

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 TWENTY-TWO

Pania walked into the saloon and shook herself slightly as the rivers of rain water dripped from her duster. The rain had started hard and unexpectedly in the late afternoon, acting as some kind of omen. Shani looked up from the pool table as she was lining up a shoot. Anything to keep her mind busy after what happened this day. Walker leaned against the bar of the saloon and watched the game. He was pensive, having said twice that Joshua wouldn't be gone this long without checking in. Pania walked over to a small wood stove near the entrance of the saloon and warmed her hands as she looked out the window into the rain filled street.

"Rains gonna be 'ere fer a while," she said aloud, hoping that would break the silence.

"Least there ain't no thunder," Shani replied with a small smirk. Pania looked over to the elven gunslinger and smiled softly, knowing exactly what she meant. Her gaze turned back to the window as she watched rivers of rain fall down the window. It seemed so peaceful in a way, yet violent, as it made it's constant rata-tat-tat sound.

Through the fog of humidity that had steamed up the windows, something was out on the street. Pania could see something swinging in the wind. "Oh gods," she whispered as she moved to the entrance of the saloon, then out onto the boardwalk without another word. She stared hard at the object that seemed to hang heavily from a large oak tree that grew beside a small church. A distant lightning strike light up the street just enough for her to see it clearly, and she gasped as she finally spoke. "I think... is tha' Joshua!"

Shani and Walker didn't have to be told twice. They both moved quickly to the boardwalk in front of the saloon to join Pania. The small elf had already begun to walk into the street, ignoring the rain as it fell around her. Walker and Shani moved right along with her as they drew closer to the body that hung from the tree. Sure enough, it was Joshua.

Walker sneered as he took a deep breath. He was certain he knew who had done this to the young man. It wasn't enough that they shot him up, but they had to hang him in the street too. But he also kept his wits about him, knowing full well what this was really about. "It's a diversion," he said through clenched teeth. "Dorval's more 'n likely got a coupla his men headin' ta the cells ta bust out Mitch."

Shani checked her pistols and looked to Pania. The elven bard checked her own, but drew her rapier. "Use the shadows," she suggested. "Try an' ge' the jump on 'em." The other two nodded in agreement, as both Shani and Walker drew pistols. The trio snaked along the buildings keeping close to the walls as they tried to blend in. Shani and Pania did it quite well, having been in this situation many a time before. Walker was surprisingly quiet for the size of man he was. Pania watched the streets around the office carefully. She pointed without

a word as she saw a shadowy figure near the side of the building.

Dorval's men were not nearly as quiet as the two elves and their human companion. Their attention was fixed on their current work, and they didn't pay much heed to the street. They assumed the rain would keep most people in doors. So neither man heard the small elven bard come up behind them as Shani and Walker moved to flanking positions. Pania raised her rapier and let it touch the jawline of the cowboy she knew to be Gator. "Awful bad weather ta be out like this, aye?" she said calmly as she pushed just a bit, letting the tip of the rapier draw just a bit of blood.

Gator didn't move, but his eyes looked toward the voice. He knew if he turned he was dead. "Ev'nin' Deputy," he said with a smirk. His partner reached for his pistol, but found the business end of a long barrel pushed against his temple. His hands slowly raised into the air as his eyes looked to Shani. Walker came out from his hiding spot, sawed off shotgun held up and aimed at Gator. "Fancy meetin' ya here."

"Out fer a stroll?" Pania replied a little too calmly. She pushed back the urge to conjure a small cantrip, and send a lick of flame up his nose. "Bi' rainy fer tha', innit?"

"You boys been sneakin' 'roun' a bit too much," Shani added quickly as she watched Gator's comrade. "Y'all shoulda stayed at home t'night. But, glad ya could come out. This give me the option ta let y'all give Dorval a message."

Gator strained his eyes to look toward Shani, his body uncomfortable as he was backed against the wall, the tip of the rapier held firm along his jawline. "A message? What message? Thet ya gonna curl up an' die?" He snorted a force laugh but winced as he felt the rapier tip push a bit more. "Alright. Wha's the message?"

"T'morra," Shani hissed. "Six o'clock tomorra night. Dorval meets me here, out in the street." Both Pania and Walker looked to Shani with some caution in their eyes. They both knew when someone was being called out, and that was just what Shani was doing now. "We end this once an' fer all." She pulled away from Gator's comrade and motioned for him to move. "Jist me an' Dorval," Shani repeated as she motioned for Pania to step back. The elven bard took a step away from Gator and the cowboy moved forward slowly.

"Dorval's gonna gun you down, girl," Gator sneered.

Shani drew her other Colt and held it firm as she aimed it at Gator's head. "Dorval ain't gonna do nuthin' ifn I shoot ya right here. Now git!" The trio watched as the two cowboys walked slowly to their horses and rode out-of-town. Pania and Walker looked to Shani for a moment. The elven gunslinger took a long, deep breath. "Please tell me I didn't jist do somethin' stupid."

Walker studied the woman for a moment before speaking. "Ya think ya kin take Dorval?"

Shani looked over to the old soldier and slowly nodded. "I like ta think thet my braggin' is more 'n jist bravado. I jist gotta b'lieve I'm better 'n he is." She turned toward the saloon and slowly began to trudge back. Walker and Pania quickly followed pace. "We need ta come up with a plan," Shani finally said as she entered the saloon. "Dorval ain't stupid, he's more 'n likely gonna try an' pull the wool over my eyes an' have his men set up ta take me out."

"If I were Dorval, that's what I'd do," Walker agreed with a slow nod as he put his shotgun in a wooden gun rack. "Probably from the rooftops, alleyways. You called him out, means he's gonna send word where the fight's gonna take place. An' he'll be cocky, pick some place where ev'ryone can see." He moved to the bar and took up his position he held previously. "He'll wanna make an example o' ya."

"Thet's what I'm gunnin' fer," Shani replied as she leaned against the pool table. "Panny. Kin ya check an' see if Ming's over at the church. Git 'im an' bring 'im here." Pania nodded quickly as Walker just watched the elven gunslinger for a moment. A smile came to his face as he saw the wheels turn in her head. "I got me a goddamned plan."

The rain had let up just a bit as Gator and his comrade rode back into the ranch. Dorval furrowed his brow as he noted the lack of two extra riders. He moved forward on the porch of the ranch house and leaned against one of the posts. "Where's Mitch?" he called out as the two cowboys carefully tied their horses to the hitching posts in the horse shelter.

"Sheriff got ta us first," he admitted with some regret. "Got a message fer ya."

Dorval pushed himself away from the post and took a step onto the ground in front of the porch. He looked to Gator with intense eyes. "Wennemein's got a message for me? Really? Well, I hope it involves her tellin' me she's surrenderin'. Then I can send 'er ont a hell."

"She's callin' ya out," Gator said quickly. He knew Dorval was not one to mince words, and like his information plain and simple. "Gun fight t'morra ev'nin' six o'clock."

Dorval snickered as he moved forward a couple of steps and looked toward the town site. "Well, that is interestin'. She wants ta die that badly, huh. Well, I see no reason not ta oblige her." He turned slowly to Gator and smiled. "Gather the boys. We got some plannin' ta do. I'll pick the spot an' you send word ta Wennemein. An' after I take her out, deal with that Alow an' Walker too. Gettin' rid o' him has been a long time comin'. An' now is just the right time for him ta be put six foot under."

