

Velvet Song - Jude Deveraux

PART I

The South of

England

January

1502

Chapter One

THE LITTLE VILLAGE of Moreton was surrounded by a

high stone wall, the gray of the stones casting a long, early-morning shadow over the many houses packed inside. Well-worn pathways connected the buildings, radiating out from the central position of the towering church and the tall white town hall. Now, in the dim light of the morning, a few dogs began to stretch, sleepy-eyed women lazily walked toward the town well and four men waited, with axes over their shoulders, while the gatekeepers opened the heavy oak gates in the stone wall.

Inside one house, a plain, narrow, two-story, whitewashed house, Alyxandria Blackett listened with every pore of her body for the creak of the gates. When she heard it, she grabbed her soft leather shoes and began tiptoeing toward the stairs, which were, unfortunately, on the other side of her father's bed

VELVET SONG

room. She'd been dressed for hours, waking long before the sun rose, slipping a plain, rather coarse woolen dress over her slight figure. And today, for once, she didn't look down in disgust at her body. It seemed that all her life she'd been waiting to grow up, to gain some height and, most of all, to gain some curves. But at twenty she knew she was always going to be flat-chested and hipless. At least, she thought with a sigh, she had no need for corsets. In her father's room, she tossed him a quick glance to make sure that he was sleeping, flipped the wool of her skirt over her arm and started down, skipping the fourth step, as she knew it creaked badly.

Once downstairs she didn't dare open a window shutter. The sound might wake her father, and he very much needed his rest now. Skirting a table covered with papers and ink and a half-finished will her father was drafting, she went to the far wall, gazing up with love at the two musical instruments hanging there. All thoughts of self-pity for what God had forgotten in her physically disappeared when she thought of her music. Already a new tune was beginning to form in her head, a gentle, rolling melody. It was obviously a love song.

"Can't make up your mind?" came her father's voice from the foot of the stairs.

Instantly, she ran to him, put her arm around his waist and helped him sit at the table. Even in the dark room she could see the bluish circles under his eyes. "You should have stayed in bed. There's time enough to do a day's work without starting before daylight."

Catching her hand for a moment, he smiled up into her pretty eyes. He well knew what his daughter thought of her little elfin face with its tip-tilted violet

VELVET SONG

eyes, tiny nose and curvy little mouth-he'd certainly heard her wail about it enough-but to him everything about her was dear. "Go on," he said, pushing her gently. "Go and see if you can choose which instrument to take and leave before someone comes and complains they must have a song for their latest love."

"Perhaps this morning I should stay with you," she whispered, her face showing her concern for him. Three times in the last year he'd had horrible pains in his heart.

"Alyx!" he warned. "Don't disobey me. Now gather your things and leave!"

"Yes, my lord," she laughed, giving what, to him, was a heart-melting smile, her eyes turning up at the corners, her mouth forming a perfect cupid's bow. With a swift, practiced gesture she pulled the long, steel-stringed cittern from the wall, leaving the psaltery where it was. Turning, she looked back at her father. "Are you sure you'll be all right? I don't have to leave this morning."

Ignoring her, he handed her her scholar's box, a lap desk containing pen, ink and paper. "I'd rather have you creating music than staying home with a sick old man. Alyx," he cautioned. "Come here," With a familiar gesture he began to plait her long hair into a fat braid down her back. Her hair was heavy and thick, perfectly straight without a hint of curl and the color was, even to her father, very odd. It was almost as if a child had thrown together every hair color possible on one very small young woman's head. There were streaks of gold, bright yellow, deep red, a golden red, mouse brown and, Alyx swore, even some gray.

4

5

VELVET SONG

When her hair was braided, he pulled her cloak from the wall, put it about her shoulders and tied the hood over her head. "Don't get so engrossed you forget to stay warm, he said with mock fierceness, turning her about. "Now go, and when you return I want to hear something beautiful."

"I'll do my best," she said, laughing as she left the house, closing the door behind her.

From their house at the very back of the town wall, directly across from the big gates, Alyx could see nearly all of the town as the people were beginning to stir and get ready to greet the day. There was a matter of inches between the houses and in the tiny alleyway that ran along the wall. Half-timbered and stone, brick and stucco houses sat side by side, ranging in size from the mayor's house down to the tiny houses of the craftsmen and, like her father's, the lawyers'. A bit of breeze stirred the air and the shop

signs rattled.

"Good morning," a woman sweeping the gravel before her house called to Alyx. "Are you working on something for the church today?"

Slinging the citternw by its strap onto her back, she waved back at her neighbor. "Yes ... and no. Everything!" She laughed, waving and hurrying toward the gate.

Abruptly, she stopped as she nearly ran into a cart horse. One look up showed her that John Thorpe had purposefully tried to trip her.

"Hoa, now, little Alyx, not a kind word for me?" He grinned as she sidestepped the old horse.

"Alyx!" called a voice from the back of the wagon. Mistress Burbage was emptying chamber pots into the honey wagon John drove. "Could you come inside for a moment? My youngest daughter is heartbroken, and

VELVET SONG

I thought perhaps a new love song might make her well."

"Aye, and for me," John laughed from atop the wagon. "I have need of a love song, too," he said, ostentatiously rubbing his side where two nights before Alyx had given him a fierce pinch when he'd tried to kiss her.

"For you, John," she said very sweetly, "I'll write a song as sweet as the honey in your wagon." The sound of his laughter almost hid her answer to Mistress Burbage that she'd see her after evening-mass.

With a gasp, Alyx began to run toward the gate. In another few moments she'd get caught and would never get her time alone, outside the walls, to work on, her music.

"Ye're late, Alyx," the gatekeeper said, "and don't forget the sweet music for my sick babe," he called after her as she ran toward the orchards outside the walls.

Finally, she reached her favorite apple tree and, with a laugh of sheer happiness, opened the little desk and set about preparing to make a record of the music she heard in her head. Sitting down, leaning back against the tree, she pulled her cittern across her lap and began to strum the tune she'd heard this morning. Totally absorbed, working with melody and lyrics, recording on paper the notes, she was unaware of the hours passing. When she came up for air, her shoulders stiff, fingers sore, she had written two songs and started on a new psalm for the church.

With a long, exuberant stretch, she set aside her cittern, rose and, one hand on a low, bare branch of the apple tree, gazed out across the fields of crops, past them to the earl's enclosed sheep pastures.

6

7

VELVET SONG

No! she would not let herself think of the earl, who'd pushed so many farmers from the land by raising their rents and then fencing it and filling the space with his profitable sheep. Think of something pleasant, she commanded herself, turning to look the other way. And, of course, what else was there really beautiful in life besides music?

As a child she'd always heard music in her head. While the priest droned on in Latin at Mass, she'd occupied her mind with creating a song for the boys' choir. At the Harvest Festival she wandered away, preoccupied with songs only she could hear. Her father, a widower for years, had been nearly insane trying to find his lost child.

One day when she was ten, she'd gone to the well to draw water. A troubadour visiting the town had been sitting with a young woman on a bench, and beside the well, unattended, was his lute. Alyx had never touched any musical instrument before, but she'd heard enough and seen enough to know basically how to make a lute play. Within minutes, she'd plucked out one of the hundreds of tunes chorusing

through her head. She was on her fourth song before she realized the troubadour was beside her, his courting forgotten. Silently, without a word between them, needing only the language of music, he had shown her how to place her fingers for the chords. The pain of the sharp strings cutting into her small, tender fingertips was nothing compared to her joy at being able to hear her music outside her mind.

Three hours later, when her father, with a resigned air, went to look for his daughter, he found her surrounded by half the townspeople, all of them whispering that they were seeing a miracle. The

VELVET SONG

priest, seeing a wonderful possibility, took her to the church and set her before the virginals. After a few minutes of experimenting, Alyx began to play, badly at first, a magnificat, a song of praise to the church, softly speaking the words as she played.

Alyx's father was thoroughly relieved that his only child wasn't light in the head after all, that it was just so filled with music that sometimes she didn't respond to everything said to her. After that momentous day, the priest took over Alyx's training, saying her gift was from God and as God's spokesman, he would take charge of her. He didn't need to add that as a lawyer, her father was far away from God's holiness and the less she associated with such as him, the better.

There followed four years of rigorous training in which the priest managed the loan of every instrument created for Alyx to learn to play. She played the keyboard instruments, horns, strings with and without a bow, drums, bells and the huge pipe organ the priest shamed the town into buying for the Lord (and for him and Alyx, some said).

When the priest was sure she could play, he sent for a Franciscan monk who taught her how to write music, to record the songs, ballads, masses, litanies, whatever she could set to music.

Because she was so busy playing instruments and writing down notes, it wasn't until she was fifteen that anyone realized she could sing. The monk, who was nearly ready to return to his abbey, since Alyx had learned all he could teach her, walked into the church very early one morning and was surrounded by a voice so powerful he could feel the buttons on his cloak trembling. When he was able to convince him

VELVET SONG

self that this magnificent sound came from his very small pupil, he fell to his knees and began to give thanks to God for letting him have contact with such a blessed child.

Alyx, when she saw the old monk on his knees at the back of the church, holding his cross tightly, tears running down his face, stopped singing immediately and ran to him, hoping he wasn't ill, or, as she suspected, offended at her singing, which she knew was dreadfully loud.

After that, as much attention was paid to her voice as to her playing and she began to arrange choral groups, using every voice in the little walled-off town.

Suddenly, she was twenty years old, expecting any day to grow up and, she desperately hoped, out. But she stayed little, and flat, while the other girls her age married and had babies, and Alyx had to be content to sing the lullabies she'd written to teething infants.

What right did she have to be discontent, she thought now, hanging onto the apple tree? Just because the young men all treated her with great respect -except, of course, John Thorpe, who too often smelled like what he hauled-was no reason to be discontent. When she was sixteen and of marriageable age and not so old as now, four men had offered her marriage, but the priest said her music was a sign that she was meant for God's work and not some man's lust and therefore refused to allow any marriage. Alyx, at the time, was relieved, but the older she got, the more she was aware of her loneliness. She loved her music and especially loved what she did for the church, but sometimes . . . like two summers ago when she'd had four glasses of very strong wine at the

VELVET SONG

mayor's daughter's wedding, she grabbed her cittern, stood on a table and sang a very, very bawdy song, which she made up as she went along. Of course, the priest would have stopped her, but since he'd had more wine than anyone else and was rolling in the grass, holding his stomach with laughter at Alyx's

song, he certainly wasn't capable of stopping anyone. That had been a wonderful evening, when she'd been a part of the people she'd known all her life, not something set aside by the priest's command, rather like a holy bit of St. Peter's skull in the church, awe inspiring but far from touchable.

Now as she always did, she began to turn her thoughts to song. Breathing deeply, spacing her breath as she'd been taught, she began a ballad of life's loneliness, of a young woman seeking her own true love.

"And here I am, little songbird," came a man's voice from behind her.

So intent on singing-and, indeed, her voice would have covered the sound she had not heard the young men on horseback approaching. There were three of them, all big, strong, healthy, lusty as only the nobility could be, their faces flushed from what she guessed to be a night of revelry. Their clothes, the fine velvets and fur linings with a jewel winking here and there, were things she'd seen only on the church altar. Dazed, she looked up at them, didn't even move when the largest blond man dismounted.

"Come, serf," he said, and his breath was foul. "Don't you even know your own lord? Allow me to introduce myself. Pagnell, soon to be Earl of Waldenham."

10

11

VELVET SONG

The name brought Alyx alive. The great, greedy, ugly Waldenham family drained the village farmers of every cent they had. When they had no more, the farmers were thrown off the land, left to die wandering the country, begging for their bread.

Alyx was just about to open her mouth to tell this foul young man what she thought of him when he grabbed her, his hideous mouth descending on hers, his tongue thrusting, making her gag.

"Bitch!" he gasped when she clamped her teeth down on his tongue. "I'll teach you who is the master." With one grasp, he tore her cloak away and instantly his hand was at the collar of her dress, tearing easily, exposing one small, vulnerable shoulder and the top of her breast.

"Shall we throw such a small fish back?" he taunted over his shoulder to his friends, who were dismounting.

The reference to her lack of physical endowment above the waist was what changed Alyx's fear to anger. Although she may have been born this man's social inferior, her talent had caused her to be treated as no one's inferior. In a gesture none of the men expected, Alyx pulled up her skirt, raised her leg and viciously kicked Pagnell directly between the legs. The next instant pandemonium broke loose. Pagnell bent double in pain while his companions desperately tried to hear what he was saying as they were still much too drunk to fully comprehend what was going on.

Not sure where she was going or in which direction, Alyx began to run. Her lung power from her many years of breathing exercises held her in good stead. Across cold, barren fields she ran, stumbling twice,

VELVET SONG

trying to hold her torn gown together, the skirt. away from her feet.

At the second fence, the hated sheep enclosure, she stopped, slumped against the post, tears running down her face. But even through tears she could see the three horsemen as they combed the area looking for her.

"This way!" came a voice to her left. "This way!"

Looking up, she saw an older man on horseback, his clothes as rich and fine as Pagnell's. With the look of -a trapped animal, she began to run again, away from this new man who pursued her.

Easily, he caught up with her, pacing beside her on his horse. "The boys mean no harm," he said. "They're just high-spirited and had a little too much to drink last night. If you'll come with me I'll get you away from them, hide you somewhere."

Alyx wasn't sure if she should trust him. What if he handed her over to those lecherous, drunken noblemen?

"Come on, girl," the man said. "I don't want to see you hurt."

Without another thought, she took the hand offered to her. He hauled her into the saddle before him and kicked the horse into a gallop, heading toward the faraway line of trees.

"The King's forest," Alyx gasped, holding onto the saddle for dear life. No commoner was allowed to enter the King's forest, and she'd seen several men hanged for taking rabbits from it.

"I doubt Henry will mind just this once," the man said.

As soon as they were inside the forest, he lowered her from his horse. "Now go and hide and do not

12

13

VELVET SONG

leave this place until the sun is high. Wait until you see other serfs out about their business, then return to your walls."

Wincing once at his calling her, a freewoman, a serf, she nodded and ran deeper into the forest.

Noon took a very long time in coming, and while she waited in the dark, cold forest in a torn dress without her cloak, she became fully aware of her terror at what could have happened at the hands of the nobles. Perhaps it was her training by the priest and the monk that made her believe the nobles had no right to use her people as they wished. She had a right to peace and happiness, had a right to sit under a tree and play her music, and God gave no one the power to take such a thing away from another person.

After only an hour her anger kept her warm. Of course, she knew her anger came partly from a happening last summer. The priest had arranged for the boys' chorus and Alyx to sing in the earl's Pagneli's father's-private chapel. For weeks they'd worked, Alyx always trying to perfect the music, driving herself to exhaustion rehearsing. When at last they had performed, the earl, a fat man ridden with gout, had said loudly he liked his women with more meat on them and for the priest to bring her back when she could entertain him somewhere besides church. He left before the service was finished.

When the sun was directly overhead, Alyx crept to the edge of the forest and spent a long time studying the countryside, seeing if she saw anyone who resembled a nobleman. Tentatively, she slowly made her way back to her apple tree-hers no longer, as now it would carry too many ugly memories.

There Alyx suffered her greatest shock, for broken

VELVET SONG

into shreds and splinters lay her cittern, obviously trampled and retrampled by horses' hoofs. Quick, hot tears of anger, hate, frustration, helplessness welled up through her body, spilling down her cheeks unheeded. How could they? she raged, kneeling, picking up a piece of wood. When her lap was full of splinters she saw the uselessness of what she was doing and with all her might began to fling the pieces against the tree.

Dry eyed, shoulders back, she started for the safety of her town, her anger capped for the moment but still very close to the surface.

Chapter Two

THE BIG ROOM of the manor house was hung with brilliant tapestries, the empty spaces covered with weapons of every kind. The heavy, massive furniture was scarred, gouged from ax blades and sword cuts. At the big table sat three young men, their eyes heavily circled from a short life of little sleep and much wine.

"She bested you, Pagnell," laughed one of the men, filling his wine cup, sloshing it on his dirty sleeve. "She beat you, then disappeared like the witch she is. You heard her sing. That wasn't a human voice but one meant to entice you to her and when you went-" He stopped, slammed his fist into his palm and laughed loudly.

Pagnell put his foot on the man's chair and pushed, sending man and chair sprawling. "She's human," he growled, "and not worth my time."

VELVET SONG

"Pretty eyes," one of the other men said. "And that voice. You think when you stuck it in her, she'd cry out in some note that'd curl the hairs on your legs?"

The first man laughed, righting his chair. "Romantic! I'd make her sing me a song about what she'd like me to do to her."

"Quiet, both of you," Pagnell growled, draining his wine. "I tell you she was human, nothing more."

The other men said nothing and sat silently for a moment, but when a servant girl passed through the room, Pagnell grabbed her. "In the village, there's a girl who can sing. Who is she?"

The servant girl tried to twist away from his painful grip. "That's Alyx," she whispered.

"Stop twisting or I'll break it," Pagnell commanded. "Now tell me exactly where this Alyx lives inside your beastly little town."

An hour later, in the dark night, Pagnell and his three cohorts were outside the walled village of Moreton, tossing pronged, steel hooks to the top of the wall. After three tries, two hooks held, their attached ropes hanging down the wall to the ground. With much less expertise than if they'd been sober, the three men pulled themselves up the ropes to the top of the wall, pausing for a moment before retrieving the hooks and ropes and lowering themselves down to the ground in the narrow alleyway behind the closely packed houses.

Pagnell raised his arm, motioning for the men to follow him as he quietly went to the front of the houses, his eyes searching the street signs hanging over the silent houses. "A witch!" he muttered angrily. "I'll show them how mortal she is. The daughter of a lawyer, the scum of the earth."

16

17

VELVET SONG

At Alyx's house he paused, slipping quickly to the side of it and a latched shutter. One strong blow, one quick sound and the shutter was open and he was inside.

Upstairs, Alyx's father lay quietly, his hands clutching at his breast, at the pains starting there once again. At the sound of the shutter giving, he gasped, not at first believing what he heard. There had been no robberies in town for years.

Quickly striking flint and tinder, he lit a candle and started down the stairs. "What do you ruffians think you're doing?" he demanded loudly as Pagnell helped his friend through the window.

They were the last words he uttered for in a second, Pagnell was across the room, his hand on the old man's hair, a dagger digging deeply as he slashed the man's throat. Without even a second glance to the body as it thudded lifelessly to the floor, he went back to his friends at the window. When they were

through, he started up the stairs.

Alyx had not been able to sleep after the day's ordeal. Every time she closed her eyes she saw Pagnell, smelled his horrible breath, felt his tongue in her mouth. She'd somehow been able to keep what had happened from her father, not wanting to worry him, but for the first time in her life something besides music occupied her thoughts.

So upset was she that at first she did not hear the sounds below stairs, only -becoming aware of her surroundings when she heard her father's angry voice and the odd thud that followed.

"Robbers!" she gasped, flinging back the woolen covers to stand nude in the room. Quickly, she grabbed her dress, pulling it-over her head. Why

would anyone want to rob them? They were too poor to be worth robbing. The Lyon belt! she thought, perhaps they've heard of that. Opening a small wall cupboard, she expertly lifted the false bottom and removed the only thing of value she owned, a gold belt, and fastened it about her waist.

A noise in her father's room startled her as footsteps came toward her room. Grabbing a stool and a heavy iron candlestick, she positioned herself behind the door, waiting breathlessly.

The door on its leather hinges opened very slowly, and when Alyx had a good clear shot at the foreign head, she brought down the candlestick with all her might.

Crumpling at her feet was Pagnell, his eyes open for

just an instant, seeing her before falling unconscious.

The sight of him, this nobleman, in her little house, renewed her terror of the afternoon. This was no ordinary robbery, and where was her father? More -footsteps, heavy ones, pounding up the stairs, brought her to her senses. After one desperate glance, she knew the window was -her only means of escape. Running to it, she didn't give a thought to how high she was when she lowered herself and jumped.

The fall slammed her into the ground, where she rolled back against the wall, stunned, breathless for a full terrifying minute. There was no time to lie in the dirt and try to collect herself. Limping, a pain in her side and left leg, she hobbled toward the side of her house where a shutter gaped open.

The moonlight was not a good source of light, but lying beside her father in a tilted candlestick holder was a glowing candle-all she needed to see clearly

VELVET SONG

18

19

VELVET SONG

the great gaping hole in her father's throat, his head

lying in a pool of his own blood.

Dazed, Alyx left the window and began to walk

away from her house. She didn't notice the cold-air on

her arms, the chill piercing through her crudely woven wool gown. No longer did she care about Pagnell or what he intended to do to her, what he took from her house, because he had already taken all he could. Her father, the one person who had loved her not because she was a musician but just because he liked her, was dead. What more could the nobleman take than that?

Walking, not seeing where she was going, she finally half fell, half collapsed in front of the church, on her knees, her hands clasped, and began praying for her father's soul, that he be received in Heaven with all the welcome he deserved.

Perhaps it was the years of training Alyx had received that made her able to concentrate so singlemindedly, or perhaps it was her grief, but she heard nothing of the turmoil that went on about her, neither saw nor heard the crackling flames that consumed her house and cremated her father's lifeless body. The constant fear of fire within the walls brought most of the citizens from their houses, and in their terror they did not see Alyx's slight form huddled in the recessed door of the church.

At first light, the gates were opened, and waiting outside were six armored knights bearing the emblem of the Earl of Waldenham. The great stallions' hoofs cut into the narrow paths between the houses, the knights slashing with two-handed swords at any sign or roof projection that got in their way as they moved slowly, possessively, through the town. Women grabbed their children away from the dangerous

VELVET SONG

horses, holding them, paralyzed, as they watched these massive, formidable, helmeted men make their way through the peaceful town.

The knights paused at the smoldering ruins of the Blackett house and the leader pulled a parchment from his saddle, nailing it to one standing, charred post. Without lifting his helmet, he looked down from atop his tall horse to the wide-eyed, frightened townspeople. With one swift gesture he took the lance he carried and deftly speared a dog, tossing the instantly killed body into the ashes.

"Read this and beware!" he said in a growl that reverberated off the stone walls of the town.

Without heed for the townspeople, the men kicked their horses forward and thundered out of the town, taking the opposite side, destroying yet another road

before they vanished through the gates, leaving a

stunned populace behind them.

It was some moments before anyone recovered

enough to look toward the paper nailed to the post

and the priest, who was able to read, stepped forward.

He took his time in the reading of the parchment, and

the townspeople were silent while they waited. When

at last the priest turned, his face was white, drawn.

"Alyx," he began slowly. "Alyxandria Blackett has

been accused of heresy, witchcraft and thievery. The

Earl of Waldenham says the girl used her devil-given

voice to entice his son, and when he tried to resist her,

she profaned the church. At his further resistance, she

smote him with her evil powers and robbed him."

For a moment, no one could even breathe. Alyx's

voice given by the devil? Perhaps she was astonishing

ly gifted, but surely God had given her her ability.

Didn't she use her voice in praise of the Lord? Of

20

21

VELVET SONG

course, there were some songs she created that were far removed from church music, perhaps . . .

As one, they looked up as they saw Alyx walk across the ground that separated her house from the back of the church, saw her stumble slightly over a torn piece of earth cut by the knights' horses. With puzzled expressions, some with doubt on their faces, they parted to let her pass. She stood still and silent, gazing at what had been her house.

"Come, my child," the priest said quickly, his arm about her shoulders, as he half pulled her to the parish house. Once inside, he began to work quickly, tossing bread and cheese into a canvas bag. "Alyx, you must leave this place."

"My father," she said quietly.

"I know, we saw his body inside the flames. Hush, now, he was already dead, and I will say twenty-five

Masses for his soul. We must worry about you now."

When he saw she wasn't really listening, he gave her a sharp shake, making her head snap back. "Alyx! You must listen to me." As a light began to come back into her eyes, he told her about the notice for her arrest. "There is a reward for you, either dead or alive."

"Reward?" she whispered. "Of what value am I?"

"Alyx, you are of great value, but you have angered an earl for some reason. I have not told anyone of the reward, but they will soon find out and they will not all protect you. Some greedy cur will be only too willing to give you away for the reward."

"Then let them! I am innocent and the king-"

The priest's laugh cut her off as he wrapped her in a heavy, too long cloak. "You would be found guilty

and the best you could hope for is a hanging. I want you to go now and wait for me at the edge of the King's forest. Tonight I will come for you, and I hope I will have a plan that we can use. Go now, Alyx, and quickly. Let as few people see you as possible. I will come tonight and bring you an instrument and more food. Perhaps we can find a way for a young girl to earn her keep."

Before Alyx could reply to what was happening, she was pushed out the door, the bag of food about her shoulder, her hands holding the long cloak up. She hurried toward the gate, making no attempt to hide, but since nearly all the townspeople were still gathered at the ruins of Alyx's house, no one saw her.

Once in the forest, she sat down, exhausted, griefridden, her mind unable to comprehend or believe the events of the last few hours. An hour passed in which the image of her dead father stayed fixed before her eyes and she remembered their life together, the way he'd cared for her. At last, after a night of prayer and a hideous morning, she began to cry, and cry, and cry, and wrapping the cloak over her head, huddling down into a tight little ball, she gave vent to her grief. After a long while, her tired muscles began to relax and she fell asleep, still shaking, buried under the folds of the cloak.

It was close to sunset when she woke, her muscles

aching, her left leg hurt from her jump from the window, her head throbbing. Carefully, she pushed back the wool from her face only to see a man sitting on a log not far from her. With a frightened gasp, she looked about for a way to escape.

"There's no need to run from me," the man said

22

23

VELVET SONG

gently, and his voice made her recognize him. He was the servant of Pagnell, the one who'd helped her escape the nobleman yesterday.

"Did you come for the reward?" she asked with a half sneer. "Perhaps I will tell how you helped me before. I don't think your master will like that."

To her surprise the man chuckled. "Have no fear of me, child," he said. "Your priest and I have had a good long talk while you slept and we have a plan for you. If you are willing to listen I think we can hide

you well enough that no one will find you."

Nodding curtly, she looked at him, waiting for him to continue. As his plan unfolded, her eyes widened in a mixture of horror, fear and some feeling of anticipation at the prospect of adventure.

The servant had a brother who had once been a soldier for the king, but since the man had had the misfortune to live through all his battles to an old age, he'd been discharged from service with no means to support himself. For two years he had wandered alone, nearly starving, until he happened on one of a band of outlaws, misfits and out-of-works who made their life in a vast forest just north of the town of Moreton.,

For a moment, Alyx sat quietly. "Are you proposing I join this band?" she asked in disbelief. "As an ... an outlaw?"

The servant understood her outrage. The priest had been full of praise for the girl's good qualities. "Yes and no," he answered. "A young girl such as yourself would not be safe with the band. For all they have a leader now and there is a measure of Christian goodness among them and some discipline, still a little thing like you would not last long."

With a sigh of relief, Alyx gave a little smile.

"And, too," he continued, "no one would hesitate to take you to the earl for the reward."

"I can sing. Perhaps someone would hire-"

Putting up his hand, he cut her off. "Only the nobles can afford their own musicians, or perhaps some rich merchant, but there again, a lone girl, unprotected ..."

Dejected, Alyx's shoulders slumped. Was there anywhere safe for her?

When the servant saw that she was aware of the problem of hiding her, he went on with his plan quickly.

"If you became a boy, you could hide with the outlaws. With your hair cut and boy's clothes, perhaps a binding about your chest, you might pass. The priest says you can change your voice at will, and your looks might well suit a boy as well as a girl."

Alyx wasn't sure she should laugh or cry at his last remark. It was true that she was no classic beauty with full lips and big blue eyes, but she liked to think ...

"Come now," the servant chuckled, "there's no need to look like that. I'm sure when you reach an age, you'll fill out and look almost as lovely as a lady."

"I'm twenty years old," she said, eyes narrowed.

The servant cleared his throat in embarrassment.

"Then you should be grateful for your looks. Now,

come on, for it grows dark. I brought some boy's

clothes, and when you're ready, we'll travel. I want to

be back before I'm missed. The earl likes to know

where his servants are."

This idea that she might be endangering him made

her move quickly, taking the folded clothes he of

fered. At the touch of the cloth, she paused for just a

moment before fleeing to the trees to change. It took

VELVET SONG

24

25

VELVET SONG

only seconds to rid herself of the dress she wore, but the boy's garments were unfamiliar. Tightly woven cotton knit hose covered her legs up to her waist, where she tied them snugly. A cloth came next, and she tried not to give a sigh of disgust when she realized she needed very little binding to flatten her breasts. A cotton shirt, fine and soft, went on, a heavier wool shirt with wide sleeves over that and, on top, a long doublet of sturdy, closely woven wool. The doublet came to the bottom curve of her buttocks and was beautifully trimmed with gold scrollwork. Never had she had such rich clothing next to her skin, and she could feel the raw places, rubbed by her woolen dress, beginning to heal. And the freedom of the boy's clothes! she thought as she kicked high with first one leg and then the other.

Slipping on knee-high boots, lacing them at the sides of her ankles, she lifted her gold belt from the heap of her dress and hid the belt about her waist, under doublet and wool shirt. Ready at last, tying an embroidered sash about her waist, she went out to where the earl's servant waited for her.

"Good!" he said, turning her about, inspecting her, frowning at her legs, which were just a little too fine looking for a boy's. "Now for your hair." He took a pair of shears from a pouch at her side.

Alyx took a step backwards, her hand on her long, straight hair. It had never been cut in her life.

"Come on," the man urged. "It's getting late. It's only hair, girl. It will grow again. Better to cut your hair than have it burned, with your head, in a witch's fire."

With fortitude, Alyx turned her back to the man and let him have access to her hair. Surprisingly, as it

26

VELVET SONG

fell away, her head felt strangely light and not at all unpleasant.

"Look at it curl," the man said, trying to please her, to make light of her horrible situation. When he'd finished, he turned her around, nodding in approval at the curls and waves that clouded about her puckish little face. He thought to himself that the short hair and the boy's clothes suited her better than the ugly dress she'd worn.

"Why?" she asked, looking at him. "You work for the man who killed my father, so why are you helping me?"

"I've been with the lad"-she knew he meant

Pagnell-"since he was a babe. He's always had all he

wanted, and his father's taught him to take what he

should not have. I have tried at times to make amends

for the boy's misdeeds. Are you ready?" He obviously

didn't want to discuss the subject anymore.

Alyx rode behind the man on the gentle horse and

they set off, staying at the edge of the forest, toward

the north. All through the ride the servant lectured

her on how she must act to keep her secret. She must

walk as a boy, shoulders back, taking long strides. She

mustn't cry or laugh in a silly way, must swear,

mustn't bathe overmuch, must scratch and spit and

not be afraid to work, to lift and tote, or turn up her

nose at dirt and spiders. On and on he went until Alyx

nearly fell asleep, which cost her another lecture on

the softness of girls.

When they arrived at the edge of the forest where

the outlaws hid, he gave her a dagger to wear at her

side to protect herself and told her to practice the use

of it.

Once they entered the dark, "forbidding forest, he

27

VELVET SONG

stopped talking and Alyx could feel the tension run through his body. She found that her hands, gripping the edge of the saddle, were white knuckled.

The call of a night bird came softly to them and the servant answered it. Farther into the forest another call and answer were exchanged, and the servant stopped, setting Alyx down and dismounting. "We will wait here until morning," he said in a voice that was almost a whisper. "They will want to find out who we are before they let us enter their camp. Come, boy," he said louder. "Let's sleep."

Alyx found she could not sleep but instead lay still under the blanket the servant gave her and went over in her mind all that had happened, that because of some nobleman's whim she was here alone in this cold, frightful forest while her dear father's life had been cut short. As she thought, anger began to replace her fear as well as her grief. She would overcome this problem and someday, somehow, she'd revenge herself on Pagnell and all of his kind.

At first light, they were back on the horse and slowly made their way deeper and deeper into the maze of the forest.

Chapter Three

AFTER A VERY long time of tiptoeing through the tangle of trees and undergrowth, following no path that Alyx could see, she began to hear voices, quiet voices, mostly male. "I hear the men talking," she whispered.

The servant gave her a look of disbelief over his shoulder, for he heard nothing but the wind. It was quite some time before he, too, heard the voices.

Suddenly, surprisingly, a deep tangle of growth parted and before them was a small village of tents and crude shelters. A gray-haired man, a deep, old scar running from his temple, down his cheek, his neck and disappearing into his collar, caught the reins of the horse.

"You had no trouble, brother" the scarred man asked, and when his brother nodded, he looked at Alyx. "This the lad?"

29

28

VELVET SONG

She held her breath under his scrutiny, fearing he'd see her for female, but he dismissed her as not of importance.

"Raine is waiting for you," the scarred man said to his brother. "Leave the boy with him and I'll ride out with you and you can give me the news."

With a nod, the servant reined his horse toward the direction in which his brother pointed.

"He didn't think I wasn't a boy," Alyx whispered, half pleased, half insulted. "And who is Raine?"

"He's the leader of this motley group. He's only been here a couple of weeks, but he's been able to whip some order into the men. If you plan to stay here you must obey him at all times or he'll have you out on your ear."

"The king of the outlaws," she said somewhat dreamily. "He must be very fierce. He isn't a ... a murderer, is he?" she gasped.

The servant looked back at her, laughing at her girlish changes in mood, but when he saw her face, he stopped and followed her mesmerized gaze straight ahead of them.

Sitting on a low stool, his shirt off, sharpening his sword, was the man who was unmistakably the leader of any group of men in his presence. He was a big man, very large, with great bulging muscles, a deep thick chest, thighs straining against the black knit hose he wore. That he should be shirtless in January in the cold, sunless forest was astonishing, but even this far away Alyx could see that he was covered with a fine sheen of sweat.

His profile was handsome: a fine nose, black, black hair, sweat dampened into curls along his neck, deep set serious eyes under heavy black brows, a mouth set

30

VELVET SONG

into a firm line as he concentrated on the whetstone before him and the sharpening of the sword.

Alyx's first impression was that her heart might stop beating. She'd never seen a man like this one, from whom power came as if it were the sweat glistening on his body. People often said she had power in her voice, and she wondered if it was like the power of this man, an aura surrounding all of his enormous, magnificent body.

"Close your mouth, girl," the servant chuckled, "or you'll give yourself away. His lordship won't take to a lad drooling on his knees."

"Lordship?" Alyx asked, coming up for air. "Lordship!" she gasped and reason came back to her. It wasn't power she saw coming from this man, it was his sense that all the world belonged to him. Generations of men like Pagnell had reproduced themselves to create men like the one before her-arrogant, prideful, sure that everyone was destined to be their personal servant, taking what they wanted, even an old, ailing lawyer who got in their way. Alyx was in this cold forest and not at home practicing her music where she belonged because of men like this one who sat on a stool and waited for others to come to him.

The man turned, looking up at them with blue eyes, serious eyes that missed little of what he saw. As if he were a king on a throne, Alyx thought, and indeed he made the rough stool look like a throne, waiting for his lowly subjects to approach. So this was why she had to dress as a boy! This man with his lordly, superior ways, demanding that everyone bow and scrape before him, bend down so he could place his jeweled shoes on their behinds. He was the leader of this group of outlaws and murderers, and how had he

31

VELVET SONG

gotten that dubious honor? No doubt from all of them believing in the natural superiority of the nobility; that this man, because of his birth, had the right to command them and they, as stupid as criminals must be, did not question his authority, merely asked how low they should grovel before his lordship.

"That's Raine Montgomery," the servant said, not seeing the way Alyx's eyes hardened, a great change from her original softness. "The king has declared him a traitor."

"And no doubt he well deserves the title," she spat, still watching Raine as they drew nearer to the man, his strength seeming to pull them toward him.

The servant glanced at her in surprise. "He was once a favorite of King Henry's and was leading men to the king's own Wales when Lord Raine heard that his sister had been taken prisoner by Lord Roger Chatworth and-"

"A feud among themselves!" she snapped. "And no doubt many innocent men were killed to feed these nobles' taste for blood."

"No one was killed," the man said, bewildered by her attitude. "Lord Roger threatened to kill Lord Raine's sister, so Lord Raine retreated; but King Henry declared him a traitor for using the king's own men in a personal war."

"Lords!" Alyx snarled. "There is only one Lord and King Henry was right to declare the man a traitor, since he well deserved the title for using our good king's men for his own personal fight. So now he hides in the forest using the ruffians as his subjects. Tell me, does he kill them at will or is he content with having them serve his dinner to him on silver platters?"

At that the servant laughed, at last understanding her hostility toward Lord Raine. No doubt the only noblemen she'd met were Pagnell and his father. Using them as criteria, she had reason to despise Lord Raine.

"Come sit down," Raine said, taking the reins and looking up at the weary man on the horse.

Alyx's first thought was: He can sing! Any man with such a deep, rich voice had to be able to sing. But the next instant her kind thoughts were gone.

"Step down here, boy, and let's have a look at you," Raine said. "You look a bit thin to me. Can you do a day's work?"

Alyx had never ridden astride a horse before, and the new exercise had made the inside of her legs stiff and sore. When she tried to swing off the top of the horse with at least a bit of bravado, her hateful legs refused to obey, and the left one, still hurt from her fall, collapsed under her.

Raine placed a steadying hand on her upper arm, and to Alyx's chagrin her body reacted instantly to this

man who represented everything she hated. "Get your hand off me!" she snarled at him, seeing the surprised look on his handsome face before she had to grab the saddle of the horse to keep from falling. The stupid horse shied away, causing Alyx to stumble again before she could right herself.

"Now, if you are quite finished," Raine said, his blue eyes alight, that delicious voice of his running across her like melted honey, "perhaps we can find out something about you."

"This is all you need to know about me, noble

man!" she hissed, drawing the knife at her side,

32

33

pointing it at him, despising his easy assurance that she meant. nothing while he was God's gift to the earth.

Completely startled by the boy's hostility, Raine was unprepared for the sharp little dagger lunging at him and barely had time to move away before it cut, not where it aimed, his heart, but the top of his arm.

Stunned at what she'd done, Alyx stood still, her eyes fastened to the slow trickle of blood coming from the man's bare arm. Never in her life had she hurt anyone before.

But she didn't have long to think on her rash act because before she could begin to apologize, or before she could even blink an eye, Raine Montgomery had grabbed the seat of her pants and her collar and sent her sliding, face down, across about half an acre of forest floor. She should have closed her gaping mouth because her lower teeth acted as a shovel and collected bushels of leaves, dirt and whatever other filth made the spongy floor.

"Now, you young devil!" Raine said from his place behind her.

Sitting up, using both hands and furiously gouging handfuls of Heaven-knows-what from her mouth, wincing at her sore leg, she looked up to see him standing at what seemed to be quite a distance from her. Between them was a deep, scoured path that had been made by Alyx's body. And what she saw renewed her anger. Raine Montgomery, that vile nobleman, was surrounded by a disreputable looking crew of men and women, all laughing, showing black, rotten teeth, choking on their tongues, generally enjoying her agony. Raine himself was laughing harder than anyone, and the sight of deep, long dimples in

his cheeks emphasizing his mirth did nothing for her temperament.

"Come on," said a voice beside her, the man who'd brought her, as he helped her stand. "Hold your tongue or he may toss you out altogether."

Alyx started to speak but paused to remove a piece of stick from its hiding place between her gum and cheek and missed her chance.

The man used this opportunity to speak to Raine, his fingers biting warningly into Alyx's arm, fairly shouting to be heard over the raucous laughter. "My lord, please forgive the lad. Yesterday a nobleman killed his father and burned his house. He has reason to hate and I fear it extends to all men of your class."

Instantly, Raine sobered and looked at Alyx with sympathy, which made her stiffen and look away. She did not want his pity.

"What nobleman did this?" Raine asked, his voice full of concern.

"The Earl of Waldenham's son."

Spitting in pure disgust, Raine's face twisted for a moment, his fine lips curling into a snarl. "Pagnell," he said, his voice full of contempt. "The man doesn't deserve the title of man or nobleman. Come with me, boy, and I will teach you we're not all cut of the same cloth. I need a squire and you will do nicely:"

In two steps he was beside her, his arm companionably about her shoulders.

"Do not touch me," she gasped, jumping away

from him. "I do not need your pity or the soft job of

serving your sweet cakes. I am ... a man and I can

hold my own. I will work and earn my keep."

"Sweet cakes, is it?" Raine asked as a dimple

flashed in his left cheek. "I have a feeling, boy," he

34

35

VELVET SONG

said, looking her up and down, "you have no idea what work is. You have legs and arms more suited for a girl."

"How dare you insult me so!" she gasped, scared that she was going to be revealed at any moment, grabbing for her dagger but finding only an empty sheath.

"Another of your mistakes," Raine said. "You dropped it to the ground." Slowly, with great show, he removed her little knife from the waist of his hose, those tight, tight hose that clung to his body, a triangular patch loosely tied over his maleness. "I'll teach you to keep your weapons about you and not discard them so lightly." Idly, he ran his thumb along the blade. "It needs sharpening."

"It was sharp enough to cut your thick hide," she said confidently, smiling back at him, glad she could repay him for some of his self-assurance.

As if just remembering the bloody cut, he glanced at it before looking back at her. "Come with me, squire, and tend to my wound," he said flatly, turning his back on her as if he expected her to follow him.

Alyx instantly decided that she did not want to stay in this camp at the mercy and whim of this man Raine, who attracted her so yet made her so angry. And she did not like these dirty, greedily staring people who surrounded her, watching as if she were part of a play put on for their entertainment.

She turned to the servant who'd brought her. "I don't wish to stay here. I will take my chances elsewhere," she said, turning toward the saddled horse.

"Neither -do you know how to obey an order,"

came Raine's voice from behind her, an instant before his big hand clamped on her neck. "I'll not let a little thing like your terror of me keep me from acquiring a good squire."

"Get away from me!" she yelled as he pushed her ahead of him. "I don't want to stay here. I won't stay here."

"As I see it you owe me for spilling some of my blood. Now get in there!" he said as he pushed her inside a large canvas tent.

Trying not to cry at the pain in her leg, at the battering her already bruised body was taking, she clutched at a tent pole and tried to stay upright.

"Blanche!" Raine bellowed out of the tent flap. "Bring me some hot water and some linen and make sure it's clean!"

"Now, boy," he said, turning back to her and, for a moment, studying her. "You've hurt your leg. Take off those hose and let me look at it."

"No!" she gasped, backing away from him.

He looked truly puzzled. "Is it me you fear or"-he gave a bit of a smile-"that you're modest? Oh, well," he said, sitting down on the cot at the edge of the tent, "perhaps you should be shy. If I had legs like yours I'd be ashamed of them, too. But don't worry, lad, we'll put some muscle on your scrawny body. Ah, yes, Blanche, put it there and go."

"But don't you want me to dress your wound?"

Alyx looked from her scrutiny of her legs, thinking that they weren't so bad at all, to see the woman who spoke. Her sensitivity to sound and especially to voices made her look up sharply. The hint of a whine, the begging quality, somehow overridden by a touch

36

37

VELVET SONG

of insolence, grated along her spine. She saw a plump woman with stringy, dirty blonde hair, looking at Raine as if she might devour him at any moment.

With pure disgust, Alyx looked away.

"The boy will dress the wound."

"I most certainly will not!" Alyx said vehemently. "Let the woman do it, 'tis woman's work and she looks as if she'd like the job." Smiling, Alyx thought perhaps she might like being a male and not having to do all the thankless drudgery tasks of a woman.

Raine, in one unseen, swift gesture, leaned forward, grabbed Alyx's thigh in one of his big hands and pulled. As her leg went flying out from under her she landed very hard on her already bruised rump.

"You need some manners as well as muscles. Go now, Blanche," he said pointedly to the staring woman. When they were alone he turned back to Alyx. "I'll be forgiving for a few days since you've not had a noble background, but if your manners don't soon improve, I'll take a switch to that puny body of yours and see if you can learn to behave. The water grows cold, so come and clean this wound and bind it."

Reluctantly, Alyx stood, rubbing her buttocks, limping a bit on her leg. When she reached Raine, he extended his arm, that large brown muscular arm, blood from shoulder to forearm, for her to clean. As she touched him with the warm cloth she realized how cold her hands were, how warm his skin-and how deep the cut. It did not set well with her that she had hurt anyone like this.

"The first time you've drawn blood?" Raine asked gently, his face near hers, his voice soft as he watched her.

VELVET SONG

She barely nodded, not wanting to meet his eyes as tears choked her throat and she remembered her life before two days ago.

"How did you hurt your leg?" he asked.

Blinking rapidly, refusing to cry, she glared at him. "By running from one of your kind," she spat at him.

"Good lad." He smiled and again those dimples appeared. "Don't let anyone scare you. Keep your head high no matter what happens."

She rinsed out the bloody cloth and started washing all of his arm.

"Should I tell you the duties of a squire?" he asked.

"Having never had your advantages of personal servants I am afraid I am at a loss as to what one should do for h"--she had almost said "her"--"his master."

A snort from Raine was his reply to her answer. "You are to clean my armor, care for my horses, help me personally in any way you can, and"--his eyes twinkled--"serve me my sweet cakes. Do you think you can do all that?"

"There's no more?" she taunted.

"A true squire would learn the rudiments of training to be a knight, using a sword, a lance, that sort of thing, as well as write his lord's letters and at times deliver important messages. I do not expect so much from you though since--"

Alyx cut him off. "Since I am not of your class and you do not think I have the brain to learn? My father was a lawyer and I can read and write better than most of your nobles, I'll wager, and I can do it in Latin and French as well as English."

Raine tested his arm for a moment, curling his hand into a fist, making his bicep bulge, all the while

VELVET SONG

smiling slightly, not at all offended by her accusations. Finally, he looked back at her. "You're still too small to do much heavy training," he said, "and it has little to do with your birth status. As for reading and writing, you must be better than I am, for I do not read more than the names of my family. Good!" he said as he stood, "You have a delicate hand with a wound. Perhaps Rosamund can use your help."

"Another of your women?" Alyx sneered, motioning her head toward the tent flap where Blanche had been.

"Are you jealous?" he asked, and before Alyx could sputter that she was jealous of no women, he added, "You'll have your share of women yet, when you get your first beard and we put a little meat on you." Cocking his head, looking at her, he said, "You're pretty enough if you don't get scarred on the battlefield. Women like pretty faces on their men."

"Such as yours?" she snapped and could have bitten out her tongue.

