

A Time-Eyed Tale:
**The Curse of the
Mountain King**

By Tomoko M. Banks



A Bad Day for Mushrooms

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In the beginning, in the mists of time's first wellspring; before reality and totality, there lived an old and foolish King. He was called Shadowsi Gone, and he ruled over a small AgriKingdom in the mountainous Dust Planes of the Sealess Country. His mind was bright and gifted; it roared with ideas like a candlenight furnace. He could craft great inventions, and engineer the most marvellous machines.

But like most rulers, he lacked kindness in his hearts. His days were spent locked away in the ancestral seat of his reign. From his obsidian balconies, old King Gone loomed in splendid isolation over the scraggly concrete dwellings and apartment huts of the lowly carving-folk in the desert below.

He liked it that way.

He refused to ever engage with the petty serfs that lived beneath his dark towers. Instead, he would control them by sending royal guards and ministers to enforce his countless demands.

His subjects lived to farm the expanses of Petrichor's Fields. They were called the Dust Carvers.

Their lives were spent mining tonnes of precious Dust, using their King's harvesting machines.

The fruits of their labour would be sold to merchants in the distant south, all to line their King's endless pockets. The dejected peoples were exhausted by their King's nonstop orders. Their lives were wasted, their throats clogged with dust, and bones sore from lives toiling in the planes.

The Carvers' only recompense was found in the communities they built, and the faith they shared.

As the Dust Carvers grew to truly hate their King, they instead sought their spiritual governance from the ancient spirits borne on the dust of their desires. They would be dutiful subjects to the Eternal Fates of the Thread. They pledged themselves to their deities, to the Ladies Tempos, Dolor, Thanatos and Vita.

Of all the Fates, the Goddess Vita was the Dust Carvers' favourite.

Through time they learnt to keep their practices and soulful contentment hidden from their resentful King.

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But it didn't take long for the King to discover his people's secret allegiances to the goddesses.

He was furious with their devotion to anything but his divine rule. King Gone spiralled further into his isolation from the rest of the kingdom. He spent every waking hour smoking his ceremonial pipe of lungwhick leaves, trying to enter the astral realms that the Fates occupied. He strained his mind with all his might to commune with the spirits that so overshadowed him.

Day after day he failed.

The Goddess Sisters were silent.

His hearts were too rotten, his mind rejected in judgement by those high and mighty entities.

His soul was locked away from their sightful unity.

Through the years that tumbled onwards, King Gone's disdain for his subjects and their gods blossomed into a raging obsession.

They didn't harvest enough Dust for his royal economy, they didn't grow enough Magenta fruits for him to feast on, and worst of all, they continued to seek the wisdom and benefits of those accursed gods who'd cast his soul away.

Every night, while curled alone in his shining silver sleep-dial, he would curse the souls of Heaven, the most pernicious being the goddess Vita. She was the embodiment of fair chance and prevailing light.

Oh, how she inspired his people! How she instilled such devotion and unity amongst the carving-folks in a way *he* never could...

Despite his rotten hearts the King was a clever man.

He had spent his life studying ancient texts and relics of times swallowed by the entropy of the emerging universe. He was well-versed in the old legends: tales of the Once Lords, and fables of his Ancestral-Shadows who had long ago walked into this realm from a previous existence. The King knew the people of his world—and of those before—had long communed with spirits and omniversal voids rooted in the heart of his planet. In the shadows of his great castle he schemed and concocted his plan.

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Shadowsi Gone ordered his guards to gather all the arcane ephemera that could guide him to the gods.

He spent countless days and nights pouring over scrolls and dusty puzzle-boxes, learning all he could about the mysterious lore of his planet.

From his arduous studies, he discovered he could attain the knowledge he sought from the ancient crones of the priorverse, general practitioners of the astral arts, who still inhabited their caves and monasteries dotted around the most desolate parts of the world. Those ceremonial Quack-Shrinks knew the gods from the days of old, and the King knew their professed wisdom could help him.

But he also knew they would not give such secrets away freely.

Breaking from his confinement within the grand towers over his AgriKingdom, King Gone embarked on his first trip to the wild corners of his wild territory. He rode atop his royal catafalque, drawn by his finest bred bearswine. The swine brayed, the King prayed, and they galloped off into the dark and the night.

A party of his finest soldiers marched in a circle around him, forming an advancing ring of warriors; all wielded swords, whilst they journeyed south towards the Tripeak Mountain.

By the first light of candeladawn, they reached the lowest point of the mountain range. Twisted grey trees sprouted from little grassy outcrops on the lumbering slope. The King led his party through the tunnel of tangled branches, towards the little cave in the mountain they sought.

Arriving at the cave, the guards drew their swords, and the King stepped down to the cave's mouth.

