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## Warrior of Darkness

by

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Rain sizzled across the broken concrete. The black skies drained dark cold drops and sprinkled frozen bits of ice. They touched Klava Diakonov's skin and numbed her cheeks and fingers. A blast of lightning cascaded across the heavens. She could not see it with her eyes. Still, she wrapped her black scarf more tightly over her face and pulled her dirty black coat closer. In spite of that, the blaze of light touched her senses and blinded them for a moment.

The lightning outlined and illuminated her. She stood across from The Bishop's Cross Pub in the grass at the base of a knoll. She was a slight woman with very black hair and dark skin. Her complexion was uniformly the color of coffee au lait. It was much darker than the Irish norm of Belfast. Her eyes were emerald and as deep as two still pools of water. They appeared almost Egyptian, or at least, like a tomb painting from that cursed British Museum. Klava was dressed entirely in black. And in her hand she held a small tablet of black metal that was covered with hieroglyphics and the depiction of a face. The face was hers and the tablet was hers.

Regardless of the downpour, Klava lifted up her cold wet hands. Water dripped down her sleeves and further chilled her. Her features tensed in concentration and strange words that were neither Irish Gaelic nor English escaped her lips.

Not far away, from the top of the knoll, four men watched Klava's slight figure and The Bishop's Cross Pub. Klava was a person who should not be anywhere near this place. No one should be here—not outside the pub. Not in this place and on this night. Everyone should be inside the warm dry tavern. That was the plan. That's why they picked this night. Rotten weather, like this, meant more casualties. The four lay in a slight depression near the top of the knoll. One had built the bomb. One had placed the bomb. One protected this bomb. One was in charge, and he was Donald, Red Donald. The three others were all members of his bombing cell. They were soldiers in the Provisional Irish Republican Army, the PIRA.

Red Donald held a pair of soviet military field glasses to his eyes. He watched the pub and he watched the girl. He had no idea who she was. He only knew that she shouldn't be here. He wondered if he should give the word to have her removed. It could be done simply and easily. Three of them were armed with silenced soviet pistols and razor sharp knives. To dispose of her would be easy. But why should he use such unsophisticated instruments? He could just ask Niul to take care of her. Niul was their subtle tool. He was their weapon from the old times. His was the power of hiding and hidden things—the power of the land and the old ones. Donald brought Niul along because most of the bombs had not worked properly for a long while. The bombs were put together correctly. They were placed precisely. But when they went off, if they went off, there were no casualties. And for some reason... Donald wouldn't think of it further. They

brought Niul in on it to make certain this bomb didn't fail. That's why they were all here watching too. They had to make certain of this one.

Niul applied the power of magic over their little gift to the Brits and to the Ulster Defense Association, the UDA. Donald observed Niul's power work more than once. Niul could make the bomb invisible to humans, dogs, or any other detection. His ability was truly amazing. Donald never thought much about magic before, but the Irish Gaelic language was one of the old ways just as magic was one of the old ways. They wanted a new Irish Republic—why not call on the ancient gods and ancient curses to bring it to be.

The bomb should go off any time now. Donald checked the radium dial of his watch, just about ten minutes more. The tavern was filled to bursting. It was Friday night, the time for drinking and carousing. He moved his gaze further down, the girl below him still stood alone out in the elements. She could be one of those lousy informers—a stinking traitor to the cause. She should be taken care of, but Donald comforted himself by the fact that she was easily within the blast radius. Very soon, he wouldn't have to worry about her. He gave a chuckle. Niul beside him looked up expectantly, but quickly returned his eyes to the tavern.

Red Donald didn't move, "Niul, how's the bomb look?" He spoke Irish Gaelic.

Niul replied in the same language, "Still there. Still shrouded in the protective cloud I made."

"What about that girl down there?"

Niul raised up on his elbows. "I've been watching her."

The leader turned his head, surprised, "You can see her?"

"A little. I can sense her."

"Does she have the stink about her?"

“Of magic, nah. No magic in that one, but there is something else.”

Donald paused in thought. Perhaps she might be their problem after all, “Can you take care of her?”

“Aye, I can do that, if you wish.”

Donald checked his watch, “Just a few minutes more.”

