

QUEENS OF
TRISTAINE

TRISTAINE BOOK FOUR

by
Cate Culpepper



2007

CHAPTER ONE

Jess ran with the mustangs, her stride long and smooth and effortless. Her powerful legs churned through the high grass of the pasture, her dark hair a snapping wildness at her neck. A smile tugged irresistibly at Brenna's lips as she watched her lover. Every line of Jess's body radiated strength and joy.

Brenna stood with several other Amazons on a low ridge overlooking the meadow. Jess and a dozen of her warriors raced among the horses cantering through the field, their cries answering the trumpeting of the beasts. They darted in and out between the loping mustangs, some leaping aboard their broad backs, others avoiding their flashing hooves in a teasing dance. Brenna's pulse spiked higher in an exhilarated rush.

Well, half exhilarated and half appalled. This would be Brenna's fourth year in Tristaine, and the third time she'd witnessed the drawing of prime horses from the clan's herd. This annual selection was eagerly anticipated, a highlight in a season rich with festivals and celebrations. The women watching with Brenna were having a high old time, yelling encouragement to the warriors below. For most Amazons, this summer rite was jubilant fun. For Brenna, it was still a bit more harrowing than thrilling. In that way, if no other, she remained a City girl.

"They look like kids down there," Kyla said beside her. "Tomboys running with big friendly dogs."

"Dogs who weigh at least a thousand pounds each, on the hoof." Brenna let her fingers coast across the base of her throat. She often stroked the gem-bright glyph etched there when she

CATE CULPEPPER

needed reassurance and Jess's strong arms weren't immediately available.

"What was that?" Kyla's arm slid through Brenna's, her dancing brown eyes still fixed on the chase below. "You're talking to yourself again, Br—*sheesh!*"

"What?" Brenna jumped and stared wildly into the running herd, searching for Jess.

"Dana." Kyla grinned and pointed. "She's trying, but she still hasn't got the hang of the whole getting on thing."

Finding Dana in the milling crowd of women and horses was easy enough. She was picking herself up out of the grass, slapping dirt off her butt and scowling. She glared at a large roan, then skipped into a fast run straight toward him. Dana launched herself into the air, a dive of impressive height and distance—unfortunately, so high and distant she catapulted right over the trotting horse's back and crashed gracelessly to the grass on its other side.

"Ouch," Brenna and Kyla gasped in tandem.

Dana rolled immediately to her feet, bellowing obscenities loudly enough to reach the cheering section on the ridge.

"Mustang, two," one of the other Amazons sang, "City soldier, zilch!"

Laughter met this remark, but the merriment was sparse and faltered quickly. Brenna glanced at Kyla and saw the muscles in her delicate jaw standing out. She pressed Kyla's arm gently.

"How many of Tristaine's battles does she have to fight?" Kyla murmured, "How many glyphs does Dana have to earn before she stops being a City soldier and becomes an Amazon?"

"You know Dana is Amazon to the core, Ky, City-born or not." Brenna nodded to acknowledge the apologetic looks a few of the women offered them. "I thought that kind of idiotic remark stopped after our last battle with Botesh. No one denied Dana's bravery and loyalty that night."

"Yes, but that was two years ago." Kyla drew in a deep breath and waved encouragingly at Dana. "Eight seasons of peace, and

Queens of Tristaine

Tristaine's warriors are itching for a fight. Amazons aren't above picking at each other if no new enemies present themselves."

Brenna studied Kyla silently and with some sadness. Her tone held a note of adult wryness that still seemed foreign to her. Brenna remembered the exuberant teenager Kyla had been when they met almost four years ago. That was before she lost her wife, Camryn, to a crossbow bolt intended for Jess. Kyla also lost some crucial youthful essence in those dark days of grief.

