

The Bard

(by Lissa Lysik'an (copyright 2016, Lysik'an))

Roisin grinned, her green eyes sparkling, and continued blowing her penny whistle as she twirled and leaped. Her dance was not traditional, but it was close enough to not offend anyone. Her bare legs and feet attracted the eyes of the men, particularly when she twirled fast enough to raise her plaid skirt high on her thighs. The faster she spun and kicked the faster she heard the clink of coins in the box she kept in front of her while she played. Her long auburn hair swirled around her, almost hiding her shamelessly bared shoulders. She tried not to think about how low she'd pushed her top, and blushed as she did. Her small breasts bouncing under her blouse excited her in spite of the glares she got from the women watching. A twinge of fear that her blouse would fall too low again sent shivers through her body and she danced faster.

Sean stepped out of the shop and nodded. Joining the crowd watching the cute girl dancing in the street he smiled. He liked the way Roisin's freckles seemed to glow when she danced. Actually, when she was excited or happy about anything. Just more so when she danced. He looked at her box and smiled wider. Whatever she was doing was pleasing a lot of people; the pile of coins was larger than usual. His eyes near bulged as he noticed how far down her arms she'd pushed the top of her blouse and had to bite his knuckles to resist the urge to run out and pull it back up, at the same time admiring her white shoulders and their red sprinkles. The pile of coins was explained.

Seeing Sean nod, Roisin wound up her dance and tune with a flourish. Holding her skirt a bit higher than conventional, she curtsied for the crowd she'd drawn, bowing low to let her blouse hang loose and tempt the men with the idea of getting a glimpse of her chest without actually giving them one. She put her pipe away in her pack and stepped into her shoes. The thick heels made her calves curve in ways Sean told her were sexy, and the network of straps that made them more like sandals than shoes showed off her pretty feet and toes. She was a little vain about her tiny toes and liked wearing open-toe shoes and sandals whenever she could. Once she had her instruments packed and the crowd had dispersed she closed her box without trying to count the coins. She walked down the street to the cafe she knew Sean would heading for by a different route.

"Your father would spank you if he'd seen that act." Sean looked into Roisin's eyes, then over her freckled face and neck. The corners of her shoulders that were still only slightly visible with her blouse pulled up properly looked thin but pretty. Everything about her was pretty in his opinion, even though everyone else said she was still just a child. When he stood near her he felt they might be right as he towered over her by more than a foot, but sitting across a table from her he saw a pretty young woman, not a girl.

"He always wants to spank me." Roisin giggled. She grabbed a piece of fried meat from Sean's plate and bit into it carefully. Cheap food was not always food. Finding no bones, she pushed it

into her mouth and chewed. "It worked, though, didn't it? Nobody even noticed you." She kicked off her shoes and put her toes on Sean's leg. He always twitched when she did that, so she did it often.

"That's not exactly true, Miss." A large man in leather armor wearing a battered sword at his waist pulled a chair up to the table. "Some people noticed." He put a plate of the fried meat in the middle of the table. "Dig in, it's on me." Pushing his legs out under the table he forced Roisin's foot away from Sean's shin. "The name's Ardan. You're Roisin," he stated, looking at Roisin. He looked at Sean. "I have no idea who you are, other than a not very good thief."

Roisin blushed and pulled her feet under her chair, looking down at the table, then put them back out again. She hated keeping her legs under her chair. While Ardan was looking at Sean she reached out and pulled a few pieces of meat from the fresh plate to the table in front of her. "Hello, Ardan." She wanted to ask him how he knew her name, but talking to strangers was hard.

Bristling, Sean looked at Ardan's face, then his large, scarred, hands, and scowled. "Sean, and I'm not a thief!"

Ardan chuckled. "No, you really aren't. If it weren't for the little girl dancing on the street you would have been caught and beaten." He smirked, "maybe you'd enjoy that?" He reached for a bit of meat while watching the young people squirm. Raising a hand, he yelled, "barmaid! A beer! Your cheap stuff." He hated wasting money on flavor when all he wanted was to get to the start of drunk. "Don't count on distraction alone. What if the shopkeeper was interested in boys instead of girls? He'd have had his eye on you while pretending not to."

As Ardan pushed his leg around under the table Roisin moved her feet out of his way. After the third time he lifted her foot with his shin she realised he was doing it on purpose. She wasn't sure why he wanted to be annoying, since he didn't even know her, but she decided to be annoying in return and left her feet on his leg, sliding them around. His shinbones were much thicker than Sean's and felt good in her arches. Taking a deep breath, she pushed herself to ask. "How did you know my name?"

Looking at her with one eyebrow raised, Ardan smirked. "I asked. For a kid, you're pretty well known on the streets. You dance well, although a bit wild, and play your whistle decently. There's also a rumor that it isn't safe to mug you." He watched her face reddening, then reached out and patted her hand lightly before covering it with his and holding it.

Wiggling her toes on Ardan's shin, Roisin blushed and looked down at the table. "I play bagpipes, too. Mostly in the park, though. They're kind of loud." She liked feeling his leg with her toes. It wasn't as much fun as making Sean jump and twitch, but it felt good to her feet. Her voice quivered as he squeezed her hand. "And I have a bodhran, but I'm not good with it yet."

A short elven woman tapped Ardan on the back of the head with a shortstaff. "Leave the child alone, Ardan. You're scaring her half out of her wits." Looking down at the table, she reached out a wand pushed Ardan's hand away from Roisin's, shaking her head. "Some men." Turning to Roisin, she smiled widely. "I'm Moira, Ardan's friend and keeper. You must be the Roisin he's been looking for. Pleased to meet you." Glancing over at Sean, she looked him over carefully, noting his well made and unpatched clothing, clear skin, and smirk. Dismissing him with a nod, she pulled a chair up beside Roisin's, on the far side of Ardan's.

"I wasn't too scared," Roisin murmured softly. Elven women always looked too pretty, although usually they were much taller and thinner than humans, giving them an almost skeletal appearance that kept them from being interesting in any personal way. Moira was neither skeletal nor tall, being only half a foot taller than Roisin. Roisin studied her face, feeling a little jealous of the smooth light brown skin that lacked any blemish, such as freckles that could give away her mood.

Shrugging to get her robes into place as she sat down, Moira smiled at the sparkle in Roisin's eyes. "I really hate these robes, but it does get more respect in towns than dressing like a thug. I prefer the thug look." Leaning her staff against the table and placing her wand beside the plates of meat, she waved to a serving girl. "I should have gotten here sooner, so Ardan could have yelled for a drink for me."

"You don't always have to be so proper. I don't think this town is going to be offering us much work, let them see the real you." Ardan smirked as he eased Roisin's feet from his leg to Moira's with subtle shifting. He yelled for a serving girl.

