

REBECCA KING

EMBER SHADOWS

and the LOST
DESERT
of TIME



ILLUSTRATED BY RAQUEL OCHOA

Praise for
**EMBER
SHADOWS**

‘A wonderfully imaginative tale about the power of sisterly love and defying the entangled threads of fate’

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the Storm in a Teacup

‘Rebecca King has written an exceptional
compelling debut – another star in the making
for UK children’s literature’

Alex Wheatle, author of *Crongton Knights*

‘Such fun, fizzing with ideas and a great,
really original adventure’

Penny Chrimes, author of *Tiger Heart*

‘Thrilling, filled with memorable images and
shot through with the delicious dream logic of
Lewis Carroll and Norton Juster’

Mark Powers, author of *Space Detectives*

‘Rebecca King has created something
really special . . . it is fabulous’

Justine Windsor, author of *Goodly and Grave*

ALSO BY REBECCA KING

Ember Shadows and the Fates of Mount Never

REBECCA KING

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Orion

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To my parents

My mum, who makes me feel as though

I can do anything.

And my dad, who never lets me give up.

1

The two girls crouched at the edge of the forest, their shadows stretching out ahead of them in the moonlight.

Heads close together, they stared at a map unfurled on the grass. Ember, the eldest, pushed her auburn hair behind her ears and looked at her sister.

‘It’s up to you, Juniper,’ she said. Excitement shone from her eyes. ‘Which way?’

Juniper bit her lip and studied the map some more. ‘It’s so hard, there are so many tunnels,’ she said.

Ember grinned. There *were* a lot of tunnels, which meant a *lot* of exploring to do. She looked up at the enormous mountain towering overhead. Light from the stars seemed to bounce off it, making it glitter.

Mount Never.

She turned back to Juniper, who was still poring over the mountain’s map. ‘Come on,’ Ember said, nudging her sister. ‘We’ll explore them all eventually. You just need to choose one for your first adventure.’

Juniper nodded and pointed at a long black line on the map. ‘That one,’ she said.

‘Let’s go, then!’ Ember said, standing and holding her hand out.

Juniper didn’t take it, but smiled, and began to make her way towards the mountain alone.

With a roll of her eyes, Ember gathered up the map and followed. Juniper was desperate to appear grown up, despite only being eight years old. Still, Ember would be right there to protect her if she needed it, though thankfully the most dangerous thing on the mountain had been gone for weeks.

They arrived at the foot of Mount Never together, pausing in front of an iron arch, the mountain’s name twisted into the frame like vines.

‘HEY!’ shouted a voice from behind them. ‘Wait for me!’ it called.

The sisters turned back towards their village to see a small metallic object bouncing towards them. In the moonlight, only its clock-hand-shaped body was visible. Still, Ember would have known her best friend anywhere.

‘Hans!’ she said.

As he approached them, hopping above the grass, Ember could make out more of his features. His little hands waved frantically and his toothy grin beamed up at her. Even after sharing a magical adventure together, Ember still found it incredible to think that she had a talking clock hand as a friend.

‘Were you going on an adventure without me?’ asked Hans with a pout, his turned-out feet landing on the ground in front of them.

‘You said you were too busy playing chess against yourself to come, no matter *what* we were doing,’ Ember reminded him.

‘Well, I won!’ Hans said, gleefully clapping his hands together. ‘So, now that I’m victorious, where are we going? To lands unknown? Mystical and magical and marvellous and—’

‘Not exactly,’ interrupted Ember, knowing Hans could go on for a *long* time once he got started. ‘We’re going *inside* Mount Never.’

‘Inside?’ he asked, eyes lighting up.

‘Yes. And actually, the tunnel entrance should be around here somewhere . . .’ said Ember. She unfurled the map again, holding it out with her arms wide.

‘Here,’ Juniper said, pointing to a wiggly black line that indicated a tunnel. ‘The map says it starts at the iron arch, but . . . I don’t see an entrance anywhere.’

