



POT OF GOLD

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POT OF GOLD

.. Robin stared up at the stars, hard. The wench was provoking him, but damned if he knew why.

He could have sworn he heard her purr as she sidled closer.

"So, does that mean you *are* going to take advantage of

me?" she asked.

"Bloody hell!" he cried and sat up so fast she rolled away from him in the sand. "What sort of talk is that?"

Eleanor sat up, too, onto her knees. She toyed with her thick braids and tucked them up again into a disheveled mess on top of her head. She glared at him. "You're a man, and I'm a woman."

"Obviously." Robin narrowed his eyes. "You're supposed to be a gentlewoman."

"But you," she pointed out, "are a pirate. You're not supposed to have morals or manners."

"So you're saying you'd want me to rape you again?" Robin had been propositioned plenty of times, but this wench had him gape-mouthed aghast.

"It's not rape if I want it, too!" Eleanor put her hands on her hips.

Even in the dimming light from the fire, he couldn't ignore her glare. "Neptune's balls!" he cried, only because he couldn't think of what else to say.

"I don't give a fig for Neptune's," Eleanor retorted smartly. "But I believe I'd like to learn more about yours."

PRAISE FOR POT OF GOLD

"...A steamy—very steamy—love story with the requisite happily-ever-after ending. If you like your stories 'spicy,' you definitely want to read this one."

—Judy Mays Author of *Perfumed Heat*

"Megan Hart comes through once again with *Pot of Gold*. This story is a mixture of fairy tale, wealth, wishes and dreams and greed and Megan deals with them all wonderfully. All the characters vividly come to life...from Eleanor and Robin to the pirates and I really loved the beautiful mermaid with the jaws of a shark. The settings are all wonderful as well as we get to go back in time to the Caribbean and the time of pirates and travel with Eleanor and Robin on their very erotic adventure. I really loved how Megan dealt with the ex-fiancée and the ending of the story is just perfect for the characters."

—Chere Gruver *Sensual Romance*

For Johnny Depp because he made such a deliciously swishy pirate

Yo ho ho and a bottle of yummy yum yum!

POT OF GOLD

"Turn this boat around right now!" Eleanor Fitzwilliam stomped her bare foot so hard on the broad boards of the deck she imagined the sound of her toes breaking.

The man towering over her smoothed the mustache and beard surrounding his arrogant smile. "I don't think so, love."

"Don't you call me that." Eleanor lifted her chin and ignored the rather blatant look of appraisal he was giving her.

Fuming, she turned to face the broad expanse of open sea. Tears clogged her throat, but she refused to let them fall. She'd made her plans so carefully, made certain when she got off this boat it would be in a place she wouldn't be easily discovered. She'd spent the last three days in the hold with the sea pitching beneath her, only to crawl out this morning to the nasty surprise of a sea view when she'd expected land. Not only did she have no idea where she was, she had no idea who the man was before her.

Desperation made her bold. "How dare you? Who do you think you are?"

He gave a deep, courtly bow that was perfect in its presentation but a mockery just the same. "Captain Robin Steele."

"Robin Steele?" She looked over his worn finery, the braids in his long, dark golden hair, then cast a look over his shoulder to the tattered black flag flapping on the main mast. "How clever. And if I told you my name was Miss Understood, would you believe me?"

"Is your name Miss Understood, love?"

"No, it's Eleanor Fitzwilliam, and I'm not your love!"

He gave another bow. "At your service, Miss Fitzwilliam."

"You are not at my service!" Eleanor pressed her lips together to keep them from trembling. Her father had always taught her a brave face made a brave heart.

He put a hand to his heart and gave an insincere pout. "Well, Miss Fitzwilliam, you happen to be a stowaway on my ship. Which means I'll call you whatever I like. *Love.*"

"It's not your boat," she told him with a sniff. "It belongs

to my fiancé, Mister Winston Dandrew, and he'll be sorely displeased to find it commandeered with me aboard!"

The pirate seemed unimpressed. "Upset he might be about the ship, but I suspect he doesn't even know you're aboard, love. Not unless a man's britches and a coating of dirt are your usual attire, in which case, I fail to see why the man asked for your hand in the first place. Care to tell me what, exactly, you were doing?"

Words failed her. She turned around and swung at him, but his hand grabbed hers and, in the next instant, she found herself wrapped in his arms.

"You don't want to do that, love," he said with quiet menace. His surprisingly white, even teeth shone against the tanned skin of his face and dark amber of his beard. "I get a mite testy when I'm slapped in the face."

Eleanor hadn't grown up with five brothers for nothing. Though her

body pressed so intimately against the pirate's she could barely struggle, she could move her knee. She brought it up sharply, right between his legs, and dropped him like a stone.

"How about when you're kicked in the nuggets?" she cried, and was off.

"I don't like that much either," she heard the pirate gasp out from behind her, but she didn't stop to see what he was doing.

She had no place to go. The boat was small—a schooner really—nothing more than a few sails and cabin atop a hold filled with cargo. Winston used it to travel between the islands on business.

She reached the foredeck and pivoted with a wince as the rough boards scraped at her bare feet. She'd thought disguising herself as a boy would help her get away unnoticed by her father and brothers, but now she regretted not wearing boots. The pirate had hunched over, but as she watched, he stood and shook himself like a dog shaking off water. Then he set his shoulders in clear determination, and strode toward her.

A sailor, only slightly less grimy but rather less fancy than the pirate captain, stepped neatly from behind one of the masts. He grabbed her arm hard enough to hurt, and Eleanor yelped.

"Unhand me, you scurvy swabby!"

The man gripping her arm frowned. "I ain't got scurvy."

Now she noticed the ship's crew. Some dangled from the masts like monkeys, while others knotted ropes and swabbed the decks with nasty-looking mops. She shivered.

"You don't need to yank her arm from her shoulders."

The pirate's grin was pure evil as he looked at Eleanor.

"Though I'd like to let you, Ridley, her fiancé might not take kindly to getting back ruined merchandise."

She had no intention of returning to Winston, but the pirate didn't know that. She certainly didn't want to be ruined, in any case. Eleanor stepped away from the sailor, who went back to his business with a

shrug.

"So you'll let me go?"

"Eventually." The pirate peered at her closely. "When I've finished my business."

"Your business!" She gasped at the effrontery of it. "This is my fiancé's boat!"

He looked pained. "Ship, if you please, love. A boat is something you row on a pond. The *Rainbow* is a ship. And a very fine one at that. One of the finest I've ever borrowed."

"Stolen, you mean! Shanghaied!!"

"Is your voice always so.... shrill?" He rubbed at his ear.

"My voice," Eleanor said from between gritted teeth, "is not shrill."

He raised his eyebrows. "It could make paint peel. It could—"

"Oh, close your gob," she retorted smartly and crossed her arms over her chest. "I want to know—I demand to know—when you're going to return me to land!"

The pirate shook his head and held out his hands, palms up. "I told you, love. After my business is completed."

He put a hand too casually on the cutlass hanging from his belt. Eleanor swallowed, hard, despite a mouth gone suddenly as dry as sand. She'd been so stunned to come on deck and find the boat—the ship—out to sea instead of docked at the next island, she hadn't had time to be afraid. Now, however, she watched the pirate's dark eyes sweep over her scantily clad body and her heart thudded.

"What is your business?" she asked in a much smaller voice. Pirates were bloodthirsty brigands. Sailors were

notoriously rowdy. She could hold her own against men who at least had a modicum of respectability, but against true buccaneers.....

"Gold, of course. What other business could I possibly be about?" He grinned at her again, which did not make her feel any safer. He had a dangerous smile, bright and cheery, in a face she'd have guessed better suited to scowling. "I *am* a pirate."

"Saddest pirate I ever seen," said the sailor from behind her. "No ship of his own, nary a crew..."

"Belay that talk." The pirate gestured so rudely at the sailor Eleanor had to avert her eyes. She knew what a gesture like that meant, of course. But a lady shouldn't be exposed to such a thing. He looked back at her with an almost apologetic look. "Ridley is a scurvy bilge rat, love. Don't listen to a word he says."

"I ain't got scurvy!" Ridley shouted and stalked away.

The pirate shrugged. "Maybe he's not got scurvy, but his temper's pretty fierce."

Eleanor straightened her back, too aware of the way the salt wind was revealing her body. She wished desperately she hadn't dispensed with her chemise before donning her brother Horatio's cast-off clothes. Now a chill swept her spine at the fresh breeze, and her nipples strained the thin linen shirt. She crossed her arms more closely about her, but that did no good, merely pushed her generous bosom up and out.

"I warn you, if you hurt me, my family will hunt you down. You'll never get away with it."

"I don't want to hurt you, love." He sounded sincere. "I may have gone on the account, but I know how to treat a lady."

Eleanor wasn't particularly reassured, but she pretended confidence anyway. "I demand you take me back, now, and return this boat—"

"Ship."

She glared at him, finding it easier to be angry than afraid. "Ship back to port!"

"We'll get to port all right," the pirate said. "But not the one you're wanting."

He turned away from her, then paused, as if he'd thought of something else.

"And another thing." His voice had gone deep again, low and dangerous. He glanced back briefly, his eyes glittering in a way she found terribly disconcerting. "You may ask me for whatever you wish,

and if 'tis in my good nature to provide it, I will. But you demand nothing."

Then he left her standing on the deck while the ship continued to

crest through the vast ocean waves.

* * *

The lass was a hardy one, thank Neptune. Robin couldn't have dealt with a green-faced wench losing her supper over the side. The wind had picked up now, and the sea was slightly choppy than normal. They'd make good time.

He heard her pacing in the cabin, and an occasional crash. *Let her wreck whatever she wishes.* None of it belonged to him.

Including her, he reminded himself. Not that he found the lass attractive with her sooty face and ratty clothes overtop the lush curves... *Blast it!* Robin shook himself. All right, he admitted reluctantly. The lass is tempting. Except...she had the face of a mermaid and the mouth of a sea hag. There was a reason why women were considered bad luck aboard a ship, and she was it.

Eleanor Fitzwilliam. She hadn't mentioned it, but he knew her father. A merchant of that much power was something like a prince in the small island community... or at least a duke. Edmund Fitzwilliam transported more goods and made more profit than any other landlubber, except perhaps for the other man she'd mentioned. Winston Dan drew.

Oh, he'd gotten himself tied up with a piece of trouble all right. Eleanor had stumbled out of the hold earlier this morning, disheveled and bedraggled and still as snooty as the royalty she'd likely been raised to believe she was.

Robin cursed himself for not checking the holds more thoroughly before he and Ridley borrowed Dandrew's schooner, but unlike other raids he'd captained, he hadn't been interested in the contents, or even the ship itself. He sought booty of a different sort. This would be his greatest plunder yet. Robin slid the leprechaun's gold coin between his

fingers. It was warm to the touch, nearly hot, and not from the fierce Caribbean sun beating down.

Another loud crash came from inside the cabin, and a muffled shout. He hoped the lass weren't hurting herself in there. He bent to the door again, listening.

It flew open so suddenly it knocked him in the head.
"Damn it!"

"I'll thank you to watch your language," Eleanor said.

He rubbed at his temple. "That's twice today you've bruised me."

She sniffed and gave him a look designed to make him feel small. Captain Robin Steele did not feel small for any woman. Not even one with icy green eyes and hair like tumbling shadows.

She looked down her finely shaped nose at him. She'd taken the time to clean herself up a bit, he noticed, though the masculine clothes were the same. He'd not have thought a pair of trousers could make him think of sex, but there they were, cupping the pert globes of her luscious...

"If you're completely done ogling me," Eleanor said.

He offered her his most charming grin. "You caught me."

She rolled her eyes, clearly unimpressed. "You can tell me when you expect to finish your business and return me to Port Howard."

"We're close, love."

"Don't call me that," she said. "How close?"

He rubbed the coin as it began to scorch his skin. "I'd say—"

"Land, ho!"

Robin turned away from the lass and shaded his eyes with his hand. "Right about now."

She stepped up close beside him...so close he could feel the brush of her elbow against his arm. "Where are you taking me?"

His closed his fingers tightly around the coin despite the burning sting. "I'm not taking *you* anywhere, love. But I'm going there." He pointed.

The small, barren spit of land boasted a few ragged tropical trees

and a wide expanse of sandy beach no different than any of the others on countless islands all around the Caribbean. Yet to Robin it looked like a tropical paradise, a haven.... the

end of the rainbow. He grinned as a gust of spray splashed his face. *Almost there.*

"There?" Eleanor sounded surprised. "Why ever for? There's nothing there!"

"Ah, but there is, love." Robin couldn't keep his grin from growing wider. "There's gold."

The lass seemed a bit taken aback and he supposed he couldn't blame her. He probably looked mad. But the grin stayed at the thought of the leprechaun's gold waiting for him somewhere on that desolate piece of island just ahead.

"Gold." She didn't sound impressed. "Not your gold, I'll warrant."

" 'Twill be mine once I've dug it up." He didn't bother much with technicalities. "And some will go to the crew, of course."

She looked over her shoulder at the skeleton crew behind her. "How generous of you. You have a crew taking on the work of twice as many men. You must have promised them quite a lot of gold."

"Enough. I've promised them enough." He looked at her. "Not that it's any of your business."

"This is my fiancé's boat. Ship," she amended when she saw his look. "I should say anything which takes place upon it is my business."

"It was your fiancé's ship," he reminded her. "Until he foolishly left it unguarded, and I borrowed it with the help of those fine lads."

She had the most intriguing green eyes, which she now used to arrest his own. "What happened to your ship?"

Her question startled him. "What?"

Eleanor put her hands on her hips. "What happened to your ship? If you're a pirate, where's your ship? Surely you'd find a larger, more seaworthy ship more profitable than Winston's schooner. If you were any sort of decent pirate, you'd have your own ship, your own crew. So, where are they?"

He had to admire the brains inside that pretty head of hair. He didn't like her question, but he had to admire that she'd thought of it. Robin smoothed his beard and mustache before answering.

"My ship," he said finally, "is at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, along with most of my crew."

He gripped the rail as he thought of the screams of his men, and the burning taste of salt rose in his throat as he recalled the frigid water of the Atlantic closing over his head. He shook off the memory and turned to find her staring at him with those wide, green eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said unexpectedly and put a hand on his arm.

Robin couldn't recall the last time a woman had touched him with compassion. "I'm not the first captain to lose a ship and crew to another's cannon."

She nodded, and her glance caught sight of her hand on his sleeve. She jerked away hastily, as if she'd been burned. Up went her nose again. "Well, I'd say it serves you right!"

Robin thought of how Danny Flynn had sobbed for his mother when he realized he was going to die and felt his face grow fierce. "Say that to the fourteen-year-old boy who went down with my crew, Miss Fitzwilliam. D'ya think he was served rightly?"

He didn't enjoy the look on her face as much as he thought he might. "We were set upon in peaceful waters by members of Her Majesty's Navy. We'd hung no black flag and carried no stolen cargo. We were heading for the coast of Ireland to take the lad back home. They fired on us with no warning. We went down within an hour."

She'd opened her mouth to speak, but he cut her off. "Save your talk, Miss Fitzwilliam. I'm no longer in the mood for conversation."

He turned and began barking orders to the grumbling crew. He didn't have their loyalty, but he did have their service for the promise of the gold he'd told them awaited. They were the lowest, scurviest bilge rats he'd ever had the displeasure to captain, but they were competent enough.

"What's that?" Eleanor grabbed at the coin in his hand.

She was quick, he'd grant her that, but he was quicker. He snapped his fingers closed and lifted his hand high in the air, over her head. She reached for it again, but wasn't tall enough.

Robin chuckled. "You'll have to do better than that, love."

The lass pointed at the deck. "You've dropped something."

He wasn't going to fall for that old trick. Not Robin Steele. He grinned, but didn't look down.

"Try again, love."

Eleanor raised her brows at him. "All right with me if you're rich enough to leave a gold piece on the deck for anyone to pick up."

"I'm not falling for that."

She shrugged and bent before him. The front of her boy's shirt, unbuttoned at the throat, gaped. His gaze followed the path of her creamy white throat, down to the first hint of smooth breast..... was that a peek of pink...

Eleanor's head came up and slammed his chin so hard he saw stars. His teeth clamped down on his tongue and bitter blood squirted out. "Bloody hell!"

She didn't pause. While he swiped at the tears of pain blurring his vision, Eleanor leaped up and grabbed the leprechaun's coin. When it was safe in her fist, she backed off and gave him a triumphant smirk.

"You just couldn't resist, could you?"

Robin gave her an admiring nod. "You are no lady, Miss Fitzwilliam."

She lifted her chin, proud despite her attire and the situation she was in. Robin admired pride. He had quite a bit of it himself.

"You're no gentleman," she replied.

He indicated his clothes, a bit sea-tattered and not quite the latest fashion. "I'd say that's obvious."

"Land, ho!" came the cry again, and Robin barked out orders for the crew to make for shore.

He turned back to Eleanor and gave her his most charming grin. "Now, give me back my coin, love."

"I don't think so. I want to know what's so special about this small disc of metal, that you're willing to steal my fiancé's boat for it."

"Eleanor, I'm a pirate. Stealing is what pirates do."

She shook the coin at him, and again Robin had to admire the lass's brains. "There's more to it than that. You said this coin was going to lead you to more! And I've never seen the likes of it before."

She peered closely at it. "*Go n-éirí an bóthar leat*. What on earth does that mean?"