As Moira turned sideways on her chair, nearly facing Roisin directly, Roisin allowed her feet to be moved to Moira's shins, then blushed as she felt Moira push off her boots and move her feet to tangle with Roisin's. "There's a lot of stuff going on in this town. Mostly boring stuff, but stuff." Roisin slid down a little in her seat as rubbing her bare feet on Moira's was making her horny and she didn't like feeling horny. Mostly because she didn't know what to do about it except touch herself in places that weren't polite to touch. Moira's feet were soft and warm.

"That's because you are a child and still learning how to be a bard. Such as listening. Don't pack and run when your show is done, walk among the crowd and say thanks, listening to what people are mumbling about." He reached for Roisin's hand again, then stopped at Moira's scowl. In spite of Roisin's youth he found her attractive. It was odd, as usually he preferred women with more mature faces and Roisin's was almost childish.

"Like you know anything about being a bard." A slender man wearing a leather vest, laced closed, over an off-white linen shirt, and leather trousers, whacked Ardan on the back. Moving around toward Sean's side of the table, he lifted Sean's chair in a surprising show of strength and moved it away from where Ardan, Moira, and Roisin were sitting, then pulled a chair up in Sean's place. Adjusting the twin swords hanging from his belt, he studied Roisin. "That part he

has right, though. Your job as a bard is to listen to everything you can, then say it back to the right people. Preferably in a way that is entertaining. And when dealing with Ardan, insulting. He can always use being insulted.” He held a hand high in the air until he heard a serving girl yell ‘gotcha’.

“Meet Daithi. He fancies himself a wit.” Ardan looked at Daithi while pointing at Roisin. “She’s the dancer, Roisin, we’ve been looking for.”

Daithi looked at Roisin’s face and neck, then at her hair. Reaching across the table he stroked her auburn curls and smiled. “So that’s why we’ve been looking. Ardan and his fascination with pretty girls and freckles.” He glanced at Sean. “Who’s the boy?”

“Sean, and I’m not a boy. I’m sixteen.” Sean scowled. People usually talked to him directly and it bothered him that these new people were dismissing him. “I’m Rose’s partner.”

“It’s Roisin, Sean. I told you not to call me Rose.” Roisin tried to glare at Sean, then blushed as she realized she’d spoken louder than usual. She hated drawing attention to herself, but since she seemed to be the center of attention already it had been a little easier. Leaning back in her chair, she let Moira stroke her arm and move her toes over Roisin’s foot.

Looking at Sean for a moment, Ardan looked away dismissively. “He’s quite sure of what he isn’t.” Boys, or even men, who insulted women to boost their own egos bothered him, and it was quite obvious the boy knew using that name offended Roisin. He looked back at Roisin, then down at her nearly empty mug of cider. “Can we get you a beer?”

“Yuck. I really can’t stand beer. I mostly drink juice or cider.” Roisin picked up her mug and swallowed the last of her drink. “They won’t serve me strong drink, anyway.” She didn’t like the taste of most alcohol. Hard cider was okay if it wasn’t strong, but beer and harder drinks just tasted bad to her.

Sean wasn’t really her partner, she wanted to say, but confrontation bothered her. Roisin had only known him a short time. She liked the way he spoke up when conversations came up, letting her just sit and enjoy company without interacting with them. Other than that, she didn’t have a lot of interest in him. Except for kissing, which he always wanted to do when they were alone. He kissed nicely and never tried to get his hands inside her blouse, which was a little unusual for boys. Not that being touched bothered her, but aggressive boys did. She noticed his scowl as he put his mug down hard and stood.

“Fine. You got more in tips than I got from the job, Rose.” He stressed the name. He hadn’t intended to bang his mug as hard as he did, but it felt good when everyone looked at him suddenly. “I’ve got other places to be.” He disliked the way Roisin was getting so much attention that she didn’t want while he was being pushed aside and dismissed. Since meeting Roisin and getting attention while she stayed quiet he’d learned to like being noticed. Now she was

betraying him, letting people talk to her and getting her to talk. Calling her Rose was probably a mistake, but he couldn't help feeling hurt.

As Sean stormed away, Moira and Ardan smirked as Daithi chuckled.

"Sorry." Roisin felt bad about Sean making a dramatic exit, but his temper helped her feel less guilty about it. Temper tantrums were for children, so it seemed a little amusing that he'd done it right after trying to claim adult status. "He's not a bad person, he just likes to be noticed."

"Not a good thing for a boy that wants to be a thief. Attention is the last thing you want." Daithi smiled at Roisin. He'd wanted to be stealthy in his youth before deciding he liked being fast and flashy. Being stealthy only worked if you maintained it almost all the time, and he found that boring. "No apologies needed. You didn't do it." He smiled up at the serving girl that walked up to the table staring after Sean. "Your best wine that doesn't cost more than five, and a cider for the little girl?"

"Big spender, eh?" The serving girl grinned. "I hope your friend didn't storm out because he didn't like the cheap beer he ordered."

"Nah, he's mad because his girlfriend is prettier than he is." Daithi smiled up, "although she might not be as pretty as you." Sometimes flattery would get him a better wine or a larger glass of it.

The serving girl laughed. "Only might? That's not really a compliment no matter how pretty she is. They haven't worked on me in years. But I might be nice out of sympathy for you." She looked around the table. "Anyone else need a drink?"

Ardan nodded, then looked and pointed at Moira. "She's missing a beer. Strong, thick, and nasty is her style."

"So a stout."

Moira chuckled and nodded. "We'll be having another friend here shortly. He'll have two."

Roisin leaned back in her chair. Moira's feet caressing hers was distracting her, making it hard to pay attention to their chat about drinks. Most of what they were saying seemed to be teasing each other about their tastes. She got the feeling that they knew each other well and the teasing was a normal part of their chatter. When she got a fresh mug placed in front of her she lifted it to her lips and almost choked when she discovered it was undiluted hard cider. The slight burning in her throat felt good and she sipped again. It still tasted like cider. Cider that was on fire, but cider.

“Ah, Glen. Late, as always!” Ardan pointed to the chair Sean had been sitting in. He smacked the newcomer on the hip as they walked by.

Moira whispered to Roisin, “this is our friend Glen. He,” she stressed the word, “doesn’t talk much, but he’s a loyal friend. You’ll be glad to know him.”

Looking up at Glen, Roisin gripped her mug tightly. He was a huge man, wearing a polished chain shirt along with bright metal plates on his arms and legs. A sword that looked as long as Roisin was tall was strapped to his back. Roisin tried not to look at Glen’s chest, as his pronounced breasts were straining the chain shirt across his chest. Looking up, she noticed a pretty face bearing a lot of faint scars. Roisin was sure Glen was a woman, but Moira’s emphasis on calling Glen ‘he’ didn’t escape her. She looked at Glen’s massive hands and figured they could easily wrap around her waist.

