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Wrath of the Mountain King

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Mountain King Trilogy

Son of the Mountain King

Wrath of the Mountain King

Reign of the Mountain King (coming soon)

Dedication

To my beloved sisters,
Julia, Elisabeth, and Kristiina—
remarkable women,
steadfast friends,
fellow pilgrims.

I'm glad we walk together.

PROLOGUE

WILDERNESS OF TUPHOO, YEAR 15 PA
(POST ASCENDING)

*

JENNA, RIDER OF THE MOUNTAIN KING

Jenna did not scream. The crusty rag shoved into her mouth made it hard to breathe. And no one in this barbaric land would give a second thought to a cry for help.

Deep crimson wounds crisscrossed her limbs, sticky paths of blood dug by lacerations from a whip. Abrasions scraped by leather straps that had bound ankles and wrists irritated her flesh. Rocks and branches had created dirt-filled gashes when she'd slammed to the ground. Her severed brunette braid swung in the breeze, still tied to the tree limb. What remained of Jenna's chopped hair covered her eyes.

Finally, she managed to twist her neck and tilt her head at an angle that allowed the hair to fall back, giving her a clear, albeit strained, view of her friend standing a short distance away.

Mary was ungagged but still tied to a tree. Her hair was intact, but they were not going to cut her free.

Mary sagged on her bonds. Her gaze flickered

from the body of her brother that lay nearby. The pool of Mark's blood swelled and seeped into the ground like a heartbeat in the wrong place. Swell and seep. Swell and seep. He was the first to die.

But Mary was still alive, still conscious after a brutal beating. Her captors had dangled life before her like fruit within grasp, but neither the beating nor Mark's death nor the torture of Jenna had torn Mary from allegiance to her king.

Every breath was a struggle. Her eyes held the light of a distant land. Mary caught the stare of her friend, and the look spoke comfort across the silence between them. By whatever path, they would both return to the king.

The giant man who held sway over this corner of the world moved and blocked Jenna's view. The strange, dark tattoos covering his body were intended to elicit fear and hatred. After such cruelty as had been endured today, hatred was tempting. But Jenna held only compassion in her heart for this man, for his people.

The giant's shield servant finished cleaning the dagger that had killed Mary's brother and handed it back to his chief. At a signal, a tall warrior stepped forward and lifted his bow, testing the bowstring before notching his arrow.

Jenna's eyes widened. She thrashed about, attempted to scream. The giant chief turned, stepping to her side with a leer. His toes impaled her shoulder onto the stick that had already left its mark when she fell on it minutes before. She choked on the gag. Beads

of sweat gathered and fled down her face.

Leaning down, the chief spoke in her ear, his sour breath puffing the hair back over her eyes. "Did they not call you *Jenna*? Jenna. Jenna." The man dragged her cheek with the tip of his dagger, splitting a new fissure of blood.

Then he rose, shoving his foot again on the dripping shoulder. The chief's voice rumbled, a breaking storm. "Jenna. You claim to be a Rider of the Mountain King. I have decreed that you will ride again, but this time, you will carry *my* message to your master."

His gaze drifted to Mary and the body of her brother before settling back on Jenna. "Tell the Mountain King and his son, 'see what happens to the servants of the Mountain King when they summon the tribes, bringing their empty words to where they are not wanted. The people of Tuphoo have made their choice. We serve Kiran!' The Mountain King and his son have no power here."

"You are mistaken." Mary's hoarse voice split the silence. "Flee to the Mountain King. The wrath is coming." The women's gazes met once more.

Mary blinked slowly, deliberately, a farewell.

Tears clouded Jenna's vision.

Mary glanced at the chief. "Hear me once more, O people!" Her voice grew, flooding the grove like the Great River. "The white fire you see surging from the heart of the mountain is set to reach the corners of the world. The Mountain King will send his two watchmen to you, and then it will be the end."

The tall warrior raised his bow, arrow trained on Mary.

The bow creaked. The string shivered. The arrow flew.

CHAPTER 1

BEGINNING ON AN UNKNOWN DAY OF THE
FIRST MONTH, YEAR 15 PA

*

JENNA, RIDER, SCOUT, AND SCRIBE OF THE
MOUNTAIN KING

Following is a faithful record of my journey from the Wilderness of Tuphoo, as I was instructed to keep by King Abel.

