

THE ADVENTURES OF BLACK MASK AND PALE RIDER

TALES OF TERRA-KAL

BY TIM HOLTORF



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Black Mask & Pale Rider, Shani Wennemein and Pania Alow are copywritten by Tim Holtorf 2009.

THE BROACH

The pair of horses came to a quick stop at the entrance to the old mine shaft. Cut into the rocky cliff face, the shaft had been abandoned for years. Some say it was a curse that drove the miners mad, others said a plague wiped them out. No one really knew what had happened all those years ago. The mine itself was to aid in the production of fuel for the newly developed airships that would shuttle elven travelers between the major cities of the continent. Whatever had happened, it backed up the launch of the first steam powered ship by several years.

Pania Alow considered this bit of history as she dismounted her horse and walked toward the cave entrance.

“Ya know, I could give ya a hand, Girly Girl,” Shani Wennemein said, still sitting in the saddle of her own horse.

Pania furrowed her brow slightly at hearing the nickname. After almost one hundred years and Shani still would call her that. “Needs to be done on me own, Shani,” she replied with a sigh. She couldn't get mad at Shani for using the small nickname. It had stuck after all these years. The elven gunslinger gave Pania a nod and relaxed in her saddle. “If ye 'ear trouble, come barrellin' in.”

Pania didn't wait for acknowledgement from Shani as she picked up a torch and began moving forward into the darkened caverns. Once lit, she could see the remains left behind in the mine shaft. It must have been years since anyone had entered this place, but the Council of the Sacred Rose had told her that her mission, her final test of knighthood lay in this shaft.

Pania didn't know what to expect, her bardic upbringing thought of the truths she could learn, while the finely honed senses of a paladin coursed through her telling her that trouble lay all around. While she could sense danger, she kept her rapier sheathed on her left hip, and her pistols in their holsters. Not many on Terra-Kal knew of her other

worldly weapons, but she was allowed by her superiors to take them. To anyone else, she'd explain they were fancy looking flint locks.

Outside the breeze was light and comforting, but as Pania moved through the mine shaft there was a howling and rush of air. She braced herself, knowing full well that it was just the air, not some folk tale of some demon within the shaft. But she did hear something.

She approached a small door, held closed by a rusty lock. Pania leaned forward, pressing her ear against the old wood and listened carefully. Nothing. Only the howls and moans of the wind met her ears.

“One bullet,” she muttered as she drew a pistol and fired. The bullet hit the lock, shattering it easily. The chain fell to the ground and the door burst open. Suddenly, there was no longer the howls and moans of the wind.

Pania could only stare in disbelief as she gazed beyond the doorway. The room was circular, and lighted by a few torches. On what appeared to be an altar was the most light, as it streamed over the glittering armour and weapons that lay upon it. The armour appeared well cared for, and something a knight would wear with pride. She could see the crest on the shield; a simple red rose, the mark of the Knights of the Scarlet Rose.

While the armour was intriguing, it was something else that caused Pania to pause. Two people; or rather one person and a creature. Screaming at each other. The person was a waif of an elven woman, who looked no older than eighty, very young. Probably stumbled upon the entrance and went exploring.

In 'er night gown? Pania's mind asked. Yes indeed, the elven woman was wearing nothing but a nightgown. Not exactly something to go walking about along the roads, let alone in an abandoned mine shaft.

Or facing a hideous creature in battle.

The creature wasn't tall by any means. It seemed



hunched over, skin leathery and calloused. Its hand held in hooks as though that was the only way it could attack. A large brow covered its eyes, as though to shade it from the light. It shuffled as it walked around, limping on both legs. Its clothing was tattered and worn, almost ready to rot off its body.

Neither of them turned to face Pania as she looked back and forth between them. They kept screaming at each other, and taking a weak swing of a fist every so often. The scene was bizarre, almost comical, had the situation not been so dire. Pania took a step forward, waiting to see what kind of reaction she would receive as she would be interrupting this pitched battle. Perhaps heated argument would be a better way to describe it.

"Screamin' match," Pania muttered as she stepped into the room. Still, the pair yelled and swung out at each other, paying no heed to the blond elf. This gave Pania time to study the situation again, as neither combatant in this battle was actually throwing a punch that would be deemed as harmful. She put together that the creature was bound to this place, the shackles that held its ankles more than clear. Adding the rattling of heavy chains only gave credence to that assumption.

The girl, meanwhile, seemed very angry, quite hostile, even if any attack she made was less than affective. Her face was twisted with anger and hatred as she screamed at the creature. The armour and weapons on the altar were almost forgotten, having become less interesting than the scene before her. What really caught Pania's attention, however, was an object that lay harmlessly on the ground between the pair.

Simple yet ornate all at the same time. A small brooch, gold leaves that seemed to hold dearly to the red rose that made up the centre piece of the small piece of jewelry. She knew what it was; the symbol of those who were members of the Order of the Scarlet Rose. Only those charged with the most precious of duties were awarded these marks. Pania had only seen one other in her lifetime, and she took care of it. The brooch was not hers, but a memento of the fallen paladin who became the elven vampire Ya'Row. But this brooch belonged to someone, that someone either the waif of a girl, or the creature.

