

BIRTH: ONCE, UPON A NEW TIME BOOK 1

DONNA RUSSO MORIN

CHAPTER I:

DRIVEN

The curved, sharp tip of the falchion blade sliced him from elbow to shoulder; in the strange, slowness of time on a battlefield, he watched blood pump from his limb with every beat of his heart.

He knew pain, the yell of it stung the back of his throat; he ignored both. He stumbled, tripped over bodies and parts, hearts no longer pumping. His broadsword sliced through any Elf daring to stand before him, dying a little each time his blade... his hand... cut off their life.

He could no longer guard himself; his shield plummeted from the damaged arm, rendered nearly useless by the blade's hard slice. His anger rose up, equally as hard, equally as impenetrable. He swung his blade before him, all the defense he had, a harsh swish that cut the air and all else that stood in his path.

The cry beckoned him ever onward. His own moaning filled his ears, like those of so many others on the field. Sword clanged against sword, or ax, or shield. The dying screamed for their mothers or the mercy of their gods. Yet the plea found him again and again. High-pitched, somehow subdued; in the lament, he heard pain unbearable, courage unshakeable. He would find that voice. Count Witon é Lahkrok would find who made such a sound... and save them.

BIRTH

His long legs made short shrift of the blood-soaked ground as he stepped around opponents locked in near mindless battle, moving ever closer to the front lines. The cataclysm thickened; he banged and ricocheted against bodies—a horde packed and locked in combat—his footsteps squelching in bloodied mud.

Witon lost his way, a red veil of blood muddling in silver-grey eyes. Confused by the mass of bodies—Human and Elf—fighting in pairs and bunches unrecognizable from one to the other. The beauty of his land lay in desolation, camouflaged by the conflagration of bodies. Pain burst in his gullet, a sledgehammer blow from within. How hard he had tried to stop this war; how miserably he had failed... a failure reeking of excrement and withering life.

“Would someone help me... please?”

It came again. That voice, a man’s, but not quite. A boy?

“Please?”

Witon’s head spun; droplets of blood and sweat sputtered out from his skin, from tangled strands of long hair.

A hand taller than most men, at least two above most Elves, his view of the vista lay unobstructed. His gaze searched as the pleading reverberated. So close now; he knew it, felt it.

“Where are ye?” Witon called out, a boom above the din. “I will help, I swear it.”

Truth rang clear in his words, the longing for the killing to stop.

“H... here.”

It came as little more than a squeak now, yet the desperation in it grew ever louder.

It was enough.

DONNA RUSSO MORIN

Witon whirled to his left, sidling now as his head volleyed left and right, avoiding a swinging sword, an avalanching ax. His foot struck and held; upon stone or body, it made no difference. He faltered, bending at the waist to balance, arms pinwheeling.

He saw him then.

In a pool of blood-like fluid, greenish and thick, with flecks of red, the creature lay. One inert arm lolled on the ground, nearly cut clean off... bone hacked in two, muscle ends withering. Just a thin layer of flesh joined limb to body; a thin layer of light green flesh.

Witon, struggling for breath after the difficulties of the search, stared down, unable to move, for he knew not what manner of being he had found.

Pale green eyes, swollen with tears and red-rimmed, beseeched him, pain writ harshly upon the strange face. Roused by the imploring gaze, Witon stirred; it mattered not at all what it was, only that it needed his help. It was the way of him, the way he had pledged to live.

"I am here." Witon squatted, leather creaking, armor rattling. Throwing his sword from his hand, he scooped his long, thick arm beneath the injured being and lifted him up as he would thin twigs of kindling, throwing the creature over his uninjured shoulder. "I will get you help."

Rising up, hitching the injured body higher up, secured by its own weight, Witon turned from the front lines of the battle.

In the world of Minra Erna, the air forever crackled with all forms of magic; but few had ever seen the sort Witon wrought in that moment.

He walked.

BIRTH

He walked with grey eyes narrowed, glowing silver. He walked with thick lips clenched in a thin, bloodless line, jaw muscles jumping. He walked with huge, long strides that proclaimed he would permit no obstruction. No one dared try.

They parted for him. Elves and Humans alike lowered their weapons, mouths dropping to gaping dark maws against pale faces blotched with blood and dirt, astonishment blighting the antagonism they shared.

“Belamay!” Witon cried the name, trudging through the forest of decimation.

“Belamay! I need you, Belamay!”

Silence answered; the battlefield hushed, became a place of worship. In the wake of screams and clangs, Witon’s voice rang out.

“Belamay, please!”

“Here! I am here, Witon!”

From the back of the field, the fully armored warrior stepped out of the crowd, near the edge of the meadow where once green grass—now torn earth, black with green and red blood—met thick and lush forest. Dark eyes peered out the visor slit; a long shaft of midnight black hair fell out the back, hanging to the soldier’s knees.

“What in the name of the Great Stars...?”

“Do not ask.” Witon stepped towards Belamay, nothing but the small, battered body between them. “He... she... it...”

Witon shook his head; a grind of his teeth, a clench of his bruised eyelids.

He opened them; with naught but clear sight, he stabbed Belamay with his piercing gaze.

“We need you.”

DONNA RUSSO MORIN

The soldier's dark eyes flicked between Witon and the creature in his arms, but only for a moment.

"This way."

Witon followed, breath hitching with relief.

"Fosrin!" Witon shrieked the name of his sergeant, head once more whirling this way, that way.

Within seconds, the brawny young man stood stiffly by Witon's side.

"Sir." A bark of obedience, a bow of his helmeted head.

Witon leaned close, voice low. "Get our men out of... *this*. I see no good end for us, for either side. But do it gradually, a few at a time, no more."

The sergeant raised his head and lifted his visor. He need not remove his helmet for Witon to see the dissatisfaction written on his ruddy face. It glinted there in the narrowed, darkening gaze, all too transparent.

"Just do it," Witon hissed, turning without another word, following Belamay once more.

Into the trees they ran, dread travelling beside them. Would the creature die before they could give help? Would either Human soldiers or Elven—or worse, both—follow and attempt to stop them? He feared both.

Belamay led them along a thin, rutted pathway. Sunshine dappled the light brown dirt beneath their feet with specks of incongruent brilliance. Then off the path, into a clearing, but not an empty one.

Within the copse, horses grazed, reins loosely tied to surrounding trees.

BIRTH

“Give h... let me take the burden while ye mount.” Belamay held out hands covered to the elbow with thick brown leather gauntlets, blood-stained and cracking.

As if handling a child, Witon conveyed the creature into Belamay’s hands.

“Which horse?”

Belamay shrugged. “What does it matter? None of them are mine.”

“Hah!” Witon barked a laugh, a blessed moment of humor in a world devoid of it.

He reached for the saddle horn on the largest black destrier, knowing it must bear the weight of two, and hefted himself up with one graceful motion.

“To me,” he said, settled in the seat, leaning down with arms held out in a cradle.

Belamay delivered the creature back to his savior, untied the reins of their horse, and handed those up as well.

“With me!” Twirling onto a bay shire, snapping the leather tongs, Belamay led them away in a flurry.

Witon blinked, a slowly closing of lids in relief, words of gratitude to the Great Stars spoken in his mind. But their exit did not come soon enough.

As if it gave chase, the sounds of the battle—the resumption he feared most—rose up behind them and his heart suffered yet another wound. With a slap of the reins, he rushed from it.