

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



The Adventures of Black Mask & Pale Rider by Tim Holtorf is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 2.5 Canada License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.5/ca/>).

Based on a work at taholtorf.wordpress.com. Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at <http://taholtorf.wordpress.com/black-mask-pale-rider/>.

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

PART EIGHTEEN

Just outside Oxford, Mississippi, September 5, 1863

They rode hard toward the plume of smoke as it rose into the air. The smell of wood and putrid stench of death filled the air as the black smoke became thicker the closer they came to the scene of the carnage. Shani tightened the reins on her horse as they drew near, Pania followed suit and could only stare in disbelief. A small wagon train, very small, maybe two covered wagons and one stage coach. The horses that weren't stolen were either scattered or dead; they could see two carcasses of the horses that had obviously been too slow to escape. Shani pointed out two other bodies, both human, one laying spread eagle on the ground some distance from the wagons, the other, in a heap on the ground by one of the wagons. All three wagons were smoldering as small fires still burned.

Pania jumped off her horse, grabbed her medical satchel and ran to the bodies by the wagons. Dead. She quickly pulled on the door of the wagon with a gloved hand and held her arm up as she guarded herself against the heat from the flames. Two more bodies were inside. She looked to Shani, who had also reached the second visible body. He lay face down in the dirt, evidence proving clear that after he had been taken down, whoever attacked continued shooting the body in the back. Pania stood beside Shani, and only watched as the elven gunslinger carefully turned the body over. Shani sighed heavily as she saw the silver star.

"Figgers," she huffed, as she crouched down and removed the sheriff's star. "Ain't no one but dang outlaws do this ta a lawman." She looked up to Pania, who understood all too well that there were those that would accuse both of them of such a thing as this. Fabrication, really. Neither one would slaughter people like this. Shani rose to her feet and pocketed the star as she looked around. "Anyone 'live?"

Pania shook her head with a heavy sigh. "Anyone in the wagons were shot an' then burned. Whoever did this, did it as a warnin'." She looked down to the body of the sheriff for a moment. "Aveta give 'em a proper burial."

Shani inspected the wagons a moment, taking note of the baggage still secured by leather straps that seemed to withstand the flames. She dragged one down

that appeared to be a strong box and opened it carefully with gloved hands. Inside, it was still filled with what could have been payroll money, money to be transported to the local bank, or even cash owned by one of the dead. "This weren't no heist, I'll tell ya thet much." She closed the box and locked it before she rose to her feet. This was blood money; no way she was going to touch it.

Pania noted the boxes that seemed carelessly discarded from the wagons, as though some had been pulled off. Something wasn't right about them. She approached one of the larger ones and studied it for a moment. Her eyes widened slightly as her keen elven ears could hear a muffled, quiet whimpering. "Shani," she called out, motioning for her partner to come over. "Listen," she said in a whisper as the elven gunslinger approached. Shani took a moment and listened, then looked to Pania. She could hear it too. Shani circled to the other side of the box and placed a hand on her long barrel. "Whoever's inside," Pania called out as her own hand rested on her Smith and Wesson. "We're no 'ere ta 'urt ye. We're gonna open the box, promise ye'll be fine."

The elven bard nodded to Shani, and she opened the box quickly. Two voices cried out as they seemed to push themselves further away from the opening, but couldn't. Pania couldn't believe what she was seeing. A man in grey robes and a long, neatly braided pony tail was protecting two children, a boy and a girl. The man was Chinese, and obviously not long in the Americas. He looked as though he had just walked out of a monastery. His robes were like that of traditional Chinese monks, Pania had seen them before when she had seen other Chinese in her previous travels in the mid west. Most came to work on the railroad, some just an adventure of exploration to this brave, new world.

Shani reached out with a gentle hand, and spoke in a calming voice. "It's alright, ain't gonna hurt ya. Y'all kin come out now." The children clung to the man in terror while tears streamed down their faces. Shani sighed as she knew the trauma they had just endured. "It's alright," she repeated, and finally found the tiny hand of the girl reaching out to hers. She helped the child out, falling to her knees as the child wrapped her arms tightly around Shani's neck.

"It's alright. Ain't gonna hurt ya. Yer safe now,"



she said as she tried desperately to console the girl. The boy followed suit, leaning heavily on the elven gunslinger. They probably were in that box for quite some time.

Pania reached out to the Chinese man, offering to help him up. He looked to her with tired eyes, and right away, Pania could tell the man was more than likely on his last legs.

"Sit up," she said as she helped him, using the back of the box to prop him up. A bullet had ripped through his shoulder, and he had a lot of blood loss. "Gonna try an' patch ye up," she said as she took out a dagger and began cutting away at the robes by his shoulder. "Fergive me fer this," she said as the cloth ripped. She began to clean him up as best she could, taking her satchel and placing it in the man's lap. Pania spoke to him in a conversational tone as she worked. "M'name's Pania," she said in a calm tone as she worked at cleaning his shoulder. "Go' a bi' o' a bum shoulder. Gonna need ta 'eal fer a time. Rest as well."

