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

PROLOGUE

Near Brockton, waning days of the Season of the Harvest

Five figures watched the two riders from the shadows of the tree line quietly. For a brief moment they considered an ambush, but they appeared quite adept, in their strange garb and odd weapons. Something slowed the hand of the leader of this small group of brigands, and he held back an order to attack.

“C'mon, Amen-Del,” one of the stocky members of this small band of thieves asked with some impatience. “We've been waitin' here for hours.”

“Still yer tongue, Jerry,” Amen-Del hissed as he shot a look to the stocky elf. “I don't have a good feelin' about those two. They might have gold, but they probably'd take a good chunk of our hides in the attempt. I don't particularly wish ta limp back ta the guild.” He glared at Jerry who backed down from the earlier suggestion. Amen-Del sighed heavily as he tried to calm himself. He was just as impatient as Jerry and the rest of them all were. But an easy mark for now was better than one that would give them a great deal of trouble.

They watched from their hidden spot as the pair of riders moved down the road, laughter echoing in the distance as they seemed to be discussing some interesting story. Maybe they were reliving a shared experience. Who knew what it was, but all Amen-Del knew for certain was they seemed more than capable to defend against a small group of brigands, even if they were outnumbered. Waiting would be good.

The wait would eventually pay off.



Pania Allow stopped her horse and took a look back along the road. Shani looked to the elven bard a moment before finally speaking. “Ev'rythin' alright?”

“Though I 'eard somethin',” she replied in a concerned tone, her eyes exploring the road and surrounding trees before finally shrugging and turning her attention back to the lights of Brockton. “Probably nothin',” she added with a smirk. “More 'n likely 'earin' some animal in the forest.”

“Ya gots yer senses trained ta listen fer horses an' cavalry, Girly girl,” Shani snickered. “No need ta worry 'bout thet here.” The pair chuckled at the thought of actually missing the chase that Captain Samuel Williams had given them as they continued down the road. Shani looked over to Pania with a grin as she asked in a quiet voice. “Ya think we should tell people 'bout Franklin?”

Pania blinked a couple of times and looked to Shani. “Are ye kiddin'? Why tell 'em 'bout the town?”

“No no!” Shani corrected in a slightly defensive manner. “Talkin' 'bout who we found in Franklin.”

“Oh! Him!” Pania replied having remembered their time in Franklin, Virginia. She shook her head and shrugged. “I dunna think we need ta bother. As Travers stated, 'e went there ta find 'is peace, an' 'is peace is wha' 'e shall 'ave.” Both elves moved their horses to the side of the road as a carriage came toward them. It was lit by a small lantern so the driver could see the road before him. The elven gunslingers saw a pair of shadowed figures inside, probably a young couple on their way home after an evening in town. Both Shani and Pania tipped their hats in greeting, smiling pleasantly to assure the driver they were no threat. The driver replied in kind, giving them a wave and a hearty 'good evein' ladies' as the carriage passed by.

Both riders continued on their way once the carriage had passed by. Brockton was closer, and the noises of festive laughter could be heard from several of the inns and taverns. Brockton was such a joyous town, and even though it wasn't the capital of Brytilonia, elves throughout the nations knew of the small town which was home to the famed academy of the arts. Even more well known was the Brockton Festivals. Held twice a year, the two week long festival was a time of song and dance and a celebration for the farmers in the region.

They brought their horses to a halt in front of a small pub, quiet but still having festive noises coming from within. Shani and Pania tied their horses to the hitches in front of the pub, Pania rubbed her shoulder a bit as they mounted the board walkway. “Think I'll 'aveta keep from gettin' in too much excitement fer the next wee while,” she stated with a sigh.

“I see no other thing fer thet then a few steins o' cider,” Shani replied with a wide grin. “C'mon, we d'serve a break from the road.”



Ashtonford, several days later

Thomas Til'Avan looked over the paperwork on his clipboard as he held his monocle firmly to his eye. A shipment of parts that he'd ordered to be made. The next step in his dream as he continued to further the industrial revolution of Terra-Kal. Every few moments he would motion to a group of workers where to

place boxes as others worked diligently at work benches and forges. He'd more than earned the grey hairs that he seemed to wear with pride.

It wasn't weapons they were making, but crafting together the necessary parts for the wondrous machines that Thomas had dreamed up. Improvements for life in Brytilonia, that was his catch phrase as he told people of his plans. Naturally, he came across a great deal of resistance with the announcement of his machinations, but he never gave up.

