

THE ADVENTURES OF BLACK MASK & PALE RIDER



A TALE OF SIX GUN & SORCERY
BY TIM HOLTORF

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WANTED



BLACK MASK DEAD OR ALIVE

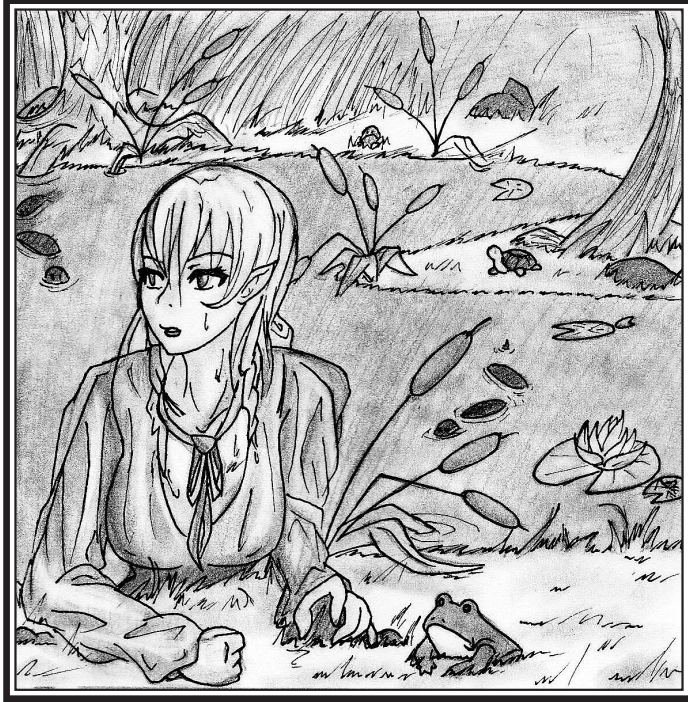
\$50,000

WANTED



PALE RIDER DEAD OR ALIVE

\$50,000



*The supple form rose from the water easily,
and spit out a cat tail reed from her mouth.*

PROLOGUE

Pania Alow sighed as she read over the note one more time, her eyes dancing over the neat, elven script carefully. Lyssa Stormwater, Pania's best friend and lover, had borrowed her horse Triumph. Adding to that, Lyssa was being joined by Ari and Shani, as the three were off on a grand adventure; some itch that Lyssa needed to do. It was important, that was all that mattered.

Such thoughts of adventure left Pania thinking about the past, how far she'd traveled in her life, and how it affected her at this very moment. She thought about that as she sat down at the large and very ornate oak desk in her quarters at the Shining Lady temple. As she held her quill between tender fingertips, she thought how different her life was now, as compared to how it was before. When did she stop becoming a bard and start becoming a holy knight? Pania snorted a small laugh as she checked her candles, lighting those that she'd need. The memories were coming back slowly, and she'd be writing well into the evening.

Before she sat down at her desk, she opened a small cabinet and took out an ornate box. Using a key, she opened it, and looked inside. There, laying inside the small container, were a pair of weapons. On her home-world of Terra-Kal, no one would know them. Called Smith and Wesson, Pania dubbed them her Twin Volcanics. Items from another place and another time.

They held a story, just as much as the memories that drifted through the elven bard's mind. But where to start, that was always the problem. The beginning, the middle? Or the point where she first met Shani on that road outside of a town called Harrisburg.

It would be a story of adventure, of daring and excitement. Instead of mulling over what to write, Pania Alow just began to write.

Many years earlier, in another place

Captain Samuel Williams had been dispatched quickly only three weeks before by the President. Williams, along with a small group of men, had been given orders to ride to Pennsylvania and search for the outlaw known as Pale Rider. For several months, this outlaw had been stirring up trouble from the east coast to the territories, and during this dark time in the new nation's history, such activities had to be quelled. Now he along with his men were assisting local posses in trying to find this Pale Rider.

So far, no such luck.

Williams looked out over the landscape as he sat tall in his saddle. The sun was starting to sink, giving warning that evening was coming on. The group had been searching all day long under the hot sun, and not a single sign of this outlaw anywhere. Private Michael Johnson steered his horse and moved closer to the Captain, gazing out where Williams was looking.

“Not a blessed sign, Johnson,” he muttered to himself as he filled his pipe with tobacco. The ritual with his pipe was a sign to the men

that he was ready to retire this chase, at least for the evening..

“No, Sir,” Johnson agreed, in part to make comment, but also in part to inform Williams that his own eyes could not find a thing either.

“It’s like she disappears into thin air,” Williams sighed heavily as he looked over at Johnson. “The men are getting restless. It’s late.” Williams looked over his small command and took a deep breath. “Alright men. Saddle up. We’ll head back to Reading and rest and restock. We’ll continue in the morning.” The men slowly climbed into their saddles and began the trek back to Reading. Another wasted day. Sometimes it all seemed for nothing.

The fields and surrounding marshes grew quiet as the horses hooves began to fade in the distance. Only the call of a few blackbirds and frogs broke the tranquility. One frog began hopping madly to shore as the water of the marsh began to ripple.

The supple form rose from the water easily, and spit out a cat tail reed from her mouth. Her blond hair was matted from water and algae. Slowly, she began walking toward the shore, pulling wet leaves and twigs out of her hair and tossing them aside without care. She stopped a moment as her hands worked in her shoulder length hair, and slowly and carefully she pulled a small passenger out into the open.

“Well now,” she said in a soft whisper to the small frog as she held it close to her face. “Cannu ‘ave ye there, luv. Though ye may very well keep the flies ‘way, I doub’ tha’ ye’d like it.” The frog let out a croak in reply, as if trying to agree with her. She held the small creature close to the water and opened her hand, watching it as it hopped away.

“Gonna need a ‘ot bath,” Pania Alow muttered as she climbed the shoreline. “An’ gonna need me ‘orse. Now where’d tha’ beast ge’ ta, I wonder.”

Skeeter Jacobson burst into the small tavern with a wild look in his eyes. He'd been riding, none stop, for two days. The heat from the days of riding and lack of any real food made him a little more than ornery. He was mad as hell, and he was looking for the one that crossed him. He looked from face to face in the tavern, his eyes meeting the cool looks of the gunslingers as everyone treated his entrance with some hesitation. Finally, he saw his quarry. Sitting in the corner of the bar, she lounged in her chair, leaned back against the wall. One hand held a whiskey glass, half full as her stetson covered her eyes. Her right leg lay propped up on the table as she drained her glass and reached for the bottle to fill it again. The only time she looked up was when she leaned forward to place the bottle back on the table. Her face tilted up as she caught sight of Skeeter.

“Well, well,” Shani Wennemein drawled as she leaned back in her chair. “I never figgered y'all fer the type ta hold a grudge, Skeeter. Least I figger ya got a grudge, by the look in yer eyes.”

Skeeter stood on the other side of the table, his body shaking with anger as he frothed at the mouth with just the very sight of the elven gunslinger. “You cheatin' whore!” he finally shouted as loud as he could. “I give you money ta bed down an' you just run off.”

“I done tol' ya the first time, Skeeter,” Shani replied in a cool voice. “I ain't one ta sleep with someone fer money. An' I ain't a whore. Ya do rememmer me sayin' thet, right?” Skeeter lashed out with the statement, his hand smashing the whiskey bottle. He was so enraged, he didn't even take note of the cuts the glass shards had made on his hand. “Skeeter, thet were a twenny dollar bottle o' whiskey,” she said evenly as she began to rise to her feet. The other gunslingers in the tavern began to make their way to the exit, knowing full well when the bullets would start flying.

“You. God dang. Whore!” Skeeter shouted. His rage was intense as he grabbed the table and tossed it aside, stepping forward to

close the gap between himself and the elven gunslinger.

Shani appraised the situation quickly. Skeeter was at least a foot taller than she was, and he stood about an even six feet tall. He was fit to be tied, but his rage was going to cost him. “You callin’ me out, Skeeter?” she asked through cleaned teeth.

Skeeter sneered as his eyes widened with the rage he felt. “Yeah. I’m callin’ you out.” Shani merely nodded and allowed Skeeter to back up toward the exit. She began to walk slowly, watching him. Skeeter made the mistake of looking back to the door. Shani was quick as she drew a Colt, slamming the butt into his temple. Skeeter saw stars as he fell to the floor. He tried standing back up, but felt a boot in his mid section that knocked the wind out of his sails. Once more, he tried to rise, only to fall right back to the floor as a bottle smashed over the top of his head.

Finally, he looked up bleary eyed to see the business end of one of Shani Wennemein’s Colts. “Ya godsdamned lucky I’m in a charitable mood, ya sonofabitch,” Shani hissed, as she held her weapon in a firm grip. “Otherwise, ya’d have a bullet plugged through yer brain pan an’ I’d leave ya on the floor ta bleed.” She quickly twirled the six gun and holstered it, then dropped to a crouch in front of Skeeter. “Whyn’tcha do yerself a favour, Skeeter. Git the hell outta here, b’fore I stop feelin’ so charitable. Unnerstand?” Skeeter nodded shakily as he began to realize just how lucky he was. “Good. Now git outta here. Crawl outta town on yer hands an’ knees an’ back ta the rock ya come from.”

Skeeter Jacobson began to crawl out of the doorway of the tavern, his sobs beginning to come forth as Shani just watched him, a lithe hand hanging near her gun belt. As soon as Skeeter had left the establishment, Shani pulled out a hundred dollar bill from her money belt and slapped it on the bar. “Bar keep. ‘Nuther whiskey bottle. An’ jist keep the rest ta buy a fancy new table fer yaself.” The bar tender

nodded as he grabbed the bill and retrieved her whiskey. As the elven gunslinger took her bottle and sauntered back to her chair, she looked to the doors that Skeeter had just crawled through. “Fight like a girl my ass.”

A crowd gathered as three lawmen stood at the bulletin board. One was hammering up two new posters. Already, the board had been covered with other announcements and posters. Most of them wanted posters for gunslingers, brigands and cutthroats wanted in the area. These two new posters were no different. As the lawman who posted the bills finished, he turned to look to the gathered crowd, addressing them in a loud voice.

“By order o’ the United States government, the outlaws known as Black Mask an’ Pale Rider are hereby wanted, bound by law,” he called out as his deputies flanked him, watching the crowd carefully. “It’s advised that ya do not approach ‘em, but if you do ever find yerselves having ta face ‘em, there is a fifty thousand dollar bounty on each o’ their heads.”

“Dead ‘r alive, gentlemen,” the lawman added. “Anyway ya see fit.”

Let the adventure begin



CHAPTER ONE

Present day, Stonebridge Market, Terra-Kal

The air was warm as Pania walked the streets of the market in Stonebridge. Farmers had come in from the south to sell their wares, a vast array of vegetables and fruits, along with wood carvings and crafts. Street performers would put on a show, giving the market a festive feel to it. It wasn't anything like the spring and fall festivals at the Brockton Academy of the Arts, but it was still something wonderful.

Pania browsed through the vendor displays, took a look at the craft-work, and even made a couple of purchases for herself. This break from her writing was needed. She'd already been writing madly for three days, recollecting what she and Shani had done, putting things into notes and then beginning the process of writing it all out. There was some embellishing, mind you, but this was a story of adventure. Still, much of what she wrote was one hundred percent true. She had hoped that she could go over some of it with Shani before hand, but she

had taken off on another adventure, aiding Lyssa with something that had been lost and needed to be found.

Pania stopped browsing as the sight of a tall elf came into view. Proud and humble all at once, Pania knew who it was right away. Sywyn Wennemein, Shani's older brother. She smiled as he came closer, browsing through the crafts as though he had a purpose in mind. Pania moved a bit closer to him, bumping him gently with her shoulder.

Sywyn turned with some alarm, even more so when he saw who it was. A nervous laugh escaped his lips as he held onto a wooden carving of a dragon that had small sapphires for eyes. "Pania," he said with a soft voice. "I wasn't expecting to run into you here."

"Oh, I needed a wee break," she replied as she motioned to the carving. "Gift buyin'?"

Sywyn looked to the dragon in his hands and then to Pania, smiling sheepishly. "It's for Vindy," he said quietly, as though the person he spoke of was nearby. "She likes sapphires, and this is the only thing I've found with them." He reached into his satchel and produced some coins, handing them to the vendor, along with the carving. The vendor took it, and wrapped it up carefully. Once the transaction was complete, Sywyn returned his attention back to Pania. She had a sly grin on her face. "What is it?" he asked with some embarrassment.

"When's the day tha' weddin' bells start ringin', luv?" she finally blurted out.

"Ah... well..." Sywyn stammered slightly. Vindy had been his first true love, and someone he didn't even know he was looking for in a partner. He'd known her for years, but it wasn't until recently that he'd seen her in a different light. "We haven't officially decided upon that yet."

"Fair 'nough," Pania replied. The two started moving through the sparse crowd of the market, continuing to talk as they went along.

“I’ve been writin’, lately,” she mentioned off handedly. “Started writin’ down the thin’s I remember from when ye sister an’ me first met.” She paused a moment and smiled slightly. “Least when we first met durin’ our travels. Ye know, no’ when she still ‘ad ‘er pigtails.”

Sywyn chuckled a bit at the memory of his younger sister when she was a child. “As long as it doesn’t include the tail of three young knaves and how they harassed their younger sisters during the Brockton Festivals. Shani still reminds me from time to time how I used to pull her pigtails.”

“Oh c’mon!” Pania replied with a grin. “The wayward adventures o’ three young boys b’fore they found they own stock in trade? Tha’d be golden,” she said with a teasing grin. Sywyn merely rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Seriously,” Pania continued as she spoke in more hushed tones. “The mem’ries ‘re there. I feel I need ta put ‘em ta paper.”

“As long as you don’t go too overboard,” Sywyn cautioned. “The truth is what needs to be written.”

“An’ only the truth shall be written,” Pania replied with a coy smile. “Sides, who on Terra-Kal would b’lieve the thin’s wha’ took place anyway, hmm? Far as anyone’ll know, it’s a tale o’ two people jus’ born ta raise ‘ell.”

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, August 16, 1863

The citizens of Harrisburg attended to their usual Sunday rituals. It was a sweltering hot summer day, and while most people didn’t want to move there still picnics that had been planned after the church services. The pace was slow, fitting for the day, as people walked down the streets from their homes, or rode in horse drawn carriages to their local church wearing their Sunday best.. No one seemed to pay any heed to the wanted posters which seemed to litter the lamp posts and bulletin boards as they tried their best to stay in the shelter of

the shade. Reward, they proclaimed in bold letters. Wanted. Dead or Alive. \$50,000. A high price indeed for outlaws. But then most of those in the Eastern Seaboard and well into the Midwestern United States knew the name of the Black Mask all too well.

For some, it was from tales of infamy, this black masked rider, robbing stage coaches and banks across the Midwest and into the Eastern States. Threatening the lives of those who would dare stand against her. Yes, there was that as well. This highwayman, was in fact a woman.

It was that fact alone that the dime store novels called *The Adventures of the Black Mask* sold so well, making a little known author a good deal of money for his work. Avid readers would clamor for the latest adventure to read what their “heroine” would do to get herself into and out of trouble. She became as popular as she was infamous. It was that fame that caused a rift between the public and the federal lawmen trying to catch her.

Neither the law men, nor the public, had any idea what the Black Mask was really all about. Only Shani Wennemein did.

She rode her horse slowly past the church, almost as though she were in solemn prayer. She didn’t believe in the religion or the gods of this world, but she would at least respect them. No stealing from a church. No shooting a minister. No gun play in the halls of a cathedral.

Though there was nothing in the good book that said banks were out of the question. Shani smirked as she looked up, taking a tug on the cigarillo as she steered the horse toward the First National Bank and Loan building. Very few people took notice of her as she stopped the horse in front of a tavern. She casually dismounted the horse, not bothering to walk toward the establishment. It was Sunday it would be closed. She kept her long coat buttoned, hiding the pair of six guns that hung at her hips. Weapons she had grown used to wielding only

three short years before when she first found this plane called Earth.

Someplace between hell and amazing grace, Shani would often call it. Here on Earth, she came to raise hell. The thrill of the chase. In a place where her brother could not corral her and lecture her.

She tipped her hat as a few citizens passed her by. People would remember a kind smile and warm eyes more than the fire and brimstone that the preachers in the church would call her. The thought of her relation to a demon. They would often mistake her elven heritage for that of a demon or devil. These humans were always so quick to judge. No wonder the Indians had their problems with the European settlers.

Shani flipped out her pocket watch and checked the time. She scanned the streets and watched the last of the citizens entering their churches to pray, and a smile formed on her lips as she looked skyward. “Well Lord. Can’t say I worship ya none, but I gotta pray ta make certain ain’t no one git in my way as I liberate this here bank o’ it’s funds. There’s people out there more needy ‘n these here thet could use this ta survive.” As she clicked the pocket watch closed, she raised the black mask over her face and unbuttoned the long coat. Time for the Black Mask to go to work.

“And I looked, and behold a pale horse,” the preacher cried out from the pulpit, fist held high in the air, his voice filled with fire and brimstone. “And his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.” The preacher fell silent as he looked out upon the congregation, the pause in his sermon acting as dramatic effect. “Friends,” he finally said in a softer, more friendly tone. “I speak to you of these words from the Book of Revelations, because I have seen that very rider.” He held his hand high and his voice raised slightly. “Nay, I have seen two of those riders. Just as you have seen

them. You see them on the wanted posters, which I have heard decorate newspapers and bulletin boards from here to Tombstone. The Pale Rider, and the Black Mask.” He paused again, letting this information sink in to the ears of his parishioners.

“To date, these two have been a plague on our society,” the preacher announced. “They are everything that the Bible teaches us not to follow. Just last week, it was heard that Black Mask ransacked a caravan, laying waste to all those who rode the carriages. And Pale Rider. She aids the savage Indians that have fought us in the past.” He paused again as he rested both his hands on the pulpit, studying his congregation intently. “These actions themselves are nothing, compared to their... suspect lineage, my friends. Should you ever have seen them as I have, they both have rather pointed ears. Pointed ears, I say.” There was a small gasp of shock from the congregation, encouraging the preacher to continue. “This alone proves they are demons and devils set upon this earth to thwart good God fearing men and women.”

The congregation was riveted to every word, not even blinking as he spewed forth lies of his own. Uneducated drivel, as some might say. But this revelation would not have stopped him. Because he had God on his side.

“I ask each and every one of you to pray now,” he said in a solemn voice that only grew as he reflected the fire and brimstone of his heart. “Pray that these heathens are captured, and they in kind face God’s mighty wrath.”

Pania Alow tossed the duster coat to the ground and rolled up her sleeves. Hokolesqua had taken a bad hit by a rancher’s bullet. The metal shard had cut through a major artery, and the bleeding was bad. She quickly worked, covering the wound with a cloth and pressing her hand against it to quell the flow. Two of the Shawnee braves

that brought Hokolessqua to her tried to help her, but her patient was struggling against the pain.

“Fire water,” one of them suggested.

The pale elf shook her head. “I’ll no’ use whiskey ta deaden the pain. No’ when them Europeans ‘ave been tryin’ ta push it ontaye.” She reached to her boot and pulled a knife from a small scabbard and sighed as she looked into Hokolessqua’s eyes. “This is gonna ‘urt.” She looked to the pair of braves as they took firm hands to hold down Hokolessqua as Pania did her work. The pale elf took a deep breath and nodded to Hokolessqua. As he nodded back, she quickly straddled his form and took her hand away from his wound, the blood soaked cloth falling slowly from the bullet wound. She had to move quickly, stabbing the dagger into his shoulder. His voice cried out in pain as she dug for the bullet, one of his companions at the ready, hand hovering over a hot iron to cauterize the wound after the small elf finished. Hokolessqua’s eyes rolled back as his screams of pain fell short as he succumbed to unconsciousness, just as Pania extracted the bullet.

“NOW!” she shouted, and the brave closed the wound. Pania moved back, grabbing a basin of water to clean the now closed wound. She felt along Hokolessqua’s neck, finding a weak pulse. “E’ll be fine. Jus’ get ‘im back ta the tribe, an’ le’ ‘im rest fer a time.”

“What of you?” one of the braves asked. “Law men chase you. They will always hunt you.”

“I know,” Pania said as she sat back against a large rock. She used the remaining water in her canteen to wash the blood off her hands, wiping them clean with a handkerchief. “Jus’ b’cause I give aid ta savages.” She sighed to emphasize the sarcasm in her voice. These Indians weren’t savages, they were people just like the Europeans who came to settle here in this new world. The Europeans were just too blind to see. “No’ many places lef’ ta run, mind ye.”

One of the Shawnee braves slapped her on the shoulder and

smiled. “For what you do for our people, we will always offer you shelter.”

Pania nodded as she offered a kind smile. She looked as Hokolessqua began to rouse from his force slumber. “Careful, lad,” she said with a gentle warning. “Ye’ll still be in a bit o’ pain fer a while.” She held out the slug she dug out of his shoulder to him. “A souvenir o’ ye day.”

Hokolessqua gingerly took the slug and studied it as he furrowed his brow. “Odd something so small, hurt so much.”

The pale elf only nodded as she rose to her feet. “Bes’ be off m’self. I’d start movin’ yeselves. Slowly, mind ye. Never know wha’ the lawmen ‘roun’ ‘ere gonna do ta three like ye.” She grabbed her gear and walked to her horse, giving one last look back to the trio. A tip of her hat and a small smile was all that needed to be said, and she mounted the chestnut mare with ease and began moving south.

After all, Harrisburg might be nice this time of year.

One of the braves rose to his feet and lifted his arm in a solemn wave as she rode on. “Watch the trail, Pale Rider.”

The steel bars that stood in front of the bank vault were no match for Shani’s skill with a lock. The padlock, as new as it looked, was easily picked and quickly gave into the elf’s lithe fingers. Now it was time for the vault, and this would be much more difficult, but not by much.

Her keen elven ears listened closely, ear pressed against the cold steel of the vault, as the tumblers dropped into position, turning the combination lock slowly until the final click could be heard. Shani gave a small laugh as she opened the vault. “This here’s easier ‘n stage coaches,” she whispered to no one in particular. Her enthusiasm was clear, this would be the biggest haul of her short, yet storied career on Earth, and she hadn’t even toured Europe yet. Her attention was

focused completely on the bags of money that had been sorted the previous Friday. She smiled to herself as she gazed over the sacks and piles of crisp new bills. Only a few would need to be taken, no reason to be that greedy. Besides, there was a small farming community in the western settlements that could use the funds due to the recent drought.

As she filled her satchel, she didn't hear the scuffle of tiny feet behind her. In her planning, she never assumed that someone could have followed her inside the bank. This would become apparent in the next few seconds.

"Hi!" the rather excited voice of the child said behind her as she dropped her satchel and reached for her irons. She stopped just as she was about to cock the hammers back and let out a quick breath. Shani couldn't believe that such a young boy had gotten the drop on her. Sloppy, Shan, real sloppy.

"Kid," Shani said tersely to the boy as he grinned happily. "Y'almost got yerself a gut fulla bullets." She holstered the long barrel Colts and picked up her satchel, keeping an eye on the boy. "What the hell ya doin' here anyhow? Ain't ya s'posed ta be in church now?"

"I snuck out," he replied with a grin. "Yer the Black Mask, aintcha?" He seemed way too excited to be meeting one of the United States most wanted criminals. "I wanna ride with ya!"

Shani was about to start walking out of the vault, but the boy's words made her stop rather quickly. "No!" she said with a great deal of force. "I ain't yer mamma, an' I ain't 'bout ta take some wet b'hind the ears kid with me on the run. What I do's dangerous, an' I ain't 'bout ta risk the life o' some kid."

The boy frowned slightly at the rejection, he almost appeared as though he was going to start crying. "But you risk yourself every day."

"Yeah," she replied quickly as she began moving out of the

bank. “B’cause I know what the hell I’m doin’.”

“You take me with ya, ‘r I’m tellin’!” the boy shouted at her.

“Yeah, y’all go ‘head an’ do thet, kid,” Shani scoffed as she loaded the satchels onto the horse. The quarter horse chuffed in minor protest, knowing that he’d have to bolt at a full gallop soon enough. “Like anybody’s gonna b’lieve ya thet I’m in...” She stopped speaking as she settled into the saddle. The boy was gone. She scanned the streets for the nine year old, only the tell tale sound of the church doors slamming gave her any indication where the boy had gone. “Well... dang it all!”

Pania let the chestnut mare follow the trail without any coaxing. After all, she wasn’t unfamiliar with the territory. The female elf that had become known as Pale Rider to the tribes was used to carrying medical supplies back and forth. In a way, Pania was a stage coach robber as well, hitting only coaches that carried medicines and supplies. She took only what was needed, and often the stage coaches carried an excess of supplies. It was these actions, as well as giving them to the Indians, that made her wanted by federal law. She wasn’t sure what the price on her head was, but if she could save a few people, it was all worth it.

Her mind wandered as she sat in the saddle. She was tired, it had been a hard few days of riding, and only more coming in the next few days. New Orleans was a long ride to the south. She supposed that pissing in the United States government’s oatmeal wasn’t enough, she might as well do it to the Confederates as well. The war had been raging for two years, all over slavery, and she planned to get involved. No better way than getting involved in the Underground Railroad. Besides, she knew a few trails that lead to the British Northwestern Territories.

Pania’s thoughts were so focused on what she wanted to do,

she didn't think about what she needed to do. So it came as no surprise that she found herself suddenly surrounded. Pania only sighed as she looked over the uniforms of the Union soldiers. Her face lit up with a smile as her gaze stopped on one of them, evident that she recognized him. "Mornin' Capt'n Williams," she said in a voice that sounded like a song. "Nice ta see ye out fer a ride with the boys on such a fine day. Wha' bring ye out this way?"

"Pania Alow," Williams announced without fail, ignoring Pania's greeting. "Also known as the Pale Rider. You are here by bound by law. You will be placed under arrest, charged with robbery, aiding the enemy, and murder."

"Murder!" Pania shot back with some shock. "I think ye been readin' 'em dime store novels too much, Capt'n. I've no' drawn blood bu' in self d'fense. Sure, I put down a couple, I'll no' lie 'bou' tha'. Bu' they were scoundrels wha' done thin's far worse 'n anythin' I done."

"You will be taken to Harrisburg," Williams continued. "Where you will await transport to Washington where you will stand trial."

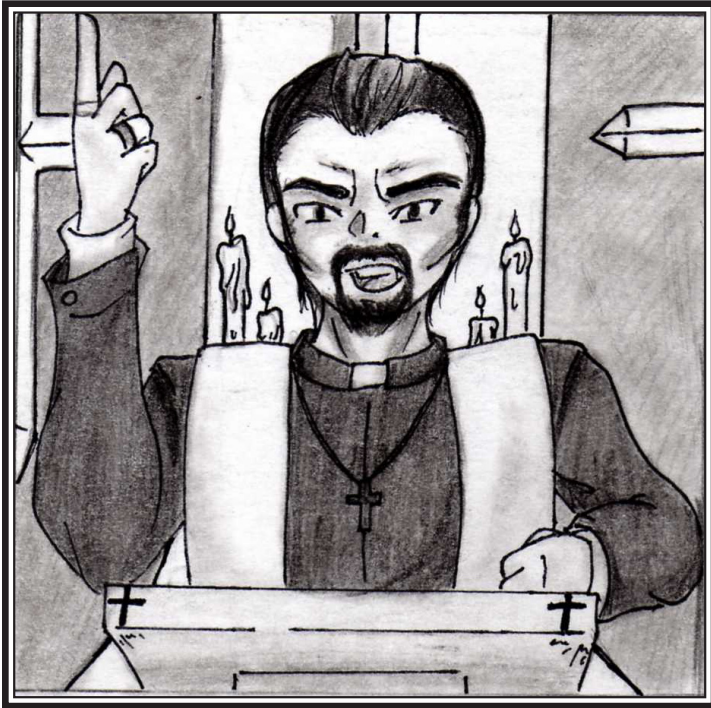
"Ooo! 'Arrisburg," she said with a coy grin. "I were 'eadin' tha' way anyway." She moved her horse closer to the Captain, stopping only when the soldiers cocked their rifles. "Easy, boys. I'm no' the Black Mask, I'm no' a quick draw specialist." She looked back to Williams with a playful glint in her eyes. "So, shall we ge' goin' then. I'd like ta see the President 'ventually. After all, I'd like ta speak with 'im 'bout the slave trade in the south."

Williams opened his mouth to speak, but found he couldn't. He had been told Pale Rider was a dangerous criminal, blood thirsty and would stop at nothing to escape. But here she sat on her horse, waiting to be escorted. "Uh... this is... rather unexpected."

"Wha'?" Pania replied with a laugh. "I were goin' ta 'Arrisburg anyway, an' ye 'ave yer orders ta take me there. It's a win-win situation, 'far as I can see." She casually looked over the soldiers with a grin.

“C’mon boys, chop chop. Dunna fall b’hind.” She steered her horse down the trail, stopping only to look back at Williams and his men. “Ye comin’ ‘r no’?”

Eventually Williams motioned his soldiers forward. Pania’s actions still confused him. The ride along the road confused him even more, as he listened to Pania hum gospel hymns as they sauntered along. What he didn’t know was that Pania’s calm and gentle demeanor was actually a ruse. After all, she had to ditch her armed escort somehow, and she plotted and schemed as she kept her horse on pace with the other riders as they lead her along the road to Harrisburg.



And I looked, and behold a pale horse. And his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.

CHAPTER TWO

PP If you will please give generously as the collection plate is passed around,” the preacher said with a kind smile. The service was drawing to it’s end, as the well known rituals were conducted. “Please don’t forget, we will be holding a small picnic this afternoon, so I do hope that you will all attend. I have been informed that the Women’s Christian League...”

The preacher’s announcement was never finished as the doors to the church burst open. All eyes turned as a small boy, no more than nine or ten came running down the center aisle. “Quick!” he shouted, not waiting for the looks of annoyance to become scolding voices for his rudeness. “Ya gotta come quick. Black Mask is robbin’ the bank ‘cross the street.”

The entire church sat in stunned silence for a brief moment. Finally, one man jumped to his feet, racing to the back of the church to collect his trappings. One of the deputies, he called out to anyone who would listen. “Sheriff Calloway’s at the station house! Somebody has

to get him!” The Sheriff of the district may have been a God fearing man, but he was often accused of being a bit too studious in his duties as peace officer. Often he would work even on a day of worship. The boy who just made the announcement bolted out the door, racing to the station house.

The congregation then had their worst fears confirmed as they heard a loud shout that penetrated the walls of the church.

“Dang it, kid!” Shani cried out in a scolding voice. “Sunday ain’t no day ta rouse people from their rest.”

“It’s true!” one woman said as she looked through a pane in the stained glass. She could see Shani on her horse, the satchels filled to the brim as money bills floated out. “It’s the Black Mask!” More of the men in the church began to rush to the back, shouting out they would offer assistance to capture her. The preacher himself shouting out Biblical verses, an attempt to encourage the men to victory.

“We ain’t gittin’ a slow ride t’day, Gypsum,” Shani called out to the quarter horse as she spurred him forward. “C’mon, time ta git!” Gypsum knew all too well what this was like. Shani would ride him hard, until any pursuers were nowhere in sight. And he was looking forward to a nice stable with hay and water.

The shouts behind her spurred her to move faster, even the horse became a bit more desperate. Escape was all they had to do, get out of Harrisburg, on the road and lay low for a few days. To think, a nine year old started this little posse. “Last time I rob a place on a Sunday,” Shani muttered to herself as the horse’s hooves pounded the cobbled street. The elven gunslinger crouched low in her saddle as she tried to make herself more streamlined. “South, that’s our best bet, Gypsum. We head a good stretch south, an’ then we start makin’ our way back north. May be cold come winter, but I doubt anybody’s gonna care ta look fer us.” The words were more an encouragement for herself than for the horse. This town had already achieved mob mentality. “Dang

right, last time I rob a place on a Sunday, mark my words.”

“So ‘ow’s the ‘ome life, Capt’n?” Pania asked as the small group slowly moved along the road. They had only been traveling for fifteen minutes and no one had said a word. So Pania decided to start the conversation. The stoic looks upon the faces of her escort did not change at all.

“I am not permitted to speak to you,” Williams responded in a gruff tone. “Besides, I’ve been warned of your sultry ways. How you charm men to do your bidding. How you bed them down and leave them with nothing.”

“Oh!” Pania said with a slight grin. “Those from them dime store novels ‘gain, Capt’n? B’cause, I’ll le’ ye in on a secret.” She leaned over in her saddle as she moved her horse closer to him and lowered her voice to a whisper. “I dunna sleep wit’ men, Capt’n. I prefer ta bed down with their wives.” Captain Williams looked over to her for the first time since they began riding, a look of disgust on his face. Pania only grinned and winked at him. “I s’ppose I’ll ‘ang fer tha’ one.”

“The more serious crimes are what we’re concerned with, Miss Allow,” Williams replied. “Your godless and heathen ways will have to be dealt with on your own, when you meet your maker.”

“Oh, don’ ye bloody star’ preachin’ ta me, Capt’n,” Pania huffed, her voice filled with disgust. “I’ve at least read yer Bible, an’ there’s thin’s I’ve seen tha’ ye people should be ashamed o’. The way ye treat the tribes fer example.”

“Godless savages,” Captain Williams spat. “They refuse to see the light, and therefore become an enemy of this great nation.”

“Ye know they were ‘ere first, righ’,” Pania remarked. She let out a breath as she shook her head, bringing her horse to a complete stop. The soldiers responded, stopping the small escort as they looked

to Captain Williams for orders. “‘Onestly, Capt’n. Did ye miss the par’ wha’ said do unta others as ye would ‘ave ‘em do unto ye?’”

Captain Williams steered his horse to face Pania, a look of rage in his eyes. “I have my orders Miss Alow. I am not here to debate things which you have no clue of. I suggest you keep your mouth shut until we get to Harrisburg.”

There was an icy calm that settled between the two, one that could only end in violence should the conversation be pressed further. Pania only hoped that some of these soldiers saw she did not reach for any of her weapons, even though they had left her unshackled.

“Fine,” Pania huffed as she looked to the sky. “Gettin’ on noon. We bes’ make tracks ‘en, shouldn’t we.” She prodded the horse forward and the small company joined her movement.

It wasn’t for very long, as almost seconds later, Williams stopped the group dead in their tracks. Harrisburg was not far away, they could see it on the horizon. They could also see a very large cloud of dust that sped quickly away from Harrisburg, toward them.

“Tha’ look like a lotta people,” Pania remarked. “Wonder if they in tha’ much o’ a ‘urry ta get ta their Sunday picnic.”

Williams shot Pania a look but quickly shrugged off the comment as he turned to his men. “Weapons, men. Protect the prisoner at all costs.” The soldiers brought their rifles up, making sure they were loaded, cocked and ready in case the unidentified group was rushing toward them with ill intent.

Pania smiled slightly and turned to Williams. “Protectin’! Thank ye, Capt’n, ye so sweet sometimes.”

“C’mon hawse!” Shani shouted as the quarter horse’s hooves pounded the dirt beneath him. She had some time, she got a head start after all. The posse was still gathering extra men, But there were enough that were blazing a trail toward her already, and they weren’t

that far back. At least, not far enough back for Shani's tastes. "I'd shout eat my dust, but theys already doin' thet. HA!" She ventured a look behind her, taking an estimate of how many had already started to give chase. "Dang it, Gypsum. We gots fifteen on our asses already."

On your ass, the horse thought. They'll let me graze at least.

The growing posse was starting to pick up momentum. Spurred on by a combination of the encouraging words spoken earlier by the preacher, the \$50,000 reward on Shani's head, dead or alive, and the sheer audacity that someone would attempt to rob a bank on a Sunday. They were determined to catch Black Mask, and make her pay. The lead riders had weapons drawn, and two of them took shots at Shani with their pistols.

"Dang it, y'all git uppity fer someone bustin' up yer day o' rest," Shani shouted back in reply to the pistol fire. "Whyn't y'all take a breather an' jist let me go." Of course, there was no response, and the posse did not slow down in its chase of the lithe elf. Shani shouted out a command to spur the horse faster, but Gypsum was already running full tilt.

The posse behind her responded in kind, as hoops and hollers sounded out, their own horses responding as they lunged forward in their quest. Again, they fired toward the lone rider, hoping a stray bullet would hit her, and knock her off the horse. But there was no indication that she had taken any wounds.

"So dang glad y'all crappy shots," she called out as she drew one of her Colts and fired back, aiming above the heads of her pursuers. Perhaps the return fire would begin to discourage them some how. The pounding of the horse hooves behind her told her that no, in fact it only encouraged them to push forward. "Didn't y'all read the wanted posters?" Shani shouted back. "I'm considered extremely dangerous, an' y'all shouldn't approach me. Jist inform the proper authorities." Desperation was clawing at Shani. She'd been chased before, but

never by a group so large “Wanted posters,” she snorted under her breath. “Yeah, alla thet information’s jist a buncha bull pucky. Proper authorities my ass!”

Strange how irony hits sometimes. Shani rode hard and fast, even as she caught sight of the small group of riders on the crest of a hill. “Ain’t no way someone got a message thet fast ta the Army. This is jist a bad series o’ coincidences. HA!” She spurred her mount to move faster as she thought of some way to get out of the obvious predicament she had suddenly discovered herself in.

“Sir,” one of the soldiers piped up with excitement in his voice. “I’m certain that’s the Black Mask.” Williams guided his horse for a better look, his brow furrowing as he suddenly had a decision to make. Leave his current prisoner and pursue this new target, or leave Black Mask to the mob behind them. He had his orders, but they also included the capture of Black Mask.

“Johnson!” Williams barked. “Stay with the prisoner. The rest of you, come with me.” His men wordlessly followed his orders and began to ride fast down the hill, leaving Johnson to stand guard over the pale elf.

Pania looked over to her new guard with a smile. “So tha’s the Black Mask.” Johnson didn’t bat an eye. “I’ve ‘eard she’s dangerous.” Again, no response. Pania watched Williams and his men as they raced toward the distant rider. She could tell there was a hesitation in Black Mask as she now had a group behind her, and one bearing down upon her. Pania sighed as she watched the Black Mask fire wildly into the air, causing some of the soldiers to break formation. This only allowed the Mask to steer her horse through the ranks and break out in the open again. “I think ye better go ‘elp ‘em.”

Johnson finally looked Pania square in the eye, but his indecision was growing. “I have my orders, ma’am.”

“I know,” Pania cooed. “Bu’, it look like they ‘avin’ some trouble catchin’ ‘er. Jus’ think o’ the ‘commendation ye’d receive fer the ‘eroic capture o’ one o’ the most dangerous criminals ever ta roam these parts.”

“We’ve already captured you, ma’am,” Johnson repeated as though he were trying to convince himself more than Pania.

“She’s worse, I’m sure,” Pania said with a firm nod. Johnson didn’t move, but Pania kept looking back to the riders, then back to Johnson. “Time’s short, lad. Bes’ make ye decision. Capt’n Williams’ll either ‘ave ye ‘ead fer leavin’ me, ‘r lettin’ Black Mask escape when she’s so close. Pania could almost hear the gears turning in the young soldiers head. She was getting through to him.

Johnson took a deep breath, and for the first time, stuttered. “Y... you’ll stay here? Wait until I come back.”

“Ave me word,” Pania said with a smile. Johnson looked back and forth between the chase, and Pania. Finally, he spurred his mount forward, racing to help. “Course, I dunna ‘xpect ye ta come back,” Pania mused to herself as soon as Johnson was out of earshot. “I’ve always wanted ta meet the elf known as Black Mask anyway.”

Pania watched as Johnson began the chase, trying to head the Black Mask off at the pass. But she had already out maneuvered eight riders bearing down on her, slipping past one was no problem. The pale elf grinned and offered a wave as Black Mask raced passed, and then she waited, counting down from five.

“HA!” she shouted, spurring her mount forward. The maddened posse, combined with the Army soldiers were riding tired mounts. They’d already been racing as fast as they could. So had Black Mask’s, but Pania’s was fresh. They’d been traveling lightly, and slowly, and it showed as Pania burst into the midst of the posse, keeping pace with them. “Mornin’ boys!” she called out, tipping her

hat to a pair of deputies. They shared a confused look, then realized Black Mask wasn't the only criminal in their midst.

"P-P-Pale. Pale. Rider!" one of the deputies stuttered as he tried to kick his brain into gear.

"Pale Rider, luv," Pania finished for him with a grin as she pulled one of her Smith and Wessons from its holster and fired into the ground near the horse's feet. The sudden sound spooked the horse, along with a few others, and they veered off the path. A pair of them jostled and stopped the chase altogether. Pania twirled the pistol easily in her hand as she placed it back in her holster, then reached for her rapier. She rode quickly behind one of the riders from Harrisburg, and gently stuck the rapier against the leather strap that held the saddle on the horse. A flick of her wrist and the rider took a mean tumble, away from the racing stampede of hooves, mind you.

"Johnson!" Pania heard Williams shouting ahead of her. "What the hell are you doing here? You were ordered to watch the prisoner!"

"I'm back 'ere, Capt'n!" Pania shouted as she sheathed the rapier, and spurred the horse forward. She became reckless, slamming her mount into the side of another horse, causing the rider to lose balance and tumble into the dirt. Only the sheriff and a few members of the Williams men were in front of Pania. It wouldn't take her long to catch up to Black Mask.

That is, if she could get away from the clawing hands of Captain Williams, who took a swipe at her. "Capt'n!" Pania shouted out in shock. "Tryin' ta beat a prisoner. 'Ow rude." She pulled her pistol and fired into the ground near William's mount. The horse swerved and jittered, but didn't completely spook. Williams had good control of his horse. "Dammit!" Pania cursed under her breath and encouraged her horse forward. The other horses were falling behind. Even the horses ridden by Williams' men were slowing. But so was Black Mask's.

Pania had to reach her and get her off the road and into the forests. It was probably their only chance at escape.

Shani had heard the gunfire behind her and ducked instinctively. She sneaked a peek back just in time to see a rider tumble to the ground, his horse racing off to nowhere. This confused her slightly, there shouldn't be any reason why that would happen. The answer soon came.

She saw the small rider, mounted on a chestnut mare. Her clothes definitely weren't American. They looked more European, with her thigh high boots, buckles from top to sole, the leather corset and silken blouse tucked neatly under the French looking long coat. The pale skin and lithe features of the woman hit Shani next, and she contemplated this as her horse raced forward. "Thet ain't nuther elf," she muttered to no one in particular. "Ain't no way. I come ta this plane on my own. Didn't ev'n tell mamma I were comin'." She sneaked another peek behind her. "Clothes're all wrong anyways. HA!"

Bounty hunter or not, the elf that was coming up hard and fast behind her could be a potential problem. There was no way Shani would simply fire indiscriminately on her. She could be a bounty hunter but what if...

"Dangit! Why didn't I think o' it b'fore?" Of course, she'd seen the dime store novels that were sold right next to the ones about Billy the Kid, Jesse James and even herself. "Pale Rider. I shoulda figgered so." She huffed and shook her head as the realization settled in. Still, there was no indication that Pale Rider wasn't in fact going after the reward money herself. It was that thought alone that forced Shani to draw one of her long barrels.

"Got a s'prise fer ya, Pale Rider," she muttered to herself. "Y'all ain't gittin' no reward money t'day."

Pania had just one last rider to race past. This was the deadliest of horse races. A mix of blood-lust and guns, the chasing mob could turn ugly any moment. Not that it wasn't already appearing that way. The pale elf spurred her mount to race faster as she zeroed in on the last rider, inching forward until she was beside him.

"Mornin' Johnson!" she shouted to the rider. Her guard, the last rider. Johnson took one confused look to Pania, and that was all she needed. She reach over, grabbing the collar of his tunic and shoved him hard. His balance in the saddle disturbed, he flailed his arms as he tried to stay up, but to no avail. He tumbled hard as his horse kept running, but had slowed down without the weight of a rider to encourage it forward. "See ye later, Johnson!" she shouted back with a grin.

Now there was just one goal left. "HA!" she shouted as her horse inched closer and closer to the Black Mask. As she approached slowly from the rear, Pania took note of the position the rider was sitting in. No apparent wounds, she wasn't sitting in the saddle in pain. The pale elf furrowed her brow as she recognized the lay of Black Mask's right arm, and Pania jerked her own Smith and Wesson from its holster.

Closer and closer she inched, her mount's nose slowly creeping forward until finally they were neck and neck. Just in time, as Pania saw Black Mask's motion. She raised her own pistol, cocked and ready, as she found herself staring down the barrel of the Colt. "Best keep tha' iron 'olstered, Mask," Pania called out. "Specially if ye want ta get rid o' these b'hind ye."

"Yeah," Shani snorted a laugh. "An' I bet y'all're gonna help me with thet. Sure. An' the sky's purple, too."

"Think 'bout it," Pania scowled. "Shootin' me's only gonna make me fire 'swell. I'll be dead, ye'll be injured, an' where we gonna be at tha' point." Pania could tell that Shani was considering this

information. Without a word, she holstered the pistol and spurred the horse forward for the umpteenth time that morning. Pania followed suit, making certain she was keeping pace with the elven rider.

Behind the pair of riders, there still was a formidable force chasing them, and they still had weapons. This fact became more clear as the sudden report of a rifle sounded out, the bullet whizzing past them.

“Dangit!” Shani shouted out angrily.

“They’re terrible shots on ‘orseback,” Pania assured her. “Couldna ‘it the broadside o’ a barn.”

Shani rolled her eyes at the comment. *Great, a comedian. Bet she’s a bard.* “Take my reins,” she said as she held her reins out to Pania. The pale elf took them, albeit hesitantly, and waited for Shani’s next move.

The lithe elf showed just how nimble she was, as she twirled her body, still in the saddle, to suddenly face the oncoming posse. “Jist keep the pace, girly girl,” Shani instructed as she pulled both long barrels and began firing, hoping that the sudden volley of bullets would be yet another in a long list of discouraging situations for the posse. Shani fired until both guns were empty, and she holstered them, peeking in front of them again to see what obstacles there were.

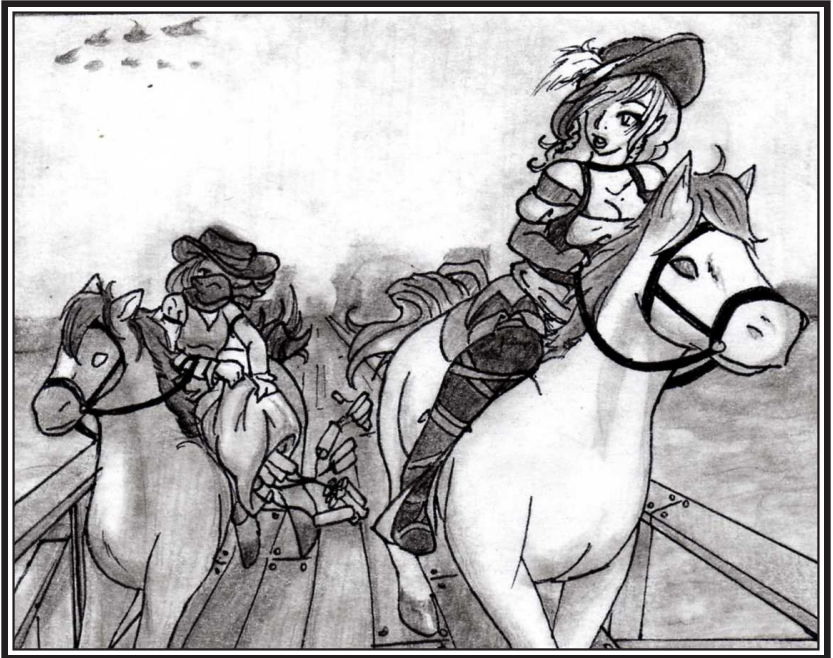
“A bridge!” Pania pointed out with a shout. Shani grinned as an idea came to her. The bridge wasn’t very big, sturdy enough for a pair of horses, but not sturdy enough for a stagecoach. Which meant it was weak enough to become kindling. Pania watched as Shani pulled four sticks of dynamite from a saddle bag. “Ye in the ‘abit o’ carryin’ explosives wit’ ye, are ye?” Pania said with some shock and fear in her voice.

“Ya never know when this here big bang’s gonna come in handy, girly girl,” Shani replied with a smirk. She took out her hunting knife and cut down the wicks of the sticks and tied them together with

the remaining wick. Carefully, she took out her pack of cigarillos, and carefully lit one of them, taking a quick peek in front to see how far away the bridge was. Timing would be everything. Picking up the four sticks of dynamite, she calculated carefully. The dynamite had to be lit at the right time. She may have been accused of over thirty murders, but she wasn't about to kill off members of the posse indiscriminately.

The posse was a fair ways back from them. Lots of time for the explosion to take out the bridge and leave them to run at a slower pace. Shani took another peek ahead of her, the bridge looming closer and closer. The dynamite had to be dropped at the best location to do the most damage so their pursuers couldn't follow. She took the cigarillo out of her mouth and held it close to the wick, watching closely as it flared up quickly. As she heard the sound of hooves on wood, she tossed the dynamite behind her, moving quickly in the saddle as she turned to face forward again.

She took the reins from Pania and spurred her mount again, encouraging Gypsum forward. It was now just a matter of time. Shani didn't have to look behind her to see if the dynamite would blow, it was a given, but there was the nagging sensation that it wouldn't work. "Don't think 'bout it," she muttered to herself. "Jist ride."



Thet weren't near as spectac'lar as I were 'xpectin' it ta be.

CHAPTER THREE

Sheriff Richard Calloway saw the small object drop to the ground at the base of the bridge. He had his suspicions what it might be, and then he looked again as he saw the small spark of the wick. “She tossed a bundle o’ TNT!” he shouted and pulled on the reins of his horse. Several of his men stopped in their tracks in response to his action. Captain Williams did as well, and steered his horse back to Calloway. The look in his eyes was not at all a friendly one.

“What are you doing, Sheriff?” Williams spat, talking to Calloway as one would speak to an unruly child. “We have to continue the chase.”

“With all due respect, Captain,” Calloway sighed with his reply, suddenly annoyed with the attitude this officer was giving him. “Black Mask just tossed a bundle of dynamite on that bridge. I’m not suicidal, and I’m not going to sacrificing my men.”

“How can you be so certain that Black Mask would take such a measure?” Williams replied, anger evident in his eyes that this sheriff

would be so bold as to question him. As though there needed to be a reply to Williams' question, an explosion sounded out, and the bridge quickly became unstable. All the men in the posse looked toward the noise, watching as the bridge didn't explode into a million toothpicks, but began to slide into the river below.

"Does that answer your question for you, Captain?" Calloway snorted.

"Well crap on a stick," Shani huffed as she watched the bridge slip into the river. "Thet weren't near as spectac'lar as I were 'xpectin' it ta be."

"Effective, nonetheless," Pania remarked with a shrug. She had to admit, Black Mask had a few tricks up her sleeve. She'd seen her shoot, she was no slouch with the long barrel Colts she carried. "I take it ye really didna wanna kill any o' those men anyway."

"What the hell fer?" Shani sighed. "They ain't done nuthin' ta me, they jist doin' their jobs, so I kin unnerstan' they chasin' me. I'm jist gonna give 'em a ride ta remember while they doin' it." Shani leaned back in the saddle, feeling Gypsum shift just a bit. It was the first time in a long morning ride that the horse had an opportunity to rest, and he took advantage of it as he nibbled at some grass that grew along the trail.

Shani and Pania watched the posse across the river, now completely separated from the two elves. The curvy elf suddenly realized something as her gaze remained on the men across the river. While the posse couldn't get their hands on either one of them, they could still make their lives hell. "Miss Black Mask," Pania said quietly.

"Shani," the lithe elf replied, correcting Pania. "Jist call me Shani. B'sides, I always thought Black Mask were a dorky name. I wanted sumthin' more akin ta Wild Bill 'r Sundance 'r sumthin' like

thet...”

“Pania,” the pale elf said with a kind smile as she interrupted Shani’s speech regarding nicknames. “Pania Alow.” She sighed softly and gazed across the river, taking note of the activity. “Bu’, I wanted ta say, we’re no’ outta the woods yet, so ta speak,” Pania informed the elven gunslinger as she pointed in the direction of the well armed men. “Tha’ posse still ‘as guns, an’ those bullets can still rip ‘cross the river.”

Shani’s voice fell silent as she gazed across the river. She hadn’t been paying attention to the small posse. And now they were moving into position. “Dang it all,” Shani said quietly. “Jist don’t git no rest at all!”

Captain Williams and the remaining soldiers lined up on the river bank, watching the pair of elves resting leisurely across the river. He was mad as hell, and had completely pushed the thought of his orders to bring Pale Rider to Washington alive. He already had a story cooked up. She attempted escape and was shot and killed. It was the truth, after all. Add Black Mask into the mix, and the story would become more plausible.

Calloway had also gathered the remainder of the posse and joined the soldiers, rifles in hand. “Wound only, men,” he warned. “Neither one of them fired with intent to kill any of us, so we can give them that grace. They’ll live long enough to face a judge and jury.”

“Sentence has already been passed,” Williams sneered to Calloway as he spoke. “There’s only one thing I want to see these two taken in for, and that’s a pine box. Shove ‘em both in the same one, save the wood.” He raised his rifle as he barked his orders to his men. “Shoot to kill, men. This is the end of the line for Black Mask and Pale Rider.”

Pania's eyes grew wide as she sat in the saddle just staring, like a deer caught by a hunter. Shani, on the other hand, grimaced as she realized how open and exposed they were. The lithe elf looked to Pania, lashing out with a swat to her shoulder to bring Pania to her senses. "C'mon, Girly girl!" she shouted as she spurred her horse forward. "We gotta git."

The two elves began the race of their lives, as they encouraged the horses down the trail, trying to outrun the bullets as they ripped through the air. The shots were close, hitting the ground and the nearby trees of the forest. Every so often a small tree they would pass behind would become riddled with bullets from the guns across the river. Shani took a glance at the men, taking note that some had began to keep pace with them across the river, firing wildly. They wouldn't have perfect aim as both their targets were moving and they were also at a full gallop. Difficult to hit a target with a rifle like that.

"Look fer a break in the bloody trees!" Pania called out. "There's gotta be a trail 'eadin' in."

"Thet's what I'm doin', dangit!" Shani called back. "I ain't no slouch. I'm jist a bit busy tryin' not ta git hit." Both of them lay low on their horses, flinching every time a rifle report sounded. The horses hooves pounded the dirt path hard, as they raced faster and faster. They also knew the desperation that they faced, as any one of those bullets could just as easily rip into them. Shani desperately looked across the river as she checked their own position. No break in the trees was visible, nor were they completely safe from the posse. It looked as though they had a clear trail for a good long while.

Which meant they could keep firing until they ran out of bullets, or they both dropped from the bullets with their names on it.

"Ain't gonna think 'bout thet," Shani hissed to herself through clenched teeth. She couldn't think about that. She wasn't about to die on some planet far from her home, never to see her family again. She

had other ideas.

Calloway raced his horse along the riverbank, slowing only to fire, then continuing the chase. He didn't subscribe to Williams' idea of shoot to kill. After seeing these two and comparing what he'd seen with what he'd read, he began to doubt the rumours that these two were vicious killers like other bounty hunters and lawmen had described. Neither one fired with the intent to kill. Neither one had tried to trap them. Even dynamiting the bridge was an obstacle to aid in their escape. That was all they wanted, to escape and ride on. Calloway was just that close to letting them go, but that would mean Williams would continue on.

The pair of gunslingers had one thing that would save them.

Calloway knew his territory well. And he knew that he had almost run to the county line. After that, he'd be out of his jurisdiction. He pulled hard on the reins of his horse, bringing it to a complete stop. His men followed suit. They too were aware of how far they'd traveled. Calloway looked to his men, making certain they were all fine. Tired, yes, but they suffered no bullet wounds.

"Sheriff!" An angry shout from Captain Williams sounded. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I know my territory, Captain," he shouted back, brow furrowed in anger. "You wanna keep ridin' those two ta hell, be my guest. Far as I'm concerned, they've run far 'nough ta live another day. They haven't killed anyone in my town. An' Black Mask only made off with some money. I doubt she cleaned out the bank."

Williams scowled but didn't argue. Calloway wasn't one of his men, so he couldn't order him without direct orders from the President. Orders which were never given. "We continue the chase, men!" he barked to the tired looking soldiers. "HA! Move out!"

Pania took a chance and peeked across the river. Calloway had stopped, so had Williams. But if she knew the Captain, he'd keep riding. Which meant they still had a long way to go. Her eyes searched the tree line they rode past frantically, there had to be a clear path through and onto freedom. Once there, then another decision must be made. Ride with this seemingly wild, and rather brash young elf, or continue south onto Shreveport. Maybe that was where Black Mask was heading. Or maybe she was just on the run. Only time, and the quiet that came with escape would finally tell.

"There!" Pania finally shouted out, pointing toward a small path that lead into the trees. Small enough for one horse and rider to pass through at a time.

"I see it," Shani replied as she gritted her teeth and pushed forward. Gypsum seemed to read his rider's mind as he bolted for the break, jumping into the small pathway with ease. Only hoof beats behind came Pania. The narrowness of the path would slow them down, but at least they would be free and clear.

Captain Williams pulled tight on the reins bringing his horse to a sudden stop. His teeth bared as he scowled. Yet again, Pale Rider had slipped through his fingers. He would have to report his failure to Washington, but maybe not just yet.