But she had healed a little since then. Two years earlier, when the clan battled a demon queen, Kyla had been given the most extraordinary gift granted any Amazon. For a few precious moments, she had been reunited with her lost lover across the veil of death. Camryn herself had wished Kyla a happy, peaceful life, rich with love beyond their marriage, and Kyla was working hard to be worthy of that blessing.

She was singing again, and that was a gift to the entire clan. Grief had silenced Kyla's ethereal voice after Camryn's death, but as she healed, music refilled her spirit and created moments of sheer beauty around the Amazons' storyfires. And Kyla was finding joy in her sisters again, thanks in part to the "City soldier" who had fought so bravely for Tristaine. The friendship between Kyla and Dana had grown strong these past seasons, and Brenna saw Kyla's expression soften again as she watched her.

"Hey, Miz Brenna!" Aria cocked a curvaceous hip and waved five perfectly tapered, berry-painted fingernails. "Looks like your brawny adonai down there has chosen her horse!"

Brenna shielded her eyes from the sun's glare and focused on Jess running in the meadow below. She was pacing a pretty little bay with a white mane, woman and horse matching stride for stride. With a burst of speed, Jess vaulted aboard the mustang's back, a motion so fluid she seemed to meld with the bay, her lithe body a natural extension of the horse's grace and strength.

The mare made a brief fight of it. She shied and skittered, as if trying to pitch Jess off like a stubborn horsefly. Jess rode her like one, through a twisting series of circles and a few sharp

CATE CULPEPPER

lunges, until the bay began to settle under her light touch.

A chorus of admiring whistles rose from the women on the ridge.

“That was *so* pretty.” Kyla sighed. “Do you ever get tired of half the clan fawning over Jess after one of these public displays of macha?”

“Not as long as she remembers whose bed her macha butt warms at night.” Brenna smiled at a private memory and then caught Jess’s eye.

Jess reached down and patted the bay’s neck, arched one brow at Brenna, and flashed a grin that was pure rogue, white teeth gleaming in her tanned face. Brenna fell in love all over again.

“Come on.” She took Kyla’s hand. “Let’s go round up our tomboys.”



If Gaia intended Amazon queens to be remote, untouchable icons of virtue, Jess thought, she has to stop making Amazon queens who look like that.

She rested one ankle on the bay’s neck and watched Brenna stroll into the meadow. If it had been blackest, moonless midnight, Jess would have been able to pick her adonai out of the group of Amazons with her. A pleasing sensuality flavored Brenna’s movements now, a certain light, sultry confidence that had grown in her these last seasons as her roots in Tristaine ran deeper. Her blond hair was still short, but thicker and wilder than she’d worn it in the City. It drifted against her slender neck in gold waves. The clear green of Brenna’s eyes could exude warmth or desire, or, as they did now, frank admiration. Jess soaked up the affection and pride in Brenna’s gaze and fell in love all over again.

Jess took a hemp rope from her belt and slipped it over the bay’s head, then lifted one leg across the horse’s neck and dropped lightly to the ground.

Queens of Tristaine

“Hey, hotshot.” Brenna rose on her toes to kiss Jess’s cheek. “You did some fine horse-wrestling out there.”

“Not much wrestling needed, lass.” Jess straightened, letting her tall shadow shade Brenna from the sun. “Our herd’s half tame. Hakan attends every birth, so Tristaine’s foals know a woman’s touch before their eyes open.”

“Not that big old roan.” Dana scowled, tipping her chin so Kyla could examine a bruise on her jaw. “Did you see that mangy mutt run out from under me? That horse is a damn bigot. It hates Amazons.”

“We saw it, my little pookie.” Kyla patted Dana’s cheek.

“Hey, she looks familiar!” Brenna stepped closer to the mare and stroked the blaze of white on her forehead. “Jesstin, you found Bracken’s twin!”

“Aye, she’s of Bracken’s line.” Jess enjoyed the sparkle of pleasure in Brenna’s eyes, and her obvious ease with this horse. Brenna’s self-assurance had been a long time coming—she’d worked hard to overcome her fear of the big beasts. Jess coiled the hemp rope that encircled the bay’s neck and offered it to Brenna.