Niul squinted in the darkness, “She’ll be dead from the blast if she doesn’t move.”

“I know that. I just don’t want to take any chances—and I want to see it again.”

“Magic, you mean.”

“Yeah. Magic. Who would have ever thought...?”

Niul pulled his pouch around where he could reach it, “What do you want me to do to her?”

“I know you can’t kill her outright. Can you take her mind or put a cloud over her to knock her out?”

“A cloud might be the best. It won’t disrupt the other spell.”

“Good, do it.”

Niul brought out a small crucible, herbs, dried flowers, a cloud colored stone. The crucible was still hot. He used it not too long ago. The heat warmed his raw fingers. He drew a magic circle in the dirt and placed everything within it just right. He lit a bit of charcoal in the crucible and placed the herbs and a twist of flower in it. He held his hands over it and recited some words. They were no words of modern Gaelic. They were ancient words that very few knew or understood. He pronounced them and as he spoke, the words themselves seemed to alight in the air. They seemed to form a thick smoke that rose up from the crucible. He said a last word and the smoke disappeared from the confines of the magic circle and, far down the slight hill, rose up at the girl’s feet.

The leader chuckled.

Klava turned. It wasn't time yet. She sensed the bomb. She knew when it had been set to go off. She was ready for it. She knew magic had been placed around it, but that was nothing to her. Then she felt the same magic well up around her. It rose from her feet like a thick fog, like smoke. She lowered her chin and squinted her eyes toward the top of the knoll. She knew they were up there. She knew they were watching. She wasn't sure how many. She had placed all her concentration on the bomb and not on the watchers. There never had been this observation before.

Klava raised her hands again into the night. She lifted up her tablet, "In the name of the great Dagda..."

Without lightning, a clap of thunder split the darkness. On the knoll, Niul's crucible began to flare and spit. The magic circle caught fire and outlined the four men in the shadows. Niul pushed away from it and covered his eyes. The magic in him was sucked up and out and out. He caught his throat with both hands and scrambled away from the crucible. The further he moved away the less the constriction on his throat and the easier he could breath.

Red Donald jerked away from the burning crucible. He glared at Niul, but didn't say a word. He moved away and further down the side of the knoll. He glanced at his watch and put his eyes back on the field glasses. The girl had turned back around.

Klava gathered the night in her hands. She gathered the night stuff and held it and molded it. She sent it out, out, out across the dark and night and wet toward the brightly lit pub before her. Just as the timer on the bomb dropped its electrical spark into the mercury fulminate to detonate

the plastic explosive, the blast of Klava's darkness took it and absorbed it and held it. Klava called the darkness back—back to her. She held tightly to the contained power and light and magic, but she couldn't just let it go, by the dictates of the Dagda, the Lord God Almighty, it had to go somewhere in the world. Klava held it for only a moment. She held it only long enough to return it to those who last touched it. All the power, all the force and energy leapt in the darkness back to the one who placed the bomb and then to the man who made the bomb. Then to the one who made the magic. Two of the men's eyes reflected pain and horror for only a moment before their bodies exploded with satisfactory thumps at the top of the knoll.

Donald let out an astounded cry. Human body parts struck him, and he rolled further down the side and away from the spot. Niul was not so lucky. The blast and bloody vapor hit him and he fell senseless to the ground. The last thought he had before he lost conscious was that his own magic returned to him and the cloud that he placed on the bomb now covered him.

As soon as Klava released the darkness and heard the soft explosions behind her, she fell to her knees and doubled over. Nothing came out of her empty stomach, but she tried to drain it anyway, over and over. She fell on her face in the wet grass and mud. That soothed her flushed face and helped calm her. Finally, she pushed herself up on her knees and then stood. Her lip burned and her mouth tasted like blood and vomit. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. It came away bloody. She spat and tasted blood in her mouth. She wasn't sure if it was all from her lip. She knew she bit it when she fell on her face. It could have come from her lungs or her stomach. It was just blood and she didn't care much about it, except that it tasted terrible. She spat on the ground again and stumbled to a phone at the side of the pub. Klava

entered a series of numbers and a bored voice answered, “Motor Vehicles Special Division, Belfast, how may I help you.”