He studied the river for a moment, deciding the water was too quick to cross, more than likely too deep as well. Caught in the current, it could carry a man for miles, and a horse and rider would surely face death. "Find a way across," he spat out. "There has to be another bridge along this river. Once we cross, then we continue our search."

"Captain," one of his men announced. "What if they back track?"

"They won't," he seemed to growl. "They already destroyed the bridge." He looked over his men and pointed one out. "Go to

Harrisburg,” he spat his word out with venom. “Get a message to Washington. Let them know that Pale Rider has enlisted the aid of Black Mask. Create new posters, double the price if necessary. I want them both found and in shackles before the end of the month.”

The elven riders slowed their horses to a crawl. It had been a while since the last gunshot had sounded, more than likely the posse had given up the chase. At least the sheriff and his men would have, Captain Williams on the other hand, would find some way to continue. They had some breathing room again, that was all that mattered.

They stopped their horses as they drew closer to a peaceful stream. Shani stretched in the saddle as Pania dismounted and guided her horse to the stream’s edge. The pale elf set her duster hat down as she cupped some of the water in her hands, splashing it over her face.

“I’m gonna be ‘eadin’ ta Shreveport,” Pania stated as she ran her wet fingers through her hair. “If ye willin’, I wouldna mind the company.” She rose to her feet, stretching slightly to work out the kinks in her body, and slowly turned around. No sooner was she facing Shani again, that she found herself falling to the ground. The lithe elf took a swing and connected with Pania’s jaw, sending the smaller of the two crashing to the ground. She partially landed in the stream, and flailed her arms as the splash of water soaked her completely. As Pania’s world began to clear again, she found herself staring down the business end of one of Shani’s Colts. “Wha’ the bloody ‘ell?”

“Who are ya?” Shani shouted, her face sneering angrily. There was hate in those eyes, Shani suspected that this elf might have been paid to find her, and bring her back to her world.

“I already bloody tol’ ye,” Pania shouted back with some desperation in her voice. “Pania Alow!”

“Yer the first dang elf I seen since I come here,” Shani said as she cocked the hammer back on the pistol. “Who sent ya after me?”

Were it my brother? Did Sywyn set ya up ta do this?"

"Sy... who? No!" Pania replied, somewhat confused. "I found a gate an' crossed o'er. More 'n likely the same as ye did. No one sent me, I'm no' searchin' fer ye. This is jus' a coincidence tha' we're meetin' 'ere."

Shani huffed a few times and kept her pistol trained on Pania, but she considered the words, weighing them carefully. Slowly, she released the hammer of the pistol, gently putting it back in place so it wouldn't fire. With some reluctance, she twirled the pistol and holstered it, resting her hands on her hips as she studied Pania, who still lay on the ground. "Coincidence," Shani said with some disbelief. "I ain't never been one ta prescribe ta fate, or coincidence. But I guess the world's big 'nough ta have it happen." She sighed slightly as she reached out a hand to help Pania up. The pale elf graciously took it, lifting herself up and trying to wipe off any leaves and twigs that clung to her wet clothes.

"Ye know, ye coulda jus' asked me tha' without the punchin' an' intimidatin'," she suggested to Shani. "I gladly woulda said the same thin'."

"Take it from my perspective," Shani replied in an even tone as she tended to her horse. "I been runnin' from pretty near everyone wearin' a badge, an' everyone tryin' ta collect a bounty fer better part o' a year now. A person kin git a might twitchy after a while." She removed the saddle from her horse and set it down on a fallen tree as she spoke. "Figger yer facin' the same thing."

"Aye," Pania said softly as she also tended to her horse. It was evident they needed a rest. The afternoon sun was beginning to shine through, and they'd be better off traveling at night. "I 'it caravans an' stagecoaches carryin' medical supplies. Take 'em ta the tribes so they can tend ta their sick." She sighed as she sat down on a good sized rock by the stream's edge. "Ye know wha' they've gone through?"

Pania asked Shani.

“I heard some,” Shani replied. “Heard tell ‘bout a hunnerd years back ‘bout Europeans givin’ Injuns diseased blankets. Whole tribe wiped out from pox, jist b’cause some governor ‘r some diplomat d’cided that the land’d be great fer farmin’, but didn’t wanna buy from the Injuns.”

“Aye, there is tha’,” Pania remarked, then looked to the satchels that Shani seemed to protect closely. “So... ‘ittin’ banks. Robbin’ stagecoaches.”

“Yeah,” Shani smirked. “Partially do it fer the thrill, but I git rid o’ most o’ the money. This here job I pulled brought in maybe five ‘r six thousand.”

“Good ‘aul,” Pania replied with a smile that showed how impressed she was with Shani’s accomplishments.

Shani shrugged at the compliment. To her, the money nor the amount was the goal, but just seeing if she could pull it off. “I give it ‘way, mostly. Come ‘cross a share cropper ‘r some drifter needed some cash ta eat. Ev’n Injuns needin’ ta git by long ‘nough fer the next huntin’ season. I jist keep ‘nough ta git by. I kin make more playin’ poker in some small town. There the law ain’t so far reachin’ as it is. An’ ya gotta be quick with a pistol.”

“Know ‘bout tha’ all too well,” Pania said with a nod. “I rode in from the west a while back. ‘Eard rumours o’ an Underground Rail Road bringin’ slaves up from the south. I were gonna be ‘eadin’ down ta Shreveport.”

“Been south b’fore,” Shani stated. “Never been much further west ‘n Madison, Wisconsin. But Shreveport I been ta b’fore.”

Pania had taken out her bedroll as they talked, setting it up and using her duster as a pillow. She lay down on the soft grass as they spoke, the wind rustling the leaves in the trees, crickets that chirped quietly and the babbling stream were the only other noises. “I could

use the ‘elp. Someone who may know the area well ‘nough.”

Shani chuckled softly as she set out her own bed roll. “Yeah, I know a few good places down there. Good saloon ta git in on a poker game ‘r two.” She rolled up her long coat as a pillow and lay down. For a few moments, she studied the smaller elf, questions filling her mind. Instead of leaving them unspoken, she fired them off as easily as she would fire off her pistols. “So, what’s a bard like ya doin’ out here?”

“Bard?” Pania snorted at the question. ““Ow ye figger tha’?””

Shani arched an eyebrow and smirked as she looked to Pania. “C’mon now.”

“Fine, fine,” Pania sighed with a resigning shrug. “Been ‘ere b’fore. ‘S no’ me first trip ‘ere. ‘Bou’ seventy five year back I come ‘roun’. Most o’ this place were still bein’ settled at the time. I were curious, an’ come walkin’ through. Bu’ this time were jus’ fer the adventure. A want ta walk. Wha’ ‘bou’ ye?”

Shani sighed as she made herself comfortable. She thought on the question for a time before finally answering. “I guess a lil from column A, an’ a lil from column B. Some place diff’rent ta come ta. A place ta do things that I wouldn’t dare do back home. Things’re a might diff’rent here, thet’s fer sure.”

“Like the lack o’ magic,” Pania offered.

“There is thet, yep,” Shani nodded with a sigh. “Ya kin feel it, can’t ya? ‘Least the lack o’ it.”

“Oh, it’s there. Bu’ no’ as strong as back ‘ome. It’s like the ‘umans dunna e’en b’lieve in it, so it’s gone down ta a faint spark. Only mages ‘ere ‘re ‘and magicians. Entertainin’ fer the crowd.” Pania rolled over onto her side, propping herself up with her arm. “So, tell me. It true, all tha’ stuff on the wanted posters?”

Shani laughed aloud at the question. “Jist a buncha bull pucky, truth be tol’. I ain’t killed no thirty nine people, thet’s fer sure. ‘R

thirty seven ‘r however many they say. An’ I ain’t stole more ‘n fifty thousand dollars. Nowhere near close ta five hunnerd grand they sayin’. I will say, though, thet they got it right on my shootin’ a pistol.”

“No ego there,” Pania said with a mocking grin.

“I ain’t gonna hold back, I am more ‘n likely the best gunslingers these parts ever seen.” Shani looked over to the elven bard with a grin. “Now what ‘bout y’all? How ‘bout yer wanted poster? Ya actually kill a U.S. Marshal?”

“Ye wanna talk ‘bou’ bull pucky,” Pania scoffed lightly as she rolled her eyes. “I were tryin’ ta save ‘im from fallin’ off a cliff. Couldna pull ‘im up. ‘E fell, they tacked ‘is death ta me.” Pania shrugged lightly and sighed. “I’m a bit ticked ‘bou’ tha’, bu’ nuthin’ I can do ‘bou’ it. ‘Least the marshal knows the way it went down.”

“Yeah, ain’t thet the truth.” Shani sighed as their conversation quieted. She suddenly realized just how tired she really was. A yawn from the pale elf told her that Pania was just as tired. A rest, a well deserved rest, and then back on the road.

Evening came along quickly. The long days of summer were starting to wane, and the lengthening shadows of the evening only hearkened the coming of fall. For the two elves, they slept comfortably, at least as comfortably as one could on the ground. Not even the sounds of the forest brought them out of their slumber.

Nor the quiet clomping of hooves, as a pair of horses walked through and slowly disappeared down the rest of the trail. One other set of foot falls accompanied them, quiet as they were. Neither elf was any the wiser.

Dieter Van Bueren held up a calming hand as he spied the two animals. He and his father had been on patrol around the small Dutch community. Always there were strangers and strange people coming

to Reading at night. But this was the first time a pair of horses showed themselves.

Dieter's father stepped forward to study the horses. "They aren't work horses," he mused. "They've been used for hard ridin'." Then he saw the holsters that held the rifles and shotguns, and then the satchel filled with cash. Frederick Van Bueren furrowed his brow. "Gunslingers," he snorted.

"They gonna be comin' here, father?" Dieter inquired, a hint of curiosity in his voice.

"If they are, they'll find these horses will be in the stables," the elder Van Bueren replied. "They can take the horses, but they'll be told ta leave as soon as possible." Frederick looked to the sky. Already the moon was rising, a brilliant full moon it was. "Come. Best get back into town. It's close to the witching hour, and that's a hunter's moon." Dieter nodded as he gently took the reins of the horses, leading them back into the safe confines of the town.

Pania struggled against the wind, eyes narrowed and hands held high to protect herself from the coming storm. She was positive this was a dream, but it felt so real. It was just a matter of waking up, which was extremely difficult. The faces that appeared before her were ghastly apparitions and she wondered if this might not be some warning of the days to come. She only received such images when closely tied to the weave, and never before on Earth. Something was extremely wrong, she knew that just a few hours earlier she and Shani had bunked down along a trail that was not that far from a little town called Reading, Pennsylvania, just east of Harrisburg. So what was this all about?

She never received an answer as she was quickly shaken awake. The elven gunslinger that had promised to help her was by her side.

"Wake up!" She was screaming and shaking the smaller elf's

shoulders. Pania opened her eyes and started to wipe the cobwebs away as Shani let go of her shoulders. “Dangit! Take ya ferever ta wake up! We gots problems.”

“Huh?” Pania grunted, having only just woken up, that early form of verbal communication having slightly eluded her, even with Shani using large words like *we* and *got*. “Wha...?”

“Horses ‘re gone,” Shani informed her motioning with one arm to the very empty looking campsite as she moved over to her small pile of possessions. “Saddles, ev’rythin’. Only the stuff I had with me, an’ the stuff you had with ya ‘re still here.” The lithe elf was more than just a bit pissed. She snorted as she picked up her belongings. “They even split with the satchel filled with alla the money from thet job in Harrisburg.”

“They? Wait, who, they?” Pania asked as she started to realize how dire the situation was.

“Hadda be more ‘n one,” Shani seemed to hiss. “Gathered the stuff up, took the horses an’ split.” She looked up to study the stars through a break in the canopy of the trees. “An’ I figger it’s gittin’ on midnight. We ain’t far from Readin’, maybe we kin catch a break, see if they may ‘ave found the horses.”

Pania sluggishly gathered her things together, still trying to piece together all the information she had received. It would be a long walk. “We’re may’aps twenty miles from Readin’. Maybe get there by mid day.”

“I figger so,” Shani replied. “But we ain’t gonna git anywheres sittin’ here jawin’ ‘bout it. C’mon. Let’s make tracks.” Shani started her trek along the path, as Pania quickly followed, even as difficult as it might have been for her. She had finally finished taking stock of her supplies but still seemed a bit groggy. They each had their guns, clothes, bedrolls, some cash and a few rations. Pania still had her rapier and a few personal items. Enough to get them to Reading.

It would still be a long trip. As they walked, the silence of the night seemed to envelope the area. Fortunately for the elves, their eyes were good in the dark. However, there were those who had much clearer vision.

A small rustle of leaves was the only sound as a lone figure stepped out of the shadows where Shani and Pania had been sleeping. His face contorted into a sick and twisted grin as he watched the pair, now some distance down the path. The individual bent low as he caught a scent, his eyes closed as he inhaled the smells that surrounded him. In particular, those left by the pair of elves. Such a heavenly aroma. “That’s right, my little jewels, get the blood pumping. It’s so much better when the rush of adrenaline has been flowing through the veins. It makes the taste, so much sweeter.” He laughed quietly, a sickening sound and fell back into the shadows that enveloped the forest.



Tell ye wha'. After lunch I'll let ye read wha' I've finished.

CHAPTER FOUR

The home of Pania Alow, Brockton, Terra-Kal, present day

Pania set down her quill and stretched in her chair. She'd been writing for several hours and only now decided a break was needed. Just as she rose from her desk, a small tapping came at her door, followed by the quiet creaking as the door opened up. Pania smiled pleasantly as she saw the white blond hair and bashful smile of her younger sister Pylia.

“Ev'nin', Py,” the elven bard said as she approached the younger elf and gave her a hug. Pylia replied in her usual manner, as she conveyed her greeting in sign language. Mute from birth, Pylia never allowed the disability to slow her down. She learned sign language, and so did her sister and brother Mandrel.

Pylia signed her greeting, and asked if her sister could join her for a small lunch.

“Maybe I should,” Pania replied with a smile. “Need ta take a break from writin'. Been writin' the first adventures tha' Shani an' me

‘ad on Earth.” This caught Pylia’s attention, and she signed quickly as she flashed an excited smile. “No, Py. No’ yet at least. I’ll write them other stories after finishin’ this one.”

What part are you at? Pylia asked in sign.

“Jus’ go’ past the darin’ escape from the sheriff an’ the cavalry,” Pania explained as the pair exited the small room. “An’ introducin’ the small town me an’ Shani entered.” Pylia nodded with a smile and signed again. “Tell ye wha’,” Pania said with a smile as she wrapped her arm around Pylia’s shoulders. “After lunch, I’ll let ye read wha’ I’ve finished.”

Somewhere between Harrisburg and Reading, August 18, 1863

The pair of elves walked the moonlight road quietly. Who knew what lay in the forests along the path they walked. Each said very little, as they both wondered just who it was that might have taken their horses. Captain Williams wouldn’t have done this, he’d have roused them from sleep and had them both in shackles by now. Pania took out a flask as she walked, pointing out a small bridge five hundred yards ahead.

“Village beyond tha’,” she said as she took a swig and passed it to Shani.

“Maybe they seen the horses,” Shani remarked as she took a drink. The sudden rush of an unexpected liquid touched her tongue and she coughed heavily, grimacing as she pulled the flask away.

“What the hell’s this?” she stated with a loud voice filled with shock.

“It’s water,” Pania said casually and then grinned. “Expectin’ whiskey?”

Shani just grumbled as she screwed the cap back onto the flask and passed it back to Pania. The lithe elf had been walking just slightly ahead of Pania, so when she passed the flask back, she had a full view of the road they just traveled. And she saw something down the road.

Shani stared in wonderment, and slight fear as she whispered to Pania. “Bein’ followed.”

“Huh?” Pania questioned as she turned to look where Shani was gazing. There, on the road, was a solitary figure. Slight of frame the figure seemed to be there, but not be there at the same time. Under the light of the full moon, he seemed to glow eerily. “Oh gods,” Pania whispered as her hand reached for her rapier hilt. As her hand drew closer, the strangest and most terrifying thing happened. The figure was about one hundred yards behind them. In a blink of an eye, he was suddenly five yards away.

Then he bared his fangs.

“Jist run!” Shani shouted as she smacked Pania’s shoulder. The action was enough to rouse the pale elf from a hypnosis of wonder, and then something else took her over. Fear, and a sudden need for survival. “Gawl dang vampires! I thought here on Earth they was jist all legend an’ myth.”

“Figure tha’ isna so,” Pania replied as her feet carried her faster and faster. Still it felt like she was trudging through molasses in January. The covered bridge grew closer and closer.

“Keep runnin’, girly girl,” Shani tried to encourage. She didn’t look back, but had a nagging feeling that Pania might have been attacked. She wasn’t sure. “We’re almost at the bridge, then we git inta thet village b’yond.”

Pania kept pace with the lithe elf. Shani was fast, but Pania had run a race or two in her time. The pale elf could almost feel the hot breath on her neck as she ran, sending shivers up her spine. Not even the comforting sound of their boots on the wooden bridge eased her. The vampire was still behind them. Only the comfort of the village would finally allow them a chance to breath easily. “Try fer one o’ the ‘omes!” Pania suggested as she bolted for a door.

The street was wide, not the usual pioneering town the elven

gunslingers had frequented before. They were in Pennsylvania Dutch territory. The buildings were practical, the street wide enough to let three teams of horses pass with ease, and at the end of the street, almost like a beacon was the church. A Lutheran building, typical of the settlers of German ancestry that settled in this area of the States. The buildings themselves were well built and sturdy looking. Front doors that were not ornate, but had a very welcoming feel. Each house that lined the main street was two stories tall, and the windows on the upper floor had well crafted wooden shutters that flanked the window opening. Smaller homes and some shops could be seen. A small plumb of smoke drifted from the chimneys of some of the homes, identifying which ones were occupied.

The elves tried each door they could, but found them locked, more than likely empty. Or the residents ignored their cries for help. Pania saw shutters on windows closed. They both huddled in the center of the street, fear creeping deeper and deeper into their bones. Desperately, they looked around the town, speaking in heavy breaths, hoping that the comfort of another would help ease their fear.

“They’s all lock up tighter ‘n Fort Knox,” Shani breathed. “I don’t think they like strangers ‘tall.”

“Wager ye righ’,” Pania replied as she desperately searched the village for one house that might allow them entry. It was then that she realized. “The Church! C’mon!” She grabbed Shani’s arm, nearly dragging her as she ran. The doors of the church might not be locked, and it more than likely would be their only saving grace. Closer and closer the doors grew, all the while, screams of terror and madness that came from the vampire grew louder behind them.

The vampire was closing in.

Just when they thought the inevitable would happen, the pair of elves burst through the doors, quickly slamming them shut as they leaned against the now strong wood. The vampire wouldn’t enter these

halls. Shani and Pania would be safe.

However, as they looked around their new surroundings, they would find they would have company.

As they breathed heavily, letting their hearts slow down from the fright they had just endured, they realized they weren't alone in this hallowed of places. Fifteen village residents had taken refuge inside the walls of the church. Obviously, they knew something was happening. Maybe this vampire had been here before.

The vicar stepped forward, studying the pair carefully. His brow furrowed as he caught sight of the guns slung low on their hips. "Outlaws," he snorted. "You seek refuge inside this building? Yet you bring weapons inside."

"Refuge," Shani panted heavily as she tried to get her words out. "Vampire... outside... chasin' us... hadda run."

"We're jus' wantin' the shelter from the storm," Pania offered in a more complete sentence. "Please, we're no 'ere ta 'urt anyone..." Her sentence was cut short as the vicar ripped her hat from her head, tilting her head to the side as he caught sight of something else. A thick finger traced the long tips of her elven ears. Pania snatched her hat back and tried to back away, but the vicar was much more determined as he reached out and grabbed her arm.

"Demons," he snorted. "You could very well be working with the vampires."

"Ya know," Shani spat out quickly. "Gittin' kinda tired o' bein' equated ta demons. We're ELVES! Ya know! Like pixies, fairies, sprites an' the like. Fey folk!"

"Uh... Shani," Pania said carefully as she tried to speak in an even tone while the vicar cupped her chin in his massive hand. The vicar was not a small man, nor weak, as Pania had discovered. "May'aps keep the roarin' ta a minimum in 'ere." Pleading eyes looked up to the vicar. "Please. We're no 'ere ta 'urt anyone. We jus' want shelter

from wha's outside. It's all we ask."

The vicar let go of Pania's chin and nodded slightly, but with no expression change on his face. "You can stay here until mornin'. Then we expect you to go."

Shani and Pania muttered their thanks then raced to the window, curiosity getting the best of them as they gazed out beyond the small graveyard in front of the church. They gasped as the pale face and deep, dark eyes looked back at them, the twisted smile only made worse by the prominent fangs seemed to grin at them. The elves jumped back with a cry and cowered against the wall beside the window. "Ye think 'e saw us?"

"I'm pretty sure," Shani replied.

The vampire walked through the graves, just waiting, savouring the scent he had caught from the pair. Sweeter than anything he'd every smelled before. He would savour this hunt, even if it meant he would have to chase them all across this continent. Just feed along the way, and the elves would be his ultimate goal. It was like a high, a euphoric feeling. Their blood would be so sweet, so pure, so filling. His thoughts drifted as he heard the click of a door latch. Turning to the sound, he saw a young woman stepping out from the door way.

"Perhaps I will have no need of the gunslingers this night. My meal has been brought to me. How precious, how lovely. A perfect sample to satiate my lust." He grinned as he slowly walked toward the woman. She was giving herself willingly, and while the chase often made the blood just as sweet, a willing victim was as exciting. The woman knelt on the ground, shaking as her hands clasped together in prayer. The wind gently touched her white night gown as the vampire stepped closer to her. Whether this girl, who gave herself willingly, or the new blood that seemed full of fight, the vampire would feed this night.

“Is ‘e still at the window?” Pania asked in a whisper. The pair had huddled together on the floor, and the closeness of each other seemed to draw some strength for both of them. Shani slowly rose to her feet, eyes peeking above the window sill.

“Holy crap on a stick!” she seemed to shout her whisper as she spied what was happening in the moonlight street.

“Shani!” Pania said in a warning voice. “We in a church.”

The lithe elf looked to Pania with a furrowed brow. “What? It ain’t like I said dangit ‘r nuthin’.” She looked out the window again, describing what she saw. “There’s a woman in the street. Look like some kid. The vampire’s walkin’ over to her.”

“Wha’?” Pania said with shock and scrambled to her feet, gazing out the window. She saw the scene clearly, almost more clearly than she’d like to. “Tha’ child’s a goner,” Pania gasped, stating the obvious.

Shani rose to her feet quickly, drawing both pistols. Those who huddled together in the church stared in disbelief, shocked that someone would draw a pistol in the confines of a holy place. The lithe elf looked to them for a moment, then spoke with reassuring words as Pania joined Shani in a weapons check. “I ain’t one ta let bloodsuckers git ‘way with such things like thet outside. Come hell ‘r high water, I’m gonna take thet bastard down, ‘r die tryin’.”

“Then you’ll need these,” the voice of a young man spoke up. A muscular and tall man stepped forward and held out a small box to Shani. “Silver bullets.”

Shani looked over the box a moment before accepting it with a nod. “I take it y’all been roughed up by this one b’fore.”

“The clutch of vampires has ravaged our community for years,” the vicar explained. “Once a fortnight they steal one person.” He hung his head as he described the situation.

“They?” Pania remarked as she loaded her pistols with silver bullets. “So there’s more ‘n jus’ the one. Ye tried fightin’ back?”

“Yes,” the vicar replied quietly. “But it is difficult. These are just the brood. They are lead by one much stronger.”

“Well,” Shani stated as she finished loading her Colts. “This’ll be one less fer the brood. Thanks fer the bullets, kid,” she said turning back to the young man.

“Dieter,” he simply said with a smile. “Dieter Van Bueren.”

“Shani,” the lithe elf replied as she tipped her hat. “Thet there short one is Pania. Pleased ta meetcha.” Shani turned to Pania and offered a grin. “Ya set?” Pania gave a wordless nod as one hand gripped a pistol, the other held her rapier. “All right then, let’s go say hi ta tall, pale an’ scary.”



A rest, a well deserved rest, and then back on the road.

CHAPTER FIVE

While the young woman had given herself freely, a sacrifice to save the rest of the village, fear still welled up in her breast. The vampire was stunning in his appearance his skin seemed perfect, his features quite handsome. His eyes held an unshaken calm about them. He was dressed in only the finest silks and only the best of leathers. He approached the woman slowly, a sickening smile forming on his face. She thought she recognized the man from somewhere before. Could it have been a traveler, unfortunate enough to stumble upon the clutch? She didn't know, nor would she know. The only thing clear to her was this would most certainly be her last night on this earth.

The vampire reached out a hand, gently caressing the woman's cheek, cooing ever so softly as he did so. "Such soft skin, for one who lives in a community such as this," he whispered as he slowly walked around her, pressing himself to her as he wrapped an arm around her waist, gently resting his hand on her belly. "Mmmm, and untouched

as well. Only the finest, I see. This village has decided to offer me only their best.” His hot breath caressed her neck as he took in her scent, almost becoming aroused by it. Tonight would be a good night indeed. The woman began to relax as though she found his advances welcoming. She looked into his eyes, and a smile formed on her face as though death meant nothing. This would be exactly what she wanted.

She snapped back to reality as a sudden crash from behind them both. A scowl formed on the face of the vampire as he looked toward the doors of the church. “Who would dare interrupt my feeding?” he seemed to scream in anger.

“I would, ya varmint,” Shani Wennemein said as she held firm both pistols. Beside her, Pania gripped her rapier and aimed her pistol at the vampire. “Time ta send ya back ta the hells where ya b’long.”

A laugh, a mocking laugh, was all that greeted the pair of elves. Obviously the vampire was highly amused. “You must be joking,” he scoffed as he pushed aside the young woman. She fell to the ground, but fear had gripped her as she only lay where she fell. “Oh, to the contrary. You will be the entrée ,” he said pointing to Shani. “She will be the main course,” he pointed to the young woman. “And for dessert,” he said as his hollow eyes drifted to Pania.

“Ope I make ye fat,” Pania hissed. The comment was almost like a signal, as Shani began firing. Pania took the cue and began to circle the vampire, taking a shot every so often to draw his attention from Shani. Bullets normally don’t hurt a vampire, but silver, that is something different.

While they would not kill the vampire, they did slow him down. Silver has a paralyzing effect on vampires. Unlike werewolves, which can actually hurt and even kill, vampires are only slowed by the components in silver. As the pair of elves unloaded, the vampire’s movements became sluggish. He growled, knowing that each bullet strike was slowing him more and more.

“Ow many rounds left?” Pania shouted out to Shani.

“Two. What ‘bout you?”

“Last one!”

Shani gritted her teeth and ran forward, hoping the effect of the silver would be enough. She slammed her shoulder into his chest. While he was slowed, he still had his strength. He grabbed her and threw her violently to the ground, falling to straddle her as his fangs dripped venom. “Perhaps I should turn you, little bit. Hmmm? How would you like that?” His right hand reached out to grasp Shani’s throat as he raised his free hand up in victory.

It wasn’t victory just yet. There were two elves, not one.

Pania drove the rapier through the vampire, just so it would exit his chest. The blade’s appearance caused confusion, and maybe even a touch of pain in the vampire. His reaction was even slower than he would have liked. By now, he would have grabbed the person who had done this, and feed viciously upon them. Instead, he heard the familiar click of a hammer being pulled back, and then the violent report of the pistol as it fired the bullet point blank into the back of his skull.

Pania forcefully removed the rapier from the vampire as the creature slumped to the ground. He was heavily injured, but his body was still regenerating. Should he escape, he could recover easily from his wounds, but Pania had other ideas. Quickly, she jumped onto the vampire’s body, wielding a wooden stake. Quickly, she drove it through the creature’s chest, aiming for his heart. As the blood spurted forth from the wound, Pania’s scream matched the death cry of the vampire.

“Burn in the ‘ells, ye bastard!” came her cry as the stake found its mark.

With that, it was over. Pania pushed herself off of the vampire as it twitched and writhed, turning to nothing but dust. Shani rose to her feet, coughing slightly as she was finally getting air into her

lungs again. Even still, she took out a cigarillo, and lit it. The match she tossed onto the frills that decorated the vampire's silken shirt. It caught quickly, eventually engulfing the creature. Shani marched over to Pania and offered her a hand to her feet. Once standing, Pania just watched as the fire ate away at the remains.

Slowly, the streets filled, all watching the spectacle. No one had ever killed a vampire in the village before, but these two elves, these two strangers had succeeded where they had failed. Perhaps these two weren't demons, but in fact, saviours.

Shani ripped off a piece of bread and used it to soak up some of her stew. It had been so long since she had a good meal like this. Her usual fare consisted of rations, whiskey, the odd rabbit, whiskey, and a sparrow or two. It was more than evident that Pania felt the same way, but the lithe elf figured that at least she got a meal or two from some of the tribes. Shani lifted a stein filled with cider and washed down some of her stew.

The two elves were the only ones seated at the long table in the rather spartan looking house. They had moved there after the townsfolk disposed of the vampire's remains, and the mother of the young woman offered the two a good, hot meal in reward. Although, she kept noting aloud how thin Shani and Pania were.

"Thank ya kindly fer the meal," Shani spoke up after finishing her stew. "Ain't had anythin' as fillin' as thet in a good long while." Pania nodded in agreement as she drank down some cider. She was still finishing off her meal, proving that she could pack away the food when need be. Shani could only stare in amazement. "Y'all ate more 'n I did, ya gots a hollow leg 'r sumthin'?"

Pania stopped eating and looked to Shani for a moment, then heard the giggling from one of the smaller girls in the room. All told, there was twenty people just watching them eat. If it hadn't been for

the fact that Shani and Pania had just saved the village from a vampire, the feeling would be rather unsettling.

“So, um...” Pania spoke up as she cleaned herself up. “Wha’ ‘appens now? We still dunna ‘ave ‘orses ‘r any supplies.”

“All that will be taken care of,” one deep voice replied as the door to the humble house opened. “I believe we may have found two horses that could suit you. But we ask only one thing of you two.”

“Hell, we won’t say a dang thing ‘bout this village...” Shani started to say until she felt a sting on her shoulder as Pania gave her a swat. “Ow! Thet dang well hurt.”

Pania looked to the man, obviously Dieter’s father by the similar features in his face. “Wha’ ‘actly is it tha’ ye be needin’?”

“That vampire was not the only one,” the man spoke softly as he took a seat at the table. “While you were eating, the village elders discussed something. It is evident we need assistance. And you look more than willing to be able to do this. We ask if you might be able to help us rid this curse which has befallen our community.”

“Well, we really ain’t vampire hunters ‘r nuthin’, we’s jist a pair o’ gunsl...” Shani started until she felt another sting on her shoulder. “Ow! Dangit, girly girl, stop hittin’ me.”

“Shani’s righ’,” Pania offered with a small sigh. “We’re no’ vampire ‘unters, bu’ we’d both be remiss if we turned our backs on this problem an’ jus’ rode ‘way. We do ‘ave some experience with the supernatural, bein’ where we from.” Pania watched the group for some reaction, seeing their attention was riveted to her words. “We come from ‘nother plane o’ existence. Elves ‘re common place there, an’ magic abounds. We ‘appen ta be o’ wanderin’ ‘earts, an’ tha’s why we wound up ‘ere. From wha’ we’ve found, people on this plane ‘ave myths o’ elves, so ye could say we migh’ be the same as those.” She sighed slightly as some of the people nodded in reply, attempting to understand, but Pania knew they never could. “As I said, we’d look

more like scoundrels if we jus' walked 'way from ye." She smirked slightly. "No' tha' it would give us any forgiveness with the United States government..." she said as she shrugged.

Frederick Van Bueren nodded with a smile, resting his large arms on the table. "For now, rest," he said in a calm and even tone. "We'll prepare in the morning. We have weapons and extra bullets. But for now, just rest."

Pania was thankful for the linen nightshirt, it was warm and cozy. Even the feather bed was a comfort and luxury compared to the hard ground she'd been laying on as of late. She crawled into the bed, and then looked over at her new partner. Shani leaned back in a chair, still wearing her denims, chaps and cotton shirt, her hat tilted down over her eyes. "Ye know, they do 'ave a nice nightgown ye could wear, an' the feather bed's go' more 'n 'nough room."

"No thank ya, I'm fine where I am," Shani's muffled voice said from behind the brim of the hat.

"S'prised ye dunna ge' a back ache tha' way." Pania grinned as she patted the bed next to her. "I could give ye a massage, work out the kinks."

"No thank ya, I'm..." Shani stopped mid sentence as she realize just what it was Pania was saying. Slowly, she tilted the brim of her hat up with a finger tip and looked over to the elven bard. "I don't swing thet way!"

"Oh," Pania seemed to whine just a bit. "C'mon, at leas' dunna sleep on a chair. I'd feel guilty if I took the bed an' ye 'adda stay there."

"Then, how 'bout I take the bed an' you take the chair," Shani offered in a deadpan tone. Pania was fluttering her eyes now, offering a tempting smile. "Stop thet," Shani said gruffly as she lowered her hat.

“No’ e’ en jus’ a wee bi’ curious?”

Shani tilted the brim of the hat up slowly again, her brow furrowed as she studied the pale elf. There was that charming smile again. She had a point, the feather bed was a lot more comfortable than a hard, wooden chair. She smirked just a bit and rolled her eyes as she pushed off the chair, and began to prepare for bed.

Morning came quickly upon the small village. As the sun began to peek over the horizon, many of the townsfolk were already full into their chores for the day. They worked together as a community, ensuring that they would survive. Neighbours would help neighbours, keeping everyone sustained with all the essential necessities. All but two residents of the village were busy with the beginning of their day. The other two, happened to be a pair of elven gunslingers.

Shani pushed her hair out of her eyes and stretched as she yawned. The sound of a rooster crowing greeted her as she slowly opened her eyes. Pania was right, the nightshirt was comfortable, and the feather bed was a great deal more comfortable than the chair ever would have been. She rubbed her eyes and began to move, but heard a squeak of protest as she did so.

“Five more minutes,” the muffled voice of Pania sounded out. It was then that Shani realized something very, very strange. She looked down and furrowed her brow as she saw the tiny hands of the elven bard wrapped around her waist. Shani huffed slightly and rolled her eyes as she lay back down.

“Ya moved the pillows,” she stated in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Mhmm,” Pania replied in her muffled voice. Shani could tell that the small elf did not have her head buried in a pillow, but against her shoulder.

“An’ the extra blanket,” Shani pointed out with a resigned sigh.

“Mhmm,” came Pania’s satisfied response. Shani could tell she was smiling.

“We never done nuthin’ last night, did we?” Shani inquired in a mildly annoyed tone. “I never started drinkin’ ‘r nuthin’, did I?”

“No,” Pania said as she sighed and moved her head to speak more clearly. She was smiling broadly as she gave Shani a squeeze.

“Cut thet out,” Shani remarked as she looked over her shoulder. Her nose came only a fraction of an inch from Shani’s, and she could see the look in Pania’s eyes. She quickly moved to look back at the door to the bedroom. “An’ git thet thought outta yer head. C’mon, we gotta git up.” Pania reluctantly let Shani’s waist go, stretching as she lay in the midst of the feather bed. Shani lazily walked over to the wash basin and ran water through her hair. “I smell breakfast bein’ cooked. Two good meals in less ‘n a day.”

“Cannu argue wit’ tha’,” Pania said with a smile as she rolled out of bed and waited for Shani to be finished with the washing basin. “Jus’ wonder when we gotta go o’er the details o’ the clutch.” Pania plopped down in a chair as she waited, watching Shani with some mild interest and smiling slight. Thoughts rushed through her mind, and she only sighed slightly. Give it time, she thought to herself. “An’ I wonder wha’ these ‘orses are tha’ they say they found,” she finally said as though trying to change the subject in her mind.

“Be nice if they were ours,” Shani said as she moved over to her clothes. She began to lift her nightshirt but stopped and looked toward Pania. “Y’all kin look the other way now,” she said as she arched an eyebrow. Pania sighed heavily and moved to the wash basin, busying herself with a quick morning clean up. Shani shook her head and rolled her eyes as she began to dress. The only thing she was thinking about was breakfast, that was enough. She had no interest in whatever filled Pania’s mind.

Breakfast was filling. Eggs, bacon, fresh bread, and a large bowl of oatmeal. Much heartier than they normally would have had. The pair of elves found themselves much more lively because of it. They could easily settle down here and forget about home, their own families, and live out a peaceful life. But they really never would fit in. Elves, they were considered different without a word spoken, and gunslingers to boot.

But right now, gunslingers is what this village needed.

The elders had gathered in the village square as some of the younger men brought out two large chests. Shani and Pania just watched as they opened the chests revealing a large number of weapons. Frederick stood beside them, explaining what needed to be done.

“We’ll prepare the weapons,” he said in a soft tone to the two elves as he watched the proceedings. “These weapons have been with many of the families for generations, brought with us from Europe. They hold a special meaning, and we believe if they are used they will give a greater deal of luck to both of you.”

“Magic o’ this world,” Pania said quietly. Shani nodded wordlessly in understanding. While these people did not know of magic as the elves did, they still had a magic all their own. “May’ap this’ll ‘elp t’ward vanquishin’ the evil foun’ ‘ere.”

Frederick looked over to Pania, his brow furrowed as he tried to understand her words. “Ya kin feel it,” Shani explained to him. “There’s somethin’ dark in the woods when ya ride. Jist like a naggin’ feelin’ at the back o’ yer skull.” Frederick nodded slowly, understanding exactly what they meant. He’d felt that feeling many times before.

“The location of the clutch we know of all too well,” Fredrick explained. “Fifteen miles north of here, the forest grows dank and thick, and the mist rises. As you draw closer, you will suddenly see your goal. It is very rare for anyone to return alive from such a journey, but we have been fortunate to have one survivor.” Frederick bowed

his head as though in prayer. “Even if it cost him his sight.” Those who had gathered remained silent as though any word spoken would be a travesty against this one man. Shani and Pania refrained from speaking during this time. Flip remarks and quick wit were not what they needed right now. Frederick looked back to the two elves as he spoke, changing the topic to their current goal instead of misfortunes of the past. “You two will head out on the road after the noon meal.”

“Um...” Shani said as she raised her hand slowly. “Whyn’t we jist head out, I dunno, maybe now. Catch ‘em durin’ the day. Whiles theys all ‘sleep in their coffins.” She looked to each person for some confirmation of the logic she tried to convey, but found no reassuring looks. “I’m gonna go out on a limb an’ say thet’s b’cause thet’d be easy.”

“Ye cannu see the castle durin’ the day,” a voice called out. Slowly, a middle aged man hobbled forward, leaning his weight on a cane as a woman, more than likely his wife, assisted him. A blindfold was wrapped around his eyes. Both elves immediately knew that this man was the lone survivor spoken of earlier. “Only by the light of the moon, will the vampire’s castle make itself known.”

“Great,” Shani huffed as she looked to Pania. “Why is it supernatural boogety boos always gotta make things hard.”

Dieter opened the doors to the stable as quietly as he could. Behind him, Shani and Pania followed, carrying their new arsenal of weaponry. Adding to the pistols they wielded, and in Pania’s case, a rapier, they each carried a crossbow and two quarrels of bolts. The weapons would help, no doubt, in particular, the two gun belts filled with silver bullets. Those would help immensely. But as the elves walked into the barn, it wasn’t the weapons they were concerned with.

“Gipsum!” Shani called out with a smile and looked to Dieter.

“Them two horses ya found were ours, by look o’ things.” She raced over to the stall and inspected the horse carefully. He was none the worse for wear, and seemed quite happy in his stall as he munched away at his pail of oats. Dieter motioned to Shani and directed her to a pile of gear, neatly packed away. Shani nearly giggled with glee as she found her satchel, still full of the cash from the bank job, all five thousand dollars were still intact as far as she could tell. She put her emotions in check for a moment and patted the satchel. “I’ll leave this here,” she informed Dieter with a nod.

Dieter smiled and shook his head, but only assisted in preparing the horses. “Don’t ride them hard,” he finally said with a helpful suggestion. “You’ll need them fresh for the ride back. And fresh just in case you have to return riding hard and fast.”

“Aye,” Pania said with a sigh and a light nod. “I’ve go’ a feelin’ we may be needin’ ta do so.” She looked over to Shani for some consolation. Shani smirked slightly as she picked up the saddle and walked over to her horse.

“C’mon,” the elven gunslinger simply said as she started saddling up the horse. “Sooner we git on the road, sooner we find this place.”

“Indeed,” Pania offered quietly as she followed Shani’s example. As she finished saddling up her horse, she began stowing the extra weapons in easy to reach places, taking care to note where everything was. Once she was finished, she looked to Shani and spoke in a quiet, but even tone. “Inta the mouth o’ ‘ell we ride.”



And I looked, and behold a pale horse. And his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.

CHAPTER SIX

Fifteen miles can be a long ride when you are willingly riding into hell. Shani and Pania left the small village shortly after the noon meal, and one last inspection of their gear. Food for two meals, water, although Shani would have demanded whiskey had Pania not given her a look of annoyance, ammunition for both pistols and crossbows. Even the metal worker in the village repaired the horses' shoes and any nicks to Pania's rapier, all the while commenting on the quality of craftsmanship that the blade had. Once they set out, an uneasy feeling settled over them, as though someone was watching them.

For ten miles, they never said a word. The sun slowly sunk toward the horizon as they let the horses plod along lazily. The trees seemed to become dead and lifeless as they drew closer and closer to their destination. As late afternoon crept up, the mist began to form. Still, they pushed on.

Afternoon turned to evening, and the sky became a deathly

black, as it was suddenly filled with clouds. There was a foreboding feeling that settled in. The air grew cooler, and lightning began to strike, as sharp bolts thundered from the heavens, making the area bright for a brief second before plunging the elven gunslingers into darkness yet again. They were certain they were getting closer as Pania looked to Shani, each giving the other a look of reassurance.

A bolt of lightning struck a tree not thirty yards from their location, the air become acrid and the roar of the thunder nearly deafening. As the area became brightly lit for a brief moment, the ominous shape of the castle revealed itself, looming high above them in the darkness like some vulture watching over its prey. Pania felt it the most, as though the very ground became death, as though she could see the tendrils of dark magic reaching up to pull them both down.

“Best make camp,” Shani suggested as she looked for a secure spot. She began to guide her horse toward a clearing just off the road when Pania stopped her.

“No’ there,” she cautioned.

Shani looked back to the elven bard as she furrowed her brow. “Why not, it’s already cleared out.”

Pania studied the area, knowing exactly why that clearing was so pristine. “B’cause tha’s a trap,” Pania simply said. “They made it, ta entice travelers ta rest, an’ they’d be able ta take their prey.” She looked around the area, and found a small path that lead to an opening in the trees. They moved the horses to it and found it wasn’t as clean as the other, but it would do. “We can leave the ‘orses ‘ere,” Pania suggested. “Ge’ ‘em in the mornin’ when we done.”

“If...” Shani started.

“No’ thinkin’ ‘bou’ tha’,” Pania said quickly, interrupting any negative thoughts from Shani. “Fer the sake o’ the village, we cannu fail. We’re goin’ back after this is done.”

“Either ta celebrate,” Shani offered with a cautioning tone. ““R

b'cause we been turned.”

The short meal was eaten without a word. Both of them kept going mentally over the details that had been described, and still, they knew nothing of what was to come. They gathered the quarrels and crossbows, made sure their pistols were ready, and began to walk toward the castle. Strange how they could not see it through the brush when they first stopped to make camp, but now it seemed to welcome them. It looked so out-of-place in this land, not something they'd seen throughout most of the New England states that was built before it, but something that almost looked to have been carried direct from Europe.

It's spires seemed to reach into the sky, as granite gargoyles watched any and all who would approach the tall wooden gate. The gate seemed firm and made of strong wood. It was ornately decorated in iron locks, each one depicting a demonic face as though the gate itself might come to life and strike out at them. The stone that made the castle walls looked ancient, as brambles and vines crept along it's surface. Moss built itself up along the bottom of the stones themselves, making them look older than they actually could be. The blackened windows looked like hollow eyes in a decaying skull. The towers along the wall held the only light, as flames in sconces lapped hungrily in the night air. The brambles and moss had died out long ago, as did anything that had once grown near the castle, including the trees. Even the air about them was cold as they drew closer to the castle walls.

The pair of elves studied the wall for a moment, searching for an easy entrance to slip into unnoticed. It didn't take long as they found a break in the wall. A suspiciously convenient break in the wall, mind you. The cracked stone looked fresh, and the ground was disturbed as though there was a scuffle. Perhaps someone was trying to escape. More likely, some one was being dragged inside.

Shani looked to Pania with some skepticism. “Whyn’t they jist put a sign up thet says ‘Imminent doom, this way.’”

Pania studied the narrow arched windows above them, as the flames from several candles made the shadows dance against the walls. “Cannu use the grapple lines,” she stated with a touch of disappointment. “Windows’ve gotta be three stories up.” She looked back over to the felled wall and then back to Shani.

“Could scope out fer a door,” the lithe elf offered. “Maybe git lucky.”

“With our luck we’ll pop into the kitchen durin’ the nightly vampire feast,” Pania said with a snort. “An’ knockin’s outta the question. Wha’ do we say? ‘Greetin’s. We from the Elven Word an’ we’ve go’ some readin’ material fer ye.” Shani snorted a laugh at the comment, then took a quick look inside. There was no monstrous hands that reached out to grab her, rending her limb from limb, so it must have been safe. “Well, ‘least we arna ‘bou’ ta ge’ killed goin’ in.”

“Nah, they leavin’ thet fer when we git further inside.” They both entered with care and caution, eyes wide on the lookout for any bloodsuckers that might be within reach. The crack lead into a long dusty hallway, which appeared to be for servants. It appeared that it had not been used in many years, as cobwebs draped themselves down the walls, and dust clung to the tapestries and few chairs that lined the walls of the long hallway. Obviously, this castle was at one time in use before it was infected with vampires. Ragged tapestries hung from the walls, depicting battles from long ago. Faded paintings depicted people long since dead. Possibly the former family that occupied this castle. Perhaps, they were now the vampires. “No way this place jist been built here,” Shani suggested. “Figger there’s some kinda magic at work. Place look like somethin’ I seen ‘bout Europe in the back o’ the newspaper.”

“It definitely lacks a frontier feel to it,” Pania said with agreement. The flames of the torches that lined the walls danced as the breeze passed over them, adding to the already uneasy feeling about the place. Shadows danced on the walls, causing the two gunslingers to keep a wide eye on their surroundings as they moved down the dark, dusty hallways. It was all too quiet, no sounds of people, even muffled. Only their footfalls gently echoes throughout the hallway, forcing them to move slower so they would not rouse the creatures that may have taken residence here.

Times like this were often when the beast would strike. Or at least send it’s minions.

“I don’t recall asking if someone would deliver food to us tonight,” the husky voice sounded in the hallway, causing Shani and Pania to stop literally in their tracks. No one else was in the hallway, but they both could feel a presence. Their eyes gradually explored the area, hoping they might see some evidence of their stalker. It came soon enough.

The mist that seemed to slip into the building began to swirl, gently at first, then rising into the air, and finally, taking form. Before them stood a handsome looking man, dressed casually in a frilled tunic, tight cotton slacks and knee high black jack boots. He leaned lazily on the rapier he held. “I suppose now is the time when you two will scream and start to run,” he said with a sickening smile as his fangs dripped from a fresh feed. “I had hoped dessert would be along shortly. So few people travel this road. Go ahead, run. You’ll only make the drink that much sweeter.”

Pania and Shani looked to each other for a moment. The elven bard rolled her eyes and shook her head as Shani looked back to the vampire. “Ya must be a youngun.” Like a signal, both gunslingers drew their pistols and fired, repeatedly. They had perfect aim, as the vampire had smugly placed himself only a few paces away from them.

Each bullet ripped into him, and he felt it, screaming as pain filled his body from each silver bullet that hit its mark. All too late, he realized these two were more than prepared. He crumpled to the ground as he felt his body stiffening.

The elves slowly stepped forward, Pania placed a boot on the vampire's shoulder as she aimed her Smith and Wesson at his head. "Ye shouldna be so cocky, lad," she said as she pulled back the trigger of the pistol, sending the vampire sprawling on the floor. Pania removed a wooden stake from her belt and tossed it to Shani who caught it expertly.

The agile gunslinger knelt beside the vampire and spoke in a hushed tone as his body stiffened more. "Next time, don't git so uppity with new folks, huh." Shani rested her arm on her knee as she considered this statement, gently twirling the stake as she did so. "I guess thet ain't really gonna matter now, is it." She looked back to the vampire, who almost appeared to be pleading with his eyes for them to let him go. Shani shrugged, and then she struck. The stake went through his chest easily, and whatever undeath was in him slowly ebbed to nothing.

Shani stood fully as Pania completed the kill, making certain that his body would burn completely. The bard looked to Shani and sighed. "Better 'ope we've no' go' an army ta deal with." Shani just nodded, as a sudden noise caught her attention. It sounded very much like...

Feasting.

The two elves slowly passed through a side door, as quiet as they could, and looked into the room, eyes widening with the horrific sight. The five vampires were too busy ravaging their current victims to take note of the new comers. Off in one corner, a man was protecting a woman, who was crying tears of madness and shrieks of terror.

Shani took a deep breath and steeled herself, while Pania used

the anger that welled up inside of her as an advantage. “Looks like we coulda made as much noise as we wanted ta,” Pania offered with a disgusted look on her face.

“Yeah,” Shani agreed with a sigh as she checked her pistol, reloading the spent bullets with fresh ones. She spun the chamber closed and twirled the pistols easily in her hands, finally cocking the hammers back. “Good thing that they called in the exterminators,” she said in a dry tone. “B’cause, we gots a regular infestation on our hands.”

Shani grinned as she stepped easily into the room, hands held onto her gun belts as she looked about the room. Pania shot her a glance that simply said *are ye bloody crazy*. Shani just shrugged and shouted out in her usual way. “YEEEEEEHAW! Howdy boys!” The vampires stopped feeding for a moment, looking somewhat bewildered as to why someone so brazenly would enter their domain. One of them slowly rose to his feet, letting the lifeless form of the woman he feasted upon drop with a thud to the floor. Her pale, lifeless hand stretched out as though begging for a rescue, as her vacuous eyes looked to the ceiling. Blood soaked her apron, staining it a deep, dark red.

The young vampire snorted a laugh as he looked to the others of the clutch. He grinned as blood dripped from his fangs and hunger renewed itself with the scent of fresh blood that seemed much sweeter than their current fare. “Look at this,” he said with a laugh as he wiped blood from his lips. “We have a regular gunslinger in our midst.” He turned to face Shani once again. “I suppose you happen to be the fasted gun this side of the Mississippi, too.”

“Hell no,” Shani said with a smirk as she seemed to rock back and forth on the heels of her boots. “I’m the best dang gunslinger this here country ever seen. ‘R will ever see.” As an added exclamation point, she quickly drew pistols and started firing.

As Shani fired, Pania steeled herself and plunged forward, moving to stand at Shani's back. Pania wasn't as good a gunslinger as Shani was, but she wasn't a slouch either. Her timing was impeccable. Just as Shani had run out of bullets, Pania began firing, allowing the lithe gunslinger time to reload. When Shani was ready again, Pania would need to reload her own. The vampires slowed down a great deal with each hit, the poison of the silver working its way through their bodies and slowing them down to a crawl as blood flowed from their bodies like streams of red.

One vampire drew too close to Pania, and she lashed out with a roundhouse kick, landing her boot square in the vampire's chest and knocking him back and off his balance slightly. This was followed with the report of her Smith and Wesson point blank at the vampire's head.

"Stakin' time," Shani called out as she continued to fire. The small village had prepared them well, right down to some of the innovative weapons they themselves had managed to create. Which included a stake-bracer for each wrist. A quick release on the bracer, and a stake would launch out of a small sheath, shooting it out toward its target at a velocity much like a crossbow bolt. Shani was the first to demonstrate this as one vampire tried draping his arms around her. The stake shot out from the device attached to her wrist and drove itself through the creature's chest. It lurched back slightly, then fell over as it's body began to disintegrate into nothing.

Pania picked up the pace as she took out another vampire, using her rapier to distract and damage it as she positioned herself to thrust a stake through the creature's heart. A second one felt the sting of a stake as it tried to advance, but the elven bard was too fast for it, it's body slowed by the silver poison's effect on it's system. A fourth one dropped as Shani let a stake fly point blank, smirking with satisfaction as it plunged into it's chest. Then there was only one.

“Cut an’ run ‘r fight an’ die,” Shani suggested to the lone vampire with a grin. “Choice is yers, either way y’all gonna be dead by dawn, I wager.” The vampire looked between Shani and Pania, hissing angrily, then bolted for the door. Shani moved quickly, cartwheeling over a chair and grabbing a stake out of an already dead vampire. As her feet landed she drove the stake through the vampire’s back, letting the force of her body’s momentum carry through and push the stake home. The vampire hissed in rage and pain as his body began to become more lifeless than it had before.

The five were dead, and Shani and Pania hadn’t taken a scratch. This was almost too easy. Pania approached the couple cowering in the corner. “Ye alright?” she asked, knowing the answer as soon as she had spoken the words. They were physically fine, but mentally, it would take a while to forget. The woman just looked at Pania, her eyes wide with fright. Pania looked around the room for a moment, as Shani gathered the bodies of the fallen. She’d start the vampire bonfire soon enough.

“Here,” the elven gunslinger called out as she tossed a pair of stakes to Pania. The bard caught them easily and reloaded each bracer, then her pistols as she continued to look around the room. It was an old kitchen, and it seemed as though not much had been updated. Even the cupboards and counters on the walls looked well aged.

Well aged, but the mirrors still worked well enough. Pania stopped as she studied the mirror she spied carefully. “Odd ‘ow a buncha vampires would keep these thin’s, aye,” she commented as she continued to stare at the reflection. In the mirror, she could see a good portion of the room. Including the woman who remained on the floor.

But not the man.

Her ears perked up slightly and she twirled fast and hard, a stake already in her hand. It caught solid in the chest of the vampire,

taking him completely by surprise as he let out a gasp of shock. Pania looked into the vampire's eyes and smirked as his form began to wither. "Elven ears, lad," she explained easily to the creature. "E'en with ye preternatural abilities, I can still 'ear a boot scuff on the stone floor." She planted a boot in his chest and pushed back, sending the creature crashing to the ground, just before his body disintegrated. Pania looked over to the woman and sighed. Before they had a chance to act, the vampire had fed from her, killing her quickly. "She ne'er e'en 'ad a chance ta scream."

"Hate ta say it," Shani commented as she dragged the last body onto the pile. "But I'd rather not be draggin' victims 'long with us. I hate that she died, but she's prolly in a better place now. Ain't no one able ta walk 'way from a scene like this an' be able ta act normal ever 'gain." Pania only nodded. It was heartless, but it was true. The elven bard just watched as Shani lit a match and tossed it onto the pile of bodies. It was amazing how quickly they lit on fire, like kindling in a freshly dug fire pit. Pania's eyes studied the room again, until something caught her eye.

A piece of parchment lay by a wood burning stove. Nothing really out of the ordinary, but it had writing on it. Writing that Pania recognized. She bent down to pick it up, covering her nose and mouth as the flames licked higher. Shani grabbed her arm and lead her out of the room into the adjacent hallway. This afforded Pania time to study the parchment closer.

By this time, Shani took note of what Pania had found. "Whatcha got?"

"Foun' this on the floor," Pania said in a slow voice as she furrowed her brow. "An' this mean we're no' the only wanderers." Shani gave the elven bard a perplexed look, forcing Pania to explain. "'S written in elven." The confusion was replaced with shock as Shani slide beside Pania to take a closer look. "Look like it taken from a

journal,” Pania stated.

Indeed it was.

My needs are met on this plane, it would seem I have found a place worthy of my attention. No wizards or knights to attempt to take me down. These humans are so easily fooled. Only the rare few know of my true nature, my true goals. Those usually find themselves turned, if worthy enough, to add to my army. When the time is right, I will indeed have my army, and we shall return home, using the portal. Unfortunate that the portal also happens to be the one thing to bind and trap me. Perhaps it is a good thing no one on this plane can read Elven. How fortunate for that indeed.

“So,” Shani said with a snort of a laugh. “Dealin’ with an elven vampire. Jist great.” She sighed as she looked to the tapestries on the walls. “Guess we jist gotta find this bindin’ portal ‘en. Good thing she never ‘xpected a few more elves ta come poppin’ ‘round.”

“There’s more,” Pania said pointing to the parchment. “Seem tha’ this vampire ‘as put it in a chamber, uses it like it’s own private study an’ bed chambers. We jus’ ‘ave ta find the room, an’ then we find the text o’ the ritual.”

“Figger this vampire’d keep thet information close at hand,” Shani replied, sounding more like a question than an actual statement.

“It’s worth a shot,” Pania said with a shrug as she continued to study the parchment. The writing was very familiar in a way, Pania furrowed her brow as she continued to look over it. “I think I know this.” She looked to Shani, her brow furrowed slightly. “Coupla nigh’s ‘go, I ‘ad this strange dream. A woman kept comin’ ta me, callin’ out ta me. I kept seein’ pages from a book.” She held up the parchment so Shani could see it clearly. “All wit’ this ‘and writin’.”

