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

PART ONE

Overbrook, Brytilona

Thomas Til'Avan watched as the wagons were unloaded and crates were carried off into the warehouse. Inside everything for this impromptu fair would be put together and put on display. It was hard to contain his excitement and almost everything else around him, save for the handling of the crates, had been unintentionally ignored. He was so engrossed in this project, he almost missed hearing an old friend of his calling for him. Fortunately, Karl Alow had a way of getting his attention.

"Hard at work, as always," Karl called out nearly starting Thomas. As soon as the old elf saw who it was, a smile crossed his face. Karl was much like he was in his youth, with possibly the addition of some age lines and a touch of grey in his platinum hair. He'd known Thomas for quite sometime, and while others thought his ideas were the thoughts of mad men, Karl always believed in him. "Decades of dreams finally seeing the light of day."

"Oh yes indeed," Thomas said with a broad smile. He shook Karl's hand excitedly, and began dragging him toward the warehouse. "I have something wonderful to show you, Karl. Remember those times I talked about one day we would see the day when we'd be able to take to the air?"

Karl furrowed his brow as he followed Thomas toward the main door of the warehouse, and a smile formed on his lips. "Are you telling me you've managed to master flight?"

Thomas turned to Karl, shushing him as he looked about for anyone who might be eavesdropping, then motioned for Karl to follow as the pair went inside the warehouse without any other words shared between the two. Inside, several dozen crates were neatly set against the wall. These were the ones yet to be opened, as there were several more already emptied of their contents. Packing straw and some tarps spread onto the floor as the constant drone of hammering could be heard. Here in the safety of the warehouse, Thomas began to speak again.

"During my studies and my travels, I've managed to meet a wide variety of people who are interested in my projects," he explained to Karl with excitement as he lead him through a maze of empty crates. "There are seven that I wish to introduce you to, but please do not report on them yet. This is to be the finale of the week long fair I have planned."

"A week," Karl replied with some shock. "I thought you were only here for a couple days."

"I managed to convince the landowner... with a little extra gold... that my fair should go for longer than just a couple of days," Thomas said with a wink and a

grin as he opened up a slit in a tarp, offering Karl to step through. Karl did so, nodding his thanks to Thomas who walked through right after him.

On the other side of the tarp, seven people were diligently working on what appeared to be a large contraption. It had a long sleek body, with what looked like a bubble on top near the front, and a fin at the back. There were two long wings extended from the body, just in front of the bubble, one underneath the plane, the other ontop of the plane. Five colourfully dressed elves worked on the contraption, as two larger ones dealt with the heavier parts. "You got a pair of Nordicians to help you," Karl marvelled as he watched the two larger elves, one man and one woman.

"Forge and Anvil," Thomas informed Karl. "Nicknames, of course, and they are married, but they are extremely knowledgeable when it comes to forging parts needed for the steam power of my airships."

"Airships," Karl said, having to make sure his voice was lowered. "You mean..."

"Yes!" Thomas grinned excitedly. "Flying machines. Steam powered flying machines. Remember when I said that it could be done. It just took a while to figure it out, but with the help of these people, that dream is now reality."

"You've tested these things?" Karl asked, not able to contain his own smile.

"Oh yes, very much so," Thomas nodded quickly. "I wouldn't be bringing them unless I had made sure they were one hundred percent ready. Now," Thomas said as he placed a hand on Karl's shoulder. "Let me introduce



you to the Skyhawks."

It was a slow journey for the three riders as they travelled along the Merchant's Road to Overbrook. While chatting would help break the silence of the ride, it was Shani and Pania who did most of the talking, while Waien did most of the listening. He'd only respond from time to time with a nod or a non committal question about the adventures the two women spoke of. It was Pania who finally pushed the questions toward Waien, finally getting him to say more than just three or four words in a sentence.

Which eventually allowed her to open up with a different series of questions, directly about him.

"This 'as been naggin' me fer sometime, Waien,"

Pania began as Waien tensed a bit. He knew when Pania would start asking more pointed questions, with the subtle change in her voice from one of a jovial nature to one that was more serious. "I know it's been a long time, but ye've never mentioned why ye left the mage academy."

"I was kicked out," Waien answered in an even tone, although there was a hint of annoyance in his voice. "Shani'd probably know 'bout it, her mum's the Headmistress."

"Mama don't talk 'bout such things," Shani mentioned without hesitation. "Sides, she keeps sayin' ta ask you."

Waien muttered under his breath as he pushed back his hood, revealing the heavily braided red hair. There was a small peep as a tiny pixie moved from his hair to his shoulder. "Why the bloody hell is it that important?"