“This is Roisin, Glen. The dancer Ardan has had us looking for. Roisin, Glen.” Moira put a hand on Roisin’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, he only looks like he eats children. He actually prefers adults. Lightly roasted.” She pushed the top of Roisin’s blouse down and put her hand on the bare shoulder, resting it there.

“With muscles. Muscles are good.” Glen snorted as he looked at Roisin. “Eat more, child. You’re hardly a snack.” Glen sat down carefully. He always sat carefully. Most tavern chairs weren’t up to holding him when he sat heavily. He smirked as he noticed Roisin look at his chest. People often looked at his chest. Some didn’t have the sense to keep their mouths shut, but the freckle faced child seemed to. Removing his sword from his back he leaned it against the table. “Stout?”

“On its way.” Daithi watched Roisin’s face as she watched Glen, noticing her confusion then acceptance. He was better at watching people than most of the team, and prided himself on knowing when someone was going to be trouble. Roisin wasn’t going to be trouble. She was a lot shyer than any bard he’d known before, way too shy to cause trouble without a good reason. Her friend Sean had more of the bard personality, but a streak too much ego for someone so young, and definitely to the type to cause trouble on a whim. Not that ego wasn’t a common failing of young boys that he might grow out of.

Fidgeting with her mug, Roisin looked around the table. An odd collection of people, she decided. The only thing missing was a dwarf to make the group fit the stories of adventurers roaming around looking for problems to fix. Well, some of the stories painted them as troublemakers, but she preferred the ones that made them out to be heroes. She’d always wanted to be one of the bards in the story, singing and dancing to make magic to support the team and confuse their enemies. Figuring the stories weren’t real, she’d settled for being a performer until Sean had come along. Moira’s hand on her bare shoulder moved a little, making her shiver.

The server stopped beside Glen and looked him up and down, then placed two mugs of stout in front of him. She looked at Daithi. "Why didn't you just ask for a pitcher? Two mugs is just a mouthful for her."

"Him." Daithi smiled as he corrected the server. "I like to tease him with just a taste first to test my reflexes." He ducked as Glen's arm swung toward his head. "Still got it!" Glen was always slow enough to let Daithi duck before getting hit, but close enough to make other people think there was a chance Daithi wouldn't be fast enough. Daithi knew that if Glen wanted to he could strain Daithi's reaction limits. "Now would be a good time to get a very large pitcher of that beer syrup he likes, though."

Roisin grinned as she noticed Glen wasn't actually trying to hit Daithi. Moira's soft feet playing with hers, and Moira's hand lightly caressing her bare shoulder were making her stomach flutter. She usually kept her blouse pulled up even though it was designed to be down on her arms because it tended to fall lower than it should. The feeling of her chest being half exposed while her skin was being lightly stroked was making her uncomfortable in a way that she wasn't sure was bad. Watching Daithi and Glen almost distracted her.

Moving his chair closer to Roisin's, Ardan put his hand on her shoulder, pulling the blouse down to where it should be on that arm to match the one Moira had moved before stroking her bare skin lightly. "We're all friends here. Don't worry about Glen bashing Daithi into a pulp. He'd stop before it was fatal."

"I could tell." Roisin liked the way Ardan and Moira's hands felt on her shoulders. It felt a little more intimate than she was used to, especially from strangers, but that just made it better. Being too shy to get close to people on her own, she appreciated when they acted friendly toward her first, if they moved slowly. The cider was helping her stay calm, although she still shivered a little as Moira continued playing with her feet. "I kind of noticed you all know each other pretty good."

"Aha, so you do notice things! That's a good start." Ardan squeezed her shoulder then let it go to slide his hand around the back of her neck and caress it lightly before resting his hand high on her back. "We've heard of your dancing and music, as I might have said already. I tend to forget what I've said before at times. But that's of no matter. What matters is we'd like to see and hear you perform. Good bards are hard to find." He nodded toward the stage in the far corner where a fiddler was doing a fair job of entertaining himself if no one else. "Most are like him. They play for tips and don't care much about the audience beyond that." Ardan resisted the urge to express his opinion of that type of entertainer.

"I like getting tips, but mostly I play and dance because I like to." Roisin shuddered as Ardan's hand slid down her back a little, pushing her blouse down with it. If he pushed much further she was afraid the front would go down far enough to slip over her stiff nipples and reveal her little breasts. The thought made her shudder again, blushing as she thought of being exposed in

public. The times it had happened by accident when she was dancing had excited her even as they'd embarrassed her.

Daithi grinned at her and raised his glass of cheap wine. "The mark of a true bard. Some day you'll be famous beyond the boundaries of this little city." He looked at her shoulders, suppressing a smile at the expanse of bright white skin liberally sprinkled with dark red freckles. Freckles weren't particularly appealing to him on their own, but sometimes they enhanced the right skin tone perfectly, as they did for Roisin. "We've heard that you play in the local taverns at times. Are you going to play tonight?"

Roisin looked down at her hand holding the half-empty mug of cider. "Maybe later. I have to go home soon or Ma will be mad at me. Once it gets dark I might come back." She felt childish admitting that her parents still tried to control when she could go out. Admitting that coming out after dark involved sneaking was too childish to add. "I play the penny whistle and dance a little if nobody else is playing when I come in."

"What about stories? How are you at telling stories?" Moira moved her feet over Roisin's. She liked how soft Roisin's feet were in spite of being human and dancing barefoot. In her experience, human's tended to develop callouses and rough hands and feet easily. Moira's long, light brown fingers looked pretty on Roisin's white skin and seemed to enhance the effect of the freckles. Moira glanced at Ardan, smiling faintly. Even if the girl didn't turn out to be the bard they hoped she was, she was pretty and might be interesting to spend a little time with.

"I don't know any that the people here want to hear. I like stories of adventure, with lots of exciting stuff." Roisin shrugged, almost giggling at the way it made Moira's hand tickle her shoulder. "The storytellers here usually tell about romance and sex. I don't know any stories like that." She could feel her face reddening. Blushing tended to make her freckles more intense and she tipped her face down. Not that hiding her face would help with her shoulders and upper chest bare.

Ardan lifted his hand from her back and ran it up the back of her neck to run his fingers through her hair, fluffing it up before watching it fall. "I prefer the adventure stories, myself, most of the time." The darkening of Roisin's freckles had amused him and he was a little distracted watching her skin.

"There are other types of stories." Daithi looked into his glass. Wine glasses always emptied faster than he thought they should. He held up the glass for the serving girl to see. "Stories that try to teach things are good. Especially in taverns. Tavern visitors aren't really fond of being lectured, but if you tell them something through a story they might learn it by accident."

