

THE ADVENTURES OF BLACK MASK AND PALE RIDER
A TALE OF SIX GUN AND SORCERY
BY TIM HOLTORF



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Black Mask & Pale Rider, Shani Wennemein and Pania Alow are copywritten by Tim Holtorf 2009.

PART FIVE

The elven riders slowed their horses to a crawl. It had been a while since the last gunshot had sounded, more than likely the posse had given up the chase. At least the sheriff and his men would have, Captain Williams on the other hand, would find some way to continue. They had some breathing room again, that was all that mattered.

They stopped their horses as they drew closer to a peaceful stream. Shani stretched in the saddle as Pania dismounted and guided her horse to the stream's edge. The pale elf set her duster hat down as she cupped some of the water in her hands, splashing it over her face.

"I'm gonna be 'eadin' ta Shreveport," Pania stated as she ran her wet fingers through her hair. "If ye willin', I wouldna mind the company." She rose to her feet, stretching slightly to work out the kinks in her body, and slowly turned around. No sooner was she facing Shani again, that she found herself falling to the ground. The lithe elf took a swing and connected with Pania's jaw, sending the smaller of the two crashing to the ground. She partially landed in the stream, and flailed her arms as the splash of water soaked her completely. As Pania's world began to clear again, she found herself staring down the business end of one of Shani's Colts. "Wha' the bloody 'ell?"

"Who are ya?" Shani shouted, her face sneering angrily. There was hate in those eyes, Shani suspected that this elf might have been paid to find her, and bring her back to her world.

"I already bloody tol' ye," Pania shouted back with some desperation in her voice. "Pania Alow!"

"Yer the first dang elf I seen since I come here," Shani said as she cocked the hammer back on the pistol. "Who sent ya after me? Were it my brother? Did Sywyn set ya up ta do this?"

"Sy... who? No!" Pania replied, somewhat confused. "I found a gate an' crossed o'er. More 'n likely the same as ye did. No one sent me, I'm no' searchin' fer ye. This is jus' a coincidence tha' we're meetin' 'ere."

Shani huffed a few times and kept her pistol trained on Pania, but she considered the words, weighing them carefully. Slowly, she released the hammer of the pistol, gently putting it back in place so it wouldn't fire. With some reluctance, she twirled the pistol and holstered it, resting her hands on her hips as she studied Pania, who still lay on the ground. "Coincidence," Shani said with some disbelief. "I ain't never been one ta prescribe ta fate, or coincidence. But I guess the world's big 'nough ta have it happen." She sighed slightly as she reached out a hand to help Pania up. The pale elf graciously took it, lifting herself up and trying to wipe off any leaves and twigs that clung to her wet clothes.

"Ye know, ye coulda jus' asked me tha' without the punchin' an' intimidatin'," she suggested to Shani. "I gladly woulda said the same thin'."

"Take it from my perspective," Shani replied in an even tone as she tended to her horse. "I been runnin' from pretty near everyone wearin' a badge, an' everyone tryin' ta collect a bounty fer better part o' a year now. A person kin git a might twitchy after a while." She removed the saddle from her horse and set it down on a fallen tree as she spoke. "Figger yer facin' the same thing."

"Aye," Pania said softly as she also tended to her horse. It was evident they needed a rest. The afternoon sun was beginning to shine through, and they'd be better off traveling at night. "I 'it caravans an' stagecoaches carryin' medical supplies. Take 'em ta the tribes so they can tend ta their sick." She sighed as she sat down on a good sized rock by the stream's edge. "Ye know wha' they've gone through?" Pania asked Shani.

"I heard some," Shani replied. "Heard tell 'bout a hunnerd years back 'bout Europeans givin' Injuns diseased blankets. Whole tribe wiped out from pox, jist b'cause some governor 'r some diplomat d'cided thet the land'd be great fer farmin', but didn't wanna buy from the Injuns."

"Aye, there is tha'," Pania remarked, then looked to the satchels that Shani seemed to protect closely. "So... 'ittin' banks. Robbin' stagecoaches."

"Yeah," Shani smirked. "Partially do it fer the thrill, but I git rid o' most o' the money. This here job I pulled brought in maybe five 'r six thousand."

"Good 'aul," Pania replied with a smile that showed how impressed she was with Shani's accomplishments.

