

TREE OF LIFE

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EPIFICTION

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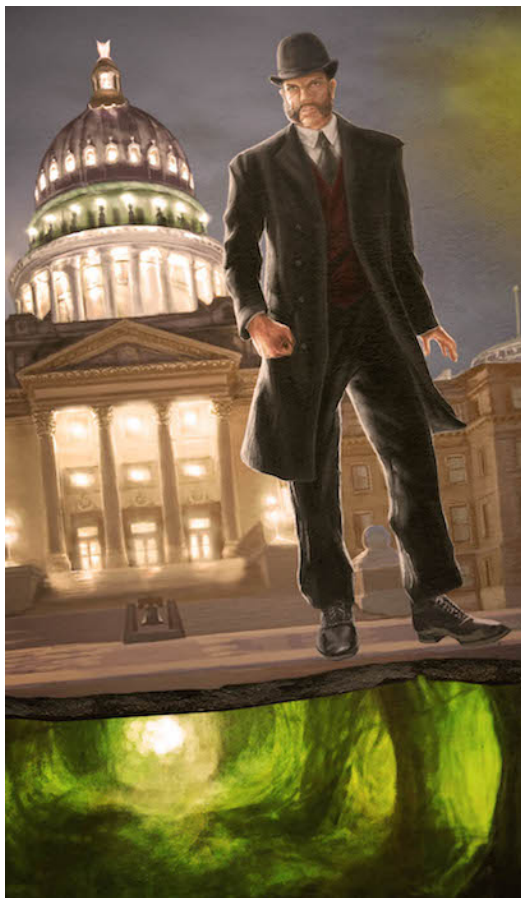
WEST WESTERLY



JAMES EDWARDS



MONTGOMERY RYMAN



EBRU ASANI



TREE OF LIFE



WEST GETS NICKED

Half a dozen opium addicts could have run a better campaign—well, half a dozen Republican opium addicts. Then again, West couldn't admit Republican opium addicts existed. If they did, they would have run his campaign without landing him on the FBI most wanted list.

The low rumble of a Model A caught West up short. Could be the Sheriff scouring the streets for liquor violations blatant enough to require enforcement. Could be one of the many enemies he had rankled during his botched campaign.

He ducked into the shadows cast by brand new incandescent street lamps. Ironic—he had based his campaign on progress such as the street lamps. Now he wished Boise's downtown business district was pitch black. *Pitch black*. That gave West an idea. He exhaled with a visible puff.

Nearly Hallowe'en, the unpredictable Idaho weather had turned bitterly cold as recent as two days ago. God

and nature and the voters were allied against him. But not the Chinese—his only stalwart supporters. If he could reach the Chinese laundry across from Hannifin’s Cigar Shop...

Headlights rounded the corner of Bannock and headed in his direction. West panicked. While his mind envisioned a graceful escape into a nearby alley, his boots stumbled over a crack in the walk and spilt him into the well-lit street. “Curses.” He gripped his ankle. The gunned engine of the Model A erased the pain. “To flight!”

He skittered across the frost-slickened surface of the street as the silhouettes of dual Tommy Guns emerged from the auto. West barked in fright and doubled his efforts to sprint clear of the bristling Model A, manned no doubt by the Irish mobsters he’d accidentally fingered in a bootlegging network three days prior.

As West reached the opposite walkway, rapid pops echoed between the downtown buildings. The spark of ricochets lit the path before him. Following the path straight through a shopfront window, West crashed down in a glittering storm of glass and slid into a rack of clothes.

Before West could stand, an arm reached down to grasp him. He squeaked as the arm plucked him from the floor like a feather from a chicken. In the dim lighting, his eyes came to focus on a genteel older gentlemen with ridiculously large mutton chops. “Um, sorry for the mess

—”

A slap stung West’s cheek. “Wait—”

A backhand quickly followed. “What—”

A third followed the first. “Who—”

Then another. “Stop that!”

The mysterious man with mutton chops did nothing of the sort. Instead, he continued the humiliating onslaught while dangling West at arm’s length and sprinting toward the back of the shop. “I say, my panicky friend, how might one stifle your blubbering?”

Before West could respond, thereby meriting another slap, Mutton Chops tossed him into a display of trousers. Removing a pair of Levi’s from his face, West marveled as the elderly man demolished a portion of the brick wall with a single haymaker. Two more punches produced a hole the size of a man.

“Out you go.” Mutton Chops seized West by the collar. He heaved him into the back alley as tires screeched to a stop in the street.

“Who are you?”

West managed the complete sentence before Mutton Chops slapped him again and threw him over his shoulder. He took off at a jog. “If I answer, will you cease your infernal whimpering?”

“I swear.”

“Sir Montgomery Ryman, but those I don’t kill know me as Monty.”

UNDERGROUND LOVE

A drop of water struck the scar tissue over James' right eye. He clenched it tight. In the closeness of the tunnel's pitch black, he focused on the sound of Ebru's voice. Like the brush strokes of a painting, the silky undertones of her Armenian tongue transported him to an ancient Kingdom populated by beings of light.

She halted her story—the tale of an ancient tree sprung from the center of an ocean.

James felt her shudder, despite the distance between them. "What is it? Don't stop. I want to hear more."

"How do you fish these stories from me? Stories I haven't heard since I was a girl listening to my father speak them as if they were true."

"My voice is ugly. There's good reason for me to dwell underground. Not you."

"I'm only noticed down here, with you."

"Most men are blind and stupid."

Ebru drew a ragged breath.

James couldn't tolerate her tears. He inched across the

darkness.

She didn't shy from him.

"I would love you as you deserve, if I were younger, less damaged." He took her hand in his. "Know that I love you like a father would his only daughter."

She leaned into him.

The heat of her tears soaked into his sleeve.

