

Firebringer

The sequel to "Beauty Come Again." Twisted, disturbing, and so on. Erith knows what he wants to do, and he will do it- no matter who gets in his way.

Fantasy - Fiction Rated: M - English - Action/Adventure/Romance - Chapters: 1 - Words: 5334 - Updated: 5-19-02 - Published: 5-19-02

A/N: Here it is, the third Erith/Surl/Lurissa story. "Firebringer" follows "Royal Beauty Bright" and "Beauty Come Again," so it probably won't make much sense if you try to read this first. Erith has decided what he wants to do, and he intends to do it just the way he wants to.

Please read and respond with anything you like- suggestions to make the story better, criticism, questions, comments. I'm pleased if you enjoy it enough, or if you're annoyed enough, to respond.

Warning (just in case someone made it past the summary without taking note): This story is Disturbing. It deals with emotions and violence that most people probably won't experience in their lifetimes. It's probably not worse than the first two stories, but, again, Your Mileage May Vary. If you think you might be excessively disturbed, please do not read it.

And, now, Erith's turn to speak...

Firebringer

232, Age of Newness, High Summer

"The important thing to do in a situation like this is not get killed."

-Attributed to Denya, Lord of Daydark, on the eve of the Battle of the Song of Swords.

He was thinking.

He didn't want to be thinking.

On the other hand, there didn't seem to be much he could do to help it.

Erith tossed his knife moodily in the air, caught it, and then winced. The cut on his arm was still tender and sore, though it had been long enough since his duel with Lurissa that it had passed scabbing and gone to scarring. He scratched at it absently.

"Don't think about it."

Erith turned his head to look at Surl. "With pleasure," he said, arching his brows. "But you have to give me something else to think about."

The viaquia folded his hands behind his head. The fire had died enough that it just flickered and caught in his blue eyes, giving them interesting red highlights. Erith stared in open fascination. He hadn't seen anything like that since a rare sunset he had once witnessed, where for some reason the red had lingered like spilled human blood long after the usually conquering sapphire had descended.

"I can give you something to think about," said Surl slowly. "But you won't want to discuss it. You haven't for the past dance."

Erith snorted and turned away, his fascination gone abruptly sour again. "I said I should be allowed to have some secrets."

"Do you remember the terms of our agreement?"

Erith did manage to laugh then. "Of course I do. I get to have pleasurable sensations regularly and a constant bodyguard. I think you came off on rather the short end of the stick, to tell you the truth."

"I swore to protect you from any enemy save Lurissa," said Surl. "And that would include yourself. If you are planning something stupid, then I want to know about it, so I can get you used to the idea of not doing it."

Oh, this was getting interesting again. Erith smiled at Surl. "Define 'stupid.'"

Surl flashed his fangs. Erith eyed them in longing, then shook his head. Surl had already fed from him once this evening. The viaquia had to be trying to intimidate him.

Erith tilted his head. This was getting even more interesting. Did Surl really think that would frighten him now?

"Something that gets you killed," Surl said, his breath descending into a hiss. Fed or not, he looked ready to spring. Erith studied the tension of the viaquia's muscles with admiration. He had never seen anyone who looked more like a predator, or acted more like one, with the possible exception of himself. "Something that makes you take risks you don't have to. In short, anything that deprives me of the greatest source of blood and art I have found in my life." He leaned forward, his hands almost in the coals of the fire now, glaring at Erith. "Do any of those things, and I will help Lurissa escape, or kill her myself."

"That would be breaking the terms of our agreement," Erith pointed out.

"If it would keep you alive, I wouldn't care."

Erith laughed. "If you don't really care about the agreement, then why should I?"

"Are you going to do something stupid?"

"Something you might think of as stupid," said Erith. "I don't. It's a risk I need to take. It's a risk that might deprive you of the greatest source of blood and art in your life, but I don't think so. If I'm right, it'll be enough of a bloodbath in Arynsia that you won't ever find a greater one."

"Arynsia!" Surl leaned back and thumped the heels of his hands on the ground. Erith watched him with a smile. The man had a playful side to him when he wanted to have it. "At last, a name. It's just been 'home' for the past ten days- and you haven't explained that reference either."

"It's the place where I was born," said Erith. "The place where I met Lurissa. That's why I think of it as home. That's all."

