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LEGEND OF LOST EARTH

G. McDONALD WALLIS



Complete Novel

THE CONSPIRACY AGAINST THE DARKNESS

“This is a picture of Tir na nOc . . . or, if you prefer, and as some have called it, this is a map of Earth.’

“Giles felt a sudden constriction in his chest as he heard the word. The word so long forgotten, in the word so nearly forbidden, the word that lived in him as it did in most of the citizens of Niflhel, in an obscure echo chamber of his being. Had he truly ever heard it before?”

Thus the long search begins on the black, ash-strewn planet of Niflhel for the green, life-giving planet of Earth. And Giles Chulainn is faced with a decision: to remain in safety on Niflhel, or to risk his life for a beautiful, impossible dream.

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G. McDONALD WALLIS was raised in Hawaii and the Orient where, she states, her interest in science-fiction began. There was something about living in a natural paradise and simultaneously being exposed to many different cultures that evoked a consuming curiosity about man and the universe in which he lives.

An actress for many years in radio, television and summer stock, she made an extensive USO tour through North Africa and Europe where her concern was further deepened by impressions of the war and witnessing the Nuremberg Trials.

She has been writing as long as she can remember and recalls that her first published effort appeared in the Shanghai American School newspaper where it created quite a stir and she was regarded, for a child, as being terribly avant-garde. . . . The printers had neglected to include the end of the story.

She has written for the stage and radio, short stories, articles and juvenile novels. She regards science-fiction not so much as fantasy but as tales of probability that offer both warning and promise to man, and that, on a deeper level, reflect man's own fears and wishes for his future.

Her previous Ace Book was **THE LIGHT OF LILITH** (F-108).

LEGEND OF LOST EARTH

by

G. McDONALD WALLIS

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LEGEND OF LOST EARTH

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For CHRISTOPHER
One of the Children

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In my search for the translators and publishers of the Celtic works from which I have drawn, I have made every attempt to ascertain and acknowledge all rights. If I have unknowingly and unintentionally transgressed in any way, I hope that I may be forgiven, particularly by those few whom, after long and wide efforts I have failed to locate. I especially wish to express my sincere thanks to the translators and publishers who have generously given me permission to use copyright material.

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ALPHA CENTAURI—OR DIE!

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I

TO GILES CHULAINN, night in Niflhel was a somber, depressing experience. For years he had felt it like this, with the keenness of a knife slicing to the bone and stripping him of all pleasure. He frowned and tried not to look up as he walked a little faster through the hard streets of the city. But even staring down at the pavement it was impossible to escape the pervasive smoke that hung like a heavy cloud over the low black buildings. His feet made crunching noises as they ground into the layer of soot that carpeted the walks. Sometimes it wasn't this bad—sometimes it was more like a blanket of ash that curled up in small puffs and vanished as one walked along. But tonight the red glow from the Eastern Factories lit the far sky like an inferno and particles of grit floated through the streets with the annoyance of microscopic insects.

Giles gave it up and stopped walking. He raised his head and stood there, on a corner of Niflhel, looking around him. There weren't many people about. Most of them would have, sensibly, taken the Underground straight home to the periphery of the city and avoided being caught in the rain of industrial waste. Momentarily he considered doing the same. His intention, after all, of how to spend the evening was without doubt the maddest scheme that had occurred to him in all his twenty eight years. Perhaps he should forget it and go home. But the picture of home that rose before him was as

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equally bleak and depressing as the streets of Niflhel. A squat round black "hut" rising out of the flat sandy plains that stretched endlessly to the horizon on all sides of Niflhel. A squat hut among thousands of others arranged in un-deviating, symmetrical rows, only broken here and there by the gaunt black elevator shafts that rose from the Underground. No, he wouldn't go home.

He looked at the street number and turned right into a smaller lane, his black cape and hood flapping behind him in a sudden gust of wind. Giles swore as an eddy of soot flew into his eyes, pulled his visor down and drew his cape firmly around him. The building should be near. He peered up at the grilled back windows that lined the alley. Why did he have to come in through the rear, he wondered. Why all the secrecy about this meeting? This madness, a part of him said.

There was an echo of footsteps behind him. Giles whirled around and ducked into a doorway, flattening himself against the side, surprised at his sudden furtiveness. Two hooded figures walked slowly and silently by, not glancing in his direction. Giles returned to the street and watched as they strolled in the same measured pace several yards ahead of him up the alley. Then they disappeared. He breathed deeply, amazed at the sudden apprehension that had seized him. These groups were all right—everyone knew about them—it wasn't contrary to attend, so why this sudden lurch in the pit of his stomach? He closed his eyes, trying to analyze it and remembered that he himself had called it madness a few moments ago. He remembered also that he knew no one who had ever actually attended. All right, it was simply the newness then. Simply the strangeness. He stared ahead to the spot where the two figures had disappeared and then slowly started walking.

A green light. A round green light shining in a second story loft in store number 63, about halfway down the building compound. A dim green light, shaped like a ball. "When you see it, ascend the stairway quietly, please. We have no wish for advertisement."

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They hadn't said enter surreptitiously, however, and that was exactly how Giles felt as he neared the building and saw, faintly glowing, the translucent green sphere. It gave him an eerie sensation. He had an uncomfortable desire to turn back. Irritated at his reaction, he quickly entered the dim doorway and began to climb the stairs. He stopped at the second landing, further annoyed to find that he was suddenly and inexplicably nervous.

One door at the landing was slightly ajar and Giles pushed it open, finding the shower room. He removed his cape and hung it up, then stepped into a cubicle that sealed behind him. It wasn't a bad jet—the air pressure was fairly strong and Giles was relieved when the last particle of grime was sucked off and blown away and the door opened. The shower had relaxed his uneasiness, he noticed, as he found himself thinking again of how much more effective it would be for the city if the soot waste from the air showers could somehow be distributed under the ground rather than released back into the air.

There were three others in the cloak room when he stepped out of the shower. He looked at them carefully, noting with relief that the types were not too distant from his own, and that the girl among them must certainly belong to the same economic and social level, if she wasn't indeed part of his own family branch. Her hair was a deep, midnight black, but she had the same hazel-green eyes and small features, and as she removed her cape Giles saw that her skin was faintly freckled like his own . . . usually the sure sign of connection.

He smiled at her easily, sure of himself now, as he usually was with women. "Is your name Chulainn?" he asked softly.

Something in his voice caused the two men to turn sharply and glance at him. Giles wasn't aware of it, but he had a tendency to address all women in a hauntingly familiar way, as if he had already had intimate contact with them.

The girl stared at him—oddly, Giles thought—and without answering entered a shower cubicle. Giles raised his eyebrows, looked at the men, smiled and shrugged. He didn't

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realize that he was expecting a sympathetic response until he received none. Their faces remained expressionless, and ignoring his gesture, they stepped into the other showers. For a moment Giles felt uneasy again. What was he getting into? Who were these serious people who displayed none of the social mannerisms of Niffhel? He must be crazy to come here, he decided, and then with characteristic stubbornness he stepped swiftly out of the cloak room to the landing where a faint green light shimmered out beneath the other door. He stepped up to it, about to push it open with his customary force, and then inexplicably slowed down, finding the handle, trying it softly and then nudging it open a speck gently.

The green light seemed to fill the room. Actually it came only from the round green globe that hung before the window. But there was no other illumination, so the effect was like being plunged into a limpid green sea. Giles caught his breath. There was something immediately startling about the effect of that green light, so different from the murky black buildings of Niffhel and the humid red sky. It was like balm, so unexpectedly soothing that he felt the shock through his whole system. So this is why people come here, he thought. That was his first impression.

The room itself was nothing more than a long bare loft. It took a few moments to discern the rows of seats, well filled with people patiently waiting. Or were they just waiting? There was another quality in the air that Giles couldn't quite fathom. He had the distinct impression that these people were doing something, but what it was he couldn't tell. He found a seat about halfway back and sat down. Scanning the faces around him he was surprised to find that many were from the top city strata. They were all very quiet and seemed to have their attention fixed on the globe. Nobody returned his glance. Giles looked at it, too, narrowing his eyes as he tried to sense the impressions the others were receiving, but he saw nothing except the formation of a halo if he stared hard enough, and a slight hypnotic tendency in the ball if his eyes remained too fixed.

All of a sudden the whole thing struck him as being

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extraordinarily silly and he had a wild impulse to laugh, as much at himself as anything else. Just what did he imagine he was doing here!

A man walked from the back of the room up one of the side aisles and turned to face his audience from the globe. Giles had never seen him before, but the man's face surprised him, removing all humor from the situation. Surely this was one of the Dagdas, the oldest and most venerated branch of Giles' own family. A remote branch, to be sure, but still a strain that even the Chulainns regarded with respect. And he must be one of the oldest of the lot, Giles decided, studying him carefully. He seemed tired, and as he spoke his voice carried a definite trace of weariness—or illness. Giles couldn't determine which. He wasted no time on a preliminary opening but jumped right to the heart of the matter.

"Of course there's no mystery about why you all feel more tranquil here. We have very little green in Niflhel and what there is of it is chemically produced. So is the globe. But the meaning behind the globe attracts you emotionally and therefore the color has a soothing effect." He stopped and seemed to be weighing something before he went on. Then his voice changed in tone from a feeling of having said this a hundred times before, to one of anger and immediacy. "A lot of people come here for just that. For this 'peace of green' or whatever it is they think they get from staring at this globe, which is nothing more than self-hypnosis. For a long time we didn't mind *how* people came here as long as they came. We wished only to keep this idea alive in as many hearts as possible . . ."

Giles winced at the words, even if the man was a Dagda.

". . . However, now the situation is a little different. Our ideas have been so thoroughly despised by Authority, our groups have been so effectively eliminated by mass psychology pressure that I now feel it only fair to warn you that it is probably only a matter of time before we will be Classified as Contrary."

There was a chorus of gasps from a group of women sitting in one corner. The Dagda looked at them coldly and con-

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tinued without changing tone. "There is no longer room for those who aren't serious, and since consequences will undoubtedly fall on those attending these meetings who are unlucky enough to get caught, I strongly advise most of you to regard this as your last meeting." He walked to a desk against one wall in the front of the room and began looking through a stack of papers.

Giles watched him closely, fascinated. Until now he had no idea that Classification might be so imminent, or that he might be putting himself in some danger and no small embarrassment by being here. That information was completely new. In a way it made him glad he had come. He might never have another opportunity to witness a meeting. And regardless of the idea behind all this, there was something about this man, the Dagda . . .

The Dagda reached for a tall frame that was leaning against the wall beside the desk, and one of the men in the front row jumped up and helped him move it to the center of the room in front of the glode. They attached a light and the Dagda placed a huge map of some sort in the frame. The man, who seemed to be an assistant, sat down, and the Dagda stood to one side of the map, looking at it as if he, too, were seeing it for the first time.

Then he said, very softly, "This is a picture of Tir na nOc . . . or, if you prefer, and as some have called it, this is a map of Earth."

Giles felt a sudden constriction in his chest as he heard the word. The word so long forgotten, the word so nearly forbidden—the word that lived in him as it did in most of the citizens of Nifhel, in an obscure echo chamber of his being. Had he truly ever heard it before?

The Dagda repeated, chanting ritually, "This is a picture of Earth."

Giles was suddenly dizzy and the map swam before him. Earth . . . Earth. The magic, mystic, forbidden word . . . and the Dagda said it so freely . . . Earth . . .

Behind the map the sphere was raised, elevated so that it hung directly above, and the light cast a green glow over the

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outlines of continents. Giles made an effort to bring his eyes into focus and saw that the ball began to rotate, disclosing in dimension what was flat on the picture below. The continents revolved slowly, the huge one, the tremendous land mass flanked with islands, the oceans between the other continents separated by a finger of land, swooping and tapering to nothing by the pole below. The poles were flaked with white and Giles shivered—could they be colder than the poles of Nifhel?

The Dagda faced his audience fiercely, his voice ringing as he cried, "Tir na nOcl Asgard! Olmypsul Eden! It is all that . . . it is Earth!"

The women in the corner began to moan and the Dagda turned to face them. "Yes, weep! For your homeland, for the country of your ancestors. Mourn for it well and suffer yourselves that you shall never see it! Not in this picture or that globe or in any way that man can devise. For if Earth was lost before, she is truly lost now. We have turned from our beginnings so completely that we now deny our origin. Weep well, and remember for what you weep!"

In spite of himself, Giles shivered. This mythical land—this planet that never was—somehow, in some strange way, attracted him. The Dagda took a long pointer and ran it swiftly over the face of the map, calling out names that rang like ghost cries in the hushed loft.

"Asia, Europe, America . . . and here, the lovely islands from which our ancestors embarked . . . but was that their only homeland?" He paused and scanned the audience like a teacher waiting for a pupil to answer. Giles looked around, astonished at the solemn, almost reverent way in which the group faced this man, breathless, open-mouthed, hanging on every word. At the end of the row in which he sat someone began to speak. Giles leaned over to look and saw the girl he had met in the shower room. But she didn't appear reverent, only terribly intent and serious, and her voice was low and matter of fact.

"No," she said, "the homeland was in many places, even far across the sea in the place called America."

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The Dagda nodded. "And the name of the islands from which we left?"

"Tir na nOc," the girl smiled, "or, as it was once called, Eire, or Britain."

Britain, Eire, America, strange names, haunted names out of a mythical, imaginary past. Giles frowned, wondering why they rang so oddly, so familiarly in his ear. Could anyone have told him stories once about the mythical land of Earth? More than one child in Niflhel had been corrupted by ancient fairy tales, held on the wrinkled knees of old grandmothers and rocked to sleep by feeble voices singing forbidden songs. Had he ever looked into the dim, watery eyes of his grandmother and seen shining there a dream of Earth?

Sitting there in that row of hushed, attentive people, with the voice of the Dagda droning like music, Giles had a sudden, swift impression of his childhood. It was as if the room and the green globe vanished, and he was there again, standing outside the doorway of his hut, waving goodbye to the bent, unsteady figure that walked down the path of ashes to cross with painfully slow steps to her own hut a few yards away. And she had paused, Giles remembered. She had turned around to look at him, a small blond boy squinting in the red glare, who had forgotten to wear his cloak and hood so that his hair, within seconds, was covered with a layer of fine black soot. She had paused to look back and seeing him there without cover had removed her own hood in a gesture almost like defiance, and had held up her hands to the particles that fell relentlessly on them both. She had greedily held up her hands and in a stronger voice than Giles could recall her ever having used, she said, nodding her head fiercely, "That's right . . . it all comes from the same source. But if we were on Earth we could be standing in the rain! You must pretend it is rain, Giles. Pretend it is rain!"

And then she had walked on to her lonely hut, still bare-headed, the sparse gray a jet black by the time she stepped inside. And Giles had stood there, not minding the ash that

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fell over his head, fell into his eyes and parched his lips—he stood there wondering what was rain. And what was the difference between that 'rain', whatever it was, and this horrid black substance that curled up from the ground and fell from the sky? Rain! He had no idea what it was, but the very word made him suddenly dissatisfied and uncomfortable, and he had run inside to the air shower and then immersed himself in a bucket of water, using up almost all of his family's supply for the week. His parents had been terribly angry when they returned, but Giles had somehow known to keep his grandmother's words a secret. The haunted word Earth he had put away somewhere and tried to forget. But the word rain he had never forgotten and never mentioned. It remained with him like a touchstone—a magical symbol that expressed all that could be beautiful in the universe and all that was utterly unattainable.

It wasn't until years later that he learned what rain actually was and that it did fall in Niffhel, at the poles only, during certain periods of the year. It was from this sparse supply of rainfall that the entire water supply of Niffhel was drawn . . . his parents had reason to be angry.

“. . . from one of the books of Earth!" The change in the Dagda's voice brought Giles back to the meeting with a start, and the words that followed fell on him curiously like the word rain had fallen from his grandmother's lips. He sat there bemused, catching only snatches of the reading that seemed to swirl around the green globe and cause it almost to seem alive.

“. . . flowing streams, wondrous curious wells flow forth, watering the earth with pleasant streams. From the woods' middle, from the turf of earth, each month a winsome water breaketh. . . . The groves are hung with bloom, the holy treasure of the woods wane not . . . the boughs are ever wondrous laden, the fruit new in every season. The forests fair stand green, joyously garnished . . . there is a holy perfume dwelleth in that land. . . . Never shall that know change for ever until *He* Who shaped it in the beginning shall bring His ancient Work of Wisdom unto the end."

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Slowly, the Dagda closed the ancient, heavy book, and bowed his head. A strange chant followed, causing Giles to shiver violently—what were these words?

“An Tri numh . . .” the Dagda called.

“A chumhnadh,” the audience answered.

“A chomhnadh . . .”

“A Chromraig . . .”

And then the rhythm quickened to an intensity Giles found almost unbearable.

“An tula . . . An taighe.”

“An teaglaich . . . An oidche . . . An nonchche.”

“O! an oidche.”

“An nochd . . . Agus gach oidche.”

And the Dagda finished, “Gach aon oidche.”

The silence that followed was, to Giles, extremely tense. But finally the Dagda turned away from the group of Earth Worshippers, walking with heavy steps into a room just off the front of the loft. Still no one moved, and Giles sat like a stone, trying to connect the ancient words he had just heard with the presence of the green light that suffused the room. What was the strange language? And what would it be like to live in a land where “the forests fair stand green, joyously garnished . . .” The thought came swiftly and Giles tried to push it away, tried to recapture his sense of the ridiculous in connection with all this. In a moment he would step out into the bleak, desolate streets of Nifhel and the magic of this odd encounter with the deviates of his society would seem like a dream.

He was hardly aware of the silent people passing by, filing out one by one until he realized that he was alone in the room. He rose and was about to leave when a low murmur of voices coming from the room where the Dagda had gone, caught his attention. Out of the indistinct conversation one phrase came clear, hanging sharply in the empty room.

“. . . all right, it will be the Branxholm then. But I'm sorry to have to use our last retreat so soon.”

There was something in Giles that detested the idea of hearing what he knew quite well was not meant for him.

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He particularly disliked this, knowing what the Branhholm was and inferring that the next meeting was to be held there. He wondered momentarily whether he should acknowledge his presence to the men in the other room, and then decided against it. It would only call attention to him, and now that the strange magic of the meeting was over he was sure that he was quite thoroughly finished with this business. He made his way to the cloak room and down the stairs, oddly reluctant to leave that glow of green.

Giles stepped out of the lower doorway and the somber, gritty night of Niffhel hit him with the force of coming suddenly into a grave. He winced, feeling the shock of the streets, after that room, like a physical blow. Instinctively he threw his arms across his face, as if he wished to shield himself against all of Niffhel. He whirled around to look up again at that green light shining in the window. At that moment a dim figure cloaked in black, slid out of the shadows to stand beside him. Giles saw, under the deep hood, the startlingly intense eyes of the girl he had addressed in the cloak room before the meeting, her face glowing pale green now in the reflection of the light. Her eyes deepened as she whispered piercingly, "You don't believe in Earth, do you, Giles Chulainn?"

He felt a tremor run through him at the words . . . or was it the girl who affected him so strongly? No matter, he was used to riding behind or above or in back of odd emotions, so he could answer now, firmly, in spite of what he felt, "No. No, I don't believe in Earth."

The words rolled down the street and echoed back to them, still containing the timbre of his rich, deep voice. The girl watched him intently, her lips parted, her head to one side, as if she were finding secret intonations in the tone of that echo. And when the last syllable faded away she smiled secretly and whispered, "No, you truly don't believe in Earth . . . good. Oh, good!" And she was gone before Giles could detain her, a black shadowy figure lost in the deep caverns of the street.

Someone above turned the light off and the pool of green

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was gone. It vanished like a flame of hope being violently extinguished. Giles stood staring at the window, staring after the lost invisible globe. Good that he didn't believe in Earth? Good? What had she meant?

At that moment Giles would have given his name and all he possessed if only he could believe, unintelligently, hopelessly, in the promise of that land they called "Tir na nOcl" . . . That unimaginable heaven that someone had named Earth.

II

HE AWOKE with an acrid taste in his mouth and a searing headache. The gray metal walls of his room glowed red on one side where the reflection of the light from the factories burst through the aperture he had forgotten to close the night before.

Giles groaned, slowly coming into focus on the day, wondering why he felt so awful. A sound of the air jets blowing from the shower reminded him and he turned over, burying his head in his arms, stretching his long body under the cool gray sheets. Yes, the day after the night was beginning, and now he remembered. Sigrid would be in there, blowing the night's accumulation of dust away. He flexed his shoulders, feeling the tight muscles and tension that ran like an invisible thread from head to feet. The day was beginning. He would have to get up. He pushed his legs slowly over the side of the bed and sat there holding his head, wondering if he could possibly face it. Another day of Niflhel and Sigrid to start it for him. If he had anticipated the morning he would never

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have brought her home with him. But he had been unable to continue the night alone after that wierd encounter with mythology. Earth Worshipers! What could have possessed him? He groaned again as the after effects of too much alcohol throbbed in his head. Then gingerly he got up and ran a wet towel over his face, carefully running the water back through the purifier when he was finished. He dressed quickly, racing against Sigrid's entrance.

Why did he always feel this haste to say goodbye to her in the morning? Was she so different at night—or was it just her morning effervescence that depressed him? Sigrid lives in the glare of day, Giles thought, as he closed his shirt and ran a comb quickly through his thick reddish blonde hair. Sigrid lives in a world of harsh red light where everything is outlined with sharp, illuminated strokes, like line drawings. And I live, he thought, in a world of mosaics and strange speckles. I live in the shadows, on the other side of the sun.

He stared at himself in the mirror for a moment and then laughed shortly. No, it was hangover thinking, it was nonsense. "The other side of the sun"—what sun? The invisible sun of Nifhel? He grinned wryly, it was a twist of words, it was heredity. All the Chulainns loved words.

He was still smiling when Sigrid stepped out from the shower room, tightly wrapped in his long robe. She was a tall girl and the robe was only slightly too large. Her heavy wheat colored hair streamed over her shoulders and her cheeks glowed red from the sting of the jets.

"Good morning," she smiled radiantly and Giles felt guilty at the obvious anticipation in her eyes. He kissed her briefly and held her for an instant, hoping to lessen her disappointment at seeing him ready to leave so soon. He knew her resilience well, however, and wasn't surprised when a stiffening in her body told him she had accepted the situation. She pulled away and glanced up at him, scanning his expression expertly, and then patted his shoulder.

"All right, I'll hurry," she said mildly. "And I think you

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ought to do something about that headache. There's some medicine in my cloak on the inner cord."

She disappeared into the dressing room and Giles went to the closet to find the pills. He felt something disturbing in Sigrid's ability to suddenly change pace and adapt to his moods. It was what most men sought in a wife, he admitted, swallowing the medicine quickly without water as he had been taught to do when a child. Then why didn't he marry her? What was this vague distrust he felt? He stood vacantly in the center of the room questioning what he had questioned so often. It would be something if he could even stop this questioning. Perhaps all riddles didn't need solutions, but he found himself still watching—for what he didn't know—when Sigrid returned dressed and ready to leave.

He helped her with her cloak and as his hands touched her shoulder he felt a tremor run through her. Was it this slavish physical devotion to him that he distrusted? He knew it was there; she had made that silent confession without meaning to each time they were together.

"Will you have much to do today?" she asked lightly, in a tone that told Giles this morning's parting was particularly difficult for her. Why?

A vision of the girl he had met during the night flashed like a material object between him and Sigrid. It was so clear that for a second he thought she was actually in the room.

Behind that vision he heard himself saying, "Yes, probably. There's a whole new network of routes to be worked out between the city and new mines, involving long distances."

Who was that girl? How had she known his name? Now, for the first time, he remembered that she had called him Giles Chulainn.

"And you'll be busy again tonight?" The suspicion in Sigrid was unmistakable and Giles narrowed his eyes, wondering if she, too, could have seen the vision of that girl. Was Sigrid that intuitive? But he didn't even know the girl; he might never see her again. Thoughtfully, realizing that he didn't like that idea, Giles answered Sigrid's question gently. "Yes, I'm afraid I will be busy."

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They looked at each other and felt the room charged with unspoken thoughts. Giles longed for something at that moment—something that seemed utterly unobtainable. He longed to really know them, but to be able to extend himself to them. He wanted very much to express something. Looking at Sigrid, he saw something verging on hysteria behind her eyes and he wondered what would happen if they could suddenly break through this vise that held them both, each to themselves, each locked in the prison of unuttered words.

He put on his cloak and they left in silence, walking down the path of ash to the Underground. It was going to be a hot day. The sun seemed to be fighting to pierce the dark clouds of haze that eternally obscured it. The soot sparkled in places from that effort, sending off brilliant flashes, looking like jewels carelessly scattered over the ground. It would be a day to look down, to catch as much color as possible in that reflection. The children would be out soon, shouting in glee when they saw the colors shining. They would toss it into the air, watching it fall and glitter, make huts out of the stuff, make roads and refuse mounds and underground shafts, imitating the world in which they lived, and be disappointed when at last their treasure of colors was gone. It would be a bad day for mothers whose children would be even blacker than usual. And it would be a horrible day for the water supply when a few people went slightly crazy as they always did on a day like this, and used up all their rations."

