

Royal Beauty Bright

First story, here goes! Rated mostly for graphic violence. Erith's (my character's) former lover is trying to kill him. This is A Problem. Luckily for Erith, he's A Problem, too.

Fantasy - Fiction Rated: M - English - Action/Adventure - Chapters: 1 - Words: 4922 -

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This was supposed to be a nice little story. Instead, some weirdity came and sat on my shoulder, and it turned into a nice little sociopathic story, mostly because of Erith. I hope that it manages to entertain as well as horrify and/or disgust.

Some quick explanation, I should suppose: Elwens (of which Erith is one) are NOT human. They live much longer, have more powerful magic, have diamond-shaped eyes rather than round- and there are a host of other differences. However, most of them aren't important to this story. "Royal Beauty Bright" is set during the middle of a war between the Elwens and the humans, though, so some differences do appear.

Enjoy!

Royal Beauty Bright

232, Age of Newness, Early Summer

"Hearts do not so easily forget what once loved them."
--Elwen Proverb.

Luckily for him, he woke up stabbing.

The humans who had surrounded him in his sleep, twelve strong and all armed with swords, never had a chance. Perhaps they would have done better standing off and shooting him with arrows, Erith thought as he kicked one of them in the groin, flipped a knife into the groin of another, and then spun and slammed his boot into the face of yet a third, instead of touching him.

By this late in the War, there wasn't an Elwen who didn't come out of sleep stabbing. Humans couldn't seem to learn that. They insisted on coming in and waking up their opponents first, as if that were the "honorable" thing to do. Erith could never understand how they reconciled that with their solemnly declared resolve to destroy every Elwen in Arcadia.

Did they never think?

Probably not, he thought, as he connected again, with his sword this time, and smiled grimly at the parting of flesh and the spray of blood. Humans had numbers on their side. They had hatred of magic. They didn't have to think.

This was getting tiresome. He had ridden fast and hard, not at his own urging but at the Lady's, and tonight's was the first real sleep he had had in three days. Erith liked his comforts. Sleep snatched on the back of a galloping horse didn't count among them.

Neither did killing humans until the rest of them got up their sense and fled. Besides, there was always the faint chance that they might warn someone else, someone who would be foolhardy enough to set out after him and clever enough to track him down, and then he would have to go through this whole tiresome business again. Enough, thought Erith as he lightly leapt a sword cut and then neatly sidestepped so the man cut into his comrade on the other side instead. The look of horrified surprise on the man's face was comical, but it wasn't worth lost sleep.

Erith called up his irritation, and flames burst from his hands and immolated the nine humans still left alive. He hadn't used his magic on the human village the Lady had sent him to neutralize. She had insisted that it

would make him easier to track. Erith didn't agree, but he obeyed because it suited him, and it did mean that his magic was rested enough now to consume them all in seconds, flashfire eating them up before they could even voice their screams.

Good enough. The stench of burning flesh was not one he relished. Humans didn't even have the decency to smell good as they burned.

Erith yawned, then shook his head as he noted that small fires were still smoldering in the grass. He must have been more irritated than he thought. He dismissed the fires with a jerk of his head, just as he had dismissed the emotion, and the flames, the product of emotional magic, flickered once and went out.

Erith looked at the bodies left and wrinkled his nose. The humans would know that something had happened here, of course. He didn't have time to conceal the bodies. They were in the open, close to a small copse but miles from the forest where he might be able to spread deep leaves over them. And the thought of burying them- Erith curled his lip. He had been willing enough to poison the human village's water; they had done such things to it themselves that he doubted poison could make much of a difference. But it was another thing altogether to bury bodies in virgin ground and leave them to make the innocent earth unclean and pollute the pure water.

That left...

Erith smiled, his tiredness retreating as the new plan presented itself. This was something he would enjoy doing, something that might actually cause the humans to stop following him, and something the Lady would never approve of. He wasn't actually sure which of those aspects made the plan most attractive, but he set about it with enthusiasm, striding to his saddlebags and drawing out the axe that he usually kept for chopping firewood.

