

A Velvet Melody

The darkened alley was quiet that morning, no sounds, but the patter of my own feet and an occasional splash from the many puddles scattered about. I kept up the pace despite the ragged breathing from beside me.

"Velvet...." A female voice said, strained and weak from exhaustion, "Slow down....I know we're late....but me being tired when we get there..... is going to make...me..my job...harder.." I pulled out a shabby pocket watch as I ran, the glass was cracked and the time barely readable. The entire thing was made of a weak brass, but still it was my most valuable possession.

"Ok, we've made up ten minutes we should be good for a small break." I said to Dayle, my friend, and partner in crime. As soon as I slowed my killing pace to a halt she bent at the knees and gulped down great breathes of air. Most city kids weren't used to running for long periods of time, just short bursts around corners and into dark alleys to escape some fat and lazy red capped guards.

Her breathing began to calm down, so I took off again at a brisk walk. We still had somewhere to be, and only fifteen minutes to get there, get the goods, and get out. The alley street curved up ahead and split off into three different directions. I chose one from memory and hurried down it, Dayle in close pursuit.

Light shafts penetrated the darkness at random intervals, as they passed openings to streets, where the sun was already up and about. One of the openings ahead of me caught my eye. It didn't look very different from the rest, but I knew it was the right one. We stopped right before the entrance, and I pulled out that raggedy old pocket watch again.

"Nice, seven minutes till the collection. We should be good if we do this fast." I glanced at Dayle's face for reassurance, but instead saw fear. "What's wrong? Don't you trust me?"

She frowned then and glared up at me, and for a short person she sure had a hell of a stare, "This is a bit big for two street rats like us, ya know. I'm not taking the dangle for wanten a few more silvers."

My expression of excitement didn't change, "We'll be makin more than a few lousy silvers." I said, and she let out a sigh.

"Did we have to do this the day the Street King collects his protection money?"

I refocused on the plan in my head, "Yes, it's the day when the stash will be the biggest, and the store owner will have his vault open for the thugs to collect." My eyes moved to the entrance to the alley, but I stopped to add, "Obviously." as if she should have thought of all that herself. Dayle rolled her eyes behind my back, and I pulled up my hood and walked out into the light.

The sun was blinding at first, but I blinked my way through it. Dayle followed as usual and we quickly tried to move across the almost desolate cobbled street. A couple of

carts, pulled by donkeys, moved along, and a drunken man...thing danced his way past, singing.

No one noticed their hooded forms as they went, into another alley, and up to a sturdy looking wooden door with a fearsome lock attached. I stared at Dayle, waiting, and she frowned.

"Really, you still aren't going to let me watch?" She said, and was even a little angry now, despite the situation.

I responded as I always did, "Now is not the time. You know I don't want anyone knowing my secrets. It's nothing personal."

"It is personal when you call me your best friend, but won't show me your 'legendary lock picking technique.' You're bloody famous for it Velvet!" The smile she gave me was obviously faked, "Please, just let me watch." I didn't respond with the answer she had to have known I was going to give, and instead stared her down until that smile shattered.

She just shook her head as she turned her back and walked back to the street to watch for threats. Now that the distraction was gone I could get to work. It was true that I was famous for being able to break into any lock, but I had no idea how to pick one the normal way.

Instead I moved my hands to a raised position on each side of my body. Palms facing up, and I began to sing. Well, it wasn't really singing, and it certainly wasn't a language anyone spoke in passing, but the sounds that came out had a bewitchingly, melodic, quality. Not only that, but the notes themselves manifested as seething light that burned their way through the air and into the lock.

First that lump of metal vibrated as note after flashing note zapped its way into it. Then as time went on it began to heat up, and finally a small popping noise came out and it opened up as if I had unlocked it naturally. With that done I gave a high pitched whistle to my friend, and she came rushing back, maybe hoping to catch one last glimpse of what I was doing, but only to find me standing there, lock in hand.

"Buzzkill." Was the only thing she said before moving to the door. I may have been the way in, but she was the inside man, well girl. Quiet as a mouse and crafty as a sewer rat, she knew the designs of almost any building worth robbing. Where they kept the most valuable of the valuables, and how to deal with any pesky armed attackers. Never seen nobody handle those daggers of hers as good as she does, and I feel real sorry to those who have to be shone the error of thinking otherwise.

The waiting was the worst as I stood there staring into the moving hands of my watch. One minute passed then two. To say I was worried would be lying. My plans almost always worked, but still anxiety cannot be fully removed from such a dangerous operation. Not only were they going to piss off the ruler of the entire city underworld, but get a heap of unwanted attention from the law as well.

A crash could be heard from somewhere in the store, and I quickly put away my watch for a small knife kept in my belt. Dayle crashed through the oak and iron reinforced door, eyes wide with terror. She snatched the lock out of my hand and quickly reattached it to its rightful place, which soon resounded with noise as someone, presumably large, tried to bust their way through.

"We need to run Velvet," She stammered before taking off back the way we had come.

I raced after her, catching up quickly, "Did you get it?"

