

BATTLE FOR  
TRISTAINE  
TRISTAINE BOOK TWO

by  
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## CHAPTER ONE

*Writing in one of these things is illegal in at least half the Cities in the Nation. Personal journals were outlawed even before personal computers. I've never understood how domestic terrorists could exploit some school kid's diary, but that's been the law as long as I can remember.*

*Shann tells me not to worry about it. "If we're captured," she said, "You'll be shot for treason long before anyone gets around to charging you with journal writing."*

*I've never even littered.*

Brenna brushed a leaf from the page of her journal and focused on the tall Amazon at the edge of the grove. Jess was hauling a roped parcel of dried meat several yards up an aspen to keep it from predators. She was intent on the narrow platform as it rose in even stages toward a high branch.

Brenna lost herself for a moment in the subtle dance of muscle in Jess's tanned forearms and the glossy hair she shook from her eyes to check the plank's ascent. Brenna forced her gaze back to the notebook in her lap.

*I'm losing track of time out here. The battle in Caster's camp is a dim memory now when I'm awake.*

*It took Jess and Camryn several days to heal enough to make the hike through the foothills to this meadow. That journey took a week, and we made camp here over a month ago. How long has it been since we escaped from the City? Six weeks? Impossible.*

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*Shann knows more about healing than I do, but we couldn't get Jess through a night without fever for what felt like months.*

Brenna tipped her head back to catch the light breeze that feathered her hair across her forehead. The nights had already turned cold, but their refuge was not so high in the mountains that it missed the last blush of summer. The hushed morning trill of a wood thrush joined the music of sparrows in the surrounding trees, and Brenna was filled with a pleasant lethargy.

*Shann wants me to record my dreams in here as well as keep a diary. I think that's redundant because I can't seem to stop talking in my sleep, so everyone's heard all my dreams anyway.*

*The Amazons have decided I'm some kind of latent mystic. Even Jess seems convinced of it.*

*Practicing mysticism, I should add, is still illegal in every City in the Nation.*

*For the first time, it might be possible to listen for what Shann calls my inner voices and think of something other than brute survival. We've all been so focused on finding food, tending the wounded, and keeping watch for these last weeks. But our immediate needs are being met. One advantage of Tristaine's Amazon heritage is the woodlore her daughters have retained. Everyone but me seems to know enough about fishing and hunting to keep us decently fed.*

*All of them teach me when they can. Shann deserves her reputation for saint-like patience, based on how she taught me about Amazons this summer. She's a walking encyclopedia on Tristaine, and she's generous about finding time for me. If you need to take a speed course about an Amazon clan, it really helps to have their queen's undivided attention.*

*Kyla keeps me from poisoning anyone when I cook, and she's teaching me to track. She's better at night tracking than either Camryn or Jess, which gratifies us both to no end.*

*Camryn is friendly now, but she still keeps her distance. She answers any question I ask, then drifts politely away. We're closer than we were before the battle at Caster's camp—digging a bullet*

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*out of someone's leg will do that—but I still can't call her Cam to her face.*

*Mostly, I learn from Jess—everything from how to skin a boar (she's impossibly sexy even when skinning a boar) to freehand fighting techniques. She started drilling again weeks ago. Sooner than I liked, but I can see her strength coming back. She takes us all through three hours of defense training a day now. Even Shann joins us sometimes, and she moves really well for a woman in her forties. I've got a lovely hematoma on my hip the size of a fist.*

Kyla's musical voice interrupted Brenna's meditation on her bruise. "Hey, Jesstin! Shann's eyes are bothering her again."

Kyla and Camryn paused on their way into the forest. They carried empty packs for gathering herbs and edible greens, and Cam cradled one of their two rifles.

"Does fennel have three leaves or four?"

"Small yellow blossoms," Jess called, tying off the pallet with an efficient slipknot. "Know what you're picking, Ky, or you'll poison our lady, rather than ease her eyes."

"We'll look for ambrette too, Jess, fer you and yer monthly crrrrrankiness." Kyla's trilling imitation of Jess's brogue broke Camryn into cackles, and Brenna smiled as they disappeared into the trees. Their adolescent teasing reminded her so vividly of Sammy.