Surl's face softened abruptly, smoothing the teasing smile away. He leaned forward again. "Then why pursue her there at all?" he asked softly. "Leave her alone, and let us go somewhere else. You wouldn't want to destroy and despoil memories of home, would you?"

Erith smiled. "Nothing can destroy and despoil my memories. They are stronger in me than you think. Besides, if I didn't insist on pursuing her, I don't think my blood would taste as good to you. And if I didn't plan the risk I'm planning, my blood probably wouldn't taste as good, either."

"What is this risk?"

"Something that may kill me," said Erith calmly. "I don't think it will."

"Is this the only way that you can take vengeance on Lurissa?"

Erith hesitated. He was actually considering lying, he realized suddenly, and shook his head. He didn't need to lie. "No. I could take vengeance any of several ways. But I want to see if this way will kill me or not."

Surl closed his eyes, and then shut his mouth hard enough that his fangs cut into his lower lip. "You're putting your life at risk just to see if you will die?"

"Yes."

Surl sprang at him silently across the fire.

Erith lay there, laughing, and did nothing to resist the pressure of the sunset Elwen's hands as they held his wrists to the ground. Surl snarled into his face, and Erith stopped laughing and wrinkled his nose. "You might want to see to your breath," he said. "It smells like old blood."

"Will you think this is so funny when I won't let you go?" asked Surl.

Erith smiled up at him. Amusement grew brighter and brighter, fiercer and hotter, under his skin, and then blazed up and out of him. Surl loosed him with an abrupt shout as trails of smoke burst through Erith's skin, on his palms and the soles of his feet, on his arms and his legs. He stood, the flames burning his clothes away, and shook back his dark hair with a laugh that was almost a cry. The flames burst and leaped and danced on his skin, not harming him, but keeping Surl at bay.

"You cannot hold me," said Erith calmly, though with joy so keen it hurt still trembling under the surface. "No one can. I go to be free. Lurissa still has a hold on me, you know, and she might continue to send mercenaries after me until one of them does kill me. No. It ends now."

He turned and raced towards Arynsia, leaving Surl so stunned that for a moment the viaquia did not fly after him. Then there was a curse, and Surl was aloft, racing off to the side. It was open ground all the way to Arynsia, a flat and level plain, and so he didn't have to worry about the low-hanging branches of trees. Erith tossed him a grin and a whoop of laughter.

"You are mad," said Surl.

"You're following me," Erith called merrily. "What does that make you?"

Surl cursed again, but Erith turned and gave himself over to madness and amusement then, and so he didn't hear the curses.

Arynsia was as he had remembered it, even touched gently by the light of the rising sun, which tended to soften the harsh contours. A natural hill of stone pocked with caves, it had been reshaped by land Elwen hands, and land Elwen magic, and simply long millennia of land Elwens dwelling on and near it, so that now it flowered with trees and ran with water. Erith could hear the music of the Lalenta, the largest cascade, almost a mile away. It had been tuned by means of small shelves placed under the water so that it gave a constant ringing concert as it flowed down and ran away into a less musical river flowing across the plain to the east.

Erith squinted as he drew near, slowing a little to make sure he didn't miss anything. Yes, there were still houses on the hill, small white cottages so covered with the branches of the trees his people loved that it was hard to make them out unless the sunlight flashed from them just right-

There!

Erith laughed exultantly, and then glanced up at Surl. Though the viaquia had been flying as hard as Erith had been running for two straight hours, he didn't seem tired, any more than Erith was. He looked at the hill with an expression on his face that was hard to read. His emotions didn't tell Erith much, either. Surl had been around land Elwens long enough to learn to somewhat shield his emotions.

"Well?" asked Erith at last.

Surl looked at him and slowly shook his head. "Sometimes one of my kind will find something so beautiful that he takes up guard duty," he said, and looked back at the hill. "To make sure that that thing is never despoiled. If I hadn't found you first, I might have taken up guard duty over Arynsia."

Erith grinned at him, and quietly set his feet. His plans tumbled and shone in his mind. He was glad that Surl wasn't a psychic assaulter, and so couldn't read his thoughts. He would surely have sprung forward right then, never mind the flames that still leaped and played about Erith.

"Hold it in your heart," said Erith. "I would be pleased if more than one person did."

