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# What Makes a Boy?

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2850.07.11

They were a few sevendays from Rubicon Hold. The small family of refugees had set up camp by a shallow river and were resting for the night. The patch of land they had chosen was slightly uphill from the water source, sheltered by a few trees, and bedded with soft, yellowed grass. It was a comfortable place for their lone runner to relax, eat, and drink, as well as providing ample room for the family to spread out and cook a meager meal. After sending their children off, Tarin called Pathi to him for a much needed discussion.

"We've got a very serious problem," he told her, his voice hushed even though their children were far from hearing range. His face was grave, and his blind eyes focused on nothing as he spoke to her. Relaxing on his old, tattered blanket, one never would have suspected him to be so uncertain, so somber.


"I know," Pathi responded, one hand reaching out to gently touch her husband's arm. They had discussed this before, in the quiet of night while their children had slept. Grief still took hold of Pathi now and then, as she thought of those she had lost, and the home they had left. Rubicon held the promise of shelter and community, but with Tarin blind, and all but one of her eldest boys dead, the family was in short supply of help. "I assume you have an idea of how to..."

Her words faded into nothing, and she gave his arm a gentle squeeze. His lips pursed, and he considered the unseen landscape thoughtfully.

"What about Lir?" he asked, his voice careful. He knew the subject was a sore one with his wife. Lir, their eldest daughter, was someone Pathi would always hold dear to her. She was a gem that had escaped the death of their older children, and Pathi was loathe to let her go.

"She's only eight," she argued, but even as she said it, her determination was gone. The set of Tarin's jaw, the look on his face, made it clear that his mind was made up. Defeated, Pathi only offered, "She is strong."

The somber couple spent the rest of their afternoon discussing the preparations that would be taken to establish Lir as a boy. For only as a boy would she be allowed to contribute, and only as a boy would she be able to make her family a place in Rubicon. She, and her elder brother, would help establish the new family as a part of the working community. It was vital, therefore, that all details fall into place.



"What do you think Rubicon is going to be like?" piped up Fali. The little girl was attempting to fill a small pail with water, but the bucket was nearly as big as she was. She wiggled a bit more with the effort, but eventually got it into the stream. "I hope they have bubbliess!"

Latra snorted. She already had her bucket full, and was just waiting for her younger sister to finish with hers. She waited impatiently, as seven-Turn-old's are apt to do, tapping her foot and giving soft little sighs every now and again. Now, though, with the present question uttered, she rolled her eyes and looked exasperated. Lir thought she looked just like their mother.

"Of course they have bubbliess! Everyone has bubbliess," she grumbled, shifting her weight once more and locking her arms around her stomach in her customary grumpy pose.

Lir repositioned her younger brother's hand within hers, and reached out her free one to help Fali with the bucket. She wouldn't get into this particular argument. The sooner they got the buckets full, the sooner they'd be able to return up the hill and get some food. Already Lir felt her stomach grumbling, and Aden had been whining for the past half hour.

"But what if they're not the *same*," lamented Fali, looking pitiful as she locked her arms around the large bucket. With Lir's help, she was just able to carry it back up the hill. "What if they only make ones with those red berries? I hate those ones!"

"There will be plenty of bubbliess," Lir assured her. She'd say just about anything to get them to stop whining. Her ears were beginning to ring, and if she didn't get Aden back soon, she felt her hand would go numb. The four Turn old had gained incredible weight, even after the firehead epidemic. It still amazed Lir that her baby brother had managed to survive. She thanked her mother's speed and the Healer's swift remedy.

Atop the small hill, Pathi already had a steady fire going, and Tarin was busy cleaning roots. He might be blind, but his fingers still worked with expert precision. Lir sat Aden on the ground, and cautioned Latra to keep a steady eye on him. She'd need both hands to help her mother tonight.

The meal they ate was meager, but it filled their stomachs and stopped the ache. Afterwards, there was always story time. Lir cuddled her younger sisters closer, and when Calric joined them, he sat near his father. Ever since the firehead epidemic, he'd taken a pseudo-father role, to compensate for Tarin's blindness. It was he who did the hunting, and the scouting. And it was he who was in charge of protecting the family from any threats. Young though he was, Calric had taken on the challenge dutifully. Lir idolized him.

The stories always centered around farming and family. Every now and then, when they were lucky and Tarin was in a good mood, they might hear something about the dragonriders. Never the current ones, but those about time-traveling Weyrwomen and proud, honorable Weyrleaders. Tarin was much fonder of the old tales.