Brenna looked at the rope, puzzled. “You want me to take her to the stables?”

“Up to you, Bren.” Jess shrugged. “She’s yours to stable if you wish.”

“Mine?” Brenna smiled and laid her palm on the warm, firm swell of the mare’s jaw. “Jesstin. You’re giving me this horse?”

“Brenna, you’ve earned this horse.” Jess patted the bay’s side. “She’s deep-chested, like my Bracken, so she’ll have his endurance. She’ll be gentle, once she’s used to us, but fast as a—*mrrf*.”

Laughing, Brenna surged against Jess, pulled her head down, and planted a kiss smack on her lips.

“Technically,” Dana said, tapping Brenna’s back, “this horse belongs to Tristaine, so she’s not Jess’s to give or yours to own, but—”

CATE CULPEPPER

“Damn, girl, please shut up.” Kyla rested an elbow dreamily on Dana’s shoulder. “We’re witnessing a real rite of passage here.”

“Ah, I know that.” Dana grinned at Brenna. “Congratulations, adanin.”

Brenna still had her arms wound around Jess’s neck. “Thank you, teacher,” she murmured.

Jess smiled, touched by the honorific, and rested her forehead against Brenna’s.

The bay mare chose that moment to break wind, genteelly rather than crudely, but Dana and Kyla were still reduced to fits of adolescent cackling.



By the time the horses were gathered and tethered and the Amazons started back to the mesa, the sun had lost its bright sheen and was coasting toward the western peaks. Brenna walked beside Dana, greeting other women as they filtered past through the trees. Jess and Kyla were ahead of them, Jess’s arm draped across the younger woman’s shoulders.

Brenna craned her neck to try to spot her bay in the small herd being led toward Tristaine’s stables. Her palms already itched to stroke her mount’s velvet-soft nose again, and she couldn’t seem to banish the grin wreathing her face.

She remembered buying her first car in the City—an exchange of mundane commerce and necessity. Nothing like this thrill. Horses were far more than transportation to mountain Amazons. They were a vital, natural link to their shared history. That pretty brown beast with the white mane was Brenna’s four-legged diploma into an important aspect of clan life, as dearly won as any of her City medical certificates.

Brenna took in the blue glory of the mountain sky shading to indigo with the coming of twilight. The fresh, clear air was

Queens of Tristaine

redolent of the pine, spruce, and fir that carpeted the hills around their mesa.

She noted Dana was scowling and rubbing her hip again. “I’m wondering if I should insist you drop your drawers so I can take a look at that.”

“No way. I’m not gonna expose my naked buttock to you.” Dana jerked her chin at Jess and Kyla, several yards up the trail. “Not with your goliath girlfriend up there, who would tear out my trachea in a fit of jealous rage.”

Brenna grinned. “Somehow I think Jess would control her fury in the face of medical necessity.”

“Eh, I’m the one who’s jealous.” Dana crammed her hands in the pockets of her trousers and kicked a pinecone off the path. “Look at her, Brenna. Not a mark on her. She’s not even dusty. Jess lands the first horse she targets, and I fall on my butt three times in a row.”

“We’ve both seen Jess take her share of falls on other days, honey.” Brenna wound her arm through Dana’s. “Even Hakan’s taken a few dives off horses at a dead run. You’re being a little hard on yourself.”

“I just wanted to show her I could do it.” Dana’s brown eyes weren’t on Jess any longer; she was watching Kyla. “It sure would have been sweet to see Ky’s face when I landed one of the stupid runts.”

“Yeah, it would have.” Brenna studied her friend. Dana was growing into one of Jess’s most able warriors. Fearless in battle, cool-headed and smart, she sometimes even mastered the stoic mask that marked a blood-tested Amazon fighter. Except when she looked at Kyla. “She loves you, Dana.”

