

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON
Andrew Withey

Part One: What Really Happened ?

At the end of Winter, 1996AP, I was asked to round up a flock of strayed sheep by the shepherds d'Tama. Apparently, one of the sheep was in fact a Black wolf in sheep's clothing, and was endangering the health of the other lead rams. One of the two lead rams wasn't all there, and had been missing for some time (maybe 2 years). The other was little more than a lamb, and had very Light coloured wool. A pack of hounds had driven this stray lamb to my doorstep, and promised vast payments if I could collect the whole flock, establish the positions of the two lead Rams and find the wolf in sheep's clothing. The wolf had been hiding in the hills for a couple of years, worrying the sheep, after having been led astray by a dark vixen who wasn't playing with a full deck of cards.

I rounded up a pack of bitches, and a dog to keep them in line. They were: Elle; a bloodhound with hypnotic eyes and a rough tongue that could heal most wounds. She led the pack in any scraps.

Kay; a scrappy little alley mutt who had recently lost grip on reality, and was timid.

Jay; a red setter who could hold her own in a mix-up and could fly across the ground, but was as playful as a sparrow.

Ivy; an eastern Wolfhound, black as night, without redeeming features, but deadly and loyal.

Wheeler; a blue pointer who could inspire followers back from the dead, and was the Top Dog.

Before leaving, we asked the stars for guidance, and they said "Water , water everywhere, but not a drop to drink". We said "Huh?", and they explained thus "Upon a painted ship, upon a painted ocean". We gave up.

On the day of Fools, after morning tea, we set off north in a gaudy minstrel's wagon travelling separately from the pack of hounds and the lost lamb. The wolfhounds were Ben and Louis; and the greyhound, Kate. Kate was loveable, but fought like a tiger, and had an eye for the top dog in any pack. Ben and Louis were steady.

At the first pasture we stayed in, the lamb bleated, letting all the animals know that the two packs were connected. I told Kate to bite him if that happened again, otherwise we would be having lambs-tongue. The pack yipped and howled until they were fed supper by a local 'keeper. After that, it became a routine for us to do a dog and pony show rather than paying for a night's rest.

On the third day north, shortly after lunch, the lamb and his herders had strayed several minutes ahead of the droving wagon. When we came around a bend in the path through the woods, we came across Ben and Louis asleep by the road. Elle, Jay, Ivy and Wheeler charged off into the woods following a trail that Wheeler had picked up. Five hundred yards in were a pack of a dozen huskies and an Eye dog. The huskies had big curved fangs, and were as skilled as they come. Their Eye dog was tired, but still slowed my bitches, and sped some of his huskies. Wheeler Suddenly Leapt Extra Enthusiastically, Pawing, and 1/2 a dozen went down, while the others tidied up the remnants. Ivy got badly hurt, but Elle licked it better. The Eye dog fled without leaving a trail, and could not be traced. Kay and I turned up after collecting stray horses & tending the wagon, and stopped Elle from ripping out the throats of the huskies Wheeler had taken down. The fangs and hides were of value, and sold to the authorities, along with the feral dogs. The dogs had a magic rock as well.

The fourth through sixth days of Spring were uneventful as we casually travelled through southern Ranke. The other pack kept a couple of hours ahead

of us, but we caught up to them on the evening of the seventh. That night, Kay, Jay, Elle, Ivy and Kate went for a dog paddle around a pool, while the lads went off on a bit of a hunt. While swimming next to the small falls, Kay was seized by an aquatic dwarf, and held under water. The rest of the girls struggled to help, and killed two of the dwarves while savaging the other two, but Kay was dead to the world. The lads loped back when they heard the howls of despair, and Wheeler licked Kay back to her feet. She was shaken, but unhurt. The aquatic dwarves had little of value.

By the end of the ninth day, we reached Dar. The tenth was spent in a peaceful trip on a barge to Silverstream. Cutting through the mountain pass after the weather changed, we made Windermere by dusk on the twelfth. We rested the next day, taking advantage of the natural thermal pools. Jay, as a red setter was particularly refreshed, but the whole pack was pleased. We sailed over the haunted lake, and had unconfirmed sightings of lake serpents and fresh water merfolk or maybe the dogs just saw their own reflections! The fifteenth and sixteenth were days for me to plan, and I split the two packs up again, with my sheep dogs having a couple of hours lead.