Loss of blood and shock left me unable to mount my horse. I was roughly thrown over her back, and she was set galloping by a switch. What special grace held me there over that rough terrain, I do not know. I crossed the Great River into Kazab, owing my life to my faithful horse, blessing whatever mercy in those cold hearts prompted the people of Tuphoo to return her to me when they cut my bonds.

Consciousness came and went like the tides for what seemed like days, weeks, but was likely a few hours.

It must have been a strange sight, a seemingly riderless, burden-bearing horse searching the river for a shallow fording place and then making her way with the care of a mother for her child. We must have attracted the attention of someone on the other side.

Strong arms jostled my wounds. I screamed. A moment of weightlessness followed by the sensation of something soft and cool—a bed of moss.

A forest servant of the Mountain King had found me.

Days passed as I lay half dead to the world. Inside, there was only darkness. Yes, the light of King Abel's presence lived within me. I couldn't deny that ultimate reality though the longing to deny flashed hot like a meteor through this night of the soul.

But where was the sense of his presence? Why did the light hide as though covered by clouds at the time I needed it most? Inside, the pulp of perceived betrayal lay in my hands. I rubbed my feelings raw, molding them into a wall against the pain.

What broke through that initial darkness was the most gentle tool.

The forest servant who found me pulled me back to the light through his healing ministrations. He could not see the lonely state of my soul, but he saw my physical brokenness and began there. And where love begins to work, light will soon emerge. The kind old man cleaned and anointed the lesions covering my back and limbs and face. His muttering became the music to which I fell asleep and awoke.

Peace was there as I healed. However, the torture would not release its hold. Pain still wracked every waking moment. Ghostly visions of my friends' final seconds ravaged any sleep. Often, I woke clenching my teeth. Sweat dripped down my neck, and the salt stung as it hit places where skin lay split open.

Wrath of the Mountain King

But in the storms of darkness and pain, one thought became my anchor: King Abel, son of the Mountain King, had been tortured at one time, had even endured a brutal death before being miraculously brought back to life. *The king submitted to pain, I breathed in, breathed out. And I can, too.*

And in the storms of darkness and pain, one truth broke through the clouds. The light of his presence within me, the spirit of King Abel himself, would enable me to endure.

His light had been there since I first climbed the mountain. When King Abel prepared Lady Judah to become his bride, he prepared all the people who chose to go with them up the mountain, what we called the Ascending. He restored leader and people. Through his love for Queen Judah, he showed his love for all of his people. As he gave her water to drink from the Spring of Life on the mountain, he also gave all of his people the water to drink. I know, for I was there. And as we drank, the new queen and the people all received the white fire within us, which was more than just life. King Abel told us that his own life, his spirit, was in the water and fire, and he would be in and with all of his people wherever we were.

Now the queen and the people were as one. What she did, the people did, and what she received, the people received. Those beloved of the king were not exempt from suffering, including Queen Judah. As queen and head rider, Queen Judah had traveled tirelessly throughout the lands, pleading with the people and encouraging and supporting the other

riders. All of them endured ridicule, imprisonment, harassment, and even physical attacks. Their suffering was the suffering of all. And my suffering now joined me with them, with my king, in fellowship.

My king and my people submitted to pain. I breathed in, breathed out. I can, too.

Finally, the day came when I was able to sit up with some assistance. The old man grunted. He crushed a few leaves before releasing them in a cup of cool water, which he held out to me. I inhaled the sharp scent before taking a sip. Fresh mint.

“This came for you while you rested. The messenger was in a hurry. He would not wait for you to wake.” The man pulled a small scroll from his leather satchel while he spoke.

The seal of the Mountain King gleamed like a star. I held it to my heart. *I am seen. I am not abandoned.* Slowly, every movement a test for pain, I opened the scroll. Breath I’d been holding broke its bonds, susurrating between my lips like a released wave.

“I am to return.” A knot caught my throat. Tears came unbidden. I turned away. “The riders are to return to the palace of the Mountain King.” I did not share the post script added in the firm handwriting of King Abel.

Follow the advice given you by my servants. There is something more to learn before you return.

The old man still studied me. “You must go slowly,” he said. “You need to stop for some weeks with the healing woman if you are to become well again. I can clean and prevent some infection, but

this” —he waved his hand— “this requires special herbs and oils, the likes of which none has but the healing woman.”