"It means 'have a good journey,'" Robin replied. He stepped toward her, hand outstretched. "But give it back now."

Eleanor held it closer to her generous bosom. "I'm not giving it back unless you tell me what you're up to."

"You wound me." He put a hand over his heart.

She clearly wasn't convinced. She glanced to the ocean at her left. "What would you do if I threw this overboard?"

His heart thudded at the very thought. This gold was meant to change his life, and he spoke without thinking. "I'd probably kill you."

That did it. Her pale cheeks went completely white. She swallowed hard. "It must be worth a lot to you."

"You want to know the story, love? I'll tell you. I got that coin from a leprechaun. And if I follow where it leads me, I'll find his pot of gold."

"How can a coin lead you any place?"

He motioned toward her. "Don't you notice how hot it is?"

She looked down at it. "From the sun."

Robin shook his head. "No, love. 'Tis the coin's own magic. The closer you get to the pot of gold, the hotter that coin will get. When it's fair burning your flesh to the bone, you'll have found the treasure."

Robin heard a loud snort of disbelief from behind. First Mate Ridley scowled.

"Not bloody likely," Ridley said. "You're daft! Leprechauns ain't real! And they sure as shite don't live in the Caribbean!"

Robin held up a finger. "Ah, but there you're wrong, my friend. I caught the wee man stealing my liquor. He was real enough."

Eleanor looked more closely at the coin. "I agree with him. You're mad. What would a leprechaun be doing down here?"

Robin remembered the wee fellow as clearly as he did his mother's face. Well, perhaps not quite like that, since he'd been sodding drunk when he found the creature. But he did recall what the small man had told him.

"He said he'd got a weakness of the lungs and came in search of a warmer climate."

Eleanor burst into laughter, but Ridley let out a string of curses that ought to have made the chit's ears burn. She only shook her head and toyed further with the coin. He was going to have to take it from her.

"You're daft," repeated Ridley. "We're following a mad

man! There's no gold on this island! You're taking us on a wild goose chase."

"I'm not," Robin said to the man, even as he kept his gaze locked on Eleanor. "I promised every man a share of the booty, and you won't be disappointed."

"Bollacks," snapped the first mate and stalked away to scream at the crew.

"What about me?" Eleanor asked. "Do I get a share of the booty?"

"You're not a man, love." Robin took another subtle step toward her. Neptune knew, he didn't want to actually hurt the wench. Hurting women wasn't his style. But he did need his coin back, and he wasn't above a bit of intimidation to do it.

"But I'm on this ship," she said boldly.

"Not my problem," Robin countered. "I promised this crew if they worked for me, they'd get rich. You're just a stowaway. Perhaps if you cared to tell me your true reason for hiding away below decks, I might be convinced otherwise."

She looked toward the unassuming island. "Assuming there's as much gold there as you say, surely there'd be enough to give me some."

"Miss Fitzwilliam, your father is the wealthiest man in the Caribbean. You're engaged to the second wealthiest. What need have you of my gold?"

"My father thinks I don't have a worthy thought in my head. He's going to leave his entire business to my brothers, with little more than an annual stipend for me. My fiancé is much the same. Though he loves me, 'tis clear I'll be as purely decorative in his home as I am in my father's."

Ah. Now he had some idea of why Princess Eleanor had donned boy's duds and stowed away on the *Rainbow*.

"And money will help you change that?"

She nodded. "With my own money, I can control my destiny a little better."

"I can't blame you for wanting that. But the fact remains, Miss Fitzwilliam, I'm under no obligation to share my prize with you. Not one. Now be a good lass and give me back the coin before you lose it."

Eleanor shook her head. "You see, Captain Steele? You've fallen under the same misconception as every other

male in my life. I'm not a good lass."

She stamped on his foot as he came closer. As he was wearing thick leather boots and she was barefoot, she only damaged herself. She let out an invective that had him laughing aloud.

"I'll thank you to watch your language," Robin said.

Her face had gone bright red, and her lovely green eyes flashed like a pair of matched emeralds. "You're a horrid pirate!"

"Thank you." He swept her a bow.

"No," Eleanor said as though speaking to a dimwit. "I didn't mean you were a horrible pirate, which I suppose is taken to be

complimentary, for a pirate to be called horrible. I meant you are horrible *as* a pirate."

All around them was the bustle of the crew readying the ship for landing. The coin must be nearly burning a hole right through her palm. And all Robin could do was stare at the snooty lass in front of him.

"A real pirate would've thrown me in the brig, or whatever you have on this ship, the second I showed up on deck! A real pirate would have..."

"A real pirate would've had his way with you seven ways to Sunday and then given you to the crew for their pleasure." Robin advanced on her, well aware he cut an imposing figure in his tall black boots and snarl. Eleanor didn't shrink before him, though he swore he could feel her trembling from where he stood. "A real pirate would've cut you up and fed you to the fish."

He turned again, aware the crew had paused in their actions to listen. A look from him had them bustling again, though he sensed their unwillingness. He'd only taken two steps when he heard her speak again.

"See?" Eleanor said. "You're a horrible pirate!"

He whirled to face her, fury making him want to throttle her. "I'm not, but would you like me to be, love?"

He was next to her in three strides, and she was in his arms for the second time since they'd met. She struggled, but was really no match for him. Robin only meant to frighten her a little and retrieve his coin, but once he caught the scent of her hair, he had no choice but to kiss her.

"Oh!" Her mouth opened in surprise beneath his, and

she stopped struggling.

It had been too long since he'd kissed a woman, and longer still since it had been a lass as luscious as this. Soft, warm...clean, despite the smudges of dirt on her face. Robin pulled her closer and deepened the kiss, urged her to open for him, and was gratified when she did.

"Let's see if Winston Dandrew can do that," he murmured against her lips.

"Oh!" she cried again, louder this time, and in the next instant he felt her knee come up between his thighs again.

"Damn it, wench!"

But she was already pushing away from him while he tried to catch his breath. She ran for the side of the ship, cast one glance over her shoulder, and climbed on top of the railing. She teetered for a moment before steadying herself.

"No, lass! Don't!"

She didn't listen. She straightened her body, put her hands out in front of her, and pushed off. Eleanor made a perfect dive off the edge, and a moment later, he heard the splash of her entry. She'd dived into the ocean to get away from him.

And bloody blasted barnacles, she still had his coin. *

* *

Eleanor had never been more thankful to be wearing trousers. She kicked steadily, moving through the water with strong strokes. Clutching the coin was becoming painful, but she didn't let go.

In moments her feet touched soft sand, and she waded up onto the beach. The island didn't look much better up close than it had from far away. A few stunted trees dotted the mostly bare landscape. Crabs scuttled past her toes. The coin burned her palm.

She scraped the heavy mass of her hair off her face and tried to shake off as much of the water as she could as she headed up the beach. When she got to the slim shade of the tattered palm tree she turned to face the ship. A small, dark speck in the water told her what she'd already suspected. He was following her.

Eleanor put her fingers to her lips. The feeling of his kiss slammed back into her so suddenly she had to rest her back against the tree or fall to the sand. She took in a deep, shuddering breath and tried to push away the sensation,

but like the coin stinging her palm, his lips had scalded hers.

Winston had kissed her many times before. Truth be told, he'd taken far more liberties than that. But never once had his kiss turned her legs to jelly the way Robin Steele's had.

Eleanor's light touch turned harsh as she scrubbed at her mouth like something nasty had touched her there. *A pirate's kiss!* She'd be lucky if she didn't catch some filthy disease!

The dark form in the water was coming closer. In another moment or two, he'd reach land. He'd be angry with her, but Eleanor wasn't terrified. She had the coin.

But what to do with it? 'Twould be no difficult task for him to take it from her. Not a big, strong, virile man like that...Eleanor shook herself. *A big, filthy pirate*, she reminded herself as she watched him wade to shore.

Maybe not so filthy now. The salt water had rinsed him off. His dark blond hair, tied back from his forehead in a myriad of small braids, dripped. He'd discarded his hat, the full-cut jacket, the imposing leather boots. The water had turned his white shirt nearly transparent, and the twin dark circles of his nipples and the dark line running down his belly into his waistband riveted her eyes.

"You stubborn wench!"

She had to hide the coin someplace. *But where?* She'd forgone the normal feminine undergarments that would have provided many hiding places. Her hair. That, at least, had maintained some semblance of style. Though the thick braids had come loose from their pins, the ties on the ends kept them from unraveling. Swiftly, she worked the coin into her hair at the nape of her neck, then up into the thickness, and gave it a twist to secure it inside the thickest part of her hair.

Captain Steele had reached her. His beard glittered with drops of water. His eyes glittered with anger. "Give me my coin."

" 'Tis not your coin," Eleanor replied smartly. "You stole it."

He'd grabbed her by the arms and pulled her upright before she had

time to protest. He pulled her against his body while his

fingers pinched her upper arms. He brought his face close to hers, but this time, he didn't kiss her.

"Give me my coin," he said. "And I won't cut you up and feed you to the crabs."

Eleanor couldn't stop herself from quaking, but she could look him in the eyes. "I swallowed it."

He blinked. "You bloody what?"

"Swallowed it."

He released her. She stepped back and rubbed her arms where his grasp had bruised her. The pirate shook his head, as though he hadn't heard her aright.

"Swallowed my bloody coin." He spoke as though to himself. Then to her. "What makes you think I won't just cut you open and take it out of your belly?"

Confidence makes bravery, she reminded herself as she replied. "Because I think if you were going to kill me, you'd have done it when you first discovered me. Because I think you're a bloody awful pirate. Because..."

"Oh, shut your gob," he ordered. He turned and stalked a few paces, then came back. "I've killed for less than that coin, love. Don't tempt me."

She lifted her chin and refused to back down, even while her knees knocked and her stomach churned. "Then kill me and have done with it! Or else stop threatening me!"

Steele let out a string of curses so salty Eleanor almost covered her ears.

"Damn you to hell, you bossy bitch!"

Nobody called her a bitch. Eleanor slapped his face as hard as she could. The crack of her palm on his cheek ripped through the sound of the surf. The blow left a white mark on his tanned skin.

"Don't you call me that!"

He growled at her like a mad dog. Eleanor would have sworn his eyes flickered red with fury. With a squeak, she turned tail and ran from him again.

He grabbed for her arm as she tripped on some deadwood. They both hit the sand at the same time. She landed on her stomach, but in moments, the pirate had pulled her around on her back beneath him. His knee nudged between her thighs. His chest crushed her unbound breasts. Water from his hair dripped onto her face, and she blinked it away.

"You'd better stop doing that to me," he said in a low, menacing tone. "I don't like it."

"Don't call me a bitch!"

"Don't act like one," Steele told her. "I may be a bloody awful pirate because I refuse to gut you like a fish, but I am not a lap dog like your Winston Dandrew."

His comment only proved he didn't know Winston very well. "He's no lap dog."

Steele moved on her, slightly, and gave her more room to breathe. His knee nudged her again at the juncture of her thighs, and a sensation bloomed there she didn't want to feel. She thought again of his kiss, and her lips parted against her will as she stared into his dark eyes.

She couldn't want him to kiss her again.... could she?

Steele swiped his tongue across that lush mouth. "I can wait a few days."

That wasn't the answer she was expecting. "For what?"

He rolled off her and gave her a hand to get to her feet. "For the coin."

"I told you, I swallowed it."

"And I told you, I'll wait for it."

His meaning became suddenly clear to her, and Eleanor blushed. Heat shot from her cheeks to her throat and over her entire body, adding to the warmth she'd already felt from his weight atop her. She

coughed, embarrassed.

"Until then, we'll just have to rely on your belly to tell us when we're getting close." Steele left her and headed back down the beach.

Eleanor watched him go. He was tall and lean. In just his shirt and trousers it was easy to see how well-formed his shoulders were, how narrow his hips and flat his belly, how deliciously rounded his sit-upon...

Have mercy. She was lusting after Robin Steele. A blackguard, a scoundrel, a thieving pirate, of all men! Yet she couldn't deny what she felt was lust. It sang through her veins, peaked her nipples and settled down low in her belly in a way that made her want to dance, slowly, in his arms while he kissed her breathless.

"Bloody hell," she whispered.

What was wrong with her? Nothing she'd ever done with Winston had made her feel the way she did now. Eager to

submit. She glanced at the sun, which had begun to sink in the sky. *Too much heat and not enough food*, she told herself.

Steele began to shout and wave his arms. His shouting grew louder, interspersed with more curses. He even went so far as to jump up and down and kick at the sand until it flew, and after a moment, she saw why.

The ship was leaving. It had unfurled its sails and caught a stiff wind. They were being deserted. She was alone on the island with the pirate.

* * *

"I can't say as I blame them too much," the wench said. "It is a crazy story."

Robin dropped another stick onto the blaze and scowled at her. "They're bloody pirates, love. They're all crazy as bedbugs themselves."

"But they're used to going after tangible things," she pointed out. "Ransacking ships and whatnot. Barrels of rum and sacks of booty.

Chasing after fictitious gold isn't what they're used to."

Robin lifted the fish wrapped in wide leaves from the fire and set it on the ground between them. "The gold is real."

With a small stick stripped of bark, she poked at the fish until it fell into several pieces, then stabbed one and brought it to her mouth. Her sigh of contentment was so absolutely sensual it made his breath catch. "This is delicious!"

"Not the fancy table fare you're used to, I'll warrant. But enough to fill your belly. If there's room in there with my coin."

She chewed and swallowed, then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Captain Steele, thank you for not killing me. Or...anything else."

He took a bite offish before he answered. "You're welcome."

The wench wanted something from him. He could feel it. She wouldn't go from spitting poison to poetry if she didn't. The question was, what?

"I still don't need to give you any of the gold," he told her. "So you can stop batting your lashes at me."

Eleanor looked offended. "I wasn't batting my lashes."

"Girls like you always bat their lashes at a man when

they want him to give them something." Robin, his belly full, leaned back on the sand and propped his arms behind his head.

"That's a rather cynical outlook on life, don't you think?"

He looked at her. "Lass, I'm a pirate. What kind of outlook would you like me to have?"

"You live a life of adventure and excitement. I should think you'd be very optimistic." She wrapped the remaining fish and tucked it close to the fire, then curled her knees to her chest.

"I'm man who makes his life taking from others and must constantly fight to keep others from taking from me. If the law gets hold of me, I'll swing as sure as anything. If any man I've made an enemy of gets hold of me, I'll be sent to old King Neptune's court."

Robin didn't expect her to understand, not this lass born to privilege and wealth. "This gold will end all that."

"How so?" She appeared eager as she scooted closer to him. "Don't tell me you're going to retire."

"You want your own money to be able to have your freedom," he said. "Didn't it occur to you I might want the same? Enough money to buy myself a ship and to pay a crew, enough to start a nice trade route, and establish a business. Buy a house."

"You'd give up pirating for that?" Eleanor cried. "But that's so dull!"

Robin yawned and stretched. "To you, maybe. But honest work and food on the table is something any man can be proud of."

He looked up to see her looking at him with an odd expression. "Is the fish griping you? Or maybe that coin is planning to make an appearance?"

She shook her head. "You're not like I expected at all."

"Funny thing, appearances." He grinned. "They can be deceiving."

Eleanor shivered a little and cast a glance at the sky. "The stars are lovely tonight."

Cast in dancing patterns of firelight, her face was as lovely as a star. Robin forced himself to look at the sky instead. "Tomorrow we'll start looking."

"We?" She gave a small, low chuckle. "So you're going to allow me to help you, is that it? And what will I earn for my

efforts?"

He rolled to look at her in the slowly dimming firelight. "If you help me, I'll see to it you get back to your fiancé unharmed."

She snorted. "Lovely. There's incentive."

"You don't want to get back to the man you're going to marry?" Robin laughed. "Doesn't sound like true love to me."

"That's none of your business," she retorted, and fell silent.

"There's a story there."

She looked up at him and bit her lip before replying.

"You want to

settle down. I want to see the world. I want to be more than some man's trophy. I want...life."

"Dandrew could give you a fine life, I'd wager."

She scoffed. "I don't want the life a man can *give* me. I want to make one for myself."

She was definitely not the spoiled young lady of privilege he'd thought. "Don't we all?"

She gave no reply, and in another few moments, he heard the soft, deep breathing that told him she'd fallen asleep.

She'd curled herself in the sand, her head pillowed on one arm. He allowed himself the luxury of watching her when she couldn't see him do it. By Neptune, she was lovely. Even in the dim firelight, 'twas no difficulty to see the creaminess of her skin, the silken curls of her hair, tied into a pair of thick braids. Her lashes shadowed her cheeks, but he remembered that beneath the closed lids lay eyes the color of the Caribbean Sea, shifting green-blue with hints of gold.

Gold. The treasure he sought.

She sighed and murmured in her sleep.

Robin turned onto his back and stared up at the night sky. He fancied he could smell her scent on the soft ocean breeze wafting over them.

He closed his eyes and went to sleep.

* * *

She woke to the sound of sizzling and the scent of frying fish. Eleanor's stomach rumbled, and she sat and scrubbed at her face with the heel of her hand. She blinked and yawned. Dawn had already pinkened the sky.

"I don't think I've ever seen the sun this early in the morning," she said.

Steele looked up from the patch of sand he was scratching at with a stick. "I imagine you nary get of bed before halfway to noon."

He was right, but Eleanor didn't want to admit it. "You make me

sound like some sort of laze-about."