Still in silence they reached the entrance to the Underground and stopped there to say goodbye. Although they both worked for Transportation Headquarters, Sigrid would go home to work on the report she was writing, while Giles had to go to his office. Giles was glad in some way that he didn't completely understand, that Sigrid was not continually there at Headquarters where he would have to face her each day.

"Maybe tomorrow?" He asked hesitantly and was immediately sorry. He didn't really wish to see her tomorrow.

But Sigrid smiled brightly and made it easy for him. "No,

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I don't think so. I'm terribly busy for awhile. But perhaps I'll see you at the office later." She looked almost gay as she nodded goodbye and hurried away down the street. Either she really was busy, or she had something more interesting planned, or she was an excellent actress. He would have to do something about Sigrid, Giles thought. His attitude could be unfair. One way or the other he would have to reach a decision.

The walk had cleared his head and the pills were beginning to take effect. Giles felt much better and raced down the steps to the long dark tunnel carved out of the rock of Nifhel. A high whine in the distance told him the tube was coming; he would have less than a half minute to catch it. He tore down the platform to the receiving box and was sucked into the tube just in time. The doors sealed behind him and he dropped into an individual contour just as the tube sped out of the station.

He put his head back against the heavily padded lining of his contour glad that he was alone instead of in a group alcove. He closed his eyes, thinking that it might be possible to take a ten minute nap before arriving at his destination. He closed his eyes and instantly a picture of the green globe swam in front of him. He tried to blank out the picture, but before it faded away a curious warmth stole over him, an odd sensation of heat that was curiously comforting. He luxuriated in that sensation of warmth until the deepening whine of the tube indicated they were stopping at the exit station. At the change in vibration Giles mechanically opened his eyes and found that he was staring into the intense gaze of the girl from the meeting. She was standing in a waiting contour next to the door and before he could speak she had vanished with the crowd into the station.

The tube hurtled on again and the warmth flooded out of his body. A picture of those deep green eyes remained fixed before him and Giles felt as if he were in a trance. Had she really been there? Or was it an illusion? He had a strange conviction that her presence in his hut had been as real as this chance meeting in the tube. And yet, there was some-

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thing about it that was not accidental. Something beyond chance he felt sure. Who was that girl?

The question haunted him for the rest of the trip and stayed with him when he emerged from the Underground in the lower levels of Transportation Headquarters. He stepped onto the ascending belt that carried him in a great circle around and up to his floor. What archives would have information on that branch of the family? He wasn't even sure to which particular branch she belonged, and why did he feel that he must know more about her? Wasn't that really the question? Was it simple curiosity or was this deeper feeling that there was something terribly important about her more real?

He walked through the great arch that led to the row of offices, barely returning the greetings from the rest of the staff. The door to his private office slid open at his presence before it, and he walked, still deep in thought, to the window and stood looking down at Nifflhel.

The roads that branched out like a great spoke from this central cluster of Organization had been there long before Giles was born. They looked old and bleak and somehow sad. He followed the straight black lines to the periphery of the main cluster, and on out to where they vanished in the thinnest of lines to the horizon. And on beyond that, stretching endlessly across the flat, scarred face of this desolate planet, was his future work. New routes, to link the old with the new. New lines of transport to continue in deadly sameness the outlines of Nifflhel that had been laid out generations ago.

Giles mentally drew a curve on one of those arrow straight roads, turned and wound it around the buildings, creating a serpentine swirl to break the monotony. What a relief it would be! But in back of that he saw the increased hours of travel, the lessened efficiency, the difficulties of building new Undergrounds. No, Nifflhel would have to remain a block, would have to stay ruled with precision lines broken only by the round buildings.

How much we owe to that ancient ancestor, Giles thought,

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whoever he might have been, who decided that the buildings of Nifhel would arch and curve. Even the mounds of huts were better than boxes. How impossible it would be if the vertical structures corresponded to those flat, horizontal lines.

"Room Four for Giles Chulainn. Will he please respond?" The assistant's voice broke through the screen and shattered Giles' mood.

He pressed the response button and answered affirmatively, then left his office. Another day, and one that had to begin with a long conference in Room Four. Giles disliked these necessary beginnings of new projects, but the faster an agreement was reached the sooner he could be out again on the aspect of his work he liked best—the actual supervision of new routes.

His superior, Bran Crinan, looked up sharply as Giles entered the conference room and nodded to a seat beside him at the long grey metal table.

Giles noticed that he was alone. "Wasn't this to be an All-Department meeting?" he asked with some surprise.

Crinan's long craggy face was rather strained this morning. He nodded absently, shoving aside a sheaf of plastic papers and drumming on the table with his hand. "Later," he said distantly, "I find it necessary to speak with you alone first."

He stopped drumming and pulled at the gray-brown beard that framed his jaws while he appraised Giles closely. Then he said with a slight frown, "There's never been anything even slightly Contrary about you, Giles, so I feel that I can speak freely. We've had a report here that you attended a meeting of Earth Worshippers last night."

Giles was shocked into speechlessness and Crinan, aware of the reaction, continued.

"We thought perhaps you were unaware that these groups are to be Classified shortly—in a matter of days, I believe. But actually that's not of importance in your case." He paused, obviously carefully weighing the words that followed. "We are interested in your reactions to what you heard last

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night. Apparently it was the first time you have ever been exposed to the Earth Worshipers."

"Am I right?" The question came crisply, like a sudden dart, and Giles nodded quickly, feeling that he had been transported to a strange territory that was utterly unfamiliar to him.

"Yes, that's what we thought," Crinan's tone was now milder and he smiled briefly.

For a moment Giles found it impossible to respond. He was lost in the midst of myriad impressions and questions that were slowly forming. But one question burst from him before he had time to reflect. "Who are 'we'?" he asked in astonishment, with a demand in his tone that gave Crinan pause. Giles, in spite of his present confusion, was a man who innately commanded respect, both from those below and those above him.

Crinan smiled again, this time a little placatingly, "Intelligence," he replied. "You are aware, of course, that we have contact with Intelligence here."

"Yes, I knew that," Giles said, "but I had no idea that it extended to you, or that you were part of the Organization."

It was a clever sentence that demanded an answer and Crinan wasn't sorry to give it. "I have just become part of the Organization," he revealed with some satisfaction. "In a very minor way, and due only to the impending Classification of Worshipers. And that brings us back to you. As I said, Intelligence is interested in your reaction to the meeting."

Giles ignored that momentarily while he wondered if there were a way to extract information from Crinan on exactly how his presence at the meeting was known. Who, in that group last night, could have been the liason between Intelligence and Bran Crinan? But he realized, as soon as he had put the question to himself, that this knowledge would not be given to him.

Crinan was beginning to look serious. "Your reactions, Giles?" he insisted again.

"I don't quite understand," Giles said doubtfully, "I'm not clear what reactions you're referring to."

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"For example," Crinan said, watching him closely, "your reaction to the basic idea of Earth."

Giles stared at him incredulously, and then sensing the seriousness behind Crinan's expression, began to laugh. "My reaction to Earth! To the basic idea of Earth!"

"Yes," Crinan stated emphatically.

"But there's no basis to it," Giles said, highly amused. "You can't take all this seriously! As a matter of fact I can't understand why they're bothering to Classify the groups. The whole thing is ridiculous—and harmless, as far as I can see."

Crinan was beaming, "Then you don't believe in Earth!"

"Of course not!" Giles resented the question. How could Crinan have even faintly suspected that Giles would believe in a myth?

"Good!" Crinan grinned and leaned forward in a preamble pose to intimate conversation. Giles didn't like it. He didn't like anything about all this. There was something too furtive about Crinan's attitude and that word 'Good' was the same word the girl had used last night. She could be the liason, Giles had to admit, and wondered why he didn't like that idea either.

"Then perhaps you could be of help to us," Crinan confided in a low voice that irritated Giles still more. "We need help, Giles. It isn't going to be easy to find and abolish all the groups."

"But why abolish them at all!" Giles argued tartly. "I can't see what harm they do. They're only small groups of people looking for some excitement or belief, or a fairy tale to make life easier. I should think that Classifying them is only going to bring undue attention, create more general discontent."

"That evaluation comes from attending only one meeting, Giles. And at that, you saw everything from the outskirts of the group. There is a real inner circle that has definite plans and objectives, from what I understand. And that inner circle doesn't consist of little old women sobbing over a dream."

At that, Giles guessed that Crinan must have himself attended a meeting once. He was reminded, by Crinan's words,

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of the Dagda and that group of men he had heard in the inner room.

"What are the objectives?" he asked curiously.

Crinan leaned back and meditated at the ceiling for a moment. "I'll be honest with you," he then said, "We're not sure of their actual plans, so I can't offer you proof of anything, but I can give you our suspicions. We suspect that they would like to revolutionize the government of Niffhel as a preparatory to making Earth the compulsory religion, and then start out on a series of journeys—crusades, if you will—to find the planet itself."

"But the planet doesn't even exist!" Giles cried.

"That's right, it doesn't exist," Crinan agreed, blinking into the distance. "And we hardly have the rudiments of flying, to say nothing of finding an imaginary planet—or any other planet for that matter—with telescopes that can't even penetrate our atmosphere. Disregarding the fantastic idea of crusades, can you imagine Niffhel under the domination of people committed to a dream? We would all be living in a fool's paradise with our entire economy devoted to endless, fruitless endeavors."

Giles snorted, "But it's ridiculous! They wouldn't have a hope of changing Niffhel."

"They would," Crinan disagreed, coming back to Giles. "They would have a very good hope if these meetings continue. You may not know it but the groups have been sprouting alarmingly. There's a tremendous increase in the number of people attending. And that's another thing we'd like to know—why? Why, after so many years? Do you realize it's been generations since the Earth Worshippers began? And until now it has been just what you said—harmless. But why is there this sudden flowering of interest now?" He surveyed Giles curiously, "Why, for instance, at your age, at this particular time, did *you* go?"

The question gave Giles a start. True. Why *had* he gone? What was that mysterious mood that had come over him last night—like something not of himself, but something descend-

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ing upon him? He stared at Crinan while they silently exchanged this curiosity and Crinan grimly nodded.

"You see? It is something to consider, isn't it?"

Giles' silence was sufficiently affirmative and Crinan pursued his advantage. "Now you're probably wondering what all this has to do with you. To cut to the essence of it, we feel that you're stable enough to continue your contact with the group, and by acting as a Watcher for us, you could bring us needed information."

"The word used to be Spy," Giles returned shortly, digesting the proposal distastefully. And yet, he had to admit, Crinan did have a point. If all that man had accomplished on Niffhel was to be threatened by the mysterious growth of this Earth cult, wasn't he responsible to do what he could? It seemed obvious and yet he couldn't shake off a certain heaviness at the idea of acting as a Watcher.

"It is an honor," Crinan needlessly reminded him.

Giles was well aware of the exterior benefits accruing to the Society of Watchers. Benefits that would come quietly from secret sources, little things that would make his already easy life even easier. Did he really want that? There was a certain attraction in the idea of being admitted to the Niffhel Hierarchy. As a Watcher many doors in society that were now closed would mysteriously open; in that sense his life would be enriched. And of course no one would ever know exactly how it all came about since only a few key people would know he was a Watcher.

Did he want that? And was this interior shame he felt at the idea simply an atavism? The various branches of the Chulainn family, although active in many aspects of the Government of Niffhel had never, to Giles' knowledge, entered the secret circles of Intelligence. He couldn't decide whether this offer now was really an honor to the family or the first note in a descending scale.

"I can't give you an answer now, Crinan," he stated abruptly. "Let me think about it."

"All right," the older man conceded, "and in the meantime if you wish to attend another meeting, don't let this

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conversation stand in the way. You may not see it now, but I'm quite sure of your ultimate decision."

Attend another meeting. Giles smiled mechanically, suddenly feeling an intense dislike for Bran Crinan. The man wasn't even very clever. Did he really expect Giles to swallow that statement and lead Intelligence straight to the Earth Worshipers' next meeting place?

It was an obvious admission that they didn't know about the Branhholm.

Giles felt a warm tingling begin in his feet that raced like a tide through his body and settled in the back of his neck, stiffening the muscles with tension. It was a strange anger. A wish for violence that he had only experienced once before. He didn't know why he was so angry, but he managed to keep still and maintain a frozen smile while Crinan, ending their private talk, called for the other department heads to come to the conference room.

Giles stared at the functional gray metal table, the black walls and the streak of red light that slanted through the window. Outside the glow was speckled with dots of black soot. He stared at the unrelieved walls and the faint cloud of ash that was slowly and inexorably settling at the joint between walls and floor. Not all the sealed buildings in Nifhel could keep it out, when men, in spite of their showers and cloaks and precautions, brought it in continually. In their clothes, their hair even, Giles thought violently, in their attitudes.

Nifhel was more than a world of minerals and metals, a world of rock and ash and soot and hot smoke blowing into the red sky. It was a world of shrouded men bent under an impossible weight of grime, a world of chained men, slavishly attached to their straight roads and round huts and blazing factories. And always, always, their new transport routes to the next group of mines.

Someday those roads will encircle Nifhel, Giles thought. Strange to think that such a round line will look so utterly straight to our eyes. A web of precision around the planet dotted with huts and hooded men. It will all be exactly the

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same, and my own horizon, the last one left in the world, will be gone. Someday there will be no more roads to build, for I will have built them all.

The doors of the conference room opened and his colleagues came in to discuss the new routes. As the meeting began, Giles, looking around him, knew that he had come to at least one decision.

By all rights, by his background, education and experience, he should be strongly on Crinan's side. On the side of Intelligence. But there was a force of resistance in him so strong that he couldn't deny it. Was it simply a wish to be Contrary himself? He didn't know. But he did know that he was going to take Crinan's advice. He would do exactly what the man said. He would go to another meeting—at the Branhholm.

And somehow, some way, Bran Crinan and Intelligence would never know.

III

WHEN GILES was seventeen he had his final Examination for Society. The sky had been redder then—there was a little less soot in the air—and his white cloak for the Examination was hanging in a sealed bag in the closet.

"Wear your black and change at school," His mother had gone to the closet and taken down the immaculate cape that gleamed through the transparent bag with an unfamiliar purity.

"Oh, no!" Giles, living in adolescent conformity, was horrified. He appealed to his father. "Nobody does that; you

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didn't do it, did you? We wear the black over it. I don't want to be the only one there changing in the school."

His voice broke and John Chulainn smiled both at the exaggeration and the youthful excitement in his son. "Giles can change here, Gerta," he said, understanding entirely how Giles was facing the day. He remembered his own day of Examination very well.

They grinned at each other in sudden appreciation, and Gerta Chulainn, seeing the look that passed between them, consented.

"Here you are, Giles," she handed him the bag with a gesture that made Giles, in his state of excitement, want to cry.

He swallowed hard and accepted it, accepting also the meaning behind it. Gerta was giving up her son to his manhood, with understandable sadness, but with also an obvious pride that made Giles feel himself a small child again, wondering for a moment if he were truly ready for manhood.

He dressed in the white cloak, feeling that he was performing a magical rite, and when he stepped back into the room, his parents both had to suppress an outward expression of what they felt. Giles was fortunately unaware of how he looked in that white robe. Carefully, he put the black cloak and hood over that strange radiance and went to the door. In the age old custom of Nifflhel, his father gravely shook his hand and stepped back. Then his mother approached, holding out her hand, and Giles took it. He felt hot behind his eyes—he really wanted to kiss her goodbye—but according to tradition he pressed her hand and then silently left the hut.

He felt wrapped in mystery as he walked down the path to the main road. There was a strange shimmer in the air and emotions that he hadn't felt before kept breaking over him in waves. He looked toward the hut where his grandmother had lived and died, years ago, and caught his breath, holding back a sob. In a gesture halfway springing from a real part of him, and half theatrical, he raised his hand to

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the hut in a parting farewell. Although he would not leave Nifhel—where else was there to go?—he felt an urge to emotionally discharge himself from all his past. And in this adolescent haze, filled with dreams and goals and associations tumbling wildly over themselves in his imagination, he walked in a high proud posture down the black, gravely main road toward school.

A huge clod of dirt filled with soot and small stones broke like hail over his head and sent him stumbling forward to sprawl headlong in the road. His black cloak billowed up as he fell and he caught his legs in the white robe that ground into the dirt. A cloud of ash rose around him and he choked on the dust. Tears sprang to his eyes and he ground his teeth together, trying to control himself, when he heard someone laugh. At that Giles darted up from the ground, creating yet more clouds of ash, and whirled around looking for his assailant.

Across the road another young figure in a black cape began to run. Giles, feeling as if he would like to commit murder, ran after him with unnatural speed. He had caught up in a minute and grabbed the black cape, jerking the boy back in his flight with a strength that tore the cape down the side. Panting with anger he knocked the hood visor down and saw that it was Car Saunders.

The two boys stood there glaring at each other, Saunders terrified at the expression in Giles' eyes. They didn't speak. Giles was breathing with an intensity that didn't allow for speech. Saunders' eyes widened and he began to whimper.

Giles felt a host of giants rise inside him, strange demons that lighted his eyes and exploded in fiery darts. Feeling that energy crackling from his body—knowing that his hands were magnets and that Saunders couldn't move unless he willed it—Giles smiled with a deliberation that reduced Saunders to quivering sobs, and slowly, very slowly, he took his hands away from Saunders' cloak.

Car Saunders was paralyzed. He didn't move while Giles, radiant with that odd smile, carefully removed his own black

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cape and then with one swift movement ripped the rest of Saunders' cape right off him.

The two boys stood there now in their white cloaks on the black street, Giles' blond hair a silver halo in the sun and Saunders' shoulders slumping, his slight body growing smaller as he waited for the onslaught. Giles had a picture of himself at that moment, one he would never forget, for it was the first time he had experienced that stranger inside himself, standing beside those two boys on the road and looking on. He saw the picture clearly and saw himself raise his arm—that arm filled with incredible energy—and saw Saunders shrink back, too terrified to try to protect himself.

Giles could have stopped. Right then, at that moment, he saw his choice. But he saw also the dream that had been shattered with irrevocable and horrible finality. That dream would never be given him again. He knew that with an almost mystical conviction.

Saunders hadn't just thrown dirt on his graduation gown—Saunders had thrown all the filth of Nifflhel on Giles. He had taken the world that Giles wanted to love and thrown the whole abomination of the planet back on him. Giles would never look at Nifflhel through a dream again, and for that he wanted to kill Car Saunders.

He could have; he nearly did. He lashed out with super-normal strength in a whirlwind of fury that left Saunders a trembling, bruised and crumpled mass on the ground. Saunders gasped for breath and cried for mercy. Giles stopped. Not out of pity and because he wanted to. He felt that he could easily go on hitting Car Saunders for the rest of his life. He stopped because he knew he had to, and he picked Saunders up with one hand from the ground and lifted him by the scruff of his neck all the way to school.

Ordinarily the sight of two boys coming up the path to the cluster of school buildings on Examination Day, in soot covered, ripped and ruined white cloaks, would have invited malicious amusement among the rest of the students. But there was a look in Giles' eyes as he dragged Saunders into the main hall and down the corridor to the Superior's office

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that discouraged anything other than awe, and on looking closer, a little fear. Even the teachers who saw Giles Chulainn enter school that day were provoked to silence.

He kicked open the door to the Superior's office with one foot, and entering, dropped Car Saunders into a chair.

Laeg Falkirk, the Superior of Giles' school, looked up from his desk at the boy standing before him. His glance traveled slowly from Giles' eyes down his ruined white robe, and then shifted to the sight of Saunders leaning limply against the chair, his eyes closed, his breath still coming in short gasps.

Falkirk was a man who inspired awe among his boys and invariably some slight mistrust among the parents. He was an enormous, ruddy man with a shock of flaming red hair and a bristling moustache that echoed a certain ferociousness in his eyes. Now the eyes narrowed as he stared hard at Giles and Saunders, trying to see beyond appearances to the reality of the situation.

Giles stared back, defying Falkirk to make the wrong move.

Finally Falkirk smiled, and with a gentleness amazing for a man his size, removed Saunders from the room and carried him to the infirmary. When he returned Giles was standing in the same position. He hadn't moved. Falkirk sat down again, knowing he would have to be careful.

"I wonder if you think it is necessary now to take the Examination," he probed quietly.

Giles stiffened for a moment with misunderstanding and then when he saw what Falkirk meant, he relaxed. "Yes," he answered, grateful for the acknowledgement Falkirk had given him. "I think I should take it anyway. But I'd like to take it here if possible."

Falkirk nodded. Of course this boy couldn't appear among the rest of the students now, and somehow Falkirk was glad, for he felt it would be a travesty. He hadn't questioned what had occurred; obviously Giles had just experienced something that could and might change the course of his life. Falkirk knew boys well, and he knew by Giles' expression

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that his own private ceremony for manhood had already taken place. For Car Saunders it was different, Falkirk thought. He would have to see about Saunders. But in the meantime this boy before him wished to follow the rules and answer questions. Falkirk stood up and looked at his student.

"Are you ready?" he asked, in the beginning statement of the official Examination.

"I am ready," Giles replied.

"Who are you?"

"I am Giles Chulainn of the Chulainns from the Dagdas, a man."

"Where are you?"

"I am on the planet of my birth, on Nifflhel, the planet of my ancestors' birth and of their ancestors before them and of those in the beginning of time."

"Give us the history of your planet."

"In the beginning was there nothing save the sun. Then, from a part of the sun was there thrown a huge mass which collected unto itself gases and particles, forming the planet we have named Nifflhel. For ages was there nothing here fit for man. After eons only did the sparse waters come from the cold places and of that we have seen only the beginning." As he said this Giles frowned, sensing something untrue, and Falkirk hurried on.

"Give us the history of man."

"Man had his beginning in the rock under Nifflhel. Who he was then and how he looked we do not know. But there was he formed, and only after long ages did man emerge from the ground and find his place on the surface of the planet. When he came up he was full grown and from those early ancestors we have only few records."

"What are those records and where are they?"

"They are songs of praise for Nifflhel. They tell of the journey from the dark caverns of the ground to the surface. They are kept in the archives of Nifflhel where all can read them."

"What of the idea that man had his origin elsewhere?"

"There is no truth in that."

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"What of the idea that man exists on other planets in the obscured universe?"

"There is no truth in that."

"What of the idea that man could ever leave Niffhel, the planet of his birth?"

"There is no truth in that." Giles' voice was becoming heavier, the questions more troublesome to answer.

He had learned the automatic responses as an exercise but never before today had they reached his mind or his heart. And now as he kept negating, as he must, the wonderful and exciting possibilities behind these questions began to bother him. He didn't wish to say no to all this. Could man never leave Niffhel? Was that true; could he, Giles Chulainn, never leave?

It was right then, during the examination, that Giles had understood what he would do with his life. If there were no hope of escape, he must go as far as he could. He must be always on the last frontier of his world. And if it hadn't been for Car Saunders he might not have understood that until it was too late. For once a life work was chosen on Niffhel there was no turning back. But it was only in later years that he realized what he owed to Saunders. Now he was too gripped in new emotions and new questions to think of Saunders other than as an assailant who had robbed him of a dream.

The Examination continued, with Giles getting more and more depressed. Falkirk passed on from the big questions to academic work and finally they were at the end, at the oath which would bind Giles to good citizenry forever.

"Do you promise to obey the laws and customs of Niffhel and to use your manhood seriously as an aid to the development of the planet?"

"I do promise that."

"Do you promise not to believe in scandalous ideas or groups who would have us deny our origin?"

"I do promise that." Giles almost smiled at this. It was such an obvious reference to the myth seekers whom no one

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took seriously. He wondered why they didn't come right out with it in the Examination.

"Do you promise to the best of your ability to maintain Niffhel in your inner thoughts as the best and only place for man?"

"I do promise that."

Falkirk pressed his palm to Giles' hand and it was over. Now Giles could watch the other Examination if he wished or he could leave. Falkirk quietly received the white cloak which Giles handed to him with an unspoken request to figuratively bury it somewhere.

"All right, Giles, I wish you luck. If you want to keep this from your parents I'll back you up. But in many ways I think you had a better Examination than most." Falkirk knew that Giles might not understand that for a long time, but he knew his words would be remembered.

Giles wrapped himself up in his black cape and pulling the hood down well over his head quietly slipped out of the school. In the large hall he could hear the regular Examination taking place, with the chorus of responses from his classmates.

It had been all right in there, in Falkirk's office, when he was fired with righteousness and anger, but now he felt terribly alone and cut off. A better Examination than most!

