
My Life as a Child Outlaw

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THEY CAME TO KILL me when I was eight years old.

I was cooking a fish over the fire when my foster mother Bodbmall burst out of the woods, her breath steaming in the cold air. “They’re coming!”

I leaped to my feet.

I didn’t need to ask who was coming. I’d been warned about this possibility my whole life. I did what any self-respecting eight-year-old would do. I dropped my fish, snatched up my spear, and said, “We can take them.”

Bodbmall hissed in exasperation.

She didn’t scare easily, being a druid and a hunter, but now her eyes were bright with alarm. Her unsheathed sword glistened red. Droplets of blood splattered her white woolen smock and the bleached rodent bones braided into her long black hair. She’d had to fight her way back to camp.

“There are *fifty* Clan Morna warriors right behind me,” she said. “Don’t be thickheaded!”

I was not impressed. “I stunned a duck on the lake when I was six. I can handle—”

“These are NOT DUCKS!” Bodbmall yelled. “Why is it always ducks with you? Just because you could—” She froze, listening. I heard nothing unusual, but Bodbmall had ways of hearing that did not involve her ears.

“We’re out of time,” she snapped. “I’ll try to hold them off. You run! Don’t come back!”

“Don’t come back?!”

“We’ll find you when it’s safe,” she promised. “Go!”

Her tone told me that further argument would be useless and possibly fatal.

I bolted through the trees, jumped a ditch, and made it half a league upstream before I smacked straight into my other foster mother, the Líath Lúachra—the Gray One from Lúachair.

She was called the Gray One because she was gray. It was not the most imaginative nickname. Her long ashen hair was braided with pieces of glass, because she had a weakness for shiny things. Her face was as hard and withered as a corpse pulled from the bog. On the left side of her nose was a wart the size of an egg, which I would sometimes watch, fantasizing about what might emerge when it hatched.

Like Bodbmall, the Líath Lúachra was a retired fénnid—a hunter-warrior of unrivaled skill—which meant she should have been able to run through the forest without disturbing a single branch or stone. But she’d gotten stubborn in her old age. She felt like she’d spent enough years yielding to the wilderness. Now she expected the wilderness to yield to her. Because of

this, her gray cloak was always ripped and tattered. You could see the progress I'd made as a tailor over the years just looking at all the tears she'd forced me to mend.

"You dolt!" She grabbed my shoulders. "The Mac Mornas are coming!"

"I know!"

"Then what are you doing, senseless boy?"

"Running away!"

"Good!" She sighed with relief. "But not upstream. You'll run right into them. Head east. We'll find you someday."

Someday?!

I swallowed the lump in my throat. I didn't want to cry in front of the Gray One, but I'd always liked her best. She insulted me with more tenderness than Bodbmall did.

"Good-bye," I said.

"Foolish child."

Then I was gone.

Even at eight, I could run fast. I'm not bragging, but I could race a deer through the forest and win. The Líath Lúachra had recently informed me that not everyone could do this.

I had no one to compare myself to except my foster mothers, and they were getting old and losing their speed. I assumed most other eight-year-olds could outrun wild animals or throw a spear with enough precision to clip the wings of a duck without killing it, but no. Apparently, I was special. Then again, I suspected most eight-year-olds didn't grow up in a tent in the wilderness, hiding from assassins, so maybe being special was overrated.