

TRISTAINE RISES

TRISTAINE BOOK THREE

by
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CHAPTER ONE

Motionless, it watched the two Amazons. Bitter drool overflowed its withered lips and dripped to the stone floor. Acidic steam rose where spittle hit rock. It hadn't fed in generations.



Jess's scruffy mustang shifted beneath her, one hoof clocking against the stony ground. She soothed the horse and scanned the deserted village. Her fingers drifted to the hollow of her throat and the light, welcome weight of the turquoise pendant resting there. Brenna's gift. A beautiful, rough stone the color of cold seawater, secured by delicate copper wire to the thong about her neck. Touching it eased the tightness in Jess's shoulders.

Bracken pawed the rocky earth again, grumpy in the twilight stillness.

"Shut up, ye crab. We're about done." Jess tousled her mount's thick mane. She released a low whistle and a moment later heard the distant trill of Vicar's response. She nudged Bracken into a canter toward the center of the village to meet her cousin.

"Nothing." As fair as Jess was dark, Vicar sat her tall roan with a lazy ease that bespoke years astride Tristaine's mountain herds. "This camp is deserted, Jesstin. Nothing on two feet has tracked over this ground in our lifetime."

CATE CULPEPPER

“Get patrols to search every cabin.” Jess eyed the stone altar that seemed to mark the mesa’s geographic center. “And Shann and the others come no closer until we check the woods on all sides.”

“Aye, easily done.” Vicar grinned and crooked a blond eyebrow. “You think madlady Artemis has forgiven her tiff with Tristaine at last, Jesstin? Amazon luck is changing. Call the odds of finding this village. Even made by our own kin, by the look.”

“But what clan?” Jess narrowed her eyes in thought. “Amazon archives don’t mention any of our sisters settling so high in these mountains.”

“Jess, our glyphs are everywhere.”

That much was true. The village square was surrounded by rough log cabins of various sizes, in mixed states of repair. Crude Amazon glyphs were carved above the threshold of each.

Jess felt her gaze drawn again to the small stone altar. Carved deep on its craggy surface were the same timeless symbols of war, hunting, mothering, creation, and worship common to all clans claiming Amazon blood.

“I count enough lodges for most of us.” Vicar uncorked her canteen and took a generous swig. “And enough timber on these hills to build more, once the snows lift. Plus a strong stable. It’ll be hard labor, but we’ll need that by spring thaw. We’ll be restless.”

“I’ll be content to get us through the winter alive, Vic.” Jess shook her head to decline the canteen.

“We’re not likely to find better shelter.” Vicar leaned over and spat delicately. “And none too soon. We’ll be up to our silky butts in snow by next moon. Amazon luck, Jesstin. Changing at last. Our Brenna deserves the credit. She finally charmed Tristaine’s spirit guides into sending the dream that led us here.”

“Ah. She’s *our* Brenna now, when she finds us an abandoned village. She’s only *my* Brenna when she dumps a haunch of venison in the cooking fire.”

“Aye, then she’s yours.”

“You’ve warmed to her, then.” As always in their private conversations, Jess heard her own brogue deepen to match Vicar’s more pronounced burr. “I wasn’t sure you would, adanin. You’re stubborn about City girls. Among all other things beneath Gaia’s moon.”

Vicar shrugged. “By my lights, your lady’s earned her lodge with us, City-born or not. Brenna saved your neck in our last battle, Jesstin. She’s a good healer, a decent seer. Horrific taste in lovers, but a strong heart.”

“That she has.” Jess shivered and pulled the high collar of her sheepskin jacket against the back of her neck. The sensation of being watched was as palpable as cold fingers drifting up her spine.

“What?”

“I still feel eyes.” Jess shook her hair off her forehead. “I know we’ve covered the mesa twice and found nothing.”

“Then what’s the...?” Vicar sighed. “No. Go on, Jesstin. Dyan swore by your instincts, and you’ve proved her trust. I want to mind your gut.”

Jess nodded toward the circle of small cabins ringing the square. “What happened to the Amazons who built this village? Why did they leave the mesa?”

