

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-ONE

The Mandrake Estate, October 14, 1863

The Elder Mandrake sat in the ornate oak chair heavily as he gazed over the pages of the ancient tome. Across the lavish desk sat a quiet and menacing gunslinger. His stetson was pulled down low over his eyes and a scarf covered his nose and mouth completely obscuring his features. The heavy duster jacket he wore had seen better days, and his hands rested gently in his lap, not far from a pair of long barrel pistols that hung with care on his hips. He realized he had need of this man, if his presence did not disturb him just a little. There was something about the mysterious gunslinger, quiet in his demeanor, that set people on edge, and he had sensed it from his son, Patrick, as the young man brought the tall stranger into the inner sanctum of the estate.

Mandrake leaned forward in his chair and carefully flipped through the onion skin pages of the tome, his eyes never directly looking to the gunslinger. "You haven't given me a name," he said with some caution. "We have discussed many things this day, but you have failed to provide some identity as to who you are."

"The Indians say that a name is very sacred," the gunslinger replied in a slow and gravely voice. He never looked up at all, did not move his hand or his body as he spoke; he didn't even seem to breath. "Knowing someone's true name means you can have control over them. But I believe you already know that, Vladimir."

Mandrake leaned back in his chair and studied the gunslinger carefully. No introductions had been given at all, yet this man knew of his first name without any hesitation. "How did you..."

"You have a reputation, my friend," the gunslinger said in low hiss. "Do not worry. I have no want to take that which you control, nor use you to my own will. The power you wield is just a tenth of that which I can command. Besides," he said as he finally raised his head, his eyes poking out from underneath the brim of the stetson, burning red as though filled with fire. "You have offered me something very intriguing." Vladimir shifted in his chair, perhaps uneasily as the gunslinger seemed so calm around him. Almost too calm. "For now, you may call me by the name of the place where I first gained my power. You may call me Shilo."

"Shilo," Vladimir replied with a quick nod, satisfied that he had some way to identify this man. It might come in useful should he ever be at odds with the dark gunslinger. "I have heard no word of your exploits on the frontier."

"Reputation," the gunslinger replied as his gaze shifted toward the stacks of books that sat behind Vladimir. "I have no want for a reputation, as you mortals would see it. Even those that you offer to me, have a reputation. Wild hearts that are filled with power. You have not heard of me, because I do not wish to be

known."

Vladimir saw a chance to change the subject as the gunslinger mentioned the two elves once again. "What do you plan on doing with them once you have captured them? Keep in mind, I am paying you to bring..."

"Do not fret," the gunslinger interrupted as he raised a hand to silence Vladimir. "You will receive the elves. At least, you will receive the Black Mask." He chuckled slightly as he spoke the moniker used for Shani Wennemein, and that low laughter was enough to put Vladimir in an even more uneasy state.

"But I am paying you..." Vladimir began to protest, but again the gunslinger waved a dismissive hand to silence his argument.

"Keep your payment," he stated. "You will have the Black Mask. All I want is the Pale Rider. She will feed me for a long time, and sustain my power. The Black Mask will be more than enough for your purpose, Vladimir. There is nothing more to discuss. Just know that in ten days I will bring you your prize."



Approaching Bloomington, Indiana, October 14, 1863

The horses moved slowly as they were guided toward the community. It had just what Shani and Pania would need for a small lay over before the long trek north through Minnesota. Pania smiled softly as she saw the streets in the distance, the soft light that began to show from the windows of the houses as the sun began to retreat back past the horizon.

Even Shani gave a sigh of relief, as she felt like she'd been riding full tilt since she met up with the elven bard that she was now getting used to having as her partner. Whether it was fate or pure luck, having Pania by her side was a godsend. Granted, she'd probably never admit it openly.

Pania sighed happily as the pair rode their horses into the main street of Bloomington. She nodded to those who walked by and greeted them with the usual pleasantries. Passed by shops that were just beginning to close for the day as their owners were ready to retire for the evening, and off in the distance, Pania could see a lavish looking house, not quite a mansion, but it was expensive looking. The sign read Madam Arella Dorchester's Boarding House For Young Women, but the elven bard knew what really went on behind the closed doors. The red velvet drapes that hung in the windows were more than an indication as to what it was.

"There 'tis," she said with a contented smile. "Avena seen tha' place in a good long while."

"Oh dang straight," Shani replied, surprising Pania just a bit. Shani was grinning playfully, but not in the direction of the boarding house. Rather in the

direction of a bustling saloon. "It has been too long since I set foot in there. Las' time I nearly lost my shirt playin' poker."

