

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 SIXTEEN

Her eyes fluttered open as she turned her head to push back the bright light of the room. Pania raised her hands to rub the cobwebs from her eyes. Everything was still a blur in her mind. She was just starting to remember what had just happened. Finally it hit home. The dream walk she had just been on, the revelation of the man who had been so kind and friendly toward the two elves. And she realized that man was still in the room with her.

She looked up and saw the large man standing over her bed. Marshal Martin Derringer, Thadius Maximus. Whichever name, it didn't matter. Because she knew what he was. Pania slowly looked up, and her body started to shake. It took everything she had to push herself back, forcing herself into the corner and grabbing the pillow, as though that alone would protect her from the creature.

"Jus!... jus' stay back!" she screamed in terror. He was a werewolf, they weren't known for their congeniality. Her free hand searched for her guns, but her eyes saw them, hanging in the holsters of the gun belt as it rested on the far table.

"I have no wish to hurt you, Miss Alow," he said in a quiet voice. "You should realize now that you are important." He removed his stetson as he watched her actions before continuing. "As for my ... condition. I have control over it."

"Con... control?" Pania replied with a nervous laugh. "Nev'r in the 'ist'ry o' werewolves 'ave I 'eard tha' someone 'ad control o' it. Tha's impossible."

Maximus leaned back in his chair as he began to explain to the pale elf a bit more of his history. "I was just sixteen, on a scouting mission near the Persian borders when we were attacked. I was the only survivor. I used my... newfound power to an advantage on the battlefield, and the generals saw this, and promoted me quickly." He sighed as he thought back to these distant memories.

"In a battle against the Prussians," he continued in his calm voice, but Pania could hear just a hint of sorrow in it. "That became the first time I realized that this curse was consuming me. When I rose to the rank of general, I always devised a plan of attack that would see the biggest push on the night of the full moon. Only this time was fatal to everyone save one man. After the battle, I realized I had killed over ten thousand men; on both sides. I ordered the lone survivor to return to Rome, tell them everyone was lost. Meanwhile, I escaped to Tibet, where I found myself in the hands of monks." He leaned forward in his chair, hands held together as he continued. "They taught me not to just control the beast, but accept it, and to teach the beast to accept me as well."

Pania could only listen to this tale that seemed so filled with fancy. Her mind wandered back to the dream

for a moment. There were many people that she had seen, but she drifted back to one in particular. Morgan le Fay. "Ye... ye b'lieve tha' the fey folk is the key?" she asked in a timid voice. "B'lieve tha' I'm the key?" Maximus looked up with a gentle smile and nodded his reply. "I cannu tap into magic 'ere. It's dead."

"You have to believe that there is, Miss Alow," Maximus said in an encouraging voice. "You have to realize, you can tap into this world's magic." Pania shook her head slowly, pushing Maximus to prove his point. "Look at what you've seen in the past few weeks. The vampire, the Huntsman, this town. It's all around, Miss Alow. You just have to believe."

Pania thought on his words, just as she thought on all the things she'd seen in the past week. It had all been so different since she first arrived. She'd always believed that this world was dead of magic. That it had given in so fully to it's technology, that no one would dare think of doing anything more than mere illusions, card tricks and hand magic. She looked directly at Thadius as she spoke with greater confidence.

"So. Wha' do we 'aveta do ta ge' Shani back." Thadius Maximus smiled a broad smile for the first time since the pale elf laid eyes upon him. It was time to take the fight back to the Huntsman.



Shani looked around the dimly lit area as best she could. The Huntsman was there, but he had treated her more as a piece of furniture than someone to talk to. She stopped struggling against the invisible bonds that held her down long ago, knowing that it was fruitless to try and escape. There were other things she could do to make her captivity worthwhile.

"What're ya doin'?" she called out to the Huntsman. He didn't turn to acknowledge her, and Shani only rolled her eyes with a huff. "Figger I know why ya got me all trussed up like this." Her eyes watched the Huntsman's reactions carefully. She took note of his attitude and found that he had many similar qualities to that of many of the humans on this world she had met. Maybe he once was human. "Ya scared."

This one comment quickly got the Huntsman's attention. He whirled quickly, standing over Shani as his eyes glared down at her from the shadows of his hood. She saw the soft glow of green that seemed to escape from his tattered robes every so often. Shani grinned up at him.

"What did you say?" he hissed at her.

"I said, ya keep me all tied up b'cause ya yella," she repeated, her grin broadening. "Figger yer too scared ta take up a fair fight, so ya gotta do this. Give ya some kinda power, holdin' a person hostage."

The Huntsman laughed at the suggestion that

came from the elf. "Brave words, for one who will soon cease to exist. Once I have your little friend, it will all be over. The hunt will be complete."

"Oh, when y'all try ta git Panny, ya mean," she said with a snicker. "I figger ya gonna be in a s'prise there. See, yer kinda slow, an' Panny's got a purty good gun hand. She ain't near 'sfast as me, but I reckon she could take ya down a peg 'r two." She chuckled with her new found confidence. "An' thet don't even include the magic she kin wield." She put on her best poker face, having had years of practice already, she hoped that this apparition would not figure it out.

"You are a fool, elf," he spat at her in a voice filled with venom. "If you think for a moment that you and that whelp of a friend of yours are any better than I am." His voice echoed as he laughed a low, gurgling laugh. One that would have left most men quivering in their boots.

Shani had nothing to lose. "Y'all still need me 'live, I wager," she continued as her grin stayed in place. "Need me fer bait. Try an' tempt Panny thet way. Smart, 'cause if ya did cut me lose right now, with the intent on fightin' me..." she seemed to sneer as she lowered her voice all the while looking straight up into the apparition's hood. "I'd kick yer sorry yella ass."