Glen put down the two mugs of stout he'd started with and lifted the pitcher that had been brought when he wasn't looking. "I want the adventure stories. Romance and sex, pfah. Not something to talk about in public." He took a gulp that he knew would seem like a large amount

to Roisin, watching her face as he did. The slight rise to one eyebrow that she gave in response rather than a look of shock pleased him. "Stories with morals are for children."

"Most of the people in these places are children, Glen. Just very old children." Daithi smiled back at the serving girl as she traded his empty glass for a full one. "Thank you, lovely."

Looking out the front door as it opened to let someone out, Roisin realised it was getting late. "I have to go." She coughed as she gulped her cider. "Thank you for the drink and talk." Giggling as she had to wrestle her feet away from Moira's, she got her shoes on, then picked up her box. Patting her belt to make sure her penny whistle and knife were in place, she gently pulled away from Ardan and Moira and stood. "I might be back a little after dark, or in Tommy's pub. Anybody outside can tell you where it is, but don't ask in here. Kevin gets mad."

As Roisin walked around his chair, Ardan patted her bum. "Looking forward to it, Roisin." He wasn't surprised at how firm and round it was. Dancing the way she was rumoured to would have given her good muscle tone.

Blushing as she hurried toward the door, Roisin barely noticed the others saying goodbyes. The only person who ever patted her bum was her father and it felt odd to have a stranger do it. Looking at the shadows as she stepped out onto the street, Roisin sighed. She was going to have to hurry to get home, and probably wouldn't make it in time to keep her mother from complaining. With luck, her grandmother would be in the main room. GranMa was good at stopping Ma from fussing very much.

Stepping out of her shoes just inside the front door, Roisin put her box down beside them gently. Making noise was a good way to add to her mother's complaints. She went to the living room to see if her father was home yet, then smiled when she saw he was sitting in his chair talking to GranMa. With luck she'd only have to put up with a few snide remarks from her mother before dinner. Hurrying to her father, she climbed onto his lap and kissed his lips as he turned his face toward her. "Hi, Daddy! Sorry I'm late. I stopped for a cider at Kevin's on my way and listened to the fiddler a bit too long."

Liam kissed Roisin as he wrapped his arm around her back. "That's becoming a habit." He tipped his head to the side and kissed her shoulder, sucking at it gently. "Wearing your blouse correctly? That's a new thing." Moving his mouth to the side of her neck, he bit gently.

"Liam, leave the girl alone for a moment." GranMa shook her head. She'd stopped thinking of herself by any other name once Roisin had gotten old enough to say GranMa clearly. "She's still a child, of course she prefers to wear it up." Smiling at Roisin over her knitting she blew her a kiss. "How was your day, Roisin? Clean all the boys out of their money?" She took a vicarious pleasure from Roisin's antics, sometimes wishing she'd been as rebellious when she'd been young.

“I think so, GranMa! The clinking in my box didn’t stop the whole time I was dancing.” Roisin snuggled against her father’s chest as he stopped biting at her neck. His mustache always tickled wherever he kissed. “It was fun, but I got dancing too much and made my legs tired.” She watched her grandmother’s needles resume twisting a dull gray yarn into something that would probably get unwound before it turned into anything usable. The knitting was her grandmother’s way of passing time rather than a way of making anything, although Roisin did own a few sweaters she loved simply because GranMa made them for her.

“There you are! Just in time to avoid helping in the kitchen again.” Rowan stood in the doorway between the dining room and the living room. “I don’t see how you expect to ever be a good wife if you won’t even take the time to learn to cook.” She looked down at Roisin’s bare feet. “And I see you were dancing in the streets again instead of doing something useful. Go get those feet washed before you make a mess of the floors. The least you could do is wear your shoes or something when you’re out playing the child.” It bothered Rowan that Roisin seemed to be refusing to grow up. She’d hoped that association with Sean would have sparked something in Roisin toward acting more like a woman, but it seemed to have just increased her desire to be a minstrel and layabout. She despaired of her daughter ever finding a good man and settling down to be a proper woman.

“Yes, Ma. I’m sorry.” Roisin slipped from her father’s lap and ran out to the hallway and the back of the house to wash her feet. It made a good excuse to get away from any lecture that might have been building. Looking into the mirror over the counter, she paused before picking up the pitcher of water and smirked. Her father had left little red ovals on her shoulder and neck again. She hoped they would fade before she went out later. People always gave her funny looks when they didn’t. After washing her feet she started to push the sleeves of her blouse up onto her shoulders, then stopped. She’d always worn them up, like children do, but lately she’d enjoyed the more adult, and revealing, style of pushing them down a little when dancing. The people she’d met in the pub seemed to prefer that, as did her father. Blushing a little, she pushed the sleeves down her arms as far as she dared.

Rowan smiled at Roisin as she returned to the living room. “Come, dear, help me get dinner set out.” Running her hands over Roisin’s bare shoulders, she pushed the sleeves down lower. “It’s nice to see you being more grown up.” While she didn’t particularly approve of the immodesty of showing the top curves of a woman’s breasts, Rowan had come to accept that it was the current fashion for young women entering adulthood and she wanted to encourage Roisin to think of herself in that position. It was past time for her to put away playing with toys and gallivanting around town. “I was just telling your GranMa that you were growing up fast.”

Roisin noticed her grandmother rolling her eyes and smirked. She was well aware of her mother’s tendency to alter the history of an argument to make herself look correct after the fact. Rowan would leap on anything that supported even the smallest fragment of what she had been arguing and act as if it proved she was entirely right. Letting her mother guide her into the

kitchen, Roisin resigned herself to another lecture from her mother about being a responsible adult. "I'm not even sixteen, Ma."

"Well, you will be soon enough. Sixteen isn't when you start becoming an adult, you know, it's when you are one. You know many girls get married shortly after they turn sixteen. They manage to do that by getting to know the young man before then. They don't wait until sixteen to start looking." Stopping Roisin in front of the cabinet that held the china and tableware, Rowan turned her and looked her over carefully. Putting her hands on Roisin's waist, she sucked at her lip. "If you wore a corset, you could bring this in a little, and push up here." She put her hands on Roisin's breasts and shoved them up and together. "With the curves it would give you, you could have the pick of any man in town."

Blushing brightly as her mother held her breasts, Roisin tried to step back. "Ma, the boys already give me too much attention! If I made it look like I have breasts they'd never leave me alone." Having her mother holding her chest didn't feel anything like when Becky had done it while kissing a few days ago, but it still caused her nipples to get hard and make bumps in her blouse. Of course Becky had done it after pulling her blouse down to her waist, which probably made a difference. "I don't want boys all over me, wanting to kiss and touch all the time."

"But you aren't so shy about kissing girls, I've heard." Rowan tried not to sound mean, but it was difficult. Having people gossiping about her daughter being one of those kinds of girls just made it more important that Roisin find a man that would be serious and get her to grow up. She sucked in a breath, then let it out, putting her hands on Roisin's cheeks. "There is no future there, dear. I'm sure you can find a young man you'd like." She almost mentioned Sean, then remembered how the boy seemed nearly as bad as Roisin about refusing to grow up. "I just want the best for you, Roisin. I hope you understand."

