

Secrets of the Wall

R. Walt Bailey

The common room of the Swallow Tail Inn was unusually full for midday. This would be the day when a visit by a special emissary from the Ahnveil leadership had been promised and word had quickly spread around the largely agrarian community. Everyone was interested in their collective safety as raids from the Wall had increased dramatically over the past six months. The Swallow Tail Clan was led like all the other clans of Abyssalia by a Star-Man, but Gawen had been pulled away to help fight in the growing war against the Empire.

This left leadership in the hands of Dermotte, a slight man with graying hair, who served as the senior member of the elder's council. Dermotte sat quietly with his son at one of the tables in the back, nervously reading and re-reading the message a courier had delivered several days before. For the fifth or sixth time, he checked he had the correct day and time; actually, the message simply stated around noon. Dermotte spoke quietly with three friends at an adjoining table and was just about to re-read the message again, when the large wooden door to the common area opened and a collective gasp reverberated around the room.

The woman who stepped through the door stood over six feet in height and was dressed in the tight brown leather uniform of the Ahnveil. Her raven black hair was swept back and woven into a long warrior's pleat hanging to the middle of her back. The fletching from a dozen arrows and the pommel and hilt from a back sword protruded over her right shoulder. Her narrow waist was accented by a brown leather band with a ten-inch belt knife. Knee high brown boots fit over her tight leather riding pants. Almost involuntarily everyone stood as she took a few steps into the crowded room. When her companion entered, most of the patrons retreated against the closest wall.

“My name is Jynelle Parr; I am a Star-Man and an officer in the Ahnveil Army,” the exquisite woman said in a loud firm voice. “My Ward is Belvyr the Black, and yes, he is a Dire-Wolf.”

With his huge head reaching almost to the tall woman’s shoulder, the wolf was easily the size of a large pony. His intense amber eyes quickly surveyed the crowded room as the Star-Man rubbed the wolf’s large head. “I am looking for a man named Dermotte.”

The leader of the Swallow Tail Clan had lost his voice suddenly, but he managed to raise his hand slightly to capture the beautiful woman’s attention. With the enormous wolf at her side, the Star-Man was quickly standing right in front of Dermotte extending her hand. Looking up at both woman and Dire-Wolf, he curbed his fear and met her hand with his. “Welcome, My Lady, to the Swallow Tail Inn and our small village. This is my son Tommen.” With much less hesitation, Tommen shook hands as well.

Before Dermotte could begin, the fat innkeeper approached and bowed to the Star-Man, “Can I bring anything for you, My Lady, or for your wolf?” he added as an afterthought.

“You can call me Jynelle, and I would like a glass of spiced wine and whatever Dermotte and Tommen are having. If you have an old bone, Belvyr would love that, preferably pork.” The innkeeper bowed slightly and then disappeared through a large swinging double door to the kitchens.

“I understand that you have been having some problems with patrols from the Wall,” Jynelle said, looking from Dermotte and then to his son, Tommen.

“That is correct, Jynelle. At the time, I approached the authorities for help, some of the outlying farms closest to the Wall were being hit once or twice a month. Mostly food, horses, and other livestock were being stolen. But lives were also lost. Now the raids are getting even closer to the village.”

“Have you had any raids reported in the last ten days?”

Dermotte thought for a few seconds. “I don’t recall any being reported, but if the raiders killed or kidnapped everyone, there would be no one to report.”

They were interrupted by the innkeeper bringing their drinks. One of the kitchen boys had a huge hambone he carried in both hands. Belvyr had lain down beside Jynelle, but he sat up at the sight of the bone. “Don’t be afraid,” Jynelle said. “Hold it out firmly with both hands, and he will take it gently from you.” The small lad of about ten looked terrified, but he held the bone out as instructed and Belvyr took it softly from his grasp. In a flash, the small boy vanished back to the kitchen.

“I don’t think our Star-Men have wolves,” Tommen said, speaking up for the first time.

Jynelle held up her right hand, showing a silver signet ring with a seven-sided star engraved on the face. “Yes, they do. Until about a year ago, The Star-Man Council wanted that little tidbit kept a secret, but now it is growing into common knowledge. Everyone who wears this ring is bonded to a Dire-Wolf.”