Surl started to nod, then turned and looked at him. "What are you planning to do?" he asked, starting to hover down towards the earth.

Erith began to run. This was the tricky part. He could run, like all Elwens, briefly as fast as a cheetah at need, but Surl could almost assuredly fly even faster.

Surl swore again and took off after him. Erith glanced over his shoulder. Yes, there he was, closing the distance faster than Erith could open it.

Erith flung himself to the ground and rolled, ignoring the small fires that sprang up in his wake. He could quell them later by a mere effort of will. For now, it was more important that he evade Surl's grasp-and the viaquia, soaring overhead so fast that it was taking him an effort to resist momentum and turn around, had indeed missed him.

Erith stood up and began to run again. The fire was growing brighter and stronger, given that he was nearer to his goal and what he planned to do. Surl howled his name, but Erith didn't look back. He was almost to the foot of Arynsia's hill now, and if his memory was at all correct, he should be passing the first of the hidden guardposts.

An arrow planting itself in the ground by his feet showed he was correct about that.

Again, he dived and rolled. Arrows studded the ground behind him, at least until the guards figured out that wouldn't work. It took them a surprisingly long time. Erith snorted, unsurprised, as he resumed his feet and saw the guards finally dropping down before him. With one notable exception, the villagers of Arynsia had never been noted for their intelligence.

"Halt," said one of the guards, causing Erith to wonder if that word was any guard's first response to any situation.

He responded by reaching out and touching one of the trees they had dropped from. Flames wreathed it at once. Erith concentrated, and they blazed to white heat in seconds, vaporizing a good part of the tree's trunk. He could hear it screaming as it died, and almost paused to listen to the exquisite sound.

But the guards were getting enraged themselves, and he had to deal with lightning bolts and fire that would harm him if he wasn't careful. A swift shield took care of that, and then a flower of flame growing amid the leaves of another tree made them turn.

"I shall burn the whole village like that," said Erith casually, "if you don't let me pass. I haven't come for you."

The guards gave him hateful glances, but couldn't resist the chance to save a tree. They turned away from him, and Erith raced past, in the shelter of trees that he didn't intend to burn now. Surl was above, looking for him, and not seeing him by the sound of his calls. Even if he did see Erith, he probably wouldn't be able to swoop down. These trees were hyleas and rowans, which grew wherever land Elwens lived sooner or later, and their leaves were so thick that Surl would have to dive as though through a sea.

The long corridor of trees that had always led to Arynsia opened ahead of him, and Erith raced down it, bending all his will to speed. His fires flickered and went out. He didn't worry, though. When he had found Lurissa, then they could burn up again, as long and destructively as they liked.

The corridor ended, and the first of the steps carved into the stone appeared before him. He sprang lightly to the first, and heard Surl roar in wordless triumph.

The viaquia came for him, stooping from above like a hawk. Erith turned and waited patiently.

A long, loud hiss split the air. Thin lines of blue light formed themselves into defensive walls which Surl had to pull up well short of. He hovered there, spitting epithets for a few wasteful minutes before he deigned to glance at Erith.

"What are those?"

"Wards," said Erith, and was astonished to hear how badly he was panting. He forced the knowledge away, though. "Set to defend those who bear the blood of Arynasia." He smiled at the wards. "It's been a long time, and I didn't leave here under the best of circumstances. I wasn't sure they would still work."

"But you risked it anyway."

"Yes." Erith looked up curiously. There was that odd sound in Surl's voice again, which had been there the first time when he spoke of keeping Erith from dying the way he wanted to die.

"You are mad," said Surl. "But I don't care. I will not let you die." His hands clenched into fists, then opened again. "Do these wards extend the length of the staircase?"

Erith responded by stepping to the stair above him. The wards followed him at once, surrounding and holding him in a protective cage of azure light. Surl regarded the wards with such dislike that Erith almost expected the magic to cower in fear.

"Why are you doing this?" asked Surl.

"Because I want to."

Surl jerked his head up. Erith blinked, his resolve faltering for a moment. There was real torment in those deep blue eyes, something he had not expected to see.

"My lord," whispered Surl, the first time he had used the title since they had left Eleriad's camp, "please. Lurissa isn't worth it. I don't know what you think she did to merit a death at your hands, but give it up. Come with me. If it's pursuit you're worried about, then we can go somewhere she will never find us. Please. Anything but this kind of death."