Inside an ancient crone sat waiting.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

The King spoke, “Old Priestess Practioner, seer of the Fates, I seek your wisdom. You are more aged than the stars themselves, tell me what I must know. Tell me how I may meet the gods.”

The crone laughed and said, “I am not the one you seek, little man. To make deals with the gods, you must find the spirits of the broken homes. It is not my business to run errands for old fae. Not anymore. The

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souls you search for are locked far under this sacred mount. A long way from your prying snoopers.”

“And, what, pray tell, are these spirits of the broken homes?” asked the King, angered by the old woman's vulgar facetiousness. “I hope they don't expect me to reimburse them.”

The witch grinned. “You seek the souls of old immortality. The spirits were of royal mind and matter once, just as you are now, my dear Shadowsi.”

The King bristled at the improper use of his forename, but the old one went on. “The fates grew wise to the spirits' cruelty. Their palaces were split asunder. They abdicated their lordship of the Lost, and were locked away beneath the holy mountains, sealed in an inescapable box. Bound in wooden faith. They are buried at the core of the world. But only they can show you the way to the gods.”

“How will I reach these spirits, if they are trapped in the core? I shall drill through the world if that brings me to the gods' attention!”

“You could do so, if that is your desire,” she said. “But it is your path. Your choice to make, dear King.”

But the King's mind was already made.

On his two hundredth naming day, the King appeared to his people for the first time in decades.

He decreed that the machines he had devised for the harvesting of his country's Dust would now be used to drill a mighty tunnel at the base of the holy mountain.

The Dust Carvers' purpose would now be focused on digging a chasm into the centre of the world.

Centuries trickled through the King's fingers while he worked generations of his people to death.

Chiselling into the mountain, the Carvers worked endlessly. The King's chasm grew deeper and deeper, getting closer to the centre of the planet year by year, decade by decade.

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Families gruelled away to mine the core of the world. Parents passed their dusty burdens onto the children, the generational baton being handed down through the ages, as the hole grew deeper.

Even the King would sire heirs, conceived with the great-mother of flame, to hold the burden of his throne should he not return from his long-planned voyage.

By the time Shadowsi Gone had reached the grand old age of five hundred and seven, the chasm to the core had been carved. As wide as the hole of a water-well, its size betrayed the slogging centuries spent to dig it. It was just big enough to fit a single passenger. The King knew it would be a tight crawl down the infinite shaft.

Ready to take vengeance on his people and their faith, King Gone waited until the blackest night.

When dusk fell he was bathed and readied. His servers dressed him in his silk ruling gown, woven the moment of his birth. Finally, he was prepared for the descent to the core. A gathered party of his select remaining advisors and guards met with him in the cold night by the mountain. They drank bitter wine and sweet port, singing songs mocking the commonfolk below them. Soon the night faded to morning, and the time for his journey had come. Bidding his only loyal denizens farewell, he slowly crawled down into the abyss that seemed to stretch on for lightyears.

Gradually he plunged himself into the darkest of darkness. Days passed, as he shuffled down towards the heart of it all, until specks of light struggled in the receding murk to reach his eyes. The end of the tunnel looked as if it were a holy road onwards, and the King scrambled towards the gap, the taste of victory sour on his tongue.

Tumbling out of the tunnel, the King found himself in a vast misty chasm lit by abandoned torches—somehow still alit, and mysteriously abandoned. In the centre of the hollow cave he spotted an ornate carved box. It was a cube-shaped parcel sitting on a grand plinth. He knew it at once. It was a banshee trap: the final work of the Ancient Forgotten.

The King approached the box, drawing his ceremonial sword from the scabbard at his side.

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“By my right as your Mountain King, I call upon the spirits that reside here. Speak to me!” said the King to the dark. “I seek your counsel. I wish to do away with the control of the accursed ones, I need to banish the influence of those fated sisters from my world.”

The whispers of spirits trapped in the rosewood parcel rang through his mind.

Their words cut deep to his bones. They said:

“All Spirits of the Broken Homes know the Souls of Heaven. We have fought them of old. Since Vita drew the first breath into this world. Since Tempos dropped her first speck of dust. Since Thanatos spilt her first blood. Since Dolor broke her first heart. Since Fortuna built her first path and Fabula told her first story. Together we danced in the time before the Ravaging of the Origin. We have seen into your hearts, and we know of your desires—oh little King. We’ve listened to your curses, and heard your lusts all your life. We’ve watched you grow into the Ruler you are now, ageing in your castle atop the Downfall Mound, under which your ancestors moulder. We’ve seen the family you sired; the descendants you abandoned, we shall have them too. Long shall they live. We agree to a bargain with you, little king.”

The spirits paused.

Shadowsi Gone stood still, waiting and hoping for the whispers to resume.

