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About 3700 words

Born of Fire

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Briana paused under the shelter of the old fir, willing the folds of her cloak to blend with the shadows of its massive trunk. Though spring had arrived, the late afternoon air bit at her cheeks with the lingering chill of winter. Her breath, ragged from running over the sea of moss that cloaked the damp forest floor, was an ephemeral mist upon the air. She laid her hands on the rugged bark -- the ridges filling the curve of her palms, the furrows swallowing the tips of her fingers -- and rested her forehead upon a thin patch of papery moss that softened its rough surface.

¹ 'Born of Fire' takes place approximately one generation before the start of my fantasy novel *Eolyn*. It is set in a forest very similar to Andrews, and I have tried to incorporate references to each of the four reflection plots I visited during my one-week residency. For more information about the novel and the world of *Eolyn*, please visit my website at <http://eolynchronicles.blogspot.com>

Silence filled her heart, deep and comforting like the darkest corridors of this ancient forest, home to her ancestors and guardian of her childhood. In the distance she heard her sisters in magic and their companions, bell-like laughter fading under the hush of a passing wind as they scattered through the understory. Twelve in all, the young magas had chosen their partners and run without fear toward the cover of the forest, embracing the promise of discovery. Only Briana had hesitated, all courage failing her when she looked upon the mages and found not one in that sea of embroidered masks and flowing robes who called to her. Heart choking with panic, she had slipped away through the chaos of dance and movement, choosing a solitary path among the oldest of her friends, until she came to rest here at the foot of the tree that knew her best.

Now, she felt like a fool, her behavior unworthy of a maga.

Master Teitelbar would laugh at her if he knew, that terrible mocking wheeze that always overcame him when she failed. And Doyenne Klarena would scold her to no end, gnarled fingers trembling with bitter disappointment.

“They must not know.” She whispered her shame into the deeply furrowed trunk. “They must never learn of my escape. It will be our secret. Mine, and yours.”

Wind sounded through the high branches, releasing the fragrance of fresh needles with its compelling hush. Fir, like Dragon, could speak the language of all living creatures, but the tree spoke with its own tongue now, promising Briana to keep her confidence as it always had.

A weight lifted from Briana’s shoulders, and the tightness that had lodged in her belly faded. Her hands released the tree and went instinctively to her cheeks, which she discovered were wet with tears. She wiped them away as the many voices of the forest crowded her awareness: the rhythmic chirp of a pine wren, the fierce chatter of the dwarf squirrel, the distant

monotone trill of a spectacled thrush. Familiar sounds that reminded her of who she was and the unique powers she wielded.

Only her friends and their partners were silent now; perhaps they had found their soft beds in verdant alcoves. It occurred to Briana she might hear them, if she listened closely enough, but she shied away from the thought, and the reminder of her solitude, choosing instead to run deeper into the forest.

Today you begin your journey as women in magic, Doyenne Klarena had declared at the ceremonies, her staff held high over the initiates, hand extended in blessing, white hair flowing wild around her hawk-nosed face.

The words burned in Briana's memory now, spurring her forward. Swift as a fox she bounded over fallen logs and through patches of lush herbs.

As if her womanhood were defined by some silly old ritual! Was she not a Daughter of East Selen, heiress to the mightiest tradition of magic in Moisehén? Was it not said that a maga is beholden to no one but Dragon in thought and philosophy, in tradition and magic?

The sun broke in haphazard patches through the high branches, painting the lichen-cloaked understory in sheets of golden light, igniting the dew in sparks of diamond-fire. At last the broad trunks of ancient guardians gave way to thinner stands of birch and alder, and her run dissolved into more careful steps as she sought sure footing on the loose rocks and pebbles that lined the banks of the Saelen River.

She paused at the edge of the water, which flowed like liquid quartz over rocks bearing shades of jade, rust and clay. Some of the tallest firs leaned precipitously over the banks, their dense branches dark against the bright sky, their aspect attentive as if listening to the voices on

the water below. From their highest limbs, Briana saw long strands of silk released by countless spiders taking flight. She felt as buoyant as they, set free by wind and sun and open space, floating between the realm of Dragon and the tradition-bound world of men.