Stone grating across stone echoed in the distance. Next came the slog of wet boots stepping out of the wash trough and down the steps. Ebru sprang to her feet.

James crouched at the ready, clenching his fists. Old man Zubiri hadn't announced the entry. That meant unwanted guests.

UNWELCOME VISITORS

Eyes closed, James threw the first punch. He felt the intruder's nose flatten beneath his knuckles. He spun to catch the second man in the gut, but his fist whiffed through thin air.

"Quick and without warning, like a soldier."

James aimed a kick at what he figured to be the family jewels of a British-sounding gentleman.

A talon-like grip clutched his leg and flung him heels over head.

"For the love of free silver! Cease your assault!" The man with the broken nose spoke through his fingers.

James pushed himself up from the floor of the tunnel. "Who are you and what do you want at 3:00 AM in my tunnels?"

"Your tunnels?" The man with the British accent struck a match, lit a pipe and puffed it until its glow revealed his face. It was framed by wild, white hair.

James started at the presence of a third man, shoulder to shoulder with the white-hair.

“You only heard the two of us, did you, son?” The second British gentleman’s features were identical to the first, save his flagrant mutton chops crowned by a neat bowler. “My brother and I have been known to move in sync as if one soul.”

James inched closer to Ebru, sheltering her from the strangers. “Your business?”

“Indeed. Sorry for the abrupt entrance. Due to my noisy chum, West Westerly, the one with the blood gushing between his fingers—”

James raised a fist. “Your business.”

“I’m Montgomery Ryman. This unkempt and uncouth fellow is my twin brother, Kered McLeavittson.”

The wild, white haired man puffed queer-smelling smoke from his pipe.

“Our business, if I’m not mistaken, is with you.”

James shook his head as if shaking off a bad memory. “You’re mistaken.”

“Then you’re not the curator of these tunnels? One Sergeant James Edwards?”

James jolted at the title. Before he could deny the truth, the gentle lilt of song swayed the attention of everyone in the cramped underground chamber. James focused involuntarily on the distant words.

“Take it easy, take it easy. Don’t let the sounds of your own wheels drive you crazy.”

COMPROMISED

The music echoed from deeper inside the tunnels. But James had learned to trust gut over mind when underground. Manholes, exhaust vents, shifting air currents—at times, the most intimate above ground conversation wafted through the tunnels as if whispered in James' ear.

The air current shifted and took the music with it. West Westerly flipped open his butane lighter. The flickering flame revealed the presence of all five members of their odd party. As if gripped in a spell, everyone in the chamber snapped to attention simultaneously.

West spoke with his nostrils pinched together to stem the bleeding. "Good sir, I'll overlook the bludgeoning of my nose, if you'll simply confirm your identity."

James locked onto a question he'd been pondering since he and Ebru had first been interrupted. "How did you get past Zubiri unannounced?"

"Who, old Jack Gartzia?" West scoffed. "The fool was asleep."

James swore. "Then you left the door open!" He rushed past West toward the carved stone stairs. "Mr. Zubiri is old, but no fool." He stopped short of referring to the smarmy local politician as the epitome of fool. With the entrance wide open, there was no time for argument, nor another round of fisticuffs.

West chased after him. "Good sir, I meant no offense. Please, hear us out."

At the top of the stairs, James climbed over the stone sill and dropped into the laundry trough—ankle high with detergent-laden water. "Zubiri?" He spotted the elderly Basque watchman asleep on his stool. He also spotted two men in suits striding across the street—Irish mobsters.

James recognized Earl, a tempestuous individual too cunning to be considered a brute despite his outward manner. "Zubiri, wake up."

The watchman snorted awake. "By shepherd's watch, be not snaking a man from—"

"Company." James clutched Zubiri's arm and nodded toward the mobsters. "Inside, quick."

"Fickly fiddle stones. And who be those?" Zubiri pointed northward up the street. A Model A equipped with an extra spot light rounded the corner.

"Police." James tugged Zubiri from his wooden stool and pushed him square into a perturbed West Westerly.

"Sir, please. All we request is confirmation—"

"It's him!" Earl the Irish mobster recognized West's incessant plea and dashed toward the cleverly disguised tunnel entrance. The mobster's partner remained slower on the uptake—perhaps frozen in the police headlights like a bumper-slain deer.

"Inside!" West leapt into the trough. Skipping across it like a stone, he rolled over the sill and disappeared.

"But I can't besmirch me watchman's name by abandoning the post." Zubiri complained.

"What do you call falling asleep?" James helped the old man into the trough, trying not to hurry him too roughly.

Earl leapt into the trough with them. "Hand over Westerly, or there'll be trouble, Moleman."

James couldn't afford a fight now. "Take him. Just get inside before we're spotted by the police."

"Police? Where?"

James lifted Zubiri out of the trough. "Get the door."

"Hey, wait!" Earl clutched James by the collar.

James grabbed the hefty mobster by the shoulder and belt. With a single tug, he wrenched the both of them over the side of the trough and into the tunnel entrance. "Shut it."

Zubiri dropped the lever. A thick, stone door slid shut with a reverberating thud.

Earl swore. "Get off me, Moleman, before I break your bloody neck."

James stood and helped the mobster up. As he did, he leaned close and whispered into Earl's ear. "Hurt anyone other than Mr. Westerly, and I'll send you to hell personally."

Earl laughed. "Then we're agreed."

"It's best we be praying them plug-legged whimper nickels didn't spot us hoisting Irish into the laundry." Zubiri descended the smooth, wet stairs carefully.

"What the bloody hell is he going on about?"

"The police." James followed the old watchman, taking each step with certainty despite the pitch black. He heard Earl shuffling blindly about in attempt to follow them.

"And if the coppers find the entrance?"

"You heard Mr. Zubiri. Pray they don't."

