

## **Chapter 1 - The Fruit of Knowledge**

The Serpent Man stood by the golden fruit tree on the south side of the walled garden - a square of extreme quiet enclosed by a wall of old, weathered red brick. There was a flat, emerald green lawn, and a circular pond in the center filled with glass smooth water, its surface scattered with white lotus flowers like large spots on a feline coat. Out of it rose a flat-topped stone pedestal, on which balanced winged Mercury - running as if he were about to step off into the air. The pedestal was entwined with snakes whose water spouting heads pointed east and west below the runner's feet, yet the surface remained undisturbed, as though water falling from the serpentine mouths was absorbed straight into its depths. The pond had a surround of short-stemmed - richly yellow camellia-like flowers in a design that looked like the 'All-Seeing Eye.'

The wall was bordered on all sides by red, white, and yellow roses, whose bright, fresh colors offset the weathering of the wall as youth and age offset each other. The lawn was of almost bowling green smoothness, though with an unusually springy feeling underfoot. The golden fruit tree stood alone, no bigger than an apple tree, but with leaves dark green on one side and silver on the other. The fruit looked like apples, but shone like refined yet matte-surfaced gold. The place was full of softly vibrant light, as though the air itself exuded flecks and sparks of gilded whiteness...

... and the Serpent Man walked round the tree, stopping from time to time to examine the fruit. He was very tall, blue eyed and fair skinned, wearing what looked like a close-fitting cape sweeping from neck to ground. It was black, but banded with yellow and white stripes like an exotic snakeskin, open at the front to show a knee-length white tunic with a gold-studded black belt, and below it bare legs and feet. His head was covered with a skull cap on which was placed at forehead level a golden circlet studded with amethysts, from which two serpents reared up on either side of his

ears like antennae, or horns. He stopped his pacing, picked one of the fruits, turned it over in his hands and said, half to himself,

“For Finn, from the Tree of Knowledge.”

“Not so...!” The voice was harsh with command and self-righteous assurance. The Serpent Man stared at what had appeared from apparently nowhere – as if just dropped down off the Sistine Chapel roof, another tall man yet totally different, in a full length, plain brown robe like a monastic habit that had been slept in. He was brown-skinned weathered, like a caricature of a Hebrew prophet, but with the same blue eyes as the Serpent Man - an angry, white haired, angular figure, straight and wiry, holding in his left hand a plain wooden staff - with a grip indicative of immense, gnarled strength. He wore the same gold circlet as the Serpent Man, and despite the fact that one appeared to have cultivated youth and the other age, they looked akin.

“Not so!” repeated the angry newcomer, “Would you turn him into one of us? Have you not done more than enough of that since time began?”

“Well what would you have brother?” Countered the Serpent Man smoothly, “A slave, half-human, a beast of burden? Have you not made more than enough of them over time?”

“The Court shall sit in judgment!” said the Angry Prophet as though the other hadn’t spoken.

“And thanks be to the Council of Anu that you’ve only one vote!”

Someone else had appeared, dressed like a Celtic nobleman in a knee length white woolen tunic, a colorful red and green plaid-like cape over the top, cross-gartered leggings, and a gold torc round his neck.

“Merlin!” said the brothers, simultaneously.

“Masquerading as a bard!” added the Angry Prophet uncharitably. There was a long pause as they eyed each other, the usual, unfriendly summing up whenever they met.

“Well for whom would your vote be cast?” Asked the Serpent Man in a carefully neutral tone.

“For Finn, for knowledge, for Sophia - the divine spark. Let him eat the fruit.”

The Angry Prophet snorted contemptuously.

“Well what would you do,” demanded Merlin, turning on him with rising anger, “tell a deliberate untruth, as you did to his first ancestor...?”

...The vibrant, gilt-flecked air of the Garden was troubled, swirling and eddying as conflicting energies intermingled.

“He shall eat the fruit,” said the Serpent Man with flat finality, “and the woman will make him wise, when they meet, body and soul.”

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John Finnis drove his Suzuki Sierra into the car park fronting a modest block of units on Casuarina Drive in Nightcliff, Darwin. He got out wearily, with a pile of books to be marked at the fag end of a school day in November, the build-up to the Darwin wet, in the mid-nineteen-nineties. It was the silly season, meaning for a teacher that the difficult were even more difficult than usual.

