

The Romantic Tale of Velvet and Leather O'Toole

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Nobody knows when they came out to the Frontier (began Gaines). Hell, they might even have been born out here. I do know that they grew up in Nightmare Alley, which was the criminal sector of Port Raven, a nondescript little world in the Willoughby Sector -- and anyone who can stay alive in Nightmare Alley for more than a day or two has developed some real survival skills.

They weren't the brightest girls I ever met -- there's no way they could ever have gotten accepted on Aristotle like the Cyborg Venus did -- but they obeyed the laws, worked hard at their jobs, and saved their money.

As a matter of fact that's how I came into contact with them. Seems we were both using the same bank at the time. I wasn't thrilled with Port Raven, but it had a branch of the Bank of Spica, and that's where I kept my main account.

The girls were pretty in a plain kind of way, if that makes sense to you. Nothing wrong with either of them, but they didn't make you want to buy the moon or go slay dragons the way that, say, Silicon Carny does. One always dressed in velvet and the other always wore leather, and after awhile any other names they might have had just faded away and they were Velvet and Leather, the O'Toole sisters.

The bank was run by a skinny little runt who went by the name of Throckmorton Lewis Frothingham. I'll swear his name weighed more than he did. He was a precise little man. He always looked like he'd just come from his tailor, even when it was hot and muggy out. There are still a few people here and there who wear glasses, but he's the only one in my experience who wore a pince-nez -- you know, the spectacles that fit on the bridge of your nose. He always had a silk handkerchief stuck in the cuff of his left sleeve, and his shoes were polished to within an inch of their lives.

I spent a lot of time at that bank, waiting for various bounties to be wired to me -- well, to Spica, actually, but then they'd notify the Port Raven branch -- and I saw a lot of the sisters. I don't know what kind of jobs they had, but they were paid in cash on a daily basis, and every night just before the bank closed they'd stop by and deposit their money. And little Throckmorton Lewis Frothingham was always there to greet them, and exchange a few pleasantries, and personally handle their transactions.

Then one day, with no warning at all, the Bellargo Gang showed up, 73 members strong, to rob the place.

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"The Bellargo Gang?" said Baker. "I haven't heard of them in close on to a dozen years now. Whatever happened to them?"

"Stop interrupting and maybe you'll find out," said the Gravedigger.

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The girls were there (continued Gaines), and maybe two or three others, a couple of robot tellers, plus Frothingham, of course -- and me.

"You're a bounty hunter!" whispered Frothingham. "Aren't you going to do something?"

"All my money's on Spica," I answered. "Whatever they do to your bank, it won't cost me a credit."

"But it's your job to bring these villains to justice!" he said.

"I'll take on any half dozen of them," I said, "but there's got to be better than fifty of 'em here. The way I see it, my job is to stay alive until I can meet them under more favorable circumstances."

The whole time we were talking Bellargo himself was staring at me, and finally he walked over.

"Ain't you Gravedigger Gaines?" he said.

"Some people call me that," I answered.

"You've been a real thorn in my side over the years," he continued. "You've killed six of my men, and four or five others deserted rather than take a chance of running into you."

"What a waste," I said.

He looked puzzled. "A waste?"

"If they quit, I don't get any bounties and you don't get any flunkies."

He threw back his head and laughed. "I like you, Gravedigger Gaines," he said. "It seems a pity to kill you."

If he wanted me to beg for my life, he was in for a long wait, but then he noticed the O'Toole sisters, and he swaggered over to them.

"Hi, ladies," he said. "I can tell you've been saving yourselves for a real man."

"When one shows up, be sure to let us know," said Velvet.

"Everybody's a humorist today!" snarled Bellargo. I thought he was going to take a swing at her, but then his gaze fell on Frothingham. "How about you?"

"I don't think there's anything funny about a bank robbery," he answered in a shaky voice.

"Must be cold in here," said Bellargo. "Look at how his hands are trembling."

"Leave me alone!" said Frothingham. "You came to rob my bank. Rob it and go away!"

