

The Star-Man's Quest

By R. Walt Bailey

The approaching patrol was one of the smaller she had yet seen, and it was still too large. Two men rode at the head of the column followed by eight Ruks running behind. Returning to the Wall, they passed her position at about a hundred yards. Just a small part of a much larger detachment camped over ten leagues to the south. "Only one more person and I could make this work," the tall woman thought.

The Imperial Army generally moved about in groups of over a hundred. Smaller detachments of several officers, like this one, were always accompanied by a squad of at least eight spawn. From her vantage point high in a large conifer, Elayne watched them disappear to the north before climbing down. Her objective was a horse and that was only available from one of the men leading one of the patrols. Out of habit, she looked at the wind feather on her bow, and it was blowing steadily in her face. You could never be too careful around Ruks; they possessed a keen sense of smell.

As the young woman began the one league journey back to her camp beside the North Thorn River, she reflected on the dangerous game being played. A horse would be considered a luxury in her current situation. It certainly wasn't a requirement to finish her training. But, Elayne wanted one; and it was worth the risk to get it. Attacking a column too large meant death. Capture meant torture and death. Neither sounded appealing. Damn, if I just had one other person, she knew they could effectively ambush one of the small columns.

Elayne swam strongly through the swift river and pulled herself up onto a large flat rock to enjoy the bright sunshine. The weather had turned warm and being on the final moon of her Quest, the Star-Man in training had nothing hanging over her head. As she reclined, she tried to make shapes out of the

white clouds high above. She was nearing the end of her seven-year ordeal to become a Star-Man, just like her father. The first years of study were more academic in nature. Except for her continued development with both sword and bow, she read and studied extensively during the initial years. And then there were always the practical exams at the end of each term. Those who passed moved forward. Those who failed were summarily dropped and never spoken of again. Now her training was more practical, all outdoors, and hands on.

How many of her thirty-five classmates from the Academy who began the instruction remained? Six, including her, began their final year of the program. That year she was to spend completely in the wild and on her own, surviving only by her wits and her skills. She could take bow and sword, but no money and no horse when she left her clan. It was considered a plus if she could acquire both while on her quest, as long as they were obtained honorably. No doubt such an accomplishment would serve her well in her choice of assignments, once her training was completed.

Lying on the warm rock in the sun, she noticed how hard her body had become from the rigors of just surviving in the wild. Tall with long blond hair, Elayne was considered pretty by the boys in her clan, but the demands on one trying to become a Star-Man left little time to flirt and get to know the opposite sex. She had not seen even the surviving members of her class in almost a full year. Her trek across Abyssalia had taken her north, all the way to the Wall. She met and worked for several members of other clans along the way. One of the highlights had been meeting some of the Fansetti, or dwarves as they were called in the common tongue. Elayne had even been invited to spend several nights in one of their halls and still remembered how strong their ale was compared to what her father made.

In a moons time, she would return to the Red-Tailed Clan and her home. It was drilled into her to expect a landmark event during the last few months on her quest. Exactly what this landmark event comprised was still a complete unknown. Regardless, after another moon, she would return. This return

completed her Star-Man training and Elayne would receive the silver signet ring engraved with the seven-sided star on its face, the symbol of a Star-Man. There still seemed to be so much mystery that surrounded the whole mystique of this most secret of societies.

Her clan would join with others in opposing the Empire beyond the Wall. War was never far off these days. As a Star-Man, she would be given a position of responsibility and leadership. Whether that responsibility took the form of training or actually leading soldiers into battle, she must discover when she graduated. Six years and eleven months and there were still so many unknowns.

Late this afternoon, she decided she would scout closer to the Wall. There was always a chance to intercept a small detachment of Imperial troops returning from a mission to the south. That was her best chance of getting a horse. Twice before she had been in position, but the returning detachment had turned out to be too large for her to tackle by herself. There was an inherent danger in this enterprise, but she was almost a Star-Man and danger was just part of the job.

The Wall was the largest manmade structure in the world. Four hundred feet in height and thirty leagues in length, it stretched from the Great Eastern Ocean all the way to the Great Western Ocean. It was built over ten thousand years ago. The great debate among the clans was its purpose; to keep something out or something in? Regardless, it separated the southern continent into two unequal halves, Mothray the larger to the north and Abyssalia to the south. With its inhospitable coastline, Abyssalia was completely isolated by *Cair Dhes Mah*, as it was called in the Fansetti tongue, The Edge of Dawn. At first light and from a distance, the largest structure ever built by mankind resembled the edge of a knife blade.