“Female elven vampire. Jist great. This here world brings ‘bout some o’ the worst o’ our world, don’t it?” The question was rhetorical, the lithe gunslinger expecting no reply as she looked about

the hallway they had stepped into. Shani let out a long sigh before she spoke. “So what’s the plan ‘en?”

“Plan?” Pania replied as she quickly stuffed the parchment into her duster coat. “We find this text fer the ritual an’ bind ‘er. Failin’ tha’...” Pania said with a shrug as she checked her pistols again.

Shani followed suit, replacing spent cartridges, as she completed Pania’s unfinished sentence. “Then we jist kill the bitch.”



I dare say I am the fastest gunhand this here United States has ever seen. If not the entire world.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Shani and Pania carefully traversed the narrow hallways that lead to the central tower. It was almost like they knew they would find their quarry there. So far, they hadn't seen hide nor hair of the elven vampire. While they traveled through the hallways and rooms they discovered more information about the woman. A parchment discarded here and there as though someone carelessly took a journal and walked throughout the halls of the castle, randomly ripping pages out and discarding them without a care. Almost like someone had deliberately left them a trail of bread crumbs. They knew she was from their home world. She described sights that both Shani and Pania recognized. From the texts they had gathered, they knew she was ancient. Pania recognized things written that she'd read about as a child, some dating back to the Wars. Other parchments they found spoke of the first years this vampire had arrived on Earth. There were descriptions of her time in Europe, especially near the Balkan states, most often in Romania, and the description of her travels to America.

Each parchment, Pania carefully placed in her inside pocket of her duster. She would save them and piece them together later. If there was a later, that is.

Shani quietly opened a large oak door with the toe of her boot, surprised that it hung slightly ajar. The door mildly protested, but swung out slowly to reveal a large library. Row upon row of shelves revealed books. Some collected from the vampire's days before she found Earth, others since she arrived on Earth. Pania marveled at the titles and authors. Some of the books were written over six hundred years ago. The shelves seemed rather odd, built in this rather circular room. The outer shelves hugged the walls, but the next row seemed to begin to spiral inward, with a small break here and there to move easily through the stacks. The pair of gunslingers soon discovered why.

In the center of the spiral, a large circular map was carved into the wooden floor. North on the map pointed directly north in the room. Half of it was recognizable as Earth, the other half, their home world, as a line seemed to be drawn between the continent of the Americas and that of the islands that surrounded the Sea of Seven Bridges of their homeworld. Elven script provided a circular border around the entire map itself. And laying on the map seemed to be markings reminiscent of a summoning circle. Pania began to work right away as she carefully read the inscriptions as Shani watched the room for any movement.

“Whatcha got?” Shani finally spoke after Pania read half of the inscription. She had been writing it down as she was doing so, keeping a record of the find.

“Seem ta be the final stage o’ a bindin’ spell,” she said in a whisper as she completed writing the text down. “Need ta find the b’ginnin’ o’ it.”

“Great,” Shani remarked with a huff as she looked back to the books. “Lets jist hope thet vampire’s got a catalog somewheres.”

Maybe she's all nice an' organized." The limber elf began looking over the books neatly piled on the closest shelves, smiling as she did so. "Seem she's got all the elven texts sittin' right here, nearest the circle."

"Ow convenient," Pania smirked as she joined Shani and inspected the books. "There's a lo' 'ere tha' seem were stolen from ol' Magic Schools long since gone." Her fingers ran quickly over the books, almost seeming to speed read the titles and catching an understanding of their content. "Good thin' the authors o' said books kept it simple when titlin' their work." Shani smirked slightly and turned to look at the summoning circle.

That was when her keen senses picked something up. She turned quickly, and felt a force hitting her in the chest that sent her flying back against a stack of books. Like a domino effect, the stack toppled and crashed into the next stack, continuing the chain until the last stack slammed against the wall. Tomes of various sizes and ages toppled to the floor, some covered in dust showing that they had not been opened in a very long time. They fell heavily to the hardwood floor with a thundering crash, some of them even damaging the fine wood with their weight. Shani had a death grip on her Colts and raised them as she sneered toward the vampire as she made her appearance.

"Figger y'all must be Ya'Row," Shani said with a growl. The name they had also gleaned from the discarded parchments. "Bit messy leavin' yer diary all thrown 'bout like thet. Anyone could jst pick it up an' read it."

"Perhaps something I will have to consider in the future," the vampire replied as she made herself known to them. Her clothing suited the style of dress of Europeans, with a low cut top, knee high boots, tight leather slacks, all in black, naturally. Similar to Pania's choice of dress, but less Gothic. Ya'Row's eyes seemed to glow with a bright crimson tint, her lips seemed painted in a blood red, and her

fangs were visible. Hungry, is what she seemed. Hungry, and angry.

“A pair of trespassers. How unfortunate for you.” She looked to Pania, the elven bard had a pistol trained on the vampire, only causing Ya’Row to laugh in an eerie tone that would send chills down anyone’s spine. “Put away that pop gun, luv. You know that won’t have any effect on me.” Ya’Row smiled seductively, causing Pania to shake just slightly as the vampire’s hypnotic effect began to take hold.

Always make certain that both angles are covered.

Shani began firing right away, bullets hitting their mark easily. Ya’Row snarled and screamed as the silver bullets did their work. She was still strong, and while the silver did work its magic, it was a great deal slower than it was with the brood. “Start the ritual!” Shani shouted out to Pania who seemed to snap awake and began pulling books off the shelves and flipping them open quickly. Shani fired one pistol as she reloaded the other, a difficult move but one she’d mastered over the years. Ya’Row on the other hand merely walked as though shrugging off each bullet. Shani backpedaled through the room, keeping her footing as she stepped over fallen books. Each step she took, she fired another round into Ya’Row. It only managed to anger the vampire, and she reached out with a scream filled with rage, grabbing Shani by the collar and slammed her up against a book shelf and place her hand around the gunslinger’s throat.

Shani’s hat fell to the floor, her hair tussled and tossed, as her elven ears poked through the black strands. This made Ya’Row stop for a brief moment. Shani snickered as it allowed her some time. “Hi! Bet ya never thought ta see more elves. We was in the neighbourhood an’ d’cided ta stop in, catch up.” Her quip gave her enough time to finish loading the Colt, and the chamber reloading sounded out clearly. Point blank, Shani lifted the pistol and pressed it to the vampire’s forehead, firing without hesitation. Ya’Row tumbled back and screamed a hideous scream of pain.

What was more important, she had tumbled back into the summoning circle.

“I GO’ IT!” Pania shouted and began to read the elven text aloud. The room began to shake as the text surrounding the summoning circle began to glow. This naturally only enraged Ya’Row. She seemed to growl and lunge for Pania, but the elven bard was ready as she fired her Smith and Wesson directly at the vampire, the bullet slamming into her chest and sent her stumbling back.

The realization that these were elves, adept with magic and able to read the elven language, had taken Ya’Row aback. She hadn’t planned for this contingency on Earth. It was never even thought of. In her own smug way, she had never realized that if she could find the portal to Earth, then other elves probably could as well.

A bright shaft of magical light flowed from the circle, trapping Ya’Row inside. Pania had finished the inscription from the book and took out the paper she had written the text upon. Shani loaded her Colts again and drew Ya’Row’s attention to her, firing upon the vampire. Each bullet became more and more painful than the last. Pania read the inscription in a bold and loud voice, as though it was echoing through the halls of the castle itself.

The summoning circle began to change, the center of the circle seemed to open up, and a obelisk began to rise. Shackles hung lifelessly from the obelisk, an indication that this object had a special meaning in some twisted way to the elven vampire. Ya’Row tried to reach for Pania, grabbing in vain as Pania read the text. The elven vampire took one swipe of her clawed hand, catching Pania across the cheek. Pania jumped back a bit, yelping in pain but pushed it aside as she concentrated on the task at hand. Black tendrils began to lift themselves up from the circle, ensnaring Ya’Row. And then the chains came to life.

Like metal snakes they reached out for Ya’Row. Pania’s voice

grew louder as she began the last part of the ritual. This would be it, the end. At least for now. The chains violently grabbed Ya'Row and hauled her back to the obelisk, snaking around her body and holding her firm as the elven vampire screamed like a banshee to be released. Once in place, four large stones rose up from the floor, shaking the room violently as they encased the obelisk that held the vampire in a firm grip. Pania's last words were nearly choked out by the screams from Ya'Row and the din created by the magic that rushed through the room. Both elves watched as a portal began to open underneath the stone cage. Slowly, it lowered itself inside the portal as the room shook even more. Books scattered throughout the room, glass shattered, chairs were tossed aside like so much tinder as the obelisk disappeared. Where it's destination was, neither Pania nor Shani dared venture a guess.

Pania rushed to Shani's side, grabbing her arm and pulling her to cover as books began rattling off the shelves and flying toward the portal. Broken furniture and pieces of glass whipped through the air. It was as if a vortex had opened and was sucking everything into it. The air began to howl as the obelisk sunk deeper and deeper inside, furniture, glass, books and papers following along with it. Pania clutched herself close to Shani as the two elves huddled together, waiting out the storm. As the obelisk disappeared inside the vortex, the air seemed to scream in protest. Whether it was just the air itself, or the protests from Ya'Row, neither elf ventured a guess. Just when it was becoming the most unbearable, it simply stopped altogether.

Both elves stayed close to the floor, slowly looking up to ensure the coast was clear. Shani looked over to Pania with a somewhat annoyed, but relieved look on her face. She leaned in close and whispered. "Why I git the feelin' y'all pulled me down jist ta cop a feel?"

Pania grinned just slightly and shrugged. "Better tha' 'en

getting' sucked up with the wave ta come." She sighed and rose to her feet, holding out her hand as she offered Shani some help up. Shani looked around the room and took a deep breath, as though she'd put a lot of work in. The lithe gunslinger pressed a hand against her chest where Ya'Row had struck her, and winced just a bit.

"The't's gonna hurt in the mornin'," Shani seemed to hiss out as she fought back the pain. She stood tall, stretching a bit to work out the kinks, but catching sight of the look Pania had. She studied the elven bard a moment, then realized that something was most definitely wrong. Pania seemed to be watching the room carefully, and listening. "What is it?"

"We're no' done yet," Pania said quietly as she seemed to be listening. That was when the first tremor took place. The castle seemed to rock violently back and forth. Both elves looked around excitedly, trying to find a place to escape. "This way!" Pania directed as she pulled Shani toward a doorway. Shani followed without question, her feet moving quickly as she kept pace with the elven bard.

They didn't watch the walls or the fixtures as they raced through the building, they only searched for the doors out. Pillars shook and tumbled to the floor, weakening the ceiling above them. Large cracks formed in the floor, and still, the elves raced on. Pania almost dragged Shani along behind her at times as they drew closer and closer to the entrance they had come through. She prayed that it would still be open.

Light began to shine in through the windows. The sun was rising, and this only made the building shake that much more. "There! This way!" Pania shouted as she saw the caved in wall. Both had to dodge falling debris as they made their way to it. First Pania, and then Shani. They raced as fast as they could away from the building, feeling somewhat better as the first rays of dawn began to greet them.

"Git ta the horses," Shani called out, still in a full run. "This

buildin's gonna blow, an' ain't no way I'm stickin' 'roun' ta watch the fireworks." Pania only followed, panting heavily as she willed her legs to keep pumping faster. They raced into the small clearing they had made earlier, both horses were still there, but they were getting jittery and skittish. Shani grabbed the reins of her horse and mounted it quickly as Pania climbed into the saddle of her own. They didn't pause to watch the castle, they just high tailed it, racing the horses as fast as they could. Behind them, the building was already crumbling violently, fiery explosions causing even more damage. The towers fell as the walls that held them high crumbled into dust. Several books flew through the air like a flock of birds that was desperately trying to escape, only to come crashing to the earth. Windows shattered outward as the air seemed to be pushed outward from the massive structure. Explosions rocked the area, crashes deafened the two elves as they rode hard and fast away from the destruction that was enveloping the area behind them.

Frederick Van Bueren stood beside his son as they watched the road. The entire village was brought suddenly out of their beds by the distant explosions, followed by the tremors in the earth. Each person knew that the castle was destroyed, now they just had to hold out hope for the two that had gone to destroy the vampires.

They waited and waited. Not budging until someone might catch site of them.

"I fear they may have been killed," suggested the vicar, a hint of sadness in his voice. "They sacrificed themselves, to save this village." Some of the villagers bent their heads in solemn prayer, but Frederick kept watching the road. His eyes never left, even as some of the villagers began to return quietly to their homes.

Along the road, he saw movement. A pair of tiny dots seemed to travel slowly, but he smiled as they drew closer. His smile turned

into a triumphant laugh as he recognized the two riders. They were not only successful, but they were also alive. The entire village heard his triumphant shout, and they turned to look. Many saw what he saw, and the smiles quickly spread on their faces. Cheers rang out, even the vicar shouted out his approval.

Pania Alow and Shani Wennemein rode slowly into the village. They were tired, bruised, and beaten. But they were also victorious. Shani looked up and smiled as she saw the villagers. “Howdy y’all,” she said, a tired smile on her face. “Ain’t it a nice day fer an early mornin’ picnic. Y’all kin watch the sun rise.”

Both elves brought their mounts to a halt as Frederick and his son approached. “We had feared the worst,” he simply said. “But there was always hope.”

Shani grinned and shook her head as she took her first look back down the road. “Take a lot more ‘n some castle blowin’ itself sky high ta take out the likes o’ us,” she said as she turned to smile down at Frederick and Dieter. “Ain’t no worries ‘bout thet.”

Evening had set upon the small village, and the celebration continued. The villagers decided it was indeed time for a celebration of freedom from an oppressor. And Shani and Pania took their places as guests of honour. The food was extravagant, the music loud and the laughter, well it was something that both elves had not seen or heard of in quite some time since their arrival on Earth.

As the sun began to set, Pania sat by the bon fire, her hands cupping a mug of cider, and she just listened to the sounds that surrounded her. It wasn’t long before the lithe gunslinger joined her, taking up a patch of ground beside the bard as she sat cross legged on the ground. Pania smiled as Shani took her seat.

“Sorry ‘bou’ ye ‘at,” Pania said with a small smile.

“Hell, I think I kin git a new one,” Shani replied with a sigh.

“Losin’ the hat’s least o’ my problems. ‘Sides, I were too busy thinkin’ ‘bou’ getting’ outta thet place.” They both sat quietly and listened to the music, shook hands with the occasional villager and even accepted more cider. “Whoa!” Shani remarked as she took a sip. “Figger this stuff’s fer special occasions, it’s got a might good kick ta it.” Pania laughed at the comment, then smiled as a small girl approached the two elves.

“I... I want to give you somethin’,” she said rather timidly. Shani and Pania watched as the girl took out a hat from behind her back and handed it to Shani. Similar in style to her old Stetson, but much newer. She took the gift with a smile and inspected it carefully.

“Well thank ya, darlin’,” she said with a grin. “I ‘ppreciate this.” To emphasize her statement, she carefully plopped the hat on her head, brushing down the brim a bit. “Need ta work it in a bit, but thet’ll be jist fine.” She smiled to the small girl, who stepped forward and gave both elves a hug before running off to join her friends.

Pania watched the girl a moment, then turned her attention to Shani. The lithe elf looked to Pania somewhat confused. Pania didn’t have lusting eyes toward Shani this time. They were much more respectful. “We make a good team, ye know,” she finally said.

Shani smirked, reminded of the past two days that they spent together. “I reckon yer right ‘bout thet,” she replied with a sigh, then turned her attention fully to Pania. The elven bard watched the gunslinger for a moment, trying to predict the thoughts now that a sly grin had appeared on her lip. Gingerly, Shani leaned over and gave Pania a quick peck on the cheek. The move was shocking, given Shani’s previous statements when they had first entered this small village. Pania merely blinked confoundedly as she stared at Shani. Her smirked turned into a laugh as she gave the elven bard a firm slap on her shoulder. Shani drew the bard’s attention back to reality with one small question. “Shreveport, huh?”

Captain Samuel Williams paced back and forth in the small room as he waited. He had been in Harrisburg for the past four days, and still nothing to report. No orders either. So all he had to do was wait. But four days was beginning to drag, he had a need to get back on the road and hunt down his quarry, Black Mask and now the gunslinger known as Pale Rider.

The door to his apartment opened as one of his men rushed in, carrying a letter with him. Williams stood straight as he waited for the soldier to read the message. “Good news, I hope,” he said in a calm voice. Inside, he was in knots.

“Received word from a few ranchers, Sir,” the soldier informed him. “There was some activity between here and Reading. And a few farmers said they saw a pair of riders heading south, toward West Virginia.”

Williams considered this information carefully before he finally gave a solemn nod. “Inform the other men to prepare their horses. We ride within the hour.” The soldier quickly saluted, rushing off to tend to his orders. Williams smiled as the soldier left.

Finally, they could pick up the trail again.

Franklin, West Virginia

Marshal Martin Derringer sat back in the saddle and watched the sky carefully, the stars twinkling down as though they winked to the lawman. Derringer wasn't a small man by any stretch of the imagination, standing at six foot eight inches tall and weighing over three hundred pounds, all of it solid muscle. His olive toned skin was not a common site among the settlers, as many believed he was possibly a mix of Indian and English. They were wrong, of course. His life was also a mystery to them. All that really mattered was he protected the area with a vengeance. As he looked to the sky, he knew that he would

have to do so again.

The clouds suddenly appeared, and seemed to rush across the sky, looking much like a group of hunters chasing after their prey. Derringer narrowed his eyes as he spoke in a low tone. “Huntsman. What is it you seek? What is it you want? And how is it that I can stop you for the second time in a millennium.”



CHAPTER EIGHT

Home of Pania Alow, Brockton, Terra-Kal, present day

Pania carefully lit the candles in her room as the sun began to sink below the horizon. She felt a need for a drink, as she'd be writing non stop all day long. At times, she didn't even notice how long she'd been sitting. This was much more difficult than the old Kit Carson children's novels she used to write. Pania opened her liquor cabinet and searched through the many bottles that lay within.

One caught her attention. The old label was yellowed with age and the bottle covered in dust. She'd almost forgotten about it. Had it been so long? A bottle of elven wine, but the label made it all the more mysterious. 'Bottled in Franklin, West Virginia' it stated boldly. The elf who brewed this batch was even more of a mystery, at least to the rest of Terra-Kal. Known as a malicious mage, he suddenly disappeared from public life, and never was heard of again.

"Should I let the readin' masses know," Pania asked to no one at all. "'R should I merely leave it as a quaint mystery fer the ages."

Franklin, West Virginia, August 29, 1863

Shani and Pania had been traveling the roads for over a week. Keeping themselves under a low profile while riding from town to town. Shani reluctantly agreed no bank jobs. Especially when they had such a long way to ride to reach Shreveport and the Underground Railroad. The horses loped into the town slowly. Another stop, it seemed. The town was small enough, and looked friendly enough. People offered a smile and a cheerful greeting as they passed by. Obviously they weren't privy to the wanted posters with the likenesses of Black Mask and Pale Rider. Or maybe they didn't care. Maybe they didn't believe the ramblings of the dime store novels.

Pania saw the man first, sitting tall in the saddle. She couldn't help but not see him, his large frame that sat almost delicately on the back of his horse. Rather, his Clydesdale. It was odd to see such an animal being used as a mount, when the quarter horse was faster, while Clydesdales were used to pull a wagon load of materials. The elven bard took note of the badge on the man's coat, recognizing the mark of a United States Marshal. She nudged Shani, who was busily taking note of the different businesses in the community. The lanky gunslinger looked to Pania, slightly annoyed, then saw where the bard was looking.

"Ev'nin', Marshal," Pania spoke up as she tipped her hat. Shani followed suit as both elves brought their mounts to a halt in the middle of the street.

The large man prodded his war horse forward a bit, stopping beside Pania's and looked down to the pair of elves. Both of their eyes were like saucers that someone would actually want to ride an animal such as that.

"Welcome to Franklin, ladies," he said in a calm voice. There was no malice in his voice, and even his eyes seemed to smile, a slight

contrast to the leathered face. He appeared to have seen a good number of years. “I believe your reputations precede you. Black Mask and Pale Rider.”

Shani gulped audibly. There was no way that she would be able to outrun or even outfox a man like this. “So... um...” Shani tried to say, but found there was no words that came to her mind as she stammered away.

“Wha’ now, Marshal?” Pania simply resigned herself to say.

The large man chuckled lightly, and even then it still sounded like a rumble of an oncoming thunderstorm. “No need to worry, ladies. As long as your stay here is peaceful, then you are free to come and go as you please. Things are done a bit differently in Franklin.” There was just a hint of an accent that Pania could not put her finger on as the man spoke. “As you have so keenly observed, I am the Marshal for this region. Marshal Martin Derringer.

“Well, guess y’already know us, huh?” Shani said without difficulty this time. “I mean, seein’ how ya mentioned our monikers right ‘way.”

“Black Mask,” Derringer stated. “Given to you by the first sheriff you crossed paths with, just because he didn’t know your name.” Derringer smiled as he repeated the tale. Shani just nodded, he was dead on the money, not like in the dime store novels. This alone made Derringer more dangerous than anyone else they had met before.

“And Pale Rider,” Derringer continued. “So given to you by the Natives in Maine and New York where you first made your appearance.” He arched an eyebrow as he looked to Pania, and there seemed to be a twinkle in his eyes. “To many in the New England states, that alone was a black mark against you.”

“Aye,” Pania said slowly as she tried to smirk. “Never could understand why, mind ye.”

Derringer tipped his hat to the two elves and smiled. “There

is an inn and tavern just at the end of this street. They have lodgings available, and they always have entertainment.” He looked to Pania for a moment. “Perhaps that might interest someone like yourself.” He rolled his shoulders as Pania could only sit in her saddle slack jawed. Derringer didn’t wait for a reply as he continued. “There are also legal poker games nightly, something you might be interested in, Miss Wennemein.” Shani just blinked for a moment, and never said a word. “For now, you ladies have a lovely evening.” He tipped his hat again, and urged the powerful mount forward. The Clydesdale lazily loped down the street as Marshal Derringer greeted townsfolk out for an early evening. His watch in Franklin was an easy one, the quiet little town that was nestled at the edge of the Appalachian Mountains in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia. The town had been founded barely seventy years ago, and already it was bustling with business as settlers, tradesmen, and the like traveled through the small town.

The two elves just watched him for a moment, then looked to each other. There was something about this town that felt just a bit off to them both. Something that wasn’t quite right, but all too familiar at the same time.

“Y’all find thet jist a bit creepy,” Shani remarked.

Pania turned in her saddle and started her horse down the street. “Le’s jus’ ge’ a good meal, a ‘ot bath, an’ ride on. I will say tha’ the good Marshal is fulla surprises.” Shani nodded as she took a deep breath, urging her horse forward as she followed Pania.

The wind whistled as evening began to approached. Clouds pulled themselves together, as if a beckoning hand demanded their attention. Thunder rolled in the distance, lightning flashed, and an unearthly howl sounded out. It seemed to echo off in the distance as though it were some wild animal in pursuit of its prey.

How fitting.

The hunt was on, and the Huntsman would begin to track his prey.

Shani opened the double doors to the tavern slowly and took a quick look around inside. It looked to be a popular place, and the townsfolk seemed to be friendly; perhaps even overly friendly. As Shani passed by one table, a portly man with a thick white beard smiled and invited her to sit and take part in a game of poker. Shani returned the smile and tipped her hat in thanks, stating she just might have to take in a couple of hands.

Pania found she was having the same reaction as Shani to the smiles and nods of greeting. One young woman began a conversation with the elven bard, and soon the conversation steered toward the topic of entertainers. Pania admitted that she was indeed a singer and a dancer, which prompted the woman to ask if Pania would put on a performance later in the evening. Pania declined the offer, but, she definitely would consider it after she had a bath and a hot meal.

They both saddled up to the bar and began to speak in low tones amongst themselves as they seemed to hang onto the immaculately polished brass railing that surrounded the bar. “This gittin’ any weirder fer you?”

“Aye, weird ‘nough,” Pania replied as she took another glance around the bar. It would have been so much like a tavern back home, with the boisterous laughter, the music in the background, and even the decor of the place. Minus all the six shooters, 12 gage shotguns and other pistols, mind you. But just like home, as the tavern itself seemed to be built with the care and attention that elven craftsmen would see to a building such as this.

She looked back across the bar, suddenly surprised at the appearance of the bartender. He offered a kind smile as he wiped off the bar in front of the two, placing a pair of clean glasses in front of

each of them.

“What can I interest you ladies in tonight?” he asked, then quickly held up a hand as though he needn’t hear any reply. “Actually, I think I have just the thing for you.” He reached under the bar and took out a rather ornate bottle, dusty coloured glass holding a rich looking liquid in its slender frame. He gently placing it on the bar before them as though offering the most expensive of gifts. “From our private stock,” he said with a smile, his chubby cheeks making him seem like a kindly middle aged man, and his eyes holding a well of wisdom.

Pania reached slowly for the bottle and inspected it closely. She brushed back some of the dust on the bottle and looked up to the bartender with bewildered eyes. “This... this... this...” she stammered, completely taken aback by the inscription on the bottle. The year stated ‘Year of the Seedling’ and the brew house name was that of Solinary, a well known and popular family that lived in Brockton.

“Elven wine, I know,” the bartender nodded with a chuckle. He saw the looks she held and felt compelled to explain. “You aren’t the first of your kind to come drifting into this town. As a matter of fact, one of the first citizens here was an elf. We keep that information quiet around here, we don’t need nosy tourists defiling his last resting place.”

“An... elf?” Shani said with a great deal of force. It was hard to believe, even if they had crossed over from their own world to Earth. Shani had always thought she was the first and only, until she met Pania. With that thought she supposed it was true. “An’ he left... left... a bottle.”

“Actually, he left an entire reserve for us,” the bartender explained, his smile ever present. “About thirty years ago, he returned home, and brought this to us. A thank you, he said, for everything we had done, and for making him so welcome. I was just a small boy at

the time, my father ran this place. About ten years later, he passed on. I remember hearing that he was very old, and just simply wanted a place to stay and live in peace.” The bartender shrugged a bit before continuing. “I suppose his life was filled with a great deal of troubles. We never bothered him about that, really.”

Again, Shani blinked, unable to say a word. Pania would have to do the talking for now. “Is there... any chance we can see the grave? Jus’ ta pay respects. It’s no’ often we ‘ear o’ ‘nother elf in these parts.”

“Certainly, I don’t see why not,” the bartender replied. “But for now, enjoy yourselves. Three days ago word came in that you helped a small village in Pennsylvania against a den of vampires. You deserve a rest after that.” He gave each of them a pat on the shoulder and pushed the bottle toward them. “Consider this one on the house.” With that, he left to perform his duties as the tavern owner.

The two elves never said a word for quite some time, as they tried to let all this new information sink in. It was Shani who finally spoke. “We ain’t dreamin’, are we?”

“No,” Pania replied in a quiet, automatic tone. “I’d say no’.” She picked up the bottle again and a smile came to her face. She uncorked it, and poured some for each of them. “Fer now, le’s jus’ enjoy the moment, shall we.”

The sound of poker chips clinking seemed calm. Shani studied her cards closely as she contemplated her bet. Finally, she took five chips and tossed them into the middle of the table, looking to each of the other participants. “I’ll see yer bet, an’ raise it twenny bucks,” she said casually.

“Elf’s got a mean poker face,” a slender gentleman in a deep blue fancy suit said with a sigh. He wiped his brow with a monogrammed kerchief, the letters JF plainly visible. His pale skin seemed almost blue

white, and he did not seem to be one who was used to such climates as West Virginia.

“You’re just jealous, Jack,” the portly man with rosy cheeks and a full white beard chuckled. “You always had the best poker face, but after a while you can tell when your dour demeanor means you have garbage in your hands.” Jack just scowled and matched the bet.

“Glad this is a friendly game, Nick,” Jack replied as he watched Nick toss in his ante. “I guess that’s why I always come to Franklin during the summer months.” One of the other players added his into the pot and looked to the last. The last player grumbled and tossed his cards down, muttering something about too rich for him. Jack looked over to Shani. “You called it, let’s see ‘em.”

Shani grinned as she placed her cards on the table. “Royal Flush, gentlemen,” she said as she watched the reaction from the others. One of them just shook his head as he grabbed his glass and walked to the bar. Nick could only laugh, and Jack, he sighed openly as he leaned back in his chair.

“That’s five in a row, Elfy girl,” Jack merely stated. “Exactly how much of my money do you wanna take?”

Shani shrugged as she dragged the pot in with a grin. “Hell, luck’s gotta run dry at some point. Lets jist say I’m havin’ fun. Lot better ‘n back in Madison, where a poker game ended in pistols.” She added her winnings to her pile as Nick picked up the cards and began to shuffle. The player who went to the bar returned with a fresh drink and a bottle of whiskey, which he began filling up the other’s glasses.

“Fortunately,” Nick said as he began shuffling the cards like an old time professional poker player. “Around here it’s an unspoken and unwritten rule. I’ve never heard of gun play at a poker game here.”

“Oh, there has been,” Jack informed them as he picked up his drink, saluting with the glass to the cowboy who’d brought the bottle. “But they usually have to deal with Marshal Derringer. I’ll just say the

last time weren't pretty." He took a swig of his drink and set the glass down. Shani noted to herself that these four players seemed to have a never ending well of money available to them. Each time the girl that carried chips walked around they always bought more. Waitresses cruised the spacious tavern carrying cigars, drinks, chips and more for the many patrons who had come in to fill this quaint place.

There was even a stage for entertainers. Decorated in rich, red velvet, the maple wood stage had seen it's fair share of entertainers over the years. Everything from singers, dancers, to even burlesque type shows that were usually of more European flare. Very different for a town in the eastern United States that had seemed to move away from the traditions of their European settlers, but something that gave a bit of a feel of home to those who may have just arrived from across the pond. The stage was lit with small candle spot lights, letting soft light drift onto the stage to illuminate the entertainers and give a small feel of something special. Very much like what was about to take place.

Each evening there was entertainment, and tonight was no different. The poker game seemed to come to a halt as the stage became lit up with the floor lights and the manager of the tavern, the friendly bartender, walked onto the stage.

"If I could have your attention, everyone," he called out to the crowd in a boisterous voice. "Each night we have a new entertainer join us, and tonight is no different. Two of our wonderful girls have joined tonight with a very special and surprise guest. Miss Pania Alow, known to most as the scourge of the New England states, Pale Rider. Tonight, we are delighted to find a softer and gentler side to Miss Alow, as she and our usual house will be pleased to perform for you all."

Shani groaned as she seemed to sink into the chair just a bit. The crowd clapped loudly as the three ladies came onto the stage, dressed in red and black dresses complete with all the finery expected

to be seen on ladies who performed the interesting line dances seen in larger halls in larger centers. As the performers lined up on stage, a fiddle player and a banjo player took their seats beside the stage. The three ladies began evening's entertainment, singing in perfect harmony, beginning slowly, and sultry.

You can take a cowboy off the range

You can take a horse off the range

You can bed them down, make them lose their frown

But he'll still want to go a ridin' on the range

As the first few lines echoed throughout the tavern, the fiddle and banjo picked up the tempo immediately, and the three ladies began dancing in unison on the stage, hands clutching the dress as they would perform a high kick in time to the music, giving just a hint of another show to the audience, as the dancers would give little flashes of the layers of colourful ruffles that were reminiscent of the Can-Can dancers normally seen in France.

There's just one thing to do

An' that's to make him understand

It's something that you always knew

He'll have to make a choice

A bass player joined in, strumming the strings in time to the beat as the ladies went back to their quick dance, bringing the crowd to clapping in time to the music, as a few of the patrons let out a whistle every now and then. Shani peeked toward the stage and saw Pania give her wink as she performed another high kick. The elven gunslinger just muttered *oh my lord* and sighed slightly.

So... fellers... this is where we tell you

Stop horsin' around

Stop horsin' around

You make your choice right here

An' let me tell you dear

You better choose me not your horse

The fiddle player brought the crowd to a boisterous clapping as the ladies danced on stage in time to the music. Each of them offered a broad smile to the crowd, knowing that their endeavor was paying off, just like magic. Just like magic, with little to no practice, they kept singing in perfect harmony at the appropriate intervals.

A night of poker with the boys

Making certain there's lots of toys

So grab an whiskey, if you're feeling frisky

Just remember there's more than just the boys

The music became quick as the ladies danced on stage, the final part just around the corner as the crowd clapped in time to the music louder and louder, as though to entice the dancers to do more. The black, high heeled shoes didn't seem to impede the trio as they moved their feet quickly in time to the music, offering a high kick from time to time as they danced. The banjo picked up the pace as the ladies sang the final line, ending the song with a flare just for the crowd.

One piece of advice

From us girls that would be nice

You spend your time playin', Sunday you're a prayin'

But with us you're prayin' all the time

As the banjo player struck the last chord the crowd rose to their feet in a standing ovation, very appreciative of the short, but entertaining number. Even Shani slowly rose to her feet and clapped for the performance. The three ladies bowed in appreciation of the applause and quickly left the stage, followed by the band members. Eventually, the crowd returned to their seats, and with that, as quickly as the song ended, the joyful saloon returned to its American feel as it stepped away from the European flavour for a moment. Poker was once again on the minds of the patrons.

The poker players tossed in their chips as the game began to

resume. “You seem less than enthused about the performance,” Nick said as he nudged Shani.

“Y’all don’t ride with ‘er,” she said with a huff, tossing her opening bet into the pot. “So I’ll fergive ya fer thet.” She took a look at her cards before the game began in earnest and sighed. “Well, look like my luck jist ran out.”



Well, look like my luck jist ran out.

CHAPTER NINE

Shani and Pania studied the grave solemnly. The bartender had brought them out to the cemetery to see the final resting place of the elf who had come to this place and called it home so many years ago. They knew the name all too well. A scourge on their home world, an elf who sought nothing but power, and strove to find eternal life. Perhaps this is what he meant.

“People back home think he’s jist some lich up in a tower,” Shani whispered. Pania merely nodded in reply. “Guess this paints a whole new picture on the bastard. Alla things he done, alla people he tortured. Weird thet he come here, an’ made things right.” Both elves had removed their hats as though in a respectful prayer when they first approached the grave site. “When we git back, should we say anythin’?”

“No,” Pania stated in a somber tone. “B’cause no one’ll b’lieve us.” The two elves slowly placed their hats back on their heads and began to turn back to the wagon owned by the bartender. “An’ no

tellin' these people wha' 'e were like on our world. Leave 'em with their own misconceptions." Shani nodded slowly as the two began to trudge back to the wagon.

The clouds covered the stars in the night sky. Lightning flashes lit up the area every so often and thunder rumbled in the distance. The wind had picked up just a bit, making it slightly uncomfortable. Shani stopped a moment and looked back toward the grave. It seemed as though she had heard laughter coming from that direction.

"Ladies," the bartender called out. "We had best get ourselves back to town. Storm's coming in, we don't want to get caught in the middle of it."

They all heard the large, familiar clomping hooves Marshal Derringer's Clydesdale as he galloped to the wagon. "Travers," he called out as he brought the mighty horse to a stop. "Get Miss Wennemein and Miss Alow back to the inn. I'll handle what's coming." Travers, the bartender, knew that sound in Derringer's voice. There was more to this storm than just thunder and lightning. "Ladies, step lively, if you please," Derringer advised in a calm voice.

Pania was already stepping into the wagon, while Shani began to lazily run toward the vehicle. She was still twenty feet away when the air became acrid, filled with electricity. Then came the lightning bolt; the horses reared back as the loud boom echoed throughout the area. Shani was thrown back several feet toward the graveyard as Pania covered her ears. Travers worked to control the horses and Derringer steered his horse slightly, away from the scorch mark in the earth. He quickly dismounted and looked skyward.

"Huntsman," he shouted to the heavens. "It's been a long time!"

The air filled with eerie laughter, the dirt picked up, swirling together and forming an image. A putrid orange glow came from within it as the apparition of a man became known. The Huntsman.

He laughed as he seemed to float toward Derringer.

“It’s been many, many century’s, Maximus,” he said with a cold chuckle. “Or is it Derringer now. I can never remember, you change your name so many times.”

“What do you want?” Derringer hissed through his teeth as he scowled at the apparition.

“What I always want,” the Huntsman replied with a sickening grin. “I want my prey.”

The Huntsman looked toward Shani who was just now trying to orient herself after nearly being hit by lightning. Her ears were ringing and she found it difficult to stand. This only made it easy for the Huntsman. Ethereal tentacles reached out and surrounded her. Pania had come back to her senses after the blast, and saw what happened. She shouted out in horror as the Huntsman drew himself closer to Shani, enveloping his cloak around her.

“The first of my prey,” the Huntsman said with a laugh as Shani disappeared into the blackness that was the Huntsman’s form. “The first of many, and you can do nothing to stop me, Maximus,” he said with a twisted grin as he looked back to Derringer.

“You bastard!” Pania called out as she drew her Smith and Wesson, jumping down from the wagon as she moved toward the apparition, firing repeatedly on it. The Huntsman only laughed as he pulled himself into the air.

“Time enough for you to join me, little elf,” he called out with a sneer. “You’re next after all.” He moved further and further away as Pania kept firing upon the apparition. When he was completely out of sight, a second bolt of lightning screamed out of the sky, slamming into the ground in front of Pania, sending her flying backwards. She hit the ground and slipped into unconsciousness.

“Marshal!” Travers called out in urgency. “What do we do?”

Derringer knelt down beside Pania’s still form. She still

breathed, so there was still hope. Gently, he picked her up with ease in his massive arms as he replied to Travers. “Go back to town and find the sheriff and his deputies. Explain what happened, everything. He’ll know what to do.” Derringer cradled Pania carefully as he mounted his war horse.

“Marshal,” Travers said in a small voice. “It’s true, isn’t it. All those things you told us. It’s all true.”

“Yes it is, Travers,” Derringer replied with a soft sigh. He looked to Travers and nodded in his direction. “Get going. Find the sheriff. I’ll tend to Miss Alow. She is our only hope right now.”

Her world was black, the wind whistled in her ears. When Shani opened her eyes, tiny dancing lights in a sea of black was all she saw. It didn’t look like the night sky at all. It was different, as though she was racing through the world at unimaginable speeds. She tried to move her arms, but found herself paralyzed, not by fear, but by something else. She could still move her head, and still had control of her voice as she grunted trying to move. She at least could still hear well enough.

The laughter filled the area, sickening, demented laughter that could send chills down the spine of any mortal. “I see my little prize is awake,” the voice seemed to call out from everywhere. “So good of you to join me.”

“Who... who the hell are ya?” Shani shouted then began coughing violently.

“Tut, tut,” the voice warned. “Too much shouting and you could injure yourself. And we wouldn’t want that.” He chuckled lightly, as it seemed to echo all around.

“Wha... whaddya want with me?” Shani seemed to plead, wanting answer to this confusing and confining situation. Her voice was stuttering badly, like she used to when she was just a small girl.

“What do I want?” the voice repeated in a shout that filled Shani’s ears, then he spoke again in much softer tones, highlighted with a sickening laugh. “What do I want? I am the Huntsman. I seek out my prey. And I take it. You and your little friend have interested me. Capturing you was easy. Capturing your friend will not take much at all. Especially with you for bait.

“Whyn’t you jist go STRAIGHT TA HELL!!” Shani shouted as she narrowed her eyes and forced courage into her very being as she snarled.

The laughter filled the area again, and the specter who spoke finally showed himself. His face made of the mists, his hair, wisps of wind and clouds combined. Shani could see his eyes as the dim light grew just a bit. They were dark and hollow, and his voice sounded like thunder when he spoke.

“Oh, I have no doubt of that,” he spoke with a twisted smile. “I just need one more, and we can all go together.”

Pania’s eyes slowly opened, and the small elf raised a sore hand up to inspect her forehead. Her vision was blurry at first, and she had a difficult time focusing on objects in the room. It took her a great deal of energy to realize the large figure in the room with her was actually Marshal Derringer.

“Me ‘ead,” she finally said in a quiet tone as she squeezed her eyes shut. She tried to get up, but found it difficult and merely slumped back onto the bed again. “Wha’ were tha’ thin’?” she finally asked. “An’ why it call ye Maximus?”

“He is called the Huntsman,” Derringer replied in a tired voice as he busied himself at a nearby stove. He poured hot water into a set of cups, and added several herbs to the mixture along with some tea, which he allowed to steep for a while as he spoke. “And I have hunted him for a long, long time.” He pulled up a chair and set it

beside Pania's makeshift bed, sitting himself down rather heavily, and continued.

"To answer your other question, I will need your complete confidence. Have you ever participated in a dream walk before?" Pania shook her head, allowing Derringer to continue. "A dream walk, is when one person can see the past of another. I have done it before, I learned it during my time in Tibet, and found that even the Natives here can participate in such things." Pania furrowed her brow, confused by what the Marshal was describing.

"Bu', 'ow's tha' gonna get Shani back?"

"To know your enemy," Derringer continued. "Is to be able to trap your enemy. I'm going to take you back with me, so you can see the first time I faced the Huntsman." He rose to his feet and retrieved the tea cups, handing one to Pania. The pale elf took it carefully, taking in the aroma of the mixture, what seemed to smell like lilacs mixed with blueberries.

"Bu' why me?" she asked in a voice that sounded more tired than what it should have. Even with just a scent of the tea, the mixture was beginning to take effect. "Wha' 'ave I go' ta do with bein' able ta stop 'im." She took a sip as she watched Derringer take a sip from his own cup.

"You have a connection to magic," he explained to her. "Something I do not have." He watched her as she lay back down on the bed, her eyes beginning to close as though they had weights attached to them. "For now, just sleep. And walk with me. Everything shall be revealed that you need to know."

Shani grew worried. It had been a while since her last conversation with the Huntsman. He hadn't made himself as accessible as she would have liked. There was one thing she found in this creature that seemed to be a very human quality, one shared by many elves as

well. A raging ego. He already had one elf, but he wanted the other as well. Pania reserved her thoughts to the fact he was using her as bait.

There was something else about this huntsman, something that didn't sit well with Shani at all. His arms protected his chest, which seemed to glow a ghastly green, when he made his appearance. Perhaps that was the key to his destruction. Maybe, like a lich in some ways, he carried his own brand of magic to keep him alive for so many years.

Shani could test the theory, if only her hand could move to reach her long barrel. For now, she would wait, perhaps in time she could find the will to move, and finally end this.

Wisps of smoke filled the air as Pania walked along. She knew there was ground below her feet, but she couldn't see it. The blackness was everywhere. And she felt so alone. Just as her body began to shiver, a reassuring hand clasped her shoulder. Pania turned quickly, somewhat comforted to see the massive frame of Martin Derringer. She watched his eyes as they turned from her to gaze out into the black.

Pania turned to see if he had seen something beyond the blackness. Slowly, a scene began to form; a massive wall that stretched out for miles. Peasants traveled the road that ran along it, and men in gold armour with red cloaks and shields of bronze patrolled the wall. She looked back to Derringer for a moment, speaking in a near whisper, only made more ghostly by the vision they watched. *Where are we?*

Hadrian's Wall, he simply said. *The year is 66 A.D. Legio II Augusta had completed the wall that pushed the Scots north.* He motioned with an open hand toward the scene as several riders approached in the same regal armour as the guards that lined the wall. *Keep watching.*

Pania looked back to take in the scene fully, and her eyes widened as she saw one soldier dismount a massive war horse. His hair

was jet black, his olive skin only made his armour gleam that much more. He was a handsome man, well built and strong in body and from his eyes, strong in faith.

That was when Pania noticed it.

You, she only managed to stammer.

Keep watching, Derringer replied in a calm tone. Pania obeyed the request, and her eyes turned back to the scene again. Three soldiers were approaching the large man. Pania assumed that he was their general.

“Hail Caesar,” the three called out in unison as they saluted.

“Hail Caesar,” the large man replied. His armour wore the crest of the ranking general of the legion stationed at Glevum. They were the remaining soldiers of the Legio II Augusta after the defeat at the hands of Queen Boudica. The general himself swore to remain and protect those citizens of the Britannia Tribes that became loyal to Rome. “What news do you bring?”

“Sir,” one of the soldiers spoke in a serious tone as he approached. “We have received word that a woman wishes to speak with you. She calls herself a soothsayer, and can grant great insight into the coming days.”

The general furrowed his brow slightly as he rested his hand on his gladius. A finger tapped the hilt of the sword as he looked to his soldiers. “What is her name?”

“Morgan le Fay, Sir,” the soldier stated quickly. The general’s look became even more tepid. The soldiers knew nothing of this name, but he was obviously all too familiar with it. “She has come to our main camp, and awaits you, Sir.” The general moved quickly past his soldiers with great determination. Two of the men took up flanking positions immediately; they sensed some distress in the general’s mood, and their own emotions began to mirror it. They had known the general long enough to know when he was suspicious.

The camp was well tended, soldiers rested in shifts as they continued their patrols. Evening was falling, and most of the men had gathered in the main tent. The general moved past it, toward his private tent, where the soldiers directed him. He stood outside the entrance for a moment before looking to his men. “You two remain out here. I will call you if I need you.” They nodded quickly taking their places on either side of the entrance as the general slowly moved inside.

She stood with her back to the doorway, but he knew all too well that she was aware of him. He heard the small chuckle as he drew closer to her. “Why don’t you dispense with the facade, le Fay,” he suggested to her. By his conversation, the tone in his voice, it was more than clear that they knew of each other.

“Just as you have dispensed with your own facade,” she replied in a hoarse whisper. “Or do your men know of the legend that is Gaius Thadius Maximus, General of the Legio II Augusta?” She turned, holding a small smirk as she looked into his eyes. Her eyes seemed to distract from the Gaussian robes she wore that seemed to flow like water around her shoulders as they draped down her body. “The general who controls the beast.”

“I don’t control it, le Fay,” he scowled as he spoke. “We co-exist.”

She tittered as she spoke, smiling at the comment made by Maximus. “You will soon learn that you cannot always escape the beast that haunts us all, Maximus.”

“What do you want, le Fay?” he said with a huff, displaying his displeasure with her need to taunt and tease.

“I have warning for you, Maximus,” she stated as she studied the large man. “And if you do not heed it, then you shall be forced to fight this for the next millennium.” She let her words sink into Maximus’ ears before she continued. “The autumn winds begin to blow, and no matter how loyal the Britains are to you, they still hold faith in the old

ways. And they will fear the Wild Hunt.”

“I have heard of this wild hunt,” Maximus replied with a scoff. “Lead by a phantom huntsman, who can steal your soul just for looking at him. I know the story. A myth, nothing more.”

Morgan laughed aloud with Maximus’ last words. “A man who is a beast, saying that the Huntsman is a myth.” She chuckled at the irony before continuing. “Heed my words Maximus. If you refuse to listen, then the fey folk cannot help you. Your destiny will be to chase the Huntsman wherever he roams, until you find a fey worthy enough to slay him.”

Pania’s eyes grew wide and she looked back to Derringer. She suddenly knew why he thought she was the key. He believed that she was the fey that could kill the Huntsman. Derringer motioned with an open hand again, and the scene changed. Soldiers lined the wall now, villagers huddled together as the sky grew dark. Thunder rumbled as lightning streaked the sky.

“General Maximus,” one of the soldiers called out. “There are rumours of bandits south of Glevum. They attack during the storms.”

Maximus furrowed his brow as the information was presented to him. Perhaps this was what the myth was, just bandits that used the storms as a cover. “Find me two of the fastest riders,” he said in an authoritative voice. “They will join me. We’ll hunt down these bandits and end this myth once and for all.”

The soldier saluted and shouted out quickly as he carried out Maximus’ orders. The general strode quickly to his horse, noting that his man servant had already made arrangements to prepare the mount for the journey. Maximus smiled as he approached.

“Always one step ahead of me, Sipico.” He shared a laugh with the man before mounting the massive war horse. “It’s time Pegasus. Let the winds carry you fast and hard as your namesake.” As if in reply, the war horse reared back, letting out a call heard throughout the

stables. With a confidence not seen by any horse, Pegasus moved as quickly as his large frame would allow, the ground seeming to tremor with each hoof strike, obediently going where his master would guide him.

Soon, the war horse was joined by two smaller Arabians. Maximus saluted the riders and they fell into rank, flanking him as they rode. This hunt might be for not, but at least they would try to end this madness. Maximus donned his helm, and held his shield firm as he encouraged his horse into a gallop. The massive hooves seemed to thunder as they hit the ground. The Arabians increased speed to match, their riders knowing they could easily outrun any huntsman. Their steeds were the fastest in the legion.

They rode for miles through forest paths, into the rich green fields and finally the hilly meadows. Keen eyes watched closely for any movement along the roads as they traveled the worn paths. They reached a clearing, and something in Maximus knew they would catch these bandits.

“Sir!” one of the riders called out. “Straight ahead! Lone rider!” Sure enough, Maximus saw the rider, sprinting along. He sneered as he spurred his horse forward, hearing the pounding of the hooves from the Arabians as they matched the speed of the war horse.

Closer and closer they neared. The bandits mount was merely a nag, Maximus assumed. Not a trained military horse with the endurance of the gods themselves. As they neared the lone rider, Maximus drew his gladius, raising it high in the air, and calling out in a commanding voice. “**ROMA VICTOR!**” His soldiers matched his battle cry as they too drew blades and urged their horses faster.

The air then filled with laughter as the thunder roared in the sky above them.

The lone rider seemed to tilt and reel as it turned back on the three. He carried a scythe, and used it with expert ability. His first

attack came at the left flanking soldier, cutting him in half as a hot blade would cut through butter. The rider seemed to fly with the winds themselves. Maximus now knew his folly; he should have listened to le Fay. The second soldier remained brave even in the face of most certain death. He had no doubt that even in death, he did what he needed to do. Death is what he received.

The scythe slashed through the air with ease, cutting through both horse and rider. The soldier fell lifelessly to the ground, never having the chance to cry out in pain as his blood spilled onto the ground. The Huntsman merely stopped and turned to face Maximus.

“You should have listened to le Fay, General.” He laughed as he charged Maximus. His scythe had already cleaved two men, what would be a third.

General Maximus had been a Roman Legionnaire for over 300 years. He could almost tell when an attacker was too brazen in his motions, too egotistical. The Huntsman was no different. Maximus grabbed the scythe with his shield hand, feeling the tip bury into his belly, but forcing himself to ignore any pain. The force of the blow carried him off his mount, and he fell to the ground. The Huntsman slowly walked over to him. It seemed to be a hollow victory.

“Just like all the others,” the Huntsman sneered as he raised up the scythe to finish Maximus off. The farmer’s blade arched down toward the General, as the Huntsman laughed with sickening glee. His glee was cut short, as his scythe suddenly came to a stop.

Maximus had caught the handle near the blade and held firm, pushing himself to his feet as the Huntsman tried in vain to force the weapon from his hands.

“What is this?” the Huntsman shouted as lightning flashed in the distance. Maximus laughed in reply, almost matching the bravado of the Huntsman. He knew when he had been double crossed, he knew that le Fay had not mentioned everything about the Roman General to

the Huntsman.

“It would seem that le Fay did not tell you everything,” Maximus stated with a twisted sneer. He gave a twist of his wrist, and snapped the blade off the handle, leaving the Huntsman only to scowl in rage. With an angry scream, the Huntsman drew back the handle and attacked. He laughed as the now useless scythe had become a most effective spear, and the Huntsman’s strength made sure it pushed through the gleaming armour of the General.

Maximus cried out in pain as he felt the weapon go right through him. He backpedaled, weakened by the blow. The Huntsman merely gloated as he assumed that victory was his. Maximus raised his head in defiance, sneering at the Huntsman as he spoke.

“No, le Fay told you nothing of me.” One hand grabbed the wooden handle that jutted from his chest, the other grasped the point that came out his back. With a roar he snapped the handle and pulled it out. Blood poured from the wound, but even the Huntsman could tell that something was most certainly wrong.

The General removed his helm and let it fall to the ground like a child’s discarded toy. His massive hands reached up to unclasp the cloak he wore about his shoulders. The breastplate fell to the ground as he rose to his feet. The Huntsman could tell, Maximus’ wound was healing. Much more rapidly than any human wound ever should.

Maximus breathed heavily, hunching low to the ground, and then the Huntsman understood. The general’s hair grew longer, his muscles became more taunt and sinewy. At the edge of the battle scene, the unseen figure of Pania watched in horror as her mind screamed at her what it was she was seeing, but she didn’t want to believe it. Pania’s eyes widened as Maximus’ face contorted as it seemed to transform before the Huntsman. Pania could only watch, realizing that while she may have been walking in a dream, her body was alone, lying helplessly in that room.

With a werewolf.

General Maximus had completely transformed, the skirting of his uniform the only mark that he was a member of the Roman Legion. He snarled toward the Huntsman, teeth bared as he crouched low, readying himself for a strike. The Huntsman laughed again, believing that the beast had taken over completely. This would still be a worthy kill. He drifted closer to the werewolf, a smile in his eyes.

That smile turned to a scowl as he realized his own folly as he saw Maximus' eyes. They weren't the eyes of a beast in rage, they contained an intelligence. He realized just a little too late, that the wolf had his wits about him.

The massive wolf reached out and grabbed at the Huntsman, shouting as he did. "Do not think I am a mere beast that can be trained to heel, Huntsman! For I will be your hunter. I will never stop chasing you!" The Huntsman could only reel back, try to escape. A werewolf with intelligence as this was unheard of. He lifted into the air as he sped away from the wolf.

As he flew higher and higher, he began to laugh as he called out. "And so it shall be, Maximus. The Hunter will become the Hunted. For all time!" He disappeared into the clouds, just as the storm began to break. The light of the moon streamed down, and Maximus looked about him. The carnage. He fell to his knees by the bodies of one of his men, and tilted up his head as he gave a mournful howl.



*Realizing that while she may have been walking in a dream,
her body was alone, lying helplessly in that room.*

With a werewolf

CHAPTER TEN

Her eyes fluttered open as she turned her head to push back the bright light of the room. Pania raised her hands to rub the cobwebs from her eyes. Everything was still a blur in her mind. She was just starting to remember what had just happened. Finally it hit home. The dream walk she had just been on, the revelation of the man who had been so kind and friendly toward the two elves. And she realized that man was still in the room with her.

She looked up and saw the large man standing over her bed. Marshal Martin Derringer, Thadius Maximus. Whichever name, it didn't matter. Because she knew what he was. Pania slowly looked up, and her body started to shake. It took everything she had to push herself back, forcing herself into the corner and grabbing the pillow, as though that alone would protect her from the creature.

“Jus’... jus’ stay back!” she screamed in terror. He was a werewolf, they weren’t known for their congeniality. Her free hand searched for her guns, but her eyes saw them, hanging in the holsters

of the gun belt as it rested on the far table.

“I have no wish to hurt you, Miss Alow,” he said in a quiet voice. “You should realize now that you are important.” He removed his stetson as he watched her actions before continuing. “As for my ... condition. I have control over it.”

“Con... control?” Pania replied with a nervous laugh. “Nev’r in the ‘ist’ry o’ werewolves ‘ave I ‘eard tha’ someone ‘ad control o’ it. Tha’s impossible.”

Maximus leaned back in his chair as he began to explain to the pale elf a bit more of his history. “I was just sixteen, on a scouting mission near the Persian borders when we were attacked. I was the only survivor. I used my... new found power to an advantage on the battlefield, and the generals saw this, and promoted me quickly.” He sighed as he thought back to these distant memories.

“In a battle against the Prussians,” he continued in his calm voice, but Pania could hear just a hint of sorrow in it. “That became the first time I realized that this curse was consuming me. When I rose to the rank of general, I always devised a plan of attack that would see the biggest push on the night of the full moon. Only this time was fatal to everyone save one man. After the battle, I realized I had killed over ten thousand men; on both sides. I ordered the lone survivor to return to Rome, tell them everyone was lost. Meanwhile, I escaped to Tibet, where I found myself in the hands of monks.” He leaned forward in his chair, hands held together as he continued. “They taught me not to just control the beast, but accept it, and to teach the beast to accept me as well.”

Pania could only listen to this tale that seemed so filled with fancy. Her mind wandered back to the dream for a moment. There were many people that she had seen, but she drifted back to one in particular. Morgan le Fay. “Ye... ye b’lieve tha’ the fey folk is the key?” she asked in a timid voice. “B’lieve tha’ I’m the key?” Maximus

looked up with a gentle smile and nodded his reply. “I cannu tap into magic ‘ere. It’s dead.”

“You have to believe that there is, Miss Alow,” Maximus said in an encouraging voice. “You have to realize, you can tap into this world’s magic.” Pania shook her head slowly, pushing Maximus to prove his point. “Look at what you’ve seen in the past few weeks. The vampire, the Huntsman, this town. It’s all around, Miss Alow. You just have to believe.”

Pania thought on his words, just as she thought on all the things she’d seen in the past week. It had all been so different since she first arrived. She’d always believed that this world was dead of magic. That it had given in so fully to it’s technology, that no one would dare think of doing anything more than mere illusions, card tricks and hand magic. She looked directly at Thadius as she spoke with greater confidence.

“So. Wha’ do we ‘aveta do ta ge’ Shani back.” Thadius Maximus smiled a broad smile for the first time since the pale elf laid eyes upon him. It was time to take the fight back to the Huntsman.