This was going to be so much fun.

Erith made a face as he dragged the last chopped limb from the last human body. That had turned out to be heavier work than he thought.

Of course, if he had been coldly angry as a proper Elwen probably would have been, he could have summoned a storm of whirling diamond shards that would have cut the limbs off for him. But a proper Elwen wouldn't have thought of this plan. No, this was better.

Erith looked proudly at the collection of limbs, and then set about hauling them into position. They would form human-shaped figures, vaguely. The limbs would surround human-sized depressions stained with blood and gore, and some of the flesh and muscle that had split inconveniently while he was cutting the bodies apart. The limbs, though, would be arranged in patterns that weren't anything like what whatever power had created the humans had meant, with three arms or a leg here, and perhaps four legs over here.

Erith could already see it in his head, like a great work of art.

He heard a sound behind him and spun around, eyes narrowed, trails of smoke beginning to rise from his palm. But it was only a flock of ravens quarreling over the first body he had taken apart. A coyote was near another, snarling at him when he glanced at it, but then continuing to feed when Erith made no move to dispatch it. Erith shrugged and turned back to his task, after having glanced skyward to make sure that no vultures were circling. That would lead pursuers to him faster than any other sign.

"I don't need vultures to find you. You are a vulture. I can feel your presence many miles gone."

Erith rolled his eyes and kept on arranging. "Good morning, Lurissa. You didn't find me for some hours, this time."

"What have you done?"

Erith tilted his head, half-closing his eyes. Human emotions were faint, distant, dim things to him. He could feel them, but it wasn't a feast of sensations, as it was with another of his own kind. A drop of wine to a

glass of it, he thought, or a note to a full symphony. Lurissa was exuding horror and anger as delicate as roses at the moment, though he didn't think she would thank him for the comparison.

"I think it's perfectly obvious what I've done," he said, still not looking at her. He finished the first depression, and stepped back, studying the collection of legs and nodding his head. "Something you don't approve of."

"Is that the only reason you did this?"

Erith laughed, and finally glanced at her. Lurissa stood trembling in the sunlight, as delicate as some beam of sunlight herself. She was tall, taller than he was, something that had used to intimidate him. She had the pale skin that those of his kind who didn't spend much time in the sun got, and long silver hair like fine strands of spiderweb touched with dew, and large, tragic dark eyes. She could only meet his gaze for a moment before she had to look away.

"You can't possibly think that I only have one reason for anything I do," he said easily. "But to annoy you was one reason, yes."

"You are horrible," said Lurissa, her voice soft but growing more passionate, though no louder, as she went on. "These humans lived, Erith. Not as many years as you or I will see, that's true. But that only made their lives all the more precious. They had less time to enjoy them. And you took their lives from them." She finally managed to face him again, perhaps because her eyes were shining with tears, and she always did like to think of herself as in mourning, thought Erith, watching her. "For no other reason than that they were threatening you."

Erith threw back his head and laughed deeply at that. A morning laughter chuckled back at him from a tree, apparently mistaking his chortle for the voice of one of its own kind. "That is exactly why I killed them, Lurissa. They would have killed me. What else should I have done?"

"Talked to them. Tried to understand them, to make peace with them."

"I didn't feel like it."

Lurissa's eyes flamed suddenly, burning away the tears. Erith was glad. She had always been so beautiful in all her moods to him, but anger was lovelier still than sorrow on her face. Silver blood surging in her cheeks, hands clenching at her hands, sword swaying like the motion of her long legs as she stalked forward... She could have snared someone else easily enough if she wasn't obsessed with him.

"That was always the problem with you," she said, her rage finally making her voice rise a little. Erith listened in pleasure. Silvery, like all the voices of his people, and not really remarkable next to, say, the Lady's voice, it was still far more pleasant than the humans' screams had been. "You never wanted to make peace. You never wanted to understand. If you ever had a mood where you felt like it, it passed so swiftly that I certainly never noticed it. I suffered because of you, and for you, and you hadn't the decency to reciprocate. Have you ever felt suffering? Have you ever really known what it's like to respond seriously to something, or have you always laughed?"