Giles kicked at the black ground and hurried on, almost running in his haste to get away from the sound of those voices. Everything was ruined. Life was at an end on the very day when it should be beginning. Or was that just very young thinking? He had a lump in his throat and the bleak streets of his world had never looked so empty.

He couldn't go home yet; they would surmise something was wrong. He wasn't expected until much later, after the ceremonial banquet, which he didn't have the heart to attend. Where could he go? On an impulse he started walking toward the edge of the city. It was a long walk but not too far for a young man.

He walked most of the afternoon and at dusk came to the edge of Niffhel. Here was the last elevator shaft to the

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Underground—he would take it home later. But first he walked on a little way into the area beyond the city. The piles of refuse had been buried here, creating a large mound in the otherwise flat landscape. Giles liked the sight of that hump of earth rising.

He climbed up it and going down the other side he saw another black-caped figure sitting at the bottom, staring off into the distance. Warily, Giles approached. He couldn't turn back now; the person had seen him. It was a girl, Giles saw with surprise.

"What are you doing here?" he blurted out. It was incredible that a girl would be sitting at the bottom of the city dump looking out at nothing.

"What are you doing here?" she repeated promptly.

Something in her voice gave Giles an odd reaction. It was a nice voice but it had a strange timber about it that made him shiver. He walked closer to her, curious to see what she looked like.

"Hello Giles," she said.

He sat down beside her, frowning. It was a girl named Sigrid whom he knew slightly—they lived in the same area—but why hadn't he recognized the voice?

"Hello," he said, "I'm sorry I didn't recognize you. You look . . . seem different."

"I know," she said, "I am different."

Giles heard it clearly now, an unfamiliar husky tone. "The girl's Examination wasn't today, was it?" he asked.

"No, not yet." She looked at him and smiled and then leaned back on the mound of dirt putting her arms under her head.

"But what are you doing here?" he asked again.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you so I won't tell you," she looked at him sideways and Giles suddenly realized that she was very pretty.

"Yes I would; I'd believe you."

"Well, I'm doing just what you're doing. I'm looking at Niffhel."

"No you're not," Giles said sadly as the shock of her

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appearance lessened and he felt the day coming back to him, "You're looking out beyond Nifflhel."

"Still, the important thing is that I'm doing just what you're doing." She sighed and turned over on one elbow looking up at him. "I wish you'd tell me what happened today. I saw you dragging Car Saunders through the street."

"You weren't supposed to be out!" Giles gasped. Examination day for the boys was an almost religiously private affair.

"I wasn't out. I was looking through a window. I wanted to see you on your way to the ceremony."

"But why?" Giles was puzzled, "I mean, we're not related—you're not a cousin or anything. I don't even know you that well."

"Not yet," Sigrid smiled again and fastened her eyes on his. He couldn't look away. With a slow movement Sigrid shook the hood off her head and a mass of heavy blonde hair came cascading down over her shoulders. Giles wanted terribly to touch it.

"You'll get dirty," he said huskily.

"It doesn't matter. Tell me about Saunders."

"I don't think I can," Giles started, "It wasn't much anyway. He just threw something at me." The sight of the hair was too much and tentatively Giles put out a hand.

"Go on," Sigrid kept her eyes fastened to his.

"Well, there was a fight—" Giles stopped as his hand touched the amazing softness of her hair. It startled him. He had never touched a girl before and he suddenly didn't know whether he wanted to bury his face in that honey-colored mass or whether he wanted to take it violently and pull it.

The shock of that conflict, coming on top of so many other conflicting emotions loosened the timidity he felt and he suddenly grabbed Sigrid by her shoulders, staring down at her. "What are you doing here?" he whispered fiercely, with the realization that he had come here to be alone.

Instead of answering, she put her arms around him and drew his face down to hers. Giles felt that he was descending to the heart of Nifflhel. There was something wonderful and

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terrible about it. He wanted to resist and emotionally he tried to—emotionally he was somewhere else. But the force of her wish captured him physically and within minutes he knew nothing more than the instinct of his own body drawing him ever deeper in a descent to Sigrid and Nifflhel.

At seventeen, on the day of his Examination, Giles had possibly learned more than any other boy in the solitary city of the planet. He had found his strength, he had found his future, he had learned how alone he was, and with Sigrid he found himself as a man.

He had also learned, although he was too young then to admit it, that neither his strength, nor his work, nor his body and Sigrid, nor Nifflhel—especially Nifflhel—would ever be enough for him.

IV

IT WAS the day of Examination that Giles now remembered as he hurriedly left the Headquarters building for the Underground. The only person who had ever evoked an anger in him comparable to the anger he had felt toward Car Saunders was his Superior, Bran Crinan. Giles still wondered why. Nevertheless he was going to trust to instinct and reach the Branxholm without being detected. It would have to be a circuitous route. Giles settled back in his contour as the tube sped away, not bothering to see if he was being followed. It wasn't necessary yet. He would change two stations later, going in a circle back to the central city and then make a few more detours before heading toward the outskirts of Nifflhel. In the meantime he wanted to think about Sigrid.

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It had been years before he discovered that she had actually followed him that day and had been deliberately waiting for him at the refuse dump. Now he wondered if that intentional act of hers, so many years ago, was the basic flaw in their relationship. She had taken the initiative and Giles wondered how it would be now if he had been the one to seek her instead.

He had been on a different level that day of Examination, and with all the horror of it, he had still been seeking something. What might he have found if he had not allowed himself to be pulled down to Sigrid's level? What questions might have been answered? He realized that his search had been turned that day, in a way which he hadn't intended, and certainly Laeg Falkirk hadn't dreamed. Saunders and Sigrid—they had both acted on him. One breaking his dreams, destroying his ideals, and the other creating another dream, or rather putting another world in the place of the Niffhel he had lost. And yet that other world that Sigrid had given him had carried him through, hadn't it? How would it have been without Sigrid, without their relationship and all the life connected with it? How would it have been without that superficial gaiety and search for pleasure that most citizens of Niffhel pursued for all their lives?

The tube whined to a stop at the first station and Giles remembered the face of the girl this morning when he had felt that curious warmth. Maybe, Giles thought, if it hadn't been for Sigrid, he might have found her.

He might even, he thought, a whimsical smile lifting one corner of his mouth, have found Earth—or the dream of Earth. And once again he was back where he was last night, at the question of what he was doing now, on this fantastic trip to the Branxholm!

Giles hurried off the tube at the next stop and circled back to Headquarters. When he descended another Elevator for the tube leading to the far periphery of Niffhel he watched the other passengers closely. They seemed to be all right, but Giles decided he had better not chance

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going to the end of the line. Instead he made a hasty exit several stations before and began walking.

The streets were almost deserted and the night was worse than the one before. He pulled down his visor to shield himself from the dust that was blowing like a small storm around him. Glancing over his shoulder he was quite sure he was not being followed. Nevertheless he cut through an arcade leading between two streets and on the other side ducked into an open hallway. He waited there for some time, listening sharply for any sound from behind. There was nothing. Convinced now that Crinan had either not set anyone to follow him, or that he had successfully lost them, he started to walk freely toward the edge of the city.

In a way he felt he was repeating the journey of his seventeenth year. Something had changed for him and he felt in a curious way that he had come full circle, that another search was beginning. What that search was he couldn't explain to himself, but of one thing he was quite sure. This time no one was going to spoil it for him.

At the outskirts of the city he paused, aware that his heart was beating loudly and that he was curiously excited. Why? It wasn't the mystery of his journey on this filthy night and the contact with the group again, was it? He stared at the red horizon until it was suddenly blotted out by a cloud of ash that swept over, blacking out the view.

Wrapped in that heavy blanket and blinded to the world for a moment, Giles began to laugh. It was the girl, of course! He hadn't had time to search for her in the archives today, and realized now that the real motive behind his movements was nothing more than his wish to see that girl again. Understanding that he felt more comfortable with himself and walked on. Perhaps she was to be the answer to his search.

The Branhholm was still a distance off, and as Giles plodded on through the dirt that covered his shoes toward that last lonely building at the edge of Nifhel, he found himself wondering why they had chosen it for a meeting place. It seemed such an obvious spot. Years before a group

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of profit seeking men had built the huge round dome as a cathedral to pleasure. Then it was possible to sit in the Branxholm and gaze at the horizon while eating the strangest food that the master chefs of Niffhel could invent from their limited resources, and watch at the same time the most exotic entertainment the city had to offer. But the new factories had spoiled all that. The geysers of smoke that billowed up from the chimneys cast a pall over the sky. There was no horizon to see now for more than a few minutes at a time, and the Branxholm was a deserted place, a ruin that would soon crumble away if it were not torn down to make way for the new roads.

Giles approached the black, round dome that rose like a ghostly shadow from the ground, the lingering red light from the factories illuminating one side. There was no light within. No green light shining as a beacon.

Giles felt strangely disappointed. He wound his way around the building with difficulty—the soot had piled up in drifts against the sides. Coming finally to the entrance he found the massive double doors closed tightly, the soot piled up against them waist high. He sank deeply into the dirt as he pushed against the doors. Nothing happened. Angrily, he pushed again. Was his journey to prove fruitless? Could he have been mistaken in what he heard at the meeting? The dirt rose up under his cape and settled down in his shoes and clothes. He sank deeper in it, feeling that he was being buried, and loudly now he began banging on the door. The violence of his fist caused him to slip and he fell face down in the soot.

Just then he heard a movement from behind, but before he could rise he felt the crack of a sharp blow on his head and at the same time the swift thrust of a needle through his cape and into his back.

. . . He felt warm, too warm, and instinctively thrashed his legs, throwing off the cloak that covered him. His eyes opened slowly on a shifting world of green haze. Dimly he saw figures moving about. He tried to move his head, to clear the lethargy that clung to him. But that slight motion

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made him violently ill and he began to retch. A hand reached under his head and lifted it, and then he sank back again, his eyes closed, only faintly hearing the sound of many voices chanting in unison.

When he awoke again his eyes focused more clearly but still the shapes seemed to be floating before him. He saw a figure clothed in green and heard a melodious voice half chanting, half singing:

“I am the wind which breathes upon the sea,
I am the wave of the ocean,
I am the murmur of the billow . . .”

Straining to see, Giles lifted himself up on one arm. The dizziness cleared after a minute and his eyes began to focus. He was lying on a pile of rugs in a huge chamber lighted with many green lamps hanging along the walls. The texture of the walls was rough, unlike any building, more like a mine excavation. It was not a round room. It seemed to be a huge cavern. He looked up and could not find the ceiling; the walls seemed to rise without end. He turned back to the figure who was chanting in the distance. She was standing in back of a fire, while grouped around it, in a large circle, sat a great number of people listening silently as her voice rose.

“I am the ox of the seven combats
I am the vulture upon the rocks
I am a beam of the sun . . .”

Her arms were uplifted and her head was thrown high—Giles felt that she was standing out of doors—that she was standing in a clear sun. Then she dropped her head and her eyes traveled the length of the hall. She seemed to be looking directly at him.

Giles lifted himself higher and recognized the girl he had come to seek.

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"I am the fairest of plants,
I am a wild boar in valor
I am a salmon in the water
I am a lake in the plain . . ."

The words sank heavily into Giles and he thought the girl seemed to change shape as she stood in back of the fire. What did these odd words mean?

"I am a ward of science
I am the point of the lance of battle
I am the God who creates in the head of man the
fire . . ."

Then her voice changed tone and she seemed to rise, standing on tiptoe as she thrust out her arms in challenge and cried, the words ringing like wild bells.

"Who is it who throws light into the meeting on the
mountain
If not I?
Who announces the ages of the moon
If not I?
Who teaches the place where couches the Sun . . .
if not I?"

Giles felt a deep shudder, a trembling rush through him, and then suddenly the girl darted away from the fire and was gone.

Giles lay back exhausted as another chant began in that unknown language. He hardly heard it. He was filled with the words, "Who teaches the place where couches the Sun . . . ?"

He closed his eyes and felt vaguely the touch of a hand on his forehead before he fell deeply asleep again.

When he awoke again his head was completely clear. He was still lying on the pile of rugs but the room, or cavern, was empty, and the fire was gone. The Dagda was sitting beside

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him, and as Giles sat up on the improvised bed, the Dagda handed him a cup of water.

Seeing the older man so closely now, Giles was struck by the sense of purpose that seemed to lie behind his eyes. He had a look of dedication about him, a vigor in spite of his age and evident ill health, that Giles almost envied. He couldn't, he realized, say the same of any other man in Nifhel. Compared to the Dagda they seemed dead, but this old man was very much alive. Giles took the drink gratefully.

"You're a Chulainn," the Dagda stated, his blue eyes probing deeply into Giles, who nodded in acknowledgement.

"Then we are cousins," the old man went on. "There are many of our family who have come to refresh their memories of Earth. I noticed you last night. It was your first time, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Giles confirmed, "my first time."

"And you found it interesting?" His eyes never left Giles. They seemed to be evaluating him in a way that made Giles extremely uncomfortable.

"Interesting, yes," Giles said, unable to suppress a note of irritation. Regardless of his innate respect for the man, he should be the one to do the questioning, shouldn't he? Who had knocked him on the head and drugged him? "Interesting and utterly untrue, of course."

"Then you didn't find that your racial memories of Earth were evoked?" The Dagda ignored Giles' tone.

"Of course not," Giles returned shortly. "How could there be a racial memory of something that doesn't exist? You might ask me instead about my racial memories of Nifhel," he added bitterly, "Of those I believe I have many."

The Dagda was silent and Giles regretted his quick retort. It disturbed him, though, that one of his own family, and someone whom he liked as much as he intuitively liked the Dagda, should be involved in something as dreamlike and useless as this Earth cult. He decided to offer the man his real opinion.

"You know," he said more gently, "I believe there is

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something quite dangerous about your group here. As interesting and different as it is, you're still only creating illusions and fantasies for our people. Creating wishes that can never be fulfilled."

He waited for a response but the Dagda simply watched him. Giles, feeling a struggle, went on, "It might be different if Earth was regarded as what it is—a fairy tale, a myth—and the groups took the form of simple entertainment. But you're creating an actual religion around this old legend. I don't know how the myth of Earth began, but I think that by treating it as a reality you're endangering the well being of Nifhel."

The Dagda disregarded everything Giles had said and asked him quite simply, "So you do not believe in Earth?"

Wasn't it obvious? Why did the man have to ask? "Of course not," Giles was annoyed again.

"You are quite sure," the Dagda insisted, leaning forward and narrowing his eyes.

"Quite," Giles said, shortly and tight lipped.

"He is the one I told you of." The girl had come silently out of the shadows and stood beside the Dagda, one hand resting on the old man's shoulders as she looked down at Giles. The green dress was gone and in its place she wore a long white gown; it reminded Giles of something.

"My niece, Lir Regan," the Dagda said, introducing her absently. Then he rose as if he had made a sudden decision. "Come along, then, Giles Chulainn, if you are the one."

So she was distantly related, Giles thought. Now at least he knew who she was, or did he? He would have followed her anywhere but there was a stubborn pride that lingered, demanding an answer to certain questions. He stood up and faced the Dagda determinedly.

"First I would like to know who it was that drugged me and hit me from behind. I would like to know where I am."

The Dagda smiled, "Have we asked you yet how you knew of the Branhholm? Have we accused you yet of being a Watcher?"

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Giles involuntarily winced at that.

"There are many questions to be answered, but my niece is seldom wrong. Therefore you are first going to hear the true History of Niffhel."

The Dagda turned without another word and began walking down the long chamber, the girl Lir Regan beside him. Giles hesitated, but seeing no other choice, fell in behind. The lights along the walls cast green shadows on the girl's white gown. They walked silently, their footsteps making not a sound. Giles noticed that slippers had been put on his feet and that he was singularly free of soot and grime. The girl's gown glowed purely and Giles realized what was so different about this place, whatever it was—there was no soot. Not a particle underfoot, not a speck blowing along the corners. He looked up and still couldn't find the roof of the huge cavern. But they must be underground, he felt, and was sure of it when the Dagda turned a corner and led them down a long tunnel. Here the ceiling was low and the stone had not been worked at all. The sides were quite rough and jagged.

He walked faster to catch up with the Dagda and Lir Regan. "Where are we?" he asked, his voice echoing down the tunnel.

"We are beneath Niffhel," Lir Regan answered.

She was much smaller than he, Giles saw. Tinier than he had remembered. Her long black hair framed her face and the eyes, before so startlingly green and open, were veiled now with caution. There was an elusive quality about her that gave Giles a heightened awareness of his position. He could have asked whether they were beneath the city itself, or, as he suspected, beneath the Branxholm, but something stopped him. She had given him the only answer he would get for now.

The people he had seen before seemed to be absent. There wasn't a sign of human presence anywhere. The Dagda stopped in front of a low archway and stooping down, entered. There was no light in here and the moment he had entered Giles was faced with a deep blackness. The girl took his

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hand—Giles felt her touch acutely—and led him several feet into that dark cavern. Then she whispered, "Lie down flat on your stomach and follow me."

Feeling along the cold rock beneath and sensing the girl ahead of him, Giles began to crawl. Rock pressed down from above and along the sides. They were in a narrow tunnel, so small that a man of Giles' size had difficulty breathing. The narrowness of the tunnel was suffocating and Giles began to feel that terror of enclosed places, began to sense the enormous weight pressing down on him from above. The space became even smaller and Giles no longer heard the breathing of Lir Regan or the Dagda. Had he taken a wrong turning? Desperately he pushed through the tunnel, feeling the jagged rock cut deeply into his shoulders, and then suddenly he was free.

He emerged into an open space and lay there taking deep breaths. Then he felt the presence of light and looking up saw that they were in a lofty, circular cave, illuminated with the same green lights but this time in a cluster which hung from above.

Giles stood up slowly, feeling his heart pound as his eyes took in a world he had never before witnessed. Hanging from the roof of the cave to the floor were huge pictures—no, cloth of some kind—and not the synthetic material which Giles knew. The hangings were richly splashed with the most fantastic scenes—

As if in a dream he walked up and put out a hand to touch the cloth. Feelling it he drew his hand back quickly; it was not smooth. Then looking closer he saw that the pictures had been woven in somehow—they were in relief. He stood back to see the scale of it.

It was a scene of a woodland. There were the "forests fair" and the "winsome water", a curl of water winding through the trees.

Trees! Giles had never seen a tree—how did he know? And grouped in graceful postures among the sun-dappled leaves were people; naked children swinging and laughing,

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and some other strange creatures with four legs lying on the ground—the green, green ground.

Lir Regan touched his arm and when she drew her hand away there was blood on it. Giles heard a swift rent and turning, saw her rip the bottom of her gown and tear the piece into strips. But he was only half aware of that because in turning he had seen, over her head, another huge hanging, and this one took his breath away.

A high jagged outcropping from the ground rising into the sun it seemed to him—a spired peak covered with white. The pinnacle soared into the clouds while below the ground rose and fell and broke in waves, each rising different, each swell unique, nothing the same.

He only half felt the bandage being wound around his shoulder as Lir Regan carefully stopped the flow of blood and tightened the cloth. Then she touched his hand again saying, "Come," and led him to the other side of the cave where, in stacks reaching to the roof, were row upon row of books. Ancient books bound in some unfamiliar material.

Giles touched one and drew back his hand in shock. The covering seemed alive in some way. He moved away nervously, feeling a need to rest his eyes on something he knew, and instead found the Dagda looking at him with a soft smile.

Giles was suddenly terribly cold. The cave was like ice. The Dagda was wrapped in a long cloak and now Lir Regan took another heavy robe from a stack lying on the floor and handed it to Giles. The Dagda threw some more robes on the cold rock and gestured to Giles to sit down. Lir Regan was already seated, her eyes misty and far away as she looked at the hangings.

The Dagda took down a book from one of the rows and sat facing Giles. "I said that you would hear the true History of Nifflhel. But in order to understand it, it is first of all necessary to hear the history of Earth." He opened the book in his lap to the first page.

The words, reverberating in the cave, fell on Giles like

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a shower of thunderbolts. He listened, trembling under the impact.

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep . . ."

V

AN ETERNITY later it seemed, Giles woke to feel the synthetic material of his own bed covering over him. His half opened eyes disclosed the familiar gray metal walls of his hut.

How long had he been here? He had no recollection of anything save the Dagda's voice. Had he crawled back through that suffocating tunnel—or had the whole thing been nothing more than a dream?

Groggily Giles tried to sit up and fell back again. It was useless. His head was still swimming, either from the influence of the drug or of those frightening words . . . those words that seemed not to come from the book nor from the Dagda's lips, but from some other infinitely remote place. And the other words he had heard, when the Dagda began to explain—

His eyes closed again and he fell back exhausted. Images floated across his consciousness, pictures and strange phantasies unfolding in a wild panorama.

A group of scientific men; what had the Dagda called them? English and German and Swiss and others from that continent across the sea on Earth.

Earth! Giles turned violently in his bed trying to darken the image of Earth. That group of men; he saw them

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gathered together desperately trying to devise a means of escaping from the catastrophe that threatened their world. What that catastrophe was Giles couldn't see. It remained blank save for the towering pillars of flame that rose from all the cities of Earth . . . And then after the flames, that group of men racing against time to save some small portion of humanity from the invisible destruction that was slowly moving towards them. The story the Dagda had told took on dimension and Giles surrendered to the vision. He lay back and let the pictures move before him, let the people act out their parts as if in a play.

The group of English and Scandinavian scientists had been the first wave of a world scientific conclave prepared to meet on one of the last lonely islands of Earth—on the Isle of Britain, strangely almost the only area left where city hadn't met city in a wild burgeoning of population and industrial growth. England, the only monarchy left in the world, had oddly not succumbed to the pressures of progress. Her ancient traditions and rituals, kept alive and nourished, had left her free, while elsewhere the fair green hills and valleys of Earth sagged under the weight of civilization, rotted under metal and concrete. Across whole continents the disease of industry spread. Almost all of Earth lay groaning under man's progress while still heads of state snapped at each other in bitter economic argument.

Had it been man's doing, or had nature at last risen in protest? The people of Earth would never know, but forces, at first as light as mist and then dark and pervasive as heavy fog had steamed from the hidden land beneath and choked the minds and the hearts of men. It blinded men in positions of power and created rage in the emotions of the people.

When disaster struck, the first group of scientists and those they sheltered deep in the rock of that one fair island, had not seen the red sky which suddenly flared across the world as if the heavens were raining blood. Too late, they had come hoping to avert the world's end. Now they and that small portion of humanity they sheltered prepared to survive. Beyond that red sky that blotted out the moon there were

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stars, there were other suns. Man's technology had gone up with the world. How could they now escape with that last nucleus of humanity?

And there the images began to fade away from Giles. He saw, only dimly and screened by veils, a procession of men and women. He saw a spinning, something like a pale sun streaking away—but where? Beyond the Earth, beyond the moon, beyond the stars?

Giles moaned and tossed feverishly in the bed. None of it was true. It was myth, it was legend, he had dreamed it. There was only Nifhel, only the flat, ashen strewn rock of this barren planet. This Nifhel, land of his birth, land of his ancestors. The Dagda was insane. He and those others before him had invented this land called Earth.

But could the Dagda have invented those words?

Giles sat up and stared in front of him blindly while the memory of them echoed. No, the Dagda could not have invented those words, nor could any man born of Nifhel.

“. . . and there went up a mist from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground . . .”

Giles turned over and burying his head in his arms felt for the first time since he was a child, the hot, liquid taste of his own tears.

Crinan was angry. There was no mistaking the outhrust of his beard or the lips pinched thinly together. His eyes were cold as he surveyed Giles.

“We want an answer,” he said tightly, “and we want it now.”

Giles detested the implication behind the “we”. Stubbornly he answered Crinan with a look of his own and refused to speak. He was exhausted and every nerve in his body was screaming for rest.

“Where were you all day yesterday and the night before?” Crinan demanded, changing the subject.

Giles stared glassily out the Headquarters window, wondering how to answer that one. It was something Crinan did have a right to know. What lie could he invent? But he was

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tired of lying. His body and his brain felt as if they'd been torn apart, and he didn't have the energy.

"I don't know," he said wearily, "The answer to that is that I don't know!"

And he didn't. He must have spent the day lying in bed; he recalled that he had been terribly hot. A fever? Something. He was rarely ill, but the day before had passed through him like some weird nightmare. He didn't think he had eaten or drunk or even slept.

Crinan wasn't unaware of Giles' haggard appearance. His eyes were hollow and red and his usual vitality had gone. Crinan bit his lip, examining the best approach. But before he had come to a conclusion Giles decided to give him his answer.

"Tell the organization," he said slowly, "that I accept their proposal."

Crinan was relieved, but wary, Giles saw. "Do you understand?" he went on, biting off each word with effort, "I will act as a Watcher for you. I accept."

Crinan pulled at his beard and nodded his head slowly, some of the anger leaving his eyes. "All right, Giles, thank you."

There was nothing more to be said. More exhausted now than before he had entered Crinan's office, Giles turned on his heel and went to the door.