Shani looked around the dimly lit area as best she could. The Huntsman was there, but he had treated her more as a piece of furniture than someone to talk to. She stopped struggling against the invisible bonds that held her down long ago, knowing that it was fruitless to try and escape. There were other things she could do to make her captivity worthwhile.

“What’re ya doin’?” she called out to the Huntsman. He didn’t turn to acknowledge her, and Shani only rolled her eyes with a huff. “Figger I know why ya got me all trussed up like this.” Her eyes watched the Huntsman’s reactions carefully. She took note of his attitude and found that he had many similar qualities to that of many of the humans on this world she had met. Maybe he once was human. “Ya scared.”

This one comment quickly got the Huntsman's attention. He whirled quickly, standing over Shani as his eyes glared down at her from the shadows of his hood. She saw the soft glow of green that seemed to escape from his tattered robes every so often. Shani grinned up at him.

"What did you say?" he hissed at her.

"I said, ya keep me all tied up b'cause ya yella," she repeated, her grin broadening. "Figger yer too scared ta take up a fair fight, so ya gotta do this. Give ya some kinda power, holdin' a person hostage."

The Huntsman laughed at the suggestion that came from the elf. "Brave words, for one who will soon cease to exist. Once I have your little friend, it will all be over. The hunt will be complete."

"Oh, when y'all try ta git Panny, ya mean," she said with a snicker. "I figger ya gonna be in a s'prise there. See, yer kinda slow, an' Panny's got a purty good gun hand. She ain't near 'sfast as me, but I reckon she could take ya down a peg 'r two." She chuckled with her new found confidence. "An' thet don't even include the magic she kin wield." She put on her best poker face, having had years of practice already, she hoped that this apparition would not figure it out.

"You are a fool, elf," he spat at her in a voice filled with venom. "If you think for a moment that you and that whelp of a friend of yours are any better than I am." His voice echoed as he laughed a low, gurgling laugh. One that would have left most men quivering in their boots.

Shani had nothing to lose. "Y'all still need me 'live, I wager," she continued as her grin stayed in place. "Need me fer bait. Try an' tempt Panny thet way. Smart, 'cause if ya did cut me lose right now, with the intent on fightin' me..." she seemed to sneer as she lowered her voice all the while looking straight up into the apparition's hood. "I'd kick yer sorry yella ass."

The Huntsman seemed to move close to Shani, his cloak

billowed around her. He was perplexed why this mere elf would feel no fear from him. In the shadows of his hood, his eyes narrowed. She was right, he did need her alive after all. But her time would come. Eventually.

The horses moved into a clearing, just west of Franklin, as the storm rumbled in the distance. Pania took a deep breath as she dismounted the horse and looked to Martin Derringer. She'd grown used to this new name, being allowed to look in on the secret of this man's past. Derringer dismounted the Clydesdale with ease, then turned his attention to Pania.

"Can you feel it?" he ask as he guided her further into the clearing. Pania took a deep breath and stepped forward, gazing at her surroundings. There was definitely something here. She looked to him and nodded slowly, a slightly surprised look on her face.

"Unfortunately, we have to use you as bait," Derringer said with some regret.

"I know," she replied softly. "It's the only way 'e's gonna come ta us. Only way we 'ave ta free Shani."

As if on cue, the sky rumbled with the mention of the lithe elf's name. The clouds seemed to swirl overhead, as though a tornado were about to touch down. But they both knew what was coming. Neither one was very surprised when the Huntsman made his dramatic appearance.

He laughed aloud as he looked to Pania first and then Derringer. "This is too easy," he said with a voice filled with twisted glee. "It's almost like you're just giving her to me, Maximus." His laugh trailed off as if like thunder rumbling in the distance as he looked to Pania again. "And you. The elf tells me you're pretty fast. Care to prove it?"

"I'm no' as good a gunslinger as she," Pania admitted in a small

voice. “Bu’ I’ll no’ back down either.” She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, muttering softly to herself.

“Really,” the Huntsman replied as he began to move closer to the elven bard. Derringer had already begun to circle around the Huntsman, getting himself into position if he needed to. “The brazen elf told me that,” the Huntsman stated, as he made mention of Shani. He watched for a moment, as Pania continued to whisper soundlessly. “Just what is it you are doing, little elf?”

Pania opened her eyes, knowing the Huntsman was so close to her. Her eyes glowed a brilliant white and the wind began to grow, tossing the leaves from nearby trees off their branches. “Gotcha,” she said with a small sneer. Her hands had been clenched tightly as she chanted the incantation, trying to concentrate and hold back the surprise she felt with the surge of power that flowed through her. She opened her hands fully, having completed the arcane spell. Power of the Earthly arcane surged from her fingertips, as white tendrils reached first into the ground, then began to flow up, surrounding the Huntsman as they grappled him back down to earth. He struggled, having realized now he’d been tricked. There was no escape for him, this elf he had underestimated. She had power, she knew the magic of this world and could bend it to her will if she wished it.

“Let ‘er go!” Pania demanded as another surge of magical energy flowed from her being. The Huntsman struggled as he growled at Pania, reaching out to strike her down, but the pale elf was quick, blocking the blow easily with a shield made from the arcane. Again and again he would try, but each time her found his attacks blocked or pushed aside. Pania muttered again and let loose with another spell, this one forcing the Huntsman to feel pain. She took the chance, not knowing if Shani would feel what he felt or not. “I said, let! Her! Go!”

The Huntsman yielded to her demand, thinking if he released

Shani, then he could counter attack and destroy them both. His cloak billowed outward, the rags of his robes becoming streams of nothing as the heart of this hunter was revealed. Before Pania could react, Shani was thrown to the side like so much garbage. Derringer was quick to her side to make sure she was fine. She was groggy and undoubtedly sore, but well enough.

The Huntsman growled and focused his attention on Pania fully now. He had more energy now that he had released the elf. He would destroy this spell caster first, and then the gunslinger. He pushed himself forward, struggling against the tendrils that seemed to hold him back, and he inched forward. His mind was so focused on Pania, that he had now forgotten completely about Shani.

Pain coursed through his body. He glared at Pania again, but then he realized that she was not responsible. He heard the report of the pistol, and now knew that he was not hearing thunder. He turned and looked to Shani as she fired again, the bullet grazing the emerald crystal that gave him life.

“I knew that were yer secret!” She shouted as she fired again, this time the bullet hit the shard dead center and shattered it.

The Huntsman screamed in agony, a deafening cry as the three tried to ignore the slight pain that invaded their ears. Pania concentrated more as the Huntsman rushed toward her. She muttered again and let the power flow through her. This time, the very earth opened up underneath the Huntsman, as black tendrils reached up and ensnared the apparition. He screamed in protest, knowing now that he had been tricked, knowing now that he had underestimated both elves.

His screams continued, but slowly faded as he disappeared into the abyss and the earth closed itself once again.

Pania seemed to let go of a breath she'd been holding since she cast her second spell. With all the energy she had used, she could not help but fall over onto the ground, exhausted. Shani limped over to

Pania and fell to her knees beside the bard. Both elves had been spent, they'd both need a good long rest. Shani wrapped her arms around the elven bard in a warm hug, and Pania laughed lightly. "This mean a change o' 'eart?"

"Hell no," Shani replied with a weak smirk. "But at least it puts ya square in my books." She slowly stood up again and smiled to Pania as she lay on the ground. "I owe ya big time, girly girl." Pania laughed again as Shani slumped to the ground. The elven gunslinger was more than just a little stiff.

The clouds above them seemed to slowly push back, as the sky began to fill with stars. Martin Derringer stood next to the elves as they rested for the moment. He would watch over them both until they were ready to move. At least now, the one thing he had hoped for, he had prayed for, had happened.

The madness finally came to an end.

Travers made certain the bottles were packed carefully into the saddle bags as he secured them on Gypsum. He gave the horse's neck a gentle pat before he stepped back and looked to the elf that sat in the saddle. Shani tipped her hat in thanks and offered him a friendly grin.

"Much 'bliged, Travers," Shani said with a grin. "The whiskey's 'ppreciated, an' thet wine's gonna be a taste o' home fer sure."

"Le's 'ope the whiskey lasts longer 'n the wine," Pania snickered as she steered her horse to stand beside Shani's. Shani looked over at the elven bard and smirked. "Thanks 'gain fer all the supplies. An' the time spent 'ere. Be 'ard ta fergot ye kindness."

"It was a pleasure to have you ladies," Travers said with a smile. A few of the townsfolk gathered around as the pair of elves prepared themselves for the next leg of their journey. A few of the poker players seemed to breath a sigh of relief knowing they wouldn't have to lose

their money to Shani anymore, as the ladies from the tavern gave Pania pleading eyes to stay and join their performances. “Where’s your next stop?”

Shani looked over to Pania for that answer. “‘Eadin’ ta Shreveport,” Pania replied. “Plan on cuttin’ through Miss’ippi first. Coupla towns there I’ve ‘eard ‘ave some contacts with the Railroad.” Pania didn’t have to say the full name, as the townsfolk knew what she meant. Fortunately, these people seemed to sympathize with the plight of the slaves, and hoped the North would somehow come out victorious even if they abhorred the war.

“Be careful on the roads,” the deep voice of Marshal Derringer called out. He walked up to stand beside Pania’s horse, and the elven bard smile gently as he ran his large hand through her horse’s mane. “You will be missed around here. But you will also be remembered.” Pania nodded as she smiled to him. She looked back to Shani as the elven gunslinger tipped her hat to Derringer. It was like a signal to move. Both elves coaxed their mounts forward and the horses began a slow trot down the street and out-of-town.

There was no need to rush, they had all the time in the world.

Eight horse and riders stopped as they neared the town. Captain Samuel Williams glared as he saw the group blocking him, twelve men, all on horse back. All wearing badges. He looked to the one wearing the familiar badge of a United States Marshal. “Marshal, might I ask why this meeting?”

“Captain Williams,” Marshal Martin Derringer called out, surprising the army captain with such a formal greeting. “Your reputation precedes you. Word has come down from Harrisburg that you are relentless in your chase of two fugitives.”

“Yes it is, Marshal,” he said with a sigh. “Am I to believe that this meeting is to assist us in such a capture?” As if in answer, the

eleven men that flanked the Marshal drew pistols and rifles, aiming at the soldiers. Captain Williams shifted uneasily in the saddle as he scowled. He did not need this right now.

“No, Captain,” Derringer replied, his hand still resting in his lap as he leaned back in his saddle. “In fact we will not be assisting you in their capture. I have met them, and I am now convinced of what I suspected.”

“And just what is that?” Williams asked, his eyes locked onto the Marshal.

“More than likely three quarters of what has been printed on those wanted posters is fabricated,” Derringer replied quickly. “I’ve come to know the two you seek, and have seen them in a different light. You would be wise to return to Washington and tell the President that chasing them is not worth the trouble.” Captain Williams remained in his saddle as he glared at Derringer. His men looked to him every once in a while, waiting for their orders.

“If that is the case, Marshal,” he finally replied in a slow, even tone. “I believe that our business here is done. We’ll meet again, I am certain.” His men began to move as he did, looking to the trail that circled the town.

“No Captain,” Derringer muttered to himself. “I hope we most certainly do not.”

Just outside Oxford, Mississippi, September 5, 1863

The two horses walked slowly along the trail as the sun rose. Shani and Pania had broken camp half an hour earlier, and felt better about traveling during the early morning hours. It was cooler, and easier to see any opposition on the road. So far, they hadn’t seen much, just a couple of ranchers herding cattle and a few Confederate soldiers passing by. No one really paid either one of them much mind save to wave hello. At least they received a bit of a welcome when Pania

tended to the wounds of some of the soldiers. A few of the soldiers were quite thankful for the aid, not only for medical needs, but just having them there. Pania even received the moniker angel of mercy for her appearance, while Shani got a chance to help lift the spirits of the men with a few jokes and a shared drink or two.

They were only a few miles outside of Oxford, Mississippi when they first heard the gunfire. Pania sighed heavily as Shani tightened her grip on her reins. “When it rains, it pours, don’t it?” she stated as she looked to Pania. The smaller elf nodded and coaxed her horse forward as Shani did the same. As they rode faster, they could see smoke start to billow over the crest of a hill.

They weren’t going to have a leisurely ride to Shreveport.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Present day, Pania Alow's home in Brockton

Pania awoke the next morning to the sound of light rain pitter patting on the roof of the flat. A gentle rain, but enough to wake her. She walked slowly to her closet as she sorted out what she was going to wear for the day. More writing was obviously something she had planned, but there were some small errands she'd promised for family and friends.

As she went through her clothes the soft clanking of a metal object sounded out as it struck the floor. Pania stopped and bent down to see what had fallen. Carefully, she found it and picked it up. A silver star. Etched into it were the words 'Oxford Sheriff Department' along with a name underneath that.

Shani Wennemein.

Just outside Oxford, Mississippi, September 5, 1863

They rode hard toward the plume of smoke as it rose into the air. The smell of wood and putrid stench of death filled the air as the black smoke became thicker the closer they came to the scene of the carnage. Shani tightened the reins on her horse as they drew near, Pania followed suit and could only stare in disbelief. A small wagon train, very small, maybe two covered wagons and one stage coach. The horses that weren't stolen were either scattered or dead; they could see two carcasses of the horses that had obviously been too slow to escape. Shani pointed out two other bodies, both human, one laying spread eagle on the ground some distance from the wagons, the other, in a heap on the ground by one of the wagons. All three wagons were smoldering as small fires still burned.

Pania jumped off her horse, grabbed her medical satchel and ran to the bodies by the wagons. Dead. She quickly pulled on the door of the wagon with a gloved hand and held her arm up as she guarded herself against the heat from the flames. Two more bodies were inside. She looked to Shani, who had also reached the second visible body. He lay face down in the dirt, evidence proving clear that after he had been taken down, whoever attacked continued shooting the body in the back. Pania stood beside Shani, and only watched as the elven gunslinger carefully turned the body over. Shani sighed heavily as she saw the silver star.

“Figgers,” she huffed, as she crouched down and removed the sheriff’s star. “Ain’t no one but dang outlaws do this ta a lawman.” She looked up to Pania, who understood all too well that there were those that would accuse both of them of such a thing as this. Fabrication, really. Neither one would slaughter people like this. Shani rose to her feet and pocketed the star as she looked around. “Anyone ‘live?”

Pania shook her head with a heavy sigh. “Anyone in the wagons were shot an’ then burned. Whoever did this, did it as a warnin’.” She

looked down to the body of the sheriff for a moment. “Aveta give ‘em a proper burial.”

Shani inspected the wagons a moment, taking note of the baggage still secured by leather straps that seemed to withstand the flames. She dragged one down that appeared to be a strong box and opened it carefully with gloved hands. Inside, it was still filled with what could have been payroll money, money to be transported to the local bank, or even cash owned by one of the dead. “This weren’t no heist, I’ll tell ya that much.” She closed the box and locked it before she rose to her feet. This was blood money; no way she was going to touch it.

Pania noted the boxes that seemed carelessly discarded from the wagons, as though some had been pulled off. Something wasn’t right about them. She approached one of the larger ones and studied it for a moment. Her eyes widened slightly as her keen elven ears could hear a muffled, quiet whimpering. “Shani,” she called out, motioning for her partner to come over. “Listen,” she said in a whisper as the elven gunslinger approached. Shani took a moment and listened, then looked to Pania. She could hear it too. Shani circled to the other side of the box and placed a hand on her long barrel. “Whoever’s inside,” Pania called out as her own hand rested on her Smith and Wesson. “We’re no’ ‘ere ta ‘urt ye. We’re gonna open the box, promise ye’ll be fine.”

The elven bard nodded to Shani, and she opened the box quickly. Two voices cried out as they seemed to push themselves further away from the opening, but couldn’t. Pania couldn’t believe what she was seeing. A man in grey robes and a long, neatly braided pony tail was protecting two children, a boy and a girl. The man was Chinese, and obviously not long in the Americas. He looked as though he had just walked out of a monastery. His robes were like that of traditional Chinese monks, Pania had seen them before when she had seen other

Chinese in her previous travels in the mid west. Most came to work on the railroad, some just an adventure of exploration to this brave, new world.

Shani reached out with a gentle hand, and spoke in a calming voice. “It’s alright, ain’t gonna hurt ya. Y’all kin come out now.” The children clung to the man in terror while tears streamed down their faces. Shani sighed as she knew the trauma they had just endured. “It’s alright,” she repeated, and finally found the tiny hand of the girl reaching out to hers. She helped the child out, falling to her knees as the child wrapped her arms tightly around Shani’s neck.

“It’s alright. Ain’t gonna hurt ya. Yer safe now,” she said as she tried desperately to console the girl. The boy followed suit, leaning heavily on the elven gunslinger. They probably were in that box for quite some time.

Pania reached out to the Chinese man, offering to help him up. He looked to her with tired eyes, and right away, Pania could tell the man was more than likely on his last legs.

“Sit up,” she said as she helped him, using the back of the box to prop him up. A bullet had ripped through his shoulder, and he had a lot of blood loss. “Gonna try an’ patch ye up,” she said as she took out a dagger and began cutting away at the robes by his shoulder. “Fergive me fer this,” she said as the cloth ripped. She began to clean him up as best she could, taking her satchel and placing it in the man’s lap. Pania spoke to him in a conversational tone as she worked. “M’name’s Pania,” she said in a calm tone as she worked at cleaning his shoulder. “Go’ a bi’ o’ a bum shoulder. Gonna need ta ‘eal fer a time. Rest as well.”

The man looked over at the elven bard, his breathing was even and continuous for a man who had just taken a bad hit to the shoulder. Even then, he was lucky. They could have hit him in the chest. Then the two children might not have had their protector.

“Yao Ming,” he replied in slow and even voice. “The children?”

Pania looked over to Shani. She was still trying to calm the children, speaking to them in low whispers as they clung to her for protection. “They’re fine,” Pania finally said as she returned to Ming’s shoulder. She examined it for a short time before reaching into her satchel. “Ye protected ‘em, by the look o’ thin’s. They’re lucky.” She produced a few of her tools and concentrated on Ming’s shoulder. “I’d say ye lucky as well. Lotta blood loss, bullet’s still in there. Bu’ ye’ll be fine with some rest an’ nourishment.” She held up a tool which had long, pincer like ends and looked to Ming with reassuring eyes. “I’ll no’ lie. This is gonna ‘urt. Bu’ better ta ‘ave it out ‘n leave it be.” Ming nodded slowly and took a deep breath.

It was going to be a long, long day of work ahead for all of them.

Shani pounded the stake into the ground, the last of eight. She’d spent a good part of the day digging the shallow graves on the roadside as Pania tended to the man and the two children. When needed, Pania would help carry the dead to the graves, where they would begin a sort of ritual similar to that of a funeral, only very, very elven. Also very quick. Shani didn’t want to feel so exposed.

As the elven gunslinger took to filling in the graves, Pania tried to find whatever supplies that she could salvage from the three wagons. One of them appeared in pretty decent shape, as it was not set ablaze as the other two were. They were fortunate that two of the horses that were hitched to the wagons had run off, but slowly returned. They would get a small train going.

Pania had moved back to her patients, checking on them carefully as she tended to the fire that burned slowly. Food was cooking, they all needed to eat. Evening was slowly creeping up on them all. The children had quieted down, falling asleep as they sobbed lightly. Ming

was also very quiet, and only spoke when Pania or Shani directed a question to him. He only accepted water and some jerky rations that Shani had on her. After hours of little to no conversation, he finally spoke.

“I have seen you two before,” he said as Shani finally came to the camp fire after finishing her work. “Wanted posters.” He looked between the two slowly as he measured his words. “Outlaws.”

“Ya know,” Shani said with a huff as she took out a flask of whiskey. “I’m gonna have ta have a talk with them thet made ‘em, b’cause I say near eighty percent o’ what’s written on them posters is nuthin’ but crap.” She took a swig and offered some to Pania. The elven bard took it, and drank deeply before coughing and spitting some up. She looked to Shani with a furrowed brow and handed the flask back to her. “I guess I shoulda warned ya, huh?” Shani replied with a smirk. “Should be used ta it by now.”

“I’d no’ mind if ye were tryin’ ta take advantage o’ me,” Pania said as she coughed again. “Whiskey’s disgustin’. Dunna know ‘ow ye can drink it.” She rose to her feet and walked to her horse, retrieving her blanket. “As fer them posters, Ming,” she said as she walked to the children and covered them carefully as they finally began to sleep. “We’ve done thin’s, aye, bu’ nuthin’ like this.”

“We ain’t butchers,” Shani added as she pocketed the flask. “We don’t ransack a caravan an’ kill near alla those inside.” Shani picked up a stick and prodded the fire slightly, making sure the flames lived enough to produce some heat for warmth and to cook the food that sat on the small, makeshift stand.

Ming nodded as the odd logic began to make sense. “Thieves with honour,” he said quietly.

“No’ thieves,” Pania remarked as she sat back down next to her patient. “Well, ‘least I’m no’,” she added as she inspected Ming’s bandages. “I dunna knock over banks.”

“So, I guess stealin’ medical supplies really ain’t stealin’, huh?” Shani remarked with a slight snicker. Pania stopped her inspection and looked to her partner, realization dawning on her that Shani was correct. She had to resign to the fact that yes, she was a thief as well. “Think what she’s tryin’ ta say is thet anythin’ we take gits ta them thet need it most.”

Shani tested the food to see if it was done. Satisfied, she began dishing up some of the beans onto simple tin plates, adding a chunk of bread and a bit of cheese. Ming took his with a nod of thanks. Not what he would usually eat, but Pania seemed to have medical knowledge. He would abide by her wisdom. Shani looked toward the China-man for a moment as she handed out food. “So how ya do it? Protect ‘em, I mean.”

Ming took his plate and rested it in his lap as he considered her question. “They were easily fooled,” he said after some thought. When he spoke, there was a hint of tension in his voice, but he remained calm and quiet. “One of them had aimed for the children as a small group was discarding boxes. I could have fought them off, but they probably would have killed me. If that had happened, then the children might have been next. I jumped in front of the bullet just as the man fired. It gave the children a chance to hide. I fell, and somehow, maybe luck, they believed me dead.” He took a spoonful of the beans and ate quietly, feeling his explanation was more than enough. Shani nodded slowly, realizing that he didn’t have to say anymore. This man of few words had spoken more than he had since they first met him.

“Prolly best ta ‘ead inta town in the mornin’,” Pania suggested as she quickly changed the subject. “Take the strong box ta the sheriff’s office.”

“I ain’t touchin’ thet thing,” Shani said as she sat her plate down and nibbled on her cheese. “Thet there’s blood money. Thet’s like a curse.”

“Ye no’ bloody takin’ it fer yeself,” Pania shot back quickly. “People’re gonna need tha’ money. Best we take it inta town.” Shani shrugged and resigned herself to the bard’s demand. No need to argue about it. “Fer now jus’ rest. I doubt tha’ whoever done this will be back t’night.”

“You an’ me’s still sleepin’ in watches,” Shani said as she reached for her gear and pulled out a Winchester rifle. She set it beside her and continued eating. “B’cause I really don’t feel like gittin’ shot while I’m asleep.” She looked over to Pania who nodded in agreement. Better to be safe than sorry.

The night was uneventful while the two elves slept in shifts. The sun rose slowly as the small group broke camp and prepared for their journey. They had twenty miles to go before they hit Oxford. Shani took the reins in the wagon, as Pania rode her horse, guiding Gypsum along behind her.

The trip itself was uneventful, as they reached Oxford by mid-morning. A busy little town, people were already hustling and bustling about. But there was something Shani could not put her finger on. An uneasy feeling that she sensed from each person. They would stop and stare at the wagon as it moved slowly through the streets, but turn and walk away quickly as their eyes meet with those of the gunslingers.

As they neared the sheriff’s office, loud shouting could be heard from the local saloon, and three very drunk cowboys came staggering out, each holding a bottle and laughing loudly. Shani pulled on the reins and stopped the horses, just as Pania brought her own horse and Gypsum to a halt. “They sure get started early at the taverns ‘ere it’d seem,” Pania noted.

“Yeah, jist a buncha good ol’ boys,” Shani replied quietly as she watched the three carefully. “Keep yer sights keen, girly girl. We don’t need no trouble, but these could bring it ta us.” Pania nodded as

she raised a hand and muttered softly. Shani could just barely make it out and coughed as she looked to Pania, shaking her head to the action that Pania was about to take. “If trouble come, there’s jist one thing we do,” she said in a quiet tone as her slender fingers tapped the bone handle of her long barrel. Pania furrowed her brow a moment, but stopped the incantation and her hand dropped next to her Smith and Wesson.

One of the three drunks seemed just sober enough to take in his surroundings. He spotted the wagon, and there seemed to be a flash of recognition, but the driver was not the same as he remembered.

“Well,” he said with a broad smile as he motioned to his drinking buddies. “Seems there’s some new folks in town. Good thing the welcome wagon is already here!” His partners laughed a loud as they advance toward the wagon. “An’ a pretty driver, an’ a pretty rider in shot gun. Well, ain’t this here a sight.”

“Maybe the three o’ ya could step ‘side so we don’t trample ya,” Shani replied in an even tone. The three stopped as the cowboy who had spoken seemed to sober up just a bit more. The smile seemed to fade from his face as he studied Shani. Pania noticed something else. The streets were clearing quickly. “Ya know, it bein’ the neighbourly thing ta do an’ all.”

“Well now, that would indeed be the neighbourly thing,” he commented as his smile returned, somewhat twisted and filled with malice as his partners came to flank him. Shani sighed and lowered her head. She didn’t want this, she didn’t need a gun fight. “‘Cept ya haveta know one thing. This here’s our town. The Canton Boys run this place. Here, we’re the law.”

“That so,” Pania replied as she slowly lifted her head. She had these three pegged quickly. They seemed the type to ransack a wagon train.

“Thet include killin’ women an’ children.” The air became

quite crisp as each participant could hear everything around them quite clearly. Shani's sudden accusation rang clear throughout the streets. She watched as one of the cowboys leaned over to the one who appeared to be the leader of this small band of brigands, and she could almost hear him mention that he was positive the kids got away and they never found them. "Guess it were lucky thet China-man hid 'em an' protected 'em."

She hit pay dirt. All three of them looked to her, they had hate in their eyes. One of the cowboys flanking the leader made the mistake of reaching for his pistol. His hand never even pulled the iron from its holster as Shani moved in a flash and fired. The first shot blew off his thumb, while the second went straight through his wrist. The other cowboy that flanked the leader grew twitchy and pulled his own pistol.

Pania anticipated it, and fired a shot that went through his wrist. Two cowboys lay on the ground, screaming in pain. Leaving the third seething with hate and anger.

"If I were you," Shani sneered right back. "I best collect yer friends an' git the hell outta here. 'Cause I'm jist bettin' thet we could fill ya fulla holes if y'all reach fer thet piece..." Shani's sentence was cut short as the report of shotgun sounded out. The elves turned toward the sound and saw a broad shouldered man lowering the firearm. He had a worn and leathery look about him, and tired but suspicious eyes had seen a great deal. He wasn't a sheriff, but he seemed to hold some air of authority.

"Mitch," he called out to the cowboy that still stood in the street. "Collect Ferret an' Gator an' get 'em the hell back ta yer ranch." Mitch sneered toward the man in the same manner as he did toward Shani. But the sound of a pair of shells, clinking together as they exited the chambers and fell to the ground with a thud. This was followed by the cocking back of the hammer of a Remington made Mitch's decision

to retreat quite easy. The man just watched as Mitch gathered his comrades and dragged them off toward the doctor's office. As the three disappeared into the building, the man looked to Shani and Pania.

"You two, come with me," he merely said in a husky tone. The two elves pushed their small train forward without any argument. They didn't want to see what would happen if they did.

The small group stood silently in the sheriff's office as one of the deputies stood watch over the wagon. Word had been sent to the local banker that the strong box had finally come into town. The man who had ended the gunfight before it really started sat heavily in a chair behind a desk and studied those that entered. The Chinaman was fairing well for taking a bad hit to the shoulder and losing a lot of blood. The children were physically fine, but the trauma they suffered would remain with them for a very long time.

They were still a little ragged and dirty, as they had to hide for so long. Even though they were safe, they both still had fear in their eyes. The young boy seemed protective of his sister, as he kept close by at all times. The girl stayed with him, all the while looking like a sad China doll, even with her floral print dress all covered in dirt.

Shani and Pania stood opposite the man, across from the simple desk. He didn't quite know what to make of these two. A pair of female gunslingers, and from all appearances, they had quite the history about them. Neither one stood taller than his shoulder, and he wasn't a very tall man to begin with. But he'd seen how quick the black haired one had been. No matter how big or small they were, they were dangerous.

"Where ya come from?" He asked with a heavy breath as he sat back in his chair, his right hand massaging the muscles in his leg.

Pania looked to Shani and for a fleeting moment, she wondered if he wanted the general heading of where they had just ridden from, or

the literal description of their home world. “Franklin, West Virginia,” Shani finally spoke up. “We’re headin’ fer Shreveport.”

“What’s in Shreveport?” he asked calmly.

“...Underground Railroad,” Pania answered quietly. Shani looked to her and whispered about how close they were to the south. Pania just shrugged and whispered back about at least being honest. The man heard it, and chuckled lightly.

“That is a most interestin’ statement,” he chuckled as he opened a drawer and removed two pieces of paper. Worn by the weather, but still very readable, he lay them on the desk. Shani audibly gulped as she saw yet another piece of evidence that had become the bane of her stay on Earth. Wanted posters. “Considerin’ the information that come through ‘bout you two.”

“Well,” Pania remarked with a sigh. “It’d seem tha’ our reputation do precede us.” The man only nodded as he sat back in his chair. Pania studied his eyes for a moment, and found all she needed to know. Walker wasn’t one to worry about grand details, he wanted things straight from the hip, honest information with no sugar coating. “I s’ppose ye want ta know ‘bout the wagon.” The man nodded with a look that gave away how impressed he was with Pania’s offer. “We were ridin’ a few days, when we saw smoke plume up on the ‘orizon. Took us three hours o’ ‘ard ridin’, bu’ when we go’ there, Ming an’ them two wee ones were all we found ‘live.”

“We found the strong box,” Shani added casually. “I maybe a highwayman, but I ain’t takin’ blood money, hell no. An’ we found this,” Shani said as she reached into coat pocket and placed the silver star on the desk. The man sighed heavily, recognizing it as he gently picked it up.

“Goddammit,” he cursed heavily under his breath. “Been waitin’ for Marsden ta get ta us, thought he got held up in red tape is all.” He looked to the two elves for a moment before continuing. “We

been without a sheriff goin' on a year now. Nobody in town's willin' ta take the position, either too old, too scared 'r ain't interested."

"Wha' 'bou' ye?" Pania suggested. "Ye've go' the look 'bout ye."

"Look is a helluva lot more 'n what it takes, Ma'am," he said with a smirk as he propped up his right leg on the desk. His left hand balled up into a fist and tapped lightly on his left shin. Both elves could hear the distinct sound of wood, knowing full well this man moved so slowly, not because he was disciplined or determined, but because he had no choice. "I fought fer the south, but I will forgive the comment 'bout the Railroad. I may have the look, but I do not have the feel fer bein' a sheriff. 'Specially after I lost my leg at Chickamauga." He looked to the star for a moment as he spoke. "This place needs someone with a quick hand an' quick wit 'bout 'em. Someone that can see the trouble an' diffuse it b'fore it gets too ugly." He looked up as he studied Shani for a moment. "It didn't take long ta see that in you."

Shani blinked a few times as his words sunk in. So did Pania. "Um..." Shani began to say as she tried to find the words. "Y'all tryin' ta tell me thet I'd make a good sheriff?" The man nodded his confirmation of her suspicions. Pania smirked slightly and laughed a bit before she looked over at Shani. The elven gunslinger furrowed her brow, but said nothing to the bard in response. Pania was right to scoff; the irony of the situation had not escaped her notice. Both Shani and Pania had spent the better part of their stay on Earth as wanted outlaws, and now Shani was given the chance to become the long arm of the law. "Well," Shani finally said. "Guess I could give it a try."

"Don't try," he said as he rose to his feet and walked over to her. He placed the silver star on her coat and stood back just a bit. "Just do it. I ain't big on pomp an' ceremony, but I'd say this is it, Sheriff Wennemein. Time ta turn in that moniker o' Black Mask, don't

ya think?”

Shani’s first duty as sheriff was to make Pania one of her deputies. That brought the count to four in total. There was Joshua, a young but determined man who had moved from New York to Mississippi with the wild dream of setting out on his own with a little section of land. That little section of land burned quickly, as the Canton boys gave him a warm welcome, leaving him homeless. He was invited to stay with Cole until he could find his own place to stay. It would have broken anyone else, but he dug deep inside and found his determination bigger than ever.

Cole was older, and really wasn’t a gun hand, though he had a sense of duty.

And then there was Walker.

Johnathon Calib Walker, as he introduced himself to Shani and Pania after dubbing the elven gunslinger the new sheriff. An old Confederate soldier, he held a wisdom in his eyes that saw past the cover that most would stop at. He only cared about what was right for his home. Especially with a wife and a new born.

After the introductions had been made, Shani turned her attention to the children. Ming watched over them protectively, but he wasn’t a father, more like a guardian. He watched over them because he had no other choice. Walker suggested they look into taking them to the local church. The preacher there may have been a drunk, partaking a bit too much in the sacramental wine, but he knew people in the area who would take the young ones in and give them a good home.

The two elves took the children by the hand, and walked slowly over to the immaculately built church. Like a palace in this town, it was a sight to see. Not unlike the temples that Shani and Pania would often see back home. Inside, the church was well kept, but felt oh so quiet and so very much alone. Shani doubted that very many people

came here on a Sunday. And currently, it seemed as though no one was here.

“Ello!” Pania called out as she moved up the center aisle of the rows of pews. “Anyone ‘ere?” She listened for a moment, hearing nothing. Just as she was about to turn back to Shani and suggest they try some place else, there was a small ruckus that came from the room behind the altar. With some effort, a middle aged man stumbled from the room, seemingly surprised to see anyone here on a Saturday afternoon. Pania tipped her hat as the man stared at the two.

“Hello?” he called back, seemingly taken aback that anyone would be here. “Didn’t... didn’t hear anyone come in,” he explained as he walked up the aisle to meet them. “Was getting ready for tomorrow’s sermon.” He stopped when he took note of the two children that seemed to hide behind Shani as they clutched to her long coat.

“We found these two this mornin’,” Pania explained without waiting for any questions. “Parents ‘re gone. They’ll need a family. Walker said ye’d be able ta ‘elp.”

His demeanor seemed to change, became more determined as he nodded. “I know a good family that will take them in. Good Christians. And they’ll be able to provide for them.” He watched as Shani spoke in hushed tones to the children. Reluctantly, they moved to sit in one of the pews by the preacher as he watched Pania and Shani. He saw the silver star clear as day and seemed to take a deep breath. “You... you’re the new sheriff.”

“I wager so,” Shani replied with a small huff. “Woke up this mornin’ never thinkin’ this’d happen.” She looked to the children and smiled. The pair looked to Shani with their own smile, having taken to the kindness of this elven gunslinger. “Well, we best git. I figger we ain’t gonna be stayin’ very long, maybe long ‘nough ta git a new sheriff, but it seem there’s some cleanin’ up ta do.” She looked to Pania and motioned toward the door, tipping her hat to the preacher as

she turned to leave. “Preciate it, padre. Thank ya kindly.”

The pair walked back into the sunlight of the streets and stood for a moment as they watched the people returning to their busy day. The lengthened shadows told what time it was, as the sun made its way to the horizon. It seemed to add to the feeling of peacefulness, almost as though the earlier gunfight never happened at all. Shani sighed heavily as she thought this must be an everyday occurrence here in this small town.

Joshua’s shout brought them out of simpler thoughts. He ran toward them quickly, with excited, yet fear filled eyes. “Sheriff...” he stammered as he tried to catch his breath. Both Pania and Shani raced to his side and waited as he tried to catch his breath. “Tried...tried stoppin’ Cole. Tol’ him it weren’t no use tryin’ ta talk ta Mitch. But Mitch were drunk down by town square an’ shootin’ off his pistols as he screamed ‘bout b’comin’ mayor. Seem they heard ‘bout ya b’comin’ Sheriff.”

“What happened ta Cole?” Shani said through clenched teeth, knowing full well what the answer would be.

“Dead,” Joshua finally blurted out. “Mitch shot ‘im without even so much as a how d’ya do.”

Shani glared as she stared down the street. “Pania. Git yer guns ready. Joshua, go find J.C.” She clenched her fists as she took a deep breath, trying to push back the anger that welled up in her breast. “This bull pucky ends now.”



*I'm no' as fast as ye.
T'day ya are.*

CHAPTER TWELVE

The crowd had gathered in small groups, whispering amongst themselves. Naturally, they would spread rumor and innuendo about what had just happened. At least they all felt sympathy toward Cole, who's body now cooled on the dusty streets as the doctor tended to him. Shani and Pania walked with determination and looked to the doctor, waiting for some sign. All they found was a heavy sigh of regret from the doctor as he looked up to the pair and shook his head solemnly.

Shani scowled and let out a hiss as she turned to Pania. The elven bard was checking the Smith and Wesson's making sure they were fully loaded. Joshua was doing the same. Shani seemed rather relieved at the sight of Walker, who made his way to them slowly as his large hands held the 12 gauge firmly in his grip. His face spoke volumes, he had known Cole for quite sometime, and now his old friend lay dead in the streets on a warm Saturday afternoon in Oxford.

"Doc," Shani turned back to the doctor as she tried to calm

herself. "See thet Cole gets alla 'tention he needs. See ta it thet ev'rythin' necessary fer his family is taken care of." She turned back to her comrades. "Time ta pay Mitch a bit o' a visit, I wager."

"There's gonna be gun play," Walker cautioned her.

"Oh, I have no doubt o' thet," Shani replied as she began to walk toward the saloon that stood across from the scene in the town square. "I purty much am expectin' it." Shani was soon followed by Pania, then Walker and finally Joshua. Walker held his shotgun at the ready as the two elves let a hand rest of the butt of their pistols. The gathered crowd began to disperse, knowing full well what was coming. Shopkeepers locked their doors after quickly rushing patrons inside for protection. The town square became very quiet, very quickly. There was only the lone, mourning cry as a bird of prey circled overhead.

Shani took a look to her right, gauging the demeanor of Walker and Joshua, then looked to her left as she studied Pania. That was when she noticed someone else stood zwith them. But it wasn't her first choice. Ming, still in his robes, stood shoulder to shoulder with them, glaring toward the doors of the saloon. "Ming," Shani spoke up in a low whisper. "What the hell ya doin' here?"

He stood firm and never took his eyes off the doors as he replied, his voice was measured and steady. "To do what is right. To avenge those children."

Shani took a deep breath, holding any argument she had to herself. Ming would not be talked out of this. If anything, she had learned the man was very resolute in his decision making. Shani turned her focus back to the saloon and shouted out in a bold voice. "Mitch Canton! Git yer ass out here now!"

The town square was still quiet, the creaking of the saloon doors seemed to echo wildly as a rather cocky looking Mitch swaggered out. His grin was twisted in a manner that he showed no care as to who it was calling him out. "Well, well," he said in a slow drawl as he

walked into the sun. He paused a moment as he took out a cigarette and carefully lit it, his eyes never leaving Shani, and a mocking smile on his face. Five more men followed him, all of them Canton's men Shani assumed. The look in their eyes betrayed their loyalty to the cowboy. "Ain't even sheriff fer a coupla hours an' here ya are, tryin' ta call the shots. I already tol' ya... Sheriff," he said, making certain that the mocking tone of his voice was heard by Shani and all those who surrounded her. "Us Cantons 're the law 'round here, nobody but nobody does anythin' without our say so."

"Thet a fact?" Shani replied in a matter of fact tone. "I see it diff'rent. I'm the one wearin' the star, Canton. I am the law 'round these parts. An' as such, y'all 're bound by law. I'm pretty sure I ain't gotta be listin' off the charges fer ya."

"Maybe I should start listin' off yers," Mitch replied as he tossed a paper onto the ground. Another wanted poster. It was always the wanted poster. "Ya know, fifty thousand dollars is a lotta money. Should claim that fer m'self."

"Who's gonna claim the bounty on yer head, Mitch?" Walker called out. The words made Mitch sneer with rage. This wounded soldier had lived far too long for Mitch's liking. "A gun hand like yerself is bound ta make a lotta enemies, an' sooner 'r later, someone's gonna come gunnin' fer you."

"They all too scared," Mitch replied with a snort.

"I ain't," Shani spoke up with a smirk. Her hand rested lightly on her gun, waiting for the cowboys to make some sort of move as she spoke. "There's only one o' two ways this here's gonna end. Either all peaceable like, an' y'all come 'long quietly. 'R we gonna have us some more bodies. An' I guarantee you, thet mine will not be one o' 'em."

The town square grew quiet as the two groups stared each other down, the only sounds that could be heard was the wind rustling the

leaves of the trees and the song of a bird every so often. Shani could even hear the low breathing coming from her comrades, Ming's was steady, calm and even. Walker's was calm as he seemed to stare down the others, as though his eyes alone would make the cowboys back down. Joshua was nervous. His hands shook, his breath quick, but he stood firm.

"I'm no' as fast as ye," Shani heard Pania whisper. Both elven gunslingers kept their focus on the cowboys.

Shani clenched her teeth as she replied in a whisper of her own. "T'day ya are." Her eyes were locked on Mitch. She studied him carefully. Even when drunk, she could tell he was still a dangerous man. Perhaps even more dangerous than when he was sober. No inhibitions. No fear of death. Six feet tall and bullet proof. "Last chance, Mitch," Shani called out to him. "Y'all kin make the decision now."

From the barricaded shops, townsfolk would dare to watch, peeking out to see what was happening as the five would face off against the cowboys. Some cried, knowing that this scene had repeated itself so many times, and each time with the same result. Others prayed that this might be the end, that finally the corruption, the chaos would come to an end. Such was life in a town ruled with an iron fist.

A young man with wild eyes stood beside Mitch. He looked even more twisted than the gun hand, and even more dangerous. But he was a greenhorn, and didn't know that every action was being measured by the elf that stood twenty feet away. Shani saw his subtle movements, heard his quiet laughter, saw his shifty eyes. She knew he would be the first to make the mistake of drawing.

It came without question. The world seemed to slow down as the young man's hand moved as though stuck in molasses. Mitch's hand gripped the pistol firmly as he pulled it from his holster, cocking back the hammer, he raised it up, leveling it with the elven gunslinger.

Just as he was about to pull the trigger, a pair of bullets slammed into him. He never had a chance as the shots fired by Shani were faster than he could ever think to be.

The shots became deafening as both sides fired with equal speed and exuberance. Ming rushed forward, catching a cowboy by surprise as he swatted the man's gun away with a simple swipe of his hand. His movements made this gun fighter suddenly very, very afraid. Ming was fast; put a gun in the man's hands, he could be a deadly gunslinger, but he didn't need a gun. It wasn't long as the cowboy never had a chance to fight back. His unconscious body fell to the ground quickly.

The other cowboys were finding their success was of equal or lesser value to their now fallen comrade. One of them tried firing on Walker, the only contact was to land two bullets into his leg, his wooden leg. Walker only replied with a large amount of buck from the barrels of the shot gun.

With two brigands now down, one of them grew scared. His mind raced as he saw his buddies fall, heard the bullets smack into the ground, the walls of the saloon and into the bodies of his friends. They were suddenly out gunned, and out classed by these five. And this one just bolted.

“One's takin' off!” Joshua shouted out.

“Leave 'im!” Shani called out. The firing had subsided. Two cowboys lay dead, and two more including Mitch, were injured. Sheriff Wennemein walked confidently over to Mitch as he dropped his gun into the dirt. “Y'all gonna keep this up?” she sneered to Mitch. He only replied with a glare of his own as his eyes shot daggers toward the Sheriff. “Take 'em ta the prison. Lock 'em up 'till we kin sort this out.”

“What's the charge?” Mitch shouted out.

“Disturbin' the peace!” Shani shouted back as she walked toward her partner. “An' the killin' o' a sheriff's deputy.” Mitch

furrowed his brow as Joshua pulled him to his feet easily and began to lead him off to the office. “Take the dead an’ prepare ‘em burial. ‘Least they gonna git thet.”

Gator didn’t stop running. Even without his horse, he bolted for the open spaces beyond the town of Oxford. He ran all the way back to the ranch. There, a few of the cowboys stopped him and tried calming him down. They all knew what to do when he told the tale, and they led him quickly to the main house. Dorval would know what to do.

Harold “Cheater” Dorval was a calm man for someone who was leader of such a group like this. They originally came out with a family from Boston to settle and farm, but the ravages of weather, constant attacks from rustlers, and then the war took it’s toll. That was when Dorval decided to fight back, and his twisted sense of justice had made himself think he was king of Oxford. He had no use for the law, unless their goals matched his own. The news that Gator told him nearly brought him to a maddening rage, but he remained calm.

“So there’s a new sheriff in Oxford,” he snorted. “It would seem that Walker is getting bold, but not bold enough to do the job himself.” He walked across the length of the porch that looked out into the west of his rustic ranch house. He stopped as he stared into the eyes of a man in a blue uniform. “Captain Williams. It’d appear your goal an’ mine ‘r now the same. You want this Alow an’ Wennemein dragged back ta Washington. An’ now I want ‘em dead.”

Captain Samuel Williams smiled with some amount of malice as Dorval spoke the words. “There is nothing that says I have to take them back alive, Mr. Dorval.”

The casket closed on Cole’s body as the remaining gunslingers stood by solemnly. No one said any words as the very private ceremony

took place. Ming bowed his head in quiet prayer for the man he had never known, but obviously a man who tried to uphold justice. Walker's expression didn't change much, making him seem that much more hardened due to his age and the things he'd seen. Joshua wept softly as the casket was peacefully loaded onto a wagon. Cole had been a mentor to him, quite possibly the one man who had helped him after his dreams of success were wiped clean.

Shani and Pania stood by and waited. They neither knew the man well enough, nor could they say any words for him. It was best the things needed were left up to his friends. Shani looked toward Walker as he limped along the boardwalk, placing his stetson squarely on his head. If anyone would be the best to tell Cole's wife, it would be Walker.

"I'll take Joshua with me," he said to the two elves. "Tell Mary Anne 'bout what happened. Probably be a better part o' the day." Shani nodded solemnly as the old gunslinger limped over to his horse. Joshua slowly mounted his own as the pair readied themselves for the journey to Cole's old homestead. The wagon would follow, and it would be there that Cole would be laid to rest.

Ming had moved on, staying in his stoic manner of little words, as he went to the church to see about the children. Leaving Pania and Shani behind to contemplate the events that had happened so recently. The pair moved back into the Sheriff's office where they had secured Mitch and one of his comrades. Both were passed out, the effects of the alcohol finally taking its toll on the men. Pania could only sigh as she looked to the cages.

"I could ride out there," Pania suggested in a quiet tone. "Ride out there an' rain fire on 'em. End this once an' fer all."

Shani looked up with a scowl on her face. "Ya ever hear o' somethin' called the Salem Witch trials?" She paused long enough for the elven bard to acknowledge with a nod, but even Pania knew where

this was going. “Ya start flingin’ magic in a place like this, we both gonna git strung up, Sheriff’s star ‘r no. I mean, it’s a dang miracle thet they ain’t done thet b’cause o’ what we look like. Ya add a massive fire ball into it, an’ we kin kiss our butts good bye.” Shani sighed deeply as she stopped her rant, knowing that her voice had raised just a bit. She wasn’t mad at Pania, but mad at the situation. Part of her would have ridden right out there to that ranch and help Pania in any way she could. “Sorry. But we gotta play this the ol’ fashioned way.”

“There’s gonna be a lotta gun play,” Pania said with a somber look in her eyes. “Isna there?”

Shani nodded her head slowly. “Gonna be ready fer it?”

Pania snorted a weak laugh and finally nodded in reply. “Aye, I’ll be ready fer it. An’ if anyone gets too close, I’ve always go’ me rapier. Diff’rent in this place, bu’ at least it’s no’ magic.” Shani finally smiled for the first time since Joshua told them about Cole. It was somewhat forced, but at least she could allow herself to do so, knowing that she had Pania on her side.

Cole was his only friend.

At least, that’s how he felt. Joshua had known no other that had seemingly sacrificed everything in order to help out someone that he barely knew, and for that, Joshua was eternally grateful, but now, Cole was dead. Killed by men in a drunken rage because Cole was interrupting their fun. The Cantons always looked at things in a more selfish light. It had to stop now. It didn’t matter that there was a new sheriff. Each sheriff always looked at things the same way. Analyze the situation, and go from there. More often than not, they ended up dead, beaten, scared or worse.

Joshua was going to end it, once and for all.

He left the homestead alone, not saying a word to anyone. Not even to Mary Anne, whom he felt the worst for. Joshua just got on

his horse and seemingly rode aimlessly. His aimless riding took him directly to the doorstep of the Canton ranch. He was alone, as he faced eight riders, including Dorval himself. Joshua could see more men at the main house, in his grief he ignored the fact that they wore blue uniforms.

“Deputy Clemens,” Dorval shouted out as Joshua brought his horse to a stop. “What brings you out this way? Sheriff Wennemein send you out here.”

“No,” Joshua replied in a shaky voice that betrayed his own fear. But something deep inside overrode any fear he felt. Vengeance. “I’m here ta let you know, just how bad Mitch shot up Cole.”

Dorval chuckled a bit as he heard the quavering in Joshua’s voice. “Well, that’s just too bad, Clemens. I heard that Cole got in the way an’ took a bad hit at the wrong time.” He shrugged lightly as his hands remained lightly tapping the saddle horn. “Pity, really.”

“Pity!” Joshua shouted back. “What your men done was pure evil, Dorval. One day, yer gonna rot in hell b’cause o’ the things you done.” Without thought for his own safety, without consideration of the consequences, Joshua reached for his pistols. He would never get the chance to draw as the bullets from Dorval’s men ripped into him. Joshua’s body fell with an unceremonious thud to the ground.

“Well, that’s a fine mess,” Dorval said with a mild chuckle as he steered his horse back toward the main house. His men split off, one group to deal with Joshua, the other continuing a patrol of the property. Dorval never liked to fight, to be honest. But when push came to shove, he always had his men to back him.

“Dorval!” the familiar voice of Captain Williams called out. Dorval could see the other soldiers mounting their horses. “I will not stand for the shooting of a peace officer.”

Dorval sighed and shook his head as he leaned back in the saddle. “You don’t get it, do ya, Captain. I am the peace ‘round here.”

I am the law in these parts. This is my town, an' my place. Them that wanna play sheriff gotta understand ta play by my rules."

"And that includes killing a sheriff's deputy?" Williams replied in disgust. "I am hunting Alow and Wennemein. But I won't require your assistance in this matter. I'm taking my men north. Should those two decide to return north, then I will pick up the trail again." He strode over to his horse and mounted it quickly. "But I will not be part of a slaughter like this."

"That's too bad," Dorval called out as Williams ordered his men forward. He smiled ever so slightly and shouted as Williams and his men began to disappear down the road. "I'll tell ya what, I'll send their bodies ta Washington in a day 'r two. How that sound?" Williams didn't even respond as he and his men continued to move forward. "Gator," Dorval called out to one of his faithful. "Find out 'bout Mitch. We're gonna have ta get 'im back. This encounter has given us a good way ta send a message."

Shani watched as the doctor patched up Mitch and his comrade, her hand always close to her long barrel Colt. Pania remained close as well, hoping that her suggestion of medical care for the gunslingers was not a mistake. At first, she was going to offer it, but gave into Shani's demand that they bring in the town doctor. Shani was not going to let a monster like Mitch anywhere near Pania.

Johnathon walked back into the sheriff's office in a somber mood. He'd seen Joshua ride off, but had no idea where he went. His face showed lines of worry, but he was not one to go off half cocked chasing something he couldn't understand. His attitude was one of a waiting game, unless the situation called for much more drastic measures. In the past, he'd found that waiting and observing would bring the best results.

He walked up to Shani and spoke in a quiet voice. "Dorval's

gonna send someone ta get him outta here.” Shani looked up to Walker and nodded in reply. She knew, she was expecting it. “Gonna have ta see what happens. Probably gonna try somethin’ t’night.”

Mitch continued to glare at Shani and Pania in turns, smirking as he barely heard Walker’s words. To him, it didn’t matter if they were prepared, they’d be dead by morning. Dorval was one tough customer. The small group continued to talk amongst themselves, watching Mitch as they did to ensure he didn’t get any bright ideas. As the doctor finished his work, they shackled Mitch up and put him back in the cell. He wanted so badly to say something to mock them, put them in an uneasy situation, he could feel something coming to the surface. But he’d never get the chance.

The door to the office opened quickly as a soldier in a blue uniform entered. Walker seemed to grimace a bit at the sight of the uniform, but made no move. Shani and Pania recognized who it was immediately. Private Johnson, one of Williams men. “Pania Alow, Shani Wennemein,” he said politely, even so far as to tip his hat. “Captain Williams sent me. We were in the area, but are returning north. You two have amnesty here, as long as you remain in the Confederacy, Williams said he will not give chase.” The two elves seemed to breath a sigh of relief with the news. “However, should you decide to return north, he will give chase again.”

“Why the news, Johnson?” Pania inquire quietly. “No’ sayin’ it’s no’ ‘ppreciated, mind ye.”

Johnson looked toward the elven bard a moment before he continued. He remembered the chase, and remembered that Pania had him dead to rights, but she didn’t kill him. Maybe she wanted posters embellished the events of Pale Rider’s past, and in a way, he grew to respect her. “Dorval’s men killed a deputy by his ranch. We were going to enlist their aid in capturing you two, but not after that.”

“Deputy!” Shani said with some shock. She looked to Walker

and Pania and each of them realized who Johnson meant. Joshua. Shani sneered as she spoke through clenched teeth. “Thank ya fer the information, Johnson. ‘Least it give us some warnin’.” She tipped her hat as Johnson left the office, then turned to Mitch and gave him a sneer. “Y’all have no idea how much yer boss is gonna pay.”

“Oh, I ain’t gotta worry ‘bout nuthin’, little girl,” Mitch sneered right back. “Come this time t’morra, yer all gonna be six feet under. You have my word on that.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Pania walked into the saloon and shook herself slightly as the rivers of rain water dripped from her duster. The rain had started hard and unexpectedly in the late afternoon, acting as some kind of omen. Shani looked up from the pool table as she was lining up a shoot. Anything to keep her mind busy after what happened this day. Walker leaned against the bar of the saloon and watched the game. He was pensive, having said twice that Joshua wouldn't be gone this long without checking in. Pania walked over to a small wood stove near the entrance of the saloon and warmed her hands as she looked out the window into the rain filled street.

“Rains gonna be ‘ere fer a while,” she said aloud, hoping that would break the silence.

“Least there ain't no thunder,” Shani replied with a small smirk. Pania looked over to the elven gunslinger and smiled softly, knowing exactly what she meant. Her gaze turned back to the window as she watched rivers of rain fall down the window. It seemed so peaceful in

a way, yet violent, as it made it's constant rat-a-tat-tat sound.

Through the fog of humidity that had steamed up the windows, something was out on the street. Pania could see something swinging in the wind. "Oh gods," she whispered as she moved to the entrance of the saloon, then out onto the boardwalk without another word. She stared hard at the object that seemed to hang heavily from a large oak tree that grew beside a small church. A distant lightning strike light up the street just enough for her to see it clearly, and she gasped as she finally spoke. "I think... is tha' Joshua!"

Shani and Walker didn't have to be told twice. They both moved quickly to the boardwalk in front of the saloon to join Pania. The small elf had already begun to walk into the street, ignoring the rain as it fell around her. Walker and Shani moved right along with her as they drew closer to the body that hung from the tree. Sure enough, it was Joshua.

Walker sneered as he took a deep breath. He was certain he knew who had done this to the young man. It wasn't enough that they shot him up, but they had to hang him in the street too. But he also kept his wits about him, knowing full well what this was really about. "It's a diversion," he said through clenched teeth. "Dorval's more 'n likely got a coupla his men headin' ta the cells ta bust out Mitch."

Shani checked her pistols and looked to Pania. The elven bard checked her own, but drew her rapier. "Use the shadows," she suggested. "Try an' ge' the jump on 'em." The other two nodded in agreement, as both Shani and Walker drew pistols. The trio snaked along the buildings keeping close to the walls as they tried to blend in. Shani and Pania did it quite well, having been in this situation many a time before. Walker was surprisingly quiet for the size of man he was. Pania watched the streets around the office carefully. She pointed without a word as she saw a shadowy figure near the side of the building.

Dorval's men were not nearly as quiet as the two elves and their human companion. Their attention was fixed on their current work, and they didn't pay much heed to the street. They assumed the rain would keep most people in doors. So neither man heard the small elven bard come up behind them as Shani and Walker moved to flanking positions. Pania raised her rapier and let it touch the jawline of the cowboy she knew to be Gator. "Awful bad weather ta be out like this, aye?" she said calmly as she pushed just a bit, letting the tip of the rapier draw just a bit of blood.

Gator didn't move, but his eyes looked toward the voice. He knew if he turned he was dead. "Ev'nin' Deputy," he said with a smirk. His partner reached for his pistol, but found the business end of a long barrel pushed against his temple. His hands slowly raised into the air as his eyes looked to Shani. Walker came out from his hiding spot, sawed off shotgun held up and aimed at Gator. "Fancy meetin' ya here."

