

A woman with red hair and pointed ears stands in a forest. She is wearing a white dress with green accents. The background is a dense forest with tall trees and a soft light filtering through the canopy.

H. L. Watson
WORLD OF
RYYAH

Book One in The Elven Age Saga

Birth of the Half Elves

*Birth of the
Half Elves*

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*Birth of the
Half Elves*

by

H. L. Watson

Two Harbors Press

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Table of Contents



A new start

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Raid on Eldergate

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Survival

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

The Wildlands

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Escape

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

The Elven Bonding Spell

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

The Kshearry River

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Sacrifice

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

The Return

Chapter 22

Chapter 23



A new start



Chapter One



The small village nestled on the banks of the Salmon River just south of the Wood Elven Forest was buzzing with excitement on that bright and sunny morning. It was the time of the salmon run! Hundreds of thousands of red-bellied salmon had begun their arduous journey upstream to spawn in the calmer waters at the Twin Rivers Bend, and every able-bodied fisherman was on the river that day, hoping to fill their boats. Clusters of cheering children sent the men off, and every woman was preparing for the festivities and feasts that would go on deep into this first night of the salmon run. Of all the people in that village, few were more excited than twelve-year-old Donovan.

Donovan's father, a metalsmith who built and repaired tools for the villagers when not fishing, had been preparing for this morning for weeks, stocking his small boat, mending nets, and building the drying racks and smoker. Donovan had helped eagerly, sharpening his father's knives and hooks and dreaming of the day when he, too, would join the triannual event.

"This is the year that will make all of our efforts worthwhile," his father had told Donovan and his mother that morning.

"You'll have fine cloth to make new clothes," he promised his wife.

"And perhaps we'll have enough to send you to an apprentice school in one of the free towns so you can learn a better-paying trade," he had said to Donovan. "The salmon will make all this possible, and more. You'll see. It'll be our best year ever!"

Donovan's family had moved from the free town of Benten, which lay about 100 leagues southeast of the village, when he was four years old and they had settled in the small village in order to be closer to the spawning grounds. The red-bellied salmon spawned in only one place on the whole planet of Ryyah, and only once every three years, making them one of the most valuable trade items to take to the free towns. A good catch would make living in this remote place—so far from other human activity—and all their other sacrifices worthwhile.

Birth of the Half Elves

When the boats moved out of sight, the children began to drift back toward the village. Donovan lingered at the riverbank until most were gone, then turned toward the forest. Immediately, his best friend, Akenji, was beside him.

Akenji gazed in the direction of the departed boats and said, "In three years, when the salmon come again, we'll be on the boats, and children will be cheering for us!"

Donovan grinned at him. "Not me," he replied. "I'll be a guard in the Grand Duke's army, defending Benten from the Barbarians and the Wood Elves." He brandished an invisible sword and slashed the air around his friend as they walked away from the river and headed toward the edge of the forest.

Akenji laughed. "Sure you will! You'll be mending harnesses for the rich shopkeepers in some free town and charming all the ladies," he teased.

"Ah, I'm looking forward to going to one of the free towns," said Donovan. He smiled as he thought of all the things they could buy there—new tools, colorful cloth for his mother, blankets, weapons... "And we can go to the carnival," he added, his cheeks flushed with excitement.

"Do they really have such a thing?" Akenji asked, a frown of doubt wrinkling his smooth, dark brow for a moment.

"Yes, I remember it," answered Donovan, although, in fact, he remembered very little about his life in the free town and mainly had pictures in his mind of the carnivals from the stories his father told him.

"There is music, food, and games," he told Akenji, gesturing wide with his arms as though to show his friend all of these amazing things. "You can play the games and win things! I will be the best in the archery game and win a real bow and arrow!" This time, it was an invisible bow that he drew back and let fly an invisible arrow high into the air. Both boys "watched" as the arrow arched and descended into the trees ahead of them.

"I think you just killed a Wood Elf," exclaimed Akenji, punching Donovan's arm.

"Of course I did," bragged Donovan, resisting the urge to rub the spot where Akenji had just punched him. Akenji was surprisingly strong for his age. "The Wood Elves fear the name *Donovan* and run before my bow and arrow!"