FURTHER IN

Forgetting the strangers, James cut a path toward Ebru based on her scent—olive oil and detergent. He knew the pitch black would subdue the others until he could deduce their next move. If the police drove on, James would open the door and force everyone to sort their business in the street.

“James, I was worried.” Ebru tugged him into a corner. “Who are these people? And how do they know you?”

“You’re okay? The Brits didn’t harm you?”

“They’ve done nothing but whisper to each other.”

“And Westerly?”

“Gone further in.”

James swore.

“You’re not responsible for him.”

James ground his teeth.

Ebru must have heard his jaw popping. “What happened up there?”

Before James could respond, the tunnel reverberated

with a dull thud.

"The police." James hadn't wanted to contemplate the next move. "We have to seal the room, quickly."

Ebru clutched his sleeve. "And all these people?"

"We take them further in." He gripped her shoulders. "Plant the evidence, but stay away from the Brits. There's something off with them." James could tell Ebru was nodding by the way her body shifted slightly. "Good girl."

He left Ebru to her business and searched for Zabiri while avoiding Earl. The mobster seemed to be searching the chamber as quietly as he could manage. *Good*. His hunt for Westerly would keep him occupied until James and the others could manage their escape.

Muffled shouting followed another vibrating thud. Now that the police knew what to look for, they would locate the lever any minute. James stashed a discarded piece of copper pipe at the small of his back before locating Zabiri. "We've got to seal the room." James whispered.

"Aye. I'm feared you're right, and at my own fault."

"There's half a dozen people down here to blame. I need you to open the chute and fetch us a broom without being noticed."

Zabiri hesitated. "We're not going to flush these wool burs into the street?"

"Westerly's already gone further in, and I can't trust

the Brits not to talk to the police.”

“By Kinderhorn’s beard.”

“The chute and the broom.”

“Pinch your cheeks. I’ll be after them directly.” Zabiri shuffled off.

James headed for the secondary door. The precautionary measure had been his own idea. With a flywheel rather than a lever, it’d take him a minute to crank the door shut. He was counting on the delay and the noise to bring Earl and the Brits to him so they wouldn’t pester Ebru or Zabiri.

James found the wheel in seconds. It took all his strength to break it loose. With a pop, the stubborn wheel began to turn.

“Hey!” Earl forgot his attempt at stealth.

James steadily cranked the wheel, sliding the rock wall shut an inch at a time.

“Curse you, Moleman. We had an understanding. If I find you—”

“Temper temper, my Irish brother.” The well spoken Brit, Monty, interrupted Earl’s verbal assault. “If Sergeant Edwards intended to shut us in, he’d have come up with a slightly more abrupt method.”

James continued to crank the wheel, letting the others come to him.

“We’ll see about that.” Earl worked his way around the perimeter, both hands on the wall.

Monty and Kered took a direct path. The diminished glow of Kered's pipe betrayed his location.

James leaned into the wheel. It was stiffer than he'd hoped. His arms trembled at the effort.

Ebru appeared at his elbow. "One crate of moonshine and some copper tubing were all I could find nearby."

James grunted his response.

A cold iron grip seized his shoulder. "If you're in a hurry to seal off the room, I suggest you allow your elder to assist."

James tried to shrug Monty off. But the tall, elderly Brit pried him off the wheel and tossed him to the ground.

"Step aside, lad. As for the rest of you, I suggest you find your way through the exit quickly."

A distant shudder revealed the police had discovered the lever to the laundry entrance. No further words were necessary. Earl found his boldness and pushed through the exit first. Still puffing queer smoke from his pipe, Kered slipped from the chamber next.

James rose to his feet and guided Ebru. He left her off at the door. "Go. I'll fetch Zabiri."

"I'll be fetched already." Zabiri handed James a broom. "Chute's open skyward." The watchman disappeared further in as the slap of wet boots echoed from the stairs.

"In you go, lad. It's closing time." Monty said.

James broomed the foot prints left in the dirt, leapt

through the doorway and joined the mysterious Monty at the wheel.

Without waiting for James to adjust his grip, Monty spun the wheel round three times with a single arm. James staggered backward as the Brit carefully cranked the wheel the final few inches until the stone door clamped tight. "Well played, my young master. And not a moment too soon, I dare say." Monty held out an arm. "I'd shake your hand if I could see it."

James ground his teeth. He didn't like being one-upped in his own home. But the Brit had helped save the tunnels. Besides, James was dying for a closer inspection of the Brit's superhuman arm.

James gripped Monty's hand with both of his own and gasped. Now that he felt it with his own flesh, he realized the entire arm was metal.

"It's not as bad as all that." Monty clapped James on the shoulder with his fleshly hand. "Besides, I hear we share the brotherhood of abnormalities. You with your uncanny ability to see without seeing. Not to mention the factory explosion you survived in Reims."

James cratered as if under a pallet of bricks. He braced himself against the roughly cut stone wall. He'd never spoken of the incident at the German chemical weapons factory in Reims with anyone.

No one outside of his family knew he'd served in the Great War. Nightmarish memories popped in his mind

like flashbulbs—screams, men on fire, men dissolving before his eyes. Then nothing but stinging, searing pain and the stench of burning flesh.

Ebru breathed into his ear. “Come further in.”

James slowed his breathing. “Of course.”

The party continued another fifty yards underground before Ebru stopped them with a stern command. “We must stay together.” She lit a flare and tossed it amongst them.

They stepped back from its red, chemical light.

With uncharacteristic assertiveness, Ebru continued. “There are inhumanly things alive in these tunnels. Things that feed on human souls—dark and evil. If you wish to emerge into the light of dawn then shut up and do what James and Mr. Gartzia Zabiri tell you.” After finishing her admonishment in English, she continued in her native Armenian.

A new student of the language, James understood only the word for “life.”