*As far as we can tell, Caster is laying low in the City. We haven't seen or heard signs of aerial surveillance for weeks. I'd like to think we've seen the last of her, but stone-cold sobriety won't let me kid myself.*

*Shann wants me to get the basic facts about our recent history down. If this journal survives us, she wants Tristaine to know what kind of enemy they're dealing with.*

*Caster was the most eminent scientist in the City, and the Clinic where she worked was the best medical research facility ever funded by the Government. I'm putting all this in past tense because I assume, believe, and devoutly pray that our escape changed all that. Caster was banking heavily on the Tristaine Study. She staked*

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*her reputation on its success. Without Jess, there's no study. Now there's just one disgraced and very pissed-off scientist.*

*The Military funded the study to find a way to force the Amazons of Tristaine out of their mountain village. They were becoming folk heroes in the City, and that made them dangerous. Steady streams of women were stealing over the City limits to join the clan. Any kind of political unrest is anathema to the Government, and in the popular imagination, Tristaine was becoming a sort of renegade promised land.*

*The Feds had Jess captured and hired Caster to devise a method to gain an Amazon's compliance. They wanted to find a way to render an Amazon passive and controllable. They had no idea who they were dealing with. None of the tortures used on political prisoners were able to turn Jess. I know Caster would have killed her trying, and Jess would rather have died than betray her clan.*

*Shann wants us home in Tristaine before the first snowfall. The Amazons long so much for their mountain village. I long for it too sometimes, and I've never even seen it.*

*Every night before we sleep they tell stories about Tristaine. Every morning, I wake up next to Jess, my head on her breast, and I hear her heartbeat, steady and strong. Then I remember kneeling over her on the floor of Caster's lab at the Clinic, pounding on her silent chest and screaming.*

Brenna dropped the pen as a shiver coursed up her spine. This couldn't be what Shann intended, this futile dwelling on the past. And it was easier to shelve those memories now that Jess was strolling up the rise toward her. Brenna studied her easy stride, her broad shoulders, her rugged face pleasantly flushed with exertion.

*A shame she's working in the brush today, Brenna thought, or she'd be shirtless. That golden tan. . .* She felt her ears blush.

A certain swagger entered Jess's walk as she climbed the short rise. She decided to allow herself that indulgence. That fond, almost hungry light in Brenna's green eyes merited a small strut. Jess felt a come-hither smile of her own drift across her face.

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She settled her long form onto the grass beside Brenna, a bare arm brushing against her, connecting them with a friendly warmth. Their silence was comfortable as they enjoyed the mild morning sun.

Brenna shifted against the log and examined the swell of Jess's bare shoulder. The skin there was smooth now, with no lingering trace of the multiple stunner burns inflicted in the Clinic. The colors and lines of the small tattoo, the glyph that identified Jess as an Amazon warrior in Tristaine, were clear and vibrant again.

With the tip of one finger, she lightly traced the image of three arrows in flight, then bent to rest her lips against her lover's shoulder for a moment. Jess's skin was warm and salty.

"Brazen hussy." Jess's light brogue made something delightful of those words. "Lipping me in broad daylight now, like a wanton guppy."

"Amazon ego, Jesstin." Brenna flipped open her journal again. "I wasn't kissing you. I was sucking on you for nutrients. I'm hungry. If you really loved me, you'd haul down that pallet of boar again and make me a nice ham sandwich."

Jess scrunched lower against the log and closed her eyes. "And while I'm carving boar, who will protect my fair wench from rampaging lions?"

"All right." Brenna sighed. "I did ask you once, probably while I was weak from hunger, about the possible presence of lions in these woods. To my unending mortification. But never mind, I'll pass on the boar. The only reason Shann lets you out of cooking duties, Jess, is you can't turn out anything remotely edible."

"I make tasty eggs."

"You burn eggs to cinders, honey."

"Aye, I do," Jess admitted. She squinted at Brenna. "You really want me to make you a pig sandwich?"

"Nah, stay put." Brenna gave her a friendly nudge. "I can wait for Camryn and Kyla to bring home a nice salad. Maybe they can find me some hallucinogenic mushrooms out there." She turned to a fresh page in her journal. "I'm going to need them if Shann expects me to play fortune-teller for Tristaine."

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“A little weed might help.” Jess cracked open an eye. “I’m serious, lass. You need to relax, if you’re to see what’s coming. I don’t think you’ve relaxed since you were five.”

“How would you know what I was like when I was five?” Brenna asked as she scanned what she’d written. “Me and Sammy were growing up in a City Youth Home, and you were growing up in the mountains, in some Tristaine kindergarten, learning to shoot pigs with your toy arrows and getting high at recess.”

“I was such a cute little tyke.” Jess chuckled, stretching against the log. “With my tiny red eyes.”