“Diakonov here. Operation was a success. I need a cleanup. At least two, possibly three dead. Use care, M involved.” She rattled off the address.

“I have the information, thank you.”

Klava slammed the handset back in place. She took a deep sobbing breath and headed down the wet and empty streets.

Red Donald took a careful look around the knoll. He was afraid to turn on his torch, and he didn't want to stick around too long. He saw where at least two of his men had come apart. He'd seen it before. In most of their failures, this was the result. Their bodies looked like they had exploded from within. Sometimes it took their families with them—wives and children. That was the worst part. He had never seen it with his own eyes or experienced it like this. They just came apart. It happened at exactly at the time the bomb was supposed to go off, and he was more than certain that that girl had something to do with it. He was certain she caused it. Niul said he didn't note the stink of magic on her, but she had to wield some kind of power to make this happen. He would take her out next time. Next time he would be prepared for her and she would not get away. She would not ruin his operations ever again.

Donald took another quick look around. He didn't see Niul's body or any sign of the magic user. Red Donald checked that he had all his equipment, he couldn't afford to leave anything that would implicate him, and then he ran back through the thin woods to his car.

The cleanup crew didn't see Niul either.

Scáth meandered along the dark streets of Belfast. She was fourteen, but very tall for her age and thin. Her hair was black and she was dressed in black. She was dressed in black because that was all Klava wore, and Scáth received whatever Klava passed on or bequeathed. Scáth's face was covered with grime. Under the dirt it was white, very white and unfortunately her cheeks lacked the cute freckles all Irish lasses were supposed to have. She wished her skin were dark like Klava's, but that wasn't to be.

The rain stopped a while ago, but the streets were still wet. Klava had been gone too long—Scáth knew what that meant. She kept her nose up and took deep breaths. That was the best way to find Klava—perhaps the only way to find Klava.

Scáth turned onto Ballarat Street. This was a bad area, but not any worse than where she and Klava lived. She didn't exactly live with Klava, but Klava let her stay at her flat. That was just about as good as living. She had a place out of the rain—except when she was looking for Klava. Scáth had tried all the usual places. Klava knew the darkest and most secluded hiding spots of the city. They were places always just in view, but hidden. The best places to disappear and still keep an eye on things. Usually, by this time Klava wouldn't be able to do anything, especially keep an eye on things.

Scáth smelled it. Ah, there it was. The smell of John Player Specials. The sweet cigarette smoke was clear to her in the wet night air. Klava couldn't ever hide from Scáth's nose—not as long as she smoked that brand of cigarettes. The usual fare in Belfast was some cheap Irish brand or at least an American Winston or Camels. Klava always smoked John Players. Scáth bought them for her by the carton.

Scáth sought with her nose. Klava must be in really bad shape. She had never hid out here before. Scáth followed the smell toward a loading dock. A pile of crates sat in front of it. The sweet tobacco scent came from there. Scáth walked quietly over and stepped behind the pile.

Klava leaned back against the concrete loading dock. Her legs sprawled out in front of her. A cigarette dangled from the side of her lips. On the ground at her side were the cast off butts of more than one pack. Scáth sat next to her. She sat as close as she could. Klava was cold. Her hands trembled and her fingers were blue.

Scáth took Klava's arm and clasped it against her, "You're wet and cold."

Klava took a shuddering drag on her cigarette. Her eyes were tired and without hope.

Scáth tugged on her arm, "All right. I know what you want to tell me. How many this time?"

Tears leaked between Klava's eyelids, "I saved over a hundred. One hundred thirty-seven exactly."

"Let's see it."

Klava dug in her pocket. After a bit, Scáth had to help her find it. Scáth pulled out a fine gold chain. It was very thin and very long. It was so long, Scáth couldn't tell there were new links, but there had to be one hundred thirty-seven new links on the chain. Klava leaned against her. Her voice was choked, "Please, Scáth, count them."

"Only the new ones, then." Scáth began to count. When she reached one hundred thirty-seven Klava gave a sigh. She began to sob softly. Scáth put her arms around her and rocked her, "You saved one hundred thirty-seven, dear. You did well tonight."

Klava tried to light a fresh cigarette. Her hands shook too much to manage it. Scáth held the lighter to the tip and it finally lit. In the light of the flame, she touched Klava's lips, "You bit your lip and bled quite a lot."