"I do well enough," he said, obviously highly amused. "Now I have some work for you to do. This armor needs cleaning and after that it must be polished to keep the rust off." Quickly, he piled pieces of steel armor together, back and front together forming a large shell which held arm and leg coverings. The helmet went on top.

Confidently, arrogantly, Alyx held out her arms and in the next moment she staggered backward and would have fallen had not Raine caught her at the small of her back.

"It's a mite heavy for a lad your size."

"My size!" she gasped, trying to steady herself. "If

VELVET SONG

you weren't as large as a pair of oxen the armor need not be so big."

"Your insolence is going to earn you some bruises, and I would advise you to show some proper respect for your leige lord." Before she could make a reply, he fairly pushed her from the tent. "There's a stream to the north," he said, piling several cloths on her burden of mud-encrusted armor. "Wash it well then bring it back. And if I find one new dent in it I will add five dents to your hide. Is that clear, boy?"

Alyx could barely nod, as she was more concerned with staying upright under her burden, wondering how in the world she was going to walk, than making any smart retorts to Raine. Slowly, one step at a time, she started forward, her arms already aching, her neck craned sideways to see around the high pile of steel she carried. When her body hurt so badly there were tears in her eyes, she finally saw the stream. At its side she started to drop the armor to her feet, but remembering Raine's threat, she braced her legs apart, squatted and carefully lowered all seventy pounds of it to the ground.

For a moment she sat there, her arms extendei, wondering if they'd ever feel the same again. When feeling came back to them, and all the feeling was pain, she plunged her arms, shirt and all, into the cold clear water of the stream.

Several minutes later she glanced back at the pile of armor with a great sigh. So much for women's drudgery. What was the difference between washing dishes and washing armor? With another sigh she picked up the cloths and began removing the crust of mud, sweat, rust and whatever else held the filth together.

40

41

VELVET SONG

An hour later she'd succeeded in taking the dirt off the armor and placing it on herself. Never had she sweat so much in her life, and every drop made the dirt cling to her skin. Removing her tunic, she used a

clean cloth to wash most of the dirt from it and left it to dry on a rock while she washed her face and arms.

As she came up from washing and reached for a dry cloth, someone handed it to her. Quickly drying her face, she opened her eyes to see an astonishingly handsome man. Dark wavy hair framed a perfectly formed, high-cheekboned face. Hot, dark eyes blazed under long thick lashes. Alyx blinked twice to make sure this dark angel was real and, in her stunned silence, she did not see the sword pointed at her belly.

Chapter Four

"WHo ARE You?" this man who was too perfectlooking to be real asked.

Alyx, unused to danger in her life, did not fully react to the sword, but what she did react to was the music in this man's voice. She'd felt that Raine, with his deep voice, could sing if he tried, but she was sure this man did sing. "I am Raine's new squire," she said quietly, using her voice and all her many years of training to bring the voice from deep within her chest.

For a moment he stared at her, puzzled, speechless, and very slowly he resheathed his sword, his eyes never leaving hers. "There's something about your voice. Have you ever done any singing?"

"A bit," she said, her eyes dancing, every ounce of, her confidence making itself known in that simple statement.

42

43

VELVET SONG

Without another word he reached to his back and the quiver of arrows he carried there and pulled out a

flute. He started to play a simple, common song that Alyx knew well. For a moment she closed her eyes, letting the music float about her. The last few days had been the longest she'd ever gone without music since that day ten years ago when she'd picked up the troubadour's lute. As the music filled her, her lungs filled with air and she opened her mouth to sing.

After only four notes, the young man stopped playing, his mouth dropping open in disbelief, his eyes wide. Alyx grinned, kept singing and motioned for him to continue.

With one quick glance of thankfulness raised toward Heaven and a laugh of pure joy, the man again put the flute to his lips.

Alyx followed the tune for quite some time, but her need to create was too strong to let it rest. Here was someone who could play, and she wondered what else he could do. Looking about for something to give her more sound, she saw a hollow log quite near. Still singing, never losing a beat, she grabbed the back, breastplate and thigh covering of Raine's armor and set them near the log. Sticks quickly made drumsticks and for a moment she stopped singing, tapping out sounds on the pieces of armor and the log. When she had the sounds down she began to hum some of the music in her head.

Fascinated, the young man watched her, and when she began to sing, a new song this time, he followed her on his flute, slowly at first until he caught the tune and rhythm. When he added a variation of his own she laughed, still singing, and followed him easily. It

VELVET SONG

became a bit of competition after that, with Alyx going one way and the man another, yet both following each other, testing one another's skill.

And when the man tossed the flute to the ground and added his strong, clear voice to hers, it was Alyx's turn to be stunned for a moment, at least enough to make her miss a beat which, from the look on his face, gave the man great joy. Grabbing her hands, both on their knees, facing each other, they blended their voices together, sending them upward toward Heaven.

At last they stopped and all around them was utter and complete silence, as if the wind and birds had stopped to listen to their magnificent music. Hands still clasped, they were still, looking at each other with a mixture of love, awe, surprise, delight and kinship.

"Jocelin Laing," the beautiful young man finally said, breaking the silence.

"Alyx . . . ander Blackett," she answered, stumbling over the male name.

One of Jocelin's perfect brows lifted and he started to say something, but Raine's voice stopped him.

"Joss, I see you've met my new squire."

Almost with guilt, Alyx dropped Jocelin's hands and stood, only to find her sore leg going under her.

Roughly, Raine grabbed her arm. "If the two of you are through entertaining each other, you can bring my armor back and scrape the rust off of it. Joss, did you get any game?"

With what were surely spots of color on his cheeks, Jocelin faced Raine, his slim, broad-shouldered body

appearing miniature next to Raine's massive form. "I

have four rabbits by the stream."

44

45

VELVET SONG

"Rabbits!" Raine grunted. "I'll go and look for a deer or two later, but now, boy, come back to camp and let's have a look at that leg. You'll be no use to me if you're crippled."

With resignation, Alyx collected the pieces of armor and Jocelin loaded them into her arms, along with her damp tunic. She followed Raine back to the camp, wondering just how much of the singing he'd heard.

If he'd heard any of it, he didn't comment as he entered the tent and pointed for Alyx to set his armor down.

"Now pull off those hose and let's look at that leg." "My leg is healing nicely," she said, standing firmly where she was.

Narrowing his eyes at her, he took a step closer. "You might as well understand now that everyone in this camp pulls his weight. We can't afford the time to deal with sick people. Get undressed while I get Rosamund," he said, slipping on a shirt and doublet over his hose before leaving the tent.

As soon as he was gone, Alyx quickly removed the tight hose, grabbed a cloth and tied it about her waist, bringing the end up and over the Lyon belt secreted beneath her clothes so that she formed a loincloth. A great deal of her thigh and hip were exposed, and as she looked down at them, thinking that they weren't bad-looking at all, she knew that now she'd be exposed as a female. Oh, well, she sighed, it was nice to think that some part of her, if not her face, was so pretty it could only belong to a woman.

A sound at the tent opening made her look up and there, in profile, was surely one of the most beautiful

VELVET SONG

women ever made on earth. Lashes so long they looked unreal, curled over pretty green eyes, a perfect nose and mouth that curved back, its lips finely shaped, chiseled, a classic beauty, how every woman dreams of looking. And behind her was Raine. No wonder he never noticed his squire! she thought. With women like this one around, why would he look at something plain and ordinary like her?

"This is Rosamund, a healer," Raine said, and his voice held a sweet softness that made Alyx look at him in wonder. It would be nice to hear him use that voice when he spoke to her.

The next moment Rosamund turned and an involuntary gasp escaped Alyx, for the entire left side of Rosamund's face was covered with a deep pink strawberry mark-the sign of the devil. Instantly, her hand raised to cross herself in hopes of warding off the evil power, but her eyes were drawn to Raine's and those blue orbs were fastened on hers in warning and threat.

"If you'd rather I didn't touch you . . ." Rosamund began in a voice that showed she was perfectly used to being repulsed.

"No, of course not," Alyx said hesitantly, then gained strength. "There's nothing wrong with my leg, only what this great horse of a man thinks is wrong."

With surprised eyes, Rosamund looked up at

Raine, but he only snorted. "The boy has no manners -yet," he added, his words carrying a threat. He

seemed satisfied that Alyx was going to treat Rosa

mund with respect and turned away from them, never

once glancing at Alyx's legs, she noticed with chagrin.

Gently, Rosamund took Alyx's leg, lifted it, turned

it this way and that, seeing no external signs of injury.

46

47

VELVET SONG

VELVET SONG

"My name is Raine Montgomery," he said, his back to them. "I prefer my name to being referred to as . . . whatever animal you choose."

"And should I preface it with `your majesty' or will `your lordship' do?" She knew she was greatly daring and had no idea what his wrath would be like, but she was still angry over the way he'd forced her to stay in his camp.

"Raine will do fine," he said, looking back at her, smiling. "I find the rules of society are fairly useless in this place, and what may I call you?"

Alyx started to speak, but Rosamund pulled her leg in such a way that Alyx gave an involuntary squeal of pain and lifted straight off her seat. Trying to control the tears in her eyes, she clenched her teeth and said, "Alyxander Blackett."

"What's wrong with the lad?" Raine asked.

"He's pulled some of the muscles and there is nothing to be done except bind it and let it heal by itself. I can offer no medicine, perhaps a poultice tonight but nothing else."

Raine ignored Alyx's I-told-you-so look as he held the tent flap open for Rosamund and watched her leave.

In seconds, Alyx dressed again while Raine's back was turned, and she tried for a normal tone of voice. "She's a beautiful woman," she said, trying not to betray how interested she was in Raine's answer.

"She doesn't think she is," he said, "and it's been my experience with women that they must believe themselves to be beautiful before they are."

"And no doubt you are very experienced with women."

One of his dark eyebrows lifted as he smiled at her.

"Get up off that scrawny rear of yours and let's get to work."

Trying not to be hurt by his too personal comments on her body, Alyx followed him outside, his big legs eating up ground at a furious pace as she hurried along behind him. Without pausing, he grabbed a large loaf of black bread from a makeshift brick oven, tore it in half and gave a piece to Alyx, who looked at the loaf with some consternation, as the bread was more than she normally ate in a day.

Raine, eating his way through the heavy, solid bread, led her through the village of outlaws. All the shelters were shoddy things, not even hinting at permanence, and the smells emanating from them were horrible. Obviously, there were no sanitary ordinances here as there were in her pretty, walled town.

"Not much, is it?" Raine asked, watching her face. "What can you teach people who empty their chamber pots on their own front doorsteps?"

"Who. are these people?" she asked, looking in disgust at the filthy, tired-looking women ambling about doing various housewifely chores while men sat and spit, now and then looking up at Raine and Alyx with insolent glares. Without realizing she was doing it, she stepped closer to Raine.

"There," he said, pointing, "that one killed four women." His voice held a great deal of disgust. "Stay away from him. He likes to terrorize anything smaller than he is. And that man with the patch over his eye is the Black Runner, the highwayman. He became so famous he had to retire at the peak of his career," he added sarcastically.

"And them? The men huddled by the fire?"

48

49

VELVET SONG

Raine frowned slightly. "They are suffering from melancholia. They are farmers, displaced by the enclosure acts. They know nothing except farming and, as far as I can tell, want to learn nothing new."

"Enclosures!" she gasped. "No wonder they hate. you."

"Me?" he asked, truly astonished. "Why should they hate me?"

"You have taken their farms, put fences around what was their land and put your nasty sheep in the pens," she said smugly, letting him know that not everyone of the non-nobles was as uneducated as these louts.

"I have, have I?" he said, not smiling but a dimple giving away his amusement. "Do you always judge an entire group of people on the actions of one? Is there no villain in your little town? If this villain picked my pocket should I hang everyone in town for justice's sake?"

"No . . . no, I guess not," she reluctantly admitted.

"Here, eat this," he said, handing her a hard-boiled egg and taking away what was left of her loaf and eating it himself. "You'll never grow any bigger if you don't eat. Now we'll try to do something about your lack of muscle."

With that comment, he led her through the trees toward the sounds she'd been hearing since she'd arrived. When they reached a large, cleared area, she halted, eyes wide, staring at the scene before her. Men, many men, seemed to be trying to kill either each other, their horses or themselves. Men lunged at one another with swords, at stuffed dummies with lances or performed bodily contortions wearing stones strapped to their bodies.

VELVET SONG

"What is this?" she whispered, not knowing how to react.

"If the men are to survive, they must know how to fight," he said, his eyes on the men. "Here, you two," he bellowed so loudly Alyx jumped. With two furious strides, he reached two men who'd dropped their swords and gone after each other with their fists. Raine grabbed the back of the rags they wore, shook them like dogs and tossed them apart. "Men of honor do not fight with their fists," he growled. "As long as you are under my rule you will fight as if you were decent men and not the scum you are. If you break my training again, you will be punished. Now get back to work!"

Silent, somewhat awed by Raine's fierceness, Alyx stood stone-still until he turned back to her. The man's voice ranged from the sweetness he used with Rosamund to this terrifying bellow.

"Now," he said, in the cool voice he used for her, "let's see how strong you are. Lie down and push your body up using only your arms."

Alyx had absolutely no idea what he meant, and at her blank look he sighed as if greatly burdened, pulled off his shirt and doublet, dropped to the ground on his stomach and proceeded to lift his body repeatedly with his arms. It certainly didn't look difficult, so Alyx assumed the same position. On her first try only the front half of her body came up and on the second try, her arms raised her half way and then collapsed.

"Too much sitting!" Raine declared and grabbed the seat of her hose, pulling that heavier part of her up. "Now push! Do something with those puny arms!"

With that, Alyx rolled away from him and sat up.

50

51

VELVET SONG

"It's not as easy as it looks," she said, rubbing her shaking arms.

"Easy!" he snorted, dropping to his stomach again. "Climb on my back."

It took Alyx a few moments to believe what she heard. Climb atop that great, bare, sweaty expanse of sun-bronzed skin?

Impatiently, he pointed and Alyx straddled him. Using only one hand, he began to push up and down, her astride him, but the last thing Alyx was interested in was his show of strength. Never had she been this near a man before, and certainly she had never had one between her legs before. His sweat began to dampen the insides of her thighs, or perhaps it was her own sweat, but she certainly was becoming damp from someone. His muscles, popping out, straining as he lifted his own considerable body weight as well as hers with the one arm, rippled along the inside of her legs, sending waves of warmth through her body. Her hands, touching his hot skin, seemed very alive, very sensitive. His muscles and skin were making music, playing her body until it was singing a song she'd never heard before.

"Now!" Raine said, rolling to one side and dumping her in the dirt. "Someday when you're a man you'll be able to do that."

Sitting down, looking up at him and all that lovely skin of his, her body still humming, she thought that the very last thing she wanted was to be a man.

Behind Raine stepped Jocelin, his beautiful eyes alight, watching her, and it was almost as if he knew

what she was thinking. Embarrassed, she looked away.

VELVET SONG

"I think you've shocked your squire into silence," Jocelin said to Raine. "You forget that people of our class aren't used to your physical vigor."

"You're too busy sitting around counting your money," Raine said in dead earnest. "And what's made you so happy today? Not enough work for you to do?"

Joss ignored the jibe. "Just curious, 'tis all. I was on my way to practice with my bow." With that, he left to go to the targets at the far end of the long field.

"Are you going to take root?" Raine asked, looking down at Alyx. When she stood, he took a long sword from a passing man and handed it to her. "Take the hilt in both hands and come for me."

"I don't want to hurt anyone," she said instantly. "I didn't even want to hurt Pagnell when-"

"What if I were Pagnell?" he said archly. "Come for me or I will go for you."

The pain, so recent, so deep, made her raise the heavy sword from where its tip dangled in the dust and she thrust at him. When the blade was a hairsbreadth from his belly, he sidestepped, evading her. Again she lunged and again, again, and still she couldn't touch him. She started for one side, changed in midthrust and made for his other side, but no matter what she did she could not hit him.

Panting from her exertions, she stopped, resting the sword tip in the dirt, her arms aching, quivering from the exertion, while Raine, smiling and confident, grinned at her until she longed to ram him with the steel she held.

"Now I will give you another chance. I will stand perfectly still while you swing at me."

52

53

VELVET SONG

"There's a trick," she said with such fatalism that he laughed aloud.

"No trick, but you must lift the sword above your head and come straight down. If you can do that you will strike me."

"I could not hurt someone. To draw blood-"

His face showed his belief in her swordsmanship. "Think of all my sheep, all the farmers I have caused to starve because of my greedy ways. Think of-"

Alyx happily lifted the sword straight up, planning to bring it down on his head, but at the moment she reached up the blasted, uncooperative sword started pulling her arms backward. Already tired and weakened, her arms could not hold it and for a few seconds it was a struggle-and the damned piece of steel won. The smirk on Raine's face as she stood there holding the long sword, its tip planted between her heels, made her furious.

"You're as weak a boy as I ever saw. What have you done with your life?"

She absolutely refused to answer that question as she twisted the sword around to the front of her.

"Lift it to the top of your head, lower it and do it again and again until I return. If I see you slacking, I'll double your practice time," he said as he left her.

Up and down, over and over she lifted the sword, her arms screaming with the exercise.

"You'll learn," said a voice behind her and she turned to see the scarred soldier, the brother of the man who'd brought her here.

"Has your brother left? I wanted to thank him, although right now I'm not sure this is any better than what could have happened to me."

54

VELVET SONG

"He needed no thanks," the man said gruffly, "and you'd better not stop because Lord Raine is looking this way."

With trembling arms, Alyx resumed her exercise, and it was several moments before Raine returned to show her how to hold the sword at arm's length, one arm at a time, lifting and lowering it repeatedly.

After what seemed like an eternity, he took the sword from her and started walking back toward the camp. Her arms and shoulders feeling as if they'd been put to the rack, Alyx followed him silently.

"Food, Blanche," he said over his shoulder on the way to his tent.

Gratefully, Alyx sat down on a stool while Raine took another and began to sharpen the point of a long lance. With her head leaning against a tent pole, she was almost asleep when Blanche came in bearing crockery bowls full of stew and curds and whey mixed with soft cooked lentils and more of the heavy black bread, with hot spiced wine in mugs.

As Alyx lifted her wooden spoon, her arms started to jerk spasmodically, protesting what she'd just

done to them.

"You're too soft," Raine grunted, his mouth full. "It'll take months to harden you up."

Silently, Alyx knew she'd die if she had to take even a week of today's torture. She ate as best she could, too weary to pay much attention to the food, and she was falling asleep when Raine grabbed her upper arm and pulled her up.

"The day's young yet," he said, obviously laughing at her exhaustion. "The camp needs food and we must get it."

55

i

VELVET SONG

"Food?" she groaned. "Let them starve and let me sleep."

"Starve!" he snorted. "They'd kill each other for what food there is and only the strongest would survive. And you," he said, his fingers meeting as they encircled her upper arm, "you wouldn't last an hour. So we go to hunt to keep you alive as well as them."

With one jerk, she moved away from his touch. Stupid man, she thought, couldn't he see that she was female? Without another word, he was out of the tent and she ran after him, following him to the edge of camp where the horses were kept. All along the way she saw the people of the camp, resting, digesting their food, no one continuing to work except Raine.

"Could it be possible that you could ride?" he asked, his voice showing he had no hope. "No," she whispered.

"What have you done with your life?" he demanded again. "I have never known a boy who couldn't ride."

"And I have never known a man who knew so little about the people outside his own world. Have you spent your life on a jeweled throne doing nothing but fighting with swords and riding great horses?"

Flinging a heavy wood-based saddle on his horse, he said, "You have a sharp tongue on you, and if it were not for us training to fight, who would protect you when there is war?"

"The King, of course," she answered smugly. "Henry!" Raine gasped, one foot in the stirrup.

VELVET SONG

"And who do you think protects Henry? Who does he call when he is attacked if not his nobles? Give me your arm," he said and easily pulled her up to sit on the hard rump of the horse behind his saddle. Before she could say a word, they were off at a teeth-jarring pace.

56

57

VELVET SONG

Chapter Five

AFTER WHAT SEEMED to be hours of banging up and

down on the bony backside of the horse, her knuckles white from gripping the edge of the saddle, Raine abruptly halted the animal and Alyx came close to flying backward over the tail.

"Hold on," he growled as he grabbed the nearest part of her, which was her sore thigh, making her gasp in pain. "Quiet!" he commanded. "There, through the trees, see them?"

Dashing away tears of pain with her sleeve, she was finally able to see a family of wild pigs scrounging in the undergrowth. The pigs halted, looked up with their mean little eyes glaring out of their lean, tough bodies and snorted over the long sharp tusks protruding from their mouths.

"Hold onto me," Raine bellowed seconds before he spurred his horse forward and went after the largest

pig, lance held point down. "Grip the horse with your knees," he said when Alyx, openmouthed, held her breath as the pig began to charge them. The animal was so big compared to the horse's thin legs.

Suddenly, Raine dipped sideways, his body parallel to the ground. Since Alyx was holding onto him, she went down with him. Unbalanced, falling, she held onto Raine with all her might as he thrust his lance into the backbone of the furious animal. The hideous scream was the voice of death, and Alyx buried her face in Raine's broad back.

"Let me go!" he growled, shaking the pig off his lance, then prying Alyx's fingers from his chest. "You nearly toppled us. Now hold the saddle with all your strength." With that command he was off again, tearing through the forest, dodging tree branches overhead, trees to both sides, as he ran after another pig. Two more were brought down as cleanly as the first before he stopped and again had to pry Alyx's fingers from his stomach. She had no idea when she'd grabbed him and was glad he made no further comment on her cowardice.

When he was free of her grip, he dismounted, took several leather thongs from his saddle and, after a cautious approach to the animals, trussed their feet. "Get down," he said and waited patiently for her to obey.

Her legs, unaccustomed to the exercise, buckled under her and she clutched at the saddle to keep from falling.

Ignoring her, Raine slung the dead pigs over the back of his horse, then went immediately to the horse's head to calm him as he pranced, not liking the smell of blood so close to him.

twel

58

59

VELVET SONG

"Lead the horse and follow me," he said to her, turning his back to her and walking ahead.

After one fearful look at the stallion, its ears back, eyes wild, sweaty from its run, Alyx gave a deep swallow of sheer terror and reached for the reins. The stallion danced away once and Alyx jumped, glancing quickly toward Raine where she could just see him through the trees.

"Come on, horse," she whispered, approaching the animal slowly but again it moved away from her.

Frustrated, she stood still, eyes locked with the horse's and softly, she began to hum, trying different notes, different tempos until she sensed the horse rather liked a very old, simple round. As the horse seemed to calm, she reached for the reins and her voice gained strength as she gained confidence.

Several minutes later, swaggering with pride at her accomplishment, she reached the small clearing where Raine waited impatiently with the third pig.

"It's a good thing I have guards posted," he said, flinging the trussed pig on the stallion's back, "otherwise with all your noise anyone within a mile could have heard you."

Absolute shock nearly flattened Alyx. Since she was ten years old all she'd ever heard was the most profuse praise for her music and now it was being referred to as "noise." Without another word from her she allowed Raine to pull her into the saddle in front of him and together they rode back to camp, her back slamming into his chest.

Once back in the camp, Raine dismounted, ignoring Alyx, still in the saddle, as he untied the pigs and slung them in the general direction of a campfire. As

Jocelin came forward, Raine tossed him the reins. "Show the boy how to clean a horse," he said before striding toward his tent.

After a reassuring smile for Alyx, Joss led the horse toward the clearing where the other horses were kept.

"Boy!" Alyx muttered as she dismounted, holding onto the saddle for support. "Boy, do this; boy, do that. That's all he ever says." When Joss had unfastened the saddle cinch, Alyx stood on tiptoe, grabbed the saddle and pulled and promptly fell backward, landing in a heap with the heavy saddle on top of her.

Obviously trying not to laugh, Jocelin removed the saddle while Alyx rubbed her bruised chin where it had struck her. "Is Raine making your life miserable?"

"He's trying to," she said as she took the saddle from him and, after three tries, managed to set it atop a wooden construction. "Oh, Joss," she gasped. "I'm so very tired. This morning he had me scour his armor, then I spent hours with that heavy sword. Now it's hunting and looking after that great beast."

At that comment the stallion rolled its eyes and began to prance. Without a thought, Alyx sang six notes and the animal calmed.

Jocelin had to control his look of amazement at her unconscious use of her voice before he could speak. "Raine has a lot of people to care for."

"A lot of people to play the lord with, you mean," she snapped, following Joss's lead in wiping down the

horse.

"Perhaps. Perhaps a man like Raine is so used to taking responsibility he takes it without thinking."

"For me, I'd like fewer orders," she said. "Why

VELVET SONG

60

61

VELVET SONG

does he command everyone? Why does he believe he rules everyone? Why doesn't he just let the people rest?"

"Rest!" Joss said from the other side of the horse. "You should have seen this place a few weeks before he arrived. It was like the worst sections of London, people slitting one another's throats for a few pennies, stealing so much you had to stay up all night to guard your possessions. Displaced farmers were at the mercy of murderers and-

"And so this righteous Raine Montgomery set everything to rights, correct?"

"Yes, he did."

"Did anyone ever consider he did it because he felt

it was his God-given right over his underlings?" "You're awfully young to be so bitter, aren't you?"

Joss asked.

Alyx stopped brushing the horse. "Why are you here?" she asked him. "How do you fit into this group? You're not a murderer and you don't look like someone too lazy to work. The only thing I can imagine is that some jealous husband is after you," she teased.

Instantly, Jocelin tossed the brush down. "I have to go back to work," he said in a hard, flat voice and walked away from her.

For a full, stunned minute Alyx could not continue. Never in her life would she have insulted Jocelin. He was the only one she could talk to, sing with and

"When you finish that you can fetch me some water from the stream," came a whiny voice from behind her, cutting off Alyx's thoughts.

Slowly, with deliberation, she turned toward Blanche. For all Alyx's words on Raine's arrogance,

VELVET SONG

Alyx also had a great deal of class pride. This woman with her slovenly dress, her coarse voice, her uneducated accents, was certainly not of the same class as Alyx. Ignoring her, Alyx turned back to the horse.

"Boy!" Blanche demanded. "Did you hear what I said?"

"I heard you," Alyx said, dropping her voice to a low tremor. "And I'm sure half the camp did, too."

"You think you're too good for me, don't you, you in your pretty clothes with your fine manners. Just because you've spent today with him doesn't mean you'll spend every day with him."

With a sneer, Alyx kept working on the horse. "Go about your business, woman. I have none with you."

Blanche grabbed Alyx's arm, pulled her about. "Until this morning I waited on Raine, brought his food to him and now he orders me to prepare a bed in his tent for you. What kind of boy are you?"

It took Alyx a moment to understand Blanche's insinuations and when she did, her eyes blazed purple fire. "If you knew anything about the nobility you'd know that all the lords have squires. I merely perform the duties of any good squire."

Blanche, obviously attempting to appear as part of the nobility, tried to stand erect. "Of course," she snapped. "I know about squires. But just you remember," she said threateningly, "Raine Montgomery is mine. I care for him as his lady would-in every way." With that, she turned on her heel and left through the trees.

"Lady!" Alyx muttered, going after the horse with a vengeance. "What would a slut like that know of being a lady?" Angry, she was unaware of time passing until she heard Raine's voice close to her.

62

63

VELVET SONG

"Boy," he said, making her jump. "You've got to be faster than that with a horse. There's plenty more work to be done."

"More?" she whispered and looked so sad that Raine smiled, eyes twinkling, and Alyx straightened.

She'd give him no reason to laugh at her again.

After setting aside the brush, whispering one last tune to the stallion, Alyx followed Raine back- to the camp, where he went directly to a group of disreputable-looking men huddled about a fire. Raine, with his proud stance, his noble bearing, made these men seem even filthier than they were.

"Here, you three," Raine said in a low growl. "You take the first watch."

"I ain't stayin' out in them woods," one man said as he turned to walk away.

Grabbing him with one hand, Raine pulled the man back and administered a swift kick to his backside that sent him sprawling. "If you eat, you work," he said in a deadly voice. "Now get to your posts. I will come later, and if any of you are asleep,-it will be the man's last sleep."

With his features set in a grim line, Raine watched the men as they left the camp, sulking like little children. "Those are your fine friends," he said in an undertone to Alyx as he turned away.

"They are no friends of mine!" she snapped.

"Nor is Pagnell a friend of mine!" he retorted.

Halting, she stared after his broad back. It was true, she knew. She had no right to hate him because of what another man had done.

"Blanche!" Raine grunted. "Food!"

With that, Alyx went tearing after him because she was very hungry. Inside the tent, Blanche placed

roast boar, bread, cheese and hot wine before them, and Alyx tore into the food with gusto.

"That's the way, boy!" Raine laughed, slapping her on the back, making her choke. "Keep eating like that and you'll put some size on yet."

"Keep working me like today and I'll die in a week!" she gasped, trying to dislodge a piece of pork from her throat, ignoring Raine's laughter.

The meal finished, Alyx looked with longing toward the pallet along one wall of the tent. To rest, she thought, just to lie down and be still for a few hours would be heaven on earth.

"Not yet, boy," Raine said, grabbing her arm and pulling her upright. "There's still work before we can sleep. The guards need to be checked, I have animal traps set and we both need a bath."

That startled her awake. "Bath!" she gasped. "No, not me."

"When I was your age I had to be forced to bathe, too. Once my older brother scoured me with a horse brush."

"Someone forced you to do something?" she asked, incredulous.

Raine's pride seemed to be at stake. "Actually, it took both my older brothers, and Gavin came away with a blacked eye. Now, come on. We have work to do."

Reluctantly, Alyx followed him, but no matter how hard she tried, she could put no energy in her steps. Like someone dead, she followed Raine through the forest, occasionally bumping into trees, stumbling over rocks, as he went around the perimeter of the camp making sure the guards were on duty and awake and removing rabbits and hares from his traps. At first

64

65

VELVET SONG

he tried to talk to her, explain what he was doing, how to toss a rock and see if the guards responded, but after a while he studied her in the moonlight, noting her exhaustion, and stopped talking.

At the stream outside the camp he told her to sit still and wait for him while he bathed. Half asleep, reclining on the bank, her head propped on her arm, Alyx watched with languid interest as Raine removed his clothing and stepped into the icy water. Moonlight silvered his body, caressed the muscles, played along his thighs, made love to those magnificent arms. Lifting herself on her elbows, Alyx unabashedly watched him. All her life had been given to music. While other girls were flirting with the boys at the town well, Alyx was composing a Latin lamentation for four voices. When her friends were getting married, she was inside the church organizing a boys' chorus. She'd never had time to talk to boys, to get to know them-actually, had never been interested in them, had always been too busy to even notice them.

Now, for the first time in her life, watching this nude man bathing she felt the first stirrings of ... of what? She certainly knew about mating, had even listened to some of the gossip from the recently married women, but she'd never felt any interest in the process. This man standing before her, rising out of the water like some heavenly centaur, made her feel things she'd never thought possible.

Lust, she thought, sitting up farther. Pure and simple lust was what she was feeling. She'd like for him to touch her, to kiss her, to lie beside her, and she would very much like to touch that skin of his. Remembering how it felt when she'd straddled his

VELVET SONG

back, she began to tingle, her legs seeming more alive, even her feet growing warm.

When he left the water and came toward her, she almost lifted her arms toward him.

"You look lazy," Raine commented, drying himself off. "Sure you won't take a bath?"

All Alyx could do was watch the course of the cloth he used for drying as it ran over his body and vaguely shake her head.

"I warn you though, boy, you start smelling so bad you drive me from the tent and I'll bathe you myself and it won't be a gentle bath."

Eyes wide, Alyx looked up at him, her breathing changing just slightly. To be bathed by this great god of a man, she thought.

"Are you all right, boy?" Raine asked, concerned, kneeling beside her as he frowned at her odd expression.

Boy!-she grimaced. He thought she was a boy, and what if she were revealed as a girl? He was of the nobility and she was only a poor lawyer's daughter. "Aren't you going to get cold?" she asked flatly, rolling away from him to stand apart, not watching as he dressed.

When he was finished, she silently followed him back to camp, where she collapsed on her pallet but did not sleep until Raine had settled himself on his narrow cot. Content at last, she fell asleep.

66

67

VELVET SONG

Chapter Six

LEANING OVER THE edge of the water, Alyx studied her own reflection. She did look like a boy, she thought with disgust. Why couldn't she 'have been born beautiful, with lovely features that could never be mistaken for a male's no matter what she wore? Her hair, all a mass of curls, its color not sure of which way to go, changing with each strand, eyes turned up, lips like a pixie's, were not what a woman's should be.

Just as tears were beginning to blur her vision, Jocelin's voice startled her. "Cleaning more armor?" he asked.

With a sniff, she turned back to her task. "Raine is too hard on it. Today I had to hammer out a dent."

"You seem to care much for his things. Are you perhaps beginning to believe that a nobleman could be worth something?"

"Raine would be worth much no matter what his

68

birth," she said much too hastily, then looked away, embarrassed.

She'd been in Raine's camp for a week now, had spent nearly every second in his company and her opinions of him had completely reversed in that week. Once she'd believed he took over the camp, but now she knew it was that the outcasts forced him to take care of them. They were like children demanding that he provide for them, then acting rebellious when he did. He left his bed before anyone else and saw to the security' of the people and always, late at night, he made sure the guard was alert and ready. He forced the people away from idleness and made them work for their own keep or else they'd sit and wait for him to provide for them, as if it were their due.

"Yes," she said quietly. "Raine is worth something, although he gets little reward for what he does. Why doesn't he leave this scurvy lot and leave England altogether? Surely a man with his wealth could make a

decent home for himself."

"Perhaps you should ask him that. You are closest to him."

Close to him, she thought. That's where she wanted to be, even closer to him. Only now was she beginning to be able to function through her blinding fatigue, to live through the strenuous training sessions each morning, but as her muscles hardened and she began to feel better, she became more involved in the camp life.

Blanche occupied an exalted position in the camp, making everyone believe she shared Raine's bed and had his ear for anything they wanted. Alyx tried not to consider if Blanche ever had spent the night with , Raine, but she liked to believe he had more taste than

69

1 -4

VELVET SONG

to use a slut like Blanche. And something else Alyx was able to find out about Blanche: she was terrified of Jocelin.

Jocelin, so incredibly handsome, so polite, so considerate, had every woman in camp panting after him. Alyx had seen women use every manner of enticement to lure him to their sides, but as far as she knew, Joss had never accepted an invitation. He preferred his duties and the company of Alyx to anyone else. And although he never mentioned her, he stayed well away from Blanche. When the woman happened to meet him she'd always turn tail and run.

Besides Joss, the only other decent outcast was Rosamund, with her beauty and the devil's mark on her cheek. Rosamund kept her head down, expecting people's hatred and fear. Once Raine had found a couple of men wagering on whether or not they'd be selling their souls if they took her by force. Twenty lashes each was his punishment for the men, followed by banishment, and Alyx felt a surge of jealousy that Raine so violently protected the flawed, beautiful healer.

"Alyx!" came a bellow through the trees that could only belong to Raine. At least now he called her by her name.

Using every ounce of power her voice contained, she yelled back at him, "I am working." The man was obsessed with work.

Coming through the trees, he grinned at her. "That voice of yours gives me hope that you'll grow, although it looks to me as if you're getting smaller." Critically, he eyed her legs stretched before her.

With a little smile, Alyx was glad to see that at least one part of her was unmistakably female. Her long

VELVET SONG

legs and curvy little bottom had only been enhanced by the hard exercise of the last week. Perhaps now, at last, she would be revealed as a girl and then ... what? She'd be tossed from Raine's tent and he'd once again only have that whore Blanche to care for him. Reluctantly, she slapped a steel leg sheath over her own legs.

"I'll grow," she snapped, "and when I do I'll pin you to the ground with your own sword." An upward glance at Raine saw that he seemed to be puzzled by something.

"You wanted Alyx for something?" Joss asked, his voice full of amusement as he interrupted the silence.

"Yes," Raine said quietly. "I need some letters written and some read to me. A messenger has come from my family. You can read, can't you?"

Curiosity made Alyx jump. She very much wanted to know about Raine's family. "Yes, of course," she said, gathering the armor and following Raine.

A man, dressed finely, his doublet embroidered with gold leopards, sat outside the tent, waiting patiently for Raine's command. With the wave of one hand, the young man was dismissed and Alyx wondered if all Raine's men obeyed so well and what a far cry from the outcasts they were.

There were two letters for Raine, one from his brother Gavin and one from his brother's wife, Judith.

The news from Gavin was bad. Bronwyn, Raine's other sister-in-law, had been taken prisoner by the same man who held Raine's sister, Mary. Bronwyn's husband was waiting, sitting and waiting, afraid to make a move for fear Roger Chatworth would kill his wife.

70

71

VELVET SONG

"Your brother Stephen," Alyx asked tentatively, "he loves his wife?"

Raine only nodded, his lips drawn into a tight line, his eyes focused on nothing.

"But it says here that she was in Scotland when she was taken. Why was she in Scotland? The Scots are coarse, vicious people and-"

"Hold your tongue!" he commanded. "Bronwyn is the laird of a clan in Scotland and there is no finer woman. Read me the other letter."

Chastised, Alyx opened the letter from Judith Montgomery, fully aware of the way Raine's eyes softened as she began to read. The letter was full of prayers for Raine's safety and entreaties for him to leave England until it was safe for him to return. She asked after his comfort, whether he had food and warm clothing, which made Raine chuckle and Alyx bristle at her wifely tones.

"Does her husband know she concerns herself so for her brother-in-law?" she asked primly.

"I'll not have you speak of my family so," he reprimanded and Alyx hung her head, embarrassed at her jealousy. It wasn't fair that she had to pose as a boy and never have a chance of gaining his attention. If she could wear a pretty dress perhaps he'd notice her, but then again she certainly was no beauty.

"Take your head from the clouds, boy, and listen to me."

His voice brought her to the present.

"Can you write what I say? I want to send letters back with my brother's man."

When she had pen, ink and paper, Raine began to dictate. The letter she was to write to his brother was one of anger and determination. He swore to stay as

VELVET SONG

near as possible to his two sisters and he would wait as long as he could before bringing his fist to Chatworth's head As for the King, he had no fear, since Henry's main source of income was from men he declared to be traitors. He told Gavin that Henry would pardon him as soon as he agreed to forfeit a goodly portion of his land.

Raine ignored Alyx's startled gasps at the insolent way in which he referred to their sovereign.

The letter to Judith was as warm and loving as hers had been, even once referring to his new squire, who thought he had no sense, not even enough to keep warm, and often covered him at night. With her head lowered, Alyx wrote, not allowing Raine to see her flushed cheeks. She'd had no idea he was aware of the many times she'd tiptoed about the tent, pulling the fur-lined coverlet about his bare shoulders.

The rest of the letter Alyx merely wrote, too embarrassed to even read what she wrote, and when she finished them she held them open, ready for Raine's signature. As he bent toward her, his face close to hers, she inhaled the smell of his hair, that thick, dark, curling mass and wanted to bury her face in it. Instead, she reached out and touched a lock of it, watched it curl about her fingertip.

Raine's head came up as if he'd been burned, his face inches from hers, his eyes wide as he looked at her. Alyx knew her breath had stopped and her heart had leaped to her throat. Now he'll know, she thought. Now he'll say that I am a girl, a woman.

Frowning, Raine stepped away from her, looking at her as if he couldn't quite decide what was happening. "Seal the letters," he said quietly, "and give them to the messenger." With that he left the tent.

72

73

VELVET SONG

Alyx gave a sigh that made one of the letters flutter to the floor and quick tears came to her eyes. Ugly, she thought. That's what I am-very, very ugly. No wonder no man ever even tried to contradict the priest and take me for his wife. Why fight for a prize not worth winning? Who wanted a flat-chested, boyish girl with a noisy voice for a wife? And no wonder Raine didn't see through her disguise.

With a sharp backhand swipe, she wiped her eyes and returned to the letters before her. No doubt his sisters-in-law and his sister were beautiful, beautiful women with chests ...

With another sigh she finished the letters, sealed them and took them outside to the messenger, walking with him to his horse.

"Have you seen this Lady Judith or the Lady Bronwyn?" she asked the messenger.

"Aye, many times."

"And are they, perhaps, handsome women?"

"Handsome?" he laughed, mounting his horse. "God must have been happy the day he created those women. Lord Raine will not leave England nor would I if I had either of those women in my family. Go on, boy, try and find someone to console him," he said, motioning toward the tent. "The loss of such beauty even for a moment must make him a miserable man."

Console him! Alyx muttered as she went back to the tent, only to be greeted by some commotion, Raine standing at the heart of it.

"It is well for your life that you did not kill her," he was saying to two men, one a pickpocket, the other a beggar. Both had been on guard duty all morning. "Alyx," he said over their heads. "Saddle my horse. We ride."

Taking off at a run, Alyx had the big horse saddled and ready by the time Raine reemerged from the tent, a battle ax and a mace in his hand. He had mounted and pulled her up behind him before she could ask a question, and in seconds they were galloping through the forest at a breakneck speed.

After a good run, as fast as the trees permitted, Raine drew to a halt and jumped from his horse. Catching the reins, Alyx slid forward into the saddle and got her first glimpse of what was going on. A pretty woman with big brown eyes, wearing a beautiful dress such as Alyx had never seen before, was flattened against a tree, looking with terror at three men from the camp as they brandished knives and swords at her.

"Get out of here, you scum," Raine growled, tossing first one man, then the other aside.

The woman, shaking in fear, looked up at Raine in total disbelief. "Raine," she whispered before closing her eyes and starting to slide down the tree.

Raine caught her in his arms, lifted her, cradling her to him. "Anne," he whispered. "You are safe now."

Alyx, fetch some wine. There's a pouch on my saddle."

Somewhat in awe of the scene before her, Alyx dismounted and took the hard leather container to him as he sat down on a fallen tree, holding this woman close to him.

"Anne, drink this," he said in a sweet, gentle voice, and the woman fluttered her lashes and began to drink. "Now, Anne," he said when she was fully awake. "Tell me what you were doing this deep in the forest."

The woman certainly didn't seem to be in any hurry

74

75

VELVET SONG

to remove herself from Raine's lap, Alyx thought, as she looked with absolute wonder at the woman's dress. It was of deep, deep red silk, a fabric she'd only seen in church, and it was embroidered all over with tiny hares, rabbits, deer, fish, all sorts of animals. The square neckline was very low, exposing a great deal of the woman's ample breasts, and about the neckline and waist were trims of gold and red, sparkling jewels.

"Alyx!" Raine said impatiently, handing her the bag of wine. "Anne," he said with great tenderness, holding the full-grown woman as if she were a child.

"What are you doing here, Raine?" she asked in a soft voice.

Can't sing, Alyx immediately thought. No strength in her voice and just a hint of a whine.

"King Henry has declared me traitor," Raine said, one dimple flashing.

Anne smiled at him. "After your money, is he? But what have you done to give him reason to take your lands?"

"Roger Chatworth has taken my sister Mary and Stephen's new wife."

"Chatworth!" she exclaimed. "Didn't that woman Gavin was so in love with marry a Chatworth?"

"My discreet brother," Raine said in disgust. "The woman is a whore and one of the worst sort, but Gavin could never see it. If nothing else, my brother is loyal. Even after he married Judith he still loved Alice Chatworth for a while."

"But what has this to do with why you are here?"

Why doesn't she stand 'on her own feet, Alyx

thought. Why does she so calmly sit on his lap and talk

as elegantly as if she were in some nobleman's hall?

"It's a long story," Raine said. "Through an acci

VELVET SONG

dent, Alice Chatworth was badly scarred, and what little there was of her mind went with her beauty. Her brother-in-law cared for her since she was a widow, and perhaps the woman poisoned his mind, because later Roger challenged my brother to a fight, the winner to get the wife King Henry promised

Stephen."

"Yes," Anne said. "I remember now. There was a great deal of property involved."

"Stephen's Bronwyn is a wealthy woman, yes, but Stephen wanted the woman as much as the land," he smiled. "But Chatworth could not stand losing and he has taken prisoner my sisters."

"Raine, how dreadful. But how did King Henry-"

"I was taking some of the king's men to Wales when I heard of Mary's being taken and I turned and went after Chatworth."

"Leading the King's army?" she asked, and when he nodded, she grimaced. "So Henry has some reason to declare you a traitor. Is that why you are dressed like a farmer and roaming about these dreary woods?"

"Aye," he said, looking at her. "You look well, Anne. It's been a long time since-"

With that she jumped off his lap, standing before him, smoothing her dress, a gown Alyx longed to touch. "You'll not seduce me again, Raine Montgomery. My father has promised to find me a husband soon and I'd like to go to him as pure as possible so I'll stand for no more of your lovely words." Turning, she looked at Alyx for the first time. "And who is this lad who stares at us with his mouth agape?"

Immediately, Alyx closed her mouth and looked away from the both of them.

"This is my squire," Raine said, his voice full of laughter from Anne's words. "I may have to live in this forest, but I do have some amenities. He works hard and can read and write."

"I take it no one was able to drive that knowledge into your thick skull," she snapped. "Raine! Stop looking at me like that. You'll get nowhere with me. Now you, boy, do you have a name?"

"Alexander Blackett."

"Blackett?" she said. "Where have I heard that name before?"

From the issue for my arrest, Alyx thought in a panic. Why hadn't she changed her last name? Now this odious woman would reveal her disguise to Raine.

"It's a common enough name," Raine said in dismissal. "Alyx, go back to the camp and wait for me."

"No, boy!" Anne said. "Raine, I'm serious. I'll not be used by you again, and I will not stay alone with you. You must lead me back to the other hunters. When they see that I am lost they'll try to find me."

"I have guards," he said, catching her about the waist, pulling her between his thighs. "We'll have all the time we need alone. Alyx, leave us."

"I want that pretty little squire of yours to stay," Anne said, her hands on his shoulders, pushing him away. "You've been so long in this woods perhaps you've come to prefer pretty boys over-"

She never finished her sentence as Raine drew her close to him, pulling her mouth down to his.

Unabashedly, Alyx watched them. Never had she seen anyone kiss someone like this, with bodies

together, heads moving. More than anything in the world, Alyx wished it were she Raine was holding in his arms.

So engrossed was she in the scene before her that when the first arrow came sailing through the air, landing inches from Raine's leg, she stood still, not sure what was happening. Raine reacted instantly, in one motion flinging both Alyx and Anne to the forest floor.

"They are after me," Raine said calmly. "Alyx, you are small enough to move along the tree." He pointed with his head. "Try to make it to my horse and fetch the weapons."