"Come help me clean up?" Pathi asked Lir, shifting

Aden to her hip. The toddler was fast asleep, one thumb in his mouth as he rested against his mother's chest. Obliging, Lir left the fireside to collect the dishes. A small stack of plates and two mugs was all the family had, but it still needed washing after every meal. She waited for her mother, loathe to walk down that dark hill by herself. The firelight cast a dim glow around the area, but even Lir wasn't brave enough to stray too far. Calric was already gone, taking up a spot on the hill as lookout. He'd sleep during the day as he rode, something Lir was still amazed at.

"Come," said her mother. The pair walked carefully down the hill, navigating the steep path with only a few falters. As they reached the bottom, Lir preceded her mother to the water's edge, balancing the plates in one hand while she fumbled with the bag of soapsand in her other. She knelt by the cool water, and submerged each plate one at a time. Rinse, scrub, and then rinse again, was the normal procedure. Sometimes her mother would help her, sometimes she would just watch. Tonight seemed like a watching night.

In the dark, Lir couldn't make out the lines of her mother's drawn, tired face. Neither could she see the tears glazing over Pathi's usually alert gaze. In the dark, Lir could only see the shadowed outline of her mother's familiar form, and the glitter of pale firelight over the gentle stream.

"Lir," said her mother, her voice choked with emotion.

The girl froze, plate submerged. Her mother's voice sounded wrong, and it made Lir nervous. Hesitantly, she answered, "Yes?"

"I.. we need to talk. Your father and I had a discussion earlier..." Pathi stopped, and seemed to hesitate. Lir couldn't make out her mother's expression, but could see the outline of her jaw working in the dark. It was an old habit, that Lir knew to mean that her mother was contemplating something difficult. "Maybe you'd better come over here..."

Hesitant, Lir stayed by the stream's side. She withdrew the plate from the water, and made a show of drying it off and placing it out of the way. Her mother's voice worried her. The only other time she'd sounded like that was when her siblings had started getting sick. Lir felt her heart jump, and her blood run cold. What if someone was sick again? What if Aden...

"Come here, Lir." Her mother's words were firm this time, and not to be disobeyed. Her steps hurried, the young Lir obeyed her mother's order, and was soon standing beside the taller woman. She craned her head back, and she fought against the darkness to try and make out her mother's face.

"Your father and I have been discussing the current situation," Pathi started. She stopped there, however, wondering how to proceed. How did you tell your eight-Turn-old daughter that her life would change forever? How did you tell this young thing, who was still so innocent in the ways of the world, that she would bear a burden larger than any she had ever been asked to carry? A burden that would impact the rest of her life. It wasn't right. It just wasn't right!

"Yes, mother?" was Lir's hesitant response. One small hand reached out to clutch at the older woman's arm, fingers soothing against the cool night air.

"With your siblings... with your siblings dead, there's a

shortage of work hands." Pathi's words grew stronger with each breath. She pushed the thought of what she was losing out of her head, and focused on what had to be done. Lir would have to sacrifice. They would all have to sacrifice. It was for the good of the family. "Calric is a very strong boy, but he can't do it alone. To be a productive member of our new Hold, and even to establish ourselves on our own new cothold... well, we need more than him."

Lir blinked up at her mother, her eyes large and innocent in the darkness. It was clear by looking at her that she had no idea where her mother was going with this. It was just another reminder of how young and innocent her Lir was. So innocent... and yet, it had to be done.

"Lir, you're strong. You're strong and responsible, and we need you to help. You've been wonderful with your younger siblings, and with helping Calric tend the runner, and even accompanying him on hunting trips. You've gone above and beyond your duties as a daughter, and now I hate to place an extra weight upon you but... but I'm afraid that without this decision, we simply will not make it in Rubicon."

Lir's grip tightened now, her fingers twitching against her mother's skin as her mind added up what was happening. She was still too young, too naive, to understand the full implications of where her mother was going, but the strength in her hand let Pathi know that Lir was willing, at least, to do whatever it took to help her family.

"We need you to take the place of your lost brothers. We need you to discard the role of daughter, and take on the role of son."

Pathi stopped there, letting silence hang between her and her daughter. What she wouldn't give for a glow light! She wanted to see Lir's face - wanted to read the reaction in her daughter's eyes to see whether it was confusion, surprise, or hurt. Several moments hung between them, Lir's hand strong on her arm, but her silence like a knife in her chest. She was about to break it herself, tell Lir that she had been foolish and sorry for ever asking, when the small girl spoke up.