We crossed the street again, still empty, and she handed me a small box, "You're bloody time was off! The Street King's collectors were already there, I barely made it out."

"No, it couldn't have been me. They must have gotten here early." I said and then eagerly checked inside. Low and behold the little wooden present was filled with gems, brilliantly cut, and beautifully expensive. This was a not so small fortune for someone like me, but the sounds of pursuit intruded on my fervor dreams of palaces and buffets. I snapped my mind into focus, closing the box as I did so.

"Okay, you know the drill split up and meet back at home base." I squeezed her shoulder to comfort her, but only noticed how scared she was. Her body trembled and breath came out in ragged bursts. She'd never escape like this. Making up my mind I pushed her on her way, "Go, Dayle!"

Just as I did so two tall, large, men muscled their way into the alley, shutting out the morning light with their immense forms.

The bruisers stopped, as I was also, and began to advance slowly. No red colored caps adorned their massive heads, the signature wear of the city's guard, and I knew I wouldn't be put up in darbies if I was caught. I was about to have the life throttled out of me if I didn't move, but I want them to get a good long look at me with the jewels. If I went down at least Dayle would get away.

They didn't have any weapons, but I doubt they needed any to snap my fifteen year old neck.

Despite being personally against suicidal actions I held up the little brown box, "Looking for these big boys? You'll have to catch me first." I said tauntingly before running off as fast as my legs would take me.

I wasn't as familiar with these streets as I was in my home area, but you didn't really need to be. Go down one street, turn; go down another, rinse repeat. Unfortunately though, they seemed to know the area very well. One of them would split off down a side street and come back onto my tail, closer than before. They kept doing this and were gradually gaining on me.

Back ways weren't going to cut it for me this time so I diverted out into an actual street. Heavy footfalls from behind signaled they hadn't lost me, and I ran towards the direction of the market square. It was getting more crowded as we went, and the big fellas

were having trouble slipping between people, while I zipped up, around, over, and in between them.

Soon I could no longer see them as I did my regular one minute look back, and so slowed down a bit to peel off into another alley. From there I made my way towards the Market Bridge which led to the Riverside District, my home, but as I came up to it, and to the stream of people moving towards me and to the market, I saw two massive shapes conversing with the Red Capped guards standing about.

How did they know I was from Riverside? They can't have gotten that good of a look at my face? I shook my head to get rid of the uneasy feeling in my stomach. *It's probably just a guess.* They have no idea who I am, and are just informing their paid off guards to look for me. To look for a hooded individual that is, so I slipped off my cloak and tossed it into an alley. Some other street person will enjoy that find. Me, I'm gonna be buying some new, nicer clothes.

I brushed my hands through my wiry, black, hair, and pulled out a leather pouch. It jingled with coins as I discreetly opened it up and poured in the gems from the box, before setting that aside as well.

The going was difficult, moving against that tidal wave of strangers. Their faces flashed before mine. Young, old, woman, man, and child, all were moving forward, and only I was going back. I kept my arms in front of me trying to push them aside, but to my dismay as I reached the bridge I saw another unfortunate, familiar, face, Dayle.

The red caps had her painfully by the arms, twisting as they asked her questions she wouldn't answer. It seemed the two brutes had moved on before she showed up, thankfully, but there was still very few ways this could go good.

It was the first step onto the bridge when time slowed down, and my palms heated up. Sometimes you just have to act on instinct and hope that everything will be okay. So I tapped into that secret place in my mind. No need for harmonics, this was rage. I opened my mouth and fear came out, fear of me. Thin little notes of green flame shot every which way, and the crowds stopped.

They froze for a just fraction of a second and then the crazy came out. First it was screaming, the shrill cutting noise was unbearable, the running came next. People dropping their goods, their money, and anything thing else they happened to be carrying at the time. They began to charge over one another to supposed safety. I kept my eyes on Dayle. The guards around her jumped for the water's tender embrace, and drowned from the weight of the chain mail they were wearing. She was screaming too and got up to her feet to run, but I reached her first and wrapped my arms around her, holding her still.

I spoke softly into her ear, over and over, "Don't be scared. It's okay you're safe." My voice though, usually so soothing and sweet, must have sounded like hell itself was reaching for her. Her struggles redoubled and the screams came again. Tears flowed down her terror filled eyes, but then it all stopped. Her movements slowed down, her eyelids fluttered

before shutting themselves, and the toxic noises she made died upon her lips. I feared the worst.

“Dayle? No!” Frantically I searched her for a pulse. My fingers pressed against her wrist, nothing. For a long moment I kept my fingers there, waiting, and then it came, a faint pushing sensation from within her skin. I was relieved, and took a deep breath to recover from the brief yet mind, numbing, trauma of thinking I had killed my best friend. She’d just fainted from fear of me. I scooped up her legs and body with my arms and got to my feet. There wasn’t a person in sight, besides a few, hopefully, also unconscious, forms.

I took no time to stare at the abandoned stalls and easy marks, as I hurried off to rejoin myself with the shadows. Down the alleys I sped, as fast as I could go without risking injury to Dayle or myself.