When Ebru finished, she nearly collapsed as if exhausted from the effort.

James caught her and whispered into her ear. “You don’t really believe Zabiri’s old stories, do you?”

She sighed. “I know them to be true.”

PREFERABLE TO THIS

West smacked his head on a low-hanging truss for the third time. "Curse this infernal darkness. Whatever his name is, the Moleman certainly can't be well adjusted. No man in his right mind would spend his time in such a wretched underground maze."

A far off shuffling froze West in his tracks. He clamped his mouth shut and swiveled his neck. The sound stopped. The shuffling seemed to increase whenever he raised his voice. "Best keep quiet from here on out."

The shuffling returned.

West clapped a hand over his mouth.

The noise ceased.

He exhaled. "There, it's gone again."

Of course it returned.

"Confound it. How can a man keep quiet by his lonesome in such a queer place as this. Everyone knows I find silence vexing. It's why I went into politics!"

This time the shuffling grew to a chatter before

dissipating.

West picked up his pace, one hand above his head and the other in front of his face. A chill shot through him. The underground air was drier and warmer than above ground. West shivered none the less. He knew in his gut someone had been tracking him for several minutes—no doubt the foul, double-talking Earl.

“What kind of self-respecting Irish mobster goes by the likes of Earl?” West spoke out loud to keep himself company. Then again, shuffling and stalking wasn’t Earl’s style. “Who else could it be?”

A breeze brushed the backs of West’s hands, perhaps indicating a juncture. He squeezed his eyes tight, then opened them. Of course he still saw absolutely nothing. He considered flicking open his lighter, but the paltry flame frustrated his larger desire to see sufficiently.

“I’m starting to think the police would be a preferable option.”

“Oh yes, preferable.”

West jumped at the croaking voice and smacked his head on the tunnel ceiling.

“Always someplace preferable to this.”

THREE FOR THREE

"I could hardly believe my ears." Monty lagged until he and his brother were at the end of the small party led by Sergeant James Edwards.

"After all these years of fruitless searching." Kered emptied the spent bowl of his pipe into the palm of his hand. "It cannot be coincidence."

Monty studied the other members of the party. The old watchman shuffled directly in front of them. Next, Earl plodded along with the dying flare clenched in his fist. Edwards kept the girl, Ebru, directly by his side. Monty had yet to determine the nature of their relationship, but it was closely felt by man and woman alike.

"I am not yet willing to count our chickens." Monty whispered to his brother. "But I must admit, the presence of an Armenian is provocative."

"Her name is Turkish."

"Most likely a war orphan."

"My thoughts as well." Kered struck a match and lit

his pipe afresh. "And her invocation of long life from the hand of God?"

"Of course the similarities are hopeful."

"Hopeful? Pah. She is the very same girl. She must be."

"Just because you wish it does not make it so, Kered."

"Just because you refuse to believe does not make it false." Kered puffed his pipe into a vibrant glow.

"What is it with you and that weed?"

The party stopped briefly. Sergeant James Edwards ventured a short way down a peripheral tunnel before leading the group in the opposite direction. Monty wondered at the behavior. Surely Edwards knew the tunnel layout. If he had to scout before proceeding, what for?

"Do not change the subject. You've never supported my move to Idaho, even after Sebastian proved members of the lost regiment settled here. Now it has payed off. Edwards was at Reims at the same time as the tree. The guardian blood line has sought him out half way across the globe. The girl's presence confirms it."

"You smoke too much, my brother. Sebastian is a nice fellow and a good farmer. The girl is a refugee. We have proved nothing more."

"And her mention of an inhuman and evil entity dwelling in these tunnels? Feeding on the souls of men? That doesn't remind you of anything?"

A sharp, blood-curdling scream emanated from deeper inside the tunnel complex or from the belly of the earth itself. The other members of the party sprang into full alert.

Monty sighed while uncorking the brandy chamber hidden in the bicep of his mechanical arm. He raised the arm as if to smell the metal armpit. Instead he tossed back a snifter of the golden liquor. He recorked the reservoir. "You very well may be right about Sergeant Edwards and the girl. If that girlish scream is who I think it is, let us hope for Westerly's sake, you are not three for three."

THE NEW WEST WESTERLY

James and Ebru sped through the pitch black passageways, many of which James had chiseled and cleared with his own hands. "This way."

"Slow down." Ebru tugged at his shirttail.

"We need to find Westerly before he compromises more tunnels."

"It's not him I'm worried about. Stop and listen."

James froze. A soft tittering faded quickly. He couldn't be sure it wasn't the echo of his own movements.

Ebru grabbed his hand and signed into his palm. She used the sign language James and his platoon had worked out in the trenches of the Great War. Soundlessly, she warned him. "The enemy are nearby. Retreat."

The hair on James' arms stood on end. He felt the truth of it.

Ebru repeated a single sign. "Retreat."

James ground his teeth. These were his tunnels. He wouldn't leave a man behind, even Westerly. He squeezed Ebru's hand, then signed, "Get the others out."

Ebru wiped his hand and started over. "Retreat together."

James pinned her hands at her side and kissed the top of her head. Before she could argue, he ventured alone toward the source of Westerly's scream. After ensuring Ebru hadn't followed him, he relaxed. *Good girl.*

For several minutes, James prized stealth over speed. He knew Ebru to be a sensible young woman, not given to flights of fancy or baseless fears. That meant he faced an enemy he couldn't identify.

A breeze brushed past his ankle. He froze. The proximity alarm in his head triggered. He faced the way he'd come, drew the short length of pipe, and struck out at the empty blackness. He strained his eyes and ears. He sniffed the air. Something or someone remained just out of reach.

"Moleman, is that you?"

James clenched his teeth. "Westerly. In God's name—"

"Never use God's name unless you're prepared for the ramifications."