Erith paused, stopped by the exquisite catch in Surl's voice. Then he shook his head. "I'm sorry. That was beautiful, but not enough to outweigh what I intend to do."

He made his way up the staircase.

Surl followed him for a short distance, then turned and streaked away into the sky. Erith watched him go, feeling an unexpected seriousness touch his heart. Then he shook his head. After all, it was best this way. Surl had realized the hopelessness of stopping Erith, and was going to let him die the way he wanted to. That was the best that Erith could have asked for from anyone.

It certainly wasn't something he had gotten from Lurissa.

He turned and strode up the steps, towards the house on the far edge of the relatively flat summit, under a great brooding hylea. He tapped smartly on the door, and felt familiar fear from inside, as strong as the slap a flood of snowmelt could give.

"You know who it is, Lurissa," he said. "You've always known it would come to this, since the morning I lay in your arms and told you what I would do if you betrayed me." He paused; there was no response from inside. "Do you remember that morning?" he whispered, low and intimate. "Spring, not summer as it is now. But the grasshoppers were calling in ecstasy, and the sound of music was everywhere. The scent of grass, too. You looked up at me, and asked what would happen if-"

He jumped to the side and then ducked as a rolling fireball destroyed the door. Standing up, Erith smiled and applauded the figure who appeared through the remains of the stone. "I really must congratulate you," he said softly. "I didn't think you were still capable of that."

Lurissa didn't respond. She looked almost deranged, though, so Erith couldn't fault her for that. Her silver hair blazed around her head-literally, since it was touched by the remnants of the fireball-and her body bent forward at the waist like a praying mantis's. Her hands flexed and grasped the air in a spasmodic rhythm that was just off enough Erith couldn't catch it.

Her eyes had looked into a place Erith would have given much to see for himself. It had to be almost pure

rage, that place, he thought wistfully, as he backed up from her, step by slow step. She was as naked as he, the flames she called having eaten her clothes just as his had. He backed up until he was sure that she meant to attack him, then paused and nodded.

"You're looking better than you ever did when you were sane," he complimented her.

Lurissa sprang at him. Erith recognized the feel of the anger surging around her now, biting at his skin like blades. Ariltoceta, vengeance-rage. She would not rest now until she had destroyed him, or she herself was destroyed.

Well, finally.

It had taken him long enough to coax that out of her.

Erith clapped his hands, and the fires danced up around him, forming quite a lovely shell. The flames that blazed from his skin itself were white, shading into red and orange at the edges. Blue burned here and there, brief and intense. He had spent some time planning the effect, and hoped that Lurissa would take at least a moment to stop and appreciate it.

She didn't, of course. When had she ever done what he wanted, without a lot of coaxing first? Erith sighed and shook his head sadly as Lurissa called another fireball and hurled it, so quickly that time couldn't even be taken to admire the colors.

Erith spread his arms, welcoming in the fire. The fireball raged about him, and he felt his skin begin to burn and crisp. It hurt, and he screamed. But, ah, this pain was the kind that he had been looking forward to since he first realized he wanted to do something permanent about Lurissa.

Then the fireball stopped burning him. His own flame had forced it to dissipate. Erith smiled at Lurissa, and began to walk towards her.

"I remember the most romantic night we ever shared," he said. "We didn't make love. Making love was always too intense for it to be romantic. Romance needs a softer mood, an appreciation that borders on melancholy, an admission of bitterness as well as sweetness. You didn't often see that bitterness takes as much art as sweetness, and that no beauty can be complete without both.

"But that night- that night- you did.

"We danced. You lay in my arms, and sometimes I lay in yours, as we swayed around the dance floor. And when the steps required that we spring about and separate from each other, our eyes were always together. I was very impressed with the way that you managed to keep your eyes on me even when your head was looking the opposite way." Erith stopped and smiled at her, holding out his arms. "That was the night I came dangerously near to loving you. I would like to end our love the same way. What say you?"

Lurissa didn't even reply, but simply came to him. Her arms were spread as if she meant to wrestle rather than dance, but Erith was counting on the memory to tame that desire once they were actually engaged.

And if it did not-

Well. Wrestling was only one step from dancing, just as making love was, and just as death was two steps from either.

The kind of death he wanted, at least.