Letting her mother kiss her on the forehead, Roisin turned back to the cabinet and got out place settings for the family. She wasn't particularly ashamed of kissing girls, nor even letting Becky fondle her chest, but she knew a lot of people thought it was bad. Not that they ever told her why, so she could decide for herself. Her mother being one of the people that always seemed to get riled up when the topic came up, Roisin chose not to discuss it, and pretended she hadn't heard that part. Staying quiet, she went to the dining room and set the table, feeling her mother waiting for her to speak. "I'll go fill the water pitcher, it's almost empty."

Sighing, Rowan waved her toward the door. "Go ahead, dear." She started putting the dinner on the table. "Come get seated, Mother. Liam." As Liam entered the dining room, Rowan glanced toward the door to make sure Roisin was still out at the pump. "Liam, maybe you should talk to her about finding a man. She listens to you."

"She listens to me because I don't try to tell her to become a miserable old crone at the grand old age of sixteen. She earns enough with her tips that she won't be a burden. If she wanted to, she could afford to move into a place of her own. Beyond that, it is up to her to decide what she

wants from her life.” He kissed Rowan’s cheek as he sat down. “We give her the information, the good and bad sides of things, and then let her live her life. So no, I will not be telling her to find a man.” Resisting the urge to comment on the rumors about Roisin kissing girls, he patted Rowan’s hand. “Dinner looks delicious.”

Slumping slightly in defeat, Rowan smiled weakly back at Liam. She knew some women would argue with their husbands or try to convince them to change their minds, but that wasn’t something she could do. Arguing with her mother over every little thing came easy, disputing with Liam over anything was nearly impossible. “Thank you, dear. Would you cut the ham, please?”

Dinner was quiet. It usually was, since Rowan had a tendency to bring up disagreement while setting it out. Roisin wasn’t good at letting go of a bad feeling and her father never tried to get her to reconcile with her mother. GranMa sometimes did, but usually by pushing at Rowan to make the first move. Since no one was particularly angry, Roisin wasn’t surprised when that didn’t happen. Helping her mother clean up after dinner was equally quiet.

The sky was growing dark by the time Roisin joined her father in the sitting room. Snuggling on his lap, she let him kiss her shoulder and neck again while he caressed her leg and back. “I guess it’s already too late to read.” She liked to read after dinner, but her mother hated paying for the candles or oil it took to light the room enough, and it was too warm to have a fire in the fireplace.

“You can read during the day, no sense in arguing with your mother over that.” Liam enjoyed spending time with Roisin, but she was rarely home at times of the day where it could last more than a few minutes. “You could spend some time in the mornings with your book before going out.”

“Ma makes me help her clean if I stay in, even when there isn’t much to clean. I only get to sit and read if you’re home to make her stop or if GranMa gets tired of it.” Roisin squirmed as Liam tickled her neck with his lips. Putting a hand under his chin, she urged him to lift his face. “Guess I’ll go to bed before she gets annoyed that I haven’t already.”

Lifting his face as she leaned toward him, Liam kissed her lips lightly. As she slipped her tongue into his mouth, he sucked it gently for a moment before breaking the kiss. She had been kissing him that way her whole life and he couldn’t bring himself to tell her it was wrong. A few times in the last year or so he’d found himself kissing her the same way. He’d felt bad at first, but since she didn’t seem to mind, he’d let himself stop worrying about it. Making Roisin happy was one of the more important goals in his life. “Good night, Baby. I love you.”

“Love you, too, Daddy.” Roisin slipped off her father’s lap and ran to the kitchen, still tasting the extra pepper from his mouth. She liked it better when he’d had a drink since dinner, since the taste of ale or whiskey was better than all the pepper he used, and didn’t taste as bad as ale or

whiskey from a mug. Finding her mother washing down a clean counter, she ran up beside her and put her arm around her waist. "Going to bed now, Ma." She tipped her face up and waited. Her mother had to be the one to kiss first or whichever thing Roisin did would be wrong. If she kissed Rowan's lips she'd be told that wasn't appropriate for a girl her age, and if she kissed Rowan's cheek her mother would pout and ask if Roisin was mad at her. She waited.

Leaning down, Rowan kissed Roisin on the lips, caressing her bare shoulder as she did. "Good night, dear. Sleep good. I love you." Rowan could never decide what it was Roisin wanted from her. Roisin always waited, never giving a hint as to what she wanted from her mother. Finding nothing to work from, Rowan just gave her what she hoped would be enough attention to let her know she was loved. Holding Roisin's shoulder, Rowan looked at it with a little puzzlement. It felt so thin and childish. She sighed as she decided it was her wishful thinking, wishing her little girl would remain a little girl forever.

"Love you, too, Ma." Roisin patted her mother's hand, then spun away and ran out to the hallway, grabbed her shoes and box, and ran up the stairs to her attic room. Her parents never came to her room due to the narrow ladder-like staircase and small trapdoor it took to get inside. At the most they would lift the door and talk around it, but they couldn't see into her room. She didn't even have to pretend to get into her nightdress on nights she was planning to go out the small window at the far end of the room. She dumped her box into the bigger box under her bed, then put a few seed coins back into it. People tipped better if someone had already tipped. Lying on the bed, she let it make creaking noises.

Hearing her parent's door slam closed, she knew they wouldn't be up again before sunrise. Rolling off the bed carefully she got to her feet without making any sounds. She was good at moving without making noise when she wanted to. The small window didn't give enough light for her to see by, but she always left her things in exactly the same place, and touching a few places on the bed was all she needed to do to orient herself in the room. Walking carefully on bare feet, she picked up her box and shoes, then moved to the window. Opening it quietly was tricky, but she'd become adept at it over the last couple of years.

Hanging her shoes on her belt and her box over her shoulder on its strap, she backed out of the window, her toes catching on the decorative beam running side to side just a few inches under the windowsill. Holding to the window frame with one hand and leaning toward the wall, she pulled the window almost completely closed, then wedged a little shim under it to prevent it from swinging open again from any stray breezes. Holding herself tight to the wall with her fingertips and toes, she made her way to the ground. Standing in the narrow gap between her home and her father's cobbler shop, she looked up at the window and smiled. No one would be able to tell it was unlatched. She knelt down and put her shoes on.

Becky smirked as Roisin looked up at her. She could never manage to sneak up on the little girl, even barefoot. Sighing good-naturedly, she dropped her shoes on the ground and put her arms out. "I'm sorry I wasn't around for the last couple of days. My mother heard a rumor that I was

seen kissing a girl and has been watching me like a hawk.” She smiled as Roisin grinned and hugged her. “I don’t think she knows what girl I was kissing.” Tipping her head down, she kissed Roisin’s full lips, letting Roisin push her tongue into her mouth. Roisin’s tendency to kiss by licking the inside of her mouth was one of the things that had led Becky to wanting more kisses from her. Carefully pushing Roisin’s blouse down her arms, Becky moaned softly when Roisin let her.