"Yes."

"You smell like vomit. Did you have anything to eat?"

Klava shook her head.

"Let's go home. You need to warm up, dear, or you won't be able to do anything tomorrow."

"I've got to confess..."

"Of course you do." Scáth knew the routine: first the number saved, then counting the links, confession, then the number who died, then counting those links.

She helped Klava to her feet. Klava leaned heavily on her. They made their way through the streets to Saint Anthony's Catholic church at Willowfield Avenue and Willowfield Crescent. They rang the night bell and went inside—it was very late. Scáth put Klava inside the confessional. She pounded on the priest's side until she heard a complaint. Scáth had to make sure he was awake. Klava had confessed too many times to a sleeping priest. Klava would do it over and over again until she received the absolution, so it didn't do if the priest was not awake.

"Beloved in Christ how can I help you?"

Klava started almost automatically, "Father forgive me, for I have sinned."

"Please continue."

"Tonight Father, I murdered by my actions two men."

Outside the confessional, Scáth heard a chuckle. The Father continued, "It is you again. You confess to all this killing. Are you certain your sin is not lying?"

Klava only responded, "Father, I murdered, by my immediate and intentional actions two men tonight. I am ashamed. Please forgive me." The only emotion in her voice was sadness.

The priest chuckled again, "How many times did I tell you to toll your rosary the last time, child?"

"You told me to do it one hundred times for each person whom I had murdered."

"Very well, I place the same condition on you this time. One hundred times for each death."

"Thank you Father."

"In that case, I am free to offer you the absolution. God the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son, has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

"Thank you, Father."

Scáth opened the door to the confessional and dragged Klava out of it. She put Klava's arm around her and half carried her from the church. They slowly made their way to Klava's flat on Lismore. Already under her breath, Klava recited the rosary. She didn't need to toll the beads that Scáth knew encircled her neck. Klava had done it so many times it was completely automatic to her. Scáth knew the priest didn't believe Klava. Klava didn't know or didn't care about that. She just longed to hear the words of the absolution.

The moment they stepped outside the doors of the church, Klava whispered, "Cigarette."

Scáth didn't stop moving. She pulled Klava along with her, "You're freezing. You need to get warm."

"I need a cigarette."

While they trudged down the sidewalk, Scáth fumbled in Klava's pockets and finally found the open pack. She placed a white tube between Klava's trembling lips and lit it with Klava's ornate lighter. Klava took a deep lungful of smoke, and for a little her shuddering subsided.

Scáth scowled, "You really should cut back."

Klava didn't say anything.

A block later, when they arrived at the dingy apartment building, Scáth helped Klava up the three dark flights to her flat. Klava was shaking again. Scáth unlocked the door and pulled Klava inside. Only three rooms made up the place. The front room had a kitchen, a small table, two chairs, and a cot. Bookshelves made of old boards and bricks covered the walls and books and newspapers covered the shelves and the floor. A couple of half empty glasses and plates sat on the table. Old cigarettes smoked to the scorched filter filled the glass and plate that was Klava's. The flat wasn't very warm, but Scáth was used to this. It was the same every time, and it was better than being outside on the street.

Scáth dragged Klava into the cramped bathroom. It had a stool, cracked basin, and a shower. Scáth turned on the water, hot, in the shower and started to pull off Klava's wet clothing.

"You're soaked, you know. Right down to your knickers, that is, if you ever wore knickers."

Klava's voice was delirious. She protested, "Mother always said to call them panties."

"Whatever you call them, you still don't wear any."

Klava couldn't help Scáth much. The false dawn was just brightening the sky over the city. Klava wasn't worth much to anyone in this state or during the day.

When Scáth finally had Klava out of her clothing, she pushed her under the hot stream of water in the tiny shower stall. Klava's cigarette gave a protesting hiss, and Klava opened her mouth to the warm water. Scáth let out Klava's long braided hair. It fell almost to her waist.

Klava slowly stopped trembling, and Scáth propped her skinny body against the walls. Scáth smiled, “That should hold you for a little while.”