Sweat welled in his palm, causing his sword to slip from his clammy grip and clatter to the floor.

The spirits hissed.

Were they laughing? The King was defenceless, at the mercy of the voices that were seemingly everywhere and nowhere, and yet trapped in the wooden box.

The spirits spoke. *“We will eke out your revenge on the sister you so hate. A twist in the fates and an eye for a heart, as were we tricked by them in the Once-Wars, at the birthing of this realm. If dear Sire agrees to our deal, we will forge a blood-pact to achieve your soul’s desire.”*

He shouted back at the darkness. “What is my part in the bargain?”

“You will receive your wish. All knowledge will be yours to witness and devour. There will be no more secrets in this world. Vita’s spark will languish in due course, forgotten in our wooded tomb, locked away by the spell that once trapped us; we who once walked in the shadows where this orange world now spins. Before the fluctuations

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and recursions, before this loop began. But in order to seal Lady Vita away, you must gift us a sacrifice: your true heart.”

The King gasped as the simmering thoughts snaked into his mind. The tendril-whispers of the spirits tugged at his every thought, pushing him to their wanted answer, the answer he had sought in his heart. The watchful glare of the spirits burrowed deeper, becoming a mighty tree of life that sprouted through the cavernous subconscious realms. He let go, and agreed to the Spirits’ ultimatum.

The bargain was completed and signed, the contract drawn in blood as the spirits plucked out his heart and fled their box.

It was an invasion. An infinite camera was being shone into the dark places of the mind where the King, and all the other peoples in shadows, had locked away their ideal self, and closed off their innermost personhood from all others.

It was too much. Every soul that toiled in the world of shadows saw what he saw. The boundaries were torn asunder; the minds of all were open and exposed to the maddening crowd. There was no more privacy; no more self. It drowned his crumbling mind.

With the curse completed and the old debts paid, Lady Vita was speared in her astral realm and dragged to this buried culdesac of the material plane—swapped with the escaping sprites.

The King crumbled away into the dust he was composed from. Cast through purgatory, his foolish ghost was bound as a speck of brightness, charged to count and witness each one of Vita’s abandoned subjects. A recompense to the Goddess he’d usurped. But his wish did come true... life would change forever on his world, and secrets would be no more...

Sight burnt through the world like a forest on fire. In the cinders, all thoughts were one.

It was the panoptic Revelation, and it claimed all souls. The world grew cold and dark. It became a gallimaufry for every hope, hatred, and secret of every person that would ever tread in its rolling red shadows.

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But the chorus of hope would forever be held under lock and key,
guarded by the spirits in their new

Homes.

Changed by their shared affliction of sight, the people of the world
were forever cursed to carry their

shame. They renamed themselves the Shadow People, and shared the
title as their burden. A totem of the

loss of their individuality to the deafening unity of the homeward-
bound crowd. There was no room for

loneliness; no time for privacy.

The remaining five goddesses withdrew their patronage from those
whose dreams had filled the

hourglass of their lives. Every year on the anniversary of the King's
descent, the Fates would look through

the cracks and crevasses in the world. Using their eternal eye to
observe the Shadow People as they

drudged through their lives of rituals, labour, and ceremonial battles.

Each year for a slogging millenia, the Fates were met with
disappointment. The community and faithful

offerings from the days of the Dust Carvers grew further away.

In their deities' absence the dark spirits found their homes in the
hearths, kitchens, brick and

mortar that sheltered the cursed people. These were the ancient
whispers of the devious ghosts, taking

back their old lodgings. Their bitter song mingled with the telepathic
chorus of Those forever destined to

walk in Shadows.

The Shadow People learnt to fight amongst themselves. Their
thoughts were one, and old grudges were shared freely across the
generations. But no one knew unity.

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From the ashes of the royal kingdoms and warring states, a new power arose in a phoenix flame of godsblood. The Court of Principles swept in, led by their anointed Pythia—a singular Witch who would privatise the gift of prophecy.

Her followers carried her to the cracked heart of Time City, where the First Pythia fed her sanity to her rejected gods in order to claim dominion over the mass of thoughts that entwined the souls of all the Shadow People.

Through the ages, the Pythia passed her titles and prophecies to her successors; the line perpetuated by her sisters in spirit— those gifted seers who could be trusted with the burden of holding all of time and space within their minds.

Over the course of true history, the line of oracles would grow to embody the planet itself,

becoming the living essence of the rock and dust, sky and bone of the world. Their order would bloom

into a vast empire across space, and they would inspire the songs and legends that heroes would sing with

them into battles against vampires and sphinxes. They would rule for generations upon generations, and

predicted their manifold order with the Fates would last forever. Yet little did their Pythic eye see the

true-future looming on the faraway horizon; to a childless time, where the harsh wind of logic rocks the

empty cradles.

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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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