"What about you?" she gasped as another arrow landed just above their heads.

"I must take Anne to safety. Obey me!" he commanded.

Without another thought, Alyx began crawling forward on her stomach, inching her way into the dense covering of the forest. Every time an arrow struck behind her, her body tightened in fear. Afraid to turn around, scared she'd see Raine lying dead, she struggled ahead. When she reached the end of the fallen tree she lifted to a crouching position and began to run. When the arrows sounded in the distance, she was able to halt and get her bearings.

The horse, that great angry stallion of Raine's, was prancing wildly from where it was tied, a man near it, trying to catch the reins. If they caught the horse, there would be no way of fighting, for most of the weapons were tied to the saddle. Damn Raine, she thought. He was so hot for the silk-clad woman he forgot everything.

VELVET SONG

After a moment's silent prayer, Alyx opened her mouth and let go of a bit of music she knew the horse liked. Instantly, it calmed, ears perked, and at that moment the man grabbed the reins, untied them and had the horse under control.

"The horse is as stupid as its master," she said under her breath before beginning another series of notes, high, sharp and discordant, something the horse hated. She was rewarded with the animal's bucking, loosing itself from its captors. When it galloped toward her, Alyx held her breath, afraid of the great animal for a moment before she once again began to sing and the horse calmed, allowing her to catch it and mount.

"Now, please do what I say," she whispered when it turned its great head toward her, its nostrils flaring, eyes wide, trained to help one heavy man in war and not liking this featherweight person in the saddle. "Go!" she commanded in the voice she used to control twenty-five active choirboys.

The horse took off in the wrong direction and Alyx used all her strength to pull back on the reins and guide the animal back where she came from.

"No, Raine! No!"

Alyx heard the woman Anne screaming as soon as she had the great beast under control, and when she broke through the trees, there stood Raine, sword drawn and bloodied over a dead man, facing two other men also with swords, Anne clinging behind the broad expanse of Raine.

"They are my father's men," she screamed. "They've come to find me. I told you they would." With that Anne left Raine to go to the man on the

ground. "He's not dead. We can take him back with us," she said, tossing an angry look at Raine. "Why do you never listen to anyone?" she snapped. "Why do you draw sword and talk later?"

Alyx, feeling a great surge of anger tear through her, jumped down from the horse. It was obvious from his tight-lipped face that Raine was not going to defend himself. "My lord was attacked first!" she said, spitting rage at them. "When an arrow flies at him is he to stand and ask who sends the arrow before drawing sword? You, my fine lady, were well content when he protected your precious, plump body with his own, but now that it costs you the care of a man you do not remember how you tried to entice my master into the bushes,"

"Alyx," Raine said from behind her, his hand on her shoulder. "Remember, it is not chivalrous to-"

"Chivalrous!" she yelled, whirling to face him. "The bitch-"

Raine clamped his hand over her mouth, drew her to him, her back pinned against his chest while she struggled to free herself. "Anne," he said quietly, ignoring Alyx, "forgive me and the boy as well. He has had little training. Take your men and go back to the stream. I will send someone to guide you out of the forest."

"Raine," she said, rising from the inert man. "I didn't mean ..."

"Go now, Anne, and if you see any of my family,. tell them I am well."

At that she nodded, a man helped her mount a horse behind him, the wounded man was thrown across the saddle and they left.

VELVET SONG

80

81

VELVET SONG

When they were out of sight, Raine released Alyx.

"They tried to kill you!" she gasped, glaring at him. "And that woman railed at you for hurting her man."

Raine shrugged. "Who can understand women? She's always been concerned with money and estates."

"And I take it you know her well," Alyx said, rubbing her jaw, aware of the touch of Raine's hand on her mouth.

"Her father once proposed that I marry her." That made Alyx halt. "And you decided not to, or did she turn you down?"

He grinned crookedly, making one dimple show. "She accepted me in every way I asked but I did not ask her to marry me. She wavers from one moment to the next. She cannot even decide which dress to wear each day. I'm sure she would not like being a faithful wife, and I dislike beating women."

"You dislike . . ." Alyx sputtered.

"Now," he said, moving forward from the tree he'd been leaning against, "if we are through with your education about women for today, I'd like to do something about this leg of mine."

At that she glanced downward and for the first time saw the dark stain of blood soaking Raine's hose.

Chapter Seven

"YOU ARE WOUNDED," she said in a voice that

sounded as if she meant he were dead.

"I don't think it's bad, but perhaps we should see to it."

Running to him, her arm about his waist, she leaned into him. "Sit down. I will fetch Rosamund and-

"Alyx," he said, amused. "It isn't a mortal wound, and I can well ride back to camp. You know, you are the worst squire I have ever had."

"Worst!" she gasped as he sat down heavily on a tree stump. "You are an ungrateful-

"What took you so long with the horse? I was fighting for my life and I could hear you in the woods singing. Were you hoping to entertain the enemy?"

Never, never was she going to speak to him again, she decided, as she turned her back on him and went

83

82

y

VELVET SONG

for the horse. Hearing him chuckle behind her only made her lift her chin higher.

Even when he struggled to rise, she refused to help him and turned away so she could not see him.

"Alyx, I must mount on the opposite side and the horse will not like it. You must hold him steady. I don't wish to jar this leg more than I must."

At that she took the horse's head in her hands, looked it in the eye and began to sing, controlling it with her voice. Raine seemed to sit on the horse's back for some time before he spoke to her and offered her his hand to help her mount.

All the way back to camp, she held onto the saddle and watched Raine's blood seep down his thigh. The horse, smelling blood, began to prance, and, as a reflex, Raine clutched with his knees to control the animal. Alyx felt him stiffen at the pain that caused.

"Perhaps you could calm him with your songs," he said quietly.

"With my noise, don't you mean?" she answered, still hurt by his words.

"As you wish," he said stiffly.

Alyx had never heard this tone before, but she recognized it as a voice covering pain. He said his wound wasn't bad, but it showed no sign of ceasing to bleed. Now was no time to be angry. She began to sing and the horse calmed.

"I will have to show you to my brothers," he murmured. "They won't believe this unless they see it."

As they approached the camp, several people, sensing something was wrong, came out to greet them.

"It would be better if they did not see that I was

VELVET SONG

wounded," Raine said to her. "They're hard enough to control and I need no new problems now."

Quickly, she slipped off the horse and went to stand at Raine's side, her body blocking the people's view of his leg.

"We heard there was a fight," a black-toothed man said, his eyes greedy.

"Only in your mind, old man," Alyx yelled, startling everyone with the power of her voice. Visibly, the crowd jumped, and so did Raine's horse. "Stand back," she ordered. "The animal's gone wild. We had to take a whip to him to control him."

While the people were looking with fear at the great horse, its eyes rolling, smelling Raine's blood, Raine swung a mace from the saddle. "Have you no work to do?" he growled. "Joss, come to my tent. I have work for you."

Grumbling, the people began to go back to their fires and hovels.

When the horse was in front of the tent, they stopped and Alyx braced herself to help Raine dismount.

"For God's sake don't help me," he said through clenched teeth. "They will see you. Go and hold the horse's head. Sing good and loud and draw attention . to yourself."

Alyx did as she was bid and did indeed draw much attention to herself, so much that she was nearly half an hour getting away from the people who wanted her to sing song after song. At last, feeling she'd covered Raine's awkward dismounting, she went into his tent.

He was propped on his cot, wearing his shirt and loincloth, Rosamund kneeling by his thigh, a basin of bloody water by her knees.

84

85

VELVET SONG

"There you are!" Raine growled. "Can't you do more than display that voice of yours? Heaven help us if you should go to war. Your enemy would ask you to sing and you would drop all weapons in order to perform like some mummer. Go now, Rosamund, and see to the man I hurt. Jocelin, show her the way. And you, my worthless songbird, see if you can bind this leg or mayhaps sing the wound closed."

Alyx opened her mouth to speak, but Joss put his hand on her shoulder, his back to Raine. "He is in pain, remember that," he whispered before leaving the tent.

One look at Raine's pale face made her realize the truth of Jocelin's statement.

"Do not stare at me! Make yourself useful," Raine spat at her.

She wasn't going to stand for this treatment. His anger and hostility could only hurt him. "Be quiet, Raine Montgomery!" she ordered. "I'll not take more of your insults. Lie still and I will tend to your wound, but there is nothing you can do to change the fact that you have been wounded. Growling at me will only make you feel worse."

He started to rise, but one look from Alyx made him lie back. "They'll kill each other," he said hopelessly, meaning the outlaws outside his tent.

"It doesn't matter if they do," she said callously, moving to the far side of the cot and Raine's wounded leg. "There aren't five of them worth their space on earth."

Kneeling, she went down beside Raine's thigh and lifted the cloth Rosamund had placed there. It was her first sight of such a wound, the skin cut, angrily

VELVET SONG

inflamed from the puncture wound, blood still seeping out, and her stomach tightened.

"Are you planning to lose your dinner?" Raine taunted as he saw her pale. "I've had much worse wounds, only this one seems to be so deep."

His legs, with the heavy, muscular thighs stretched in front of her, had several thick ridges of scars. Tentatively, she touched one.

"An ax blade," he murmured, lying back, at last the loss of blood beginning to drain his strength.

As gently as she could, she cleaned the wound, frowned when she saw how dirty it was, as if the arrow had been filthy and had cleaned itself in Raine's flesh. When she was finished, she drew a stool near his bed and watched him, his eyes closed, his breathing shallow but even, and she hoped he was sleeping.

After a very long time, he spoke, his eyes staying closed. "Alyx," he whispered, and immediately she knelt by him. "Under the cot is a case. Would you get it?"

Instantly, she pulled the leather case out, smiled when she recognized it as containing a lute.

"Can you play it?" he asked.

Smiling confidently, she opened the case and withdrew the lute, her fingers already dancing in her anxiety to touch the strings. Softly she began to play and sing one of her own compositions.

It was hours later when she felt sure Raine was asleep, lying still and pale on the cot, and she put the lute aside. In the silence, with only his ragged breathing in the tent, she wished Rosamund would return. Raine seemed worse than he had been and she needed someone to tell her he was going to recover.

86

87

VELVET SONG

A glance about the tent showed her they needed water, and the side of her doublet was soaked with Raine's blood and needed to be washed. In the morning there would be questions from the outcasts as to where the blood came from.

Silently, buckets in both hands, she left the tent and headed for the river, avoiding all contact with the camp people. With a sigh of relief she saw Blanche engaged in a game of dice with several men and knew the woman would not leave to see to Raine.

It was almost dark by the time she reached the water, filled the buckets and began to wash the doublet. To her chagrin, her shirt was also soaked. After a moment's hesitation, she removed it and the binding on her breasts and began to wash everything, including her own dirty skin and hair. Nearly freezing, she dried herself with the binding cloth and gritted her teeth as she slipped into the very cold, very wet shirt and hose, tossing the doublet over her arm, grabbing the buckets and nearly running back to camp.

Inside the tent, she held her breath, listening, glad Raine was still sleeping. When she'd rid herself of the buckets, she quickly discarded her wet clothes and pulled on one of Raine's shirts, which covered her to her knees. She knew she was taking a chance, but, truthfully, she wasn't sure if she didn't hope he woke and found out she was a girl.

She'd no more put the shirt on than a groan from Raine made her turn.

"Mary," he said. "Mary, I'll find you."

With one leap she was beside him. He must stay quiet and not let the people in the camp know he was unwell. The idiots had some idea that Raine secreted

VELVET SONG

jewels and gold inside his tent, and Alyx had no doubt they would love the opportunity to search.

"Mary," Raine called louder, one big arm waving, just missing Alyx's head.

"Raine, wake up," she whispered loudly. "You are having a bad dream." As she caught his arm and touched his skin, she realized immediately that he was feverish. His skin was hot to her touch.

"No," she gasped and cursed Rosamund for leaving the camp when Raine needed her. A fever! What could she do? Feeling totally useless, she dipped a cloth in one of the buckets of water and went to place it on his forehead, but one of Raine's arms hit her and sent the cloth flying. At the rate he was flailing his arms, he'd hit a tent pole and the whole canvas would come crashing down on their heads.

"Raine," she said fiercely, commandingly. "You must be still." She grabbed both his hands in hers and found herself lifted from the floor, pulled half across him.

"I must find Mary," he said, much louder, slurring his words, and as he moved, so did Alyx.

"You overgrown ox," she hissed. "Keep still!"

That seemed to register with him, for he opened his eyes and she could see the feverish glint even in the dark tent.

For just a moment he looked at her, unseeing, and then his eyes seemed to focus and he put one hand on the back of her head and pulled her mouth down to his.

Protest, even if Alyx had thought of such a thing, was not possible. The moment her lips touched Raine's all was lost. She was a woman of great

88

89

VELVET SONG

passion, great feeling and, always, she'd spent that passion on music. At the first touch of Raine, music exploded throughout every pore of her body, angels singing, devils humming, choruses reaching new notes, happy songs, sad songs.

He turned her head as he nuzzled her lips apart, seeking the inner sweetness of her mouth, his tongue touching the tip of hers.' It didn't take Alyx but a moment to learn how to kiss him back. One foot on the floor, the other waving about, in heaven, her body half across his, she put her arms around his head and pulled him closer to her, her tongue plunging deeper and deeper into his mouth. This was what she'd wanted ever since she'd first seen him, not to be treated as a boy but as the woman she was.

Raine reacted enthusiastically to her aggressiveness, his lips sucking at hers, biting them, pulling them between his teeth, running his tongue over the sweet swell of them.

When his hand slipped downward and touched the top of her calf, she drew her breath in sharply and began to kiss his cheek, her lips trailing down to h's neck, that powerful, strong neck she'd looked at so many times, had watched with interest as sweat trickled down it.

His skin, so hot, broiling, left seared places on her legs as he moved to his side and began to run both hands up the sides of her legs, his fingers digging into the firm muscles at the backs of her thighs. When he reached her buttocks and cupped them, he gave a little chuckle of satisfaction. "Sweet wench," he murmured, moving his head so he again captured her lips, and the kiss strengthened as his fiery hands stroked

VELVET SONG

her legs, kneading the flesh, exploring the curves and contours of her body.

But Alyx was not content to be a passive participant and her hands also began to explore him, pulling up his shirt, touching his feverish skin with her ardent, inquisitive hands. The hair on his chest, great curling piles of it, was as soft as she had imagined, and the muscles on his chest, undulating, curving, were exciting beyond her wildest imagination.

"Raine," she murmured, her lips following her hands, detesting the linen shirt. His hands stilled as he gave all his attention to what she was doing with her mouth. When the shirt would allow her to go no lower, she moved so that she could start at the bottom and work up.

Her lips touched the line of hair as it disappeared into his loincloth and Raine's breath quickened, his hands still as they clutched her firm, hard thighs. As her lips moved upward, so did her hands, taking the shirt with her until she reached his neck and, miraculously, the confining piece of cloth slipped off his body, exposing all of that sun-bronzed, hot skin to Alyx's view, and touch.

Raine, slow to move, slower to realize what was happening to him, that this nymphet from heaven was making love to him, easily, with a practiced gesture, divested the vision of her shirt, and in the same motion put an arm around the specter's tiny waist and pulled her to lie beside him.

It was Alyx's turn to gasp as her nude body touched Raine's flaming skin and his hot hands began exploring her body, stopping at her waist, loosely encircled by the gold Lyon belt. He seemed to think it was

90

91

VELVET SONG

natural that she wore no clothes but this golden belt of her ancestors. As his hand moved upward toward her free breasts, she held her breath, afraid he'd reject her as too small for his taste, but as his hand encircled her and his lips nuzzled her neck, she forgot any imagined deformities. And when Raine's mouth burned a path down to her breast and touched the rosy tip with his tongue, she gasped and arched against him, her hips ungracefully banging against his.

A low, deep sensuous chuckle welled out of Raine's throat as his teeth nipped too hard on her nipple, causing her to squeal and move away from him. Raine quickly slipped a hand under her waist and easily pulled her back to him and all in one gesture caught her earlobe in his teeth. "You are mine, my sweet woodland fairy," he said between his teeth, and his breath, as hot as his skin, seemed to enter her ear and travel directly to the pit of her belly.

"No," she giggled in a tone that no one could mistake for a negative answer, her hands on his stomach, pushing against him. He let her move a few inches from him, but his hand pulled her back, treating her as if she were a child's toy on a string.

Caught up in the game, not liking his toying with her, Alyx brought her knees up to her chest and pushed out at him. She was pleased to see that at least it took two arms to hold her against the strength of her legs.

Seeming to enjoy her curled position, he held her and ran his hands down the back side of her, caressing her back and legs, curving around her buttocks, stroking and stroking, leaving a trail of heat until Alyx knew her body was as hot as his, and suddenly he turned serious again as his lips found hers and crushed

VELVET SONG

her to him, hard, hard, his passion rising, a tangible thing, something she sensed in the air about them as well as felt through the crushing of his body on hers.

Impatiently, he pushed her legs down so they lay on their sides, facing each other and his hands were no longer gentle but demanding, pulling her slight body in to his larger one, seeming to attempt to fuse their skins.

Blinded, music, magnificent music, roaring in her head, Alyx tried to get closer to him, throwing one leg over his, wrapping it about his thighs, hooking her foot behind his knee.

Raine's hand descended down her back, slowly, feeling every nook and crevice until he reached the center of her being. Gasping, eyes wide, Alyx pulled back from him, saw his eyes were closed as he concentrated on feeling. When his finger entered her, she began to tremble, scared of this new experience, frightened of what was happening to her, of what her mind and body were feeling.

His hand moved, stroking her inner thighs, touching her ever so lightly, making her part her legs more and more widely, as she wrapped them about his hips, holding him so tightly she threatened to crush him.

When his hand left her she whimpered, but his mouth captured hers as he attempted to swallow her and Alyx, nearly in tears, pushed her body closer and closer to his. His loincloth disappeared and as his maleness touched her womanliness, she fairly jumped atop him. He held her back, entering her slowly, slowly, slowly, inch by inch by inch.

He held still, filling her, resting, allowing the sensations to flow from one body to the other until Alyx, eager, inexperienced, began to move, jerkily, ineptly.

92

93

VELVET SONG

Raine's hands cupped her buttocks and guided her, moving her in a fluid, slow motion, rhythmically, easily and with each stroke, pushing her higher and higher in her pain-pleasure.

When she began to move faster, he accommodated her, thrusting harder and faster, deeper and deeper until Alyx began to claw his back, bite at his neck, her whole body beginning to twist and turn, seeming to fight him and at the same time beg something of him.

With one twist, Raine slammed her on her back and lowered his magnificent, delicious, glorious weight on top of her, pressing her into the cot so hard she threatened to fall through and she clutched at him with her legs, locking her ankles, pushing her hips up to him as he came down for two penetrating, blindingly hard thrusts-and Alyx died.

White hot, intoxicating music exploded throughout her, blasted apart her skin, separating all the pieces of her as her body trembled and quaked, shivered until her strength turned to jelly.

Sticky, horribly weak, unsure of what her body had just done and she had done to it, she clung to Raine, letting herself feel all of his hot skin, his breath, uneven, in her ear. Moving one arm, and feeling as if she'd just rolled down a steep hill covered with stones, Alyx touched the damp hair along his neck. In a quick, fierce movement, Raine grabbed her hand as he rolled to his side, pulling her with him and clutched her hand in his, so tight he threatened to break her fingers.

"Mine," he whispered, bringing her hand to his mouth and kissing two fingers before sleep overtook him.

For several minutes Alyx dozed, half in sleep, half

VELVET SONG

out. Her body was exhausted, yet somehow she was more alive than she'd ever been. She felt no shame for mating with a man who was not her husband, and perhaps she should, but at this moment there was nothing in life she needed other than this dear man's leg across her, this wet stickiness holding more than their bodies together.

"I love you," she whispered to the man sleeping in her arms. "I know you can never be mine, but for this moment you are. I love you," she said again as she kissed one damp curl and fell asleep again, more happy than she'd ever been in her life.

Chapter Eight

ALYX AWOKE To a tent bright with early morning light, and Raine's skin touching hers was hotter than the night before. Asleep, he moved restlessly, rolling about, ignoring Alyx's presence as he rolled across her, threatening to break her bones. Pushing with all her might, she managed to get him off her and quickly began to don her clothes, which were wet in places, dry in others since they'd lain crumpled in a heap all night. She dearly wished she could put on a dress and give up the pretense of being a boy. Men's clothes and men's ways gave one a great deal of freedom, but if she were a boy she'd have missed a night such as she had had last night.

She had barely fastened her doublet when the tent flap opened and Jocelin, Rosamund behind him, entered.

"How is he?" Joss asked, watching Alyx intently.

VELVET SONG

Before she could answer, Rosamund interrupted them. "He has a fever and we must bring it down. Fetch some cold water while I get my herbs."

Immediately, Alyx grabbed the buckets and went to the river.

The next three days were torture for Alyx. She and Rosamund worked continuously to bring Raine's fever down. His big body was plastered with poultices and the women had to force noxious concoctions down his throat. This forcing was always accompanied by terrible commands from Alyx in which she called Raine everything from a worthless beggar to an overgrown strutting peacock, making Rosamund giggle and, at times, blush. Alyx sang to him constantly, played the lute often, anything to soothe him, to keep him from thrashing about so.

And while Raine was raging with fever, Jocelin tried to keep command of the outlaw camp, enforcing the daily training Raine had begun, trying to keep the cutthroats from murdering each other.

"I don't believe they're worth it," Joss said, sitting on the floor at the foot of Raine's cot. "Why does he," motioning to the sleeping man to his left, "feel he has to take on their problems?" He accepted a bowl of stew from Rosamund.

"Raine adopts everyone," Rosamund said quietly, her head lowered, as it always was. "He truly believes we are worth saving."

"We?" Alyx questioned as she looked up from Raine. She never left his side, slept sitting on a stool, her head propped on the edge of his cot. "I do not consider myself the same as a murderer."

"And you, Rose?" Jocelin asked. "What crime have you committed?"

96

97

VELVET SONG

Rosamund did not answer, but when Joss turned his head she looked up at him in such a way that Alyx gasped aloud, quickly covering the sound with a little cough. Rosamund was in love with Jocelin. As Alyx looked from one to the other, each with their extraordinary beauty, she saw how suited they were for each other. She knew why Rosamund was in this horrid camp, because people believed she was marked with the devil, but why was Joss here?

Early the next morning, Raine's fever broke. Alyx was sleeping, her head next to his bare arm when she sensed he was different. Looking up at him, she saw his eyes were open, looking about the tent and finally resting on her face.

Immediately, Alyx's heart began to pound and her betraying skin began to blush. How would he react to their having made love?

After a moment he turned away from her, his eyes telling her nothing. "How long have I been ill?"

"Three days," she answered, her voice catching in her throat.

"And you have held order in the camp? Or have they murdered each other?"

"They ... they are well. Jocelin has held a sword over their heads and has kept the peace." When he didn't reply, she drew in her breath. Now he would speak of them, their passion.

Instead, he struggled to sit up, and when Alyx started to help him, he pushed her away as if she were of no consequence. Tossing the wool blanket aside, he tore the bandages off his thigh and impersonally inspected the wound on his leg, pushed at it.

"It's healing," she ventured. "Rosamund said the

VELVET SONG

wound was not bad, only the fever. We feared for your life."

Turning to her, he gave her a cold, hard look, and she could almost swear there was anger in his eyes. "Fetch me some food and a lot of it. I need to regain my strength."

Alyx didn't move.

"Damn you!" Raine bellowed, his voice shaking the walls of the tent. The explosion obviously depleted what little strength he had, and for a moment his hand went to his forehead. "Obey me," he said quietly, lying back. "And boy," he added as she reached the tent flap, water buckets in her hands. "Bring me hot wine."

"Boy!" Alyx gasped once she was outside the tent. "Boy!"

"Alyx?" Joss asked. "Was that Raine I just heard?"

Glumly, -she nodded.

"Are you all right? What was he shouting about?"

"How should I know what that great ox was bellowing about?" she snapped. "How can a low being like myself know what a friend of the king thinks?"

To her consternation, Jocelin laughed aloud and left her, whistling what Alyx knew was a ribald little song.

"Men!" she cursed, tossing the buckets into the river, hauling up sand and rocks with the water and then having to repeat the process. The second time she paused, tears in her eyes. "Boy," she whispered to the cold, rushing water. Did she mean so little to him that he couldn't even remember their night together?

Perhaps he needed a few hours to remember, she thought as she went back to the tent, stopping to tell Blanche Raine wanted food.

98

99

VELVET SONG

"I should know," Blanche said, her voice sweet, insinuating. "He's already called me to him, and I must say that Raine Montgomery has lost none of his strength," she said loudly for the benefit of the people around her, ostentatiously fastening the top of the dirty shirt she wore. "I've taken him his food."

With her chin up, Alyx entered the tent, her shoulders dragged down by the heavy buckets.

"What took you so long?" Raine asked, his mouth full.

She whirled to face him. "I have more duties than fetching your food," she said angrily. "And it looks like that whore of yours can well provide for you."

"Fair enough," he said evenly, tearing into a leg of pork. "Perhaps we should work on your prudery. A woman is a woman, a fragile, helpless thing, someone to be protected and loved, no matter what her station in life. If you treat a whore like a lady, she'll be one, and a lady can become a whore. It all depends on the man. Remember that. You're a long way from reaching manhood yet, but when you do-

"When I do I won't need any advice from you," she fairly shouted before turning toward the exit, where she slammed into Jocelin. With one angry glance at him, she pushed past him and left the tent.

Joss glanced at Raine, took a seat on a stool and idly began to strum the lute while Raine silently ate. After a moment, Joss stopped playing.

"How long have you known about Alyx?" Joss asked.

Only a hesitation in his eating showed that Raine had heard. "For a matter of hours, really," he said calmly. "And how long have you known?"

"Always." He laughed at Raine's expression. "I

was surprised no one else did. To me she was like a little girl dressed in her brother's clothes. When you called her a boy I couldn't believe you meant it."

"I wish the hell you'd told me," Raine said with feeling, a dimple appearing in his cheek. "A few days ago she was writing a letter for me and I nearly kissed her. I was sick for hours afterward."

"You've worked her harder than anyone else, you know."

"Perhaps I was trying to change her shape," Raine laughed. "I've been fascinated by her legs for some time."

"And now what do you plan to do with her?"

Pushing the tray away, Raine leaned back on the cot, feeling very weak, very weary. "Do you know how much of her story is true? What has Pagnell done to her?"

"Accused her of robbing him, declared her a witch, put a fat reward on her head."

Raine lifted one eyebrow at Joss, feeling foolish that he knew so little about what went on under his nose. "How do you think the filth of this camp would react to a young girl in their midst? One whose capture would bring them a reward?"

A snort from Joss was the only answer.

"I think it's best she stay a boy," Raine said thoughtfully, "and under my protection. The fewer people who know of her true identity the better."

"But you will tell Alyx you know she's a girl, won't you?"

"Ha!" Raine grunted. "Let the baggage suffer as I have. She's flipped that pretty little tail of hers at me at every opportunity, and this morning when I realized how she'd played me for a fool, I could have

100

101

VELVET SONG

wrung her neck. No, let her stew awhile. She thinks I don't remember-" He glanced quickly at Joss. "She thinks I don't know she's female, let her stay that way."

Jocelin stood. "You won't be too hard on her, will you? Unless I'm mistaken, I think she believes herself to be in love with you."

Raine's grin was face splitting. "Good. No, I'll not harm her, but I will make her taste a bit of her own medicine."

An hour later, when Alyx returned to the tent, her chin pointed toward the sky, Raine and Jocelin were leisurely playing a game of dice, neither of them seeming to be much interested in the game.

"Alyx," Raine said, not bothering to look up. "Did you practice on the field today? You're scrawny enough without losing the little muscle you have."

"Practice," she gasped, then calmed herself. "For some reason I don't understand now, I was concerned about whether you lived or died and gave no thought to embellishing my puny body."

With an expression of astonishment and hurt, Raine looked up at her. "Alyx, how can you speak to me

so? Are you truly angry that I lived? Go away, Joss, I'm too tired to play anymore. Perhaps I'll fetch myself some wine-as soon as I'm strong enough," he added, lying back on the cot with a great show of weariness.

Joss gave a choking cough before slipping the dice into his pocket, rolling his eyes at Raine and leaving the tent.

Alyx tried to remain aloof, but when she saw Raine collapsed on the cot, looking so pale, so helpless, she relented. "I will bring you wine," she sighed, and

VELVET SONG

when she handed it to him his hand was-trembling so that she had to put her arm around his shoulders, support him and hold the cup to his lips-those lips that even now made her breath come quick.

"You are tired," Raine said sympathetically. "And how long has it been since you've had a bath? No one in the world can get as dirty as a boy your age. Ah, well," he said, smiling, leaning back. "Someday when you've found the right woman you'll want to please her. Did I ever tell you of the time I was in a tournament outside Paris? There were three women who-

"No!" she yelled, making him blink innocently at her. "I do not want to hear your dirty stories."

"A squire should have more of an education than just weapons. For instance, when you play the lute, the tunes you choose and the words you sing are more suited for a female. A woman likes a man who is strong, sure of himself, she'd never like a wailing youth who sounds more like a female."

"A wailing-!" she began, thoroughly insulted. She may not be beautiful, but she was sure of her music. "And what do you know of women?" she snarled. "If you know as little of women as music, you are as ignorant as you are-"

"As I am what?" he said with interest, propping himself on one elbow to face her. "As handsome? As strong? As lusty?" he asked, practically leering at her.

"As vain!" she shouted.

"Ah, would that the size of you matched the strength of your voice. Have you ever tried pulling down castle walls by screeching at them? Perhaps you could strike a note and an enemy's army of horses would follow you off into the wilderness."

102

103

VELVET SONG

"Stop it! Stop it!" she screamed. "I hate you, you great, stupid, cowering nobleman!" With that she turned toward the tent flap, but Raine, his voice low, commanding, called her back.

"Fetch Rosamund, would you? I don't feel well at all."

She turned one step toward him but recalled herself and left the tent. Outside many people stood, obviously having heard the argument inside the tent. Trying her best to ignore the people as they laughed and punched each other, Alyx went to the training ground and spent three hard hours practicing with a bow and arrow.

Finally, exhausted, she went to the river, bathed, washed her hair and ate before returning to the tent.

It was dark in the tent, and since no sound came from Raine she assumed he was asleep. Now, she thought, if she had the courage, she'd walk away from this camp and never return. Why did she think that what was special to her was anything at all to this lord of the realm? No doubt he was used to women slipping in and out of his bed and paid little attention to them. What did one more matter? If she revealed herself as his last conquest, would he laugh or perhaps try to establish her as one of his many women? Would she and Blanche take turns entertaining him?

"Alyx?" Raine asked sleepily. "You were gone a long time. Did you eat something?"

"A bucket full," she said nastily, "so I can grow to be the size of your horse."

"Alyx, don't be angry with me. Come and sit by me and sing me a song."

"I know no songs like the ones you like."

"I will manage," he said, and his voice was so tired

VELVET SONG

she relented, taking up the lute and playing quietly, humming with the tune.

"Judith will like you," he murmured.

"Judith? Your brother's beautiful wife? Why should a lady like her bother with a baseborn lawyer's ... son?" She'd almost said "daughter."

"She will like your music," he said, his voice heavy with sleep, and Alyx resumed her playing.

When she was sure he was asleep she went to him, knelt by his bed and for a moment watched him, doing little more than assuring herself that he was alive. Finally, she went to her own hard bed and used all her strength to keep from crying.

In the morning Raine insisted on going to the training ground. No protest from Alyx or Jocelin could persuade him to rest for another day. As he walked, Alyx could see the sweat on his forehead, the dull

look in his eyes as he forced himself to move.

"If you die, what use will you be to us?" Alyx tossed at him.

"If I die will you go personally and notify my family?" he said in such seriousness that her breath caught. Then a dimple flashed and she knew he was teasing her.

"I will throw your great carcass over a horse and go to meet your perfect family, but I will not kneel with your sisters to mourn you."

"There will be other women besides my sisters to cry at my passing. Did I ever tell you about Judith's maid Joan? I have never met a more enthusiastic woman in my life."

At that Alyx turned away, her back rigid against the sound of Raine's rumbling laugh.

After an hour's training, Alyx ran back to the tent

104

105

VELVET SONG

to fetch some of Rosamund's herb drink for Raine, and there she found Blanche sorting through his clothes.

"What do you think you're doing?" Alyx demanded, making Blanche jump guiltily.

"For ... for laundry," she said, her eyes darting.

Alyx laughed at that. "Since when do you know what soap is?" With a quick movement she grabbed Blanche's arms. "You'd better tell me the truth. You know what the punishment for stealing is-banishment."

"I should leave here," Blanche whined, trying to twist away from Alyx. "There's nothing here for me anymore. Let me go!"

As Blanche pulled Alyx pushed, and Blanche went sailing across the room, her back hitting a tent pole.

"I'll repay you for this," Blanche sneered. "I'll make you sorry you ever took Lord Raine away from me."

"I?" Alyx asked, trying to keep the pleasure from her voice. "And how have I taken Raine?"

"You know he doesn't take me to his bed anymore," she said, rising. "Now that he has a boy-"

"Careful," Alyx warned. "It seems to me that you should worry about my anger toward you. What were you searching for when I came in?"

Blanche refused to speak.

"Then I guess I'll have to talk to Raine," Alyx said, turning to leave.

"No!" Blanche said, tears in her voice. "I have nowhere else to go. Please don't tell him. I'll not steal. I never have before."

"I have a price for not telling Raine." "What?" Blanche asked, frightened.

VELVET SONG

"Tell me about Joeelin."

"Jocelin?" Blanche asked, as if she'd never heard the name before.

Alyx only glared at her. "I will be missed soon, and if I don't have the story by the time someone comes for me, Raine will hear of your stealing."

Immediately, Blanche began the tale. "Jocelin was a jongleur and all the highest-born ladies wanted him, not only for his music but for his . . ." She hesitated. "The man never grew tired," she said wistfully, making Alyx believe she had firsthand knowledge. .

"He went to the Chatworth castle at the command of Lady Alice."

The name Chatworth made Alyx's head come up. Chatworth was the man who held Raine's sister and sister-in-law.

"Lady Alice is an evil woman," Blanche continued, "but her husband, Lord Edmund, was worse. He liked to beat women, watch their struggles as he took them. There was a woman, Constance, and he beat her until she died-or at least he thought she was dead. He gave the body to Joss to dispose of."

"And?" Alyx encouraged. "I haven't much time left."

"The woman was not dead and Joss hid her, nursed her back to health and he fell in love with her."

"Was this unusual for a man of Joss's ... talents?"

Blanche suddenly began to look very nervous, her hands pulling on each other, standing on first one foot, then the other. "I don't believe he'd ever loved anyone before. When Lord Edmund found out the girl was still alive, he took her for his own again and threw Jocelin in an oubliette. And the girl ... this Constance ..."

106

107

"Yes?" Alyx said impatiently.

"She thought Joss was as good as dead and so she killed herself."

At that, Alyx crossed herself at such a sin. "But Joss did get out, and he came here," she finished.

"But first he killed Lord Edmund," Blanche said quietly, and with that she pushed past Alyx and ran from the tent.

"Killed a lord," Alyx whispered to no one. No doubt there was a huge reward for his head, and no wonder he wanted nothing to do with the women of the camp. Alyx knew very well what it was to love a man and to lose him.

"What are you doing in here?" Raine asked angrily from behind her. "You have been gone for at least an hour, and here I find you standing alone doing nothing."

"I'll work," she muttered, turning away.

He caught her arm but released her as quickly as he touched her. "Have you had some bad news?"

"None that would interest you, she snapped before leaving the tent.

Alyx's thoughts for the rest of the day were taken up with Jocelin. Joss was a sweet, kind, sensitive man, and he deserved someone to love him. She wished she could have fallen in love with Joss; how much easier everything would be. Someday, probably soon, Raine would leave the forest and go back to his rich family and she would be alone.

As she absently lifted a sword, trying to bring it straight down over her head, her eye caught a movement at the corner of the field. In the shadows, standing still, watching, was Rosamund. Following her glance, Alyx saw that the woman looked only at

VELVET SONG

Jocelin, that in her eyes blazed passion and fire and, as Alyx recognized it, lust. Her head wasn't bowed, and for the first time there was no subservience about her, no apology for having been born.

"Alyx! You slacken!" Raine yelled at her, and with a grimace she put her mind back on her training.

That night, Raine, exhausted, still very weak, went to his cot to rest, while Alyx sat outside in the cold night air and ate a bowl of beans. Beside her sat Jocelin.

"You tore your shirt," she commented. "Someone should sew it for you."

Before Alyx could breathe, three women cheerfully said they'd sew it.

"No," Joss muttered, looking at his bowl. "It does well enough as it is."

"Give one of them your shirt," Alyx said impatiently. "I will fetch one of Raine's to warm you. He has more than enough of them."

Reluctantly, Joss took off his shirt as Alyx hurried to the tent, cast one look at Raine's sleeping form and hurried out again, a shirt over her arm. Outside, she paused. Jocelin sat before the fire, his body bare from the waist up, women all around him, their eyes greedy as they looked at Joss, at his handsomeness, his obvious melancholy, and far to one side stood Rosamund. But Jocelin never looked at any of the women.

At the fire, Alyx handed Joss the shirt and dipped herself a mug of boiling cider, blowing on the liquid to cool it.

Suddenly, a noise just outside the circle of light made everyone's head turn in that direction.

Later, Alyx didn't really remember consciously planning what she did. No one was looking, she was

VELVET SONG

108

109

VELVET SONG

standing next to Jocelin's bare body and holding the hot cider. All she thought of was that if Joss were hurt, he'd have to go to Rosamund, and the next moment she poured half the cider on Joss's arm.

Instantly, she was sorry. Jocelin jumped away from her, the shirt falling from his lap.

"Joss, I . . ." she began, looking in horror at the skin on his arm turning red.

"Rosamund," someone whispered. "Get Rosamund."

Within seconds Rosamund was there, her cool fingers on Joss's arm, and she was leading him away into the shadows.

Alyx wasn't aware of it, but there were tears in her eyes and her body was trembling from what she'd just done. It had all happened so fast and she'd had no time to think.

A great hand clamped on the back of her neck, paralyzing her.

"You will follow me to the river, and if you do not I will take a whip to your back now," Raine growled in her ear, his voice barely concealing his rage.

Her guilt over what she'd done to Joss was replaced by sheer terror. A whip to her back? Swallowing, she followed Raine into the dark forest. She deserved punishment, for she had no right whatever to hurt her friend.

Chapter Nine

AT THE RIVER, Raine turned to her, his fine lips curled into a snarl. "I should beat you," he said fiercely as he pushed her once, lightly, sending her sprawling onto the cold earth.

"And what slight did you imagine Jocelin had done you?" he asked, teeth clenched. "Were you jealous of the cut of his doublet? Had he said something you disliked? Perhaps he played a better song than you."

That got her attention. "No one is better than I," she said firmly, her jaw jutted forward as she stared up at him.

"Damn you!" he said, grabbing the front of her shirt and pulling her upward. "I trusted you. I thought you

were one of the few of your class who had a sense of honor. But you're like all the others allowing your petty differences to override your honor."

110

111

VELVET SONG

The two of them were an odd couple, Raine twice Alyx's size, towering, looming over her, but Alyx's voice was second to no one's. "Honor," she yelled back at him. "You don't know the meaning of the word. And Jocelin is my friend. He and I have no differences." She made it clear who she had the differences with.

"So! Your low little mind poured boiling cider on him for the fun of it. You are like Alice Chatworth. That woman loves to give and receive pain. Had I known you were like her-

With that Alyx doubled her fist and hit Raine in the stomach. While he was blinking at her, she grabbed his knife from the sheath at his side. "Spare me the history of your stupid family," she shouted, pressing the point to his stomach. "I will explain to Jocelin what I did and why I did it, but for you, you vain, arrogant braggart, you deserve nothing. You judge and condemn without one word of facts."

Impatiently, Raine brushed at her arm to knock the knife away, but Alyx's reflexes had quickened in the last weeks and Raine's were dulled from his fever. The blade cut the back and side of his hand and caused both of them to halt as they watched the blood well from the cut.

"You thirst for blood, do you?" Raine said. "Either mine or my friend's. I will show you how to receive pain." He reached for her, but she sidestepped him.

It took two tries to catch her, and when he did his hands clamped down on her shoulders as he shook her very hard. "How could you do that?" he demanded. "I trusted you. How could you betray me?"

It was difficult for the words to register when her head was about to fly off, but she finally began to

VELVET SONG

understand what he was saying. Jocelin was Raine's responsibility, and he took his duties seriously. "Rosamund, Rosamund, Rosamund," she began to chant. -

When at last he heard her, he stopped shaking her. "Tell me," he yelled in her face.

Her body was weak from the force of his shaking of her. "Rosamund is in love with Jocelin, and I thought she could replace Constance, but not if they were apart."

This made no sense to Raine. His fingers tightened on her shoulders, and she wondered if soon they'd come through. Quickly, she explained Joss's story about Constance, omitting the name of Chatworth.

Stunned silence from Raine filled the air. "You are matchmaking?" he croaked. "You wounded Jocelin because of some idiotic ideas of love?"

"What would you know of love?" she tossed at him. "You know so little of women that you don't know one when you see one."

"True," he countered quickly. "I am an innocent when it comes to the lying, deceiving ways of women."

"Not all women are liars."

"Name one who is not."

She was dying to mention herself but could not. "Rosamund," she blurted. "She is a good, kind person."

"Not when she uses such methods to snare a man."

"Snare! Who would want to catch such a loathsome specimen as a man?" She stopped her tirade when she saw Raine's eyes sparkling. "You know," she gasped. "You know."

She did not waste much time in speculating on the

112

113

VELVET SONG

truth of her assumptions but lifted herself from the ground and flew at him, her fists clenched. "You-!" she began in anger, but Raine stopped her. He caught her, clasping the slight body against him and drawing her mouth to his. Hungrily, he kissed her, his hand on the back of her head, his other hand about her waist, holding her off the ground.

"Remember that I am a weak man," he whispered. "And a long day on the training field has-

Alyx bit him on the shoulder. "How long have you known?"

"Not as long as I would have liked. Why didn't you tell me from the start? I understand why you had to dress as a boy, but I would have kept the secret."

She nuzzled her face in his neck, such soft, sweettasting skin. "I did not know you. Oh, Raine, are you really, truly very weak?"

Raine's laugh rumbled through her body as he pulled her away from him, tossed her in the air. "Got your first taste of love and can't stop, is that it?"

"It is like music," she said dreamily, "the very best music."

"I'm sure I should take that as a compliment," he said, beginning to unbutton her doublet.

For a moment it flashed across Alyx's mind that he wouldn't like her flat-chested body now when no fever blurred his senses. "Raine," she said, her hand on his. "I look like a boy."

It took a while before he understood her words. "You drive me to distraction with those legs of yours, and now you say you look like a boy? I have done everything in my power to make a man out of you and failed. But I have made a woman out of you."

With her breath held, Alyx allowed him to undress

VELVET SONG

her, and when he looked at her slight body with hot, wanting eyes, she forgot any feelings of being unworthy.

With a laugh, she tore at his clothes, pulling whatever she could reach away from his skin.

Raine lowered her to the ground, kept his hands on her bare back while she had her way with him. Never had he encountered such enthusiasm.

"I do not hurt you?" he murmured as he held her small body.

"Only a little and only in the right places. Oh, Raine, I thought you would never recover from your fever." With that she jumped atop him, and after a look of astonishment, he put his hands on her slim hips.

"Sing for me, my little songbird," he whispered as he lifted her and lowered her onto his shaft.

Alyx's gasp was indeed musical, and it took her only minutes to catch the rhythm of Raine's movement as his big hands traveled upward to her breasts, warming her, exciting her. His hands traveled all over her body, halting just briefly at the gold Lyon belt, then down to her thighs that worked as she raised and lowered herself.

Raine's fingertips explored, caressed, until his urgency increased and his hands dug into her hips, holding her, manipulating her as he desired. With one violent upward thrust, he spent himself as Alyx shivered, shuddered and fell forward onto him.

"How could so much woman have disguised herself as a boy?" he murmured, his hands tangled in her hair, kissing her temple. "No wonder you threatened to drive me insane."

"Oh?" she asked, trying to hide her interest in his

114

115

VELVET SONG

answer. "When was that? I would never have guessed you knew I was alive except as someone to fetch for you."

"Perhaps when you bent over or tossed a leg before my face or other such unmanly things."

"Toss-! I did no such thing. And what about you? Having me climb on your back, to straddle you! Is that how you treat all boys?"

He laughed at her. "Boys would have been interested in my strength. Are you cold?"

She snuggled on top of him, her body touching only his. "No."

"Alyx!" His head came up. "How old are you?" There was fear in his face.

She gave him a haughty look. "I am twenty, and if you hope I will grow-"

Chuckling, he pushed her head back down. "God has given you the gift of music, what more could you want? I was afraid you were a child. You don't look more than twelve."

"Do you like my music?" she asked innocently, making her voice soft and seductive.

"You'll get no more compliments from me. It seems you've had too many already. Who has trained you?"

Briefly she told him of the priest and the monk.

"So that is how you come to be a virgin at twenty and Pagnell- Hush," he said when she started to speak. "He is a coward, and he will not harm you while you are near me."

"Oh, Raine! I knew you'd say that. I knew it! There are many advantages to being a nobleman. Now you can go to the king and beg his forgiveness, then you and I will go to your home. I will sing for you and play for you and we will be so very happy."

VELVET SONG

Raine, in one motion, pushed her off him and began to dress. "Beg the king's forgiveness," he said under his breath. "And what have I done to be forgiven? Do you forget that two of my family are being held prisoner? Do you forget why I am here? And what of those in that camp? One moment you preach about the Enclosure Acts and the next you demand the farmers leave this new home they have found."

"Raine," she pleaded, holding her shirt to her neck, "I didn't mean- Surely if King Henry heard your side of the story he'd help you. This man Chatworth should not be allowed to hold your fami

ly.,,

"Henry!" he snarled. "You talk of him as if he were a god. He is a greedy man. Do you know why he's outlawed me? For my lands! He wants to take all the power from the nobles and keep it for himself. Of course, your class wants him to do this since he does good things for you, but what happens when a bad king has the power? With the nobles, at least, a bad one controls only a small area. What if Pagnell were king? Would you wish to follow a man like him?"