The man looked over at the elven bard, his breathing was even and continuous for a man who had just taken a bad hit to the shoulder. Even then, he was lucky. They could have hit him in the chest. Then the two children might not have had their protector. "Yao Ming," he replied in slow and even voice. "The children?"

Pania looked over to Shani. She was still trying to calm the children, speaking to them in low whispers as they clung to her for protection. "They're fine," Pania finally said as she returned to Ming's shoulder. She examined it for a short time before reaching into her satchel. "Ye protected 'em, by the look o' thin's. They're lucky." She produced a few of her tools and concentrated on Ming's shoulder. "I'd say ye lucky as well. Lo'a blood loss, bullet's still in there. Bu' ye'll be fine with some rest an' nourishment." She held up a tool which had long, pincer like ends and looked to Ming with reassuring eyes. "I'll no' lie. This is gonna 'urt. Bu' better ta 'ave it out 'n leave it be." Ming nodded slowly and took a deep breath.

It was going to be a long, long day of work ahead for all of them.

that were hitched to the wagons had run off, but slowly returned. They would get a small train going.

Pania had moved back to her patients, checking on them carefully as she tended to the fire that burned slowly. Food was cooking, they all needed to eat. Evening was slowly creeping up on them all. The children had quieted down, falling asleep as they sobbed lightly. Ming was also very quiet, and only spoke when Pania or Shani directed a question to him. He only accepted water and some jerky rations that Shani had on her. After hours of little to no conversation, he finally spoke.

"I have seen you two before," he said as Shani finally came to the camp fire after finishing her work. "Wanted posters." He looked between the two slowly as he measured his words. "Outlaws."

"Ya know," Shani said with a huff as she took out a flask of whiskey. "I'm gonna have ta have a talk with them thet made 'em, b'cause I say near eighty percent o' what's written on them posters is nuthin' but crap." She took a swig and offered some to Pania. The elven bard took it, and drank deeply before coughing and spitting some up. She looked to Shani with a furrowed brow and handed the flask back to her. "I guess I shoulda warned ya, huh?" Shani replied with a smirk. "Should be used ta it by now."

"I'd no' mind if ye were tryin' ta take advantage o' me," Pania said as she coughed again. "Whiskey's disgustin'. Dunna know 'ow ye can drink it." She rose to her feet and walked to her horse, retrieving her blanket. "As fer them posters, Ming," she said as she walked to the children and covered them carefully as they finally began to sleep. "We've done thin's, aye, bu' nuthin' like this."


"We ain't butchers," Shani added as she pocketed the flask. "We don't ransack a caravan an' kill near alla those inside." Shani picked up a stick and prodded the fire slightly, making sure the flames lived enough to produce some heat for warmth and to cook the food that sat on the small, makeshift stand.

Ming nodded as the odd logic began to make sense. "Thieves with honour," he said quietly.

"No' thieves," Pania remarked as she sat back down next to her patient. "Well, 'least I'm no'," she added as she inspected Ming's bandages. "I dunna knock over banks."

"So, I guess stealin' medical supplies really ain't stealin', huh?" Shani remarked with a slight snicker. Pania stopped her inspection and looked to her partner, realization dawning on her that Shani was correct. She had to resign to the fact that yes, she was a thief as well. "Think what she's tryin' ta say is thet anythin' we take gits ta them thet need it most."

Shani tested the food to see if it was done. Satisfied, she began dishing up some of the beans onto simple tin plates, adding a chunk of bread and a bit of cheese. Ming took his with a nod of thanks. Not what he would usually eat, but Pania seemed to have medical knowledge. He would abide by her wisdom. Shani



Shani pounded the stake into the ground, the last of eight. She'd spent a good part of the day digging the shallow graves on the roadside as Pania tended to the man and the two children. When needed, Pania would help carry the dead to the graves, where they would begin a sort of ritual similar to that of a funeral, only very, very elven. Also very quick. Shani didn't want to feel so exposed.

As the elven gunslinger took to filling in the graves, Pania tried to find whatever supplies that she could salvage from the three wagons. One of them appeared in pretty decent shape, as it was not set ablaze as the other two were. They were fortunate that two of the horses

looked toward the Chinaman for a moment as she handed out food. "So how ya do it? Protect 'em, I mean."

Ming took his plate and rested it in his lap as he considered her question. "They were easily fooled," he said after some thought. When he spoke, there was a hint of tension in his voice, but he remained calm and quiet. "One of them had aimed for the children as a small group was discarding boxes. I could have fought them off, but they probably would have killed me. If that had happened, then the children might have been next. I jumped in front of the bullet just as the man fired. It gave the children a chance to hide. I fell, and somehow, maybe luck, they believed me dead." He took a spoonful of the beans and ate quietly, feeling his explanation was more than enough. Shani nodded slowly, realizing that he didn't have to say anymore. This man of few words had spoken more than he had since they first met him.

"Prolly best ta 'ead inta town in the mornin'," Pania suggested as she quickly changed the subject. "Take the strong box ta the sheriff's office."

"I ain't touchin' thet thing," Shani said as she sat her plate down and nibbled on her cheese. "Thet there's blood money. Thet's like a curse."