"Out fer a stroll?" Pania replied a little too calmly. She pushed back the urge to conjure a small cantrip, and send a lick of flame up his nose. "Bi' rainy fer tha', innit?"

"You boys been sneakin' 'roun' a bit too much," Shani added quickly as she watched Gator's comrade. "Y'all shoul'da stayed at home t'night. But, glad ya could come out. This give me the option ta let y'all give Dorval a message."

Gator strained his eyes to look toward Shani, his body uncomfortable as he was backed against the wall, the tip of the rapier held firm along his jawline. "A message? What message? Thet ya gonna curl up an' die?" He snorted a force laugh but winced as he felt the rapier tip push a bit more. "Alright. Wha's the message?"

"T'morrah," Shani hissed. "Six o'clock tomorrah night. Dorval meets me here, out in the street." Both Pania and Walker looked to Shani with some caution in their eyes. They both knew when someone

was being called out, and that was just what Shani was doing now. “We end this once an’ fer all.” She pulled away from Gator’s comrade and motioned for him to move. “Jist me an’ Dorval,” Shani repeated as she motioned for Pania to step back. The elven bard took a step away from Gator and the cowboy moved forward slowly.

“Dorval’s gonna gun you down, girl,” Gator sneered.

Shani drew her other Colt and held it firm as she aimed it at Gator’s head. “Dorval ain’t gonna do nuthin’ ifn I shoot ya right here. Now git!” The trio watched as the two cowboys walked slowly to their horses and rode out-of-town. Pania and Walker looked to Shani for a moment. The elven gunslinger took a long, deep breath. “Please tell me I didn’t jist do somethin’ stupid.”

Walker studied the woman for a moment before speaking. “Ya think ya kin take Dorval?”

Shani looked over to the old soldier and slowly nodded. “I like ta think that my braggin’ is more ‘n jist bravado. I jist gotta b’lieve I’m better ‘n he is.” She turned toward the saloon and slowly began to trudge back. Walker and Pania quickly followed pace. “We need ta come up with a plan,” Shani finally said as she entered the saloon. “Dorval ain’t stupid, he’s more ‘n likely gonna try an’ pull the wool over my eyes an’ have his men set up ta take me out.”

“If I were Dorval, that’s what I’d do,” Walker agreed with a slow nod as he put his shotgun in a wooden gun rack. “Probably from the rooftops, alleyways. You called him out, means he’s gonna send word where the fight’s gonna take place. An’ he’ll be cocky, pick some place where ev’ryone can see.” He moved to the bar and took up his position he held previously. “He’ll wanna make an example o’ ya.”

“Thet’s what I’m gunnin’ fer,” Shani replied as she leaned against the pool table. “Panny. Kin ya check an’ see if Ming’s over at the church. Git ‘im an’ bring ‘im here.” Pania nodded quickly as Walker just watched the elven gunslinger for a moment. A smile

came to his face as he saw the wheels turn in her head. “I got me a goddamned plan.”

The rain had let up just a bit as Gator and his comrade rode back into the ranch. Dorval furrowed his brow as he noted the lack of two extra riders. He moved forward on the porch of the ranch house and leaned against one of the posts. “Where’s Mitch?” he called out as the two cowboys carefully tied their horses to the hitching posts in the horse shelter.

“Sheriff got ta us first,” he admitted with some regret. “Got a message fer ya.”

Dorval pushed himself away from the post and took a step onto the ground in front of the porch. He looked to Gator with intense eyes. “Wennemein’s got a message for me? Really? Well, I hope it involves her tellin’ me she’s surrenderin’. Then I can send ‘er onta hell.”

“She’s callin’ ya out,” Gator said quickly. He knew Dorval was not one to mince words, and like his information plain and simple. “Gun fight t’ morrah ev’nin’ six o’clock.”

Dorval snickered as he moved forward a couple of steps and looked toward the town site. “Well, that is interestin’. She wants ta die that badly, huh. Well, I see no reason not ta oblige her.” He turned slowly to Gator and smiled. “Gather the boys. We got some plannin’ ta do. I’ll pick the spot an’ you send word ta Wennemein. An’ after I take her out, deal with that Alow an’ Walker too. Gettin’ rid o’ him has been a long time comin’. An’ now is just the right time for him ta be put six foot under.”

The day went by slowly as the people of Oxford went about their business. Rumour had spread quickly, something was going to happen on this day. No new people, no celebration in the town, nothing of happy times ahead, but news and rumours that put worry in the eyes

of the townsfolk. They could feel it as they would pass by Sheriff Wennemein or any of her deputies.

Shani walked the streets just for something to do. She was nervous, excited, and worried about the events to come. She knew Dorval would cheat, as his nickname would indicate. He'd try to set up some sort of trap, and have her gunned down in the streets by his men. Fortunately, Shani had backup of her own.

Word came down where Dorval wanted to meet, and it was ironic that the location was where Cole had been gunned down by Mitch and his buddies in their drunken revelry. Shani would not allow that to happen to herself. So she inspected the town square, taking note of the rooftops, the alleyways, the hiding spots where Dorval might set up his men. She wanted all of the angles covered. So for most of the day, Pania, Walker and Ming explored the town square as best they could. They determined absolutely every possible location that Dorval's men could ambush the elven gunslinger from. They already knew that Dorval had ten men who would ride with him. More than likely they would come into town a couple of hours before the appointed meeting. Possibly half an hour before they would set themselves up, so Pania had her work cut out for her; thirty minutes to flush out the ambush.

Shani had the easy part. If one could call being faced down by a gun hand with the possibility of being shot dead in the street easy. However, with her three allies, she had nothing to worry about. Dorval would be the one who needed to worry. Shani just had to keep up her bravado.

Nothing like a date with death to make the time drag by slowly. Noon came and went and Shani paced with a nervous excitement in the office for an hour. Partially wanting to steel herself by letting Mitch mock her, call her down. After a while, even that outlaw knew that Shani was just using him to bolster her own confidence. Eventually,

he quieted down and lay down on his cot until Shani finally decided to leave.

The afternoon dragged on. There was no contact and no sight of either Dorval or his men. The assumption was that Dorval would leave things until the last minute and not allow Shani the time to scope out the area decided upon. And so, Shani stayed close to Pania, Walker and Ming in case anyone tried to ambush her before the allotted time come.

By five thirty that afternoon, the message finally came.

Gator had an obnoxious smirk on his face as he walked down the street toward the Sheriff's Office. He felt he was on the winning side, and felt justified in his cocky demeanor. Shani and her crew was lazily resting on the porch to the Sheriff's Office when they saw the cowboy approach. Shani pushed herself off the support post she'd been leaning on to meet Gator in the street. "Bout time ya come here," Shani called out, stopping Gator in his tracks.

He snickered as he studied the elven gunslinger for a moment. "Small change in plan," he stated with a smile. "Dorval d'cided it best thet y'all don't gotta git worked up too much. So he figger ya just stay here. Dyin' in front o' yer office'll be poetic 'nough."

"So Dorval thinks," Shani replied in an even tone. "Tell Dorval I'll be ready." She watched as Gator lazily turned and marched back down the street. Shani waited until he was out of earshot, then turned to her comrades. "Time's a wastin'. Guess we best git this started." The other three nodded wordlessly and moved into the street. They had just one goal, find Dorval's men, take them out and make certain to quell any thoughts of an ambush. Shani was suddenly very alone as she stood in the street and waited.

It wasn't long.

Dorval walked down the street slowly, his eyes landing on the elven gunslinger as she stood in the street. He smiled and let out a quiet

chuckle as he called out. "Seem yer all 'lone, little girl." He came to a stop twenty yards away from her, his eyes staring her down.

"Oh, I got alla help I need," she said as she patted the pair of Colts that rest on her hips. Her voice held a brash confidence that Dorval could easily recognize. "Way I hear things, this has been a long time comin' fer you."

"Indeed it has," he replied quietly. "Sheriff always come inta town with dreams o' keepin' the peace. What he don't understan' is the peace always been here. I keep the peace. I set the laws. I am the king o' this here territory."

"Settin' yerself up fer a mighty big fall, Dorval," Shani called out, her voice echoing in the now empty street. Shopkeepers busily locked their door and boarded the windows, knowing full well what was about to happen. "Talk like thet draws all sorts o' nasty lookin' ta take ya out."

"Whyn't we just get this started," Dorval sneered as his hands rested lightly on his six guns. Shani nodded and positioned herself as her eyes stared down the gunman. The air grew still, and even the birds stopped their chirping as though they too knew what was about to happen. No one wanted to get in the way of this fight. Huddled in the safety of the surrounding buildings, some people prayed, hoping that this constant fight of chaos would today finally end.

The silence was broken, not by a gun shot, but by breaking glass. Ming had found a target in the upper floors of the boarding house. The gunman was easily taken care of, as the cowboy's body broke through the window violently. Ming walked onto the balcony with confidence as he stood over the unconscious form of the would be assassin. Dorval glared as he realized that his plan was slowly starting to unravel. That became more of a confirmation as a shot gun blast sounded out. A wounded cowboy stumbled out into the street and fell to the ground. Walker strode slowly up to the man as he loaded the

double barrel shotgun and stared at the wounded cowboy.

Dorval was growing uneasy. His plan was completely and utterly ruined. He only had one hope, and those were the men he'd ordered to position themselves on the rooftops, and he soon realized even they would not be able to assist.

Gun shots rang out, one man fell from the rooftop to the street below. Dorval looked up, seeing the elven bard with a smoking Smith and Wesson in her hand. And she didn't stop. Keen elven eyes spotted the other attackers and flashes from both pistols came to life as the elven songstress cut down the rest of the cowboys with ease. Pania looked down to Dorval on the street with a smirk as the last gunfighter fell to the ground. She twirled the pistol in her hand like an expert gunslinger and calmly blew the whisp of smoke that trailed from the barrel. None of Dorval's men were killed. Wounded, but not killed. "Looks like the fight's gotta be fair, Dorval," Pania called out. "Guess ye'll 'aveta rely on yer own skill."

"Less yer a coward," Shani added as she smirked toward Dorval. The old cowboy was steamed. His plan was destroyed, and he was madder than hell. To be mad in a gunfight was a big mistake, because the gunfighter could slip up and that could have the most fatal of consequences. He reached for his guns, fully expecting to fill Shani with bullets, but found he was just a bit too slow. As his hands reached for the pistols the first of the bullets rained down. Shani was faster than he was, and she was so much more deadly. Her aim was perfect as the shots hit his chest first, filling him with lead. Her last shot struck Dorval dead center in the forehead.

His body seemed to float as it fell back. The windows of the nearby shops began to open as people peeked out. There was a sudden sigh that could be felt, as though a weight had been lifted from their shoulders. The tyrant who had ruled this territory with his own style of justice lay dead in the street.

Shani held up the pistols as she stared at Dorval's body. It was over. Finally over. Slowly, she twirled the now empty six shooters and holstered them. She looked up to Pania's position on the rooftop and offered a smile. Pania replied with a small wave. Ming and Walker gathered up the remaining cowboys and carted them off toward the Sheriff's Office.

It was all finally over.

Shani looked around the office for a moment as she gathered her things together. She and Pania had been in the town for nearly two weeks. They'd gone from hunted outlaws to trusted peacemakers, in just two weeks. After Shani took down Dorval, life in Oxford grew much more peaceful. A new judge came in from Jackson, and the rest of Dorval's men were sent to trial. Some were given light sentences. Others, like Mitch and Gator, had enough evidence against them that they would share the same fate that they visited upon Joshua. Peace had returned to this little spot in the south.

Now it was time for the two elven gunslingers to move on.

Johnathon Caleb Walker stood in the doorway as Shani finished packing her things. He watched her as she gazed upon the silver star that she wore for those two weeks. It had become an extension of her, something that she didn't even take notice of. Sheriff Wennemein. It did have a ring to it. "Lotta people gonna be a bit disappointed that yer movin' on," he said in a somber tone.

Shani didn't look up, she merely shrugged in response. "Sometimes a person has ta do what they gotta do. I come ta this world lookin' fer adventure. I ended up doin' somethin' thet needed bein' done. Now it's time ta move on."

Walker pushed himself off the door frame and walked into the room and took a look around as he spoke. "Guess that's true 'nough. At least ya helped put people's minds at ease. Been a while since a

man could walk down the streets o' this town an' see people smilin' without getting' that feelin' o' dread." He stood beside Shani, and even though his six foot seven frame towered above the elven gunslinger, he looked upon her as though she were ten feet tall. "Gonna be hard ta find a new Sheriff."

She moved to face the old gun hand fully, and looked up into his eyes with a smile. Shani still held onto the silver star with delicate fingers, and for a brief moment, looked to it before reaching up and gently placed it on Walker's lapel. "No," she said in a quiet voice that held a small smile. "No, it ain't gonna be too hard ta find a new sheriff."

Shreveport, Louisiana, September 22, 1863

Armed guards circled the small camp that was set up just outside the small city of Shreveport. In recent years, it had come to this. Renegades from the north and sympathizers from the south had begun raiding slave traders, and freeing slaves. Owners who were putting slaves up for auction had the most to lose, as they had time and money invested in these slave auctions.

To Ezekiel Morgan, the politics didn't matter. He just waited things out, going from one master to another. He hoped, in time, that he might see some of these people who would free him or any of those he was caged with. Born in captivity, he did not know what freedom was. But he'd heard the stories. Perhaps one day, he might actually taste his own freedom.

He looked up as one delicately dressed man wandered through the camp. Behind him there was a small group that followed him, including a woman. A black woman, dressed in the oddest of clothes. The dress looked to be made of the finest silk, and coloured with all the colours of the rainbow; she wore a cloak and hood that hid her face, but still her eyes seemed to study each person carefully. She looked very

fine, and very well kept. Maybe this slaver actually treated his slave better than some others, but he soon pushed that from his mind as the hair on the back of his neck stood up. He got a bad feeling from this woman. He wasn't sure what it was, but he only knew, she could not be trusted.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Brockton, Terra-Kal, present day

Pania stopped suddenly as she entered her room, seeing the head priestess of the Shining Lady reading through the papers on Pania's desk. "Mistress Arewella," Pania said in a quiet voice as she tried to hide her slight annoyance. "I werena expectin' ye ta come by."

"You have squirrelled yourself away in here," Arewella announced as she rose from the chair behind Pania's writing desk. "Some were rather worried. I came to see if everything was alright. And then I find this," she said as she held up some of the papers. "A holy knightess of the order does not while away the hours writing of fanciful tales which seem to glorify acts not becoming of a knight at all."

"Mistress," Pania replied as she kept a calm and even tone in her voice. "I felt a need ta write down me mem'ries an' detail some events which set me on the road ta b'come a knightess."

"And these memories," Arewella stated as she carefully set down

the papers on the desk. “You write them down and plan on profiting from them?”

“They tell a story,” Pania again replied, this time her annoyance more evident in her voice. “An’ each part o’ ‘istory is in a way a story. Me only profit is ta keep this on paper so tha’ the mem’ries willna be forgotten.”

“I see,” Arewella remarked with an impressed nod. “Then perhaps you will entertain me by detailing this place called Shreveport.”

Shreveport, Louisiana, September 23, 1863

Pania removed her duster and wiped her brow. Not only was it hot, but humid; unseasonable hot and humid. Never before had she felt such conditions. The heat and humidity felt like a huge weight that bared down on her. Shani felt it too, as both gunslingers looked tired in the saddle. Even their horses loped along slowly. That didn’t stop them, however, as off in the distance they could see their goal. Shreveport. Here was where Pania had wanted to come, help with whatever was needed in the Underground Railroad.

“Goddamn,” Shani huffed as she tried to breath through the thick and cloying air. “Ain’t never felt nuthin’ like this b’fore.” She pulled on the reins and brought her mount to a halt as she looked toward the town sight. “Gonna need a bath when we git inta town.”

“There’s gotta be a place ta rest b’fore we start lookin’ fer them wha’ run the railroad,” Pania suggested in a tired voice.

“Jist keep thet talk ‘bout the railroad quiet, ‘right,” Shani offered her advice. “We don’t need no gun play when the air’s so hot it’d make a Junebug fry on a sidewalk as it’s walkin’.” Pania chuckled lightly with Shani’s simple wisdom, but she was right. It wasn’t as though they could walk door to door and ask. Both elves coaxed their horses forward toward the town. They took note of the small camp that lay on the outskirts of Shreveport, saw the armed guards. “Wonner

what's goin' on?" Shani mused.

"Slave auction," Pania replied under her breath. She could see the slaves, lined up like cattle in the camp. Rich dandies walked through the camp, inspecting possible purchases for later in the day. She had only heard stories of the auctions, and now seeing one up close, she grew just that much more disgusted with the human race. "I still dunna know how one man can claim ownership o'er 'nother man, an' sell 'im like 'e were cattle."

"The obvious reason's starin' ya in the face," Shani suggested as she lit a cigarillo. "Y'all don't gotta go no further 'n the colour o' their skin." Again, Shani was right. The rich, white slavers that held court to decide the fate of the dark skinned workers. To the Confederates, this was just another day. But to a pair of elves who had only heard about such activities, it was just another nail in the coffin of the human race.

Pania motioned to Shani as they entered the town limits, pointing out the different sights to be seen. Citizens busied themselves with their days work, almost ignoring the small camp. The sight had become a normal one on auction day. For the elves, it wasn't so much the camp that filled their minds, but a place to rest, and Pania saw a rather comforting looking boarding house. They brought their horses to a halt and tied them off on the hitching posts, lazily entering the establishment. Pania held her duster over one arm while carrying in her satchel, Shani did the same, making sure that her most precious possessions were close at hand. Shani would let Pania talk to the owner, maybe they could get a decent room, a decent bath and a hot meal.

"There looks ta be a good place there," Pania pointed out a clean looking boarding house. "Need ta get a good 'ot bath." The establishment was one of common appearance in Shreveport, with it's elegant décor and obvious southern charms. Much like the people that

seemed to frequent it.

“While yer doin’ thet,” Shani called out as Pania opened the door to the establishment. “I’m gonna scout out, see what I kin find ‘round here ‘bout information on the auctions an such. Give a listen in there, maybe some loose lips.” Pania nodded as Shani tipped her hat and rode off. The pale elf stretched as she worked out the kinks in her back. She’d been riding in the saddle for too long a time, and had grown stiff. Yes, a good hot bath would be in order.

Shani brought her horse to a slow stop as she neared the gathered crowd. Their attention was riveted to the main stage as the auctioneer called out. She furrowed her brow as she saw men and women paraded onto the stage, and prices called out. Men in the crowd placed bids quickly as each lot was brought onto the stage. Shani became sickened by what she saw, but knew there was no way to stop it without getting gunned down in the streets. It was time to play things cool and just watch.

Shani gained a feel for the crowd as she watched, and saw the looks on the slaves as they were paraded up on the stage. And then she realized, she still had a large sum of the money from the job in Harrisburg. “Maybe one wrong kin make a right,” she muttered under her breath. “Use some o’ this here money ta buy somebody’s freedom.” The prices that were finalized were high, but not enough to make a significant dent in the amount she had. She looked through her money belt and found a cool one thousand tucked away. Her favourite saddle bag held the rest of her earnings.

“Ma’am,” a voice called out. Shani looked up and studied the man who approached her. She didn’t even realize she hadn’t dismounted from her horse yet, her mind was too full of ideas. “Ya look like yer contemplatin’ a look over the merchandise.”

She struggled with keeping a civil tongue, knowing full well

the word merchandise referred to other human beings. “Been thinkin’ ‘bout it a might, I wager,” she replied.

“Well ma’am,” the man said as he approached her. “If you’ll dismount, one o’ the boys can take care o’ yer horse an’ I’ll register ya with a ticket.” He took out a clip board and pencil as he watched her dismount. He got a strange feeling from Shani, she didn’t look like the type to be owning slaves one bit. “Mind if I ask yer interest in this auction, ma’am. Haveta know, just ta be certain. There’s a lotta agitators that would like nothin’ more ‘n ta strip down a way o’ life we built up.”

“Well, I’d say that there is mighty polite o’ ya,” she said with a smile after she let the workers take away her horse. “Been range ridin’ fer a spell, figger it’s time ta settle down. Get a piece o’ my own, so ta speak.”

“Puttin’ the cart b’fore the horse, ain’t ya ma’am?” he replied with a small snort of laughter. “Usually plantation owners buy land first, then worker stock.”

“Some workers have a good eye fer land,” she replied. “Be nice ta know I ain’t buyin’ somethin’ thet’ll be done in two years. I got a lotta time invested, an’ I’m lookin’ fer one ta help me an’ mine out.” She took the clipboard and wrote down her name as she spoke. “I’m here with a partner o’ mine, Pania’s her name.”

The man nodded, confirming that Shani’s bull story had done the trick. The bigger the lie, as it were. “I understand completely, ma’am. I take it you two have husbands.”

“Hell no,” Shani replied with a smirk, trying to hold back some laughter as she had an image float through her mind of Pania in a wedding dress getting married to some southern gentleman. No chance that would ever happen. “But ya never know what’ll happen in the future.”

“True ‘nough, ma’am,” the man said with a smile and tipped

his hat. Shani walked into the throng of people that watched the stage. She'd already seen quite a few of the slaves that had come and gone. She just wanted one, didn't matter. One to free. Her good deed, so to speak. She watched the others as they bid, studying how much the offer was, watching their facial expressions. In a way, even though she had the noblest of intentions, she felt extremely dirty.

The bidding continued as each was brought to the front. Shani found herself standing beside a rather well dressed man, a dandy as it were. He held himself with an air of importance. She then looked to the stage, and saw the latest brought on the block. The auctioneer gave no name, just a lot number. But Shani could see a dark skinned human, and looked upon the man with different eyes than the rest that stood here. He looked incredibly healthy for a slave; a strong build, tall with a humble expression. The man looked almost timidly around him, but his eyes never look directly at any one man in the area. Shani could sense something from this man, and in that moment she became disgusted with the display she had willingly taken part in.

"Bidding will start at 15 dollars," the auctioneer called out. Immediately, a fine dressed dandy called out with his bid, opening the session. She knew he always backed off around one hundred dollars as she had studied his bidding before. Another called out, raising bid to twenty. When the bid hit thirty, Shani made a call.

"One hunnerd!" she called out, and looked right at the dandy. He was watching her with a smile, and Shani became surprised as he raised his own hand.

"One hundred an' twenty."

The bid surprised her. He never went above one hundred as far as she saw. But the bidding continued. Shani didn't know if this man was a caring slaver or not, but she didn't care. She knew that if she won, she had the best chance to give the man his freedom. It was a far cry from how she would usually do such a thing, busting into a place

with guns blazing or steel slashing.

“One thousand!” she called out to the shock of the audience. There was silence as the crowd stared at Shani. Even the dandy was looking at her with a grin on his face. The auctioneer called out for other bids. As none came, the gavel came down, and the lot was completed. With one shocking announcement, Shani had just purchased a human being. The realization finally sunk in. *Oh lord*, she muttered to herself. *What have I just done?*

Ezekiel Morgan followed obediently behind one of the slavers as he was taken out of the paddock. He’d seen this before, slaves taken from one owner to another. This was his time now. Ezekiel prayed at least that maybe this master would be kind and understanding. Perhaps, maybe even grant him his freedom. He kept his head low, eyes looking to the ground, knowing exactly when to stop and exactly when to start walking. He listened as the slavers talked but didn’t really register what they said. He didn’t really look up until he heard the voice of the one who had paid for him.

“Thank ya kindly, boys,” he heard her say. A woman. He’d never heard of a woman owning property before. His eyes drifted up for a brief moment, taking in the lean figure that stood before him. He saw the pair of long barrels slung low on her hips, a pair of short swords tucked neatly into scabbards that rested near the holsters. A gunslinger. He’d been bought by a gunslinger. What would a gunslinger possibly want with a slave? “Son,” he heard her say again. “Y’all kin look up, son.” Ezekiel’s head slowly looked up to take in the woman before him. She was shorter than he was by at least a foot and a half, and skin whiter than any white man he’d seen. True white in colour. And her ears, her pointed ears.

“Yes’m,” he said as he looked up, nodding respectfully.

“Name’s Shani,” she replied. That alone took him aback, never

before had his owner introduced him or herself to him before. “Ya gots a name, son?”

“Y-yes’m,” he replied with a hesitant nod. “Ezekiel, ma’am.” His timber remained respectful and timid, as he’d learned from previous owners. Any sign of confidence was usually beaten out of most slaves.

Shani nodded with approval and turned to the guards. “Y’all gots the key ta his shackles?” The guards stared at her for a moment in disbelief. Shani huffed and rolled her eyes as she continued. “If I wanted a puppy ta lead ‘round on a leash I’da bought a dog.” The guards muttered as they finally handed Shani the key to the shackles, and watched as the pale elf began unlocking the chains around Ezekiel’s hands and feet.

“Miss,” one of the guards cautioned as he stared at Ezekiel. “He could bolt an’ run.”

Shani stood up and tossed the shackles to the ground and looked Ezekiel in the eye. “Ya ain’t gonna run from me, are ya, Zeke?” The tall black man shook his head slowly. He didn’t know what to make of this woman, and decided if he did run, she could easily gun him down. “There, see?” she said as she looked back to the guards. “Sides, I don’t need no personal servant draggin’ b’hind me all chained up. C’mon, son. Let’s go.”

Ezekiel followed her dutifully, keeping his head bent low and eyes on the ground. His mind raced as he tried to figure this woman. That detective work would have to continue later, as he heard another voice call out to his new Mistress.

“I congratulate you, Madam,” the very debonair voice stated as he approached with his entourage, the dandy that he had seen before. Along with the woman. The woman that made him feel uneasy. “I had hoped to add a strong back to my work force, but it would appear that t’day was not that day.”

“I reckon so,” Shani replied with a nod. She didn’t smile, but remained cool as the dandy approached. “I needed somebody ta help out with a few things, an’ a strong back’s what I need. I can’t lift ev’rythin’.”

The dandy extended his hand in an offer of greeting. “Allow me ta introduce myself. I am Jeremiah Kingston. The Third. It is a pleasure to meet such a lady as yerself.” He smiled to her with a slight bow as he introduced himself, his well trimmed mustache and goatee matching his demeanor.

Shani smirked and nodded as she shook the man’s hand. “Shani Wennemein,” she said slowly, allowing him to believe that she had a slow, Texas drawl. “The first.” Ezekiel kept his head low but managed to shift his eyes back and forth between the two of them. He already was beginning to piece together some of Shani’s body language. He could tell she really didn’t like this man. Rightly so, he also gave Ezekiel a very odd feeling.

“If I may be so bold,” Jeremiah continued after the short introduction. “But it is often an honour ta meet a lady such as yaself. It would be most pleasant if ya might join me at my plantation for dinner.” His smile was ever present, making Shani believe that it actually might really be a fake.

“I would haveta say thet is most kind o’ ya, Mr. Kingston,” she said with a nod. “Gotta mention I am gonna bring ‘long my partner. Pania’s ‘er name.”

“Well then,” Jeremiah let draw out as his eyes seemed to brighten at the prospect of not one, but two women that he could entertain. “I will look forward ta seein’ ya both. And please, do bring your manservant. He is most welcome ta join us as well. I will send a carriage ta your quarters around six this evenin’. If you will just give me the name of the hotel you are stayin’ at, then I can make certain a carriage comes by to pick you up at the appointed time.” He bowed

to her as his smile grew just a bit as Shani wrote down the name of the hotel, and then he moved off, followed closely by his entourage.

When he was completely out of ear shot, Shani turned to Ezekiel. “I sure as hell don’t trust that bastard.” This comment, combined with the fact that she confided in him, surprised him even more. No one had ever done that before. Ever. “C’mon,” she said as she began to move down the street. “Need ta git cleaned up an’ then all three o’ us needa git gussied up. Y’all kin meet Pania, too.” Even with the few surprising events in the last few minutes, he obediently followed her down the street. These events would be nothing compared to what was to come.

Pania sat back in the warm water, eyes closed as she hummed quietly to herself. Finally, she had a decent bath. After several days of running creek water through her hair, she would be able to soak and get some of the stench of the trail out of her skin. This was something that she’d been waiting for over the course of their ride from Oxford to Shreveport. They didn’t stay for very long in one place, so it made it difficult to get a decent bath. Now she had the opportunity to actually sit and soak in a nice warm bath.

The boarding house was very high class. The few thousand they had accumulated from previous jobs afforded them some ability to pass themselves off as higher than their class. Even on Earth, flash enough cash and it would get you places. She sighed deeply as she relaxed. All was perfect with the world. Even the sounds that filtered in through the window; the tromping of booted feet down the hall, the laughter from the patrons of the establishment, the shouts from outside as people called to each other; all of it seemed relaxing.

She even enjoyed the reception she received, as each person took to calling her Mademoiselle, to which she would nod her head in thanks and repeated the greeting. It felt very high class here.

The sound of light boots and the familiar ching of spurs signaled that Shani had returned. Pania smiled, maybe if she remained in the tub, Shani might be tempted in some way shape or form. The door opened as Pania continued to hum to her self.

“Damn, it is hot out there,” Shani called out as she moved through the three room apartment they had rented. A decent sized place for such a boarding house. Another example of its high class nature. Pania heard the shuffling around of feet. And then she heard something else.

“Oh my Lawd!” The voice was most definitely male. “I am so sorry, Miss. I did not mean ta ...” Pania opened her eyes, which grew to the size of saucers when she saw the tall black man standing with his back to her, a hand covering his face. “I am so sorry, Miss.”

“Shani!” Pania called out quickly as she rose to her feet and quickly grabbed a towel. The elven gunslinger walked back into the room as she heard the commotion, somewhat confused by what she was hearing.

It became all too clear when she became enlightened of the situation.

“Oh fer cryin’ out loud!” she said with a sigh. “Pania, put some dang clothes on.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Pania huffed, her voice holding a mocking tone. “I didna know we were gonna ‘ave comp’ny comin’ o’er.” She wrapped the towel around her, gazing over at the black man every so often, then motioned Shani over as the shock of being seen in all her glory had finally passed. “Who’s tha’?”

“His name’s Ezekiel,” Shani explained. “I call i’m Zeke. Seem fittin’ ‘nough.”

“Mhmm,” Pania said with a nod as her eyes continued to gaze over the man’s form. “Now. Please explain why there’s a very, very black man in the room. An’ dunna try an’ say ye met an ol’ friend on

the street. I know ‘ow blacks ‘re treated ‘ere.” Her eyes moved to Shani as she waited for the explanation.

Shani sighed slightly, knowing that no excuse would be good enough for the elven bard. “I ... I bought ‘im,” she finally said in a quiet voice. Pania’s only response was a blank stare, only broken up by the odd blink from time to time.

Pania opened her mouth two or three times as she tried to find the words. Her mind tried to process what she had just been told. Naturally, it was the only logical answer, but she still couldn’t believe what she had just been told. “Ye... bough’ ‘im?” she finally said with a voice filled with shock. “With money?”

“Yeah, money,” Shani shot back. “I figger one way ta actually free a slave may very well be ta buy ‘em.” Shani rolled her shoulders as though she struck a small victory with her comment. Ezekiel heard the words, and realization sunk in. This woman did plan on saving him. Maybe not him per se, but she purchased him, and she wanted to free him.

“An’... wha’ ‘xactly were the plan?” Pania finally managed as she was able to produce a full sentence with less shock in her voice. “Buy a slave, ride up ta ‘Arrisburg, knock o’er a bank, ride back ‘ere, buy a few more...”

“Hell, no,” Shani replied with a grim tone. “It were impulse. I jist... I couldn’t jist stan’ there an’ watch.” She took a deep breath as she waited for Pania to continue her tirade. But the elven bard’s attention had focused on Ezekiel again. “Zeke,” she called out to the black man. “‘S’alright, she ain’t all nekked no more, ya kin turn ‘round.” Ezekiel did as he was told, keeping his head bowed low and eyes to the floor.

Pania moved forward, her anger toward Shani, the shock of being exposed in front of a complete stranger, was all but gone. “Ye dunna ‘aveta look ta the ground, ye know lad,” she said softly. “I were a bit s’prised, an’ no’ angry.” She smirked as she looked to the elven

gunslinger behind her for a moment. “‘Least no’ at ye, lad.”

Shani sighed and shook her head in reply before changing the subject. “We got other problems ta think ‘bout anyways,” she stated quickly. “We been invited ta a fancy dinner by a Jeremiah Kingston. The Third.”

“The Third?” Pania repeated with a chuckle. “Sounds important, aye.”

“I bet he thinks he is,” Shani replied with a smirk. “Anyways, coach is gonna come pick us up at six. We needa git us some fancy clothes an’ git ourselves all purtied up fer t’night.” Her eyes moved over to Ezekiel and then to the bath tub. “But first, we needa git cleaned up.”

Ezekiel stood straight while he inspected the fine suit he wore. He never had clothes like these, and it made him feel important. The fine, black material of the slacks and suit jacket. A soft cotton shirt that felt light on his skin. Even the black dress shoes, though they did pinch a bit, but he wore them, never having had such articles before. Both Shani and Pania were off in other rooms dressing for the evening. Ezekiel still had a difficult time getting past the image of the white hair elf from his mind. It was their first meeting, and he often did not see people naked when being introduced. One thing was certain with these two, they were different, and they treated him differently. While they shopped for clothes, they took him along, asked his opinion, wanted to know if he liked the clothes they picked out. Granted, it was done in hushed tones, but still, they asked his opinion as though they treated him as an equal.

His thoughts came back to the present as the door to one of the spare rooms opened and Shani walked in. She wore smart looking slacks and matching vest that covered a fine silk shirt. The pale elf slipped on a matching bolero jacket and topped off the wardrobe with

a brand new stetson. Her new boots seemed slick and the spurs gave a sharper ching as she walked. Even the gunbelt was new and pristine looking, holding her trusted long barrels with care. Under the vest, she wore a shoulder harness that held each short sword in comfortable scabbards and neatly tucked away from sight. Ezekiel smiled as she stood in the middle of the room, as though modeling the latest fashion. Shani dressed up quite well, making the Tom Boy look come out that much more for her. Had it not been for the fact that her long hair and feminine features gave away her gender, she could have been mistaken for a man.

“Ya look right nice, Miss Shani,” Ezekiel said with a genuine smile. His opinion was honest, it wasn’t a forced thought that came out to satisfy an owner. Shani did look very nice indeed.

“Well, thank ya, Zeke,” Shani replied with a grin. She had begun taking to calling him Zeke, finding the name quicker to use and easier to say. “How ya find them clothes?”

“They fit right good, Miss Shani,” he said with a nod. There was some hesitation before he continued, however. He knew there would be no reprisal for his comment, but he had grown up not wanting to voice discomfort in front of white folks. “Shoes’re a bit tight.”

“Well, couldn’t find nuthin’ in yer size,” Shani replied with a sigh as she fixed up the bow tie for him. “Jist keep up ‘ppearances ‘til we git done dinner ‘n then we kin find ya a decent pair o’ soft shoes.” She picked up a smart looking black cap that sat on a nightstand and handed it to Ezekiel. He took it carefully and gently placed it on his head, adjusting it so it felt comfortable. The pale elf smiled and nodded her approval. “I figger we gonna come off lookin’ like a right respect’ble group o’ upper class society at Kingston’s lil swore-ay.” She looked back to one of the doors that lead to another spare room. “How y’all comin’ in there, Panny?”

“I’m comin’,” a muffled voice said from behind the door. “Jus’

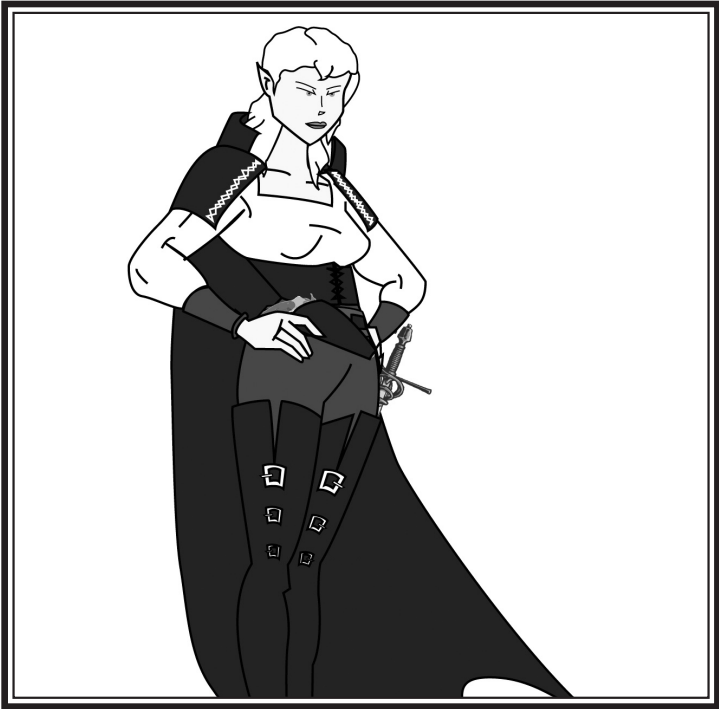
gimme ‘nother minute.”

Shani rolled her eyes and shook her head as she muttered in a low voice next to Ezekiel. “Fer swingin’ fer the other team, she sure are a girly girl.”

“I ‘eard tha’,” a louder, but still muffled voice called out from behind the door. There was some shuffling around and several moments passed. Finally the door opened, and Pania stepped out. Both Shani and Ezekiel were silent for a good long while as they took in the vision that Pania had become. Her dress was maroon with gold trimming along the ruffles of the skirt, at the waist line and about the neckline. Pania wore long evening gloves and displayed a gold ring on her left hand. A gold flower nestled on her bosom, as gold trim went up to the shoulders. With her left hand, she held lightly onto a matching umbrella. Pania had transformed into an upstanding southern belle.

Ezekiel smiled as he nodded. “You... ya look real nice, Miss Pania.” The elven bard grinned as she curtsied. She could tell the tall, black man’s comment was genuine. Just something in his eyes let her know.

“Yeah,” Shani added with a slight smirk. “Y’all purty up but good, girly-girl.” The elven gunslinger snickered as Pania scowled mockingly at her. The seeming playful nature between the two elves made Ezekiel smile. It had been a long time since he had felt like this. It felt good. The sound of a carriage coming to a stop could be heard through the open window, and Shani moved to get a clear view of the street below. “Looks like our carriage has ‘rrived.” She looked back to her companions, smiling a sly smile. “We went all out an’ gussied up, now it’s time ta play the part. Like I done said b’fore, I don’t trust this Kingston ‘far as I kin throw ‘im, so be on yer guard.”



Well then, why didna ye say so in the first place

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PP Jeb, be a good boy an' fetch my cane if you would," Kingston said in a calm and cool voice that held the air of sophistication.

"We are entertaining two fine ladies, so I must make certain my attire is appropriate." He smiled to the small black boy and waved him off to carry out his duty. Kingston fussed a bit in the mirror as one of his body guards stood by near the window. Kingston looked over to him somewhat curiously. "Is there any sign of the carriage?"

"Not yet, Sir," the guard replied as he adjusted the cuffs on his jacket. Dressed in finery, the man looked like one to be more at home on the range than working as a guard on a plantation. The hired gun looked back to the window as the small boy ran back in with Kingston's cane.

"Why thank you, Jeb," Kingston replied with an overly genuine smile. Why don't you go downstairs an' ask Miss Mabel for some corn bread, hmmm." The boy smiled and Kingston saw the question that seemed to hang in the boy's eyes. "An' yes, you may ask for some fine

Swiss cheese to go with that.” The boy ran off excitedly as Kingston waved him off yet again. “Make certain ta inform Marcus that we’ll be lockin’ the gates once the carriage arrives.”

“Sir?” the gun hand inquired as he looked back to Kingston.

“This Miss Wennemein spent a great deal of money on that slave,” Kingston said as he tucked the cane under one arm. “That means he is worth a great deal, and is someone to be added to the stable.” The gun hand nodded and quickly stepped out of the room as Kingston slipped into his evening gloves.

“You must be careful, Mahstah Kingston,” the deep, seductive voice of the black woman said from the shadows. Kingston turned to look in her direction as he arched an eyebrow.

“An’ why would you say that, Isabella?” he asked, punctuating the question with a thud of his cane on the hard wood floor.

“That woman was a gunslingah,” Isabella commented. “She is powerful. Ah can feel it in me bones.”

“Well,” Kingston replied with a sly smile. “If that is the case, then we will most assuredly have to call upon your talents, my dear. For how many people in this world have ever had ta deal with the walkin’ dead b’fore?”

The carriage came to a slow stop at the front gates of the plantation. Ezekiel hopped off the back of the carriage and moved to the door, opening it with ease. Shani took her first steps out onto the pristine raked path that lead to the mansion that lay before them. She took in the area with a gunslinger’s eye, taking note of the hiding spots that snipers could hold themselves up in; from the fountain in the middle of the well cared for courtyard to the upper balcony of the mansion. Once satisfied, she turned her attention back to the carriage and assisted Ezekiel as Pania climbed down to the ground. The elven bard moved slowly as she climbed down, making certain her dress

didn't become snagged on the carriage at all, or fall face first as she struggled just a bit. Ezekiel quickly came to her assistance.

"Well then," Pania said with a sigh as she looked around the grounds. "Fine lookin' place, isna it?"

"Fine 'nough," Shani replied as she once again turned her attention back to the grounds and tried to determine where attackers might lay. "If ya don't mind livin' in a bunker." The three began walking toward the front steps of the mansion, both elves taking in the beauty of the place. Shani, though, could not help but feel a sense of foreboding as they walked past the marble of the Roman columns. Then there was that tug on her arm.

She looked to her left and found Pania smiling as she stood beside the elven gunslinger, arm neatly tucked into Shani's. "Um... what're ya doin'?"

"A lady needs an escort, ye know," Pania replied with a grin.

"I'm fine," Shani stated with a nod. "Really, I don't need no escort." Pania furrowed her brow and let out a harrumph. No time to argue, however, as Ezekiel approached the door and knocked loudly to announce their presence. Shani had her mind on other details. "Got a Colt slung on my side in a shoulder holster an' two short blades jist in case. You packin'?" she asked of Pania.

"I've go' one o' me pistols tucked 'way in a garter," Pania replied with a sly smile. "Wanna see?" she asked with a grin as she looked to Shani. Pania's arm was still tucked into the elven gunslingers, and Shani's only response was to roll her eyes and sigh. Any further banter between the two elves was brought to a quick halt as the massive double doors, made of only the finest oak no doubt, were being opened.

A rather sophisticated looking manservant bowed to the trio and quietly bid them enter. The lobby of the mansion was incredible. Two stair cases that hugged the wall while seeming to embrace the room with warmth. An elegant chandelier hung with care from the tall

ceiling. Paintings were displayed, obviously announcing the former owners of this plantation, which gave a hint as to the long lineage that Kingston came from in the Americas.

The three stood in the lobby and marveled at the sight. Pania gazed with wide eyed wonder, while Shani took a much more skeptical view of the place. Ezekiel too gazed about the room, but his eyes drifted back to a spot on the floor, making certain to keep himself unnoticed in his position behind the two elves.

“Well, well,” announced the broad smiling voice of Jeremiah Kingston as he sauntered into the lobby. “What a sight indeed. Two fine lookin’ ladies. Allow me ta introduce myself, I am Jeremiah Kingston, the Third,” his smile seemed to grow as he held out his hand to each lady.

“Pania Alow, if ye please,” the elven bard said as she took his hand and curtsied with a coy smile. Kingston seemed to chuckle as his eyes drifted across Pania’s curvy form.

“I do b’lieve we’ve already met,” Shani said as she removed her stetson, but shook Kingston’s hand as a matter of formality.

“Yes indeed, we have,” Kingston replied. His eyes fell on the figure of Ezekiel and his smile again grew just a bit more. “I am so pleased to see that you have brought your manservant with you. I believe that if we associate from such lower class people, perhaps they can become educated in the ways of higher society. I am all for equality, but a person needs ta know their place first b’fore they can ascend.”

“In’erestin’ philosophy,” Shani said with a slight smirk. *Gods he’s such a racist bastard*, she thought in almost the same breath.

“I do b’lieve we can discuss more o’ this over dinner,” he said as he held out a hand to usher the pair toward the dining room. As they walked, Pania wondered if the dining room was just as immaculate as the lobby of this rather palatial mansion.

Shani dabbed the corners of her mouth with her napkin and waited for the dessert to be brought around. It was an excellent meal, and seemed full of flavour. Kingston even surprised both elves as he allowed Ezekiel to sit at the table with them and partake of the meal. Although while his explanation did make some sense, it still seemed rather odd to see. His philosophy was simply just because they are slaves does not mean that they should not be well fed. Shani remained quiet for most of the meal, letting the conversation flow between Kingston and Pania. The elven gunslinger could see the look in Kingston's eyes and smirked as he continuously looked over Pania. *If only you knew*, was her only thought.

Dessert was brought to the table and the conversation continued, but Shani had a very wandering spirit, and the conversation began to bore her. When there was a lull in the discussion of the slave trade, she finally spoke up.

“As innerstin’ as this is,” Shani said politely with a soft smile. “I have a small need ta freshen up. Ya know, powder my nose, as it were.” She rose to her feet with a small nod to Kingston. “An’ ifn y’all don’t mind, I’m gonna take Zeke here with me.” She looked over to Ezekiel and nodded. The tall, black man rose to his feet attentively.

“If ya must, then I will not stop you, Miss Wennemein,” Kingston replied with that oh so patented smile. “Allow one o’ my servants ta direct ya both ta the proper quarters.” Kingston snapped his fingers and one of the several servants stepped forward. Dressed quite fine, the man bowed and moved to Shani. Again he bowed and wordlessly motioned for them to follow. There was just one thing that bothered Shani about these servants. While they wore rather fine clothes, each one also wore a hood, hiding their face. When the question was brought up, Kingston explained that it was a family custom that dated back to the days in England, when servants would hide their faces while in the

company of lord's household.

Shani thought on that for a moment as they walked. When they finally were out of earshot from the dining room, she spoke. "Sorry 'bout draggin' ya from dessert, Zeke. I jist wanna make sure yer fine."

"Wha' 'bou' Miss Pania?" he asked with some worry in his voice.

"Panny kin take care o' 'erself," she replied with a low voice. "'Sides, I ain't worried 'bout Kingston tryin' ta woo 'er inta steppin' inta his bed. She's as gay as the day is long." She caught the confused look in Ezekiel's eyes and explained further. "She's more innersted in my backside then his." He nodded, satisfied with the translation, though found it rather disturbing to say the least, having meeting a woman for the first time that only had interest in other women.

As they walked down the long hallway, Shani took note of the man servant sent to escort them. He shambled along slowly, as though hobbled. She doubted he could actually run, and for a moment she wondered if Kingston would be so low as to sever the tendons in their ankles. "Quite a nice place here," she said back to the man servant as she motioned to the paintings that hung from the walls with care. The man servant did not respond, which perplexed Shani. Slaves would often respond quickly and politely, she had learned. Perhaps it was just Kingston's servants that remained quiet when spoken too. But something aabout this man told Shani otherwise. The movements of the man didn't add up.

She moved quickly, reaching out to the man servant and grabbing his hood, ripping it off with ease. The man servant did not respond, but Shani reeled back, one hand pushing back Ezekiel, the other reaching for one of her Colts.

"Miss Shani, wha's wrong?" he said quickly as he remained behind the elven gunslinger.

“Ev’rythin’, Zeke,” she hissed in return as she stared at the man servant, taking note of the flesh that seemed to hang from his face, the vacuous eyes and the stringy hair. “I knew dang well thet Kingston weren’t up ta no good. But one things clear now, I know a goddamned zombie when I see one.”

“I mus’ say, this were such a lovely dinner, Mr. Kingston,” Pania stated with a gentle smile. “So glad we could come ta see ye place an’ share in some int’restin’ conversation.”

Kingston smiled as he picked up a wine glass and lifted it in toast. “Mi casa es su casa, as they say,” he replied before taking a sip of his wine. “I am just very pleased that a pair of ladies such as yourselves were able to attend at my invitation. I know that Miss Shani has a rather keen eye to go with her rugged appearance, but she can put on a lovely palette for the eyes when she needs to. But it was my amazement when you walked through my front doors. I had believed that the heavens themselves had opened up and let one of their finest angels descend into my good graces.”

“Oh, well now Mr. Kingston,” Pania tittered as she chuckled lightly. Her outward appearance suggested that she was blushing from the compliment, but inside she only thought one thing. *Go blow it out ye arse*. She wasn’t exactly sure how much more of such saccharine compliments she could take. It was getting to the point where she prayed that Shani would stir up some trouble.

Her prayers were soon answered.

All conversation stopped as three distinct gun shots came from the hallway, followed by the elven gunslinger’s familiar whoopin’ and hollerin’. “Panny! Git yer ass in gear. We are leavin’!”

Pania rose to her feet, curiosity getting the best of her as she looked to the hallway. First Ezekiel stumbled forward, then Shani, firing back into the hallway without care of who was there. Finally,

Kingston rose to his feet, that plastic smile still pressed to his face.

“It would seem that my intentions have been revealed,” he stated as he leaned on his cane. “I did not wish it to come ta this, but I have need ta increase my stable, as it were. Your manservant is of notable strength an’ endurance, and would complete my workforce quite well.” As he spoke, the remaining servants slowly began to step forward. Pania watched them carefully, not fully understanding what was going on.

“Quit gawkin’ an’ jist move!” Shani shouted as she grabbed Pania’s arm. The servants were drawing closer to them, but the trio bolted toward the front doors of the mansion. Pania obediently moved, but there were still questions that filled her mind.

“Wha’ in bloody ‘ell is goin’ on?” she seemed to scream back at the elven gunslinger.

“You got yer guns?”

“Aye, I do...” she replied, but Shani cut her off quickly.

“Good, ‘cause ya needa pull them irons an’ start shootin’,” she explained as she reloaded her Colt then pulled her second one and handed it to Ezekiel. “I hope y’all know how ta use this.”

“I... I’m okay with it,” Ezekiel nodded quickly as he took the pistol carefully.

“Would someone please explain wha’s goin’ on!” Pania again screamed. Her confusion became more so when Shani pulled a short sword and proceeded to cut a slit into her gown, revealing not only her curvy leg, but also the pistol that was neatly packed into the leather garter belt around her thigh. “Well now. Ye surprise me all the time, Shani,” she said with a sly smile.

“Would ya git yer mind outta the gutter,” Shani scoffed as she began herding the pair through the doors. No explanation came from Shani’s lips, but one didn’t need to come as they burst through the front doors. Pania saw it all, there had to be one hundred of them. Zombies,

all of them. The walking undead.

“Well then,” Pania said as she furrowed her brow. “Why didn’t you say so in the first place?”

The three raced into the court yard only to find themselves surrounded. Pania’s calculation had outnumbered thirty three to one; she wasn’t far off as she observed the shambling husks that came toward them from the gates, the rear of the house, the interior of the house and seemingly everywhere. It would be a tough fight to escape this hell, but the need for survival greatly outweighed the temptation to curl up and die. All three brandished a pistol as they raced to the fountain that stood as the center piece of the court yard. Shani kept watch as the others quickly scrambled on the statue, desperately seeking some higher ground. As her companions climbed, she fired careful shots into the crowd of zombies that slowly lurched forward. They would have to be careful with their bullets, as they might very well run out before it was safe to bolt. When Shani was assured that the other two were safe, she joined them quickly. The three pushed their backs to the statue, a free hand ensuring that they would not fall.

Pania’s shots were well trained, even though they were virtually ineffective. Ezekiel, however, fired more out of fear than anything else. Deep inside he felt that this would be his last night on Earth. The bullets hit the zombies squarely, but they did not repel the undead crowd. They needed something bigger.

Something much more powerful than a mere pistol.

“Panny,” Shani cried out over the din of grunts and growls that surrounded them.

“Aye?” Pania called back through heavy breaths of worry and fear.

“Memmer what I said in Oxford,” Shani stated as she tried to jar the elven bard’s memory. “The part ‘bout not usin’ magic?”

“Aye,” Pania replied, a smile forming on her face as she could tell what the next words from the elven gunslinger’s lips would be.

“Fergit I said anythin’ ‘bout it,” Shani stated flatly. “‘Cause we need a fireball cooked up somethin’ fierce.”

Pania only smiled in response as she tossed the Smith and Wesson to Shani. As the shambling crowd advanced, Pania began muttering her incantations, her hands became alive with flame as she weaved her fingers together, forming a larger ball. Without warning, she hurled it into the largest group of zombies that advanced. Most were tossed back, some burned to cinder. All of those in the line of fire were suddenly engulfed in flames. That still did not stop their forward movement. But it would eventually, as the dry bodies were perfect kindling for the magical flame. The burning bodies smelled like oily, wet rags as they burned, it was stomach wrenching, even more so when witnessing the shambling, mindless animated corpses flailed their burning arms in one last attempt to attack.

Shani kept firing into the advancing crowd, looking back to the mansion every so often. On the main balcony, she saw her target. Kingston had dragged his dark mistress with him. From what Shani could gather, the woman was the central cause of this, but not of her own accord. Rather, she was forced by Kingston. Some how he had a hold over her, and Shani would find out what. “Hey Kingston!” she shouted out over the echoing sounds of gunfire, magical assault and zombie shuffling. “Nice dinner! Hate ta run, though!”

“Oh, you will not run far, m’dear!” he called back before turning to his charge. He held tightly to her arm and spoke in a voice filled with venom. “That girlish one seems to have your power. Do whatever you can to stop her. Remember, your family’s life is at stake.” Isabella nodded timidly and began to concentrate on the pale elf in her tattered dress.

“Her powah is strong,” she said in a voice that was like a squeak.

“It not be o’ this world.” She turned quickly to look at Kingston as his hand squeezed tightly around her arm. The look in his eyes were enough to kill, and she understood that not only was her family’s life at stake, but her own as well. She had no choice, she had to try. As the zombie horde began climbing slowly up the fountain, she again concentrated on the pale elf.

“Bloody...” Pania shouted out as she tried casting another hellfire, but found something blocking her concentration. “I cannu ge’ ‘nough power t’gether. Somethin’ keeps interruptin’.” She quickly looked around the area to see who might be able to counter her spells, and soon she found it. “There!” she cried as she pointed to the balcony, right toward Isabella.

Shani nodded, knowing exactly what Pania was motioning to. “I wager so, but I dare say she ain’t doin’ it b’cause she want ta. I figger Kingston’s got a hold o’er her.” She loaded her Colt and cocked back the hammer as she steeled herself. “Time ta sway his mind.”

Kingston ducked quickly as bullets hit the marble railing of the balcony. The gunslinger had decided he would make an excellent target. “Fire on that bitch!” he shouted to his body guard. “Make her bleed, but don’t kill her. I want to watch her die. Slowly.” The bodyguard took his rifle and fired, indiscriminantly into the massive throng in the courtyard below. He had no clue who he was firing on, as his bullets were replied in kind quickly and much more effectively than his own.

The bodyguard’s head snapped back quickly, and his body slumped to the ground, a trail of blood trickling down his forehead. “Thet’s how ya shoot, ya bastard. Maybe ya should learn how ta handle a pistol, ya yella coward!” Shani shouted from her position, hoping her words would infuriate Kingston to the point of making a fatal mistake. “Girly girl, we need more fire power! Keep hurlin’ fireballs ‘r lightin’ bolts ‘r whatever ya got!”

“It’s no’ like I’ve go’ an endless supply!” Pania shouted back. “I’m nearly drained o’ all o’ me...” She stopped as she realized that one of her spells did something she wasn’t expecting; as she raised a hand to cast another fireball, she felt a surge of power rush through her body, as though divine blessing was granted upon her. Pania, Shani and Ezekiel only watched in amazement as a pure, white light seemed to spread forth from Pania and went outward. With each zombie it touched, it destroyed them completely, crumbling them to piles of dust. At the outer edge of its reach, the zombies turned in fear, shambling away from the three as they perched on the statue.

“H...how the hell ya do thet?” Shani asked in a much quieter tone.

“Um... I dunna know?” Pania only replied in a rather meek voice. Whatever it was, it had given them a lot of space. The danger had seemed to pass, as the zombies where either scattered in pieces or running aimlessly. Shani just smirked as she found her senses and climbed down from her perch. Pania and Ezekiel soon followed. “Wha’ now?”

“Don’t it make sense ta go see the bastard what started this,” Shani asked with a sneer as she reloaded her Colt. “I intend ta misbehave!”

Kingston dragged Isabella with some difficulty, as she struggled to get away. While he did not often show it, Kingston had quite a formidable strength, having worked in the fields before he took over the plantation’s operations. He forced her along, snarling as he did so, dragging her down a dingy hallway toward a locked door. Quickly and effortlessly, he threw her to the floor in front of the door as he reached into his suit jacket and produced a pistol. “Now my dear,” he sneered as he worked the lock on the door. “It’s time that you and your family paid dearly for this failure. I cannot abide by failure, and those who

fail must pay.” He tossed the lock to the side and cocked the hammer back on the pistol, slowly lowering it to aim at Isabella. “You shall be first, my dear.”

Isabella flinched and shrieked as the report of a pistol sounded out. She felt her heart stop, but only for a moment. She looked to Kingston with fear, and then wonder, as a trail of blood red began to flow down the clean white shirt that he wore. Without any grandeur, he fell over to the ground, the life pulled from him.

