

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-FIVE

Shreveport, Louisiana, September 23, 1863

Pania removed her duster and wiped her brow. Not only was it hot, but humid; unseasonable hot and humid. Never before had she felt such conditions. The heat and humidity felt like a huge weight that bared down on her. Shani felt it too, as both gunslingers looked tired in the saddle. Even their horses loped along slowly. That didn't stop them, however, as off in the distance they could see their goal. Shreveport. Here was where Pania had wanted to come, help with whatever was needed in the Underground Railroad.

"Goddamn," Shani huffed as she tried to breath through the thick and cloying air. "Ain't never felt nuthin' like this b'fore." She pulled on the reins and brought her mount to a halt as she looked toward the town sight. "Gonna need a bath when we git into town."

"There's gotta be a place ta rest b'fore we start lookin' fer them wha' run the railroad," Pania suggested in a tired voice.

"Jist keep thet talk 'bout the railroad quiet, 'right," Shani offered her advice. "We don't need no gun play when the air's so hot it'd make a Junebug fry on a sidewalk as it's walkin'." Pania chuckled lightly with Shani's simple wisdom, but she was right. It wasn't as though they could walk door to door and ask. Both elves coaxed their horses forward toward the town. They took note of the small camp that lay on the outskirts of Shreveport, saw the armed guards. "Wonner what's goin' on?" Shani mused.

"Slave auction," Pania replied under her breath. She could see the slaves, lined up like cattle in the camp. Rich dandies walked through the camp, inspecting possible purchases for later in the day. She had only heard stories of the auctions, and now seeing one up close, she grew just that much more disgusted with the human race. "I still dunna know how one man can claim ownership o'er 'nother man, an' sell 'im like 'e were cattle."

"The obvious reason's starin' ya in the face," Shani suggested as she lit a cigarillo. "Y'all don't gotta go no further 'n the colour o' their skin." Again, Shani was right. The rich, white slavers that held court to decide the fate of the dark skinned workers. To the Confederates, this was just another day. But to a pair of elves who had only heard about such activities, it was just another nail

in the coffin of the human race.

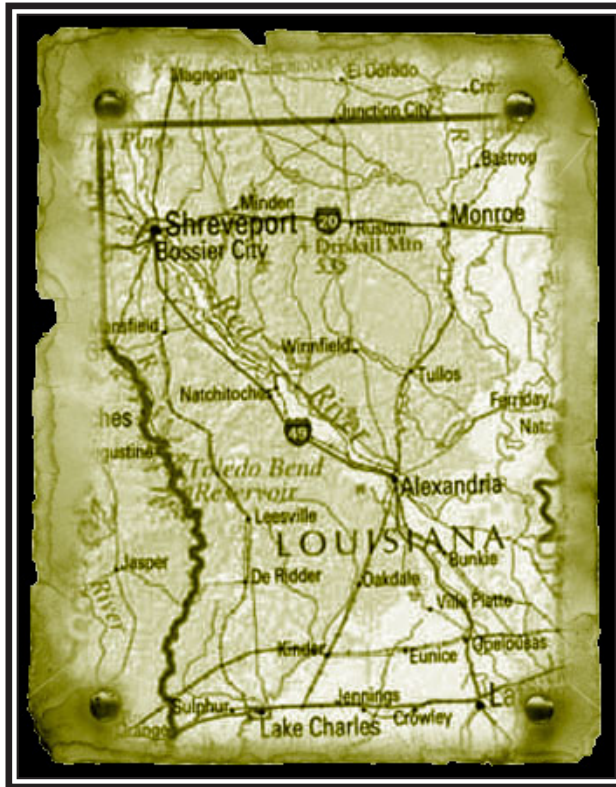
Pania motioned to Shani as they entered the town limits, pointing out the different sights to be seen. Citizens busied themselves with their days work, almost ignoring the small camp. The sight had become a normal one on auction day. For the elves, it wasn't so much the camp that filled their minds, but a place to rest, and Pania saw a rather comforting looking boarding house. They brought their horses to a halt and tied them off on the hitching posts, lazily entering the establishment. Pania held her duster over one arm while carrying in her satchel, Shani did the same, making sure that her most

precious possessions were close at hand. Shani would let Pania talk to the owner, maybe they could get a decent room, a decent bath and a hot meal.

"There looks ta be a good place there," Pania pointed out a clean looking boarding house. "Need ta get a good 'ot bath." The establishment was one of common appearance in Shreveport, with it's elegant décor and obvious southern charms. Much like the people that seemed to frequent it.

"While yer doin' thet," Shani called out as Pania opened the door to the establishment. "I'm gonna scout out, see what I kin find 'round here 'bout information on the auctions an such. Give a listen in there, maybe some loose lips." Pania nodded as Shani tipped her hat and rode

off. The pale elf stretched as she worked out the kinks in her back. She'd been riding in the saddle for too long a time, and had grown stiff. Yes, a good hot bath would be in order.