Elayne tied her dry hair up in ribbon she had brought for just such a purpose and began her long swim across the current and back to her camp. She stopped in the shallows with the river just to her knees and shook the water from her arms and torso. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught movement

to her left. A huge Dire-Wolf walked into the camp, right by a burning fire, and stopped to look at her. The huge gray head and intense amber eyes stared a hole right through her. Elayne glanced at her bow, quiver of arrows, and backsword stacked neatly right beside her drying clothes that were spread across several juniper bushes.

Dire-Wolves were not a common sight. They lived in large packs, but as long as there was ample game to hunt, they never bothered humans. Unlike their smaller cousins the timber wolves, they never even bothered with domestic animals as long as the hunting was good. A mature Dire-Wolf stood as tall as a pony and this one looked to be a young male, but certainly full grown. Probably a year and half old, his magnificent gray fur was long and smooth. If such a thing could be said of an alpha predator, this animal was beautiful.

Much of her early Star-Man training had been about Dire-Wolves. From both her instructors as well as her reading, she knew Dire-Wolves were regarded as almost sentient creatures shrouded in mystique, magic, and lore. In ages past they played a valuable role in the lives of Star-Men. However, the exacting relationship between man and wolf had never been revealed or made clear in her studies.

Ancient friends or enemies, they stood at thirty yards looking deeply into each other. Elayne saw a fierce intelligence in those eyes. She wondered what the Dire-Wolf saw.

I see a Star-Man.

Elayne involuntarily looked around her to see if someone else had spoken, but she knew just as surely as she as standing naked in this river, the Dire-Wolf had touched her mind.

Elayne of the Red-Tailed Clan, I am Rensmeer the Gray and I would bond with you if you find me worthy.

She took two steps forward before she made herself stop. What are you doing? This is a wild animal that can kill you with one snap of his jaws. But she felt the warmth and the intensity coming

from Rensmeer; and, something else, she felt loyalty, even devotion. Taking a deep breath and shoving all the reservations to the back of her mind, Elayne approached the magnificent wolf and dropped to one knee. She reached both of her arms and stroked his huge head. His fur seemed as soft as down.

“Rensmeer the Gray, I accept you as my Ward, may I never let you down.”

The enormous wolf leaned down and licked the tears from her cheeks. *Star-Man Elayne, may I Rensmeer the Gray always be worthy of you.*

Elayne completely forgot about sneaking up to the Wall. She and the huge wolf spent the rest of the afternoon getting to know each other. She quickly discovered that Rensmeer loved the water and they swam together until almost dark. As Elayne stood by the new fire and brushed her hair, she noticed the Dire-Wolf preferred to roll in the sand and then shake vigorously, only to repeat the whole process over and over again. He would sneeze several times when he got too much sand in his muzzle which made her laugh almost hysterically. As she completed drying herself, he disappeared for a few minutes, but returned carrying two large plains rabbits. Rensmeer confessed that he had caught them earlier in the day and simply placed them in the shade to cool.

She cleaned the rabbits by the water but left the entrails for the wolf. In short order, Elayne had the rabbits roasting on a pair of spits and she sat down to take stock of things. How was she going to explain to her Star-Man instructors about this wolf? How was she going to take him home? What would her father say? Could you have a wolf and be a Star-Man? She didn't know and there certainly wasn't anyone out here she could ask. The gray lay down beside her and she stroked his soft head pondering all these questions that had no answers. She got up once to add spices to the rabbits and turn them. When she came back, she still did not have any answers.

Elayne found that she had a great appetite from all the swimming, but she still could not eat both the hares. Rensmeer on the other hand seemed to be a bottomless pit and he consumed everything that

was left, especially the bones. “This has been a most interesting day, Rensmeer. I believe you qualify as one large furry landmark event. I wonder what tomorrow will bring for us?”

Tomorrow we are going to get you a horse.

“How do you plan to accomplish that?” she asked, but the wolf would volunteer no details.