Isabella slowly turned to look away from Kingston, down the hall. There stood Shani Wennemein at the end of the long hallway like a shadowy spectre, a smoking gun in her outstretched hand. Behind the elven gunslinger were Pania and Ezekiel. All three appeared to be out of breath. Isabella shrank back as Ezekiel stepped forward. “Please. Please don’t hurt me,” she pleaded, her voice coming out in a squeak.

“Ain’t nevah plannin’ on doin’ such a thing, Miss’m,” Ezekiel replied in a calm voice. “Way I see it, y’all been forced ta do things that ya never want ta do in the first place.”

“He... he foun’ out,” she began to speak, telling the tale of what she had done. “Foun’ ou’ wha’ I could do. Said he’d kill mah fam’ly if I did no’ do as he said.” She curled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. Ezekiel knelt beside her, as though to console her as Shani and Pania looked on.

“Wha’ now?” Pania asked quietly.

The elven gunslinger twirled the pistol and holstered it as she took a deep breath and looked around. There wasn’t much life left in this place. Kingston and his body guards were dead. The zombies were destroyed, and those that managed to escape wouldn’t last very long. “Lets jist get the hell outta here,” Shani said with a long sigh as she looked to Pania and then to Ezekiel and Isabella. “All o’ us.” Shani lit a cigarillo as she picked up a discarded torch. She used the

end of the cigarillo to light the torch as she walked toward the mansion. Carefully, she started the expensive curtains on fire as she kicked over a kerosene lamp. With the mansion slowly burning, she tossed the torch onto the pool of kerosene and walked out without looking back.

Just outside Munroe County, Indiana, October 10th, 1863

Two riders flanked the three wagons, their watchful eyes gazing over the landscape as though searching for that one thing that would bring salvation. Every so often they would ride to each wagon ensuring that each was fine, and each time the pair that rode in the driver's seat nodded their reassurance. Pania and Shani had to make certain, each wagon contained the most precious cargo they had ever escorted. In total, the pair of elven gunslingers had freed sixty slaves from Kingston's plantation. Just before they torched the grounds. More than likely something that law men in the south would want to hang them for now.

The small train halted as Shani held up her hand to signal them. She watched the lights of the farm yard carefully as Pania coaxed her horse beside Shani's. "What ya figger?" Shani asked as she lit a cigarillo. "Should we chance it? I mean, last few places were duds, but thet ol' man back in Knoxville tol' us there'd be a place in Minnesota we could bring 'em."

"There's only one way ta find ou'," Pania replied as she took a deep breath and pushed her horse forward. Shani looked back to the small train and gave the signal to move forward. In the lead wagon, Ezekiel Morgan sat with a hooded cloak to cover his features as his trained hands took control of the reins. Isabella sat beside him, almost as if Ezekiel were trying to protect her.

As they pushed forward, Pania began to hum, and then sing, an old gospel hymn, which was used more often as a signal to the stations of the underground railroad that passengers wished to board.

“The Gospel train’s comin’, I hear it just at hand, I hear the car wheel rumblin’, And rollin’ thro’ the land.”

The elven bard’s voice was that of an angel, soft and pure, commanding those in earshot to listen. As Pania sang, other voices added to the song from the wagons as they recognized the lyrics. “Get on board little children, Get on board little children, Get on board little children, There’s room for many more.” The voices grew as they neared the small farm. Shani could see a pair of men begin to approach on horse back and she steeled herself for the worst. All the while the voices continued. “I hear the train a-comin’, She’s comin’ round the curve, She’s loosened all her steam and brakes, And strainin’ ev’ry nerve.”

The riders drew nearer to the wagon train, and Shani seemed to breath a sigh of relief as she saw one of the riders. His skin as dark as midnight, his features like chiseled stone, but his eyes soft and caring. Still the voices continued, and the riders soon joined in. “The fare is cheap an’ all can go, the rich an’ poor’re there, no second class ‘board this train, no diff’rence in the fare.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PP Yer bloody kiddin' me!" Mandrel Alow remarked with a laugh.

"Ye cannu be serious. Arewella 'ung onto every word?"

"No word o' a lie," Pania said with a grin as she crossed her heart. "I think I've achieved the mark o' archivist with tha' wee performance."

"So wha' next," Mandrel said with a sly grin. "Any chance o' more adventures after this one? I mean, there were Pueblo, an' when we 'ad ta go rescue Pylia."

"We?" Pania said with a laugh. "As I recall it were me an' Shani tha' hitched up the 'orses an' went barrelin' off into the great north plains o' Canada."

"Well, aye, tha's true," Mandrel said as he sat back in his chair. "Bu' keep in mind, it were me leadin' a group o' adventurers ta battle the arch wizard." Pania let out a scoff and rolled her eyes. "Alright. Sywyn lead the group. Bu' still, I played me part."

"I've go' an idea," Pania stated with a smirk. "When it come

time ta write tha' adventure, we'll write it t'gether, deal?"

Mandrel grinned as he took a seat by Pania's desk. The elven knightess only cocked her head and gave him an odd look, as if to ask what he was doing. "Wha'?" Mandrel finally said in defense. "Oh, look. I know tha' after tha' Shreveport place ye mentioned fightin' a major evil. Bu' ye never went inta details. Now if ye can amaze Mistress Arewella with yer ability ta tell a tale, then I'm most certain ye can tell me all 'bout wha' 'appened in Indiana."

Monroe County, Indiana, October 12, 1863

Pania Alow set down the pails of feed by the horse trough, satisfied that the horses were tended to. The wagon train had stopped for the night at a small ranch just inside the Monroe County border, owned by Mr. and Mrs Clarence Chesterson, ranchers sympathetic to the plight of the slaves. The trek from Shreveport had not been without its small problems as they had to outrun bounty hunters, soldiers and even lawmen. In many cases, the bounty hunters were after the slaves only to discover the guides were wanted outlaws. Word spread quickly, and the small wagon train never seemed to get a break. Once they had crossed the border into Indiana, however, much of the troubles had seemed to cease.

Pania took a deep breath and stretched her limbs as she finished the menial tasks. It was a long journey, but they managed to make it with all former slaves alive. Fortunately, a good number of the other men connected to the Underground Railroad were as competent with a six gun as she and Shani were, if not more so. Pania smiled as she saw the lanky elf come around to the horse paddock. Shani looked tired, but it was a satisfied tired. They had done some good over the past couple of weeks.

"Well," Pania said in a soft voice as Shani leaned against the wooden fence. "Figure its time we moved on, don' ye think?"

“Yeah, I ‘xpect so,” Shani replied as she took out a cigarillo and lit it. “I figger we done jist as much good as we done hell raisin’.” Shani chuckled a bit as she thought of the past few months. Each day had been an adventure; more than if she’d have gone on her own.

“Ye sound ready ta go ‘ome, Shani,” Pania noted as she joined the elven gunslinger by the fence. Shani nodded wordlessly, in a way confirming that it was time to go. “I think bes’ place fer tha’ is more ‘n likely ta ‘ead north. I’ve ‘eard some thin’s ‘bout Lake o’ the Woods from a few people here an’ there. Mostly tales from the Tribes, bu’ it’s worth a look.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Shani said with a heavy sigh and a nod. “Gonna seem down right borin’ back on Terra-Kal, though. People gots a tendency ‘o bein’ a bit more civilized.”

“It’s also no’ a frontier spirit back ‘ome, ye know,” Pania said with a small chuckle. The bard pushed herself off the fence and motioned for Shani to follow. “C’mon. I understan’ tha’ Mrs. Chesterton ‘as made dumplin’s fer t’night’s supper. She makes the best dumplin’s I ever tasted.”

South of St. Paul, Minnesota, The Mandrake Estate, October 13, 1863

Within the heart of the lavish mansion, the owner toiled away in an ancient looking library. Placed where a wine cellar usually would be located, the walls were lined with bookshelves. Old tomes, some collecting dust, rested as though they awaited their keeper to open them for some purpose. Though, unlike any usual library, these books did not just contain historical knowledge, or mathematical figures. They contained ancient knowledge of long past arcane wisdom. Books of magic.

Even the older gentleman who puttered around in the library did not represent the typical owner of a lavish estate. He was dressed in a

simple robe that swept along the floor as he walked, tied at the waist with a simple gold chord, and a hood that he kept in place when not in the confines of his library. On this day, however, he had pushed it back, allowing his long, raven hair, peppered with grey, to flow freely. His features were those of a man who had lived a life of luxury, but his eyes had seen many strange and wonderful things.

Adding to the strangeness of the man's appearance and the room itself, were the symbols engraved into the stone that made up the floor. Using limestone brought in from Indiana, the room became rather elegant with the ornate floor. To the casual observer, the circular pattern would have been wonderful, but to one more knowledgeable of certain antiquities, they would realize just how sinister those symbols were. Both the man and the room seemed as though they were both time displaced, seeming to look more comfortable in a European castle hundreds of years previous.

As the man carefully read through pages of one particular tome, The heavy oak door was pushed open. The man looked up as a well dressed young man walked through. He looked around the library for a moment, before his gaze settled upon one chest that had been tucked away in a corner, and he sighed openly. The man seemed to understand the gesture and seemed to smirk as he returned to his tome.

"Good evening Patrick," he said in an even, but polite tone. "You may take the chest if you wish. Everything inside belongs to you anyway." Patrick merely stood his ground as he stared at the man with fire in his eyes. "Of course, I don't see why you study such things as you do, it's rather barbaric."

"It's called biology, father," Patrick Mandrake finally spoke up in defiance. "It is the science of the modern world. Not like this..." He waved his arm toward the bookshelves with a look of disgust as he tried to find the appropriate word for the small library. "...archaic ritual that seems to consume you. And you call my study barbaric."

The elder Mandrake glared at his son for his choice of words. “I will not release something that has brought this family the fortune it has worked so hard to acquire. This study will last for centuries long than your precious science.”

“Foolishness,” Patrick spat back. His father’s eyes widened, as though Patrick had just slapped him in the face. It took everything for him to force his rage down.

“Is our...” he finally said in a quiet and even voice. “Is our guest here?”

“The gunslinger?” Patrick replied quickly with a slight look of disgust. “Yes, he arrived this morning. An odd man, I might say, for a gunslinger.”

“That is none of your concern, Patrick,” he replied slowly. “Fetch him and bring him to me. This gunslinger and I have a great deal which we need to discuss.” Patrick said not another word as he pivoted on his heel and walked through the open door. As the younger Mandrake left, the door began to close again as though it had made the decision to do so consciously. It clicked lightly as Patrick’s footsteps echoed in the hallway beyond.

The elder Mandrake merely returned to his tomes, studying intently as he dreamed of the power that would become his. His mind had become very preoccupied with such things over the past several months. Ever since he had first heard of the two elven gunslingers. At first, it was merely a passing interest, but that soon became something more when rumours of their activities in Franklin began to spread. If their power was even a tenth of what had been described, then his plan would be worth the risk.

Monroe County, Indiana, October 14, 1863

Pania finished loading her meager supplies onto her horse as she prepared for another long journey. She looked over to Shani as the

elven gunslinger mounted her own horse. As usual, Shani didn't worry too much about supplies. The only thing she seemed to care about was some dried rations, her weapons and ammo, and the money she had 'collected' over the past year. Admittedly, Pania would have had enjoyed a moment of bliss with Shani, and a smile touched her lips as she contemplated the more than raucous adventure between the sheets they'd have. She pushed that thought away as she mounted her own horse. Shani had become a dear friend, more than just a play time lover would ever be.

"Whaddya figger?" Shani asked as she steered her horse to stand beside Pania's. "Maybe 'bout a month an' we should be near the border?"

"Aye, seem like tha'," Pania replied with a nod as she settled herself into the saddle. "'Course factorin' in stops 'long the way, it may be longer. It'll be cold by the time we reach there. I think it bes' ta stop in Bloomington an' pick up supplies. B'sides, I have a friend tha' runs an establishment there I've no' seen in some time."

Shani looked to Pania and caught that glint in her eye, and she knew all too well what the elven bard was thinking. "Well, while yer rollin' 'round b'twixt the sheets with an' ol' lover," she said with a small smirk. "I kin 'least find m'self a decent poker game goin' on. Ain't had a good one since we set foot in Franklin."

As the two elves did one final check on their mounts, Shani nodded to Pania, then tipped her hat to those who had gathered to send them off. "C'mon. We ain't gonna git very far jist stan'in' here," Shani stated as she urged her mount forward. Pania wasn't far behind. As they rode off to the north, Pania felt as though they had just completed the most exciting of adventures. What little she knew that it was actually just another beginning.

gazed over the pages of the ancient tome. Across the lavish desk sat a quiet and menacing gunslinger. His stetson was pulled down low over his eyes and a scarf covered his nose and mouth completely obscuring his features. The heavy duster jacket he wore had seen better days, and his hands rested gently in his lap, not far from a pair of long barrel pistols that hung with care on his hips. He realized he had need of this man, if his presence did not disturb him just a little. There was something about the mysterious gunslinger, quiet in his demeanor, that set people on edge, and he had sensed it from his son, Patrick, as the young man brought the tall stranger into the inner sanctum of the estate.

Mandrake leaned forward in his chair and carefully flipped through the onion skin pages of the tome, his eyes never directly looking to the gunslinger. “You haven’t given me a name,” he said with some caution. “We have discussed many things this day, but you have failed to provide some identity as to who you are.”

“The Indians say that a name is very sacred,” the gunslinger replied in a slow and gravely voice. He never looked up at all, did not move his hand or his body as he spoke; he didn’t even seem to breath. “Knowing someone’s true name means you can have control over them. But I believe you already know that, Vladimir.”

Mandrake leaned back in his chair and studied the gunslinger carefully. No introductions had been given at all, yet this man knew of his first name without any hesitation. “How did you...”

“You have a reputation, my friend,” the gunslinger said in low hiss. “Do not worry. I have no want to take that which you control, nor use you to my own will. The power you wield is just a tenth of that which I can command. Besides,” he said as he finally raised his head, his eyes poking out from underneath the brim of the stetson, burning red as though filled with fire. “You have offered me something very intriguing.” Vladimir shifted in his chair, perhaps uneasily as the

gunslinger seemed so calm around him. Almost too calm. “For now, you may call me by the name of the place where I first gained my power. You may call me Shilo.”

“Shilo,” Vladimir replied with a quick nod, satisfied that he had some way to identify this man. It might come in useful should he ever be at odds with the dark gunslinger. “I have heard no word of your exploits on the frontier.”

“Reputation,” the gunslinger replied as his gaze shifted toward the stacks of books that sat behind Vladimir. “I have no want for a reputation, as you mortals would see it. Even those that you offer to me, have a reputation. Wild hearts that are filled with power. You have not heard of me, because I do not wish to be known.”

Vladimir saw a chance to change the subject as the gunslinger mentioned the two elves once again. “What do you plan on doing with them once you have captured them? Keep in mind, I am paying you to bring...”

“Do not fret,” the gunslinger interrupted as he raised a hand to silence Vladimir. “You will receive the elves. At least, you will receive the Black Mask.” He chuckled slightly as he spoke the moniker used for Shani Wennemein, and that low laughter was enough to put Vladimir in an even more uneasy state.

“But I am paying you...” Vladimir began to protest, but again the gunslinger waved a dismissive hand to silence his argument.

“Keep your payment,” he stated. “You will have the Black Mask. All I want is the Pale Rider. She will feed me for a long time, and sustain my power. The Black Mask will be more than enough for your purpose, Vladimir. There is nothing more to discuss. Just know that in ten days I will bring you your prize.”

The horses moved slowly as they were guided toward the community. It had just what Shani and Pania would need for a small

lay over before the long trek north through Minnesota. Pania smiled softly as she saw the streets in the distance, the soft light that began to show from the windows of the houses as the sun began to retreat back past the horizon.

Even Shani gave a sigh of relief, as she felt like she'd been riding full tilt since she met up with the elven bard that she was now getting used to having as her partner. Whether it was fate or pure luck, having Pania by her side was a godsend. Granted, she'd probably never admit it openly.

Pania sighed happily as the pair rode their horses into the main street of Bloomington. She nodded to those who walked by and greeted them with the usual pleasantries. Passed by shops that were just beginning to close for the day as their owners were ready to retire for the evening, and off in the distance, Pania could see a lavish looking house, not quite a mansion, but it was expensive looking. The sign read Madam Arella Dorchester's Boarding House For Young Women, but the elven bard knew what really went on behind the closed doors. The red velvet drapes that hung in the windows were more than an indication as to what it was.

"There 'tis," she said with a contented smile. "'Avena seen tha' place in a good long while."

"Oh dang straight," Shani replied, surprising Pania just a bit. Shani was grinning playfully, but not in the direction of the boarding house. Rather in the direction of a bustling saloon. "It has been too long since I set foot in there. Las' time I nearly lost my shirt playin' poker."

"I be' tha' woulda been int'restin'," Pania commented with a coy smile. Shani finally looked over to Pania, slowly putting two and two together as she furrowed her brow. "Jus' imaginin', luv," Pania said somewhat defensively, then chuckled lightly having placed Shani in such an awkward spot yet again. "Truth be tol' I'd 'ang ye 'at down

with the girls at the boardin' 'ouse. Soft bed, wonderful food. An' b'cause ye know me, I'm sure tha' Arella Dorchester can ge' ye a deal."

"I'm gonna go out on a limb an' guess thet y'all hooked up at one time," Shani commented as she steered her horse toward the saloon. "Thet she's the one y'all 're thinkin' 'bout wrestlin' in the sheets." Pania never said a word, but shrugged lightly. Shani huffed as she dismounted, knowing the coy smile on the bard's lips was answer enough for her. "I tell you what, I think 'bout it while I'm winnin' back all the money I lost last time, ya hear?"

Shani tied her horse to the hitching rail as Pania guided her own further down the street. Inside the saloon, the elven gunslinger could hear the jubilant cheers and the clink of poker chips. The tinkling of ivories denoted a smooth piano player was in the saloon that night, keeping the mood festive with a lively piece. Shani opened the gated doors to the establishment and leaned lazily against the door frame as she watched the crowd. Several faces she recognized in this place, and maybe a few might recognize her.

"Well," called out a gruff, but cheerful voice. Shani looked to her left as she saw a large man push himself away from the bar. "Look what the autumn wind blew inta town, boys. Shani, yer a sight fer sore eyes."

"Slow Hand Johnson," she drawled with a smile. "Been a while since I seen you. Y'all been keepin' y'self pretty low key, I hear."

"Ya know the way it is Shan," Johnson replied with a boisterous laugh. "Ain't 'xactly like you. I hear the army were chasin' yer tail. What you doin' in town?"

"Jist passin' through on the way north, figger I stop fer a bit," she replied as a smile formed on her face. "In partic'lar, win back thet money ya done won from me 'bout a year back. So, I'd say if there's a game, deal me in boys."

Madam Arella Dorchester's Boarding House For Young Women was at its usual relaxing time of the day. Just before some of the more ravenous clientele would come calling. All the girls knew who was here for business, and who was just coming to call for a visit. Though there was the odd customer that would stop by, unannounced that one of the women knew quite well.

Such was the case this evening.

Several of the young women stopped their playful discussion as the door opened up without the warning of a knock. They watched as the figure make her entrance, marveling at the finely crafted European style clothing she wore. The women continued to watched as she stopped in the entryway to the living room, delicate hands landing with ease on sensuously curved hips, accented more by her thigh high boots. They gazed at the ornate rapier, held fast in its sheath at her hip. Then came the captivating part as the woman looked up and her eyes seemed to dance from person to person in the room.

Pania Alow always knew how to make an entrance.

"Ifn ye fine ladies pardon the int'rruption," she said in a sultry voice. "Bu' would Madam Arella be 'bout."

"I thought I recognized that swagger when you walked through the door," a woman called out with a smile, her voice betraying her southern upbringing. Pania turned just slightly, as her eyes seemed to sparkle with the appearance of Arella. "Landsakes alive, girl," Arella said as she approached the elven bard and gave her a warm hug. "It has been too long."

"It 'as indeed," Pania replied as she returned the hug. She stepped back just a bit, her eyes appraising the figure of Arella before her. A full figured woman, with creamy white skin, long chestnut brown hair kept in curls that seemed to dance on her shoulders. A bodice that accented all the right places only added to the floor length dress that

this stately woman wore. “Ye are a sight fer sore eyes, luv,” Pania cooed.

“So, might I inquire as to why you have stopped by?” Arella asked with a coy, but knowing smile. Pania took a deep breath and seemed to hum as she nodded her head. It had indeed been too long.

The horse’s heavy hooves seemed to shatter the earth as they landed. It stopped by command of its rider, the mysterious gunslinger. Just like the rider, the horse was also a mystery. Draped in tattered leathers that seemed to hide it’s true form, and eyes that seemed to burn with a fire inside of them. All around the horse and rider everything had died. Plants and animals alike merely fell to their death in the wake of this black steed. Even the sky seemed to become gray, blotting out the stars where this rider traveled.

Death always lay in their wake. It was the trademark of this mysterious gunslinger.

The rider looked out toward the horizon and a sneer, if it could be called that, formed on his blackened and broken face. His quarry was resting, which meant he had time. Neither one of them would know what was coming.

So much the better. It would make the hunt that much sweeter.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The clink of poker chips only added to the already festive feel of the small saloon. Shani was up in the game, as she'd won a good chunk of her money back that she had lost to Slow Hand over a year ago. As the game went on, she and Slow Hand would share stories, jokes and generally laugh about the strangest of things. A few of the other card players joined in with the uplifting talk as well, making the game much more friendly.

“You remember when we hit that small wagon train, just outside o’ Montgomery?” Slow Hand asked as he nudged Shani’s arm. “An’ that woman in the rich lookin’ wagon?”

“Oh ya durn right, yeah,” Shani replied with a grin. “She were jist gittin’ all hysterical an’ screamin’ an’ whatnot.” She chuckled as she tossed back her shot of whiskey and then tossed in her bid for the round as she looked to the other card players. “We never had no intention o’ shootin’ anyone, but the way them people went on, ya think we was cold blooded murderers.”

“An’ then Shan just look at the young filly kickin’ up a fuss an’ she just shouts ‘keep yer bodice on, woman. We ain’t after yer jewels!’” Slow Hand described with a wide grin as he checked his cards and tossed in his bid.

“So why you two split up?” one of the card players asked with genuine interest. “Ya had such a successful run t’gether, but ya just split?”

“Well, we knew there’d be a time come when we’d haveta,” Slow Hand explained. “Law was gettin’ tight, an’ especially with the war we needed ta lay low. I ended up workin’ for some people in the Railroad an’ went honest. I figger there’s a few lawmen that won’t gimme the benefit, though.”

“Yeah, we knew there’d be them thet’ll still try an’ come after us,” Shani added as she checked her cards yet again. “This pot’s too rich fer me, I fold on this one.” She tossed her cards aside and grabbed the whiskey bottle to refresh her drink. One of the other players tossed his cards aside angrily.

“Ya pretty much cleaned us all out,” he said with a slight sneer. “But now ya foldin’. Ain’t gonna gimme a chance ta win back what’s mine?”

“Clem,” Slow Hand said with an air of caution. “Keep yer shirt on. This here’s just a friendly game an’ we don’t want trouble. We each lost our share. An’ it ain’t like Shan’s been cheatin’.” Slow Hand took the bottle and poured himself a drink before he added, “Sides, Clem, if she were cheatin’, I’d know.” He looked to Shani with a smirk. “She gets this look in ‘er eye.” Slow Hand lifted the shot glass to his lips and stopped as he saw Clem’s hand move toward his gun belt. “You don’t wanna do that, Clem,” he warned as he leaned back in his chair. His thick, meaty hand rested on the bone handle butt of his pistol as he stared down Clem. For a while, the two gunfighters just glared at each other before Clem realized there were others at the

table. Shani and five other card players had leaned back in their chairs, hands resting on pistols. Even if Clem got a shot off on Shani, at least five more would hit him.

Clem huffed with anger as he stormed out of the saloon, slamming the doors wildly. The card players listened as they heard his spurs jingle loudly down the boardwalk until fading out, and seemed to relax a bit as they went back to their game.

“You be careful with him, Shan,” Slow Hand warned Shani as he leaned across the table and pulled in his winnings. “Clem’s got a jealous streak. I figger he’s gonna call you out b’fore too long.”

“Well,” Shani said with a resigned sigh as she picked up the cards and began shuffling. “It ain’t like I never seen a buncha hot pucky like thet b’fore. When the time come, I’ll deal with ‘im. Let’s jist hope thet Clem kin see reason an’ leave well ‘nough ‘lone.”

Pania smiled as she lay next to Arella, playfully twirling a lock of her hair around her finger. Arella’s hand gently caressed the smooth skin of the elven bard’s arm as she looked into Pania’s eyes and she sighed softly. “Been a long time, Pania,” Arella finally said for the first time since greeting the curvy elf into her establishment. “Almost a year.”

“I’ve ‘ad me travels,” Pania replied, her voice never losing it’s sulty sound. “I guess ye could say I went on an adventure. ‘Ooked up with Shani Wennemein.” She smiled slyly as her eyes seemed to twinkle just a bit. “Ye know, the Black Mask.”

“You hooked up with Black Mask?” Arella said with a soft chuckle. “I never saw you as the gunslinger type, Pania. What’s she like? You and Black Mask... You two never...”

“Oh no!” Pania replied with a giggle. “No’ fer lack o’ tryin’, mind ye. Shani’s no’ tha’ type. Bu’ she’s an ‘onourable person. As far as fightin’ go, I’d no’ ‘ave no one else ta back me up.” She moved

closer to Arella, wrapping her arm around her waist as her fingers gently caressed Arella's backside.

A shudder went through Arella and she closed her eyes as a soft moan escaped her lips. "You keep doin' that an' I would have to say that you may be in trouble."

"Trouble?" Pania replied with an impish grin. "I dunna 'ear ye complaining 'tall, luv."

"No complaints, love," Arella stated as her hands gently cupped Pania's cheeks. She leaned in closer to the elven bard, and gently pressed her lips to Pania's. It was going to be a good night after all.

The door to the post master's home slammed open with violence. A man sitting by a fireplace set down his pipe and looked up with a scowl as he reached for a pistol that lay on a side table. As he saw the man who entered his home he sighed and shook his head with frustration. "What now, Clem?" he announced with some annoyance.

"I hear word there's a group o' U.S. Army not far from here," Clem said with a touch of ire in his voice. "You get a word out on the telegraph, Black Mask is here in town."

The post master sat motionless for a moment as he tried to comprehend what Clem had just informed him. One of the most wanted gunslingers in the United States was here in Bloomington. He shook his head as he snapped back to reality and rose from his chair. "I know there's a group in Bedford. They came in from Washington not that long ago." He lead Clem to the back room of the house where his telegraph machine was, and sat down at the desk, pencil and paper in hand. "Lead by a veteran captain. I met him three years ago, good man too."

"Well, you get this captain here, an' I'll point him in the direction o' Black Mask," Clem stated as the wild look in his eyes became even worse.

“It’ll take a couple of days,” the post master informed Clem. “Captain Samuel Williams only arrived last week, and he’ll more than like want fresh horses and train his new rotation. I’ll get word out, but don’t expect them here for at least fer a few hours, maybe even ‘til tomorrow mornin’.”

“You just get word out,” Clem replied as he looked back to the front door of the house. His eyes held that wild look of a man scheming. “If it come ta it, I can keep Black Mask busy. An’ if it so happen that I kill ‘er, so much the better. Posters say dead ‘r ‘live anyway.”

Bedford, Indiana, October 14, 1863

A sharply dressed junior officer walked with purpose down the hallway of the bunkhouse. Most of the men were already asleep, but this man knew that their commanding officer was still very much awake, and the message he had received by telegraph would be welcome indeed. He stopped before the door to the captain’s quarters, taking a moment to straighten his neatly pressed blue uniform. Light was spilling out underneath the door, an indication that Captain Samuel Williams was still awake. The junior officer knocked lightly on the door and awaited the reply from inside.

“Come in,” Williams muffled reply came quickly. The junior officer opened the door quietly, and stepped inside the room. Williams looked up from the work he had laid out on his desk, which included maps, transcripts and a large journal. “What is it Beaumont?” he asked as he removed the pipe from his mouth.

“Wire just came in from Bloomington, Sir,” he explained quickly as he crossed the room to stand in front of the desk across from Williams. “Seems that Black Mask has been seen at a saloon there.” He handed Williams the transcript of the telegraph message and stood at ease as he awaited further orders from the Captain.

Williams looked over the transcript as he furrowed his brow.

The junior officer knew that Williams had already formulated a plan as the Captain laid the paper down on his desk and sat back in his chair. “Let the men sleep for now. Wake them at Oh Six Hundred hours. I’ll assume that Pale Rider is with her in Bloomington as well. Those two have been riding together since Harrisburg, so I don’t doubt they’ll be in Bloomington together.” The junior officer snapped a stiff salute and turned on his heel as he exited the room.

Williams took a puff from his pipe as he contemplated the news. Strange how fate seemed to draw these two gunslingers together, and how fate always placed them so close at his fingertips. Perhaps this time, he’d capture them in Bloomington.

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 thet 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."

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 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."

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 got 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.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Miss Dorchester,” one of the girls said in a hurried voice as she raced down the steps. “There’s gunslingers in the streets. Four ‘r five of ‘em.”

“I know, Charlotte,” Arella explained with a nod as she peeked out the window of the front room, pushing the silken curtain back just a bit. “But one o’ them gun fighters isn’t a man. That’s Black Mask out there.” Charlotte had been joined by a few of the other girls as they too peeked out the window. With the call of the familiar name, the girls let out a gasp. Black Mask’s notoriety had gone a long way.

“She’s no’ ‘lone,” Pania said behind them. She was busily loading her Smith and Wessons, slamming the chamber shut and twirling it expertly before holstering the pistol. The girls looked back for a moment then to Arella. The house mistress had mixed feelings with what was about to transpire. Pania could sense this and a small smile crept over her features. “No worries, luv. No’ like we cannu deal with the likes o’ Clem an’ ‘is boys.”

“Just don’t kill ‘em, okay,” Arella replied with a frustrated breath. “They maybe no accounts, but they ain’t bad men.” Pania nodded carefully, making sure her eyes met Arella’s, then moved quickly to the front door.

As she reached out to open the door, Charlotte ran up to her with a pleading look in her eyes. “Clem’s all kinds of stupid, but he’s a good person deep down. Don’t hurt ‘im. Too bad.”

“So Arella’s said, Pania replied with a nod and a soft smile. “I’ll make certain no’ ta ‘urt ‘im too bad.” She turned the door knob and opened the door loudly so all in the street could hear. Heads turned as her boots hit the wooden boardwalk. They watched as she walked with confidence toward Shani. The elven gunslinger only shrugged her shoulders as she saw the bard.

“‘Bout time y’all got out here,” Shani said in a low voice as Pania stopped beside her. “An’ here I thought it were gonna be borin’.” Shani looked over Pania for just a moment before she smirked. “Were she good?”

“I guess ye’d ‘aveta experience wha’ tha’ might be like sometime,” Pania replied with a coy smile as Shani narrowed her eyes slightly. Pania went over one last check of her weapons before her tone became a touch more serious. “Just dunna kill ‘em,” Pania said quietly as she finally took her stance beside Shani.

“I figgered as much,” Shani replied with a nod. “These boys don’t look like much. They talk, but they ain’t got the balls when push come ta shove.”

The night air grew quiet even with the gathering of spectators. It was rare that Bloomington had a midnight gunfight in the middle of the streets, let alone any time of day. It was all new and exciting, yet at the same time frightening. In this case, two of the gunslingers were very well known. Shani and Pania stared down at Clem and his boys. The Shani took into account the shots that would wound the four with

ease. Make it fast, let them cry in the dirt, and it would be over.

Hands hung carefully over their holstered six shooters. Every so often, a gunslinger would flex his or her fingers, always eyes watching the opponents. Clem began to crouch, his hand twitching just slightly; he was partially scared, partially excited. Who wouldn't be when you're faced with two of the most notorious gunslingers in the Union and the Confederacy. He sneered as he tried to look intimidating to the two elves, but just like in the poker game, neither Shani nor Pania gave a hint as to their demeanor. This seeming lack of emotion, this kind of poker face was the kind of stuff that made Clem incensed with rage. It would only cost him.

But not from the barrel of a gun.

Clem's eyes grew wide as he felt the blade escape from his chest. He hadn't heard the footsteps behind him. He screamed out as he felt his very life force being drawn from his lips. The spectators drew back as Clem's body began to decay and wither before their very eyes. Within seconds it was over. Clem's buddies drew back, looking to the new player who had arrived. The tall figure tossed Clem's body aside with ease. The black cloak seemed to be alive, the figure's face masked by a long scarf, his stetson pulled down so even his red eyes were almost obscured. He held the long blade beside him as he stretched out a boney finger toward Shani and Pania.

"There is a bounty," he said in voice hollow of emotion and devoid of life. "And I intend to collect."

Pania blinked hard as her hand reached for her Smith and Wesson. It was impossible, there was no record of such a creature on this planet before. Yet here he stood. "D'ye realize wha' tha' is, Shani?" Pania asked as her eyes widened. She wanted to run, but she thought of those that lined the street. This monster would kill them all.

"Yeah, I know what thet sonofabitch is," Shani replied as she

pulled out both long barrel Colts, tightening her grip on them as she glared at the tall dark figure. “It’s a gawl durned lich!”

There was a stunned hush that filled the street as the gathered crowd stared in disbelief at the corpse that had only moments before been Clem. The tall, dark figure had taken him down so easily, without any effort whatsoever. At the other end of the street, the two elven gunslingers knew all too well what this creature was, and if he wasn’t stopped then all of Bloomington could be destroyed. Shani and Pania quickly drew their weapons and began firing. Clem’s buddies scurried away like rats as they realized this was more than they had bargained for.

Shani heard the loud boom of a twelve gauge shot gun and looked to her left in time to see Slow Hand reloading the hand held cannon. “Slow Hand! What the hell ya doin’? Git as many people outta here as ya kin!”

“Bar keep can do that, Shan,” he replied with a sneer as his gaze landed upon the dark figure. “If this here thing’s gonna chase us down an’ kill us, then I ain’t runnin’. I’m goin’ down fightin’.” As though he wished to emphasize his statement, he let loose with another volley toward the dark figure.

Pania fired off her Smith and Wessons, wincing slightly at the sound of the twelve gauge. Her attention was diverted as she heard another gun firing off, but knew it was neither Shani’s nor her friend Slow Hand’s weapons. She turned to her right and took a deep breath as Arella held the Winchester rifle steady in her hands. “Slow Hand’s right, Pania. I ain’t one ta back down from a fight. Especially when I got so much to lose.” The elven bard merely nodded and fired again at the figure. The bullets only seemed to slow him down.

“Reloadin’!” Shani called out as she dumped the empty cartridges from her long barrels. The four had managed to create a

small line and backed up as the figure advanced. Behind the four was chaos as townsfolk ran for their lives. The figure kept advancing upon the four, laughing maniacally as he did. With a calm and boney hand, he pointed at the fallen corpse of Clem. The dusty bag of bones began to move, rising to it's feet and shambling after it's new master.

“CLEM!” came a shout from across the street. Pania looked over in time to see Charlotte racing toward the once living cowboy.

“Charlotte!” Pania shouted out with a voice filled with desperation and warning. “Luv! No! Do...” Her words fell short as the walking undead grabbed Charlotte with an unearthly strength as it's arms wrapped around her and lifted her up, snapping her spine. Lifelessly, she fell to the ground. Pania screamed out in anger and fired again until her pistols were emptied.

“Girly girl!” Shani shouted out as she nudged Pania's shoulder. “Keep yer whits 'bout ya, girl. This ain't time fer revenge.”

Pania snapped back to reality and shook her head as though she were shaking loose cobwebs from her mind. A cry from Arella made the transition to the here and now complete. Pania watched as the fresh body of Charlotte lurched to it's feet, shambling behind the undead Clem and their dark figured master. “Arella! She's gone! She's dead! There's nuthin' we can do!” Arella's eyes welled up, and then she grimaced with anger as her delicate hands gripped the rifle.

Pania finally holstered her pistols and began conjuring. Two well placed fireballs made a direct hit, engulfing the two shambling corpses in flames. Only the lich remained, as he seemed to shrug off the magical flame with a raspy laugh from his decayed lips. The tall figure stopped to observe the now burning corpses and began to smile. He looked back toward the four, in particular toward Pania. “I knew you were filled with power. I shall enjoy taking it from you.”

“No' without a fight,” Pania shouted back. The chaos that was behind them was gone as the crowd had long since left, leaving

only an eerie silence in this newly created ghost town. Only the lich and the four gun fighters graced the street with their presence. They continued to fire upon the lich as he advanced, however, the bullets merely ripped through the fabric of his tattered cloak.

Shani saw it first, as her sharp eyes searched wildly for some way to win. As the lich's cloak billowed out, she caught sight of a glowing, red crystal that hung in a necklace around the figure's neck. "Girly girl," she said with gritted teeth. "Ya listen up, 'cause I got us a gods danged plan!"

The four slowly retreated down the street, firing at intervals as the lich advanced on them. Shani explained her plan as they moved. "Girly Girl, gonna need alla yer magic fer this one," she stated with a great deal of urgency. "An' I hate ta say it, but yer probably gonna have ta git in toe ta toe with the bastard."

"I figured as much," Pania replied with some reservation as she fired off her Smith and Wessons. "Ye've seen somethin' in tha' lich," she stated with a knowing smile as she quickly emptied the pistols chambers and reloaded. She reholstered the pistol in her right hand and drew her rapier. "Somethin' tha'll let us destroy 'im with ease."

"Ya know the secret ta a lich," Shani stated almost matter of factly as she fired again. "They need some object ta keep 'em 'live. They's phylact'ry. Usually they keep it hid."

"Ye've go' a lot o' knowledge fer thin's such as this, Shani," Pania replied with a sly smile. She muttered an incantation and touched the blade of her rapier, and it became alive with flame. "I wager ye shoulda been a bard."

Shani smirked and scoffed a laugh as she continued her plan. "Miss Arella. Slow Hand. Gonna need you two on the sides o' the streets. Jist keep pumpin' bullets an' buckshot inta him. With Pania in his face, I'll try an' git off the right shot. An' Girly Girl, make sure ta

dance ‘round him ‘nough thet I kin git a clear shot.”

“Dancing shouldn’t be too hard for Pania,” Arella said with a slight smirk. Shani just rolled her eyes and sighed. At least the attempt at levity in this situation was not unwelcome. Arella moved to her position on the side of the street as Slow Hand moved to his. Each of them took a shot at the creature as it advanced. Shani moved from side to side taking a shot making sure she could see around Pania as the elven bard advanced, rapier tightly gripped in one hand, Smith and Wesson in the other.

The lich seemed to smile as Pania stepped closer to him. His voice was a low rumble as he spoke. “This is so much better. Just give yourself to me. You will be delaying the inevitable if you continue to resist.”

Pania stopped in her tracks as she looked up to the lich’s face. “Were ye as stupid in life as ye are in death?” The quick comment seemed to take the lich off guard as he stopped for just a moment. He moved his head as though he was about to speak once again, but was met with bullets and buckshot. Pania trusted the aim of her friends as she grinned. The lich was pushed back by the violent volley, and thrust her rapier forward. She lunged and parried as the lich responded with an attack of her own, slashed with the blade of her rapier as she caught tattered garments and only managed to tatter them even more. Each attack revealed more and more of the sickly, skeletal form of the lich.

Pania danced to one side as the creature swung his longsword. Slow Hand fired off a shot with both barrels of his shotgun. He was close to the lich, and the flying buckshot tattered the lich’s garments even more, but it also did one thing. It gave Shani a clear shot.

“Git yer ass down!” she shouted to Pania as Shani saw the glowing crystal that hung in a simple chain around the lich’s neck. Pania did as she was instructed, taking one last swipe with her blade as she hit the dirt. The lich was looking right at Shani, glaring at her, or

so it seemed.

He realized all too late that he had been drawn into a trap. As Shani's long barrels sounded out their reports, Shilo looked down to see the crystal revealed to the world. The one object that kept him alive in this world. Or as alive as a lich could be.

The first bullet slammed into his chest, doing little more than sting. The first was quickly followed by a second, then a third. Shilo's eyes grew wide as the world seemed to slow down. The fourth bullet was heading straight for the crystal. The point of the bullet struck the edge of the crystal, sending a wave of pain through Shilo's being. Shards of the crystal flew into the air in haphazard directions. The fifth and sixth bullets finished the job.

Shilo clutched his chest, trying in vain to hold the shattered crystal together, as he screamed in agony and rage. The shards seemed to mock him as they fell helplessly to the ground. The air rushed around him as the wind seemed to pick up. Shani and Pania could feel it, as did Slow Hand and Arella. Shani reached Pania's side and dragged her away from the lich, now screaming a horrifying howl. Slow Hand and Arella had moved to join the two elves as they sheltered themselves behind a horse trough, and all four watched as the lich lurched from side to side, his body disintegrating into nothing.

Finally, his form turned to ash as though he were never a threat to begin with. The wind seemed to hold final judgement, as it swept it away the remains of the lich harmlessly. The street had become quiet once again. Shani looked over to Pania, then to Slow Hand and Arella. A snort of a laugh escaped her lips as the tension from the past few minutes seemed to ease considerably. "Well dang it all anyways, I think I need a drink after that."

Arella closed the door to the boarding house and looked into the living room. Her girls were huddled together, some sobbing lightly

as they were still reliving the horror they had seen. She looked to the large bay windows and watched through the lace drapes as Shani and Pania cleaned up the street. Poor Clem. Poor Charlotte. There was nothing they could do, it had happened all so fast. Arella merely sighed heavily as she remembered what Pania had said. Mourn for them, but it was fortunate more weren't taken by the lich.

The door opened to the boarding house once more, and Arella turned to meet Slow Hand. He politely removed his hat and nodded to her before speaking. A polite gesture from a man many had seen as a rough and tumble gunslinger. "Anythin' ya need, Ma'am?" he asked in a low voice.

Arella shook her head and smiled in reply to his offer. "No Wilbur," she said in a soft voice, using the man's real name. "I believe we'll manage."

"Alright then," he said with a smile as he slipped the stetson back onto his head and bowed slightly. He said not another word as he quietly opened the front door and slipped out, moving across the street to the tavern to ensure nothing was amiss there.

Arella helped the girls calm down as she fussed over their safety. Slowly, they would return to something akin to a normal life. But how could anything be normal after having seen what horrors there were in the world. Arella pushed those thoughts back as she heard the front door open and close, and two sets of spurs jingled as they announced the arrival of the elven gunslingers.

"Ev'rythin' alright in here?" Shani asked with a sigh as she looked over each person.

"We'll manage," Arella replied as she stepped forward and hugged Pania. "It could have been much worse. But you warned me when we first met, Pania, that things would change. When I found out you weren't... human. That things would be different. And they have been." She moved back just a bit, but did not release Pania from her

arms. "But with the bad there's been an awful lot of good."

Pania smiled and embraced Arella in a tender hug, closing her eyes as she seemed to fall into the comfort that was her lover. She opened her eyes and caught sight of Shani, watching them for a moment. The elven gunslinger furrowed her brow and sighed as she finally rolled her eyes. "Y'all kin git thet thought outta yer head."

"Wha' thought?" Pania replied with a coy smile.

"You know what I'm talkin' 'bout."

"Ye should 'ear 'bout the thin's we've done t'gether," Pania cooed as she turned her attention back to Arella. The boarding house mistress returned the look with one similar, and took Pania by her arm and began to guide her to the steps. "I'll tell ye all 'bout our adventures if ye wish," Pania commented as the pair mounted the stairs.

"Well surprise, surprise," Shani called out as she watched the pair climb the stairs. "Thet all ya think 'bout is sex, sex, sex. Gawl durned, Girly Girl, there's more ta life then jist--" she stopped herself suddenly as she caught a slight movement from the corner of her eye. A figure leaned lightly against the door frame that lead into the pantry. Shani arched an eyebrow as she studied this rather handsome individual for a moment. He had a lithe frame, and dusty blond hair. He was young, but not too young, as he carried himself with an air of sophistication. Shani muttered more to herself than anyone else in the room. "Well dang. I never knew y'all had boy whores here too." She looked over the young man and grinned. It was going to be a good night.

Shani sauntered out of the room as the first rays of dawn began streaming in through the windows. She grinned like the cat who ate the canary as she ran a hand through her messy hair, and paused a moment before she closed the door to the bedroom. "You have a good nap now boy, ya hear," she said with a sly grin as she looked back to

the young man who lay sprawled on the bed. She shut the door quietly and began down the hallway.

A few of the doors opened and the girls of the boarding house peeked out as they watched Shani, giggling quietly. Pania too had opened the door to Miss Arella's room and leaned on the door frame, a knowing smirk on her face. "Did ye 'ave fun?" she asked with arms crossed as she studied the elven gunslinger, seeing her in a new light. Shani noted that Pania had already dressed and seemed ready to ride.

"Rode hard," she replied with a sly smile and a deep sigh. "Put 'way wet." She nodded and turned to look toward the other rooms as the girls yet again let out muffled giggles. Shani let them have their fun and turned back to her partner. "Didn't git no complaints."

"I should say no'," Pania replied with a giggle as the pair began walking down the stairs into the main room of the boarding house. The smell of fresh bacon and eggs, hash browns and coffee wafted its way throughout the house, a sign that Arella was already up as well. "I dare say they may 'ave 'eard ye in Shreveport, wha' with the way ye carried on."

Shani gave Pania a slight look of disapproval, but pushed the thoughts aside. She needed to have fun that didn't involve gambling, drinking and shooting. "It'll be nice ta have a decent breakfast thet ain't somethin' we shot, 'r somethin' at a tavern," she commented, changing the subject quickly.

"Arella's cookin' is some o' the best I've 'ad in this world," Pania replied, trying to sell Shani on the idea. "'Sides, it'll give us a chance to take a look at these," she said as she took out two envelopes. She handed them both to Shani who opened each one and began reading the enclosed letters. Pania noted the elven gunslinger's brow furrowing in frustration and anger. "Those were the only thin's left from our lich after 'e evaporated inta dust. Seems tha' someone contracted 'im out. Name's on tha' seal on the envelope." Pania pointed to an ornate seal

of wax that had held the envelope closed. It read simply, Mandrake.

“So wha’s the plan?” Shani said as she handed the envelopes back to Pania.

“First, breakfast,” she said as she moved into the kitchen. She gave Arella a warm smile and hugged her tight, ending it with a quick kiss good morning. “Then we should more ‘n likely ‘ead north ta Minnesota. I did some diggin’ an’ found out tha’ this Mandrake fella ‘as a mansion near St. Paul.”

“You been busy,” Shani noted as she took her seat at the table.

“I ‘ad me fun already,” Pania said with a grin. ““Sides, I didna want ta interrupt ye.”

Shani rolled her eyes and shook her head as a plate of food was placed before her. “Y’all ain’t gonna let me live this one down, are ya.”

On the streets of Bloomington, life was returning to normal. The townsfolk gathered talking about the night’s events, some in shock, some as though it were a grand adventure. Others passed it off as an excuse for some juvenile raucus. But still they talked about it. Slow Hand Johnson sat in the saloon and just listened, a smile on his face, as he knew none of their speculation came close to what had happened the previous night.

He finished his breakfast and tossed down some cash on the table, collected his things and rose to greet the morning light. A few people had begun to make their way onto the streets, as businesses began to open for the day. Wagons began rolling in and Slow Hand would stop as he walked, letting them pass by. He saw riders down the street, and felt a twinge go through him. “Those’re U.S. Army,” he muttered to himself as he peered down the street.

Riding tall in the saddle of the lead horse was their captain. A well known man by many. In Slow Hand’s case, known for the

bounty this captain chased. He changed his direction and began walking toward the boarding house. He had to warn Shani and Pania that Captain Williams was in town.

Shani returned to the main living room of the bordello after freshening up. She'd dressed and made sure that her gear was all in one piece, all the while trying to be quiet while the two young men were in a deep sleep. She tied her hair back in a pony tail and slid the stetson onto her head as she cleared her throat. Pania and Arella were sitting on the couch, not actually doing anything, but seemingly lost in each others eyes. "We still got us some supplies ta git," Shani reminded Pania.

"I've taken care of some of that," Arella announced as she looked up from her dream like state. "Some rations have been packed for both o' you. Plus any extra ammunition that ya need." She looked back to Pania with a sultry smile. "Gotta keep those pistols ready, honey."

Shani rolled her eyes and sighed. She'd let Pania have her fun, at least for a little while. Then it was back on the trail to find this Mandrake. Her thoughts of the coming ride were broken, as the door opened quickly. Slow Hand walked in, urgency etched into his features. "Slow Hand, what the hell's matter?" Shani asked quickly, knowing the usual pleasantries of the morning would be gone with his look.

"You two gotta get on the road again," he announced without hesitation. "Now. Captain Williams an' his men just showed up in town. I figgered it'd take 'em a helluva lot longer ta get here." He looked over to Shani with a smile. "Wanted ta win my money back. Guess I'll have ta wait."

"No rest fer the wicked," Pania remarked as she slipped into her long coat and dropped the duster hat on her head. "C'mon. We

best make tracks now.” The pair of elves quietly exited the bordello, their horses waiting for them on the street. At least Slow Hand had made sure to get them ready before they had to run.

Shani took quick glances across the street as they approached the horses, noting the horsemen in uniform were busy around the tavern. “Maybe we kin catch a break,” Shani whispered.

Across the street, the men tended to their horses in a casual manner. Private Johnson was hitching up his horse as he managed to look up toward the bordello. He froze for a moment as he saw the two elves. For a brief moment, he almost said nothing. He remembered what these two had done in the South. Acting as sheriff and deputy to help clean up a small town. But they had their orders. He had no choice.

“Sir...” he said in a whisper like voice, then bolstered his courage and forced his voice to rise in timber. “Captain Williams!” Williams, along with the other soldiers, looked toward Private Johnson. Captain Williams gaze continued as he looked across the street.

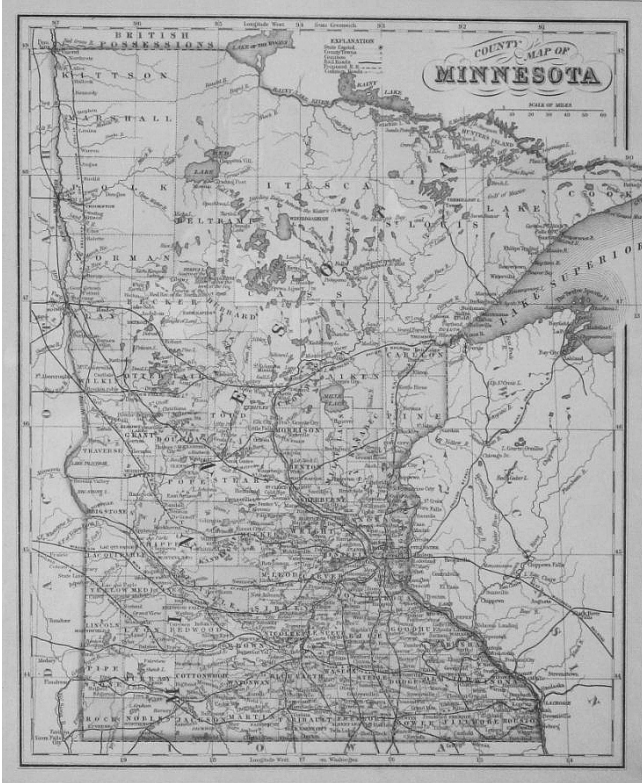
Shani and Pania nearly froze in place. Pania was already in the saddle, Shani had one foot in her stirrup. “Well ain’t this jist a wonnerful predicament,” she muttered to herself.

A few seconds seemed to draw out like hours as the staring contest continued. Captain Williams was the first to break it. “Men, mount now!” he shouted, which seemed to snap Shani out of her trance. The lithe elf jumped into the saddle and coaxed Gypsum into a gallop. They’d have a head start as the soldiers still had to unhitch their horses. But here they were once again; on the run.

“Jus’ like ol’ times, aye,” Pania said with a grin as she tried to bring some levity to the situation.

Shani gave Pania a quick look and spurred her horse forward. “Yeah, ‘cept I’m gittin’ kinda used ta ridin’ at a leisurely pace.” She

took a quick look behind them as they raced down the main street of Bloomington. They had a long ride ahead of them, and having the pursuit would not be helpful. “Let’s jist git our asses ta St. Paul an’ figger this out. ‘Cause ifn we don’t, no tellin’ what this bastard’ll do.”



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Brockton, Terra-Kal, present day

Pania looked up as she heard a loud crash outside. She furrowed her brow and stared at her front door for a moment, finally moving when she heard an excited muttering. Pania chuckled and shook her head as she realized just who it could be. Unia Wennemein, mother of Sywyn and Shani and head mistress of the Arcanum Bridge Academy of the Magical Arts. A brilliant wizardess, but often times slightly clumsy.

“A good evenin’ ta ye, Mistress Wennemein,” Pania said with a smile as she opened the door. Unia looked up from her embarrassing position on the floor of Pania’s porch, gingerly picking up yellowed etching plates. Similar to a photograph on Earth, these etching plates lasted a good while longer, as the image was imprinted onto elven steel. A wonderous invention crafted by the technically inclined elves over one hundred years before.

“Oh, Pania,” Unia said with a start as she collected the plates

and rose to her feet with Pania's help. No doubt she had caught her robes on one of the steps leading up to Pania's front door. "And please. Call me Unia. Mistress is so... only my students call me that."

Pania lead Unia into the house as the older elf caught her breath. Once inside, Pania offered her some tea and lead her into the main sitting room. "I'm rather s'prised ta see ye, Unia," Pania said with a smile. "No' tha' I dunna mind, ta be 'onest."

"I was talking with Sywyn and Mandrel," Unia stated matter of factly. "They have grown much closer since Waien passed away." Both paused for a moment, as if to let a moment of silence pass between them at the mention of Waien. Waien Argith was one of the three young elves that included Mandrel and Sywyn. So different were their choices in vocation, but truer friends there never were. "But Mandrel mentioned you were writing a book. About the adventures you and Shani had all those years ago."

"Aye, Unia," Pania replied as she brought a tea service into the sitting room. She poured tea as she sat down, offering one to Unia. "I though' it best ta try an' write it down, jus' so the mem'ry stayed alive."

"Well, I thought perhaps it might be nice to bring these by," she said mentioning the etching plates. "They were taken around that time, and I know that you and Pylia are such good artists, perhaps you could use them in the book."

"They could indeed," Pania replied with a smile as she sipped her tea. She watched as Unia went through each etching, explaining the scene in great detail, even so far as to explain events that surrounded the scene. Unia stopped suddenly as a small object caught her eye.

It was an ornate broach. Golden leaves that gently held a scarlet rose. The object lay as part of a centre piece on Pania's end table, and though it had faded with time, it still held it's regal look. "Pania, I had no idea that you had been given service to enter the Order of the

Scarlet Rose fully.”

“Tha’s no’ mine,” Pania stated as she glanced to the broach. She looked to Unia for a moment, the older elf’s brow furrowed slightly, and felt that more needed to be said. “There is a story b’hind tha’. Would ye like ta ‘ear it?”

Somewhere near Reading, Pennsylvania, Early October 1863

The moon was high as five figures dragged a woman, whimpering and struggling weakly against their grip. They worked quickly, binding the woman to a fallen support column, and then turning their attention to a dark pit. As they feverishly worked, the young woman could only look on in horror as they dragged up a disfigured obelisk from the pit, the figure of a twisted humanoid shape chained to the structure. She could only watch as the five began some sort of ritual, as they worked feverishly to awaken the figure. Fear crept further and further through her veins as the twisted figure began to move, the woman could see the creature’s fangs, and feel it’s hollow eyes land upon her.

“R-release me!” it seemed to hiss as it’s attention was completely focused on the woman before it. “Must... feed!” The five pale figures worked quickly as they unshackled the creature from its prison, with each second they grew closer the creature growled out a desire for sustenance.

When the final chain fell, the creature lumbered forward; the woman tried to scream, call out for help, anything that would summon a quick rescue, but none would come. The creature sank it’s fangs into her neck and began to drink deeply from her. As the life ebbed from the young woman, the creature began to take on a new appearance, as though life had begun to fill it up. The pale skin, long black hair, and full figure of the female took on a greater appearance.

As the elven vampire drank her last, she tossed the useless husk of the now dead woman to the side and looked to the five that held

Ya'Row in a solemn regard. "You," she said as she pointed to one of the thralls bound to her. "Find me appropriate garments." Her gaze snapped to another of her thralls. "And you. Tell me where we can find them. Where are those elves?"

"Mistress," the thrall replied in a hushed voice, filled with reverence. "We have heard word that they are west of here. Travelling through Indiana as we speak." He paused a moment before continuing. "We believe they are travelling north, chased by the United States Army."

"The Army will catch them," another thrall replied. "More than likely the elves will hang."

The elven vampire snarled as she looked to her thralls. "That must not happen," she said with a sneer. "They will be mine. I will destroy them."

"Yes Mistress," the thralls replied in unison. "We will begin our travel at once."

Ya'Row snorted a laugh and smiled a most wicked smile. "Excellent. Let the hunt begin."