Hastily she pulled on her shirt. She'd never seen Raine so angry. "I wasn't talking about all of England," she soothed. "I meant us. Surely you could do more good for your family if you were with them."

"And for that you wish me to go on bended knee to the king?" he whispered. "Is that what you want? You wish to see me groveling, forsaking my vows of honor?"

"Honor!" she said loudly. "What has honor to do with this? You were wrong to use the king's men."

For a moment she was sure he was going to strike

117

VELVET SONG

her, but he took a step backward, away from her, his eyes blazing. "Honor is all to me," he whispered before turning back to the camp.

As quickly as she could, she dressed and ran after him.

Standing before Raine's tent was one of his brother's men, a message in his hand. She was glad to see the man. Perhaps some good news from home would make Raine forget his anger.

Hurrying forward, she took the message and without a glance from Raine, slipped inside the tent. Smiling, she opened the message, and the next moment, her shoulders fell.

"What is it?" Raine growled. "Is someone ill?" There were tears in Alyx's eyes when she looked up

at Raine. As they locked gazes, his eyes hardened. "What is it?" he demanded of her.

"Your ... sister Mary is ... dead," she whis

pered.

Raine's face betrayed no emotion except for a bit of white appearing at the corners of his mouth. "And Bronwyn?"

"Escaped from Roger Chatworth, but she has not been found yet. Your brothers are looking for her." "Is there more?"

"No. Nothing. Raine-" she began.

He brushed her aside. "Go! Leave me to myself." Alyx started to obey him, but as she looked back

and saw his rigid back, she knew she couldn't leave

him. "Sit!" she commanded, and when he turned to

her his eyes were like black coals from hell.

"Sit," she said, quieter, "and we will talk." "Leave me!" he growled, but he sat on a stool and

dropped his head into his hands.

VELVET SONG

Immediately, Alyx sat at his feet, not touching him. "What was she like?" she whispered. "Was Mary short or fat? Did she laugh often? Did she rail at you and your brothers? What did she do when you were so obstinate she wanted to take a club to your head?"

He looked up at that, his eyes dark, angry. "Mary was good, kind. She had no flaws."

"It's a good thing," Alyx said. "She would have to be a saint to stand your mule-headedness, and no doubt your brothers are as bad."

Raine's hand fastened about her throat as he went for her, the stool flying. "Mary was an angel," he said into her face, pinning her body, his hands tightening.

"You will kill me," she said in a resigned voice, gasping. "And still Mary will not come back."

After a moment, his hands dropped and he pulled her close to him, twisting her body in impossible directions as his arms wrapped about her. Slowly, he began to rock her as he stroked her hair.

"Tell me about your angel. Tell me about your brothers. What is Judith like? And Bronwyn?"

It wasn't easy to get him to talk, but as the words began to come, she saw a close, loving family. Mary was the oldest of the five and adored by her younger brothers. Raine talked of her selflessness and, recently, how she and Bronwyn had risked their lives to save a serf's child. He spoke of Judith, how his brother had treated her badly yet Judith had loved him enough to forgive him.

Alyx, living in her small, walled village, had never thought ' about the family life of the nobles, had assumed they lived untroubled lives. Listening to Raine, she had a glimpse of heartache and sorrow, of life as well as death. She was glad that she had not

118

119

VELVET SONG

read aloud Gavin's message to Raine. Roger Chatworth had raped the virginal Mary and, in horror, she'd thrown herself from a tower window.

"Alyx," Raine murmured. "Now can you see why I cannot go to the King? Chatworth is mine. I will have his head before we are finished." .

"What!" she gasped, pulling away from him. "You're talking of revenge."

"He has killed Mary."

"No! He did not!" She looked away, damning herself for saying that.

Forcibly, he turned her face back. "You have not told me everything in Gavin's message. How did Mary die?"

"She ..."

His fingers tightened on her jaw, the pain causing her tears. "Tell me!" he commanded.

"She took her own life," Alyx whispered.

Raine's eyes bored into hers. "She was of the Church, and she would not have done that if she had no reason. What was done to her?"

She could see that he had guessed, but he was pleading to be told he was wrong. She could not lie to him. "Roger Chatworth ... took her to his bed."

Violently, Raine shoved Alyx across the room. As he stood, he threw back his head and let out a cry of such despair, such rage, such hate, that Alyx cringed at the foot of the cot.

Outside, everything was unnaturally quiet, even the wind having stopped.

Glancing up at him, Alyx saw that he was beginning to tremble, then shake, and as he lowered his head, she saw that pure hate was causing the convulsions.

VELVET SONG

Instantly, she left the floor to throw her arms around him.

"No, Raine, no!" she pleaded. "You cannot go after Chatworth. The King-

He pushed her off him. "The man would be glad to have fewer nobles. He will take Chatworth's land as well as mine."

"Raine, please." She pressed herself against him again. "You cannot go alone, and your brothers are searching for Bronwyn. And what of the people out there? You cannot leave them to murder each other."

"Since when has your concern been for them?"

"Since I am in a terror of your being killed," she answered honestly. "How can you fight Chatworth? Your men are not here. You do have soldiers, don't you? Does Chatworth have knights?"

"Hundreds," Raine said through clenched teeth. "He is always surrounded by men, always protected."

"And if you went to him would he meet you fairly, one to one, or would you have to plow through his men first?"

Raine looked away from her, but she could see her words were making sense. How she wished she knew more about the nobility! Honor, think of honor and whatever you do, don't mention money, she warned herself.

"Chatworth is not honorable," she continued. "You cannot deal with him in the way of a knight. You must work together with your brothers." Silently she prayed they were not so hotheaded as Raine. "Please, wait until you are calmer. We'll write to your brothers and work out a plan together."

"I am not sure-"

1.

120

121

VELVET SONG

"Raine," she said quietly, "Mary has been dead for days. Perhaps Chatworth has already been brought to justice. Perhaps he has escaped to France. Perhaps-"

"You try to coax me. Why?"

She took a deep breath. "I have grown to love you," she whispered. "I would die before I stood by and watched you be killed, and that is what would happen if you attacked Chatworth alone."

"I do not fear death."

She looked up at him in disgust. "Go, then!" she yelled. "Go and give your life to Chatworth. No doubt he'd like that. One by one he can destroy your family. And you will make it easy for him. Come, I will help arm you. You will wear your finest armor. We'll strap on every weapon you own, and when you are invincible, you can ride out to face this Chatworth's army of men. Yes, come on," she said, grabbing his armor's breastplate. "Mary will be pleased to look down from heaven and see her brother hacked to bits. It will give her soul great peace."

Raine's look was so cold she felt it piercing her skin.

"Leave me," he said at last, and she did.

Alyx had never known such fear as she felt at this moment. Even in the cold air outside the tent, she was sweating profusely.

"Alyx," came a whispered voice that belonged to Jocelin.

In seconds she was in his arms, her tears flowing. "Raine's sister," she sobbed. "Mary is dead and Raine wants to face the murderer's army alone."

VELVET SONG

"Ssh," Joss calmed her. "He is not like us. We were taught to be cowards, to turn tail and run, to live to fight another day. There are not many men like Raine. He'd rather die than face dishonor."

"I do not want him to die. He cannot die! I have lost everyone-my mother, my father. I know I have no right, but I love him."

"You have every right. Now be quiet and think what you can do to prevent his suicide. Surely his brothers know how hotheaded he is. Can you persuade Raine to write his brother and you can add a note?"

"Oh, Joss," she said, grasping his arms. At his wince, she stopped. "Your shoulder where I poured the cider. I am sorry, I-"

"Quiet," he said, placing his fingertips on her lips. "Rosamund is caring for me. It is a small wound. Now go to Raine and talk to him and do not lose your temper."

Silently, Alyx reentered the tent. Raine sat on the edge of the cot, head in his hands. "Raine," she whispered, touching his hair.

Fiercely, he grabbed her hand, kissed the palm. "I am useless," he said. "A man kills my sister and I can do nothing. Nothing!"

She sat by him, put her arms around him, her head on his arm. "Come to bed. It's late. Tomorrow we will write to Gavin. Perhaps he can do something."

Docilely, Raine allowed himself to be put to bed, but when Alyx started toward her own pallet, he caught her arm. "Stay with me."

There was no possibility that she was going to reject such an offer. With a smile, she glided into his arms.

k

122

123

VELVET SONG

All night, as she dozed fitfully, she was aware that Raine lay awake beside her.

In the morning there were shadows under his eyes and his temper was black. "Wine, I told you!" he bellowed at Alyx. "Then fetch pen and paper."

The letter Raine dictated to be sent to his brother was one of anger and revenge. He vowed to take Roger Chatworth's life, and if Gavin did not help him, he would go alone.

Alyx added her own message to the bottom, pleading with Gavin to talk some sense into Raine, that he was ready to take on all of Chatworth's men alone. Sealing the letter, she wondered what this great Lord Gavin would think of her presumption.

It was two days before replies came. The messenger, nearly dead from the pace he'd set, practically fell on Alyx. With trembling hands, she broke the seal.

King Henry was furious with both the Montgomerys and the Chatworths. He was placing a heavy fine on Roger Chatworth and renewing his issue for Raine being a traitor. He wanted both noblemen out of England and he was doing what he could to bring it about. He was angered by Raine's hiding in England, and it was rumored that Raine was raising an army to fight against the King.

With eyes filled with fright, Alyx looked up at Raine. "You would not do such a thing, would you?" she whispered.

"The man worries more as he grows older," Raine said in dismissal. "Who can train such scum as those to fight?"

VELVET SONG

"This is proof that you must stay in hiding. Your brother says King Henry would love to use you as an example of what would be done to others who do not believe he is the man with the power."

"Gavin worries about losing his land," Raine said in disgust. "My brother cares more for soil than he does for honor. Already he has forgotten our sister's death."

"He has forgotten nothing!" Alyx shouted at him. "He remembers he has other people in his family. Would it make you happier if he sent you to your death? He lost his unborn babe not long ago, he has lost his only sister, his brother's wife is missing and now he is to encourage you to willingly give your life for something as stupid as revenge?"

"For my sister's life!" he yelled back at her. "Do you expect me to stand still after what has been done to me? Is there no way one of your class can understand the meaning of honor?"

"My class!" she yelled back at him. "Do you think because of your high birth you are the only one with feelings? In one night one of your kind slashed my father's throat and burned my house. If that were not enough, I was declared a thief and a witch. And all this because of some man's lust. Now you talk to me of revenge, ask me if I understand it. I cannot step out of this forest for fear of my life."

"Alyx," he began.

"Don't touch me!" she shouted: "You with your superior ways. You ridicule us because we concern ourselves with money, but what else do we have? We scrape all our lives and give a big piece of our income to support you in your fine houses so you can have the

k

124

125

VELVET SONG

freedom to spout about honor and revenge. If you had to worry where your next meal came from, I wonder how much you would talk of honor."

"You do not understand," he said sullenly.

"I understand perfectly and you damn well know it," she said before leaving the tent.

Chapter Ten

IT WAS MANY hours before Alyx could calm herself. She sat alone by the river. Perhaps she was right in hating Raine because he was part of the nobility. There were barriers between them that could never come down. Everything he believed was the opposite of what she knew to be true. All her life she'd had to contend with work, chores before her music, chores after. There was always the worry that they were not going to have enough food. If it hadn't been for the priest, they would have gone without many winters. Sometimes Raine complained about the food in the camp, but the truth was she'd had more variety and quantity than she'd ever had.

When Pagnell had killed her father, she'd done what she could to survive. Survival! That meant nothing to someone like Raine and his powerful brothers. War, revenge, honor, these childish games

126

127

VELVET SONG

of kidnapping each other were things that had never entered into her life.

"May I join you?" Jocelin asked. "Like to share your thoughts with me?"

Her eyes glistened. "I was imagining Raine behind a plow. If he had to worry about his fields growing he wouldn't have time to think of murdering this Chatworth. And if Chatworth were driving a team of oxen he wouldn't have had the energy to kidnap Raine's sister."

"Ah, make everyone equal," he said. "Rather like King Henry wants. Give all the power to one man and none to anyone else."

"You sound like Raine," she accused. "I thought you'd be on my side."

Jocelin leaned against a rock and smiled. "I am on no one's side. I have seen both ways of life and the poverty of the lower class doesn't appeal to me nor the ... the decadence of the upper class. Of course, there are people in the middle. I think I should like to be a rich merchant, a buyer and seller of silks, and grow a fat belly."

"There were rich merchants in Moreton, but they weren't happy either. They were always worried about losing their money."

"Rather like Raine is worried about losing his honor?"

Alyx smiled at him, realized he was leading toward something. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"That all of us are different, that nothing is all good or bad. If you want Raine to understand your ways, be patient. Screeching at him will do little."

She laughed at that. "Screeching, is it? Perhaps I am a bit loud."

Jocelin gave an exaggerated groan. "You do realize that you are as stubborn as he is, don't you? Both of you are so sure you're right, that your way is the only one."

For a quiet moment, Alyx considered this. "Why do you think I love him, Joss? I know he's lovely to look at, but then so are you. Why would I love Raine when I know nothing can ever come of that love? The best I can hope for is to be made his family musician, to serve his . . . his wife and children."

"Who knows what makes us love?" Joss said, a faraway look in his eyes.

"It was almost as if I'd known Raine before I met him. All the way into the forest I kept thinking how I hated all the nobility, but as soon as I saw Raine-" She laughed. "I really did try."

"Come on, let's go back. I'm sure Raine will have work for us to do. And try to remember that he needs comfort now as much as lectures on what a mule he is. "

"I will try," she said, taking his hand as he helped her up.

In the shadows of the trees stood a woman everyone seemed to have forgotten-Blanche. Her face contorted into ugliness when she saw Jocelin take Alyx's hand. For the last few days Alyx and Raine had been tearing at each other as only lovers can. They seemed to think the inside of the tent gave them privacy, but their two voices were so loud that stone walls wouldn't have sheltered them. The people in the camp wagered on who was going to win the arguments, saying the boy could hold his own. They cheered when Alyx said her class of people had too much work to do to talk about honor.

128

129

VELVET SONG

But there were things the people didn't hear, things that only Blanche heard as she fastened her ear to the tent wall: that Alyx had been declared a witch because of some man's lust, that Alyx loved Raine, and at night were the unmistakable sounds of lovemaking.

Once she'd had a good position in a castle, Edmund Chatworth's castle, and she'd had Jocelin for a lover. Now, in the rare times when Joss did look at her, his lips curled into a snarl and his eyes glowed with hatred. All because of that disgusting whore Constance! Constance had taken Joss away from Blanche, away from women everywhere. Jocelin, who used to laugh and sing, who took three women to his bed at once and made them all happy, was like a celibate priest now. Yet recently, he'd been looking at that devil-marked Rosamund with more than a little interest.

And now she was losing Raine-great, handsome, powerful, rich Raine. And to what? A skinny, short-haired, flat-chested boy/girl. If I were to wear men's clothes, Blanche thought, no one would mistake me for a boy. But that Alyx had no curves and her face looked like an elf's. So why was Raine panting after her? She was no highborn lady but of the same class as Blanche. Before Alyx came,

Blanche was Raine's personal attendant and once, oh lovely night! she'd shared his bed. Now it was never likely to happen again-unless she could get rid of Alyx.

With a new, determined look on her face, she turned back to the camp.

For weeks Alyx worked to keep Raine from declaring war on Roger Chatworth. The letters that went

VELVET SONG

from Montgomery Castle. and back again began to be exchanged weekly. More than once, Alyx thanked the Lord Raine couldn't read, because at the bottom of her letters to Gavin, she added a postscript of her version of the truth. She told Gavin how Raine's anger grew each day, how he was driving himself harder and harder on the training field, preparing himself for battle with Chatworth.

In return Gavin wrote of Bronwyn's having been found, of her baby due in August. He wrote of their youngest brother's rage at his sister's death and how Miles had been sent to relatives on the Isle of Wight, in hopes that their uncle could cool Miles' temper. In a lighter vein, Gavin said that their uncle was the one in a rage now since his ward had fallen in love with Miles and was vowing to follow him to the ends of the earth.

"What is this brother of yours like?" Alyx asked, curious.

"Women like Miles," was all Raine would say. There was no humor about him these days. Even his lovemaking had a desperate edge to it.

Another brother, Stephen, wrote from Scotland. The letter, to Alyx's mind, was odd, filled with anger against the English, talk of the year's poor crops.

"Is your brother a Scotsman?" she asked.

"He is married to the MacArran and has taken her name."

"He has given up a good English name for a Scot's?" She was incredulous.

"Bronwyn could make a man do anything for her," Raine said flatly.

Alyx bit her tongue to keep from making a snide

130

131

VELVET SONG

VELVET SONG

comment about the idle, rich women Raine had always loved. Once she did say something of the sort and made Raine smile.

"Judith," he said with such longing that Alyx winced. "In my life I have never spent a day working as hard as she does each day."

"Chivalrous of you," Alyx had snorted, disbelieving what he said.

It was in April that things began to happen. The camp of outlaws seemed docile all through winter, but as the trees began to bud and there was a breath of fresh air about, they began to fight. Not fight each other head on, but sneak up quietly and club someone.

Raine's work increased a hundred fold. He was

determined to keep order in the camp.

"Why do you bother?" Alyx snapped at him. "They

aren't worth your time."

For the first time in a long while, she saw one of his dimples appear. "Can't teach honor to one of their class, is that it? Only we are privy to those feelings."

"We?" she snorted. "Since when have I become one of your satin-clad ladies? I'll wager I can handle a sword as well as your Judith can handle a needle."

For some reason this seemed to highly amuse Raine. "You'd win that bet," he laughed. "Now come here and give me a kiss. I know you're the best at that."

Gladly, she clung to him. "Am I, Raine?" she asked seriously. She tried to live each day as it came, but sometimes she thought of the future, of seeing Raine with his lady-wife, of herself in the shadows.

"Now, what's that look for?" he asked, tipping her chin up. "Am I so difficult to be around?"

"I'm just afraid, that's all. We won't always be in the forest."

"That is something to be thankful for!" he said passionately. "No doubt decay has set into my house in these last months."

"If you went to the King-" she began tentatively.

"Let's not argue," he whispered against her lips. "Is it possible to love a woman and hate her mind?"

Before Alyx could reply, he began to kiss her, and after that there was no thought of anything but the feel of him against her body. They were never very discreet; they couldn't be. Although Alyx still kept up the pretense of working on the training field, she was never quite serious. Whenever she felt Raine's eyes on her, she did everything she could to entice him to her. She teased him mercilessly.

And oh, what freedom the boy's clothes gave her! Once when they'd gone hunting and were quite some distance from the camp, Alyx turned around in the saddle to face him and untied the triangle in front of her tight hose. Raine, at first astonished, soon began to react to her creativity. Within seconds, he, too, was unfastened and he pulled her on top of him.

They had not counted on Raine's stallion. The horse, nostrils flaring, went wild at the smell of their lovemaking. Raine was fighting the horse and trying to hold onto Alyx's ardent little body. But the point came when he could no longer control anything. As his body exploded in Alyx's, the great beast reared, making Alyx's eyes fly open in wonder.

Raine laughed so hard at her expression she was insulted. "No, I will not do it again," he said, grinning. "And to think you spent most of your life

132

133

VELVET SONG

inside a church. Now you're"- he wiggled his brows -"riding horses."

She made an attempt to snub him, but as she tried to turn around, she realized the triangular patch on her hose was missing. For an hour she had to bear Raine's laughter while they scrounged in the leaves looking for the bit of fabric.

But Alyx had the last laugh. The sight of her so provocatively clad soon changed his words to honey. She, with all the pride she'd learned from him, made him fall to his knees and beg for her favors. Of course she hadn't realized at what level his mouth would be with him on his knees and her standing. In seconds, it was Alyx begging for mercy.

After a long, leisurely lovemaking, Raine extracted her hose patch from his pocket-where it had been all along. As she pummeled his chest with her fists in mock fury, he kissed her until she was breathless.

"Learn who is the master here, wench," he said, nuzzling her neck. "Now we must return to camp. That is, if my horse will let me ride him. No doubt he is as in love with you as you are with him."

She tried not to, but she blushed furiously at his jest. Raine gave her taut buttocks a friendly slap and lifted her into the saddle. He shouted with laughter when the horse danced in protest as Raine mounted. . "He protests your weight, most likely," she said smugly.

"You do not protest my weight, so why should he?"

Alyx thought it was better to keep her mouth shut because she knew Raine was going to win.

Now, holding onto him, she tried not to think of the future, of the time when they would no longer be equals.

A shout outside the tent made them start apart.

"What is it this time?" Raine growled. "Another robbery or another beating?"

There was a mob of people approaching the tent, all of them angry.

"We demand you find the robber," said the leader. "No matter where we hide our things, they are taken."

Rage swept through Alyx. "And what right do you have to make demands, you stupid oaf?" she yelled. "Since when is Lord Raine your protector? You should have gone to the gallows long ago."

"Alyx," Raine warned, clamping his hand onto her shoulder so hard she nearly fell. "Have you kept watch?" he asked the leader of the mob. "Have you hidden your goods?"

"Well!" he said, glancing hostilely toward Alyx. "Some of us have buried them. John here had his knife under his pillow and in the mornin' it was gone."

"Yet no one has seen this thief?" Raine asked.

Blanche stepped forward. "It must be someone small, someone light enough to slip about so easy." Her eyes darted to Alyx.

The mob turned their malevolent glances toward the boy next to Raine.

"It would have to be someone fearless," Blanche continued. "Someone who thought he was protected."

Involuntarily, Alyx took a step backward, closer to Raine.

"Blanche," Raine said quietly, "do you have someone you suspect? Get it out in the open."

"No one for sure," she said, loving the way everyone listened to her. "But I have me ideas."

135

VELVET SONG

Alyz, regaining her courage, started to step forward, but Raine stopped her.

"We'll catch the thief," one of the men said, "and when we do, is he gonna be punished?"

Alyx was so stunned by the look of hate in the man's eye that she didn't really hear Raine's answer. Somehow he was able to promise them enough that, grumbling, they finally dispersed.

"They hate me," Alyx whispered as Raine pushed her into the tent. "Why would they hate me?"

"You hate them, Alyx," Raine said. "They feel it even if you never say so. They think you put yourself above them."

She thought she was used to Raine's blunt way of speaking, but she was not prepared for this. "I don't hate them."

"They are people the same as you and me. We had the advantage of a family. Do you know the woman without a right hand? Maude? Her father cut off her hand when she was three so she'd get more money when she begged. She was a prostitute by the time she was ten. They are thieves and murderers, but it's only what they've known."

Alyx sat down heavily on a stool. "In these last months you've never mentioned this. Why?"

"It is your opinion. Each of us must do what we must."

"Oh, Raine," she cried, throwing her arms about his neck. "You are so good and kind, so noble. You seem to love everyone while I love no one."

"A saint is what I am," he agreed solemnly. "And my first act of sainthood is to declare my armor filthy and to deputize one scrawny angel to clean it."

VELVET SONG

"Again? Raine, in the next letter could I ask your brother for a real squire?"

"Up, you lazy child," he commanded, grabbing the pieces of steel, but as she stood at the door, loaded down, he gave her a fervent kiss. "To remember me by," he whispered before pushing her outside.

At the stream, Jocelin met her, five rabbits on a string across his shoulder. They spoke only briefly before Joss went back to the camp. He was spending more and more time with Rosamund.

Alyx tried her best to put the incident of the robberies out of her mind. Surely the people would not believe Blanche's insinuations.

Two seemingly uneventful days went by and then there was another robbery and again people looked at Alyx suspiciously. Blanche, Alyx thought. The woman had certainly been busy in the last few days.

Once, when she ladled herself a bowl of stew, someone jostled her and the hot broth burned her hand. It seemed to be an accident but she wasn't sure. Another time she heard two men loudly discussing people who thought they were better than others.

On the fourth day, as she was walking on the training field, a sword accidentally cut her arm. At Raine's questioning, no one seemed to have had his hand on the sword, and when he made them all train an extra hour, they glowered at Alyx.

In the tent, Raine was quiet as he bound her wound.

"Say something!" she demanded.

"I don't like this. I don't like to see you hurt. Stay closer to me. Don't leave my sight."

She only nodded at him. Perhaps she had been too

136

137

VELVET SONG

hostile to these people. Perhaps they did deserve some of her time. She didn't know much about people really, only music. In Moreton she'd been popular because she gave people her music, but here they seemed to want something else. She knew Blanche was turning the people against her, but if she'd been kind over the last months Blanche wouldn't have had such an easy job.

That evening she borrowed Raine's lute and sat by the campfire and began to play. One by one, the people got up and left. For some reason this frightened her more than anything else.

For two days Alyx stayed close to Raine. The camp people now had someone to turn their hatred on, and they showed their feelings at every opportunity.

It was on the evening of the second day, while Alyx was just a few feet from Raine's side, that a man suddenly grabbed her and began searching her. Before Alyx could even cry out, the man yelled in triumph and held aloft a knife Alyx had never seen before.

"The boy took it," the man yelled. "We have proof."

Instantly, Raine was beside Alyx, pulling her behind him. "What does this mean?" he demanded.

The men grinned at the crowd gathering around them. "Your high-nosed little boy can't deny this," he said, holding the knife out for examination. "I found this in his pocket. I've had me suspicions for some time, but now we're all sure." He pushed his face close to Alyx's and his breath was foul. "Now you won't be thumin' your nose at us."

In seconds, he was picking himself up from the

138

ground where Raine had tossed him. "Get back to work!" Raine ordered.

The people, the crowd growing larger by the moment, refused to move. "He's a thief," someone said stubbornly. "Beat him."

"Tear the flesh off his back and then see how proud he is."

Alyx, eyes wide, moved behind Raine.

"The boy is no thief," Raine said stubbornly.

"You nobles talk about fair treatment," someone in the back yelled. "This boy steals from us and is allowed to go unpunished."

"No!" yelled at least five people.

Raine drew his sword, pointed it at them. "Get away, all of you. The boy is no thief. Now, who will be the first to lose his life over this lie?"

"We'll punish the boy," someone yelled before the crowd began to disperse.

139

Chapter Eleven

IT WAS A very long while before Alyx could move away from the protection of Raine's solid form. Her knees were trembling and she clung to his arm.

"I didn't steal the knife," she finally managed to whisper.

"Of course not," Raine snapped, but she could tell from his expression that he wasn't dismissing the incident.

"What will happen now?"

"They will work to get what they want." "And what is that?"

"A trial and your banishment. Before you came I promised them justice. I swore that all wrongdoers would be punished."

"But I have done no wrong," she said, on the verge of crying.

"Would you like to put that before a group of

VELVET SONG

them? They would find you guilty even if you were the Holy Mother."

"Buy why, Raine? I have done nothing to them. Last night I even tried to sing for them, but they turned away."

He was serious when he looked down at her. "Has your music always been enough for people? Has no one ever asked more of you than to sing prettily?"

She had no answer for him. For her there'd been no life except her music. To the people of her town all they'd expected of her was music, and it was enough for them as well as for herself.

"Come," Raine said. "We must make some plans."

Glumly, she followed him, her head down, not meeting an eye of anyone they passed. This anger directed toward her was something so new to her.

Once they were in the tent, Raine spoke quietly. "Tomorrow we will leave the forest."

"Leave? We? I don't understand."

"The people are poisoned against you, and it will no longer be safe for you to stay here. I cannot protect you every minute of the day and I cannot allow them to harm you. Tomorrow morning we'll leave."

Alyx, so aware of the hate of the people just outside the thin walls, could barely listen to him. "You cannot leave," she murmured. "The King will find you."

"Damn the King!" Raine said angrily. "I cannot stay here and worry that each day one of them will turn on you. You cannot sing your way out of this, Alyx. For all their look of it they are smarter than the horses you charm. They will do what they can to hurt you."

Alyx was beginning to listen to him. "You would go with me?"

140

141

VELVET SONG

"Of course. I couldn't very well let you leave alone. You wouldn't last a day outside in the world."

Tears blurred her eyes. "Because other people would also find out what I am? That I am a vain, arrogant person who cares for no one but herself?"

"Alyx, you are a sweet child and you care for me."

"Who could not love you?" she asked simply. "You have more kindness in your little finger than I have in all my body. And now you risk capture and imprisonment to save me."

"I will take you to my brother and-"

"And Gavin will risk the King's wrath because he harbors a woman wanted for witchcraft. Would you jeopardize all your family for me, Raine? Do you love me that much?"

"Yes."

Alyx's eyes flew, to his, saw the love there, and instead of giving her pleasure it gave her pain. "I must be alone," she whispered. "I must think."

He followed her to the tent flap and as she left, he called Jocelin to him.

As Alyx made her way through the dark forest to the stream, her thoughts jumbled about in her mind. She sat on a rock, staring at the dark, sparkling water.

"Come out, Joss," she called. "You are a poor follower," she said despondently when he sat beside her. "Did Raine order you to protect me?"

Joss remained silent.

"He has to protect me now," she said. "He can't leave me alone for even minutes for fear someone will punish me."

"You have done no wrong."

"I have not stolen, true, but what good have I

VELVET SONG

done? Look at Raine. Now he could be in another country living in comfort, but he chooses to stay in this cold forest and help his countrymen. He protects them, sees that they are fed, works for them always. And yet there is a reward on his head and he must stay here while his family needs him. His sister is raped and commits suicide and in his grief he does not even stop work for an hour."

"Raine is a good man."

"He is a perfect man," she said.

"Alyx," Jocelin whispered, his hand on her arm, "Raine will protect you from the people, and what time he can't be near, I will be. Your love for him has helped him through his grief."

It came as no surprise to her that Joss knew she was a woman. "What good is my love? I am not worthy of him. Tomorrow he plans to leave this camp, to ride freely into the sunlight of a country where he is fair game for the King's wrath. He will leave the safety of the forest and risk prison or even death to protect me."

Again Jocelin was silent.

"Don't you have anything to say? No soothing words telling me Raine's life will be safe?"

"He will be in great danger if he leaves the forest. Raine is well-known and easily recognized."

A great sigh escaped Alyx. "How can I let him risk so much for me?"

"So what do you plan to do?" Joss asked sharply.

"I will leave by myself. I cannot stay and cause Raine worry, and he cannot leave with me. Therefore I will go alone."

Joss's laugh startled her. "I'm sure Raine Mont

143

VELVET SONG

gomery will be as obedient as a lap dog. You will inform him you plan to leave and he will meekly kiss you goodbye and wish you well."

"I am prepared for a fight."

"Alyx," Jocelin laughed. "Raine will toss you across his horse and carry you out of the forest. You can yell all you want, but when it comes to the point, muscle will win over words."

"You are right," Alyx gasped. "Oh, Joss, what can I do? He cannot risk his life for me."

"Love him," Joss said. "That's all he wants. Go with him, stay with him. See him through everything."

She jumped up from the rock, hands on hips, glaring at Jocelin. "What am I to do when he is killed because of me? Should I hold his cold hand and sing a sweet song to the Lord? No doubt I'll make magnificent music, and everyone will say how I must have loved him. No! I don't want cold hands. I want hot ones loving me--or loving anyone, for that matter. I'd rather give Raine back to Blanche than see him dead."

"Then how are you going to make, him stay here?" Jocelin asked quietly.

She sat down again. "I don't know. Surely there must be something I could say. Perhaps if I insulted his family."

"Raine would laugh at you."

"True. Perhaps if I told him he were a ..." She couldn't think of a single thing she hadn't already called him. Obviously names would not harm him. "Oh, Joss," she said desperately, "what can I do? Raine must be protected from himself. If he were to leave the forest no doubt he'd pursue Chatworth, and

VELVET SONG

then the King would become involved in the quarrel and- I can't let it happen! What can I do?"

It was a long moment before Jocelin spoke and when he did, she barely heard him. "Go to bed with

me.,,

"What!" She whirled on him. "I am talking to you of a man's safety, his possible death and you are trying to woo me to your bed? If you want a woman, get one of those hags who pant after you. Or take Rosamund to your bed. I'm sure she'd enjoy it more than I would."

"Alyx," he chuckled, hand on her arm. "Before you launch into me more fully, listen to me. If you are serious about Raine's staying here, there is nothing you can say to make him stay, but perhaps there is something you can do. He doesn't really know you very well, not enough to trust you, or perhaps no man ever trusts a woman. If Raine were to find you with another man there would be nothing you could say to make him take you back. He would let you go and he would stay here."

"He would hate me," she whispered. "He can have a violent temper."

"I thought you were serious about this. A moment ago you said you'd rather Blanche had him." He nearly choked on the woman's name. "Are you hoping that you can leave Raine now and later when he is again in the King's good graces, you can come back to him? That would only happen in a song you wrote yourself. The only way Raine Montgomery will let you leave this forest without him is if his feelings for you are totally reversed."

"To change his love to hate," she whispered.

"Do you dream of his standing and waving goodbye

144

145

VELVET SONG

to you, tears in his eyes?" Joss asked sarcastically. "Alyx, you love him too much to hurt him. Tomorrow let him take you out of here. His brothers will protect him until the King pardons Raine."

"No! No! No!" she shouted. "No one could protect him from an arrow. Even in this forest surrounded by guards, he was shot. To leave would risk death. How could I hurt him more than to kill him?"

She buried her face in her hands. "But to have him hate me! To change the way he looks at me from love to hate- Oh, Joss, that is a great price to pay."

"Do you want his love or his life? Would you rather sing over his grave or know he is alive but in another woman's arms?"

"I'm new to this idea of love, but right now the idea of another woman touching him makes me prefer his death."

Joss tried to keep from smiling. "Is that what you truly want?"

"No," she said softly. "I want him alive, but I also want him with me."

"You must choose one."

"And you believe the only way to get him to stay is to ... to bed someone else?"

"I can think of nothing else."

Her eyes widened. "But what of you, Joss? Raine would be very angry with you."

"I daresay he will."

"What will you do? Your life here could be hell."

Joss cleared his throat. "If I want to keep my life, I

think I should leave also. I wouldn't like to indulge in

a duel with Raine after making love to his woman."

"Oh, Joss," she sighed. "I would be ruining your

VELVET SONG

life as well as mine. You're wanted for murder. What if someone recognizes you?"

She didn't see Joss start at her words. He had no idea she knew his history.

"I'll grow a beard and you, as a boy, will not be known. We'll sing together, play, and we'll be able to earn our keep."

Pagnell was her first thought, but she brushed it away. For the first time in her life she wasn't going to think of herself first. "Raine has had so much tragedy in his life. His sister's death was so recent, and now . . . "

"Make up your mind, Alyx, and get your clothes off. If I'm right, Raine is coming this way now."

"Now?" she gasped. "I need time to think."

"Choose," he said, close to her. "Dead and yours or alive and someone else's?"

The image of Raine quiet, forever silent, made her throw her arms about Jocelin's neck, her lips seeking his.

For many years, Jocelin had been an expert at removing women's clothes, and it was something he had not forgotten. Even if Alyx did wear boy's clothes, it was amazing how quickly Joss's skillful fingers rid her of them. Before she could come up for air, both of them were nude from the waist up, bare flesh against skin.

Jocelin entwined his hands in Alyx's hair and pulled her head back and kissed her hungrily as her eyes flew open in alarm.

She did not have a second to consider Joss's kiss because Raine's powerful hands pulled them apart, sending both of them flying across the stream bank.

147

VELVET SONG

"I will kill you," Raine said, under his breath, his eyes boring into Jocelin's.

Alyx, dazed from the flight Raine's hands had sent her on, thrust her arms into her shirt as she saw Raine drawing his sword and bellowed, "No!" loud enough to make the trees drop their nighttime dew. Give me strength, she prayed as she stood.

She placed her body before Joss's. "I will give my life for this man," she said with feeling. As she saw the looks on Raine's face changing from bewilderment to hurt, to anger, to coldness, she felt them in her heart.

"Have I been a fool?" he asked quietly.

"Men are like music," she said as lightly as she could manage. "I cannot exist on a diet of love songs or alone on dirges. I need it all. I must have variety in men as well as in my songs. You, ah, you are a song of fury, of cymbals and drums, while Joss"-she fluttered her lashes-"Joss is a melody of flutes and harps."

For a moment, she thought perhaps Raine was going to tear her head from her body, and instead of feeling fear she was almost welcoming him. Her soul was praying that he wouldn't believe her. Could he truly believe that music meant more to her than he did?

"Go from my sight," he whispered from deep inside himself. "Let . . . your friend care for you from now on. Leave tonight. I do not want to see you again."

With that he turned to leave, and Alyx was several steps toward him before Joss grabbed her arm. "What can you say to him now except the truth?" he asked. "Leave him alone. Break the tie now. Wait here and I

VELVET SONG

will return in a short while. Do you have any other clothes or other possessions?"

She shook her head and was barely aware that Jocelin left her alone.

There didn't seem to be any thoughts that went through her head as she waited for him to return. Raine believed her, believed that she thought her music was so very, very important. The people of the camp were willing to believe she was a thief and were eager to see her punished. Yet what had she ever done in her life to make anyone trust her, believe that she was a good person?

"Are you ready?" Jocelin asked from beside her, Rosamund a silent shadow behind him.

"I am sorry I have caused you-" she began.

"No more," Joss said firmly. "We must look to the future now."

"Rosamund, you will look after him? See that he eats? See that he doesn't train too hard?"

"Raine will not listen to me as he does to you," she said in her soft voice, her eyes devouring Jocelin.

"Kiss her," Alyx whispered. "Someone should give their love and not hide it." With that she turned away, and when she looked back she saw Rosamund clinging fiercely to Jocelin. When he returned to Alyx there was a look of surprise on his face.

"She loves you," Alyx said flatly before they started the long journey to reach the outer edges of the forest.

148

149

PART II

August

1502

Chapter Twelve

ALYX Purr HER hand on the small of her back and eased herself down in a grassy patch just off the road, giving a grateful little smile to Joss when he handed her a cup of cool water.

"We'll rest here for tonight," he said, his eyes studying the tired lines on her face.

"No, we must play tonight-we need the money."

"You need rest more!" he snapped, then sat down beside her. "You win. You always do. Hungry?"

Alyx'gave him a look that made him smile, and he glanced downward to her big belly as it pushed out the wool of her dress. The summer's heat and their constant walking made Alyx miserable.

It had been just over four months since they'd left Raine's camp, and in that time they'd barely stopped walking. At first it hadn't been difficult. They were

VELVET SONG

both strong and healthy and they were popular musicians. But after a month on the road, Alyx became ill. She vomited so often people refused to travel with them, fearing the boy had some disease. And Alyx became so weak she could hardly walk.

They stayed for a week in a little village while Jocelin sat by the city gates and sang for pennies. Once Alyx came to him carrying bread and cheese, and as he watched her he thought how she'd changed since the time in the forest. Perhaps it was because he'd grown to care about her lately that she seemed to have grown lovelier, softer, prettier. Her boyish swagger had turned into a gentle, rolling, definitely female walk. And even though she'd been ill, she was gaining weight.

All of a sudden, it had hit Joss what was "wrong" with Alyx: she was carrying Raine's child. By the time she reached him he was laughing, and if they'd been alone, he'd have swirled her about in his arms.

"I will be a burden to you," Alyx said, but her eyes were alight. Before Joss could reply, she began chattering. "Do you think he will look like Raine? Would it be wrong to pray for a child to have dimples?"

"Let's save our prayers and wish for the means to dress you as a woman. If I travel with a pregnant boy I don't think I will live long."

"A dress," Alyx smiled, something soft and nice to make her feel like a woman again.

Once Jocelin was relieved of his feeling that Alyx was dying of some dread disease, he was more confident about allowing her to journey from castle to castle. And Alyx, after finding she had not lost all of Raine, was in much better spirits. She talked constantly about the baby, what it would look like, how

VELVET SONG

Raine's features would look on a girl and if she did have a girl, she hoped the child would not grow to be quite as big as her father. Alyx also laughed over the fact that she never did anything properly. Instead of being ill the first three months, she was ill the second three.

Joss listened to everything over and over again. He was so pleased she was no longer silent and sullen as she'd been for months after they left the forest. At night, sleeping on pallets on the floor of whatever house they were performing at, he often heard her crying, but she did not mention her sorrow during the day.

Once they played and sang at a large manor house belonging to one of Raine's cousins. Alyx had again become very silent, but he could almost feel her straining to hear any bit of news.

Jocelin had dropped a few hints to Montgomery's wife and the woman had told him much. Raine was still in the forest and King Henry, in his grief over the death of his eldest son, had nearly forgotten the outlawed nobleman. The King was much more worried about what to do with his son's wife, the Princess Katherine of Aragon, than what to do about a private feud. He ignored the petitions of the Montgomery family to punish Roger Chatworth. After all, Chatworth had not killed Mary Montgomery, only raped her. He had harmed her in no way. It was on the girl's soul that she committed suicide.

There was news that in July Judith Montgomery had borne a son and later in August Bronwyn MacArran had also been delivered of a son. The Montgomery cousins were still incensed over Stephen's adopting the Scot's name and ways.

154

155

VELVET SONG

Alyx listened avidly to everything Jocelin reported to her.

"It's good that I'm no longer with him," she said quietly, strumming a lute. "His family is full of ladies while I am a lawyer's daughter. If I had stayed with him I don't believe I could have been docile or polite to his

lady-wife and she wouldn't have wanted me near, though some of these ladies I see are coldblooded wenches. Perhaps he could have used a little warmth."

Jocelin tried to show her that what was different between her and the ladies could be solved with a silk dress, but Alyx wouldn't see it. He knew she brooded not only over Raine but over the hatred of the people in the forest.

As Alyx's pregnancy advanced she grew quieter, more thoughtful, and she seemed much more aware of the world than she had been when he first met her. Once in a while, not often, really, she'd stop practicing to help someone do something. On the road they always traveled with a group rather than risk the highway robbers alone, and Alyx sometimes took a few children for a walk to give the mothers some peace, and once she shared her food with a toothless old beggar. Another time she prepared a meal for a man whose wife was lying under some trees giving birth to her eighth child.

The people smiled in gratitude and as a result they'd made friends wherever they traveled. A child once gave Alyx a little bouquet of wildflowers, and there'd been tears in Alyx's eyes.

"These mean a great deal to me," she'd said, clutching them tightly.

"She was repaying you for helping her yesterday.

VELVET SONG

The people here like you." He motioned to the travelers beside them.

"And not music," she whispered.

"Pardon?"

"They like me for something besides my music. And I have given them something besides music."

"You have given of yourself."

"Oh, yes, Joss," she laughed. "I have tried to do things that were difficult for me. Singing is so very, very easy."

Jocelin laughed with her. That anyone could say that music such as Alyx produced was easy was amazing.

Now, in August, when the burden of the heavy child was dragging on her, her steps were slower and slower and Joss wished they could afford to stay in one place for a length of time.

"Are you ready to go?" she asked, trying to heave herself upward. "We'll make the castle by nightfall if we hurry."

"Stay here, Alyx," he urged. "We have food."

"And miss the lady's betrothal celebration? No, once we're there we'll have plenty to eat, and all we have to do is create a divine bit of music celebrating the heiress's slender charms. I do so hope this one is pretty! The last one was so ugly I confessed the severity of the lies I sang to the priest."

"Alyx!" Joss said in mock chastisement. "Perhaps the lady was beautiful inside."

"Only you would think such a thing. Then, of course, with your face you can afford to be generous. I saw the way the ugly girl's mother threatened to devour you. Did she make you an offer after the singing?"

VELVET SONG

"You ask too many questions."

"Joss, you can't keep cutting yourself off from people and life. Constance is dead."

It had taken Alyx a long time to get him to tell her about the woman he'd once loved.

Jocelin set his jaw in such a way that Alyx knew he was refusing to speak of himself. Between them, her problems were common property while his were his own.

"Of course, none of the women have been as lovely as Rosamund. Except for her devil's mark, that is. That hideous thing makes it difficult to see any beauty at all. I wonder if it really is Satan's sign."

Jocelin whirled on her. "It is more likely a mark of God's favor because she is a good, kind, passionate woman."

"Passionate, is she?" Alyx teased as he turned away.

"You are cruel, Alyx," he whispered.

"No, I only want you to see that there is no reason for you to bury yourself with me. You cannot hold yourself inside. You have so much to give, yet you stay inside yourself."

When he looked at her, his eyes were cold. "Raine is not here, so why don't you find someone else to love? I've seen many men, from noblemen down to stable boy, give you looks. They'd take you even with your big belly. Why not marry some merchant who will give your child a home and who will make love to you every night?"

After his attack, she was quiet for a few moments. "Forgive me, Joss. I had hoped Rosamund could replace Constance, but I see she cannot."

Jocelin turned away because he didn't want Alyx to

VELVET SONG

see his face. Too often in the last months the face he remembered at night was Rosamund's, not Constance's. Rosamund, so silent, almost apologizing for her existence, was quite often the woman he saw, not as the quiet, gentle woman he knew but as the woman who'd kissed him goodbye. For the first time since Constance's death, a spark had shot through him. Not that there hadn't been a few women here and there, but before he'd met Constance and since then he'd been detached, always apart from the women. Only that one brief time when he'd held Rosamund had he felt even a flicker of real desire, real interest in a woman.

Joss took Alyx's hand in his and together they started toward the castle that loomed ahead of them. It was an old place, one tower crumbling, and Alyx knew they'd have another drafty sleeping place. In the last months of traveling she'd learned a great deal about the nobility. Perhaps the most significant thing was that noble women had as little freedom as women anywhere. She'd seen great ladies with blackened eyes from their husband's beatings. She'd seen weak, cowardly noblemen who were treated with contempt by their wives. There were matches of great love, couples who hated each other, households of great decadence and some based on love and respect. She'd begun to realize that nobles had problems very similar to those of the people in her own small town.

"Daydreaming?"

"Thinking about my home, what a protected childhood I had. I almost wish my music hadn't set me apart from everyone else. It makes me feel as if I don't quite belong anywhere."

"You belong wherever you want."

159

VELVET SONG

"Joss," she said seriously, "I don't deserve either you or Raine. But someday I hope I can do something worthy."

"Did you know you talk more like Raine every day?"

"Good!" she laughed. "I hope I can rear his child to be even half as good as he is."

As they approached the old castle, they had to wait to be admitted, since there were hundreds of people entering before them. The betrothal was to join two powerful, rich households and the guests and entertainment were to be sumptuous.

Joss kept his arm around Alyx's shoulders as he led her through the crushing crowds.

"Are you the singers?" a tall woman shouted down at Alyx.