He raised his eyebrows at her, but didn't comment. He went back to scratching in the sand.

Eleanor put her hands on her hips. "I'm not, you know!"

He shrugged and gave her a sly grin over one shoulder. "No. I'd never say that about anyone who lives in the lap of luxury, and has servants to fetch and carry for her and to service her every whim."

Not my every whim, she thought as he bent forward and she caught sight of a smooth strip of skin where his shirt pulled out of his waistband. Her stomach trembled with a different kind of hunger this time. Eleanor frowned.

"And I suppose you consider yourself a hard worker, by contrast? Living off of what other men earn without every putting forth an honest effort yourself?"

His back stiffened. She'd struck a nerve.

Robin turned and gave her an even look. "I only take from those who can afford to lose it."

She laughed. "I see. Like the leprechaun?"

Robin bent to his scrawling again. "Like him, aye. The wee folk hoard gold and treasure for their own pleasure, not from need. What do they need money for? Their pleasure is the game of trying not to be caught. I caught him. He lost. He'll start over with a new game, a new chance."

"You seem to know an awful lot about mythical characters," she said, fascinated despite herself.

He shrugged again. "My mother told me lots of stories about the wee folk."

She got up to see what he was doing. "Is that a map?"

He glanced at her, then pointed with his stick. "While you were still sleeping, I paced this island. This is the layout."

"It's not very big." Eleanor bent to look at his drawing. "Did you find the gold?"

"If I had, would I be drawing a map?"

The back of her skull twinged as the coin put forth a sudden blast of heat. "Oh!"

He got to his feet immediately. "What's wrong?"

She clutched her stomach, though her head was on fire. "I had a sudden pain."

He grinned. "Serves you right for swallowing that coin."

The pain faded and she glared at him. "Maybe I'm just hungry."

"There's fish on the fire," he told her. "Help yourself."

They ate in a silence that she was surprised to find companionable. In the growing light, he didn't look so disreputable as he had upon board the ship. His clothes had dried rumpled and his hair was windblown and tangled, but without the pirate garb and the skull and crossbones flag behind him, Eleanor had to admit Robin Steele was a handsome man.

"What?" he asked her suddenly. He ran a hand over his head. "You're looking at me as though I've grown horns."

"If only," she replied without thinking, and clamped her mouth closed in embarrassment. Horns would make her want to avoid him, while instead she kept finding herself focusing on his wide mouth and imagining it upon hers again.

Thankfully, he didn't seem to notice. "If you're done, I say we get started looking."

"I just need to—" Eleanor broke off and looked around. "Um. Use the necessary?"

Steele stared at her for a long moment, then burst into guffaws of laughter. "Look around you, love. This is the necessary."

She squared her jaw. "Then I must ask you to grant me some privacy."

"I don't think so." He raised his eyebrow at her. "I'm sticking around until I get my coin back."

Eleanor got to her feet. "You are a cad!"

He didn't even try to deny it. "And worse than that. I'm a rake and a scoundrel as well."

She stomped away and availed herself of some low scrub bushes. When she came out, Steele had swept away his crude map and banked the fire. He'd left the fish for her, and she grabbed it up to eat as he paced.

"Which way does your belly tell you we should go?"

Her belly, now full with fish, told her nothing, but the back of her skull prickled fiercely when she turned to face the sunrise. "That way."

He nodded. "I went that way. There's even less that way than there is the other. But the wee folk are tricksters. I'd bet it is that way."

She followed him across the sand and around another set of battered palms. "This entire island can't be more than five hundred paces long, Captain Steele. And I don't see any sign of any treasure.... oh!"

Her toe had stubbed something hard enough to make her hop up and down with tears of pain sparking her eyes. At the same instant, the coin tucked into her hair shot a bolt of fire into the back of her head. Eleanor screamed and doubled over. The coin fell out of her hair, onto the sand, but she no longer cared as long as it was away from her skin.

"Well, well." Steele reached for the coin but hissed and dropped it again. "I'd say we found the place."

Eleanor's fingers found something hard beneath the thin layer of sand. She swept away the grains and rapped on the wooden planks beneath. "Do the wee folk often take advantage of rum runners' stashes?"

Steele pushed her aside and lifted the wooden platform. "This only looks like a rum runner's stash to the untrained eye. 'Tis what the leprechaun would have us believe, to keep us from his treasure."

"Maybe it fools the untrained eye." She waved her hand in front of her face. "But it surely doesn't fool the untrained nose!"

The smell of liquor was so strong it made her eyes water. Several casks looked as though they'd cracked and spilled their contents.

Whoever had left this booty hadn't been back to claim it for a very long time.

Steele dropped down into the hole, shored on all sides by the same wooden planks that made up the roof. He kicked at a broken crock with his bare foot. Then he moved further into the shadows...and disappeared.

* * *

He'd been right. This was more than just a pit dug to hold casks of rum between runs. Robin took two more steps

into the hole. Where his outstretched hands ought to have met with the dirt and wood wall, he encountered only emptiness. Another step, and another. The ceiling grew closer above his head, the walls narrower. He was in some sort of passage.

Behind him he heard the wench hollering, but he couldn't spare his attention at the moment. The tunnel grew yet tighter, until his shoulders scraped at the gritty sides, and he had to turn sideways to get through. For one awful moment he thought he was stuck, but he pushed and then popped through like a cork being shot from a bottle.

He'd stepped into paradise.

A nicely laid path twisted out in front of him and led toward a rushing waterfall surrounded by a wealth of flowers, grass, trees...and Robin knew one thing for certain. He wasn't in the Caribbean any longer.

He'd been weaned on stories of the fairy folk. This smelt strongly of magic. He tilted his head and took in a deep, lingering breath, then grinned. The treasure had to be here!

From behind him, he thought he heard the sound of the Fitzwilliam wench's voice, but he ignored it. *Let the lass find her own way here, or not.* He didn't need the coin to find the gold any longer.

He put his foot on the path and a bolt of pure desire shot up through his feet and made his cock surge to life like a marlin on the end of a fisherman's line. Robin's breath left his lungs with a low, strangled

sound. He shook his head to clear it of the sudden sensual daze that overcame him. An image rose unbidden to his mind of Eleanor, naked and writhing beneath him.

With every step, the picture in his mind grew more and more vivid, until he had to stop for fear he'd spill his seed just from walking. "Magic," he muttered.

'Twas magic all right. That bloody green drunkard didn't want anyone getting to his pot of gold, and he'd put some sort of sex spell on the place to keep people from it. Well, Robin Steele was more than just a walking erection, and he wanted that treasure.

With a force of will that had served him well in the past, Robin forced himself to keep walking. He forced himself to think of fly-blown carrion, of the feeling of a rope around his neck, of poor Danny Flynn's whimpering cries for his

mother before he drowned. The morbid thoughts couldn't completely chase away the surge of lust that had threatened to overpower him, but it did help to tamp it down some.

Just down the path was a lovely whitewashed cottage. Red roses climbed the outside. The carved wooden door was propped open. The windowsill even held a pie to cool. Apple, by the smell of it. Robin's stomach rumbled fiercely.

"Hello?" He didn't expect an answer, and he didn't get one. "Bloody green bastard."

He went to the door of the cottage. Inside 'twas neat and tidy as a pin with a freshly swept dirt floor and a cheery fire crackling in the hearth. A large, soft-looking bed took up most of one wall, while a rough-hewn table and chairs took the space along the other. A crude ladder made of lashed branches led up to a small loft space overlooking the main part of the cottage.

Despite the fire, the pie, and the neatly made bed, 'twas clear the cabin was unoccupied and had been for some time. Everything had the taint of magic about it. He'd have to tread carefully.

His cock was still as hard as his last name. Every step had him

thinking about plunging his shaft deep within a woman's willing flesh. He remembered the creamy whiteness of Eleanor's breasts, the tempting pink glimpse of nipple.

He groaned and imagined the sweet taste of her on his tongue. She'd be like nectar. Like honey.

Arousal clouded his mind in a way he knew had to be magic, but Robin couldn't force himself to care. His cock throbbed in his pants and demanded release.

The laces of his trousers came open with a quick, practiced pull. His pride sprang free, all stiff eight inches of it, and his hand was on it quicker than a sailor on a keg of rum.

By Neptune, that feels good! He hadn't been with a woman in six months, perhaps longer. He palmed the rosy head, then stroked downward.

Her mouth would be hot and wet. She'd close it over him and drawn him deep, to the back of her throat. She'd cup his balls and stroke the line between his cock and his ass, and he'd explode.....

Part of his mind knew a woman like Eleanor Fitzwilliam

would no more perform fellatio on him than marry him. He also knew this irresistible urge for sex came not from within him, but from the wee bastard's tricks. At that moment, however, with his cock twitching in his hands and his seed ready to shoot, Robin simply didn't care.

He stroked faster, one hand on the wall to keep his balance. He threw back his head, eyes closed, concentrating on the building sensation between his legs. One more moment....one more.....

He cried out as the pleasure ripped through him and he shot his seed. His balls throbbed and pulsed, and his knees trembled. He held himself, hard, and imagined burying himself to the hilt in Eleanor's wet, hot box. The thought sent a last spasm of climax through his body. He'd come fiercely, but his shaft showed no signs of wilting. If anything, 'twas more rigid and in need of attention than it had been before his self-pleasuring.

He tucked himself away as best he could with an iron bolt between his legs. "Neptune's balls," he said aloud. "What in the bloody hell was that all about?"

* * *

Where by the devil had he gone? Eleanor put out her hands but felt nothing beneath her fingertips but air. Cool, damp air. *A cave? Had the blighter found a cave?*

"Hello? Captain Steele?"

She strained her ears and thought she heard his voice, but it sounded very far away. *How had he gone such a distance in so short a time?* Eleanor's stomach curled tightly beneath her breastbone. Nothing about this smelled right.... literally.

She sniffed the darkness in front of her, expecting the tang of the ocean, or the dry, hot scent of sand. Instead, a fresh, moist smell tickled her nostrils and made her mouth water with a thirst she hadn't known she had.

"Hello?"

Damn him to the devil, she thought. The bloody bastard had left her behind. The coin she'd picked back up gave a sudden burst of fire so sharp she gasped. It fell to the ground and gleamed as brightly as a candle. Cautiously, Eleanor bent to lift it up by the edges. Though she could feel the heat emanating from the disk's flat surface, the edges didn't hold enough heat to scald her.

She lifted it above her head and found it as useful as a torch. In fact, the further into the darkness she went, the brighter the coin gleamed. It lit her path as nicely as any lantern might have done, and kept her from stumbling over the fallen rock and pits which otherwise might have given her a bad fall.

A few more steps and she'd reached a bend in the passage. Eleanor called for the pirate again, but heard no reply. She pushed forward...and stopped, stunned at the glorious landscape laid out before her.

A jade colored waterfall frothed and foamed ahead, its water spilling into a deep, clear pool the same shade of green. High but gently sloping cliffs flanked either side of the fall, while lush vegetation covered the land all around it.

Directly in front of her was a crushed-shell path that led down a small hill toward the pool. Flowers of every color bloomed in the grass, green as emeralds, and the air was redolent with their fragrance.

The coin abruptly stopped burning and went dead in her hand like a candle that had been snuffed. She curled her fingers around it.

"The leprechaun's treasure," she murmured. She hadn't believed the captain before now, but the sights before her had her convinced. Something magic had to have created this haven, for surely no tropical island could boast such paradise beneath it.

She put her foot to the path and felt a tingle in her toes that quickly led up her ankle, to her thigh, to...a place that made her gasp. Eleanor paused, her heart pounding so hard she saw bright sparks in front of her eyes.

The spot between her legs, the secret spot she'd explored by herself too many times to count, had begun to burn. *Like the coin*, she thought and swallowed hard. Leading her to treasure. But of what sort?

She took another step, and another flare of sensation stroked her core like the finger of a lover. She shivered. The crotch of her borrowed trousers all at once seemed unbearably tight. Another step, and she heard a low moan burst from her throat.

This was ridiculous! She had to get hold of herself! She was behaving like a common dock strumpet, flaunting her wares to the sailors in port. She was behaving like a trollop,

a woman who'd lift her skirts for any man who could pay for the privilege.

At the thought, her nipples grew tight beneath the suddenly too-small shirt. Her hands cupped the weight of her breasts and her thumbs caressed the taut peaks before she caught herself. She shifted her legs and felt the answering twinge between her legs.

There was magic afoot here. Strong magic. And Eleanor wasn't sure if she loved it or hated it.

Purposefully, she set out down the path and tried to tamp down the raging lust which threatened to send her to her back in the grass with one hand on her tits and the other stroking her cunny until she got what she needed...

Eleanor Fitzwilliam! she admonished herself. *Stop it this instant!*

She didn't, of course. Eleanor knew her body well enough to realize it wouldn't be satisfied until she gave it the release she craved. What she didn't understand was, why now? Why here?

She took a few deep breaths and forced herself to ignore the tendrils of desire threading throughout her body. It wouldn't do to succumb to it. There was something definitely odd about what was happening to her, and she'd bet it had something to do with the leprechaun.

She squared her shoulders and took a few more deep breaths until the heat in her cheeks subsided. The heat between her thighs did not diminish by much, but she had it under control. When she set off down the path again, she was surprised to see a lovely white cottage in front of her.

As she took one more step toward it, the spot between her legs burst into a fire of lust so strong it sent her to her knees in the grass beside the path. She lay there panting for a moment, her vision aswirl.

The grass, and the sand beside it, was as soft as a bed underneath her. Eleanor rolled onto her back and stared up at the sky. There was something odd about it, but her senses were so awash in the haze of desire she couldn't figure quite what it was.

The spot between her legs beat in time with her heart. Her fingers found it effortlessly, slipped below the waistband of her trousers, circled the swollen nub she knew would send her to the heavens. She rolled her hips with her

movements.

Her tunnel clenched on nothing and she let out a whimper. She wanted a man inside her. A big man, a virile man—one who knew how

to make love to a woman and send her soaring.

A man like Robin Steele would know how to use his cock for a woman's pleasure. The wicked thought made her gasp aloud as her fingers moved against her center. He'd slide inside her to the hilt. He'd pound her, ride her.

Like cannon fire, her orgasm shot through her. It left her wrung and gasping, yet strangely unfulfilled. She blinked and shook herself, then sat up in shock.

What had she been doing? She hadn't been able to control it. She'd stroked herself to completion, and still her nipples pushed at the front of her shirt and her quim pulsed with desire.

She got to her feet, the heat in her cheeks not solely from embarrassment. She stumbled from the grass back to the path, toward the cottage. She felt as though she were moving through molasses.

She looked up, sensing eyes on her. Robin stood in the cottage's doorway. His gaze burned through her core and her desire surged. He must have seen some unspoken invitation in her eyes because he came toward her.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Her voice sounded husky, low. Sensual.

"I'm thinking how delicious you must taste."

His words shot a thrill down her spine, while at the same time alarming her. "You shouldn't talk like that."

He pulled her into his arms. "Perhaps I shouldn't talk at all."

She ought to protest, but didn't as he crushed his mouth to hers. Her mouth opened to allow him to sweep his tongue inside, and she met it with her own. Without quite knowing what she was doing, she brought his hand up to cup her breast through her borrowed shirt.

His thumb passed over her nipple and she shivered. She wanted this man, his mouth, his hand. His cock. All at once, she was desperate to have it. Taste it. Desperate to have him inside her.

Eleanor knew how desire felt. She knew how the touch of a man's

hands could arouse her. Winston had taken a married man's liberties though they hadn't shared any vows, and she'd allowed him because doing so gave her power over her own body since it had been her choice.

She had no such power now. Desire so fierce it buckled her knees swept through her at Robin's touch. This was more than attraction— this was inevitable, undeniable, irresistible. It was like watching the waves crash to shore during a storm. She couldn't control it; she could only think of how to assuage the burning in her loins and breasts.

Somehow they had moved into the grass again. Following an impulse she couldn't fight, Eleanor went to her knees. She found the front of his trousers and tugged open the laces. His cock, his thick beautiful cock, sprung free and nudged her cheek. Without hesitation, she took him between her lips.

His hands tangled in her hair, hard enough to make her wince, but she didn't move. Her hand crept between her thighs to press in time with the strokes she was making with her mouth and lips. His shaft swelled as did her pleasure point again.

She reached for the weight of his balls and cupped them in her palm. Her mouth came down to meet her fingers before she moved back along his length to swirl her tongue on the smooth tip.

He pushed himself into her. She took him in as far as she could. Her body sang with delight as another climax surged and tossed her like a ship upon a storm-struck sea.

With a groan, he pulled himself from her mouth. They didn't speak. She was incapable of words and thought he must feel the same. All she could think about was having him inside her. Robin took her by the waist and turned her onto her hands and knees. In a moment her trousers were pushed to her thighs and he filled her.

She cried out, nearly a scream, and didn't recognize her own voice. Her head hung down, her hair tangling with the flowers and the grass. Her elbows bent as he thrust inside her, and she pressed her cheek to

the ground while her ass lifted high in the air to give him greater access.

She'd never been taken like this. Her experiences with Winston had been furtive and full of false protests to make

him believe he'd really been the one in charge. Getting something from her. This was different, powerful...but liberating.

He took and she submitted willingly. His hand came around to find the juncture of her thighs. He pressed right where she needed his touch, and her body splintered into climax.