“I know she does.” Dana nodded toward Kyla and Jess. “See that?”

Brenna glanced at the pair walking ahead of them and smiled. Kyla’s arm was draped with friendly warmth around Jess’s waist. She bumped the much taller warrior playfully with her hip as

CATE CULPEPPER

they laughed together, the affection between them palpable and deep.

“Kyla walks with me like that now,” Dana said. There was something stiff in her smile. “She paws me like that, all the time. We’re good friends. We’re adanin.”

“But?” Brenna tried to see her.

“But she doesn’t walk with me the way you walk with Jess.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well...” Dana colored. “Think about it.”

Brenna’s sense memory had no trouble recalling Jess’s muscular body against hers, heating the length of her side as they strolled down Tristaine’s shaded paths. Their matched steps were more often a relaxed, sensuous dance than mere walking, as different from the platonic friendliness evident between Kyla and Jess as night and day. Brenna remembered the combined strength and gentleness of Jess’s arm around her, and that led inevitably to more intimate memories, of arching beneath the strong hands holding her down...

Brenna shivered.

“That’s what I mean.” Dana smiled at her sadly. “Kyla doesn’t walk with me like that. She doesn’t look at me the way you look at Jess. I’m thinking she never will.”

“Maybe.” Brenna watched Kyla thoughtfully. “But I hope you won’t give up on her, Dana. Kyla and Camryn were friends for ten years before they became adonai, remember? She’s always been careful with her heart.”

Dana sighed, and Brenna watched her visibly shake off the topic. “Well, give me ten more years and maybe I’ll learn to sit a damn horse, at least. Hey, your little sister learned to ride faster than either of us, Bren. Sammy’s gonna be jealous of your new hooves.”

“Yep, she will.” Brenna smiled.

“Won’t bother you a bit, huh?”

Queens of Tristaine

“Not me.”

“Ah, sisters.” Dana bent down and lifted a glossy black feather from the trail. “I thank my lucky butt I’ve got no blood-kin in the clan. Where is Sammy, anyway? She was looking forward to watching us slide around in horse poop.”

“She still had a sore throat this morning, so I talked her into staying back.”

Brenna had to admit she still mothered Samantha, even now, well into their twenties. Her younger sister tolerated it reasonably well. Sammy was smart enough to realize she might still need some maternal care after the losses she’d suffered.

Brenna noticed that the dark, elongated shadow beside her was bouncing oddly. She glanced at Dana, whose gaze was pinned again on Jess. Dana had stuck the black feather in her chestnut hair and was walking with an overly long stride, her jaw clenched, her shoulders swinging in slow, brawny arcs.

Brenna snickered. Dana had an uncommon gift for physical mimicry, and she had Jess’s long-legged saunter down to a T. “You know she’s going to catch you doing that someday.”

“Doin’ whut?” Dana might be able to imitate Jess’s moves, but her rendition of her mild brogue was a miserable failure. “Doan worry, lassie. Yer warrior’s too dang tall ta see me from way up thar.”

“But she’s got uncommon hearing.” Jess turned and waited for them, her arms folded. Kyla stopped too, grinning.

Dana straightened quickly, and Brenna reached up to tousle her hair, almost dislodging the feather.

“How does she do that?” Dana muttered.

Brenna smiled at Jess. “Well...she’s uncommon.”

“Brenna, lady!” A husky Amazon, well past middle age, hustled up to them, beaming ear to ear. “Sorry to interrupt your council, sisters, but Brenna, Shann asks that you come to the healing lodge. Nothing urgent,” she added quickly. “She just wants you to check out some new herbs she found.”

CATE CULPEPPER

“Thanks, adanin,” Brenna said. “I’ll be right there.”

“I’ll tell Shann, lady.” The woman turned, but Brenna touched her wrist gently.

“Carelle,” Brenna said kindly. “Tristaine has only one queen. We have only one lady.”