Lurissa slid into his arms. Her hands came up and wrapped around his throat. Erith shook his head and raised one eyebrow. The shell of flame about him increased, white fire springing up until Lurissa was forced to withdraw her hands.

Erith placed his hands gently on her shoulders, and Lurissa did the same, though she had a little higher to reach. Their eyes locked together.

"What dance shall we dance?" Lurissa's voice was hoarse, the music almost lost, as though she had been

screaming for hours. Erith smiled tenderly at her.

"I will sing the words. Follow my steps."

Lurissa nodded without looking away from him. They began to whirl, Erith crooning the first notes of his chosen song. Their flame-shells still spat and sparked at each other, but, perhaps figuring out that they couldn't do any more harm to each other yet, had settled into concord at last.

Erith sang the first verse.

"I was the wave as it rode the ocean,
And thou, my love, wert the wind on the sea,
And I crooned to thee forever a song of devotion,
And thou, blowing by overhead, spake naught to me."

A breath of cool, salt-scented air touched his face for a moment, seeming as if it would breach the flame-shell. But it was gone almost at once. Erith closed his eyes and smiled. What he had hoped for was happening. This song was old enough, having been sung by Elwens for millennia, to have acquired a magic of its own. It would do what it could to bless this, the last dance that he and Lurissa would have.

He opened his eyes, and saw her staring intently at him. He lowered his head and sang the next verse almost into her ear.

"I was the flame as it danced in the fire,
And thou, my love, wert the wind upon the light,
And though I sought to speak to thee of my desire,
Thou spake not to me, from upon thy great height."

Lurissa drew back her lips, so that he could see her teeth. Erith smiled again and reached up a hand to touch her face. Lurissa snapped at it, her teeth just grazing his skin. The blood ached and burned like fire.

Erith took his hand back and bowed a little, then whirled her to the side and sang the next verse.

"I was the pebble as it lay in the earth,
And thou, my love, wert the wind upon the trees,
And I sang that thou wert sorrow, thou mirth,
And thou spake naught, said naught, to give me ease."

Lurissa's eyes flickered for a moment, as though she, too, had felt the brief press of dirt on their lips. "I have said much," she whispered.

"Never the right thing."

"You never told me what the right thing was to say!" she said, clenching her hands on his sides, so that her fingers dug into his ribs. Erith winced, then accepted the flowering of bruises with a smile. He was actually more interested in her response to his next question.

"How could I have loved you, if you were not intelligent enough to figure it out?"

Lurissa opened her mouth, then closed it again. Her breathing was softening, becoming intent. She knew, as well as Erith did, that the song had only two more verses.

Erith sang the next.

"O, my love, let me be a wind in the air!

And let thee be a wind come from the sun,

And then, I might speak thy speech beyond compare,

And thou might turn thy course, beside me to run..."

He let his voice trail off teasingly, though really the last two verses were meant to be sung as a unit. Lurissa leaned forward until her breath scraped his nose. Her fingers were fisted in his hair, now. Erith's flame-shell danced, shading into white everywhere, forming into pictures of castles and clouds.

He finished the song.

"And together we should blow over the sea;

Then together we should blow over the light.

Then together over the earth we should flee,

And come, thou and I, together on the height."

It was done.

Lurissa howled, deafeningly from so close, and grasped him, pulling him to her. Her flames struck through his defenses, into his body.

Erith bowed his head and kissed her, releasing flames down her throat.

The fire was bonding them, taking them into a realm where pain and pleasure were so much the same that Erith was somewhat surprised he was still conscious. He continued turning, eyes closed, refusing to look and see if the thing he hoped for was there.

Only two things could happen now. He was not sure which one of them he hoped for more.

He took one more step.

The cliff of Arynsia dropped out from beneath them, and, burning, they fell together, like dragons mating in mid-air.

Erith clasped her close, holding Lurissa as she tried to struggle away, breathing flames down her throat, feeling her try to scream with burned-away vocal chords, knowing that he could only hold on so long before one thing would claim him- the death by slamming into the ground- or the other thing-

There.

Just as the wards that still wrapped him flickered off, since he was now too great a distance from the hill to be protected, a pair of arms caught his shoulders. A flailing foot kicked at his arms, and a body well-used to functioning in the air twined around him, so close that Erith was forced to release Lurissa.