“I’m sure you were. Ah, Jesstin, this is so much—gaaaah!” Brenna slapped the notebook shut. “I have no idea what Shann wants from me. Do I look like an oracle to you?”

“Why not?” Jess turned her head on the rough bark and regarded her with affection. She understood all too well how City life could bleed the confidence out of the strongest woman, and Brenna had spent more than two decades there. “You never belonged to the City, Brenna. If they hadn’t gotten their hooks into you young, you’d have been drawn to Tristaine years ago. Your sister Sammy too, most likely. If the two of you had grown up among us, we’d have nurtured a seer’s talent, and you wouldn’t doubt yourself now.”

Brenna stroked the cover of the journal. “I guess I’m lucky Shann doesn’t see me as a sorceress, or you guys would expect me to float us back to Tristaine on a cloud.”

“Shann knows women well, adanin.” Jess smiled, her eyes drifting shut again. “If she’s wrong about you, she’s wrong. But if marking your dreams and recording our story might help us preserve Tristaine someday, is it so much to ask?”

She didn’t seem to require an answer, so Brenna opened the journal and went back to scanning the few paragraphs she’d written. A shadow swam across the white page, and she flinched violently. Jess put a steadying hand on her wrist.

“Brenna, I’m sorry.” Shann’s gray eyes held real regret as she joined them. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Brenna pressed a hand against her pounding heart. “Why

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can't Amazons learn to rustle some grass when they walk, like normal people?"

"I heard her coming ten yards back," Jess said helpfully. "Shann has enormous feet. She's hard to miss."

"True," Shann agreed. She hopped up on the fallen log and walked its length, her arms spread for balance. "Dyan despaired of teaching me stealth decades ago, Brenna. And I despaired of teaching Jesstin to cook. And lo, it came to pass that Tristaine's Amazons lived in harmony forever more."

Shann walked the log with her tongue clenched between her teeth in concentration. Strands of silver shone in her light brown hair, but at the moment, her posture and expression were almost childlike with pleasure.

Jess peered at Shann's feet. "We'll want to patch those boots before we break camp for Tristaine, lady. They're falling apart. You can't scale cliffs in those."

"Cliffs?" Brenna repeated politely. "Ah. Are there many of them between here and Tristaine? Cliffs?"

"Yes, there's one rather daunting ridge, even on the kindest route." Shann pivoted, wheeling her arms slightly for balance, then started back down the log. "But," she stepped over a small protruding branch, "I made it over alone, even with my enormous feet."

Brenna slid the thick spiral notebook back into her pack. "Jess says it'll take us about three days to hike from here to Tristaine, more or less?"

"If Gaia grants us good weather." Shann nudged Jess's dark head aside with her toe to clear her path.

Brenna was finding it impossible to hold on to the feeling of safety she'd enjoyed earlier. A sneaking cold began to creep through her, despite the sun's rays on her back. "How can we be sure Caster's not just nesting up there, waiting for us?"

"We'll scout our routes carefully on the way," Jess replied. "Once we get close to Tristaine, there'll be sentries posted at regular intervals. They'll warn us of anything waiting in the village. You're stepping on my hair, Shann," she added.

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“Oops. Enough time has passed with no sign of us that Caster might consider us well and truly banished, Brenna. At least beyond the border of the County.” Shann stood balanced on the log in graceful silence for a moment with her hands clasped behind her. “In any case, our home calls to us, and we need to return soon. Jesstin and Kyla and Camryn haven’t known Tristaine’s peace since they were captured—”

“Camryn,” Brenna said.

Shann glanced down at her. “She and Kyla are hunting herbs, Blades. They’ll be back soon, hopefully with enough wild onions for a—”

“C-Camryn,” Brenna said again, and she laid cold fingers on Jess’s arm.

Jess heard the fear in Brenna’s voice and sat up.

They heard the dull, flat crack of a rifle shot, deep in the trees.

Jess was on her feet and pulling Brenna erect as Shann jumped from the log. They raced down the grassy rise toward the tree line where Camryn and Kyla had entered the forest minutes before.

Jess and Brenna ran full out, quickly leaving Shann behind. Acid coated the lining of Brenna’s stomach as she snapped through the snarled greenery of the forest floor. She was acutely conscious of Jess, beside and slightly ahead of her, leaping a waist-high bank of brush without breaking stride, searching for any path through the dense trees ahead.

They heard a frenzied squealing—not just one inhuman voice, but several, a chorus of chalkboard shrieks that chilled Brenna’s blood. Camryn’s rifle sounded a second time, then a third.

