

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 FOUR

Sheriff Richard Calloway saw the small object drop to the ground at the base of the bridge. He had his suspicions what it might be, and then he looked again as he saw the small spark of the wick. "She tossed a bundle o' TNT!" he shouted and pulled on the reins of his horse. Several of his men stopped in their tracks in response to his action. Captain Williams did as well, and steered his horse back to Calloway. The look in his eyes was not at all a friendly one.

"What are you doing, Sheriff?" Williams spat, talking to Calloway as one would speak to an unruly child. "We have to continue the chase."

"With all due respect, Captain," Calloway sighed with his reply, suddenly annoyed with the attitude this officer was giving him. "Black Mask just tossed a bundle of dynamite on that bridge. I'm not suicidal, and I'm not going to sacrificing my men."

"How can you be so certain that Black Mask would take such a measure?" Williams replied, anger evident in his eyes that this sheriff would be so bold as to question him. As though there needed to be a reply to Williams' question, an explosion sounded out, and the bridge quickly became unstable. All the men in the posse looked toward the noise, watching as the bridge didn't explode into a million toothpicks, but began to slide into the river below.

"Does that answer your question for you, Captain?" Calloway snorted.

"Well shit," Shani huffed as she watched the bridge slip into the river. "Thet weren't near as spectac'lar as I were 'xpectin' it ta be."

"Effective, nonetheless," Pania remarked with a shrug. She had to admit, Black Mask had a few tricks up her sleeve. She'd seen her shoot, she was no slouch with the long barrel Colts she carried. "I take it ye really didna wanna kill any o' those men anyway."

"What the hell fer?" Shani sighed. "They ain't done nuthin' ta me, they jist doin' their jobs, so I kin unnerstan' they chasin' me. I'm jist gonna give 'em a ride ta remember while they doin' it." Shani leaned back in the saddle, feeling Gypsum shift just a bit. It was the first time in a long morning ride that the horse had an opportunity to rest, and he took advantage of it as he nibbled at some grass that grew along the trail.

Shani and Pania watched the posse across the river, now completely separated from the two elves. The curvy elf suddenly realized something as her gaze remained on the men across the river. While the posse couldn't get their hands on either one of them, they could still make their lives hell. "Miss Black Mask," Pania said quietly.

"Shani," the lithe elf replied, correcting Pania.

"Jist call me Shani. B'sides, I always thought Black Mask were a dorky name. I wanted sumthin' more akin ta Wild Bill 'r Sundance 'r sumthin' like thet..."

"Pania," the pale elf said with a kind smile as she interrupted Shani's speech regarding nicknames. "Pania Alow." She sighed softly and gazed across the river, taking note of the activity. "Bu', I wanted ta say, we're no' outta the woods yet, so ta speak," Pania informed the elven gunslinger as she pointed in the direction of the well armed men. "Tha' posse still 'as guns, an' those bullets can still rip 'cross the river."

Shani's voice fell silent as she gazed across the river. She hadn't been paying attention to the small posse. And now they were moving into position. "Shit," Shani said quietly. "Shit!"

Captain Williams and the remaining soldiers lined up on the river bank, watching the pair of elves resting leisurely across the river. He was mad as hell, and had completely pushed the thought of his orders to bring Pale Rider to Washington alive. He already had a story cooked up. She attempted escape and was shot and killed. It was the truth, after all. Add Black Mask into the mix, and the story would become more plausible.

Calloway had also gathered the remainder of the posse and joined the soldiers, rifles in hand. "Wound only, men," he warned. "Neither one of them fired with intent to kill any of us, so we can give them that grace. They'll live long enough to face a judge and jury."

"Sentence has already been passed," Williams sneered to Calloway as he spoke. "There's only one thing I want to see these two taken in for, and that's a pine box. Shove 'em both in the same one, save the wood." He raised his rifle as he barked his orders to his men. "Shoot to kill, men. This is the end of the line for Black Mask and Pale Rider."

Pania's eyes grew wide as she sat in the saddle just staring, like a deer caught by a hunter. Shani, on the other hand, grimaced as she realized how open and exposed they were. The lithe elf looked to Pania, lashing out with a swat to her shoulder to bring Pania to her senses. "C'mon, Girly girl!" she shouted as she spurred her horse forward. "We gotta git."

