

**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 NINE

Fifteen miles can be a long ride when you are willingly riding into hell. Shani and Pania left the small village shortly after the noon meal, and one last inspection of their gear. Food for two meals, water, although Shani would have demanded whiskey had Pania not given her a look of annoyance, ammunition for both pistols and crossbows. Even the metal worker in the village repaired the horses' shoes and any nicks to Pania's rapier, all the while commenting on the quality of craftsmanship that the blade had. Once they set out, an uneasy feeling settled over them, as though someone was watching them.

For ten miles, they never said a word. The sun slowly sunk toward the horizon as they let the horses plod along lazily. The trees seemed to become dead and lifeless as they drew closer and closer to their destination. As late afternoon crept up, the mist began to form. Still, they pushed on.

Afternoon turned to evening, and the sky became a deathly black, as it was suddenly filled with clouds. There was a foreboding feeling that settled in. The air grew cooler, and lightning began to strike, as sharp bolts thundered from the heavens, making the area bright for a brief second before plunging the elven gunslingers into darkness yet again. They were certain they were getting closer as Pania looked to Shani, each giving the other a look of reassurance.

A bolt of lightning struck a tree not thirty yards from their location, the air become acrid and the roar of the thunder nearly deafening. As the area became brightly lit for a brief moment, the ominous shape of the castle revealed itself, looming high above them in the darkness like some vulture watching over its prey. Pania felt it the most, as though the very ground became death, as though she could see the tendrils of dark magic reaching up to pull them both down.

"Best make camp," Shani suggested as she looked for a secure spot. She began to guide her horse toward a clearing just off the road when Pania stopped her.

"No' there," she cautioned.

Shani looked back to the elven bard as she furrowed her brow. "Why not, it's already cleared out."

Pania studied the area, knowing exactly why that clearing was so pristine. "B'cause tha's a trap," Pania simply said. "They made it, ta entice travelers ta rest, an' they'd be able ta take their prey." She looked around the area, and found a small path that lead to an opening in the trees. They moved the horses to it and found it wasn't as clean as the other, but it would do. "We can leave the 'orses 'ere," Pania suggested. "Ge' 'em in the mornin' when we done."

"If..." Shani started.

"No' thinkin' 'bou' tha'," Pania said quickly, interrupting any negative thoughts from Shani. "Fer the

sake o' the village, we cannu fail. We're goin' back after this is done."

"Either ta celebrate," Shani offered with a cautioning tone. "R b'cause we been turned."



The short meal was eaten without a word. Both of them kept going mentally over the details that had been described, and still, they knew nothing of what was to come. They gathered the quarrels and crossbows, made sure their pistols were ready, and began to walk toward the castle. Strange how they could not see it through the brush when they first stopped to make camp, but now it seemed to welcome them. It looked so out-of-place in this land, not something they'd seen throughout most of the New England states that was built before it, but something that almost looked to have been carried direct from Europe.

It's spires seemed to reach into the sky, as granite gargoyles watched any and all who would approach the tall wooden gate. The gate seemed firm and made of strong wood. It was ornately decorated in iron locks, each one depicting a demonic face as though the gate itself might come to life and strike out at them. The stone that made the castle walls looked ancient, as brambles and vines crept along it's surface. Moss built itself up along the bottom of the stones themselves, making them look older than they actually could be. The blackened windows looked like hollow eyes in a decaying skull. The towers along the wall held the only light, as flames in sconces lapped hungrily in the night air. The brambles and moss had died out long ago, as did anything that had once grown near the castle, including the trees. Even the air about them was cold as they drew closer to the castle walls.

The pair of elves studied the wall for a moment, searching for an easy entrance to slip into unnoticed. It didn't take long as they found a break in the wall. A suspiciously convenient break in the wall, mind you. The cracked stone looked fresh, and the ground was disturbed as though there was a scuffle. Perhaps someone was trying to escape. More likely, some one was being dragged inside.

Shani looked to Pania with some skepticism. "Whyn't they jist put a sign up thet says 'Imminent doom, this way.'"

Pania studied the narrow arched windows above them, as the flames from several candles made the shadows dance against the walls. "Cannu use the grapple lines," she stated with a touch of disappointment. "Windows've gotta be three stories up." She looked back over to the felled wall and then back to Shani.

"Could scope out fer a door," the lithe elf offered. "Maybe git lucky."

“With our luck we'll pop into the kitchen during the nightly vampire feast,” Pania said with a snort. “An' knockin' outta the question. What do we say? 'Greetin's. We from the elven word an' we've got some readin' material for ye.” Shani snorted a laugh at the comment, then took a quick look inside. There was no monstrous hands that reached out to grab her, rending her limb from limb, so it must have been safe. “Well, 'least we arn' 'bout to be killed goin' in.”

