

HIDING HAND

Lee Denning

Chapter 1

Blue Islands, Ballydonegan Bay, Ireland | Sunday 1800 GMT

The sea-kayak cleared the last of the islands around the bay then turned northwest into open water. Golden beams from the setting sun shot underneath gathering dark clouds. One seemed to pause on the kayak before it ran back outward. The young Magician studied the water's chaotic chop intently in the uncertain light.

"Any minute now," he called into the wind, "ship your paddle, catch your breath, get ready!"

The smaller form in the front of the craft slid the paddle into clips on the narrow deck and relaxed into deep breathing.

A darker band of water moved in rapidly from their port side, a gyre current formed by tidal change. The chop shifted frequency, the waves transitioning from chaos to order. The gyre caught the kayak and yanked it forward.

"Right on time!" he exulted. "A strong one today. This is going to work, we're getting a free ride!"

Tinkling laughter of agreement from the front seat of the kayak was mostly lost in the gusty wind as she deployed a helium riser from the forward hatch. The parasail it pulled out caught the wind instantly. Her gloved hands played the lines exquisitely, angling the sail to control their direction, but not letting it put too much lift on the front of the boat. They sped along, neatly centered in the gyre's outer current, riding it toward their objective at the base of the basalt cliffs.

Incredible finesse, the Magician thought, *a true feeling for the sea and the sky. Earth-mother, for sure.* He shook his head in admiration then bent to his own task, paddling strongly, adding his energy to keep them positioned in the current.

Low thin streamers of scud clouds condensed as they lifted over the cliff. A tortuous path ran down it, carved into the rock, following natural rills and crevices; at the cliff base the path turned inland toward the village of Allihies. Fragmented thoughts ran through the part of his mind not busy processing their seaward assault. *A back door out of the Castle. A bolthole. Standard medieval construction practice for turbulent times.* Some days the Magician believed he could almost visualize how it had been used. *Some days I think I used it myself, in a past life.* Lately, those visions were becoming stronger.

The gyre in the bay expanded and he adjusted his paddling to keep them on its outer edge. His companion, sensing changed motion without turning around, shifted the angle of the parasail. The kayak drove northward around the head of the cliffs, aided now by an increasing southerly wind. Their mission profile was nominal, even ahead of schedule. Mother Nature was cooperating; both the sea and the wind currents were better than his careful analysis had projected. *A boon.*

A sudden shower pelted them, squeezed out of the humid Gulf Stream air by its lift over the rugged terrain of the Beare Peninsula. Cold fat droplets bounced off their backs. The Magician smiled as he remembered what the ancient village innkeeper told him last week.

"Why, it only rains twice a week in Ireland, young master! First for three days. Then for four." The old man had guffawed infectiously at his own wit.

Rain is no problem. We might need a trifle longer to get up the cliff, but that's already factored in. The cold dampness of the air went unfelt under their high-tech wetsuits. The rain served only to remind him to check the explosive packets when they beached the kayak. The packets had to remain tightly sealed in their plastic wraps for their assault on the castle. Getting them wet wouldn't do. A fine detail, he admitted, but good artists always pay attention to details. *And war is an art, n'est-ce pas?*

He smiled at the back of his companion, and the sense of their mutual artistry ran through him, exultant.

The Mullah stared at his Crone, discomfited. Her amusement cackled through the black veil of the burkha, muffled and sinister.

"An abundance of power demands its use," the Crone hissed. "Oh, yes, always. But *when* to use it... that is more difficult."

An implied insult, he thought. *And to me, a direct descendant of the Prophet. She is becoming more outspoken, more disrespectful. One day I shall have her head. But not yet.* He stared into the veil, a hard smiling stare. Her dark eyes stared back. Finally they blinked in submission, acknowledging her transgression. He kept staring. *She knows better than I how delicate the balance, how careful we must be in a place like this. So why does she provoke me?*

"Small craft to starboard, your Eminence." The submarine pilot's announcement derailed his irritation, and he turned toward the periscopic camera's display screen. The castle on the cliff sat darkly in the distance, intermittently shrouded by scud clouds. He momentarily envisioned himself as a mythical sea-monster, rising from the water, wrapping around the castle, suffocating it, sucking out its power. *Slow death*, he remembered his father's words, *choke them so they cannot breathe.*

A small craft slid into the foreground on the display screen, cutting off his musings.

