

# CLOAK and MIRRORS

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The winds whistled and swirled in the frosty night like a chorus of apparitions dancing and bobbing, leaving soft whispers against Dylan's ear, enticing, cajoling, flirtatious and deadly. Ah, but they could drive a man insane on a night like this, he thought, pulling his collar tighter about his ears. He wore an Irish tweed cap and still the winds licked at his hair like fingers running through it, soothing, insistent and treacherous.

The horse's mane was grasped as well by the same invisible force, the long strands stretched as though they were being combed by an otherworldly creature that would not let go. They were nervous tonight and he imagined given their heads, they would turn about and leave the eerie foothills of the Blue Stack Mountains. He kept a firm hold on Dougal's reigns as the horse snorted, the sound unnaturally shrill.

He could read a horse like he could read a man's face, and tonight it didn't bode well. Dougal's ears were

stiff and pitched forward, a sign of unease for sure, and every now and again they twitched and trembled as his haunches dipped low. Dylan peered through the shadows at the other horses, both as spirited as his; and yet their tails were clamped low, their voices constant.

In contrast, the men were hushed as they had been since leaving the manor house, the silence broken only intermittently as Jack announced a change in direction or a distant landmark for which he was aiming. Even then, his statements were terse as if he was reluctant to speak in the eerie terrain.

The ground beneath the horses' hooves was uneven and unpredictable. As the night sky began to brighten with the first vestiges of the aurora borealis, he began to see why their progress had slowed since entering the mountain range; the horses had to pick their way around craggy rocks, the tall grasses obscuring whether the land was firm or soft until their hooves either landed on solid ground or they felt the disconcerting descent into boggy earth.

He inched the horse forward until it was nearly even with Jack. He rode a silver mare with a jet black mane and tail, a beautiful animal to be sure and under the stars her coat was mesmerizing as if it was aglow.

"Are you certain this is the way to Innisbarracar?" Dylan asked.

Jack glanced in Alexei's direction before shifting his attention to Dylan. "You said you needed weapons, did you not?"

"Aye."

"Then we'd be taking a bit of a diversion." He pointed at the mountain's highest peak. "Innisbarracar would be on the other side through the pass. We'll be headin' in that direction—" he pointed slightly to the left of the mountain "—where we'll be arming ourselves first."

"Ah."

They rode for a few minutes in silence before Dylan asked, "And what type of weapons would you be havin' there?"

Jack looked at him out of the corner of his eye. "Whatever kind you'd be needin'." With that, he urged his horse forward.

They found themselves on a course that was hardly wide enough to be considered a path. Forced to ride single file, Jack took the lead as Dylan urged Alexei into the middle and he took up the uneasy position of rear guard. The Russian was proving himself to be quite an accomplished rider; his appaloosa was a spirited stallion that was rearing his head in a clear signal that he wanted to take the lead. Alexei was constantly pulling back on his reigns to keep him in check.

As they climbed ever higher, the mountains loomed large on either side of them, nearly obscuring everything else on their periphery. It was a fine place to be ambushed, he thought. He wasn't certain the horses would even have the breadth to turn about if needed. He wondered how much further they would be forced to travel on this dangerous route but Jack was too far in front of them and he dared not call out.

In the distance he heard a chorus of owls; each one individually might have gone unnoticed but together their voices were eerie, ethereal; both soft and surrounding so that he couldn't tell from which direction they came. He told himself it was nothing but the long-eared owl, or Ceann cait, a species widespread in Eire; and on a cold night such as this one, they were as likely to huddle in groups of a dozen or more as not. But his gut told him their nesting had been disturbed, setting off a chain reaction of calls.

His eyes shifted skyward, seeking the outline of the mountains that rose above them. The ridgeline appeared to be set afire from the dance of the Northern Lights.

Flashes of red, purple and green pranced and undulated, the colors becoming more vivid as they climbed ever higher. Here in the rural, largely uninhabited Blue Stack Mountains, the skies were spectacular. There had to be thousands of stars, he surmised, and for the briefest of moments he wondered if there were life forms on any of those distant white dots and whether somewhere, someone was looking back at this blue planet and wondering the same.

They came to an opening and Jack held up his hand briefly, stopping his horse while he surveyed the landscape before him. Then he looked back to Alexei and Dylan, nodded, and began a descent.

As Dylan cleared the last of the rocky mountainside that had impeded his view, he found himself on a crest overlooking a valley that was sufficiently wide enough for the aurora borealis and starry skies to illuminate it. Tall grass still stubbornly green was covered in hoarfrost, the winds causing the tall reeds to ripple as if shivering. He stopped Dougal for a moment while he drank in his surroundings. He noted Jack well out in front, covering the ground more rapidly now, with Alexei's stallion directly behind and gaining ground. He scoured the area for Jack's intended destination, eventually coming to rest on an outcropping of vegetation that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. He spurred his horse forward.

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The vegetation turned out to be a mass of overgrown wildflowers now gone to seed, the stalks that stubbornly remained brown and twisted and larger than any had a right to be. They blended almost seamlessly with ancient, mangled hawthorn, misshapen limbs nearly naked but for a scattering of red berries here and there, the best long ago eaten by the stalwart birds that remained for the winter.