"Sir," a timid voice called out to him. He turned quickly as he removed the monocle, smiling pleasantly as he recognized the voice of Mary Twillene. She was such a bashful, young elf, but one that had such a great curiosity, and was so excited when Thomas invited her to join the ranks of the clankers. Although excited, she still retained her modesty, wearing rather frumpy clothing to hide her plump figure, which only seemed to add to her shy attitude. "I've finished the navigational apparatus for the gliders, sir."

"Oh, excellent, Mary," Thomas remarked with a wide smile, taking the time to inspect Mary's work carefully.

"Clock, sir," Mary stated with a small smile. "The other workers have taken to calling me Clock. I find it a nice nickname."

Thomas chuckled as he lay a gentle hand on her shoulder. "A fitting name indeed," he stated as he looked to the row of clocks that ticked happily away over Mary's workbench. "Now, with this apparatus, I will leave it to you to give it a name. Something extraordinary, obviously. Something that will draw the interest of the masses to it. Even though it will only be one part of the whole that will make up the glider, it is a very important part."

Mary nodded with a shy smile as she curtsied and returned to her workbench. Thomas continued on before he again heard a voice call out for him. This time it came from the young Oliver Crimsmore O'Ryley. A curious young elf, who constantly wore his Goggles of Multiple Magnification at all times. A devise Oliver had created with interchanging lenses. "Ah! Yes, Oliver... wait. Don't tell me, let me guess," Thomas said as he held up a finger, thinking carefully. "Spyglass."

"Yes sir, that's me sir," the young elf replied with a large grin. "I've finished me latest piece, sir. Works wonderfully." He held up a plain, grey roll in his hands for Thomas to see.

Thomas peered at the roll for a moment. He didn't out right reject it, as he'd come to trust the instincts of those he'd gathered around him. "What exactly is it, Spyglass?"

"It's like a glue, sir," he explained as he began to peel back some of the roll, a loud squeal sounding out as he pulled some of it up. "But it's on a strip, like this. It can be used to quickly patch a hole in anything. Wood, metal, you name it. Probably even clothing if you wanted to. But, I'd say not to put it on yer skin. Hurts when

rippin' it off." He winced a bit as he rolled his shoulder, evidence that he'd already tried that idea.

Thomas perked an eyebrow, a look of impressed fascination displayed in his eyes as he studied the roll and the strip that Spyglass held up. "What do you call it?"

"I call it Spyglass' Wondrous Steadfast Adhesive," he announced with a proud smile.

"Wonderful," Thomas replied in a quiet tone, smiling as he heard the name. "Simply wonderful, Spyglass. I want you to make sure that there is at least five of those rolls in each glider. That's twenty five rolls. Do you think you can do that?" Spyglass nodded enthusiastically and gave a thumbs up to Thomas, as the older elf clapped a firm hand on Spyglass' shoulder. He looked around a moment, watching each person as they worked at their stations, then called out in an authoritative, yet pleasant voice. "If I can have everyone's attention!" The various workers looked up toward Thomas as he held his clipboard in the air.

"We have five days to our deadline," he continued as several of the workers gathered around. "I've given each of those who will be coming with me to Overbrook for our demonstration an itinerary of what we will be doing. I just wanted to say to you all, how very proud you all have made me. I have had a dream since I was a boy of a revolution that not only would change the face of Brytilonia, but of all Terra-Kal. That dream began to see the light when I created the Til'Avan Movable Type Press. And since then, a new way of communication has been born. The city of Stonebridge and the towns of Brockton and Overbrook have their very own daily newspapers. As well, several magical tomes that are in the library at Arcanum Bridge have been printed using that very machine.

"The same can be said for the Still Image Copier Transference Machine, which can take an exact duplicate of what it sees through it's lens and print it onto metal plating. And I am extremely pleased," he said as he motioned toward a young, handsome looking elf. "Extremely pleased to offer my thanks to Piston for his hard work, and the discovery that instead of using metal, it can be done with parchment. That is the key, ladies and gentlemen," he announced in a quiet voice as he smiled to all those gathered. He found when he lowered his voice, the crowd actually listened closer to his announcements. "Not to ensure that the incredibly wealthy have these wondrous devises, but to ensure that every man, woman and child in Brytilonia... Nay! In all of Terra-Kal... has access to these devises."



Castybur, Capital of Mystria

Rom'Orlian Thol walked briskly down the hallway to his main chambers in the Senate House. It had been a long, arduous day in the senate. As usual, nothing of worth had been accomplished. But then, that had been something of a usual occurrence since Rom had risen to the rank of Exalted, the highest rank in Mysterian government. He'd worked hard to gain the trust of the Myst Elves, and saw his labours bear fruit as he was elected to the highest rank in the land. Of course, that did nothing but anger his detractors. If there was one thing that the dark skinned elves were good at, it was creating a filibuster in the senate.