Fishermen? He squinted at the display; the resolution of the periscopic camera was limited by the rain and sea spray. He could make out two figures. One, discernibly smaller, sat in the bow seat. Curly hair, darkened and wet, whipped in the wind around narrow shoulders, obscuring the face. *A woman? Perhaps. A small one, unless the craft is larger than it looks.* Deft hands on the ropes of a billowing sail guided the vessel. *But evidently one skilled in sailing.* He turned his attention to the larger figure, in the stern seat, paddling hard. Something made him uneasy. *Not fishermen, these two.*

"What do you see?" the Crone's husky voice rasped in his ear. As she bent beside him over the monitor, her veil drooped to reveal features twisted and gnarled and warped by pain.

How quickly I might end this ugliness, he thought, not for the first time. "What do *you* see, witch?" he asked instead, impatiently. "Tell me about *that* one." He tapped the monitor screen over the larger figure in the stern seat of the kayak.

The glint in the Crone's charcoal-ember gaze faded into contemplation. Her voice changed, became steadier, thoughtful.

"He may be the One; your enemy."

"Are you sure?"

"He *may* be, Eminence. Nothing is certain this close to a locus of power. But... a certain resonance with the castle."

The Mullah opened his mouth to give the command to surface, but she put a hand on his forearm.

"We have not tested our weapon under these conditions, Eminence," she rasped. "Formidable defenders in the castle may protect him. Our network cannot sense them. The power locus obscures all with chaos."

"It could be a trap?"

"Aye, a trap." She stared hard at the screen.

The Mullah turned from her, and the kayak filled the screen as he keyed the magnification higher. They watched the small craft careen past. The smaller figure, frozen for a brief moment on the crest of a wave, looked over its shoulder directly into the tiny periscopic camera.

Yes. Female, I think, and small.

She couldn't possibly see the tiny periscope in the rain and sea spray, he knew. Nonetheless, a peculiar feeling passed over him, a sensation of possibilities unfolding. Rage flared immediately. He liked control and certainty; not possibility.

"Caution now," the Crone spoke softly, reading his rage, "if he is the One, we do not know what he might sense."

"Follow that craft," the Mullah snapped at the submarine pilot, "as conditions permit."

"Yes. Caution now, and patience," the Crone hissed behind him. "To come close, to see the One, if it is he, is to our advantage. For tomorrow."

The Mullah snarled inwardly, suppressing his rage, watching the kayak turn inland toward the cliffs and the castle above. *Tomorrow.*

Kenmare River off Cod's Head, Ireland | Sunday 1808 GMT

The shoulders ahead of him cringed and trembled under the slick wetsuit, suddenly out of sync with her hands on the lines. The parasail billowed momentarily before she fought it back under control.

“What’s wrong?” the Magician yelled, “you cramping?”

She turned to look over her left shoulder, into the squall. “Monster,” she whispered, fear on her face. Then, more loudly, “Paddle!”

Instantly he drove the kayak faster, stealing a quick look into the rain and spray on their port side. *A monster? Is that what she said? A downdraft howled in answer, clearing his view, but nothing was visible. A whale? Is that what she saw? Or a Great White? But they never come this far up the bay.* Still, he paddled with a vengeance; his companion’s uncanny intuitions about the sea and sky were to be respected, always.

Her trembling stopped, and her hands on the parasail brought them closer to the edge of the gyre. The squall abated slightly. He looked back again. *Nothing behind us.* He dropped his frantic paddling and sucked in air.

“What did you see?” he gasped.

“Nothing. Felt something.” Her shoulders trembled again, and she looked back at him. “Big and dark. Evil.”

“No shoals out there. Didn’t see any shark fins. What was it?”

“Don’t know.”

“Is it gone now?”

“Yes... I think so. Maybe. I don’t feel it anymore.”

“Okay. Spill some air. Come to port a bit. There’s the beach.”

Her hands responded on the parasail lines. The kayak bounced outward across the chop, seeking the tangent edge of the gyre, the current that would carry them in.

“Breakers!” Her excited voice sounded over the wind.

“Got it! Pull in the sail and stow it. We’ll ride the current to shore.”

The Magician drove the kayak forward, adding his paddle strokes to the current’s flow. His companion hauled in the sail, squeezed the helium out of the riser, stuffed the collapsed fabric quickly into the forward hatch. *Didn’t miss a beat, he thought proudly, and we only had one chance to practice. Incredible!*

With quick strokes, he drove the kayak free of the gyre and into the turbulent eddies ahead of the breakers. He studied the wave motion for a brief moment. *Last leg, better get it right. If we dump now, the mission is blown and we’ll be in rescue mode.*

“Hard, now! Straight on!” he yelled.