Hans looked around. ‘Let the search begin!’ he said.

The three of them started kicking leaves away, searching the ground for any signs of a tunnel. But there was no entrance to be seen.

‘It’s hopeless,’ said Juniper at last. ‘I should have chosen a different tunnel.’ As she spoke, she leant back against the iron arch, and her elbow caught against one of the metal leaves. An almighty creak sounded around them.

Ember grabbed Juniper by the arm and pulled her close. Hans’ eyes widened.

The floor began to shudder and shake, as though an earthquake was starting beneath their feet, and a crack formed underneath the arch. It grew larger and larger, the ground opening up like a mouth.

Not wanting to fall into the chasm, Ember edged backwards, pulling Juniper with her, and Hans followed. After a moment or two, the juddering stopped, leaving a large hole in the ground, complete

with a set of steps leading downwards.

‘A super-secret entrance!’ squealed Hans in an excited whisper. ‘Fantabulous! Let’s go!’ And without giving Ember a moment to think, Hans began to hop down the steps into the darkness. Juniper quickly followed.

Taking a deep breath, Ember hurried after them, trying to push aside her protective nerves and let the excited butterflies through. But a familiar niggling worry remained. Juniper had been begging to go on an adventure for weeks. Ember herself had been missing the magic and wonder of Mount Never since she returned from her own adventure on the mountain to Everspring a month earlier. But watching her sister walk down the steps into the darkness . . .

Juniper will be fine, she told herself sternly. If there was even a sniff of danger as they journeyed to discover what was at the centre of the mountain, they could turn back to safety.

As Ember reached the bottom of the stairs, the entrance closed above her, leaving the three of them in total darkness.

‘Wait a second,’ she called out. Ember took hold of

the Illumitube around her neck and gave it a shake. It was her latest update on an old invention, the Nothing-Goes-Bump-In-The-Light. Instead of a whole jar of luminescent plants, the Illumitube was a small tube of them that could be worn around your neck like a necklace – perfect for adventuring.

With a quick shake, the Illumitube's glow filled the space around them, and, their path lit, they began to walk again.



The tunnel appeared to have been empty of any human visitors for a long time; it was cold and rocky, with spider webs covering the walls.

‘These webs look as though they have been here for years,’ said Juniper. ‘And they’re enormous!’

‘What do you think we’ll find in the middle of the mountain?’ asked Hans.

‘Knowing Mount Never, it will be something truly magical,’ said Ember, her excitement beginning to return.

After a short while, the tunnel came to a fork. Hans whooped and leapt into the air.

‘It’s the classic adventurer’s conundrum!’ he shrieked. ‘Which way? One road to certain doom, the other to paradise!’

But Ember smiled and shook her head, showing Hans the map. ‘Sorry, Hans, it’s not quite as exciting as that. The map shows the two paths end up in the same place. They link up a little further on. The one of the left looks a little shorter though. The one on the right seems to zig-zag a bit . . .’

Hans crossed his arms with a sigh. ‘Juniper, which way do you want to go?’

Juniper chewed her lip again and then pointed to the left. 'If that one's shorter, we'll get there faster, right, Ember?'

Ember nodded, and rolled up the map and tucked it into her bag, secretly *very* happy to take the shorter route. She didn't want to take any risks on this trip, not with Juniper here. The sooner they got to the centre, the better.

As the trio walked along the path, Hans chatted about his fierce chess match with himself, but, slowly, a chill crept over Ember. She couldn't help feeling as though something wasn't quite right.

She glanced down at her Illumitube. It was still glowing, but somehow the tunnel felt darker.

They walked on. It had become very quiet. Even Hans stopped talking.

'Ember,' whispered Hans finally. 'Does it feel strange in here to you?'

'No,' said Ember, hoping she sounded certain. The silhouettes of Hans and Juniper were getting harder to see, but the soft blonde colour of her sister's hair still glowed faintly in the dim light. 'It's a bit darker maybe—'

But before she could finish, Hans let out a yelp.