Erith smiled at her. "I'm responding seriously now."

"To what?" Lurissa spoke quickly, but she couldn't hide the hope in her eyes, or her scent, or her emotions. This was a pleasant aftertaste to the rage, like the chocolate he had once tasted, briefly, from some place almost unimaginably far away.

"To your decision to come here and berate me for the deaths of these humans." Erith could feel his eyes sparkling, or so it felt; he could feel the hectic heat in his face, at least, and had often been told in the past what his eyes looked like when he did this. "You acted as if you cared about what happened to them. But that's not really it, is it? You're using them as excuses to demonstrate your own suffering. At least I was more decent than that. I just killed them. You're making them slaves to your emotions."

Lurissa stopped as though he had struck out at her. Erith had never done that. She had initiated both of their battles in the past, and had never been able to forgive him for winning both- or maybe it was for sparing her life. Erith truly wasn't sure. He watched her curiously now, wondering what she would do.

"That is all," said Lurissa. "That is it. You won't do this anymore. I vowed that you wouldn't, but I came here thinking, foolishly, that I could convert you. I see I can't. Therefore, I will do what I should have done the first time I ever met you, long ago, soaking with the blood of your enemies and laughing."

"And drinking it," said Erith helpfully.

Lurissa shivered, almost imperceptibly, but the horror returned, like a delicate bouquet, to her emotions for a moment. She looked behind her and nodded.

"Not that I could really help it," Erith said, leaning forward and making his tone as low and intimate as he could. "I cut into the bodies so hard that some of the nain spilled down my throat."

A vivid blush took Lurissa's cheeks for a moment. Erith had known the word would make her blush like that. Nain was battle-honey, blood drunk in battle, but it meant other kinds of honey as well.

She didn't answer him, but called loudly, "Surl!"

The shadows stirred. For a moment Erith wondered if she hadn't hired a curalli mercenary. The shadowed Elwens could stand in any patch of shade and be invisible. But then the opponent she apparently intended him to fight stepped into the open, and Erith nodded his understanding even as he drew in his breath in appreciation. His foe must have been in the trees themselves, crouched among the leaves. It only made sense, as he could fly.

His prospective foe was a viaquia, a sunset Elwen, his battle-leathers doing little to dim the shine of his dark purple skin, or the intense stare of his deep blue eyes- or the shine of the fangs that he bared as he snarled, softly. Viaquia were blood-drinkers. They were also the strongest of all the Elwenkind, and had the favor of the God Dermand. Erith had always avoided fighting them before. Partly, he wasn't sure he could win.

Partly, if he did, it would seem such a waste to destroy such beauty.

"His name is Surl," said Lurissa unnecessarily, stepping back with a pleased smile on her face. "I hope that you'll get along in the short time that you have together."

Erith took his eyes off Surl for a moment to smile at her. "That's wonderful. That's a wonderful line. It'll almost be enough to make me spare your life if we ever meet again. I'll cherish it forever, and repeat it to you at least once before I kill you."

Lurissa blinked. He had never really threatened her life before, except in ways that even she could see were meant as jest. "You won't survive the battle," she said. "You can't hunt me down."

Erith smiled at her, tilting his head to the side. "I'll have to remember your face. So lovely. The curve of your brow... I don't think that I've ever seen one tilted in just that way. It'll be in my mind forever, along with your line. And the shape of your chin. Wonderful. Simply wonderful."

Lurissa turned to Surl, her words sharp and fast. "I paid you to kill him. Do it." Then she turned her back and strode off.

"You even walk beautifully," Erith told her. "The set of your back is something I would trade a sunset for."

Lurissa strode off faster, and at last vanished around the curve of the copse.

Erith laughed and turned back to Surl, who for some reason was staring at him. "Don't mind her," he told the viaquia. "She means well, but she never gets it quite right. Shall we?" He held up his sword, still bearing faint traces of human gore, and cocked his head towards an area relatively free of human blood.