We arrived in Taen's Field mid morning on the seventeenth, and found an appropriate kennel. There was an atmosphere of fear and violence, and most sheep were timid. When the little lamb entered the field around noon, we were at the gate to escort him in discreetly. Kay & I lead them in, with Elle and Ivy following. Wheeler and Jay went off to cover some shepherd boys that were counting our sheep, and traced them back to a hunched figure they called Fagan. We then explored the field, and noticed that there were two main flocks of sheep owned by the d'Tama's and the Medici's, as well as several other minor herds. Their business practices were pretty cut-throat, and a lot of large dogs patrolled the field, each keeping to their own turf. During this time, a cat took Elle's tongue.

As dusk fell, Jay and Elle went into the pen where the little white lamb was staying, disguised as lap dogs. The rest of the pack skulked around outside. Suddenly there was a yell, and a huge transparent dog leapt out of the pen and ran across the garden. He breathed, and a huge wall of thorns sprang up behind him, and then he leapt down a well. I jumped on Ivy's back and vaulted the 10' fence, and chased after him. By this time, the outside pack were all inspired and running double quick, and I had turned transparent to chase the enemy dog more easily. I jumped down the well, but it was all boarded up, so Ivy leapt down beside me. We pushed through the wall with a spectral shove, and Ivy charged down a tunnel. Another thorn bush had sprung up, so I called for a sword to be thrown down. It must have been my thick country accent, for the guards threw a dagger at me. However, Ivy had worried away at the thorn bush, and an accidental shove in the back from me pushed her all the way through. We ran down some tunnels, and realised that they were connected to the sewer network. Expecting trouble, I caught a glimpse of the moon (one night off new), and changed. Ivy and I tore through the tunnels until we lost the scent. We met up with Kate, and she opened a man hole so we could leap up a ladder to get out. Wheeler caught up and re-invigorated us, and Ivy and I set off. Kate started looking for a horse, but we caught a scent, and chased after the galloping sounds ahead. We ran helter-skelter through alley ways and streets, and were just behind a dark figure on a huge, panicked horse, when the path opened out to a huge bridge leading to the Medici pen. With a last burst, I leapt for the steed, and balanced on its rump long enough to throw my weight on the riding figure. We fell, and I managed to break his fall to stop him from being harmed, then rolled with him until I was on top. I sat on him, lolling, as he slashed repeatedly at me, until Ivy arrived and put her fangs to his throat (I have sworn never to harm another).

It seemed that Ben had tried to worry the lamb, but Kate, who was trying to explain tuppings to him, intervened in time. Jay and Elle soothed the sheep, and spent the night there to keep them all safe. The little lamb found Elle's tongue overnight, and they met us in the morning.

The eighteenth was a quiet day - I took Wheeler to a meeting of minstrels, where he chased a bitch that used to ride herd on a flock of sheep including the second Ram we were looking for. We got cosy with her pack, and found a cold trail - 2 years old, heading downstream. The next day we sailed north. On the way, Wheeler found a very recent trail heading out of the field to the Fetch Wood, which seemed to belong to the original wolf in sheep's clothing. We kept an eye on him, and sent a message back to the field, telling the lamb that "The black stoat is in the Fetch wood", and drew a frog so he knew it was us. That evening we asked at a couple of kennels, and got a good description of the bird the ram flew out on - apparently it had been back in port the previous day.

At dawn on the twentieth, Wheeler and I approached the Sun God who lived there. He was known to burn all bitches who crossed his path, but we wheedled seagull wings from him for all of us, and one more for a stone. We flew as high as the sun, with the breeze, and Wheeler and I caught the swift Osprey, and wrestled it down to the water. We confronted a mongrel called George, who could look like the ram at will, and stripped him of his powers, leaving him with a protection from evil eyes instead. We released the Osprey, and as it glided on, we followed the Sun's chariot back to my own home hillside, where Elle got more health problems sorted, and we asked the stars for more guidance, having found the false trail (while the ship and the ocean were real, the ram was painted). They patiently replied "He sits within a web, gathering information. He knows all that happens. He is closer to home than you think". We instantly realised that the shadowy figure answering to Fagan was the ram, proving the third line wrong immediately (the second would follow shortly). We slept over in Elle's pen.