He opened his eyes, and saw her falling away, a bright point of radiance and warmth that soared into what seemed endless darkness.

"I'm being burned," said Surl's voice in his ear. "Will you let the flames go?"

Erith considered for just a moment if he wanted to die in flames. It wouldn't be so evil, to go that way. He was at peace. He was free of Lurissa, and-

Surl solved the problem by hitting him smartly behind the ear.

The darkness abruptly swallowed up everything, including his flame and the still-falling figure that was Lurissa.

"You're lucky that you're not going to be permanently disfigured."

Erith blinked open his eyes slowly, wincing as he felt the pull of tender skin on his face. He sat up just as slowly, only to find a pair of strong hands pushing him back down.

"No," said Surl. "Oh, no. I didn't go through all that only to have you ripping the work of the healers to shreds in the first moments you're awake. Stay down until one of them comes in and tells you you can sit up."

Erith tried to say something and coughed. His voice sounded smoke-hoarsened. "You brought me to the healers in Arynsia?"

"You're still mad, aren't you?" asked Surl flatly, sitting back far enough that Erith could see him. His hair looked shorter than it had before, as if it had been singed rather than cut neatly. "No. They would have killed you. I flew some distance until I found a village that liked either my money or the look on my face, I don't really know which. The healers here are competent-"

"Aitra," murmured Erith. "It's the only village of any size anywhere near Arynsia."

"Which is now almost a burned-out mound," said Surl. "Did you know that would happen?" He flashed his fangs.

"I thought it might." Erith looked up and met Surl's eyes, smiling. Surl caught his breath. Erith didn't know why; perhaps his face looked worse than he thought. "Thank you for saving my life."

Surl blinked. "You're not angry that I didn't let you die the way you wanted?"

Erith shrugged, then flinched. That pulled new skin on his shoulders and back as well. He began to wonder how extensively he had been burned. "There was a way that I wanted to die, and a way I wouldn't have objected to living. You rescued me the way I wanted."

"Wait a moment," said Surl slowly. "You planned that? You thought I would stop you from falling?"

"Yes."

"How could you have known I didn't just abandon you when you were climbing up the stairs, protected by the wards?" The viaquia looked as if he were still too stunned to be upset, but Erith could feel the anger coming in, like slow tides of a magma sea.

He touched Surl's throat in answer, feeling the pulse beat under his fingers. "This," he said softly, watching the sleek purple skin quivering under his fingertips. "Your life. I know you. I know that you want glory and beauty from your life, as much as I do. You want to find beauty and glory that my blood and my ambitions might bring you, so of course you would save me."

"But you couldn't have known that I would be fast enough to stop you from falling."

Erith smiled and reclined again, raising his eyes to Surl's. "No. I couldn't have known that. But it was a risk I needed to take."

"Why?"

"To see if you were what I thought you were, as well as I what I knew you were."

Surl closed his eyes and shook his head. Erith studied him closely, then smiled. He had seen that kind of tight pressure from eyelids before, had used it himself on occasion. Surl meant to keep tears from falling.

"You're right," said Surl quietly, without opening his eyes. "I wouldn't want to stay with you if you weren't the kind of Elwen who would do that. But now I have another request to make, one that I expect you to honor." He opened his eyes and glared fiercely at Erith. "Before, I would have been content with what you did to Lurissa in Eleriad's camp."

Erith frowned. "You said that before. I didn't understand what you meant, and I still don't."

"If you ever find it necessary to destroy my soul, then do it just that way," said Surl. "With beauty, with soft words, by being you. But if you ever find it necessary to kill me, then I want it done the way you did to Lurissa."

Erith rolled his eyes. "What is the fun of duplicating a death?"

"As a friend, I ask you. You did it for Lurissa, and you didn't love her. Will you do it for me?"

Erith stared into Surl's eyes. The viaquia dropped his barriers, and released his emotions. Erith basked in them as much as he could with his tender skin, then was forced to raise his own barriers. Softly, he said, "If it becomes necessary, then I will do it."

"Thank you." Surl sat back and said, "Now recover. They've been giving me cows and pigs to drink from here, which are even worse than humans; I want to be back at drinking your blood again as soon as possible."

Erith smiled obediently, and closed his eyes. He planned to have pleasant dreams. Stars knew he had enough to dream about.