The Huntsman seemed to move close to Shani, his cloak billowed around her. He was perplexed why this mere elf would feel no fear from him. In the shadows of his hood, his eyes narrowed. She was right, he did need her alive after all. But her time would come. Eventually.

voice filled with twisted glee. "It's almost like you're just giving her to me, Maximus." His laugh trailed off as if like thunder rumbling in the distance as he looked to Pania again. "And you. The elf tells me you're pretty fast. Care to prove it?"

"I'm no' as good a gunslinger as she," Pania admitted in a small voice. "Bu' I'll no' back down either." She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, muttering softly to herself.


"Really," the Huntsman replied as he began to move closer to the elven bard. Derringer had already begun to circle around the Huntsman, getting himself into position if he needed to. "The brazen elf told me that," the Huntsman stated, as he made mention of Shani. He watched for a moment, as Pania continued to whisper soundlessly. "Just what is it you are doing, little elf?"

Pania opened her eyes, knowing the Huntsman was so close to her. Her eyes glowed a brilliant white and the wind began to grow, tossing the leaves from nearby trees off their branches. "Gotcha," she said with a small sneer. Her hands had been clenched tightly as she chanted the incantation, trying to concentrate and hold back the surprise she felt with the surge of power that flowed through her. She opened her hands fully, having completed the arcane spell. Power of the Earthly arcane surged from her fingertips, as white tendrils reached first into the ground, then began to flow up, surrounding the Huntsman as they grappled him back down to earth. He struggled, having realized now he'd been tricked. There was no escape for him, this elf he had underestimated. She had power, she knew the magic of this world and could bend it to her will if she wished it.

"Let 'er go!" Pania demanded as another surge of magical energy flowed from her being. The Huntsman struggled as he growled at Pania, reaching out to strike her down, but the pale elf was quick, blocking the blow easily with a shield made from the arcane. Again and again he would try, but each time her found his attacks blocked or pushed aside. Pania muttered again and let loose with another spell, this one forcing the Huntsman to feel pain. She took the chance, not knowing if Shani would feel what he felt or not. "I said, let! Her! Go!"

The Huntsman yielded to her demand, thinking if he released Shani, then he could counter attack and destroy them both. His cloak billowed outward, the rags of his robes becoming streams of nothing as the heart of this hunter was revealed. Before Pania could react, Shani was thrown to the side like so much garbage. Derringer was quick to her side to make sure she was fine. She was groggy and undoubtedly sore, but well enough.

The Huntsman growled and focused his attention on Pania fully now. He had more energy now that he had released the elf. He would destroy this spell caster first, and then the gunslinger. He pushed himself forward, struggling against the tendrils that seemed to hold him back, and he inched forward. His mind was so focused on Pania, that he had now forgotten completely about Shani.



The horses moved into a clearing, just west of Franklin, as the storm rumbled in the distance. Pania took a deep breath as she dismounted the horse and looked to Martin Derringer. She'd grown used to this new name, being allowed to look in on the secret of this man's past. Derringer dismounted the Clydesdale with ease, then turned his attention to Pania.

"Can you feel it?" he ask as he guided her further into the clearing. Pania took a deep breath and stepped forward, gazing at her surroundings. There was definitely something here. She looked to him and nodded slowly, a slightly surprised look on her face.

"Unfortunately, we have to use you as bait," Derringer said with some regret.

"I know," she replied softly. "It's the only way 'e's gonna come ta us. Only way we 'ave ta free Shani."

As if on cue, the sky rumbled with the mention of the lithe elf's name. The clouds seemed to swirl overhead, as though a tornado were about to touch down. But they both knew what was coming. Neither one was very surprised when the Huntsman made his dramatic appearance.

He laughed aloud as he looked to Pania first and then Derringer. "This is too easy," he said with a

Pain coursed through his body. He glared at Pania again, but then he realized that she was not responsible. He heard the report of the pistol, and now knew that he was not hearing thunder. He turned and looked to Shani as she fired again, the bullet grazing the emerald crystal that gave him life.

“I knew that were yer secret!” She shouted as she fired again, this time the bullet hit the shard dead center and shattered it.

The Huntsman screamed in agony, a deafening cry as the three tried to ignore the slight pain that invaded their ears. Pania concentrated more as the Huntsman rushed toward her. She muttered again and let the power flow through her. This time, the very earth opened up underneath the Huntsman, as black tendrils reached up and ensnared the apparition. He screamed in protest, knowing now that he had been tricked, knowing now that he had underestimated both elves.

His screams continued, but slowly faded as he disappeared into the abyss and the earth closed itself once again.

Pania seemed to let go of a breath she'd been holding since she cast her second spell. With all the energy she had used, she could not help but fall over onto the ground, exhausted. Shani limped over to Pania and fell to her knees beside the bard. Both elves had been spent, they'd both need a good long rest. Shani wrapped her arms around the elven bard in a warm hug, and Pania laughed lightly. “This mean a change o' 'eart?”

“Hell no,” Shani replied with a weak smirk. “But at least it puts ya square in my books.” She slowly stood up again and smiled to Pania as she lay on the ground. “I owe ya big time, girly girl.” Pania laughed again as Shani slumped to the ground. The elven gunslinger was more than just a little stiff.

The clouds above them seemed to slowly push back, as the sky began to fill with stars. Martin Derringer stood next to the elves as they rested for the moment. He would watch over them both until they were ready to move. At least now, the one thing he had hoped for, he had prayed for, had happened.

The madness finally came to an end.