Elayne was an early riser and always awoke when the first birds began to sing at false dawn. The wolf had lain beside her all night. Each time she reached her hand out, he was there beside her. She didn't remember ever sleeping so restfully. The Dire-Wolf was gone when she placed the tea kettle on coals from last night's fire, but he returned as she was pouring herself a cup.

There is a small party of soldiers returning this morning. There are two horses; you might find one of them satisfactory for your needs. It isn't far, and we need not rush.

Elayne grabbed her bow anyway and placed both the quiver of arrows and her backsword over her shoulder. Rensmeer led her up into the foothills of the North Thorn mountain range. The closer they came to the Wall, the more nervous she became, but relaxed when she remembered the Dire-Wolf was scouting ahead for her. He stopped in a small meadow where an obvious well used travel corridor wound through the middle of the tall grass. The returning patrol would be coming from the south so Elayne began looking for her ambush point on the north end of the meadow. Right where the road left the open field and rejoined the mature woods, she saw something that made her heart skip a beat.

Nailed to one of the large trees, ten feet off the ground was a corpse. As she began to look more closely, she could see others nailed to the trees on either side of the road as it continued north towards the Wall. It had been there a year, perhaps even two. This one was female, but as she looked closer, she could see others that were male. From the grimace on the woman's face, she had still been alive when they nailed her to the big oak. Elayne could not help but wonder what else the poor woman had endured before she was killed.

Why do humans do this to each other?

“This is a message to anyone from the clans as to what fate awaits you if you continue on towards the Wall... I don’t know if I will find a horse I like or not, but one thing is clear. We are going to kill everyone in this returning patrol and send our own discrete message.”

Elayne went to work, using the techniques and skills she had schooled on for almost seven years. She had never seen the relevance of some of the exercises her instructors had taught, but now she did, and they all came back. She asked the Dire-Wolf to keep tabs on the returning patrol. In the process, she discovered that he could speak with her empathically from at least a leagues distance. When everything was ready, she sat down in the cool shade and looked up at the leather corpse nailed on the tree opposite her position. “I never knew you or your companions, but I take my oath as one who aspires to be a Star-Man, that you shall be avenged. Today, I will make a difference.”

She was startled back to the present by the appearance of the huge wolf. “How many of them did you count?”

Two horses and riders with eight of the short black ones running behind.

She knew he meant two men and eight Ruks running behind them. A Ruk was a genetically engineered fighter of the Empire. Five feet tall with a large barrel chest, they tended to have bandy legs and long arms that gave them the illusion of being humpbacked. They were first noticed about the time the Wall had been built and were a creation of the dark lord, Karshee. Ruks preferred cudgel or tulwar for weapons but on occasion they were known to carry longbows that shot long black arrows.

“Alright, just like we planned. You take them from behind while I get the men. None of them leave the meadow alive.”

Without a word, the huge wolf disappeared in the mature trees to the left of the field. Elayne checked and then rechecked her weapons. Not two hundred yards on the other side of the meadow, she

knew they were close when she heard the whicker of a horse. Very soon after, she got her first look at the approaching column. Two men rode at the head of the small group. The one on the left looked much older and had a great deal of braid on his uniform. That was good, probably a high-ranking officer. He at least would have brought his own horse. The other man was much younger. As they got closer, Elayne could see that both soldiers rode fine horses. The older man was mounted on a huge black stallion, the younger on a roan mare.

Elayne knocked an arrow and focused on the approaching men. Just like her instructor had taught her, she concentrated all her attention on her first target. When the two men were at twenty yards, several things happened at once. Rensmeer had positioned himself upwind of the approaching Ruks, and they caught his scent and stopped to look for the danger. Elayne rose smoothly from a crouch behind a small screen of brush and released her first arrow. She automatically had the second knocked almost before the first found its mark, and just as quickly it was on its way. She hit both men right in the throat and they fell dead out the saddle almost together. She sprinted forward and quickly grabbed both sets of slack reins and pulled the horses away from the opening. She had prepared two large branches and quickly secured both reins, each to a heavy branch. She gave each horse a loving pat on the neck as she ran past them and picked up her discarded bow.