Shivering as Becky pushed her blouse down, Roisin caught herself breathing heavily. She liked being half naked in public, even if public was a dark alley where no one could see her bare chest. Pushing Becky’s hands to cover her small breasts, Roisin moaned in return. Slowly breaking the kiss, she backed away to let Becky look at her body. “It’s okay. Ma heard the same kind of rumor and told me I need to find a boyfriend.” Shuddering as Becky looked over her topless body, Roisin reached to pull her blouse back up.

“Please don’t, yet? I have to go soon and I want a few more minutes of your beautiful body.” Becky bit her lips. She hadn’t intended to say anything so direct. Usually she just touched, with a few glimpses when she thought Roisin wouldn’t notice. Although considering how Roisin had stepped back to show herself off, it was probably not a bad thing to admit she liked looking at her. “Kiss me again?”

Smiling cheerfully, Roisin stepped close again, giggling as Becky put her hands on Roisin’s chest. “I like that. And I like being half naked out here, it’s exciting.” She giggled into Becky’s mouth as Becky stopped her talking with a passionate kiss. Wrapping her arms around Becky tightly, Roisin returned the kiss just as passionately. While she wasn’t ready to start tossing words like love around, she was very attached to Becky and enjoyed being with her even when it was just for a moment.

Stepping away from Roisin, Becky smiled down at her. She was sure it wouldn’t be too long before Roisin was closer to the same height, but for now she was a few inches short. “I have to hurry before my mother gets upset with me again. Want to meet for lunch tomorrow? I know a tavern we could go to that my mother doesn’t have friends at.” She stepped into her shoes, smirking at how taking them off hadn’t helped her sneak.

Roisin put her hands through her sleeves as Becky helped her get her blouse back up where it belonged. “Okay. Which way?” She always tried to be a little discreet about her willingness to kiss both boys and girls, but she knew most people had to be totally secretive and accepted it.

“South. Just keep going south on your street and I’ll meet you.” Becky hugged Roisin and kissed her lightly. “I’ll see you.”

Waiting until Becky had disappeared around the back of Liam’s shop, Roisin walked out to the front, being careful to keep her hard shoes from making much noise. Hurrying toward Kevin’s,

she smiled and skipped on her toes a little. The fondling and kissing had rekindled her good mood.

Kevin's pub was quiet. Ardan looked around as he pulled two tables together and put chairs around them. Sharing just one of the small tables was fine when they were just having drinks but they were going to need more space for plates of food when they ordered dinner. He'd barely started getting chairs when the rest of his friends arrived. "So, find anything interesting?" He asked, sitting in a chair facing the stage where a storyteller was boring the patrons. Ardan figured that was why the place was currently quiet. A bad performer could really hurt a pub.

Sitting in a chair Ardan had set close to his, Moira set leaned her staff against her side. She'd put her wand into a loop of leather at her waist after changing to leather knee breeches, a shirt, leather vest, and knee-high boots. Between dressing like a man and keeping her long hair loose to hide her ears she knew most people wouldn't guess she was either mage or elf. As long as they thought the wand was a dagger in a sheath they'd think she was some form of traveller. During the day it didn't matter, but at night every little thing could be the cause of a fight. "The little girl gonna get here soon and save us from whatever that is on the stage?"

"I don't know any more about her or this place than you do, Moira. She said she comes by after dark." He smirked, "which probably means she sneaks out when her family goes to bed. Hard to predict that sort of thing." He put his arm over Moira's shoulders. "So, a little attracted to the little snack?"

Lifting Ardan's arm off her and moving it back to the table, Moira shrugged. "She's cute. I want to hear her play." Blatantly admitting an attraction to the girl would be crude at best, and Moira tried to avoid being crude in public. "I'd really like to hear her sing." Hearing someone sing was an easy way to discover their potential. A good Bard sang with magic that did more than the song alone could accomplish. Magic could add to the bagpipes in a battle, or the whistle or pan flute in tighter places, but not nearly as powerfully as it could work with a voice. The girl's voice had been soft, but it had been clear and ringing even when she was barely speaking at all. A promising start.

Shrugging, Ardan stretched out his legs as Daithi raised a hand to summon a serving girl. Crossing his arms over his chest, he smiled at Moira. He wasn't really interested in her as a romantic or sexual partner, but it was fun teasing her. "All I know is she is widely known for her dancing in the streets, and the way she plays her pipes and whistle. A young kid with that kind of reputation has to be good enough to at least give a listen to."

Entering the pub, Roisin looked at the stage and rolled her eyes. The man sitting on a stool and reciting a story in a monotone was too frequently monopolizing the place. He never seemed to understand why he made no tips and usually got pulled away after an hour or so, and no amount of explaining to him seemed to get through. It didn't help that he tended to repeat the same stories every day. She'd been tempted to do some story telling of her own after him just to

show that there were more interesting tales to tell, but talking was not her strong point. Speaking too softly to be heard would be nearly as bad as talking in a monotone.

“She’s here.” Glen nodded toward Roisin. He smiled, as close to a smile as he ever got, as a serving girl handed him a pitcher of stout. Performers and bards didn’t interest him a lot, although he did appreciate having one around during rough times. Better than having a cleric, since bards rarely mentioned gods of any sort. Glen didn’t like clerics that pushed their gods and almost all of them did.

Moira moved to the chair beside the one she’d been in, leaving an empty one between herself and Ardan. Holding up her hand to get the little girl’s attention, she waved her over. Having someone between her and Ardan was always good, and having that someone be a pretty girl made it better. Looking at Roisin’s small chest, she smirked. Humans were generally much larger than elves in that area, but Ardan’s bard was about equal to Moira. Probably due to her being a little bit young for Moira to be thinking about her that way, but it would still be interesting to explore if the girl were open to it.

“Hi.” Roisin blushed as her voice came out as a whisper. Taking the chair that was offered, she pulled her box onto her lap as she sat down. “It’s nice to see you all again.” Her voice was still soft, but at least it carried tone instead of sounding like air blowing across grass. “Sorry about the guy on the stage. I guess I should have warned you, since he’s here at dinner time most nights. Kevin will pull him away soon if no one else does.” Reaching into one of the pouches on her belt, she pulled out her penny-whistle and set it on the table in front of her. “If nobody goes up there after, I will.”