Scáth picked up Klava’s clothing and hung it on the line strung across the middle of the main room. Then she started to clean up the trash and the dishes. She opened the cupboards to see what they had left—little enough. She heard a soft thump and sighed. That was her signal.

Klava had slowly collapsed to the bottom of the shower. The hot water still cascaded over her. A little blood and bile circled the drain along with the dead cigarette. Scáth felt Klava’s arms and shoulders. She wasn’t trembling, and she felt warm. Scáth turned off the water. She took a couple of the towels and began to dry Klava. She flicked Klava’s cheek, “Klava, Klava. Time to go to bed.”

Klava roused herself enough to stand. Scáth finished drying her. Klava protested, “You’re much too rough.”

Scáth didn’t stop. She rubbed Klava’s hair until it was as dry as she could make it. She really should blow-dry it, but they didn’t have a blow-dryer. Scáth pursed her lips, “That will just have to do for now.”

Klava was already nodding off. Scáth rolled her eyes. She flicked Klava’s cheek and the woman jerked awake and frowned. Scáth’s lips were a thin line, “You can’t sleep here. Come on.”

Scáth tugged Klava into the one bedroom. There was a bed, not made. Home constructed bookshelves lined these walls too, all filled with books. A glass on the floor by the bed held cigarette butts. Scáth helped Klava to the bed. She had already pulled back the covers. It was too much trouble to try to get a nightshirt on Klava while she was in this state. She rarely wore one anyway. Klava plopped down on the bed, and Scáth rotated her legs the rest of the way on.

She pulled up the covers and carefully tucked Klava in on both sides. If she didn't, Klava would fall off the bed while she slept.

The dawn was breaking and shown just a sliver of light through their lone window in the main room. Before Scáth turned out the bedroom light and closed the door, she took a final glance at the smooth and already sleeping face on the pillow. Klava was beautiful. Her long black locks fell over the pillow and outlined her wonderful features. Her skin was perfect. Her lips were like coral. Her eyes were shut, but Scáth could imagine them as though they were wide open. They were like emeralds, like the perfect green of Ireland. Scáth took a deep breath and closed the door. She went into the bathroom to pick up the towels and caught a glimpse of herself in the cracked mirror over the basin. Scáth was tall and gangly. She should have been a boy, and at first sight, many on the street thought she was. Her hair was finally growing out, so she didn't look too bad, but she wasn't anything like Klava. Scáth's face was pale and no amount of summer sun would change that. Her hair was black, but not as black as Klava's and it was straight—just straight, and no amount of teasing or brushing could make it curl at all. She cut it almost all off before she met Klava. Cut it off to get rid of that little bit of ugliness, but also to stop looking like a girl. It was dangerous to look like a girl when you lived on the streets. She learned that lesson more than once—they wouldn't pay either, and that was the worst. When you were raped or sold yourself and you were still hungry afterwards that was a true crime. Scáth didn't ever want to have to do that again, and since Klava had taken her in, she hadn't.

Klava found her on the street one night while Scáth slept out in an old cardboard box. Scáth should have thought it was odd that this beautiful woman, Klava, would notice her at all. Perhaps she should have been afraid—Klava wore only dirty black clothing and wandered the streets at night. At the time, Scáth was too “out of it” to think of anything. Klava sat down

beside her box and smoked a cigarette—of course she did. She offered Scáth part of her sandwich. Why Klava had a sandwich right then was a question Scáth asked herself many times—Klava rarely had anything to eat, food didn't interest her much. But that night, she did.

Scáth found herself answering many of the beautiful woman's questions. They were about the street and about herself. They struck up an acquaintance. Scáth saw Klava on the street a lot after that. Especially at night. Klava rarely went out during the day. She worked at night. As far as Scáth knew, Klava was an interpreter for the Belfast Motor Vehicles Special Division. She worked at night doing something for emigrants and their identification. With a name like Klava Diakonov, if that was her real name, Scáth thought she must work with emigrants from Slavic nations, but she wasn't sure. Scáth didn't know much about such things and not enough to ask the right questions. She only had an education to Level Seven before she ran away from home. She had been advanced and she loved to learn, but she couldn't stay another day in that place. Klava knew all about it, and Klava had held Scáth many times for hours while she sobbed tearlessly. Anger was the driving passion in Scáth's heart, but Klava had helped ease that anger.