“The letter I received asked me to be prepared to be away a week. We have two pack horses with all the supplies the three of us will need,” Dermotte said.

“Have you ever seen the Wall, Tommen?”

“No, Miss Jynelle,” he answered. “But I am longing to see it.”

“Well, when we finish our drinks and when Belvyr finishes consuming that enormous bone, we can depart.”

The three traveled slowly and easily that afternoon, stopping on occasion to visit with the owners of the outlying farms. Most of the residents herded goats or sheep and their dogs were not pleased when they eyed Belvyr. They stopped for the night alongside a small lake. The sixteen-year-old Tommen went for a swim after the camp was established and was soon joined by the huge Dire-Wolf. By the time they were both summoned to leave the water and sit by the fire to dry, they were fast friends.

The next morning, they were off early with Belvyr ranging far ahead of them. The farms they passed became fewer and fewer, and none reported having seen any raiding parties in at least ten days. Late that afternoon, as they rode easily through an open meadow, they passed the first of a series of funeral pyres, the smoldering bodies of dead Ruks barely recognizable among the piles of ashes.

An hour before dark, Jynelle suddenly ordered them off the road. She handed the reins of her horse to Tommen and asked both he and his father Dermotte to stand behind a small grove of large oaks. The Star-Man moved up the road fifty yards and silently strung her recurve bow. The two villagers took cover and positioned themselves, so they could view the action in front of them. Jynelle's position was slightly below them and they had an unobstructed view of the wood's road beyond her.

Her brown leather uniform blended almost perfectly against the shaded trunks of the ancient oak trees. Tommen was only certain of her location when she reached over her right shoulder to remove an arrow from her quiver.

Suddenly, two men and six Ruks appeared sprinting into view a hundred yards in front of the Star-Man. She waited patiently until they were within forty yards before shooting. Her first arrow took one of the men squarely in the chest. Within seconds her next shot took the second man. Her next move surprised the villagers. Leaning her bow against the trunk of an oak, she smoothly drew her backsword and stepped into the middle of the road.

The Ruks, all dressed in black leather, hesitated at first; but after seeing only one obstacle in front of them with a blade, they attacked. The sleek woman flowed into the six attackers that approached her as if the whole episode were a dance. Her blade was a blur as she opened throats, blocked tulwar and cudgel strikes, and even severed a head. In only a few seconds, five of the spawn were dead; the remaining member of the party turned in a panic to flee back up the road. Before he had taken a dozen

steps, he was stricken from the side by the enormous black Dire-Wolf. Catching the Ruk by the neck, one shake of his huge head was all it took to break the creature's spine.

Tommen was the first to arrive, leading two of the horses. He had never seen a Ruk before and took a few minutes to examine one of them. At about five feet in height, the Ruk had a large head and pointy teeth, with a barrel chest and squat body over bandy legs. Their arms seemed too long for their torso, which made them appear hunched over when they ran. The evil creatures were a genetic creation of the dark lord, Karshee, and first appeared over ten thousand years before; about the time the Wall was constructed. They were immensely strong and lacking human dexterity with either sword or club, they fought largely in packs, relying on their strength in numbers to win the day.

As his father joined them in the road, Tommen said, "That was amazing. Those were great shots with your bow, but I have never seen a sword move that quickly."

Instead of answering, Jynelle looked down the road before them. She seemed to be in deep concentration, as both she and Belvyr looked in the direction where fleeing Ruks had appeared. Both Dermotte and Tommen followed her line of sight, and just at the very edge of their vision they could see a half-dozen huge wolves moving among the large trees of the forest. As suddenly as the wolves had appeared, they just as quickly vanished.

"What were those Dire-Wolves carrying on their backs?" Tommen asked.

"I couldn't see from here," Jynelle said taking the reins of her horse from Dermotte and vaulting into the saddle with a fluid grace that only came from years of practice. "I want to camp tonight by a pretty stream." Instead of following the road, the warrior dressed in all leather turned sharply left, leaving the two villagers to scramble aboard their horses to keep up with her.