“What the hell...” he said moodily, flinging the books onto a coffee table, switching on the fans, and opening a few windows, “everyone’s going troppo, so why bother?”

The air was like a humid blanket but that made no difference to his evening routine, putting the kettle on, taking out a tea bag, honey jar, slice of lemon, mug, making lemon tea with two teaspoons of honey, placing it on the table, and sitting down on a sofa.

John was of medium height, slim in spite of being middle-aged, with dark hair going gray, divorced, and away from his background. He was of Anglo-Irish descent, brought up in Dublin, and a graduate of Trinity College qualified to teach English and Music. He’d moved around a bit, teaching in Ireland, Scotland and England until the break-up of his childless marriage. He tended not to analyze the reasons for this, simply recollecting that he and his

wife had been like oil and water - a recipe for disaster. Now here he was, still somewhat surprised by it all, having arrived in Darwin a few years ago with two suitcases, no fixed abode, and a guaranteed post at Macassar Junior High School...

... *but teaching's not what it was...* he reflected with increasing frequency, moving inexorably towards mid-life crisis. John had never been a brilliant teacher, but when he began work in the seventies his methods were effective enough to persuade most of his students to at least appear to be learning something. He was efficient, conscientious, and persistent, but now...

"Your methods don't seem as suited to the nineties as they no doubt were to the seventies..." said the School Principal during a private discussion in his office. The Boss was Anglo-Irish like John, or Finn as he was generally called, so the two had a natural rapport, but that didn't stop the Principal being concerned, and not without reason. Finn was finding teaching increasingly problematical, with rewards declining as stress levels rose. He was no longer enjoying the work, and becoming acutely conscious of his limitations. Of course the Boss noticed, and despite the friendly tone, Finn knew exactly what was in his mind... *Change your methods and be successful, or...*

Fortunately it was Friday evening, giving him the weekend in which to think. He didn't go for a walk across the road and along the beach because he knew exactly what it would be like. The air was dead still, pressing down heavily, and the sea would be oil smooth. A dip would have been a relief, but the risk of being stung by box-jellyfish at this time of year made it out of the question.

He would have liked nothing better than to have handed in his notice and changed career, but it was out of the question - or was it? He wasn't qualified for anything else- was he...? *But the longer you delay, the older you get, and the harder it becomes to make a new start...* As he relaxed, allowing thoughts to drift, his mind wandered back to childhood days... to dreams not recalled for many long years, but still fresh in his memory as if he'd just woken from them... *Yes, why not...? There may be some guidance in*

*remembrance*...from a dream pattern that had threaded its way through his life, about which he had told no one.

Over the years it had grown in apparent complexity - like a tapestry perceived first at a distance as something vaguely defined, gaining in meaning as one approached and details were clarified. Putting down his empty mug and settling back on the sofa Finn closed his eyes, letting memory take over, drawing him gently but swiftly away from the humid Darwin evening...

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The boy came awake again, rising out of the dream like a swimmer surfacing from deep water. Moonlight shining through the leaded-light window panes made diamond shaped patterns on his bed...*that dream again...why does it always start like this*...in a forest clearing, somewhere in Britain, late fifth century, with grass in the clearing looking as green as Ireland.

Forest covered much of the country, like fleece on a sheep's back, deciduous expanses bursting with light green and silver freshness in spring and where trees gave way to open country clumps of blackthorn in flower like sunlit snowdrifts. In summer dappled sunlight shone onto the forest floor, not unlike the moonlight patterns on his bed. But it was the autumn forest that stayed most vividly in his memory, when leaf stripping winds under overcast skies roared through the branches, and sudden rainstorms flailed the trees. Then the forest brooded, and the boy had visions in the after storm stillness of leaves endlessly falling onto damp mold, leaves that had been falling onto untouched acres since before Britain was islanded from Europe. He could almost smell the age... vigorous but subtle, a slightly rotting tang.

Yet on this early morning in late spring the clearing was bright and still. Clearing though was a relative term because it was not devoid of trees, but simply a place where dense woodland had given way to something like open park, with trees widely scattered

across a big expanse of grass. A meandering stream intersected it. He absorbed the scene, but not for long...