Surl stared at him for a moment longer. Then he spoke for the first time. His voice was deep and resonant, reminding Erith of a drum he had heard once in an elven ritual where he wasn't supposed to be. The danger counted for half the beauty. "Where did you learn such things?"

"This art?" Erith glanced behind him at the human bodies. "Oh, probably in some book with a fading flower

pressed between the pages. Or are you referring to the way I hold my sword? I would reveal my fighting masters, but I'm afraid I couldn't unless you also promised to disclose the way you were trained." He turned and smiled into Surl's eyes again.

"Not that," said Surl. His left hand rose in a slow gesture that turned sharp halfway through; then his hand dropped limply to his side, without really expressing anything. Erith watched it, narrowing his eyes slightly. The man was probably left-handed. If he had been trained as a verin, one of those elite viaquia fighters who considered fighting as much art as profession, then he could most likely use two hands; but very few verina worked as mercenaries. "The- way you spoke to her."

Erith smiled. "Words, my friend. Everyone can use them."

"But so much depends on how you use them."

Erith closed his open mouth and looked thoughtfully at Surl. "That is something I would have said. In fact, it is something that I was just going to say. Are you a psychic assaulter, as well as an artist?"

"No," said Surl, then blinked. "I'm surprised that I just told you that."

"So I noticed," said Erith dryly. The viaquia's emotions were stronger and sweeter than any human's, but nowhere near the strength of Lurissa's. But then, no race could match land Elwens in either their emotions or the way they used those emotions. It was poetic enough that she had wanted to kill him, and had gone to such great lengths to do so. He would have to be content with that. "But we have to be able to trust each other, do we not?"

The viaquia smiled suddenly, fangs and all. "Yes, we do." He took a step forward, and Erith began to circle. Surl smiled again. "That is not the way I do things," he stated, and then leaped into the air.

Erith laughed, and leaped up to meet him. He couldn't stay in the air, but he could match Surl in the height of his jump, as any Elwen would be able to. It was apparent that not many would have tried, though, because Surl gaped at him dumbly, and thus gave Erith the first strike.

Erith tried to kick him in the groin, and Surl seized him by the ankle. His grip was too strong to break. Erith cursed as he abruptly, sickeningly, turned upside down, and his sword and a good many of his blades plummeted out of his grasp and to the ground. Surl grinned down at him.

"It appears that I have you."

"Not quite," said Erith, and flexed his hand, sending the knife that was in a spring sheath on his arm flying into his grasp. Surl held him by one ankle, and it was easy enough, ignoring the rush of blood to his head, to swing forward and grasp the viaquia's ankle, trying to hamstring him.

Surl made a loud, startled, distinctly ungraceful noise, and hurled Erith from him, towards the branches of a tree. Erith spun in midair, and so connected with the branch rather than the trunk. He grabbed hold as best he could, slinging one arm and half a leg over the bough. He didn't fall to the ground, but he did get the wind knocked out of him and drop the knife.

His eyes narrowed as he watched Surl fly towards him.

Now he was beginning to get annoyed.

He waited patiently until Surl was in range, and then moved one hand forward, calling acid through his palm. It flew out in a cloudy spray that embraced Surl's legs, though not his face, as he somehow sensed the danger and flew up at the last moment. Erith was glad of that. He wouldn't have wanted to scar that face, which was nearly as wonderful as Lurissa's in its way.

Surl cried out in pain as the acid ate at him, and Erith flipped himself to the ground and made for his sword.

Hands seized him under the shoulders before he could do that, and Surl's fangs gashed his chest, the viaquia leaning over him too far in trying to get at his throat. Erith reached up with one arm and got a headlock on the other Elwen, holding him firmly as he tried to withdraw.

Surl got free easily enough, given his strength, but the angle was so strange that he dropped Erith. Erith picked up his sword and turned around, favoring the leg he had hooked over the branch of the tree and feeling the unexpected, stinging pain from Surl's bite. He had never been bitten by a sunset Elwen before, and hadn't realized how much it would hurt, or how deep it would go. The fangs had cut through cloth and flesh as if they both weren't there.