That evening they caught trout from the large stream beside Jynelle's chosen campsite for supper. She made Belvyr stay away from the water until they had enough fish for all of them. The next

day they passed more funeral pyres, some appearing to be only a day or two old. “When we received your letter about concentrated attacks coming from the Wall, we moved a company of the Ahnveil into this area. They have been here about four weeks and are intercepting one to two sorties a day.”

“That explains why the attacks on the Swallow Tail Valley have declined,” Dermotte said. “Why is it that we have seen none of your warriors?”

“They don’t get paid to stand around and greet the locals. They get paid to kill the soldiers of the Imperial Army and their Ruks,” Jynelle said curtly and would not discuss the subject any further that evening.

The next morning their travels brought them back to the main road. Less than a mile later, they came to the largest pyre they had seen, but this one had yet to be fired. Tommen walked his horse around the piles of the dead examining them more closely. Numerous small arrow wounds were visible through their leather armor. Before he could ask a question, two riders wearing brown leather approached them on ponies from the forest. “Those are dwarves,” Tommen exclaimed to no one in particular. Each carried a double-bladed axe over their shoulder and a short belt knife.

Jynelle rode out to meet the new arrivals and both the dwarves saluted as they stopped in front of her. The Star-Man conversed with them in the common tongue for about five minutes before the two dwarves saluted, turned their ponies around, and then disappeared into the forest again. Jynelle motioned for Dermotte and his son to follow her as she continued north on their original track. She would offer no details from this brief conversation.

Late that afternoon as the sun was beginning to vanish below the horizon on their left, the three crested a large hill, and Tommen got his first glimpse of something he would never forget. Directly in front of them, rising above every hill and stretching from horizon to horizon, was the largest structure ever created by mankind. Even at almost a league, the Wall was hugely impressive. The setting sun

reflected from the façade giving it the illusion of a knife blade. “*Cair Dhes Mah*,” Jynelle said. “The Edge of Dawn, it is even more impressive at first light.”

That evening she led them away from the Wall and back up into the mountains. There they made their camp around a small lake. After a small fire was blazing, Jynelle announced that she was going to bathe. “You are welcome to stay, join me in the cool water, or otherwise occupy yourselves. It matters not to me, but I don’t want to embarrass anyone.” With that announcement, she began removing her boots and then her uniform.

“Tommen, let’s you and I go check on the pack animals,” Dermotte said. The boy seemed slightly disappointed but went with his father. They busied themselves for fifteen minutes adjusting harnesses and saddles. When they returned to the fire, Jynelle wore a thin white shift that came to about the middle of her long legs. She sat facing away from them, brushing her long black hair by the fire.

Tommen knew with no hesitation she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He was most uncomfortable until she walked over to her saddle bags and removed fresh clothes to wear. When the Star-Man returned, she wore her riding pants, knee high boots, and a thin sleeveless under tunic.

“Tomorrow we will head back,” Jynelle announced. “Dermotte, are you satisfied that the Ahnveil Army is protecting your valley?”

“Yes, but I have some questions.”

“Let me anticipate some of them,” Jynelle began. “We will keep a company in this sector until the sorties from the Wall stop. As you have probably seen, the Ahnveil do not take prisoners. When a patrol leaves the Wall, no one comes back, including the horses their men ride. It is our experience that after we hammer them hard for a month, they first begin to increase the size of their patrols. After losing so many men, Ruks, and equipment, they simply give up and move to another section on the Wall.”

“How big is the Wall?” Tommen asked.

“Four hundred feet high and it stretches from the Great Eastern Ocean to the Great Western Ocean, a span of about sixty leagues. It is manned by a huge garrison of soldiers who keep working siege engines at intervals all along the way. The top is a flat roadbed made of the same inert stucco material as the Wall itself. Every league there is a sally port with a huge iron portcullis for a gate.”

“How is it possible that you know all of this?” Dermotte asked.

“That I cannot tell you,” Jynelle looked from father to son and could see they did not understand. “I must assume that it is possible that one of you could be captured by the Imperial Army on one of their sorties. Under torture, they can make you talk. The less you know about our operation, the better for you and for us.”