At home, Scáth had to fend off her stepmom's son. He raped her twice, and she was beaten by her stepmom for it both times. Her stepmom beat her regularly, usually where the bruises wouldn't show. Her father wouldn't stop her stepbrother or stepmother—it was too much for Scáth, so when she turned thirteen, she ran away to Belfast and found a place on the streets. She was raped there too, but not beaten afterwards. She tried selling herself, but that was horrible, and without a pimp, the johns wouldn't pay up. She finally found a way to live without any of that. That's when she cut her hair and became Scáth. Scáth meant shadow in Irish Gaelic, and Scáth fit her very well. She went from Susan to Scáth, and intended to be a shadow forever and

never a Susan again. Unfortunately a live shadow still has to eat and sleep. She was both starving and hiding when Klava rescued her.

Eventually, Klava took Scáth to this flat and made her shower. She fed her and gave her clothes. All of Klava's clothes were black, so Scáth wore black. Klava let her sleep on a cot in the main room. Klava helped her find a job at a local convenience store and smoke shop. The work was easy and paid better than selling herself, but Scáth thought Klava might have helped her get that job there because of the discount she received for beer and cigarettes—especially cigarettes. Scáth bought Klava a carton nearly every week.

Klava took Scáth to church. Scáth's family had been absently Anglican—they went to church at Christmas and Easter. Klava was Catholic, and really believed it. Klava attended Mass nearly every day and confession...well when she needed it. It wasn't difficult for Scáth to follow in Klava's belief. Klava lived it—it was entirely real to her. It was becoming entirely real to Scáth.

Scáth didn't reflect much on how strange Klava's life really was. She was afraid to. She didn't want to be out on the streets again, and even though she was taller than Klava, Klava was like the mother and sister Scáth never had.

The first time, Klava snuck out in the middle of the night, Scáth ignored it, but Klava hadn't returned by noon the next day and she didn't take more than one pack of cigarettes. Scáth knew Klava couldn't make it that long without her cigarettes. Scáth found her hiding in the backstreets. That time she was in pretty bad shape—silver links. Klava clung to Scáth for hours, and that was the first time anyone depended on Scáth. Scáth had to comfort another person—that was a first too. Even that first time, Klava made Scáth count the links on the chain. The gold chain first, there were already many links on it. Then she was confessed of the priest in the

church at St. Anthony's. That's where they attended. Scáth wasn't sure the parish priest knew who Klava was or that she confessed to murder more than once a month.

Then she had to...a groan and a cry came from the bedroom. "Scáth."

Scáth checked her watch. Klava was ready, and Scáth still could get to work on time. She stood, dusted her hands, and went into the bedroom. At the sound of the door, Klava's emerald eyes snapped open. "The chain..."

Scáth held the chain with black and silver links. There were many more black than silver links. Scáth already noticed the links mysteriously added last night were both black. Klava was a basket case for days when a silver link appeared. Then they would go to Mass three times a day for weeks straight. Scáth wasn't exactly sure why.

Klava cried out from the bed. Scáth wasn't ever sure if at this time if she was awake or asleep. "Scáth, bring me the chain."

Scáth had fished it out of Klava's clothes right after the cigarettes. She had been through this too many times before. Scáth sat on the side of the bed and held the chain in front of Klava's eyes. She never looked right at it—not at the black chain. Klava swallowed, "Please, Scáth, count the new links."

Scáth smiled, "One, two. That's all there are sweet. Just two new ones, both black."

"Black...you're certain."

"Yes black. I'm certain."

"Thank God then." Klava took a deep breath. "Thank God." She didn't turn her head, "I confessed...?"

"Yes, very nicely, and the priest said the absolution."

"Thank you, Scáth." Klava closed her eyes and was asleep again.

It was always the same. Oddly the same. Scáth eyed the black and silver links on the chain. There had been forty-six black links before last night, now there were forty-eight. Forty-eight dead, two, this time, traded for one hundred thirty-seven alive. Scáth understood that part. She understood that. Scáth couldn't explain any of it, but she understood it. She asked Klava once if all this had to do with magic. That was the wrong word to mention to Klava. Klava glared at Scáth and would not speak to her for days. Scáth wished Klava had screamed or hit her or something. Scáth knew what it meant to be hit or screamed at. She had never had someone she loved ignore her like that. Eventually, Klava cooled down. All she told Scáth was, "We do not use the M word around here." Scáth never mentioned it again.