Shani shrugged at the compliment. To her, the money nor the amount was the goal, but just seeing if she could pull it off. "I give it 'way, mostly. Come 'cross a share cropper 'r some drifter needed some cash ta eat. Ev'n Injuns needin' ta git by long 'nough fer the next huntin' season. I jist keep 'nough ta git by. I kin make more playin' poker in some small town. There the law ain't so far reachin' as it is. An' ya gotta be quick with a pistol."

"Know 'bout tha' all too well," Pania said with a nod. "I rode in from the west a while back. 'Eard rumours o' an Underground Rail Road bringin' slaves up from the south. I were gonna be 'eadin' down ta Shreveport."

"Been south b'fore," Shani stated. "Never been much further west 'n Madison, Wisconsin. But Shreveport I been ta b'fore."

Pania had taken out her bedroll as they talked, setting it up and using her duster as a pillow. She lay down on the soft grass as they spoke, the wind rustling the leaves in the trees, crickets that chirped quietly and the babbling stream were the only other noises. "I could use the 'elp. Someone who may know the area well 'nough."

Shani chuckled softly as she set out her own bed roll. "Yeah, I know a few good places down there."

Good saloon ta git in on a poker game 'r two.” She rolled up her long coat as a pillow and lay down. For a few moments, she studied the smaller elf, questions filling her mind. Instead of leaving them unspoken, she fired them off as easily as she would fire off her pistols. “So, what's a bard like ya doin' out here?”

“Bard?” Pania snorted at the question. “Ow ye figger tha?”

Shani arched an eyebrow and smirked as she looked to Pania. “C'mon now.”

“Fine, fine,” Pania sighed with a resigning shrug. “Been 'ere b'fore. 'S no' me first trip 'ere. 'Bou' seventy five year back I come 'roun'. Most o' this place were still bein' settled at the time. I were curious, an' come walkin' through. Bu' this time were jus' fer the adventure. A want ta walk. Wha' 'bou' ye?”

Shani sighed as she made herself comfortable. She thought on the question for a time before finally answering. “I guess a lil from column A, an' a lil from column B. Some place diffrent ta come ta. A place ta do things that I wouldn't dare do back home. Things're a might diffrent here, that's fer sure.”

“Like the lack o' magic,” Pania offered.

“There is thet, yep,” Shani nodded with a sigh. “Ya kin feel it, can't ya? I mean, 'least the lack o' it.”

“Oh, it's there. Bu' no' as strong as back 'ome. It's like the 'umans dunna e'en b'lieve in it, so it's gone down ta a faint spark. Only mages 'ere 'r 'and magicians. Entertainin' fer the crowd.” Pania rolled over onto her side, propping herself up with her arm. “So, tell me. All tha' stuff on the wanted posters. It true?”

Shani laughed aloud at the question. “Jist a buncha bullshit, truth be tol'. I ain't killed no thirty nine people, that's fer sure. 'R thirty seven 'r however many they say. An' I ain't stole more 'n fifty thousand dollars. Nowhere near close ta five hunnerd grand they sayin'. I will say, though, thet they got it right on my shootin' a pistol.”

“No ego there,” Pania said with a mocking grin.

“I ain't gonna hold back, I am more 'n likely one o' the best gunslingers these parts ever seen.” Shani looked over to the elven bard with a grin. “Now what 'bout y'all? How 'bout yer wanted poster? Ya actually kill a U.S. Marshal?”

“Ye wanna talk 'bou' bullshite,” Pania scoffed lightly as she rolled her eyes. “I were tryin' ta save 'im from fallin' off a cliff. Couldna pull 'im up. 'E fell, they tacked 'is death ta me.” Pania shrugged lightly and sighed. “I'm a bit ticked 'bou' tha', bu' nuthin' I can do 'bou' it. 'Least the marshal knows the way it went down.”

“Yeah, ain't thet the truth.” Shani sighed as their conversation quieted. She suddenly realized just how tired she really was. A yawn from the pale elf told her that Pania was just as tired. A rest, a well deserved rest, and then back on the road.

Evening came along quickly. The long days of summer were starting to wane, and the lengthening shadows of the evening only hearkened the coming of fall. For the two elves, they slept comfortably, at least as comfortably as one could on the ground. Not even the sounds of the forest brought them out of their slumber.