“What does the word Ahnveil mean?” Tommen asked.

“It is a Fansetti word. Dwarfish if you will that means literally, “Those who would be free.” They were interrupted as Belvyr returned to their camp and after a quick scratch on his head by each of them, the huge Dire-Wolf laid down by the fire.

“That wolf can speak to you, can’t he?” Tommen stated.

Jynelle smiled at the handsome young man. “Yes, he can, and I can speak with him empathically up to distances of over a league... Enough questions for tonight, let’s get some sleep.”

The next morning when Jynelle swung aboard her tall horse, Tommen and Dermotte were already mounted and waiting on her, each holding the lead to a pack animal. “You have been to the other side of the Wall, haven’t you?” Tommen asked with a big smile.

“Yes, I have,” Jynelle answered him with a quick wink. She trotted ahead of them to terminate any more conversation. Most of that morning they spent climbing a large mountain pass to their southwest. The Star-Man reined her black horse in abruptly as Belvyr made a brief appearance at the top of the pass. She seemed lost in deep concentration for almost a minute. Suddenly Jynelle spun her horse

around and faced the two men. “I need an honest answer from each of you, and I need it quickly... Dermotte, can you and Tommen swear to me, upon penalty of death, that you can keep secret the things you are about to see?”

When they both agreed, Tommen eagerly added, “What an adventure.”

“Good, now keep up with me, we need to hurry.”

The tall Star-Man led them up and over the mountain pass before them and quickly through two more gaps where three mountains merged together. When they exited from the last gap, they were looking down on a large meadow that was a half mile long and a third as wide. Tall, waist high grass covered the expansive mountain pasture. A beaten down track coursed right through the middle and headed almost directly at them. “This is where the battle will take place. Our company is already in position. We have been waiting for over a month for an opportunity like this.”

“I don’t see anyone,” Dermotte said.

“Exactly,” Jynelle answered. She had them dismount and tie their horses back in the trees, out of sight from the meadow. They did not have to wait more than twenty minutes. “Here they come,” the Star-Man whispered.

On the far side of the long meadow four men dressed in solid black uniforms emerged riding abreast of each other. Behind them, about thirty Ruks followed, shuffling along in their standard ground covering lope they could maintain for hours. Two hundred yards behind them, two men led another company of a hundred Ruks. After three more companies with the identical hierarchy, a wagon train followed composed of twenty flat bed wagons drawn by teams of four horses each. Lastly, a fifth company of men and Ruks bought up the rear of the huge column.

The morning was cool, and the sky was overcast, suggesting the possibility of rain in the afternoon or evening. A slight breeze hit them in the face as they watched the drama unfolding below. “About forty men and five hundred Ruks,” Jynelle whispered.

The van for the Imperial Column was within fifty yards of the wood line at the end of the meadow, only several hundred yards from the three observers, when the Ahnveil struck. One single long peal on a war horn sounded from just below their position. The sound resonated off the walls of the surrounding mountains. Out in the meadow several things occurred at once. Almost immediately, the northern end of the field towards the Wall was ablaze in a dozen places. In the tall, smooth, wavy grass of the meadow suddenly two dozen wolves appeared on each side of the column. Riding the Dire-Wolves were children, each armed with a small longbow, and a quiver of arrows and backsword across their shoulders.

The huge wolves darted in between the different formations of Ruks, their riders firing their deadly missiles at almost point-blank range. Another dozen wolves and riders attacked the wagon train. Their fire arrows quickly had all the wagons ablaze and panicked the teams of horses. Most of the drivers cut their teams loose and tried to steer the horses to safety, but they were quickly cut down by the wolf riders. At the sound of a second horn the wolf riders dispersed to both sides and the southern end of the meadow. As the last rider passed the east and west extremes of the opening, the entire column of grass on each side was set on fire.

Looking down from their perch above, it was clear that to escape, what remained of the Imperial Battalion would have to flee to the south, right into the jaws of the ambush. On the edge of the forest fifty wolf riders sat their Dire-Wolves waiting for their targets to come into range. In twenty minutes, the massacre was over. “Where did you find children, who can ride and shoot like that?” Dermotte asked.