Slowly, she became aware that her hands and wrists were aching from the pressure of her weight. Her knees throbbed from scraping on the ground. Robin seemed to realize he was pulling her hair, because he untangled his fingers and gently withdrew from her.

Though her mind welcomed his withdrawal, her body protested. She moved forward in the grass and pulled her clothing back around her. Her thoughts whirled. She might have expected a man like him to take a woman by force...but she had been a willing, nay, an eager participant. What had overcome her?

She felt the slow, hot trickle of his seed down her thighs and winced. She'd been worse than wanton. She'd been ravenous. Even now, her body still tingled with desire.

She thought meeting his eyes would be more difficult, but she managed with little effort. To her surprise, he wasn't grinning at her with cocky assurance. He wasn't looking at her with neutral nonchalance. His expression was distinctly shamefaced.

"I'm sorry."

She blinked up at him. "You're what?"

Robin shrugged. "I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"Hurt...oh." Eleanor closed her mouth on a smile. The last thing in the world he'd done was hurt her. "No, I'm fine."

He didn't look convinced. "A woman shouldn't lose her maidenhead like that. I've never forced a woman—"

She laughed a little, ruefully, and got to her feet. She laced her trousers tighter around her waist then tried, without success, to smooth her wrinkled shirt. Her palms still stung, and she brushed at the green stains.

"Don't worry, Captain Steele. You didn't take anything that hadn't been lost quite some time ago."

She'd stunned him again. Robin made as though to speak, then closed his mouth. Eleanor crossed her arms

over her chest, unwilling to admit, even now, how much the sight of him affected her.

"You cried out," he said at last. "I assumed...."

"Another misconception." She lifted her chin, faintly insulted at his insistence at apologizing for giving her the best lovemaking she'd ever had. "So there.... no guilt for you. Feel better?"

He shook his head and gave her a dark look. "I want you to know, Miss Fitzwilliam, I would never have taken you that way, if it weren't for the magic."

The sincerity in his words made her believe him, but that only insulted her further. "You're saying it was only magic that made you desire me?"

He nodded. Eleanor gritted her teeth, knowing she had no reason to be upset, but helpless not to be. What was wrong with her that only a leprechaun's magic could make him desire her?

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize to me again!" she snapped. She gave him her back. "You've done quite enough already. Saying you're sorry won't change anything that happened. The damage has been done!"

"Believe me—"

She looked over her shoulder at him. "Oh, I believe you. Your whole life is about taking what's not yours, isn't it? Why should this be any different?"

She didn't want him to be sorry, damn him. She wanted him to take her in his arms again, to crush his mouth down on hers. To make love

to her as fast and furiously as he'd done the first time.

His eyes had narrowed, and he stepped toward her to grab at her hand. "You've got a real mouth on you, don't you? It worked better when 'twas wrapped around my cock."

Heat flooded her cheeks, and she reacted instinctively. *

* *

The wench slapped him. Hard. Bells rang in his ears and stars shot their bright fire into his eyes. He took a step back, hand to his face, and let out a low stream of curses.

"Keep your hands to yourself, you filthy pirate!"

"You say filthy like that's a bad thing," he called to her back as she stalked away down the path.

He watched her smooth buttocks work beneath the tight

trousers she wore and cursed again. The woman was going to drive him mad, and it wasn't just the magic that would do it either. She was a barrel of gunpowder in more ways than one.

He'd almost lost himself in another sensual reverie when her scream echoed throughout the valley. Robin ran to her, his hand already reaching for the sword he'd damnably left behind when he jumped ship to follow her. He skidded on the rough shell path and nearly fell as he rounded a bend and found her.

In moments, she was in his arms. She shuddered and clutched at him, then buried her face in the front of his shirt. His arms went around her automatically. Damn it all, but the chit fit in his embrace like she'd been born to it.

Robin looked, but saw no animal, nothing that could have prompted her scream. "What's wrong, love? What happened?"

Eleanor raised her tear-streaked face. Her tongue swiped across her lips before she could answer. She glanced off the path to a thicket of brush as verdant and lush as everything else. She pointed one small hand. "In there."

"Shall I go see?"

She buried her face in his shirt again. "It's awful."

What a pampered and privileged merchant's daughter would consider awful probably wouldn't faze him at all. Gently, Robin extricated himself from her grasp and moved toward the bushes. What he saw made him avert his eyes quickly. It wasn't the most awful thing he'd ever seen...but it came damn close.

"Pirates, by the look of their clothes," he said, though there was so much gore it would have been difficult to identify anything else on them.

The men, two of them, lay in an embrace...of sorts. Somehow, though Robin knew a life at sea led some men to seek their pleasure from other men, he didn't think these two had been making anything like love. Decay had taken much of the flesh from their bones, but what remained was quite obviously intertwined. They'd been physically joined when one or both slit the others' throat. Who'd done it first, he couldn't tell, but the other had countered within moments. They'd died in each other's arms, fighting to get free and unable to.

"The magic." He put a hand to her chest and felt the wild thumping of her heart. "There's magic here. A lot of it. Some sort of protection for the treasure, I'll wager. A spell. It makes you feel things. I think we've discovered that already."

Her nipple rose beneath his palm and her face flushed. She didn't pull away. Again, she licked her lips, more slowly this time. He moved a step closer. His thumb moved across the peak of her nipple, and then he cupped the fullness of her breast. His groin throbbed with new arousal at the physical evidence she was feeling the same as he.

He looked down at the placement of his hand. "The magic must've made them feel the same things we are. Only two men who weren't interested in each other...they must not have been able to control themselves. It was enough to make them kill each other."

Her breath shuddered out, and she stepped away from his touch. "I told you, Captain Steele. Keep your hands off me. I don't want you

to..."

"You're not a very good liar, love."

Her chin went up and the fire returned to her eyes. "I assure you, sirrah, I'm not lying."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself, lass. But I know I could hammer nails with what I'm sporting between my legs."

He watched her throat work as she swallowed. "How crude," she whispered finally.

Robin stepped back, his own face heating. The lass was right. The magic had made him crude. A woman like her wouldn't want him unless the magic made her. She might not believe it of him, but he did have honor.

"What do you expect from a pirate?" he asked as he turned to leave her. "Especially a filthy one."

Robin stomped down the path, determined to find the leprechaun's hidden stash and get out of this place without one more encounter with that raven-haired wench. He'd covered as much of the valley as he could before the sky, such as it was, began to grow dark. The darkness surprised him, as he'd seen no sign of clouds, or the sun, for that matter.

Now, as he headed back toward the cottage, bright, sparkling stars began to appear overhead like diamonds

scattered on a piece of black velvet.

He stared up at them for a long while, thinking. The gold had to be somewhere in this enchanted valley. The entire place stank of magic. The only question was where the bedamned green bastard had hidden it.

He busied himself with gathering small twigs and brush to build a fire. He didn't fancy trying to enter the cottage with that virago still inside. Besides, he liked to spend the night under the open sky, even if the sky wasn't real.

He heard her soft footsteps and looked up. She'd managed to brush

and rebraid her hair, and her face looked cleaner.

"Did you find it?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

She favored him with a small smile that nonetheless sent a bolt of desire straight to his groin. "I would actually. But I'd say you haven't."

"What makes you think that, love?"

The lass had a lovely voice. Low and soft. How could he ever have thought her strident? He shook himself a little. The magic was working on him again.

"Well, you came back here," she pointed out. "I imagine if you'd found the treasure, you'd still be cavorting in it."

"Ah, cavorting." He returned her smile and watched a stray night breeze lift a tendril of her hair. "I've done my share. But alas, no, I didn't find the treasure."

She nodded and bit at her lip. "A roast chicken appeared on the hearth awhile ago, and wine, and a table set for two. With biscuits. And...gravy."

She might well have been listing a menu of sexual delights for the reaction her words gave him. He swallowed heavily. "Sounds delicious."

She looked over her shoulder to the cottage. "I didn't want to eat it alone."

"Are you inviting me in?"

She scowled and scuffed at the sandy edge of the path. "Captain Steele, must you make everything so difficult? I'm trying to be nice."

"Why?"

She looked disgruntled and shrugged. "Why not? It's not like we're strangers any longer. Is it so wrong for me to want to be nice to you?"

Robin sat back and stared at her for so long without speaking she huffed and crossed her arms over her chest. She tapped her foot and tossed one thick braid over her shoulder. The movement caused her breasts to rise and fall beneath the lad's shirt she still wore, and the sight had him catching his breath.

"Or do you just want your share of my gold?" The question burst out of him before he could stop it.

"Forget I said anything." Eleanor gave him a look that would have leveled a lesser man. "Be a pig-headed lout. See what I care. I'm going inside to eat."

The smell of roast chicken wafted from the cottage's open window as he continued to make a place for himself in the sandy grass beside the path. His stomach was fair to flapping against his backbone, but he quieted some of his hunger with a few swigs from the flask in his pocket. He'd gone without food before. He could manage one more night.

He settled down near the fire and scratched out another map of the places he'd already searched. This magic valley, hidden beneath a Caribbean island, shouldn't have been half as large as it seemed to be. The little, green bugger had plenty of tricks. Robin swiped at the line drawing and settled back, trying to ignore his hunger and the way his cock still swelled half-erect in his trousers.

He couldn't sleep, but when he heard the lass come out of the cabin, he closed his eyes and pretended to snore. Either she wasn't fooled or she didn't care because she came and sat so close to him he could smell the wine she'd drunk and her own sweet scent. His prick stirred. *Damn magic.*

"I know you're not asleep."

He cracked open one eye to stare at her. "I'd like to be."

"I'm cold," she said.

She rubbed her arms and moved a little closer. He dug a little deeper in the sand and wished for his heavy overcoat. He had built only a small fire, so as not to attract attention from anyone who might be searching for them. Now it had nearly burned down to the embers. The night breeze was chilly, especially to someone wearing as little as she was.

"Why not go back inside the cottage then?"

"I don't want to."

Robin thought he could have made his fortune already if

only he'd had a ten pence for every time a woman didn't do something because she didn't want to. He sat up and poked at the fire to make the flames rise a bit.

Eleanor sighed and held out her hands to the blaze. "Can I come closer to you?"

He jumped a little at her question. "Do you think that's a good idea, love?"

"I think it's a very good idea."

She moved closer, and Robin sat up. "Neptune's balls, you're a young lady and I'm—"

"Warm," she finished as she moved so close she was touching him. "And I'm a cold, young lady."

"What makes you think I won't take advantage of you?"

She made a wry face. "'Tis a little late to worry about that, isn't it?"

"I already apologized for that." Robin stared up at the stars, hard. The wench was provoking him, but damned if he knew why.

He could have sworn he heard her purr as she sidled even closer.

"So, does that mean you *are* going to take advantage of me?"

"Bloody hell!" he cried and sat up so fast she rolled away from him in the sand. "What sort of talk is that?"

Eleanor sat up, too, onto her knees. She toyed with her thick braids and tucked them up again into a disheveled mess on top of her head. She glared at him. "You're a man, and I'm a woman."

"Obviously." Robin narrowed his eyes. "You're supposed to be a gentlewoman."

"But you," she pointed out, "are a pirate. You're not supposed to have morals or manners."

"So you're saying you'd want me to rape you again?"
Robin had

been propositioned plenty of times, but this wench had him gape-mouthed aghast.

"It's not rape if I want it, too!" Eleanor put her hands on her hips.

Even in the dimming light from the fire, he couldn't ignore her glare. "Neptune's balls!" he cried again, only because he couldn't think of what else to say.

"I don't give a fig for Neptune's," Eleanor retorted

smartly. "But I believe I'd like to learn more about yours."

Robin got to his feet, heart thudding and his cock twitching in his pants like it had a mind of its own. He'd have bet half the leprechaun's gold that Hugh Fitzwilliam's daughter hated him. He'd never expected to hear such bold words out of her, especially after she'd tried to geld him a number of times already.

God's wounds, but he wanted to take her in his arms, to taste that fresh mouth, to plunge his hands into the glorious tangle of her hair. "You don't even like me! You think I'm a filthy pirate!"

"You are a filthy pirate," she said. "Well, maybe not so filthy at the moment."

"But you don't like me."

In the flickering light, her eyes gleamed. "Like? Maybe not. But you don't like me much either. And that doesn't stop you from wanting me."

"Who says I want you?" He regretted the words the instant they left his mouth because they so clearly gave her power over him.

Eleanor sat back a little and tilted her head to look at him. "Your eyes say you want me. And your cock."

The groan escaped his lips before he could stop it. Her frank language had him straining at the front of his britches. Robin turned his back to her. "No proper young lady would even know that word."

"I believe I told you before, Captain Steele. I'm not good. Or proper."

He smelled her before he felt her. She came up behind him and

slipped her arms around his waist. He straightened, not giving in to the embrace, but feeling it in every pore just the same.

"Turn around," she whispered.

He imagined the roar of the sea filling his ears to block the sound of her invitation, but had no such luck. She whispered again. She was breaking him without even trying.

"Robin," she said, and he was lost.

* * *

With a moan that was nearly a growl, the man turned and swept her into his arms. His mouth crushed down on hers, which opened eagerly. Her arms came round his neck

and brought him closer, and he reached down to sweep her into his arms.

"Say my name again," he ordered.

"Robin," Eleanor replied. "Robin, I want you."

The ground was no place to make a bed, so he took her inside the cottage. He laid her down on soft covers in front of the fire and covered her body with his while he kissed her. She arched beneath him, offering her body and her mouth to him. She sank her fingers into his hair and tugged until he looked up at her.

She traced the line of his jaw, his cheek, touched the smooth arching line of his brows. She caressed the rim of his ear and the bridge of his nose. She couldn't get enough of this rough and wild man on top of her.

He didn't toy with her. He went straight to the buttons on her man's shirt and undid them with a slow precision that had her aching for his touch. He spread the folds of her shirt and she lifted herself against his hand. His caress on the bare flesh of her breast made her cry aloud from pleasure, and when he bent his head to suckle at her nipple, she thought she might sob with relief.

He nestled between her thighs while he kissed her breasts, then trailed a line of fire down her stomach. His hands held her hips still while his tongue danced on the sensitive skin. She giggled.

"Do you like that?" He tilted his head to look up at her.

"It tickles."

He smiled and bent to nudge at her belly with his nose. "It's supposed to."

Eleanor knew what she was doing was wrong for any number of reasons. The fact was, she simply didn't care. She owned her body, not her father, not her brothers. Not even Winston. She owned herself, and what she wanted was Robin Steele.

She felt the wet path of his tongue on her again and sighed. Everything around her felt liquid, fluid, like the sea he loved so much. She floated on it, with him, beneath his hands and mouth.

He left her stomach and moved up her body to capture her mouth again. His hand slipped over her ribs and covered her breast while he tweaked her nipple. His tongue slid between her lips, and she met it with her own.

No one had ever kissed her like that—like a force of nature that couldn't be stopped with a gentle, "Not right now, dear." Winston had always treated her like delicate china, even when he had a hand up her skirt. Robin took her mouth like he owned it, like she owed him the right to plunder her as he plundered ships.

It drove her absolutely wild.

He broke the kiss to press his lips on the pulse beating in her throat. His teeth scraped at her. Pain mingled with the pleasure and she moaned his name again.

His breath hissed. "God's teeth, Nora, hearing you say my name like that makes me crazy for you."

"Nobody's ever called me that," she managed to say.

"Nora." He reached up to brush a tendril of hair off her forehead. "It suits you."

The tender gesture made her catch her breath. It lasted only a moment because, in the next instant, he'd bent to her throat and shoulder, then down the slope her breast, over her belly and back to her

mouth again. His kiss grew fiercer, almost bruising, but she took it without complaint.

His hand slipped between her legs. His thumb prodded the swelling nub of her pleasure. The sensation was frustratingly muffled through the cloth of her trousers, and she lifted her hips to press herself harder against him. She was wanton, she was wild, she was on the edge and going over.

He rubbed in small, tight circles through the cloth. Inside, slickness coated her. She wanted his flesh on her flesh. This was better than her own touch, better than anything she'd ever experienced. He found the rhythm she craved as smoothly as a schooner cutting through the waves.

His hand left her for a moment, and she gave a cry of protest.

"Hush, love," he told her, and slipped his hand inside the waistband of her trousers. He laid his head upon her shoulder and sighed aloud when he encountered her slick folds, her heat. The tip of one finger tested her opening. His thumb teased the kernel of her passion.

White heat exploded through her. She cried his name. Pleasure whirled within her like a maelstrom, moving in

ever-tighter circles into her center. A gust of air teased her heated flesh, and she realized it was Robin's breath upon her. He'd pulled her trousers away, discarded them, and she didn't care where they'd gone. She lay open to him, exposed, waiting. He blew another soft breath across her throbbing nub.

"Please," was all she could say, and he obliged her inarticulate request.

His kiss sent a sharp bolt through her. A bolt of lightning. A thunderclap. Her thighs trembled. Her fingers clutched handfuls of the blankets, and her head tossed from side to side. He slid his hands beneath her buttocks and raised her to his mouth, where he used the tip of his tongue to probe her.

He licked her slowly, then settled into a pattern of smooth, circular strokes that echoed what he'd done earlier with his finger. Eleanor had

no name for this feeling, this pleasure, this breaking and shattering and reforming of her body. She opened herself to it, released herself to his whim, gave herself over to a pleasure she was helpless to control.