‘Hans?’ Ember called. She could no longer see his silhouette. She stepped forward – and instead of solid ground, her foot met with nothing but air. Her stomach lurched. Before she could rebalance, Juniper bumped into her from behind, and Ember was launched into space.

With an ‘oof’ she landed on her back, and found herself slipping and sliding downwards. The tunnel had turned into a steep slide!

Juniper’s scream followed a moment later and Ember could hear her sister skidding down the tunnel above her head. Ember flailed her arms out as the three of them slid further and further down into the mountain.

‘Wooooo-eeee!’ shrieked Hans in front of her.

Ember reached out for something to grab, but the tunnel was smooth and slippery, with no handholds. The three of them hurtled through the underground, unable to see anything in front of them, until finally, the ground levelled out and they slowed, crashing into one another as they came to a stop.

‘That was INCREDIBLE!’ shouted Hans, always

happy to have an adventure take an unexpected turn.

‘I guess the two paths weren’t quite the same,’ said Juniper, as they got to their feet, pointing. To the left of the slide they’d just emerged from, another path connected to the tunnel; this one contained a set of ordinary, safe-looking steps, leading upwards.

‘Never mind,’ said Ember, rubbing the dirt off her knees and making a mental note to go back the other way. ‘It looks as though we’re nearly there.’

Ahead, a light shone at the end of the tunnel, and Ember heard Hans softly squeal under his breath with excitement.

‘Wait!’ called Juniper. ‘Look!’

She pointed at a nearby cobweb that stretched from the wall of the tunnel right across the ceiling above them. There, hanging in the middle, was a fuzzy brown ball.

Ember frowned. ‘What is that? Mud from the tunnel?’ she asked.

Juniper shook her head. ‘That’s an egg, I’m sure of it.’

‘I thought eggs were hard and made of shell,’ said Hans. ‘That looks too fluffy to be an egg.’

‘We don’t know what it is,’ said Ember. ‘So let’s leave it and keep going.’

But Juniper was already reaching up to pull the brown ball free from the web. ‘No way. This could be somebody’s baby,’ she said. ‘From everything I know about eggs, they shouldn’t be left unguarded. And it’s far too cold in here for an egg without its mother. We can’t just leave it – it might not survive!’

‘Fine,’ Ember said, still certain it was nothing more than a ball of tunnel dirt. ‘We’re close to the centre now, so let’s keep going.’

‘It looks like a spider’s egg, but much bigger,’ said Juniper, as she tucked the ball into her jacket to keep it warm. ‘Maybe it’s a creature I’ve not read about yet.’

‘You know so much about animals,’ said Hans in awe. ‘I’m happy you’re here, Juniper. This is going to be the *best* adventure yet!’

They continued walking and, step by step, closed the distance to the end of the tunnel. There, the narrow passage opened before them into a brightly lit, immense space.

They were clearly in the very centre of Mount Never. As Ember peered up, she realised the whole

centre of the mountain was hollow; she could see all the way up to the mountain's peak, which was a blurry point in the distance above her. Below the peak was a shimmering layer, which looked almost liquid. And all around them, spider webs had been woven and sculpted to create incredible structures. Ember could hardly believe her eyes. There were roundhouses made from web, balls made of web, even web hammocks.

But as they stepped over the threshold from tunnel to mountain centre, something twisted in Ember's stomach and a thought rang clear in her mind.

If there were this many spider webs . . . and the hammocks and houses were that large, then that meant . . .

The brown ball Juniper had found *was* an egg.

'E-e-e-ember,' stuttered Hans. 'Are spiders *always* that big?'

An enormous spider, as tall as Juniper, was scuttling towards them, over the webs. Then another appeared. One by one, spiders emerged from their web homes until there were *hundreds* darting towards them.

Hans leapt into Ember's jacket as she pulled Juniper behind her back.

Everywhere she looked, spiders were rushing towards them.

There were more eyes and legs than she could count, and as far as she could tell . . .

They did *not* look happy.

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