“They are not children,” Jynelle answered him. “Follow me, and I will show you.”

The first thing Dermotte noticed was a firebreak had been cut on the southern end of the meadow to keep the wind from spreading the flames into the mature hardwoods. He could not see but assumed this same firebreak extended to both the eastern and western side of the meadow as well. When they reached a point approximately fifty yards from the field, Jynelle signaled for them to dismount in the road. On both sides of them the mature forest blocked their vision for any distance. One of the dwarves they had seen the day before joined them but stayed mounted on his stout pony.

“Good morning, Colonel Parr,” the dwarf said saluting Jynelle.

“Sergeant Major, I would like to see Captain Igen as soon as possible.”

The barrel-chested dwarf saluted again and departed. “You have obviously seen dwarves before,” Jynelle said.

“Yes, from time to time they visit our clan to purchase some of our wool,” Dermotte answered.

“Well, I can assure you, you have never seen anything like this before.”

A huge dark gray Dire-Wolf came bounding out of the woods from the right and skidded to a stop in the middle of the road. Riding a small saddle aboard the beautiful creature was a child, except the face said this was someone much older. In one smooth motion, the rider saluted Jynelle and vaulted from the saddle only to land at her feet. The beautiful Star-Man dropped to one knee and embraced the small warrior as an old friend. “Come, Igen, I want you to meet someone,” she said stroking the head of the beautiful gray female wolf.

Dermotte watched the small warrior walking beside Jynelle. He was dressed in mottled tan leather. Across his back were both a quiver of arrows and a backsword. His huge Dire-Wolf walked alongside him and lowered her head for a welcomed scratch around the ears. They were obviously a bonded pair and a dangerous, well trained, fighting team.

“Dermotte and Tommen of the Swallow Tail Clan, this is Captain Igen, the commander of the Pelian Wolf Riders, the most dangerous and valuable contingent of the Ahnveil Army.”

Both the villagers dropped to one knee to shake hands with Igen. “Pardon my rudeness, Captain, but what manner of man are you?” Tommen asked.

“Why, I am not a man at all. My race originated on the northern continent and they were called Thanes. A large contingent of my ancestors participated in the First Great War and many of them stayed on the southern continent on an escarpment in the middle of the Mothray desert called the Pelian. That is north of the Wall, Mr. Dermotte. Jynelle and the Ahnveil had an abundance of Dire-Wolves but no one small enough to ride them. We simply put the two together and here we are.”

Jynelle smiled at the expression on the faces of the two men. “What Igen is omitting is he and other members of his wolf riders have almost singlehandedly destroyed the supply lines north of the Wall. The reason the Imperial Army is now scavenging for food and other supplies in the south is because they are starving to death over there.”

“How did you get here?” Tommen asked.

“On a ship, young man,” Igen answered, “but that is another big secret.” The Pelian put his finger in front of his lips but kept his contagious smile.

“You see,” Jynelle said, “the Ahnveil did not have an effective cavalry and more importantly, we did not have the time to train one. The Pelian and the Dire-Wolves were a perfect match. Even as we speak, the plan is in place to breach the Wall and take it down permanently. Men, Dwarves, Pelian, and Dire-Wolves will all play an important role in that fight.”

A man wearing a uniform similar to Jynelle’s rode up to the group on a tall roan. He saluted Jynelle but did not dismount. “Several Dire-Wolves have some singe marks, otherwise no casualties, Colonel.”

“Thank you, Commander, how many horses were you able to salvage?”

“All but a half dozen, Igen’s company is still herding some of them back, but all in all it was well executed.”

“Thank you, Commander.” As the officer left to continue his duties, Jynelle explained. “The secret to winning this war is food. Right now, we lack the ability to breach the Wall; but we cannot kill the Imperial Army and their Ruk hordes unless they come to us. So, our strategy is simple, we starve them from the other side and make them come south seeking sustenance. We think of a horse as a means of transportation. To a starving army, it is a source of food. We deny them everything.”

“How long were you over there?” Dermotte asked.