Briana laughed out loud, lifted her skirts and ventured into the water, delighting in its icy grip, so cold that her muscles began to ache. On the far side of the river rose the Ashen Wood, a patch of forest that had been kissed by the breath of Dragon some ten years before. Briana, then but five summers old, had wept bitterly at the power of those roaring flames, imagining the terror of her friends the trees. They could not run like deer and rabbits, but could only endure as their bark steamed, crackled and melted under the searing onslaught of fire. Doyenne Klarena had explained in gentle tones that all firs must die this way, for it was the breath of Dragon that gave their saplings such vigor when they reached once more toward the sky; it was the breath of Dragon that infused the branches of Fir with the power of flight.

Fir holds the most extraordinary power of all trees, the Doyenne had explained, and so it is from Fir that the Gods exact their most extraordinary price.

True to Klarena's promise, within a few years of the fire, new life crowded under the solitary giants whose scorched trunks had resisted the call of death: prickly shrubs that produced generous harvests of tart berries; vigorous young firs studded with pale new leaves, soft as feathers to the touch; unusual herbs with brightly colored flowers pushing up through dead branches that littered the ground.

As Briana scanned this strange landscape, she reflected on the Doyenne's words, and she wondered what price the Gods would exact from her, were she in truth destined to inherit the extraordinary magic of East Selen.

She removed her richly embroidered mask and gave it to the river, which carried it downstream, bobbing on effervescent streaks of captured sunlight. It seemed improper to hide her face in presence of these blackened giants, whose scarred and weeping trunks beckoned to her with some unrevealed message. Ascending the opposite bank, she wandered into their midst.

The tallest saplings were more than twice her height and densely packed. Raspberry bushes sprawled underfoot in a thorny net that caught at the hem of her cloak. Broken twigs crunched like scavenger-cleaned bones on some old and forgotten battlefield. As she rounded one of the wide trunks, a shadow broke free from the blackened bark and sprang upon her. Pain shot through Briana's back as she was thrust up against an old tree. Her assailant assumed the shape of a man, and Briana froze like a rabbit in his hold, fighting for breath under the crushing pressure of his arm, paralyzed by the icy song of his blade at her throat.

He was young, perhaps a few years older than she, and his eyes, dark as the earth of East Selen, burned with fury and determination. He held her gaze for an endless moment in which the sounds of the forest ceased. Briana struggled to calm her heart, trying to remember the invocations against fear, but they slipped away one by one, like so many fallen leaves carried by a moonlit river into an obsidian sea. A restless procession of emotions crossed his countenance: surprise, followed by recognition, then intense uncertainty. These mingled in an agitated dance with his stubborn anger, until he released her as suddenly as he had captured her, stepped away and stared with a puzzled look at his knife, running one hand through his chestnut colored hair.

“If there were ever a hope,” he muttered, “I have certainly killed it now.”

Briana sagged against the scarred tree, fingers numb with terror, heart pounding furiously behind her bruised sternum. She desperately wanted to run, but her knees were weak and her

legs refused to support her weight. Even now her spells of grounding escaped her, and she lamented the fact that she did not yet know how to sear her attacker's face with flame.

“What,” she demanded, forcing the little courage she could into steadying her voice, “is your business here, sir?”

He sheathed his blade and returned his attention to her. On his broad shoulders he bore the cloak of Caradoc, which descended in generous folds to the ground, the richly woven cloth a shade of forest green so dark it bordered on black. The familiarity of his stance ignited a thread of recognition upon which all the elements of his appearance converged in a single moment. Briana gasped when his name surfaced in her mind. She had seen him many times, at festivals and ceremonies all across the kingdom, bound within the small circle of mages that comprised Master Tzeremond's odd little School, serious in aspect and quiet in mannerism like all his cohorts. She had heard his name thrown across the table in heated debates among the Elders of her Clan: Kedehen, the prince whose insistence on learning magic had insulted the most respected traditions of her people, the man who had put the future of their kingdom in danger, the mage who threatened to drag them all toward war.

Briana wondered now whether she should call him prince, mage or assassin.

“Forgive me, my lady. I was lost in my own thoughts, and you came upon me so suddenly I did not realize...” He faltered and looked away, a brooding frown upon his brow.

“Forgive me. I did not realize it was you.”

“And had it been any other maga you would have slit her throat?” The words slipped out before she could consider her impertinence, but she rejected the instinct to avoid insulting him.

Prince or not, he had mishandled her badly. This man did not deserve her respect, no matter what his station.

“I suppose I might have,” he said without meeting her gaze.

A nervous laugh forced its way up Briana’s throat. She wanted to believe he spoke in jest, though his subdued tone and grim countenance suggested otherwise. In the brambles at his feet, she noticed his discarded ceremonial mask, its fine fabric torn asunder as if in a moment of careless rage.