"It's no'," Pania remarked with a shrug. "Jus' int'rested is all. I mean, it's no' somethin' I ever 'ear ye talk 'bout."

"There's good reason fer that, lass," he grumbled after taking a deep breath. Pania didn't push the subject any further, knowing full well when Waien had enough of such things. The three rode on a bit further in silence. This time, Waien broke the silence.

"I'm sure ya heard all the rumours 'bout the drinkin' an' womanizin'," Waien stated more than asked. Both Shani and Pania watched him, listening carefully. "Well, there's truth ta quite a few o' 'em. Though, the accusation o' me bein' with the Grand Magus' daughter is a complete load o' bollocks. There's another reason fer why I were kicked out, an' me own drinkin' an' carousin' were just the excuse they needed."

He sighed as he shifted his weight in the saddle, turning to look to Shani. "Yer gonna haveta remember, lass, yer mum werena the Highmistress at this time, nor were she a magistrate. So there were nuthin' she could do. I respect yer mum fully, b'cause she were the only one ta stand b'side me when the accusations flew." Shani only nodded in reply, letting Waien continue. Still, she smiled with the compliment directed to her mother.

"There were a tinge o' jealousy from many o' me classmates," he continued in a slow and steady voice. "What they took weeks ta learn, I found was easy 'nough. Cantrips, incantations, all o' it just a natural branch o' magic I grew up with in the Garden. The arcane's not so different from natural magics when ya think o' it. So, that itself was 'nother o' the reasons."

"Ardly 'nough ta kick someone out fer jealousy from classmates," Pania commented, a tad dumbfounded that the Council of Mages would use that to kick a student from the academy.

"Oh, tha' were just a part o' it," Waien replied with a chuckle. "Alone, it'd never stick. It weren't 'til me next bit o' education that I set their decision firm. Ye know 'bout the Library Arcanum?"

"Yeah, thet's where alla them tomes found all over the place is held," Shani said with a nod. "Some-

thin' 'bout a lotta them books hold a lotta the old ways o' magic."

"Aye, that's right," Waien said with a nod. "I were one o' a few students allowed inside ta see what the library contained. An' they werena kiddin' 'bout the knowledge the tomes held. Ev'rythin' ya could barely imagine is in them tomes. The Council even showed us the fabled Tomes o' History. Mages from 'round the world come ta take a crack at d'cipherin' 'em."

"What the bloody 'ell did ye do?" Pania asked, interrupting Waien's narrative. "Steal 'em?"

"Don't be daft, girl," Waien replied with an annoyed tone in his voice. "I took it 'pon m'self ta take a crack at d'cipherin' 'em. I don't know why the mages had such a problem. It was like starin' 'em in the face. But ta make a long story short, I found out that the tomes had a direct link ta them portals you two found. So when you come back an' regaled Mandrel an' Sywyn with yer tales, they were mystified by 'em, but I weren't."

"Thet's b'cause ya knew," Shani spoke up as she looked to Waien. She began to realize Waien knew a lot more than he was letting on. "Didn't ya?"

Waien nodded as a small smile crossed his face. "The tomes spoke o' 'nother world, one that we came from. So once I had that figured out, I tested the theory an' went travellin'."

"Wai' a bloody minute," Pania remarked as she brought her horse to a full stop. "Ye mean ta say tha' ye crossed over ta Earth." Waien nodded without hesitation. "An' ye never wished ta tell anyone else 'bout it?"

"Phht! Lass, it were me own d'scovery ta make," Waien said with a smirk as the three sat on their horses, parked in the middle of the road. "Sides, I tol' the Council me findin's an' that sent 'em inta an uproar. All how dare I break inta the library, an' how dare I read the sacred tomes without permission."

The three moved their horses again, continuing to talk as they travelled the road. "So they kicked ya out 'cause ya showed 'em up," Shani said as they continued their travel. Waien nodded with a small smirk. "An' I take it thet you breakin' an' enterin' were the straw thet broke the camel's back, so ta speak."

"So," Waien said with a deep breath. "Now ye know the story. Ya can stop persterin' me now." Before either Shani or Pania could protest, Waien brought his horse to a stop. He pointed down the road and smiled. "An' there's Overbrook. Just in time. This is were I depart, lasses. Mandrel an' Sywyn should be down this way in a coupla days, I'll come inta town then. Fer now, take care o' yeselves."

