

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-THREE

Bloomington, Indiana, October 14, 1863

Clem paced back and forth in the post master's office. Since the message had been written, three other gunslingers joined the small meeting. Close friends of Clem's, they saw dollar signs as soon as word spread that Black Mask had been sighted in the local saloon. The three discussed the rumours about her and the other gunslinger, Pale Rider.

"I heard that them two is pardnered up," one of the young men stated. "An' thet she's worse'n Black Mask."

"Hell, I heard that they both got some o' the best shots in the whole midwest," another piped up. "I got a friend what live over in Franklin that seen them two do some powerful strange stuff."

"So what the hell're we gonna do 'gainst the likes o' them?" the third stated. "The money's one thing, but hell, I don't wanna die."

Clem stopped his pacing as he looked to his three friends. "We just gotta keep 'em busy," he explained with a smile. "I figger them army'll pay us at least half o' what them reward posters say. If it's just Black Mask, then that's still twenny five grand. An' if Pale Rider is 'round town, then that's fifty grand split five ways."

"Five?" the post master said with a snort of a laugh. "Clem, you should have listened to your mother and stayed in school. There's only four of you."

Clem grinned, displaying a row of rather yellowed teeth as he looked to the post master. "I'm includin' you in on that, Sir. Yer the one that made the call."

"Oh, how very generous of you," the post master replied as he rolled his eyes. His attention drifted back to his telegraph as it seemed to spring to life, and he picked up a pencil and began writing furiously. "Message has been received," the post master informed the junior cowboys. "The United States Army would like to pass on their thanks for the information you provided. A detail will be dispatched from Bedford in the morning."

Clem furrowed his brow as he looked back to his companions. "Mornin'. That mean it could be late afternoon, maybe evenin' b'fore they get here."

"What do we do 'till then?" one of the men asked.

Clem began to smile as a hand rested on his gun belt. "Hell, we do what we were born ta do, fellas. Gonna keep 'er busy, an' if that don't work, then I guess a lil gunplay ain't gonna hurt none."

to pack her things up as she finished off her whiskey while she laughed with Slow Hand. The pair had a lot of catching up to do, and the bar tender didn't mind that they took their time. At least they weren't being rowdy at all, and it gave the bar keeper something to listen to and chuckle over as he took to cleaning tables and storing bottles of alcohol.

"You remember when we first hooked up?" Slow Hand said with a sly grin. "I saw ya screamin' yer head off, layin' on them railroad tracks. Thought ya were gonna die."

"Oh gods, ya hadda remind me o' thet," Shani replied with a soft chuckle. "Hell, thet were the first time I ever seen a train. I had no clue what it were. But you seem ta be the only one willin' ta drag me offa them tracks. Ifn it weren't fer you, I don't know what woulda happened."

The pair continued sharing in old stories of their past, how they first met, how it was Slow Hand who taught her how to shoot and care for a pistol, and how it was Shani that taught Slow Hand how to smile. As they talked, the bar tender stood beside them, not caring if they hurried as he cleaned. He stopped to lean on his broom, laughing as they told story after story.

The three stopped talking as a glass window pane shattered and a rock thumped its way across the floor. The bar tender looked toward the street through the window and scowled as he saw four men standing outside. Shani and Slow Hand had turned toward the window as well, the elven gunslinger sighing openly.

"Clem!" the bar tender shouted loudly as he put his broom aside. "You get your ass home! Right now before I come out there an' whup you good!"

"Don't want no trouble from you, Shiller," Clem shouted back. "We just wanna talk with Black Mask."

The bar tender looked back to Shani and Slow Hand, the former already standing up as she checked her weapons. "Clem's an idiot, but he's a good kid. I'll tan his hide for this, but just don't kill him."