She picked the paddle out of the clips and bent her slender strong shoulders into the task. The kayak shot forward, catching a wave they rode right up onto the pebbly beach. He grinned at their luck: skill was not necessarily enough in these chaotic Irish waters. The crevice targeted by their reconnaissance lay open in front of them, zig-zagging erratically up the cliff wall toward the castle.

“Hard part’s over?” she guessed, smiling up at him as they dragged the kayak above the tide line and into the crevice.

“Maybe,” the Magician smiled back, glad she’d gotten over her scare. This climb was no time to be getting nervous. “But now we’ll see if your legs are strong like your arms. Here, strap on the explosives, and let’s get to it. We’re running ahead of profile, so the quicker we get up to the castle, the better our little surprise is going to be...”

He looked at the small beach, imaging it clearly in his mind as a transposition target if they should fall or be thrown from the cliff. Then he patted her. “Go!”

Under Kenmare River off Cod's Head, Ireland | Sunday 1830 GMT

Even with the built-in motion compensator it was difficult to hold the periscopic camera steady on the two cliff-climbers. The currents buffeting the small vessel made the figures dance around on the monitor screen. The Mullah gave up trying to get a clear look at their features; they were just too far away. Clearly, though, they were moving with considerable agility up the erratic crevice in the cliff wall. *Their movements seem practiced, particularly the female.* The printed picture of the kayak’s transit past the submarine had been blurred by intervening rain and sea spray, giving only a hint of longish curly hair and small size. The light, quick movements and ability to hoist her weight up the cliff belied a child’s physique. A few meters

below, the larger figure had kept his attention upward, seeming to monitor her movements. His hands went out from time to time to guide her feet. *But why? She seems the better climber.* The puzzle irritated him.

“Who are they,” the Mullah muttered out loud, “and why do they approach the castle this way? If he is the One, why does he not walk in the front door?” He glanced at the Crone. “If he is not, is it an infiltration? An attack? Perhaps there is another traitor besides ours?” He turned angrily on the old woman behind him.

“Our asset in the village spoke of no one else,” she replied. “And besides, the east entrance is the most easily penetrated, certainly not the cliff wall. Those two I sense are... *expected* by the castle. Yet they do what is *unexpected*. A mystery, Eminence.”

Frustration flared his rage past its control point.

“Useless!” He snapped the back of his hand against her face. She recoiled, stumbling into the bulkhead. Blood trickled into the veil. Her hand moved to cover her lips.

He glared at her crouched form. The pilot in the forward compartment kept his attention carefully focused on his instrument panel.

I must kill him after we're done here, the Mullah realized, *he has seen too much.*

“Answer me, witch!” he bellowed. “For all we know, we might also be expected by those in the castle!”

“Patience, Eminence,” she hissed, dropping the veil and spitting blood onto the sleeve of her black burkha. “They cannot detect us underwater. Those in the castle do not know we are here. And tomorrow, if our informant is correct, the One will leave the castle for the village. He will be outside the power locus. Your machine will overcome his defenses.”

My machine. The Mullah felt a tickle of anticipation, almost erotic, following the release of his frustration. *A focused K'Shmar field. I will have him. Tomorrow. No mind yet has been able to resist.*

They had experimented extensively to verify that. Most frequently, the target fell to his knees, frozen in place and trembling violently. A few were able to function, but barely. He had killed them all afterward, as a precaution.

Castle O'Donnell, Coulagh Bay, Ireland | Sunday 1835 GMT

She climbed steadily, with utter confidence, her legs tired but not cramping. *Almost at the top.* She pushed her tacky-gloved hands against the cold rock behind her and lifted, then walked her feet up two more small steps on the other side of the crevice. *This is fun!* Two hundred meters below the surf rumbled its agreement.

“Okay,” her Magician’s voice came in a whisper, “you’re almost there. Brace your right foot in that crack and feel for the top of the ledge with your hands.”

She giggled at his instruction. It was unnecessary; the rock itself had told her as much.

“Shh! No noise!”

She stifled another giggle and pushed onto the ledge below the castle wall. Then, in a fit of exuberance at their success, she backflipped into a standing position on the narrow ledge and held out a hand to her less-agile Magician.

“Showoff!” he whispered sourly, kissing her forehead. “Come on, now. Stretch your legs while I set the timers. Then we go straight up the wall to the roof.”