Alyx nodded up at her, awed by the dark, steelbanded hair, the richness of her gown. "Follow me."

Gratefully, Alyx and Jocelin followed her up a narrow, winding stone stairway to a large round room at the top of the tower, where several women were pacing and showing signs of agitation. In the center of the room was a young woman wailing loudly.

"Here she is," a woman beside Alyx said.

Alyx looked up at an angelic face, blonde hair, blue eyes, an ethereal, delicate smile.

"I am Elizabeth Chatworth."

Alyx's eyes widened at the name, but she said nothing.

Elizabeth continued. "I'm afraid our little bride-tobe is terrified," she said in a tone of exasperation and disgust. "Do you think you could calm her enough so that we could get her downstairs?"

VELVET SONG

"I will try."

"If you can't, then I'll have to put my hand to her cheek and see if that music will quieten her."

Alyx had to smile at this sweet-looking woman's words. They did not fit her face at all. "What is she frightened of?" she asked, trying to decide what music to play.

"Life. Men. Who knows? We have both just come from the convent, and you'd think Isabella was going to her death."

"Perhaps her betrothed-"

"He's manageable," Elizabeth said with a wave of dismissal. Her eyes went to Jocelin, who was staring openly at Elizabeth. "You're pretty enough to not frighten the rabbit," she said. A loud wail from Isabella sent Elizabeth to her side.

"My goodness," Alyx said, feeling as if she'd just left a storm. "I don't believe I've ever met anyone quite

like her before."

"And I pray we don't again," Joss said. "She calls us. Heaven help the man who dares disobey that one, although ..."

Alyx looked up at him, saw the speculative gleam in his eye. _ "She'll have your hair if you disobey her."

"It's not my hair she'd remove, and damned if I'd mind letting her."

Before Alyx could reply, Joss pushed her toward the crying bride.

It took an hour to calm the woman, and all the while Elizabeth Chatworth paced behind the chair, now and again narrowing her eyes at the weeping Isabella. Once she opened her mouth to say something but Alyx, fearing the woman would ruin what

160

161

VELVET SONG

she and Joss had accomplished, sang even louder to cover the beginning of Elizabeth's sentence.

When at last Isabella was ready to go downstairs, all of her maids went with her, leaving Jocelin and Alyx alone with Elizabeth Chatworth.

"You did well," Elizabeth said. "You have a magnificent voice, and unless I miss my guess you are well trained."

"I have spent some time with a few teachers," Alyx said modestly.

Elizabeth's eyes fixed on Jocelin in a piercing gaze. "I have seen you before. Where?"

"I knew your sister-in-law, Alice," he answered softly.

Elizabeth's eyes turned hard. "Yes," she said, with a brief, insolent look up and down Joss's form. "You would be her type. Or perhaps any man with the proper equipment is pleasing to her."

Jocelin had an expression on his face Alyx had never seen before. She wished he'd say no more. After all, it was Joss who'd killed Edmund Chatworth, Elizabeth's brother.

"And how are your brothers?" Joss asked, and there was challenge in his voice.

For a long moment Elizabeth's eyes bored into his, and Alyx held her breath, praying Elizabeth would not know who Joss was.

"My brother Brian has left my home," she said quietly, "and we do not know where he is. There is rumor that he is held by one of the filthy Montgomerys."

Jocelin's hand clamped down on Alyx's shoulder brutally. "And Roger?" he asked. "Roger ... has changed. Now!" she said smartly.

VELVET SONG

"If we are through discussing my family, I am sure you are wanted below." With that, she swept from the room.

"Filthy!" Alyx yelled before the door was closed. "Her brother kills my Raine's sister and she dares call us filthy!"

"Alyx, calm yourself. You cannot take on a woman like Elizabeth Chatworth. She'd eat you alive. You don't know what kind of brother she grew up around. Edmund was mean, vicious, and I've seen Elizabeth stand up to him at times when even Roger backed down. And she adores her brother Brian. If she thought the Montgomerys caused him to be taken from her home, she'd be full of hate."

"But she has no right! It was the Chatworths' fault."

"Quiet! and let's go downstairs." He eyed her sharply. "And none of your tricks of writing songs about feuds. Do you understand me?"

She nodded once, but she didn't like making such a promise.

It was late at night, and most of the guests were lying drunken on the floor or sprawled across the tables when a servant whispered to the man sitting in the corner. With a smile, the man rose and went outside to greet these newly arrived guests.

"You'll never believe who is here," the man said to the one dismounting.

"What! no greeting?" he asked sarcastically. "No concern for my safety? Come, John, you're letting your teeth show."

"I have remained sober to tell you this. That should be enough."

VELVET SONG

"True, that is a great sacrifice." He gave the reins of his horse to a waiting servant. "Now, what is so important that it can't wait until I've had some wine myself?"

"Ah, Pagnell, you're too impatient. Remember that little songbird this winter? The one who knocked you over the head?"

Pagnell stiffened, glaring at John. It was all he could do to keep from fingering the ugly scar on his forehead. He'd had headaches ever since that night, and although he'd tortured to death some of the people from her town, no one would tell him where she was. Every time a pain shot through his head, he vowed he'd see her bum for what she'd done to him. "Where is she?"

John laughed deep in his throat. "Inside and swelled out with a brat. She's traveling with a pretty lad and the two of them are singin' as pretty as you please."

"Now? I thought everyone would be asleep." "They are, but I marked where the lad and the songbird stretched out."

Pagnell stood still for a moment, contemplating his next move. When he and his friends had gone over the town wall looking for Alyx, he'd been drunk and so had bungled the job. Now he mustn't make that mistake again.

"If she cried out," Pagnell said, "would she receive help?"

"Most of them are dead drunk; the snoring's so loud a charge of gunpowder might not be heard."

Pagnell looked up at the old stone walls. "Does this place have a dungeon, some place for keeping prisoners before they're executed?"

VELVET SONG

"Why wait? We'll tie her to a stake and burn her as the sun rises."

"No, some people frown at that, and with the King in this melancholy mood, who knows how he'll react? We'll do this legal. A cousin of mine is conducting court not far from here. We'll toss the slut in the cellar, then I'll talk to my cousin and when I return, we'll have a trial. Then we'll watch her burn. Now show me where she is."

Alyx was lying in an uncomfortable sleep, trying her best to position her big stomach, when a hideous whisper sounded in her ear. The voice, one she had never forgotten, and never would, sent shivers down her spine, made her skin tighten.

"If you want your little play fellow to live, you'll be quiet," came the voice.

Pressed against her throat was the sharp steel of a knife. She didn't need to open her eyes to see Pagnell's face leering into hers. It was a face that had haunted her dreams for months.

"Have you thought about me, sweetheart?" he whispered, his face very, very close to hers. His hands went down to caress her hard stomach. "You gave to somebody else what you fought me for. You're going to die for that."

"No," Alyx whispered as the knife pressed forward.

"You going to go peacefully, or do I have to slip a knife into his heart?"

She knew well who he meant. Jocelin was asleep not a foot from her, his breath coming even and deep, not even aware that her life was in danger.

"I'll go," she managed to say.

Trembling, too frightened to cry, Alyx heaved

164

165

VELVET SONG

herself upward, Pagnell's knife scraping, cutting the skin of her throat once. It wasn't easy to make her way through the bodies sprawled on the floor. Each time she stumbled, Pagnell twisted her arm behind her back, almost pulling it from the socket.

When they came to the dark, cold, stone stairs leading downward, he pushed Alyx so hard she slammed into the wall and tripped down four steps until she caught her balance. Pausing for a moment, her hands protectively on her belly, she tried to catch her breath.

"Go on," Pagnell sneered, pushing her again.

Alyx managed to get down to the bottom without falling again. The room they were in was cold and totally dark, the ceiling very low. Barrels and sacks of stores crowded the floor. She whirled when she heard the door creak open.

Pagnell stood in front of a heavy door, open to reveal a yawning black nothingness. "In here," he growled.

"No." She backed away, but the room was so crowded there was nowhere to go.

He grabbed a handful of her hair and with one shove, slammed her into the blackness.

Crouching in a corner, surrounded by the cold blackness, she saw the door shut, blocking off the last ray of light, and heard the heavy iron bolt shoot into place.

Chapter Thirteen

THE HIDEOUS LITTLE room seemed to be the epitome

of every nightmare, every bad thought, every horrible story she'd ever heard. There was no light, and even after an hour she still could not see her hand before her face. For a very long time she remained huddled in the corner where Pagnell had tossed her, afraid to move.

If she could not see, she could certainly hear the noises of insects on the walls and floor, sounding loud and treacherous. What made her finally move was something scampering across the soft leather of her shoes. With a little squeal, she came upright, her hands trying to clutch the stones of the wall behind her.

"Calm yourself, Alyx," she said aloud, and her voice echoed off the walls. It would be morning before long and Jocelin would be looking for her-if

166

167

VELVET SONG

he were still alive. No, she couldn't depend on anyone getting her out of here. She had to try to find her own means of escape.

Cautiously, hands out like a blind person, she took a step forward and nearly fell across a low bench.

Kneeling, she ran her hands over it and was glad to see that she could make out the shadow of it. When she'd finished her exploration of the bench, she moved to the walls, feeling her way to the door. For all the door gave when she pushed against it, she might have been trying to move the stone walls.

The room was about six feet square with stone walls and a dirt floor, and the only furniture was the short bench. There was no window in the door and no light came in around the corners. The low ceiling allowed her to explore every inch of the room. There were no windows, no gratings, no weak places anywhere. When she finished, the upper half of her body was covered with spiderwebs, and there were tears on her face. Angrily, she tried to brush the sticky things from her face and clothes, all the while crying and cursing Pagnell and men of his kind.

After several hours she sat down on the bench, knees drawn up, and put her head down. Absently, she pushed the baby's foot down from where it was kicking her in the ribs, and as her child became more active, restless, she started to sing to him. Gradually, he quietened and so did Alyx.

Overhead, she heard people walking and knew the ceiling was the castle floor. Somewhere up there Jocelin was trying to find her. She began to imagine ways to escape and wished she could start a fire, thinking that perhaps she could burn her way out.

VELVET SONG

But, of course, the smoke would probably kill her before the fire burned the door.

When the door opened, the sound, so loud in the quiet room, startled her so badly she nearly fell off the bench. Candlelight flooded the room and nearly blinded her.

"There you are," came a voice she knew was Elizabeth Chatworth's.

Alyx gave no thought to her class as she threw her arms about Elizabeth. "I am so very, very glad to see you. How did you find me?"

Elizabeth gave Alyx a one-arm hug. "Jocelin came to me. It's that idiot Pagnell, isn't it? That man is as vicious as any man created. Now, come on before the dunce returns."

"Too late," came a drawling, half-amused, halfangry voice from the doorway. "You haven't changed much, Elizabeth, you're still giving orders to everyone."

"And you, Pagnell, are still tearing wings off butterflies. What has this one done to you? Refused your advances as any woman with any sense would do?"

"Your tongue is too sharp, Elizabeth. If I had time I'd teach you softer ways."

"You and how many other men?" Elizabeth spat. "You're scared to death of me because what I say is true. Now get out of the way and let us pass. We've had enough of your nasty little games. Go find someone else to play with. This child is under my protection."

He planted himself in front of Elizabeth and Alyx, not letting them out of the little cell.

"You go too far!" Elizabeth hissed. "You're no

168

169

VELVET SONG

longer threatening a helpless servant. My brother will have your head if you harm me."

"Roger is too busy plotting against the Montgomerys to give a thought to anyone else. I hear he stays drunk all the time now that dear, sweet, crippled Brian has gone off sulking somewhere."

Alyx didn't see -the little eating dagger Elizabeth pulled from the sheath at her side, but Pagnell did. With a sidestep he dodged her, caught her arm and, twisting it, pulled her to him. "I'd like to feel you under me, Elizabeth. Do you bring as much fire to your bed as you do to everything else?"

Alyx saw that now was her chance. On the wall outside the cell, to her left, was a heavy ring of keys. In one swift motion she flung them at Pagnell's head, catching him on the temple.

He released Elizabeth, staggered back one step and put his hand to his head, stared at the blood on his hand. By the time he regained his senses, Elizabeth and Alyx were halfway up the stairs.

Pagnell caught Elizabeth's skirt and jerked so hard she came tumbling backward, slamming into his chest. "Ah, my dear Elizabeth," he drawled into her ear, his arm about her waist, the other hand going to her ample breast. "I've dreamed of this moment for a long time."

Alyx knew Pagnell's attention was on Elizabeth and she could have escaped, but she couldn't leave Elizabeth alone because it was obvious what he planned for the young noblewoman. She could think of nothing else but to throw her body weight onto both of them.

Pagnell stumbled backward, still clutching Elizabeth, while Alyx rolled away, her hands protecting her stomach. Elizabeth saw her opportunity and

170

VELVET SONG

slammed her elbow into Pagnell's ribs, making him grunt in pain. With one swift motion she grabbed a small oaken cask and brought it down with considerable force on Pagnell's head.

Oak staves broke away and dark red wine ran down his face, over his clothes as, after one startled look, he lapsed into unconsciousness.

"Such a waste of good wine," Elizabeth said, looking across the inert man to Alyx. "You haven't harmed your baby, have you?"

"No, he's secure enough."

"Thank you," Elizabeth said. "You could have run away, but you stayed to help me. How can I reward you?"

"Excuse me," came a voice from the doorway.

They turned to see a tall dark man, sword drawn.

"I hate to interrupt this little meeting, but unless you revive my friend and quickly, I shall take pleasure in killing the both of you."

Elizabeth made the first move, jumping away from Pagnell's body to the dark man's right side. "Go to his other side, Alyx," she directed. "He cannot take both of us at once."

Immediately, Alyx obeyed, and the man moved his head back and forth like a baited bull, watching the two women. A groan from Pagnell made the man look at his friend. As he did, Alyx made a quick move toward him. He backed into the opening of the stairway, guarding the entrance.

"God's teeth!" Pagnell cursed, trying to clear his vision. "You'll be sorry for this, Elizabeth," he groaned. "Hold them there, John. Don't let them get nearer. Neither of them is human. Pity to man the day woman was created."

"You wouldn't know what a woman was," Elizabeth hissed. "No female worth her salt would let you near her."

Shakily, Pagnell stood, looking in disgust at his wine-stained doublet. Suddenly, his head came up and he began to smile at Elizabeth in a nasty way. "Last night when I rode in I saw the camp of Miles Montgomery." He grinned broader at the way Elizabeth stiffened at the name. "I wonder if Miles would like a guest? I heard he was so angry at the death of his sister that his brother sent him to the Isle of Wight to keep him from declaring open war on the Chatworth family."

"My brother would annihilate him," Elizabeth said. "No Montgomery-"

"Spare me, Elizabeth, especially since from the story I heard, Roger attacked Stephen Montgomery's back."

Elizabeth leaped for him, hands made into claws, and Pagnell caught her to him.

"I hear Miles is a great lover of women and has many bastards. Would you like to add yours to his stable, my virginal little princess?"

"I would die first," she said with feeling.

"Perhaps. I'll leave that up to Miles. I would take care of you myself, but first I have a debt owed me by that one." He motioned his head toward Alyx, who stood quietly, John's sword in her back.

"And how do you get me out of here?" Elizabeth asked, smiling. "Do you think there won't be a protest if you carry me through the hall?"

Pagnell seemed to consider this for a moment as he looked about the dark cellar. With a smile, he looked

back at her. "How do you think Miles will like playing Caesar?"

Puzzled, Elizabeth had no reply.

Pagnell grabbed her arm behind her. "John, watch that one carefully while I take care of Elizabeth. My head hurts too much to tussle with both of them again."

"More than your head will hurt if you harm me," Elizabeth warned.

"I'll leave that worry to Miles. The Montgomerys are altogether too high above themselves. I'd like to see all of them brought down, their land dispersed."

"Never!" Alyx shouted. "No slime-infested carrion such as you will ever destroy a Montgomery."

The full power of Alyx's voice made all of them stop and stare at her. Elizabeth stopped struggling against Pagnell and her gaze on Alyx turned speculative. Pagnell's look was calculating.

John gave Alyx a nudge with his sword tip. "Raine Montgomery is said to be hiding in the forests somewhere, king of a band of criminals."

"This bears investigation," Pagnell said, giving Elizabeth's arm a twist. "But first we must deal with this one." Pulling her with him, he grabbed a length of hemp rope from atop a pile of wine barrels and began to tie Elizabeth's hands behind her back.

"Think what you're doing," Elizabeth said.. "I'm not some-"

"Shut up!" Pagnell commanded, clipping her on the shoulder with his fist. When her hands were bound, he pushed her onto grain sacks and bound her ankles. With his knife he cut a piece of red silk from her dress. "A kiss, Elizabeth?" he teased, holding the gag close

172

173

VELVET SONG

to her lips. "Just one before Miles Montgomery takes them all?"

"I'll see you in hell first."

"I'm sure you'll be there with me if some man doesn't dull the edges of that tongue of yours."

Before she could speak again, he tied the cloth tightly over her mouth. "Now you look almost appealing."

"What do you do with her now?" John asked. "We can't very well carry her out like that."

From a far corner of the cellar Pagnell picked up a dirty, moth-eaten piece of canvas and, after a couple of shakes which sent dust flying, he spread it at Elizabeth's feet. "We shall roll her in this and carry her out sight unseen."

Alyx watched Elizabeth, her eyes widening with fear now, but all Alyx could think of was that Elizabeth would be much better off with Miles than anyone else. "You'll be safe with Miles," she said, trying to reassure Elizabeth.

Again, they all stared at Alyx, but she ignored them. Elizabeth needed her help now.

Not at all gently, Pagnell pushed Elizabeth onto the filthy canvas and rolled her in it, hiding her completely.

"Can she breathe?" Alyx asked.

"Who cares? If she dies she can tell no tales. As it is, after Miles finishes with her she won't even remember me."

"Miles won't harm her," Alyx said passionately. "He's good and kind like his brother."

Pagnell laughed at that. "No one has ever had a temper to match Miles's. As soon as he finds she's a

174

Chatworth ... oh, I almost envy him, but I'm not a fool like Miles. He won't care about Roger Chatworth, and when Roger hears what Miles has done to his beloved baby sister- The King will have all the Montgomery lands to award to him who does favors for the King. And I shall be there to collect."

"You are a vile pig of a creature."

The back of Pagnell's hand slammed into Alyx's jaw, sending her reeling. "I'll ask for the advice of an underling like you when I want it. Is it Raine Montgomery who's put ideas into your head? The man thinks he can reform all of England. He hides in the forest and sneers at anything material, spouting about the old ways of honor and nobility while the people of your class grow fat and rich."

Alyx wiped blood from the corner of her mouth. "Raine is worth a-hundred of you," she said.

"Raine is it? No `Lord Raine'? Do you carry his brat? Is that what makes you think you're so high and mighty? When the flames lick up your legs we shall see if the name of Montgomery is so gentle on your lips. John!" he said sharply. "Take Elizabeth away. Give her to Miles Montgomery and see what he wants to do with her. And John," he warned, "Elizabeth's virginity is a known fact, and I want her to arrive at

Miles's feet intact. Let all of Roger Chatworth's wrath come onto the Montgomery heads and not mine. Do I make myself clear?"

John gave him an insolent look as he tossed the bundle containing Elizabeth across his shoulder. "Montgomery will receive her in the best possible condition."

"But make sure he is inclined to forget she is a

175

VELVET SONG

high-born lady. See if you can rearrange her clothing to stir his blood."

With a parting grin, John left the cellar.

"What do you want from me?" Alyx asked, backing away from Pagnell as he came closer to her. "I have done you no wrong."

He glared at her big belly. "You have given to another man what should have been mine." He grabbed her arm and pushed a small, sharp dagger to her ribs. "Now, go up the stairs and out the door and then to the stables. If you make a single sound it will be your last."

Her breath held, Alyx had no choice but to obey him. Once in the great hall there were guests milling about, but no one paid the least attention to Pagnell and the cheaply clad girl. They were nursing swollen heads and bruised bodies from where they'd slept across stools and tables.

Alyx searched for Jocelin, but she saw no sign of him. Every time she attempted to move her head, Pagnell's knife pushed harder against her until she kept her head straight. Perhaps Jocelin didn't know she was in trouble. Perhaps he was with a woman and hadn't yet discovered she was missing from the hall. For all their closeness, they respected each other's privacy. There were whole days when they didn't see

each other and no questions were asked later.

Outside, Pagnell pushed her toward the stables, where he bellowed to a servant to saddle his horse. Before Alyx could think, she was slammed into the saddle, Pagnell behind her, and they set off at a pace that made Alyx's teeth jar.

It was nightfall when they finally stopped before a

tall stone house at the edge of a small village. Pagnell pulled her from the horse, grabbed her arm and dragged her to the door.

A short, fat, balding man greeted them. "You took longer than I thought. Now what is so important I must wait for you this late at night?"

"This," Pagnell said, pushing Alyx into the room before him. It was a large, dark room, a few candles on a table at one end.

"What do I care for a dirty, pregnant lowling like that? Surely you could have found a tastier bit than that for your sport."

"Get over there," Pagnell commanded, pushing her toward the table. "If you say one word I'll slit your throat."

Too tired to reply, Alyx moved, sank down to the floor before an empty fireplace in a shapeless heap.

"Explain," the fat man said to Pagnell.

"What, uncle, no welcome, no wine?"

"If your news is good enough, I will feed you."

Pagnell sat down in a chair before the table, studying the sputtering candles. It wasn't that his uncle was so poor that made him use such cheap tallow but that for the last three years the man had done little except wait for his own death.

"What are your feelings toward Raine Montgomery?" Pagneli asked softly, watching with interest as his uncle's face turned from white to red to purple.

"How can you say that man's name to me in my own house?" he gasped. Three years before, in a tournament, Raine had killed Robert Digges's only child. No matter that the son had been trying to kill Raine rather than just unhorse him or that his son had

VELVET SONG

176

177

VELVET SONG

already killed one man and severely wounded another . that day. It had been Raine's lance that had taken Robert's son's life.

"I thought you felt the same way," Pagnell smiled. "Now I have a way to repay the man."

"How can you? The man hides in the forest and not even the King can find him."

"But our good king doesn't have the bait that I do." "No!" Alyx shouted, getting to her feet with what

strength she had left.

"See," Pagnell said, amused, "with every breath she takes she defends the man. Whose child do you carry?"

Alyx gave him a stubborn look. If she hadn't tried to reassure Elizabeth about the Montgomery men, Pagnell wouldn't know about her relationship with Raine, but Elizabeth had helped her.

"Pagnell," Robert commanded, "tell me all of your story."

Briefly, Pagnell told his version of the story, that Alyx had used her voice to entice him. Then, when he'd gotten close, she'd disappeared into thin air. Later, he'd gone looking for her and she'd leapt on him with the force of demons. He showed his uncle the scar on his head. "Could a little thing like that have left such a scar unless she were helped by the Devil?"

Robert gave a weak laugh, a snort of derision. "It sounds to me like she outsmarted you." "She's a witch, I tell you."

Robert waved his hand in dismissal. "All women are witches to some extent. What does the girl have to do with Raine Montgomery?"

"I believe she's spent the last few months in his

VELVET SONG

camp and it's his child she carries. If we were to let it be known that we mean to burn her as a witch, he'd come after her. And when he does, we'd be ready for him. You could have him, and we could share the King's reward."

"Wait a minute, boy," Robert interrupted. "Look at her! You mean to use that as bait? Raine Montgomery can have his pick of women. No doubt there are lean pickings in the forest and she

probably does carry his child, but why would he risk his life to come after that? And why would you spend so much time searching for a flat-chested, hipless, plain-faced child such as her?"

Pagnell gave his uncle a look of contempt before turning to Alyx. "Sing!" he commanded.

"I will not," she said firmly. "You plan to murder me anyway, so why should I obey you?"

"You will die," he said evenly, "but the question is whether you will burn before or after the child's birth. If you disobey me I will see that the child dies with you. Now sing for your child's life."

Alyx obeyed him instantly, her hands on her stomach as she lifted her voice in a plea to God for her child's life.

There was a long silence when she finished, both men watching her intently.

Robert, rubbing away the chills on his forearms, spoke first. "Montgomery will come after her," he said with conviction.

Pagnell smiled in satisfaction, glad his uncle could see why he'd spent so many months searching for the girl. "In the morning we begin the trial, and when she's found guilty we will tie her to a stake. Montgomery'll come for her and we'll be ready for him."

178

179

VELVET SONG

"How can you be sure he'll hear of this in time? And if he does come, are you sure you can take him?"

"I tossed the chit in a cellar for a few hours and let it be known to the pretty boy she was with what I planned to do with her. He rode away like a shot and I'm sure he was headed south toward the forest where Montgomery hides. And as for men, there won't be time for him to collect them. Now he's surrounded by criminals and out-of-works. None of them can ride a horse, much less wield a sword."

Alyx bit her lower lip to keep from defending Raine. It was much better that Pagnell thought Raine defenseless; perhaps then Pagnell would send only a few men to capture Raine.

What was she thinking about? Raine would never come after her after what she'd done to him. She doubted very much if he'd speak to Jocelin. The forest guards reported to Raine whenever someone approached, and all Raine had to do was refuse Joss entrance-which he'd surely do. If Jocelin tried to sneak into the forest, Raine could order the guards to kill him. No! Raine wouldn't do that, would he? And what if Jocelin did somehow get to Raine? Would Raine believe Joss? Would he care what happened to Alyx?

"He'll come," Pagnell repeated. "And when he does, we'll be ready for him."

Chapter Fourteen

ALYX LOOKED OUT the window of the small stone

walled room and into the courtyard below, watching with horrified fascination as the carpenters built the gallows for her burning. It had been eight long, terrifying days since she'd been taken by Pagnell, and during that time she'd been subjected to a fiasco of a trial.

The men who ran the trial had been some of Pagnell's relatives, and he'd easily persuaded them to his views. Alyx listened to it all, for they talked about her as if she weren't there, and her head echoed with Raine's words.

Raine and she had argued so many times about the rising middle class. Alyx had always adored King Henry, loved the way he was taking away the power from the nobles, was forcing the nobles to pay wages and no longer own serfs. But Raine said the King was

ourteuL

180

181

VELVET SONG

turning the nobles into fat merchants, that if the ruling class had to count pennies they would forget their knightly virtues, would' no longer know the meaning of honor. She talked of people being more equal, but Raine asked who would do the fighting if England were attacked. If there weren't a class of people freed from money making to stay strong and practice warfare, who would protect England?

As Alyx sat through the "trial," she began to see more clearly what Raine meant. The judges didn't for a minute believe she was a witch, and Alyx marveled at this because the people in her town believed quite strongly in witches, and had a multitude of ways to protect themselves from evil curses.

All the judges cared about was winning the King's favor and reaping the rewards that came with the King's pleasure. Pagnell told them that she carried Raine Montgomery's child and, like vultures, they jumped on this fact. Raine had been declared a traitor, and with a little more pushing, he could have his lands given to someone else. King Henry loved to create his own nobles, to give out titles to anyone rich enough to buy one. The judges hoped he would give some of the Montgomery lands to them if they delivered Raine-or his head--to the King.

Alyx sat silently through the whole proceedings as they plotted and planned, laughed and argued. At the end, they pushed her into a cart and drove her through the little town-she didn't even know its name-a man walking before her declaring her to be a witch.

As if she were someone else, Alyx watched the people cross themselves, make crosses of their fingers, turn away lest she look on them with an evil eye, and

VELVET SONG

the bolder ones threw food and offal at her. She wanted to cry out that what was being done to her had nothing to do with witchcraft but greed-the greed of men already rich. But as she looked at the fascinated/ scared expressions of the dirty, diseased people, she knew she could not reason with them. She was not going to do away with centuries of ignorance in a few minutes.'

When the cart ride was over she was dragged to the ruins of an old stone castle, one tower standing, and pushed up the stairs. Many hours later she was given a small bowl of water and Alyx washed the stench from her body as best she could.

They kept her there for days, guards on the floor below and more on the roof. At night the townspeople gathered to circle the tower and chant exorcisms to guard themselves against her evil. Alyx merely sat in the center of the cold little room and tried to listen to the music that ran through her head. She knew the judges delayed her execution to give Raine time to arrive to rescue her. She prayed with all her might for his safety, pleaded with God to let him realize he was walking into a trap. The judges and Pagneil had been so right when they said that Raine could not go for his own knights. In fact, Pagnell had taken his own men north to Raine's home to guard that Raine did not ride there first.

Alyx sat and thought over the men in Raine's camp, what poor soldiers they were, how lazily they trained -and how much they hated her. "Please," she prayed, "do not let Raine come alone. If he comes, let him have a guard and let the men protect him."

Before daylight on the ninth day, a fat, stinking old woman came bearing a plain white linen sheath for

182

183

VELVET SONG

Alyx to wear. Without a protest, calmly, Alyx slipped it on, leaving it loose over her stomach. At the

proceedings she'd pleaded for her child's life, but the men had only given her a blank look, totally uninterested in her. One of the judges told Pagnell to silence her and one slap from him had made Alyx hold her tongue. There was nothing she could say to sway them anyway. They figured they had to burn her now while Raine was still hot for her and the child must also be endangered. Pagnell laughed and said he'd hold Raine and make him watch while Alyx burned.

With her chin high, using all her strength to control the shaking in her knees, Alyx descended the stairs before the old woman who carried Alyx's dress over her arm pay for risking being in the same room with the witch.

A priest waited at the foot of the stairs, and quickly, Alyx made her confession, denying that she was a witch or that she carried the Devil's child. With an air of disbelief, he blessed and sent her on her way.

It must have looked strange, Alyx thought, for someone of her size to be escorted by so many large men: one in front, one in back, two on each side. The clanking of the full armor they wore was the only thing louder than the pounding of her heart as she fixed her eyes on the platform in front of her. A tall stake reached skyward and all around it was a pile of brush and dried grasses.

The crowd was joyous as they watched her approach, jubilant at the special treat that awaited them. Not many witches were burned nowadays.

As Alyx climbed the stairs, the guards kept her circled, their backs to her as their eyes scanned the horizon. Involuntarily, Alyx also looked at the land

VELVET SONG

scape. Hope and fear mixed together within her. She feared for Raine's life should he try to save her, yet she hoped she would not have to die.

A guard grabbed her arm, pulled her to the stake and tightly tied her wrists behind her.

Alyx lifted her eyes skyward, fully aware that this would be the last time she'd see the day. The early morning sunlight was just lightening the day and she looked across the high brush and into the crowd. It

was bad, very bad, that these were the last faces she'd ever see, that she'd go to Heaven--or Hell--with these faces on her mind.

Closing her eyes, she tried to picture Raine.

"Get on with it," came a voice that made Alyx open her eyes. Voices were life to her; she'd more likely remember a voice than a face or a name. Scanning the crowd, she saw no one she knew. They all seemed to be an especially dirty, scarred lot.

"Let me light the fire," came the voice again, and this time Alyx looked into Rosamund's eyes. A chill went all over her skin, her scalp tightening and a tiny flame of hope surged through her.

The guards, all around her, were taking their time in lighting the fire as they studied the country around them, looking for some sign of a knight and his men.

Not sure whether to trust her eyes, she looked at the crowd again.

"What're ye waitin' for?" came a voice Alyx knew as well as her own. There, in the forefront, with blackened teeth and a dirty, bloody bandage over one eye was Jocelin. Beside him stood a man Alyx recognized from the forest camp, one of the men who'd accused her of stealing. They were changed, some looking dirtier than she remembered, but the whole

184

185

VELVET SONG

forest camp was there, gazing up at her with halfsmiles of conspiracy as they saw she recognized them.

In spite of all she could do, tears began coursing down her cheeks, but through her blurred vision she could see that Joss was trying to say something to her. It took a long moment to understand what he was mouthing.

"This fire should make the witch sing loudly," he said, and Alyx recognized exasperation in his voice.

Surreptitiously, she glanced at the guards as they frowned at the bare distance, never even glancing at the crowd at the foot of the platform.

"We've waited long enough," said one of the black-robed judges from behind Alyx. "Let the witch burn."

One of the guards lowered a flaming torch toward the bracken and as he did so, Alyx filled her lungs to capacity with air. Desperation, fear, hope, joy, all combined in her voice and the note she emitted was so strong, so loud, that for a moment everyone was paralyzed.

Jocelin was the first to move. With a cry much like Alyx's, he leaped to the top of the platform and behind him came twenty men and women. One confessed murderer threw his weight onto the guard holding the torch, sending the flames backward, to land in the pile of branches behind Alyx, where they went up instantly.

There were six guards and four judges on the platform. The judges ran away at the first sign of trouble, their robes raised to their knees, flying out behind them.

Smoke curled around Alyx's body as she watched the men and women fight the steel-clad knights. With

VELVET SONG

each blow that hit flesh she felt it in her own. These people she had treated so badly were risking their lives to save her.

The smoke grew thicker, making her cough and her eyes water. Heat, like the hottest sun, hurt the back of her. Trying to see, she looked at the people around her, fully aware how fragile they were compared to the knights in their heavy armor. Her only consolation was that Raine had been sensible enough not to risk his life in this fight. At least he'd stayed away somewhere safe.

It was some time before she became aware that one of the knights was not being attacked by the, forest people. It was only when she heard his roar, hollow from inside the helmet, that she realized that one of her guards was Raine.

"Jocelin! Cut her loose!" Raine commanded as he brought a double-edged ax down on the shoulder of an armored knight, sending the man to his knees. A woman jumped on the fallen knight, pulled his helmet off, while a one-eyed man slammed a club into the head of the dazed knight.

The smoke was so thick Alyx could see no more and her throat was raw from coughing. More tears flowed as Joss cut the ropes about her wrists, grabbed her hand and pulled her away from the burning brush.

"Come with me," he said, pulling her by the hand.

She'd halted, looking back at the platform. Raine fought two men at once, swinging mightily at them with a steel-studded mace, sidestepping, moving with slow grace in the heavy armor. Behind blazed the fire, flashing off the men's armor, turning it to a frightening, bloody red.

"Alyx!" Jocelin shouted at her. "Raine gave me

186

187

VELVET SONG

orders of where to take you. He's angry enough at both of us. For once, obey him."

"I can't leave him!" she tried to say, but her raw throat and the lump there made it come out as a croak.

One strong pull from Joss and they were running together. After a very long time she saw horses coming toward them.

"He's late," Joss yelled, panting from the run. "Come on, Alyx!"

At least the running kept her mind from the danger Raine was in. Carrying the extra weight of her unborn child made her awkward, and she needed every bit of her wind.

When they reached the horses, Jocelin mounted and pulled her up behind him and, to her chagrin, they headed away from where Raine and the others fought. Alyx tried to protest, but again her voice failed her. Her silence was so uncharacteristic that Joss turned to look at her, and his snort of laughter showed he understood her predicament.

They rode hard for two hours and when they stopped at last, it was at a monastery. Alyx, exhausted from her fear during the last several days, could hardly stand when Joss helped her down.

"Is your voice really gone?" Joss asked, half amused, half in sympathy.

She again tried to speak, but only a rasp that hurt her throat came out.

"Maybe it's better this way. Raine is angry enough to tear the tongues out of both of us. Are you all right, though? They didn't harm you while you were a captive?"

VELVET SONG

Alyx shook her head.

Before Joss could speak again, a tonsured, brownrobed monk opened the heavy wooden door.

"Won't you come in, my children? We are ready for you.

Alyx touched Jocelin's arm and frowned in question. What did the monk mean by "ready"?

"Come inside. You'll find out," Joss said, smiling.

Inside the wall was a large, lovely courtyard, green and shady in the early morning August sunlight. There were doors off three sides of the courtyard, a thick stone wall behind them.

"We have a few rooms for women visitors," the monk said, glancing down at Alyx's soot-covered coarse white gown. "Lord Raine has made arrangements for your comfort."

Moments later Alyx was in a spacious room off the courtyard and given a mug of thick buttermilk to drink. She was only halfway through it when the sound of clanging steel came through the door.

"Alyxandria!" came a bellow that could only be Raine's.

Out of habit, Alyx opened her mouth to answer him in kind, but only a painful yelp came out. With her hand at her throat, she opened the door.

Raine whirled to look at her and for a moment their eyes locked. There were shadows under his eyes and his hair was sweat-plastered to his head in black curls. Dents in his armor were numerous. But what was frightening was the fury in his eyes.

"Come out here," he growled, and his tone left no room for disobedience.

When she stood before him he clutched her shoul

188

189

VELVET SONG

ders, stared for a moment at her stomach, then looked back into her eyes. "I should beat you soundly for this," he said.

Alyx tried to speak, but the rawness of her throat made tears in her eyes.

He looked puzzled for a moment, then one dimple flashed in his cheek. "The smoke take your voice away?"

She nodded.

"Good! That's the best news I've heard in months. When we get through with this I have a few things to say to you and for once you're going to listen." With that he grabbed her shoulder and pushed her toward a small gate in the wall. Outside was a tall, deeply recessed door that obviously belonged to a chapel. Not waiting for her to enter on her own, Raine opened the door and pushed her inside. Before the altar stood Jocelin and a tall,, slim man whom Alyx had never seen before.

"In your armor?" the stranger asked, looking at Alyx curiously.

"If I took time to change no doubt she'd slip through my fingers again. You have the ring, Gavin?"

Alyx's eyes opened wide at the name. So this was Raine's older brother, the man she'd written to and begged to help control Raine's anger at Roger Chatworth. As she looked up at Gavin, thinking he wasn't at all like Raine physically and Raine was so much more handsome, she was barely aware of a priest before them, talking.

"Pay attention, Alyx," Raine commanded, and Gavin coughed to cover a laugh.

In consternation, Alyx looked at the men surround

VELVET SONG

ing her. Jocelin's eyes danced with laughter, Raine's smouldered with barely controlled rage and Gavin seemed to be amusedly tolerant of everything. The priest was waiting patiently for something from her.

"Alyx! Raine growled. "I know you can't speak, but you could at least nod your head-unless of course you'd rather not marry me. Perhaps you'd rather have Jocelin . . . again?"

"Marry?" she mouthed.

"For the Lord's sake, Raine! Sorry, Father," Gavin said. "Have pity on her. She's had a shock. One minute she's about to be burned at the stake and the next she's getting married. She needs a moment to adjust."

"And since when have you known so much about women?" Raine asked hostilely. "You dumped Judith on your doorstep hardly minutes after you married her, and if I hadn't broken my leg, she'd have been alone.."

"If you hadn't been there she might have come to me sooner. As it was-"

"Quiet!" Jocelin shouted, then stepped backward when the two Montgomery brothers turned their wrath on him. He took a deep breath. "Alyx was looking at Lord Gavin and I'm not sure she realized she was marrying Lord Raine. Perhaps if it were explained to her, she'd answer the questions properly, even without her voice."

The full realization of what was going on hit Alyx and, with her usual ladylike finesse, her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open.

"Is that horror at the idea?" Gavin laughed.

Raine looked away from Alyx, obviously not sure

190

191

VELVET SONG

what her expression meant. "She carries my child. She will marry me," he said flatly.

Alyx couldn't speak, but she could hiss at him through her teeth, and when Raine still wouldn't look at her she looked about for other means of getting his attention. He didn't ask her to marry him, didn't allow her the sweet pleasure of throwing herself at him and telling him she loved him, but instead stood sullen and angry and announced she would marry him.

"Would you like to borrow my sword?" Gavin asked, and his voice was so full of laughter he could hardly speak. "Oh, Raine." He slapped his brother's shoulder, making the armor clank, but Raine didn't move. "I hope she leads you a merry chase. Judith's going to like a sister-in-law who looks daggers at her husband. It'll make her feel less alone in the world."

Raine didn't bother to look at Gavin and Alyx sensed there was some old argument involved. Never in

her life had she wished more for the power of her voice than she did at this moment. She'd make Raine look at her if she could speak.

"My lady," the priest said, and it took Alyx a while to understand that he was speaking to her. "It is not the church's place to encourage unwanted marriages. Is it your desire to marry Lord Raine?"

She looked up at Raine's profile, furious that he wouldn't look at her. With two steps, she planted herself in front of him, his eyes focused somewhere over her head. Slowly, she reached out and took his hand, held it in hers. His hand was cut in several places, bloody, bruised, and as she looked down at it she knew he'd been hurt saving her. She raised it to

VELVET SONG

her lips and kissed his palm, and when she looked up, his eyes were on her. For a moment they seemed to soften.

"She will marry me," he said as he glanced back at the priest.

Alyx wanted to curse at him for his self-assurance and for his refusal to weaken in his anger at her. Silently, she moved back beside him and the marriage was completed, a gold ring slipped onto her finger.

Raine gave no one time to congratulate her. "Come, Lady Alyx," he said, fingers digging into her upper arm. "We have a great deal to discuss."

"Leave her alone, Raine," Gavin said. "Can't you see she's tired? And besides, this is your wedding day. Rail at her some other time."

Raine didn't bother to even look at his brother as he ushered Alyx from the chapel back through the courtyard and into her room. The moment the door was closed, Raine leaned against it.

"How could you, Alyx?" he whispered. "How could you say you cared for me then put me through the

last few months of hell?"

It was very frustrating not to be able to talk. She looked about for a pen and paper but remembered Raine couldn't read.

"Do you know what it's been like the last few months?" He tossed his helmet on the bed. "For years I've searched for a woman I could love. A woman with courage and honor. A woman who wasn't afraid of me or after money or land. A woman who made me think."

He began unbuckling the leather straps that held his armor in place, tossing piece after piece in a heap on

192

193

VELVET SONG

the bed. "First you drive me nearly insane in those tight hose, flipping about in front of me, looking up at me with big eyes so full of hunger you frightened me."

With one movement, he pushed all the armor to the side, sat down on the edge of the bed and began unfastening his leg coverings. Alyx knelt before him and helped. Raine leaned back on his elbows, never stopping his tirade.

"When I found you were a female I had a fever and wasn't sure I wasn't dreaming, yet that night I found more joy than I ever had. There was no coyness about you, no holding back, just exuberance, pleasure given, pleasure received. Later I was furious at you for having played such an ugly trick on me, but I forgave you."

He said the last as if he were the most magnanimous person alive, ignoring Alyx's look of disgust as he raised his leg for her to unbuckle the second leg sheath.

A knock on the door made him pause. Several servants, dressed more costily than Alyx had ever been, entered the room bearing a large oak tub and several buckets of steamy hot water.

"Put it there," Raine said distractedly.

Standing, Alyx watched the procession with disbelief. A tub full of hot water, brought by servants and set before them as if they were royalty. Never in her life had she had a full, hot bath. In Moreton she'd bathed from a basin and in the forest there'd been the icy stream.

"What is it, Alyx?" Raine asked when they were

alone again. "You look as if you'd seen a ghost." Silently, she pointed at the steaming tub. "You want to bathe first? Go ahead."

VELVET SONG

Cautiously, she knelt by the tub, put her hands into the water and smiled up at Raine as he began to remove the leather padding he'd worn under his armor.

"Don't try to distract me," he said a little too sweetly. "I am still considering blistering your behind. Do you know how I felt after I found you with Jocelin?"

She looked away from him, remembering the hurt in his eyes that night.

"It took me years to find you, then to have you tell me your ... your music meant more than I did. Close your mouth! You did in effect say that. You know, Alyx, I rather like your not being able to talk. My brother wouldn't believe that a little thing like you could outshout fifty grown men. I offered for him to put some money on his big mouth, but he declined.

"Alyx," he warned, "don't look so offended. You have no right to be offended. No! I am the one who's gone through hell these last months. I never knew where you were, how many men you were sleeping with."

At that, she sent him a look of blackness.

"You were the one who made me believe you lacked virtue-that is the kindest way I can say it. At camp I drove the people nearly insane. Some of them rebelled and refused to go near the training field."

He frowned for a moment at the way she was pointing at him. "I spent a great deal of time there, if that's what you mean. I was trying to wear myself out so I wouldn't remember you and Joss."

Alyx narrowed her eyes at him, used her hands to form a large curving mound over her chest.

"Oh, Blanche," he said, understanding so easily

194

195

VELVET SONG

that Alyx hissed at him. "It would serve you right if I had invited her into my bed, but after you I wanted no other woman. Damn you, Alyx! Stop looking so pleased with yourself. I was miserable while you were gone."

She pointed at herself and all her love showed in her eyes.

He looked away and his voice was hoarse when he spoke again. "I nearly killed Joss when he came to me. I refused to see him and the guards wouldn't let him pass, but he knows his way about the forest too well. One night I'd had a little too much to drink and when I woke in the morning Joss was sitting on a stool by my bed. It took a while before I would listen to him."

Alyx heard the understatement in his words and rolled her eyes so exaggeratedly that Raine pointedly ignored her.

"I can tell you that it didn't help my sore head any to hear of Pagnell's capture of you, nor that the loathsome man planned to set a trap for me."

Alyx, sitting by the tub, reached up and grabbed Raine's hand. He wore only a loincloth now. To think that he had risked his life for her.

"Alyx, he said softly, kneeling before her. "Don't you realize yet that I love you? Of course I'd come for you."

She tried to show him, with her hands and expressions, how she'd worried about Pagnell harming him.

"What?" Raine said, standing. "You thought I didn't know about the trap?" He was obviously insulted. "You thought some mosquito like Pagnell could maneuver a Montgomery into his clutches?"

With a swift gesture, he tore off the loincloth and

VELVET SONG

stepped into the tub. "The day a bit of filth like that-Alyx, you didn't really believe that Pagnell-?"

She threw up her hands, bowing before him with mock humility.

"Well, perhaps you should be forgiven. You don't know what the man is like. Maybe to you all noblemen are alike."

Now she was the one insulted. By "you" he meant people of her class, lowlings who believed in witches and the goodness of the King, who thought the trials were honest and fair and other stupid things. She slammed her fist into the water, splashing it into Raine's face.

He grabbed her wrist. "Now what was that for? Here I've forgiven you for leaving me, saved your skin from a fire and married you and you aren't even grateful."

Oh how very, very much she wished she could talk. She'd tell him in a voice that'd pin his ears back that she left him to keep him safe from the King's wrath and she was facing being burned because she carried his child. As for marrying her, he'd no doubt done it out of his stupid sense of honor.

"I don't like what you're thinking," he said, pulling her closer to him. "Gavin laughed at me when I said you'd be grateful for what I'd done. He said women never reacted the way they should, I mean with logic. Now what have I done?"

She'd doubled her fist and threatened to smack him in the nose.