On the morning of the twenty-first, we changed the coat of the dogs, and headed back to Taen's Field riding Vance's bat. Approaching out of the sun, it was obvious something was wrong - a stream of refugees were fleeing, and a pall of smoke hung over the field. Landing, we ascertained that it was plague, and headed in. As Wheeler, Elle and I could all cure plague, we were not concerned. The field was nearly empty. We caught a few shepherd boys and dragged some of them along in our teeth (mine fainted from my howls so I didn't mark him - sewers have odd acoustics). We found the figure Fagan, and lo - it was the missing ram! He told us of the cause of the plague - the wolf in sheep's clothing was causing it, and had a group of 30 huskies and a dead bitch helping. They hung around a bit of turf in the middle of the field, claiming the entire field and promising to stop the plague. We got a promise for him to return to the flock, as well as covering our expenses, and headed through the field to the centre. We entered some empty huts, and snuck through the attics into adjoining huts via convenient Erelhein-designed holes. By dusk we overlooked the enemy's lair. Wheeler sniffed the place out, and scratched out a map. I sent Kay into the river behind the place to lay down a hide so that they wouldn't hear us strike. While she swore it was an hour's task, it took her until 2 hours before dawn. We gathered our collective minds and headed to their lair. We smashed a hole in the wall and stood watching them for 10 minutes. One by one, we became transparent and drifted through the sleeping dogs. Jay lit a candle in the deepest darkest hole, and we found the wolf and the dead bitch curled up around each other. Wheeler peered at them through his eye, and breathed gently until their slumbers were deep and even. Jay and Ivy then picked up the mutts and dragged them back to the hole. Meanwhile, some of the more soundly sleeping huskies had their collars taken. The watch was getting suspicious at the occasional noise, but couldn't see us.

Just after dawn we dropped the wolf and his bitch off at the d'Tama pen, then rounded up the second ram (disguised as a ewe, for some reason). The family reunion was intense, and their cups overflowed and filled our coffers. With the wolf gone, the plague cleared up, and we took the money and ran. The horses, wagon, and stray dogs trickled back to the green pastures of home over the next two months.

Part Two: Just the Facts.

The Party: Spinner - Party Leader, E&E. Liessa - Military Scientist, Mind. Hugh - Scribe, Shapeshifter (Wolf) Witch. Jhiselle - Fire Mage. Victoria - Erelhein Warrior. Kayseri - Illusionist.
Party Employer: Phaeton d'Tama - Guild Member, Solar.

Mission: To find his brother Paul d'Tama (Illusionist) and ensure he is the heir to the d'Tama fortunes.

Secondary Mission: To stop his eldest brother (disowned), Cyrus (Witch) from inheriting the family fortunes.

Mission Background: The d'Tama house is one of the two major merchant houses in Taensfield, the major sea trading port in northern Ranke. The Medici are the rival house. Both Paul & Cyrus had been missing for two years.

Travel Notes: We took the coastal route through southern Ranke, then cut through the lakes and mountain passes to avoid Sanctuary. This is one of the standard routes, and avoids the Enchanted Forest and Sanctuary. However, a day south of the Carzala / Ranke border, we were attacked by an E&E (Sleep, Quickness, Slowness, Teleport?) who got away, though all his dozen thugs (chainmail, Tulwar Rk 8) were captured. Additionally, just inland of the south-western point of Ranke, we found a pool with a waterfall, and four Fossegrimme. Some may still be around - two were left tied up to a tree. The entire rest of the party insisted that I point out that Windermere, on the south side of one of Ranke's mountain lakes, has the most luxurious thermal pools, but I warn you that they are muddy and smelly. Merfolk and sea-serpents were seen in the mere - it is several hundred feet deep. There are regular barge/ferry services up the Winder Mere, the lake north of it, and from Taensfield to the sea port.

