

Into the Garden by Mark Souza

Girah Baheer stood at the gate blocking the road and read the sign. 'BEWARE - No one who has passed beyond this gate has ever returned.' It wasn't that he didn't believe the warning. He'd heard the stories and known some of the people who had disappeared. What lured Girah to squeeze between the bronze bars was the knowledge that no one would dare follow him. Whatever awaited, never again would he have to suffer another sympathetic look.

Weeds grew tall on the road behind the gate. Underbrush constricted the roadway down to a meandering game trail. Jungle towered over the path drenching Girah in shadow. Insects buzzed and birds called from the treetops. The faint sound of rushing water echoed through the wood. The trail eventually joined a small stream and paralleled its course into a valley. Its churning water cooled the air and made the world seem new.

As the terrain leveled, the forest opened onto a meadow. A sea of fresh spring grass stood waist high under an azure sky. Breezes pushed the stalks in waves like an incoming tide. At the center of the field a lone tree breached the plain, its broad canopy supported on thick boughs. Girah waded to it through the grass. As he approached, he heard the rhythmic sound of a shovel, a sound he'd come to hate.

Beneath the tree a bald man with a long, white beard busied himself digging a hole. Sun, work, and time had transformed the old man's skin into deeply furrowed leather with nothing beneath but sinew and bone. "What are you doing, old man?" Girah called.

The man jolted upright and turned. A pair of milky eyes locked onto Girah. The old man's lips puckered in and out like a wasp stinger. "I'm tending the tree as I always have. Who asks such a silly question?"

"Your eyes, are you blind?"

"Eyes are but one way to see, and perhaps the least effective."

Girah peered into the tree's branches. Fist-sized purple fruit hung in fuzzy grape-like skeins. The sickly sweet smell of it perfumed the air. "What kind of tree is this?"

The old man's lips paused long enough for him to grin. "It has no name, but it sometimes brings sight to the blind."

"Then why are you still blind, old man?"

"Ah, a skeptic. I have met many of your kind. You see only with your eyes so you have become lost." The old man leaned heavily on the shovel handle, his crooked back sagging into an arch. "Eating the tree's fruit brings total knowledge of all things in the universe, from alpha to omega, what has been and what will be."

"I am not the village idiot, old man," Girah hissed. "No such thing exists."

The old man cackled and plunged the tip of his shovel into the dirt sending a thunderous shudder through the ground. He left it embedded there with the handle pointing toward the sky as he sidled to the tree and sat against its trunk. "You wonder if your dead wife and son found heaven and whether you will ever rejoin them, eh?"

Girah staggered back and felt his face go numb.

The old man's clouded eyes widened with expectation. "Cat got your tongue, boy?"

Girah studied the old man. He was sure they'd never met. Yet how could he know these things? "Who are you, old man?"

"A guardian who protects the tree from the unworthy," the old man said.

"And who decides who's worthy?"

"The tree. It sensed you coming. When you arrived at the gate it went into bloom. When you reached the stream it bore fruit. And as you crossed the meadow the fruit ripened."

"Impossible," Girah sputtered, "Nothing produces fruit that quickly."

The old man shook his head. "Of course not. You are right. No tree could do such a thing. Perhaps you already have universal knowledge." He stood and reached a boney arm up and plucked a berry from a low hanging skein. He tossed the fruit to Girah. "Do you want to know what's become of your wife and son or not? Do you want to know what heaven awaits you? Then eat."

Girah looked at the fruit in his hand and at the old man. It was then that he noticed the mounds of earth scattered beneath the tree. Some were bare dirt and fresh. Others had grass growing on them ranging from ankle high to as tall as the grass in the field. "What are those?"

The old man turned his head as if following Girah's gaze. "Fertilizer. There can be no fruit without it, no knowledge. Nothing comes free. Everything has a cost."

Girah's eyes returned to the hole the old man was digging. The size and shape of it carried new significance. "Did they all eat the fruit?"

The old man smiled as if Girah now shared his secret. "The fruit doesn't treat all equally. Some aren't ready for the knowledge, and once they have it, can't bear what they know. To them knowledge is poison. What about you, Girah? Are you ready; ready to know what's become of your wife and son, ready to know what will become of you, ready to have the knowledge of the Gods?"

Girah stared at the fruit. It suddenly felt heavier. He closed his eyes and held it to his nose letting the syrupy odor fill his sinuses. His head tingled. He conjured up an image of his wife before her pregnancy, and another of what his son might look like if he'd lived. He brought the fruit to his mouth and sunk his teeth into it. Warm juice gushed over his chin. Despite the sweetness, it burned his throat going down.

When Girah opened his eyes the old man was nodding happily. "Yes, yes." The old man then picked up his shovel, returned to hole, and began digging again. He winked at Girah and said, "Just in case."