope that you find her again, so that you can have a chance to practice the art again."

Erith inclined his head, accepting the compliment graciously. The zorkro turned and faded back into the darkness.

"Where are we going?" asked Surl.

Erith turned around, met the viaquia's eyes, and said lightly, "Last chance. Do you really want to stay and help with my art, or are you ready to leave?"

"I can't wait to taste your blood."

Erith supposed that was answer enough. He turned to the trail before him, where Lurissa's feet had disturbed the dew, and said, "It will not be long now. I know where she is likely to run."

"And will you catch her, and do the same thing you did to her last time?"

Erith smiled at Surl. "Now, what would be the beauty of a perfect repetition? No. This next task will indeed require art, but mainly in the areas of finesse and speed. She will wall herself in what she thinks is a secure stronghold. I intend to break the stronghold and bring her out to face her fate."

"Which is?"

"I do prefer to keep some secrets to myself."

Surl laughed briefly, and then sprang into the air. "I will scout the trail ahead," he said, and flew into the darkness.

Erith followed, letting the smile fade from his face a little. It was possible that he was becoming too serious, and that that would spoil him. But he couldn't worry too much about that right now.

He was going home.