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

PART ONE

High Court of Stonebridge, Brytilonia Parliament

“...at this present point in time, we must ensure the safety of those merchants that utilize the Merchant's Road for transporting of goods,” the high magistrate's voice droned in his monotonous way. Pania Alow sat with journal in hand, quill hovering above the parchment as she waited for something, anything of interest to come from this monthly meeting of Brytilonian government. Presently, she felt that any distraction that could take her away from such dull proceedings would be a welcome one. Even the pixie that had very recently come into her life was fast asleep in the breast pocket of her bolero jacket. This new, small creature was something Pania was still getting used to.

She stirred slightly as she felt the heavy thump as someone sat beside her. Pania turned to her left and smiled as she saw Shani, the lean elf removing her stetson as she got comfortable in the hard wooden chair. “Thought ye'd be off tearin' up the countryside,” Pania smirked as she playfully teased. She looked down at Shani's frame and took note that she still wore the twin gun belts around her waist. “I thought ye werena gonna wear those 'round 'ere.”

“Well, I had thought 'bout it,” Shani said with a small nod as she pointed toward Pania's hips, motioning toward the Smith and Wessons that hung neatly to the elven bard. “But then you'd haveta start explainin' that too.” Shani peered a little closer to Pania, finally pointing out the small, glowing creature that seemed to be snoring away happily in Pania's breast pocket. “What's this all 'bout?”

Pania looked down as the tiny pixie shifted her form and stretched a bit, but did not wake up. “This is Verit,” she began to explain. “I got a letter from ye mum the other day, d'livered by the wee one 'ere. Seems the Mage Academy in Arcanum Bridge 'as felt that me own magical abilities 'ave grown, an' an invitation 'as been extended ta meet with the Academy Board o' Education.” Pania looked up to Shani and shrugged lightly. “As such, I get me own familiar ta 'elp with spells an' whatnot.”

“Thet'd be a might weird ta have thet thing makin' a nest in yer pocket,” Shani stated as she leaned back in her chair.

“Better than when she tried makin' a nest in me 'air,” Pania said with a sigh. “Tha's a lot like Waien, wha' with Aasia puttin' 'is 'air in braids an' so on.” The pair chuckled as they thought of the rather grim image of Waien Argith, son of the arch druid of the Diplomacy of the Garden, the natural centre of Brytilonia. Instead of following in his father's footsteps, however, Waien wanted to become a mage. That didn't work out so well, as his constant carousing and womanizing got him kicked

out of the Academy. Now, he tried to make peace with his past. “I think Waien's 'ere t'day. Saw Mandrel 'bout. Sywyn's supposed ta give a report ta the magistrates.”

“Yeah, I spoke ta Sywyn earlier,” Shani replied with a nod. “Seems thet there's some brigands 'bout on the road b'tween Brockton an' Stonebridge. Attacks started 'bout ten days 'go.”

Pania carefully sat upright in her chair, hoping not to disturb the tiny pixie, but even so there was a small peep and Verit was awake, clinging to the edge of Pania's pocket. The elven bard looked directly at Shani. “When we came back, I thought I 'eard somethin' in the woods. Ye figure there coulda been somethin' ta tha'?”

“Ain't sure, but I ain't takin' chances. Why I kept my guns handy,” Shani said as she motioned to Pania. “An' I dare say thet you had the same idea.” Shani furrowed her brow for a moment as she studied Pania again. “What 'xactly you doin' here 'gain?”

“Writin' a report fer me father,” Pania explained with a shrug. “E said it would be useful ta learn, as 'e'd like fer me ta take me 'and at the newspaper business. Said it would be nice if I could let 'im retire in a few years, seein' 'ow 'e'd like ta move on an' try somethin' new.”

“Yer daddy's been at the Brockton Courier fer goin' on seventy five years,” Shani remarked. “Think you'll be able ta do somethin' like thet?”

“Not sure, really,” she sighed as she sat back in her chair. “On the one 'and, it'll be a nice change ta do somethin' like tha', bu' on the other, it'll never compare with wha' the two o' us saw.” She looked out over the main floor of the Magistrate's Court. “As per example...” she said as she motioned to the floor. “Granted, me father did say 'e wanted me ta come ta Overbrook fer a presentation. Says it's ta be announced by Thomas Til'Avan. Ye know 'im, the great inventor.”

Shani chuckled and nodded as she thought of the many times she'd heard the elf's name. “Oh, yeah, I rememmer him. He's thet one thet come up with the printin' press an' the image copier, but give 'em fancy names an' all. Wonner what he'd call a train ifn he ever seen one.”