“Slightly less than a year,” she answered. “You would not know it to see the Wall from this side, but it is mostly hollow, really a marvel of engineering.”

“Will the Ahnveil burn all of those bodies?” Tommen asked.

“Not this close to the Wall. They will pile them up and let the Imperial Army be reminded of what awaits them every time they pass by here... Come on Tommen, you will enjoy seeing this. The Dire-Wolves consider this a big game and they race each other to see who can put the most-dead Ruks on the pile.”

When they reached a point, they could see the entire burned meadow, Dire-Wolves were racing everywhere pulling the dead into a central point. “Is Belvyr somewhere out there in that melee?” Tommen asked.

“Of course, he is right in the middle of it somewhere. He says all this competition is just a wolf thing and I wouldn’t understand even if he explained it to me.”

Later that afternoon the trio began their return journey to the Swallow Tail Valley. They rode steadily but were not hurried and arrived back at the inn mid morning of the third day. Jynelle declined

their invitation for lunch with the excuse she had a new mission and challenge ahead of her. They thanked her and Tommen and Dermotte shook her hand, but Tommen hugged Belvyr to say goodbye.

Father and son visited with a few friends in the inn and then walked the few hundred yards to their home. After greeting his mother, Tommen sought out his friends while Dermotte spent the next few hours at his desk. He left by the back entrance to their home and walked slowly down the well used pathway to the large cages where he kept his ravens. His long missive was rolled into a tight tube and placed into a wooden cylinder that had been sealed with wax. The lightweight device would be tied to one of the birds before the raven was released. As he neared the cages, he noticed the birds were squawking loudly, something they usually only did when they knew they were going to be fed. As Dermotte made the last turn in the path, he spied what had them so upset.

A huge tan Dire-Wolf stood stoically in the trail, just before the cages. Twenty feet away, its amber eyes froze him in his tracks. He didn't remember how long he remained that way, unsure and unable to move his feet. Gradually, he composed himself and turned around. Twenty feet behind him stood a solid black Dire-Wolf. "Belvyr," Dermotte said out loud.

"A dark message destined for dark wings; Dermotte, you have several decisions to make this afternoon and this is the first," Jynelle said appearing from the trees just beyond her Ward. "Will you run, or will you stand?" Long seconds passed before Jynelle said, "A good start, you made your first right decision in a long while. By the way, the only thing that would have beat Belvyr to you is Nymera the Tan." Dermotte turned slightly to look at the tan Dire-Wolf and saw a friend of his standing beside the huge female.

"Hello, Star-Man Gamen," Dermotte said. "When did you get back?"

“Never actually went very far away, Dermotte. It’s probably a pretty safe assumption that the note you have in your hands there is a pretty descriptive missive about Wolf-Riders and Star-Men and a number of things that just might confuse someone on the other side of the Wall.”

Dermotte did not speak, just nodded his head.

“How much does Tommen know about your spying for the Imperial Army?” Jynelle asked.

“Nothing,” Dermotte answered.

“Why did you do it then?” Gawen asked. “Your wife is fine and living in Swallow Tail, what have they got on you to make you turn on your people and your country?”

“My sister, she is stationed at Kenville on the other side of the Wall. She was taken by a raiding party twenty years ago. She wasn’t much more than five or six when it happened.”

“While undercover, I was stationed at Kenville for about a year,” Jynelle said, “what is your sister’s name.”

“Weryl, the last time she wrote me she had just made sergeant. One of the new Lieutenants had promoted her, but I’ve heard nothing about her in almost half a year.”

“I’ve some good news for you, Dermotte. I was that Lieutenant. Your sister once saved my life and came over with me when I returned. Now she is working for the Ahnveil Army at our training academy at Fangort. She has been there about six months. Weryl is my top training instructor; certainly, she would love to see you... We can be there in about ten day’s time and you can see for yourself.”

Star-Man Gamen picked up the conversation at this point. “But, when you return, you are going to work for me and become the Ahnveil Army’s first double agent... There is, however, an alternative.” Gamen stroked the head and neck of his enormous female.

Dermotte looked into the intense amber eyes of the huge tan wolf. “I like the idea of doing something for my country again... I accept.”