The tension in her quadriceps faded under her mental relaxation kata. She watched with interest as he tapped the time codes into the tiny devices with the point of his knife. Their biggest uncertainty had been how long the approach would take. Now, with the mission being *nominal*, as her Magician would say, the tiny digital timers would trigger the six explosive packets carried in her fanny-pack. Things should go smoothly from here: get into the castle, place them, get into position. *Nominal*, she giggled to herself, *he likes that word. He's so serious now, all the time!* But she understood his serious purpose: with the right placement and the proper sequence of explosions, the castle’s defenses would crumble quickly. *And won't that be just perfect!*

Her role was worming her smaller, more flexible form through spaces where the Magician couldn't pass, placing the packets, then hitting the small button that started the timers. She stifled another giggle at the thought and tried to reach out with her mind to absorb some of her companion’s seriousness. *No laughing*, she told herself sternly. She watched him slip the last of the explosives into her pack. He slapped it, pointing at the castle wall.

“Up you go. I’m right behind.”

Race you to the top, she thought, scampering easily up the stones extruding from the near-vertical surface.

“Shit!” His whispered expletive followed her, “not your freakin’ Spider-Woman act! Slow down!”

She waited at the top, smiling at the finger he held over his lips. Of course she wouldn’t speak. Or even make any noise louder than a mouse. They were close, now, so very close.

The Magician lifted the grate silently out of its frame, and nodded her into the opening.

“*Go n-eiri leath*,” he mouthed, a Gaelic *good luck*.

“*Thusa freishin*,” she mouthed back, kissing him on the cheek as he boosted her into darkness.

She slithered through the passages by the feel of the stones as much as by her infrared headlamp, checking her watch, laying the packets, pulling their tiny timer pins at the pre-set times. Working downward, carrying the single remaining packet, she squeezed into the modern sheet-metal heating duct. It led to the room in which she and her Magician would converge their attack. There she paused to insert earplugs and switch the infrared goggles for specially polarized glasses. She studied the countdown on her watch and controlled her breathing while awaiting the Magician’s diversion.

She didn’t wait long.

A booming blast and shattering crashes of glass reverberated up the ductwork. The need for silence over, she crawled rapidly down the duct toward the ceiling grate. Reflections of fierce blue-green and silver lightning from the room below instantly flashed up through the grate. Shearing sounds, as metal being ripped, pounded into the duct, shaking it wildly on its attachments to the castle rock. She pulled herself to the grate, lifted it off and looked downward.

Ten feet below, the Magician’s shadowy black form, outlined by a coruscating turquoise field of energy, engaged his opponent in a death-dance. The castle’s defender, a shifting silvery blur around blackness, parried and thrust. Lightning flashed around the room, white and blue-green, and all other hues of the rainbow where they met. The ozone smell of ionized air enveloped her, and tears came behind her lenses. She watched the carefully conceived deception of their attack play out beneath her, tasting her Magician’s satisfaction.

He flipped backward over the table beneath, but then slipped and sprawled on the floor.

She threw the last packet into the corner of the room.

The screaming whistles of the timers went off simultaneously, indicating detonation of her carefully-placed explosive packets.

The defender’s flashing terrible sword of silver lightning, pointed at her Magician’s now-vulnerable belly, suddenly wavered.

Yes, she giggled, *now!* She dropped straight down onto the back of the castle’s defender, encircling its throat with her strong young arms.

The silvery energy shield evaporated instantly as she dropped through it, and the black formlessness snapped into a short rotund old man. She saw his astonished look in the big wall mirror across the room, even through the haze left by the battle.

“You’re *it!*” she exclaimed, tapping his shoulder. Then she levered herself up a bit and kissed the top of his sweaty bald head.

The Magician’s energy field snapped off, and he lay on the floor convulsed with laughter. “Gotcha this time, Uncle Ham.” He picked up the packet, a Zip-Loc bag containing a scone about the same size as a charge of plastic explosive. He shook it to show the timer and whistle, and laughed some more. “The cameras and mini-guns are out. Courtesy of the village bakery. Told you it could be done.”

Hamilton O’Donnell roared with laughter himself, flipping eight-year old Eva Connard easily over his head and into his arms, collapsing onto the sofa with her in shared merriment.

“Indeed and ye did, my young warriors, indeed and ye did. Oh my! How shall I ever live this down?”

“You shan’t!” Eva gasped, hugging her sides helplessly as her uncle tickled her.

“You can’t!” Eighteen-year-old Joshua O’Donnell, big brother as well as Magician to his little step-sister Eva, held his own sides as he laughed harder. “Ever!”