Robin slid the tip of his finger inside her and pressed the soft interior of her tunnel while he continued to tease her swollen nub with his lips and tongue. In and out. It wasn't enough. She wanted...no, needed his rod where his mouth and hand were.

Before she could demand he make love to her properly, a final burst of sensation filled her. She could not see or hear; she could only feel. Her entire focus dwindled to the tiny bundle of nerves between her legs and the relentless pressure of his tongue upon her. Her entire world drew in and in, tighter and tighter, until she cracked and broke open, and exploded.

Her entire body shuddered in his grip. Her hips thrust. Her hands clutched his hair. She let out a low, satisfied cry as she pulled him upward toward her.

The scent of her sex upon him made another slow wave of pleasure spurt through her. She kissed him as she fumbled at the waist of his trousers. He couldn't get them off fast enough to suit her. She pushed, he pulled, and finally, he rested between her legs without bothering to take the garment all the way off.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked.

"I don't want to hurt you, love."

Another tender gesture from him that surprised her completely. She touched his face. "You won't hurt me."

His hand slid down to lift her buttocks. His prick rubbed at the entrance to her quim, and she tilted herself to allow him easier passage. He slid inside her slowly, not like the way they'd joined before, but his entrance gave her no less pleasure this time.

For a time, he stayed that way, without moving. He pressed his forehead to hers, then dipped down to kiss her so thoroughly he left her breathless. When he began to move, every stroke caught her sensitive

button and brought it to further arousal.

She was on the edge of climax again within moments. Her orgasm fluttered through her, a set of tiny spasms that had her clenching around his thickness. Robin rolled his hips to thrust inside her again, and another small shudder ran through her passage. She'd never reached completion so many times in such a short time.

She expected him to finish soon—to take his pleasure and roll off her like Winston did—but Robin made love to her as though he never planned on doing anything else again. Every kiss, every stroke, seemed planned to give her ever-greater sensation. Her arousal ebbed and flowed as he moved within her.

She'd already exploded, and suspected her body could provide her with no more. She was wrong. Small climaxes continued to ripple through her, each one mild by itself, but together, creating a sensation of never-ending orgasm.

His thrusts grew faster, more ragged. The pattern of her arousal changed. It became fiercer to go along with his urgency. Eleanor scraped at his back with her fingernails, reached for the rounded globes of his buttocks to urge him to pump inside her even harder. Robin gave her what she craved. His cock stretched and filled her. She captured him with her arms and legs and held him close to her.

Something built inside her, one small climax after another, until ecstasy overtook her again. Her body shuddered. She cried his name. Robin answered with the name he'd given her, the name nobody had ever called her. The sound of it forced her to splinter apart into a myriad of

shards. Her clitoris beat, and her passage closed on his cock until, at last, he thrust one last time and emptied himself inside her.

He moved off her and turned her back to him so he could hold her from behind. She waited for him to speak, but soon heard the smooth sounds of his sleeping breath. Knowing he couldn't hear her made her brave.

"This is magic," she whispered. "But I don't think the leprechaun

has much to do with it."

* * *

Robin slept poorly and woke when the sky first brightened. He left Nora asleep in bed and began his search for the treasure anew. Without the coin to help him, he had to rely on where his sense told him the wee bastard would hide the treasure. So far, Robin's senses had been wrong.

After hours of fruitless searching, he stalked to where the path looped down toward the waterfall. At the back of the clear green pool the water churned from the force of the waterfall plunging into it, but here at the other edge the water was as smooth and reflective as glass.

He bent to look at his face. 'Twas no new sight; he'd seen his own visage plenty of times before. Thick, dark gold hair, braided to keep it from getting in his eyes. Dark brows over eyes equally as black. His features were fine enough, he supposed, though his skin was weathered and tanned from so many hours at sea. His dark mustache and beard framed a smile he had to admit could be rather charming, when he tried.

He tried now, but got only a grimace for his efforts. He didn't feel charming. He felt like what she'd named him—a filthy pirate. And why did that bother him so much? He'd been called worse, and deserved it.

He struck the water and his image broke into a dozen fractured pieces. He caught a glimpse below the water's surface. Another face, framed by flowing golden hair. A lithe female body, and then the quick flash of silver and blue scales on a fish's tail.

"Blimey!"

A mermaid. He plunged his face into the water, his eyes open and searching. His body on dry land, his head underwater, he felt split in twain, but was rewarded by

another glimpse of the seductive lass.

There was no shallow edge to this pool. It plunged immediately into depths easily a fathom deep, but so clear the false sunlight easily lit the rocks and cliffs beneath.

His lungs had begun to burn, and he came out to take a breath

before ducking his head under again. There she was, far below. A lass with hair like liquid gold streaming over her bountiful breasts. Her slim waist swelled into curvaceous hips before tapering into a thick, muscular tail covered in shimmering scales of silver and blue.

She was every mariner's dream. A mermaid. She beckoned him with one finger. Her eyes were wholly dark, without pupils. Like a fish's eye, but gleaming with intelligence. She swam closer, and he saw the thin frills of her gills on her throat, fluttering open and closed as she breathed.

He'd been under so long he was starting to get a little dizzy, but he didn't want to miss her. She swam closer, and he saw her mouth curve into a smile.

Closer still. She hovered, twisting in the water a few feet below his face, her hair a golden swirl around them both.

He was looking down, and she up, her head tilted back and her tail moving beneath her in the green water. A silver bubble of air escaped his lips. He needed to breathe, but...he didn't have the strength to pull himself out of the water. Her eyes, her fathomless eyes—dark, but swirling with colors. Dark eyes. They held him. Kept him.

Her lips parted. Was she going to kiss him? Her body tensed. The tail thrashed in the water and hurtled her toward him.

Her mouth opened, and 'twas filled with razor sharp teeth, like a shark's, in a double row, serrated. They stretched and filled her mouth, and he screamed while the water rushed into his mouth and choked him. The monster was racing toward him, upward out of the depths, and Robin scrambled back, but he'd taken too much water and not enough air. He was drowning while still on land. His hands splashed but found no purchase.

Mouth agape, the creature was almost upon him when a hand tangled in his hair and yanked him upward and out of the water. He gasped and choked, but breathed air instead

of the lagoon. The hand slipped, and he fell back into the water, only inches away from the

mermaid, which snapped at him like a shark scenting blood.

Then he was yanked backward again, onto land, and he rolled as fast as he could to get away from the water's edge. Even as he choked and spewed water from his mouth and nose, he watched the water erupt in a frenzied froth. The mermaid leapt from the green depths like a swordfish, her body arching and glittering in the sun before she plunged back beneath the surface in exactly the spot he'd just occupied. The water bubbled and foamed for a minute longer before becoming as smooth and placid as a mirror again.

"What in the bloody hell was that?" Eleanor cried in a voice thick with shock.

Robin couldn't answer her. He rolled onto his side and vomited a gout of water. His lungs were on fire. He heaved again and again.

Eleanor pounded him on the back until the wracking coughs subsided. When at last he lay still, she helped him to sit and move further away from the edge of the lagoon. Her eyes serious, she smoothed away the tangles of his hair.

"What was that?"

"Mermaid," he croaked.

She looked toward the water. "I thought they were supposed to seduce sailors. Not eat them."

"So did I, love." Robin spit to one side.

"Do you think you can stand?" She reached for his hand and helped him to his feet.

His head spun for a moment, and he found himself leaning on her. She looked up at him, her face creased with concern, and looped his arm over her shoulder.

"I'll help you back to the cottage," she said. "And I have something to show you."

"As long as it doesn't have teeth and try to kill me, I'll be glad to see it," he said.

Eleanor gave a small laugh. "No, it doesn't have teeth. I think I

found the treasure."

* * *

"It looks like a treasure chest to me." Eleanor pointed at

the large wooden chest she'd found behind the cottage. "It wasn't hidden."

Steele appeared to recover after nearly drowning and being devoured by the awful creature he'd called a mermaid. He was still a trifle pale beneath his tan, but he was breathing normally at least. He went to the chest and touched the lid.

"Did you open it?"

She shook her head. "I was going to when I heard the commotion and I ran to find you."

He made a thoughtful sound. " 'Twould seem too easy for this to be the treasure. I'd have thought the bugger would hide it better."

"Open it and see." Anticipation surged in her chest, and she stepped forward.

He flicked the hasp with one finger, then lifted the lid. It creaked. Eleanor realized she was holding her breath, and she forced herself to let it out as the lid opened and revealed.....

"It's empty!" she cried in utter disappointment.

Steele let out a low curse. " 'Tis a trick."

Eleanor put her hands on her hips and stared down into the empty chest. "I was sure this was the treasure."

Steele shrugged. "A leprechaun is better at deception than that, love."

"It could at least have had something in it," she grouched. "If not gold, at least something of value. A new gown or—"

At her words, the air in the bottom of the trunk shimmered. Bright bands of color wove themselves together rapidly, and formed into a gown of emerald green fabric.

"Neptune's balls," she heard Steele say, almost reverently.

Eleanor bent and picked up the gown. "It's real!"

"As real as anything magic can be."

She smoothed the velvet and touched the gold braid trim. She lifted the soft cloth and rubbed it on her cheek. "It's lovely!"

"Wish for something else."

She looked into the empty-again trunk. "I wish for a new pair of slippers."

In a moment, they were there, in cloth of gold with a

curved heel and ribbons of silk. She took them out and held them up. A perfect match to the gown.

"I'd say you did find the treasure, of a sort," Robin said. "Though I doubt any of what you wish for will ever leave this place."

"You mean I can't just wish for it to be filled with gold?" she asked in disappointment.

"Aye, you could," he conceded. "And I don't doubt 'twould be there. But try to take it from this place and 'twill vanish into thin air like a morning mist. No, we'll know the real gold when we find it."

She sighed. "Well, at least I can change my clothes."

She looked up to see him watching her with an intense expression that made her stomach jump in a different sort of anticipation.

"You'll look lovely in that gown."

She looked toward the trunk. "I wish for a new set of clothes for Robin."

He lifted a set of garments in the latest fashion. "And what am I supposed to do with these?"

"Wear them," she said.

He shook his head, but grinned at her. "To what purpose?"

"Because," Eleanor said, "they'll look lovely on you."

He stared at her again, the smile curving his lips, then down at the pile of material in his hands. "Will they, love?"

She nodded and felt the breath catch in her throat. His gaze made her flesh heat and her nipples peak. She licked her lips and watched him watch the movement of her tongue with avid fascination.

"You will."

"Then if 'twill please you, I'll put them on."

"It will please me," she said, and spoke the truth. She glanced into the chest. "I wish for hot water, soap, and anything else we might need to clean ourselves."

Nothing happened. Robin shrugged. "Mayhap even a magic chest has its limits."

"I don't think so," she replied and pointed over his shoulder. Two small, identical buildings had appeared where none had been before. Through the open doors, she could see porcelain tubs with steam curling out of them.

"Well I'll be a scurvy dog," he said and gave her an

admiring look. "You have a way with words."

"Which one do you want?"

He gave her a low bow. "Whichever pleases you, Nora, me love."

Eleanor laughed. "You take the one on the right, and I'll use the one on the left."

"Suits me."

They looked at each other for another long moment ripe with promise. Her heart beat faster. Maybe it was magic. Maybe it wasn't. But whatever it was, she liked it.

She availed herself of what the chest had provided. Hot water, scented soap, fluffy towels. *Heavenly*. Following the leisurely soak, the gown fit her perfectly. She combed her hair until it squeaked and tucked the cascade of ringlets into a carelessly arranged topknot.

When she came out of the small building, the sight of him took her breath away. He'd taken the braids from his hair and shaved the beard. Dressed in the new clothes, his hair clubbed back in a tail at the nape of his neck, he looked as fine as any gentleman.

He turned and held out his hand while he made a short bow. She'd already tasted herself on his lips. He'd already sent her to the stars. Yet now, she was unaccountably shy.

"You look breathtaking."

She ducked her head in response. "Thank you."

His fingers were warm on hers as he drew her close enough to kiss the back of her hand. Instant heat flared in her at the touch of his lips on her skin. She drew a deep, shuddering breath that made her bosom push at the low cut bodice.

"I've taken the liberty of ordering some music," he said.

She looked, and sure enough, a small orchestra of instruments hovered by the magic chest. Despite having nobody to play them, the instruments struck up a lilting tune that had her toes tapping.

"Shall we dance?" Robin asked.

She took his hand. "I'm afraid I don't know how to do the hornpipe."

"I know how to do other dances, love," he chastised lightly. "You'd be surprised at how genteel I can be."

"Actually, I don't think I would." She reached to brush the velvet lapel of his coat, then let her fingers trail along his

shoulder. "You clean up very nicely."

He inclined his head by way of thanks then swept her into his arms and a waltz that took her breath away. He danced like he did everything else—forcefully and with charming grace.

Or maybe 'tis the magic again, she thought dreamily as Robin twirled her around on the grass. She felt as light as air in his embrace. She was giddy from it.

The music paused and they stopped. Eleanor kept her gaze on the firm, broad chest in front of her. She didn't dare look up at him. She knew her longing would be evident in every line of her face.

"Nora," Robin said. "When we find the treasure...."

"Yes?"

"We'll have to leave this place."

She nodded as her mouth pulled into a frown she tried to hide. "I know."

"You'll go back to your family. To Dandrew. And I'll go back to

the sea. Back to Ireland, perhaps. We won't see each other any more."

She nodded again and blinked against tears she couldn't understand. "I know, Robin."

He put a hand beneath her chin and lifted her face until she was forced to meet his gaze. "I want you to know I've never had the pleasure of meeting anyone quite like you."

She turned her face so his hand cupped her cheek. "You mean a spoiled, rich laze-about?"

"No, love," he replied. "I mean beautiful, strong and brave. I mean stubborn and passionate and smart."

She laughed, though she felt more like crying. "I'm not any of those things."

"You are," he insisted and made her look at him again. "You pulled me safe from that merbitch. You found the magic chest."

"Magic," she scoffed. "We saw firsthand what havoc the magic here can wreak. It makes people act in ways they normally would not."

"If you think I wouldn't do this, magic or no, then you're mad as well as beautiful." Robin bent his head to kiss her.

He didn't plunder her this time. He didn't possess her. He urged her to open for him as gently but inexorably as

waves caress the sand.

Eleanor had no resistance. Her arms went around his neck and she accepted his mouth. His hands slid across her bare shoulders, then down to her hips and pulled her against him.

They kissed for a minute or an hour, she could no longer be certain. All that mattered was Robin's hands upon her, his lips caressing hers. He reached up and tugged loose her carefully arranged hair, and it fell down around her.

"This is magic, love. But I don't believe 'tis all that green bastard's doing. I think some of it surely must be our own."

"Hush," Eleanor whispered and drew him down to her again. "You talk too much."

With a teasing growl, Robin swept her into his arms and carried her

into the cottage. "Did I mention you're also impertinent?"

"I don't believe so, no."

He put her down on the bed and stretched out beside her. "D'ya think there's a magic spell that could rid us of these clothes?"

Eleanor sat up and put her hand on his chest. "Who wants that when removing them is so enjoyable?"

He stretched out his hands behind his head. "You are a wanton lass, aren't you?"

She shrugged and toyed with the polished buttons of his coat. "So I've been told."

"Really?" He grinned. "By whom?"

"None of your business," came her retort. She thought of Winston and pushed his face resolutely from her mind. His idea of wanton behavior seemed like teatime conversation compared to how being with Robin made her feel. She'd given her virginity to Winston ages ago, but he'd never set her aflame with desire like Robin did.

"I'm not complaining, mind you."

"Good." She slipped open the five buttons, then folded back his lapels to expose his fine, white shirt beneath.

Eleanor smoothed her hands up Robin's chest to the tie holding closed the throat of his shirt. Deftly, she loosed it and laid aside the ruffled neckpiece. She unlaced the shirt's front and revealed his bare chest to her gaze.

He didn't move, though his dark eyes had grown luminescent with passion. A flush crept from his throat to

paint his cheeks with a delicious color that made her want to kiss him again. So she did. Her hands slid along his muscled chest while his tongue darted in and out of her mouth, and when she pulled away, she was dizzy and breathless with desire.

Still, he didn't move, which suited her fine. She pushed open the throat of his shirt further and ran both hands over his taut, tawny skin. Her fingers found the twin dark circles of his nipples, and she thumbed

the sensitive flesh as he had already done to her. His reaction, a sigh and a groan, pleased her and sent an answering flicker of fire between her thighs.

"Nora, you are a vixen."

"Hush," she admonished. "I'm busy."

His chuckle tapered into another groan when she lightly pinched his nipples and rolled them between her fingers. The bulge in his trousers tempted her, but she resisted. For now he was being compliant, and she wanted to take advantage of that.

"Take this off."

He unlinked his hands from behind his head to allow her to slip his arms through the sleeves of the coat, which she tossed unceremoniously to the floor.

"That's the finest coat I've ever owned," he protested.

She lifted a brow at him. "And I daresay you'll be able to afford hundreds more like it. Let it go."

"Just like a wench used to a life of privilege," he said without rancor.

She swatted him without anger. "It's something I imagine you'll get used to."

She lifted the shirt over his head and tossed it as well. With a hand on his chest, she pushed him back against the pillows again. She sat up to look at him.

In the firelight, he seemed to have been hewn of polished wood. He was all angles and planes of hard muscle and firm lines. His nipples stood upright from her attentions. She reached to caress his smooth skin, then ran her finger down the line of dark hair trailing to just below his navel. Her hand stopped at the waist of his trousers.