Akenji snorted and looked over at his friend with admiration. Donovan, a year older than Akenji, was already beginning to show

A new start

signs of manhood. His slender arms were beginning to thicken with muscle and his body moved with a natural coordination that made the younger boy, who was taller and more awkward, somewhat envious. Akenji tended to imitate Donovan and strove to keep up with his friend in all their many adventures.

Now, he turned to face the forest and said, "I dare you to go into the forest to find the Elf and retrieve your arrow."

The confident smile faded slightly on Donovan's face and he glanced sideways at Akenji. "I would," he said, "but mother is waiting for me."

Both boys looked into the gloom of the forest, silently, and shivered slightly.

"Ya," whispered Akenji. "We should get back."

Just then, the sound of a high-pitched whistle reached them, and before they had taken ten more steps, they heard a scream. It was coming from the village. Then more and more screams—frantic, horrible screams. Both boys froze, terrified. What could be causing the women to scream like that?

"Mother!" yelled Donovan, snapping out of his daze. "Come on, we have to help them!" he cried, taking off at a dead run.

In the nearby forest, a Barbarian scout had been watching the villagers. As the fishermen drifted out of sight, he smiled and thought, *So many pretty women, left all alone. They will fetch a good price at the slave markets.*

He stroked the feathers of his hawk and adjusted his pet onto his forearm. He tied a note to the hawk's talons and threw the large bird into the air.

Moments later, the bird flew down and landed on the thick forearm of the Barbarian leader, Boric the Knife. He removed the note from the hawk's talons and read it quickly. *Everything is in position, all clear, proceed with plans.*

Boric whistled and about fifty men began moving toward the village.

By the time Donovan and Akenji reached the edge of the village, all hell had broken loose. Boric's men had surrounded the perimeter of the village and were systematically moving toward the center, charging, yelling, and driving the children and womenfolk ahead of them.

"It's slavers," whispered Donovan. He and Akenji were crouched behind a hut at the edge of the village. The screams and cries of the women put shivers up Donovan's spine and he couldn't

Birth of the Half Elves

stop the trembling that was taking over his whole body. He peeked around the edge of their hiding place, just as one of the Barbarians dragged an old man from a nearby hut, sliced his throat, and threw him aside. Donovan gasped and lurched back beside Akenji.

“We have to get our fathers,” whimpered Akenji. “We have to go back.”

They had barely stood, preparing to head back to the river to get help, when a man—the same man who has just killed the elder—rounded the side of the hut and grabbed them both. The boys struggled under the man’s iron grip, but they were soon being dragged along, helpless to defend themselves. As the man moved them toward the growing crowd of captured villagers, they saw many bodies strewn around like ragged, discarded toys. Anyone who offered a token of resistance was ruthlessly slaughtered.

Donovan scanned the group of frantic women for his mother. When he finally spotted her, the terror in her eyes made it hard for him to breathe. She was like a wild, cornered animal and the keening sound that arose from somewhere deep inside her when she spotted him brought tears to his eyes. Unashamed, he ran to her and for a moment they clung to each other, instinctively knowing that the worst was yet to come.

“I won’t let them hurt you,” he promised her.

“You’re only a child, Donovan. Do as they say or they’ll kill you. Keep yourself safe!”

The men began shouting for quiet and soon only whimpers and muffled moans could be heard throughout the crowd. The captives were pushed and prodded into the closest huts, with threats of death to any who dared to make a sound. The doors were barricaded and guarded. There was no hope of escape.

Boric’s men quickly set up an ambush for the men who had left that morning, expecting to return to celebrations and a feast. In one of the huts, Donovan and his mother sat in a tense silence, praying for something, or someone, to help them.

The fishing boats came into sight by midafternoon. The men were singing songs of the salmon and trips to the free towns as they drifted downstream and closer to the village. As they drew near the shore, their songs faded. No one was there to greet them and apprehension spread through the group.

“Where is everyone?” wondered one of the men. “It’s like a ghost town.”

“Where are my boys?” shouted another man. “Come help haul

A new start

the fish, my sons!” There was no response.

No longer laughing and singing, but quiet now with a strange dread, the first of the men pulled their boats to shore and began to make their way toward the village in search of their loved ones. They never made it. Boric’s men attacked them and cut their throats before they even had a chance to cry out. Within seconds, the shoreline was flooded with Barbarians and the surprised fishermen were quickly cut down. Not one was spared during the bloody attack. The Barbarian warriors wasted even less time rifling through the dead fisherman’s pockets, searching for any valuables.