Crinan's voice followed him. "Take the day off, Giles. Go home and get some rest."

Giles nodded on the way out and left without looking back. Now that he had made his decision he felt infinitely weary. Crinan undoubtedly thought he had spent the day in some amusement or other, and what would he do now? Send another Watcher to check on his movements? It didn't matter. Giles was going to do exactly what Crinan had suggested. He was too tired to do anything else.

At least the affair with Intelligence was settled. And now, as an official Watcher, he would be in a position to protect Lir Regan from whatever they decided to do about the Earth Worshipers. In accepting a personal responsibility

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for her, however, Giles realized that he was also assuming the role of protector for the entire group. If he sensed anything about Lir Regan, it was certain that she wouldn't accept personal protection at the expense of the others.

Giles had to smile at himself. Because of one woman whom he had seen twice in his life and whom he hardly knew, he had chosen one of the most dangerous roles open to a man. And he was also about to play father to a group of misty eyed people whose beliefs he didn't share, and, to tell the truth, about whom he cared little.

It was midnight when the insistent buzz at his door awakened him. Answering it, Giles realized that he must have slept all day, and felt now alert and clear. It was Sigrid, flushed and strangely excited.

"Giles, it's started!" she cried. "Crinan sent me for you."

"What's started?" Giles asked, a lick of fear moving inside him.

"The Classification went through. They're being picked up and you're needed for identification." She smiled at him and then impulsively embracing him, whispered, "Oh, Giles, I'm so glad you accepted!"

Automatically Giles held her for a moment, staring beyond her head as he tried to subdue the trembling in his stomach. Then he held her away from him and looked into her eyes.

"You're also a Watcher?" He knew the answer before she nodded her head, her eyes shining.

"Yes, we can work together now. Come on, Giles, you're needed."

"Wait a minute," he insisted, still holding her, "Was it you who had me followed that first night when I attended a meeting?"

"Yes, yes," Sigrid said impatiently. "I knew you didn't believe in Earth. I was just waiting for the right moment to have you approached." She pulled away from him and began retrieving the clothes he had left on the floor. "Hurry, Giles, please!"

"What do you mean they're being picked up? Classification

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has never meant detaining people, has it?" Giles took the clothes she pressed into his hand but stood without moving as he waited for her answer.

"No, but in this case they have to be held for a while. There's so much we don't know that has to be clarified. We have to question what it is that has caused so many people recently to become interested in the groups. It's got to stop, you know, before the cult grows any further."

"Where are you picking them up?" Giles asked steadily, "and where are you putting them?"

"You'll see. Come on, Giles!" Sigrid urged.

He took his time dressing with an instinctive stubbornness that had Sigrid almost dancing with impatience. Giles couldn't understand her evident delight in the night's work. He was afraid of what he might see outside. He was afraid for the people under the Branhholm. Afraid for Lir Regan. There were a hundred questions he wanted to ask. He knew so little about this thing called Intelligence. He knew even less what was expected of him now, as a Watcher.

As if sensing his thoughts, Sigrid touched him softly and said, "You have nothing to worry about, Giles. You're under my direction."

He stared at her without smiling. Under her direction. That meant she was his superior—was she Crinan's superior, too? How far up in the scale of Intelligence was she? He had thought he knew this woman. Thought there was nothing about her he didn't know. He had even thought that where Sigrid was concerned, he led and she followed. It was only the memory of their first meeting that told him it wasn't so. He had even felt sorry for Sigrid, guilty about his emotions toward Lir Regan. He had regarded her recently with a certain pity mixed with that odd distrust.

Now, all at once, Giles knew what that feeling of distrust had been. It was a wrong label. It wasn't distrust he felt toward Sigrid—it was fear. For the first time in his life he was afraid of a woman.

And he had been right to fear what awaited them outside. The thick walls of the hut had muffled the sound, but as

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they stepped out they were assaulted by wave upon wave of the high screeching sirens. The sky was a glare of sweeping searchlights and the vibration of the sirens had picked up all the loose soot from the ground and spun it savagely into the air. They walked into an inferno of yellow light streaked with red and dotted with the erratic mosaic of black soot.

At the corner of Giles' street a barricade had been erected and in front of it a group of hooded Watchers were examining a long line of people. At least, Giles saw, it seemed as if they hadn't found a real cell of Worshipppers. They seemed to be indiscriminately questioning all the residents of the area.

"Do you recognize any of them?" Sigrid whispered.

Giles sensed a quality in her tone that was new. What was it? A touch of brutality or sadism? He looked anxiously at each face, moving beside Sigrid as she drew him along the line of people. He hoped that no sign of recognition would trace itself across his expression if indeed he should find Lir Regan here. Sigrid was watching him intently as they passed each one.

The people were standing quietly, apparently unaffected by this sudden and unprecedented examination. Giles looked for a sign of anger or resistance, and was dismayed to find instead a sheeplike surrender to the face of authority. He knew many of them; neighbors and friends but there was no one, he was grateful to see, that he recognized from either meeting of the Earth Worshipppers.

As his body relaxed with the relief of that, he saw the scene suddenly as if it were a moment of madness. The sirens screamed in his ears until he was one with the vibration. In Sigrid's eyes there was insanity. In the tracelike stupor of the people being questioned there was insanity. In the stiff postures of the guards moving the people along with mechanical precision there was insanity. The movement of the Watchers racing up the streets was a dance of madness that merged with the soot and the searchlights. The mounds of dwellings looked to Giles like graves housing dead people

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that had been suddenly resurrected to play their parts in a macabre imitation of life.

What are we dead to? Giles wanted to scream, and that moment the sirens stopped and the people caught in that sudden vacuum of sound, their bodies still carrying the echo, stopped too, like frozen corpses who must quickly, quickly rebury themselves in the ash and soot of their tombs.

Giles had to get away. He felt that if he stayed one more minute he too would become lost in this current of insanity, if he were not lost already. He thought of the caves beneath the Branhholm with a clean, clear feeling, as if there he could become whole again, or at least retain what small part of him was not already corrupted with the grime of Niflhel.

Had the Watchers already flushed out that last secret meeting place? Could he get there in time to warn Lir Regan? He turned to Sigrid, his mind leaping nimbly with quick inventions, and found that her attention had shifted to the group of Watchers before the barricade.

"We'll let these people go, Giles," she said, and he realized that she had understood there was no one worth detaining. Giles filed away his new knowledge of Sigrid's perception as something he would have to take into account.

"You'd better come along to the next block with me." Sigrid took his arm under the cape and led him past the Watchers with a nod to release those who were in line.

Her feet moved swiftly under the long black cape as she drew him up the street toward the next barricade. Her body was tense with determination and Giles felt that his best chance was to correspond to her mood with a physical invention—a quick action that would not leave room for thought.

He pressed her arm as they walked along, looking at her with a smile. Then he glanced over his shoulder at the barricade they had just left, his eyes narrowing.

"Wait a minute," he said, holding her while she stopped in surprise. "There's someone from the meeting there, I think." He stood rigidly, peering back at the barricade where the line of people was slowly dispersing, returning to their huts. Sigrid made a motion of impatience.

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"No, wait!" he held her tighter while he strained to see. "Yes, I'm sure of it!" he said tightly, and releasing her in a quick movement, broke away into a run that brought him back to his street before Sigrid had a chance to follow.

She stood there watching after him as he flew down the road yelling, "That one!" and beckoned the Watchers to follow. The activity, coming in the middle of the silence, created confusion at the barricade. People who had been in line broke away in haste to let the Watchers run past. Giles, leading them on, ran wildly up one street and down another, shouting directions as he went until the Watchers were all segregated, covering different streets.

Giles ran on, apparently in determined pursuit, until he had left all the Watchers behind and was well away from his own section. Then he paused for breath, hearing the wail of the sirens begin again, either for his non-existent victim or for the round up in another part of the city. It didn't matter. The noise was an effective aid to his own movement.

He had carried it off if Sigrid didn't suspect, and he guessed that the swiftness of his action had surprised her sufficiently to catch her off guard. Now, however, whether Sigrid suspected or not, he must reach his next objective, the Branhholm.

Behind him the sirens screamed even higher. Giles shut out the sound, walking along as if nothing existed but the cold, soot-free air of the caves, and the pure white gown and the clear eyes of Lir Regan.

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VI

MIRACULOUSLY he was in the cave again. His body had carried him there with an intelligence of its own. He had no conscious memory of the labyrinth of passages leading to the cold room of high ceilings and preposterous hangings, but somehow he had known where to find the camouflaged entrance and trace his way back, alone this time. There was no sign of Lir Regan or the Dagda. He had seen no one on his journey through the caves. The Branxholm was apparently deserted.

Now he sat wrapped in a heavy robe, feasting on that peak of white that met the sky. His eyes ranged from that to the hanging with grass and trees and water. He was prevented by some physical lethargy from making his way back through that long tunnel to the empty meeting chamber. The words of Lir Regan that night when he had first come here hung like echoing reverberations in the room. He heard them again—"Who announces the ages of the moon, if not I? . . . Who teaches the place where couches the sun, if not I?"

What was the sun of Niflhel, he wondered. A hot red globe obscured by dust clouds, sullied with ash; but he didn't want to think about that. He wanted to visualize another sun, clear and radiant, supporting a land unlike any he had ever known.

Was he beginning to believe in Earth? Or had he reached the point—he was beginning to understand it—that so many reached who turned to the worship of this imaginary land. To remain in Niflhel required blindness, and Giles saw now that if that screen were lifted even a little, as tonight in the madness of the round up, Niflhel became insupportable. He could no longer bear it. He had to turn to something else.

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And where else was there to turn if not to Earth—or the dream of Earth.

And yet this was his home. A man should love the causes of his birth, the circumstances that had given him life. The thought disturbed Giles and he threw off the robe, getting up and looking closer into the picture on the hanging. He felt disloyal. But that was probably a result of his education, wasn't it? What was wrong, he wondered. What was wrong with him and what was wrong with Niffhel? There was something wrong, even, with the very name of his world. One name for one planet, one name for the one city on that planet.

Giles began to pace up and down, slapping his arms against his sides to warm himself. The feeling of lethargy was passing. And he was becoming too introspective. He felt an irritation with himself, a need for action. How long had he been dreaming here? It must be dawn by now. He decided to enter the tunnel again and look once more for Lir Regan. There might be other underground passages here—perhaps the groups were hidden more deeply below . . .

He had been staring at the mountain without really seeing it while all these thoughts passed through his head. Now suddenly, in front of that precipice there appeared, like a superimposed image, the figure of Lir Regan.

He started and almost spoke and then she was gone.

But the sight had been so real, like the vision of her that had passed between him and Sigrid. Like the moment he had seen her on the tube. Giles frowned and approached the hanging. Was it possibly another camouflage? Or a mirror trick? He didn't really want to touch the material again. There was something about the texture that had shocked him before. He looked at it for a moment more before he decided, and then swiftly felt it, finding that this time the organic quality did not disturb him. He walked to one side, and lifting it aside a little, looked to see what was in back. Then he almost laughed.

He was right. There had been no need for feelings of strangeness or sensitivity. There was a door hewn out of the

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rock. A high, square door of some material he was unfamiliar with. Lir Regan must be just inside. Boldly he sidestepped in back of the hanging and pushed through.

There he stopped smiling while a chill of fear coursed along his spine. He was alone in a round globe made of some unfamiliar plastic, empty save for a large transparent panel on one side. A window? Giles approached it to see. At the first step he was thrown to the floor in the center of the globe as it began to spin. There was a thin, high vibration as the speed gathered fantastic force, and then an ear splitting explosion as the globe seemed to break free.

Giles was pinned to the floor, and at that sudden upward thrust he lost consciousness.

He had no idea how long he'd been like that, lying unconscious in the middle of the globe. When he came to, the vibration seemed to have diminished somewhat, and his body seemed lighter in some curious way. Giles stood up carefully and began to make his way again to the window. He felt the globe still spinning but in a way now that made it possible for him to walk. Gingerly he approached the sheet of transparency.

He had just time to see what appeared to be a blue halo far below before he was again thrown to the floor as the globe began to rock wildly with a decrease in vibration. Giles began to roll across the floor and stretched out his arms for some hold. His hand brushed against something flapping against one curve of the wall and he grabbed on to that, securing himself against the strong pitching.

Suddenly, with a savage lurch and jolt that would have thrown him to the ceiling had he not been hanging on, the globe stopped. There was another muffled sound of explosion. Giles lay still, head down on the floor, his body aching with the bruises he'd received. The globe seemed to have stopped entirely.

There was a soft sliding sound in back of him. Giles, head down on the floor, breathing hard, found his lungs and nostrils filled with a scent that acted on him like a strong narcotic. For a moment he was afraid to open his eyes. He

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lay still, breathing in that odd mixture of bittersweet and damp. Then he began to distinguish odors and knew there was more than one—there was scent upon scent—a fragrance so exhilarating, an air so clean and pure that he began to cough, and stood up dazed to look behind him.

One part of the wall had slid back and beyond was a view that blinded him. He put his hands over his eyes and stumbled forward to the door. Holding on to the edge for support he opened his eyes and ignored the wild trembling that shook his body. His eyes smarted with tears and he heard himself choking and coughing as his breath came in heavy gasps and sobs. He knew he was weeping but he had no control over his body or his mind or his emotions.

He jumped to the ground from the globe in a mixture of uncontrolled movement that sent him sprawling head first. His hands flew out before him and dug into something dark and damp and his fingers curled around little, live, bending shoots that thrust upward from the ground. His body dug into the hard but resilient turf and he breathed in the odor of earth and grass until his lungs were bursting with the richness of it. Still sobbing, he raised his head and tried to wipe his eyes. His hands were filled with the damp brown earth and his eyes burned from the contact. Still, with a fierce enjoyment of the pain he looked around to see, rising up from the earth like strange giants, huge long living limbs with leaves dancing in the wind above him and sunlight striking through branches, making pools of gold upon the ground. The green of the grass and the trees created living shadows, color and light so various that every cell in Giles' body ached with the beauty of it. He closed his eyes again, and holding his body tightly against the earth, as if he could feel its life and hear it answer, he sobbed in rhythmic, passionate whispers, "Home . . . home . . ."

He felt that he couldn't feel the earth enough. He couldn't look at the sky enough. The fleecy clouds took on strange shapes, like living creatures moving against the warm blue of heaven. The hill to his right rose in sweeping curves while the forest traced patterns against the sides. To his

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left a far horizon moulded itself with beautiful variations of hills and trees beyond a broad valley that seemed to be moving with the dance of the long waving grass in the wind. Giles' eyes kept filling with tears that ran unheeded down his cheeks. He didn't care, he couldn't help it; wherever he looked there was so much life to bear. How could we have ever lived here, he thought shakily; how could man exist in a state of emotions like this?

The majesty of the horizon and the hills and the whole broad view was too much for Giles, and he turned to a single splash of color beneath a tree.

He spent hours simply regarding one flower. He looked at it from one side and then the other. He looked at it from the top and from beneath, carefully lifting the petals, afraid, almost, to touch them. He handled the flower as if he were handling something infinitely fragile and new-born. The more he looked the more he was filled with the indescribable beauty of it, and he sat in wonder, his eyes as full of awe and mystery as a child's. One flower and then another. But they were all so different, and that became too difficult. He had to see one thing at a time.

The sun rose high overhead and Giles moved beneath a tree, looking up at the leaves in wonder, feeling the shade as a living movement around him. He spent hours like that, slowly moving his hand from the sun to the shade, watching the shadows dance on his fingers, catching a sparkle of reflection on one fingernail and moving it as the light danced from blade to blade of grass.

He measured his hand against the grass, against a fallen leaf, against a flower petal, against a grain of earth. What size was he, what place, what relation did he have to all this? He stood up to measure his body against the tree. He touched the bark and drew his hand back quickly, still feeling the odd texture tracing his skin. He felt it again and left his hand there longer until the bark became familiar. Then he put both arms around it, and his cheek against the trunk, as if he could hear the pulse of growth moving

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through. At last he sat down again and slowly leaned back, letting the tree support him.

It was as if his eyes had been so filled with impressions that his hearing had been lost, for now, suddenly, he began to hear the voices of nature. The wind rustled the leaves above, something was singing in the air. There was a chirping, a buzz, a flutter, a scraping, a movement through the bushes. He heard a sigh and a grating, and as his hearing began to expand, from a distance a slow rushing sound, a swirl of movement like something liquid.

Giles stood up, an expression of anticipation lighting his eyes. With his ears following the sound, his eyes seemed able now to bear the unfamiliar beauty. His body, too, seemed to take its place as he walked hopefully toward the rushing, listening as it became louder.

He rounded a group of trees and there at his feet—he had almost stepped into it—was a clear, fresh stream. "A winsome curl of water winding. . . ."

If Giles at that moment could have seen himself, he would have seen man and child together, not separated by the passage of time, but merged into one. The postures and attitudes of childhood, the postures of maturity, blending into one related whole. If he had thought about what he was doing he might have felt embarrassed or strange, but there was nothing strange in the grace with which he knelt by that stream of water in the attitude of a child, and bent his face down to drink with the eagerness of a child, or in the way he tossed off his shoes and thrust his feet into the water with the delighted satisfaction of a child.

The water, tumbling over mossy rocks and curling in small whirlpools around fallen branches and boulders, seemed to remind Giles that he wore more than shoes. Leaping up on the bank he undressed in haste, dropping the black cape and suit behind him as he stepped into the water.

And there, sitting on a rock in the middle of the stream, splashing water with wild delight, Giles observed his heap of clothes on the bank out the corner of one eye, and was reminded for the first time of Niffhel.

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His face clouded as he compared the filthy black garments with the green bank on which they lay. Quickly he retrieved them and tried to wash them out, rubbing with an ancient, instinctive knowledge against one of the rocks over which the water made a swift, clean fall. Then he arranged them in the sun to dry.

He was home.

He had known it from the moment the door of the globe opened and he had seen the face of Earth.

He had known even before, he suspected, at that first scent of grass and ground. He needed no maps or pictures to tell him that this was indeed his own, that he belonged to it and had belonged to it for thousands and perhaps billions of years. First his emotions, scent and sight had told him, then his hearing, then his entire body, and now his mind. He had come together enough now to be able to think about it.

The globe must have transported him to Earth. How was a mystery, for there were no flying machines or space ships on Nifflhel. The ancient ones, he guessed, had truly escaped from Earth, just as the Dagda had said. But surely that one green globe could not have transported them all. Perhaps there had once been a fleet, Giles thought. Perhaps there was still a fleet of ships on Nifflhel, buried somewhere underground. Perhaps the globe was one of many—perhaps we could come home again!

But why hadn't the Earth Worshippers already left if that were true? They could have quietly disappeared. No, maybe not quietly. He had no idea whether his departure had been a quiet one or not. That sound of explosion—he might have burst through the surface of the planet with the force of a detonation. His brows furrowed at the thought. If that were so, and if the Earth Worshippers were hidden underground beneath the Branzholm, they might have been caught by now, Lir Regan among them.

Strange that he had almost forgotten about Lir Regan. He had been so sure that he would find her behind that hanging in the cave, but there had been no room for her between the door and the globe. He had stepped directly into the globe

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and the panel must have shut behind him. What had caused the journey, though? Had his foot, stepping on the floor, triggered off the acceleration? Or were there controls elsewhere that Lir Regan or the Dagda might have used to send him here?

Giles thought that must be the answer and he hoped that it was, for in that case they would find him. If he had caused the journey himself, and if there were only one globe or ship, he might be on Earth forever, alone, with no way of return.

Return!

Giles laughed aloud at the thought, a feeling of joy surging through him. He would never return! He had come home, and if he had to live out the rest of his life on Earth without another human being, he would never be alone!

He felt his clothes, finding they were only slightly damp, and put them on, thinking that before he surrendered completely to the magic of his homecoming he owed it to those left behind to take another look in the globe. There might be an explanation somewhere that he had missed.

He took another drink from the stream and started to turn back. There in front of the group of trees, watching him quietly, stood Lir Regan.

She appeared to grow out of the earth, blending in her green gown with the grass and the trees as if she were one with the landscape. From that swift impression Giles found now that he couldn't visualize Earth without man. Lir Regan belonged to the earth as he did, so much a part of it that he wondered how nature could have existed without her.

The wind lifted her long black hair in a waving halo and her eyes reflected the dancing light of the sun. She was incredibly beautiful, Giles thought, walking up to her, noticing her quick new smile. He responded with joy, putting aside for the moment his many questions.

"I'm glad you're here," Lir Regan said simply, "I wanted you to come, you know."

"But you called me," Giles said, reaching without hesitation for her hands and holding them tightly in his own.

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There didn't seem room here for subterfuge or games. The virgin land demanded directness and he felt a freedom that would have been incomprehensible on Niffhel.

"Yes," she replied, tilting her head on one side and looking up at him, "I called you . . . in my own way. I'm sorry if it has seemed strange to you, but one day you'll understand."

Giles looked deeply into her eyes for a long time, surrendering to this totally new sensation of himself as a man towards a woman. He felt none of the old passions of Niffhel, but it was curious how, with new instincts of protection and wonder, he felt his maleness more than ever before in his life. Putting his arm around Lir Regan, he led her to the top of a small rise beyond the grove of trees where they stood looking out at the broad expanse of valley.

"It seems to be waiting, doesn't it?" she whispered as they watched the movement of the far trees bending slightly in the wind. Low pink clouds scudded across the horizon and the sky was tinged with purple shadows that changed color as they watched.

"Look!" she pointed to a flash of color in the air, and Giles saw a winged creature streak by in an arc of blue.

His arm tightened around her shoulder, "What is it?"

"A bird," Lir Regan said. "I don't know the species, but it is a bird—a bird of Earth."

"As we are the men of Earth," Giles said quietly. "How did we lose it, Lir Regan? What did we do? And how is it that we are here now? How have we found it again?"

"You have already heard the story of the destruction of Earth," she answered softly, "but dead things are regenerated. Death leads into life, and Earth is living again, as she waits for the homecoming of man."

Giles felt a deep shudder run through him as he suddenly visualized men like Bran Crinan and the Watchers coming home to Earth. He sensed defilement in the thought, defilement in his own clothes, the black garb of Niffhel, on this pure land.

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"Not all men," he said passionately to Lir Regan, "Not the homecoming of all men!"

"No," she agreed, "and that is why you had to be here now, to understand that. That is exactly why you are here. And even if you had been one of us, if you had wanted to believe in Earth before, you would still not have been prepared for the reality of it. We tried in small ways, to prepare you a little, to expose you to some of the life of Earth."

Giles nodded, understanding now why the shock of the living materials in the cave had been necessary. Without that small contact might he not have collapsed altogether under the impact of the nature of Earth?

"Without that contrast between life and death," Lir Regan said, "and without actually standing here, you would never have understood why all men must not come home. Perhaps someday," she went on, her voice ringing as it had that night in the caves, "perhaps someday it will be for all. But now there is only room for a few."

Giles thought of the globe. How many could be transported? And how long would it take? How far was Earth from Nifflhel, and how long had he been gone? Could they be sure of finding Earth again? The science of astronomy on Nifflhel was almost totally limited by the clouds of ash that obscured the sky. As far as he knew there were no facilities for looking into the universe.

Lir Regan seemed oblivious to these practical thoughts. Her eyes were visionary as she gazed at the hills. "Strangely enough, Giles," she said, "if you had believed in Earth you could not have been the one to play the role we hope you will play. It had to be someone utterly opposed to the idea, someone who rejected it, someone so strongly entrenched in the life of Nifflhel that he would even be asked to join the Watchers."

She smiled at his expression, "Yes, we know that. We know also that you accepted, and we know why. But that is what was needed. It had to be someone who had the capacity to understand, someone who would respond to me

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and who could withstand the shock of having his old ideas thoroughly destroyed."

Giles suddenly felt Lir Regan stiffen. She looked past him with a quick, strange fear in her eyes. He whirled around, shielding her with an instinctive movement. Not five feet away stood Sigrid, her hood pulled down over her shoulders and her black cape grimy with soot. In her hand she held a long metallic object and her eyes were glazed as she peered before her.

Giles felt his heart lurch to his mouth as Lir Regan quickly stepped in front of him and pushed him back.

"Run, Giles!" she cried, "Go back to the globe!"

He stood glazed with fear while Lir Regan urged him. "Hurry, Giles! It will be all right . . . Run! . . . Giles!"

In that last call he felt a command so urgent that he couldn't disobey. In one word she reminded him of powers he was sure she possessed and he felt suddenly that he must do as she said. He turned and sprinted for the globe, feeling that the future of Earth and man depended on the movement of his legs. Without once looking back he reached the globe and threw himself inside, hearing the door slide shut in back of him. He grabbed the length of strap he had used before and managed to buckle himself in before the spinning began and the globe rocked with a violent explosion.

