

**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 THIRTY

*Monroe County, Indiana, October 12, 1863*

Pania Alow set down the pails of feed by the horse trough, satisfied that the horses were tended to. The wagon train had stopped for the night at a small ranch just inside the Monroe County border, owned by Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Chesterson, ranchers sympathetic to the plight of the slaves. The trek from Shreveport had not been without its small problems as they had to outrun bounty hunters, soldiers and even lawmen. In many cases, the bounty hunters were after the slaves only to discover the guides were wanted outlaws. Word spread quickly, and the small wagon train never seemed to get a break. Once they had crossed the border into Indiana, however, much of the troubles had seemed to cease.

Pania took a deep breath and stretched her limbs as she finished the menial tasks. It was a long journey, but they managed to make it with all former slaves alive. Fortunately, a good number of the other men connected to the Underground Railroad were as competent with a six gun as she and Shani were, if not more so. Pania smiled as she saw the lanky elf come around to the horse paddock. Shani looked tired, but it was a satisfied tired. They had done some good over the past couple of weeks.

"Well," Pania said in a soft voice as Shani leaned against the wooden fence. "Figure its time we moved on, don' ye think?"

"Yeah, I 'xpect so," Shani replied as she took out a cigarillo and lit it. "I figger we done jist as much good as we done hell raisin'." Shani chuckled a bit as she thought of the past few months. Each day had been an adventure; more than if she'd have gone on her own.

"Ye sound ready ta go 'ome, Shani," Pania noted as she joined the elven gunslinger by the fence. Shani nodded wordlessly, in a way confirming that it was time to go. "I think bes' place fer tha' is more 'n likely ta 'ead north. I've 'eard some thin's 'bout Lake o' the Woods from a few people here an' there. Mostly tales from the Tribes, bu' it's worth a look."

"It's worth a shot," Shani said with a heavy sigh and a nod. "Gonna seem down right borin' back on Terra-Kal, though. People gots a tendency 'o bein' a bit more civilized."

"It's also no' a frontier spirit back 'ome, ye know," Pania said with a small chuckle. The bard pushed herself off the fence and motioned for Shani to follow. "C'mon. I understan' tha' Mrs. Chesterton 'as made dumplin's fer t'night's supper. She makes the best dumplin's I ever tasted."

*South of St. Paul, Minnesota, The Mandrake Estate, October 13, 1863*

Within the heart of the lavish mansion, the owner toiled away in an ancient looking library. Placed where a wine cellar usually would be located, the walls were lined with bookshelves. Old tomes, some collecting dust, rested as though they awaited their keeper to open them for some purpose. Though, unlike any usual library, these books did not just contain historical knowledge, or mathematical figures. They contained ancient knowledge of long past arcane wisdom. Books of magic.

Even the older gentleman who puttered around in the library did not represent the typical owner of a lavish estate. He was dressed in a simple robe that swept along the floor as he walked, tied at the waist with a simple gold chord, and a hood that he kept in place when not in the confines of his library. On this day, however, he had pushed it back, allowing his long, raven hair, peppered with grey, to flow freely. His features were those of a man who had lived a life of luxury, but his eyes had seen many strange and wonderful things.

Adding to the strangeness of the man's appearance and the room itself, were the symbols engraved into the stone that made up the floor. Using limestone brought in from Indiana, the room became rather elegant with the ornate floor. To the casual observer, the circular pattern would have been wonderful, but to one more knowledgeable of certain antiquities, they would realize just how sinister those symbols were. Both the man and the room seemed as though they were both time displaced, seeming to look more comfortable in a European castle hundreds of years previous.

As the man carefully read through pages of one particular tome, The heavy oak door was pushed open. The man looked up as a well dressed young man walked through. He looked around the library for a moment, before his gaze settled upon one chest that had been tucked away in a corner, and he sighed openly. The man seemed to understand the gesture and seemed to smirk as he returned to his tome.

"Good evening Patrick," he said in an even, but polite tone. "You may take the chest if you wish. Everything inside belongs to you anyway." Patrick merely stood his ground as he stared at the man with fire in his eyes. "Of course, I don't see why you study such things as you do, it's rather barbaric."

"It's called biology, father," Patrick Mandrake finally spoke up in defiance. "It is the science of the modern world. Not like this..." He waved his arm toward the bookshelves with a look of disgust as he tried to find the appropriate word for the small library. "...archaic ritual that seems to consume you. And you call my study barbaric."

The elder Mandrake glared at his son for his



choice of words. "I will not release something that has brought this family the fortune it has worked so hard to acquire. This study will last for centuries long than your precious science."

"Foolishness," Patrick spat back. His father's eyes widened, as though Patrick had just slapped him in the face. It took everything for him to force his rage down.

"Is our..." he finally said in a quiet and even voice. "Is our guest here?"

"The gunslinger?" Patrick replied quickly with a slight look of disgust. "Yes, he arrived this morning. An odd man, I might say, for a gunslinger."

"That is none of your concern, Patrick," he replied slowly. "Fetch him and bring him to me. This gunslinger and I have a great deal which we need to discuss." Patrick said not another word as he pivoted on his heel and walked through the open door. As the younger Mandrake left, the door began to close again as though it had made the decision to do so consciously. It clicked lightly as Patrick's footsteps echoed in the hallway beyond.

The elder Mandrake merely returned to his tomes, studying intently as he dreamed of the power that would become his. His mind had become very preoccupied with such things over the past several months. Ever since he had first heard of the two elven gunslingers. At first, it was merely a passing interest, but that soon became something more when rumours of their activities in Franklin began to spread. If their power was even a tenth of what had been described, then his plan would be worth the risk.

*Monroe County, Indiana, October 14, 1863*

Pania finished loading her meager supplies onto her horse as she prepared for another long journey. She looked over to Shani as the elven gunslinger mounted her own horse. As usual, Shani didn't worry too much about supplies. The only thing she seemed to care about was some dried rations, her weapons and ammo, and the money she had 'collected' over the past year. Admittedly, Pania would have had enjoyed a moment of bliss with Shani, and a smile touched her lips as she contemplated the more than raucous adventure between the sheets they'd have. She pushed that thought away as she mounted her own horse. Shani had become a dear friend, more than just a play time lover would ever be.

"Whaddya figger?" Shani asked as she steered her horse to stand beside Pania's. "Maybe 'bout a month an' we should be near the border?"

"Aye, seem like tha'," Pania replied with a nod as she settled herself into the saddle. "Course factorin' in stops 'long the way, it may be longer. It'll be cold by the time we reach there. I think it bes'ta stop in Bloomington an' pick up supplies. B'sides, I have a friend tha' runs an establishment there I've no' seen in some time."

Shani looked to Pania and caught that glint in her eye, and she knew all too well what the elven bard was thinking. "Well, while yer rollin' 'round b'twixt the sheets with an' ol' lover," she said with a small smirk. "I kin 'least find m'self a decent poker game goin' on. Ain't had a good one since we set foot in Franklin."

As the two elves did one final check on their mounts, Shani nodded to Pania, then tipped her hat to those who had gathered to send them off. "C'mon. We ain't gonna git very far jist stan'in' here," Shani stated as she urged her mount forward. Pania wasn't far behind. As they rode off to the north, Pania felt as though they had just completed the most exciting of adventures. What little she knew that it was actually just another beginning.