In the village, Boric shouted orders to bring out the women and children.

“Women and female children on this side,” he commanded. “Male children over here. Get rid of the infants.”

Everything happened quickly then. Donovan’s mother dragged at him and screamed his name as the Barbarians forced them apart. Tears ran down his face, but he made no sound. All around him, children and mothers cried their anguish as families were torn apart. The worst was the sound of the mothers with infants. Donovan knew that the sound of their wails and desperate begging and screaming, as their babies were torn from their arms and slaughtered before their eyes, was a sound he would carry with him forever. He fought waves of nausea as the smell of blood filled the air, and the sight of the dead was almost more than he could bear.

“Take these women and girls to the southernmost free town slave market and sell them off,” Boric ordered his second-in-command. “Answer no questions. Keep it quiet and do it as quickly as you can.”

A group of men were selected to escort and guard the distraught women and girls. As they began herding the females toward the riverbank, mothers tried to run back to their sons, snatch up their dead babies, or reach for their husbands as they passed the bodies of the fishermen. The guards ruthlessly beat the frantic women into submission and were finally able to get them into the fishing boats among the treasured salmon that had been caught that day.

Donovan stood beside Akenji, numb and dazed, along with all the other boys left behind, listening as the wailing of the women gradually faded. He could feel his friend shaking and crying silently, but could not move to offer any comfort. The youngest boys cried openly for their mothers. Donovan looked at them as if from a distance. He had never felt so helpless or lost. It was like an unimagi-

Birth of the Half Elves

nable nightmare.

The boys fell into an uneasy silence as the leader of the slavers approached them, followed by some of his Barbarian warriors.

“Who here is thirteen years or older?”

Several boys glanced nervously around the group and slowly raised their hands.

“Stand over here,” ordered Boric, pointing to where he wanted them to move.

“If you are younger than eight years, join those boys,” barked the fierce leader.

When the boys had finished sorting themselves, Boric looked over the remaining boys. He pulled a few boys out of the group and pushed them toward the cluster of older and younger boys. His eyes rested for a long moment on Donovan.

“How old are you, boy?” he demanded.

“Twelve, sir,” Donovan answered nervously.

“And you?” Boric gestured to Akenji who, although a year younger than Donovan, was taller than him.

“Eleven, sir,” said Akenji, his voice trembling with fear.

The fierce looking man sized them up, seeming to try to decide about them. “You’ll be able to work hard,” he finally growled, moving on. When he had inspected each boy and seemed satisfied with the groups he had made, he swept his arm toward the boys who had been separated, and shouted, “Do it!”

The Barbarian warriors swiftly moved into the group and sliced the throats of every boy. Within minutes, not one boy from that group was alive. If Donovan had been numb before, now it seemed that all feeling had left his limbs. He struggled to remain standing and his heart raced in his chest. He felt Akenji, beside him, collapse to the ground, heard his sobs. He saw boys try to run, overcome with panic, only to be sliced down in their flight. His mind, deep in shock, couldn’t make sense of all that was happening. His mother, his father, his friends and neighbors...all gone. The blood, the screams, the horror of it all was too much for his young mind to comprehend. He slowly sank to the ground beside Akenji and sat there, staring straight ahead, just trying to breathe.

He wouldn’t sit for long, however, as Boric called out to his men to tie the children’s hands together with rope and prepare to move them.

“We’ll head southwest, following the river,” he ordered.

It was a sorry-looking group of boys who were prodded and

A new start

pushed before Boric's men that afternoon. Parched with thirst, exhausted, blood-splattered, bruised and battered, they stumbled along in a daze of shock, knowing nothing of where they were going or what was to become of them. The warriors showed no mercy, and were quick to land a harsh blow to any boy who lagged behind or fell. They marched along in this state until they came to a juncture where the river flowed directly south before curving around to flow southwest again. Here, they stopped and allowed the boys to drink from the river and rest while Boric decided their route.

Boric calculated that he could cut several hours off their journey if they left the river and cut through the forest. The river route was treacherous along this bend and would be slow and long. They could move through the forest with much greater ease and speed. His men shifted restlessly and eyed the forest with nervous glances and mistrustful frowns, although none dared to speak out against their leader's idea.