“Where is she?”

“You will find her when you cross the border into the land of the Mountain King. Ask for the healer. There is only one left.” The old man abruptly stood and began preparing food and drink for my journey. I lay again to rest.

That evening, the old man gave me a simple supper. “Will you tell me your story?” His voice, gentle as the underfoot moss, stable as mighty tree roots on which we sat, still startled me with the question. I hesitated. But had not this man been as a father and mother to me? Did I not owe him my very life?

I dipped the spoon into the broth and brought it up to my lips. My hand shook, and the liquid spilled from the spoon back into the bowl. I lowered the spoon. Then I nodded. “Mary and her brother Mark were my travel companions, fellow riders. We journeyed first to the farthest reaches of Kazab as instructed by King Abel. The riders, as you surely know, were sent to warn people about the black poison before it was too late.

“What we found was...resistance. Incredulity. Hostility. Some people had suspected the existence of the poison and sought to know what to do about it, but most people, whether man, woman, or child, scoffed at our account of the black poison as a fabrication. Our words were something hilarious, offensive, even

foolish to them. From the darkest hut to the glittering royal courts, the three of us were mostly laughed at and thrown out.

“Finally, we journeyed to the Wilderness of Tuphoo.” A cool breeze flicked up hair and it stuck to the sweat on my forehead. My hand trembled.

“Three entered, but only one left.”

The old man laid his hand over mine. I closed my eyes. The drag of air shuddered her body as Mary fought for every breath. Mark’s peaceful smile the moment before the knife went home. I gasped. My eyes flew open and up, up to the branches sheltering this piece of earth. Wave after wave of nausea roiled so suddenly that I would have dropped my bowl if not for the man catching it from my stiffening fingers.

Sharp, heaving breaths. Sweat. My mind coiled, spiraled, twisted like a storm-whipped rope. Surely, disseverance was imminent. Surely, this soul would release, would fly off in this storm. But the old man’s hand grew strong, mooring me to the material.

And then time returned, and the shuddering constricted into a single, great sob, the cry as that of an animal. My chest squeezed, squeezed. There was no room for air. Finally, the tears came. Knees dug into forearms, knobby bones lashed by tears as I rocked and cried, curling into myself as a shell. The old man touched my head, then rested his hand there in blessing. “Peace unto you, daughter,” he muttered. “Peace.”

“Why did they have to die? And why do I live? Why must I suffer these things? Why did they?” The

words tumbled from somewhere shattered and dark that I did not understand.

“I do not know the answers to these questions, daughter. I only know that the Mountain King whom I serve is good. I know that evil is allowed at this time, and all will be made right in the end.” He knelt beside me and removed my sandals, laying my feet on the pillow of moss.

A moment later, cool water streamed over my toes, feet, ankles. I blinked open my eyes. It was as though a breeze dissipated the storm.

I uncurled.

The old man sat by me again and picked up my broth. Peace had waited for me in the elements—the trees, my covering, the mossy hollow, my cradle, the old man, my root. Life throbbed as a gift through foot to fingertip. My breath slowed. I reached for my bowl.

We sat in the silence for some time.

Then a whisper escaped, unexpected, irrepressible. “Mary and Mark were not alone in their fate. Many of my fellow riders suffered things I have not the heart to retell.” My lungs stretched, filling with air, holding, releasing. “And of the large group sent by the Mountain King to the ends of the world—Kazab, Apostasia, and the Wilderness of Tuphoo—I believe only a handful of us will be returning with our lives. Before the...horror that befell us in Tuphoo, it had already been months since a fellow rider had crossed our paths.” Something fluttered by the corner of my eye, skimming the gash on my cheek like the trace of a kiss.

A leaf.

The stem arced with the curve of a dancer's arm, twirling in my fingers with flashes of gold. It felt strange to smile, but I couldn't help it. I gazed at the old man. "So you can see, I am more than relieved to turn homeward."

The old man reached across and took both my hands in his own. "I am relieved for you"—he cleared his throat—"but heed my warning to travel slowly. If you want to arrive at your home alive, you will take my advice and find the healer."

I nodded, blinking back tears. "You have my word. And regardless, I do not believe my horse would allow me to hurry even if I wanted to do so." I did not add, *And the king commands me to do as you say*. But perhaps, as a forest servant of the Mountain King, the old man already knew what the king wished.