Before the first man hit the ground, Rensmeer had charged into the stunned Ruks from the side. He quickly killed two of the vile creatures including one that carried a longbow by ripping their throats out. The other half dozen was well trained, and they quickly dropped into a defensive circle, thinking they were only being attacked by a single wolf. Elayne killed two more with arrows before they realized they were up against more than one attacker. Seeing a lone woman, two of them charged her, but she had plenty of time to toss her bow into the grass and pull her back sword. Her instructors had told her

that her archery skills were superior, but her ability with a blade was extraordinary. With only a half dozen moves, she killed both strange creatures.

By the time she looked up, Rensmeer had killed one of the remaining Ruks in the meadow. The last one chose to flee, but the Dire-Wolf caught him by the neck before he made the woods line. She ran back to check on the horses and they were calm and standing in the road where she left them. “I cannot have horses that shy from a Dire-Wolf, how can we condition these mounts.”

Hold them firmly by the leather harnesses with their heads close together.

Elayne did as he said and watched in fascination as Rensmeer approached from downwind. She felt the horses tense when they saw the huge wolf, but her presence seemed to calm them. He slowly approached and touched noses with each of them. She could feel the tension leave them immediately. Elaine left the animals to get to know each other and went back to the meadow to search the men. Neither carried much in the way of coin, but both of their belt knives were very fancy. As she went through their saddle bags, she found the black was carrying one hundred pieces of gold; the roan carried half that amount again. Together with the engraved swords both had on their saddles, she had just become very wealthy.

Elayne dropped to one knee before the magnificent wolf. “Thank you, my Ward. I believe I now understand. You become a Star-Man when you are accepted as a Warder by a Dire-Wolf.” Rensmeer didn’t respond, but instead licked her on both cheeks.

Before leaving the meadow, they drug all the dead into a large pile so that anyone using the road would have to bypass them and take notice their handy work. After making slight adjustments to the saddle, Elayne vaulted up on the black. Before she left the meadow, she saluted the men and women nailed to the oaks. “Consider this a down payment on a large debt,” she said to the corpses.

They traveled westerly and soon found themselves back beside the huge river. They crossed at the first set of rapids they found that looked passable. Elayne was afraid that if they got too far down stream, the river would become too deep and they would have to use a ferry. She was not sure how the ferryman would feel about a Dire-Wolf for a customer.

She could tell that she had not been on a horse in almost a year. Her legs reminded her each morning when she got up, but the soreness slowly went away. She was having her tea one morning when the Dire-Wolf alerted her.

A rider coming into the camp and he also has a wolf.

Elayne had taken to wearing her hair in a long braid and she had just finished tying a ribbon on the end, warrior fashion. She looked up expectantly as a distinguished looking man rode into her camp and dismounted. Beside him was a magnificent tan Dire-Wolf. "Hello, Father," she said and rushed to greet him.

"You look well, Elayne." Both Dire-Wolves came to him and he gave each a loving scratch about the head and ears. "I know Rensmeer, but you don't know Lasail, his mother."

As Elayne placed her hands on the soft fur of the enormous tan female, she asked. "Why do Star-Men keep the existence of their Wards a secret?"

"People are afraid of magic, sorcery, and in general anything they don't understand. Have you stopped to question how it has come to be that you can speak empathically with a huge wolf? No, because you were born with the talent, but others will find that concept harder to accept. For thousands of years, the Star-Men have kept the existence of their Wards a secret, because they feared the common people would not accept them as leaders if their leadership were shrouded in magic. You see, Elayne, magic is a sword without a guard, very hard to grasp if you are not prepared. But now we are prepared to take this war to the Empire. The time has come for us to lead the free people, both men and dwarves, of

Abyssalia and take back what we have lost so many centuries ago. It is time for us to tear down the Wall and retake Mothray from the Empire.”

“Dwarves will follow the leadership of men?” she asked.

“No, but they will follow a Star-Man. All the Fansetti legends say the same thing. ‘A Star-Man will lead them’.” From the pocket of his tunic he took out a silver ring with a heptagram engraved on the face. She dropped to one knee and handed him her right hand. “Rise, Star-Man Elayne of the Red-Tailed Clan... You know this ring is just for ceremony and the benefit of others. You become a Star-Man when you are accepted by a Dire-Wolf and he bonds with you for the rest of your life.”

“In his own way, Rensmeer already told me.”