“Goodness knows,” Pania commented with a small smile. “Anyway, would ye like ta come? Be a sight more excitin' than this, ta be certain.”

Shani shrugged lightly and looked to Pania. “Might be a hoot jist ta see what he's come up with next.” Both elves looked to the floor of the court as they heard the herald clear his throat.

“Magistrates, I present to you, Lord Sywyn Wennemein, Sherrif of Stonebridge County,” he stated in a clear and bold voice. “As is custom, Magistrate Unia Wennemein will step down from these proceedings to

be replaced with Lord Wilmer Cobblestone.” There was a small murmur that went through the attending crowd, discussing the proceedings thus far. It had become common practise for Unia Wennemein to step down from the Magistrate's table whenever Sywyn stepped forward to present a report. Unia was his mother, after all, and it would be seen as a conflict of interest were she to remain at the table.

Sywyn, dressed in his dress uniform of the Stonebridge Knight's Command, bowed to his mother as she stepped down, and then to Wilmer as he took her place at the table. Then, he began his report from the podium. “Magistrates, I thank you for allowing me to address you this day. As you know for the past three weeks the Merchant's Road and Farmer's Road has been plagued with banditry activity. The Patrollers of the outlying regions have reported they have begun to make some headway on the roads, as many of the small bands have been captured. But they have reported they suspect there is an outside influence at work. It will be difficult in the coming days to root out who may be directing them, and I respectfully ask that some additional troops are sent to the northern areas of Stonebridge County.”

The three magistrates quietly discussed the request for a moment before the Premier spoke up. “It is with regret that I have to deny this request, Lord Wennemein,” the Premier announced as he held a parchment up and slipped on a pair of wire frame glasses. “Lord Cobblestone has informed us of recent events near Arcanum Bridge. This court has received a letter from The Exalted, leader of the Mysterian Senate. He has reason to believe that one of his rivals is planning for war with an attack on Arcanum Bridge. While he has not named who his rival is, and even being a Mysterian, I trust his judgement. We've been keeping a close eye on Mysteria, and Rom'Orlian has worked diligently to preserve the peace, focusing his attentions on the people of Mysteria first. I would like you, Lord Wennemein, to join the Sherrif of Arcanum County and begin making details for scouting parties and defense of the city there.”

“Beg your pardon, M'Lord,” Sywyn replied with a small bow. “But the farmers and merchants toward Overbrook, Ashtonford and Brockton are requesting more patrols.”

“You may recruit volunteers if you wish, Lord Wennemein,” the Premier informed him without hesitation. “But all our experienced manpower is needed at Arcanum Bridge and the surrounding county.” There was a

hush that went through the room as everyone waited for Sywyn to speak. Sywyn may not have agreed with such orders, but he never vocally berated the Magistrates. He also knew when the Magistrates opinion could not be swayed. At least he managed to acquire some boon from the table, as he could recruit those he trusted to scout along the Merchant's and Farmer's Roads.

In the balcony overlooking the court, Shani and Pania watched and listened carefully. They seemed to smile as they both came to the same idea.

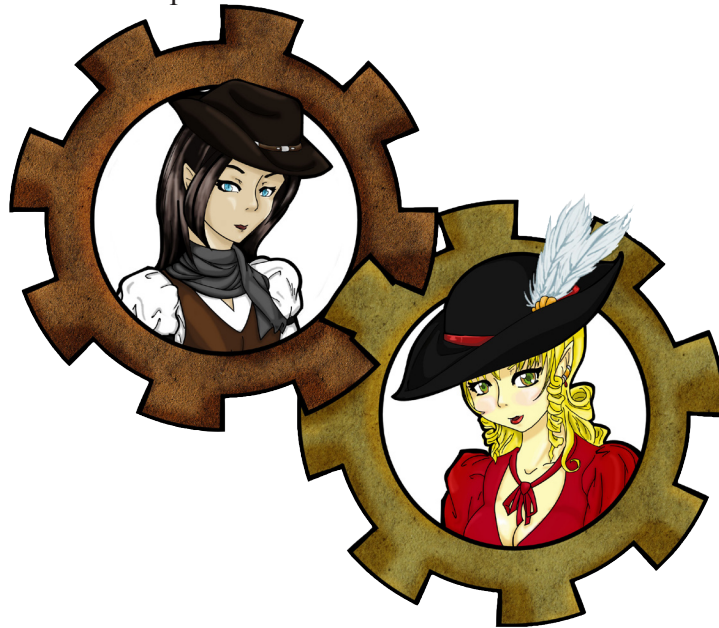


Outside of the court hall, Sywyn Wennemein took a deep breath as he thought of the limited resources that were available to him. It seemed that any available soldier that could be used to patrol the outlying areas around Stonebridge had been moved south to bolster the military might along the border with Mysteria. He knew that tensions were high between the two nations, but he felt that it shouldn't be at the expense of the common people Brytilona. This was on his mind as he felt a hand on his shoulder.