“Oh, Brenna.” The wrinkles bracketing Carelle’s mouth deepened with her smile. “I know that, dear girl. I honor Shann as the only ruler of my clan, we all do. Just forgive your adanin if we want to honor Shann’s daughter, and our next queen, as well!”

Brenna smiled and patted the big woman. Carelle waved a cheerful farewell and trotted back toward the mesa.

“Jesstin.” Brenna forced the words through clenched teeth. “Am I still smiling?”

Jess tipped Brenna’s chin up to check. “And a lovely grimace it is.”

Brenna hissed out a long breath and worked her stiff jaw back and forth.

Kyla slipped her arm through Brenna’s as they continued down the trail. “Carelle didn’t mean any harm, Bren.”

“Of course she didn’t. She’s a nice woman.” Brenna pulled open her collar and pointed to the colorful tattoo at the base of her throat. “But where on this glyph do you see a royal insignia, Ky? Hmm? Anywhere?”

“Let’s take a look.” Dana turned and walked backward, peering at Brenna’s throat. “I see some stars, a little hand with a whirlpool in it, and a pretty weed.”

“A *weed*,” Kyla groaned. “You wear the sigils of a healer and a mystic, Bren.”

“Nothing queenly,” Dana added.

“Thank you.” Brenna snapped her collar closed, mollified.

Jess draped her arm around Brenna’s shoulders. “No queen can be forced to rule, Brenna. All you have to do is decline Shann’s throne.”

“Which I’ve done, Jess, every way I know how.” Brenna

Queens of Tristaine

kicked another black feather off the path, irritated. “I’m a good medic, but I won’t pretend to be anyone’s leader. Shann seems to hear me, but the word sure hasn’t filtered through the ranks yet. *Lady* they call me, for heaven’s sake.”

“Aye, you’re a fine healer,” Jess agreed. “And a talented seer.”

Brenna mumbled grumpily.

“You are, Brenna, you’re amazing!” Kyla squeezed her arm. “You see into the realm of spirit more clearly than any mystic Tristaine has ever known.”

Brenna sighed.

Dana nudged Kyla. “See, she’s learned not to argue with that.”

“Being called a seer bothered you at first.” Jess kissed Brenna’s hair. “You used to snap at me like a harpy whenever I mentioned your sight.”

“Well, stuff just kept happening.” Brenna fingered the coarse fabric of Jess’s vest. “You can only have so many visions, and so many out-of-body strolls, before denying that you’re having them starts to sound psychotic.”

“Confidence in your powers came to you slowly, but with certainty, over time.” Jess’s rough palm caressed Brenna’s upper arm. “Just as all our gifts take root and grow.”

“Jesstin.” Brenna peered up at her suspiciously. “Please tell me you’re not implying I’ll simply *get used* to being an Amazon queen.”

Jess chuckled. “I don’t presume to know what our Grandmothers intend for you, adonai. I’m just enjoying the journey.”

Jess stopped walking and trained her cobalt eyes on the sky, and then Brenna heard it—a dry, cawing sound overhead. She focused on its source just as the large bird made a clumsy landing on a thin branch high in a pine by the side of their trail.

“Crow?” Dana squinted up at the black creature as it pecked slowly at the branch.

CATE CULPEPPER

“Not this far from the City,” Jess said. “A raven.”

The bird seemed unsteady, rocking slightly on its narrow perch.

“A drunk raven,” Dana added.

Jess crouched, resting her elbows on her knees, and studied the ground. Brenna saw two more long black feathers in the grass, and another further along into the trees. She looked up and spotted a raven balancing awkwardly on a thin branch. It rose with an angry snap of wings and flew in a slow, ragged arc toward the east.

Jess rose. “Something’s up.”

Brenna noted they all stepped closer to Jess, an instinctive raising of their shields. Jess nodded toward the trees and started toward them, and they fell in behind her with the ease of long seasons of drills. They wove quickly and silently through a stand of aspen, following the bird’s lurching progress overhead.