James inched closer to Westerly's voice. A sour breeze washed across his face.

Westerly asked, "Where are the others?"

"Where they should be." Following a gut feeling, James searched the blackness on all sides of him.

"And the girl?"

The back of James hand struck something hairy for a

split second. He struck at it with the pipe, but missed. James lunged toward its retreat without result.

“The girl!” Westerly shouted.

James rushed Westerly, forced him into the wall of the tunnel with his forearm, and choked him at the neck. “The girl is none of your business.” He growled, his face an inch from the tip of Westerly’s nose.

Westerly exhaled and the stench knocked James backward. “My business extends infinitely beyond your comprehension. Yet, you and the girl play critical roles.”

James’ head spun. The world lost its mooring. He grasped at gravity to anchor his feet as Westerly’s voice intensified inside his head.

“Alas, you do me no good without her. I finally have a willing vessel. You have the tree. I only need the magic of the girl.”

“I’ll kill you before you touch her.” James blindly swung the pipe. His head compressed from all sides. He dropped the copper pipe and covered his ears as if to keep his brains inside. He dropped to his knees.

“So headstrong.” Westerly bent over him. “Always looking forward. You’ve never allowed yourself to wonder how you survived the explosion at Reims, or for that matter, the Bunker Hill cave-in. You’ve no idea why you’re always the sole survivor.”

James coughed and spat. He tasted the warm salt and iron of his own blood. He felt it against the palms of his

hands as the throbbing in his ears increased.

“Sure, you’ve experienced guilt, even self-loathing. You hate yourself for being powerless to save those around you.” Westerly clapped his hands over James’ hands and squeezed.

James cried out.

Westerly drove his knee into James’ nose.

Lightning spidered across James’ vision as his head tossed backward and crashed into the stone floor of the tunnel.

“That’s not going to change this morning.”

James tried to clench a fist, but his entire body had gone limp. He used his fading strength to curse. “Go to hell.”

Westerly laughed. “Where do you think I’m from?”

The sour breeze returned as fine hairs crept over the entire surface of James’ prone body. His insides roiled. He clenched his eyes tight.

“*T’vogh astvats pahpani Dzez bolorin dem ch’ar!*” Ebru’s voice exploded in the confines of the tunnel.

Through James’ clenched eyelids, a brilliant red light flared. Heat and shattered rock washed over him, then all memory faded.

TIME FOR A SNIFFER

Monty wedged his mechanical arm into the crumbling cleft of rock over their heads and shouted. "Forward! Advance or die!" Instinctively, he removed the cork in his bicep with his teeth and spat it out. The gracefully aged Kanyak brandy burned the back of his throat. "No time for fear!"

He shoved Earl through the crumbling gap in the tunnel just to discover his arm had stuck fast.

"Brother!" Kered reached back for him.

"Don't be daft!" Monty kicked his brother clear of the cave-in as the compromised tunnel released his arm and swallowed him whole.

"Bloody hell, who turned out the lights?" Monty inhaled an acrid mixture of carbon dioxide and dust. He coughed, causing his tomb to contract. "Oh right, the tunnels." He spared a short moment to bar pain from his mind. His next thoughts were of the incantation he'd heard in Armenian the moment before an earthquake had

shook them. His Armenian wasn't automatic, not like his French, Arabic or Turkish.

He drummed his brain until the translation formed. It was an imperative—something resembling, *God protect us from every evil*. He finally dared believe Kered had been correct. Ebru was the same little girl from the last time they came this close. If it hadn't have been for the rampaging German-led pogrom against the remaining defenders of the tree—"

Another thought chilled him. The girl must have had a reason to invoke the spell that collapsed the tunnel. *The evil she'd warned them of*. Monty had never given such mythology any heed. Kered had always been the mystic. But whoever their enemy, he wasn't about to lose the tree for a second time.

He flexed his mechanical arm. It responded.

If the entire weight of the earth above the tunnel had collapsed, he'd already be dead. If any sudden movement were to collapse the rest, he'd soon be dead. *Destiny belongs to the bold*.

After a wistful longing for a swallow from his brandy reservoir, he swept his arm upward and out.

BEDTIME STORIES

Unfamiliar and distant lyrics roused James from his stupor. The song progressed for several minutes. When it ended, all he could remember were the words, “You can’t always get what you want. But if you try sometimes, you just might find, you get what you need.”

He focused on the words until they sparked his conscious mind. “Ebru?”

James rose onto an elbow. His head throbbed and his hair had matted with blood. The wound was no longer bleeding freely, so it could wait. “Ebru.” He crawled forward on hands and knees as his mind scrambled to piece together his memory before the blackout.

“James?” Ebru breathed his name.

James located her head and lifted it into his lap. “Can you move?”

“I’m fine.” She sat up. “Westerly?”

“I don’t know.” James sniffed the air. The foul scent had faded. “What happened?”

“I think my past has found me.”

James waited for an explanation.

"I only remember flashes of my parents. Mostly, I remember my father's bedtime stories."

"About the tree."

"Yes, always the tree. I thought he had made it up to distract us from the slaughter of our people."

"And the words you spoke moments ago?"

"My father made us repeat them every night before we slept—prayers of protection. I speak them whenever I fear."

A memory sparked in James' thoughts. "Westerly said something about already having the tree." James squeezed his throbbing head. "He said he already had a host and the tree. All he needed was you."

Ebru shuddered.

"I think it's time you tell me the rest of the story."

ALL EXPENSES PAID

West stumbled mindlessly through the dark. He'd forgotten when and where he was. He didn't understand why the sun and moon had been extinguished. But he knew he had to get away.

A soft chittering pursued him.

"Who's there?" West squeaked. "What do you want?"

The darkness didn't respond.

"Oh, wretched fortune. Why is this happening to me?" His skin crawled. A myriad of small cuts wept blood. He'd lost his suit coat and one of his shoes. "How does a man lose a single shoe?"