"I ain't got any 'tentions o' killin' 'im," Shani replied with a huff as she holstered her long barrel. "'Sides, if he's dead, he ain't gonna learn nuthin'." She started to move forward but stopped as she heard the familiar sound of a gun being loaded. Slow Hand was making certain his weapon was ready to go. He looked to her with a knowing smirk and she replied with a nod. "Anyways, it ain't like it's four ta one. I gots back up, an' thet jist means thet Clem an' his boys 're now the underdogs."

Chairs pushed back lazily as card players said their good byes to each other. The boisterous saloon had grown quiet as people began to move off to paid rooms or to their homes. Even Shani was beginning

The two lovers lay contented as they held each other close. For Pania it had been so long since she had felt this way. Coming back to Bloomington helped

a great deal, and this moment helped to drain all of her tensions and worries away. Arella slipped out of the embrace to prop herself up on one arm as she studied Pania. The elven bard merely lay back and watched Arella. So much to say, but so little time.

"I missed you," Arella said in a quiet whisper. "I often thought I wasn't never gonna see you again. Especially when those dime store novels started cropping up about the Legend o' Pale Rider."

Pania groaned and rolled her eyes with mention of the rag novel. "Oh gods, ye had ta make mention o' tha' pile o' tripe," she said as she seemed to push herself down under the sheets, as though the mere mention of it was enough to cause great embarrassment. "The thin's they write 'bout me in tha' thing... They make it sound like I've go' supernatural powers 'r sumthin'."

"Pania," Arella said with a smile as she leaned over and kissed Pania's nose. "I've seen you cast spells an' do things no other person I ever met could do. Not even those magicians in New York or Boston. Those things are all just illusion an' slight o' hand compared ta what you can do. What might seem normal to you, ain't so normal to us." Arella let a sly smile cross her lips as her voice became a sultry whisper. "An' that alone is one o' the reasons I love you so much."

The pair began to lean in close to each other, feeling the passion of the moment, something that both had not had in so very long; not since their last meeting. Closer they came, feeling the heat of each others bodies.

In the distance, a shattering window brought them back to reality, as though a rug was quickly pulled from underneath them. Shouts on the street below soon followed. Arella wrapped a sheet around herself as she moved to the window. "Oh hell!" she said with some frustration, both on the sudden interruption as much as she recognized who was on the street. "It's that kid, Clem. He's stirrin' up trouble again."

"Wha's 'e doin'?" Pania said as she stood beside Arella and peered out the window. Her eyes focused on the four men, and then narrowed as she recognized

a fifth, tall and lanky figure coming out of the saloon. "Bloody 'ell!" she cried out as she moved away from the window.

"What is it?" Arella asked quickly as she watch Pania dress in a rather hurried manner. "What's goin' on?"

"Tha' one tha' jus' walked out o' the saloon," Pania replied as she reached for her gun belt and rapier. "Tha's me partner. Shani, also known as the Black Mask."

Arella looked back to the street below, catching sight of a sixth person. "Slow Hand Johnson just came outta the saloon. I think he's sidin' with your friend."

"Bloody..." Pania huffed as she pulled on the long coat over her shoulders. "This Clem more 'n likely 'as dollar signs fer eyes. Be' 'e called Shani out. An' Shani's no' one ta back down from a fight, tha's fer certain."

"You gonna help her out?"

"I'm gonna make bloody certain tha' Clem dunna ge' 'is face shot off," Pania said as she completed one last inspection. "Shani dunna need the 'elp, bu' this Clem needs a lesson in manners. An' some brains."



The tall figure watched from the shadows down the street. A sickly smile crossed his rotted lips as he knew what was about to happen. Both of his targets would soon make themselves known. It was the way of gunslingers, especially those who made reputations for themselves. He began to move forward down the street, keeping in the shadows as he watched the scene before him.

It wouldn't be long now, he could almost taste the power that would come to him. So easy it would be. A pity he would have to do the same to Mandrake; after all, he had lived an unlife for so long, he had learned not to trust ones like Mandrake who coveted power so much.

This night, Black Mask and Pale Rider would be his.