“Nah, they leavin' that for when we get further inside.” They both entered with care and caution, eyes wide on the lookout for any bloodsuckers that might be within reach. The crack led into a long dusty hallway, which appeared to be for servants. It appeared that it had not been used in many years, as cobwebs draped themselves down the walls, and dust clung to the tapestries and few chairs that lined the walls of the long hallway. Obviously, this castle was at one time in use before it was infected with vampires. Ragged tapestries hung from the walls, depicting battles from long ago. Faded paintings depicted people long since dead. Possibly the former family that occupied this castle. Perhaps, they were now the vampires. “No way this place just been built here,” Shani suggested. “Figger there's some kinda magic at work. Place look like somethin' I seen 'bout Europe in the back o' the newspaper.”

“It definitely lacks a frontier feel to it,” Pania said with agreement. The flames of the torches that lined the walls danced as the breeze passed over them, adding to the already uneasy feeling about the place. Shadows danced on the walls, causing the two gunslingers to keep a wide eye on their surroundings as they moved down the dark, dusty hallways. It was all too quiet, no sounds of people, even muffled. Only their footfalls gently echoed throughout the hallway, forcing them to move slower so they would not rouse the creatures that may have taken residence here.

Times like this were often when the beast would strike. Or at least send its minions.

“I don't recall asking if someone would deliver food to us tonight,” the husky voice sounded in the hallway, causing Shani and Pania to stop literally in their tracks. No one else was in the hallway, but they both could feel a presence. Their eyes gradually explored the area, hoping they might see some evidence of their stalker. It came soon enough.

The mist that seemed to slip into the building began to swirl, gently at first, then rising into the air, and finally, taking form. Before them stood a handsome looking man, dressed casually in a frilled tunic, tight cotton slacks and knee high black jack boots. He leaned lazily on the rapier he held. “I suppose now is the time when you two will scream and start to run,” he said with a sickening smile as his fangs dripped from a fresh feed. “I had hoped dessert would be along shortly. So few people travel this road. Go ahead, run. You'll only make

the drink that much sweeter.”

Pania and Shani looked to each other for a moment. The elven bard rolled her eyes and shook her head as Shani looked back to the vampire. “Ya must be a youngun.” Like a signal, both gunslingers drew their pistols and fired, repeatedly. They had perfect aim, as the vampire had smugly placed himself only a few paces away from them. Each bullet ripped into him, and he felt it, screaming as pain filled his body from each silver bullet that hit its mark. All too late, he realized these two were more than prepared. He crumpled to the ground as he felt his body stiffening, and finally turning to ash.

The elves slowly stepped forward, Pania placed a boot on the vampire's shoulder as she aimed her Smith and Wesson at his head. “Ye shouldna be so cocky, lad,” she said as she pulled back the trigger of the pistol, sending the vampire sprawling on the floor. Pania removed a wooden stake from her belt and tossed it to Shani who caught it expertly.

The agile gunslinger knelt beside the vampire and spoke in a hushed tone as his body stiffened more. “Next time, don't get so uppity with new folks, huh.” Shani rested her arm on her knee as she considered this statement, gently twirling the stake as she did so. “I guess that ain't really gonna matter now, is it.” She looked back to the vampire, who almost appeared to be pleading with his eyes for them to let him go. Shani shrugged, and then she struck. The stake went through his chest easily, and whatever undeath was in him slowly ebbed to nothing.

Shani stood fully as Pania completed the kill, making certain that his body would burn completely. The bard looked to Shani and sighed. “Better 'ope we've no' got an army to deal with.” Shani just nodded, as a sudden noise caught her attention. It sounded very much like...

Feasting.

The two elves slowly passed through a side door, as quiet as they could, and looked into the room, eyes widening with the horrific sight. The five vampires were too busy ravaging their current victims to take note of the new comers. Off in one corner, a man was protecting a woman, who was crying tears of madness and shrieks of terror.

Shani took a deep breath and steeled herself, while Pania used the anger that welled up inside of her as an advantage. “Looks like we coulda made as much noise as we wanted to,” Pania offered with a disgusted look on her face.

“Yeah,” Shani agreed with a sigh as she checked her pistol, reloading the spent bullets with fresh ones. She spun the chamber closed and twirled the pistols easily in her hands, finally cocking the hammers back. “Good thing that they called in the exterminators,” she said in a dry tone. “'Cause, we got a regular infestation on our hands.”