

Board Report

The room was unusually spacious, with a high vaulted ceiling that served to emphasise how conspicuously empty it was. A hemispherical quartzite table that followed the curves of the walls dominated the centre of the room, surrounded by austere matching thrones. The walls themselves had been lavishly decorated with murals of ships on the rolling waves, wagons in convoy or similar scenes of commerce, interspersed with stark white panels into which the large, bold letters “C T C” had been carved. Pale, pulsing blue light spilled from behind the letters.

Five of the fourteen thrones had been filled, two on either side of the central one. The occupant of the central throne glanced unhurriedly around over steepled fingers, his indexes pressed against the waxed black moustache. His eyes focussed on the goateed dwarf to his left, tea-leaf cigarette already in hand.

“Mr Jensen, you claim to have uncovered something that requires legal advice and...what was it?” he began, glancing languidly down at a notepad. “Ah, may open us to criminal prosecution up above?” He glanced back up. “And yet...this is apparently not critical enough to require the full board of directors. Please explain, Adam.”

Adam Jensen drew on his cigarette, glancing down at the notes in front of him. “All right,” he began in the guttural voice of a heavy smoker, “three weeks ago, contact was lost with one of our research outposts on the edge of the Homelands. A place called...Cruagh Island, just two miles west of Omey Island.”

“On the edge of the Homelands?” echoed one of the people opposite him. The director frowned over at her. “Is that not too close to the...the Fomorians? What if they-”

“The proximity to the orcs was precisely why it was chosen for certain projects, and precisely why we did not intend to skimp on the security of the site. A full company of the security forces was dispatched to hold the island, with plans to build at *least* one shock tower to reinforce them.” Ignoring the raised eyebrows at the expense implied, he blandly continued, “There were also several shock doorways dispatched, and three wireless sets. Instructions were given to transmit status messages daily at 6 am, 12pm, 6pm and 12am. In fact, the lack of radio messages were precisely what alerted us to the incident.”

“A shock tower, shock doorways and a full company? And yet,” the director commented icily, “it appears to have done *damn all* to protect the island! I presume that your report contains a full analysis of this failure?”

“Of course.” Jensen did not seem fazed by the implied accusation of incompetence. “The entry point appears to have been via a maintenance doorway on the northeast cliffs. As part of the retrofit and attempt to modernise the security, the door was fitted with a lock that could be accessed via an electrical keypad. I believe you have all seen them.” A quick glance around for the nods and noises of confirmation, before he continued.

“The keypads come with a default code for installation and testing. The installer’s manual explicitly tells the reader how to change this, and to do so forthwith. The box that encloses the keypad also includes a plaque that spells this out.”

“Yes, yes, we all know this,” the director interrupted testily. “Why is this relevant, Adam?”

“Brian, the keypad hadn’t been updated. The default code still worked. Given how easy it is to disable that – I’ll defer to Gavin on that – I can only assume incompetence or an oversight.”

“Forgive my curiosity, Mr Kelly, but *how* easy is it to change this code?” one of the dwarves to the director’s right interrupted, looking at the one to her right. The prim grey bun and matching eyes behind her half-moon glasses screamed ‘librarian’; the plain but high-quality, well-fitted dress and notepad under her right hand screamed ‘lawyer’. “Is there potential liability here?”

“It requires one wire to be snipped. That sounds like an older version of the lock; we removed that circuit and the default code entirely about a year ago. Before you ask, the default code was

1234,” Kelly replied. He continued snidely, “Only the most blatantly obvious example available, since marketing explicitly wanted it ‘easy enough for Fomorians to use’. In writing.”

“Spare us the snide comments, Gavin,” Brian sighed. “Adam, were there any other errors? And do you have any suspects?”

Jensen looked down at his notes. “The wireless system wasn’t syntonized, i.e. it wasn’t tuned to use a specific frequency. There’s no evidence that anyone exploited this, but it *could* have been used to help the raiders eavesdrop on us. As for who did it...I have a few possibilities. Starting with the least probable: the British.