Mandrel Alow, complete with his signature smirk, had been one of two friends Sywyn had since he was a child. The other friend, Waien Argith was also there. How much these three had grown up from their time as a trio of rough and ready youngsters who's only thoughts were to find adventure and reach out to it. How the times had changed. Sywyn being one of the biggest changes, having become a highly respected knight of the realm. Waien went through with his dream to become a mage, but certain circumstances, combined with his own drinking and womanizing, saw him kicked out of the academy. He'd been paying penance to his father, the Arch Druid, ever since. Then there was Mandrel, the son of a musically talented family, who continued to live his dream of tall tales and good yarns.

At least Sywyn knew he always had the support of these two.

“Not to worry, Sywyn,” Mandrel said with a wide smile. “Ye can count on me an' Waien ta come with ye an' support in anyway we can when ye 'ead down ta Ar-



canum Bridge. Isna tha' righ', Waien," Mandrel said as he looked to the rugged red haired elf.

"Yer bloody daft, Mandy," Waien replied in his usual gruff tones, an attitude combined with a rugged appearance of an outdoors man that usually caused surprise when it was mentioned that Waien was an adept mage. "I'm headin' back up the road t'ward Brockton, back near the Garden. Bollocks ta any brigands if they wish ta cause trouble."

"Don't kill anyone," Sywyn cautioned as he held out a steady hand toward Waien. "I don't need the deaths of some highway robbers and to watch a friend go to the stocks."

"Who said anythin' 'bout killin'?" Waien replied with a snort of a laugh. "I'll shoot 'em in the arse an' give 'em a lesson. Think twice b'fore robbin' anyone on that road 'gain."

Sywyn nodded with a sigh as he took in Waien's words. He turned to Mandrel with a serious look in his eyes. "Waien's right, you know. I need more people on the Merchant's Road and even on the Farmer's Road. There are rumours that travellers are being harassed there as well."

"An' tha's wha' we'd like ta speak wit' ye o'," a pleasant voice called out behind them. The three young men turned to see who spoke. Mandrel rolled his eyes when he saw just who it was. Pania and Shani stood only a few feet away from them, confident in their appearance. "Ye need volunteers, well, look no further."

"Bloody 'ell," Mandrel said with a laugh. "Ye mean ta tell me tha' ye two 're gonna try an' patrol the roads?"

"An' why the hell not?" Shani replied as she stepped forward to Sywyn. Mandrel moved out of the way, to stand beside his sister. "Sywyn, ya know me an' Girly Girl kin git things done. Hell, thet stuff we tol'

ya 'bout thet we went through together weren't jist some yarn fer a buncha ale filled heads."

Sywyn took another deep breath as he looked to his sister. Shani could tell he was considering her words, and she even knew he could count on the resourcefulness of the two. But it was Waien that tipped the scales in favour of the pair of elven gunslingers.

"Ya know she's right, Sywyn," he said as he leaned over to speak in a hushed tone. "Shani already travels the realm workin' fer them what need better locks, an' Pania's no slouch with a rapier, I've seen 'er fight. Ya'd be best ta consider them."

Sywyn nodded as he glanced to Waien. "I know. I just worry that I'm needlessly putting my own sister in harms way."

Shani coughed and leaned forward. "Ya do realize I ain't no slouch when it come ta a fight. Ya ain't got no reason ta worry, Sywyn. Me an' Girly Girl kin handle anything git thrown at us." Finally, after a short pause, Sywyn finally nodded his approval. Shani grinned and threw her arms around Sywyn in a big hug. "Ya ain't gonna regret this, big brother."

It had been confirmed, Shani and Pania would travel the road to Brockton, patrolling when need be along with Waien, while Sywyn and Mandrel went south to Arcanum Bridge. Even Mandrel could deal with something such as this.

The older of the two Alows could only chuckle as he saw the caring affection that Sywyn and Shani gave each other. He leaned over to Pania, whispering. "Girly Girl?"

"Shut it, Mandy," Pania replied through a forced grin.

"An' 'ow come ye an' me dunna act tha' way," he said with a small chuckle. "Ye know, all carin' an' concerned fer each other."

"Tha's 'cause yer a berk."