Sensing their unease, Boric added, "The Wood Elves are not likely to patrol this far south. If we move quickly, we will reach the other side before sundown and we can camp by the river on the other side for the night. Be on guard and do not linger. Let's move!"

The men and their captive boys moved swiftly and silently through the forest, on alert to every snapping twig, rustling bush and whispering breeze. The boys had been raised to fear the forest and the Wood Elves who controlled it. Stories were told of disobedient children who ventured in, never to return, and of the fierceness and magic of the Elves. There was little that the villagers feared more, as the Elves were well known to have little tolerance for humans. Unlike the Barbarians, though, they did not openly engage in attacks against humans unless the humans invaded their territory.

They marched on for hours with no sign of trouble and as they neared the end of the journey, fatigue and relief began to make Boric's men complacent. They had less than four leagues to go, and their focus now was on keeping the exhausted boys moving. Little did they know that they had been being trailed by a Wood Elf scout for the last three leagues.

The Elven scout whistled for one of the forest wolves, and tied a message around the beast's shaggy neck. "To Alayna, on swift feet," he requested. The wolf turned, without hesitation, and loped into the forest.

The Barbarians urged the boys on, eager to leave the gloom and threat of the forest. Night was falling and they were only a few

Birth of the Half Elves

leagues away from a meal and rest.

The sound of a long, low whistle brought them to a standstill. The warriors drew their weapons, alert and tense. The boys huddled together, terrified, and the men surrounded them, prepared to defend their prize. The forest revealed nothing, made no further sound, and finally Boric gave the signal to start moving again.

Suddenly, arrows were whistling through the air, striking the warriors down where they stood. The Elven Rangers were deadly accurate, and within moments, not one man was alive. The children were huddled together, weeping and begging in a language unfamiliar to the Elves. The Rangers notched their arrows and took aim, ready to complete their duty.

“Stop!” shouted a woman’s voice. Donovan’s eyes searched the forest in the direction that the voice had come from and then widened as he watched a slender, beautiful Elven woman stride into their midst.

“Lower your arrows,” she commanded, and the Rangers complied. “These are mere children,” she said, her brow furrowed with concern. Donovan, watching her, could not understand her words, but sensed that she was trying to protect them. All of the children were still, their anguished eyes riveted on her face.

“Lord Aden has ordered us to kill any human trespassers,” one of the Rangers reminded the woman. “These children are human, which makes them a threat to our kind. You know the laws as well as we do!”

“The law was put in place to nullify direct threats. Look at these children. Do they seem threatening to you? What have we become, Shadow Elves? Killing children and spilling so much innocent blood are the actions of evil beings. Is that what we are? These children were forced here. They are no threat to us.” There was no reply and she knew she had won the argument.

“I will take full responsibility,” the woman assured them. “As your leader, I order you not to harm these innocents.”

“As you command, Alayna,” said one the Rangers.

“Shall we leave them here, then?” asked another.

“They would not survive the night,” Alayna replied, her eyes on the children. “We will set up camp here and attend to their needs tonight.”

Murmurs of protest rippled through the Elven group, but stopped immediately when Alayna raised her hand for silence.

Alayna pointed to one of the Rangers. “You, head back the way

A new start

they came and find their village. If there are survivors, we will lead the children back to their home.”

She pointed to another. “You, take word to Lord Aden, explaining the situation. Request further orders about what he wishes us to do with the children.”

To the group in general, she said, “We will need food, shelter, water, and fire. Make camp!”

Alayna turned her attention fully on the boys. A feeling of safety and relief swept over Donovan as he looked up into her delicate face. Her red-gold hair was pulled back in a ponytail, revealing long, slender ears that pointed at the tips, and her eyes were a deep turquoise. When those eyes rested on him, he sensed that she was sharing his sadness and was somehow connecting with his mind and with his heart. His eyes began to blur and tears fell onto his cheeks.

She wrapped her arms around him and said, “Child, it will be okay. I can see that you have witnessed great horrors this day. You will not be harmed further.” He looked up at her, surprised to hear her speak human words. She smiled at him, looking more like an angel than a flesh and blood being. “I am Alayna, of the House of Dorandal. I am sorry for your loss,” she comforted. “Cry if you must. It is good to mourn those who have passed. I am here with you tonight.”