“You are here for Bel-Aethne,” she realized in astonishment, and he did not deny her claim. “But how? Master Teitelbaum and Doyenne Klarena, the Elders of the Clan, they would have never allowed you to--”

“There is little a man cannot accomplish with some magic and a purse of gold.”

“So you have been with us these three days? Masked and cloaked, and not recognized by anyone?”

“No. I did not arrive until this morning. All I wanted was--”

“To have your pleasure with one of the Daughters of East Selen?” Briana did not bother to hide her indignation. As if Bel-Aethne were some sort of game, and her sisters the playthings of princes.

“No.” Kedeheh drew a breath and let it go. His agitation seemed to fade for the moment, his stance relaxed. “Not exactly.” He scanned the area around them, eyes lingering on the direction from which she had come. “You are alone.”

It seemed an odd moment to affirm the obvious. Briana shrugged and averted her gaze.

“And without your mask,” he continued. “Why?”

Her lip trembled with renewed shame, and she despised the traditions of Moisehén just then, and the Elders of her Clan, and Master Teitelbaum and Doyenne Klarena, and especially this prince-turned-mage, for invoking this unbearable rift between the need to hide the truth and the desire to share it. The embarrassment would live inside her forever, she feared. She would never be a true maga because of it.

“The question you ask has no answer,” Briana said, using the words of her Doyenne as a shield, “for the awakening of *aen-lasati* is not to be spoken of, but rather lived, enjoyed and remembered forever in the heart of each maga.”

Her response hung stagnant in the air, until the brooding darkness passed from his eyes and a flicker of a smile appeared behind them.

“You did not complete the ritual,” he said.

“How dare you accuse me of such irreverence!”

“I do not accuse you of irreverence.” He took a step forward, hands extended in a conciliatory gesture. “It was your choice, Briana. That is all.”

Briana was not certain what unsettled her more, the suggestion that she was not bound in any way to obey the Old Rites, or the sound of her name upon his lips.

“You are the only one who would say so,” she replied bitterly, “you and the other students of Tzeremond. I have heard they have no love for the awakening of *aen-lasati*, that they see the Rites of Bel-Aethne as crude and barbaric.”

“I have great respect for Tzeremond and what he has taught me,” Kedehen said, “but that does not mean I agree with him in everything.”

“So that is why you came all the way to East Selen? To experience Bel-Aethne without your Master’s leave? Surely you could have found a coven closer to home.”

He frowned and turned his gaze inward, jaw working upon some unspoken thought.

“It is said that when Caradoc first saw Aethne in the wood, her beauty ignited a flame in his heart that kept him awake at night and restless by day.” Kedeheh glanced up, catching her eyes and searching them, reminding her of an owl trying to spot a mouse on a moonless night.

“Have you ever met someone who invoked such longing in your heart?”

She would not call him ‘prince’ or ‘mage’ or ‘assassin’, Briana decided. She would simply call him ‘mad’.

“No,” she said.

He drew a breath, paced a small circle in silence. Briana thought it odd that a man so quick with his knife should be so slow with his words, but then he stopped in front of her and spilled his story all at once, every phrase emphasized with the rapid movement of his hands.

“There is a woman in your Clan who...haunts my dreams. From the day I first laid eyes upon her I have not been able to release her from my thoughts. I knew today she would celebrate her awakening at Bel-Aethne, and I could not bear her being with another man, so I came hoping perhaps the Gods would smile upon me and put her hand in mine, and there was a moment when she was so close I believed it would happen. I saw her eyes behind the mask, the deep shade of her hair beneath her hood, her stature, her figure. I even recognized her aroma – of pine, and wild roses. I knew it was her, and then...She was gone. She simply slipped away like a lynx in the dusk. All the others left with her. The dancing ended, and I was alone once more.”

There was a lost look in his eyes, a sadness that inspired a reluctant sympathy in Briana's heart. She felt an unexpected sense of commonality. She was not the only one who had confronted confusion and uncertainty in that moment of choice. Nor was she the only one to have sought solitary refuge deep in the forest. Perhaps the blind fury with which he had greeted her, though never pardonable, was at least understandable.

"This woman you speak of is not with another man," she reminded him. "Certainly not in the ordinary way that a village maiden might turn her back on one suitor in preference for another. Every mage is Caradoc on this day, and every maga Aithne. She will never know his true name or face, any more than he will know hers."