As they drew ever closer, he discovered the plants hid a structure beneath their tapestry. An image rose in his mind of a vibrant cottage built perhaps four hundred years in the past, the walls of the same stone that littered the ground even now, the shades of brown and beige blending seamlessly with its surroundings. Underneath the gnarled shelter of limbs was a sheath of thatch; no doubt a thick layer in days gone by, it was now worn thin and weathered with time but was remarkably still intact.

Jack reached the front of the structure and dismounted and as Alexei and Dylan joined him, Dylan realized the back of the house was cut into the mountain itself, obscuring it completely from two sides. A door was deep set, its muted and peeling red paint a reminder that it had been someone's home in days long past.

He dismounted his horse and joined the others at the entrance. Metal plates had been added on one side, nails painstakingly driven into the stone itself, now encrusted with rust. The plates joined others set into the door, married with a thickset chain. Jack fumbled with a lock, blowing on his hands as if to unfreeze fingers from the bitter chill that had permeated them all. Finally, the key clicked in the lock and the chain fell away, landing with a clatter on the rock beneath their feet.

"I'll be getting a light on directly," he said, brushing into the room.

Alexei stepped to the doorway and Dylan remained just outside. There was one window on this side of the house, the glass rippled and imperfect but unbroken. He caught a glimpse of light within and he turned back to follow Alexei through the door.

He found himself in a room of perhaps twenty feet wide and fifteen feet deep. Underneath the window he had just been studying was a thick table of simple, utilitarian lines. Atop it was the oil lantern Jack had just

sprung to life. As the flame caught and grew, the rest of the room leapt into clearer focus. All four walls were stone but two were interspersed with earth from the mountainside they were cut into. Only one other window existed; it was set into one side wall. From Dylan's vantage point at the door, he could see another structure through the mottled glass; it appeared to be built like the first one but much smaller. Beyond that was a heap of thatch from years gone by that might have once reached six feet high but was now compressed through years of harsh Irish weather.

Jack picked up the lantern and moved to the opposite wall, illuminating two long, narrow tables. They had been placed against the earthen wall and held stacks of rifles, pistols and ammunition.

Jack glanced at Dylan and smiled. Then, like a small boy eager to show off his toys, he moved to the head of the first table.

"These would serve our purpose well," he said, his voice gaining enthusiasm as he continued. "Have you ever seen the Armalite AR-18?"

"Can't say I have," Dylan answered.

"No," Alexei said, joining them.

"They're old, I won't be denying that, but I'd wager they're as good as the day they were purchased."

Alexei picked one up and studied it in the lantern's light. "American?"

"Aye," Jack replied proudly. "It's lightweight and you'll notice the shortness of it. The stock folds so it's easily hidden." He eyed Dylan's long leather jacket. "You can easily carry it under your jacket there, and we can place an extra in each of the horse satchels. We've plenty of ammunition—" he waved toward a separate stack of boxes "—as you can see." To demonstrate, he picked up one of the rifles, folded the stock, held it up to show its shortened length, and then extended it once again. He



popped a magazine in front of the trigger. "Forty rounds," he announced. "That should do us, wouldn't you think? Load our pockets with extra magazines and we'll be ready for anything."

"Aye," Dylan said quietly, picking up an AR-18 and inspecting it.

"These are Russian made," Alexei said. He had replaced the AR-18 he'd been holding and was now admiring another.

"Ah, that would be the Kalashnikov AK-47," Jack said. "But then, you would have known that, wouldn't you?"

Alexei's voice was hushed. "How did you get these?"

"Those? Oh, those likely came from Libya, you know. We got our weapons from all o'er the world."

"We?" Dylan asked.

"Aye. We."

"How many would be knowin' about all this?" Dylan asked, motioning toward the long tables.

"Oh, I see the wheels turnin' now, I do. Don't you be worryin' about anyone happenin' across these and turning 'em on us." Without waiting for Dylan's response, he pointed to another area of the table. "Pistols o'er there, if you prefer them, and might not be such a bad idea after all to line our pockets with 'em. Whate'er you fancy, we're likely to have it as not—Browning, Beretta, Taurus—I'd wager a Glock or two. Even a Webley, if you prefer."

Dylan wandered down the table's length. In one way, he felt as if he was at a modern-day gun show. In another way, he sensed he had stepped into the past. His mind began to calculate his age when the weapons were likely to have been amassed. He had an uneasy feeling that continued to grow as the realization of what was stored here began to sink in. By the time he had reached the end of the table, perspiration had broken out across his

brow, despite the fact that the cottage was frigid. "What are these?" he asked. But before Jack had answered, he knew exactly what he was staring at.

"Those?" Jack said excitedly. "Those are rocket launchers. RPG-7's, they are. They'll penetrate tanks, they will. And those o'er there—those are SAM's."

"SAM's?" Alexei asked, joining them.

"Surface-to-air missiles."

"Enough for an army," Dylan said quietly.

"Aye," Jack said. He looked him square in the eye. "Enough for an army."