She looked at him and winked. Then she dipped her head to use her mouth on his nipples the way she had her fingers. He tasted salty, like the sea, and musky, like a man.

No perfume and cologne for him. He was as natural as the landscape and she adored it. She breathed in the scent of him, the taste, and felt herself grow wet with desire.

She kissed his firm, ridged stomach and let her lips brush the dark curls she'd just stroked. Now she allowed her hand to rest on the bulge in his pants. Recalling how he'd teased her earlier, she stroked him through the cloth. He swelled and throbbed beneath her touch, and her body echoed his reaction.

"Nora, love, you're driving me mad."

"I know," she said. "I mean to."

He didn't resist when she pulled open the ties of his waistband. He didn't move or speak. She sensed him waiting for her to continue what she'd begun, but he didn't pressure her. A smile touched her lips. She took a deep breath and pushed his trousers down over his hips. His erection sprang free immediately. Eleanor couldn't help it; she gasped.

"God's teeth, Robin. How do you walk with that beast between your legs?"

His raised brows proved she'd surprised him. He looked thoughtful. "Well, love, 'tis not always so...proud."

She looked again at his thick, long member. She imagined it filling her as it had twice already, and her puss convulsed and sent an aching throb to her pleasure pearl. She closed her hand around his length and marveled at the thinness of his skin.

" 'Tis like silk," she murmured. "Silk over steel."

Her touch had made him clutch at the bedcovers. "Nora, with the magic are you sure—"

"Shut it," she told him in a no-nonsense tone of voice. "I'll not hear any more excuses about magic or any other whatnot. I know what I'm doing, Robin!"

"You certainly do," he replied as her hand continued to move on his shaft.

She kissed and nuzzled his mouth and flicked him lightly with her tongue while her hand continued to move up and down upon him. He grew warm beneath her fingers. She slid her fingers down to cup the

weight of his sac. His curls tickled her fingers. She felt his jewels expand and contract slowly as she stroked him.

She got up from the bed and yanked off his boots, one by one, with little grace in her desire to see him completely naked. The boots flew across the room and hit the wall, but Robin didn't comment on her lack of care this time. Eleanor pulled his trousers down the rest of the way and left them in a tangled heap as well.

She admired the paler skin of his thighs and legs compared to his sun-kissed chest. His cock rose between his thighs and was a totally different color, a lovely brownish-rose that begged for her to kiss it. So she knelt between his legs and did.

"Somehow, I didn't take you for a religious man," she replied to his muffled shout.

He laughed. "You took me unawares, love."

"Then get yourself awares," Eleanor said. "Because I'm about to do it again."

This time, she took him into her mouth. The soft hood covering his cock retracted and she suckled him first gently, then more firmly when he responded. She slid her lips down his shaft, then up, and used her tongue to lave the underside at the same time. She stroked his balls again, and found a small line, almost like a seam, in his flesh. He surged beneath her when she ran her fingers along it, so she repeated the motion.

Her hair fell across her cheeks and became wet with her spittle as she continued to suck him. Each time he thrust into her mouth, 'twas as though he were thrusting into her nether mouth as well. Her cunny swelled and pulsed, and the bead of her pleasure begged for a touch she was only too happy to oblige.

Her hand went beneath her skirt and found her center. One stroke, two, her middle finger found the erect bud and rubbed it. She shuddered with bliss. The pace of her hand matched that of her mouth.

Eleanor slipped a finger inside her slick tunnel, then another. The

heel of her palm pressed against her pearl and she tilted her hips to create a better friction.

She was rapidly approaching her breaking point. A few more strokes, a bit more pressure, and she'd burst into ecstasy. Her thighs quivered and her cunny tightened on her fingers as she pulled them free.

She left off loving Robin with her mouth and crawled up the bed to lay next to him. Without speaking, he rolled to face her and gathered her into his arms. His mouth found hers and his tongue swept inside her lips.

"This isn't fair," he breathed against her. "You're still fully clothed."

"You can fix that."

She thought he might unlace her bodice. Instead, he gripped the sides of her gown in his fists and tore it open. He pulled the shreds away and threw them unceremoniously on the floor. She was bare beneath it.

"That was the finest gown I've ever owned," Eleanor teased.

"I'll buy you a dozen even finer."

She pulled a face. "Only a dozen?"

"If I had my way," Robin said, "you'd go about always clad in what you're wearing now."

She looked down at her naked skin. "You'd have me catch a draft, would you?"

"Oh, no, love." He grinned wickedly. "I'd make sure you were always just as hot as you are now."

His lean, strong body covered her softness. His embrace engulfed her. He nudged her thighs apart with his knee and sank into her without prelude. She cried out in delight as he speared her.

The flames of her passion had waned momentarily, but at his entry, the inferno flared to life. His arms slipped beneath her head, cradling it. They kissed while he moved, too slowly. She urged him with her hips

to move faster, to match her urgency, but he only kept moving at the same steady rate.

She surged and crested. Her desire mounted until she thought she might faint from the force of it. Only then, when she moaned and writhed shamelessly beneath him, did he begin to thrust faster. Harder. He pounded her the way she wanted it, needed it.

He added a grinding twist of his pelvis that rubbed his stomach where she most needed the pressure. Eleanor hooked her heels around his buttocks and urged him to love her harder, more fiercely. He obliged, bless him, for if he hadn't, she thought she might have killed him.

Robin buried his face in her neck. His mouth found the

sensitive junction of her throat and shoulder, and he nipped her. She shuddered into climax again and there was no respite. Her body sang beneath him while she burst once more.

"Nora!"

His *petite mort* shook him. He thrust again and filled her with his hot seed. It slicked her already slippery passage and coated her. Her pearl twitched and pulsed in a final spasm, less powerful but no less enjoyable than the others.

He sank on top of her, his chest heaving. They lay together in silence for a few moments before he took pity on her and rolled off to let her breathe.

She rolled to face him, one leg slung over his. She put her hand to his chest and felt the slowing beat of his heart. Her chin fit perfectly into the curve of his shoulder. She kissed his warm skin and gave a fully satisfied, replete sigh.

"That sounds like a well-contented woman."

"Oh, aye." She stroked down his chest and cupped his member, still half-hard. "For now."

"For now?" He twisted to look at her. "Are you aiming to kill me, love?"

Eleanor laughed and snuggled more deeply against him. "If I'd

wanted to kill you, I'd have done it already."

* * *

Robin woke the next morning with a bursting bladder and a smile on his face. He left Nora still asleep and went outside to where the first pearly gray light of dawn was beginning to blush pink. *Still no sun*, he thought, staring up at the sky. *Ah, well. Magic.*

Today was the day they'd find the pot of gold. He felt it in his bones. They'd win that stunted schemer's game and get away with the treasure....and each other.

With the gold, he'd have plenty to offer Nora to keep her in the lifestyle to which she was accustomed. He could do more than just begin a moral life. He could give Nora everything she needed.

Naked, Robin stretched and grinned. Was he actually thinking of sharing his life with the lass sleeping inside? He fancied he caught a whiff of her scent on the slight breeze, and knew he was. But would she have him?

She'd only known him as a pirate, a thief, a rogue. She

might not see him as anything else. He was prepared to admit she might not want him as anything else. She'd seemed appalled when he told her he wanted to become a trade merchant.

"Robin?"

He turned. " 'Mornin' love."

She yawned prettily and rubbed at her eyes. "Isn't this idyllic?"

"It beats being horsewhipped, I'll grant you that."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Have you ever actually been horsewhipped?"

"No, love, but only because I've never been caught."

She laughed. "Come have some breakfast."

Sitting at a table set in the clearing, they feasted on fresh eggs, though there was not a chicken in sight. Warm biscuits slathered with creamy butter, plump, sizzling sausages, broiled kippers and milk so

creamy it left a mustache of foam on their upper lips completed their meal.

"Is there nothing that chest can't provide?" He leaned back in his chair and gave a contented sigh.

Eleanor shrugged. "It seems it can give us anything we want— except the pot of gold."

"Ah, well. We'll find that today on our own."

She looked at him oddly, then frowned and cast her gaze to her empty plate. "I'm not so sure I want to find it."

Surely he hadn't heard aright. "Say what?"

She looked up at him. "Once we find the gold, there's nothing to keep us here. Together. You'll take the gold and leave."

"I'll give you half," he said, but could see that wasn't what she was worried about. He got up and went around the table to pull her into his arms. "Do you want something different, love?"

She bit at her lip and he bent to kiss her before she could tear her flesh. She nuzzled his nose with hers and pulled away.

"I don't know, Robin."

It wasn't the most positive of answers. "What do you know?"

She looked around the clearing, at the cottage, at him. "I'm afraid that when we leave here...all of this will turn out

to be just another fairy tale. A dream. A leprechaun's trick."

He put her hand on his bare chest, over his heart. "You feel the way my heart beats faster when you touch me? That's real."

His penis had been resting semi-turgid since he'd first caught sight of her this morning, but now it swelled to full life. He slid her hand down to grip his shaft. "And this? Does this feel like a fairy story to you?"

He was relieved to see her smile.

"No."

"Then let's not worry about what might happen when we finally get out of here until it happens."

Her fingers tightened slightly and her grip drifted back and forth along his length. "You're right. Let's think about that later."

"You're a minx."

"But you love me anyway." Her face bloomed crimson and betrayed her shock at what she'd said. She began to back away, but he reached for her hand to stop her.

"I love you anyway," Robin said.

Her eyes glittered and she bit at her lip again. Eleanor shook her head. "Don't say it if you don't mean it."

"Nora, I've never told a woman I loved her, except perhaps for my mother. I don't have any idea if I mean it or not. I only know it feels right to say it."

She let him pull her closer. She nuzzled his chest and let her hand slip down to cradle him again. "I've never told Winston I love him. He just seemed to assume I did."

"Because you allowed him liberties?"

"Because," she said vehemently, "he thinks I ought to have no other choice but to love him!"

"And what about me, love? Do you think you have a choice in loving me?"

She rubbed her cheek against his skin like a cat. "I don't know, Robin. What if this, all of this, is just some more of the leprechaun's magic to keep us from leaving with his gold? What if we leave here and can't stand the sight of each other again?"

"Then I doubt we'll care very much about what we're missing." He pressed his lips to the softness of her hair. "We can't stay here forever, Nora."

"I know." She sighed. Her grip on him tightened and

relaxed in a way he found incredibly arousing. She slid her fingers underneath his shaft to stroke his testicles. "I don't want to lose this."

"Nor I, love."

"Make love to me, Robin."

She tilted her head for a kiss, which he gave her. He cupped her breasts and teased her nipples to rosy peaks, then bent to take each one in his mouth in turn. She sighed and arched her back. Her hands played in his hair. He put his hands beneath her buttocks and lifted her so her legs went around his waist and his cock slid neatly into her slick passage.

"That's a fancy trick." Her voice had gone deep with desire, but she managed to tease him.

He rocked her against him, making certain to rub the erect bud of her sex against his belly. "It gets better."

She put her arms over his shoulders and lifted herself up and down a little. "Mmm. It's getting better already."

She was small, and his arms were strong, but there was no way he could hold her this way for long. Robin walked with her toward the cottage and pushed her back against the lime-washed wall. She giggled at the sensation, then gasped when he used the pressure to thrust more thoroughly.

He was on the edge in moments. She did that to him, made him lose control faster than any woman he'd ever been with. The way she sighed, or moved, the scent of her, had his cock ready to burst. He could tell by her low cries and the way she kissed him that she was as close as he, but not close enough. She needed more.

"What do you want me to do, love?"

She knew exactly what he meant. "Stroke my pearl."

He moved a hand between them to use his thumb how she desired. "Like that?"

She shuddered and sank her teeth into his shoulder before saying, "Yes, oh, God, Robin. Yes!"

The sound of her climaxing shot him over the edge. His cock swelled within her, and his balls tightened. He thrust harder while his thumb continued to circle her bud. He felt it convulse under his touch while her tunnel tightened around him, and he exploded. His seed burst

forth in a gush of heat that left him weak-kneed.

After a moment of the only sound being their mingled breaths, Eleanor winced. "I fear I'll have permanent markings on my back."

He kissed her firmly and set her down, then stretched the kinks in his back. Eleanor busied herself with the things women do to tidy themselves after lovemaking. Robin asked the wishing chest for a tall mug of ale.

He drank half of it down and found her looking at him with a bemused expression. "What?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Look at the pair of us. Wandering around as naked as the day we were born. We're going to have a hard time when we do go back."

He looked down at himself. "Speak for yourself, love. I walk around like this all the time."

She rolled her eyes. "Somehow, I thought the main mast was a part of the actual ship."

He laughed at her wicked sense of humor, and she joined him. She twisted her hair into a knot on top of her head and ordered the chest to provide her some garments, which she put on while he watched.

"You might enjoy flaunting what Mother Nature gave you," she said. "I'll prefer a modicum of modesty."

He looked at the nearly sheer white blouse and equally gauzy skirt the chest had provided. Her nipples and the dark triangle between her legs showed almost as clearly as if she wore nothing. He grinned.

"If you say so, love." He asked the trunk for a pair of trousers. "I'll cover up, too, if only because I aim to find that pot of gold today if I have to look under every bush and tree in this place."

She watched him step into the pants and tie the waist string. She looked down at her garments, then at his, which concealed much more. "This hardly seems fair."

He wagged his brows at her. "Maybe I had a word with that trunk before you woke this morning."

"Really?" She glanced at her body through the sheer cloth, then

gave him a saucy grin. "Well, wait until you see what I asked it to do."

* * *

She'd have to think of something exciting to ask the trunk for, now that she'd boasted about it. Robin threatened

to tickle her if she didn't reveal her plans, but Eleanor resisted. Her erotic repertoire was limited. She'd have to wrack her brain to come up with something before tonight.... unless they found the treasure first.

She made no secret to herself she was longing for another day, another week here with Robin before they found the leprechaun's hidden booty. At first she'd thought her portion of the gold would give her the freedoms she craved. Now she knew that, without Robin at her side and in her bed, she had no need of gold or anything else.

She watched him walk ahead of her and wanted to kiss his smooth, tanned back. She wanted to slide her tongue along the waistband of his trousers and dip beneath to his thick, ridged cock. She wanted to take him in her mouth and have him do the same to her, until they both exploded into ecstasy.....

"You all right?"

He'd caught her looking. Eleanor winked. "Just watching your luscious fundament."

"You have a mouth like a sailor," he replied.

She was about to reply when something caught her attention. She moved to his side and ducked low along the path to peer beneath a stand of bushes. She'd seen something glittering. Something gold.

"I found something!"

She lifted the coin, identical to the one Robin had first shown her. It caught a ray of light and gleamed so brightly she had to close her eyes momentarily against the glare. When she opened them, she saw another coin on the ground close to where she'd found the first.

Robin knelt beside her in the dirt and picked up the second coin. "There must be more of this."

Impulsively, she hugged him. "Robin, I think we found the treasure!"

He nodded as he squeezed her back. "It looks like it."

She sat back solemnly. "And now we should go get it."

"I suppose we should."

" 'Twill be all right, Robin." She reached to touch his cheek.

He kissed her palm. "I hope you're right, love."

She slapped her hands together briskly. "We'll never know unless we try, though. Shall we go get ourselves a pot

of gold?"

He kissed her until she was breathless, then pulled away to give her a look so serious it made her frown.

"I just want you to know something. If, when we leave here, you do hate me again..."

"Yes?" she prompted.

Robin shrugged. "I just wanted you to know I won't hold it against you."

She nodded. "Nor I, you. But, as you said. If we leave and discover 'twas truly the magic bringing us together, 'tis unlikely we'll regret losing it."

He took her hand and looked toward the green wall of brush in front of them. "Right. Well, then. Let's have at it!"

Using the machete he'd taken from the wishing chest, Robin went first and hacked his way through the thick undergrowth. He let out a few ripe curses, which made her giggle. Suddenly, he fell forward so fast he disappeared from sight.

"Robin!" she cried, alarmed.

"I'm all right, love," came the reply. "Beware the hole just beyond the bushes here."

She pushed forward tentatively, then harder through the hole he'd made. As Robin had, Eleanor plunged through the greenery, but managed to sidestep the freshly dug hole on the other side of the bushes. She crossed to the other side, where she found Robin with a

huge scowl covering his face.

"The wee bloody bastard's gone and moved it."

"That's not fair!"

"No, but 'tis fairy," he said grimly. "Damn little buggers have no sense of honor!"

Eleanor was not to be put off so quickly. She ducked her head and looked carefully at the edges of the hole.

Something glittered out of the corner of her eye, and when she turned to look, she saw the glint of gold sticking out of the earth. She pulled it.

"Another coin." She showed him her prize. "I don't think he did move it after all. I think he's just trying to deceive us again."

She bent and dug in the soft ground with her bare fingers. Robin joined her and, in moments, the hole's walls began to crumble. She kept back from the edge of the

growing hole, but in another few moments let out a small cry of glee to see the first glimpse of what looked to be an iron pot.

"Lift it out, Robin!"

Robin tugged on the pot's edge. More dirt fell away. The container was larger than she'd expected, and heavier, by the looks of it. Robin worked his fingers beneath the pot's curled rim and yanked, but couldn't manage to free it from the ground.