Hollow laughter sent a series of quakes through West.

"What do you want with me!"

"You know good and well what I want, Westerly."

West jumped at the closeness of a solid, human voice. "Earl!"

The Irish mobster flashed his butane lighter. His menacing, disembodied grin appeared suddenly, like the Cheshire cat. "Thought you could bury your head in a

hole, did you?"

"No such thing." West composed himself, almost glad to see the hit man sent to collect on his life. "I only fled in order to fetch my recompense."

Earl shook his head. "You talk like a fairy. At least do me the favor of dying like a man."

"Education does not make a man soft." West held up his hands in defense. "I merely meant to say, I admit my wrongs, and I've come here to collect all my worldly wealth and offer it to you as an apology."

Earl scoffed. "You think money can make up for fingering me in court?" The mobster's anger flared. He jabbed West in his already broken nose.

Tumbling backwards and flailing his arms, West knocked the lighter from Earl's hand. The tunnel returned to pitch black. Before West could retreat further, a foul breeze encompassed him. "Not again."

A legion of fine, bristles rushed over and through him. When his eyes opened, blindness had transformed to sight. The darkness remained, but its detail became illumination to him. He formed every outline of the crouching mobster as he searched for his lost lighter.

"Curse you, Westerly. No more clowning. I'm gonna spend one more thought and two more bullets and be done with you for good."

West leapt to his feet. "Let me spare you the expense."

Earl didn't have time to look up.

West no more than thought the thought, and the mobster dropped dead. In seconds his body turned to dust. Tendrils from West's feet consumed the dust and leached the stone clean.

West felt both satisfaction and horror. His hatred encompassed Earl and himself and everything else. "Indeed, the time for clowning has passed, as has all of human history."

BORN AGAIN

The belly of the earth groaned, reluctant to release Monty from its grip. The surrounding rock threatened another collapse. Working quickly and as precisely as possible, Monty crushed the boulders that pinned him down. The dust grew too thick to breath. Dizziness threatened to overtake him.

With a final stroke, fresh air rushed in. Quickly, he freed his legs and escaped the compromised area as another collapse filled the space.

“Brother!” Kered pulled Monty further from the dust cloud.

Monty sniffed the reservoir in his mechanical bicep. He tipped it back, but found it dry. “Bother it all. I don’t suppose you found a speak easy while I was otherwise occupied? Or a still perhaps?”

Kered kicked Monty in the shin. “You know, I was just about to, until your distraction.”

“Well played. Now help me up.” Back on his feet, Monty checked the condition of his extremities. One knee

appeared hyperextended and less than fully functional, but the pain had yet to set in. The rest of him had fared remarkably well. "It appears I'll survive long enough to partake in a proper drink back at the farm. I'm rather fancying Sebastian's grappo at the moment."

"After we find the tree, vanquish Beelzebub and find a way out of here, I'll be chipper enough to join you."

"You haven't drunk anything stiffer than seltzer since father passed."

"I haven't had occasion."

"I look forward to it." Monty put an arm around his brother's shoulders. "Not to change the subject, but you really think the Prince of Darkness lives in Idaho?"

"Indeed, I do." Kered responded. "During your entombment, Mr. Zubiri and I discussed the matter in full."

The watchman made his presence known. "The evil one appeared some months back."

Monty probed the darkness with his ears. "And the others?"

Zubiri answered. "James and Ebru left to check on the cowardly weasel. Irish left after the earthquake. Now we best find James and Ebru before the devil do."

"Lead the way. I'll follow at your service." Monty said.

Zubiri scurried further in, leaving Kered and Monty to keep up. "You boys talk stranger than a shepherd three

months from the village.”

“While we’re talking, do you mind if I ask one last question?”

“Toot your pretty.”

“Right.” Monty scratched his chin. “I’m curious as to the protocol when vanquishing an immortal spirit of unmentionable evil.”

Zubiri spit. “You give him what he wants and then poke him in the eyes before he sees it coming.”

CAN'T FIGHT THE PAST

Ebru exhaled and rested her head on James' shoulder. "That's all I can remember."

James reflected quietly before asking the only question he couldn't erase from his thoughts. "Do you think any of it's true?"

"Before tonight, no."

"And now?"

"What do you think?" Ebru bounced it back to him.

The skeletons of James' past rattled too loudly for him to contain them. "I've never told anyone about Reims."

Ebru waited patiently for him to continue.

"My platoon had been assigned mop up for several industrial blocks of the city. The warehouse didn't feel right from the start. It had been staged—done up to look abandoned—but the garbage was fresh. No vermin. No decay.

"Erwin tripped the wire. He died fast." James quaked with the memories. "The krauts were still evacuating the building—something real precious. It must have been

taking too long. There was a firefight. Then a chemical explosion.”

“The blast knocked me unconscious. I woke up under a heap of mangled lab equipment wearing glass shards like porcupine quills and missing part of my face. Half my platoon died in the fire.” The nightmare overwhelmed him until Ebru squeezed his arm.

“Finally, I couldn’t stand their screams. I don’t know what happened next. I went nuts. I stormed the nearest kraut and hit him with something. I don’t remember what. I took his gun and killed the rest. On the way out, the building collapsed. A steel I-beam pinned me to the ground.

“I’ve always known I should’ve died that day.” James lifted Ebru’s head from his shoulder. He stared into the darkness that masked his deformity and imagined her eyes staring back at him.

“Here I am. Here you are. I fought against the Germans less than two years after they killed your parents. What if the story *is* true? What if your people were defending immortality itself, and the Germans took it? But then, during the war, they lost it in a warehouse in Reims?”

Ebru didn’t respond.