He looked up and saw Surl hovering above him. The man wasn't moving, though, just floating there and apparently staring into the distance. Erith studied him with a faint frown. Was he calling for help? Erith wanted to reach out and try to feel the steady stream of telepathic energy that would mean Surl was doing so, but he had to stay alert for the slightest movement on Surl's part.

Besides, it would be disappointing to find out that Surl was that much of a coward. Just once, Erith thought, I would like to find a beauty that does not hide cowardice.

Surl shook his head slightly, and looked down at Erith. His face was soft, eyes focused apparently on a different place still. His words slurred as if he were drunk. "I've served in the Lady's army since almost the first day of the War. I've been drinking human blood for years. I've come to accept it, but to loathe it at the same time. Taste of iron, pah!" He spat.

Erith fell into a crouch. He had heard of viaquia being driven mad by the need, the desire, to drink, and with so much blood spilled all around, he wouldn't be surprised if Surl had felt the need come upon him. It would be poetic to witness, but it could also be dangerous to anyone still alive in the vicinity.

"But now, today, I've found what I need again." Surl's voice was a trumpet, swelling into a paean, and Erith couldn't help smiling in spite of his conviction that Surl meant to kill him. "What I've missed for so long. Elwen blood. There's nothing like silver. Nothing like the liquefied light of our creators in the veins they open willingly to me at times, unwillingly at others. And land Elwen blood is richer than most. I could almost believe the story that the Lord of Light created you by himself, rather than entrusting the task to the other stars." He looked fully at Erith for the first time, and had Erith not been able to read emotions as well as faces, the look in his eyes- focused, feverish, passionate- might well have convinced the land Elwen that Surl was about to kill him. But the emotions said something different altogether.

"I do not want to kill you," said Surl softly. "Not someone who speaks as you do, who fights like you do." His eyes flickered to the wound on Erith's chest, then back up to his eyes. "Not someone with blood like yours. But I was paid. Only one thing would make up for the loss of the coin I would have to return."

Erith inclined his head. He thought he knew what the viaquia wanted, but he desired to hear the words spoken.

"Blood. Given willingly, and completely."

Erith arched his eyebrows. "I won't allow you to drain me."

"Not that," said Surl, his face flying into a perfectly horrified expression. Erith was charmed. He had never seen anyone's face so fully match the way that his emotions spoke. "Never that. I want this feast many times."

Erith considered this suggestion, his head tilted. "Having my life spared is attractive, certainly, but I'm not sure I would want to live if I were to become a slave to your feeding."

Surl snarled, his fangs flashing again. Erith had to squint. The silver blood on them was as bright as molten metal. "Whoever tells such stories should be made to drink human blood for the rest of his life," he said. "I would be more like your slave. Viaquia would kill me for a taste of your blood, if they knew. I will protect you from that, and from other enemies, in return for a little blood now and then."

"Only if one condition is met."

"What is that?"

"When we catch up Lurissa, I want her to myself. You have to let me have her, no matter what she does or

how well she tries to kill me. No interfering." Erith leveled his gaze straight at Surl. "Do you understand?"

Surl smiled and bowed in the air, his hands spread wide. "I understand, my lord. Now, may I?"

"You may."

Surl descended in a rush of flight almost too hasty to be graceful. He knelt in front of Erith and gently extended his fangs. No, on second thought, Erith realized, it was reverent.

He had expected it to hurt, but apparently only the first bite hurt. Like a mosquito bite in reverse, he thought. There was one intense difference, though.

No mosquito drinking his blood had ever felt quite like this.

Intensity came at him first in the form of tangible intimacy. It almost felt as though a hand were resting on his heart. The fangs and even the tongue barely touched him; his blood barely flowed. But nevertheless he could feel them, sense them, feel the darting pricks of both as though tiny stabs of lightning were shocking him. Erith found himself closing his eyes, the better to savor it.