Daithi picked up his glass of wine and winked. “Glen can go with you. No one argues with him. About anything. Ever.” He ducked, smiling wide, as Glen swung at his head slowly. “Why do I always sit beside Glen? I know he’s going to try to hit me.” Making an exaggerated sigh, he tipped his head down. “I should have learned. But no. I wait, dreading the day when that monstrous hand hits my pretty face and sends me flying across the room, broken and bloody.”

“You could shut up.” Glen patted Daithi on the head. “Then I might not try to hit you.” He watched Moira and Ardan pull the sleeves of Roisin’s blouse down her arms a little. The girl’s body was not interesting to him, but the way she seemed to enjoy letting them was. Most young girls resisted, sometimes teasingly, sometimes seriously, but Roisin just sat up a little to make it easier for them.

“That presents a conundrum. I enjoy not being hit, but I also enjoy speaking.” Daithi watched as the front of Roisin’s blouse dipped low enough to show the top curves of her young breasts, then looked back to her face. Watching Roisin’s reactions was more interesting to him than seeing her body.

Blushing as Ardan and Moira pushed her blouse down, Roisin shook her head. "It's okay. I can wait until there's free time." She twitched as Moira put a mug of cider in her hand. Remembering Ardan's advice to pay more attention to things going on around her made her blush deeper. Trusting these people to not push her blouse down too far in public was a silly thing, but she did it anyway. The thought that they might was exciting. "I only dance if it's early, but I can play anytime."

"What about singing?" Moira stopped pulling Roisin's blouse down and moved her hand up to run her fingers through Roisin's thick auburn curls. Finding the hair softer than she expected, she twisted her fingers over and over as she pulled them through the long hair. "Your voice is so sweet when you're speaking up, I think it would be lovely for singing." As a plate of something fried was placed in front of her Moira pulled her hand free of Roisin's hair. "You can have a bit of this whatever it is while you wait for a time. I'm not really fond of fried things, but the other options looked worse." Picking up a piece of the fried thing, she nibbled at it.

"Fried things is what they do best here." Roisin reached for a small brown lump of something. "Oh, it's pig. I don't sing much. Everytime I try I get shivers all over and it sounds too loud. I mostly do it when I'm alone and nobody will care." She didn't think it important to mention singing love songs for Becky and Sean. That was different. It made shivers, but she liked them then.

"Maybe later, if you can stay a while, you could sing for us?" Moira patted Roisin's hand. She knew about the shivers that using magic could cause. Ardan may have found a natural bard. A pretty, young, bard, in need of training. But a natural. They were rare, in spite of what the common stories implied. "Do what you want, though. Never let other people tell you what to do."

Giggling, Roisin grabbed another piece of fried pork from Moira's plate. "I don't. It makes Ma a little mad sometimes, but Daddy thinks it's funny." Kicking off her shoes, she wiggled her toes. "People like it when I play fast songs and dance a lot while they drink. They get happy and sometimes they dance and sing." Shrugging, she looked at the man on the stage. "Probably because it's more fun than listening to him drone on and on."

Raising an eyebrow, Ardan winked at Moira. "I like this kid already, even if she doesn't have the talent." Being of a rebellious nature, he liked seeing it in younger people. The people that found the quiet life of farmers and merchants fulfilling were not beneath his respect, but they weren't interesting either. "Ah, the barkeep is escorting the dull man from the stage. Perhaps you could go up before another one takes his place?" He pushed gently at Roisin's shoulder.

Picking up her penny-whistle, Roisin slipped from her chair and squeezed around Moira's. She was in a mood to play and dance. "Okay. I hope you aren't disappointed." Without waiting for an answer she hurried to the stage. Putting her box down she tried to open it and found it had locked itself again, probably from being bounced around a lot. Taking a couple of bent pieces of metal from a pouch on her belt she quickly picked the lock, having lost the key years ago, and

opened it for people to drop coins in if they wanted to. “Hi,” she murmured as she stood up again. Putting her whistle to her mouth she started playing a moderate tune that always made her feel like dancing but wasn’t so fast as to jar people’s senses after they’d been lulled by the long storytelling.

Looking at Ardan, a slight raising of her eyebrows indicating shock, Moira whispered, “she’s got so damn much magic it’s coming out of a cheap little toy! A natural, Ardan. You actually found one.” The waves of magic washing out from the little girl as she played, spinning and hopping in a dance that was similar to traditional dances but wasn’t quite like them, washed through Moira. She looked around at the people in the pub, watching as they started swaying to the tune and tapping their feet. Seeing even Glen moving in time to the tune, she grinned. It took a lot to get Glen to react visibly.

As additional people entered the pub Moira went up to the stage and picked up Roisin’s box, carrying it table to table and asking for tips for ‘the little girl’. She was surprised at how many tipped, as she’d seen excellent performers who would only get a tip out of about a quarter of their audience. The fact that Roisin was showing more bare leg than most probably contributed, but not enough to explain the near total response. She smiled as her own feelings were confirmed. Roisin’s magic touched nearly everyone, whether they were magic sensitive or not. Returning the box to the stage, Moira took her seat again and watched.

“If she spins any faster we’re going to find out if she wears unders or not.” Daithi had been watching as Roisin’s playing and dancing had grown faster and faster. “Or she’s going to collapse any minute.” Her bare legs, a little short but showing the signs of the curves she would have when she grew up, didn’t interest him. The speed she moved, and her ability to avoid tripping over things while maintaining her dance around and across the stage did. He smirked as he labeled it uncoordinated dexterity, since a lot of times it seemed like last-second adjustments to a mis-step. There were many fighters he’d known who would have wished for that level of skill.

“She doesn’t.” Moira smirked. Waiting until Ardan and Daithi looked at her with raised eyebrows, she grinned. “No, I haven’t seduced the child. I patted her butt earlier. Nothing under her skirt but a round, firm bum. With all that activity, she’s got to have one hard body under that last little bit of baby fat.” Looking at Daithi she shook her head, “no, she won’t collapse. She’ll be hungry later, but not particularly tired. Her magic is feeding her energy that she’ll turn back to magic from eating. She’s probably a little hungry all the time.” Moira ran her hand over her wand. “The hard part of having magic like hers is the lack of direct control. I think she doesn’t even know she’s using magic, she’s just having fun.”

Smirking at Moira’s admission to patting Roisin’s bottom, Ardan asked, “so she eats like Daithi?”

“Probably more like Glen. She moves as much as Daithi, while using magic, so burning more, plus she’s a kid. Still growing and needing to eat for that.” Moira shrugged. “That’s a lot of energy.”

“Get another plate of that fried stuff, then.” Glen looked at his empty plate, ready for another. “The servings here are small.” Servings were always too small, in his opinion. He assumed it was to get people to pay for more than one serving.

Grinning at Glen, Daithi raised his hand in the air. Watching Roisin as he waited for a response from the serving girl, he nodded toward Moira. “I can see that. She’s been moving faster than I do in a fight for a lot longer than a fight usually lasts. Longer than several fights usually last. She’s gotta have muscles on her muscles to keep that up.” Winking at Moira before turning his attention to the serving girl that walked up he added, “you’ll have to tell us about that later.”