"I'll do it. For you, mama, and for dad. I'll do it." Her words were so much stronger than her conviction, and Pathi almost wept at hearing them. How young Lir was! How strong her voice sounded, but did she really understand the implications of this choice? Could she really have any comprehension of how this would change her life forever? Pathi knew there was no way her eight-Turn-old could, but it was too late. They had no time to wait for Lir to grow up, and they could hardly enter Rubicon with one elder son, only to produce another Turns later.

"Tomorrow," Pathi heard herself saying, not knowing where her strength had come from, "I will find your brother's old clothing... and we'll cut your hair."



*2850.07.15*

Lir's hand went instinctively to her hair. It still surprised her how short it was. No longer could she tug on the long locks for security. And no longer could she hide behind it when she was scared. She breathed out a sigh,

attempting to convince herself that she wasn't scared at all. No, of course not! Why would she be scared? Her mother and father had reassured her many times that she looked very convincing. Even Calric has been amazed at the transformation.

It was he who was most upset at their parents' decision. While Lir had been content, even proud, of taking on this new role, Calric had been outraged. His little sister whom he adored, was going to be a boy. He just couldn't stand for that.

It had taken a few hours for her parents to convince him it was necessary. As a show of silent protest, Calric would turn a dark look towards them, and refer to Lir as his 'sister'. It annoyed her, and only after she insisted that he treat her like a boy did he calm down and relent. But, he'd added, he didn't have to like it.

"Lir," whined Aden, reaching up with one hand to tug on her pants. "Up!"

She stooped, and gathered the four-Turn-old awkwardly in her arms. Her legs shook with the weight of him, but she stubbornly refused to give in. If she was going to be a boy, she had to start acting like a boy. And boys, she reminded herself, didn't give up.

"It's only a few days until we hit Rubicon," noted her mother, her eyes cast towards the horizon. "Should make it within the sevenday."

Lir felt a lump form in her throat, and she finally gave in and put down Aden. Within seven days, within seven days, within seven days. The sentence whirled tirelessly through Lir's mind, and she suddenly felt very dizzy. What if they saw through her? What if she, or her siblings, made some sort of slip and she was found out? Her parents couldn't live through the shame of being holdless a second time. And Lir didn't think she could live if it was because of her.

"You'll be fine," said Latra, giving her older sister a careful pat on the arm. "You look just like a boy to me!"

Somehow, hearing the seven-Turn-old say that made Lir feel better. She could do this, she told herself. Just a couple more days of practice, and then the real test would begin.

"Let's make camp."



### 2850.07.19

Just as Pathi had predicted, the small band of family members rolled into Rubicon Hold only a few days later. Lir led the runner steady, keeping an even pace with her family. Her father walked beside her, and one hand was on his arm to help guide him. Her mother was a few paces ahead, talking hurriedly with Calric as they neared the main gates. Lir wondered, briefly, if they were discussing her. She felt a stab of fear, and quickened her pace. The sooner they were inside those gates, the sooner she could hide.

They followed the main path, through the courtyard of the Hold and on to the steps of the main entrance. There, Pathi and Calric dropped back to Lir's side. Calric was handed the squirming Aden, and Pathi pulled Lir aside for some last minute instructions.

"Now, your father and I are going to have to speak to the Steward about acquiring a cohold. It could take several hours, but I want you and your brother to keep an eye on your younger sisters. Don't let Aden out of your sight, alright? We'll be back as soon as we can. And remember," Pathi cautioned, doing her best to keep her voice steady, "You're a boy. Behave like a boy. Calric will help you."

Lir nodded her head obediently, but she couldn't fight down all of her panic. This was it! This was her one and only chance to prove herself to this new Hold. If she could make it through today, the rest would be smooth sailing.

She tied the runner to a post nearby, and took a few cautious steps towards Calric. He had taken a seat on the stairs, and patted the spot next to him. She sank down, feeling her knees shake with the stress she felt. She didn't know what to say, or what to do. How did boys act? How did they speak?

"Spread your legs a little," Calric whispered in her ear. "Boys sit with splayed legs, not crossed like girls. And lean back a bit. Sprawl."