As though they had been waiting for that, the images attacked. Gold-green as leaves in sunlight was the first vision, then dark blue, then silver, then a royal purple that reminded him of Surl's skin. Then came colors for which he had no names. Erith watched them in quickening delight, and did his best to come up with names on the spot. Let's see, he might call that one embiron, or that one abasilon...

Sounds began to play, soft music from an unguessable place. Cymbals, trumpets, flutes, drums. Erith tossed his head back and laughed aloud, but that didn't drown the music. It played in a full chorus in his head now. The brassy clash and clang that might have been expected to create didn't happen, though. Instead, each instrument found its proper place, just as it would in a real symphony. And when flashfire stormed his body, a larger version of the lightning of Surl's fangs and tongue, the music swelled to accompany it, racing as though to catch it up.

The taste of limes and strawberries was on his tongue by the time that Surl called to him, gently.

Erith opened his eyes. The voice seemed to lure him back from a remoter world, where he had only been before when he was watching the grass glow as bright as fire in the wake of a single sunbeam escaped from lowering clouds. For a moment, somewhat disappointed, he wondered if he hadn't imagined it all from loss of blood.

Then he saw the awe in Surl's eyes, and felt it from him, too, as open as a wound, and he knew that it had been no dream.

Such wonder, such delight as that. It did exist.

Erith lowered his head, touching the gash in his chest. It had a scab on it, already. He probed it, gently, and then winced as a faint stab of pain rebuked him. Surl's hand came up quickly and caught his own.

"You mustn't," Surl said sharply. "The scab is just settling. Break it, and it will pour blood again. I stopped while you could still stand, but it hurt to stop. I don't want to have to resist the temptation again."

Erith nodded. He seemed to be having trouble catching his breath. "I can understand why there are tales of Elwens spending the rest of their lives in thrall to viaquia, for that sensation," he murmured.

"That does not happen."

"The slavery?" Erith stepped back from Surl, his eyebrows rising. Already the memory of the sensations was fading. He understood even as he mourned their loss. They could not survive in the world for long, any more than the more brilliant emotions of a dream could. "Surely it must. Not all Elwens are as strong of will as I am."

"No," said Surl, rising to his feet again. His gaze clung steadily to Erith's. "The slavery does happen, at times, but never for long. The viaquia tire of it and kill their victims. But that kind of sensation does not happen. At

most, a victim might feel a faint ecstasy."

"Then you used some kind of magic," said Erith, disappointment lading his voice before he could stop himself. He didn't want to think that such beauty had been the product of another power.

"No."

Erith blinked. "Then what was it?"

"I don't know." Surl's dark skin made it hard to be sure when he was pale, but his face did look a little closer to lilac than it had before, Erith thought, studying him. "I felt it, too, though it was mostly taste for me. But I heard the music, and saw the colors." His eyes locked on Erith's again, in a grasp as firm as a handshake. "And I heard you naming the ones you didn't know."

"Were they not the real names?" asked Erith. "Had you seen them before?"

Surl blinked. "It doesn't trouble you that we don't know what caused this?"

"Not really. It troubles me that I might never experience it again, that's all. Perhaps that was the only time that it will happen."

"Stars, I hope not."

Erith smiled, his gaze locked on the other man's. "I don't think I can take much more blood loss right now. But we'll have time to make sure that it wasn't fleeting, I think."

Surl smiled at him, a different smile than the one he had used before. This pulled the corners of his mouth up, so that only the tips of his fangs peeked out from under his top lip. "Stars, I hope so."

Erith stared at him for a moment longer, then made himself turn away before he said anything else about that. He was in danger of becoming serious if he looked much longer, and spoiling the beauty.

"Remember," he said, as he began the search for his horse. The poor beast had probably run off in the middle of his fight with Surl. "Lurissa is mine."

"Understood, my lord."

Erith smiled. "You don't have to call me by the title, you know."

"I want to."

And that, Erith thought, was what mattered.