Gary, Indiana, October 16, 1863

The tall man flipped his pocket watch closed and placed it in the pocket of the long, black coat. He had a rugged appearance about him; a face that had seen many days on the range, eyes that had seen much death. His grey hair flowed from under the black stetson, kept crisp and clean. An old gun-hand by all appearances, right down to the breastplate he wore. Many were shocked, though, as they saw the cross emblazoned on the plate, and the reverend's collar at his throat. Gripped in his right hand was the well worn book that seemed to always remain by his side. The very same book that he opened and continued to read from as he waited on the boarding platform of the train station.

People mingled all around him, not paying him much attention, only when he would offer a kind smile in greeting. He didn't talk much, or to many that walked past him; he was just a traveller like many to this station. This did not mean his eyes did not take in those around him.

A tall, thin man stumbled and fell to the platform as three rugged looking gunslingers pushed him around. They laughed as the man attempted to collect his bags and rise to his feet only to fall once again as one of the cowboys tripped him up. "What's the meaning of this?" the man cried out as the rough hands on one cowboy pushed him down again.

"Jist wantin' ta find someone who can be generous 'nough ta git us fair fer the train," one of them announced with a wicked grin. "Figger you'd be nice 'nough ta do jist that."

"I... I only have enough for myself," the man pleaded as he gathered his bags up yet again. "I do have some things to sell. If you'll leave me alone."

The three cowboys grinned at the man as they circled him like vultures. The man looked up with pleading eyes to the three gunslingers, pushing himself back along the platform as other commuters around him paid no heed. He stopped moving when his hand came to rest on a soft, leather boot. The three cowboys stopped as well, their attention fixed upon the man in the long, black coat with the black stetson.

"And Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead." the man simply said aloud in a gravely voice as he looked from gunslinger to gunslinger. "And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came

where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.” The tall man stopped as he held out a helping hand to the man, still speaking as he assisted the man to his feet. “You three should heed the words and act more like the good Samaritan.”

“We don’t need no preacher tellin’ us what ta do,” one of the cowboys sneered. “B’sides preacher, who’s gonna help you?”

“I put my faith in the Lord,” he replied as he moved between the young man and the three gunslingers, one hand opening his long coat. The three cowboys stopped as they saw the long barrel Colt that rest in a holster on his hip. “As for those that are troubled by the evils of the world, I will act in accordance to the good Samaritan, and offer aid. Might I suggest you boys think on those words for a spell.” His hand remained on the butt of the long barrel as he watched the trio of men. They tried to determine if he could actually take them out, and at one time thought he might. But this place was not the time for a gun fight. The man watched them as they slowly walked away, down the length of the platform.

“Thank you, Reverend,” the young man said as he checked his bags quickly. “What can I do to pay you, Sir.”

“No need for sir, young man,” the older of the two said with a kind smile. “Name’s Reverend Carter Stewart. An’ the only thing I’d ask o’ you is ta remember this, and do something in kindness for someone else down the road.” Without another word, Stewart turned to the conductor of the train and handed his ticket over.

Across the platform another gunslinger holstered her own long barrel Colt.

“I tol’ ye there’d be no need fer tha’,” Pania said to Shani as the elven gunslinger moved back to the ticket window.

“I jist don’t like it when a buncha brigands start roughin’ up

some city slicker who come out here fer a new life,” Shani huffed openly as she reached into her coin purse. “How much were thet ‘gain?”

“That’ll be fifty dollars, Miss,” the man behind the ticket counter repeated.

“Fifty dollars!” Shani replied with a great deal of shock. “Thet there’s highway robbery. An’ I know all ‘bout high way robbery.”

“Two tickets to Thief River Falls,” the man behind the ticket counter explained. “And boarding of your horses on the livestock trailer.”

“Well then. Fifty it is,” Shani said as she easily dropped the money down and took the two tickets. “Gonna be nice ta ride on a train,” she said as she handed Pania her ticket. The pair walked down the length of the platform to the conductor. “Be nice fer them horses too, not havin’ ta be on the go so much.”

“Aye, give ‘em a wee bi’ o’ a rest,” Pania nodded in agreement. “Sides, I’ve never ridden on one o’ these iron ‘orses b’fore. Be a nice experience ta say the least.”

“You gonna write a sonnet ‘r opus ‘bout it?” Shani asked with a teasing grin.

“Ye never know,” Pania replied. “Tha’ migh’ jus’ be a good idea.” The pair continued talking about the concept of trains and how they might make life much easier on their home world, a pair of eyes watched them from the window of a darkened passenger car.

Reverend Carter Stewart sat in his train compartment, reading from the Bible he carried faithfully with him. The book had become an old friend to him, and a reminder of his younger days as a gunslinger. Finding this worn book changed his ways, and he vowed only to use his pistol in defense of the weak, and only as a last resort. His imposing frame often times would sway an attacker quickly.

Stewart looked up as the door to his compartment opened. The conductor peeked inside and quickly apologized for the intrusion. “Sorry, Reverend,” he stated with a tip of his hat. “But this car’s full up and there’s not many more compartments. Would you mind sharing with these two ladies?”

“Of course not,” Stewart replied with a smile as he rose to his feet. He held the door open as a pair of diminutive women made their way into the compartment. He took note of each in kind; both were short and seemed slight of build, but graceful at the same time. The dark haired one was a little rougher around the edges, while the blond seemed more debonaire. “Good afternoon, ladies,” Stewart greeted them with a tip of his hat.

“Oh my,” Pania said with a smile and responded in kind. “Thank ye kindly, sir.”

“No thanks necessary, ma’am,” Stewart replied as he waited for the two to take their seats. He took note each carried two pistols, the blond also carried a rapier. “If you don’t mind my sayin’, you two seem like you’ve been travellin’ a great deal.”

“Well, I guess ya could say that,” Shani remarked as she settled in. She took her hat off and tussled up her hair a bit. This action revealed to Stewart the dark haired gunslinger’s heritage, and at the same moment, Shani took note of the priest’s collar around Stewart’s neck. “Jist ta let ya know, we ain’t demons ‘r nuthin’.”

Stewart chuckled a bit and shook his head. “And whatever possessed you to make that remark?”

“It’s cause o’ the ears,” Pania replied quickly as she grabbed hold of one of Shani’s long, elven ears. The lithe gunslinger furrowed her brow and made a painful cry as she gave Pania a swat on the arm. The elven bard only chuckled lightly.

“I had noticed,” Stewart chuckled as he watched the pair. He assumed they were adults, but acted like children in some way. “But

it's not my place to say. I cannot judge someone I don't know. It does make me a bit curious."

"We're elves," Shani explained without hesitation. "Ya know, fae folk, faeries an' the like. Ifn ya don't mind my sayin', usually men o' the cloth tag us as bein' demons 'r devils."

"Most men, whether they are of the cloth or not, have a tendency of misinterpreting what they see," Stewart explained with a smile. "I only see more of God's creatures, put on this Earth. And admittedly, I have seen you before. And have heard of you." He arched an eyebrow and smiled as Shani and Pania shared a worried look between each other. "Neither of you need worry. I have come to find most stories on wanted posters are just that; stories. I speak from experience, of course."

Pania took note of the gun belt that lay on the Reverend's hip, and believed he spoke the truth. Still, she extended her hand in greeting. "Ye may call me Pania Alow," she stated with a broad smile.

"Reverend Carter Stewart," he replied as he took her hand in his, not in a firm grip, but one that displayed his kindness in greeting. He extended his hand to Shani in turn.

"I'm Shani," the elven gunslinger announced without hesitation and clasped his hand, giving a firm grip and a good pump in her greeting.

"May I enquire as to your destination, ladies?" he asked as he sat back in his seat. The conversation paused as they heard the bellowing of the conductor announcing all to get on board. A few seconds later, the train lurched forward and slowly began to increase in speed.

"We're 'eadin' up north," Pania explained as they settled back into their seats. "Inta the British Territories, an' may'ap from there 'omeward."

"I'm headin' north myself," Stewart stated with a firm nod.

“There’s a parish near Battleford that I hope to join. Maybe there I can finally put to rest this cold iron that’s weighed me down for so long.”

“I gots ta say, yer the first person ‘round here thet ain’t been real eager ta draw pistols,” Shani observed with a nod. “Most people we run into jist wanna challenge someone ta a standin’ fight in the street.”

“I don’t find the need for it anymore,” he said with a smile as he held up the worn book in his right hand. “I’ve found my peace, and moved on with my life. I can only pray that others can do the same.”

“Tha’s very noble o’ ye, Reverend, I mus’ say,” Pania said with a grin. “There’s no’ many like ye ‘round, tha’s fer certain.” She looked to Shani who just rolled her eyes and slowly rose to her feet. “Where ye off ta?”

“I heard there were a decent dinin’ car on this here train,” Shani announced as she opened the door to the cabin. “I plan on gittin’ me some grub.”

“An’ a wee shot o’ whiskey, no doubt,” Pania remarked with a teasing gesture.

“Maybe,” Shani merely shrugged as she let the elven bard’s jibes roll off of her. “I am a bit peckish, thet ain’t no lie.” She turned to Stewart and gave a nod and a smile. “Reverend. Ifn y’all excuse me.” Shani turned on her heel and shut the door to the compartment as she moved toward the rear cars. She passed by several other passengers as she moved to the next car, nodding politely as she went. They nodded in kind and smiled pleasantly, something Shani found with each person. A touch unnerving for her, as she’d come to distrust most humans on this world.

As she reached the door to go to the next car, she stopped. There was a feeling at the base of her skull that something wasn’t right. In the next car, she took note that all the windows were darkened, letting no light in at all. Which wasn’t that different from the car she

was in.

She looked back to the windows. All the blinds had been closed, the only light came from the lamps that rocked back and forth on the walls of the car. Then she took note of the passengers.

They all looked at her, and smiled toothy smiles.

“Crap on a stick,” she spat out quickly as a hand reached her Colt. “Well dangit all! It would haveta be vampires on this train.”



As the good book teaches, judge not lest ye be judged.

CHAPTER TWENTY

PP If ye dunna mind me sayin’ so,” Pania mentioned with a smile as she looked Carter Stewart directly in the eyes. “Ye’ve a very liberal view. Rather refreshin’ ta see a man o’ the cloth tha’ dunna condemn those tha’re diff’rent.”

“Well,” Carter began with a small smile of thanks and a chuckle. “As the good book teaches judge not lest ye be judged.” His smile remained but his words became rather somber and serious. “I believe that the words of the Bible are words not only to read but those ta live by.”

“So why the gun?” Pania asked as she motioned to the gun belt that hung on Carter’s hip.

He looked down and removed his hand from the belt, an involuntary action that he had grown so used to. “An old relic from a time long gone. I used ta be a gun fighter, a mercenary for hire that would track down those who would willingly take lives. But I began to realize that the more I worked, the more I became just like those

outlaws. So much blood and death.”

“So why keep it?” she asked in a voice that was almost a whisper, her words more curious than uplifting like her usual attitude.

Carter managed a smile as he looked to Pania. “Ta toss it aside is ta forget that time. I can’t forget it, it was a part of my life for so long. I don’t keep it as a trophy like some would think, but I keep it as a reminder of man’s tools and how they can be used to cause pain and death.”

“Well ‘en, if ye dunna mind me sayin’ tha’s quite admirable,” Pania said with a nod and a smile. Her features changed dramatically as she heard a shot ring out. Carter Stewart heard it too, looking toward the entrance to their cabin with a furrowed brow. Pania sighed slightly as her shoulders sunk. “I bloody ‘ope tha’ Shani’s no’ in some kinda trouble,” she said as she rose to her feet. Carter also rose, but he sensed something different from just the wild heart of an elven gunslinger.

Shani fired as two vampires lunged at her, slowing them only a little. She cursed as her eyes searched for some other weapon to use, and hoping for an opening that would give her a brief moment to load silver bullets into her twin Colts. There were fifteen in the passenger car, which brought up several red flags; how did they get on the train, who was responsible for this, and how quickly could she dispatch them before they overwhelmed her.

Those questions left as she heard the first click from her pistols. Empty. “Crap on a stick!” she shouted out, readying each gun to use as a club if necessary. The vampires took note of her predicament and smiled with glee. There was nowhere for her to run now.

Just as Shani believed the end was in sight, one of the vampires burst into flame. Not from sunlight, as the windows had still been boarded up. She heard the incantation and smiled as she knew what it was, and then saw Pania at the other end of the passenger car, slinging

small flares of fire at the vampires. Behind Pania stood the imposing figure of Carter Stewart. His gun remained in its holster, but in his right hand he held his Bible. This was when both elves witnessed a miracle they had never before seen since their arrival on Earth.

“Ye though I walk through valley of the shadow of death,” Carter’s voice rang out bold as he held the book high. “I shall fear no evil!” It was working. As the gunslinger turned reverend spoke the passage, the vampires doubled over in pain, eventually withering away into nothing as all they could do was scream in pain as the words were spoken.

Shani pushed one of the vampires away as it’s body began to decay quickly, the elven gunslinger moving quickly to stand with Pania and Carter. Both elves knew what was happening, they’d seen it before on Terra-Kal, but never here on Earth. As the last of the vampires began to cease all movement and sound, Pania looked to Carter.

“Ye said tha’ ye’ve no’ killed anyone in a few years,” Pania stated with some sense of awe and wonder in her voice. “I’d suspect tha’ it’s been a lot longer ‘n tha’. An’ I’d go so far as ta say the las’ time ye drew yer gun, it werena ‘gainst ‘umans

Carter sighed openly as he placed the book back into his coat pocket. Shani looked over the man again with a new respect. This wasn’t just some reverend who spouted rhetoric from the pulpit in fire and brimstone. She finally began to recognize the things he wore, that they held a great deal more meaning than what people might expect.

“Yer a paladin,” Shani stated with a nod. “Ain’t ya? A holy knight, born ta take on the likes o’ these.”

Carter considered Shani’s words for a moment before speaking. “I suppose a knight might be a close description. An’ born ta it, I doubt that. But I do seek out the evils o’ the world while I try to help my fellow man build a life of righteousness for himself an’ his family.”

He took note that both elves were looking at him a little strangely. He chuckled as he spoke again. “Can I ask why the look you two’re givin’ me?”

Shani and Pania blinked in response, unable to find the words. Finally, Shani let go of a breath it seemed she’d been holding before she encountered the vampires in the passenger car, and spoke. “My... my brother’s a paladin. He do the type o’ stuff you do.”

Pania perked an eyebrow and looked to Shani with a somewhat baffled look. Shani looked back and shrugged lightly. “Ye’ll ‘aveta pardon us, Reverend,” Pania said as though to break a forthcoming uncomfortable silence. “Shani, an’ meself, really. Well, we’re no’ familiar wit’ seein’ this kinda act on this planet. ‘R this kinda man wha’ can...”

Her small speech was cut short as one vampire who managed to survive crawled up and laughed aloud. “You’ll never stop my mistress, you know,” he spat out in a sickening sneer. “At this very moment she lay in wait in the luxury car. And meanwhile, this train will soon be ours.” He lunged forward, fangs bared as he meant to overpower the diminutive bard. But for her size, she was fast and well versed with her rapier. She drew it quickly as she muttered an incantation. As the vampire impaled himself on the blade, it glowed with magical flame and eventually consumed the vampire, turning him to dust.

Pania looked to Shani and Carter as she sheathed her blade again. Carter arched an eyebrow as he studied her for a moment, but all Pania could do was shrug. “I’ve knowledge o’ the arcane, meself. Bu’ anyway...” She looked to Shani as a thought came to mind. “Where were the only other place we met vampires ‘ere?”

Shani furrowed her brow and snorted a laugh as though she began to realize. “Back in Pennsylvania. Ya figger thet Ya’Row come back fer revenge.”

“It’s possible,” Pania admittedly resigned herself to say.

“No matter what,” Carter finally said in a calm voice. “We have a duty to do. I’ll head to the engine an’ see ‘bout clearin’ the rest o’ these scum off this train. I wouldn’t mind havin’ an extra gun hand like yaself, Miss Shani.” Shani nodded quickly as she reloaded her Colts. Carter looked to Pania with a soft smile. “Do you think you can deal with this vampire while we’re gone?”

“More ‘n capable,” Pania said with an assured nod. “Like ta put tha’ witch back in the ground.”

With those words the three went their separate ways to deal with the evil that had begun to fester on the train.

Pania walked slowly through the passenger cars of the train, leading herself closer to the rear car. Ya’Row had positioned herself in a way where she would take over the train and surprise the next stop which was on the line. Pania knew that this vampire had to be stopped, and while she pulled courage within her, there was that fear; she could very well die tonight.

Each passenger car she went through became darker and darker. Pania knew she was coming closer to Ya’Row. Unlike their brief meeting in Pennsylvania, Ya’Row knew very well who she was up against. Both Pania and Shani had made names for themselves, sometime it was a blessing, but in this case it could very well be their downfall.

Earth had a folklore of vampires, Pania had seen it in that small village near Harrisburg. As the world moved forward, those folklore had become myths and legends, and even mere stories to scare children into behaving. The same too could be said of the elves. Pania and Shani were oddities, often their appearance seen as demonic. That could be further from the truth.

While they may have run wild through the United States, they still held a firm moral code, even if that code pitted them against

the likes of Captain Williams. Pania thought of these things as she gripped her rapier tightly in her hand. Every so often she would be faced with another of Ya'Row's newly created brood, finding them easy to dispatch. Weak were these vampires, nothing compared to their mistress that created them.

As Pania moved into the final car on the train, she felt a weight on her shoulders, filled with dread and uncertainty. Ya'Row was here. She could feel it. Pania's elven eyes explored the darkness, being able to see better than a human, but still forced to squint into the black. All that she prepared could not prepare her for what was to come.

"Ah!" a voice hissed from the darkness. "Finally we meet." Pania couldn't see Ya'Row, but her voice held a sickening smile, as though she was measuring Pania and preparing her to become her latest victim. "You caused me a great deal of pain, little one. I'm sure that you expect me to return the favour."

"Oh, I think I'm no' yet done dealin' ye some pain," Pania replied through gritted teeth as she held the rapier firm. "Whyn't we get a look at ye. Come outta the dark, an' stop bein' a coward."

The gunfire filled the car as Shani placed well aimed bullets into the attacking brood. Behind her Carter Stewart did not draw his gun but spouted the words he had taken so close to his heart. Shani knew within the short time that she had met Stewart that he was a true believer in the words that were printed in the Book. More so than any other man of the cloth she had ever met. He did not judge those he met on face value; he could sense evil as though it were a blinding light; he had a humble nature about him and considered the well being of others above himself.

In those ways, Shani believed Carter Stewart was the first Earth born paladin she'd ever met. Right down to the effectiveness of her bullets as they flew to their targets. Before they began moving, Shani

had taken out both Colts and held them in her open hands. “It probably ain’t nuthin’ ever been asked o’ ya,” she had said as she looked directly at him. “But I know thet there’s somethin’ in ya thet can tip the scales ‘gainst these vermin. I ask thet ya jist bless my shootin’ irons.” Carter was a bit mystified by the action, but did as Shani asked.

Whether it was the words of God or the skill that Shani had as a gunslinger, or even the desperation of the moment, but whatever it was the vampire spawn fell easily to them both. Only once did Carter draw his pistol.

The loud crack as the report came from the gun shocked even Shani as she looked to Carter with shock filled eyes. The sound was like the heavens themselves had opened up. Even the vampires seemed to reel back, writhing in pain as the bullets from the preacher’s gun cut into them. Finally the last of the brood that stood before them had been cut down and they made their way to the engine. They had climbed through baggage cars, livestock cars and more, fighting as they went.

Shani hoped that their work had not been in vain.

As they broke down the door to the main engine, both the engineer and conductor turned, ready to attack, but stopped suddenly as though they sensed something about these two. The conductor recognized the figure of the man that was Carter Stewart, and seemed to relax a great deal. “Thank god,” the conductor exclaimed. “We were both beginning to think this entire train had gone mad.”

“Aye,” the engineer agreed with a nod. He was a burly man with a massive red beard and clean shaven head. “The train’s been bloody well cursed, I tell ya.”

“Not cursed,” Carter stated in a calm voice. “But there is an evil aboard that must be stopped.”

“An’ just exactly what’re ya plannin’ on doin’ ’bout it?” the engineer retorted in his gruff manner.

“We’re hopin’ thet my partner’s got thet covered,” Shani

replied as she emptied her pistols and began reloading. Her gaze drifted through the door that she and Carter had just burst through. “I jist hope thet she’s alright.”

“The best we can do right now, is pray,” Carter stated as he took a deep breath and began his own silent prayer, hoping that it would aid the elven bard as she faced the villainy that was Ya’Row.

Pania’s eyes adjusted to the light as she muttered an incantation. A small glowing orb appeared beside her, granting a soft illumination of the darkened caboose. She saw that the windows had been completely covered, blocking out any light from the outside world. There were a few artifacts that she knew were not common with any rail cars she’d ever heard of or seen before. They were too familiar, something that could only be equated with the vampire mistress that stood in the centre of the car.

The smile Ya’Row held as she watched Pania held a great deal of malice. Against her pale skin and gothic clothing, it gave way to a very sinister look. Yet, there was one thing that seemed to scream out from Ya’Row’s appearance. A small splash of colour that came from a pin the vampire wore to hold her cloak in place. A single scarlet rose.

“I recognize tha’ symbol,” Pania muttered, more to herself than to Ya’Row. “Those were ‘anded out ta the knights o’ the Order o’ the Scarlet Rose.”

“Quite astute of you, Miss Alow,” Ya’Row replied with a bold voice. “You’ve taken after your parents quite well.” She snickered a bit as she saw the incredulous reaction on Pania’s face, and then continued. “Oh, I know you. And I know your partner Shani. When I began to hunt you both, I noticed the wanted posters. You two have made a name for yourselves on this planet. In much more a way than I ever could.”

“Bu’ ‘ow...” Pania began, only to be quickly interrupted.

“Centuries ago, I knew your parents,” she explained to Pania. “Even before you and Shani were born. You see, I was something of their mentors. They looked up to me. But then, I had made a name for myself, becoming the first elven female to attain the stature of a knight of the Order of the Scarlet Rose.”

“Cassandra Felegio,” Pania gasped as she recognized the tale. This knight had been heralded as a champion. “Bu’ Cassandra fell in battle. Fightin’ ‘gainst an evil tha’ threatened Terra-Kal.”

“I did, yes,” Ya’Row replied, all the while moving closer to Pania. “And Terra-Kal was saved, obviously. But I didn’t fall, so much as rise in power. You only know a little of the tale, Pania Alow. You only know what the scholars and historians of the great Stonebridge Library want you to know. But then, I doubt even they know the full story behind what happened that fateful day over one hundred years ago.”

South of Arcanum Bridge, Season of the Sun, Terra-Kal

The trio of riders brought their horses to a quick stop as they neared the border of the war like Myst Elves. The three were unmistakable in their armour, brightly coloured with gold and red, each one wearing a scarlet rose pin against their cloaks. Dispatched from nearby Arcanum Bridge, they were not sent out to deal with Myst Elf skirmishes; such a duty would be commissioned to rank and file Patrolers.

These were different. These were the Knights, a higher order of protectors that dealt with much graver incidents than those of small thefts. From time to time, Knights would oversee investigations, but more often than not they were dispatched to aid in matters that threatened all of the continent, including the citizens of the Myst Lands.

Among these Knights was an oddity; Cassandra Felegio. The

first woman to be elevated to the station of Knight, she commanded respect wherever she went. There were those who gave her great respect, but there were still those that did nothing to hide their contempt for her.

Both of those factors could have been the reason why the Order of the Scarlet Rose ordered Cassandra and her companions with this most serious of missions. Reports had come in from farmers along the border that regular attacks had been made. At first it was believed to be small skirmishes put together by the Myst Elves, but that soon changed as Patrolers began to find the mutilated bodies of young victims. Consolers were dispatched quickly to deal with the situation, as each victim had been found completely drained of blood. In a pair of instances, the victims rose from their resting place, forcing the Consolers to deal with them immediately by returning them to their eternal rest.

It meant only one thing; a vampire had risen to terrorize the populace.

This suspicion became confirmed when reports of attacks against Myst Elf communities along the border began. Similar victims were found, and for a time, an unsteady peace had been forged between the great city of Arcanum Bridge and the Myst Elf strongholds to the south. It would only be a matter of time before that peace was shattered, either with the death of the vampire, or the continued terrorism of the undead lord.

Cassandra lead her companions through the thick forests to the south of Arcanum Bridge. If need be, battle mages could be summoned from the school housed within the walls of the city. Cassandra was confident that only three would be enough to take down this creature. After all, she had the Shining Lady looking down upon her and offering her blessing. The further south the trio went, the more the mists began rolling in. The forming mists were perfect for brigands to attack or

even the vile Myst Elves to take down quarry. But word had come down from the capital that no Myst Elf scouts would attack the roads. These knights had clear passage, and only a vampire to deal with.

As they pushed on, the air grew still and the very forest grew quiet, as the leaves didn't even move with the wind. Something unnatural was in the area, and that meant they were close to their quarry.

"Keep a sharp eye," Cassandra said in a confident voice to her companions. She drew her blade as she looked around the forest with her keen eyes. "Should either of you..." Her words were cut short as one of her companions screamed out as though caught in a trap. Cassandra and her remaining companion searched the area, but could not find any sign of either their friend or the attacker. Quickly, the pair dismounted, holding firm to their shield as they brandished long blades. "Come out, you coward!" Cassandra shouted out to the darkness that surrounded them both. "Show yourself!"

Her words were answered with a gurgling sound followed by a thud as a body hit the ground. Her remaining companion now lay dead, but this time, the vampire revealed himself.

"This was all too easy," he said softly with a voice that seemed to sooth, yet was filled with bile. "I was hoping for more of a challenge. At least, that was what I was promised." He chuckled lightly as he saw the look on Cassandra's face, her frame frozen in place by his presence. "I can see that you are rather confused, so allow me to inform you of what has happened. Your magistrate doesn't like you. As a matter of fact, you claimed the prize that had been sought by his son. He wants to be rid of you. So, he came to me with an offer. I had no idea that I would be travelling across the very cosmos itself to get here and meet you."

"What are you talking about?" Cassandra forced herself to say.

The vampire chuckled lightly again and began his explanation. “I’m not an elf. Even being a vampire, I’m not originally an elf. I’m ... rather, I was a human.” He waited and watched Cassandra before continuing. “Your magistrate found a celestial door, as he called it, that brought him to my world. A tiny blue planet called Earth. Mind you, where I come from, they are so backwards that they cannot conceive of the wonders of the universe. Many of them continue to argue whether or not Earth actually is the centre of the universe or not. I, however, know it is not. Such was revealed to me when I was turned.” He studied Cassandra for a long while, gauging her reaction, and spoke once again. “What your magistrate does not know is what I have planned. Come with me, Cassandra. Join me, and return to my world, and I’ll show you wonders you could never imagine.”

Cassandra panted heavily, her heart raced as she willed herself to stay, but fear creeping into her being. This vampire had just told her that her superiors had ordered her dead. At least one, with his jealousy, wanted to be rid of her. “I trust in the Shining Lady. I shall see you destroyed.”

Again, the vampire chuckled. “I can hear the fear in your voice. I can hear your heart race.” With each word he took a step closer to her until her was only a foot away, his gaze mesmerizing her. “And I will take that which I want.” He closed the gap and opened his mouth to feed, his fangs dripping with excitement.

But he did not anticipate the paladin’s next move.

As he began to drink from her, she found her strength and drove her holy blade through his chest, in one last attempt to keep her purity. As he drained her completely of her life blood, the blade destroyed him, as it’s very pure essence ate away at his form. The damage had been done, however. Cassandra lay dead at his feet, as the wind would soon scatter the ash that was this Earthly vampire.

On board a train bound for St. Paul, Minnesota, October 1863

“The next morning,” Ya’Row said in a whisper. “I sought out the gates that lead to this world. I renounced my faith, having felt betrayed by the order. And I began to seek out this new power I had acquired.”

“But... ye kept the pin given ta all in the order,” Pania forced herself to say, finding her eyes were difficult to focus and it felt as though a weight was on her shoulders..

“Oh yes,” Ya’Row agreed, suddenly behind Pania, as a cold hand wrapped around her waist. “I did indeed keep it as a memento of that which had been the true deceiver. Now, little elf. Are you ready to taste that which was given to me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Shani reloaded her pistols as Carter watched the entryway of the engine. The engineer kept the coals burning as he focused on keeping the train moving as the conductor watched the pair of gunslingers. The lithe elf took a deep breath and looked to the others for a brief moment. Pania had been gone a long time, and Shani was starting to worry.

“Panny’s been gone a long time,” Shani mused as she looked to Carter. His face held its stoic nature, but there was concern in his eyes. “I’m goin’ back ta check on ‘er.” She holstered her shooting irons and began to walk toward the coal car, stopping only as the conductor began to protest.

“But what about us,” he announced more than asked in a nervous voice. “I’m no gun fighter. And no offense to the reverend, but two gun hands are better than one.

Shani looked to Carter with a grin then back to the conductor. “I figger thet Reverend Stewart here is better ‘n ten gun hands.”

Carter dismissed the comment with a small chuckle, then turned his attention to the task at hand. “What do you plan on doin’, Miss Shani? There could be more o’ them thralls in the passenger cars.”

“Inside, sure,” Shani called back as she climbed onto of the coal car. “Them thet ‘re turned won’t be able ta walk in the sunlight. I’m hoofin’ it on top o’ the train. Maybe I kin hear some fightin’ an’ peg where Girly girl’s at.” She offered a wave of her hand and began to climb onto the car as Carter murmured a silent prayer. Hopefully, it would be seen fit to grant the righteous the might to put down this evil once and for all.

Shani climbed from car to car, moving slowly so as not to lose her footing. The train rumbled along the tracks, keeping it’s speed constant as the engineer continued to stoke the fires. Shani hoped that her treacherous walk would not be met with unneeded peril. She was not surprised as she saw one of the thralls crawling onto the roof of the first passenger car.

“Ya know,” Shani shouted out as she drew her Colts. “This’d been a whole lot easier ifn ya jist kept yer butt in the train. Now ya gotta come up here an’ start yer fussin’, an’ I’m jist gonna have ta kick ya off o’ this here train.” The thrall only grinned with glee as he began to approach Shani. She took note of the look in this one’s eyes, nearly vacuous, but holding some intelligence. Not fully turned, but kept to protect the vampire mistress during the light of day. “I kin tell y’all ain’t too bright,” Shani huffed as she raised her pistols.

Two reports sounded out, striking the thrall dead centre. The creature clutched at his chest and fell to his knees as Shani advanced. “Yer ticket ain’t valid on this here train,” she said as she gave the thrall a boot to the head, and watched as he fell to the ground. Shani didn’t stop to see if he’d fallen under the wheels or not. She had a purpose and that was to reach the car that Pania was in.

Shakily, she continued her long walk, unimpeded by any other

thrall. She didn't need any further interruptions. As she neared the caboose, she took note of the windows. They were heavily blacked out, but not boarded up. A good chance that she could shoot the windows out. As she checked her pistols again, she caught the sound of steel on steel, and a smile formed. The elven bard had more than once surprised Shani, and now she heard the sounds of a definite duel. It was time to even the odds.

Pania raised her rapier and parried an incoming blow from Ya'Row's gladius. Ya'Row seemed frustrated, anger more than evident in her eyes. Blow for blow, Pania parried like an expert swordsman, each thrust giving her more and more confidence. The elven vampire, however, was becoming more and more angry.

"How?" she cried out as she swung out at Pania, only to find the bard's rapier ready to push aside the assault. "No one has ever been able to resist my charms! How is it, a young snipe such as you are able to do so?"

"I've got talent," Pania smirked as she moved into her defensive stance. "I also read me 'istory. At one time, I wanted ta be just like ye. I wanted ta learn how ta be the swordsman tha' ye'd b'come. I wanted ta rise in the ranks an' become tha' which ye 'ad. Fer years, ye were my hero!"

"And now," Ya'Row responded with a sickening sneer. "What do you think now?" She thrust her blade forward, only to find the bard's rapier easily stopping the attack. "Now that you know how the magistrates back-stabbed me. They'd only do the same to you!"

"Oh, I've no doubt there 're them tha' would b'come jealous," Pania retorted with a laugh. "Bu' the diff'rence is, instead o' givin' up, I'd prove 'em wrong. It's all 'bout faith. An' in truth, Cassandra, I dunna want ta be you. I want ta be better 'n you!" As though Pania's remark needed further exclamation, the report of a pistol sounded out,

followed quickly by the shattering of glass. The bard smiled as she knew that Shani wasn't far, proving her guess correct as she overheard the exuberance of the elven gunslinger as she gave out a few war whoops. Sunlight streamed into the caboose, forcing Ya'Row back. Another report from Shani's pistols shattered another window, and Ya'Row had to retreat further.

"Time ta turn the tides on this here little adventure," Shani shouted out as she managed to kick in the door to the caboose. "We got us a vampire ta destroy!"

Ya'Row tucked herself into the darkest corner of the caboose as sunlight streamed into the cabin. During the fight with the bard, she'd let her guard down, only focusing on one target, not realizing that Shani would be close behind. A report sounded out from Shani's long barrel Colt, and a lantern fell to the floor, kerosene spilled across the boards and the lighted wick began to hungrily feed off the liquid. Ya'Row was not only trapped in the corner, but a possible escape route had been cut off, as flames rose up between her and the two elven adventurers. She let out an ear splitting scream, frustrated that her prey was cut off, and also from her own fear being put forcibly on display.

The flames feed off the kerosene and began using whatever fuel was left, which meant the rest of the flammable structure of the caboose. Smoke began to billow out of the windows as seats, boxes, drapes, and wood began to light on fire. Shani grabbed Pania's arm and began to drag her back to the door, but the elven bard resisted, as she dove for an object just outside of the flames.

During the fight with Ya'Row, Pania managed to cut loose the intricate pendant, sending it flying to the floor. Not only was this pendant a part of history, but for Pania it held deeper meaning. A reminder to never give up.

“Git yer britches in order,” Shani spoke in a hurried tone as Pania rejoined her. “We gotta cut this car loose.” The pair exited through the door, Pania moving to the doorway of the next car as Shani began working on the clamp that held the caboose in place.

Ya’Row could only watch as flames grew higher. She watched as Shani’s lithe fingers worked over the mechanism that held the two cars together. She heard the groan as the clamp was released, and felt the caboose lurch as it now rolled of its own free will, but without the forward motion of the engine, the wheels turned slower and slower. The train in front began to grow smaller and smaller as Ya’Row saw both elves give one last look before moving into the passenger car.

Shani heaved a sigh as she brushed down her long coat. Pania watched for a moment longer as the caboose burst into flames, fully engulfed now. The burning car became smaller and smaller, until it was only a brightly burning dot in the distance. This unexpected adventure was finally over.

“Whaddya think o’ trains now?” Shani said with a small huff as she took out her whiskey flask and downed the remainder of it’s contents.

Pania studied the rose in her hand for a moment before looking up to Shani with a small smile. “I found it kind o’ enlightenin’.”

“I hope you two find what you need ta find,” Carter Stewart stated with a smile. He removed his stetson and offered a small bow to the two elves as they gathered their belongings and looked over their horses. “It gives me a good feelin’ ta know that there are those out there willin’ ta face the evil that exists, and try ta put a stop ta it.”

“He... heck, Reverend,” Shani said with a grin as she corrected herself. “I’m jist glad ta know that this here world’s got it’s own paladins.” Carter smiled before wordlessly offering a wave and moving on. Shani mounted her horse and leaned back in the saddle

as she watched Pania finish collecting her things. “Whaddy a figger, maybe a day ‘re two ta find this place thet sent a lich after us?”

“Oh, maybe less time,” Pania replied as she slid into her saddle. She adjusted her hat for a moment, and took note of the people around her. Suddenly, she became very interested in one group on horseback. “Shani,” she said in a quiet whisper. The elven gunslinger looked in the direction Pania was and sighed heavily.

“We jist can’t git a break, kin we?” Shani huffed as she grabbed the reins and prodded her horse Gypsum into motion. “Afternoon, Captain Williams,” she called out to the soldiers that sat in their saddles, watching the two elves intently. “So y’all ready fer a ride?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Brockton, Terra-Kal, present day

Pania sat behind her writing desk for an uncomfortably long period of time as she watched Shani Wennemein's expressions. There were two more chapters that needed to be written, and Pania wanted Shani to go over what had been written so far.

"Ya realize," Shani said for the first time in two hours after Pania handed her the manuscript. "A lotta this stuff didn't 'xactly happen this way. Mostly accurate, mind you."

"It is 'bout the pair o' us," Pania reminded. "No' so much a tribute ta us, bu' somethin' we can give ta our children."

Shani let out a laugh, knowing full well what Pania's sexual orientation was. "So y'all tryin' ta tell me there's a bun in the oven? Who's the lucky fella?"

"Alrigh', may'aps no' me own children, bu' maybe yers," Pania said with a smirk. "Tha' is, if ye can find someone willin' ta tame ye."

“I don’t need tamin’ none,” Shani scoffed. “Sides, think I found somebody.” Pania did a double take as she stared at the elven gunslinger. Shani just smiled as though she had the world’s biggest secret, then handed the manuscript back to Pania. “Y’all got two tales ta go. Finish ‘em, an’ I tell ya all ‘bout it.”

Just outside Thief River Falls, Minnesota, October 18, 1863

Glass shattered and fell to the cold, wood floor as gun shots sounded out. The pair of elven gunslingers ignored the discomfort of the cold and returned fire with vigor. Pania loaded her Winchester and took several careful shots through the now broken window. They had found this small, abandoned cabin as they made their way north, hoping to reach Lake of the Woods. But Captain Williams had been hot on their trail. Somehow, he had received word the pair had returned to the Union and the chase began once again.

The two elves took turns returning fire as they would stop to reload, all the while attempting to devise some sort of plan of escape. All hope appeared to have gone out the window as Williams’ men surrounded the secluded cabin. There had to be at least fifty men with him, a formidable force for just two gunslingers. But their fame, or rather their infamy, had spread throughout the Union. Shani sneered as she thought of the dime store novels, wishing that they had never been written. Since they had teamed up, she found that there were new dime store novels, exaggerating even more of what they had done, and making them out to be cold killers.

Perhaps teaming up with Pania had been a mistake Shani often thought. She’d shake that thought from her mind as she’d realize had it not been for the elven bard, there would have been a few situations where Shani would have been dead. The same could be said for Pania as well. Had it not been for the lithe gunslinger, neither of them would be breathing right now.

Presently, that situation appeared to grow less and less likely that they'd walk out of the small cabin. Indeed, it appeared as though they would be dragged out and tossed into a pine box.

Just outside Thief River Falls, Minnesota, October 20, 1863

Dieter Van Bueren brought the small wagon to a complete stop. The small trail that brought him here was just wide enough for the horse and wagon. He didn't know why, but something told him that he needed to travel. It was just before Christmas, he first received the dream. An odd one at that. But it was the elves that had helped the village so long ago. He had to do something, but he wasn't sure what. All he really knew was the burned out shack that still seemed to smolder in the cool air. Dieter looked to the shack with wide eyes, then caught sight of the shell casings that scattered the area. There was definitely a gun battle here. Did this have something to do with the elves?

His thoughts were broken as he heard the footfalls of a heavy horse. Dieter watched quietly as the Clydesdale walked into the clearing, carrying his equally large rider. He caught sight of a glint of silver, and knew right away, this man was a law man. Then there was more shuffling as other horses began entering the area. A dark skinned fellow on a fast mount. Another law man. And a small framed oriental man.

The Clydesdale snorted as a stream of vapours escaped his nostrils. The rider shifted in the saddle and took each new face in kind. Quietly, he took out his pocket watch and studied it for a moment, then looked to the canopy of the trees that surrounded the small shack. He took a deep breath and finally spoke. "I am going to assume that each of you received some kind of... message."

"Pretty well spoken for a US Marshal," the old man said as he dismounted. Dieter saw the tin star of a Sheriff, but one that was

well out of his jurisdiction. He had the accent and mannerisms of a southerner. The larger man that sat atop the Clydesdale only chuckled in his response.

“Oxford, in truth,” he replied. “But then, you’re quite educated yourself. Aren’t you, Sheriff Walker?”

“I wager ya already know ‘bout that, Marshal Derringer,” he stated before looking to his partner. To Dieter, it was obvious that these men had some familiarity in the past. From the way they spoke they didn’t necessarily like each other, but they still held some respect for each other. “Ming, gimme a hand. I wanna take a closer look.”

Dieter watched as the pair walked toward the shack. To his right, the dark skinned man sat quietly. Dieter looked to him and extended his hand in greeting. “Dieter. Dieter Van Bueren,” he said in a quiet voice.

The dark man took his hand with a firm grip in reply and nodded. “Ezekiel Morgan,” he replied simply.

“Well, now that the introductions are over with,” Marshal Derringer said aloud as he dismounted his horse. “Perhaps we can find out what happened to the last stand of Shani Wennemein and Pania Alow.”

Walker picked at the spent shell casings, examining them carefully. He tossed one to the side and rose to his feet, his left hand never leaving the butt of his Remington. “Brought in a Gatlin’ gun,” he muttered, then looked over to Ming. The often quiet Chinese man was standing twenty feet from Walker’s position, and calmly inspecting a patch of ground. “Whatcha got, Ming?” he asked as he approached slowly. Walker saw the piece Ming was looking over, the snow had appeared to have been melted in a perfect circle and the grass had been killed off, permanently.

Derringer approached the pair and inspected the circle a

moment, then looked to the canopy of the trees. “It would appear this has been here for a week,” he mused.

“It should be covered in snow,” Ming finally stated as he finally looked up and studied each old gunslinger. “Even with the trees, there should be snow. And look,” he said as he pointed to the snow that surrounded the circle. “Animal tracks. They approach, back away, and move around the spot.” Ming was right. There were several tracks that had come close to the spot but seemed reel back and head off around it in an erratic fashion.

“Someone directin’ Williams?” Walker offered the small suggestion.

Derringer took a deep breath before looking back to the burned out shack. “Or something,” he finally suggested.

Dieter stood beside the rubble that was the shack and sighed as he looked toward the destruction. In this small building, the two elves held off a small army. Bullets ripped into the walls of the building as shots were returned. Already they had found bullets embedded in the surrounding trees, evidence that the pair did not just hold up and sit tight. Dieter looked to the ground in front of the small shack and shook his head. There were spent shell casings all over the ground. He stopped a moment, as the light seemed to glint off a spot on the ground.

He bent low as he inspected the snow, carefully pushing away the white flakes until he found the object he was looking for. A silver bullet. Pure silver. Carefully, he picked it up and held it in his open palm. Dieter didn’t move even when he felt movement behind, so intent on studying the deformed bullet.

“Whatcha find?” Ezekiel asked in a quiet voice as he crouched down beside the young man.

“I think this is a silver bullet,” he replied, and his comment

suddenly became the focus of the others. Dieter looked up as he saw the others looking right at him, and he explained further his suspicions. “When Shani and Pania were in our village, they helped rid a clutch of vampire. I gave Shani a small box of silver bullets. I think this is one of them.”

The small group was silent for a few moments after Dieter explained. Finally, Walker shook his head and scoffed. “Vampires. Ya tryin’ ta tell me that there’s such a thing.

“Miss Shani an’ Miss Pania an’ me, we hadda run from zombies,” Ezekiel quickly explained. “I ain’t never thought they were real, but they were. If that can happen, may be vampires is real too.”

“I used to think the Huntsman was a mythical creature,” Derringer spoke as he looked to the lawman. “But he still managed to capture Shani. Pania managed to tap into the magic of the world to free her.” Derringer moved forward, stopping in front of Dieter and looked to the bullet in his palm. “Let us not forget, gentlemen, these two are elves, and one of them managed to contact us. Through our dreams.” Walker sighed with the explanation, it didn’t exactly sit right with him, but how else could the nature of the two gunslingers be explained.

“So what’re ya sayin’,” Walker finally asked as he moved closer to Dieter and Derringer. “That a vampire were here as well as Williams’ army?”

“No,” came the soft spoken voice of Ming. He was still examining the burn mark they had discovered earlier, but now rose to his feet to face the other men. “Not a vampire. Something worse.”

Ezekiel Morgan poked at the fire as he tried giving it a bit more life. The air had grown cooler, and the comfort of the fire was a welcome sight. After spending several hours exploring the area, they still knew very little about what had happened here. At least the picture

was beginning to come into focus. Ming had built a fire a few yards away from the shack, and started cooking some food for the others. Dieter had gathered together some firewood to help keep the warm glow going, as Walker and Derringer kept a close watch on the area. Something didn't sit well with Walker, this place kept him on edge.

After an hour with no one saying a single word, Walker finally spoke up.

"Lemme get this straight, Marshal," he said in a slow drawl to the taller of the two. "Yer tryin' ta tell us that whatever done this, weren't human, but in fact a demon." Derringer looked to Walker, studying the man for a moment and nodded his reply. "Ya realize how farfetched that sounds, right?"

"Sheriff," Derringer finally spoke in an authoritative voice. "You say that belief in a demon is farfetched. Please explain to me the existence of Miss Wennemein and Miss Alow." Derringer only watched the old gun hand a moment. Walker merely rolled his shoulders and gave a low sigh, which allowed Derringer to continue. "Fey folk, elves-- Some would say impossible. They don't exist. But here we are, attempting to solve a mystery of the sudden disappearance of two elves, one of which contacted each of us through a dream. And I know for a fact, Sheriff Walker, that you would not be standing here right now, if you didn't at least believe in some of that."

"They acted more human than anyone I know," Dieter spoke up from the fire. The pair of gun hands turned back to the fire as the young man spoke. "After you saw their actions, talked to them, you ignored the obvious differences."

"Some northerners say that Pennsylvania Dutch lack worldly experience," Derringer said with a smile. "Let me say, Mr. Van Bueren, you prove that statement wrong." Dieter seemed to blush slightly, and nodded his thanks as Derringer turned back to Walker. "I'm not planning on leaving here until I find out, for certain, that both

of them are still alive. Or, tragically, if there is enough evidence that they perished.” Derringer looked back to the shack and began walking toward it with purpose. “Someone also brought that creature here. For what purpose, I cannot say, but I will find out. Of that, you have my word.”

South of St. Paul, Minnesota

The mansion was quiet for the late afternoon. Even as people walked slowly down its massive hallways. More like a monastery than an actual home, the building and grounds were kept neat and clean, but with hands that never seemed to know joy, but always tireless work. There was no happy laughter that filled the halls of the mansion or the grounds. No smiles, no song. Even the sun seemed to hide behind clouds whenever it was near.

The family did not care, they had business that needed to be taken care of. They waited for a sign that the fruits of their labour had been successful. But this day, they would find that only failure came for them. Such failure, that a rift would begin to form in the family’s hierarchy. From father to son.

The mansion and grounds was property of an old family, the Mandrakes. They had settled in the area over one hundred years before. The line dates back to the time of the Romans. And they always had influence over governments. But that had slipped away. And they fought to keep it any way they could. However, while the father wished to keep the status quo, the son had more noble pursuits. The son wished to find ways to perfect the human condition. Lengthen the life and he had seen it in two travelers. The father had felt their power, and that was all he coveted.

But now the father tirelessly aided a creature that had limped back onto the grounds, not knowing how such a thing could happen to one such a powerful beast that he had summoned. With little fan

fare, and no words, the father dragged the creature back to its cage, making certain it was first cleaned, and then locked down. The son, meanwhile, did not keep silent when the creature was under lock and key.

“Father,” he said in a firm tone. “You realize that this is madness. That chasing after those two, trying to take their power, will not work.”

The older of the two stared at the other for a good long while. Finally, he lashed out, a heavy hand catching the son on the cheek. “Patrick,” he seemed to hiss. “I will not allow you to speak to me in such a manner. These are rituals handed down through the ages. Those two elves will make certain that the grip we had on the government of the day will continue to pass through us.”

Patrick rubbed his cheek as he looked to his father. He knew for certain now that his father was more than just mad. “Those days are far gone, father. We cannot look to those any more. There are other ways.”

“What ways?” he shouted out, hoping his voice would quiet his son.

“Give in to science, father,” Patrick pleaded while keeping his voice firm. “These old ways that give into magic that is nearly gone-- It will do nothing at all.” The older man stared at his son, a look of bewilderment in his eyes. His own son would say something such as this.

“You believe,” the father spoke quietly as he walked over to a chair, slumping down into it. “You believe that all this, everything we have worked for, is meaningless?” Patrick nodded slowly, but did not say a word. “You think me mad?” the father said, his voice raised just a bit as he furrowed his brow. Patrick was about to speak, but his father dismissed his words with a wave of his hand and continued to speak. “You make me sick, that you would say something such as this

that would dishonour this family. I will not have any of it, nor will I have you here anymore. Begone from my sight. Never darken this door again.”

Patrick stood for a few moments as he allowed the words to sink in. He knew when his father had spoken, and knew that nothing would change his mind. “Very well,” Patrick finally said. “I shall gather my things and be on my way. For what it’s worth, father. I always believed you to be devote in your beliefs. I only wished you had the ability to respect someone else’s beliefs.” He never said another word, nor did his father reply. Nothing more needed to be said.

Father and son would never see each other again.

Just outside Thief River Falls, Minnesota

Derringer studied the ruins much more carefully than before. There was something that was missing. They should have found bodies, even if they were burned, but there was nothing. He pushed aside some of the rubble, his demeanor becoming almost desperate as he began pushing aside fallen timber and charred furniture. Walker watched for a moment, then something in him realized that Derringer was right. He shouldn’t give up and soon he joined the older gun hand in moving debris.

Both men stopped as they cleared away the floor of the shack. Both men saw it at the same time. Walker looked to Derringer, then bent down as he ran a gloved hand over the latches. It was a trap door, something you normally didn’t find in a rustic looking shack. Wordlessly, Walker pulled up the door and took a look inside. He laughed aloud as even in the dark, he could tell what it was. “It’s a root cellar,” he informed them. “An’ by the looks o’ it, a lot bigger ‘n normal.” He looked up to Derringer and then waved over the others. “I think we found what mighta happened ta our elves after all.”

Ming held the lantern still as he looked down the long shaft. It appeared to be an old mining shaft, but as Derringer suggested it may very well be a tunnel that carried a much more valuable resource. People. The small group determined this shack was actually an abandoned station in the Underground Railroad. “Where d’ya think it leads ta?” Ezekiel Morgan asked quietly as he stood beside Ming.

“No idea,” Derringer said as he shook his head. “But it does confirm one suspicion. Both elves are very much alive.” Both Ezekiel and Dieter looked to Derringer as he began inspecting his weapons. Sheriff Walker had also begun loading his side arms, as his deputy, Ming, began to check the rifle he carried. There was a feeling of slight relief among them, but they still had one last detail to carry out.

“What’a’ya gonna do?” Ezekiel asked in a meek voice, fear tugging lightly at his mind.

“Ming found a trail outside,” Walker explained as he holstered his Remington. “Figger it’s the thing that chased Pania an’ Shani down. Somebody sent it after ‘em. I plan on findin’ the bastards an’ teachin’ ‘em a lesson they ain’t never gonna ferget.”

Ezekiel began inspecting his own, crude side arm leaving Dieter to wonder if his own hunting rifle would be up to the task. He’d never fired the weapon in anger before, always feeling that such things were debasing of mankind. But now he began to understand the need to go to war at times. His thoughts came back to the present as Derringer spoke up. “You two won’t be coming with us,” he said in a calm voice as his skilled hands flipped the pistols into their holsters. Ezekiel only stared in disbelief. Dieter began to protest, but Derringer cut him short. “We’ll need some sort of back up if we don’t come back.”

“He’s right,” Walker stated evenly. “If in two weeks, neither o’ ya hear from us, it’s up ta you ta follow the trail. Find what done this. An’ kill it.”

“What do you three plan on doing?” Dieter asked in a quiet

voice.

“Ming found a trail that leads ta the south east,” Walker explained. He holstered his pistol and took a deep breath as he looked to the ever stoic Chinese man. “Time ta saddle up an’ ride. This thing ends t’night.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The lawmen said their good byes to Ezekiel and Dieter and began the long ride, trying to follow the trail that they had found. Sometimes it would sneak off and disappear, but they had a tendency to pick it up again quickly. Ming's keen eye saw to that. His determination, when he was focused on the task at hand, was unmatched. The trail they followed lead them south, and the ride was a few days, but they found what they were looking for. They were just surprised that it would be inside a very elaborate looking mansion.

Derringer and Walker had both heard whispers of the name Mandrake before. Associated with politicians in both the north and the south. For Derringer, that name was even heard of across the pond in the nations of Europe. Walker shifted in his saddle as he prodded the horse forward through the open gates of the estate, his trained eyes watchful of his surroundings. "How we gonna play this?" he asked with a sigh. "I am a helluva long way outta my jurisdiction."

"I'm not," Derringer replied as he too pushed his horse forward.

“As a United States Marshal, I can claim jurisdiction within another region.”

Walker looked over to the older gun hand and snorted. “That’s a buncha bull, an’ you know it. You can’t do a damn thing without informin’ local authorities.”

“I would believe that Mandrake does not know that,” Derringer replied with a sly smirk on his face. The trio did not argue the point any longer, as they brought their horses to a stop in front of the lonely mansion. No servants came to greet them, no calls of welcome from the tenants inside. Even the grounds looked less than inviting as vegetation crept up the walls of the buildings, covering them in some macabre display. The three riders dismounted and walked toward the front entrance. Derringer knocked loudly and waited. When no response came, he looked back to Walker.

The old grisly gunslinger drew his pistols and shoved the door open with a strong push. “If we’re gonna do this, may as well go all the way,” he remarked as his brow furrowed. Derringer snorted a chuckle as he drew his own. Ming had taken out a rifle, opting for the ranged weapon instead of his skill with his fists. If the creature they hoped to face were anything like Derringer explained, then he’d need to have something that would take it down faster than even his own hands could move.

Inside the mansion was like a tomb. Their footsteps echoed on the marble floors, no lamps were lit to give the rooms any welcoming glow. No sounds of people busily scurrying about. Walker looked to the floor for a moment, stooping to inspect something. He picked up what appeared to be some dirt mixed with blood and small chunks of wood. His hand holding a small specimen, he rose to his feet to show Derringer.

“It would appear as though our two elves managed to damage their pursuer,” he said with a small smirk. He looked to the floor and

saw the trail, now that his eyes had adjusted to the darkness that was the mansion. There it was, a trail of blood and dirt, leading them directly where they wanted to go.

“Like the critter ain’t even scared,” Walker stated as began following the trail.

“And it’s our job to make it feel fear, Sheriff Walker,” Derringer replied as he pushed forward. His two companions followed wordlessly, knowing full well that bullets were about to fly.

South of St. Paul, Minnesota, October 21, 1863

Derringer stood outside the small doorway. They followed the trail down into the cellar, past the empty wine racks and into the back storage rooms. The basement of this mansion was a maze. Any man could have gotten lost if he didn’t have some guide. The blood trail of an unknown creature was more than enough. The large man stood by the door, listening intently for a moment, then looked to Walker and Ming. With only a nod, the two men knew what the plan was. They had to move fast, let their instincts guide their hands if they in fact had to fire.

Walker stood on one side of the door while Derringer took up position on the other. Ming was the fastest of the three, he would enter first. And this time, he would not use the cold, iron weapons that Walker had trained him to use. The small Chinese man closed his eyes, found his center, and pushed himself forward. Like a dancer, he crashed through the door, opening his eyes only to find the target and rush forward.

Inside, Mandrake scowled as he tried to administer an alchemical medication to the creature. These men could not interfere with that. Mandrake began to speak aloud, trying to conjure, but found his voice gone as Ming knocked the wind from his chest. The old alchemist fell heavily to the floor as the creature, now stripped of it’s robes, roared

in pain and anger. Walker and Derringer had entered the room, firing upon the abomination as Ming forced Mandrake to the ground.

Walker noticed it first and scowled as he looked to Derringer. “Bullets ain’t doin’ a damn thing,” he said with a hiss as he holstered his pistols. “It may be hurtin’ it, but it ain’t doin’ nuthin’ more.”

“That would be due to its unworldly origin,” the Marshal replied, holstering his own weapons. He moved quickly towards Mandrake, fury evident in his eyes. Ming held the man tightly against the wall as the old werewolf questioned him. “I doubt that I’ll be able to convince you to send whatever that is back to whichever abyss you pulled it from. So I’ll have to do it myself.”

“It would take a man decades to learn such a spell,” Mandrake sputtered in defiance. “I doubt mere gunslingers could learn it so quickly.”

Derringer leaned in close to Mandrake and sneered as he spoke. “That is the comment I expect to hear from someone as ignorant as you.” Derringer got the reaction he wanted; Mandrake suddenly knew there was more to these gunslingers than met the eye. The Marshal turned to an altar that stood before the creature and chuckled. “Obviously while you are trying to heal it, you’d need it to be in its summoning circle. So you could control it.” He reached out with gloved hands and carefully began to turn the pages of an old tome that lay on the altar. “And no doubt, everything you need, from summoning to banishing, is right here.” Derringer looked back to Mandrake for a moment and snorted a laugh. “Not only ignorant, but arrogant as well.”

“Listen to me!” Mandrake cried out as he struggled against Ming’s grip. “I will pay you anything! Money, gold, power beyond your imagination.”

“Ya ain’t too swift, are ya,” Walker called out as he watched the proceedings. “This ain’t ‘bout money ‘r power. Ain’t even ‘bout justice. It’s ‘bout somethin’ higher ‘n all o’ us. Divine right, as it

were.”