"Alyx, you really are trying my patience. Don't you have even one kind thought for me? I've been through an awful couple of days. I had to scale that tower wall at night, kill the guard on the roof and put on his

196

197

VELVET SONG

armor, all so quietly the other man wouldn't hear me.

As he held both her wrists, she could feel herself melting. No matter that it was his fault that she was facing being burned; he had risked a great deal to rescue her.

"Aren't you pleased with me just a little?" he murmured against her lips. "Aren't you just a little bit glad to be married to me?"

As Alyx felt her body dissolving, disappearing under his strong will, she wasn't aware of how he was pulling her across the tub. With a great loud splash, he pulled her onto his lap, water sloshing over the sides.

"Now I have you," he laughed as she tried to sit up. "Now I'll make you pay for your lack of gratitude." He laughed again as Alyx tried to protest, her voice croaking, but as he began to kiss her, she forgot about speaking.

Chapter Fifteen

ALYX'S ARMS WENT about Raine's neck and all thoughts of anger were gone. It had been so long since she'd seen him, and her hunger for him was overwhelming. Eagerly, she pulled him closer to her, her mouth clinging to his, her tongue invading his mouth, seeking as much of him as she could reach.

"Alyx," he whispered into her hair, and there were tears in his voice. "I saw you as I went up the wall, sitting alone in that tower room, crying softly, so little, so sad. Right then I wanted to kill all the guards, but I knew I couldn't rely on the men from the forest to help me. If my brothers had been free, I would have tried it, but I wouldn't risk injuring you."

Her head came up at the mention of brothers. Elizabeth!

"What is it, Alyx? What's wrong?"

She tried to get out the word "Elizabeth," but it

198

199

VELVET SONG

was unintelligible. After several more attempts she managed to say "Miles."

"Did you meet my little brother? No, you couldn't have. He's been on the Isle of Wight. After Mary ... died, Miles nearly went crazy and Gavin persuaded him to go visit Uncle Simon. He left the Isle a few weeks ago."

Raine was puzzled at Alyx's vigorous shaking of her head. Miles, she kept mouthing. "Has something happened to Miles? Is he in danger?"

Alyx nodded yes, and before she had made one more nod, Raine was out of the tub, Alyx under his arm. Hastily, he set her down, wrapped a cloak around her and pulled on his loincloth. "We'll go see Gavin and you can write what you have to say."

Alyx's face was red the instant they left their room. She wore only a wet sheath under the cloak while Raine wore practically nothing as he pulled her through the holy monastery. They found Gavin in the stables.

"You aren't ready to ride so soon, are you, brother?" he teased. "Surely your bride deserves some attention."

Raine ignored his jibe. "Alyx says Miles is in trouble. She'll write for you what's happened."

Gavin's face immediately turned serious. "Come to the monk's study."

He led the way with such long strides that Alyx would not have been able to keep up if Raine hadn't grabbed her arm and pulled her behind him. He'd better enjoy this time while she had no voice, she thought.

The monk in the study protested a woman's presence, but the men ignored him.

VELVET SONG

"Here!" Gavin said, thrusting paper, pen and ink before her.

It took her several minutes to write the story of Pagnell's tying of Elizabeth Chatworth and his plan to deliver her to Miles. Raine and Gavin hung over her shoulder until her palms began to sweat.

"Elizabeth Chatworth," Gavin said, "I thought she was still a child."

Alyx shook her head.

"What does she look like?" Raine asked seriously.

Alyx's expression was enough to make them understand.

"The King isn't going to like this," Gavin said. "He has placed a heavy fine on the Chatworth estates and ordered Roger away from all Montgomery land."

"Land!" Raine shouted. "Is that all you care about? Chatworth kidnapped Bronwyn and killed Mary. What does it take to make you consider people instead of land?"

"I care more for my brothers than any land. What will happen if Miles rapes this Chatworth girl? It will look as if we are disobeying the King, and who will suffer then? You! He will never pardon you and you will have to spend your life in that forest with that army of cutthroats. And how will the King punish Miles? By outlawing him, too? I'm worried about losing two of my brothers because of Pagnell's nasty tricks."

Raine was still glaring at his brother while Alyx looked at Gavin with new respect.

"It's been days," Raine said finally. "I'd put my life on it that the girl is virgin no longer, and I'll wager that Miles raped no one. Perhaps if he knew who she

200

201

VELVET SONG

was, he released her, and all we can do is pray she doesn't bear his child."

Gavin's snort said a great deal. "I'll take half my men and leave now and try to find Miles. Maybe I can talk some sense into him. Perhaps the girl's fallen in love with him and won't demand his head."

Alyx grabbed Gavin's arm and shook her head vigorously. Elizabeth Chatworth was never going to fall in love with a Montgomery in less than a fortnight.

"A hellion, is she?" Gavin asked, then paused and raised Alyx's hand to his lips. "Raine is going to take you home and you'll meet my Judith. I'm sorry your wedding has been such a hurried affair. When this is all settled we'll give a tournament in your honor."

Still holding her hand, he looked back at his brother. "You'll be safe at the Montgomery castle for a while. Take her there, let her rest. You haven't seen my son yet, either. And buy her some clothes!"

Alyx was sure Raine would take offense at Gavin's tone, but Raine was smiling. "It's good to see you again, brother," he said softly, his arms open. The brothers clasped each other fiercely for a long moment.

"Give Miles my best and try to keep him out of trouble," Raine smiled. "And when he returns he can meet my wife."

With one flashing grin, Gavin left them.

Raine turned back to Alyx. Her cloak had fallen open and the damp gown clung to her. "Now, if I remember correctly, we were just starting something when my little brother's problems interrupted us."

Alyx took a step away from him, gesturing toward the room they were in.

With a laugh, Raine swept her into his arms, carried

VELVET SONG

her through the courtyard and back to their room.. Heedless of the piles of dirty armor on the bed, he tossed her in the midst of it and in one gesture stretched out on top of her.

"Will I hurt the child?" he murmured, biting her earlobe. Her headshaking was so vigorous that he gave a warm, seductive laugh as his hand trailed downward and pulled at the linen gown. The coarse, poorly sewn garment came away from her body with one easy tear.

Alyx had never been very proud of her body, always wishing for more curves, but now, bloated with child as she was, she didn't want him to see her in daylight. Her attempts to cover herself were brushed away by Raine.

Moving off her, he kissed her stomach, caressed it. "It's my child who distorts you, and I love it as well as his mother."

"Daughter?" she managed to say, hurting her raw throat.

"I only ask for your safety and, if God wills, the life of the child. I would love to have a daughter. With you for a mother, Bronwyn and Judith for aunts, I will gladly leave her all my estates. I'm sure she'll run them better than I do."

She tried to speak again, but he didn't let her as he began kissing her neck again. When she felt him remove his loincloth, knew his skin was next to hers, she forgot her worries about how she looked.

She had no idea how much she'd missed him physically, how much she needed the caress of his hands. He touched her body all over, running his hard fingertips over her skin from toes to head, making her feel cherished, loved. Even now when she could feel

202

203

VELVET SONG

the power of his hunger for her, he took his time, loved her, touched her.

She lay on her back, eyes closed, her arms lightly about his neck as he ran his hands over her. When he touched her inner thighs, she opened her eyes, met his and the deep, dark blue piercing through her made chills run along her spine. The power of this man, the strength, the size of him, all held in leash as he fondled her, excited her horribly.

With an upward thrust of her body, she pressed against him, kissed his mouth hungrily, making him laugh deeply as he rolled onto his back and pulled her on top of him. The armor surrounding them clanged and a couple of pieces fell to the floor.

Alyx ran her teeth down Raine's neck, her hands sinking into the mass of muscle of his upper arms. Glorious! she thought, such a magnificent, splendid man-and all hers!

The laughter that came from her burned throat wasn't pretty, but the deep, raspy quality of it was seductive. She ran her thumb down Raine's ribs so hard he pushed her arm away as he sought her mouth. But Alyx applied her thumb to his other side, laughed again when he twisted away from her.

"Hellion!" he murmured, grabbing her by the hair and pulling her head back as he lifted his head and bit into her stomach.

Gasping, Alyx brought her feet forward, attempted to get away from him. Raine caught her left foot and proceeded to bite each one of her toes. The sensation that ran up her made her stop all movement.

She lay on top of him, stretched out, her feet in his face, his in hers. Two can play this game, she thought

VELVET SONG

as she raked her teeth across the soft underpad of Raine's toes. She was quite pleased to feel him jump beneath her, and another piece of armor went crashing to the floor.

Raine's arms, longer than hers, slid up the sides of her legs, caressing and kneading so provocatively that after a moment she could think of nothing else but his hands on her body.

She began to tremble, shiver, and her skin seemed as hot as when the fire had been licking at her back.

Raine grabbed her hips and as if she had no weight. at all, picked her up and set her down on his

manhood with such an accurate thrust that Alyx let out a raspy squeal.

"Swordplay," Raine laughed. "I'm very accurate with a sword."

Alyx leaned forward and with her strong thighs began a rhythm that left Raine too busy to speak again. He lay still, his face a mask of almost pain as he held back, all his senses given over to the enjoyment of what Alyx was doing.

When he could stand no more, he grabbed her to him, rolled her over and with two hard, almost violent thrusts, they ended together, shaking, quivering, clutching as if they might get even. closer.

After several moments, Raine raised his head and gave Alyx a smile that said more than all the words in the world. With a grunt of satisfaction, he rolled off her, pulling her close to him, their sweaty skin glued

together. And together they slept.

It was early evening when they woke and Raine made an awful sound as he pulled a sharp, hard knee

204

205

VELVET SONG

up from under the small of his back. "How can anything so small be so dangerous?" he asked a sleepy Alyx.

With one sharp smack on her buttocks, he moved away from her to stand and stretch. "Up!" he commanded. "We've stayed here too long already. It'll take us two days to get home as it is."

Alyx didn't relish moving to ride on a horse and her expression said so. She'd much rather stay here-in bed-with Raine for a few more days.

"Alyx, don't tempt me. Get out of there this minute or I shall return to the forest and send some of Gavin's men to escort you to the Montgomery estates."

That made her jump. Within seconds she was out of bed and had pulled the torn white sheath over her head.

"Filthy thing," Raine said, fingering it. "Judith will find you dresses fit for a Montgomery. It will be nice to see you dressed as you should be, although I must say I like your hair like this." He rubbed her curls as if he still thought of her as his squire.

There was no time for anything else as he pushed her out the door and tossed her into the saddle of a horse. Except for messengers, Alyx had never seen knights as they were with their lord master. Raine had only to hint at a command and Gavin's men jumped to obey. Quickly, efficiently, they cleared the armor Raine had taken from Pagnell's man from the room while Raine dressed in the dark green wools he'd worn in the forest. One of the knights gave such a look of astonishment that Raine laughed.

"They itch, too," he said. "Ready, Alyx?"

Before she could answer, they were off, galloping at a pace that she should have been used to. It was no

VELVET SONG

surprise to her when Raine rode through half the night. But what did surprise her was the way Gavin's men treated her. They asked after her health, if she were tired. When they stopped to eat and rest the horses, some of the men presented her with flowers. One man spread his cloak for her to sit on. No one seemed to notice that the fur-lined cloak was of far better quality than the sack she wore.

With surprise and disbelief in her eyes, she looked up at Raine but saw that he thought nothing of the way the men treated her. A knight asked permission to play the lute for her, and as three men sang together, Raine raised one eyebrow at her, for the men were not very good. Alyx looked away, because to her, the knights, so kind, so polite, were perfect.

When Raine lifted her back on her horse, he said, "They are practicing their chivalry on you. I hope you can bear with them."

Bear with them! she thought as they started riding again. She felt as if she'd just seen a glimpse of heaven and, indeed, she could withstand it.

At night they stayed at an inn and Alyx was embarrassed by the way she was dressed. There was no need to be. The innkeeper took one look at Raine and the twenty men in their rich green and gold and he practically lay down to be their carpet. Food such as Alyx had never seen before was set before them in a quantity that made her gasp.

"May they sit with you?" Raine asked.

It took her a moment to realize he was asking permission for these lovely men to sit at the same long oak table with her. With a large smile, she gestured to them and the chairs.

The men's table manners were so good that Alyx

206

207

VELVET SONG

was overly cautious about her own. All through the meal they offered her prize tidbits of meat and fruit. One man peeled an apple, placed a sliver on a plate and asked if she'd accept it.

They expressed sympathy about her lost voice, which made Raine laugh and say they were missing more than they knew. Formally, they asked Lord Raine to explain this. He said they'd not believe what he said, which made Alyx blush.

In their room was a large, soft bed, sparkling clean, and Alyx immediately snuggled under the light blanket. In seconds, Raine joined her there, pulling her close to him, his hands caressing her stomach, smiling when the baby jumped.

"Strong," he murmured, falling asleep. "A good, strong child."

In the morning the landlord tapped on their door and delivered fresh baked bread and hot wine, along with twenty red roses from Gavin's knights.

"That's Judith's doing," Raine said, dressing. "They're all half in love with her, and it looks like you've won their hearts, too."

Alyx shook her head at this and indicated that they only cared for her because of her relationship to him.

He kissed her nose. "Perhaps all men fall in love with women who can't speak."

Alyx grabbed a pillow and threw it at him, catching him in the back of the head.

"Is that any way for a lady to act?" he teased.

In spite of his light manner, Alyx worried about his words all day. She wasn't a lady and she didn't know how one should behave. How could she possibly meet this paragon, Judith Montgomery, dressed in a sooty, scorched, shapeless sack?

VELVET SONG

"Alyx, what's wrong with you? Are those tears I see?" Raine asked from beside her.

She tried to smile and indicate that there was something in her eye and she would be fine in a moment. After that, she tried to control herself better, but by the time they rode into sight of the Montgomery castle, she was ready to turn tail and run.

The massive stone fortress, centuries old, was even more formidable than she had imagined. As they rode closer to it, the old stone walls seemed to be crushing down on her.

Raine led them to the back entrance, to announce their arrival to as few people as possible. The path to the gate was lined with high stone walls and as they rode, men called down in joyful greeting to Raine. He seemed so at home here that the man she knew began to seem far away. The men who obeyed him without question, the whole vast scope of this place, was closer to the real man than the artificial outlaw camp.

They rode into a courtyard and, to Alyx's astonishment, houses, looking comfortable, with many windows, were inside the walls. In the few castles where she and Jocelin had sung, the people still lived in the towers, which were so uncomfortable most castles had been abandoned.

They had barely stopped when out of a little walled garden came running a breathtakingly beautiful woman wearing a gown of flashing red satin.

"Raine," she called, running, arms open.

She can't sing, Alyx thought defensively, watching her husband leap from his horse and run toward the woman.

"Judith," he said, grabbing her, twirling her about,

208

209

VELVET SONG

feet off the ground, kissing her mouth, in Alyx's opinion, much too exuberantly.

"My lady," came a voice to Alyx's left. "May I help you down?"

Her eyes never leaving Raine and the exquisite Judith, she let herself be lifted down.

"Where is she, Raine?" Judith was saying. "Your message was so garbled we could hardly understand it. We must have misheard because it seemed the messenger was saying your wife was about to be burned at the stake."

"True. I rescued her at the very last moment." His voice held a great deal of pride. With one arm around Judith, he led her to Alyx, whom he casually embraced. "This is Alyx and this vision is my unworthy brother's wife."

Alyx nodded once, openly staring at her sister-in-law. She'd never seen anyone who looked like this before: gold eyes, auburn hair barely visible under a pearl embroidered hood, a small voluptuous figure.

Judith pulled away from Raine. "You must be tired. Come with me and I'll have a bath brought for her." She took Alyx's hand in hers and started toward the house.

"Oh, Judith," Raine called from behind them. "Alyx lost her voice because of the smoke."

Beside her, Alyx felt Judith stiffen and knew it was because Raine dared to marry someone like her.

Rapidly, she tried to blink back tears.

"You are tired," Judith said sympathetically, but there was an edge to her voice.

Alyx had no time to look at the house as Judith led her up the stairs and into a large paneled room.
Alyx's

house in Moreton could have been set in the room at least four times.

Heavy footsteps on the stairs made Judith turn. Raine stood just inside the doorway, grinning. "She's pretty, isn't she?" he said fondly, looking pat Alyx. "Too bad her voice is gone, but I'm sure it's only temporary."

"No thanks to you," Judith said, leading Alyx to a chair.

"What does that mean?" Raine asked, bewildered. "I rescued her."

Judith whirled on him. "From what? From Pagnell's trap? She was used as bait to lure you to him. Raine," she calmed, "I think you should leave now. I don't think your sweet little wife wants to hear what I plan to say to you."

"Sweet!" Raine snorted. "And what reason do you have to be angry with me?" He was offended.

"You are trying my patience, Raine," she warned. "Alyx, are you hungry?"

"Look, Judith, if you have something to say, say it."

"All right, then we'll leave this room. Your wife needs her rest."

Alyx was beginning to get an idea of what Judith had to say. She grabbed her sister-in-law's hand and with her eyes urged her to continue. There were so many things she would like to say to Raine.

Judith blinked in understanding and whirled back to face Raine. "All right, I shall tell you what I have to say. You men, all of you, all four of you brothers, think nothing of dragging a woman all over England with no thought to her safety or comfort."

210

211

VELVET SONG

VELVET SONG

Raine's jaw jutted out. "We stayed in a very comfortable inn last night."

"You what! You took your lady wife into a public place dressed like that? How dare you, Raine? How dare you treat any woman like that?"

"What was I supposed to do, shop for clothes? Perhaps I should have ridden to London and asked the King for a bit of silk."

"Don't try to gain sympathy from me for being declared a traitor. It was your own Montgomery hotheadedness that caused all your problems."

At this Alyx began to clap her hands.

Judith flashed an understanding half-smile at her while Raine glared.

"I can see I'm not needed here," Raine said.

"You're not running away from this," Judith said. "I want you to run downstairs, pull Joan from whatever corner--or bed--she's lounging in, then order a bath sent up here. Oh, Raine, how could you do this to this poor child? The mother of your baby? It's been days since the fire and she's still covered with soot, and how you must have ridden to get here so fast! Now go along and get yourself cleaned up and dressed properly."

With his jaw still out, refusing to speak, Raine left the room, the door slamming behind him.

With a sigh, Judith looked back at Alyx. "You have to stand up for yourself or men will take advantage. Are you well? Raine didn't harm you in his haste, did he?"

Alyx only shook her head, looking at Judith with admiration and the beginnings of love.

"It's a good thing the three of us are all sturdy and strong or else we'd be dead by now."

Alyx held up three fingers, frowned in question.

"Bronwyn, Stephen's wife. You'll have to meet her. She is lovely, absolutely lovely, but Stephen drags her everywhere, makes her sleep on the ground rolled up in a wool blanket. It's really dreadful."

A knock on the door interrupted Judith, and seconds later servants arrived with a tub and pails of hot water. "I should send Raine more often," Judith said. "He certainly gets things done quickly."

Alyx gave a little giggle and Judith smiled back.

"They are good men. I wouldn't trade Gavin for anyone, but sometimes you have to raise your voice a bit. Someday you'll get over your awe of your husband and you'll find yourself shouting right back at him. You may not think so now, but you will."

Alyx merely smiled and allowed herself to be led to the tub.

212

213

VELVET SONG

Chapter Sixteen

RAINE, up To his neck in a tub of hot water, his eyes still blazing with anger, looked up hostilely as the door to his room opened. Gavin burst in.

"Miles has taken the Chatworth girl to Scotland, and from what I can gather he had to drag her there while she screamed curses at him. Damn him!" he said passionately. "Why do I have so much trouble with my younger brothers? Only Stephen-".

"You'd better stop," Raine warned. "I'm in a mood to drive a sword through someone's belly."

"And what has happened now?" Gavin asked tiredly, sitting down across from Raine. "I have more problems than I need. Has your wife said an unkind word to you?"

"Not my wife." He stopped. "What do you plan to do about Miles? Do you think he's taking her to Stephen?"

"I can only hope so. Sir Guy with him, so perhaps he can talk some sense into Miles."

"Do you have a reason why Miles should keep the girl? Other than for his own pleasure, that is? I can't imagine our little brother forcing a woman , to do anything, nor can I imagine one refusing him. I've never seen him have any trouble with women."

"One of Miles's men broke his arm right after Lady Elizabeth was delivered and so stayed behind when Miles went to Scotland. I caught him on the road."

"And what was his bad news? It couldn't be as bad as the look on your face.."

"There were four men in Miles's tent at the time. Pagnell's man was allowed to enter, all the men holding swords on him. He was carrying a long carpet in his arms. He paused just inside the entrance, tossed it to the floor, gave it a push with his foot and unrolled it."

"Well?" Raine demanded.

"It unrolled at Miles's feet, uncovering Elizabeth Chatworth wearing nothing but several feet of blonde hair."

"And what did our little brother do?" Raine asked, torn between laughing and groaning at the picture he'd conjured.

"From what I found out, all the men stood and stared without moving until Lady Elizabeth jumped up, grabbed a cloth from a cot and an ax from a corner and took after Miles."

"Was he harmed?"

"He managed to dodge her blows and sent the other men from the tent. When the lady started cursing worse than what anyone had heard before, Sir

214

215

VELVET SONG

Guy took the men out of hearing distance of the tent."

"And no doubt she was purring the next morning," Raine said, smiling. "Our little brother has a way with women."

"I don't know what happened after that. An hour later the man I spoke to broke his arm and was sent back to Miles's house."

"Then how did you know they went to Scotland?" Raine asked.

"I went to Miles's campsite and when no one was there, I asked some of the tradesmen in the area. Over a week ago Miles and his men left, and several people heard them say they were going to Scotland."

"No clue as to why?"

"Who can say what goes on in Miles's mind? I know for sure he wouldn't harm the girl, but I'm afraid he'll hold her to punish Chatworth."

"Miles would fight a man, many men, but he wouldn't take his grudges out on a woman. That's Chatworth's game," Raine said grimly. "I'm sure he had a reason to take her from England. What do you plan to do now?"

Gavin was quiet for a moment. "I'll leave him to Stephen and see what he can do with Miles. And Bronwyn has a level head on her. Perhaps she can do something with Miles."

Raine stood in the tub. "I doubt if anyone can reason with him where women are concerned. If the woman took more than ten minutes to fall in love with him, it would be the first time such a thing has happened. Maybe Miles saw it as a challenge."

Gavin snorted. "Whatever his reasons, he's tempt

VELVET SONG

ing the King's wrath. King Henry's changed since his eldest son died."

Drying himself, Raine stepped from the tub, gave a kick to his clothes heaped at his feet. "It will be good to get out of these for a while."

"How long do you think you can stay?"

"Three, four days at most. I need to get back to the camp."

"Are your outlaws so important?"

Raine considered for a moment. "They aren't all outlaws, and perhaps if you'd lived their life you would have different ideas about right and wrong."

"Stealing is wrong no matter what," Gavin said firmly.

"Would you sit by quietly and let Judith and your new son starve to death? If they were hungry and a man pushing a cart of bread walked by, would you sit on your high morals and let it go?"

"I don't want to argue with you. Does Alyx know you plan to return?"

"No, not yet. I'm not sure I'll tell her, but just slip away. If I don't I'm sure she'll try to go with me. I want her here with you and Judith. I want her to live the way she never has before."

With one sweep he picked up his old clothes, flung them into a corner and reached for the silver embroidered, black velvet gown on the bed.

"What's this?" Gavin asked, moving to lift something from Raine's dirty clothes. He held up a gold belt.

"It's Alyx's Lyon belt, as she calls it, but for the life of me I can't make out anything like a lion on it. One of the guards at the trial took it from her, and I had a devil of a time getting it from him."

216

217

VELVET SONG

With a frown on his face, Gavin took the belt to the window and studied it in the sunlight. "It looks very old. Is it?"

"I guess. Alyx says it's been handed down from mother to daughter in her family for as long as anyone can remember."

"Lions," Gavin muttered. "There's something familiar about this belt. Come downstairs with me to the winter parlor."

When Raine was dressed, he followed his brother to the paneled room. On one wall hung an old and faded tapestry. It had been there for ages and was so familiar to Raine it was nearly invisible.

"Did Father ever tell you about this tapestry?" Gavin asked. When Raine shook his head, Gavin continued. "It was woven in the time of Edward the First, and the subject was a celebration of the greatest knight of the century, a man called the Black Lion. See, here he is atop the horse and this lovely lady was his wife. Look at her waist."

Raine looked, somewhat bored by Gavin's recitation of the family history, but saw nothing special. He was always a man concerned with today and now, not centuries ago.

Gavin gave his brother a look of exasperation. "I saw a drawing of this belt-" he pointed to the tapestry-"long ago. The Black Lion's wife's name was something to do with a lion, and for a wedding gift the Lion gave his wife a belt of a lion and his lioness."

"You don't think Alyx's belt could be that one. It would have to be a couple of hundred years old." "Look at the way this thing is worn down," Gavin

218

said, holding Alyx's belt aloft. "The links have been wired together with iron and the design is almost gone, but from what I can see of the clasp it could be lions."

"How would Alyx have gotten the belt?"

Gavin didn't need to be reminded of his new sister-in-law's origins. "The Black Lion was a fabulously wealthy man, but he had one son and eight daughters. He gave all his daughters enormous dowries, and to his eldest daughter went the lion belt to pass on to her eldest daughter."

"You don't think Alyx-" Raine began.

"The Black Lion's eldest son was named Montgomery, and it's through him that all our family has descended. Don't you remember Father saying you were like the Black Lion? The four of us were tall, slim and fair while you were always shorter, sturdier."

Raine remembered all the teasing he'd taken as a child and sometimes wondered if he was a full brother to his sister and three brothers. But he'd been twelve when his father had died, and there were many things he didn't remember.

"Father said you were like him." He pointed to the massive black-haired man atop the rearing stallion in the tapestry.

"And you think this belt Alyx has could have belonged to the man's wife?" Raine took the belt from his brother. "She cherishes it, never lets it out of her sight. I knew it would be taken from her at the trial. She hasn't mentioned it to me, but last night she must have been dreaming and she cried out about this bit of gold."

"Did you know the Black Lion married a woman

219

VELVET SONG

well beneath him? Not quite Alyx's status, but compared to him, the Montgomerys are as poor as gamekeepers."

Raine rubbed the worn belt between his fingers. "It's too farfetched to believe. But sometimes I feel as if I've known Alyx longer than just a few months. I've been with women more beautiful than her, and certainly women who treated me with more respect, but when I first looked at her-" He stopped and laughed. "When I first saw her I thought she was a boy and I thought that if I had a son he would look like Alyx. There was something about her ... I don't know how to explain it. Was it the same with you

and Judith?"

"No," Gavin said flatly, looking away. He hated any reminder of how he'd treated Judith when they were first married.

"Speaking of your wife," Raine said. "She gave me a tongue-lashing when I arrived."

Gavin laughed at that. "And what had you done? If I remember correctly, she usually fawns over you to no end."

"She said I was mistreating my wife by bringing her here."

"Because of the King?" Gavin asked. "We discussed it and she agreed that you would be safe for a few days. It will take that long for someone to recognize you and get word to the King."

"No, it wasn't that." Raine was truly puzzled. "It was something about not buying her enough dresses. Perhaps she thinks I carry dresses on my saddle."

"I'm certainly glad I arrived in time to defend myself," Judith said from the doorway, smiling. Im

mediately, she went to her husband and kissed him. "You are safe? Well?"

"As well as can be," he said, holding her close to him. "And what is this I hear about your berating my brother? I hope you did not hurt him. He's not as strong as I am."

"Delicate," Judith said sweetly. "All of your brothers are as delicate as spring flowers." She smiled up at Raine, both men overpowering her slight form. "I merely said that Raine should not have dragged his wife across the country when she is carrying his child and she is ill from the fire's smoke and all the while dressed worse than the lowest menial."

Judith started to say more but turned as in the doorway stood Alyx, but an Alyx no one had seen before. She wore a gown of deep, dark purple velvet, the low, square neckline hung with a heavy silver chain, a large purple amethyst in the center. The back of her head was covered with a simple hood of silver cloth embroidered with purple flowers. Her violet eyes sparkled brilliantly.

Raine moved toward her, lifted her hand and kissed it. "I am overwhelmed with such beauty," he said sincerely.

"You are different," she whispered.

"And you can talk. Can you sing yet?"

"Don't rush her, Raine," Judith said. "I've given her honey and herbs, but I think she'll heal much faster if she doesn't use her voice. Dinner is ready. Is anyone hungry?"

Alyx was glad she couldn't speak because she didn't believe she could have anyway. Raine had always seemed so much more than the people around him

220

221

VELVET SONG

VELVET SONG

even when he dressed in his forestry clothes, but now, in his black and silver, he was awesome. He fit so well into this magnificent house, and he saw nothing unusual about so many people bowing toward him.

As Raine led her to the tables set in the Great Hall, she had to work to keep her mouth from dropping open. The meal she'd seen at the inn had seemed like a feast, but on these tables was food enough for a village.

"Who are these men?" she whispered to Raine beside her. There were over a hundred people eating with them.

Raine glanced up, noticing the people as if from her eyes. "They're Gavin's men, a few of mine, some of Stephen's. Those men are Montgomerys, cousins, I think. You'll have to ask Gavin for the exact relationship." He pointed toward the end of the table where they sat. "Some of them are castle retainers. You can ask Judith. I'm sure she knows who everyone is."

"Yours so big?" she rasped.

"No," he grinned. "My estates are small compared to this. Judith is the rich one. She brought great wealth when she married into our family, and she has to support many people. She's always buying and selling and counting grain in the storerooms."

"Me?" Alyx asked, scared.

Raine took a while to understand her. "You mean will you have to run my estates? I don't see why not. You can read and write. That's more than I can do." He looked away as one of his cousins spoke to him.

Alyx had difficulty eating more of the meal and .after a while sat quietly as course after course was brought into the room. Most of the food she'd never

seen before, and new names and flavors were beginning to run together.

After a long while, Raine stood and introduced her and the people shouted a welcome to her.

Judith asked Alyx if she'd like to rest, and together they went back to Alyx's room.

"Is it all a bit bewildering?" Judith asked.

Alyx nodded her head.

"Tomorrow there's a fair in the village, and I'll see if Raine will take you to it. You'll have some fun and not have so many new people to deal with. But now, why don't you rest? Gavin and Raine are preparing a message to send to Miles, and you'll have hours to rest because I'm sure they'll argue for that long."

When Alyx had removed her dress and slipped beneath the covers, Judith took her hand. "You have nothing to fear from us. We are your family from now on and whatever you do will meet our approval. I know that all this"-she motioned to the elegant room-"is new to you, but you'll soon learn and we're here to help you."

"Thank you," Alyx whispered and was asleep before Judith was out of the door.

Nothing could have prepared Alyx for the fair set up in Montgomery pastureland. She'd slept soundly and long and when she woke, her voice was at least half restored. The sound was there and she was glad, even if the tones were gone.

"Do you think I'll be able to sing again?"

Raine laughed at the fear in her voice and helped her button the purple dress Judith had altered to fit Alyx. "I'm sure that in another few days the birds will fly into the room just to hear you."

Laughing, she whirled about the room, the bellshaped skirt swirling around her. "Isn't it lovely? It is the most beautiful dress on the earth."

"No," Raine laughed, grabbing her. "It is you who makes it lovely. Now stop turning about before you make my child dizzy. Are you ready for the fair?"

The fair was like a city, a city composed of people from all over the world. There were stalls for animals, stalls of lead and tin from England, booths of Spanish wines, German commodities, Italian cloths, toy shops, wrestling matches, games of skill, butchers, fishmongers.

"Where do we begin?" Alyx asked, clinging to Raine's arm. They were surrounded by six of Gavin's knights.

"Perhaps my lady is hungry?" asked one knight. "Or thirsty?"

"Would my lady like to see the jugglers or the acrobats?"

"I hear there's a fair singer just this way."

"The singer," Alyx said firmly, making Raine laugh.

"To see what you have to compete with?" he teased.

She smiled at him, too happy to let his teasing bother her, After a brief visit to the singer, who was no good at all in Alyx's opinion, they stopped at a gingerbread stall and Raine bought her a spicy freshbaked lady.

Eating her treat, looking this way and that, she was hardly aware when Raine stopped before an Italian's booth.

"What do you think of this?" Raine asked, holding up a length of violet silk.

VELVET SONG

"Lovely," she said absently. "Oh, Raine, there is a bear doing tricks."

"Your bear of a husband is going to do tricks if you don't listen to him." When she looked up, he continued. "I have had enough of Judith's berating me. Choose the colors you want and I'll have them sent to the castle."

"Choose?" she asked dumbly, looking at the wealth before her.

"Give us everything you have in purple," Raine said quickly. "And those greens. You'll look good in those, Alyx." He turned back to the merchant. "Cut off enough of each one for a dress and send it to the castle. A steward will pay you." With that he took Alyx's arm and pulled her away.

Like a child, Alyx looked backward, her gingerbread in her mouth. There must have been three shades of purple, four of green in each type of fabric, and the types included silks, satins, velvets, brocades and others Alyx didn't recognize. Raine stopped before the performing bear, but when he saw Alyx wasn't watching, he pulled her to another booth—a furrier's.

This time he didn't wait for her to choose but ordered a cloak lined with lambskin and another with leopard from Asia. He told the furrier to see the cloth merchant and send some bits and pieces for trim for the dresses he'd ordered.

By now Alyx was recovering herself. She was being dressed without even so much as a consultation as to what she wanted. If she had any idea of what she did want, she'd protest Raine's highhandedness.

"Do you choose your own clothes like this?" she

224

225

VELVET SONG

ventured. "Do you leave the choices up to the merchants?"

He shrugged. "I usually wear black, saves time that

way. Miles is the one who knows clothes."

"And what about Stephen? What does he know?" "He keeps Gavin and me apart and all he wears are

the Scots' clothes, leaving most of him bare." "Sounds interesting," Alyx murmured, making

Raine give her a sharp look.

"Behave yourself. Look at this. Have you seen this before?"

What Alyx saw was a woman working with hundreds of wooden spools on a fat little pillow. "What is it?" The finished product looked to be white silk cobwebs.

"It's lace, my lady," the woman said and held up a collar for Alyx's inspection.

Gently, Alyx touched it, almost afraid it would fall apart.

"Here," Raine said, pulling a bag of gold from under his doublet. "Let me have three of those. Take your pick, Alyx, and we'll give one to Judith and send the other to Bronwyn."

"Oh, yes," she breathed, pleased at the idea of a gift to Judith.

The lace collars were carefully laid in a thin wooden box and given to one of the knights to carry.

The next few hours were the happiest Alyx had ever known. Seeing Raine in his natural environment, seeing him get the respect he deserved, was a joy to her. Yet this man who was so honored could sit down with the lowest beggar and listen to the man.

"You're looking at me oddly," Raine said.

VELVET SONG

"I am counting my blessings." She looked away from him. "What are all those people looking at?"

"Come on and we'll see."

The crowd in front of them parted to let the seven big men and the small woman through. Inside the circle were four half-dressed women, their flat bellies bare, their legs visible through transparent silks, undulating to some strange music. After her initial shock, Alyx glanced up at her husband, saw he was completely captivated by the women, as were the guards around them. And to think that moments before she'd been thinking Raine was close to the Lord's angels!

With an exclamation of disgust, which Raine didn't even hear, Alyx began backing out of the crowd, leaving the men to their obsession.

"My lady," said someone beside her. "Let me lead you out of this crush. You're so small that I fear for your safety."

She looked up into the dark eyes of a very handsome man. He had blond hair streaked by the sun, an aquiline nose over a firm mouth. There was a curved scar by his left eye and shadows under his eyes. "I'm not sure-" she began. "My husband ..."

"Let me introduce myself. I am the Earl of Bayham and your husband's family and mine are well acquainted. I've traveled a long way to speak to Gavin, but when I saw the fair I hoped to find one of the family here."

A heavy-set man who'd had more than a little to drink lunged toward them, and the earl put out a hand, protecting Alyx.

"I feel it's my duty to protect you from this mob. Let me lead you out of here."

226

227

VELVET SONG

She took the arm he offered. There was something about him that seemed both sad and kind at the same time, and she instinctively trusted him.

"How did you hear of my marriage?" she asked. "It was so recent and I haven't come from the same people as my husband."

"I have a special interest in what the Montgomery family does."

He led her away from the noise of the fair, to a bench just inside a small grove of trees. "You must be very tired since you've not sat down all morning. And surely the child must be a heavy burden."

Gratefully, she sat down, rested her hands on her stomach, and looked up at him. "You have indeed been watching us. Now, what do you want to talk to me about that you needed me away from my husband?"

At that the earl smiled slightly. "The Montgomerys choose their women well, for brains as well as beauty. Perhaps I should reintroduce myself. I am Roger Chatworth."

Chapter Seventeen

ALYX, FEELING SO smug because she thought she'd guessed that this man wanted her to use her influence on her husband, suddenly felt very frightened. Clumsily, her fear showing on her face, she started to stand.

"Please," he said softly. "I don't mean to harm you. I only want to talk to you for a moment." He sat down on the end of the bench, feet away from her, his head down, hands clasped. "Leave. I won't stop you."

Alyx was already past him when she turned back. "If my husband sees you, he will kill you."

Roger didn't answer and Alyx, frowning, telling herself she was a fool, went back to the bench. "Why have you risked coming here?" she asked.

"I would risk anything to find my sister."

"Elizabeth?"

228

VELVET SONG

Perhaps it was the way she said the name, but

Roger's head came up sharply. "You know her? What

do you know?" His hands made fists. "Pagnell, the earl of Waldenham's son-" "I know the piece of slime."

Quickly, Alyx told the story of how Elizabeth had helped her and how Pagnell had punished Elizabeth.

"Miles!" Roger said, standing. He was richly dressed in dark blue velvet, a satin brocade doublet, his long, muscular legs tightly encased in dark hose. This was not the man Alyx would have imagined as anyone's enemy.

"And what has Miles done with my innocent sister?" Roger demanded, his eyes flashing.

"Not what you did with the Lady Mary," Alyx shot back.

"The woman's death is on my soul, and I have paid for it with the loss of my brother. I do not plan to lose my sister as well."

Alyx had no idea what he was talking about. What did Roger's brother have to do with Mary's death? "I don't know where Miles and Elizabeth are. I have not been well. Perhaps while I was resting Raine found out about Miles, but I know nothing."

"What of the Lady Judith? I don't think much is done that she doesn't know about. Did she tell you something?"

"No, nothing. Why are you free when my husband has to hide, yet it was you who killed Mary?"

"I did not kill her!" he said vehemently. "I-no! I don't want to discuss it, and as for being free, the King has taken all my rents for the next three years. Most of my men have left me because I cannot pay them. I have only one small estate to house what is left of my

VELVET SONG

family, which now consists of one vicious sister-inlaw. My brother hates me and has vanished from the earth, and now my lovely, sweet sister is held prisoner by a boy who is notorious for his deflowering of women. I have not been punished? Your husband still retains his lands, his own steward runs them while a King's man runs mine. Do you know what will be left in three years' time? Your husband has all of his family. He even has the leisure to fall in love and marry while I have no one left-one brother killed, one turned against me, my sister a prisoner. And you say I am not punished? That I am free?"

He stopped after this speech and looked away, unseeing, into the distance.

"I don't know what has happened to Elizabeth. Gavin went after Miles, but he came back right away. I didn't speak to him when he returned.

"I will kill him if he harms her."

"And what will that gain?" Alyx shouted, hurting her sore throat, but at least her voice made him blink. "Will any of you rest until all of you are killed? Miles did not take Elizabeth; she was given to him. He is innocent. Pagnell is the one who should bear your wrath. But you are too used to hating the Montgomeys and blaming them for all your problems."

"What could I expect from a Montgomery?" he asked sullenly. "Already you believe them to be gods on

this earth."

"Stupid man!" she spat. "I only want this war of yours to end. Raine has to live in a forest surrounded by criminals and all because of you."

"Gavin started this by playing with my sister-in-law. One woman wasn't enough for him. He also wanted Alice."

230

231

VELVET SONG

Alyx put her hands to her head. "I don't know any of this. You must go now. Raine will be looking for me."

"Do you mean to protect me?"

"I plan to protect my husband from a fight and me from his wrath."

"I cannot leave until I find out about Elizabeth." Alyx gritted her teeth. "I don't know where Elizabeth is."

"Will you find out and tell me?"

"Absolutely not!" She was astonished that he'd ask this. "Miles is with her, and I'll not do anything to endanger him."

Roger's mouth made a grim line. "You are a fool to come out here with me. I could take you now and demand Elizabeth's release while I hold you."

Swallowing once, Alyx knew she must brave this out and not let him see her fear. "You have no guards near you. Will you strike a pregnant woman? How far will you get alone with me? Elizabeth still believes you are a good man. Would she still if you took yet another Montgomery prisoner?" Alyx could tell by his face that she was striking a nerve. "How did you explain Mary's death to her?"

Alyx paused a moment, watching him. "You must go."

Before either of them could react, through the trees burst Raine and his guards. Instantly, four swords were at Roger Chatworth's throat.

Raine grabbed Alyx, held her with one arm, his sword drawn in the other. "The bastard has not harmed you?" Raine growled. "Kill him," he said in the next breath.

"No!" Alyx screamed at the top of her lungs and successfully made the men halt. Instantly, she placed herself before Roger. "He has done me no harm. All he wants to know is where his sister is."

"In the grave beside mine," Raine said, eyes narrowed.

"She's not dead," Alyx said. "Raine, please, let's end this feud now. Swear that you'll see that Elizabeth is returned to Roger."

"Roger, is it?" Raine breathed in through his teeth, glaring at her until she took a step backward, closer to Roger. "How long have you known him?"

"How-?" she began, bewildered. "Raine, please, you're not making sense. He's a man alone and I don't want to see him killed. He wants his sister. Do you, know where she is?"

"Now you ask me to betray my brother for this filth. Has he told you of Mary's last moments alive?" He looked at Roger, a snarl curling his lip. "Did you enjoy the sound of her body breaking on the stones?"

Alyx could feel herself becoming ill at the images Raine conjured, and she almost wanted to turn Roger over to him. But the King would only have another excuse to keep Raine's lands. He'd never pardon Raine if an earl were killed by him.

"You have to release him," she said quietly. "You cannot kill him in cold blood. Come, Roger. I will walk with you to your horse."

Without a word, Roger Chatworth walked before her back into the fair where his horse waited. Neither Raine nor his guards followed.

"He will never forgive you," Roger said.

"I didn't do it for you. If Raine killed you, the King

232

233

VELVET SONG

would never forgive him. Go now and remember that a Montgomery was good to you when you didn't deserve it. I want no harm to come to Miles or Elizabeth and I will do what I can to see that she is returned to you."

With a look of disbelief, awe and gratefulness, he turned his horse and rode away from the Montgomery estates.

Alyx stood still a moment, her heart beating wildly as she thought about facing Raine again. Of course he'd be angry, but when she explained why she'd helped his enemy, he'd understand. Slowly, dreading the coming argument, she walked back toward the trees where the guard stood.

It took only seconds to see that Raine wasn't there. "Where is he?" she asked, sure he had gone to some private place for their coming battle.

"My lady," one of the guards began.. "Lord Raine has returned to the forest."

"Yes, I know," she said. "Where we can be alone. But which direction did he take?"

For a moment Alyx only looked at the man, and after a long while she came to realize what the man meant. "The forest? You mean the camp of the outlaws?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Fetch my horse! I'll go after him. We can catch him."

"No, my lady. We have orders to return you to Lord Gavin. You are not to follow Lord Raine."

"I must go," she said, looking up at the men pleadingly. "Don't you see that I had to keep Raine from killing Chatworth? The King would put Raine

VELVET SONG

on the block if he killed an earl. I must explain this to my husband. Take me to him at once!"

"We cannot." The guard hardened his jaw against the look of sympathy in his eyes. "Our orders come

from Lord Raine."

"Perhaps if my lady were to speak to Lord Gavin," another guard suggested.

"Yes," she said eagerly. "Let's return to the castle. Gavin will know what to do."

Once mounted, Alyx set a pace that the knights had difficulty keeping up with. As soon as the horse's hooves touched the pavement of the courtyard, Alyx was off and running into the house.

. She slammed into one empty room and started for another, then stood still and bellowed, "Gavin!"

In seconds, running down the stairs came Gavin, his face a mask of incredulousness. Judith was close behind him.

"Was that you calling?" Gavin asked, awed. "Raine said you had a strong voice but-"

Alyx cut him off. "Raine has returned to the outlaw camp. I must go to him. He hates me. He doesn't understand why I did it. I must explain."

"Slow down," Gavin said. "Tell me what's happened from the beginning."

Alyx tried to breathe deeply. "Roger Chatworth-"

The name was enough to make Gavin explode. "Chatworth! Has he harmed you? Has Raine gone after him? Fetch my men," he said to one of his men standing behind Alyx. "Full armor."

"No!" Alyx shouted, then put her face in her hands. The tears were finally starting.

234

235

Judith put her arm around Alyx. "Gavin, talk to the men while I take care of Alyx." She led Alyx to a cushioned niche under a window, took her hands in her own. "Now tell me what has happened."

Alyx's tears and her sense of urgency made her nearly incoherent. It was only by careful questioning that Judith was able to piece the story together.

"I didn't understand," Alyx sobbed. "Roger kept talking about things I didn't understand. Who is Alice? Who was his brother? What did he have to do with Mary's death? Raine was so angry. He ordered Roger killed and I had to stop him. I had to!"

"It's a good thing you did. Now I want you to sit here quietly while I go find Gavin. I'll tell him your story and Gavin will be able to reason with Raine."

Judith found her husband and twenty knights in the courtyard, looking as if they were preparing for war. "Gavin! What are you doing?"

"We're going after Chatworth."

"Chatworth? But what about Raine? He believes Alyx sided with Chatworth. You have to go to Raine and make him understand. Alyx was protecting Raine -not Chatworth."

"Judith, I don't have time to solve a lovers' quarrel now. I have to find Miles and warn him about Chatworth or else find Chatworth and see that he can't gather an army and go after my brother."

"Get Miles to release Elizabeth. That's what Chatworth wants," Judith said. "Give him back his sister."

"Like he returned mine? Across a horse, face down?"

"Gavin, please," Judith pleaded.

He stopped a moment and pulled her to him.