She nervously did as he said, doing her best to look calm and composed, but failed miserably. She watched her sisters play, while Calric bounced Aden to sleep on his leg. The toddler was out almost instantly, stress from the day claiming him. Lir wished she could sleep. She wished she could just lay her head on Calric's shoulder and pass out. If she slept, she thought, this whole day would go much faster. But she knew boys didn't do that. Boys didn't sleep. Boys were strong.

As they sat watching their siblings, Lir couldn't help but notice a few strange faces watching them. With a jolt, she realized they were boys about her age. Did they see through her? Did they see that she was a girl, and not a boy? Her heart only beat faster when one approached them.

He had a shock of red hair, curly, and as Lir watched, it seemed to be perpetually in his eyes. His nose was strong, and he walked with an arrogance that made Lir want to sink in on herself. She fought the urge to bolt behind Calric and sat her ground, watching him approach. The redhead gave her a once over, and Lir suddenly felt nauseous. 'He knows!' she thought, panic shaking her knees.

"M' names Taloren," he said, wiping his hand across his nose. "What are you, new?"

Calric nudged Lir with his elbow, urging her to speak. It was several moments later before Lir could answer, and the redhead was looking annoyed.

"I'm... I'm Lir. And yeah.. we... we just got here." Her voice sounded painfully shy and weak to her ears, and she felt another fleeting jolt as Taloren stared her down. He shrugged, and offered his hand to her. Hesitantly, Lir stretched her own out, and he gave it a sharp shake.

"We go down to the river to fish. Maybe you can come with us, sometime?" Taloren asked, shoving his hands back into his pockets as he considered Lir. "It's got great mud."

The thought of mud made Lir's stomach roll, but she quickly bobbed her head. "S... sure," she decided, clearing her throat. "After.. after m' family's settled."

To Lir's relief, Taloren seemed to take that as an end to their conversation. His duty done, the redhead beat a hasty retreat, returning to his gang of snickering holdbrats. Lir had no doubts they'd be talking about her, and she only

hoped they wouldn't catch on to her secret. Beside her, Calric bent his head, and whispered in her ear.

"You did good, little brother. You did good."

His words reassured her but, even so, Lir was glad when no other curious lad came to question her. She settled down to watch her sisters, feeling her confidence build. They, at least, could have fun and play games. She knew it'd be a long time before she felt comfortable playing games with boys. She still had so much to learn.

"Lir, Calric, up!" Their mother's voice broke through Lir's thoughts, and hastily, she was on her feet. Pathi took Aden back, swinging him on her hip while he slept. Lir once more admired her baby brother's ability to sleep through anything, and wished for one moment that she could trade places with him.

"Calric, call your sisters in, please? The Steward needs us to register. We've been given a small cot on the northern side - needs a bit of work, he said, but your father and I said we'd be glad to have it." She was in a good mood, and it made Lir hopeful. If they could get through this, she knew they could get through anything.

Pathi guided her brood of children into the Hold, navigating unfamiliar tunnels and hallways easily. Lir wondered how she did it, as it was Pathi's first time too, but didn't have a chance to ask her. Soon enough they were all crowded into a small office, and a stout man with grey hair was standing over a piece of hide. He held a quill in his hands, and one by one, called them up.

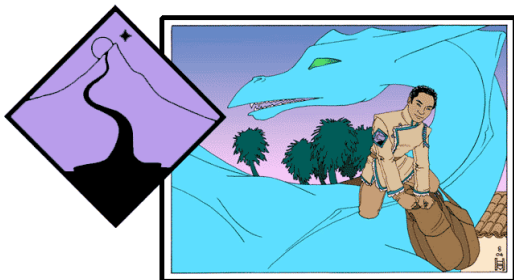
Lir was last, purposefully placing herself behind her sisters as she mentally rehearsed what she was going to say. The words sounded foreign in her head, and she wrung her hands with nervousness. She fervently hoped she wouldn't mess it up. As he called her forwards, her heart leapt. She felt her throat close shut, and thought she might pass out.

"Your name, boy?" he asked, tapping his foot expectantly. Lir's mind swam, and she felt her mouth dry up. "Boy, I haven't got all day. Your name, please?"

She felt the eyes of her parents on her, even if she couldn't see them. She felt panic race through her body, and she fought the urge to bolt. Calric was right there, beside her, and as he reached out to give her shoulder a comforting squeeze, Lir heard the words come out of her mouth.

"I'm Lir. Son of Tarin and Pathi."

END



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