“No truer words were spoken, Sheriff Walker,” Derringer said with a loud voice as he turned to look at the creature. He focused his attention on it while he spoke the words from the book out loud. The creature howled in protest as the runes in the floor began to glow. An ethereal prison erected itself around the creature as it writhed in pain on the floor. Its eyes looked to Derringer, as though begging for mercy. As the old werewolf continued to recite the words, the creature became violent, thrashing wildly as it tried with vain desperation to save itself.

All for naught.

The resounding cacophony of sound caused Walker and Ming to flinch, this gave Mandrake an out. But he rushed the circle, hoping to break the boundary and free the creature so it would destroy these men. Arrogance and ignorance. Mandrake paid with his life, as the magic from the runes only destroyed him, as it sent the creature back into the abyss. The sounds in the room grew and grew, a chorus of screams that forced Walker and Ming to find cover, as both expected an explosion to destroy the room. But as full as the sound became, it suddenly stopped.

Slowly, Sheriff Walker climbed up from his hiding spot and looked to Derringer. The Marshal breathed heavily as his hands gripped the sides of the altar. Ming was beside Walker in an instant, making sure the old Sheriff was alright. Walker only nodded, patting the Chinese man on the shoulder, and informing him to ready the horses. They were done here, there was no need for their presence anymore in this old, empty mansion.

As Ming left the room, Walker looked to Derringer through narrowed eyes. “You an’ I are gonna have a talk,” he said with words that seemed skeptical, yet in awe of what just transpired. “Alla this gets explained.”

“Walker,” Derringer said as he pushed himself off the altar and took a deep breath. “Go back to Oxford. Go back to your wife and child. Be a good man.” The old werewolf straightened the stetson on his head and allowed a small smile to form on his lips. “Leave all of this behind you. And leave the business of immortals to me.”

Just outside Thief River Falls, Minnesota, October 18, 1864

Shani tossed a battered bookcase in front of the door as Pania checked her ammunition. The elven bard gave Shani a dejected look and sighed. Shani knew that they were running out of bullets, and out of time. Williams had them surrounded. “Why’d he have ta git all uppity?” Shani sighed as she hunkered down beside Pania and began reloading her Colts. She took a quick peek outside, making certain to remove her stetson first. Outside, Williams’ men were also reloading and preparing for another volley. “Godsdammit! They bringin’ out the big guns.”

Pania removed her duster and took peek, grimacing as she saw the Gatling gun dragged into position. She saw the Gatling gun, but she also saw something else. “It’s tha’ bloody bugger in the cloak tha’s go’ me worried,” she said as she sunk back into her crouched position. Shani had seen him before, always hanging back, never speaking to the soldiers or Williams. “I go’ a feelin’ tha’ ‘e’s jus’ an observer. An’ I’ve go’ a feelin’ tha’ Williams an’ ‘is men cannu see ‘im.”

Shani furrowed her brow and looked to Pania for a moment. She sighed and shook her head. “If one o’ them bastards from back home d’cided ta follow us an’ have some fun, I’ll fill the bastard fulla buck an’ leave ‘im there ta die.”

He stood, watching as the soldiers unloaded their ammunition into the old shack. Marveled at the efficiency of the violence. For more than a year he had heard of these two bandits, and had tried so

hard to find them. What luck when he heard not only had they teamed up, but that Captain Williams was on their trail. All he need do was find Captain Williams, and then let Williams find them. Their magic had been what had drawn this one out, he craved it, needed it. Power to add to his own.

But before he took them, he'd force them to take him to their home world, where he could become drunk with the power. He smiled in the shadow of the hood as he watched the Gatling gun begin to rumble and spew forth it's hot death. Watched as the bullets ripped into the logs that made up the shack's walls. Then he reeled back, just a bit, as a bullet ripped into his chest. There was more shock than pain. He'd never been hit by a bullet before, it was an odd feeling. Slowly, he looked back to the small shack.

"That's right, you sonofabitch!" he heard the elven gunslinger shout out in furious rage. "I see you, ya bastard! An' I'll send ya back ta hell!"

Inside the shack, Shani and Pania had built up a good enough barricade, but they knew that Gatling would chew through even the thickest logs. It wouldn't be long. At timed intervals, they would return fire. But the cloaked apparition had become a new target. "Ye think Williams know 'bou' 'im?"

"Not a chance," Shani replied with a sneer. "Bastard's keepin' quiet, way too quiet. Where ya figger he come from?"

"Well, there's rumour o' a spook tha' used ta travel the Marches," Pania suggested. "Suddenly jus' disappeared. Bu' I figure tha' were jus' stories ta ensure the b'haviour o' wee ones." She hopped up and took another pair of shots, aiming directly at the apparition, before dropping to the floor once again. "We're 'ittin' the bugger square, tha's fer certain." Pania took another stock of their ammunition as Shani took another peek out the window.

"Gotta try an' tempt the bastard closer," Shani suggested as she

ducked back down, looking to her partner. “An’ maybe this time I’ll git a shot point blank in the sonofabitch’s face.”

The cloaked figure moved forward, seeming to glide effortlessly over the ground. If he could be seen by human eyes, they would take note that he was not touching the ground at all. His focus was on the elves, to obtain their power. Power that he would have, their life force would sustain him. And the rest of their essence he would take back to the cult that had summoned him. They could have what was left. The bullets from the soldiers guns seemed to pass through him with ease. The ones fired by the elves, however, were a completely different matter.

Several shots slammed into him, forcing him to stop and wonder just how that could happen. His form hung in the air as he seemed to contemplate the minor detail, staring at the bullets that had merely fallen from his frame in misshapen lumps. A shout brought all the answers he needed.

“Tha’s righ’, ye bastard!” Pania cried out as she fired again and again. “We can see ye clear as day!” The creature seemed to scowl in the shadow of the hood, a small hiss escaped his lips as this revelation became all too clear. A minor inconvenience, really, and so he slowly moved forward.

Inside the shack, the elves took turns firing, as one would fire, the other would reload. Pania crouched down as she padded down the pockets of her long coat, searching frantically for ammunition. She stopped as her hand brushed against a small, worn box in her inside pocket. Shani nearly forgot it in Shreveport. They’d carried it since Pennsylvania. Dieter Van Bueren had given it to them. Quickly, she pulled the box out and opened it, muttering a quiet prayer as she opened it. Inside lay twelve bullets, enough for her to reload.

“Le’s see if these’ll stop ‘im,” she hissed as she quickly dumped

the shell casings and replaced them with the silver bullets. “Worked fine ‘gainst vampires, ‘ope it works ‘gainst this one.”

Shani sneered as she fired her last bullet into the apparition, and ducked down to reload. She knew of the item Pania spoke of. She’d almost forgotten about them. But now she was glad they still had that small box. “Give ‘em hell, girly girl,” she encouraged the elven bard as Pania rose to her feet and fired directly at the cloaked figure.

A blood curdling scream filled the air as the first bullet slammed into the creature. It still fell to the ground, but it had done it’s damage. Silver obviously had some effect on this one. As the second forced the creature back a step, he cried out yet again. The men behind him had begun to stop firing, and only stared in disbelief. From the shack, Shani Wennemein called out, her words directed to Williams. Not in spite, not in a taunt, but in a warning.

“Williams,” she called out from her position. “I know y’all kin see it. We ain’t the ones ya should be worried ‘bout. It’s the devil o’ a thing that ya kin see square. If ya got any sense ‘tall, start firin’ on the bastard. ‘R we all bound straight fer hell!”

Captain Williams furrowed his brow as he heard the shouts from inside the small shack. His men had been relentless in firing upon the structure, and they would take nothing less than a white flag of surrender from the two outlaws. He had heard the stories of the things these two had done, but he still had his orders and would not back down, disgracing himself and the uniform he wore. But as the shouts continued he began to watch the area just in front of the shack. He saw the snow seeming to retreat without cause or reason. He saw bullets fired from the two outlaws seem to drop in mid air.

Finally, he heard a blood curdling scream. So did his men.

The shooting stopped as his men looked to him for guidance. Williams did not hesitate. “New target, gentlemen. Open fire!” The

apparition had fully manifested in front of the soldiers, glaring at them in pain and anger, that they would dare to change targets to him. It screamed in anger, trying to make even the hardest of men quake in his boots.

Inside the shack, Pania grinned deliciously as both elves realized Williams now saw the apparition fully. The elven bard grabbed at the bookcases and barrels that made the small barricade at the door and began tossing them to the side. She loaded her Smith and Wesson's with silver bullets and handed the remaining bullets to her partner. Shani kicked open the door, waiting just a moment to see if the soldiers would start firing again upon their position. When it was safe, both elves exited the shack, firing directly upon the apparition with only one goal.

Take it down.

The bullets from the soldiers weapons only angered the creature, as they were more of an annoyance than anything damaging to it. But it reeled in pain as a silver bullet struck it, howling in agony as the elves kept firing on it. The creature turned and looked straight into the eyes of the elven bard. Howling in madness, the creature crew a blade that was as black as pitch and thrust forward. Pania moved but not fast enough, as the blade's tip buried itself into her shoulder. She cried out in pain as she felt the life begin to drain from her, the magic of the weapon revealing itself to her. In one defiant move, she raised the Smith and Wesson she gripped, pointing the business end directly into the hood of the creature and cried out in defiance.

“Burn in ‘ell, ye bastard!” She pulled the trigger as though to put an exclamation mark on her shout. The bullet disappeared into the blackness of the hood and the creature's head snapped back, his grip still on the blade. As he fell back, the pain felt from the silver bullet coursing through him, the weapon was freed from Pania's shoulder. Shani was quick to respond, moving to the bard's side and hauling

her up. She dragged Pania back into the shack as the creature writhed in agony on the ground. The soldiers continued firing as it tried to escape.

The creature knew that death was close at hand. In a desperate move, it looked toward the small shack and let out a hiss in anger. It ignored the bullets as it pushed itself forward. It only had one thing in mind. The destruction of both elves.

Pania clung to Shani as they searched the root cellar for some kind of shelter. They didn't need to search for long. The little light they had showed them the tunnel entrance. Shani desperately looked around the small room, looking for some way to stall the creature that chased them, so they could reach safety and work on Pania's wounds. In the dark light Shani saw it.

She gently placed Pania down on the ground as the elven bard began checking her pistols with her good hand as the lithe elven gunslinger began moving barrels toward the small ladder that lead down into the cellar. By the smell alone, Shani could tell they were filled with gun powder. How old it was, she didn't know, but now was not the time to throw out plans. She built a small barricade and poured a small trail of powder away from the barrels toward the small tunnel. Once she was done, she helped Pania back to her feet and began moving down the tunnel. Once they were a good distance back, Shani drew her pistol and took aim on the end of the trail of powder.

Pania raised her weakened arm just slightly as Shani took aim. The elven bard muttered a few words, timing her spell with the elven gunslinger's motions. As Shani pulled the trigger, the bullet exploded with an added bonus. A small cantrip, magical fire that sped along with the bullet. As the fiery projectile hit the ground, sparks and flame set the powder burning. There was no argument if the powder was old or not. It was now burning. Shani holstered her Colt and helped Pania as

the pair moved down the length of the tunnel.

As the powder burned along the trail, the creature was madly trying to force it's way into the cellar. Like a rabid dog, it was pulling at planks and floor boards, desperately trying to get in. As the door to the cellar was finally opened with violent purpose, the creature stopped. It saw the barrels lined up against the ladder, packed together in a ramshackle fashion. And then it saw the small glowing ball that lead closer and closer to the barrels.

By then it was too late.

Outside, Williams sensed something was wrong. He could smell the familiar scent of gunpowder, burning as though it were about to explode. One look to Johnson, and he gave the order. "Find cover, men! Now!" His men reacted quickly, finding a place to hunker down just in time. As the last man found cover, the building exploded, fire spewed forth, and an ungodly howl erupted from the small shack. The creature clawed its way out, screaming in pain as it did so. Williams and his men could only watch as the creature ran past them, it's robes burning as it spewed blackish blood onto the ground. They were transfixed as it sped off into the forest. No one said a word until it had completely disappeared, it's screams of pain finally ending.

"Is it dead, Sir?" Johnson asked as he came out of his hiding spot.

"No idea, Private," Williams replied quietly. He looked to the shack and watched as the fire fed hungrily on the old wood. "Let the fire die down, men. Then we'll search the ruins."

"You think they..." Johnson began to ask. He did not receive a reply. Each men knew in their minds that no one could have survived such an explosion. Even Johnson realized this. In a way, even though they had chased these two outlaws for more than a year, they had some respect for them. They knew in their hearts that everything written on the wanted posters was a bold faced lie.

But now, it didn't matter.

South of St. Paul, Minnesota, October 21, 1863

Marshal Martin Derringer climbed into the saddle as he watched the buildings of the estate burn. He began the previous night, setting fire to each building individually after examining it for clues about the Mandrake family. There was a son, but as he found in a diary, he and the father had a falling out. Perhaps he would not have to worry about young Patrick. But he would keep his ears open for any word. As the fires lapped hungrily at the wood of the estate, Derringer steered his horse toward the gates. Fire spread to the trees that surrounded the estate grounds, consuming the once lavish of places into an all purifying fire. An honest end to a dishonest place.

The threat was dealt with, but Derringer had other things he needed to take care of. As the horse leisurely walked down the road, the rider knew he had to make contact with Pania. Fortunately, he believed he could. But not now, now he needed sleep. He had a long journey ahead of him. In more than one manner of speaking.

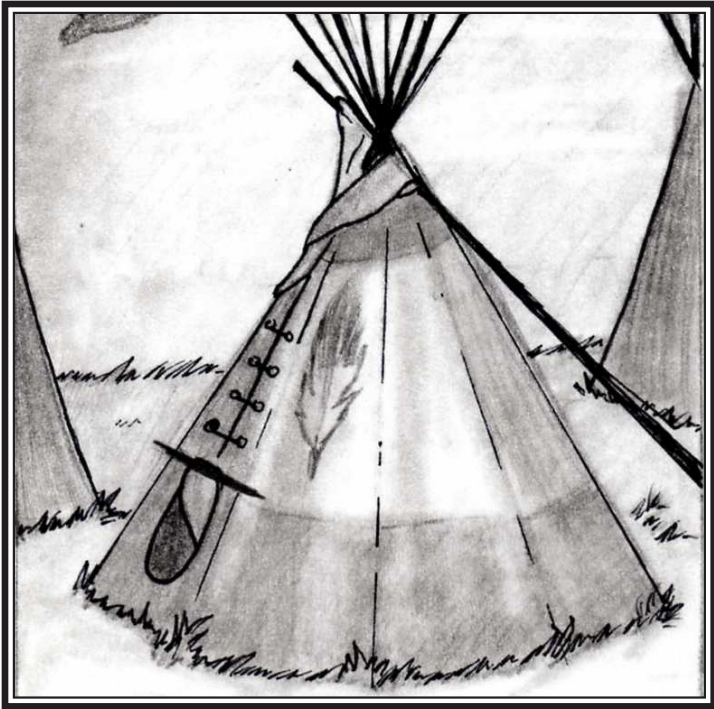
Shani Wennemein held fast to Pania's arm, and propped her up against her frame as they walked through the snow covered forest. She did everything to ensure that the elven bard would remain awake. Bad stories, jokes, even an off key song or two. "C-c'mon girly g-girl," she stuttered slightly as she shook Pania. The action forced them both to the ground, as Shani cradled Pania in her lap. "I-I ain't gonna l-lose you now."

Pania opened her eyes just a bit and smiled. "Ye stuttered," she said quietly and coughed just a bit. "I now r'member where I've seen ye b'fore." Shani nodded as she listened to the elven bard speak, trying desperately to hold back any tears. "Brockton. We 'ad tea t'gether a few times. Ye wanted a library."

Shani laughed as her tears began to flow. She replied with a nod, then spoke with a cracked voice. “An’... y- ya wanted ta marry a p-p-prince.”

Pania laughed until it hurt, then coughed before speaking again. “Times change, dunna they. Promise me somethin’, Shani.” The elven gunslinger nodded as she listened to Pania, holding her tightly in her arms. “Make sure I get ‘ome, alrigh’.”

“Don’t t-talk like thet,” Shani said as her lip started to quiver slightly. “Yer gonna w-walk back inta yer folks p-place on yer own two f-feet, I guarantee it. You’ll see,” she said as her voice trailed a bit. “...We’ll b-both git home s-safe an’ sound...”



Bear says we'll take you to our camp. We can take better care of your friend there. I am known as Running Cloud.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Brockton, Terra-Kal, present day

Pania lifted her head from her desk as the door to her room gently opened. She looked around in a daze as her world began to focus. At first she was angry, because it may been the Mistress Arewella come to check on her again, but she smiled as she saw the red hair of her lover, Lyssa Stormwater.

“I was worried about ya, Panny,” Lyssa stated in a soft voice that was filled with a bit of teasing. “You’ve been locked away in yer tower for a while.”

“Tower o’ me own makin’,” Pania replied. “Been busy writin’ ‘way the past few days while ye been gone.” She yawned and stretched in her chair and then smiled to Lyssa. “Did ye find wha’ ye needed ta find, luv?”

“Mostly,” Lyssa replied with a weak nod. “I’ll tell you the whole tale in the morning.” Lyssa looked over the papers strewn on Pania’s desk for a moment. “You’ve been busy. More of those Kit

Carson books Shani's told me about?"

"No," Pania replied as she shook her head and chuckled at the mention of her previous works. "Ye said ye wanted ta know more 'bout me. More 'bout me past. Here ye can learn tha' an' 'bout Shani too. Go on an' read it. While I finish the las' part."

Over one hundred years ago

The mist from the ocean spray touched her skin lightly as she stood on the rocky shore. The sun was bright as it shone down, the cool breeze lightly tossed her hair. Pania closed her eyes and took a deep breath as she took in the fragrance of the ocean. Home, it had been so long since she had seen it. Riding dusty trails and sleeping where she could find a quiet spot had almost made her forget what home was really like. She smiled as she opened her eyes, a single tear fell as it caressed her cheek. As much as she had missed this place, she knew it couldn't be real.

"Dreamwalkin' 'gain, aye?" she asked in a quiet voice. She heard the crunch of boots on the rocks behind her, felt the hand on her shoulder and knew who it was without even having to look. "Is there some sorta trouble tha' ye be comin' inta me 'ead, Thadius?" She turned, looking up into the Marshal's kind eyes. The long coat fluttered in the wind as he moved his hand to rest on his gun belt. He took a deep breath, just as Pania had done earlier, and he smiled.

"This is your home?" he asked as he looked out over the ocean.

"Aye," Pania replied quietly. "It's been over three year since I set foot on this place. I miss it now more 'n ever." Her gaze drifted out to the ocean before again turning to Marshal Derringer. "Somethin's wrong, isna it," she stated more than asked.

"Yes," Derringer replied with a nod as he removed his stetson. He ran his fingers through his grey hair before looking to the elven

bard. “You are dying, Pania,” he said without hesitation. There was no time to sugar coat the obvious. “Your battle with the creature left you weak. Your body has been infected with a life draining force.”

“An’ this is the way ta say g’bye,” her voice wavered slightly as she spoke. She had never feared death. It was to know a person was dying was the hardest thing. To know, and not be able to do a thing about it. “I dunna s’ppose I’ve long left,” she said as she looked to the ground. Her bare toes played with the small pebbles as she spoke with the old werewolf.

“This isn’t good bye, Miss Alow,” Derringer said with an even voice. “This is to help you fight. To help you live.” Pania looked up, slight confusion in her eyes. “Your time is not yet up. You’ve a great deal of life left to live. And I’ll be damned if I will let someone like you slip away so easily. I am here, to help your spirit stay. You already have Shani to help your body heal.”

Pania let out a small laugh with Derringer’s comment. “No ‘ffense ta Shani,” she said through tears that began to flow faster. “I love ‘er, an’ she’s quick with ‘er wit an’ e’en quicker with ‘er irons, bu’ she’s no doctor.”

“True,” Derringer said as he held out his arm, offering it to Pania. “But I am certain you will find she is incredibly resourceful.” Pania looked into Derringer’s eyes as she took his arm, resting her hand at his elbow. The old werewolf guided her away from the rocky shore and began to walk toward the fields in the distance. “For now, all I want to do is talk. We never had much of an opportunity to do so. Now might be that time.”

Pania smiled and let out a small chuckle as they walked. The pebbles slowly gave way to grass as the wind ruffled her gown. “I ‘ate ta tell ye, Thadius, bu’ I’m no’ lookin’ for a courtier. I ‘ave me eye set in other areas.”

“Nothing like that,” Derringer replied with a smile. “Just

simple curiosity. After all, you know my tale. Now, it's time for the bard to tell hers." He watched her as they walked through the tall grass of the field. She was smiling, as though everything was right with the world. Derringer just hoped that everything would indeed be right in Pania's world.

Shani wrapped Pania up tightly in her long coat, making certain that the elven bard would be warm. Several times Shani checked Pania's breathing and listened to her heartbeat. It was weak, but it was there. The elven gunslinger gently picked Pania's form up and cradled her carefully in her arms. The air was cool, but not unbearable. Given time, they would have to come across some settlement or even a farm. Maybe there someone could help with Pania's predicament.

Shani felt as though she'd been walking for hours, and making absolutely no headway. Evening was starting to roll in, as the sun began to sink beneath the horizon. They would need to find a place to rest soon. Some cave, or abandoned house, or even under some fallen timber. Shani's keen sight searched the area for any shelter at all. No house, no cave, but there was a large tree that had been felled. It was large enough to give some shelter, and adding a few extra branches would give a decent enough roof. Shani made certain to place Pania in a comfortable spot underneath the tree, and then set about making the rest of the shelter. She worked quickly, gathering enough branches to put together a roof, packing it in place with snow. Then, near the entrance of the small shelter, she built a small fire. Rocks were put in a circle, followed by some kindling. She smirked as she used an old wanted poster to help light the fire, knowing it was one of many that she had ripped off of bulletin boards for a souvenir. The fire lit quickly and burned brightly, as Shani added to it to keep it alive as she watched over Pania.

She looked to the elven bard as Pania made a small groaning

noise. Shani sighed and smiled just a bit. “I hope yer dreams ‘re sweet, darlin’,” she said as she brushed back some of Pania’s hair. “Hope ya git better. ‘Cause I ain’t ‘bout ta let ya jist die.” Shani looked to the night sky, seeing the stars for the first time in a long time. She reached out and pointed to one, and spoke in a quiet voice. “Thet one. Right next ta the big, red one. Thet there’s home.” She looked back to the elven bard as Pania’s breathing increased just a bit. “An’ I swear I’ll git ya there, an’ yer gonna walk on yer own two feet, jist like ya always done. Ya have my word on thet.”

Pania watched Derringer closely as he concentrated on the paper before him. He was carefully drawing a picture, but wouldn’t let her see. He had just told her to sit quietly until he had finished. She wasn’t certain how long she’d been sitting, but then remembered this was a dream walk. Time was irrelevant here. So she wouldn’t have to worry about rushing about to get things done. Derringer smiled as he set the charcoal to the side, held up the paper for a moment, and then handed it to Pania.

“You make a good subject,” he said with a quiet and complimentary voice. Pania looked over the picture and smiled. He had drawn a perfect image of her, the detail was incredible.

“This is amazin’,” she said not taking her eyes off the drawing. “Me brother Mandrel were an artist like this, bu’ e’en ‘e couldna produce somethin’ so... alive.” Derringer chuckled lightly as he took the compliment. Pania finally set the drawing in her lap, and looked over to him, studying him for just a moment before speaking again. “I take it tha’ wit’ ye long life ye’ve learned a thin’ ‘r two. S’ppose there’s no’ many tha’ know.”

“Oh,” Derringer replied with a small sigh. “A few in Franklin know. Not many, mind you. I keep a lot of that to myself.” He smiled again and leaned back in the grass, propping himself up on his elbow.

“Now my turn to ask a question. You’re a story teller, you sing and dance, that is obvious from your stay in Franklin. So why this? Why come here... rather to Earth, and go on some grand adventure?”

Pania shrugged as she let an impish smile flash. “Why no’? The best adventures in story books ‘re seen first ‘and. An’ who’s ta say tha’ a little embellishin’ ‘ere an’ there willna add ta it.” She grinned as Derringer nodded in reply. “Now, my turn. Why Derringer? Why change ye name?”

“How many United States marshals do you know of that have a name that hearkens back to the days of the Roman Empire?” he replied with a boisterous laugh. “Martin Derringer allowed me to fit in, as I found a place that would accept me for what I am. Now, when did you realize that the magic you can wield is stronger than you’ve ever tried to summon?”

“No’ sure, really,” she replied with a quiet voice. “I’ve no’ really used magic ‘til I go ‘ere, an’ no’ really ‘til ye tol’ me ta use it. I guess it mean when I go back ‘ome, I’ll ‘ave more power.” She paused as she considered the statement, then added. “If I go back ‘ome.”

“Oh, you will, Miss Alow,” Derringer stated with a smile. “I have no doubt of that. You will survive. Because you are a miracle. Both you and Shani. And miracles will even happen for miracles like you. Just wait and see.”

The fire had long since died by the small shelter. As the sun began to rise, Shani Wennemein began to stir from her slumber. Even with the grogginess of sleep still clinging to her, she had her wits about her to check on Pania. The elven bard still breathed, her heart still beat, better than the previous night. Maybe she would get better. Or maybe she would remain in a state of unconsciousness forever. Shani prayed that it was the former. As the gunslinger made sure that Pania was still warm, that eerie feeling that someone was watching began to

creep into her bones. Slowly her hand moved to her gun belt as she turned to look out the entrance of the small shelter.

She realized she'd have to be a lot quicker on the draw than she usually was. Four figures stood quietly, about five feet away from the camp fire. They said nothing as Shani stared at them. Shani didn't volunteer any greeting either. The two elves were in Dakota country, Shani had a feeling this might happen. She just expected it sooner. The four men were warriors with a Dakota tribe, she could tell by the markings on their clothing. Well made tan hides that looked just as warm as they were ornate. It could have been a hunting party or a scouting party. Shani wasn't too sure.

"Um..." she finally managed to say in a quiet voice as she sat beside Pania protectively. "H.. howdy there. Fine mornin', ain't it." One of the warriors turned to the others and spoke in their native tongue. Shani couldn't understand them, having never been well versed in some of the western nations practises. Finally, after a long conversation among the four, one stepped forward.

"Bear asked what you said," the warrior stated. His skin was tanned and looked smooth, his eyes held the look of a hawk's, always gazing and studying his surroundings. He wasn't a small man either, even as he crouched down to look Shani over, the elven gunslinger estimated he stood about six foot six, maybe even eight inches in height. And powerful looking. But as he spoke, Shani could tell this man was also very, very educated. "I told him your greeting, and he wished to relay that to you. Are you two in trouble?"

Shani nodded in replay to the greeting, then began her tale. She explained everything, right down to the creature and how Pania sustained her injury. How the fair skinned elf had not awakened since she passed out half a day before. Again, the man relayed this information to his comrades. Bear stepped forward now, crouching down to get a better look at Pania. He spoke to the second man, the

one who could speak English. After a small conversation, Bear reached out to lift up Pania. Shani nervously tried to protest, but the second man explained.

“Bear says we’ll take you to our camp,” he said. “We can take better care of your friend there.” Finally, Shani nodded and Bear lifted the pale elf into his arms with ease. “I am known as Running Cloud,” the man said to Shani as he held out a hand to help her up.

“I’m Shani,” she replied as she accepted Running Cloud’s offer and rose to her feet. She noted that the four men did not have horses, but they moved quickly as though the trails of the forest were familiar to them. “So, y’all think ya kin help ‘er?”

Running Cloud walked beside Shani as they followed the other three warriors. He nodded and offered her a kind smile as he spoke. “I am positive of that. You can count on it.” With those words, it felt as though a great burden had been lifted from Shani’s shoulders. Her friend would get better. She just knew it. And suddenly, everything was right in the world.

Pania watched as the sun began to set beneath the horizon. It sank into the ocean waves, lighting up the sky in purples and oranges. As she watched, she felt Derringer’s hand on her shoulder. She looked up into the old werewolf’s kind eyes, and knew that it was time for him to go. With this knowledge, she felt a small amount of sadness. “Time fer ye ta go?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“Yes,” he replied in an even tone. “But you have a visitor coming. I can sense it on the wind.” He looked back to the east for a moment. Pania’s gaze turned to follow his. She saw nothing, but somehow knew that Derringer was right. “She’ll want to have a long talk with you, from what I can gather.”

Pania shook her head and let out a sigh. “Ow d’ye know these thin’s?”

Derringer tapped his temple and smiled. "I've been around for a while. It takes us humans a while, but given time we manage to see the forest for the trees." Pania chuckled as Derringer described the analogy. "Good bye, Miss Alow." He smiled and offered a small bow, which Pania responded with in kind. She watched as Derringer turned, straightening his stetson as he walked through the tall grass. Eventually, he disappeared from view, and Pania knew that he was gone. Her gaze returned to the east.

In the distance, Pania saw the woman. Elven in form, wearing gossamer robes that followed in the wind. She walked, but it seemed her feet did not touch the ground. As she drew closer, Pania thought that she was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. All at once, her heart was filled with joy and song. The woman was small of frame, but held a strength about her. Her lips held a kind, loving smile. Finally, she stopped in front of Pania and held out her arms as she offered a warm embrace. Pania accepted it, and fell into the woman's arms as though she were meeting an old friend that had been gone for so long.

"It is time, Pania," the woman said with a voice that calmed and soothed. "It is time for you to realize the path you must take."

Shani drained the water from her cup as she huddled around the fire. It was more for comfort than anything else. She had been at the small camp for a few hours, only the tribal shaman was allowed to see to Pania. Shani didn't protest, she'd heard about the strict rituals of the Native Americans, she wasn't about to argue when her friend's life was in the balance. All she did was watch as the tribe members went about their business. Some were mending clothes, others were getting food prepared, even more were working at building weapons. To Shani it appeared as though they were on the move. It stood to reason, many of the tribes moved from place to place. But this move seemed more urgent.

She kept quiet about her suspicions until Running Cloud joined her by the camp fire. He was a tall man, well muscled and appeared to have seen his fair share of hard work. He assisted the shaman and advised that Shani remained outside while the medicine rituals were conducted. His words were calm, and diplomatic. Which caused Shani to consider another observation.

“Y’all mind ifn I ask ya a personal kinda question?” she asked in a quiet voice as the tall man sat cross-legged by the fire. Running Cloud nodded, indicating she could. “No ‘ffense ‘r nuthin’, but y’all don’t act like no Injun I ever met b’fore.”

Running Cloud chuckled lightly at the observation, his smile seeming friendly and kind, and never faded as he answered. “There is an explanation. I spent a great deal of time in the east, and I actually went to university. I spent four years in Lower Canada in McGill studying medicine, and five years in Harvard studying philosophy.”

Shani arched an eyebrow as her eyes widened with awe and wonder. “How’d they take it down east? I mean, ya bein’ an Injun an’ all. Word travels ‘bout some o’ them folk thinkin’ y’all’re nuthin’ but savages.”

“I met with some resistance,” Running Cloud stated without hesitation. “I met with a lot of hate, and a lot of people who tried to say that I should just go back to the reserve.”

“But... ya did. I mean, ya come back here,” Shani replied quickly, her voice not nearly as hushed now that she knew Running Cloud was not angered or embarrassed by the questions. “Why ya come back?”

“To teach. Impart the knowledge I learned to the people I grew up with.” He set to work cutting up strips of meat as he spoke, offering some of the smoked venison to Shani. She accepted it without hesitation. It had been a while since she had anything resembling a decent meal. “My ability to let the harsh words inflicted upon me

came from our chief. He is a very peace loving man, and he only wants what's best for his people."

"So, yer all pickin' up an' movin'?" Shani asked with a touch of disbelief in her voice. "I mean, thet ain't jist somethin' ya do on a whim."

"We are moving, yes," he replied with a firm nod. "During my time in the eastern States I heard several rumours. Nothing is happening now, because the United States are focusing on the war with the Confederacy. But once that ends, they'll begin pushing settlers west again. People have asked what will happen when settlers meet up with the Natives. Most answers were less than flattering." He stopped talking as a woman brought them both some more water, then went about her chores. Once Running Cloud took a drink, he continued. "While I was in McGill, I learned that things might be less pressured on us in British North America." He chuckled a bit and shrugged before adding his opinion. "It's ironic that we'd feel less pressure from the same people that brought us this pressure in the first place. But, I think Great Britain is trying to do things a bit more diplomatically up north."

"So, y'all 're gonna jist settle down up there," Shani commented more than actually asked. "Ain't there tribes up there thet might take exception ta thet?"

"We've already sent scouts ahead to speak with the Cree Nations," he explained quickly. "We'll be allowed to have a place of our own in the Saskatchewan Territory." He finished his water and set down his cup, then looked over to Shani for a moment. She looked back, feeling quite nervous about the way he looked and mouthed a 'what' to get him to speak. "You've had your questions, now mine. It took you over an hour to sit down after you came into camp. You're worried about your friend, aren't you?"

"Oh hell yeah," she exclaimed with a voice that may have been

a bit too loud. A couple of small children that had been watching the pale elf let out a loud laugh as she spoke up. She turned to look, but could only smile when she saw them. She felt a bit sheepish at the outburst, and turned pink in the cheeks as she went back to Running Cloud. “Me an’ Panny, well we been travelin’ t’gether fer a few months. Learned that she were probably the best back up I ever had.”

“I know for a fact you aren’t originally from here,” Running Cloud continued and pointed to her slender, sharp tipped ears. “And I doubt you’re from Europe either.” Shani smirked a bit, knowing that she had this well educated man a bit stumped, and his curiosity was getting the better of him.

“What if I were one o’ yer ol’ classmates from school,” she began as her impish smile only grew. “An’ I were ta say ta you, thet elves, an’ pixies an’ all manner o’ fey folk do actually exist.” She watched him for a moment and caught the skeptical look in his eye. “I kin see yer d’batin’ whether I’m feedin’ ya a line o’ horse pucky, ‘r I’m actually tellin’ ya the gods honest truth. But, I kin confirm thet yeah, us elves do exist.”

“Okay,” Running Cloud said with a nod. He decided that was the best explanation, but his voice was still skeptical. “So you’re an elf. Fair enough. Then where in the world do you live?”

“Ain’t in this world,” she replied with a soft smile and looked to the sky. “Ya kin see it clear when the stars’re out. Where I’m from.”

“So how did you get here? Did you fly?”

Shani laughed at the question and shook her head. “No. I ain’t been blessed with sproutin’ wings an’ takin’ flight. But there’s ways. Doors, we call ‘em. Portals ta realms. This here place, Earth, is one o’ the realms. I guess both me an’ Panny got the hankerin’ fer an adventure an’ well,” she shrugged just a bit and grinned. “Here we are.”

Running Cloud remained silent as he took in the information. Without warning, he looked to the tent Pania was being tended to. Gracefully, more graceful than a man his size should have had, he rose to his feet, and clapped a gentle, consoling hand on Shani's shoulder before he took long steps toward the tent. Shani watched him, wondering if her explanation confounded him, or only made him more curious. Only time would tell.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Washington D.C., November 2, 1863

The large horse came to a stop and let out a chuffle as his rider dismounted. The tall man that climbed down adjusted his long coat and squared his stetson on his head. His eyes never left his target, United States Army Captain Samuel Williams. He saw Williams in front of a small cafe, could tell that the events of the past few weeks still haunted his mind. He had to report his findings. But the man knew that Williams wasn't even really sure of his own findings, of what he had seen.

Martin Derringer tied his horse to the railing and walked slowly across the street. The silver star that indicated he was a United States marshal gleamed in the low light of the early morning. His boots kicked up small snow storms from the ground as he made his way toward Captain Williams. As Derringer made his way across the street, Williams looked up. He nodded in greeting to Derringer, taking note of the star he wore, recognizing the position the man held.

He filled his pipe with tobacco, and expected Derringer to open up conversation. Williams had a feeling as soon as he saw this man, that he had something urgent to say.

“Good morning, Captain,” Derringer greeted him with a smile as he mounted the curb and joined Williams on the sidewalk. “Crisp morning, isn’t it.”

“I would have to agree, Marshal,” Williams replied before striking a match to light his pipe. As the embers began to glow, the sweet smell of tobacco filled the air, Williams inhaled and continued his conversation. “Though from the look of it, I’d say that you did not come here to discuss the weather with me.”

Derringer smiled just a bit as he leaned against a post that held up the awning in front of the cafe. “You are very astute in your deductions, Captain. But I don’t have to inform you of that, or your tenacity to never give up. Your dogged determination in chasing the outlaws Black Mask and Pale Rider is proof of that.”

Williams just stared at the man for a moment. He knew there were wanted posters that had declared the capture of the pair of gunslingers, but he had not known that he and his men were also watched as they gave pursuit. “You have me at a disadvantage, Marshal. It would seem you know a great deal more than one should.”

“You could say it that way,” Derringer replied with a nod. “You should also know that I doubt you’ll have to worry about them anymore.”

“Perhaps I was wrong,” Williams snorted a laugh at Derringer’s comment. “I take it a man such as yourself would have seen the destruction in Minnesota, then you must also deduce that both Black Mask and Pale Rider are dead.”

“If such were true,” Derringer replied with a chuckle. “There are things that mankind in this world does not know of. Some men have seen them and tried to explain them, others have gone mad just

for thinking of it. But there is an explanation, Captain Williams.” Derringer pushed himself off the post and stood straight. “If you are willing, I can explain them to you.”

Williams studied Derringer for a moment as a carriage pulled up beside the men. The Captain tapped out his pipe and tucked it away as a smile formed on his face. “Marshal, I believe I would like an explanation. But at present I have an appointment with the President to discuss these matters pertaining to Black Mask and Pale Rider. No doubt, he will want to hear your explanation as well, so if you please...” He held out an arm toward the open door of the carriage and nodded to Derringer. The United States Marshal looked to the door, then back to Williams. He nodded only once, mouthing a ‘very well’ before climbing into the vehicle.

Pania sat in the tall grass and watched the sun sink lower on the horizon as the woman who had come to her hummed a soft, sweet tune. This mysterious woman hadn’t said a single word since she first appeared and introduced herself. Pania had spoken, seemed almost willing to speak as though she had to tell this woman everything she knew. The woman was very comforting to be around, of this there was no doubt. It was as though Pania felt comfortable imparting information to her. But the elven bard felt there was something else that needed to be discussed. Something that still tugged at the back of her mind. She looked over to the woman and smiled. “Well, I’d say it were time ta find out wha’ ‘xactly Thadius were talkin’ ‘bou’.” she stated in a calm voice. “Dunna ye?”

“Hmmm,” the woman simply said as she smiled a coy smile. “You have questions, don’t you Pania.” The elven bard nodded slowly in reply. “Then all you have to do is ask.”

“Ask,” Pania repeated with a small smile. “Righ’ then. Ask. Wha’ now, then? Wha’ ‘appens ta me now?”

“You will soon awaken,” the woman replied. She looked to the west and watched the sun as the last rays of light seemed to wave it’s good evening. The woman raised her hand and closed her eyes, her lips moved as they spoke a silent incantation, and an orb of brilliant light rested in her palm, shedding light around the small area. “You will awaken, and realize the path you are on. Not right away, but in time.”

“The path I’m on,” Pania again repeated, feeling a tinge of frustration for these cryptic words. “Wha’ path’s tha’?”

The woman again let a coy smile slip onto her face. “I can’t tell you everything Pania. You must learn what you need to know when the time comes. Every decision you make will be a choice that will lead you to the path. Some choices will be wrong, others will be correct, but you will always find the path.”

“An’ wha’ ‘xactly is the path?” Pania asked as she lay back in the grass. The soft grass felt very much like a warm embrace and she tried to stifle a yawn.

“The path you take,” the woman said with a mild chuckle. “Is the path that leads to me.”

Pania lazily looked up and laughed. “Bu’ ye ‘ere righ’ now.” The woman only replied with a smile as she easily rose to her feet. To Pania, it seemed as though the woman floated to her feet. But she reminded herself that this was what happens when you dreamwalk. Sometimes it is the shared experiences of memories. Other times, it could be discussions with creatures only residing in thought. And still more times it was believed the dreamer had visions of deities.

Pania blinked as she thought of this last point. Her eyes tried to focus on the woman as she knelt down beside the bard. She tried to speak, only to find a gentle finger pressed against her lips as the woman hushed her quietly. “Meet me on the shores of Invermane,” she said in a whisper, then bent low as she pressed her lips to Pania’s in a kiss that

embodied friendship, love and caring all at once. The woman leaned back, breaking the kiss and smiled. “It is time to get up, Pania.”

Her eyes fluttered open as her lungs breathed deeply of the air around her. She smelled the smoke from a fire, the scent of tanned leather, burning sweet grass. The room she was in was dark, but eventually, she realized she wasn't in just any room. Pania Alow looked about at the walls of the tipi for a moment and smiled. Dakota, she figured. These tribes populated this region. The memories of the past few days began to rush into her mind again, and she remembered what happened once again. She tried to rise, but a gentle hand pushed her back down.

“You are still weak, Pale Rider,” the elder stated. Pania turned to his voice, and saw the ceremonial trappings of the Dakota medicine man. “Do not move too quickly. Let your body believe in itself again.”

Pania lay back down and felt a tingle in her shoulder. She reached up a hand to inspect it, remembering the blade from the creature as it had tried to skewer her. She opened her mouth to ask a question, but only coughed. Finally, she managed to mutter, “Water, please.”

The medicine man turned and spoke softly in Dakota to another in the tipi. Quickly, some water was brought to Pania as the medicine man explained. “Your spirit is healed, though it was injured very badly. Now, you are awake, and your body can heal.”

“Shani,” Pania whispered after she took a large gulp of water. “Is she...”

“Black Mask is fine,” the medicine man replied with a kind smile. “She has been very worried about you. You two are very good friends, I think.”

“Aye,” Pania replied with a smile. “We’ve ‘elped each other outta the odd scrape ‘r two.” She looked around the tipi and sighed

deeply. “I guess this proves ‘ow much I can trust ‘er.” The medicine man chuckled in reply as Pania let out a weak laugh. “Fate, maybe. I think there were somethin’ out there tha’ wanted us ta come t’gether. Ye know, ta ‘elp each other out.”

The medicine man nodded in reply and spoke in his usual quiet tone. “One of our warriors, Running Cloud, has spoken with Black Mask. He says that you are both far from home. He says that you and Black Mask would like to return home.”

“It’s crossed me mind,” Pania stated with a smile. “There’s thin’s I miss, ta be certain.”

“You can see things that the white man cannot,” he explained as though answering a question never asked. “Even somethings that the People cannot. Here, near the many lakes, you shall find your path.” He poured more water for her, then rose to his feet. “Rest. In the morning you will feel better.” He walked slowly out of the tent, leaving Pania to rest and contemplate his words.

Shani poked the fire with a stick. The early morning was crisp as a fog rolled in off the lakes. Morning in the northern state was deceiving. What appeared to be warm was less than that. It didn’t help that she had nothing to do since she had received help from this tribe of Dakota, she was beginning to feel restless. She kept to herself mostly, speaking only to Running Cloud whenever he would come around. Sometimes, she would help with some small task that needed to be done. Enough to pay her way for the kindness these Natives showed her and Pania.

Always, the elven bard crept into her thoughts. She’d been in that tipi for more than two days now, and no word on what was happening. She wanted to ask, but felt as though she would be intruding upon old rituals. It would be a waiting game for Shani. Besides, Running Cloud promised her he would tell her if there was any change, for better or

worse. As the wait grew, Shani wondered if all hope was lost, that if her friend had passed on. She braced herself for the horrible news.

She didn't look up as a figure plopped onto the log beside her. Shani had grown used to many of the tribes people sitting beside her, often asking a question or two while they rested from their work or sat to eat. She prepared herself for the inevitable questions just as she heard the figure take in a deep breath and sigh pleasantly. The elven gunslinger stopped poking at the fire for a moment. That sigh was all too familiar. Part of her said she must still be asleep, that this must be a dream. Slowly, she turned her head to her left where the figure sat. She blinked a couple of times and went so far as to pinch herself. She let out a little cry of pain, realizing that this was not a dream at all.

Pania grinned as she wrapped the blanket around her shoulders. She seemed more chipper than when she first woke up the previous night. The elven bard looked to Shani as her grin widened. "Mornin'," she spoke in a quiet voice, her vocal chords still a bit tired from her ordeal.

"Land sakes 'live!" Shani cried out as a smile formed on her own lips. She threw herself forward, throwing her arms around the elven bard. Pania gave a small squeal and laughed as the lithe elf embraced her in a tight hug. "Thought I lost ya fer certain, Girly girl." Pania let out a laugh as she tried her best to return the hug, but Shani's arms had her pinned down a bit. The elven gunslinger composed herself as she released Pania from the warm embrace, but leaned in and spoke in a quiet voice. "Don't think thet hug meant my feelin's t'ward ya changed any. I like ya fine 'nough, jist not 'nough fer a role in the hay."

Pania gave Shani a mocking pout before the smile returned to her face. "I spoke with the med'cine man," she stated in a hoarse voice, coughing a bit as she tried to speak. A woman brought her some water, which Pania took graciously and had a sip before continuing.

“‘E says tha’ we migh’ be able ta ge’ back ‘ome. Says there’s thin’s we can see ‘round ‘ere tha’ others will no’ see.”

“Ya mean, like a doorway home,” Shani replied with a grin. Pania nodded affirmatively and took another sip of water. Shani let out a small laugh of triumph. “When do we git started?”

“Med’cine man says they’ll give us a coupla ‘orses. We can ride north ta the lakes an’ we should be able ta see it.” She finished off her water and set her cup down before wrapping the blanket around her shoulders. “Bu’ first, there’s somethin’ I need ta do.” She looked to Shani for a moment and smiled. Shani groaned just a bit, trying to predict the elven bard’s next statement, only to find it wouldn’t be what was expected. “I’m bloody ‘ungery. I need food.”

Washington D.C., November 4, 1863

The doors to the office closed quietly as the two men discussed the meeting that had taken most of the day. As promised, Derringer provided the information that he knew and that he suspected about the two outlaws known as Black Mask and Pale Rider. Both the President and Captain Williams listened to the entire tale in earnest, but the old werewolf could tell it would be difficult to prove anything to them that his words were true. So he used evidence and fact. Evidence from the burned out shack in Minnesota. The evidence and fact that Williams himself had seen with his own eyes.

Confront a man with what he had seen, truly seen, and it was difficult to discount the tale Derringer had told them both. The next question that came about was what to do next? If Derringer was correct, then the possibility of meeting these elves again, or others of their kind, was very real. The President wanted to be certain that they wouldn’t try to thwart the plans of this country in any way shape or form. But Derringer himself reminded them both there were enough men in the world right now that were trying to undermine the government’s of

the world. These elves wouldn't nearly be as strong a threat as that. Besides, Derringer felt they came here more out of curiosity than anything else.

After many hours of discussion, it was finally resolved that the office of the President would not reveal anything about these people. Letters were also drafted that would be sent to each marshal and sheriff in the Union, telling them, quite plainly, that the outlaws known as Black Mask and Pale Rider were indeed dead. Killed in a hostile action that proved they were trying to protect the people who chased them. The last part used to turn the tables on the vicious nature that some held toward the pair. That in fact, they were heroes more than outlaws.

The letters were completed and the two lawmen were excused from the office. No commendations, no pats on the back or a job well done speech. Neither needed it, nor did they expect it. Now they just had to return to their everyday lives. Derringer watched as a messenger came down the hallway toward them. Williams saw the man as well. He carried with him an envelope, and as he approached the two men, he held it out to Derringer.

"What's this?" the marshal asked as he took the envelope. He took note of the official seal of the office of the President.

"The President felt it necessary to draft a second letter," the messenger announced. "Copies of this letter will be delivered to the people you mentioned. Sheriff Walker in Oxford, Dieter in Reading, and we have reason to believe that Ezekiel Morgan and his family have now taken up residence near Philadelphia. This letter is for you," he said motioning to the envelope in Derringer's hands, and then he handed another to Captain Williams, indicating it was also the same letter. His next comment was directed to Captain Williams. "The President wishes to express his gratitude, Captain. He admires your determination, and wished to offer a suggestion. After you have

accomplished what you wanted in the military, he suggested you seek a political position. Men with your determination are difficult to find, and he believes you would make an excellent governor some day.”

Williams nodded as he tucked the letter away inside his coat. “Tell the President I will consider his words.” The messenger nodded and continued on down the hallway, leaving Derringer and Williams to their thoughts.

The old werewolf looked up, and offered a small smile to Williams. “I was hasty in our last meeting, Captain,” Derringer said in a quiet voice. “I said back in Franklin that we wouldn’t meet again. I was wrong. But I’m glad I was wrong. You’re a good man, Captain.”

The Captain only nodded as he took a deep breath. With a tip of his hat, he bowed slightly to Derringer and began to walk down the hallway to the entrance. Derringer’s smile never left his lips as he tapped the corner of the envelope against the cleft in his chin.

He took one last look toward the doors of the oval office, straightened his stetson, then turned on his heel and followed Williams example. It was time to get back to his town again. At least for a little while.

The horses stood quietly by the lake shore, neither really minded the light riders they carried. They seemed to know they were about to go on a journey. But even the horses wouldn’t know just what that journey would entail. The elders of the tribe offered Shani and Pania a pair of fast horses, blankets and some food to carry on their journey. A few of the women offered them extra clothing, and some hand made gifts so the pair would remember them. Pania stated quite boldly, that for what these people had done for them, no matter how great or small in the grand scheme of things, she for one would never forget.

The pair of elves watched the lake for a long while. Taking

note as the fog was rolling in. Both could see strange shapes and strange lights appearing here and there in the fog. And then, a brilliant light danced close to them as the fog twisted and turned between their mounts. Shani looked over to Pania with a small smile on her face. “Looks like this is it,” she drawled as she felt nervous and excited all at the same time. She felt Pania’s mount move a bit closer to her own, then was surprised as the elven bard leaned over and kissed her cheek. Pania leaned back away with an impish grin and chuckled a bit. Shani just smiled and shook her head. “I’ll give ya that one.”

Pania offered her hand to Shani, who took it graciously. “Time ta go ‘ome, wouldna ye say?” The elven gunslinger took a deep breath and nodded as she looked to the bright light from the portal before them. Without another word, they coaxed their mounts forward, leaving behind one adventure that would live on in their memories.

Near Brockton, waning days of the Season of the Harvest

The stars shone brightly in the night sky as the animals of the Harvest Hills and into the Forest of the Garden all slept quietly, save for those few that used the night time to hunt and play. These included pixies, sprites and other fey that hid themselves away in the trees and brush of the hills and forest. On this night, however, there was something else.

Two horses stood on a small hill, as their riders sat comfortably on their backs. Each rider seemed content with just staying in one spot and letting the sounds of the night greet them. To any nocturnal traveler they would have seemed quite outlandish in their dress. The long coats, the stetsons, right down to the weapons they carried. But these riders weren’t too concerned about anyone seeing them. They were finally home.

Pania Alow leaned back a bit and inhaled deeply, smiling as she closed her eyes. “Tha’s somethin’ I’ve no’ smelled in forever,” she

said as she sat back up. “Smells cleaner ‘n it were on Earth.” She looked over at Shani, who was intently looking at the stars.

“Ya kin see the stars better here ‘n ya kin there,” she said as she looked to Pania. “Guess jist chalk it up ta bein’ a nice place ta visit.”

“Ever think ye want ta go back?” Pania asked in a voice that seemed filled with just a touch of wonderment.

“Maybe,” Shani replied as she thought about the question for a moment. “Never know what time will show us. ‘R wha’ opportunities’ll come ‘long. ‘Sides, I might jist settle down here an’ stay put fer a bit.”

“You couldna stay pu’ in one place if ye tried,” Pania smirked and gave Shani a playful swat. “I seen ye attitude out there. Ye’ve a wanderin’ ‘eart, tha’s fer certain.”

“Could say the same ‘bout you, girly girl,” Shani replied with a smirk of her own. Both elves finally steered their horses toward the small cobble road that ran past the hill top. It would lead them to the town of Brockton. From there, they could venture onto the city of Stonebridge, or remain at the town’s tavern and continue talking about their adventure over a good meal and some good cider. As they rode, they continued to talk, mostly about family members. Shani spoke of brother Sywyn, a Knight of some rank now. Pania spoke of her own brother Mandrel, more a knave, in her words, than a knight. But still a charming individual.

Two things were certain. Pania was right, Shani had a wandering heart. There was a very good chance the elven gunslinger would be on the road again. But this time she’d more than likely be on the road with the elven bard at her side. Whether the adventure was here at home, or in some distant land on Earth, their time of adventure was far from over.

The End... for now.

EPILOGUE

Near Brockton, present day

Lysa lowered her glasses as she closed the book. She had just finished reading the first book that Pania had written. It was a series of memories written down in the form of an adventurous story. Lyssa was perched on Pania's writing desk as she read, she hadn't moved in the last several hours as the book held her attention while Pania worked on the second volume of adventures.

"That oughta do it." Pania murmured as she dried the ink on the last page and closed the book. The title had been chosen a while ago, and had some strange language written on the leather cover. *Los Elfos y el Diablo*. As Pania had explained before, it was fitting for the volume. A sentence in Spanish, one of the languages of the realm she and Shani had visited together.

"A prince huh?" Lyssa started with a small smirk as her gaze fell to her own protruding chest. Pania's description of the festival in mind, her own words as a little girl had not exactly come to fruition.

“Did you get lost along the way?”

Pania laughed softly at Lyssa’s comment. “Ye be perfect the way ye are, luv. Would no’ change a ‘air on your ‘ead.” She smiled softly as she sat back in her chair, the first break she had since she began writing several hours before. “‘Sides, who’s ta say my dreams didna come true, jus’ with a small twist.”

“Was Shani really like that?” Lyssa said as she referenced the image of Shani as a little girl, all ribbons and bows. “And Sywyn? He would never have struck me as the type to be such a brat as a child.”

Pania nodded in reply. The idea of Shani being a girly girl and Sywyn being anything less than knightly amused Lyssa to no end. Lyssa slid off the edge of the desk, stretching out her stiff muscles. She let out a long sigh as her body seemed to protest from having sat for so long. “Will you tell me what the third one is about?” she asked as she nodded toward a small pile of papers that had several notations written on them. Lyssa knew Pania’s writing style, she would take carefully organized notes before she set about authoring a book. Even if it was the simplest of books to write.

“No,” Pania said with amusement in her voice. She too, stood up and stretched. “It’ll ‘ave more of an effect when ye read it yourself. Bu’, I’ll jus’ give ye one ‘int. Me sister is in it.”

Lyssa’s lips moved into a pout. It would be a while until Pania would let Lyssa read the book. The suspense was enough to keep her wanting more. At least she had one hint as to what it could be about.

“This book also told about how you became a knightess.” Lyssa stated as she handed the volume back to Pania. The elven paladin took it carefully and placed it upon a shelf, next to several others that Pania had written.

“It did,” Pania replied, agreeing with her. “Only I didn’t know what it was until later. I jus’ only recently b’gan ta remember the images from the dreamwalks I ‘ad. I though’ I’d forget, bu’ as I wrote

this, ev'rythin' come back quickly.”

“Well, she must be watching over you or something.” Lyssa continued. “Otherwise she wouldn't have opened the turning power to you when you needed it the most.”



“Mm.” She said with a nod. “I s'ppose the Lady is watchin' o'er me, now as much as she were back then. Else I would no' be 'ere with ye right now.”

“I'm grateful for that.” Lyssa said with a laugh. “C'mon lets get something to eat,” she said taking Pania by the hand as she pulled her toward the door of her room. “I'm starving, and I think perhaps it's time to make a trip into Stonebridge. At least to let people know we're still alive, if nothing else.”

“Don' see 'ow they would think that,” Pania giggled. “With the way we carry on in 'ere las' nigh'.”

Lyssa laughed and started for the door, letting Pania's hand go as the pale elf picked up her quill once more. “Need ta add this one thin',” she informed Lyssa as she opened up the cover to the new book she had begun. She opened it to the first page, and quickly dipped her pen in fresh ink as she scrawled out one final line. *I always knew.*



Map Legend	Capital Cities
Territorial Borders - - - - -	Stonebridge, Byulona - pop. 130,000
Battles X	Stennbri, Nodicia - pop. 65,000
Cities 	Misbridge, Myeteria - pop. 275,000
Villages 	Dawnbridge, Dawn's Rise - pop. 15,000
	Smerkhet, Heralcia - pop. 500,000



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tim Holtorf is a graphic designer working for a weekly newspaper in Outlook, Saskatchewan. Developing characters and story ideas for over two decades, he now has two books to show for a long effort.

Previously, he worked in the field of broadcasting, working as both an on air announcer and as a news reporter. This ten year career took him to many different communities throughout Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

His first book published is *The Adventures of Black Mask & Pale Rider*, his second is *Canyons of Steel*

Elven Magic Meets Gunslinger Grit

What happens when two elven travellers find themselves in the United States in the middle of the Civil War?

The Adventures of Black Mask and Pale Rider tells the story of two elven women who's curiosity gets the better of them. The wild ride takes them from the Union to the Confederacy and back again. Along the way they make enemies and friends and learn a little bit about this world, and about themselves.

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