The sea port at the mouth of the River Taen has a powerful Solar Mage known as Apollo, living in a tower. He sells light magics, and runs a lighthouse. He has Rank 20 Star Wings available to strangers. He is a misogynist. Phaeton used to be his apprentice, and he is friendly with Herkum (Head of Mind College), so he likes adventurers.

Taensfield Notes: Taensfield is a bustling town of around 10,000. The River Taen runs through the middle, splitting the town into Southside & Northside, with three bridges across. The river is approximately 50 feet wide, and dredged regularly. The Southside law is run by the d'Tama, the Northside by the Medici. This town is dangerous - a man was shot dead in the streets, and people just stepped over the body. Armed (short sword / club) bands of 5-8 men in black armour patrol regularly, and watch from roof tops. There is no official curfew, but activities after dark should be performed rapidly and discreetly. There is a large group of urchins and guttersnipes that form an informal network which now serves d'Tama. Fires and Plague have recently decimated the town, and the spring fair (St David's) was cancelled. If the level of open conflict does not die down, I believe that Taensfield will decline as a preferred destination.

The Tuneful Tabor is a high-quality Inn which doubles as the local Troubadour Guild HQ. Out of town Troubadours are welcome. General performance quality is good, but avoid the amateur nights. Avoid the Inns recommended by guards - they will be of good quality, but closely watched / patronised by the ruling families.

There is an extensive tunnel network through the town, based on the old sewer system. There are pop-ups throughout town, as well as the more usual entrances. However, the d'Tama's have sealed off their entrance through the old well.

D'Tama Notes:

Seagate Guild members have an advantage with dealing with the d'Tama's, as Phaeton (known there as Phil) is a scion of the house. In the next six months he will become heir, as Paul d'Tama inherits from Donald, their father. Donald

is not a mage. His wife is an untrained Mind Mage. Phaeton is a medium-level, non-violent Solar Mage. Paul (probably the head of the household as you read this) is a medium-high Illusionist. His partner, Katerina, is an Assassin, and expert in Rapier and Unarmed. There were no noticeable magical protections around the household when we visited, but this may change with an Illusionist running the business. D'Tama's keep their word in business dealings. They are the local (Southside) law, and leave bodies in the river. Secret contact with Phaeton or Katerina can be made by using a picture of a Frog to indicate your Guild affiliation. The urchin "irregulars" may be integrated into the d'Tama operations in the medium term.

Classified Statistics - Need to Know basis only:

Phaeton: Master Healer, Astrologer, Artist

Many Special Knowledge Spells known.

Misogynist or Gynophobe.

More Information available on request from Librarian.

Rating - Harmless, Useful. Weaknesses - women, healing, no backbone.

Paul: Master Thief, Master Troubadour, soon Master Merchant, Courtier.

Contacts with troubadours, town urchins, neighbouring towns.

Most Special Knowledge Illusions known at low Ranks. Minor Illusion, Euphonia, Deep Pockets, Bolt Rk 6+.

Illusory Aura, Disguise Rk 15+. Not known - Permanency, Nightmare, Maze, Multiple Images.

Rating - Ruthless, Powerful, Reasonable. Weaknesses - urchins, music, illusions???

Unaccounted Treasure:

Payment for Chainmail & swords - bandits.

Fossegrimme Items:

Oyster Shell with black pearl - silver chain, blue/green stone, real black pearl.

The Pearl is Pearl of waterbreathing Mk III *covered*

Copper Rod (8" W 1/2") - firelight invested. *covered*

2 rings, one plain gold, one ornamental & gold.

50sp 5 gs (60sp) 1 tg (252sp)

warped lute; matched pewter knife, fork, spoon; 3 partially corroded daggers;

4 belt buckles; miscellaneous iron bits.

Favour owed to Apollo

Invested Rank 20 Star Wings (cost him 2,500sp to make, should return to Apollo).

Big book of anatomy - worth money to guild - if not, I'll sell it to a necromancer (Baron Saydar)