“The Royal Navy *did* have a couple of destroyers within 30 nautical miles of the island, but there’s no records of them coming within range. Besides that, if they *had* raided the island, we’d have found a lot of deaths by .303-calibre ammunition. We found none. Every death was either caused by .32-calibre dum-dums, knives, blunt trauma or crossbows. That’s tunnel weaponry, so it leaves either the Seekers or Fomorian raiders.”

“Ciara, correct me if I’m wrong,” the director looked over at the lawyer, “but we would have heard if they had executed this attack?”

“I’m not aware of any warrants that were issued for Cruagh Island,” the lawyer replied. “If any were issued for any major violations, I would have heard before this.”

“Precisely,” Jensen agreed. “We know that they know it exists – there was a monastery there once – but if they had any major reservations, they would have swarmed the place. I believe the director was ordered – in writing – to cooperate with them, and to acknowledge that he received the orders. That has been received, so I think we can disregard them for now.

“That leaves the Fomorians. On paper, there are several points in their favour. The first is that the likely entry point would allow access to Omey Island and the...Aughrusbeg peninsula. Both are at most two miles away. The second point is that it would explain why some of the garrison’s weapons are unaccounted for; they likely stole the guns. Thirdly, there are communication records that suggest a boat was dispatched to a nearby bay to retrieve research materials, in exchange for cash.

“As for *why* the Fomorians might attack, I’ve been chasing down some shipping records which suggest that the cash was counterfeit money that should have been destroyed. If so, they were likely paid with bad money, or somebody else took it.”

“Why would we pay them at all? Trading with them violates the Act of Eradication!” Ciara expostulated. The director glowered at Jensen.

“Gavin?” Jensen glanced at Kelly. The other dwarf looked down at a file in front of him, cleared his throat, and began to summarise the contents.

“The main project being undertaken at Cruagh was to figure out what *caused* the Fomorians. The current thinking is that it might be a physical disease with an environmental cause – and if so, it could potentially be reversed or prevented. The initial reports and recordings that were recovered implicate the air from the homeland tunnels.”

“I see why you would consider that important, but...how would this expose us to liability?”

“Firstly, Dr Burke left some notes about possibly patenting this discovery,” Kelly began. Aoife raised an eyebrow and quickly noted this; she was already wondering if that would be blocked by the aforementioned Act. Glumly, the engineer continued, “Even worse, it turns out he deliberately chose a few human test subjects. Unwilling humans.”

A frigid silence descended as the group tried to digest this. The director’s face turned a mottled shade of red as good breeding clashed with disgust. Jensen raised his eyebrows in a manner which, clearer than words, described what he thought. The dwarf to his left simply rolled her eyes and examined her fingernails.

“Was this approved?” Aoife asked coldly, her eyes narrowed. “And what evidence do we have that this occurred?”

“No, it wasn’t,” Kelly replied, pinching the bridge of his nose. “The scope of the experiments were explicitly limited to mice, cats, dogs and sheep, with confirmation in writing. As for evidence,

I believe Adam's staff found two gramophone recordings describing the test subjects' initial examination. Neither sound at all willing."

"I brought them with me. Ms Collins?" Jensen looked at the woman to his left. She reached forward to wind up a gramophone that sat in front of her. In the dead silence that fell, the motions seemed to take longer than they should have.

The speaker crackled to life, revealing a nasal, pompous voice announcing the recording as "Initial examination of Subject One by Doctor Burke". It then went on to describe the subject, who was clearly screaming behind a gag in a mixture of fear and rage. In silence, they listened to the doctor ordering the subject to be stripped and describing various muscles in a clinically detached tone. At the end of it, Ms Collins swapped out the wax recording cylinder for another.