I left in the early hours of the morning. Mists soon hid the old man from view, and my final glimpse was of his gnarled hand raised in benediction.

At last, I was going home. The journey would take many weeks longer than I desired—healing demanded it—but the end of my travels was certain.

As the old man had predicted, once I crossed the border into the land of the Mountain King, the inhabitants readily set me in the direction of the healing woman. People did not meet me with much suspicion. This was surprising considering the number of spies and robbers that wandered the lands, but perhaps my dreadful appearance validated my story.

After a few days, the hut of the healing woman

appeared before us, perched in a grove almost under the shadow of the mountain itself. I dismounted and stared, patting my horse as she jostled and snorted. Could she smell our proximity to the path home?

Perhaps I could bypass the old woman and make it to the palace intact. I would receive the best care in the world...if I made it. To be so close to my goal, and yet to stop, to wait! But the instructions from King Abel stood firm. *There is something more to learn before you return.*

The ancient door returned my knock with the dull thud of old wood. Could anyone inside hear that? Should I knock again? But the well-oiled hinges eased outward. The door had hardly cracked open for an eye to peek through before it was thrown wide. A tiny old woman stood there, her long, white braid draped over her shoulder like a girl. She surveyed me from head to toe. "There is a pen and shelter in back for your horse." Her voice swished like quiet water among reeds. "Then you'd better come in."

The old woman would not allow me to speak until I had eaten, coaxing me with fresh strawberries, bustling and brewing something that smelled like tea until I had consumed the last crumb of her dark bread and thick, mellow cheese. She held out a steaming cup, nodded for me to begin my tale, and listened to the whole story without interrupting. "...and here I am." I finished, lowering my head.

With hands still cracked and swollen, I cradled the cup as though its very warmth would infuse restoration. The tea slipped over my tongue, sharp

roots blended with something floral and what must have been wild honey.

The healing woman studied me for some minutes, her chin resting on her hand, her manner like that of a mountain cat in thought. The woman had a sensible face. Her eyes glimmered, penetrating and bright, her nose no less sharp, her smile no less bright. But something shrouded her with an air of sorrow, and I wondered at what might steal this woman's peace.

"You have done well to come." Finally, she spoke. Another long pause passed between us. "I will do all I am able to help you. But you must stay here for many weeks so that what I do for you may not be undone by impatience."

I nodded my gratitude, and thus began the months of healing that brought me from near-death back to life.

Over time, I discovered that the healing woman was not only skilled in the arts of physical healing, but she was also wise in the ways of treating distress that was emotional and mental. Over time, my nightmares abated. Over time, I learned to smile and laugh again, and my heart felt less heavy.

As I healed and contemplated leaving, the old woman told me what lay heavy on her heart, and thus our bond of friendship sealed further.

"Months ago," she muttered one evening as we sat around the fire, "soon after the first beacon of white fire split the evening sky, I gathered precious herbs under cover of darkness when there arose the pounding of many hooves, not a common sound in

these parts nowadays, I can tell you! The horses stopped close to where I crouched behind a screen of brush. I was afraid, though I did not know why.

“These herbs can only be found near where the fissure of white fire had split the earth like a burning wound, and by that light, I was able to see from my hiding place even though it was likely midnight. Hoods covered the features of perhaps five or six riders. To my surprise, a woman was first to speak. ‘I ordered my head priest to have his man meet us here,’ she said. ‘He should arrive soon.’

“‘And you are certain this is what is required?’ one of the other riders replied. Tense silence answered him. An owl’s screech pierced the night, then another, like twin omens of death.

“My heart pounded. An almost palpable shroud of evil seemed to float around the riders. The man who had spoken opened his cloak and revealed a bundle wrapped within. It appeared to be a sack of potatoes, or something of that size, perhaps a small animal. ‘Then what must be, must be.’ His voice hardened.

“I blinked, and another man appeared, standing on the ground so suddenly it was as if he had arrived out of thin air. His back was to the bright light of the fissure, and he was wrapped from head to toe in a dark mantle. A deep hood completely covered his face. ‘Why are you here?’ he asked.

“The severity in the newcomer’s voice sent a tremor down my spine.

“‘Have you come to take the child?’ the woman demanded, and the man extended his arms. ‘Give the