...Harsh horn calls brazenly shattered the silence as horsemen broke cover, bursting onto the scene like water from a burst dike. No hunt this, no baying of hounds or fleeing deer, this was war...*civil war by the look of it*...Two bodies of similarly dressed mounted men fighting, their sword blades catching the light - silver and red. The clash of weapons, cries of the injured, stamping of horses feet, even the panted breathings of furious exertion, all were audible. Only the smells were missing - blood, sweat, fear, and death. Now foot soldiers armed with bows and spears were filtering out of the trees along the edges of the clearing, flights of arrows and javelins adding to the apparent confusion.

The boy knew he was not bodily present, but felt as though he was hovering a few feet above the ground - an invisible yet involved observer. The instinct of self-preservation must have been still with him because he recalled ducking to avoid a flung spear, until a horrible choking sound alerted him to its victim. A foot soldier had received the full force of it in his stomach. The boy averted his eyes from blood and intestines as the hapless man fell forward into the stream...and for yet another reason.

His attention was caught by a man standing out amid the chaos and confusion as if he were controlling it, who, unlike his fellows was dressed entirely in white apart from his helmet... *Even that has a white crest*... His shield was white, bearing no device. He rode a white horse, and a white hound ran at the horse's heels. The tide of battle seemed to eddy around him, almost to ebb and flow at his command. His sword was everywhere - stained with the blood of his enemies. He was the target of arrow, sword, and spear, yet seemed untouchable... *and there's something about that sword. Where have I seen it before, and why are the Eye of Fire, and the Greenstone missing from its hilt? Merlin must know*...but the scene was fading, only to re-form almost instantly...

...Time and location had changed. It was evening on the same day, and the fighting was over. The defeated were penned on a

bluff of land above a raging torrent. The White King's army hemmed them in, forming a semi-circle. The sun was setting behind them in a vast expanse of sky banded with long pennants of dark gray cloud- like stripes on the back of a great cat, with a diffused red light blood-staining their undersides. A small wind had risen, and a grim silence had fallen as the defeated contemplated their probable fate.

Then the White King dismounted, and stepped forward to stand in the open space between the combatants, addressing his defeated foes and inexplicably the boy understood what was being said, even though the language was unfamiliar. He could not even be surprised by this, almost taking it for granted because he was strangely drawn to this White King, as if they had met once...who now was reminding these rebels that had tried to seize his throne they deserved death for treason. All expected that he would have them dispatched there and then. The boy listened intently to the words, unthinkingly mentally translating...

"... Had it been one of our brother kings across the Narrow Sea against whom you had rebelled you would have been executed at once, even had you been his own flesh and blood. However, you have fought bravely today, and we would have such men as friends rather than enemies. So swear now, on the hilts of the Sword of the Kingdom that you will be true to the Pendragon House, standing with us in the defense of Britain against her enemies..."

They swore of course. What else could they do? The boy found himself assessing their characters, as the leaders came forward one by one to kneel and take the oath of allegiance on the hilts of the Sword. Most of them appeared to be honest men... typical Celtic warriors, who would fight for any or no reason at all, yet who could be trusted to keep an oath. There was one though about whom he had grave misgivings, a black-eyed, black haired, wiry man with a sallow skin and a slight limp... "KING LOT OF LOTHIAN AND ORKNEY"... He turned sharply. The voice had come quite clearly across his right shoulder, but there was no one there. Yet even at this early age the boy had sensed that there were

some people who... whatever they do, say, or pretend to be cannot be trusted. This man was one such....

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When he woke again the moonlight patterns had shifted with the passing of the hours. They were fading; dawn could not be far off. Dawn, another school day during which he would feel like a fish out of water; school, which somehow seemed less real than the dreams he lived in sleep with such fullness. He felt a strange bond with the White King, and the exact opposite with the dark King Lot. He knew who the White King was, and knew also, in the depths of his being, that they had been together once; and that his destiny had been and still was, bound up with the White and the Black. It had been a story of love, war, triumph, tragedy, a grail hidden in darkness, and a pervading mystery reaching out across time.