Moira made a rude gesture at him, smiling.

As Roisin’s legs tired out she sat on a stool that someone put behind her. There was always a stool behind her when she needed to stop dancing. Setting her feet on the bottom rung, she changed the tune to something just as fast as the one she’d been dancing to but a little more complex. Playing a dancing tune while not dancing made her head feel strange. She always ended on something cheerful and light. Her tips were much better that way, and the pub had a more festive air for the rest of the night.

“I don’t think this is new for her.” Ardan nodded toward the stage as one of the patrons walked up around behind Roisin and put a stool down just before she stopped dancing and stepped backwards, sitting without looking. “This sounds like a last song sort of thing. Daithi, how about carrying her box around the tables for her while she finishes up?”

“Glen could do it.” Daithi grinned at Glen as he stood. “People would be emptying their purses into the box.”

“Intimidating people into tipping only works once. They don’t come back to tip again.” Ardan waved Daithi toward the stage.

Glen smacked Daithi’s butt as he walked past, sending him skipping a few steps, laughing.

After carrying Roisin’s box around the room, collecting tips from nearly every table, Daithi stood near the stage holding it until Roisin finished her song and slipped from the stool. He smirked as she looked around and blushed at the applause, then curtsied. Holding her open box in one hand he extended his other elbow to her, then escorted her back to the table, catching more tips as they wove among the patrons. “You’re a natural,” he whispered just loud enough for Roisin to hear.

“A natural what?”

“Bard, performer, whatever. You get the people moving and happy.” He looked down at her. “By this time of night a pub is usually getting moody or surly, depending on the type of people it attracts. Lively people chatting happily is not a normal thing.”

“Psh. It’s always like that here.”

“After you play, I’m guessing?” He helped Roisin to her chair, then closed her box and handed it to her just before she reached to stop him.

“Darn! I wanted to look before you closed it.” She put the box on the table, then reached into her pouch, “I’m almost always the first to play. Most people want to wait until there’s a big crowd.” Using her bent pieces of metal she opened the box and looked inside, then grinned. “Wow. I don’t usually get this much in a night!” She reached for a piece of fried pork from a nearby plate, then closed the box. Putting the strap over her head to let the box hang at her side, she looked around the table as she reached for another piece of food.

Watching her open the lock of the box, Ardan smirked. When she sat back in her chair he pushed the plate of food closer to her. “You know, they make these things called keys. You put one in the hole in the box and turn it and, tada, the box opens.”

“I lost the key.” Roisin blushed and shrugged. “It doesn’t take much longer to open it my way.” Looking at the hand still holding the metal bits, she opened her pouch and put them away. “The locksmith wanted a lot of money to fix the lock for a new key.” Grabbing another piece of meat, she sighed and asked softly, “you didn’t like my dancing?”

Sliding her chair up against Roisin’s, Moira put her arm over Roisin’s shoulders. “We did. We liked it a lot.” She caressed Roisin’s shoulder and neck. “And your music. Your music has people swaying and tapping their feet when they just came in to eat a bit and get drunk. A wonderful performance.”

“Oh. I still get insecure sometimes if nobody says anything even though I know people like it.” She shrugged and started eating again. “Sorry, I think I’m eating somebody’s dinner. It was in front of me and I just started without thinking. I’m always hungry, it seems.”

“Don’t worry about it. We got a lot extra. Here, this is for you to wash it down.” Moira handed Roisin a mug. Even knowing how hungry people got from using magic, she found the way Roisin was eating interesting. “You’re a growing girl, you’re supposed to eat a lot so you can fill out and up.”

“Probably just out. Ma is short but kind of curvy. Well, Daddy says curvy. Ma says she’s fat, but I don’t think so. Her waist isn’t much bigger than mine although she says it’s because I have baby

fat still and my waist will be a bit smaller in a year or two unless I grow up a lot more and I think I'm talking too much." Roisin never felt comfortable talking to strangers, but for some reason she compensated for it by talking too much once they got her to start. Blushing, she looked down as she sipped at the cider while reaching for another bite from the plate.

Patting Roisin on the shoulder, Moira smiled. "It's okay. Blathering like that makes it easier to get to know you." She didn't really grasp shyness as a feeling, but she'd seen enough of it in others to recognize it. "Would it bother you to get a little curvier?"

"Nah, I kind of expect it. If I dance enough I won't get too fat, I think." Roisin continued eating as if she had ordered the food. Sipping from the mug, Roisin coughed. "I usually drink it watered down. I don't really care for really strong drink." She took another sip, then resumed eating.

Caressing Roisin's shoulder, Moira watched her for a minute. "Have you ever noticed how cheerful people get after you've been playing? Even when you play the slower tunes as you get tired from dancing?" Other than fans of adventure stories, most people didn't believe bards had any magic. A lot of people weren't entirely sure magic was more than legend until they had a reason to see it, which was rare for townspeople. The closest they usually got was the traveling shows that used tricks more often than real magic, and most townspeople knew it.

Shrugging, Roisin washed down another bit of food. "It's because I play stuff that they like and I don't make bad squeaky noises or other sounds that don't sound right. And playing a lot of fast fun stuff first helps a lot." She grinned, "and spinning fast so they see most of my legs gets the men watching to see if I'm wearing unders. The old guys really love trying to catch a glimpse."

"Are you?" Moira was sure she wasn't, but liked to get confirmation every once in a while to make sure she wasn't slipping.

Blushing, Roisin looked down at the food. "Uh uh. I hardly ever do except during that time. Then I usually stay home since it's only a day or so, not like a whole week or something like some people."

Moira and Glen laughed as Ardan and Daithi blushed and tried to find something else to pay attention to.

"You don't talk to many men, I guess," Moira chuckled. "That is one topic they really hate to hear about. Well, anything to do with women having normal body functions. Even simply mentioning you need to relieve yourself causes many of them to try to shush you and tell you not to be disgusting."

"I don't talk much to anyone except when I talk too much." Roisin smirked. "Even with my friends. They do all the talking." She preferred it that way, as she didn't often feel she had something to say. People didn't want to talk about stories or music or dancing.

“Like Sean? I can believe it. He’ll grow out of the need to be the focus, sooner or later.” Ardan was glad to change the subject. He didn’t care for the way Moira put it, but he had to admit she was right. It made him, and most men he knew, uncomfortable when women talked about those things.

“Sean’s okay. He’s good at keeping people from bugging me too much, and he’s nicer than a lot of boys.” Roisin wasn’t as annoyed at Sean as she had been and felt a need to defend him. She did like him, partly because of his need to always be the one talking. Making a note to try to find him after she met with Becky in the morning, she ate another bit of fried something.