"It does not matter."

"You speak like a prince, not a mage."

"I have the heart of a man."

Impossible, Briana thought, but she held her tongue. One could not speak of love from a prince or king, not in Moisehén. The sons of Vortingen had abandoned the labyrinth of love generations ago, binding themselves to simpler codes of duty and power. Kedehen might be mad with many things, but love was not one of them.

"Even if the Gods had given her to you today for the awakening," she insisted, "even if you had seen each other's faces, and she felt affection in the moment of your union, you could not hope to bind her to you as a prince marries his princess, or a king his queen. A maga cannot be possessed by any man, and she will love many -- if the Gods look upon her with favor before they call her home."

Kedehen turned away, fists clenched and cloak flaring at his heels with the sudden movement. He paused at the burnt remains of a hollow stump that dwarfed him and embraced him with its shadow, so that his cloak appeared nothing more than an extension of the ruined bark.

“You know much of the doctrine of your Elders, Maga Briana.” His voice, though subdued, was tinged with resentment. He kept his gaze fixed on the cruel carpet of dry twigs at his feet. “Yet here you are, alone, having fled from the ceremony you’ve been trained to complete since the time you could speak. Where is your mask? What were you thinking when you gave it to the earth, the wind or the river? Why did you leave it and all your companions behind, if you truly believe we must always act according to what we are told?”

Briana had no response for him, or perhaps she did but could not yet find the heart to voice it. In her silence the wind sent a haunting moan through the dead trunks, a rattling hiss through the stiff shrubs. She fought a troubling impulse to approach him, lay her hand on his arm, rest her head on his shoulder, invite the comfort of his embrace. An involuntary shiver made her pull her cloak tight around her shoulders. The sun hung low over the western trees, casting auburn rays across the barren landscape.

“I should return home,” she said quietly.

He looked up at her. “Let me escort you.”

She shook her head. “It’s not a good idea. If someone were to see you, if the Elders discovered you were here...”

“I will not accompany you all the way to your family’s home, just far enough to be certain you are returned safely.”

“The most dangerous creature I’ve met out here is you.” She regretted her frankness at once, but the mage prince only laughed, a hearty sound that broke the somber spell they had been under and provoked the release of her own mirth. When their laughter faded, a smile persisted upon his lips and a merry look in his eyes. For the first time Briana realized he was handsome. She wondered which one of her sisters had caught his attention. Khira, perhaps, with her sweet face and gracious manners. Or Alondra, who at festivals drew suitors like honey draws bees. A touch of envy flared in her gut, and she reminded herself of the words of her Doyenne.

There is no room for jealousy in a maga’s heart.

Besides, she told herself, it would be foolish to envy the hollow affections of a Prince of Vortingen. Especially a mad prince like this one.

Kedehen proffered his hand. “The danger is past, Maga Briana. I assure you it will not happen again.”

She decided to accept his gesture of reconciliation, and let her hand rest in his as they started toward the river. His arm was steady and strong. He had an aroma of burnished stone and fire in deep places that well-suited to this landscape.

“I saw the fire that took this forest,” she told him as they descended the slope together, “when I was a child.”

She looked up at him expecting to continue her story, but another frown had crowded his countenance. He halted their pace, grip firm about her wrist, regarding her as if she held the answer to some very difficult and important question.

“My Lord Prince?” she prompted, feeling at once small and distant from his world.

With a shift in his stance he blocked the sun. The sky shone unbearably bright behind him, so that she had to close her eyes to avoid its blinding effect. When she did the breath of Dragon roared up in flames of ruby, sapphire and gold, claiming the trees once again, wrapping them in its brilliant embrace, tearing off their bark in long strips of floating ash, until the trunks gave way and the blazing crowns came crashing down in an explosion of sparks and smoldering branches. The animals screamed in terror, running deeper into the forest, taking refuge on the far side of the river, begging the Gods to bring forth the rain. All of them fled except Briana, who lingered with her prince, entranced by the discovery of his lips fast upon hers, hungry yet tender, seeking only sweet satiation as the world crumbled around them.

Their lips parted, and the vision ended.

Briana blinked as she returned to herself, feeling like the old giants that towered over them, forever scarred but alive and strong, transformed by the daunting magic of fire.

Kedehen held her face in his hands, dark eyes aglow with desire and fulfillment.

“There, my beloved Briana,” he murmured. “I could not let all of Bel-Aethne pass without at least one kiss.”