Rom poured himself a Mysterian Rum and sat at his desk as he went through the day's paperwork. A light tapping came at his door and he called for whomever it was to enter. A short elf entered, his white hair thinning on top of his head. "Exalted, you asked to be informed when the sisters arrived," he stated as he bowed slightly.

"Yes," Rom nodded as he picked up his glass, holding it carefully in slender, but strong fingers. "But I believe my exact request was to bring them to me directly." He sighed openly as he muttered aloud. "Next time I'll make such things an order. Seems to be the only way to get anything done around here." The short elf nodded quickly as he exited the room to carry out his orders as Rom took a quick drink and refilled his glass before returning to his books. He jotted down his necessary work until the door opened. He was about to shout out his displeasure, when he saw just who it was.

Both women were dressed in a black cloak, with purple designs. A hood covered their faces, but Rom could still see their eyes, glowing blood red in the shadows. They didn't seem to walk, so much as glide across the floor before his desk. He downed his rum as he studied each woman in turn, then filled his glass again.

"I take it you are Thradra N'Tir," he motioned to one of the women, who replied with a nod. "And by process of elimination, you must be Threna." His observation was met with a nod. Thradra and Threna N'Tir were known throughout Mystreria, and even into Brytilonia. The twin assassins that would stalk victims into the night, slitting their throats without hesitation. "Please be seated."

"Thank you for your kind offer," Thradra replied with a small nod, her voice cold and even.

"We have no need to sit in this chamber," Threna completed in a similar cold and even voice.

Wonderful, Rom thought to himself, they speak in rhyme. How bloody unsettling.

"To speak such has been seen as legend," Thradra began.

"We have heard the tales that have been fashioned," Threna completed.

"And you can read thoughts," Rom replied with a scornful grin. "How equally unsettling. But it does happen to be that very talent that I do require." He reached

out to motion toward the bottle of rum. "Care for a drink, if not a seat."

"We do not partake in such libations," Thradra began.

"We find it merely dulls our actions," Threna completed.

Rom nodded with a small smile as he leaned back in his chair. "Very well then. Down to business. I need you to watch someone for me, and report on their activities."

"Why not just merely have him killed?" Thradra asked.

"I'm certain such an action would have you thrilled," Threna suggested.

"Yes, I'm sure," Rom sighed as he opened a drawer in his desk and took out a leather bound portfolio. He tossed it onto the desk and motioned for the sisters to take it. "His name is Cor'leone Thorilian. He is a very old adversary of mine, in the political arena. I have reason to believe he is setting his sights on increasing the conflict with Brytilonia." He picked up his quill and jotted down a few more notes as he spoke. "As you are well aware, I am sure, since I have come to power I have managed a rather uneasy peace with Brytilonia. That was a promise I made to the people. The last thing they need right now is another war. We were nearly devastated fifty years ago when we surrendered at Arcanum Bridge during the last conflict."

Thradra and Threna nodded as they listened to the history lesson from Rom, the defeat at Arcanum Bridge, his own rise to power, and his want to bolster Mystreria's economy before any thoughts of military conquest are enacted. All the while, he continued to write in his journal, and the sisters went over the portfolio.

"Cor has a grudge," Rom informed them. "He was in charge of one of the battalions that surrendered at Arcanum Bridge. I've often heard of his hatred for Brytilonia's magistrates and especially for Unia Wennemein, who happens to be headmistress of the Arcanum Bridge Mage Academy." Rom sat back as he drained his glass of rum and poured himself another. "It is my belief that Cor is being funded. That he is somehow getting the gold to build an army. I want to know who. His voice in the senate is currently a quiet one, but he has friends. If he is able to build an army, then he will gain more power. If there is someone in Mystreria that is funding him, I want to know that person. And if it is someone outside of this country, then I want the evidence that will bring him down. Then, and only then, will I allow you to kill him."

Thradra looked to Threna as each nodded to the other. Silent communication through telepathic means, no doubt. And obviously discussing what Rom had just informed them of. Finally, Thradra looked to Rom.

"You have done nothing to deceive us," she began.

"Cor's own deception will become ageless," Threna continued.

“We will do as you ask and be your spies,” Thradra added.

“And course of action, we will advise,” Threna concluded.

Rom nodded with a smile as he steeped his fingers. “Excellent. I look forward to your results. Thank you, ladies. Now, if you will excuse me, I have other more mundane duties to attend to.”