"Your bank?" repeated Bellargo.

"He's the president," said Leather proudly.

"Good. Then he should know the combinations to all the computer locks on the safes."

"I can't tell you that," said Frothingham. "I'm willing to be robbed, but I'm not willing to collude with you."

"You'll do what you're told and like it!" said Bellargo, and then he made his fatal mistake -- he slapped the poor little bastard right across the face.

Two seconds later Velvet was flying through the air, and gave Bellargo's head such a kick that it damned near left his shoulders. His neck made a huge cracking sound, and that was the end of Bellargo.

In the meantime Leather had jumped in among his men, raining blows and kicks right and left, and then Venus joined her, and by the time I'd overcome my surprise long enough to pull my gun, seventeen of Bellargo's men were laid out on the floor. Twelve of them never got up again, and I began to understand

how the sisters O'Toole had managed to survive in Nightmare Alley.

The rest of it was a rout. Velvet picked up a burner from one of the outlaws, Leather picked up a pair of screechers from another, and they started using the rest of the Bellargo Gang for target practice. I got in one or two shots, but they sure as hell didn't need me.

When the dust had cleared and every member of the gang was either dead or disabled, the two sisters rushed up to Throckmorton Lewis Frothingham.

"Are you all right?" asked Leather solicitously.

"Poor baby!" crooned Velvet. "Did they scare you?"

At first I thought it was an act. I mean, how could two such formidable women care for a mousy little man like that?

But it was anything but an act. Two weeks later Velvet O'Toole married her bank president in the morning, and three hours later, Leather married the same man in a tasteful afternoon ceremony. Then the three of them left on their honeymoon.

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"And that was the end of it?" asked Willie the Bard, scribbling furiously.

"Not quite."

"What else is there?" asked the Bard. "Did they leave him?"

Gaines shook his head. "I was back there about a year ago. They all live in this huge house -- just the kind you'd expect a banker to own. The girls (well, women actually) still dote on the little bastard. Velvet has seven kids and Leather has eight. I'd love to tell you they look like the O'Toole side of the family, but the fact is that almost all of them look like their father."

"Poor kids," offered Big Red.

"Oh, I don't know," said the Gravedigger. "They're each going to inherit a couple of million credits, and they don't get a lot of teasing at school despite their looks."

"They don't?" said Big Red. "Why not?"

"Because Leather and Velvet are both on the school staff. Leather teaches martial arts, and Velvet coaches the murderball team. Let me tell you: no one messes with their kids."

"I can believe that," said Little Mike Picasso. "Wish I'd had a mother like that."

"Think it through," said Hellfire Van Winkle. "Maybe she could protect you from bullies, but would you really want to be disciplined by someone like that?"

"You've got a point," admitted Little Mike.

"I sure do," said Van Winkle. "A mother who can mete out that kind of punishment could turn you into an accomplished liar."

"Not that anyone here needs much help," said Three-Gun Max sarcastically.

"Every word spoken tonight was the truth," I said, feeling a need to stand up for the Outpost's clientele.

"Is that a fact?" said Max.

"Except for the ones that weren't," I answered lamely.

"I imagine the Outpost has heard its share of both," said Argyle.

"You think buildings are sentient, do you?" said Max, still looking for an argument.

"How the hell should I know?" asked Argyle.

"Well, take it from me," said Max. "They aren't."

"Nonsense," said Nicodemus Mayflower, his thin, angular face looking more Satanic than ever. "I knew an entire city that was sentient."

"Bullshit," said Max.

"Okay," said Mayflower with a shrug. "If you don't want to hear about it, that's fine by me."

"Hey!" said the Bard. "I want to hear about it."

"Me, too," I added, just to annoy Max.

"If Max doesn't want to listen, there's a war going on out there," said Catastrophe Baker, pointing to another explosion just beyond one of our moons. "He can go make the galaxy safe for the rest of us while we stay here and listen."

Which ended Max's objections to hearing the story.