VII

HE HAD TRIED to remain conscious, but when he awoke in a lifeless silence, he knew he hadn't succeeded. The globe was motionless, and before he even looked toward the sliding

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doors, Giles knew from the sensation of heavy atmosphere that he was back in Nifflhel.

Even for the caves it was strangely quiet. Giles pushed out from the hanging, carefully closing the huge doors behind him. The cave was empty, the robes stacked on the floor as they had been when he had left. . . . No, not quite. The robe he had used and tossed aside when he had decided to go through the tunnel, before seeing Lir Regan—where was that? He examined the one on top of the pile. That was it. Then someone had been here and folded and stacked it. The Dagda perhaps? If only he could find the man . . . then he would know what to do. What did Lir Regan expect of him now?

Giles' mind raced to answer other questions. There must be a carefully concealed opening for the globe, something that would move aside to let it emerge from the ground and cover it when it returned again. There was no sign of debris or fallen rocks, at least in here. Everything except the robe was exactly as it had been when he had left. And when was that? How many minutes, how many years to Earth? Regardless of seeing Lir Regan and Sigrid, Giles was afraid of the time element. He didn't understand.

Cautiously, trying to make no sound, he crawled through the tunnel and forced himself not to panic at the enclosure. He didn't want to call attention to himself by appearing in the streets of Nifflhel wounded or bleeding from the rock. But what would it matter? What Nifflhel was he returning to? He was sorry he had left the cave. It was like a bridge between Earth and Nifflhel . . . could he bear this deadness again, he wondered, after that life? But he must be wary of these associations, he told himself, and go on trusting in Lir Regan. He had nothing else to trust, except for his certain knowledge of Earth.

Gasping for air, for he had taken a long time coming through the tunnel, he emerged in the huge chamber with the green lights. He stood up choking, for instead of the clean, fresh atmosphere he remembered there was now, blowing along the empty corridors, a regular storm of soot.

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His feet made patterns in the film on the ground. Looking closely he saw the prints of many pairs of shoes.

Had the globe made cracks in the ground, then, as it broke away? Had he brought the dirt of Niffhel down here to the Earth Worshippers? He walked along quickly, afraid of what he might see outside and yet anxious to know. The silence was so heavy he could hear his every motion. And then another faint sound came to his ears from far down the corridor. He tensed and jumped silently behind an outcropping of rock to wait. The sound fell into the pattern of footsteps, as silent and cautious as his own. He didn't dare look around the rock; he waited until the black cape brushed past him and then, with a swift leap, jumped upon the figure, pinning him to the floor with one hand over his mouth.

There was a muffled cry as the man thrashed with rage beneath him. He rolled over so suddenly Giles couldn't contain him. It was Crinan.

With relief Giles let him go and helped him to his feet. At least he knew now that he hadn't come back to Niffhel at some far point in the future. "Sorry," he panted, as Crinan gingerly moved his limbs, "I didn't know who it was."

Wondering how to explain his presence here under the Branhholm, Giles tried to remember his last actions as a "Watcher" and found that his story was effortlessly ready. The scene might have been written for him, if he was judging the time element correctly. The last Intelligence had seen of him was in that imaginary pursuit of an Earth Worshipper. He had to chance it.

"I thought you were the man I've been chasing," Giles said.

He held his breath until Crinan said, "Oh, got away, did he?" with uncharacteristic mildness, futilely shaking his cloak. The gesture only served to raise more clouds of dust from the floor, and with a cough of irritation Crinan let it go.

"Filthy stuff down here," he said, peering absently down the hall.

Giles regarded him closely. Even if he believed him, Crinan was disregarding the episode with suspicious ease.

"Come along then, we'll forget your man, although it's

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too bad you lost him." Crinan started back in the direction from which he'd come.

Giles was wary, but seeing that at least Crinan was heading away from the tunnel entrances, fell into step quietly. "How did you manage to locate the caves?" he asked as casually as he could. He felt he must risk the question, but to his surprise, Crinan accepted it without apparent thought.

"Hm?" he murmured distantly, "Oh, we've had a suspicion about the Branhholm; Found a group here hidden below. . . ." His voice trailed away as if he had lost interest in the question.

Giles stiffened imperceptibly, heightening his guard. So they had found some of the people. All of them, he wondered? Why hadn't he found them himself—if only he had looked further before— And what could he do now? He had no plan, no scheme. Sigrid was on Earth and if he didn't have such faith in Lir Regan he might easily assume she was dead by now. But he put that thought away. He felt a strong assurance that it wasn't so. He didn't know how to reach her again, though. He had no knowledge with which to devise a plan of escape for the others. Sigrid had arrived on Earth too unexpectedly—too quickly for Lir Regan to tell him . . .

The one thing he didn't question in all this was how Sigrid had come. She must have uncovered another globe in searching the Branhholm and been transported to Earth as he had been. The only difference was that his journey had been deliberate, apparently called for by Lir Regan, and Sigrid's was accidental. If only, he prayed, she had been alone when she chanced upon the globe. He hoped that Lir Regan could detain her before she could return and tell Intelligence of the existence of Earth. If Intelligence found out, all was lost. He would have to be very careful. He didn't know what awaited him on the face of Niflhel. Crinan must know. But Crinan, unless he was a consummate actor, evidently accepted him. Giles followed him, therefore, as one Watcher with another.

They came to the end of the first corridor and turned into the huge chamber where Giles had first heard Lir Regan

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singing. The place bore no resemblance to that memory now. The Earth Worshippers might never have existed, or they might have existed so long ago that only now had man stumbled into their ancient meeting place. Most of the green lights had been broken. The globes were only jagged scars against the walls. Ripped robes and mats were strewn about the floor, heavy with dust. The air was foul. Giles choked, wishing for the first time for the air on the surface. It was worse here now that it had ever been on the streets of Nifhel.

"Come along," Crinan started slowly across the chamber.

There was something queer about his movements. Even at an ordinary walking pace Giles would have outdistanced him easily. Crinan acted like a man just roused from a deep sleep. He stumbled a little.

"Is something the matter?" Giles asked, noticing that Crinan seemed hardly aware of the bruise on his cheek where he had fallen, although it was now turning an ugly red.

"No, just the air I think. Can't seem to breathe very well." He began to cough violently and Giles steadied him. "This way," Crinan pointed to a corridor that Giles hadn't seen before. It went just a short distance before ending at a flight of stairs.

"Maybe you can help," Crinan choked again and leaning on Giles for support, attempted to walk faster.

The stairs were well lit with a string of glaring white lights, evidently put there by the Watchers. Giles helped Crinan up with difficulty and pushed at the double doors at the top. They swung out immediately and Crinan pitched forward, almost falling as he gasped for breath in the cleaner air. Giles was glad himself to leave the suffocating atmosphere of the lower caves. Now, seeing the huge, high-ceilinged room, he realized where they were.

The Branhholm had been cleared of dust as much as possible and brilliantly lit with the same small spotlights that played mercilessly over each curve of the tremendous hall. The glare of the revolving lights was blinding and it took Giles a few minutes to see what had been done.

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A low hum of vibration told him that the air purifier had been hooked up again. It was an old, ineffective method, but better than nothing.

Far across the vast room, their backs to Giles, a group of Watchers stood in a semicircle, facing the Earth Worshippers who were standing each a precise distance from the other against the wall. They still wore the colorful, vibrant, softly flowing clothes of their meetings underground. The color, against the black border of Watcher Guards, was like a capsuled impression of Earth and Niffhel. Giles calculated quickly and figured there must be one Watcher to every two Earth Worshippers. All were perfectly still. The Guards had their hands on their hips, ready for any sudden move.

Then, squinting his eyes to see better, Giles frowned furiously. There were quite a few children there, looking in their colorful garments, like small, stiff flowers, standing rigidly against the wall.

He turned to Crinan angrily, "They're holding the children! Is that necessary!"

"They'll be released," Crinan seemed to have recovered in the better air.

"When?"

Crinan surveyed him blandly, "When their parents are. They'll all go together."

Giles knew better than to believe him. His rage was like a physical pain but he knew he was utterly impotent to help. He clenched his fists while Crinan asked him in the same disinterested tone, "Do you want to see if the man you were following is over there?"

Why were they so interested in this man? Or did they simply feel that the hunter must pursue his quarry to the end? Giles' mouth tightened, sick of this imaginary hunt. "No, if he was captured that's the end of it. If not I don't think he was that important. Let's let it go."

Crinan nodded but not before Giles had caught an odd questioning in his look. As if deciding something for himself, he nodded again and began moving toward the doors. Giles followed without looking back. He didn't wish to see the

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children, or any of the Earth Worshippers, for that matter, until he was able to help. And what could he do without Lir Regan or the Dagda.

A Guard standing by the doors opened it for them and they were outside. The soot hung like black flakes in the odd half light. It was just before dawn. Was it possible, Giles wondered, that he had been gone such a short time? Would it be dawn on Earth for Lir Regan? Automatically he started walking toward the faint outlines of the black huts which rose like a scattering of nuts in the distance.

Crinan, not following, called after him. Giles turned back and saw with surprise that a wagon shed had been erected against the wall of the Branhholm. He retraced his steps beside the old tracks that had been hastily uncovered and repaired. There had never been an Underground to the Branhholm. Part of the excitement in going, for the people of Niffhel, was to ride on the old magnetic wagon, flying swiftly over the ground. It had been the only place where the people were able to use the same method of transportation as that used for the routes to the mines. For some reason they had called this particular wagon the Gondola. And long after the Branhholm had been closed the children of Niffhel had explored along the old tracks and played in the abandoned wagon until it was finally removed.

Giles entered the shed and followed Crinan into the wagon, running his hand along the rough metal of the interior as they sat down facing each other on the rows of bucket seats. Could it possibly be the same old Gondola? Giles looked out the window with a feeling of nostalgia, and he observed the emotion with amazement. If he could feel even this much about his childhood and any part of Niffhel, what would an impression of Earth be like for a child born there? The idea defied his wildest imagination.

Even Crinan must have sensed something about the Gondola, for he said, "Strange to be here again, isn't it?" Then he relapsed into silence, relaxing on his seat and closing his eyes.

Where were they going, Giles wondered? Crinan might think he knew, so he didn't dare ask. The brake in the

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shed was released by a Guard and the wagon sped off, rocking slightly as it moved down the tracks toward Nifflhel. Giles watched Crinan, but the man seemed to be asleep, his head hanging buried in his beard, eyes tightly closed. He coughed once or twice and Giles thought that he seemed to have slumped back into that curious dreamlike state.

When the Gondola stopped, Giles had to help him off. He held Crinan by the arm while the older man shook his head, as if trying to clear his vision. "Sorry," he said, taking a deep breath, "The ride must have made me dizzy. If I can lie down for a minute I'll be all right." He acknowledged the Guard who had opened the shed door with a weak wave of his hand.

They stepped out into the last street of Nifflhel. Directly in front of them was the end of the Underground. Crinan took Giles' arm as they descended the stairs. The tube was approaching, and when it stopped Giles helped Crinan into a contour. He still seemed to be having trouble with his eyes. They kept closing as he tried to focus.

"Look here, Crinan," Giles said, openly worried about the man, "I don't think you're in any condition to travel."

"No, I had orders!" Crinan returned sharply. The words seemed to have awakened him and he sat up straight as the tube whined away. "Most important. Superior of Intelligence wants to see you—expecting you. Have to go directly to Headquarters."

Intelligence Headquarters! Giles' heart leaped in a sudden panic. Had Sigrid returned, then?

"You'll have to keep me going," Crinan mumbled, "Keep talking, moving, anything—"

"I could go alone," urged Giles. If Crinan would only tell him where Intelligence Headquarters was located he could choose his own time about reaching the Superior. They undoubtedly had surprises for him. If he had more information himself before appearing he would be in a better position. He would have to show up. There was no question about that if he wished to continue the game he was playing. He must make no move yet to give himself away.

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Even if Sigrid had returned from Earth and told the Superior, he was not certain she had seen him there. She had looked dazed and Lir Regan had stepped between them. It was quite possible that the Superior knew only that he had followed an Earth Worshipper to the Branhholm and had lost him. That was the line he must follow until some other course presented itself.

And he wanted to know where Headquarters was. He was just as anxious as Crinan that the man not pass out yet. "Tell me where to go," Giles insisted. "I'll go on myself."

Crinan laughed shortly, "Sorry, Chulainn—orders."

The tube stopped and with astonishing speed Crinan got up and exited. Giles had to admire his effort. They went up the stairs halfway to the top and then Crinan stopped and looked around carefully. No one was in sight. If there had been other passengers getting off at this stop, they must have taken the elevator up.

Crinan ran his hand over the blocks of stone on the wall. Giles watched closely, trying to locate the number of stones from the step, but he didn't have time to count. The wall swung back and with a hurried exclamation Crinan drew him through. The wall shut behind them.

They were in another tunnel. Giles was now truly amazed at what he guessed must be an entire honeycomb of underground passages beneath all of Nifhel. And the existence of this network was known to whom? To the Earth Worshipers and to Intelligence? Did each know of the other's location?

Giles followed Crinan down the tunnel a short way until it made a sharp turn. There Crinan opened a door and they stepped into an elevator that descended swiftly. They were down in a minute and the doors opened. Here was the same clear air that Giles had enjoyed in the caves. It did not have quite the same natural quality, but still he breathed it in gratefully and it seemed to have an equally good effect on Crinan who marched off down the brightly lit corridor. Many numbered doors opened off the hall and Giles assumed correctly that this was Headquarters.

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Crinan stopped at the only door with no marking on it and said loudly into a disc on the side, "Bran Crinan here."

Instantly the door opened and Giles gasped as they stepped into what must have been the most flagrantly vulgar and luxurious room in all of Niffhel.

Unlike the peaceful effect of the exposure to green in the loft and the caves, the colors of this room shocked and alerted the senses. The lights were harsh and brilliant—purple, scarlet and blinding chartreuse green. The walls were decorated with the same hard colors in bold form murals which framed the largest mirrors Giles had ever seen. Because of the reflection the room seemed to stretch endlessly into the distance. The rug was inches thick. Giles' shoes sank deeply into it and looking down he saw that of all things the rug was pure, speckless, undirtied, frigid, antiseptic white. There had never been anything as white. Not his graduation cloak, not even Lir Regan's gown. This synthetic white was whiter than white, almost obscenely white.

So far the glaring color scheme and lurid decorations had taken all his attention and the mirrors had cleverly prevented him from immediately noticing a huge desk in the center of the room. Now as he looked down at his feet where the grime he and Crinan had brought with them was sinking inexorably into the rug, the voice that suddenly screamed at them from the desk made every hair along the back of his neck bristle.

The epithets were foul and a few would have been sufficient, but the Superior of Intelligence continued his tirade with shrill venom, leaning over the desk with every muscle in his neck bulging as he cursed them for sullyng his rug.

Giles would have blamed himself for not thinking of the air showers, considering Crinan's condition, but he knew, by the nape of his neck, before he even looked up, that he would be locking glances with a familiar adversary.

He smiled coolly as he unfastened his cape and deliberately let it fall with a shower of soot on the rug, much as he had done eleven years ago on the streets of Niffhel, and then he looked up with an actual surge of anticipation as his

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eyes fastened on the Superior of Intelligence, a man he knew only too well—a man coming strangely out of his own past to this weirdly fitting climax. A man named Car Saunders.

VIII

SAUNDERS stopped screaming when Giles dropped his cape. His eyes traveled slowly from the heap of black on the rug up to the smiling face of the large blond man before him. Something in the stance of Giles' body and the glint in his hazel eyes caused an immediate shift in Saunders attitude. Was it an echo of the past? That same quick fear he had felt on Examination Day so long ago? Giles waited, his arms hanging loosely at his sides. Once again he was ready for Saunders and knew that he would welcome the fight.

But it was to be a different kind of duel this time. Saunders smiled back at him easily and came around the desk to shake Giles' hand. He had matured from insignificant nastiness to a subtle brutality often found in men with positions of power. Gone was the young school bully, even the innocence expressed in such overt actions of childish violence. Here was a man fused into the pattern which had begun in childhood. All of his early spite and latent sadism had come to a full flowering. He was expertly and painfully polite.

"Sorry, Chulainn," he said in a voice that had the thin, tight pitch of constantly suppressed emotion. "You didn't announce yourself and for a moment I didn't recognize you. That was Crinan's job, of course but then he's often forgetting the details."

Giles returned the handclasp distastefully. Saunders had

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aged more than he should have considering his years. His thin hair had receded, showing an oddly round, sloping forehead that was slightly mottled like the rest of his thick, rather flabby face. He looked dissipated, the circled puffs under his eyes permanent. He had the florid complexion common to those who over relied on stimulants.

Bran Crinan had slumped into the nearest chair, not bothering to remove his cape. He sat there with his head hanging, his eyes closed, his heavy breathing audible in the room. Saunders didn't bother to look at him and Giles was once more worried about the man.

"Crinan seems to be ill," Giles said to Saunders, "He had a difficult time getting me here. I think he should have someone to look at him."

Saunders glanced at the man in the chair and smiled. Then he walked over and nudged him with his feet. "What about that, Crinan? Chulainn here thinks you need attention."

Bran Crinan moved a little, opened glazed eyes and looked up at Saunders. "Yes, good idea," he mumbled distantly, "just need to lie down."

Saunders' face stiffened and with a jerk of anger he kicked Crinan sharply under the cape that spread out over the chair. "Wake up, Crinan," he snarled softly.

The man looked at him, dazed, and didn't move. Saunders kicked him again, harder this time. Giles drew in his breath. If this scene was for his benefit, he wasn't going to play. He stood rigidly against his inclination to come to Crinan's aid. Crinan blinked and tried to move. He gasped at the effort and looked up at Saunders. Then painfully he drew himself up in the chair, hanging on to the arms as he stared straight ahead, trying to keep his eyes open.

Saunders smiled and walked backwards a few feet, examining Crinan as if he were under a microscope. Tilting his head he flung out one arm dramatically. "There, Chulainn," he said, "we have a picture of a man who doesn't know which side he's on. Peculiar, when you realize that Bran Crinan, until a few days ago, didn't even know there was more than one side. Even more peculiar when you stop to

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think that Crinan himself doesn't know that he has a question."

Crinan, looking even more dazed, frowned as if he would like to object. He opened his mouth slowly but Saunders broke in harshly before he had a chance.

"You came to us, Crinan, because you were offered something. Life in Niffhel, good as it's been for you, had an opportunity of becoming a good deal better. We all know that. But unlike Chulainn here who had a real choice to make and made it for us, you just slipped into the situation because it was easy." Saunders tilted his eyebrows knowingly. "You see, Chulainn," he smiled, "Crinan never reported a little journey he made several years ago. Never said a word about it. That was one big mistake."

Crinan tried to move but fell back in the chair. He moaned a little, shaking his head. Giles frowned as he watched the two men. There was something very strange here. Strange and wrong. Crinan would never have been on the Earth Worshipers' side; Giles was certain of that. He wondered what Saunders was trying to do. But Saunders, it seemed from his next words, had already done it.

"We asked Crinan to join us," Saunders said, moving back to his desk, "because he was in an excellent position to help. Primarily because you were working under him and for certain reasons we needed you." Saunders seated himself behind the desk. "But Crinan never reported his own attendance at a meeting years ago. Naturally we knew of it. We waited for Crinan to divulge that information of his own accord, but he never did." Saunders paused for a moment and sniffed, "But then, of course, knowing that we couldn't trust him—"

Crinan lurched to his feet in a sudden, violent movement and would have fallen if Giles hadn't swiftly caught him.

" . . . something had to be done." Saunders ignored Crinan's mute protest and went on. "We got you, Chulainn, and then we quietly fixed Crinan so that he would be available for a while longer—unable to remember much or certainly

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to disclose anything—but able to move and talk and bring you here.”

Saunders' face was an impassive mask, “Now he will have to be relieved of his duty because in his condition he can't possibly fulfill any further purpose. He will be quite comfortable, I assure you, until the end. In these cases the end doesn't come until after all the senses have lost their power of functioning. It's quite a gradual and painless thing. But it is a pity that he didn't give us his trust, as you have given us your trust, Chulainn.” He smiled broadly at Giles, “You see, we have many reasons to be absolutely certain of you.”

Saunders raised his wrist with a flourish and pushed a button on the desk. Immediately one of the pictures on the wall slid back to reveal a door. Two men dressed in dark suits and well hooded, entered the room. Giles was still holding Crinan who now clung to him weakly. Giles knew it would be futile to resist. He let the men take Crinan, without protest, through the door. The picture slid back to its place and except for the black ash and soot in the chair where he had sat, Bran Crinan might never have existed. Giles knew that he would never see him again.

Saunders threw his head back and began to laugh in a high, disconnected giggle. It was particularly revolting and Giles had to force himself to smile in return. Saunders expected a certain attitude from Giles if he really thought Giles was on his side—which was open to question—but he wasn't going to have the game played entirely his way.

There were a few postures which Giles felt would violate his entire being. He would go just so far and no further. Saunders had so far expressed the power of his position quite effectively, but he was spoiling it now with the laugh, and Giles was glad. It meant that somewhere, under that mask of control, emotional weakness existed and could be evoked.

Still laughing, Saunders pulled out a large chartreuse handkerchief and mopped his face. The color, against his mottled red face was more than unattractive. “He was absolutely loyal, of course,” Saunders said. “Forgotten completely about that one meeting he attended, but that

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was all the excuse we needed." He smiled at Giles as if perfect understanding existed between them. "You know things have to be done this way sometimes. Crinan was unreliable, that's the whole story really. He could have been swayed in another direction. And he knew too much, far too much."

He drummed his heavy fingers loosely on the desk, serious now as he looked at Giles. Giles hadn't said a word. He watched the fingers idly drumming, wondering what was to come next, and then he saw the paperweight.

Giles felt the color drain from his face as he drew in his breath and held it for what seemed an eternity.

The paperweight—

It was a small, round ball, flattened on the bottom and accurately etched above in blue and green with the outlines of the continents and seas of Earth.

A small globe of Earth.

Watching him, Saunders smiled and negligently picked up the globe, flipping it in his hand. Then with a quick motion, almost too fast for Giles, he suddenly tossed it.

"Catch!" Saunders grinned as Giles leaped for it.

He caught it neatly, feeling the dampness of Saunders' hands still lingering as he held it in his own.

Saunders was smiling as if he held a private joke. "Of course, you don't believe in Earth, do you, Chulainn?" he asked with wry amusement.

Giles looked down at the globe in his hand, feeling sick. Whatever he answered it was sure to be wrong. Saunders had topped him this time. He stared at the miniature green land, his forefinger tracing along the edge of Europe . . . just a line on a small, hard ball. He began to wonder if it all hadn't been a dream. Perhaps his feet had never touched a grassy hill on Earth . . . perhaps he should admit all this to Saunders . . . perhaps his safety lay here, not in that dream he carried cupped in his hand. His fingers tightened around the ball as he remembered Lir Regan, and as he thought of her he saw the line of people against the wall in the Braxholm, the children standing motionless until this man chose

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to release them. But what could he do? What could he say?

Giles returned the globe to the desk, setting it down carefully on the pile of synthetic papers. Dream, reality or whatever, there was only one course to follow. For Lir Regan's sake he must continue to deny Earth.

He looked at Car Saunders and said steadily, "No, I don't believe in Earth. Would I be here if I did?" As he said it he realized this was the third time he had said no to Earth: to Lir Regan, to Crinan, and now to Saunders. Would he ever, he wondered, be able to affirm it?

Saunders tapped the globe, "But you've seen this before?"

"Of course. There was a globe at the meeting I attended."

"Yes, we have them, too." Saunders' smile faded, "But you're very stupid, Chulainn, if the reality of all this has escaped you. I would have expected more. Even Crinan began to have an inkling of the truth."

His eyes hardened as he looked at Giles. "Naturally Earth exists! A legend like that doesn't grow out of nothing. I find it hard to believe that you didn't suspect; you've had enough exposure."

In spite of the globe Giles was stung by the open disclosure. He was afraid that he looked as shocked as he felt. He couldn't have realized at that moment that this obvious astonishment was the factor that saved him.

"Sit down, Chulainn," Saunders invited soberly, pointing to a chair in front of the desk.

Giles was glad of the solidity under him. His head was swimming as he tried to evaluate it. So Intelligence did know about Earth! He felt ill until another thought struck him. . . . Or did they know? This could be a ruse. So far he had seen no sign of Sigrid's presence, and if she hadn't told Saunders, how could he know? He felt that he was buffeted by a wind of treacherous cross currents. Saunders looked as if he were expecting something from him, but Giles was at a loss for words. Again it was the very best thing, for now Saunders started to talk.

"Earth does exist!" Saunders insisted, "I don't care what your feelings are or what your education has been, you'll

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have to revise all that. Earth exists. The planet is as real as Nifhel." He looked at Giles narrowly to see if this had been digested and Giles could only nod.