If the previous silence had been mortified, the second one was even more shocking. The doctor had examined a teenage girl in the same clinically detached manner, coldly ignoring her gagged pleas to stop. At the end of it, three of the five were glaring at the gramophone in the vain hope that it would burst into flames and destroy the offending evidence with it. The other two kept their faces still with an effort born of long experience at cleaning up the company's mistakes.

Nobody spoke for a long moment.

"What...what other evidence ties this to us?" Aoife finally spoke. "Who else knows of this?"

"Everything in the facility was stamped with company logos," Jensen replied wearily. "Inside the company, about fifty, sixty people know of parts. The full story is known by the five of us and Mr Fisher. As for external parties...the only possible ones are the Fomorian."

"Are you certain of that? What if the orcs contacted somebody about this?" she persisted.

"Why would they do that?" the director sneered. "And who would they tell?"

Jensen hesitated. "There have been reports that...that not all of the Fomorian are interested in snatching and turning people. Some have even been reported to cooperate with the British military."

"What? That violates the-

Ms Collins rolled her eyes and spoke for the first time. "Madam, sources inside the British War Office confirm that they have a department dedicated specifically to the homeland region. There are rumours that they have orcs on staff – either as hirelings or servicemen who were captured and turned by the Fomorian Brotherhood."

"So, the worst case scenario..." the director began, a feeling a trickle of sweat running down his back.

"Is that the Fomorian handed the...test subjects, Dr Burke and some documentation over to the British military," Jensen finished grimly. "Unfortunately, we have nothing to confirm this – all we have is a *lack* of the good doctor and *maybe* some missing documentation discussing the experiments themselves."

"Bugger. Aoife, if this is the case, can we expect to have the Brits kicking up a fuss?"

"Most likely. However...Gavin, you said that we have copies of the messages confirming the scope of the project?" Upon receiving a jerky nod from the engineer, she continued, "In that case, I would recommend that we emphasise that this was a rogue experiment, and move to dismiss Dr Burke for breach of contract. I would need his full employment history – Adam, I presume you have these to hand?"

"I do, but I need to clarify something. All records of the project have already been locked away under a false ID – why not just burn them?"

The lawyer shook her head. "It might be too late for that. If it gets out that we burned the evidence, it will backfire on us even more. In fact, it might be possible to mitigate our liability by admitting that this has happened, and that we wish to support the *victims*."

"You propose that we go public?" the director asked with a sharp, sardonic laugh. "I still remember what happened with the Special-purpose Agents of Marketing!"

"No, sir. Offering some discrete *support*. Perhaps a token amount of compensation. However," she smiled slyly, "for that, we *would* need to know where they are."

“I think it would be worth asking the orcs, just in case,” Jensen added, raising a hand to forestall the coming objections. “Since we didn’t authorise the counterfeit payments, they may reconsider if we offer compensation for that.”

“Adam,” the director sighed, shaking his head wearily, “I know damned well that you’ll look into it anyway, even if we forbid it. Therefore, you have permission to do so. *Discreetly*. Anything else from anyone?” No replies. “Then I declare this meeting over, and classed under the highest possible security rating.”

After retiring to his spacious, luxuriously empty office and pouring himself a generous measure of whiskey, the director sat back and considered the meeting. Why, in God’s name *why*, had that idiot doctor ignored the instructions he’d been given? And why the *hell* had he cheated the Fomorians? Even it was *legal*, that didn’t make it a *good idea*! What had he been thinking?

Because they’re Fomorians, his inner voice replied. *They’re monsters. Demons. Entirely incapable of civilised behaviour. They deserve no mercy – they’re incapable of it. They have no legal rights – merely tolerating their existence is more than they deserve – so it is entirely legal to cheat them.*

That didn’t make it a *stupid* idea. They must have had a way to recognise the counterfeit money, and decided that they weren’t going to accept it. And, rather than handle it in a *civilised* manner, they had decided they weren’t going to accept their station. Monsters.

He lowered the glass as something occurred to him. Just *how* had the monsters managed to recognise the fake money *and* figure out where and when to strike?