Pania shifted back to the lack luster battle that went on before her. She took a step forward, clearing her throat just a bit. When there was no response, she cleared her throat again, only a bit louder. Still no response. Pania sighed and looked between the two once again before she tried one last time.

"Ey!" she called out in a loud voice. Both combatants stumbled a bit, surprised by the sudden shout. Neither one had any idea that Pania was there. "Bloody 'ell, ye think the gun shot destroyin' the lock would o' been signal 'nough." She sighed again as she shook her head and rested her hands on her hips.

"...the... the room..." the creature said in a shaken and fear filled voice. "...it... it is warded. Sound... cannot come in... nor out."

"An' 'ow ye ge' 'ere?" Pania said as she motioned

to the girl.

"I came to slay the beast that destroyed my family in this very mine," she replied in a stoic and determined voice.

"In yer nighty?"

"Well... I knew of the legend of the armour," she replied with a nervous shrug. "I didn't think I'd need armour of my own." She crossed her arms and nodded firmly as if that was all the explanation that was needed.

"...righ'," Pania stated with a hint of scepticism in her voice. She turned to study the creature. She now realized that what she saw earlier was not the creature's skin, but in fact, ragged clothing. As though, he... she... it... was wearing the contents of a rucksack.

"He would not let me at the armour," the girl stated with an accusing finger toward the creature.

"...e's no' 'xactly lookin' fierce," Pania said quietly as she looked back to the girl. Pania looked to the altar, then over to the creature again, then down to the shackles that held it firm. The chains weren't that long, maybe six feet. From the position in the wall the chains would never allow the creature to reach the altar. Even if it laid on the ground and stretched out.

Pania looked back to the girl and walked over to the altar. "Seem easy 'nough," she said with a sigh, then walked back over to the creature and gave it a shove. The creature flailed its arms and tumbled to the floor as Pania's sudden motion took it off guard. "An' no' 'xactly somethin' diff'cult ta bypass." She stepped over to the creature and helped it back up to its feet. With that motion, she caught a glimpse of his eyes. "Bu' then, ye no' the one I should be worried 'bout, are ye."

Pania moved fast, turning as she removed one of the pistols. She wasn't as fast as Shani ever was, but it was fast enough for this. The girl was no mere girl it seemed, Pania realized as she fanned her hand on the hammer of the Smith and Wesson. In her place was a much more dangerous creature. A succubus. Pania fired until the weapon's bullets were spent, then drew the other pistol and emptied it into the succubus. Each bullet that slammed into the succubus caused her to scream in rage.

"I knew it were a good idea ta soak me bullets in 'oly water," Pania said with a triumphant grin as she holstered the second pistol. "An' tha's no' the only thin' I soaked." She drew her rapier, the blade gleamed in the low light as she muttered an incantation. Fire leaped up the length of the blade and Pania lunged forward.

The succubus was waiting. No longer was she in a weaker former, and she smiled wickedly. "Oh to be free of that feeble form," she laughed with sadistic glee and rushed toward Pania. The succubus' attack was met with an equally skilled parry, as Pania's flaming blade stopped the claws of the succubus with ease.

"Ye mus' be a young one," Pania chided with a grin. "Ta be so easily fooled by a paladin."

"Paladins aren't allowed to fool anyone," the succubus scowled and continued her attack. "Unless you aren't really a paladin."

“Oh, I'm a paladin,” Pania grinned as she continued to easily parry the claws of the succubus. “I were talkin' 'bout 'im.” The comment made the succubus stop. She looked to the form that wore ragged clothing, stood with a slight hunch and seemed to limp every time it walked. It was even chained to the wall.

“I don't...” The succubus' words were cut short, as Pania's rapier thrust up with an opening. The elven swashbuckler held the hilt of the rapier firm as the blade poked through the succubus' head as though it sat on a pike. With a flick of her wrist, she pulled the blade back and watched as the succubus slumped lifelessly to the floor.

“Tha' were less 'n epic,” she smirked as she cast an incantation. Dust crawled over the body of the succubus, eating away at it until there was nothing left. Pania turned to the paladin and reached out carefully, removing the heavy cloak and hood that the old elf wore. She smiled

as she saw his eyes, twinkling with excitement. His skin was wrinkled and his hair, long and tangle. Still, he had attempted to keep himself presentable. Even under such rotting clothes.

“How did you know?” he asked with a small chuckle.

“I saw it in yer eyes,” Pania replied with a smile. “Now, le's see if we cannu ge' ye outta them bonds.”

“Are you so certain, Lady Alow,” the paladin remarked in a most serious tone. “You entered here on a quest, not even knowing the goal. But you came at any rate. You still have a choice to make.” He motioned his arm toward the well kept armour and weapons on the alter as he studied Pania.

She watched him for a moment, then picked up the broach carefully in her slender fingers. Pania walked over to him and pinned the broach carefully to his clothes. She stepped back and smiled. “I've already made me choice.”