"Once that's clear you must understand that the knowledge is to be given to no one. Without exception. Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course," Giles said slowly.

"Crinan's unfortunate experience was due to the fact that he suspected and passed on that suspicion in certain ways. Not in words, but in the way he handled things, in his attitude. It's a difficult thing to describe, but the point is that Crinan was not supposed to know. For definite reasons you must know, and how things go with you will depend largely on how reliable you are."

The warning was obvious, and Giles guessed that his presence at the scene between Crinan and Saunders had been a deliberate device. He nodded again, watching with interest the change in Saunders. He was all business, all serious intent. His eyes, over the puffs of dissipation, had the cold glare of the fanatic. Whatever flabby immoral quality the man's physical presence expressed, his attitude towards his aim, whatever it was, was tough and direct.

"I'm amazed, Saunders, as you can see," Giles said, deciding it was time to begin playing the part of the loyal citizen Watcher of Nifhel. "Forgive me if I seem silent, but it's rather tremendous information to absorb in one sitting."

Saunders nodded, "There's more," he went on, "I don't think I have to tell you why our history has been rewritten. If we had known of the existence of Earth in school, you and I, would either one of us have been content on Nifhel? As it is, the secret is closely kept in Intelligence and always will be."

"Sigrid knows, doesn't she?" Giles asked, feeling that he must have the answer to this question.

Saunders looked up sharply and frowned, "No, she does not and she must not yet. That might be hard for you."

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The statement was really a question and Giles returned his glance coolly.

If he was telling the truth, Giles thought, it meant that Sigrid had not returned. He wondered.

"We didn't mind the religion of Earth," Saunders continued, apparently satisfied, "so long as the Earth Worshipers confined their activities to the meetings and rituals. It was actually a help for us, a screen for our own activities."

Giles held his breath, listening intently. This was what he wanted to know. But Saunders sidestepped it.

"Crinan told you of the increase in the meetings and the numbers of new people attending. That had to be curbed. Obviously there was danger for us in that. The thing was becoming too real. Too many intelligent people showing an interest. Someone might have guessed." He got up from his chair and began pacing up and down the room. Then he suddenly smiled.

"Ironically enough, it is the Earth Worshipers who haven't believed in the reality of their dream! You might think about the meaning of that! I find it most interesting."

He began to mutter, speaking more to himself than to Giles, "And all of us can't get to Earth. Has to be the ones who can create a civilization out of a wilderness—the builders, architects of a new world." Saunders stopped shortly, his eyes narrowing as he turned to Giles and for several minutes there was absolute silence in the room. Then he began to speak in a quick whisper.

"And you never wondered why you were building new roads, digging new mines? For more industry, you thought, more mines for more factories. Didn't it ever occur to you that all these mines are unnecessary? Did you ever compare the number of mines with the population of Niffhel?"

Giles frowned and Saunders laughed shortly, "You never knew you were looking for Earth, did you?"

"Yes, you were looking for Earth, hunting for the fleet. The lost fleet of ships that brought us here in the beginning."

Giles rose to his feet and stared at Saunders, his own face ashen now.

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"We know it exists!" Saunders' voice rose. "It has to. How else could man have come here in the beginning?"

They knew of the fleet, Giles thought numbly. And he had already found one globe, Sigrid another.

"A fleet of ships thousands of years old," Saunders went on, "but without it Earth will be lost and we will be lost forever. Didn't you ever wonder what might be beyond this filthy haze? With all our advanced technology we can't look into the universe. And there are all the secrets. The instruments, the navigation to lead us, blind as we are, off this damnable planet. And in all these thousands of years we haven't been able to find it!"

Saunders walked back to the desk and sagged down in his chair. "We thought the fleet might have been destroyed," he said wearily. "It could have been. They might have needed whatever power there was on the ships to create sources of light and energy here in the beginning. But we felt if they had left even one ship, only one, it would be all we'd need. They wouldn't have destroyed all the records, and we felt that they may have hidden one ship. Tonight, after discovering the caves under the Branxholm, we thought we might find it there."

Giles tried not to let any expression cross his face. But Saunders was not looking at him. He had a bitter smile, "And we were right!"

Giles froze in his chair, anticipating the next disclosure. But Saunders surprised him.

"We didn't find a ship in the Branxholm, but we found something else. After all these years we finally discovered there is a torch bearer who has real information, actual knowledge of all the secrets. Throughout the centuries the information has been passed down. It's amazing they've never used that knowledge to get to Earth, but we think we know why.

"Nevertheless," he glared up at Giles stonily, "this is why we need you. You are going to find out where that fleet of ships is hidden. You are going to find that girl, the Dagda's niece. She's the current Bard and she has the answer. We

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know that she has taken an interest in you. We're going to release her uncle in your custody as a decoy, and once you have him you're to act as an Earth Worshipper and give no indication that you ever heard of Intelligence. You'll have to work that out."

Giles tried to suppress the elation he felt. The Dagdal Even if they did know of Lir Regan, the old man could tell him what to do.

"There'll be someone Watching you," Saunders reminded him, "and if you are interested in Earth I suggest you act very carefully. With us you'll get there. Without us you won't."

Saunders picked up the paperweight again and held it loosely in his hand. "Remember this, too, Chulainn, if you have any notions of sympathy for the Earth Worshipppers. Repairing or building a fleet of ships requires more than a group of empty-headed dreamers. It takes scientists and engineers and any number of specially equipped men. You could hardly lift off a group of men, women and children without them. And we have them. The Earth Worshipppers don't."

"Here!" he tossed the globe at Giles again, "Keep it as a reminder." He bent over a piece of paper and began writing, then handed it to Giles. "Here's your authorization to get the Dagda released to you. His location is on the paper." Saunders leaned back and smiled. "I feel a lot better, Chulainn. I think we're on the track at last."

"And when and if you do find the fleet," Giles said, fingering the paper in his hand, "what do you intend to do? Will you transport everyone from Nifflhel gradually? Evacuate the planet? Is that your idea?"

Saunders' smile deepened into a broad grin, "What do you think?"

Giles looked at him without answering.

Saunders laughed and waving one hand expansively said, "Oh, perhaps everyone would be taken eventually. But after all we would have to create a beginning, as we did here.

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We might need to transport a lot of materials, the fruits of our civilization here."

Giles nodded. He understood quite well. The masters on Earth would be served by the slaves of Niffhel. The picture was crystal clear. A fleet of ships transporting metals, goods and luxuries, mined and fashioned on Niffhel by a swarm of workers who would work out their lives on the dream of one day getting to Earth themselves.

And yet he had been deeply disturbed by Saunders' statement about scientists and engineers. It seemed true; how else could the fleet ever be used?

Giles looked off at a point beyond Saunders' head, visualizing the kind of city Intelligence would build in the valleys and on the hills of Earth—the fragrant, warm green hills. But they were covered with a grey mist like ash and the sky was obscured. Some words that the Dagda had read lingered in his mind . . .

"And it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth."

His eyes came back to rest on Saunders. It was an effort to make himself look at the man as if he, too, were luxuriating in that dream of mastery, as if he, too, shared the same secret corrupt madness.

"I think we understand each other, Chulainn," Saunders said.

But apparently Giles' success was to be qualified.

"Just keep in mind that you're still in the middle of an examination," Saunders smiled. "I hope it goes better for you than the last."

He was still grinning when Giles, holding the globe of Earth in his hand, walked thoughtfully out the door.

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IX

ONCE OUT in the hall Giles' first thought was a prayer that Lir Regan had managed to keep Sigrid there on Earth. But with all his trust in her powers, Giles was afraid. The thought of Bran Crinan, too, disturbed him, and he found it difficult to continue without looking for the man. But he knew that past this corridor there were countless other halls and rooms and even if he did succeed in finding Crinan, what could he do? Certainly no man, not even Crinan, deserved a fate like that. But the task of helping him was impossible and reluctantly Giles gave the idea up. There were more important issues at stake.

He didn't know where to begin. At the thought of the possible choices that confronted him, Giles felt his mind as a labyrinth comparable to the web of corridors under Niffhel. Had any man before him been given so many tastes of different truths with so little certainty about any of them. And to meet Car Saunders as the Superior of Intelligence . . . Giles couldn't help wondering at the meaning of that. There was something that seemed almost planned in back of it. Again something beyond chance, beyond accident. He felt as if a master designer had been at work on a serious and intricately complicated game of strategy and that he was a piece, like a child's marker, moving across the board. At the same time the mysterious understanding that this was more than a game haunted him. The map had been drawn and there were several avenues open to him. But now he would have to move of his own choice, and which was the true road to Earth?

He came to the elevator trying to sort it out. He reached the surface quickly but the door in the wall took some time to open. Giles stood before it waiting, looking without success for some mechanism. Then suddenly, of its own accord, it slid

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back and Giles stepped into the Underground stairwell. He understood it then; the door would not open until the passage was clear of people coming up from the tubes.

He was still holding the globe in his hand. He tucked it away now in his cape as he went up to the street and looked quickly at the paper of authorization; the Dagda was being held at the Branhholm. It was strange that he hadn't noticed him among those standing against the wall. Even at that distance the Dagda's presence would have evoked a response of recognition, Giles thought. But they might have kept him apart from the others. Giles frowned as he realized the old man might have been subjected to extremely strong measures of questioning.

Giles decided that he didn't want to pick him up just yet. It could be the very worst thing; it could be a trick. He wanted a chance to look at the weird series of possibilities to which he'd been exposed. What was the logical thing to do? If he were truly a Watcher his first move would be to pick up the Dagda, of course, but before that wasn't it possible that he would pause at home? Anyone following him would assume that he wished to shower and change his clothes. That would be a reasonable respite, Giles thought, if he were facing a grueling day of attempting to lead Intelligence to Lir Regan.

Under his hood, Giles smiled grimly. He was going to lead his Watcher a long way out of the way before finally reaching the Branhholm. He turned abruptly at the corner and went to the next Underground.

A stream of people were emerging from the shaft-workers about to start their day. Giles threaded his way down through the black caped crowd and got on an empty tube that was returning to the city's residential area. His Watcher, whoever he was, was doing a good job of remaining invisible, Giles thought. As far as he could see he was entirely alone in the tube. He leaned back in the contour and felt a wave of exhaustion flood through him. He hadn't realized he was so tired. He closed his eyes, straining to keep awake while green images of Earth swam before him. He shook his head

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and forced his eyes open; once home he would have to take something to keep awake. But that was no problem. There were enough remedies on Niffhel to keep a man going through almost anything. Pills for pleasure, pain, sleeplessness, shocks, lethargy, energy, diet; if he wished a man could control his entire nervous system and attitudes synthetically all his life and never know how he really was—if he wished that. Giles never had. He managed to keep awake until he reached his exit. The streets were deserted and as he walked back to his hut through the steaming heat of the hazy sky, he tried to catalogue what he had learned. Each fact had after it a question.

Intelligence knew of Earth. But how much did they know and where had they gotten their knowledge? And how many men in Intelligence were aware of Earth's reality?

Giles began to wonder if perhaps Saunders himself was the only one who knew of Earth. It was possible.

Or that other thought that had haunted him earlier—that Saunders might not really be sure of Earth at all. That he might merely suspect and be using Giles as his way of discovering whether or not it were true.

But then how would he have known about Lir Regan? In fact how did Saunders know about her? Or know, as he had said, that she had taken an interest in Giles?

Maybe the idea of the lost fleet of ships was a pretext altogether. Maybe Intelligence already had a way of getting to Earth, had even sent Sigrid there. Maybe they were already occupying Earth!

Giles stopped short, thinking about that. It would explain Sigrid's presence in a different way. It would explain why they had so suddenly Classified the Earth Worshippers. If, as Saunders had said, more intelligent people were taking an interest in the groups, they would have to stop any real search in fear that the Earth Worshippers might really find it.

Giles felt sick. Had he been living in a fool's paradise all this time? Working at his roads, working at the frontiers of

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this miserable world when already men like Saunders were enjoying the air and the wind and the water of Earth.

No, there was something wrong about that. He had smelled the rich damp ground of home. He had felt the clean wind and seen the sky clear and pure, the clouds forming innocent shapes over the hills. He had held Lir Regan's hands as if they were both children. . . . No, he couldn't have stood on Earth so freely had it been defiled with the presence of men like Saunders. He felt sure he would have known, that certainly Lir Regan would have known, had a civilization of Saunders' making been halfway around the globe.

He plodded on toward his hut, bone tired, sick of the ash that blanketed him, sick of the smell of smoke and the taste of grime.

If Saunders' story were a true one, what would they do to him once he had picked up the Dagda? What would they do to Lir Regan if she should come back?

And if the story of the lost fleet was true and Sigrid returned to get to Saunders first—

Giles turned up the walk to his hut pondering the answer to that. Had she discovered the lost fleet? He opened the door and stepped directly into the shower room.

After the jets had dried him, Giles rummaged in his closet until he found the pill to keep him awake. He swallowed it with a dry mouth and then, thinking of the liquid stream on Earth, he angrily ran several full cups of water and drank them all. His ration was gone, but wide awake now, he didn't care. He felt a savage desire to return to that fair green planet alone, without the Dagda, without the others, to return, naked if possible, and stand on the hills of Earth as if he were newborn.

He caught a glance of himself and his expression startled him. His face was pale; the faint freckles stood out starkly and his red blonde hair, clean from the shower, leaped around his face like flame. He ran a comb through it quickly, trying to subdue the violence in his eyes. This was not how a man should look, wild and slightly hysterical; he was not fit for Earth in this state. He looked almost as Sigrid had

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looked when she faced Lir Regan. He would have to collect himself Giles thought, turning away from the mirror. Regardless of events and questions he would have to be calmer before he went for the Dagda.

He entered his bedroom.

It was dirty. His bare feet made patterns on the floor. He looked up at his bed with a sharp intake of breath, trying to keep his face expressionless. She hadn't bothered to remove her cape. She had propped up the pillows and lay against them, the black cloak spreading grotesque wings across the cover. And under the mass of streaming gold hair, her eyes, piercing into his, were stabs of suspicion and hate.

She smiled thinly and the contradiction was so violent that Giles couldn't play the usual game of response.

"Welcome home, Giles," Sigrid said.

He stared at her quietly, sensing the hostility that moved between them. But he mustn't let his emotions show; Giles forced himself to smile, forced himself to hold back the question that rolled like thunder in his head. Had she been to Saunders yet? Did he know?

Instead he heard himself saying softly, "Sigrid," and then he walked towards the bed as he had done so many times before.

He thought what an incredible memory the body has of its own past movements. The imitation was faultless, and Giles felt that in this capacity to imitate himself lay some enormous source of power. Perhaps he could carry it off . . . he must retrace himself again to where he had last left Sigrid.

Watching him, her eyes widened in surprise and some of her hostility vanished. "Giles . . . I thought—"

"That I had run off without you?" His smile deepened. "But you remember, I had a man to pursue. I thought you would follow."

"But I did," she was bewildered, "I followed with the others until we all lost you. And then later, after we discovered the Branxholm, I was sure you had chased him there, but I couldn't find you."

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"Were you at the Branhholm when the Worshippers were discovered?" Giles asked, his smile fading.

Sigrid frowned, "Of course. Weren't you?"

"Yes, but lower down," Giles answered quickly. "I thought I had him, and I kept looking. There's a real labyrinth of tunnels, you know. As a matter of fact, I got lost." He sat down on the bed and began softly stroking her hair. "Where were you?"

Sigrid looked at him with relief, "Oh, then that's it . . . I was with the guards upstairs, at least for awhile." She closed her eyes and a faint line appeared again on her forehead. She turned her eyes away from Giles and looked unseeingly at the gray walls, "But then I think I must have been lost myself. I can't quite remember. Please don't do that, Giles." She moved his hand away from her hair and with a quick movement sat straight up in the bed, frowning as she tried to explain.

"They were having a service down below where we found them," she said carefully. "That old man was leading them. Didn't you see that?" She looked at him quickly but Giles shook his head. Sigrid considered that for a moment. "Then there must be another way down; I don't understand."

Giles watched her tensely, but she seemed to be, for the first time he could remember, on the defensive. She seemed hesitant and cautious.

"They were singing something—I don't know the words—and they had that green globe hanging in back of the leader." Sigrid looked down and clasped her hands tightly together. Then she looked up and appealed to him again, "You must have heard it, Giles."

"No, I didn't," he said flatly.

"Well, the rest of us did and it was such a shock at first that we just watched for awhile." She shrugged, "After all, they were all there. It was a mistake to look for them in the city. We'd found the main group and there was plenty of time. No way for them to escape." Her eyebrows lifted and she gave a short laugh.

But Giles could sense, under that brittle smile, an under-

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current of doubt. He frowned at a sudden, surprising thought. Could Sigrid, of all people, have been affected by the meeting, and by the light of Earth?

She destroyed that idea immediately. "Such a childish religion," she said contemptuously, "Silly people, idiotic ideas. I can't imagine why . . ." Her voice trailed off and then she asked Giles rather nervously, "Do you think it's possible they use some form of mass hypnosis, by mechanical means for instance?"

"I have no idea," Giles quickened at her words. Was it possible—

"That must be it, because it's the only thing that can explain—Well, I think I can tell you. I had an odd notion that I saw Earth!"

Giles laughed, a little unsteadily.

"No, it's true," Sigrid said seriously. "They have some way of projecting this imaginary picture. Terribly dangerous. I was sure I was standing on Earth for a moment." Her voice was distant. "The colors, the image of the place, if such a planet existed. . . ."

But Giles no longer heard what she was saying. His heart was pounding so madly he was sure Sigrid must notice. She had given him his answer; she thought she had dreamed it! Could Lir Regan have been responsible? Had she hypnotized her? Unless—

He got up from the bed and paced across the room, keeping his face averted. Unless she was lying.

Suddenly Giles remembered the weapon she had held in her hand as she looked at Lir Regan. He whirled around. Sigrid lay on the bed smiling, and then, meeting his eyes, she got up quickly amid a shower of soot from the cape. The covers were empty. There was no weapon there. It could be concealed in her cape. Giles crossed the room swiftly and took her in his arms, heedless of the dirt. Holding her close he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that she was concealing nothing. She was lying then. She had left it on Earth. She might have killed Lir Regan. He drew back, ignoring the suspicion that began again in her eyes.

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Sigrid pulled the cape about her closer and smiled at him coolly. "We'll have to get back to the Branhholm, Giles. I want you with me for the Judgements. Crinan is waiting for us and once we arrive they can start."

It was like a sharp blow. Inwardly Giles reeled with the impact. Judgments for the Earth Worshippers—she couldn't mean it!

"We've never used Judgments for any group of people," Giles said unsteadily, trying to conceal the terror the word evoked in him. "Only for individuals who threaten security and that only centuries ago."

"Of course," Sigrid smiled, "but what do you call this if not individuals who threaten security? How silly, Giles. Naturally they're all traitors."

"They've made no disturbance," Giles said doggedly.

"Of course they have," her eyes narrowed. "Everyone has been disturbed."

"They've not harmed anyone," Giles insisted, "And that is the only basis of law for invoking the use of Judgments."

"They have harmed me," Sigrid replied sharply, "Showing me a picture of something that doesn't exist, upsetting my natural process of discrimination. It's like an unlawful use of narcotics. I did not request a picture of Earth; I did not ask for a dream!"

There was something convincing about that statement, Giles thought. Maybe she had been telling the truth. And she had mentioned Crinan—Crinan waiting—perhaps he could find out.

"Crinan isn't waiting any longer," Giles said flatly. "He was sick, very sick. I took him to Saunders."

"You did what?" Sigrid's mouth dropped. The information seemed to have caught her off guard.

"Took him to Saunders, or rather, he took me. Saunders had some instructions." He watched Sigrid intently.

She looked around rather nervously and then said in a low voice, "So you've met Saunders." Giles judged that for some reason she didn't like the idea.

"Yes," Giles replied, "Didn't he tell you?"

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"I haven't seen him since . . ." she broke off suddenly and Giles saw that it was true. Her attitude gave it away. She hadn't seen Saunders. Perhaps after her experience she was afraid to face him.

But she had seen Earth. She had found a globe. And whether she thought she had dreamed it or not, how long would it be before she decided to speak to Saunders about it? He would have to keep Sigrid with him, Giles saw. She would have to be at his side every minute until he knew what to do.

He was terrified at her disclosure of the Judgments. For the Earth Worshippers it could mean only one thing. They would be mercilessly exterminated, as some heretical groups had been centuries ago. To Giles' knowledge, the law of Judgments had been a dead anachronism, something frightening that one read about in history, some unbelievable error in the beginnings of man's attempt to create a stable society. It didn't seem possible that such brutality could be unleashed now in the sophisticated order of the day. He wanted to believe that Sigrid was wrong, that she had made a terrible mistake. But her attitude of unconcern, her complete acceptance of the old law told him more than anything else could have done.

And Giles found himself wondering whether unknown to him and to the rest of Niffhel, the law had been quietly invoked before. Who knew what secret courts might have met? Who knew what actually happened to those who were Classified Contrary? One heard about it from time to time, but then in the pursuit of one's own activities it was swiftly forgotten.

The Hierarchy of Niffhel—the governing body. Was it truly a group of fine men loyally leading their citizens, or was the government merely a façade, taking their orders from Intelligence? For the first time Giles wished that he had paid more attention to those relatives of his who had been active in the government. He wished he had dug more deeply into the archives that contained the history of the

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families of Niffhel. He wished he had asked his parents about it before they died.

His grandmother, he saw her again standing bareheaded before her hut, raising her hands to the sky—she had known, Giles was sure. She had known, and if only he had listened. He caught again the echo of her voice saying, "If we were standing on Earth, Giles. . . ."

She had said it almost as if it were possible. Giles felt a rush of tenderness toward the memory of that bent, gray-haired figure who had never realized her dream. She had been, without knowing it, another Earth Worshipper, another visionary.

With startling quickness, as though a veil had been suddenly lifted, Giles began to see. How could he have been so blind! Until now, he realized, he himself had thought of the Earth Worshipers as visionary dreamers, fanatics, even fools. His own fantastic journey to Earth had appeared dreamlike, and worse, something only for him and Lir Regan. His attitude had been exclusive. He felt a sick wave of remorse as he suddenly understood that his attitude toward those people standing against the wall in the Branxholm hadn't been real. He had been touched only by ideas, not by the total horrible reality of flesh and blood facing perverted minds. For Judgments, and Intelligence, and yes, Giles felt, all of Niffhel was perverted, in a way he was just beginning to understand.

Sigrid was staring at him. Giles looked deep into her eyes and saw there the same blank acceptance, the same living death he had seen during the soot-filled night of the round up.

Not dreamers, no! The Earth Worshipers were the only real people in Niffhel, he thought. Whether or not they knew the reality of their dream, regardless of whether they regarded Earth as a myth or some unobtainable religion, some ancient memory, some part of them had instinctively and rightly rejected the reality of the world they lived in. Something had understood the evil of Niffhel and reached out for a higher good.

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They were not dreamers and fools. They were intuitively wise people who had touched upon the great question of where man did belong.

Was it to this black planet, this dark night of Niffhel, for weren't the days and the nights here one, or did man belong to a fresher, a cleaner reality?

How brave they were, Giles thought, to keep that dream. They stood there at the Branxholm, these people he didn't know, who were more truly his relations than he could have dared hope, they stood there in a fearful waiting, among them the Dagda. Giles had had enough of words and thoughts now. He could forgive himself much for his ignorance and his unanswered questions, but now, regardless of those answers, he must act. And he must act, Giles thought, not only for himself and for Lir Regan who might well be dead. Others were waiting.

He put on his cloak, and with a new and awful repugnance, as though he were touching something unclean, he took Sigrid's arm and led her out of the hut.

X

THEY HAD thrown a cordon of armed Watchers around the Branxholm. The black-hooded figures stood at rigid intervals like an army of statues, the only movement being the lift and fall of their capes in the gusts of wind and soot. The sky was so dark that it looked deceptively like night.

They had come in the Gondola. Now, as he helped Sigrid out to the platform, Giles looked up anxiously. The ceiling of atmosphere was a dirty dark brown. Far away along the

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horizon was an enormous cloud of black, stretching as far as he could see. Giles paused for a moment. Although he had seen many soot storms on Nifflhel, there was something ominous about that cloud of black that looked so oddly still now, a strange lump of dust quiet on the horizon. But distances here were not what they seemed. As the cloud advanced slowly across the flats it would gather more ash from the ground, getting larger and larger, until by the time it reached the city all Nifflhel would be engulfed.

Sigrid, following his glance, shivered slightly, "It looks like a bad one."

"Yes, very heavy," Giles turned to the nearest guard. "How long before the storm is due?"

Under the hood and visor, the Watcher's voice was muffled, "They say several hours, but it's not certain."

"It's never certain," Giles agreed. He took Sigrid's arm roughly and led her to the entrance doors.