VELVET SONG

"Raine is safer in the forest. No doubt Chatworth will let the King know of Raine's threats and that will renew the King's wrath. And Alyx was to stay here anyway, so it's worked out well. Now Miles is of more concern to me. I don't believe he's harmed the girl, but I'd hoped we'd have time before Chatworth found out where she was. I have to warn my brother and give him protection if he needs it."

"And what of Alyx? Raine believes she betrayed him."

"I don't know," Gavin said, dismissing the subject. "Write him and send a messenger. Raine is safeangry perhaps, but anger won't harm him. Now I must go. Look after Alyx while I'm gone and feed my son."

She smiled up at him and he kissed her lingeringly. "Take care," she called after him as he and his men rode out.

Judith's smile didn't last long as she reentered the house and saw Alyx sitting alone on the window seat.

"Is Gavin going to Raine?" Alyx whispered, hope in her voice.

"Not now. Perhaps later he will go. Now he has to warn Miles that Roger Chatworth knows a Montgomery holds Elizabeth."

Alyx leaned back against the stone casing. "How could Raine believe I'd betray him? Chatworth asked me to find out where Elizabeth was, but I refused. I only wanted to help Raine, to help the whole family. Now I have worsened all of it."

"Alyx," Judith said, taking her sister-in-law's cold hands. "There are things you don't know, things that happened before you were part of our family."

VELVET SONG

236

237

VELVET SONG

"I know about Mary's death. I was with Raine when he found out."

"Before that there were events-"

"Having to do with this Alice Roger mentioned and his brother?"

"Yes. Alice Chatworth started it all."

Alyx was amazed at the coldness in Judith's eyes, at the way her lovely features changed. "Who is Alice?" Alyx whispered.

"Gavin was in love with Alice Valence," Judith said in a small voice. "But the woman would not marry him. Instead she caught herself a rich earl, Edmund Chatworth."

"Edmund Chatworth," she said. The man Jocelin had killed.

"Edmund was killed one night by a singer who was never caught," Judith continued, not knowing Alyx's knowledge.

"I always believed Alice Chatworth knew more about what happened than she told. As a widow she decided she could afford to marry Gavin, but Gavin refused to put me aside and marry her. Alice did not take losing very well." Judith's voice was heavy with sarcasm. "She took me prisoner and threatened to pour boiling oil on my face. There was a scuffle and the oil scarred Alice."

"Roger said his household consisted of one vicious sister-in-law. Surely he cannot have harmed Mary i because of the scarring?"

"No, later Roger was in Scotland and met the woman King Henry had promised Stephen for a bride. Bronwyn is rich and well worth a fight. Roger claimed her for his and he and Stephen fought. Roger

is a proud man and a renowned knight, but Stephen bested him and in a rage, Roger attacked Stephen's back."

"Stephen was not hurt, was he?"

"No, but Roger's reputation was destroyed. All over England people laughed at him and began calling a back stabbing a `Chatworth.'"

"And so Roger retaliated by taking Mary. He must have seen the Montgomerys as the cause of all his humiliations," Alyx said.

"He did. He begged Stephen to kill him on the battlefield, but Stephen wouldn't and Roger felt further insulted. So Roger held Mary and Bronwyn prisoners for a while. I don't believe he'd have harmed Mary if it weren't for Brian."

"And who is Brian?"

"Roger's young brother, a crippled, shy boy who fell in love with Mary. When Brian told Roger he planned to marry Mary, Roger got drunk and climbed in bed with Mary. You know what Mary did. Brian brought her body back to us."

"And now Miles has Elizabeth," Alyx said. "Raine is outlawed. Roger has lost his family and his wealth and now Miles's life may be in danger. Is there no way to stop this hatred? What if Roger kills Miles? What will happen then? Who will be next? Will any of us ever be safe again? Will our children grow up to hate Chatworths? Will my child fight Roger's?"

"Quiet, Alyx," Judith said softly, pulling Alyx into her arms. "Gavin has gone to warn Miles and he will be safe. Besides, Bronwyn is there with her men, and even if Chatworth were to raise an army, he won't be able to fight the MacArrans."

238

239

VELVET SONG

"I hope you're right. And Raine will be safe in the forest."

"Let's go and write letters to Raine now. We'll send a messenger tonight."

"Yes," Alyx said, sitting up, brushing tears away. "As soon as Raine knows the truth I'm sure he'll forgive me."

Chapter Eighteen

RAINE RETURNED ALYX'S letters unopened. Although he read Judith's explanation of what had happened, he made no comment in the verbal messages he sent back. He had no squire now, so Judith had to be careful to send only messengers who could read.

Alyx seemed to accept all that was happening stoically, yet each morning her eyes were red and her appetite was all but gone.

When Gavin returned from Scotland, he gasped at the sight of Alyx, nearly skin and bones except for her stomach sticking out in front.

"What is your news?" Judith asked before he could say anything about Alyx's appearance.

"We found Chatworth and detained him for a while, but he escaped."

"Did you harm him?" Judith asked.

240

241

VELVET SONG

"Not one hair!" Gavin snapped. "When he was gone we went to Scotland, but he hadn't appeared there. My guess is Chatworth went to King Henry."

"Did you see Miles?"

Gavin nodded his head in frustration. "He has always been stubborn, but now he goes too far. He refuses to release Elizabeth., and nothing anyone could say made him see reason."

"And what about Elizabeth?"

"She fights him constantly. They would argue over the color of the sky, but sometimes I see her looking at him with something besides hate. Now, how is Alyx?"

"Raine returns her letters unopened and I've had no mention of her, although my letters plead with him to listen. The messenger says Raine has him skip the passages dealing with Alyx."

Gavin's frown said a great deal. "My brother would forgive a triple murderer, but if he thinks his honor is besmirched he is remorseless: I'll write to him and tell him of Alyx's condition. When's the child due?"

"In a few weeks."

Raine did not answer Gavin's words about Alyx either.

In November, Alyx was delivered of a large, healthy baby girl who smiled seconds after her birth and showed that she had Raine's dimples. "Catherine," Alyx whispered before falling asleep.

But in the next weeks, the child was not so happy. Catherine cried constantly.

"She cries for her father," Alyx said bleakly, and Judith almost shook her.

"If I didn't know better," Judith said, "I'd think she was hungry."

VELVET SONG

Judith's words were prophetic because as soon as a wet nurse was found, Catherine quieted.

"What good am I?" Alyx wailed.

Judith did shake her. "Listen to me! You have to think of your child. Perhaps you can't feed her, but there are other things you can do. And if the child isn't enough, I can find work for you to do."

Alyx nodded numbly and before she knew what was happening, Judith gave her more work than she knew existed. Alyx was given ledgers to read, columns of figures to add, bushels of grain to count and record. There were storerooms to clean, meals to oversee and hundreds of people to care for.

Alyx was given the care of the hospital for two weeks and learned she was good at cheering the patients. Judith was pleased with Alyx's musical ability, but she saw no reason for Alyx to spend the day alone working on music. She composed songs as she bandaged a wounded leg or as she was riding to the village below the Montgomery castle.

It was a bit of a shock to Alyx when neither Judith nor Gavin was awed by her talent but took it in stride. They, too, had talents, but they did not indulge them to the exclusion of work.

Alyx wasn't sure when she started to realize how selfish her life had been. She'd been set apart from the people of her village by her talent. Everyone had been reserved toward her, had treated her as if she were someone touched by Heaven. In her smug sureness she'd decided she hated the nobles because of what one man had done. But in truth she was jealous. She'd always felt she was the equal of anyone, but actually, what had she ever given to anyone? Her music? Or was her music really for herself?

VELVET SONG

VELVET SONG

She realized that Gavin's men and the servants were kind to her because of her relationship to Raine, but she wanted to give something that wasn't so easy for her.

She set up a school for the many children in the castle complex and began to teach them to read and write. There were many days when she wanted to quit, but she kept on and was rewarded once in a while when a child learned a new word.

In the afternoons she worked with the wounded and ill. Once a man's leg was crushed under a wine barrel and it had to be taken off. Alyx took his head in her hands and used all her training, and all her feeling, to hypnotize him with her voice. Afterward, she cried for hours.

"It hurts to become involved," she said to Judith. "One of my children, a lovely child, fell off the wall yesterday and she died in my arms. I don't want to love people. Music is safer."

Judith held her and soothed her and they talked for a long time. In the morning Alyx went back to her school. Later, the man who'd lost his leg asked for her and there were tears of gratitude on his face for Alyx's help.

Judith was behind Alyx. "Did God give you your talent to help men who need you or should you save it for prettily dressed people in church?"

At Christmas, Judith's mother came to visit them. Helen Bassett didn't look old enough to be anyone's mother. At her side was her husband John, who looked as content as any man could. Together they smiled at their eleven-month-old daughter, who was just learning to walk.

Judith's son was six months old, Alyx's daughter

two months. Everyone tried to make the festivities merry and no one mentioned how many of the family were missing.

"We were all together last year," Gavin muttered into his ale cup.

There was no word from Raine.

In January, everything seemed to happen at once. Roger Chatworth had indeed gone to King Henry but not alone. Whether by chance or contrivance, Pagnell had appeared at the same time.

Roger said Miles was holding his sister prisoner in Scotland and Pagnell said he had proof, not just the vague rumors of before, that Raine was training non-nobles to fight as knights, that he was attempting to raise an army against the King.

King Henry said he was heartily sick of the feud between the Chatworths and the Montgomerys and he wanted Lady Elizabeth released. If Miles did not do so, he would be declared a traitor and his lands confiscated. As for Raine, if he put more weapons in those outlaws' hands, the King would burn the forest and all of them together.

Gavin sent a messenger to Scotland, pleading with Stephen to force Miles to obey the King. Before there was a reply, it was heard that Pagnell had been found dead and it was whispered that the Montgomerys were responsible. The King added this to a long list of grievances.

"He wants what we've held for centuries," Gavin said. "Other kings have tried to take it and have failed. This one will, too." He grabbed a mace from the wall. "If Stephen cannot reason with Miles, I can."

Within an hour he was off again for Scotland.

VELVET SONG

"And what about Raine?" Alyx asked quietly as she held Catherine. "Who is going to warn him about the King's threats?"

"King Henry won't burn the forest," Judith said practically. "There are too few of them left. Raine wouldn't really march on the King with his band of cutthroats, would he?"

"Perhaps. Raine would dare anything if he saw some injustice. If he thought his brother were in danger there is no predicting what he might do."

"Miles will listen to Gavin this time-I hope," Judith said. "Roger will get his sister back and everything will be settled."

They looked at each other for a long moment, neither of them believing Judith's words.

"I'm going to Raine," Alyx said softly, then opened her eyes in surprise.

"Will he allow you into the forest? Oh, Alyx, I'm not sure you should do that. The Montgomery men can get terribly angry."

"Has Gavin's anger ever kept you from doing what you had to do? If Gavin were in danger would you hesitate helping him in any way you could?"

Judith was quiet for a moment. "I once led Gavin's men against a man who held him captive."

"I merely ride into a forest. Would you care for Catherine? She's too young to take with me. It will be cold there."

"Alyx, are you sure?"

"I might be able to distract Raine. I'm sure he's brooding over all that has happened and no doubt contemplating all manner of honors to commit against Roger Chatworth. Sometimes I can outshout him and force him to listen to me. He probably won't

VELVET .SONG

know what Gavin is doing to persuade Miles to release Elizabeth."

She stood, clutching her baby tightly. "I must prepare. I'll need a tent, for I can't see Raine willingly sharing his with me."

"He might forgive you the moment he sees you," Judith said, eyes dancing.

"Forgive me!" Alyx said, then saw she was teasing. "I'll make him sorry he accused me of betraying him. And I'll need medicines. I owe something to those outlaws Raine leads. They helped me once, but I never helped them. I want to make up for some of my neglect and my arrogance."

"How soon do you want to leave?" Judith asked.

"Before Gavin returns or we may have trouble. How soon can we gather things together?"

"A day if we hurry."

"Judith," Alyx said. "You are an angel."

"Perhaps I just want to see my family safe. Come along now, we have work to do."

Silently, Alyx groaned. Raine had once said Judith did twice as much in a day as anyone else. Alyx guessed it was closer to three times as much. Quickly, she handed Catherine to a maid and hurried after her sister-in-law.

246

247

Chapter Nineteen

"I DON'T LIKE like this place," Joan said from the horse beside Alyx's. "It's too dark. Are you sure Lord Raine lives in a place like this?"

Alyx didn't bother to answer. Judith had said her maid, Joan, would be an asset in this venture, that Joan could keep Alyx looking good enough to make Raine notice and Joan could ferret out all sorts of information. Judith had also warned that Joan was much too familiar and must be constantly reminded of her place.

"Hello," Alyx called up into a tree.

Joan looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. "Is the tree expected to answer you?" She added, "My lady" when Alyx gave her a sharp look.

From the tall branches of the tree dropped what Joan saw as a divine man.

VELVET SONG

"Joss!" Alyx laughed, and before she could dismount Jocelin had grabbed her about the waist and pulled her into his arms.

For a moment they just laughed and hugged until Alyx pulled away and looked at him. "You've changed," she said quietly. "There are roses in your cheeks."

Joan coughed loudly. "Perhaps the gentleman would like roses elsewhere than his cheeks."

"Joan!" Alyx warned. "I'll leave you overnight alone in this forest if you don't behave."

"Is that the voice of command I hear?" Joss asked, holding her hands at arms' length. "You have more than changed. I have never seen such a lovely lady. Walk with me and let's talk."

When they were away from Joan and the loaded horses, he asked, "You have a child?"

"A daughter with Raine's dimples and my eyes. She is sweet and perfect in every way. How is he?"

Jocelin knew who she meant. "Not well. Wait! He is physically well, but he is sad, never smiles and when a messenger comes from his brother he is angry for days." He paused. "What happened after your marriage?"

Briefly, she told him of Roger Chatworth.

"So, you have left your child and come back to Raine."

"No doubt he will welcome me with open arms." She grimaced. "There are several reasons why I've returned. I owe the people here something for saving me from the burning. How many ... died?"

"Three, and a fourth one later."

Her hand tightened on Joss's arm. "The King's

248

249

VELVET SONG

anger at the Montgomerys and the Chatworths is increasing daily. Gavin has gone to Scotland to reason with one brother while Raine is mine to deal with."

"Do you know that he won't let any messenger read anything concerning you in a letter?"

"I guessed as much. Damn Raine and his honor! If he'd just listen for ten sentences he'd find out I'm not a traitor. The best I can hope for is to distract him for a while. I'm afraid he may decide to go after Roger Chatworth on his own, and no doubt he will if he thinks his baby brother is in danger. If his 'little' brother weren't such a seducer of women perhaps none of this would be happening. But the Montgomery brothers stand up for each other no matter what."

"Distract him?" Joss asked, smiling. "I think you'll do that. Do you know how good you look? The violet of your dress makes your eyes glow."

"Speaking of seducers," she teased, looking him up and down. "I thought I'd wear simple clothes more suited for the forest, but Judith planned my wardrobe, saying beautiful gowns would make me more visible to Raine. Have I really changed?"

"Yes, you've filled out. Now, who is that greedy wench you brought with you?"

For a moment Alyx studied Joss. In all the time she'd known him, she'd never seen him so full of laughter or tease so much. "How is Rosamund?" she asked tentatively.

Jocelin tossed his head back and laughed. "You are too clever. She's magnificent and getting better. Now, let's go into camp. Raine will be glad to see you no matter what he says."

VELVET SONG

Although Alyx thought she was prepared for her first sight of Raine, she wasn't. He'd lost weight and the striations in his muscles were standing out. He was standing by a campfire looking down at two men who talked to him earnestly.

For a moment Alyx stood completely still, watching him, remembering every inch of him, wanting to run to him, launch herself into his arms, feel him welcoming her.

But when he turned, her breath caught in her throat. Hate she could have dealt with, but Raine's eyes did not show the warm fires of hate. Instead there was nothing there but a frigid wasteland of ice: blue so cold it sent slivers of ice through her body. There was no flicker of recognition and especially none of welcome.

Without moving, Alyx watched as Raine turned his back on her and walked toward the training field.

"A mite angry, isn't he?" Joan said from behind Alyx. "Those Montgomerys do have tempers. Did I ever tell you about the pit Lady Judith climbed into to save Lord Gavin? Of course, any woman in her right mind would risk all for such a man as Lord Gavin. And Miles, too. I've never been to bed with Lord Raine, though. Is he pleasing?"

"You go too far!" Alyx snapped, spinning around.

Joan gave a catlike grin. "At least I got you to quit feeling sorry for yourself. Now where do you want the tent? You decide while I fetch a few men to help us."

With that she was off, silently slipping into the group of people who were slowly gathering about Alyx and the four loaded horses.

250

251

VELVET SONG

"We see you didn't get much of you burned," one

man said, looking Alyx up and down insolently. "Can't burn real witches," a woman said.

"Fancy dressin'," came another voice. "Who'd you

sleep with to get that?"

Alyx put her chin up. "I want to thank all of you for coming to my rescue when I needed help. I'm sure I didn't deserve it, but thank you."

This seemed to take the crowd back for a moment.

"Nobody meant to help you," said a man with a scarred face. "'Twas for Lord Raine that we went. And now, from the looks of him, he wishes we'd let you burn."

This caused a great roar of laughter from everyone and, shaking their heads, slapping one another's backs, they went back to the camp, leaving Alyx alone.

"You plannin' to cry?" Joan asked nastily in Alyx's ear. "They'd like that. Here, come see what I found."

With one deep sniff, Alyx turned away from the forest camp. Had she expected them to see that she'd changed? She looked up at Joan, who was flanked by four large, good-looking young men.

"They'll help us set up the tent," Joan said, slipping her arms through two of the men's.

Alyx had to smile at Joan, who could be made happy so easily. Judith had said Joan was a cat slipping from bed to bed. With amazement, Alyx watched as Joan began to give the young men orders, all the while giving them a caress here and there. Once Joan looked up and winked at Alyx. Insolent girl! Alyx thought, turning away to hide a smile.

At the horses she began to unload the bundles she and Judith had packed.

VELVET SONG

"Need any help?" asked one of Joan's young men from behind her as he took the bundle from her.

"Thank you," she said, smiling up at him. "Are you new in the camp?"

At that he laughed and his brown eyes sparkled. "I was here before Raine, was here when you were a boy. You've changed some," he teased, watching her.

"I don't ..." she began before looking away.

"I don't guess you looked at any of us. It was always him you watched." He jerked his head toward Raine's tent. "I don't guess I blame you, seein' as how he's a rich nobleman and you are-were-a ..." He stopped.

"Is that how it looked?" Alyx said, mostly to herself.

"It did explain a great deal when Lord Raine told us we were to rescue you."

"Told you, did he?" she asked. "No doubt everyone was quite cheerful at the prospect of saving me."

The young man cleared his throat and shifted his burden. "I'll take this to the camp for you."

"Wait!" she called. "What is your name?"

"Thomas Carter," he said, grinning.

Thoughtfully, Alyx finished unloading the horse. She'd spent months in this camp and to her knowledge she'd never even seen Thomas Carter, yet he'd been here all along and had even risked his life to rescue

her.

Frowning, she went back to the camp and was very

pleased when Thomas smiled at her.

Joan and the young men had the tent erected in a

very short time and the goods stored inside. Outside

blazed a warm campfire.

"Come up in the world, ain't ya?" asked a woman

252

253

VELVET SONG

from across the fire, her eyes glaring at Alyx. There was an enormous goiter on her neck, making her hold her head to one side.

"Could we share what we have with you?" Alyx asked quietly, then turned to glare at Joan, who'd gasped in protest.

The woman shook her head, her eyes wide, and left them.

"You can't let that diseased scum near us!" Joan hissed. "Would you like to have one of those things on your neck? All she has to do is sit by us and-"

"Quiet!" Alyx said, seeing herself in Joan. "I'll not have you snubbing these people. They saved my life and for all their filth and disease they deserve more than I can repay. And as for you, you will treat them well-and not just the men."

Joan set her jaw firmly, muttering something about Alyx betraying her class, that she was becoming more like Lady Judith every day. Without a sound, she slipped off into the darkness.

Like Lady Judith, Alyx thought, and knew she'd never had such a compliment before. Smiling, she stood and went into her tent. Alone on the little cot, she was reminded of her nights with Raine. At least now she was close to him, and for the first time in months she was able to sleep well. Her last thoughts before falling asleep were of Catherine.

In the morning, Alyx awoke refreshed, smiling. The clean, cold, forest air felt good to her and even somewhat like home. Joan was not in sight, so Alyx dressed alone in a dress of emerald green wool trimmed with gold braid. A little cap on the back of her head did nothing to conceal the curls about her

254

face. Her hair was longer now, and no longer did she hate the unusual color that made every strand seem to be an individual.

Outside the tent, she was greeted by an exhausted-looking Joan sitting lifelessly on a tree stump of a stool. Her hair was down her back, the shoulder of her dress torn. There was a bruise on her neck. She looked up at Alyx with bright eyes staring out of bluish eye sockets. "They are lusty men," she said wearily, yet so happily, that Alyx worked to keep from laughing.

"Go and rest," Alyx said sternly. "And when you awaken we'll talk of your disgusting conduct."

Heavily, Joan rose and walked toward the tent.

Alyx caught her maid's arm. "All four of them?" she asked curiously.

Joan only nodded, her eyelids drooping wearily, as she went inside the tent.

Alyx was contemplating this-four men at once?when Raine presented himself before her, his eyes blazing angrily. She gulped twice. "Good morning," she managed to say.

"Damn your mornings!" he growled, glaring at her. "That harlot you brought with you has worn out four

of my men. They're no good to me at all this morning. Can't even lift a sword. I don't know why you came here, but I think it's time you returned."

She smiled at him_ sweetly. "What a charming welcome, my husband. I apologize for my maid, but as you may remember I haven't had much practice in handling underlings. We can't all be born to the nobility. As to why I came here, I have a debt to pay."

"You owe me nothing."

255

VELVET SONG

"You!" Alyx spat, then calmed herself, forcing a smile. "Perhaps I do owe you something, but I owe more to these people."

"Since when have you cared?" He narrowed his eyes at her.

"Since they risked their lives to save me," she said calmly. "Would you care to join me for a bit of food to break your fast? I can offer you a cold meat pie."

He seemed to want to say something but turned on his heel and left her.

Alyx kept smiling, her heart pounding as she watched his broad back retreat.

"Pleased with yourself?" Jocelin asked from behind her.

Alyx laughed aloud. "Am I so transparent? Raine Montgomery is an arrogant man, isn't he? He thinks I'm here only because of him."

"And aren't you?" Joss asked.

"I shall drive him insane," Alyx said happily. "Would you like something to eat? Do you have time to sit with me and answer some questions?"

The questions Alyx asked were about the camp people, questions she should have known the answers to, since she'd lived with them for months. But she felt like an outsider.

"They won't be easy to win," Jocelin said. "They have many grudges against you. Blanche has blamed many problems on you."

"Blanche!" Alyx said, sitting up straight. Pieces of the puzzle were falling into place.

"Blanche was the woman who caused Constance's death. How else would she have known about Edmund Chatworth? You must hate Blanche."

"I am through with hating." He stood. "Would you

like to see Rosamund? If you want to help the people, she can tell you how to start."

Alyx wasn't prepared for the changes in Rosamund. Her eyes shone so brightly when she looked at Jocelin that the birthstain on her cheek almost disappeared. Joss's eyes were no less bright.

"Alyx would like to help you," he said in a soft, sweet voice, taking Rosamund's hand.

Rosamund gave Alyx a tolerant smile that made Alyx stiffen her back, and she thanked heaven for Judith's training.

"I'm sure we can find something for you to do," Rosamund said in her soft voice.

It took Alyx a week to make Rosamund realize she meant business. During that time Alyx worked early and late and no job was beneath her. She washed and bandaged running sores. She delivered a child to a woman eaten with the French pox and when the blind baby died, she buried it; no one else would touch the poor thing. She sang to an old woman who screamed incoherently at ghosts only she could see.

"Her ladyship's doin' us low ones a favor," a man said to her as she went through the dark to her tent. "Afraid to dirty her hands, she was, and now nothin's dirty enough for her. But I don't see Raine bowin' before her."

In her tent, Alyx put her hands to her temples. Her head ached from noises and ugly smells. The sick allowed her to touch them, but the healthy people ignored her except to taunt her. And as for Raine, she rarely even saw him.

"Did you come here to win Raine or these diseased scum?" Joan asked frequently.

256

257

VELVET SONG

"Raine," Alyx had whispered, rubbing her temples. Now the tent was empty, Joan obviously sleeping somewhere else. Alyx wasn't used to having servants and was a failure at controlling Joan. Seeing that the water buckets were empty, Alyx grabbed them and went to the river.

Kneeling at the bank she looked about her, at the sparkling surface of the water, broken diamonds in the moonlight. A sound made her turn and her heart leaped to her throat at the sight of Raine, his big body-a body she knew so well-blocking the moon.

"Have you proven what you wanted?" he asked quietly, his voice as smooth and hard as steel. "Did you expect to bandage one nasty wound and the people would fall at your feet in gratitude? They are better judges of people than I am."

"And pray tell me what that means," she said, aghast.

"You are a good actress. Once I believed you were ... honest, but I learned the hard way. I hope they do not fall as far as I did."

She stood, hands into fists at her side. "Spare me your self-pity," she said through her teeth. "Poor Lord Raine lowered himself to fall in love with a commoner, and then when she did her best to save him from the King's wrath, he knew at once she'd overstepped her bounds."

Her voice rose. "I want to tell you something, Raine Montgomery. It doesn't matter if these people do hate me. I damn well deserve it. And as for their falling at my feet, I don't expect them to. At least they are the honest ones. You hold yourself up like some

martyr and won't listen to anyone. Instead you'd rather believe yourself wronged and to think that only you has a sense of honor."

"And what do you, a woman, know of honor?" he sneered.

"Very little. In fact I know very little about anything except music. But at least I'm willing to admit I have faults. I have wronged these people, and I'm trying to right my wrong. You, my high lord, have wronged me-and your daughter whom you don't even ask about."

"I have heard of her," Raine said stiffly.

Alyx let out a sound that ran across Raine's skin like a steel rasp. "How big of you!" she spat. "The great, lordly Raine, lord of the forests, king of the outlaws, has heard of his own daughter."

She quietened. "I came here to win you back, but now I'm not sure I want you. Stay away from me. Take your cold honor to bed with you."

"There are other women willing to share my bed,' he said, eyes hard.

"My pity goes to them," Alyx forced out. "As for me, I prefer a different sort of man, one who is not so stiff and cold, one who is still alive."

She did not see his arm shoot out. He was always

faster, stronger, than she remembered. His strong

fingers bit into the back of her waist and as her eyes

locked with his, he smiled slightly, humorously, as he

pulled her close to him.

Bending his head, his lips hovered above hers.

"Cold, am I?" he said, and his voice sent chills down

her spine.

Some small part of Alyx's brain could still reason.

258

259

VELVET SONG

He meant to teach her a lesson, did he? she thought, as she stood on tiptoe and slipped her arms about his neck.

When their lips touched, both of them drew in their breaths sharply and pulled away from each other, violet eyes staring into blue. Alyx blinked once, twice, before Raine's mouth descended on hers with the hunger of a dying man. He straightened, his arms about her, and her feet came off the ground as he grabbed the back of her head in his strong hand and turned her head sideways. His tongue thrust inside her mouth, sending sparks so hot through her body that they seemed to burn away her strength. Her body went limp against his, allowing him to support her full weight.

His lips began working against hers, pulling her closer, his hand massaging, kneading her head, his fingers playing with the muscles in the back of her neck.

Alyx began to tighten her grip in her attempt to get nearer. Her legs moved upward until they were about his waist. She turned her head, taking the initiative as her tongue tangled with his, her teeth hard against his lips.

The sound of approaching riders, many horses strong, came through to Raine's sense of danger. Slowly, groggily, he came" out of the red fog and roughly, angrily, set Alyx away from him.

For a moment, his expression was soft; then it turned cold again. "Did you hope to entice me back to you?" he whispered. "Did you use the same weapons on Chatworth?"

It took Alyx a moment to understand what he

meant. "You are a fool, Raine Montgomery," she said softly. "Does your hate override your love?" With that, she lifted her skirts, forgetting the water buckets at her feet, and turned back to camp. Behind her she heard Raine talking to the riders, his voice unnecessarily angry.

260

261

Chapter Twenty

"FOR WHAT GOOD it is," Joan was saying as she

combed Alyx's curls, "the people are less angry with you." There was no congratulation in Joan's voice. "When are you going to stop wasting your time and go after Lord Raine? We've been here two whole weeks and still he only glares at you. You should strip off your clothes and climb into bed with him."

"He'd gloat too much," Alyx said, buttoning the purple wool of her sleeve. "I'll not give him the satisfaction of winning so easily. He's said some awful things to me."

At this, Joan laughed. "What does it matter what men say? They have brains only for killing each other. Put a sword in a man's hand and he's happy. A woman must work to teach him there are things in life 'besides war."

"Perhaps you're right. Raine worries more about whether I have 'betrayed him than he does about how his child fares alone without its mother. Perhaps I should return to my Catherine and leave Raine to his brooding."

"Brooding is correct," Joan said. "Did you know that he has slept with no woman since he returned from Lord Gavin's?"

Alyx's smile started small and stretched very wide.

"He loves you, Alyx," Joan said softly.

"Then why doesn't he show it! Why does he sneer and glower at me? When I am with Rosamund I'll look up and there he'll be, watching me with his cold looks. I feel as if I've had the icy river water tossed on my body."

Joan laughed delightedly. "He is showing you that he cares! What do you expect him to do-apologize?" Joan laughed even harder at this idea. "The Lord made women stronger so they could put up with men's weaknesses. You say you were wrong to treat the forest people as you did, so you admitted it and set about changing your error. Do you think any man could be so strong?"

"Raine has accused me of being a traitor," she said stubbornly.

"The King has said Lord Raine is a traitor. The King is wrong, but will he admit it? No more so than your husband will come to you and ask you to forgive him."

"I don't like this," Alyx said, her lower lip thrust out. "I have done no wrong to Raine. Roger Chatworth-

"Damn Chatworth!" Joan said. "Raine's pride is

262

263

VELVET SONG

hurt. You stayed beside some other man instead of your husband. Above all else, men expect blind loyalty."

"I am loyal, it is-

She cut herself off when a breathless Jocelin burst into the tent unannounced.

"You should come," he said to Alyx. "Maybe you can prevent a death."

"Whose?" Alyx asked, standing immediately and following Joss before he could answer.

"Brian Chatworth has just begged entrance into the camp. Raine is donning armor to meet him."

"But Judith said Brian loved Mary, that Brian brought her body back to them."

"Maybe it's the name Chatworth. That alone would send Raine into a rage."

Jocelin pulled Alyx onto a horse and set out quickly, dodging tree branches as they rode. When at last they stopped, the sight ahead of them surprised Alyx. In a small clearing, lit by the early morning sun, stood a young man. He was small, slight, even delicate. Yet he had the facial features of Roger Chatworth. Had Alyx seen him elsewhere she would have guessed this near boy was Roger's son.

Alyx slid off the horse before Joss could dismount. "May I welcome you?" she said, walking toward the boy. "I am Alyxandria Montgomery, Lord Raine's wife. I have met your brother."

Brian pulled himself to his full height. "I have no brother," he said in a surprisingly masculine voice. "I come to join Lord Raine in his fight to avenge his sister's death."

"Oh, my," Alyx said, astonished. "I had hoped you offered some solution to this feud."

VELVET SONG

"We're all wishing that," came a voice from above Alyx's head.

She looked up but could see no one. "Who are? You're not one of Raine's guards."

"Oh, but I am, and are you truly Raine's wife?"

Alyx listened to the voice, sure she'd never heard it before, yet something about it was familiar. It was definitely a voice full of humor. She glanced at Brian and Jocelin. Brian's face was immobile, too hard for one so young, while Joss gave a shrug.

Her attention was suddenly given to the appearance of Raine riding his great heavy war horse, wearing full armor, covered from head to foot in steel.

Dismounting, he walked toward Brian Chaworth, and the young man did not flinch. One blow from Raine's hand would have been enough to send him sprawling. "Do you plan to hide behind my wife's skirts?" Raine said in a low voice. "She is known to protect Chatworths."

Alyx put herself between Brian and Raine. "And do you make war on children?" she yelled up at him. "Can't you listen to him? Or are you too pig-headed to give the boy a chance?"

Raine never said a word to Alyx because laughter coming from the trees made him halt.

Alyx watched, openmouthed, as a man dropped to the ground. He was wearing the most extraordinary clothes she had ever seen: a big-sleeved shirt, a soft yellow color, was covered by a bright blue tartan blanket wrapped about his waist in such a way that it formed a skirt and then was tossed over one shoulder, a heavy belt holding it in place. His knees were bare, his calves encased in heavy wool socks, thick shoes on his feet.

264

265

VELVET SONG

"Stephen," Raine breathed, his eyes softening.

"Aye, 'tis me," this oddly dressed man said. He was tall and slim with dark blond hair, a very handsome man. "I've brought this boy to you. He wants to share your exile and would like to learn from you.",

"He's a Chatworth," Raine said, his eyes hardening again.

"Yes, he's a Chatworth," Alyx said. "And you'll not forgive him, will you? No doubt you'll hate this man for daring to bring him here. Go," she said to Stephen. "It's no use trying to reason with him. He has a piece of wood for a brain."

To her surprise, Stephen began to laugh, a great, deep, joyful laugh.

"Oh, Raine," he cried, slapping Raine on his armored shoulder, making the steel rattle. "How Gavin and I have prayed for this time. So you've fallen head over heels for a woman who fights you at every step? Gavin had written us what a sweet, helpful, congenial little thing our new sister was." He turned to Alyx. "Judith said you had a strong voice, but a moment ago you nearly knocked me from the tree."

"You are Stephen Montgomery," Alyx said in wonder. He did look a bit like Gavin, but besides his clothing, his accent was strange.

"MacArran," Stephen corrected, smiling at her. "I am married to the MacArran and my name is hers. Now do I get a kiss or would you rather fight with my brother?"

"Oh, a kiss!" Alyx said so enthusiastically that Stephen laughed again before drawing her into his arms. His kiss was less than brotherly. "Can you help

VELVET SONG

me talk some sense into him?" she whispered. "He is obsessed with the Chatworths."

Stephen winked as he released her, turning back to Raine. "I've come a long way, brother. Will you offer me no refreshment?"

"And what about him?" Raine motioned toward Brian.

"He may come, too," Stephen laughed. "He can help me disarm you. And you, Alyx, will join us?"

"If I am invited," she said, looking directly at Raine.

"I invite you," Stephen said, as he threw an arm around Alyx's shoulders and started forward. "Follow us, Brian," he called over his shoulder.

"Are you always so courageous?" Alyx asked, looking up at Stephen.

Stephen's face was serious. "How long has he been like this?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"Unsmiling, angry, glaring at everyone. This isn't like Raine."

She thought a moment before she answered. "He has been this way since Mary's death."

Stephen nodded once. "Raine would take it hard. That's one reason why I brought Brian. They are very much alike. Brian is eaten with hatred for his brother. And what of you? My brother's black moods don't frighten you?"

"He thinks I've betrayed him."

"Yes, Gavin and Judith told me."

Her voice became louder. "He won't listen to me. I tried to explain, but he sent my letters back unopened. And he won't listen to Gavin, either."

266

267

VELVET SONG

Stephen squeezed her shoulders. "Gavin will always think of Raine and Miles _as children. Raine and Gavin can't be in a room two minutes without arguing. Stay with me and I'll see if I can make him listen."

Alyx gave him such a radiant smile that Stephen laughed. "My Bronwyn will have your heart on a platter if you keep looking at me like that. Can you really sing as well as Judith says?"

"Better," Alyx said with such confidence that Stephen laughed again.

They stopped before Raine's tent and Stephen muttered something about wasting money that Alyx didn't understand. Rather like a sulky boy, Raine followed them inside and, after one malevolent look cast at Alyx, turned to Stephen. "What has caused you to travel so far south? Have those Scots tossed you out?"

"I came to meet my new sister-in-law, of course."

"She would prefer that you were a Chatworth."

Stephen paused, Raine's helmet in his hand. "I cannot allow you to say such things," he said quietly. "Don't cause a quarrel between us. Do you plan to disown me because I have brought a Chatworth to your camp?"

"You are my brother," Raine said flatly.

"Meaning that you trust me?" There was laughter under his voice. "Tell me, brother, what bothered you the most, that your wife talked to a Chatworth or that she dared to talk to any handsome man?"

"Chatworth!" Raine said loudly, with a glance at Alyx, who was studying her fingernails.

"Did I ever tell you the trick Hugh Lasco played on me?" Stephen knelt to unbuckle Raine's leg protectors.

VELVET SONG

As Stephen began to tell some long-winded, slightly unbelievable tale, Alyx watched Raine. After a while she began to understand Stephen's point. Stephen had believed all manner of low-minded things about his wife, and as a result of his mistrust, he'd almost lost her.

"Alyx," Stephen turned to her suddenly. "Are you in love with Roger Chatworth? Are you contemplating

leaving Raine for him?"

The idea was so ridiculous that Alyx laughed-until she saw the smoldering light in Raine's eyes. "Roger Chatworth deserves to die for what he did to Mary but not at my husband's hands. He's not worth seeing Raine hanged for his murder."

For a moment Alyx thought Raine might be listening to her, but the moment passed as he sat down on the cot and began removing the cotton pads that protected his skin from the steel armor. "Women have glib tongues," he murmured.

Stephen glanced at Alyx, saw her eyes shoot fire. "You have my permission to take an ax to him," he said amiably. "Alyx, could you fetch us some food? I may die of hunger soon."

As soon as they were alone, Raine turned to his brother. "Why have you come? Surely you want more than to step between my wife and me."

"Someone should," Stephen snapped. "Her heart is in her eyes. Can't you forgive her? She doesn't know our ways, and women have such strange ideas about honor. I hear you haven't seen your daughter. She looks like you."

Raine refused to be swayed. "Why did you bring Chatworth?"

"For the reason I said: he wants to train with you.

268

269

The King won't like your training one nobleman to fight another. And what is this I hear of your raising an army of criminals to overthrow the King?"

Raine guffawed at this idea. "What liar told you this?"

"Pagnell of Waldenham told King Henry this. Hadn't you heard? I thought Alyx came to warn you of this. The King's ears are being filled with lies against the Montgomerys."

"Alyx hasn't seen fit to warn me," Raine said.

"And I'm sure you sat down and asked her nicely why she deserted her child and the comfort of Gavin's house to come live near you in this cold forest."

"I neither need nor want your interference in my life."

Stephen shrugged. "I remember a few kicks I received when Bronwyn and I had problems."

"And now all is sweetness and light with you, is it?" Raine asked, one eyebrow raised.

Stephen cleared his throat. "We do have ... ah, a few disagreements now and then, but generally she learns the true way."

"I'd like to hear Bronwyn's version of that," Raine said before changing the subject. "Have you seen Miles?"

Stephen was saved from answering by the appearance of Alyx bearing a tray, Joan behind her with a second tray. Stephen didn't want to tell Raine that his problem with women was mild compared to Miles's.

As soon as Alyx realized that Joan was going to make a fool of herself over Stephen, she sent the maid out. The meal was an awkward one, the first Raine and Alyx had shared since she returned to the forest.

270

VELVET SONG

Stephen did nearly all the talking, entertaining them with stories of Scotland.

"And you should see my son," Stephen boasted. "Already Tam has taken him riding and he can't really sit up yet. You and I weren't on a horse until we could walk. And how is your daughter, Alyx?"

For the first time in two weeks Alyx let herself think completely about her daughter. "She is strong," she said dreamily, "short and healthy with a lusty cry that made Judith's son cry, too."

"Protective of his cousin, no doubt," Stephen said. "She has your eyes."

"You saw her?" Alyx came off her stool. "When? Was she healthy? Had she grown any?"

"I doubt if she's changed much since you've seen her, but I agree about her voice. Do you think she'll be able to sing?" He turned to Raine. "She has those dimples you got from Mother's family."

"I must see to the camp," Raine stood so suddenly he nearly upset the food Alyx had brought. Quickly, he left the tent.

"He'll come around," Stephen said confidently, smiling at Alyx's tearing eyes.

Alyx tried not to think of Raine's constant anger and instead turned her attentions to Brian Chatworth. He was a miserable young man, his eyes black with a deep, burning hatred, and he never smiled nor seemed to find pleasure in anything. Alyx could not persuade him to talk or to confide in her about any subject. Her questions about where he'd been for the last several months since Mary's death were met by silence.

271

VELVET SONG

Alyx gave up after a while and left him to the men on the training field. As for Raine, he neither looked at nor spoke to the boy and spent most of his time with Stephen.

After Stephen had been in camp for three days, Joan came to Alyx.

"I think they're fighting," Joan said excitedly.

"Who? Not Raine and Brian Chatworth?"

Joan's voice was impatient. "Of course not! Lord Raine and Lord Stephen have gone deeper into the forest, and one of the guards has reported loud voices coming from there. Everyone's planning to go and watch."

"You will not!" Alyx said, pushing past her maid and out into the cool air. "Jocelin," she shouted when she saw her friend. "Stop them. Leave Raine in private. And you," she turned to Joan. "Help keep the men in camp. Do what you must. But nothing lewd," she called over her shoulder as she hurried forward.

Jocelin enlisted the aid of some ex-soldiers to help him while some of the wounded helped Alyx, and Joan had her own methods of making men obey her. Together they managed to keep the camp people away from where Raine and Stephen were having their "discussion."

"They're just settin' now," said a guard as he was replaced by someone else.

Alyx walked away, not wanting to hear any more of the facts. Raine was so much heavier than his

brother, obviously so much stronger. Stephen couldn't possibly win a fight between them, and Alyx prayed Raine would hold back and not truly hurt his slim brother.

VELVET SONG

At sundown, Alyx took the water buckets to the river, hoping to escape the gleeful voices of the people in the camp. They were all huddled about campfires listening to the guards with rapt attention.

She stood beside the river, motionless, glad for the quiet, when a sound made her whirl. Coming toward her, walking heavily, wearily, was Raine. Perhaps she should have listened to the people's comments so she would have been prepared for her first sight of him. The left side of his face was swollen and turning purple. There were bruises on his jaw, his eye a flamboyant mixture of unnatural colors.

"Raine," she whispered, making him look up and away from her as he knelt by the water. She forgot any memories of anger between them but ran to him, knelt beside him. "Let me see," she said.

Docilely he turned his head to her and she placed cool fingers on his misshapen face. Without a word, she raised her skirt, tore away linen petticoat, dipped it in cold water and touched his face.

"Tell me all of it," she said in a half-command. "What sort of club did Stephen use on your face?"

It was a long moment before Raine spoke. "His fist."

Alyx paused in her washing of Raine's face. "But a knight-" she began. She'd heard Raine shout a hundred times about how unchivalrous, how unmanly it was to fight with one's hands. Many honorable men had died rather than lose their honor by using their fists.

"Stephen has learned some strange ways in Scotland," Raine said. "He says there is more than one way to fight."

VELVET SONG

272

"And no doubt you stood there like a great ox and let him beat you rather than do an unknighly thing such as hit his face in return?"

"I tried!" Raine said, then winced and calmed himself. "He danced about like a woman."

"Don't insult my sex. No woman did this to your face."

"Alyx." He grabbed her wrist. "Have you no feeling for me? Will you always side with others against me?"

She took his face gently in her hands, her eyes searching his. "I have loved you since the first moment I saw you. Even then, when I had planned to hate you, I was drawn to you. I fought against loving you, but it was as if some great power controlled me and I had no say in what I did. Don't you realize that I'm always on your side? That day at the fair if you'd killed Roger Chatworth you could have been hanged. I pretended to bed Jocelin to keep you from leaving the safety of the forest. What more can I do to prove my loyalty and love?"

He pulled away from her. "Perhaps it's your methods I don't like. Why can't you tell me what you're doing? Why must you fight me all the time?"

"Fighting is the only way you'll listen to me," she said in exasperation. "I told you you could not leave the forest when the people accused me of stealing, but you wouldn't listen. I told you not to kill Roger Chatworth, but you stood there like a bull with veins standing out on your neck." Her voice was rising.

"I don't know who unmans me most-my brother 11 or you."

His tone was so little-boy, feel-sorry-for-himself

VELVET SONG

that Alyx tried not to laugh. "What did you and Stephen quarrel about?"

Raine rubbed his jaw. "Stephen suggested I consider that perhaps you weren't disloyal when you saved Chatworth's miserable life."

Raine turned and looked at her. "Have I been wrong? Have I treated you very badly? Is there any love in your heart left for me?"

She touched his cheek. "I will always love you. I sometimes think I was born loving you."

A single dimple appeared in his cheek and she caught her breath as she thought he was going to pull her into his arms. Instead, he reached under his doublet and rummaged in his pocket. "Perhaps I can purchase a smile or two," he said as he dangled the Lyon belt before her eyes.

"My belt!" she gasped. "How did you find it? I thought it was lost forever. Oh, Raine!" She threw her arms around him and began kissing his face so enthusiastically that she caused him great pain, but he didn't mind.

"You are the best husband," she whispered, kissing his neck. "Oh, Raine, how I have missed you."

She didn't say anymore because his hands twisted in her hair and pulled her head backward as his lips came down on hers. Alyx was sure she would burst apart into little pieces. She catapulted all her weight against him, and as he was in a precarious position, he fell backward, caught himself, then changed positions on her mouth and let himself fall, pulling Alyx with him.

Mouths attached, they rolled sideways, then changed directions, and in one quick movement landed themselves in the icy river water, Alyx on bottom.

275

VELVET SONG

274

"Raine!" Alyx screeched in pain as his heavy body rolled atop her arm, scraping it against a rock. "You're breaking me!" Already, her teeth were beginning to chatter.

"It would be small payment for what you've done to me," he said, lying in the water as if it were a feather bed. "Before I met you my life was peaceful and calm. Now my own brother beats me."

"Which you deserved!" she spat. "IQ's the only way to make you listen. Now let me up and let me get dry before I freeze to death."

"I know a way to keep you warm." He began to nuzzle her neck.

"You great stupid boar," she yelled into his ear, making him move away and shake his head to clear the ringing. "I'm cold and wet, and if you don't let me up I'll bring the whole camp to my rescue."

"You think they'd come to rescue you or would they side with me?"

She pushed at him. "They wouldn't recognize you with your great purple face."