The wild boars had lost one of their pack to Jess’s arrows the day before. Brenna had been unpleasantly surprised by the dead creature’s total lack of resemblance to the City’s domesticated swine. It was four feet of smelly, bristled brutality, its gray tongue lolling between two deadly looking tusks in its lower jaw.

Now the rest of that wild porcine tribe were bursting through the green foliage all around her, their tusks slashing fat leaves to green slivers in their terrorized flight. Brenna dodged, narrowly

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avoiding one gray-black torpedo streaking toward her, and called back a sharp warning to Shann.

She heard a solid thwacking sound and an explosive grunt, and as she followed Jess through a tangled curtain of vines, she saw Camryn. The young Amazon had reversed the empty rifle in her hands and used its solid oak stock as a club against the head of the last charging boar.

The blow was powerful, but it didn't stun the huge creature entirely. It was enough however, to dissuade it from another lunge, which was fortunate since Camryn had no leverage for a second swing. Her bad leg gave out beneath her, and she sprawled onto her knees in the sparse grass, keeping a white-knuckled grip on the rifle barrel.

Jess's solid kick was enough to send the addled boar into a shuffling, grunting trot after its brothers.

Over her pounding heart, Brenna registered the trampled greenery and the high, thin squawking of birds startled out of their morning's peace. Only a few feet away, blue-winged flies had already settled on the two dead boars in the high grass.

Jess helped Kyla stand, and Brenna tried to make sense out of Kyla's stammers as Shann joined them, panting.

"They j-just attacked, lady." She was as pale as ash. "You can let go of me, Jesstin. I'm okay."

Brenna went to Cam, who struggled upright, using the rifle as a crutch. Like Kyla, she was covered with dirt and a frightening amount of blood. It took Brenna a moment to reclaim her bedside manner.

"Sit down, Camryn!" She grabbed the girl's arm just as her leg buckled again and helped her awkwardly lower herself to the grass.

"I shot him, then he jumped on me, but I'm fine." Camryn's teeth rattled like castanets, looking past Brenna to Kyla, who was staring just as wide-eyed back at her. "This is his blood on me—the pig's. It's not my blood."

"What happened, Cam?" Jess raked her fingers through her hair and willed the faintly sick aftermath of an adrenalin surge to pass. "Weren't you watching?"

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“Wild boars happened, Jesstin. This isn’t a City park.”

Shann knelt beside Brenna and Camryn. “Blades? What do you think?”

Brenna finished her examination of Cam’s trembling extremities and sat back on her heels with a nod of relief. “You’re all right, Camryn. A few bruises, but nothing too serious.”

“There were seven of them,” Camryn told Shann. “Seven boars. I didn’t even see them, lady, until they swarmed us.”

She looked about twelve years old, Brenna thought. Almost as tall as Jess and a member of the same warrior’s guild, Camryn, though ordinarily inscrutable, was as pale as Kyla now that the crisis had passed.

“I shot two,” Camryn continued. “Ky helped me bat one off. The others ran. Jess kicked out the last one before you got here.”

“Those tusks are like razors, adanin. They could have cut you both down.” Jess was still angry. “You weren’t on a nature hike, Camryn. We knew this pack was out here.”

“And our little sisters fought them off.” Shann’s voice was low as well, but her gaze on Jess was more intense than Brenna had seen before. “One rifle against seven animals. They did well, Jesstin. Let it be.”

“I kept distracting her, Shann.” Kyla’s voice was still high and breathless, and she kept her hands pressed tightly to her thighs, as if to contain herself. “We found some henbane. No fennel, but a patch of fiddleheads, lady, for your eyes. Cam, I’m s-so sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault, adonai.” Cam looked bleak.

“Let’s get you both back to camp.” Shann’s tone warmed as she extended a hand to Camryn and helped her stand. “We’ll make you a fine pork dinner, adanin, a fitting end to this morning’s saga.”

“Ah, Artemis, you guys are gonna be so pissed,” Kyla whispered. Tears rose in her eyes. “I’m sorry. Don’t yell, Jess.”

“What are you on about, Ky?” Jess’s tone was milder, but Brenna eyed the red-haired girl uneasily.

“I might as well...” Kyla sighed. “Look, I can’t move my hand off my leg to walk, okay, because if I lift it—” She demonstrated by removing her palm from her thigh.

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An alarming jet of blood sprayed from it, and Brenna shot to her feet.

Jess lunged and caught Kyla as she fainted.