"I be' tha' woulda been int'restin'," Pania commented with a coy smile. Shani finally looked over to Pania, slowly putting two and two together as she furrowed her brow. "Jus' imaginin', luv," Pania said somewhat defensively, then chuckled lightly having placed Shani in such an awkward spot yet again. "Truth be tol' I'd 'ang ye 'at down with the girls at the boardin' 'ouse. Soft bed, wonderful food. An' b'cause ye know me, I'm sure tha' Arella Dorchester can ge' ye a deal."

"I'm gonna go out on a limb an' guess thet y'all hooked up at one time," Shani commented as she steered her horse toward the saloon. "Thet she's the one y'all 're thinkin' 'bout wrestlin' in the sheets." Pania never said a word, but shrugged lightly. Shani huffed as she dismounted, knowing the coy smile on the bard's lips was answer enough for her. "I tell you what, I think 'bout it while I'm winnin' back alla the money I lost last time, ya hear?"

Shani tied her horse to the hitching rail as Pania guided her own further down the street. Inside the saloon, the elven gunslinger could hear the jubilant cheers and the clink of poker chips. The tinkling of ivories denoted a smooth piano player was in the saloon that night, keeping the mood festive with a lively piece. Shani opened the gated doors to the establishment and leaned lazily against the door frame as she watched the crowd. Several faces she recognized in this place, and maybe a few might recognize her.

"Well," called out a gruff, but cheerful voice. Shani looked to her left as she saw a large man push himself away from the bar. "Look what the autumn wind blew inta town, boys. Shani, yer a sight fer sore eyes."

"Slow Hand Johnson," she drawled with a smile. "Been a while since I seen you. Y'all been keepin' y'self pretty low key, I hear."

"Ya know the way it is Shan," Johnson replied with a boisterous laugh. "Ain't 'xactly like you. I hear the army were chasin' yer tail. What you doin' in town?"

"Jist passin' through on the way north, figger I stop fer a bit," she replied as a smile formed on her face. "In partic'lar, win back thet money ya done won from me 'bout a year back. So, I'd say if there's a game, deal me in boys."

Madam Arella Dorchester's Boarding House For Young Women was at its usual relaxing time of the day. Just before some of the more ravenous clientele would come calling. All the girls knew who was here for business, and who was just coming to call for a visit. Though there was the odd customer that would stop by, unannounced that one of the women knew quite well.

Such was the case this evening.

Several of the young women stopped their

playful discussion as the door opened up without the warning of a knock. They watched as the figure make her entrance, marveling at the finely crafted European style clothing she wore. The women continued to watched as she stopped in the entryway to the living room, delicate hands landing with ease on sensuously curved hips, accented more by her thigh high boots. They gazed at the ornate rapier, held fast in its sheath at her hip. Then came the captivating part as the woman looked up and her eyes seemed to dance from person to person in the room.

Pania Alow always knew how to make an entrance.

"Ifn ye fine ladies pardon the int'rruption," she said in a sultry voice. "Bu' would Madam Arella be 'bout."

"I thought I recognized that swagger when you walked through the door," a woman called out with a smile, her voice betraying her southern upbringing. Pania turned just slightly, as her eyes seemed to sparkle with the appearance of Arella. "Landsakes alive, girl," Arella said as she approached the elven bard and gave her a warm hug. "It has been too long."

"It 'as indeed," Pania replied as she returned the hug. She stepped back just a bit, her eyes appraising the figure of Arella before her. A full figured woman, with creamy white skin, long chestnut brown hair kept in curls that seemed to dance on her shoulders. A bodice that accented all the right places only added to the floor length dress that this stately woman wore. "Ye are a sight fer sore eyes, luv," Pania cooed.

"So, might I inquire as to why you have stopped by?" Arella asked with a coy, but knowing smile. Pania took a deep breath and seemed to hum as she nodded her head. It had indeed been too long.

Indiana border

The horse's heavy hooves seemed to shatter the earth as they landed. It stopped by command of its rider, the mysterious gunslinger. Just like the rider, the horse was also a mystery. Draped in tattered leathers that seemed to hide it's true form, and eyes that seemed to burn with a fire inside of them. All around the horse and rider everything had died. Plants and animals alike merely fell to their death in the wake of this black steed. Even the sky seemed to become gray, blotting out the stars where this rider traveled.

Death always lay in their wake. It was the trademark of this mysterious gunslinger.

The rider looked out toward the horizon and a sneer, if it could be called that, formed on his blackened and broken face. His quarry was resting, which meant he had time. Neither one of them would know what was coming.

So much the better. It would make the hunt that much sweeter.