He chuckled at that and easily moved off her. "You look good, Alyx," he said, his eyes alight, looking at her wet dress, which clung to her.

Alyx put her arms behind her and started to push herself up and found the wet dress to be very heavy. With another chuckle, Raine stood, lifted her and started toward the darkest part of the forest.

"The camp is that way," she pointed.

"Alyx, someone should teach you that you shouldn't always give orders. Perhaps you are right now and then, but sometimes you should listen and leave the commands to the men."

"I have to do what is right, and if you need to be saved from yourself, I will," she said arrogantly.

"You are leading up to a paddling such as you've never had before-if you've ever had one, which I doubt. That priest who trained you should have applied a lute to the bottom half of you now and again and perhaps you'd have a little humility."

"I have as much humility as you do," she said, watching him. "If you do foolish things, am I to stand aside and not raise my voice?"

"Alyx, you are going too far," he warned.

"And how will you punish me for speaking the truth?"

"Not in a way that you'll like."

"How can you threaten me after all I've done for you? I've saved you from Roger Chatworth. I was nearly burned at the stake because the judges wanted your lands. I left with Jocelin to keep you safe in the forest."

Raine grabbed her shoulders and held her at arms' length, her feet off the ground. One half of his face

was swollen purple, but the other half was red with rage. "You've gone too far," he said through his teeth.

Before Alyx could take a breath, Raine had seated himself on a stump, pulled Alyx across his lap, bottom end up and tossed her skirts over her head. He gave her one strong, painful whack across her buttocks.

"You were not tried as a witch because of me," he said. "You had your quarrel with Pagnell before I ever met you."

Alyx didn't have a chance to answer as Raine

smacked her bottom again. "True, I was angry and perhaps should not have ordered Chatworth to be killed, but as we were in a secluded place, who would have known to tell the King? I am not as stupid as you seem to think and would not have left the body near my brother's estate."

Again, his hand came down. "I don't like having my orders countermanded and especially not before my men. Is that clear?" Again he punctuated this with a blow.

Alyx, tears in her eyes, nodded silently.

"Good! Now, as for you and Jocelin, I don't like games and jests at which I'm the butt. It hurt too much to see you with another man, and later when I found out it'd all been a trick, as if I were a dunce to be made a fool of, I could have killed you. And you risked the life of my daughter with your stupid jests."

A very hard blow hit her. "You nearly lost my daughter to the fire as well as to the hazards of the road while you and Jocelin wandered about the country. I want no more of it, Alyx." He struck her again. "Do you understand me? You are my wife and you damn well better start acting like it."

With one more painful spank, he pushed her off his lap.

Alyx sat up, wincing with pain when her bottom hit the forest floor. There were so many tears in her eyes

that she could hardly focus.

Raine stood, towering above her. "When you're through sulking," he said, "come back to the tent and I'll make love to you so passionately you'll for

get who you are." With that, he walked away from her.

For a moment, Alyx sat staring after him, then she closed her mouth and stood. No sulking in the world was worth missing a bout of lovemaking. As quickly as her stiff legs could carry her, she ran after Raine.

Chapter Twenty-one

ALYX LAY ON her back on Raine's cot, a bare leg dangling over the edge, one soft leather shoe hooked over two happy toes. All of her was immensely happy, from toes up to the roots of her hair. Raine had made good his promise. All last night he'd been insatiable, never letting her sleep, tossing her around like a rag doll. She'd be on top, then on bottom, then he'd stretch her sideways and pull her between his legs. One minute he was sweet and gentle, the next fierce, driving, and the next he'd be almost bored, as if he'd forgotten she was there. At those times Alyx would

do something naughty to get his attention back to her. His sensuous laugh would make her aware that he was manipulating her and was far away from being bored.

The sun was coming up when she finally pleaded with him to halt. He'd merely kissed her nose, smiled lopsidedly with his battered face, rose, washed,

280

VELVET SONG

dressed and left the tent. Alyx settled her sore, bruised, exhausted body to a few hours' sleep.

Now, awake at last, she lay still, humming to herself and remembering last night.

"Looks like you finally learned what to do with a man," Joan said, slipping inside the tent. "I wondered if all the brothers were as good as Lord Miles. It looks like you think so. Did you know you were smiling in your sleep?"

"Be quiet, you insolent woman," Alyx said in such a friendly way that Joan only laughed.

"You'd better get up. Lord Stephen has had some news from Scotland and he's leaving very soon."

"It's nothing bad, is it?" Alyx asked, reluctantly sitting up, wincing at a pain in her back. Sometimes Raine seemed to think she was a piece of cloth the way he wrapped her about his body, one leg here, another one there, an arm over there. There was a crick in her neck and the memory of what Raine had done to hurt that area made her grin.

Joan was looking at her with unconcealed interest. "My four men together could not have made me look as you do now. Is Lord Raine really such a lover?"

Alyx shot her a dangerous look. "I'll have your heart on a platter if you so much as look at him."

Joan only grinned. "I've been trying for years and he's not interested. What will you wear today?"

Alyx dressed carefully in a dress of palest lavender, trimmed in rabbit fur dyed a deep, luscious purple.

"Ah," Stephen said when he saw her, "such beauty in the midst of such a wilderness." He took her hand and kissed it.

Alyx caught his hand, examined his knuckles, which were raw, cut, not yet beginning to heal. "May

281

you lose your hand if you strike my husband again," she whispered passionately.

Stephen blinked once before he laughed. "And my brother worries about your loyalty. You must come and meet my Bronwyn. She will like you."

"I've heard you have news."

Stephen's face darkened. "Roger Chatworth found Miles and Elizabeth alone and has run a sword through Miles's arm. Lady Elizabeth has returned to England with her brother."

"Then perhaps soon this feud can end. Roger has his sister safe. All that's left is to make the King forgive Raine."

"Perhaps," Stephen said. "Now I must go home and help my clan. My little brother is in a rage and wants to ride on Chatworth."

"Go!" she said. "Stop him."

He kissed her hand again. "I will do what I can, and now I know I leave Raine in good hands. He is a stubborn man."

Alyx laughed at that. "In your ... talk yesterday, did you by chance mention Brian Chatworth? Now that Roger has harmed Miles, will Raine take it out on Brian?"

"No, I don't think so. This morning Raine and Brian talked for a long time and I believe Raine's heart has gone out to the boy. I don't believe there'll be more problems. In fact, they're on the training field now. I must go. My men wait for me."

"Your men?" Alyx asked, astonished. "I saw no one. I assumed you were alone."

Stephen seemed pleased by this. "There are six MacArrans with me, all stationed about the forest, keeping watch."

VELVET SONG

"But we have guards. They should have come into the camp near the fires and had some hot food. They'll freeze out there."

Stephen laughed hard at this. "The English are a soft lot. Our summers aren't as warm as your winters. You'll have to come to the Highlands someday. Douglas says your singing will make his brothers cry."

There were so many questions Alyx wanted to ask, but she had no idea where to start. Her emotions showed on her face.

"You'll have to come," Stephen smiled, kissed her cheek and disappeared into the trees, the short plaid swirling about his thighs.

What followed for Alyx were three days of relative peace. Raine seemed to grow an attachment for the crippled Brian and was impressed by Brian's eagerness to learn.

"The hate is eating him," Raine said as he and Alyx lay in bed. "He thinks that if he trains hard enough he'll be able to fight his brother, but Roger is formidable. He would slay Brian in one thrust."

"Brother against brother," Alyx whispered and shuddered.

Alyx felt sorry for Brian, who slept apart from the people of the camp.

"I don't trust him," Joan said. "He says too little and he has nothing to do with anyone."

"He's been hurt. He'll get over it," Alyx defended the boy.

"He's planning something. He's been gathering the down from thistles and yesterday he paid a man to send a message to someone."

"To whom?" Alyx demanded, immediately concerned. Perhaps Brian was actually loyal to his broth

283

VELVET SONG

282

VELVET SONG

er and was planning to lead Roger Chatworth to Raine, or worse, to send the King's men in.

"I don't know who it went to."

"We must tell Raine," Alyx said, grabbing her maid's wrist and dragging her toward the training area.

"I know of the message," Raine said when Alyx told him. "Brian wishes to find out the condition of his sister."

"Have you had a reply?"

Raine jabbed a sword at a quintain. "My little brother's seed has taken and Lady Elizabeth carries his child."

Alyx thought of the lovely Elizabeth-and her sharp tongue. "She'll not like that. She'll not like any man taking her to bed, then discarding her."

Raine gave her a hard look. "You seem to give my brother all the credit. Perhaps this Elizabeth is a wayward wench and seduced my brother. Then, when he loved her, she left him. If Chatworth struck Miles, it would seem that Miles fought to keep the woman."

"Perhaps, but Miles-" She broke off at the sound of trumpets in the distance. "What is it?"

Raine turned to some ex-soldiers near him. "Find out what that is."

Within seconds, the men were on their horses and away into the forest. Long minutes later, they returned. "Roger Chatworth is accepting your challenge, my lord."

"Raine!" Alyx bellowed at him.

After one quelling look, he ignored her. "I have issued no challenge. Perhaps Chatworth means to make the first move."

"No, my lord. He-"

VELVET SONG

"I sent the challenge," Brian Chatworth said from behind them and they all turned. "I knew my brother would not respond to a challenge from me, so I sent it in the name of Raine Montgomery."

"You can just go and tell him what you've done," Alyx said, as if talking to a child.

In the distance, the trumpets sounded again.

"Go now," Alyx said, "and explain."

"Alyx," Raine said in a low voice. "Go to the tent. This is not business for women."

She looked up at him, still bruised from Stephen's beating, and what she saw there frightened her. "Raine, you can't be thinking of accepting the challenge? You didn't issue it. You surely have more sense than to-"

"Jocelin," Raine ordered. "Take Alyx away."

Alyx waited for her husband inside the tent, pacing back and forth, snapping at Joan until the maid left her.

When Raine finally appeared and their eyes met, Alyx gasped. "No, Raine," she said, wrapping her arms around his middle. "It wasn't you who made the challenge."

He pulled her away from him, his hands on her arms. "You must understand that it's a matter of honor and it's been a long time coming. When Chatworth is dead, perhaps then my family can live in peace again. If I don't kill him now he'll go after Miles for impregnating his sister. He swears Miles took her by force."

"Let Miles fight Chatworth!" Alyx yelled. "I don't care. Let all your brothers fight, but not you. "

"Alyx," Raine said gently. "I realize you're a woman and more, you haven't been raised to our

285

ways of honor, but now I must ask you not to insult me more. Help me dress."

"Help you! Honor! How can you talk to me of such things? What do I care for honor when the man I love may die? I have fought long and hard to keep you safe, but now because of some foolish games of a boy you must pay the price. Let Brian fight his brother."

Color was rising in Raine's neck. "Brian is no match for Roger Chatworth. And it's the Montgomery family who has been insulted. Do you forget my sister who died because of what Chatworth did to her? I don't fight for Brian but for Mary and for Miles and for future peace."

She dropped to her knees in front of Raine as he sat on the edge of the cot. "Please don't go. If you aren't killed, you'll be hurt badly."

"Alyx." He nearly smiled at her as he touched her hair. "Perhaps you don't know, but the estates I have I purchased with money I'd won in years of tournaments. I've been through hundreds of these challenges."

"No," she said with feeling. "Not like this one. The hatred that you and Chatworth have for each other wasn't involved in those fights. Please, Raine."

He stood. "I'll listen to no more. Now, will you help me arm myself or must I get Jocelin?"

She also stood. "You ask me to help prepare you for your death? Should I be the dutiful wife and murmur soft words about honor? Or should I talk of Mary and how she died and add fuel to your hate?"

If Mary were alive would she want you to fight for her? Wasn't her whole life an attempt at peacemaking?"

"I don't want us to part with angry words between us. This is something I must do."

VELVET SONG

She was so angry she was shaking. "If we part now as you walk off to answer a challenge that wasn't made by you, then it will be with angry words-and it will be final."

Their eyes held each other's for a long while.

"Think carefully on what you say," Raine said quietly. "We've quarrelled before over this matter."

"Raine, can't you see how this hatred is eating at you? Even Stephen saw how it had changed you. Forget Roger Chatworth. Go to the King, beg his forgiveness and let us live, not this constant talk of death and dying."

"I am a knight. I am sworn to avenge wrongs."

"Then do something about the Enclosure Acts!" she screamed. "They're wrong. But cease this hideous feud with Roger Chatworth. His sister will bear a Montgomery. A new life for Mary's. What more could you want?"

Outside, the trumpets sounded, and the noise went through Alyx.

"I must dress," Raine said. "Will you help me?"

"No," she said quietly. "I cannot."

"So be it," he whispered. With one last look at her, he turned toward his armor.

"You are choosing between me and Roger Chatworth today," she said.

He didn't answer her but kept at his armor. Alyx left the tent.

"Go to him, Jocelin," she said once she was outside. To Joan, she said, "Come, we must pack. I'm going home to my daughter."

Alyx had every intention of being out of the forest before any fighting began. Of course Raine could win, she thought, but could she stand by and watch bits and

287

VELVET SONG

286

VELVET SONG

pieces hacked off him? She was sure Roger Chatworth would be as filled with hatred as Raine was.

It was two hours before she heard the first sounds of steel against steel as they echoed through the forest. Slowly, she dropped the gown she was folding and left her tent. Whatever he did, whoever he fought, for whatever reason, he was hers.

She was almost to the clearing where the men fought when Joan stopped her.

"Don't look," Joan said. "Chatworth is merciless." Alyx stared at her maid a moment, then started forward.

"Joss," Joan called. "Stop her."

Jocelin grabbed Alyx's arms, held her in place. "It's a slaughter," he said, catching her eyes. "Perhaps Roger's hatred was greater and has given him more strength. But whatever the reason, Raine is losing badly."

Alyx pushed away from Joss. "Raine is mine in death as well as alive. Let me go!"

With one look at Joan, Jocelin released her.

Nothing could have prepared Alyx for the sight in front of her. The two men fought on foot, and Raine's armor was so covered with blood that the gold Montgomery leopards were nearly hidden. His left arm seemed to be hanging by a thread, but he kept fighting, swinging valiantly with his right. Roger Chatworth seemed to be toying with the weakened, bloody man as he circled him, teased him. -

"He's dying," Alyx said. Raine always believed in honor so much, but now, to die like this, as an animal in a cage, at the mercy of Chatworth's torments.

She started forward, but Joss caught her. "Raine!" she yelled.

VELVET SONG

Roger Chatworth turned toward her, looked at her, although his face couldn't be seen beneath the helmet. As if understanding her misery, he circled once more and plowed his ax into the small of Raine's back.

Raine hesitated for a moment, then fell forward, face down, Roger standing silent over him.

Instantly, Alyx pulled away from Joss and ran forward. Slowly, she knelt beside Raine's torn body and pulled his head into her lap. There were no tears, only a deep numbness, a feeling that her blood was also pouring onto the ground.

With great reverence, she lifted his head and removed his helmet.

The gasp she let out at the sight under the helmet made Roger Chatworth turn back. After one long moment of disbelief, he threw back his head and let out a horrible cry-a cry very much like the one Raine had given when he heard of Mary's death.

"A life for a life," whispered Brian from Alyx's lap. "Now Mary can rest."

With a trembling hand, Alyx touched Brian's sweaty cheek, watched as he gave his last breath and died in her arms.

"Leave him," Roger said as he bent and picked up his brother's body in his arms. "He is mine now."

Alyx stood in her blood-soaked gown and watched as Roger carried Brian toward the waiting Chatworth men and horses.

"Alyx," Joss said from beside her. "I don't understand. Why is Chatworth taking Raine's body?"

Her body was shaking so much she could hardly speak. "Brian wore Raine's armor and Roger has killed his young brother."

"But how-?" Joss began.

288

289

VELVET SONG

Joan held up thistle down, the ends of it soaked in blood. "He must have planned this for a long while. No doubt he used the down to pad a hauberk so Lord Raine's armor would fit."

Alyx turned to them with wide eyes. "Where is Raine? He wouldn't have docilely allowed Brian to take his armor."

It took them some time to find Raine, his armor missing, lying in his leather padding, soundly asleep under a tree. Joan laughed when she saw him, but Alyx didn't. The unnatural position of Raine's body alarmed her.

"Poison!" Alyx screamed and ran to her husband. The warmth of him showed he wasn't dead, but he might have been for all the notice he paid her.

"Fetch Rosamund at once," Jocelin ordered Joan.

Alyx started to slap Raine's cheeks when her voice couldn't rouse him. "Help me stand him up."

It took all Joss's strength and Alyx's to lift Raine's inert form, but still he slept on.

Rosamund came running and after only a glance at Raine she looked at Joss with fear in her eyes. "I hoped I was wrong. My opium was stolen two days ago, and I hoped the thief knew how to use it."

"Opium?" Alyx demanded. "Isn't that a sleeping drug? My sister-in-law used it."

"It's common enough," Rosamund answered, "but what most people don't know is that if too much is taken, the victim could sleep until death."

Alyx's eyes widened. "You don't think Brian Chatworth gave Raine a great deal, do you?"

"A thimbleful is too much. We must assume Lord Raine has taken too much. Come, there is much, much work to be done."

VELVET SONG

It took a full day to clean out Raine's system. Rosamund gave him vile-tasting concoctions that made him vomit, that emptied his bowels. And constantly, men took turns walking him.

"Sleep, let me sleep," was all Raine would mumble, his eyes closed, his feet dragging.

Alyx allowed no one to stop walking him nor would she let him turn away from the liquids that were forced down his throat. After many hours, he began to regain control of his feet and started walking somewhat under his own power. His body was empty of all solid matter and Rosamund began to make him drink buckets full of water, hoping to flush him more. Raine was waking enough to protest more loudly.

"You didn't leave me," he said once to Alyx.

"I should have, but I didn't," she snapped. "Drink!"

At noon of the second day, Rosamund finally allowed Raine to sleep and gratefully, she and Jocelin also rested. Tired beyond belief, Alyx went to each of the people of the camp and thanked them personally for helping her with Raine.

"You ought to sleep yourself," came a gruff voice, and Alyx recognized one of the men who'd accused her of stealing. "We don't want to save one of you just to lose the other."

She smiled at him so gratefully that he turned red and looked away. Still smiting, she staggered into Raine's tent and fell asleep beside him.

Alyx stayed with Raine for another week-until he

found her holding a woman's baby and crying silently. "You must go back to Gavin," Raine told her. "I can't leave you."

291

290

VELVET SONG

He raised one eyebrow. "You've seen that your presence here won't prevent what's going to happen. Chatworth will lay his brother to rest, then we shall see what will happen. Go home and see to our daughter."

"Perhaps a visit," she said, her eyes alight. "Maybe just for a week or so, then I'll return to you."

"I don't think I can live long without you. Go now and tell Joan to pack for you. You can see our Catherine in three days' time."

Alyx's thanks, her joy at the thought of seeing her daughter again, made her leap into Raine's arms. And her kisses soon led them elsewhere. Before either of them realized what was happening, they were rolling

on the floor on top of a Saracen carpet, tossing pieces of clothing here and there.

Gleefully, they made love and Raine was pleased to see so much happiness in his wife's eyes. Afterward, he held her close. "Alyx, it meant a great deal to me that you stayed during the fight with Chatworth. Whether you admit it or not you have a high sense of honor-not the honor I believe in but your own special sort. Yet you forgot it for love of me. I thank you for that."

He smiled when he felt her tears wet his shirt. "You are going to see our daughter, yet all I get are tears."

"Am I selfish for wanting everything? I want you to see our daughter, for the three of us to be together."

"I will soon. Now give me a smile. Do you want me to remember you in tears or with your own special impish smile?"

At that she smiled and Raine kissed her. "Come on, let's start getting you ready."

Alyx kept telling herself the parting was only for a

292

VELVET SONG

month or so, but she had a sense of permanence, as if she'd never see the forest camp again. The people seemed to think the same thing.

"For your baby," said a man as he handed her a toy whittled out of a bit of green oak. There were more gifts, all homemade, all simple, and each one brought fresh tears to her eyes.

"You stayed up with my baby when she was sick," said one woman.

"And you buried mine," said another.

When it was time to leave, Raine stood quietly behind Alyx, his hand on her shoulder, and he was radiating his pride in her. "Don't stay away too long," he whispered, giving her one last kiss before setting her on her horse.

Alyx rode away, her head twisted back over her shoulder, watching all the people waving at her until the trees hid them.

293

Chapter Twenty-two

FOR TWO WHOLE weeks, Alyx was content to play with her child, to create lullabies for Judith's son and Catherine. She sent long, glowing messages to Raine describing the perfections of their daughter and parcels of medicines to Rosamund. A messenger returned with the news of the camp saying that Blanche had been caught stealing and had been banished from the forest. Alyx felt no joy at the announcement.

After two weeks of bliss, she began to miss Raine, and she left the children's nursery in search of his family.

"I'd heard you were with us again," Gavin teased, "but I wasn't sure. Come and join us. Judith is with the falconer and I was about to join her."

"Do you think the King will like this hawk, Simon?" Judith was asking the grizzled old falconer.

"Aye, my lady. There's no finer in the land."

Judith held the big, hooded bird on the end of her gloved arm, studying the hawk, frowning.'

"Are you planning a gift for the King?" Alyx asked.

"I'll try anything, " Judith said vehemently. "Since Brian Chatworth's death and Elizabeth's pregnancy, the King despises the name of Montgomery."

"And now since the Queen's death-" Gavin began.

"Queen Elizabeth died!" Alyx said loudly, and the hawk fluttered its great wings until Judith soothed it. "I'm sorry," she said. She knew nothing of hawks and hawking. "I hadn't heard the Queen had died."

"He's lost his eldest son and his wife in under a year and his son's widow's family threatens to take her dowry back. The man does little but brood now. Once I could have gone to him and talked to him."

"And what would you ask him?" she asked, hope in her voice.

"I want this feud ended," Gavin said. "There has been a life taken from the Montgomerys and one from the Chatworths. Perhaps if I could speak to the King I could persuade him to pardon Raine?"

"And what about Miles?" Alyx asked. "He has heartily used Elizabeth Chatworth. I don't think her brother will forgive him that."

Gavin and Judith exchanged looks and Judith spoke. "We have corresponded with Miles, and if the King gives permission, he is willing to marry Elizabeth."

"No doubt Roger Chatworth will welcome a Montgomery into his family with open arms," Alyx smiled. "So! You'll use the gift of the hawk to persuade the King. Does he like to go hawking?"

Again, Gavin and Judith exchanged looks.

294

295

VELVET SONG

"Alyx," Gavin began, "we've been waiting to speak to you. We knew you wanted to spend some time with Catherine, but now there's no more time to lose."

For some reason, Alyx began to feel a sense of dread. Absurd, of course, but still, cold little fingers went up her spine. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Let's go inside," Judith said, handing the hawk to Simon.

Once the old man was inside the stone falconery, Alyx stood her ground. "Tell me what I should know," she said flatly.

"Gavin!" Judith said. "Let me tell her. Alyx, the King doesn't particularly care for hawking. Right now he cares for nothing or no one-except one thing." She paused a moment. "Music," Judith said quietly.

Alyx stood still a moment, staring. "You want me to go to the King of England, sing him a song and while I'm there casually beg him to forgive my husband and to give the hand of a wealthy heiress to her sworn enemy?" She smiled. "Never have I said I was a magician."

"Alyx, you could do it," Judith encouraged. "No one in the country has a voice or talent to match yours. He'll offer you half of his kingdom if you but make him forget for an hour or so."

"The King?" Alyx sputtered. "What do I care for the King? I would love to play and sing for him. My concern is Raine. He's spent a year trying to make me understand his sense of honor and now I do-at least to the extent that I know he wouldn't thank me for begging before the King."

VELVET SONG

"But if you could get a pardon for Raine ..." Judith argued.

Alyx turned to Gavin. "Were you in Raine's place, would you want Judith to go to the king for you or would you expect to fight your own battles?"

Gavin's face was serious. "It would not be easy for me to swallow such a humiliation."

"Humiliation!" Judith said. "If Raine were free, he could come home and we could be a family again."

"And our strife would be internal," Gavin said. "I can see Alyx's point. I don't think she should go against her husband. We wit] all fight our own battles and keep the King out of this."

Judith seemed to want to reply, but as she looked from Gavin to Alyx, she remained quiet.

But what made Alyx change her mind was Roger Chatworth's growing anger. Gavin sent out spies and they came back with the news that Roger was vowing death to both Miles and Raine to revenge his young brother and the loss of his sister's virtue.

"Raine has no men to fight Chatworth," Alyx said. "And will Miles last against a seasoned warrior such as Roger?"

"He has the backing of all the Montgomery forces," Gavin said quietly.

"You are talking about war!" she yelled. "A private war which will cause you all to lose your lands and the King-" She stopped. Everything seemed to go back to the King.

With tears in her eyes, she fled the room. Was she the only one who could possibly prevent a private war? She'd once told Jocelin she'd do anything to keep Raine alive, that she'd rather see him with

296

29;

VELVET SONG

another woman than dead. Yet he'd been so very, very angry when she did what she felt she had to. He did not want her to interfere in his life and especially in what he considered his honor.

What if she kept quiet now, didn't try to win a pardon from the King and there was a war? Would she be happy knowing Raine died with his honor intact? Or would she curse herself for all eternity for not at least trying to prevent the battles?

With quiet dignity, she stood, smoothed her dress and went downstairs to the winter parlor where Judith and Gavin sat over a game of draughts.

"I will go to the King," Alyx said quietly. "I will sing with all my might and I will ask, plead, beg, whatever I have to do, to get him to pardon Raine and to arrange the marriage of Elizabeth and Miles."

Alyx stood outside the King's chamber, her body trembling so badly she feared her dress would fall off. What was she, a common lawyer's daughter, doing here?

A shout from inside the chamber and a sound of something breaking made her gasp. After a moment, a slim man tiptoed out of the room, a red mark on his cheek, a flute in his hand.

He gave Alyx an insolent look. "He's in a bad mood today. I hope there's more to you than appears."

Alyx pulled herself up to all of her small height and glared at him. "Perhaps it's the music he hasn't heard today that's put him in a bad temper."

The man grunted and left her alone.

Alyx adjusted her dress again, a wonderful concoction of deep green velvet with sleeves and skirt inset

298

VELVET SONG

so heavily embroidered with gold thread that the fabric was stiff. The dress had been Judith's design and the embroidery was a fanciful arrangement of centaurs and fairies playing many musical instruments. "For luck," Judith had said.

"Come in and wait," said a dark-clad man, just his head sticking out of the door. "His Majesty will hear you in a moment."

Alyx picked up her cittern, a magnificent thing of rosewood and inlaid ivory, and followed the man.

The King's chamber was a large room paneled in oak, richly done, but certainly no better than the rooms at Montgomery Castle. This surprised Alyx. Perhaps she'd expected the King's rooms to be made of gold.

She took the seat the man pointed to and watched. The King sat on a red-cushioned chair and Alyx wouldn't have known he was the King except that occasionally someone would bow before him. He was a tall, somber, tired-looking man, and as he drank from a silver goblet, she saw he had few teeth and

they were blackish. He frowned at the singer, before him, and the young man's nervousness was apparent in every word he sang. The air was charged with tension as the musician tried to please him.

With the big room echoing as it did and everyone being so stiff, it was no wonder he was displeased, Alyx thought. None of the music made him forget for a moment his sadness. If I were in charge, I'd put the musicians together, challenge them with some new music. When they were enjoying themselves, the King would find pleasure.

Alyx sat still for a moment longer. There were eleven musicians auditioning for the King today.

299

VELVET SONG

Lately, he'd been staying alone in his rooms, refusing even to attend the Queen's funeral. Alyx had had to wait a week to get this chance to play and sing for him. And would she shake and quiver before him as these others were doing?

Think of Raine, she told herself. Think of all the Montgomerys.

She took a deep breath and stood, offered a silent prayer of hope, then let her voice take over.

"Here!" she said loudly to the singer. "You'll have us all in tears. What we need is laughter and no more tears."

Someone put a cautioning hand on her arm, but Alyx looked straight at King Henry. "With your permission, Your Majesty." She curtsied, and the King gave her a nonchalant wave.

Alyx's heart was in her throat. Now if she could just get the musicians to cooperate. "Can you play a harpsichord?" she asked a man who gave her a hostile look.

"Wait your turn," he hissed.

"I have more to lose than you do. Perhaps together we can work some magic." She cocked her head.
"Or is your talent too limited?"

The man, after one considering look, went to the harpsichord.

As if they were all the choirboys she'd taught at Moreton, she began ordering the men about, giving them different instruments that were abundant in the room.

Once they were seated or standing, she flew about, giving melody here, rhythm there. About halfway through she began to sing and two of the musicians

were immediately won to her side. Grinning, they picked up the melody and stayed with her.

It seemed to Alyx everything was taking so long and she only felt encouragement when the man on the harpsichord added his voice to hers. The man on the harp caught the melody and showed his talent with those heavenly strings.

Alyx had chosen an old song, hoping they'd all know it, but perhaps it was her rendition of it that made them awkward. The man she'd given a tambourine moved to a kettledrum hidden in a shadowy corner and the sound began to make the floor vibrate.

Finally, finally, everyone seemed to have caught the song, and Alyx dared to turn and look at the King. His face was impassive, silent, but the men behind him looked astonished. At least she knew now that what she was doing wasn't an everyday occurrence.

They repeated three choruses of the song and Alyx started them on something new, church music this time, and when that was done she went to a folk song.

It had been an hour since she'd started and she quieted the musicians. This time, she'd sing alone, unaccompanied. Once, four years ago, a singer had come to Moreton and the villagers had said Alyx at last had some competition from someone. Alyx, frightened of looking bad, stayed up all night and composed a song that would be difficult for even her to sing, a song that covered the entire range of her abilities. The next day, she'd sung the song and the visitor, an older woman, had looked at Alyx with tears in her eyes and kissed Alyx on both cheeks, saying Alyx should give thanks daily for her gift from God.

300

301

VELVET SONG

Now, Alyx planned to sing that song. She'd hated it ever since she wrote it because the woman she'd meant to-humble had actually humbled her. But now she needed to do what she could to win the King's favor.

The song showed the heights and depths of Alyx's voice, as well as the controlled softness and extraordinary volume. She built up to the total power of her voice slowly, liltily, and just when it seemed she could go no further, she put everything into one note and held it-and held it until there were tears in her eyes and her lungs were dry.

When she finished, she dropped to a deep curtsy and there was total, absolute silence about her, the sound of Alyx's last note still reverberating off the walls, swirling about the people like blue and yellow lights.

"Come here, child." The King broke the silence. Alyx went to him, kissed his hand, kept her head bowed.

He leaned forward, lifted her chin. "So you are the newest Montgomery wife." He smiled at her startled look. "I try to keep up with what happens in my realm. And I find the Montgomery men marry the most entertaining women. But this ..." -he motioned to the musicians about the room- " ... this is worth a king's ransom."

"I am pleased to give you pleasure, Your Majesty," Alyx whispered.

He gave the first indication of a smile. "You have more than pleased me. Now, what do you ask in return? Come, you didn't leave Gavin's home for no reason."

Alyx tried to gather her courage. "I would like to

VELVET SONG

end the feud between the Montgomerys and the Chatworths. I propose a blood bond between them, Miles to marry Lady Elizabeth Chatworth."

King Henry frowned. "Miles is a felon by the Act of 1495. He abducted the Lady Elizabeth."

"He did not!" Alyx bellowed in her usual manner. "Forgive me, Your Majesty." She fell to her knees before him. "Miles did not abduct her, but it was because of me that Lady Elizabeth has suffered."

"You! Fetch a stool," King Henry commanded and when Alyx was seated, he said, "Now tell me all of the story."

Alyx told of Pagnell accusing her of using her voice to seduce him, of her hiding in the forest, of falling in love with Raine. She watched his eyes, saw that he was interested in her story and went on to tell of her capture by Pagnell and Elizabeth's abduction.

"You say he meant to roll her in a carpet and hand her to Lord Miles?" King Henry asked.

She leaned forward. "Please don't repeat this; but I heard she was delivered without a stitch of clothing on and that she attacked Lord Miles with an ax. Of course the story could be wrong."

The King gave a sound very like a laugh. "Go on with your story."

She told him of the witchcraft trial, how the men had used her to entice Raine to her rescue.

"And he saved you at the last moment?"

"A little after the last moment. The smoke was so bad I lost my voice for days."

He took her hand in his. "That," he said with great

gravity, "was a tragedy. And what happened after this

magnificent rescue?"

Her voice changed as she told of her child and her

302

303

VELVET SONG

VELVET SONG

return to the forest and meeting Brian Chatworth. She told the way Brian had dressed in Raine's armor and how Raine had nearly died from the opium.

"So now you'd like Lord Miles to marry Lady Elizabeth."

"And ..."

"Yes?" he encouraged.

"Please pardon Raine," she said. "He's so good. He isn't trying to raise any army against you. The people in the camp are outlaws and out-of-works. Raine only trains them to give the criminals something to do and to keep the others from dying of melancholia."

"Melancholia," the King sighed. "Yes, I know of that disease. But what of Lady Elizabeth? Is she willing to marry Lord Miles?"

"She is intelligent and she'll no doubt see the sense of the marriage and if Miles is like his brothers, how could she refuse him?"

"Someday I'll have to learn the secret of the Montgomery men and the loyalty they can inspire. If Lady Elizabeth is willing, I'll allow the marriage if for no other reason than to give the child a name."

"And Raine?"

"For that you will have to work. What say you to spending a week here with me and singing for me night and day?"

"I will dedicate my life to your pleasure if it will save my husband," Alyx said fiercely.

"No, do not tempt me, child, I have enough problems. Now go and sing and I'll have the papers drawn." He waved to one of the men behind him who quickly left the room.

Alyx sang for the rest of the day, until her throat

was raw. It was only after the sun had long ago sunk that the King fell asleep in his chair.

"Go and rest now," said one of the King's retainers. "Lord Gavin waits outside for you and he'll show you to your rooms. I'm sure His Majesty will call you early in the morning."

As soon as Alyx saw Gavin, her weariness left her. Grinning from ear to ear, she flung herself into his arms. "He agreed! He agreed!" she croaked.

Gavin held her tightly, spun her around. "Let's tell Judith and do something about your voice. Besides, we're about to start some ugly gossip."

Alyx stiffened as soon as Gavin released her and formally he escorted her through long drafty corridors hung with riotously colorful tapestries and into the set of rooms reserved for them.

Alyx drank the honey concoction Judith prepared for her and sat down to wait-a waiting which took days. King Henry kept Alyx at his side constantly and, like a trained dog, showed her off to his son Henry and to his late son's widow, Catherine. Alyx was involved in the court gossip, hearing that the King himself planned to marry the young princess. She very much liked the big, good-looking twelve-year-old Prince Henry. If ever anyone seemed like a King, he

did.

Instead of the week King Henry had asked for, Alyx remained at court for two weeks before the papers for Raine's pardon and an order for Miles and Elizabeth's marriage were drawn up. Both Gavin and Judith were pleased at leaving court, but Alyx was very worried at seeing Raine again. What would be his reaction to her interference?

It took days to pack all their belongings that they'd

304

305

needed at court and more days to return to Montgomery Castle. With a pounding heart, Alyx dismounted and waited, hoping Raine would be there.

He wasn't, but messages awaited them. Roger Chatworth had refused to release Elizabeth, but Miles wrote that he'd found her. Gavin groaned at this, lamenting his little brother's disregard for the law. They'd been married not far from the Chatworth estate and immediately after the ceremony, Elizabeth had returned to her brother. This puzzled them, but Miles gave no hint of explanation.

A week went by and there was no word from Rains. At the end of the second week, Gavin sent messengers to the forest, but the men came back saying they were not greeted by guards as usual but had wandered for two days, finding no one.

The next day Gavin and his men rode out and it was a week before they returned.

"Raine's at his own estates now," Gavin reported. "And he's brought all the forest people with him. He must have five farmers in every field and he insists on paying them all. He'll be a beggar himself in three years."

"Gavin-" Alyx began.

Gavin touched her cheek. "He's angry now, but he'll get over it."

Quietly, Alyx left the room, Gavin and Judith watching her.

"Tell me the truth," Judith said.

"Damn that brother of mine!" Gavin shouted, pounding his fist on the table. "Raine says Alyx has insulted him for the last time, that he can bear no more. He says he's warned her repeatedly but she won't listen to him and he knows she never will."

VELVET SONG

"Perhaps Stephen could talk to him-" Judith began.

"Stephen tried, but he won't listen. He's spending all his time with those criminals . . ." He stopped and laughed. "The oddest thing has happened. Alyx always complains that she owes those people in the forest so much and could never repay them. There's a singer with the band, Jocelin, I believe he traveled with Alyx, and this Jocelin met a man who'd been in the room the day Alyx first performed for the King. I'm not sure what happened that day, but according to the witness, Alyx was magnificent and one of the things she asked for was security for the people under Raine."

"I don't remember Alyx saying anything about that."

"I don't think she did-directly, anyway. But she did mention that later she told the King stories about her life in the forest. I heard King Henry had her dress as a boy once to prove she'd actually done it."

"You think Alyx told King Henry about how some of the people had been unjustly treated?"

Gavin smiled. "Sometimes Alyx is so innocent. With her background I doubt if she had any idea of the power she held. Men have killed to be able to hold the King's ear for as long as she did each day. If she'd had an enemy she could have sent him to the gallows."

Judith gave her husband a speculative look. "Or she could have saved several hundred people. By any chance were more pardons issued?"

Gavin grinned. "Raine was allowed to pardon anyone he thought fit_ for forgiveness. According to Jocelin, Alyx sang songs of Raine's loyalty and honor

307

VELVET SONG

306

VELVET SONG

until King Henry was ready to declare him a saint. She twisted things until it seemed Raine was doing the King a favor when he attacked Chatworth."

"Clever girl! She can do so much with that voice of hers. The people know that it was she who obtained their pardons?"

"This man Jocelin made sure they knew. When it comes to singing praises, he's as bad as Alyx. All of them sent greetings to Alyx and said they wished her well. The lot of them are as bad as Stephen's Scots the world is losing respect for its betters."

Judith laughed at that. "We must tell Alyx she's done some good and now we'll start working on Raine. He must see that Alyx has not insulted him by going to the King."

"I hope you can reason with him." "I pray that I can, too."

Chapter Twenty-three

A MONTH PASSED and there was no word from

Raine-and all correspondence sent to him was ignored. For the first weeks Alyx was sad but her sadness soon turned to anger. If his pride meant more than their love and their daughter, so be it.

Her anger fed itself for an entire summer. She watched Catherine grow, saw that the little girl had indeed inherited her father's sturdiness.

"There'll be no chance for a slim, elegant lady," Alyx sighed, looking at Catherine's chubby legs as she took her first steps.

"All babies are fat," Judith laughed, tossing her son into the air. "Catherine looks more like Raine every day. Too bad he can't see her. One look at those violet eyes and her dimples and he'd melt. Raine could never resist a child."

308

309

VELVET SONG

Judith's words haunted Alyx for days and at the end of the fourth day she made a decision. "I'm going to send Catherine to her father," Alyx announced one evening as Judith was weeding the roses.

"I beg your pardon?"

"He may not forgive me, but there's no reason Catherine should be punished. She's almost a year old now and he's never even seen her."

Judith stood, wiping her hands. "What if Raine doesn't return her? Could you bear losing both your husband and your daughter?"

"I'll say I'm sending her until Christmas, then Gavin will fetch her. Raine will honor the agreement."

"If he agrees."

Alyx didn't answer. She hoped with all her heart that Catherine would win her father's heart, melt it.

Days later, when Catherine was ready to leave, Alyx almost changed her mind, but Judith held her shoulders and Alyx waved goodbye to her daughter, who was escorted by twenty of Gavin's men and two nurses.

Alyx waited breathlessly for the next weeks. No message came from Raine, but one of the nurses wrote regularly, sending her letters via a complicated network arranged by Gavin through Jocelin.

The nurse wrote of the turmoil that had been caused by Lady Catherine's arrival and how brave the little girl had been. Raine's house, his men and Raine himself had frightened her badly. At first the nurse thought Lord Raine was going to ignore his daughter but once, while playing in the garden, Raine had retrieved Catherine's ball and he'd sat a few moments on a bench watching her. Catherine had begun rolling

VELVET SONG

her ball toward her father and he had played with her for an hour.

The letters of the nurse began to describe more and more incidents. Lord Raine took Catherine for a ride. Lord Raine put his daughter to bed. Lord Raine swears his daughter can talk, that she is the smartest child in all of England.

Alyx was glad to hear the news but she was unhappy at being so alone. She wanted to share the pleasure of their daughter with her husband.

In the middle of November, the letters stopped and it wasn't until nearly Christmas that she heard any more news. Gavin came to her and said that Catherine had been returned and waited below in the winter parlor.

Alyx flew down the stairs, tears blurring her eyes as she saw her daughter in an elaborate dress of gold silk standing quietly before the fire. It had been months since they'd seen each other and Catherine. took a step away from her mother.

"Don't you remember me, sweetheart?" Alyx whispered pleadingly.

The child took another step backward and as Alyx moved forward, Catherine turned and ran, grabbing her father's legs. 11

Alyx turned startled eyes up at Raine's intense blue ones. "I ... I didn't see you," she stuttered. "I thought Catherine was alone."

Raine didn't say a word.

Alyx's heart jumped into her throat and threatened to choke her. "You look well," she said as calmly as she could.

He bent and picked up his daughter and, jealously, Alyx saw the way Catherine clung to him.

310

311

VELVET SONG

"I wanted you to meet your daughter," she whispered.

"Why?" he asked and his voice, that deep rich voice she knew so well, nearly made her cry.

But Alyx refused to cry. "Why?" she hissed. "You hadn't seen your daughter in her entire life and you ask me why I sent her to you?"

His voice, quiet, low, interrupted her. "Why would you send her to a man who deserted you, who left you alone to fight his battles?"

Alyx's eyes widened.

Raine stroked his daughter's hair. "She is a beautiful child, kind and giving like her mother."

"But I'm not-" Alyx began, then stopped as Raine started walking toward her. He passed her, opened the door and handed Catherine to the waiting nurse. "Could we talk?"

Silently, Alyx nodded her head.

Raine walked to the fireplace and studied the blaze for a moment. "I think I could have killed you when you went to the King," he said with feeling. "It was as if you were announcing to the world that Raine Montgomery couldn't handle his own problems."

"I never meant-"

He put up his hand to silence her. "This isn't easy for me, but it must be said. While we were in the forest

it was easy for me to see why people disliked you. You put yourself so above them and they resented you so much. When you came to understand what you were doing you set about to do something about it. You changed, Alyx."

He paused for a long moment. "It's not so ... comfortable to look at myself, to judge myself."

His broad back was to her, his head low, and her

VELVET SONG

heart went out to him. "Raine," she whispered. "I understand. You don't have to say anymore."

"But I do!" He turned to face her. "Do you think it's easy for me-a man-to realize that a little bit of a child/woman such as you can do something I can't?"

"What have I done?" She was genuinely astonished.

At that he paused and smiled, and there was much love in his eyes. "Perhaps I thought I should have my way because I was sacrificing all I had for some filthy beggars. Maybe I liked being a king of criminals."

"Raine." She reached out her hand to touch his sleeve.

He caught her hand, raised her fingertips to his lips. "Why did you go to King Henry?"

"To ask him to pardon you. To persuade him to let Elizabeth and Miles marry."

"It hurt my pride, Alyx," he whispered. "I wanted to march into King Henry's chamber wearing silvered armor and talk to the King as an equal." A dimple appeared in his cheek. "But instead, my wife went and pleaded for me. It hurt very much."

"I didn't mean to ... Oh, Raine, I would beg anyone to save you."

He didn't seem to notice that his hand was nearly crushing hers. "I have been distorted with pride. I want to ... ask your forgiveness."

Alyx wanted to shout that she'd forgive him anything, but now was not the time for flippancy. "In the future I am sure I will do other things to wound your pride."

"I'm sure you will."

Her chin raised a fraction. "And what will you do when I offend you?"

312

313

VELVET SONG

"Rage at you. Get very, very angry. Threaten to murder you."

"Oh," Alyx said in a small voice, blinking back tears. "Then perhaps-"

"Alyx, I want you, not someone who will agree with my every word." He swallowed, grimaced. "You were right to go to the King."

"And what about Roger Chatworth?"

For a moment, Raine's eyes shot fire. "You were wrong about him. If I'd killed him, then Miles wouldn't-"

"If you'd killed him, then King Henry would have killed you!" Alyx shouted up at him.

"I could have done away with his body. No one-"

"You would have probably felt the need to confess your sins in public," she said with disgust. "No, I did the right thing."

Raine started to say something but stopped. "Perhaps you're right."

"I'm what?!" Alyx said, aghast, then saw Raine's dimple. "You're teasing me." She set her jaw.

Raine, with a deep laugh, pulled her into his arms, held her when she tried to pull away. "It seems we'll never agree on everything, but perhaps we can agree to work together. Will you just discuss what you plan before you do it?"

She considered that for a moment. "And what if you tell me not to do something? I think perhaps I should do it the way I have done."

"Alyx," he said in almost a growl, then began to laugh. "Alyx, Alyx, Alyx." Laughing, he tossed her into the air, caught her. "I think we shall always quarrel. Are you willing to live with that?"

"We wouldn't quarrel if once in a while you'd think

before you acted. Just once you should think about tomorrow. If you'd stopped to consider what you were doing maybe you wouldn't have led the king's men against . . ." She trailed off because Raine was

nibbling her neck.

"I am a man of passion," he murmured. "Would you like me to change that?"

She tilted her head to allow him better access. "I might be able to stand your passion, Raine!" She pulled away to stare at him and she was very serious. "Will you leave me again? If I do something you dislike will you leave me and our children alone?"

His eyes too turned serious. "I will make a vow to you, Alyxandria Montgomery, a vow as sacred as any oath as a knight. I will never again leave you in anger."

For a moment she watched him, searched his face and finally she smiled, threw her arms about his neck. "I love you so very much."

"Of course I may lock you in your room, put you under guard, whatever I must. But I will never again ship you off to my brother to let him deal with my

problems."

"Problems!" she bellowed beside his ear. "I am a joy to your family. You are the one who has broken their hearts. You are a great, stubborn-"

Raine rubbed his battered ear. "Ah, the delicate voice of a woman, as soft as a spring morning, as gentle as a-"

He stopped because Alyx planted her mouth on his and he forgot about words.