All the way on the gondola he had been wondering how to extract some real information from her. He was tired of surmises and wild guesses. He wanted something concrete. His attitude had aroused a curious combination of respect and resentment in Sigrid. He had led her faster than usual, pulling her along relentlessly. But she had made no motion of pulling away. She looked at him now with blazing eyes, but eyes that told him she would follow him . . . Out of curiosity? Out of the memory of that old physical devotion? Or because of secret orders?

The smile he gave her was like steel. He turned on his heel and began walking across the huge room. In back he heard her following.

Giles had to force his emotions down, pushing them away with the same effort he would use at hard labor. He was glad of the size of the room. In that long walk he had time to tense his muscles and gather himself against the impressions he received from the line of people against the wall.

They were still standing. How many hours had it been? The children, their eyes pitifully large, leaned against the wall, their arms outstretched on either side, their legs trembling.

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Some of them had crumpled on the floor. The adults, many who stood with closed eyes, were out from the wall a few feet, standing painfully with no support.

Giles tried to close his mind to another question. Why had they brought their children here? Why had they acted with this stupid defiance, exposing the children to such danger on the very night of the Classification? The very night . . . was it such a little time ago? An eternity has passed.

One of the children, a little boy about ten, saw Giles approach and opened his mouth in a soundless scream of terror, shrinking back against the wall.

Sigrid laughed.

Giles felt the fine nerves at the back of his neck and his head tighten in a blinding vise, as though, through that extreme tension, nature had given him a means of controlling his emotions.

He approached a guard standing in the center who wore a special marking on his cape. He seemed to be in charge.

"Let them sit down," Giles ordered casually.

The guard whipped about in surprise and glared at him. Giles smiled and ignoring his reaction asked just as casually, "Your name?"

"Duncan," the man ventured hesitantly.

Giles eyed him, waiting. The guard faltered for a moment and then, as Giles' face hardened, he abruptly barked out the order.

The Earth Worshipers blinked with disbelief, and then as the order was repeated, began to slowly let themselves down, one by one.

Giles would not watch. Ignoring the pathetic scene, he whipped out the piece of papers Saunders had given him and thrust it into Duncan's hands. The guard looked at him sharply, and then with a respectful nod, beckoned him to follow.

They had put the Dagda into a small, hollowed out room on a lower level. There was one Watcher standing outside the jagged entrance. As his eyes became accustomed to the dim

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light, Giles saw that the Dagda was standing quite still in the center of the room, his head upright, his eyes closed.

"Release him in this man's custody," Duncan gave the authorization to the guard. "You're relieved now."

The guard yawned appreciatively and waved toward the Dagda, "Get him to move if you can. I had orders to let this man sit down, but he's been standing like that all day. Refused every bit of water or food. I'm glad to have somebody else try." He yawned again and with a doubtful shrug at Giles, walked off.

Duncan looked inside the room at the Dagda and stated, "You're released in the custody of Giles Chulainn."

There was no response. Duncan frowned and tried again, louder. "You may come out now!" The Dagda didn't move, didn't open his eyes.

"He couldn't be unconscious?" Sigrid whispered.

"No," Giles said slowly, "I don't think so." He looked at the old man carefully. "If you will both move away for a moment I think I can handle it."

Sigrid nodded at the guard and they moved off down the corridor. Giles was not concerned; he knew she wouldn't go far. He stooped to enter the low archway and walked up to the Dagda. Softly he said first what he felt the old man wanted to hear.

"I gave orders upstairs that the other be allowed to sit. They're comfortable now."

With his eyes still closed the Dagda slowly nodded and Giles saw the stiff posture of his body relax a little.

"I'll have to tell you the rest quickly; the guards are just down the hall. I have been to Earth." It was the first time Giles had said the words aloud to anyone. As he heard himself, he felt at last the shock of that affirmation. The Dagda didn't move or respond in any way. Drawing a deep breath, Giles continued.

"But I'm afraid I have bad news. Lir Regan was there and as we were talking one of the Watchers appeared. A girl named Sigrid whom I know." He paused, realizing that the explanation might be difficult. Well, there wasn't time now.

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"She was carrying a weapon and Lir Regan told me to run back to the globe. I did. I'm afraid she might have harmed your niece. I don't know."

Giles heard the footsteps of Sigrid and Duncan returning down the corridor. Hurriedly he whispered the rest, "She says that she dreamed her journey to Earth. But she may be lying. She may have discovered the lost fleet. The head of Intelligence knows of Earth, or says he does, and I know him. He's a vicious, utterly unprincipled man. He gave orders to use Judgments against your people. He wants you released in my custody because he wants to find Lir Regan." There wasn't time for more. He could feel Sigrid and Duncan standing just outside the arch.

Still the Dagda didn't open his eyes. He said, in a voice so low that Giles had to strain to hear, "There are two hundred of us here."

"No, not so many," Giles said gently, "Only about fifty."

"There are two hundred," the Dagda repeated. "Not only where you saw them, but others hidden below."

Giles felt a wild surge of elation, "Then they didn't find all of you!"

"But almost all the children are among the fifty upstairs," the old man's words came with infinite slowness. "And I want you to do something more now. We must have a meeting up above. You must be there."

"I can't do that," Giles whispered urgently, "I can take you with me but that's all the authority I have. I got away with the other order by pure luck."

"You will have to do more," the Dagda said. "I will not move until a meeting is called." His eyes remained closed and his breath came so slowly that at any moment Giles thought it might stop altogether.

Frantically he whispered, "I can't," and Sigrid came in beside him. The Dagda didn't move. Giles drew Sigrid out of the room and beckoned to Duncan. Then he walked up the corridor with both of them.

"You have my authorization to take the Dagda," he reminded the guard.

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Duncan cast an uneasy glance back at the man standing in the small room and wordlessly nodded.

Giles looked at Sigrid, "And you are here to see that I make as few mistakes as possible." He ignored her quick protest and continued, "The greatest mistake at the moment would be in not following the order I'm about to give you. That man in there holds the security of Niffhel in his hands, and there is only one way I'm going to be able to give the Superior the information he wants. You have plenty of guards here and I can assure you there won't be any trouble. We are going to let the Earth Worshippers have another meeting—now!"

Duncan opened his mouth to protest but Sigrid was faster. "What do you think you're doing, Giles? Saunders warned me you might do something like this." Startled at her own disclosure, she stopped.

So, it was out, Giles thought. She was Watching him for Saunders. She must know quite well she had been to Earth. Maybe, if she had harmed Lir Regan in any way, she might be afraid to tell Saunders. Perhaps that was why she hadn't seen him yet. But if Lir Regan were safe they would feel they still needed Giles as a contact. They must realize by this time that he was playing a double game. Whatever the answer there was only one thing to do. He must try to get the Dagda what he wanted, as long as he could. The old man was not a fool. There must be something in back of his demand.

"We are after a girl," Giles began, "and she may be hidden here. You may be sure that if there is a meeting and she is in the vicinity, she will appear regardless of our presence." Now, he wondered, what would Sigrid say?

Surprisingly she agreed, "That's true. These people are all crazy and that girl especially would never think of the consequences. I'm sorry, Giles. It's a good idea."

Giles' heart leaped with hope; did this mean that Lir Regan was safe?

"Do you think the Dagda will lead them?" Sigrid asked. "I think it's the only way to move him out of that room."

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Sigrid nodded and turned to Duncan, "Have your men ready for questioning in case she appears. It shouldn't take too long. And make whatever arrangements are needed upstairs for the meeting. It doesn't matter, green lights, anything. Give them what they want. We'll be up presently.

Duncan started to go but she detained him, "And do be ready for the other thing. Possibly the Judgments will have to be immediate. Do you understand?"

Duncan nodded and left and Giles wondered if Sigrid was including him in that last order.

"I told Saunders about your contact with that girl," Sigrid said.

Giles waited stolidly. Was she going to tell him now about seeing him on Earth?

"I know we're taking a long chance, Giles," she went on, "But the way the girl spoke to you on the street that night made me think she might tell you something, or at least be responsive to you. You're one of the few people on Niffhel who has ever seen her, outside of the Earth Worshipers."

Giles frowned. It wasn't possible, was it, that he had convinced her he was working for Intelligence? Did Sigrid really accept him as a Watcher?

"We discovered who she was from one of the Earth Worshipers who wasn't able to keep the information," Sigrid smiled at him.

Giles managed to keep his expression steady. "I think I'd better get the Dagda," he said, and turning away, he stooped into the room.

The Dagda was still standing in that erect posture but he seemed to have grown several inches. His eyes were wide open, blazing, Giles felt, with a secret dream. What would he do with his meeting? Was it to be a last blessing of those who were shortly to come under the Judgments? Would he inspire them to violence? He had said there were many others hidden below. If only he could ask, Giles thought, but Sigrid was waiting just outside the door.

"Come," the Dagda said, smiling at him, "I think they are waiting for us." He bent under the arch and began walk-

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ing toward the stairs, a little as if he were monarch of this underground kingdom. Sigrid, after raising her eyebrows at Giles, fell into a mock step behind.

Giles wondered if she had any idea of how far she would be led; he didn't know himself. But there was something in the physical movement of following that old, stately man that left him free for a moment from his terrible questions and his fear.

XI

“Between us and the heavy temptations
Between us and the shame of the world
Between us and the death of captivity . . .”

The children sat cross legged in front of their elders, looking up with round eyes at the Dagda as he led the chant. Behind them the voices of their parents and all the Earth Worshipers rose and fell in rhythmic waves.

The green lights the Watchers had restored around the walls cast flickering shadows on the group of people sitting on the floor. Around them the black capes of the Watchers circled like a border of death.

The words of the song were heavy. The Dagda looked down at the children, and as if wishing to release them from the mysterious fear that echoed in their eyes, he smiled and changed to another, lighter invocation.

“From every brownee and banshee . . .”

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The children clapped their hands, laughing, and eagerly joined in.

“From every nymph and water wraith
From every fairy mouse and grass mouse . . .”

It seemed to be their special song. Giles looked wonderingly at their uplifted faces, listened to the high, light childish voices that rose above the rest. He tried to fit the words to the life they had known—a world of black cinders, blacker soot. Could they know the meaning of grass, the magic of water? What associations could the words possibly have for them who had been denied from birth their natural home? Wouldn't they sing as eagerly about the dust of Nifhel?

“From every troll among the hills . . .
Oh! Save me till the end of my day.
Oh! Save me till the end of my day.”

And silently, Giles echoed the prayer . . . save them till the end of their day.

Beside him Sigrid was watching with amusement. They stood at the end of the circle of guards, nearest the Dagda. Giles still couldn't determine what the man intended to do. So far it had been a meeting like any other but confined to chants. The Dagda had not spoken of Earth. But he didn't need to. Earth was reflected in the eyes of each person sitting along the floor. And Sigrid, too, Giles knew, was thinking of Earth. He wondered how she visualized it, how she visualized herself there. He wondered why she was amused; because they were waiting for nothing? Because at the end of this meeting she instead of the Dagda would be giving directions?

Giles looked at her out of the corner of his eye. How did she intend to execute the Judgments? But he didn't want to think about that. If only he could quietly disappear from that circle of guards and look for the others who were hidden below . . . But the Dagda had made an almost imperceptible

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motion to Giles, at the beginning of the meeting, that he was to remain there. Whatever must happen now was in the Dagda's hands.

"An Tri numh
A chumhnadh
A chumhnadh . . ."

It was the same strange chant he had heard so long ago, at least it seemed so long ago. Those strange words. The Dagda was saying them alone. His voice was deep and steady and clear, reaching to the farthest recess of the huge hall.

As if the words frightened her, Sigrid stiffened and grabbed on to Giles' arm.

"The sacred three
To save
To surround . . ."

Giles started. The words had changed and the voice was changing. In back of the Dagda another, clearer sound came ringing through the room, a feminine voice. Slowly the Dagda's voice faded away and there was only that bell like tone . . .

"The hearth
The house
The household . . ."

Standing beside the Dagda, as if she had appeared out of mist, came Lir Regan, her hands stretched out before her.

"This eve, this night, O. This eve!"

Sigrid gave a signal to the Watchers. Giles threw her arm away and dashed for Lir Regan. The Dagda was standing close beside her. She put out a hand and drew

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Giles close, away from the guards who were right beside him. The voices of the Earth Worshippers were screams in the air. There was sudden bedlam as the ash from the floor was raised in a blinding flurry. . . . Everyone had risen. . . . Giles felt it coming down over his head, into his eyes. He rubbed his knuckles quickly and opened his eyes . . .

And looked at Lir Regan.

They were standing on a grassy rising by the banks of a small stream.

Everywhere the trees rose in an infinite variety, rising and arching in graceful profusion. Low in the Western sky the sun hung red, a flaming disc streaking the clouds with pink and orange and gold. A light mist was settling along the undergrowth, curling around the grass and lifting in wispy tendrils about the trunks of the trees. Somewhere in the distance there was an insistent rushing, a rise and fall, a gentle thunder crashing and fading away.

Lir Regan was still holding Giles' hand. Beside her the Dagda had his arm linked through hers. Now she released them both and standing back, looked at Giles with an odd, searching expression.

Suddenly he began to tremble. The Hall at the Branhholm, the ash, the circle of armed guards, that cloud of soot, and now—

Fearfully he stared at Lir Regan, unable to control the panic that swept through him. His mind was tumbling in a series of wild gyrations and suddenly, irrationally, he wished to be away, to be back—

"Don't!" Lir Regan quickly put out her hand to steady him. Holding his arm firmly she drew him down to the grass and sat down beside him. "I'm sorry, Giles," her voice was sympathetic, but light and clear. It rang through the glade like a shower of soft bells.

The natural sound of it helped him. He continued to look at her while slowly, gradually, his body stopped shaking and his heart resumed its normal beat. The Dagda, watching the scene guardedly, smiled and sat down beside them .

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"There was no other way this time, Giles," Lir Regan said, her green eyes reflecting the light of the leaves.

Giles watched those eyes steadily and asked, "Was it you, then?"

"Yes, this time it was."

"And you . . ." he stopped. He had no reference point. There were no words on Nifhel for what he wished to ask.

"I am only myself," Lir Regan softly answered his unspoken question. "I am exactly what you know of me—the Dagda's niece. And beyond that I am the Bard, yes."

"What you really wish to know is something different, Giles," the Dagda broke in, "but Lir Regan did bring us here this time, it's true."

"I couldn't stay," Lir Regan said, "They would have caught me this time and there is a limit."

"The others!" Giles cried suddenly, springing to his feet.

"Yes, you must go back. The time has come. That's why I brought you here, to tell you how, to show you the way." Lir Regan, too, jumped to her feet and began speaking hurriedly. "There isn't too much time left, Giles, and you will have to do it. My uncle and I can't go back now."

"They've invoked Judgments for our people, Lir Regan," The Dagda said.

She turned and looked at him with terror in her eyes. It was the first time Giles had ever seen her show fear.

"Then you must go now, Giles!" she cried.

"And all the children are in the main hall with those who were caught," the Dagda told her.

She stared at him for an instant in wordless horror and then turned to Giles. "The children," she said helplessly. "Then is there time?"

"Perhaps . . . if he goes now," the Dagda urged.

"But how?" Giles asked, "How can I return?"

Lir Regan turned to her uncle and he shook his head. There was still a question in her eyes as she looked at Giles, but making a sudden decision, she cried, "There isn't time to explain now. Just follow me!" and she began to run down the slope.

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He caught up with her quickly and followed as she led him in a twisting path through the maze of trees, down to the stream and along its curving edge. The sun was sinking lower as they ran, bathing the earth in a red gold twilight. Running through that golden mist with the droplets of water on the rocks reflecting like jewels, Giles felt that they were running into the heart of the sun . . .

"Follow me!" Lir Regan called again, and Giles, the sun in his eyes, in his mouth, in his hair, lighting him like a streak of gold, ran on.

XII

NOT MUCH time had elapsed, Giles saw. The main hall was still foggy from that sudden shower of ash, the green globes still flickered palely behind the specks of soot that hung stubbornly in the air. A cloud of dirt was digging its way in under the heavy doors and through the cracks of the old building. Outside, Giles could hear gusts of wind buffeting the walls. The dirt storm had reached the Branxholm.

The Earth Worshippers were lined up against the wall again and now all the guards were inside the building. They stood with their weapons pointed at each man, woman and child. The children were whimpering in fear. But at least the Judgments had not begun.

From the head of the stairs Giles caught a glimpse of Sigrid's heavy blonde hair in a far corner. She was talking animatedly with a man. Giles squinted through the haze . . . it looked like Saunders. Slowly he began to edge his way toward the line of captive people, trying to recognize the man

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Arthur whom Lir Regan had told him to find. Brown hair, tall and thin, a narrow, high bridged nose. He might be standing near his children, two boys about five and six.

There were dozens of guards standing about in loose clusters who were not watching the Earth Worshippers. Giles found that in the dense fog of soot he could move through them freely; they took no notice of him. Carefully he made his way along the line of people. Running his eyes swiftly down the row, Giles found him. It was the same man who had assisted the Dagda at that first meeting. He was at the far end, near Giles, and away from Sigrid. Giles moved up in back of the Watcher who was standing in front of the man. He waited for what seemed an eternity before he caught Arthur's eye. Then quickly, hoping that he wasn't seen, Giles made the gesture with his hands that Lir Regan had taught him. Arthur, his eyes fast on Giles, raised his head slightly and softly cleared his throat. Giles smiled at him quickly and turned down the line of guards.

He walked along their backs until he came to Sigrid. Her back was towards him and Saunders saw him first, making an exclamation of surprise. Sigrid whirled around and Giles, who had been rehearsing this moment, said an involuntary prayer. Before she had a chance to speak, Giles grabbed her arm in a viselike grip and pulling her closer to Saunders said in a low voice, between his teeth, "What did you do with them?"

Sigrid gasped in pain and surprise. Saunders looked startled.

His hand tightening on her arm, Giles shook her again. "Tell us where they are!"

"Just a minute, Chulainn," Saunders frowned, but Giles didn't give him a chance.

"She's got the Dagda and his niece, Saunders, and I want to know what she's done with them."

"What you've done with them, you mean," Sigrid tried to wrench herself away from Giles. "Call a guard!"

"Wait!" Saunders' eyes were icy. "Let Sigrid, go, Chulainn, and explain yourself. I understood this another way."

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"He ran for the girl and got them both away," Sigrid panted, rubbing her arm where Giles had let her go.

"And you were right behind me," Giles accused, "I ran to get the girl and the next thing I knew you were all gone. I've been hunting for you and them ever since. I don't know what game you think you're playing, Sigrid, but I want that girl."

Saunders watched the scene intently, his glance moving from Sigrid's outraged eyes to Giles' cold fury.

A sudden gust of wind rocked the old building and a cloud of ash forced its way in under the doors. His eyes smarting, Giles nevertheless kept them fastened on Sigrid. Saunders rubbed his hand across his mouth and kept watching them both. If Giles had guessed Saunders correctly, the suspicion he was throwing on Sigrid would be enough.

Choking on the dirt, Sigrid began to cough, and unable to stop she looked up at Saunders in a panic. Outside the wind began to pound upon the building in angry, savage blows, and suddenly, with no warning, the huge entrance doors burst open violently. With a wild explosion the storm raged into the Branxholm. Sigrid swayed and was thrown to one side in the blinding rush of soot. Almost knocked off his feet himself, Giles managed to retain his balance and shout, "Watch her, Saunders!"

He saw Saunders reach out and stumble after her before the world became a black, blinding nightmare of flying soot and ash.

Giles felt like shouting with elation. His chance had come; if only the man Arthur had kept his head, if only they were still there, keeping their place against the storm.

It was a wild melee of bodies and shouts and sudden cries. The Watchers tangled in their flapping capes, falling against each other, blown down and twisted in the savage wind. Through the dark, blinding soot, Giles doggedly felt his way, carefully, stopping when he had to wipe his eyes. Determinedly he inched his way; he didn't see Arthur until he was upon him, at the end of the line. They looked at

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each other, barely able to see through the flying soot, and then the man whispered softly, "We are all together."

Dimly Giles perceived his hand holding on to his child, and the little boy holding on to his brother, steadily, patiently.

Of all those present in this nightmare of ash, the Earth Worshippers were the only ones who had kept their place. But how long did they have until this blessing of blindness subsided? There were fifty to lead down below, to find their way in the dark, down the long, tortuous tunnels.

Echoing Lir Regan's words, Giles said hopefully, "Follow me," and taking Arthur's hand, he began to lead the way.

Under cover of the darkness and the storm, while behind them the Watchers floundered in a rudderless panic, the long line of people, hand in hand and single file, followed Giles down the stairs. Inch by inch they made their way until they reached the next level below. Still they were not safe. In fact here there was more danger than above, for now they could see slightly.

"Quickly," Giles called back over his shoulder, and could hear the whispers following down the line. He walked swiftly past the room where the Dagda had been held, then down the corridor that led to the tunnel and the cave room. But here he took another turn, down another long corridor, and as soon as all the people were safely around the bend he exchanged places with the man Arthur who was in back of him. "You'll have to take us from here," he whispered, "to the others."

Arthur nodded and placed his child's hand in Giles'. The line had stopped for an instant. Now they stood, listening. They could faintly hear the sound of the storm up above; could they hear if they were followed yet? Quickly, Arthur began to walk. He stopped at a part of the corridor where the rock jutted out abruptly in a sharp wedge. Then, putting his ear close to the rock, he knocked upon it.

One of the children started to cry. Giles put his fingers to his lips and the mother hushed it. Arthur knocked again and then slowly, painfully slowly, the rock began to move aside.

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Giles stood by the opening, hurrying the people through. Back of them down the corridor, he could hear faint voices. "Hurry, hurry!" he urged. It seemed to take years before the last man entered and Giles himself went through.

They waited another eternity and then slowly, finally, the heavy rock closed behind them.

The group huddled there, mothers with their arms around the children, holding them close, hands over mouths, while outside the unmistakable sound of their pursuer's feet went by. And still they waited, not daring to breathe, until at last they heard the return of the footsteps outside and the last echo returning down the hall.

Giles looked at the man Arthur who was standing against the rock door, keeping his hand to his lips as a sign to the children. "They may have left someone outside," he whispered, "so be very quiet. Now, quickly, follow me and we will go to the others."

Only the one man who had let them in was in this part of the caves. It was a fairly large room, almost circular, and on one side there was another narrow, slanting corridor, leading down deeper into the rocks of Niflhel. Giles breathed freely at last. It couldn't be far now. He took up the end of the line, after the children who were obediently tiptoeing after Arthur. As they walked, they left a trail of black behind them. The soot from the storm rolled like grain from their clothes. Giles stopped to pick up a child who was stumbling, too tired to walk. They must be exhausted, he thought, noticing the line of weary backs. The little girl gratefully clung to him, and putting her arms around his neck, fell fast asleep. Giles smiled down at her, wondering what kind of an awakening she would have. If Lir Regan was right—

But he didn't dare hope for that. It would be too much of a miracle. He couldn't yet believe it.

Now they came, a few hundred yards down, to the well hidden caverns where over a hundred and fifty of the Earth Worshippers had been hidden. Quietly, wearily, the group sank down to rest while the others rushed to make them comfortable with pillows and blankets and food.

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Giles looked around in amazement. He had been prepared for another large cavern like the one on the first level, but this was more like a small city. His eyes followed the huge central room to a honeycomb of smaller rooms leading off it, with equipment for cooking and bathing, dormitories for sleeping. Arthur came to sit beside him after settling his children down to rest. He smiled at Giles' open surprise.

"Some of us have lived down here for years," he said. "Those that the government particularly wanted to Classify."

"So I was right," Giles murmured, more to himself than to Arthur.

"They never tried to use mass Judgments before," Arthur said, "but individually they have tried to get rid of a number of people. Most of them have quietly disappeared—down here. Of course we had to have some warning, but we usually did."

"Lir Regan didn't have time to explain everything," Giles said, "So it is the Hierarchy that's at fault."

"No, not entirely. Some of the Hierarchy are excellent men, but others work closely with Intelligence, and take their orders from the Superior."

"And Saunders wanted to get rid of . . ."

"Those whom he felt knew too much," Arthur confirmed what Giles was already thinking. "You see, Saunders—we know of him—and a few others in Intelligence suspect the existence of Earth. And many of our people don't realize that their dream is a reality. In fact most of them think of Earth as their religion, as something they want to be free to dream of and worship. I've worked with the Dagda for years and we've tried to prepare a few, only a few, for the reality."

Giles nodded, looking over the many faces, each so very different. "Yes, you'd have to be careful. And how many have actually been to Earth?"

There was no answer.

Surprised, Giles looked at the man beside him. He was staring at Giles with a strange expression in his intelligent eyes; what was it? Startled, incredulous, yearning, unbelieving, wary, all at once. Giles almost laughed until he saw,

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behind all those contradictions, a hunger so naked and deep that he suddenly felt he knew what real starvation was.

"How many, Arthur?" he repeated gently.