James caught an alien scent on a light breeze—like sulfur and curdled milk. He pulled Ebru to himself protectively and held a finger to her lips. They sat in

silence while the odor intensified.

“Don’t stop on my behalf.” Westerly wheezed the words as if a bellows were artificially operating his lungs. “The story was just getting good.”

Ebru spoke softly but firmly. *“Menk’ payk’arel dem ch’e mis u aryun, bayts’ dem prints’ipalities dem liazorut’yunneri dem Rretinner mt’ut’yan ays ashkharhi.”*

“Quoting scripture does not impress me, although it will be nice to finally consume someone who understands their fate before meeting with it.”

“Ebru beat you before.” James stood and shielded Ebru with his body.

“I’ve had more time to acclimatize with my host. He won’t be scurrying off again.”

“No more talk.” James plunged fist-first into the darkness. His knuckles connected satisfyingly with flesh and bone. Fueled by his own demons, he rode Westerly’s frail frame to the stone floor and drove both fists into his face.

The indwelling entity attempted to speak. Fury-driven, James clenched Westerly’s throat and squeezed.

“Stop! James, you’re killing him!” Ebru cried.

James only heard the command to kill. From deep within his soul, a voice egged him onward. *Yes. Kill him, and you kill them all.* James blindly obeyed until nothing but Ebru’s gentle whimpering filled the tunnel. Westerly’s body had gone cold and limp.

Now kill the girl. James jumped up, pressing his hands to his ears and screaming in attempt to drown the inner voice. *Kill the girl!* It screeched louder. James' fists shook. His fingernails bit into his palms causing them to bleed. *I'll destroy you both.*

James lurched sideways and slammed into the rough-hewn side of the tunnel. His temple split, spilling blood onto his neck and collar. "Not if I take you with me," he growled.

James abandoned his effort to escape the evil. Instead, he bent his will toward controlling it. Temporarily, his muscles became his own. With no other plan than to spare Ebru, he careened recklessly through the narrow tunnels at full tilt.

THE DEVIL ABIDES

Gurgling curses grew louder and nearer.

The old watchman ushered Monty and Kered flat against the side of the tunnel. "Something wicked this way comes." He whispered.

A ruckus accompanied the cursing as if two men were at full fisticuffs on the fly. Suddenly, the source of the sour rage burst upon them.

Zubiri recognized the situation first. "The devil abides in the lad!"

Monty understood at a primitive level—the Sergeant had been indwelled. The presence of pure evil brought bile to the back of his throat. A vestigial sense of moral decency governed his actions. Jutting out his mechanical arm, he connected solidly with Sergeant Edward's chin. Monty cringed at the snap of the jaw. *For the greater good, old man*, he reminded himself.

The gurgling profanity stopped when James' body hit the wall. The calm worried Monty more than the madness, until he feared he'd made a terrible misstep.

“Don’t give ‘em peace!” Zubiri yelled as he charged the invisible, motionless mass recoiled against the tunnel wall. A foul wind greeted them.

Monty at once knew the smell. Its remembrance haunted his dreams. “No!” Razor sharp tendrils brushed past Monty’s legs on their way to entangle the watchman.

“The Lord be my Shepherd!” Zubiri met the inhuman tangle of ropey vines head on.

Monty did what came naturally to him in such moments: put his head down, barred it with his mechanical arm and charged full bore into the dark. He struck Sergeant Edwards in the chest and bore him into the wall as the watchman’s flesh turned to a fine dust.

With his eyes clenched tight, Monty drove his arm upward into the possessed man’s throat. He pinned the sergeant with all his might, turned his head and waited for the neck to snap.

What are you? A voice rang in his head.

“I could ask you the same.” He spoke through gritted teeth.

I am the devourer of souls.

“What’s wrong? Found one you can’t stomach?” Monty’s feet began to slip. He redoubled his effort to force Edward’s body through the very rock—to grind it to dirt if he must.

The voice in his head weakened. It spoke as if gasping for breath. *You...don’t...have...one.*

Monty twisted his elbow upward. The vertebrae in Edwards' neck slacked. A loud pop filled the silence and seemed to repeat itself for several moments. After counting to ten, Monty stepped back and allowed the body to drop to the tunnel floor.

TWO IN ONE

Monty stumbled backward into Kered. They collapsed to the tunnel floor together. After a long silence, Kered spoke softly. "Have we found it and lost it all at once?"

"I've smelled this foul scent before, after father's murder. You were there. You know what happened, don't you?" Monty wrestled with a strange nausea. A distant weeping reached his ears. He tensed.

"It's the girl." Kered held his brother back. "We should not interfere."

Monty held his peace as Ebru flowed toward the motionless body of Sergeant Edwards as if it were clearly illuminated beneath a noon day sun. He trembled at the wordless sounds of her grief—sobs mixed with strangled anger. For the first time during their ordeal, he felt grateful for the pitch black.

Finally, she formed her emotions into an incantation of her old world Armenian tongue. "I pray your heart be flooded with light, that you experience the incredible power for those who believe, the same power which has

defeated the grave.”

A blinding pulse of light banished the darkness.

Blinking through the brilliance, Monty used the cracks between his fingers to gaze upon the silhouette of the girl. The edges of her form glowed as she shielded him from the epicenter of the star, which appeared to originate from the expired Sergeant. Slowly, Monty rose to his feet.

Kered attempted to hold him back.

Curiosity drove Monty forward. The light seared his eyes, but he couldn't look away. From over the girl's shoulder, he watched hairy roots spew from the Sergeant's mouth. The skin graft covering much of his face radiated with an arterial pattern. His chest swam with liquid fire. The motion of the flames mesmerized Monty until he lost balance and dropped to his knees.

“Amen!” Ebru spoke the word like a gunshot as she raised the hairy mass of roots above her head and whipped them into a single, long strand. “Amen!” Obedient to her commands, the root wound itself into a tight ball in the palm of her hand. It pulsed once and became a miniature glowing tree like the bonsai Monty had seen in the Orient.