The two elves began the race of their lives, as they encouraged the horses down the trail, trying to outrun the bullets as they ripped through the air. The shots were close, hitting the ground and the nearby trees of the forest. Every so often a small tree they would pass behind would become riddled with bullets from the guns across the river. Shani took a glance at the men, taking

note that some had began to keep pace with them across the river, firing wildly. They wouldn't have perfect aim as both their targets were moving and they were also at a full gallop. Difficult to hit a target with a rifle like that.

"Look for a break in the bloody trees!" Pania called out. "There's gotta be a trail 'eadin' in."

"Thet's what I'm doin', dangit!" Shani called back. "I ain't no slouch. I'm jist a bit busy tryin' not ta git hit." Both of them lay low on their horses, flinching every time a rifle report sounded. The horses hooves pounded the dirt path hard, as they raced faster and faster. They also knew the desperation that they faced, as any one of those bullets could just as easily rip into them. Shani desperately looked across the river as she checked their own position. No break in the trees was visible, nor were they completely safe from the posse. It looked as though they had a clear trail for a good long while.

Which meant they could keep firing until they ran out of bullets, or they both dropped from the bullets with their names on it.

"Ain't gonna think 'bout thet," Shani hissed to herself through clenched teeth. She couldn't think about that. She wasn't about to die on some planet far from her home, never to see her family again. She had other ideas.

Calloway raced his horse along the riverbank, slowing only to fire, then continuing the chase. He didn't subscribe to Williams' idea of shoot to kill. After seeing these two and comparing what he'd seen with what he'd read, he began to doubt the rumours that these two were vicious killers like other bounty hunters and lawmen had described. Neither one fired with the intent to kill. Neither one had tried to trap them. Even dynamiting the bridge was an obstacle to aid in their escape. That was all they wanted, to escape and ride on. Calloway was just that close to letting them go, but that would mean Williams would continue on.

The pair of gunslingers had one thing that would save them.

Calloway knew his territory well. And he knew that he had almost run to the county line. After that, he'd be out of his jurisdiction. He pulled hard on the reins of his horse, bringing it to a complete stop. His men followed suit. They too were aware of how far they'd traveled. Calloway looked to his men, making certain they were all fine. Tired, yes, but they suffered no bullet wounds.

"Sheriff!" An angry shout from Captain Williams sounded. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I know my territory, Captain," he shouted back, brow furrowed in anger. "You wanna keep ridin' those two ta hell, be my guest. Far as I'm concerned, they've run far 'nough ta live another day. They haven't killed

anyone in my town. An' Black Mask only made off with some money. I doubt she cleaned out the bank."

Williams scowled but didn't argue. Calloway wasn't one of his men, so he couldn't order him without direct orders from the President. Orders which were never given. "We continue the chase, men!" he barked to the tired looking soldiers. "HA! Move out!"

Pania took a chance and peeked across the river. Calloway had stopped, so had Williams. But if she knew the Captain, he'd keep riding. Which meant they still had a long way to go. Her eyes searched the tree line they rode past frantically, there had to be a clear path through and onto freedom. Once there, then another decision must be made. Ride with this seemingly wild, and rather brash young elf, or continue south onto Shreveport. Maybe that was where Black Mask was heading. Or maybe she was just on the run. Only time, and the quiet that came with escape would finally tell.

"There!" Pania finally shouted out, pointing toward a small path that lead into the trees. Small enough for one horse and rider to pass through at a time.

"I see it," Shani replied as she gritted her teeth and pushed forward. Gypsum seemed to read his rider's mind as he bolted for the break, jumping into the small pathway with ease. Only hoof beats behind came Pania. The narrowness of the path would slow them down, but at least they would be free and clear.

Captain Williams pulled tight on the reins bringing his horse to a sudden stop. His teeth bared as he scowled. Yet again, Pale Rider had slipped through his fingers. He would have to report his failure to Washington, but maybe not just yet.

He studied the river for a moment, deciding the water was too quick to cross, more than likely too deep as well. Caught in the current, it could carry a man for miles, and a horse and rider would surely face death. "Find a way across," he spat out. "There has to be another bridge along this river. Once we cross, then we continue our search."

"Captain," one of his men announced. "What if they back track?"

"They won't," he seemed to growl. "They already destroyed the bridge." He looked over his men and pointed one out. "Go to Harrisburg," he spat his word out with venom. "Get a message to Washington. Let them know that Pale Rider has enlisted the aid of Black Mask. Create new posters, double the price if necessary. I want them both found and in shackles before the end of the month."