Both Shani and Pania offered a wave and watched as he guided his horse down a lonely trail in the treeline of the forest that surrounded Overbrook. They knew now, and because of that, they held Waien with a little more respect than they ever had before. He was more than just a drunkard who happened to be the son of the Arch Druid; he proved he was a fair bit smarter than those who held magic so near and dear.



Karl talked at length with each person Thomas introduced. Gwendeline Malory, or Ratchet as she was introduced, seemed to the leader of this small squadron. She took it upon herself to introduce each member, even Forge and Anvil, the Nordician elves who repaired the airships and other heavier machinations. Forge and Anvil, a married couple who were weapon smiths back in their Nordician clan, sought to seek their own path as they learned of the world. Clock and Spyglass, the quiet and bashful inventors that added to Thomas' grand designs, and believed in his philosophy. Hammer, who was just as good with his namesake as he was at describing some of those very ingenious inventions. Piston, however, was the better at telling the tale, as Karl could see the bardic background in the young lad. He had even gone so far as to make his own steam powered guitar, which produced a different kind of sound from the instrument. Karl admitted, it would have to take some getting used to.

But the ones that impressed him the most, were the tiniest of all. Karl had heard of the pixies that lived off on their own, away from elven eyes, and who didn't wish to be a part of the society of mages. Here with Thomas and his devoted group were just a few of those pixies. Five determined and skilled pixies, they also managed to help with the manufacture of the machines. One pixie in particular caught Karl's eye.

It wasn't hard to notice, the small creature with the seemingly out of place wing. She would use a pull cord, attached to her coveralls, to unfold it. Once unfolded, she'd then take flight.

"That's Bauble," a voice spoke up behind Karl as he was watching the pixies carefully. He turned to see Ratchet. "I assume ye were lookin' at the wee one with the bent wing."

"Um, yes, yes indeed," Karl responded after settling in from the startling voice. He'd been so enthralled by the pixies, he'd almost forgotten about anyone else in the room. "Did ye... rather, how did... ahem... What 'apened ta 'er?"

"I found Bauble maybe two weeks after I joined this bunch," Ratchet explained as she reached down to pick up a very, tiny wrench and hand it to the small pixie. Bauble grinned as she took it and gave a small salute of thanks before rushing off to join the others. The metal wing didn't seem to slow her down. "Her wing were broken, so I took it 'pon meself ta help her out. As it turned out, she helped out just as much."

"She seems to be doing quite fine with it," Karl stated with a smile as he watched the pixie brigade fly

off to repair or work on something or other in the workshop.

"I knew she were d'pressed at first," Ratchet said. "But, once we got that all fixed, she seemed right as rain. Been with me ever since. An' a good replacement fer Rosemary."

"Excuse me... Rosemary?"

"Me old pixie from the academy," Ratchet explained with a nod.

"You were a student o' the Mage Academy in Arcanum Bridge?" Karl asked, quite curious about this young woman's history. "Why'd ye leave? And where would this Rosemary be?"

"Rosemary never really wanted ta be a mage's familiar," she said with a soft smile. "I could tell, which were fine by me, b'cause I never really wanted ta be a mage. Just somethin' ta please me parents is all. So, when I come of age ta make me own decisions, I put in me request ta take me leave, and I took Rosemary back ta be with her family."

Karl nodded with the explanation, seemingly satisfied with it. "So, 'bout matters o' the ... " He motioned toward the flying machines lined up against one very long portion of the warehouse. "Flyin' thin's. There ta be a demonstration."

"Hopefully, yes," Ratchet said with a Cheshire smile. "Have ta stay the week ta see it, though."



The grunts and groans of the elf that leaned against the wall were audible, but not overly loud. His companions hissed out to shush, but how could one when there was so much weight pressed upon his shoulders. Another elf was standing on his shoulders as he tried to glimpse inside the warehouse through a dusty window. If anyone would have seen them, the authorities would have been alerted immediately. Good thing they decided to use a dark alleyway.

There were four elves in total, all dressed none too well. Save for one, and even his dress seemed less than presentable. Even still, he seemed to be the one who had the brains of the outfit. "What do you see inside?"

"I can't tell," the elf who was peeking through the window whispered back. "If Gammut'd stop jitterin' 'bout."

"Shut it, Seymore," Gammut replied with a harsh, but quiet hiss displaying his anger and his annoyance with being used as a ladder.

"We might need to watch these people some more, find out what they are doing," the fancy dressed

elf stated. "Once we do, let's try to steal... rather, borrow some of their ideas, and turn that into a tiny profit for ourselves." The elf chuckled quietly at the thought.

"With the bad year the farmer's have been having, who knows, we might be able to get a sucker or two. Or three or four."