"Ye no' bloody takin' it fer yeself," Pania shot back quickly. "People're gonna need tha' money. Best we take it inta town." Shani shrugged and resigned herself to the bard's demand. No need to argue about it. "Fer now jus' rest. I doubt tha' whoever done this will be back t'night."

"You an' me's still sleepin' in watches," Shani said as she reached for her gear and pulled out a Winchester rifle. She set it beside her and continued eating. "B'cause I really don't feel like gittin' shot while I'm asleep." She looked over to Pania who nodded in agreement. Better to be safe than sorry.

and Gypsum to a halt. "They sure ge' started early at the taverns 'ere it'd seem," Pania noted.

"Yeah, jist a buncha good ol' boys," Shani replied quietly as she watched the three carefully. "Keep yer sights keen, girly girl. We don't need no trouble, but these could bring it ta us." Pania nodded as she raised a hand and muttered softly. Shani could just barely make it out and coughed as she looked to Pania, shaking her head to the action that Pania was about to take. "If trouble come, there's jist one thing we do," she said in a quiet tone as her slender fingers tapped the bone handle of her long barrel. Pania furrowed her brow a moment, but stopped the incantation and her hand dropped next to her Smith and Wesson.

One of the three drunks seemed just sober enough to take in his surroundings. He spotted the wagon, and there seemed to be a flash of recognition, but the driver was not the same as he remembered.

"Well," he said with a broad smile as he motioned to his drinking buddies. "Seems there's some new folks in town. Good thing the welcome wagon is already here!" His partners laughed a loud as they advance toward the wagon. "An' a pretty driver, an' a pretty rider in shot gun. Well, ain't this here a sight?"

"Maybe the three o' ya could step 'side so we don't trample ya," Shani replied in an even tone. The three stopped as the cowboy who had spoken seemed to sober up just a bit more. The smile seemed to fade from his face as he studied Shani. Pania noticed something else. The streets were clearing quickly. "Ya know, it bein' the neighbourly thing ta do an' all."

"Well now, that would indeed be the neighbourly thing," he commented as his smile returned, somewhat twisted and filled with malice as his partners came to flank him. Shani sighed and lowered her head. She didn't want this, she didn't need a gun fight. "Cept ya haveta know one thing. This here's our town. The Canton Boys run this place. Here, we're the law."

"That so," Pania replied as she slowly lifted her head. She had these three pegged quickly. They seemed the type to ransack a wagon train.

"Thet include killin' women an' children." The air became quite crisp as each participant could hear everything around them quite clearly. Shani's sudden accusation rang clear throughout the streets. She watched as one of the cowboys leaned over to the one who appeared to be the leader of this small band of brigands, and she could almost hear him mention that he was positive the kids got away and they never found them. "Guess it were lucky thet Chinaman hid 'em an' protected 'em."

She hit pay dirt. All three of them looked to her, they had hate in their eyes. One of the cowboys flanking the leader made the mistake of reaching for his pistol. His hand never even pulled the iron from its holster as Shani moved in a flash and fired. The first shot blew off his thumb, while the second went straight through his wrist. The other cowboy that flanked the leader grew



The night was uneventful while the two elves slept in shifts. The sun rose slowly as the small group broke camp and prepared for their journey. They had twenty miles to go before they hit Oxford. Shani took the reins in the wagon, as Pania rode her horse, guiding Gypsum along behind her.

The trip itself was uneventful, as they reached Oxford by mid-morning. A busy little town, people were already hustling and bustling about. But there was something Shani could not put her finger on. An uneasy feeling that she sensed from each person. They would stop and stare at the wagon as it moved slowly through the streets, but turn and walk away quickly as their eyes meet with those of the gunslingers.

As they neared the sheriff's office, loud shouting could be heard from the local saloon, and three very drunk cowboys came staggering out, each holding a bottle and laughing loudly. Shani pulled on the reins and stopped the horses, just as Pania brought her own horse

twitchy and pulled his own pistol.

Pania anticipated it, and fired a shot that went through his wrist. Two cowboys lay on the ground, screaming in pain. Leaving the third seething with hate and anger.

“If I were you,” Shani sneered right back. “I best collect yer friends an' git the hell outta here. 'Cause I'm jist bettin' that we could fill ya fulla holes if y'all reach fer thet piece...” Shani's sentence was cut short as the report of shotgun sounded out. The elves turned toward the sound and saw a broad shouldered man lowering the firearm. He had a worn and leathered look about him, and tired but suspicious eyes had seen a great deal. He wasn't a sheriff, but he seemed to hold some air of authority.

“Mitch,” he called out to the cowboy that still

stood in the street. “Collect Ferret an' Gator an' get 'em the hell back ta yer ranch.” Mitch sneered toward the man in the same manner as he did toward Shani. But the sound of a pair of shells, clinking together as they exited the chambers and fell to the ground with a thud. This was followed by th the cocking back of the hammer of a Remington made Mitch's decision to retreat quite easy. The man just watched as Mitch gathered his comrades and dragged them off toward the doctor's office. As the three disappeared into the building, the man looked to Shani and Pania.

“You two, come with me,” he merely said in a husky tone. The two elves pushed their small train forward without any argument. They didn't want to see what would happen if they did.