Quickly, Ebru lifted the tree to her lips. What had appeared solid one moment, transformed into green, luminescent smoke. With a single breath, the girl inhaled the tree, and the tunnel returned to pitch black. Ebru returned to tears.

Monty, for the first time in his life, felt regret. He had sought forces he didn't understand. He'd nearly been possessed by the same evil that had claimed his father. All this time, he'd never been qualified to possess the tree. He reached a hand toward the weeping Ebru. "You're a guardian."

"You're a monster." Ebru snapped.

Monty recoiled. He fumbled for words. "I did what duty required."

"Don't talk to me about duty. You don't even understand your own nature."

Monty huffed. "And what is that supposed to—"

"Brother, don't." Kered put a hand on Monty's shoulder, then spoke to Ebru. "Leave him out of this. I'm the monster."

"I was talking to you." Ebru's voice took on a sharper intensity. "James could sense it too. He was learning how to channel the tree. He could have become a guardian in time."

Kered trembled with passion. "He came upon it by accident, not like you and me. We were made to possess it."

"I'm nothing like you. You're an abomination!" Ebru collapsed into tears. "And I'm alone."

Kered raised his fist against the girl, but Monty knocked him back. "We're not brothers, are we?" Monty lifted Kered to his feet. "When the demon mentioned I

had no soul, he was correct, wasn't he? But how could such a thing be true?"

"It was the only way to protect myself from father's fate." Kered sputtered. "In the end, the demon overpowered him and the tree was lost. I *had* to create you."

"So I *am* an abomination." Monty sagged.

"No. You're me. I'm you. One person in two vessels."

Monty scooped Ebru from the tunnel floor. "You can fix this, can't you?"

"No." Kered objected. "We're not broken. I need you."

Monty thrust Kered against the tunnel wall with his mechanical arm. "I shouldn't exist. After this night, I no longer wish to. But you're right as usual, brother. You need me. You need to become me once again." He turned to Ebru. "Do it quickly."

"No!" Kered struggled helplessly against Monty's iron grip.

Ebru approached soundlessly in the pitch black and placed a hand on each man's shoulder. "Amen."

The tunnel sparked with a blue electricity. The light coursed through the brothers until only the physical body of Kered McLeavittson remained—once again fused with all the internal strength of Monty Ryman.

OCTOBER DAWN

“I’m sorry.” Kered shed tears for the first time since his father’s death. He’d forgotten what it felt like to care for his fellow human.

“Come. The sun is rising.” Ebru knelt over James’ body a final time before leading Kered quickly toward the Eighth Street exit.

The sound of song intensified until Kered recognized the words. “Where have all the good men gone? And where are all the gods? Where’s the street-wise Hercules to fight the rising odds?” The lyrics continued in the same vein, praising storybook heroics. Kered felt both grief and pride in the events of the last several hours. Monty’s actions had indeed been heroic. Kered regretted his inability to embody the heroics in tandem with his fearful nature.

Ebru quietly led him into the basement of a grocery, up a narrow stair, through a closet, into the lobby of a dingy hostel and finally outside into an open square.

After the endless pitch black, Kered emerged into the

comparative radiance of a grey October dawn. Overwhelmed by the expanse of fresh air, he cast his gaze skyward and watched the dimly lit belly of a cloud slide past.

“Kered? About time you show up. I was beginning to think you’d missed your first match in months.”

Kered lowered his gaze. “Sebastian?” Slowly, Kered realized it was Sunday morning—the morning of his weekly backgammon match with the kindly farmer who’d hosted his stay in Idaho. “Of course. So sorry to have made you wait.”

“No problem. I’ve made a new friend.” Sebastian gestured toward a gentleman sitting across the backgammon board from him. “Meet Nicholas Ivory. He’s a traveling musician with some truly unique song writing skills.”

Kered shook Mr. Ivory’s hand. “Were you just singing a song about heroics?”

“You liked that one?”

Kered nodded. “Oh, where are my manners. Let me introduce my compatriot.” He turned around to locate Ebru, but the girl had gone. “Oh, um...”

“Didn’t you bring Monty this morning?” Sebastian asked. “He would have loved these interlocking wooden blocks Mr. Ivory has given me.”

Kered pulled out a chair and sat. “I’m sorry, Monty was unexpectedly called back to England. Queen’s duty,

I'm afraid."

"And I didn't even get to say goodbye?"

"Quite urgent business. But enough of all that. Show me these blocks you mentioned."

Mr. Ivory scattered several wooden blocks across the table.

Sebastian pointed out their highlights. "He says he's been looking for some partners to fund an operation that would make them from plastics. Weren't you just talking about the bright future of plastic the other day?" Sebastian continued without waiting for a response.

Kared nodded and smiled. Occasionally, he cast furtive glances toward passing women. But none of them were the young Ebru. After a lifetime of pursuing the empty promise of the tree of life, he'd finally seen it. He'd come within feet of possessing it. In that moment, he'd been exposed as a phony and a highwayman.

Now, with Monty gone, he'd have to make his own way. He needed a new vision. Maybe these lego blocks Sebastian seemed so excited about were exactly what he needed. "Indeed!" He smiled at the diminutive farmer and laughed. "These interlocking blocks sound like quite the opportunity. Let's continue the discussion over a game of backgammon, shall we?"

END

GREETINGS FROM THE AUTHOR

A special thanks goes out to those of you who participated in the creation of this ground-breaking crowd-sourced story. For those of you who have come upon Tree of Life after it's live creation event, let me explain a bit of what Epifiction is all about.

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DAVID MARK BROWN

Tree of Life: Something Lurks in the Tunnels Beneath Boise
David Mark Brown

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