Nor the quiet clomping of hooves, as a pair of horses walked through and slowly disappeared down the rest of the trail. One other set of foot falls accompanied them, quiet as they were. Neither elf was any the wiser. Part Six

Dieter Van Bueren held up a calming hand as he spied the two animals. He and his father had been on patrol around the small Dutch community. Always there were strangers and strange people coming to Reading at night. But this was the first time a pair of horses showed themselves.

Dieter's father stepped forward to study the horses. “They aren't work horses,” he mused. “They've been used for hard ridin'.” Then he saw the holsters that held the rifles and shotguns, and then the satchel filled with cash. Frederick Van Bueren furrowed his brow. “Gunslingers,” he snorted.

“They gonna be comin' here, father?” Dieter inquired, a hint of curiosity in his voice.

“If they are, they'll find these horses will be in the stables,” the elder Van Bueren replied. “They can take the horses, but they'll be told ta leave as soon as possible.” Frederick looked to the sky. Already the moon was rising, a brilliant full moon it was. “Come on. Best get back into town. It's close to the witching hour, and that's a hunter's moon.” Dieter nodded as he gently took the reins of the horses, leading them back into the safe confines of the town.

Pania struggled against the wind, eyes narrowed and hands held high to protect herself from the coming storm. She was positive this was a dream, but it felt so real, however, it was a matter of waking up. Which currently was extremely difficult. The faces that appeared before her were ghastly apparitions and she wondered if this might not be some warning of the days to come. She only received such images when closely tied to the weave, and never before on Earth. Something was extremely wrong, because she knew that just a few hours earlier she and Shani had bunked down along a trail that was not that far from a little town called Reading, Pennsylvania, just east of Harrisburg.

So what was this all about?

She never received an answer as she was quickly shaken awake. The elven gunslinger that had promised to help her was by her side.

“Wake up!” She was screaming and shaking the smaller elf's shoulders. Pania opened her eyes and started to wipe the cobwebs away as Shani let go of her shoulders. “Dangit! Take ya ferever ta wake up! We

gots problems.”

“Huh?” Pania grunted, having only just woken up, that early form of verbal communication having slightly eluded her, even with Shani using large words like we and got. “Wha...?”

“Horses 're gone,” Shani informed her motioning with one arm to the very empty looking campsite as she moved over to her small pile of possessions. “Saddles, ev'rythin'. Only the stuff I had with me, an' the stuff you had with ya 're still here.” The lithe elf was more than just a bit pissed. She snorted as she picked up her belongings. “They even split with the satchel filled with alla the money from that job in Harrisburg.”

“They? Wai', who, they?” Pania asked as she started to realize how dire the situation was.

“Hadda be more 'n one,” Shani seemed to hiss. “Gathered the stuff up, took the horses an' split.” She looked up to study the stars through a break in the canopy of the trees. “An' I figger it's gittin' on midnight. We ain't far from Readin', maybe we kin catch a break, see if they may 'ave found the horses.”

Pania sluggishly gathered her things together, still trying to piece together all the information she had received. It would be a long walk. “We're may'aps twenty miles from Readin'. Maybe get there by mid day.”

“I figger so,” Shani replied. “But we ain't gonna

git anywheres sittin' here jawin' 'bout it. C'mon. Let's make tracks.” Shani started her trek along the path, as Pania quickly followed, even as difficult as it might have been for her. She had finally finished taking stock of her supplies but still seemed a bit groggy. They each had their guns, clothes, bedrolls, some cash and a few rations. Pania still had her rapier and a few personal items. Enough to get them to Reading. It would still be a long trip. As they walked, the silence of the night seemed to envelope the area. Fortunately for the elves, their eyes were good in the dark. However, there were those who had much clearer vision.

A small rustle of leaves was the only sound as a lone figure stepped out of the shadows where Shani and Pania had been sleeping. His face contorted into a sick and twisted grin as he watched the pair, now some distance down the path. The individual bent low as he caught a scent, his eyes closed as he inhaled the smells that surrounded him. In particular, those left by the pair of elves. Such a heavenly aroma. “That's right, my little jewels. Walk, get the blood pumping. It's so much better when the rush of adrenaline has been flowing through the veins. It makes the taste, so much sweeter.” He laughed quietly, a sickening sound and fell back into the shadows that enveloped the forest.