

Musings over Uncertainties

<keywords content="dungeons and dragons,dark fantasy campaign,alternative 3.5 rules,D&D in edinburgh" />

"- The times are changing, boy.

Man is making progress. Look at all those ships: relics, archaeological artefacts...pieces of junk. Yet they managed to put them to work, which is what worries me."

"- They didn't manage to work out all of the original functions, did they? Can they use them as the Giants did?"

"- Of course not, and even if they did, they're pieces of junk. They'll blow them apart if they fiddle with them too much. To my knowledge, ours is the only one you can really count on. We don't even need the dwarven cannons."

The two men stood on deck, overlooking a valley that housed some kind of military installation. Uniformed ranks of men marched from barrack to barrack, bearing steel blades and long thick rods covered in runes. Hovering above the building and troops were some ten ships, bearing no sails, but suspended by strong cables, ropes and beams from huge, floating constructions of unknown design: some looked like slanted towers, others like oval disks. A thrumming noise coming from the apparatuses could be heard in the distance. The hulls sported several openings, from which cannon-like contraptions peeked out.

"- Are the Clans okay with this arrangement? So much dwarven weaponry outside of their hands, who ever gave them out?"

"- They only shared the goods, not the technology. They're making a lot of gold right now... They know who the Milesians will turn their weapons to, and they probably have nothing against it, quite the contrary."

"- And won't the elfen realize that? I thought Milesians had their eyes in the West now. You think they'll risk breaking the arrangement?"

"- It has only been seventy years. Men have short lives, they forget fast. Aelfen to them are 'mystical creatures that hide in the woods and kidnap your children' once again. Old wives' tales die hard. And war veterans' stories only tell of gore and killing, so with these new toys they have, they feel pretty confident in tackling 'the boogeymen'. Now the Aelfen, they do actually remember how it all started! They were as much to blame as Men were, though. Paranoid bastards."

The younger individual turned slowly, his eyes looking downwards.

"- I heard they got to Noriander and rounded him up to the gnome camps. The little folk will throw themselves at them now, just to get him out. I already thought he was pushing his luck, last time we met, when he told me of the raid on Tamrain. "

"- The gnomes are good, but they're not that good. Even if they get him free, it'll only get worse for them. Milesians haven't tolerated gnome explorers in their homes and towns at all for more than a century now. Honestly, I can't blame them. Learning they've been 'spied upon' and 'studied' by invisible, sneaky little folk for as long as they could remember is not a comfortable feeling. The gnomes should know better. And this

resistance thing of theirs will only get them killed.”

The elder man paused, closes his eyes and sighed. “- Too many of them will be rounded up.”

“- Is that your prediction?”

“- Common sense, boy, nothing more. You don’t need any magical powers of foresight to tell that much. But this isn’t the worse yet.”

Down in the camp, troops started to retreat from the outside, while a lone artillery team stayed in the courtyard, next to a strange contraption. A rider on horseback just appeared coming down the mountainside, racing towards the camp. The men at the courtyard signal with flags to the rider.

The elderly man looked at the younger one, with eyes that told of decades of experience, loss, sorrow and the weight of knowledge.

“- Father, what is going to happen? Tell me, I know you know it!”

The old man lowered his eyes to the deck, took off his glasses and sighed again. “- It’s not written, you know that. But something is coming. I felt it then, when all hell broke loose and the war halted. Something under it all, in the silences between screams and explosions, and the marching elementals. I felt it, creeping through my senses and leaving me numb with despair.” He clenched his fist and swallowed hard.

“- You’re talking about the Upheaval? You’re ... saying there was something else? Apart from the explosions, the earthquakes and the raging spirits?” The son paused for a moment. “Will you tell me this time?”

The father chuckled, and looked sideways to the younger man. “- Very well. I don’t think it’ll affect the outcome anyway. I think it happened but not out of the spirit’s will to stop the war. Everyone knows they are involved because of the Forbiddance and the Edict, but there was a greater purpose at work that day. They would not care about our petty conflicts enough to stop them, not with that much destructive force.”