J’heika, rise.

Brenna came to a dead halt, and Kyla very nearly smacked into her back.

“What is it, Bren?” Kyla steadied herself against her.

“Nothing,” Brenna murmured. She touched Kyla in reassurance, then turned and followed Jess.

She didn’t recognize this new voice. In the past, the voices that had whispered those two words in Brenna’s mind had all sounded elderly. Shann said it was the Grandmothers calling her. This voice was someone new, someone young. Brenna hadn’t heard this particular command in years, and a thrill of misgiving went through her.



Jess hadn’t felt this kind of prickling at the back of her neck in many seasons. She had learned to respect this rising of her inner hackles, as Dyan had called Jess’s keen instincts for danger. Shann’s adonai and the leader of Tristaine’s warriors, Dyan had

Queens of Tristaine

died beneath a hail of City bullets shortly after naming Jess her second. Now Jess carried the burden of her clan's protection alone, and she relied on her gut. One addled bird didn't mean disaster, but any disruption in the natural world was worrisome.

She couldn't keep sight of the black bird's path through the canopy of green branches above them, but visual tracking wasn't necessary. Jess heard the discordant chorus of dying ravens before she saw them.

They emerged from the trees into a small, circular enclosure, a patch of sparse grass all but carpeted with dusty black feathers and droppings. Jess put out a hand to stop Brenna, a chill working up her back.

There were fifty or more birds milling in the clearing, staggering, flapping frayed wings without gaining flight. Mountain ravens were big creatures, with wingspans nearly four feet across, but these birds looked shrunken, diminished. Their cawing, usually a crisp, sharp cracking sound, was reduced to throaty rattles. Several were already dead, on their backs in the grass, their stick-like legs stiffened, their black eyes milky and vacant.

"Sweet Gaia." Kyla stepped carefully into the circle. "Jess, what's happening to them?"

"I don't know, lass."

"Could they be poisoned?" Dana nudged a dead bird cautiously with one foot. "What do these things eat?"

"Insects, carrion." Jess watched another bird convulse in the grass, then lie still, and an odd shiver coursed through her. "I can't see this many feeding off any one source."

"And they don't travel in big groups like this, do they?" Kyla hugged herself. "They're suffering, Jesstin. Is there anything we can—"

"Brenna?" Jess frowned and took her wife's arm. Brenna's posture was rigid, and she stared at the ravens intently. The color was draining from her face.

Brenna heard the sharpness in Jess's tone, but she couldn't

CATE CULPEPPER

respond. Even if she hadn't been gripped by the paralysis of sudden trance, she was too filled with horror to summon any sound.

Dying Amazons, dropping in drifts at her feet. Young women, older ones, children, clothed in tattered gray shrouds, staggering, falling to their knees. Their faces were ghostly white, and contorted with the futile agony of trying to draw breath in vain. Other Amazons knelt at their sides, and the harsh cawing of the ravens sounded in Brenna's ears like the grief-filled shrieks of the bereaved. Then those who comforted the afflicted fell ill too, their hands clawing at their throats in terror.

"Kyla, back away!" Brenna's tone rang with command, and Jess started and reached for the dagger in her vest.

Kyla obeyed at once, stepping around the stumbling ravens until she reached clear grass.

Brenna went to Dana in three fast strides and snatched the black feather out of her hair. "Keep your hands away from your faces, all of you. Let's get out of here."

"Brenna, what the—" Dana began.

"Move," Brenna ordered, and they moved.

Jess ushered Kyla quickly out of the circle. She took Brenna's arm as they weaved through the trees and felt her trembling.

"Head for the stream." The fingers Brenna wrapped around Jess's wrist were cold. "We need to wash our hands."

Jess swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. "You're thinking plague, Bren?"

"Maybe I'm wrong. I pray I am." Brenna closed her eyes. "I have a sister with a sore throat."