Scáth went back to the main room. She made a list of things they would need for the next few days. Cigarettes were on the top of the list. She took money from Klava's hiding place in the kitchen, and went out. She carefully locked the door behind her and walked to work.

Niul woke cold and stiff. It was already daylight. He groaned and lifted himself up a little. For a while, he wasn't sure exactly where he was, then he remembered. His head swiveled back and forth. Two men died last night right here in this spot. For the life of him, Niul couldn't detect any evidence of the night. Nothing was amiss. He rose to his knees. He was dressed in camo with all his implements about him. The magic still held a protective cover over him. It made a fog. That's why no one had seen him. That was strange. The cloud, the fog, never lasted this long before. When he stood, he noticed the aerated blood and other terrible stains on his clothing. They already stunk like rot. Around the place where he had lain were dark splotches and human remains. He rubbed his bloody hands on his trousers. He felt a bit ill and swallowed thickly. He took a deep breath and pulled himself together.

He still had his pouch. It was handmade of animal hide and cursed quite properly for its role. A thick smell came from it. That nauseated him too. He had been at this magic work so long that nothing as simple as rotten flesh should bother him, but this did, very much. He opened the pouch to check his implements, his cursed items, and a cloud of darkness rose out of the bag. He barely had a chance to pull the strap over his head and sling the bag to the ground. The smell and darkness hit him all at once. It was clean and pure as though it destroyed all his cursed items as well as the curse on the pouch. It touched him and he doubled over and gagged. He had nothing in his stomach and heaved bile for much too long. Slowly the pain and clenching in his gut stopped. He lay on the cold ground for a while longer until he recovered. He stood, shakier than before and very cautiously made a search for the rest of his things. He kept well away from the bag. It was ruined, completely spoiled and unusable—uncursed. He would have to make a new one plus everything in it. All his other items were gone. There was no evidence in the place that four men had been there. There was no evidence that two men burst into pieces here. His magic circle and magic things were gone. There wasn't even a scorch mark on the earth where he scratched out the magic circle and burned the charcoal in his crucible.

Niul ran his fingers through his hair. He wasn't sure what happened, but he realized he needed to get out of here and away. He needed to reconnect with his bombing cell and section. Niul headed back down the knoll and to the woods. He didn't meet anyone.

Last night was another failure. An unbelievable failure. He couldn't imagine how his magic could be breached so easily. It never failed him before. It never had been so easily turned before and turned back on him. The knoll had become like a church or a consecrated place. Magic didn't work at all near either. Holy water and crosses were equally able to disrupt and spoil a good spell, but he had seen none of those things last night.

He arrived where their motorcar had been parked and noted it was gone. Part of the cleanup or had someone escaped last night. Likely Red Donald—their cell and section leader. Niul headed down the road. He needed to get to a safe house before he was seen by the wrong people. He continued down the backstreet. Last night, all they noted that was odd was that girl. She had done something against the bomb and against his magic. Had she made all those things happen? Had she made the men explode? Could she really have the magic to do that? Niul thought such things were impossible though the use of magic. They didn't square with what he knew, and why was the area around them cleaned to perfection. Except where he lay, every indication that they had been there was cleared away. He was hidden only because his spell had been turned back on him. Now that he understood. A magic practitioner at a very high level could turn a spell back, but that took great power—very great power.

Niul made up his mind. He wanted to meet this girl. If for no other reason but to learn from her—he wanted to meet her. She had power that was greater than anything he ever experienced or heard about. She had to be the reason they failed. She had to be the reason the men beside him died. She had to be the reason his magic had come back to him. He knew it, and he wanted more than anything in the world to meet her. He made up his mind at that moment. In spite of his commitments and his promises, Niul would find her. Although he had detected no magic around her, he would find her and learn from her—or he would worship her. Such were the requirements of magic in the world. The magic required a complete focus on the world and everything in it. It required the worship of the world—such a person as that girl would make a very worthy being to worship.