Eleanor joined him, side by side, and heaved with him. Together, they managed to pull the pot free of its dirt prison. Together, they lifted it to the grass, and together, they watched its contents spill forth in a glittering, gleaming stream of gold.

"I couldn't have done it without you, Nora." Robin paused from running his hands through the stream of coins tumbling from the pot.

Eleanor leaned close to kiss him. "We make a good team."

She scooped a handful of the heavy coin and let it slide through her fingers into a clanking heap. She'd never seen so much money in one place. The metal was warm on her skin, and she touched it over and over, reveling in the pure sensuality of it all.

Robin tipped the pot on its side and more gold cascaded from it to cover the green grass with molten yellow. He swept the pile of coins with his hands and spread them out, then stretched out on top of them and wriggled into the pile with a grin the size of a whale. The metal clinked around him as he shifted.

"You look lovely surrounded by all that money," Eleanor teased.

He raised an eyebrow at her. "I think you'd look as lovely. Why not try it out and see?"

Lying on a bed of metal discs would have been uncomfortable but for the sheer quantity of them. They lifted and held her without pain. Eleanor rolled on her side, and Robin heaped coins along her shoulders and over her hips. He covered her with as many of the coins as he could then, dipped to kiss her still-exposed lips.

She loved that he was so playful. Her mouth opened to him and she reached for the back of his head to hold him

close to her. His hair fell across her face and she rubbed it on her cheek.

His hand came up to cup her breast. One thumb brushed over her nipple, which instantly stood at attention. Eleanor caught her breath. How many times could he bring her to completion in one day? How many times could he rise beneath her touch? She wanted to find out.

Robin let his mouth trail along her throat and found the swell of her bosom, then slipped lower to close over her nipple. The thin cloth of her shirt was no real barrier, just enough to keep the sensations from overwhelming her too soon. Eleanor rolled in the coins and drew him down beside her. They slipped onto the grass, the money forgotten.

Robin got to his knees to pull his shirt over his head, and Eleanor sat up. She put her hands on his warm skin. Her fingers found the taut buds of his nipples, and she pinched them lightly just to hear him moan. She moved lower, over his firm stomach, then slid a hand between his legs to cup him through his trousers.

"You are insatiable," he said.

"You don't sound displeased."

He kissed her again while murmuring, "I'm not."

He'd grown thick and hard already, and he strained mercilessly at the front of his breeches. Eleanor's fingers nimbly unlaced the front of his pants and let him free. She loved looking at him, this part of him that gave her so much pleasure. She ran a hand along his length and down to cup his tender sac. He let his head tilt back and pushed his pelvis forward to give her further access to him.

Eleanor wasn't one to miss an opportunity. She stroked him lightly, then paused to remove her own blouse. Their position allowed his cock to rest almost exactly between her breasts, and that was where she put him. He looked down, startled, then grinned.

"Fancy me giving you a pearl necklace, do you?"

She'd never heard that term before but quickly discerned he wasn't talking about jewelry. She pushed her breasts together to create a greater friction and moved her torso up and down, but couldn't get enough movement for satisfaction.

They reclined together. *So in tune*, she mused, as he poised himself over her, his cock still nestled in the valley of

her cleavage. He thrust forward, and she bent her neck to allow the tip of him to slide into her waiting mouth. His sigh was worth the awkwardness of her position.

Her saliva made him slick, and he slid without effort between her breasts. Eleanor's fingers dipped and swirled on her own arousal, tweaking the erect bud until her hips rocked of their own accord. The first bright sparks of orgasm beckoned her, and she backed off. She didn't want to climax too soon.

Again, without speaking or asking her what she wanted, Robin simply knew. He slid down her body, his cock leaving a moist trail on her belly, and buried himself inside her aching passage. He rested for a moment on his forearms, his chest hairs teasing her throbbing nipples. Then, with a swift, smooth motion, he rolled over until she straddled him.

"There are as many ways to make love to you as there are stars in

the sky, and I intend to try them all."

Eleanor smiled, but said nothing. Kissing him was a better use for her mouth. Robin's tongue darted between her lips and teased her before he moved his mouth over her forehead, her cheeks, the hollows of her eyes.

They moved in unison. In this position, Eleanor found she could control the depth and pace of their lovemaking. She rode him, hard then soft, while her body tensed with passion.

Her climax built. Robin slid his hand between them and pressed his thumb to her center. With every thrust, her pearl stroked against him. She let her head tilt, and the weight of her hair fell across her back.

Together, they reached their ecstasy. With a sigh of completion, Eleanor sat up, her heart still thudding from the passion they'd shared. She reached to smooth his hair away from his cheek. She meant to tell him she loved him again, but a voice stopped her.

"Well, well. What have we here?"

Winston Dandrew pushed forth from the line of bushes behind Robin. Her fiancé—former fiancé—crossed his arms over his chest and scowled down at her and Robin. Robin, on the other hand, merely glanced up nonchalantly at Winston.

Eleanor gathered her flimsy garments and began to

struggle into them. "Winston! What are you doing here!"

The man she'd planned to bind herself to furrowed his brows. "A better question, my dear Eleanor, is what were you doing?"

Robin got up, too, and pulled on his trousers as casually as if he were alone in his own bedroom. He shrugged into the shirt the trunk had earlier provided, now with green stains on the sleeves, then lifted the machete he'd used to cut through the brush. He moved in front of the pot and its spill of gold.

"Hello, Dandrew."

Winston sneered. "Your crew sailed back into port a week ago, Steele. Did you really think I wouldn't find you?"

A week? Had they been there so long? Eleanor counted rapidly, but couldn't find a week in her mind. More magic.

Robin shrugged. "I have to say, I didn't much care whether or not you found me, Dandrew. I got what I came here for."

Winston's eyes shifted to Eleanor, who lifted her chin to meet his gaze without flinching. "And a bit more besides, I see. I understand why you took my ship, Steele. But why on earth would you kidnap my betrothed?"

"I didn't kidnap her," Robin said, as Eleanor spoke, "He didn't kidnap me!"

"No?" Winston's gaze again took in her disheveled hair, the skimpy outfit, perhaps even the love marks still on her throat. "Don't tell me you went with this rogue willingly, Eleanor!"

"Not exactly," she admitted. "I was stowing away on the ship... hoping to..."

Now Winston had the grace to look perplexed. "To what, Eleanor?"

She took a deep breath and looked him in the eye again. "I was hoping to run away."

She'd obviously stunned him. "Run away? Why in Heaven would you want to do that?"

Eleanor sighed, not wanting to hurt him, but no longer willing to lie. "Because I didn't want to marry you, Winston."

"Didn't want to marry me?" His mouth gaped like a fish's. "Why not?"

Robin put his arm around her shoulders. "You don't really need a list, do you, mate? 'Tis enough the lass came

to her senses in time."

Eleanor winced at Robin's tactlessness, though the sight of Winston's purpling face made her want to giggle. She choked off the laugh when she saw the other man put his hand to his sword, however, and let out a cry when he unsheathed it and put the tip to Robin's throat.

"Unhand her!"

"Don't you hurt him, Winston!"

Winston gave her a pitying gaze that made her grit her teeth. "Do hush, Ellie. I'll take care of this ruffian for you, and then we'll get off this God-forsaken island."

"With my gold, most likely." Robin didn't even flinch when Winston's sword point nicked his neck. "I don't think so, Dandrew."

Winston's lip curled further. "We'll see about that. Stand aside, Ellie."

"I won't!"

"Nora," Robin said calmly. "Do as he says."

Her breath hissed out in indignation. "I will not—" Robin's eyes flicked toward her for one minute, and she stopped her protest. "You'd be wise to mind this time, love."

Then with a move so fast it made her head spin, Robin leaped away from Winston's sword and struck out with the machete.

* * *

Winston was no match for him at fighting. The man might have had tutors and training, but Robin had learned to defend himself against some of the most bloodthirsty, cutthroat blackguards on the sea. Now he twisted his body away from Dandrew's casual threat and lifted his own weapon.

Nora slipped to the side, but Robin had no time to see if she was all right. Dandrew attacked. He moved like a man unused to being fought against. He slashed out, and Robin blocked the blow with his machete. Dandrew countered with another swift swing.

Robin ducked, and Dandrew's sword whistled over his head.

"You'll have to try harder than that to kill me."

"Gladly," Dandrew snarled and leaped forward.

Robin pivoted on his heel and blocked another swing. He wished for a real sword instead of the blocky machete. He

had no real range, no grace, and could only block and hack. Dandrew, with his dueling rapier, had an advantage.

"Just turn around and go home," he advised Dandrew. "There's naught for you here."

"And leave you with the gold and my wife?" Dandrew gave a laugh worthy of the scurviest pirate.

Robin slashed and caught a chunk of brush near Dandrew's back. "She's not your wife!"

"She's as good as mine." Dandrew whipped his blade close enough to slash the thigh of Robin's trousers, though the skin beneath remained unscratched. "Damn it!"

"I don't think the lass wants to marry you any longer, Dandrew."

Robin danced out of Dandrew's reach and paused. Dandrew threw him a contemptuous look. He kept his sword at the ready. "Her father as good as sold her to me. I'll be the one to decide if we marry or not."

"Just walk away," Robin repeated. He gave Nora a quick glance. Her face looked strained, but her eyes snapped angrily at Dandrew's back. "Walk away with your dignity intact, mate."

Dandrew laughed. "My dignity? As if you could ever take it from me? A filthy, worthless pirate? You stole my ship because you had none of your own, and I see you stole my bride for the same reason. If there's a man here who needs to learn some dignity, it's not me, Steele."

Robin itched to simply run the man through and let his guts spill out of his belly like festival ribbons—but he held back. Nora knew him as a pirate. She didn't need to see him as a ruthless murderer.

"You got your ship back, mate," he said quietly. "And the woman is no more mine to command than she is yours. She'll make the choice of whom she wants to be with. Just go before this gets ugly."

"It's already ugly." Dandrew swiped his blade through the air again. "And I believe there's something here I want to take with me when I go."

"You'll not take the gold. 'Tis mine. I found it. I worked for it."

Again, Dandrew scoffed. "I doubt you've ever worked for anything

in your entire life, you ingrate."

Dandrew lunged, and Robin countered. Together, they made a deadly dance. There'd be no mercy now.

Robin swung his heavy weapon and caught the edge of Dandrew's sword hard enough to knock the blade from the other man's hand. The force of the motion made Dandrew slip and fall in the pile of spilled coins. He went to the ground with a thud, then held his hands up to protect himself from the final blow Robin never gave.

"Get up, Dandrew. And get out. Go back to your ship."

The other man got up, his face red with exertion and fury. He dusted himself off, but made no attempts to attack Robin again. He held out his hand to Nora.

"Come along, Ellie. Let's leave this worthless barnacle to his bedamned treasure."

She shook her head and came to stand next to Robin. She tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow. "No, Winston."

"No?"

"I'm sorry. I.... I'm staying here. With Robin."

Dandrew nodded. "I see."

"Please tell my father I will write to him. But I'm not going home with you."

"I could've given you everything you ever wanted!"

Dandrew cried, and Robin felt a bit of pity for the bastard.

"No, Winston." Nora gently squeezed Robin's elbow. "I'm afraid you couldn't."

Robin had seen looks like the one on Dandrew's face before, usually on men who'd been kneed someplace tender. He would have taken great pleasure in taunting the man further, but Nora's hand on his arm stopped him. For her, he'd be the man Dandrew should have been.

Without another word, Dandrew disappeared into the brush. Nora let out a sigh of relief so great Robin could have sworn he felt her lift off the earth from the force of it. Then she rested her head on his chest.

"That went better than expected."

"You have an odd sense of humor, love." He tilted her head up to kiss her. "But I like it."

"How sweet."

Something sour filled Robin's mouth at the sound of Dandrew's voice. He looked up to see the man pointing his pistol at the pair of them. Dandrew's grin was fierce and

bright.

"Step away from her, Steele!"

"Winston, no!"

"Don't be an idiot, Dandrew." Robin held up his hands to placate the man.

"I said step away!"

Robin saw the man's finger twitch on the trigger, and did the only thing he could. He stepped in front of Nora. The world exploded, and everything went red.

* * *

Robin stumbled back and his weight knocked her to the dirt. Pain flared in her back and legs as she struck, but fury overrode them. She struggled to her knees and cradled Robin. His eyes had closed, the lashes making dark shadows on his suddenly pale cheeks. Crimson bloomed on his shoulder, turning the white shirt red.

"You bastard!" She choked and spat the words toward Winston. "If you've killed him, I'll—"

"You'll what?" Winston's voice was cold. "You'll do nothing. You've made your bed, Ellie. Now you have to lie in it."

Ignoring her, Winston opened up the large canvas sack slung over his shoulder and knelt to fill it with the pile of gold coins. They clinked in his fingers like chimes. Soon the sack bulged with booty, and still the iron pot continued to pour its treasure.

"Robin, wake up, love." She slapped his cheeks lightly, but he didn't respond.

She had to stop the bleeding. Eleanor pulled open the loose throat of

his shirt and cried out at the sight of the blackened wound on Robin's tawny skin. Blood oozed freely from the hole's ragged edges. She tore the bottom half of her skirt and pressed it to the bullet hole. Her lap felt warm and wet, and when she lifted his shoulder, she saw the hole in the back was worse than the one in the front.

She heard herself moaning his name, over and over, and pleading. To him, to God, to whoever would listen to her cries for mercy. He couldn't die. Not her Robin. Not now. *Oh, please, oh, please...*

"Nora?" He'd opened his eyes, but they were glazed with pain. He wasn't seeing her.

"You have to stay awake." She didn't know much, but she knew if he fell back to sleep, it might be for good. There was too much blood. He was growing lighter in her arms by the minute. The ground around them stank of it.

"Please." Eleanor raised her eyes to the false sky. "Please don't let him die!"

From behind her, she heard Winston's mumbled shouts. He'd begun stuffing his pockets now that the sack was filled to the brim. His face had taken on a light of madness. He staggered upright and hefted the sack onto his back. The weight of it bent him nearly in half, but Winston grunted and crashed away into the brush.

She couldn't even cry. Her eyes burned and her throat was so tight she could barely breathe. She bent her head to kiss his forehead and shuddered at how cold his skin had become.

If she could get to the wishing chest.....

"Nothing from that chest can leave this place, lass. Do ye really want it to give ye back ye're love?"

Eleanor stared into the face of a man no larger than her forearm. Incongruously, he wore a green, flowered sarong. Tropical flowers adorned his bowler hat. The stump of a pipe jutted out from his mouth, and green smoke wreathed his tiny head. His hair and beard were as red as flame, his eyes flint black. He gestured with his pipe toward Robin.

"There's only one kind of magic that'll help that one, and it don't come from the chest."

"You're the leprechaun."

The little man inclined his head. "Bright, ye are."

"Please," Eleanor said. "Help him."

The leprechaun snorted. "Help the man who stole me lucky coin? The one who planned to rob me blind?"

"It's a game! And we won the game, you bloody little bastard! You don't need that gold!"

Again, he inclined his head. "Need is relative, lass. Who are you to say the difference between my needs and my wants?"

"Help me," she whispered, as Robin grew suddenly heavy in her arms. She was too afraid to touch her fingers to his lips to see if he still breathed. "I'll give you anything."

The little man snorted again, louder this time. "Ye have naught I want, lass."

She had nothing more to offer. "Please."

He shrugged. "Far be it from me to have you mortals bleedin' and dyin' in my realm. A mess it makes, and 'tis me who'll have to answer to Danu and her children about it. Me!"

"Tell me what to do!"

"Just love him, lass. Ye do love him, do ye not?"

There was no doubt in her heart. "Yes."

"Here, in the fairy realm, 'tis enough."

She put her hands, sticky with Robin's blood, over the hole in his chest. Just love him, the wee man had said. She thought of the way he made her body sing. Of how empty her life had been before she met him, and how empty it would be if she lost him.

"I do love him. More than anything."

"Then close ye're eyes, lass, and imagine him whole again."

She closed her eyes and thought of Robin how she'd first seen him. The vision shifted until he stood before her, dressed in the magic

chest's finery, his face clean-shaven and his hair like shining amber.

Another shift, and she saw him reaching for her with the familiar lustful glint in his eyes. One more, and he sat, an infant cradled in his arms. A babe with his honey-colored hair and her green eyes.

Eleanor opened her eyes with a gasp to see Robin staring up at her with a bemused expression. "Robin!"

"Aye, love."

She pulled away the blood-sodden shirt and pressed her fingers to the smooth, unblemished skin of his chest.

"You're all right!"

"I'm all right."

At last, she could weep. Her tears splashed onto his face. He laughed and pulled her down to kiss him.

"Don't cry, love. It's all right."

"What a lovely picture," said the leprechaun.

Robin sat up and glared. "Sod off, you little, green pustule!"

The leprechaun stuck out his tongue and disappeared. The iron pot disappeared with him.

Robin shouted out some more curses at that, but

Eleanor stopped him with a kiss. She smoothed her hand again over his chest. She shook her head and marveled at how close she had come to losing him...and how easy it had been to get him back.

"Don't worry about it," she told him. "We don't need that gold."

He smiled. "Need and want aren't necessarily exclusive, love."

"I want you," she replied. "And I need you, too. But I've discovered I couldn't give a fig for the gold."

He grimaced and pulled his shirt away from his body. "I need to get rid of this."

She looked down at herself and wrinkled her nose. "Me, too."