Shani brought her horse to a slow stop as she neared the gathered crowd. Their attention was riveted to the main stage as the auctioneer called out. She furrowed her brow as she saw men and women paraded onto the stage, and prices called out. Men in the crowd placed bids quickly as each lot was brought onto the stage. Shani became sickened by what she saw, but knew there was no way to stop it without getting gunned down in the streets. It was time to play things cool and just watch.

Shani gained a feel for the crowd as she watched, and saw the looks on the slaves as they were paraded up on the stage. And then she realized, she still had a large sum of the money from the job in Harrisburg. "Maybe one wrong kin make a right," she muttered under her breath. "Use some o' this here money ta buy somebody's freedom." The prices that were finalized were high, but not enough to make a significant dent in the amount she had. She looked through her money belt and found a cool one thousand tucked away. Her favourite saddle bag held the rest of her earnings.

"Ma'am," a voice called out. Shani looked up and studied the man who approached her. She didn't even realize she hadn't dismounted from her horse yet, her mind was too full of ideas. "Ya look like yer contemptin' a look over the merchandise."

She struggled with keeping a civil tongue, knowing full well the word merchandise referred to other human beings. "Been thinkin' 'bout it a might, I wager," she replied.

"Well ma'am," the man said as he approached her. "If you'll dismount, one o' the boys can take care o' yer horse an' I'll register ya with a ticket." He took out a clip board and pencil as he watched her dismount. He got a strange feeling from Shani, she didn't look like the type to be owning slaves one bit. "Mind if I ask yer interest in this auction, ma'am. Haveta know, just ta be certain. There's a lotta agitators that would like nothin' more 'n ta strip down a way o' life we built up."

"Well, I'd say thet there is mighty polite o' ya," she said with a smile after she let the workers take away her horse. "Been range ridin' fer a spell, figger it's time ta settle down. Get a piece o' my own, so ta speak."

"Puttin' the cart b'fore the horse, ain't ya ma'am?" he replied with a small snort of laughter. "Usually plantation owners buy land first, then worker stock."

"Some workers have a good eye fer land," she replied. "Be nice ta know I ain't buyin' somethin' thet'll be done in two years. I got a lotta time invested, an' I'm lookin' fer one ta help me an' mine out." She took the clipboard and wrote down her name as she spoke. "I'm here with a partner o' mine, Pania's her name."

The man nodded, confirming that Shani's bull story had done the trick. The bigger the lie, as it were. "I understand completely, ma'am. I take it you two have husbands."

"Hell no," Shani replied with a smirk, trying to hold back some laughter as she had an image float through her mind of Pania in a wedding dress getting married to some southern gentleman. No chance that would ever happen. "But ya never know what'll happen

in the future."

"True 'nough, ma'am," the man said with a smile and tipped his hat. Shani walked into the throng of people that watched the stage. She'd already seen quite a few of the slaves that had come and gone. She just wanted one, didn't matter. One to free. Her good deed, so to speak. She watched the others as they bid, studying how much the offer was, watching their facial expressions. In a way, even though she had the noblest of intentions, she felt extremely dirty.

The bidding continued as each was brought to the front. Shani found herself standing beside a rather well dressed man, a dandy as it were. He held himself with an air of importance. She then looked to the stage, and saw the latest brought on the block. The auctioneer gave no name, just a lot number. But Shani could see a dark skinned human, and looked upon the man with different eyes than the rest that stood here. He looked incredibly healthy for a slave; a strong build, tall with a humble expression. The man looked almost timidly around him, but his eyes never look directly at any one man in the area. Shani could sense something from this man, and in that moment she became disgusted with the display she had willingly taken part in.

"Bidding will start at 15 dollars," the auctioneer called out. Immediately, the dandy called out with his bid, opening the session. She knew he always backed off around one hundred dollars as she had studied his bidding before. Another called out, raising bid to twenty. When the bid hit thirty, Shani made a call.

"One hunnerd!" she called out, and looked right at the dandy. He was watching her with a smile, and Shani became surprised as he raised his own hand.

"One hundred an' twenty."

The bid surprised her. He never went above one hundred as far as she saw. But the bidding continued. Shani didn't know if this man was a caring slaver or not, but she didn't care. She knew that if she won, she had the best chance to give the man his freedom. It was a far cry from how she would usually do such a thing, busting into a place with guns blazing or steel slashing.

"One thousand!" she called out to the shock of the audience. There was silence as the crowd stared at Shani. Even the dandy was looking at her with a grin on his face. The auctioneer called out for other bids. As none came, the gavel came down, and the lot was completed. With one shocking announcement, Shani had just purchased a human being. The realization finally sunk in. Oh lord, she muttered to herself. What have I jist done?