True to her word, she sat with the traumatized youngsters all through the night, comforting those who cried out in their sleep, holding the ones for whom sleep would not come and watching over them all. None of them could know just how important this woman would become to them, or where their lives were heading. For now, all they knew was the soothing lull of her melodic voice as they struggled to get through this first long night as orphans.

Chapter Two



It would be a full month before Lord Aden sent his orders to the Elves regarding the human children. It was not entirely surprising that he had not made their dilemma a priority but, for most of the Elven Rangers, the wait was deeply annoying. Many an argument had been raged over that month. Some Rangers suggested taking the children to the outskirts of a human village, or one of the free towns, and leaving them to the mercy of their own kind, but others argued that they had already seen and heard too much. They were now a serious threat. Many were in favor of simply doing away with the little ones, as they should have from the start. Only a deep respect for their leader, Alayna, restrained them, as she had formed an unexpectedly strong bond with the boys and refused to consider any option other than to protect them and wait for Lord Aden's orders.

During their long wait, the boys slowly regained their strength and natural curiosity, as only children can, even in the face of great tragedy. None of the boys would ever be the same. A seriousness had replaced their youthful playfulness of the past, and a few remained quiet and withdrawn. But the spirit of youth was on their side and they were soon exploring and helping with the daily running of the camp, eager to learn the ways of the Wood Elves.

Alayna had become very fond of the children, especially Donovan. He was a quick thinker and a fast learner, very much like her youngest son whom she had recently lost in a minor border skirmish. She was a mother of nine children—four boys and five girls. Three of them were dead. The loss of each one had been a crushing blow, but her youngest had been the hardest to come to terms with. They had been very close; he had reminded her strongly of her bonded mate, who had died defending the Wood Elven capital city from foreign invasion. He was a great man and she missed him, and her son, terribly.

Alayna was about five hundred years old, give or take a hundred years. None of her fellow Rangers could ever pinpoint her exact age, and Alayna wasn't planning to tell them anytime soon. All of her surviving children were grown and had bonded mates and children of their own. Having these boys around her made her

Birth of the Half Elves

realize how much she missed the young ones and how she wished she could have had more of her own. She was a fierce warrior and a highly respected Ranger, but her heart was that of a mother.

As she watched the boys, one afternoon, struggle to solve the problem of building shelter as efficiently as they had seen the Rangers do it, she sighed, not for the first time, as she remembered her son's first attempts at the skill.

Hearing her sigh, Donovan looked up to see a sad, wistful expression cross her face and he looked at her, quizzically, until she laughed and said, "No need to look so serious, young Donovan. I was just thinking about how much you remind me of my youngest son. He was quick to laugh, just like you, and he was intelligent—a skilled problem solver. When he died, he was on his way to becoming a great warrior. I believe, given enough time, he would have become one of the elite guards of the high lord. But, it was not to be."

"Elves can die?" Donovan questioned. He, like most humans, thought that the Wood Elves were immortal, with some kind of magic that prevented them from being killed, or a magic that brought them back to life if they were fatally wounded.

Alayna looked puzzled, and then her face cleared with understanding. "We were once immortal," she explained. "In the times of the Elders, before the source stone exploded. Those powers died during the Time of Darkness. Although we do live very long lives, we can, alas, be killed." A shadow of pain crossed her face as she spoke these final words and Donovan was surprised to learn that Elves also loved and missed their families, just as humans did. Before he had met Alayna, he had never imagined them as anything but fierce creatures to be feared.

His sharp, adventure-loving mind was buzzing with questions about the Elders and the source stone and the Time of Darkness, but for now, as he looked into her sad, turquoise eyes, he held his questions and said, "I'm sorry I upset you, Lady Alayna. You've been so kind to us. I didn't know you had lost family, too. Is there any way I can make it better?"

Alayna laughed and replied, "I am not a lady. That title is reserved for the nobility, and no, child, there is nothing you can do. I will carry this pain, as you will yours, for all of my life. We simply need to find ways to live as best we can and accept what life gives us to bear."

"That seems very hard," answered Donovan thoughtfully. "When I think of the look in my mother's eyes, and hear the screams in my sleep..."

"It will get easier," promised Alayna.

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