

A Bad Day for Mushrooms

By Tomoko M. Banks



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In the blistering heat by the slopes of Mount Lung, Cousin Owis was looking for mushrooms. He swept his long greying hair from his eyes, and trudged on. His basket was empty.

The haytime air was thick and cloying. Things were always warmer this side of the fifth Temporal Age. It was rare for him to venture near the deserted ruins of former home. He hated that haunted wreck, but it had been a particularly arid season. The makeshift fungatorium in the Family's shed had failed to provide any crops. Soon he would need new produce for the market stall he operated with old Cousin Rynde. Scrambling over the dunes, he longed for the neon lights and cool air of the underground village where he lived with the other survivors of Lungbarrow.

But he had a Family to support. He'd never give up on them. There was his partner and children, old Cousins and little second Cousins. They'd all need supper. The outcasts of Lungbarrow had blossomed, the Family growing in the long years since their curse was lifted. And yet they had nothing—no House or voice in the world. They preferred it that way. Owis remembered the tortuous years he'd been trapped in the House, he'd grown up buried under the soil of Mount Lung, never knowing the open sky. By comparison, he loved his frugal life—migrating with the weather to the sheds, stables and mountain-caves. It was so much less stifling than the pomp and ceremonies that some of the older Cousins had grown nostalgic for in their centuries of isolation.

He knew he'd get a stern talking to should he let it slip he'd returned to the ruins, as Kinkeeper Innocet outright forbade it on the occasions she tagged along for a foraging trip. But he couldn't deny the richest and most succulent mushrooms grew in the deep valley where the House had fallen from its perch.

There was a strange feeling in the air as he approached the dip where the ruins lay, the sort of thing Innocet would call 'a bad omen'. Owis stopped, the dunes dropped off at a sheer point, plummeting down to the misty valleys from which the bole of Mount Lung rose. He tried to assemble his thoughts. In the sand he spotted track-prints, the silhouettes of heavy footfall. Someone was intruding on Lungbarrow's grave. Owis wracked his brains, trying to remember if he'd seen anyone else heading this way. He'd departed his home in the shed at rush hour, avoiding the roving Hedge-guards and House-County commuters on his way through the dunes. A flash of movement rendered his musings redundant.

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Something tiny was inching its way down Mount Lung. Owis peered as close as he could, it looked ant-sized in the distance, but it was definitely a person. They were abseiling into the mist that acted as a shroud for Lungbarrow's unsightly remains. Owis stared in disbelief, and tried to focus on the mad tomb-raider. He looked closer, and saw it. A shock of blond hair, a garish fruit-print shirt. He only needed a glance to recognise that strange and panicked man dangling into the abyss. He was Chris Cwej; that alien chap who'd been the squire to the Family's runaway heir. He'd only met Cwej once, on the day the old House fell. He'd waited with the surviving Cousins during that warm night on the mountainside. Cwej had pointed out each emerging star to Owis, and held him as he wept at seeing the evening sky for the first time in his life. Owis shook the memory from his head, heaving himself down to an outcrop that faced the mountain's foot. He called out to Chris.

"Oi, Cwej! Don't go down there. Innocet says the ghosts'll kill you!"

Chris didn't seem to hear him. The suns were beating down on the dunes and mountains with a harsher intensity. Owis tried waving, but Chris had already gone.

The heat reached a crescendo, and then Owis felt the temperature drop by precisely one degree. He didn't know how, but he *felt* it deep in the weft of his being. The world was a degree cooler, and there was no Cwej in sight.

A groan echoed from the gullet of the valley below; the ghosts of Lungbarrow weren't happy at all.

A gust of wind kicked up thick plumes of dust, and Owis wheezed and choked. The gale stopped after a moment. Owis rubbed his eyes. Had he eaten a bad mushroom? He looked down to the valley, deep into the crater where the ruins once lay, and there was nothing. The ruins had gone... Vanished. He almost threw up his breakfast, his hearts beating in terror. But as he climbed up the crook of the dune, a newfound easiness came over him. A weight was lifting from his shoulders, as if some great burden had been relieved. Cousin Owis took a deep breath, and wandered home to the shack on Lungbarrow's common. He'd go to Innocet and tell her about what he'd witnessed. She'd probably felt it too, and Owis wondered if she'd be sad. He thought of Cwej, and whispered a silent prayer for him. Innocet would want to discuss all this funny business, and knowing her, over a game of cards. As the suns set, Owis decided a day without mushrooms was a worthy price to pay for the exorcism of the Family's old haunts.

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Coming Soon From Arcbeatle Press:

Cwej: Lungbarrow by Loomlight

All is not well on the world of the Temporal Superiors. Chris Cwej is having someone else's nightmares. Reflections in grimy mirrors whisper dark secrets about a forgotten past. And Chris finds himself drawn into a plot of revenge, rooted in a murderous family conspiracy. At the root of it all, is a terrible place; the Ancient House of Lungbarrow lies waiting in ruins. Something immense is unfurling in those derelict towers. The dead House inextricably stirs from beyond the grave. Many centuries ago Chris Cwej and his forgotten mentor left that lonely House on the point of Domicide. Abandoned, disgraced, resentful; it has planned for this fateful reunion. To rewrite his fate, Chris must track down the hidden figure at the heart of it all, and traverse into Lungbarrow's storied past to kill an ancient other founder, lost in Loomlight.

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