Unexpectedly the man's eyes filled with tears. "You don't mean that you . . . ?" The question was left unfinished but Giles nodded while Arthur unashamedly brushed at his eyes, staring at Giles as if he were seeing something almost un-human.

Giles felt himself shrink under that scrutiny. Mutely, wondering why he felt so suddenly ashamed, he nodded again. He didn't have to repeat his question. But why had he been the only one? The question bothered him terribly until he remembered what Lir Regan had said: it had to be someone who was opposed to the idea. Someone who didn't believe in Earth. But he still didn't understand why, and he still couldn't shake off his feeling of shame. He looked at the people before him who had spent their lives worshipping a dream, and couldn't reconcile the irony of having been the only one of them all to see Earth.

Nervously, impatiently, he got to his feet. Lir Regan had said there wasn't much time. He suddenly cared about nothing but getting these people to their goal, the goal that most of them didn't know existed. He didn't care what happened to him, although he would like to see the children . . .

"Have they rested enough?" he asked Arthur, "I think we must be on our way."

Still with that odd look on his face, Arthur stood up beside him. "On our way?" he repeated, his voice numb.

Hesitantly, Giles cleared his throat. With this man Arthur he felt his own position as an embarrassment. "In the Dagda's absence you are the leader," he said, "and Lir Regan asked me to show you this. She said you would understand."

Giles reached into an inner pocket where he had kept concealed the tiny thing she had given him. He put it on the palm of his hand and held it out to Arthur.

The man began to reach for it, and then realizing what it was, he pulled his hand back as if he had been stung. He

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stood very quietly without touching it and looked at it for a long time. Finally Arthur nodded and with a look of such burning hope in his eyes that it frightened Giles, said softly, "Please lead us on our way."

Giles closed his hand and put the blade of grass back in his inner pocket.

XIII

THE DAGDA and his niece were waiting for them. Lir Regan stood beside a large boulder, her white dress blowing softly in the warm night under the stars.

Maybe, Giles thought, it was a blessing that it was night. He didn't know how many in this large group of people might have trembled and fallen under the impact of Earth in the day. As it was, they would have a gradual dawn to help them face the new splendor of the sun.

The night was beautiful enough for a beginning. Almost too beautiful, Giles thought, as he saw them sink to the ground quietly, one by one, and look up at the blazing heavens with awe-filled eyes closing and opening and closing again, unable to bear it all at once. Giles had wondered how it would be, shouts and cries of joy, weeping and excited laughter, fainting and hysteria perhaps? He had been totally unprepared for this uncanny silence. There wasn't a whisper other than the whisper of the wind among the trees.

They came out in a worshipful silence, so quiet that the only noise they made was the rise and fall of their breathing. Giles fancied he could hear heartbeats. They sank down on

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the grass under the stars and laid their children carefully down beside them on beds of grass under the cover of the soft night wind. It was so still. . . .

The children slept quietly, their small faces upturned to the sky. Here and there was an older child awake, lips parted, eyes roving across the stars nestling the dark bed of the sky. Hands hesitantly fingered the grass, stroked the ground, heads bowed to rub against the body of the Earth . . . and no one spoke.

It was so still. . . .

Lir Regan appeared beside him like a wraith in the silence and on soundless feet led him away. The moon lighted a path for them. She took him well away from the others into a small clearing surrounded by trees. The Dagda was waiting and when he saw Giles he came up and took both his hands, "Thank you!"

"No, I'm ashamed," Giles replied, "It should have been your Arthur."

Smiling, the Dagda shook his head, "It doesn't matter. They're all here now."

"And you're sure they can't find us?" Giles turned to Lir Regan doubtfully. There was so much he still didn't understand; it seemed like a dream.

"Yes, I'm sure," she said, "but you're not, are you? You still don't know why they can't find us, why they never will."

"No," Giles shook his head. He didn't know. She had said there was no fleet of ships, that there was only one green globe, but still he didn't understand. She had told him to lead the people down that long tunnel and he had found it and led the way. At each step he had faltered, feeling that he was leading them to nothing—deeper and deeper into nothing—into the rocks of Nifhel. Behind him were two hundred exhausted people, patiently following, continuing beyond their endurance. And still he had gone on following that endless tunnel, putting one foot in front of the other and finding beyond each bend . . . nothing. And patiently they had kept following.

She had said he would lead them to Earth, and he had.

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For finally, when he had given up all hope, when all he wanted to do was to turn back, he had instead gone on and turned that last bend. And there, like a mirage at the end of the endless blackness, was a night filled with stars and a warm fresh wind blowing down the tunnel and Lir Regan waiting in her white dress.

"No, I don't understand," Giles repeated. If they had come like this, why couldn't all of Niffhel?

And where had they come? Where were they? Where was Niffhel? Where was Earth? A man couldn't walk to Earth—walk to another planet through a tunnel in the sky . . .

"Giles," Lir Regan said softly, "you remember that girl who appeared on Earth—that Watcher who almost saw you here—"

It made Giles sick to hear Lir Regan speak of Sigrid now. It reminded him too much of what had been, and there was even a sorrow about Sigrid—a wish that none of it had been the way it was. He didn't want to be reminded of that now, not now on Earth, not from Lir Regan's lips—

But she was watching him, "You have to know sometime, Giles. The reason Sigrid appeared on Earth was not because she had found another globe—there wasn't any. Nor did she find a fleet of ships—there wasn't a fleet. She came to Earth because I had been thinking very strongly about her."

She even knew Sigrid's name, Giles thought regretfully.

"And both of us had just then been speaking about the homecoming of man to Earth. Do you remember?"

Giles nodded.

"We had both agreed that all men must not come, that all were not prepared. And after that I was thinking about Sigrid. I shouldn't have been, but I wondered if you would want her here. And I wondered so strongly, Giles, that for a moment she appeared on Earth. It was my fault—an accident. I was afraid she might see you. I don't think she could have, but there would have been a great danger if she had."

Appeared on Earth. . . . Giles remembered that twice or

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more he had thought Lir Regan appeared: once in the tube, in his room, in front of the hanging.

"But Sigrid is not you," he protested, "I know you have some strange power, Lir Regan, but Sigrid doesn't. She can't just appear."

"Can't she?" Lir Regan asked, "Right now, at this particular time anything can appear, Giles. Not only Sigrid, but anything in Niflhel. Niflhel can appear. I'll show you."

"Regan!" the Dagda remonstrated quickly, but she shook her head.

"No, he must see for himself."

"It's dangerous," the old man argued.

"No. Look Giles, if you want to see Niflhel, or if you want to be in Niflhel—" she took his hand.

And the woodland glade vanished.

Suddenly they were standing on a street, the last fury of the soot storm dying down around them. The factories belched their red flames in the Eastern sky and in the distance the huts were covered with blankets of ash, blacker than ever from the storm.

"No! Lir Regan!" Giles shivered in protest, and then with fear as two black caped figures approached them from up the street.

The men stopped for a moment in obvious disbelief of Lir Regan's white dress, and then began running towards them.

"Hold me," she whispered, "and think of Earth strongly, Giles, strongly!"

Still the men came running and nothing happened. Lir Regan became very quiet. She closed her eyes and her touch on Giles' arm was like a feather.

The Dagda rose out of the soot which slowly vanished along with the vision and they were back in the glade on Earth.

"You will not do that again!" the old man said, and his voice was sternly reproachful.

"No," Lir Regan opened her eyes and brushed off her dress which was covered with soot. "It won't be necessary. Giles has seen what he has to."

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"And what the others must never see!" the Dagda's words were a command. "Or know is possible, until the way is closed again." He turned to Giles, and looking at him closely, was satisfied.

As if her job was finished, Lir Regan sat down on the grass and looked off in the distance. But Giles stood before her and his voice in the still night demanded an answer.

"Lir Regan," he said, "Where are we?"

"On Earth," The tone of her voice, rising at the end, made the whole thing seem perfectly natural.

"And where is Nifflhel?" Giles insisted.

"On Earth," she repeated quietly.

Shaken, Giles looked around. He looked up at the stars twinkling overhead, he felt the grass beneath his feet, he smelled the air . . . no, it was fantastic, he thought, impossible.

But the Dagda nodded. "Yes, Giles, Nifflhel is all around you, just as Earth is around Nifflhel, but out of reach. The ancient ones had a name for it . . . In their language it was called parallel worlds. And in that sense Nifflhel is another planet. But in another and much truer sense, we are there now, as Nifflhel is here."

He watched Giles for a moment and then said gently, "Sit down, and I will try to explain."

Lir Regan nodded at her uncle gratefully, "I had better get back to the others." She smiled and pressed Giles' hand before she left the clearing.

"My niece is tired," the Dagda said, "This is harder for her than it appears." He was still watching Giles steadily.

Sitting on the grass, Giles wondered if after all he had gone through, he was not going to break under the impact of what the Dagda was saying. Did it mean that at any time, at any moment, he might find himself back in that world of death?

"Once in the caves," Giles murmured numbly, "you said you would explain; you told me about Earth."

"And gave you the idea that man had escaped to Nifflhel," the Dagda smiled, "and you felt, quite naturally, that man

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had escaped in ships of some kind to another planet. Well, we couldn't tell you everything."

He looked up at the stars and said, his voice heavy, "Can you imagine what man had to become to lose all this?" He paused for a moment and Giles felt that there was a kind of prayer going on inside him. Then he continued.

"I told you truthfully about the great horror, the monstrous conflagration that struck Earth. What led up to it, how it happened, we don't know. The scientists and those they took with them into their caves made sure we would never know.

Caves? But you said ships, stars."

"No, I didn't say it," the Dagda's voice was patient, "but you thought it. It's a natural thought. And a good one. Thanks to that thought we needn't fear those left on Nifhel who would like to find us, not that they could."

"No, Giles, there were no ships, no stars; there wasn't time. We know that. Apparently their science and technology was concerned with something quite different, something that harmed both themselves and their world. There was death on the face of the earth so they escaped underground into the caves they had prepared. The same caves you have just left—the caves under Nifhel. They were prepared to wait there for centuries, if necessary, until they could emerge again.

"And when they went underground they left behind to be destroyed all their secrets of power and technology. They left behind the records of flight, records of weaponry, records of political science.

"Do you know what they did take with them, Giles? Can you guess? It will answer many of your questions about the Earth Worshippers."

Mutely, Giles shook his head.

The Dagda smiled, "They took with them only their Great Myths, their Epic Poems, their Bibles and their music!

"Outside of what was absolutely essential for life underground everything was left to be destroyed in the flames. The scientists had turned violently against their own technology. They hoped that man, by seeking the truths hidden in the

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old legends, could fashion a better world than that he had left behind."

Giles leaned forward intently, hanging on every word. There was something about what the Dagda was saying that made him want to cry or shout, that filled him with terribly mixed emotions of joy and shame. He couldn't extricate himself from the feeling that he, too, was part of this story, that it involved him in some awfully direct and personal way.

"They had thought in the beginning of their life under the rocks that all men felt the same, that all wished the same, that when at last Earth was free from the forces that made her unfit to live on, they would come out together and in the same hope begin anew.

"But the evil began again, under the rocks, even before the last evil was finished. Man again split into different camps with different ideas, and unfortunately this happened before the memory of certain technologies had been lost. Those who remembered began looking for power again, and the books of the Great Myths and Poetry passed secretly into the hands of those who kept the original dream.

"And right there, in the caves under Nifflhel, the civilization of Nifflhel started long before man ever walked out from under the ground."

"The Examination!" Giles exclaimed, "The History of Nifflhel."

"Yes," the Dagda quoted the words Giles had said so long ago. "Man had his beginning in the rock under Nifflhel. The History of Nifflhel that you studied is in a way quite true."

"But there was something wrong," Giles said, remembering how he had felt a lie in the words.

"Yes, you are told only half the story. But fortunately, Giles, not many people on Nifflhel know the other half. Only a few. The people who say they know of Earth, like Saunders, only suspect. They want it to be true and they will keep looking for that fleet of ships until the end of time and never find it—because it doesn't exist."

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"But the globel" Giles remembered with a sudden fear, "They could find the globe."

"No," the Dagda shook his head, "they won't find the globe. It was made by one of the early scientists who remained loyal to the dream of Earth and who was himself a Bard. He made it when the trouble first began, as a means of crossing the invisible barrier between our worlds.

"You see, Giles, always, since the time when man first disagreed, there has been a Bard. The books had to be hidden and the ideas protected somehow. The Great Myths were all that was left for men. It explains why all men now are called, at least partly, after the names of those in the legends. Our first generations knew no other names.

"At first, being keepers of the books, the Bards only served the function of reading and reciting to those who met to keep the idea of Earth alive."

Giles was reminded, shamefully, of how those words had once affected him.

"In that way," the Dagda said, "they became the leaders of those who dreamed of Earth. And then slowly, through the centuries, as the Bards schooled themselves more and more in the great words, they began themselves to unlock some of the secrets hidden within."

"At one time on Earth, the Bards, particularly the Druidic Bards, were thought to have magical powers, to have invisible forces at their command. And under the rocks of Earth-Niflhel, the new Bards came to slowly understand that power. For centuries they had used the globe as a means of seeing Earth. But at last they were able themselves to cross that barrier between worlds without aid. The globe was no longer needed for that purpose, but it was kept for another. It was kept for your use."

Giles stared at the old man while he smiled patiently.

"Oh, yes, Giles. We weren't sure of your name, but your help was foretold long ago, when it was first understood by the Bards that one day man would have a chance to come home. Lir Regan recognized you when the time came."

The Dagda raised his hand, "Do not ask me how, Giles.

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I was the previous Bard but I am old now, and Lir Regan is the keeper of the secrets. I do know that when man is safely home again the globe will destroy itself. No one on Nifflhel will find it."

"But there is the tunnel." Giles said.

"Yes, the tunnel is open again," the old man said thoughtfully, "for those who can find it. The same tunnel through which man came to Nifflhel so many centuries ago. It leads in both directions.

"Can you see that ancient journey, Giles? Can you see that group of men and women after thousands of years underground, coming up at last and meeting that flat, ash-strewn planet, devoid of life or any reason for life. A planet habitable only because the atmosphere, foul as it was, could nevertheless sustain life. Can you imagine what they saw?"

"Thousands of years. . . ." Giles said numbly.

"Yes, they had raised generations underground. Generations of people who began ever more closely and subtly to resemble in their minds and hearts the scene that greeted them when they finally climbed out. A barren land to support a barren people. I don't think they could have been surprised at what they saw. I think they must have recognized what they created."

Giles was very quiet. This could not be the answer . . . and yet he knew that it was.

"On Nifflhel, Giles, they met the Earth they had created within themselves. They met their own inner environment. And beyond that, but hidden where they could never see it, lay the fair green land they had ruined."

Giles didn't dare breathe. "The land," he murmured, "the Earth, it can't . . ."

"We don't know how intelligent the Earth is," the Dagda said firmly. "She may be capable of many disguises. There may be many Earths. Nifflhel is as real as this. And yet here we are on an Earth that has either accepted us, or an Earth reborn, or an Earth that has always been waiting.

"When man emerged from the rocks he met Nifflhel because Nifflhel is what he was. He couldn't see any further

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than himself. He wasn't capable of seeing beyond that screen to a truer Earth. He met what he had to meet. He met himself when he met Niffhel."

"Niffhel," Giles said slowly.

"Yes, without knowing it our ancestors named their new world correctly. It is an old, mythological name for Hell."

Quietly Giles looked up at the stars. They were dimming now in the first pale hint of dawn.

"And that is exactly what they proceeded to make of it," the Dagda said softly. "The faults of their civilization had grown in them until they instinctively imitated what they had left behind. And each step they took grew worse and worse. And as they became increasingly lost, Earth must have kept pace, removing herself ever further from their consciousness.

"Perhaps there's something in the Earth," the Dagda said slowly, "that will reject, at a certain point, what is harmful to her. What mis-serves her purposes. Certainly man did not serve her well. And in misusing her he lost the possibility of serving himself. Remember that even the Earth Worshippers, those who dreamed of a fairer land, had to meet Niffhel. Perhaps Earth required that they, too, must pay for something.

"It has been a long time since we had an opportunity like this."

"Like this," Giles repeated slowly.

"Yes," the Dagda paused for a long moment and then whispered, "Can you feel it?"

The air was very still. The wind might have been resting. The grass was damp and pungent, almost speaking to them with its smell. A faint pink light was beginning to creep over the horizon; Giles could see it through the trees. They stood with dark limbs outlined in the early dawn, stretching out and up, ever up and out. Giles looked at them in wonder, in a feeling of their mystery. Were they guarding, waiting, praying? Yes, there was a guarded quality about all of Earth, a prayer in her waiting. Having accepted man again was she sure now? Why was it so still, so hushed, as if all life

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were in suspension, waiting. To see what man would do? To see what man could be?

Giles slowly rose to his feet, feeling as if the very imprint of his feet upon the Earth was felt by her acutely as she waited. . . . It was as if Earth were holding her breath.

"Come," the Dagda said very softly, "Dawn is breaking and the people will be waking up, and Earth is waiting to see."

XIV

IT WAS the young child of Arthur that Giles saw first. The little boy of five. He was curled on the grass, cheek against an outflung arm, his lips parted in sleep, eyelids moving imperceptibly at the first stirrings of awakening. He moved on the grass, then stretched and blinked as his eyes slowly opened on the dawn. He was lying on his side and as he began to take in the world around him, he first saw the grass, and ran his small hand carefully over the top of it. Then he brushed his cheek against it, and put his nose down and smelled it, and then he sat up, eyes wide open, to look at the sky.

He sat without moving while the sun rose, sending first shafts of gold, pillars of pink and orange, and then slowly climbed in a burst of radiance that showered the Earth with warmth.

Arthur's child watched it first with wide eyes, open mouth, and then as it rose ever higher, he stood up and took a few steps toward it, holding up his hands as if he could catch some of that lovely fire. He began to smile, and then to laugh,

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and then to run faster and faster toward the golden ball in the sky.

And with him the other children began to run; they were all awake, all tumbling and rushing down the slope, dancing toward the light, running on winged feather feet, like a mass of flowers running wild toward the golden delight in the sky.

At the foot of the slope there was a shallow stream, bubbling and tumbling, running as quickly, as lightly, as the children. It seemed to come awake for them. And as if they knew that catching the sun was a game, the children, with one harmony, in one graceful dance, all discarded their clothes and tumbled in, laughing, splashing, singing, making fountains and waterfalls and mists of rainbow colors, making the stream grow with their dance until it rose in wild sprays of color, sprinkling them like a live, dancing curtain of millions of crystals.

The adults silently watched their children.

And Giles smiled with thanksgiving. Of course, this was how it had to be. Whatever the elders might have thought or felt or done under the impressions of Earth, the children had been first. The older ones would have to follow. It couldn't be too much for them now, because they had their children with their quicknesses and adaptability, their instinctive understanding.

And yet still, Giles felt, away from that splash of life in the stream, Earth was very quiet. There was not yet the murmur of life he had heard once himself.

Lir Regan was waiting, too, at the top of the slope. She stood extremely quietly, Giles felt, as if she could do no more, but as if something were yet to be done. And the Dagda was waiting beside her. Giles held his breath, feeling that he, too, was waiting, as he felt the Earth waiting. And there was a focus, he could sense it, a center of quiet even more silent than the silence of Earth. It seemed to come from the group of people watching their children—the Earth Worshipers. Was it up to them, then? What would they do? What must they do?

And then, in a sudden flash of understanding, he knew

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what it was. Earth would accept them, if they could accept her life. But after half-living in a world of death so long, could they meet the demands of life that Earth would make? Because if they could not learn to live here, to help Earth live, they would forever seek what they had left behind on Nifflhel, without even knowing what they sought. And once again Earth would die.

Until now Earth had been a dream for them. It was easy to worship a dream, easy to fantasy a loveliness where all would be well. They could not have known, until now, that in return for her life Earth would demand a real life from them. She would not accept, this time, men who were less than men, half men who could not make the effort to live. And with every part of her being, because she wished for men, Earth was straining for their understanding.

If they did not understand, if they were not prepared to try, Giles knew there would be only Nifflhel, or worse than Nifflhel. Yes, Giles thought, it might be even harder for these people who were so close, so very close, to understanding.

Giles walked up the slope to join Lir Regan and the Dagda as they waited, still feeling that focus of silence, that guarded quality about the Earth.

And then, very slowly, the group turned away from the children and looked up to where they were standing. At the top of the slope was an open clearing surrounded by trees with one huge ancient oak in the center. One by one they began to come up the hill, as if they were pulled, none looking at the other, each intent on some private effort, some individual question. But together, as if it were understood they grouped themselves around the great tree and sat down in a circle.

Thousands of years ago man had done the same. Now many thousands of years later he repeated the ancient ritual. Lir Regan made her way to the front of the great tree that might have had memories itself of the last Bard who had stood there.

Even the children, seeing their parents in the clearing,

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left their delight and came up to sit, like solemn little plants, in front of their elders. They clasped their small hands together hopefully, and Giles, watching them, felt a wish rise in his breast that was stronger and harder and fiercer than anything he had ever known. He joined the Dagda in the circle among the others.

Softly Lir Regan began her song.

She began it in a quiet that was quiet beyond imagining.

"I am a wind of the sea . . .
I am a stag of seven times . . .
I am a hawk on a cliff . . .
I am a tear of the sun . . .

And each time the group responded.

"for depth . . .
for strength . . .
for deftness . . .
for clearness . . ."

The song, if it was a song—it was more of a prayer—went on. And later, when it was finished, Lir Regan told an old legend. Giles only heard part of it because he was listening, so strongly, for what he thought was a whisper from Earth.

"And when the seven Bards were gathered," Lir Regan recited, "Catwg put to them seven questions.

"The greatest wisdom of man; what is that? Replied one, 'The ability to do evil and not to do it.' The worst principle of man; what is that? 'Falsehood,' came the answer from Taliesin, Chief of the Bards.

"And the greatest folly of man? Ystyvan answered, 'To wish a common evil which he cannot do.'

"What is the noblest action of man? said Catwg. And the son of Clydno Eddin, called Cyman, replied, 'Correcting.' "

Giles held his breath, listening, feeling; was it a touch of wind? Lir Regan had started singing again.

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"I am fair among flowers . . .
I am a lake on a plain . . .
I am a hill of poetry . . ."

And everyone had joined her singing. Giles looked at them; they were suddenly robust, standing freely out of doors, as if they had just come.

Their faces glowed; he thought they might not have known Earth before this minute. They sang strongly, loudly, joyfully, and the children were not solemn any more; they were up and lively, wild again, and dancing in the clearing.

And they all felt the wind and they all heard the voices begin—when Earth decided to speak. The trees rustled and leaves fluttered, birds appeared suddenly, flashing through the air in scarlet streaks, singing and chirping while underneath, in the grass, the murmur of small things began. And from a cloudless sky, from a clear blue heaven, they were given the miracle of rain. It fell softly on their heads like a blessing, on their upturned faces, on hands held high to catch the golden, glistening drops. They stood bareheaded in the lovely wetness, letting the rain wash them, smelling the damp perfume of grass and ground and flower and shrub. And Earth intensified herself in an exalted gladness of their understanding.

And man had come home at last.

Later, after the incredible day which had belonged to the children, Giles stood by the large boulder at the tunnel entrance. Tonight Lir Regan waited with him. There would always be someone here now, to wait. Giles' last question had been answered. He knew that no one on the other side could come this way unless they were truly able to come. They need not fear anyone on Niflhel because those they feared would never find the way. It was not for the people of Niflhel who sought death. It was for those who felt that somewhere life might exist. And when there was no one left to seek the way, the tunnel would be closed again.

Giles smiled at Lir Regan and took her hand. He had left Niflhel behind at last.

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Once, he remembered, he had thought that being on Earth would be the final answer. That this coming home was the solution. Now he realized that there was yet another home he and all the rest must come to. It lay somewhere within him, and on how well he and everyone else understood it, would depend the future.

He looked up at the sky wondering how it was that having come home he must now go on. It was only the beginning. Now once again man had the conditions to help him. Giles felt a new understanding stir within him. Earth was only the beginning. What she wanted from man, for man, what she wanted for herself, they didn't yet know. They must help each other find out.

The night was blazing with stars reaching into infinity. Giles sat down on the boulder beside the entrance and looked down from that splendor in the sky to the long, dark tunnel—the bridge between Earth and Niffhel. The first to come home, he must be the first now to wait.

And as he waited and watched, he thought he saw a vision of someone in the tunnel. And he thought he was a child again. He knew it was only his wish, only his desire to thank her, for hadn't she given him the dream he didn't even know he carried, so long ago? Hadn't she secretly known and hoped? He said the words silently in his heart, hoping that somewhere, in some far place, she would hear.

"We have been standing in the rain, Grandmother," he said to the memory of that gray-haired figure who had held her hands high in defiance of the soot of Niffhel. "On Earth, we have been standing in the rain!"