"I have an idea." He gave her a smile she couldn't resist. "Follow me."

* * *

Nora was giving him a look he recognized all too well. "It's hardly

as nice as a heated bath."

"But 'tis far more adventurous." He looked over her shoulder to the cascading waterfall beyond.

She looked skeptical. "I'm not so sure I'm ready for more adventure."

Robin waggled his eyebrows at her. "I'll make it worth your while."

At that, a smile bloomed on her lips. "I'll hold you to that."

He took her by the hand and led her to the warm, sandy path that led behind the waterfall. 'Twas dim behind the water, the light a wavering, greenish gold. Her eyes were nearly luminescent, her skin the color of fine pearls. Even with the streaks of gore covering her—his blood—she was the loveliest sight he'd ever seen.

She pulled off her stained clothes and walked slowly backward until the fine spray from the waterfall began to caress her. It sluiced away the muck and lifted her hair in fine tendrils about her face. She shivered prettily, and her nipples pebbled into rose-colored points he longed to suckle.

"You look like a fairy," he said.

"Hush your tongue." Eleanor beckoned. "C'mon, then. This was your idea."

He stripped down to his skin, glad to be rid of the nasty, clinging clothes that smelled of death. The spray was cool on his skin, but Robin instantly warmed when he took Nora into his arms and kissed her.

"You take my breath away."

She laughed and ran a hand over his belly, then lower, to cup him. "That's the cold water."

He lifted her chin. "No, Nora. 'Tis you."

She licked her lips, her eyes wide and glowing in the shifting light. Her body was lush and smooth in his arms. He palmed her breasts, then rolled her nipples lightly with his thumbs. Her gasp encouraged him.

Robin went to his knees before her and pressed his face to her belly. She ran her fingers through his hair, wet now from the spray. He kissed

her stomach, ran his tongue over the soft curve, then dipped lower to part her nest of curls.

Her hips moved at his touch, and he slid his hands up to keep her still. Moss cushioned his knees as he pulled her closer and nudged her knees apart to open her further to his tongue.

He dipped inside her slick fold and found her pearl, already erect and trembling under his lips. His hands cupped her buttocks and tipped her mound toward him. The position was awkward. Robin took his mouth away, and the sound of her protesting moan swept like fire through him. She was as hot for him as he for her.

He took her hand and urged her to lay down in front of him on the bed of soft moss. The fine mist of the waterfall, interspersed with more forceful droplets every now and then, coated her skin and shone like diamonds in her dark hair. He stretched out beside her and found her mouth with his.

She opened eagerly for him. Robin let his hand drift down to her breasts, but gave the nipples only the briefest tweak before he left them for the heat between her legs.

His finger dipped between her curls and found the spot he'd so recently been attending with his tongue. The small bud was erect and straining under his fingertip. He circled it slowly, gently, then went a little lower to coat himself with her slickness. Then up again, this time to swirl his caress on her pearl aided by her own fluids.

Nora arched her back and tilted her pelvis in time with his strokes. Her tongue thrust in and out of his mouth harder, faster. Her hands clutched at his hair. She was getting close to her release.

The scent and taste of her, and the frantic way her body moved, made his cock rise in a thick ridge along his belly. He pushed himself against her thigh as he continued to move his hand in small, tight circles. The steady rhythm had her writhing in another moment.

She gasped his name and left his mouth to press wild kisses along his neck and throat, where she nestled, trembling. Robin left her pearl

to slide his finger inside her, and she cried out and shuddered against him.

Her passage tightened around his finger, and he imagined his cock there instead. He throbbed, close to his own release with the mere thought of sinking into Eleanor's wet heat. Another finger joined the first, stretching her. He stroked her slick tunnel while he pressed his thumb to her source of pleasure.

He felt the first spasms of her orgasm flutter through her, and he pulled free. With a swift, smooth movement, he rolled atop her and sheathed himself inside. He groaned aloud at the exquisite pleasure, but didn't move for fear he'd spill himself like a virgin lad.

Propped up on his elbows, he could look into her face. Her cheeks and throat had flushed with her passion, and her eyes continued to catch the shimmering light. She smiled at him, and put her arms around his neck to draw him back down to her mouth.

"Make love to me," she said.

He began to move in the dance as old as humanity. In and out, as slowly as he could, though his body demanded he thrust harder and faster. Nora lifted her hips, wrapped her legs around the back of his calves, pressed her swollen center against the lower edge of his stomach. Her entire body began to shake, and his echoed it.

His balls, heavy with his seed, tightened. His cock felt as hard as iron, and hotter than an inferno. His thrusts became ragged as he tried to hold off long enough for her to climax.

All at once, her passage convulsed around him. She

gripped his cock and her cry of ecstasy sent him over the edge. Robin gathered her in his arms and held her close as he thrust into her one last time, and his cock exploded into sensation so fierce he saw spots dancing in front of his eyes.

Moments passed, and he became aware of Nora's shallow, strained breaths. He lifted his weight and saw her smile.

"Thank you," she teased. "I thought you intended to suffocate me."

Robin rolled off her, but kept her in his arms so she rested on top of him. "Never."

She pushed a sodden length of hair off her face. "I'm soaking wet and getting chilled."

He stroked his hands down her back. "But wasn't that better than some dull bath?"

She rolled her eyes, but he could see she was pleased anyway. "I suppose."

She got up and went further into the waterfall's spray, where the water came down harder and could wash away the bits of moss clinging to her skin. She scrubbed herself all over as she tilted her face into the cascade. She cracked open one eye and beckoned for him to join her, and soon both were as clean as could be.

"What now?" She looked down at their nakedness.

"Food." His stomach was rumbling. "And I might make love to you again."

She gave him an arch look. "Might?"

Robin brought her hand to his lips. "Definitely."

"Perhaps on a bed this time?" Nora asked. "I'm rather looking forward to that."

"You'd never make a good pirate, love." Robin sighed. "You're much too used to your creature comforts."

She pretended to be angry, but he could tell she was only jesting. She flounced away, back toward the path. She tossed him a glance over her shoulder.

"That may be so, Captain Steele. But you're not much better."

At least, he'd thought she was only jesting. He frowned. "How so?"

"Well." Nora pursed her lips. "You said a real pirate would have had me seven ways to Sunday." She counted on her fingers. "And I believe you've only had me six so far."

With another saucy grin, she disappeared down the path. * * *

The wishing chest had once again provided a delicious meal. The clothes it had given them were modest and appropriate. Eleanor found herself wishing for the gauzy, erotic garb she'd been wearing.

"It's telling us something, Robin. 'Tis time for us to leave here."

He wiped his mouth with the fine linen napkin the chest had put on the laden table. "I know."

She traced a pattern with her fork in the gravy on her plate. "I don't want to go."

His dark eyes got darker for a moment. "The wee green bastard took his pot away, and Winston got away with the rest. We'll be leaving without the gold, love."

"Is that what's important to you?" She pushed back from the table as heat flared into her cheeks. "The gold?"

" 'Tis why I came here, love."

She should have known better than to trust a pirate. Eleanor pushed back from the table so fast her chair fell back. Her dishes clattered as she pulled against the tablecloth.

"What else could I expect from a filthy pirate?"

His face hardened. "So now I'm a filthy pirate again?"

"You've always been one. That never changed!"

"You didn't seem to think so when I had my cock buried inside your cunny." His tone was matter-of-fact, but his eyes blazed. "Did you, love?"

"Don't you call me that!" She flailed at him. "It's a lie! And you're nothing but a filthy, scurvy liar!"

Robin got up from the table and tossed down his napkin. " 'Tis started already. The magic is fading."

His whisper brushed her face, and she bared her teeth at him. "Don't be ridiculous."

" 'Tis that bloody leprechaun again. I'd bet anything on it. Don't let him do this to us, Nora."

"Do what? Show us the truth? We knew all along this might not be

anything more than a fantasy!"

Robin drew her closer to him until she was forced to look into his eyes. "Listen to your heart, love. 'Tis trying to tell us the truth."

She closed her eyes, but opened them quickly when she thought she heard the leprechaun's fading laughter. "But the gold?"

" 'Tis the reason I came here, yes. But the treasure I found is far greater than that. I found you."

Her anger melted like sugar poured into hot tea. She flung her arms his neck. "Oh, Robin, forgive me. I was foolish! I don't know what made me so angry with you!"

"Magic," came his simple reply. He kissed her temple. "We'd best leave this place, and quickly, else he might try to turn us against each other even worse."

Her mind flashed back to the memory of the two men they'd found their first day here. She shuddered and clung to him for one more second before stepping away. "I agree."

Robin took her hand. "Then let's go, love. Together."

Eleanor squeezed his fingers. "Together."

They left the table and its dishes, and put their feet to the curving path down which they'd originally come. Robin's hand was warm and strong. They walked in silence for about a dozen paces before she spoke again.

"I can't hate him."

"Who? Winston?" Robin gave her a sideways, cautious glance.

She shook her head. "The leprechaun. He let us a merry chase, and perhaps he manipulated us more than I'd care to admit. But I can't hate him."

"I believe I hate him enough for the both of us," Robin replied grimly. "And your thieving Winston as well."

She stopped, and their linked hands meant he stopped, too. "You really do care about that gold."

He sighed. "Of course I do, Nora. That money was going to turn me

into an honest man. The sort who could make an offer for your hand and keep you in the manner you deserve. Without it.... I'm just what you said: a filthy pirate."

"Is that what you think?" She put her hand to his cheek. "Oh, Robin. Do you think I couldn't love you unless you're a staid and proper business man like Winston Dandrew?"

He embraced her and nuzzled her hair. His voice was muffled. "Love isn't always enough, Nora."

"Robin Steele," she scolded. "If you think I'm going to let you get away just because you didn't find that bedamned

gold, you're absolutely mad!"

He pulled away to look at her. "I want to be able to provide more for you than a sea-damp berth on a stolen ship."

"Robin," Eleanor said gently. "Wherever we go will be wonderful. As long as we're together."

She could tell she hadn't convinced him. "You say that now, but what of when we've naught but salt biscuits and grog to sustain us?"

"I have faith in you," was all she said.

It was all she needed to say. It was the truth. No magic could change it.

"And what if I disappoint you?"

She'd never heard such blunt honesty from a man. Winston, her father, her brothers all spent all their days blustering and swaggering. She'd never thought a man could admit to doubt of anything, much less about himself.

His vulnerability only made her love him more, for she understood how difficult it must have been for him to reveal it. She stood on her toes to take his face in her hands. She searched his gaze with her own and marveled at how fates and magic had led her to this man.

"Robin, I love you. And not because of the size of your purse or the number of sails on your ship. I love what's inside you, and that could never disappoint me."

She saw his struggle, and admired him all the more.

"I don't know what I did to make myself worthy of your love, Nora, but 'tis proud and glad I am to have it. I'll do my best for you, love."

His kiss took her breath away. When he left her lips, she laughed and shook her finger at him.

"Stop distracting me or we'll never get out of here."

He looked down the path and a cloud passed over his face. "The sooner we rid ourselves of this place, the better. Let's go."

She followed him on the path, their hands linked and his strength helping her when the way grew steep or narrow. There seemed to be a far more foliage than when they'd arrived, and the way more difficult to transverse. In fact, she barely recognized the trees and bushes along the path.

"Are you certain this is the right way out?"

Robin paused and hacked at a low hanging tree with the

machete from his belt. "No. And I wouldn't put it past that scurvy emerald dog to try and trick us either."

She thought about the leprechaun's advice. "Stop for a moment."

Robin looked at her, and she concentrated on the face and form that had brought her so much joy. A shaft of the not-sunlight came from the not-sky and outlined him in gold. He was her treasure, the only one she'd ever need.

"Love will show us the way," she told him. "That's what the leprechaun said."

Robin snorted. "And he's a trustworthy devil, is he?"

"It helped me save you." Eleanor squinted over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of clearer ground. She pointed. "There."

Together they pushed through the last overgrown stand of trees and reached the clearing she'd spotted. It became immediately clear why the trees had not overgrown this small portion of land. The center of it was a round pit of mucky, wet sand. The edges sloped toward the middle, where a thin sheen of pure water glimmered on top of the sand.

"Winston!"

Her former fiancé floundered and splashed in the center of the pit. "Help me out of here!"

"Stop moving!" Robin ordered. " 'Tis quicksand, man. 'Twill suck you down if you don't stop struggling!"

"Like I'd listen to you, Steele!" Winston sank to the bottom of his chin. He scrabbled at the surface of the sand. One hand still clutched the canvas sack he'd stuffed with gold.

"Let go of the gold!" Robin shouted.

Winston sunk another inch, and the sand covered his mouth. He struggled harder, but kept hold of the sack. Eleanor took a step closer, horrified at the sight. Only Robin's hand on her arm kept her from falling into the sand herself.

"Winston, please!"

Winston gave one last, desperate lunge. Then he went under. A few bubbles burst in his wake and he was gone.

"No!" Eleanor covered her face with her hands.

Robin's arms went around her. "Don't look, love."

"Why didn't he listen?"

Robin, to give him credit, didn't give the answer they both knew to be true. Winston's pride and greed had sucked him below the surface. She sniffled, but couldn't shed more than a tear or two.

Several scattered coins around the edge of the pit showed the path Winston had taken to his doom.

"Quicksand." Robin let out a low whistle. "Poor bastard. He might have made it if he'd let go of the gold, but the weight of it must've taken him right down."

She shuddered. "Poor Winston."

She bent to pick up a coin lying near her foot, but Robin stopped her. "Don't. That gold is cursed. Leave it to the wee man."

She nodded and stepped away. They moved away from the clearing and its deadly contents, and pushed back through the brush. Hours

later, tired and sore from the multitude of scratching branches, they at last found the portal through which they'd originally arrived.

"This is it." Robin swiped at his sweating brow.

Eleanor swallowed and wished for a drink. "Back to civilization."

"Back to face your father and brothers." Robin pretended to shudder.

"I can handle them."

"I have no doubt of that." He pulled her into his arms. "There's not a man alive who can stand in your way when you want something, you stubborn vixen."

She pointed her chin toward the black tunnel. "It's time, Robin. But this time, don't leave me behind."

"Never," he promised. "You'll be with me all the way."

She took a deep breath. His hand closed over hers. They stepped into the blackness.

For an instant, disoriented, she staggered and almost fell. Robin was there to steady her. His body heat warmed her in the tunnel's dank chill. He moved, and she followed, while the passage closed in on them.

It seemed they walked forever before the first glimmer of light shone ahead of them. In the next moment, they stumbled out into the abandoned rumrunner's den. A minute after that, they were blinking in the bright Caribbean sunshine.

Eleanor lifted her face to the glorious warmth of it. It was real. The sand beneath her feet was real. The sea in front of her was real. And the man beside her as real as anything she'd ever seen...and as naked as the day he was worn.

"Robin!" She looked down at herself, as bare as he. She began to giggle. "The leprechaun was right. Nothing from the wishing chest can leave the fairy realm."

Robin put his hands on his hips and widened his stance. "That little mucker."

She shaded her eyes and caught sight of a familiar shape, anchored just beyond the surf. "There's the *Rainbow*."

A spear of sorrow shot through her at the thought of Winston, whose greed had been his demise. She could mourn for the man who had almost been her husband, even if she hadn't loved him. On the ship's deck, small dark shapes moved and clambered up and down the ropes.

"It has a crew."

She looked at Robin, then let her gaze move over the glory of his nakedness. "I'm sure they'll take us wherever we'd need to go."

"The question, love, is where do we want to go?"

Before she could answer, something else caught her attention, a flash of fire in the sand. She bent to pick it up, then turned it over and over in her fingers while it caught the light. It came to rest in her palm, a heavy green stone the size of an egg. An emerald.

She showed him, and Robin immediately looked around, as though he expected to see someone. "It's his!"

"The leprechaun's?"

"I've no doubt."

She curled her fingers over it. It was faintly warm, but from more than just the sand. She took a step toward the sea, and a familiar heat flared against her skin. A step back and the gem cooled.

"It's like that first coin." She moved again toward the waves and felt the sting. "Do you know what this means?"

"It means that wee nightmare is trying to bugger us again!"

He scowled, but Eleanor laughed and took his hand. "No, love. It means we have the chance for another adventure."

A slow, hot smile spread across his face and made her

knees weak. "Are you sure that's what you want, love?"

Eleanor stepped into his arms. "I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

As he bent her backward from the force of his kiss, and her body

caught aflame with desire, Eleanor thought she heard the faint sound of the leprechaun's laughter on the warm Caribbean breeze.

MEGAN HART

Megan Hart began her writing career in grammar school when she plagiarized a short story by Ray Bradbury. She soon realized that making up her own stories was better than copying other people's, and she's been writing ever since.

Megan's award-winning short fiction has appeared in such diverse publications as *Hustler*, *On Our Backs* and *The Reaper*. Her novels include every genre of romance, from historical to steamy futuristic SF. In addition to her short erotic fiction for the Amber Kisses imprint, look for her other Amber Quill novels: *Riverboat Bride*, *Lonesome Bride*, *Convicted!* and *Love Match*.

Megan's current projects include a fantasy series, a futuristic trilogy and a dramatic suspense novel. Her dream is to have a movie made of every one of her novels, starring herself as the heroine and Keanu Reeves as the hero. Megan lives in the deep, dark woods of Pennsylvania with her husband and two monsters.... er.... children.

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***Don't miss Opening The Door, by Megan Hart,
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