“- I would hardly call the Crimson Century a petty conflict... But what is in the Forbiddance? Any treasure they wish hidden? Maybe a secret city?”

“- Maybe... but I expect worse. I felt it then: the spirits, that was no fight for territory or country, it was a desperate, outraged rebuke. There is something in there they wish to keep hidden at all costs... and I suggest we respect their Edict. Because something is going to happen. The Serpent has been shifting oddly in the sky lately. There is a pattern up there that I cannot understand.”

Both men looked upwards, where the stars were already beginning to shine in the twilight, and the great brilliant strip of the Great Snake streaked across the sky. “- See there? How there is a blank spot, starless? It has been moving through the sky for the last month now. And the stars move out of its way.”

“- I... don’t know what to say. Others must have seen it already, too. Hmmm... It’s almost time for a another Pilgrimage to the Forbiddance. Do you think it has to do with it?”

“- Possibly, or maybe not at all. I don’t even know if all their need for these ‘Chosen’ has anything to do with it. Or what the poor souls go through.”

“- Every generation they demand a few more... and some of them aren’t even seen again.”

"- Dead, perhaps... but with the Spirits, who knows? There might be more to it than just being a debt for our trespass into the Forbiddance. They are drafted into the druids, we know that... some of them, at least. You've seen Forbiddance druids, haven't you? Those bastards look like they've lost everything and are just waiting to die. They are cursed, that much I can tell, but it is a willing curse. They know something, but they've kept their mouth shut, they did."

The younger man grinned, knowing well his father's temper and determination. "- How politely did you ask them?"

"- Very, actually... I don't make enemies of the Sidhe, son. You'll be wise to do so as well. They can be just outside the door, in the yard. Or inside your house. You might even get your newborn child switched for a changeling... or whatever those things are. They rule this world, and you better get that into your head. Just because they don't show themselves to us often doesn't mean they are not there. They just don't care enough."

The courtyard below was now filled with shouts, as the rider arrives and flag signals are sent to the camp towers and vessels above. The giant machines start to sail away, and down in the camp, all windows are being shut, and barricades put in front of the device and its handlers. The device seems to have been activated in some way, glowing and humming.

"- Then what should we expect?"

"- I don't know. But I have been hearing that the folks out in the frontiers have been more spooked out than usual. Ghost stories, apparently. No real threats, it seems, but the missives for help have increased somewhat. The Fiannas have had their hands full chasing wild geese. It might have something to do with that thing in the sky. That is why we're sailing to the Well of Urdr. I already had a sip of one well's waters, now let us see the future in those of another. I just hope the Witches are in on this with us, if it's as bad as I fear. Let's get out of here before it gets messy."

The old man turns to the helmsman and shouts: "- Take us away, northward!

Let these idiots kill themselves. It has been like this for as long as the world has stood, another turn of the wheel won't make a difference."

Up above the camp, a conspicuous-looking cloud started moving swiftly away, against the wind. By the time the disguised skyship was already safely away, the test down at the camp finally started. The device on the ground thrummed, the handlers took cover. The earth trembled and lightning struck the device, seemingly coming from no stormcloud at all. Shapes in the air, vaguely reminiscent of humanoid forms, were being pulled towards the device. For a moment, the sky darkened, and then the device returned the lightning, arcing through the air in a multitude of colors, eastwards, in the direction of the mountain the rider came from. The mountain exploded into a thousand pieces, releasing molten rock and powdered stone into the air. At the same time, the ground beneath the camp buckled, and everyone in it opened their mouths in silent screams, as a wave of deathly cold washed in a hundred yard wide radius, sealing them all in ice. The test was a success, but the philosophers hadn't anticipated the backlash. The officer at the main skyship, overlooking the valley writes: 'Conduit rod testing #3 was a success. Further deployments must require evacuation of the firing site.'

--Nuno 05:16, 25 November 2010 (UTC)

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