“Plague?” Vicar scratched her scalp and shrugged. “One harsh winter too many? We’ll never know, Jess. But it’s perfect for Tristaine.” She swept her arm in a slow arc. “These forests are flooded with game, and a mesa’s easy to defend. Care was put into its design, and it was forested well.” She pointed toward the expanding circles of poplar, aspen, maple, and oak that surrounded the village. “It’s a natural fortress.”

“Aye.” Jess sat still for a long moment. “We’ve seen

CATE CULPEPPER

enough for now. Let's find an easier trail up that rise. Something wide enough for the wagons."



It watched the light woman canter after the dark one, the hooves of their horses kicking up the sparse dust of the square. Its dripping eyes followed its prey until it was out of sight, and the hunger in its blood surged.

The love between these two mortal Amazons ran deep, but it was more than equal to the challenge. The stronger the bond, the more devastating the betrayal. It gathered its sleep-logged energies and reached out.



The mesa looks like the top layer of a round cake, with trees for candles, plopped down in the middle of a valley, Brenna wrote. She sat cross-legged on a small hill overlooking the pasture, her journal balanced in her lap.

We've laid camp in the field I dreamed about, surrounded by thick forest. The mesa looks out of place here, in the midst of all this open land. It seems pathogenic, like a raised birthmark that might prove malignant. The Amazons find it strange too, and I trust their instinct over mine. But they think this odd landmark might be some kind of blessing from their goddesses, a gift to our weary clan. I'll have to take their word on that. I never left the City limits before I met Jess, so my knowledge of divine intervention and mountain terrain is pretty nil.

As I remind Shann every time she insists on relying on my bizarre dreams to guide us through these stupid mountains.

The Amazon word for mountain is "hill." Much like Jess calling that canyon we leaped over to escape the flood a "ditch." When Shann said we'd have to go deep into the hills

Tristaine Rises

to find a new site for Tristaine, she meant hauling six hundred women, kids, and assorted livestock over a bloody range of sheer cliffs.

Brenna had already filled half of her notebook with the chronicle of that journey, which had taken all summer. The clan had endured long weeks of pure, grueling effort climbing a harrowing series of mountain passes. Moving always higher, farther from the City and the watery grave that drowned their last village.

Her journal described Shann's calm leadership throughout their migration. Even when a fast, cruel fever swept through their tribe in high summer, taking some of Tristaine's youngest children and vulnerable elders, Shann's courage kept her women's spirits kindled with hope.

Shann's authority was tempered by her humanity. Brenna remembered watching tears pour soundlessly down Shann's face as she cradled a dying child, her refined features fixed in an eloquent expression of grief. The image had stayed with Brenna, and she'd sketched the two figures at the bottom of one page in her journal.

She focused again on her entry.

It'll be dark soon. We've finished laying camp, so I can sit here for a few more minutes, imagining disasters. Bracken threw Jess and she fractured her skull. She and Vicar have been jumped by grizzlies. They've been ambushed by a City patrol. Unlikely, I know, but they should have been back hours ago.

What other horrific fates can befall two Amazon warriors on an uncharted malignant birthmark? Caster came back from the dead and turned them to stone. Homicidal bandits captured them, or a swarm of rabid bats chased them off a cliff.

I used to panic when my little sister was ten minutes

CATE CULPEPPER

late from school. I'm not sure my nerves can stand a lifetime married to an Amazon warrior.

Brenna scanned the pasture below her, a waving blanket of silver in the twilight. She willed two small moving dots to appear at the base of the shadowed mesa, but the vista remained stubbornly empty. Blowing her bangs off her forehead, she bent over the lined notebook again.

I last saw my sister just days before I helped Jess escape from the Clinic—sweet Gaia, over a year ago. I wish I remembered the last thing I said to her. I do remember the last thing she said to me—that sisters shouldn't treat each other the way I was treating her. Sammy was four months pregnant. If she's alive, I'm an aunt by now. But if Caster was telling the truth, Sammy is dead.

Brenna rested the pen gently on the notebook. Her hands ached to cup Jess's shoulders, their broad strength always a source of comfort. The atonal humming of crickets rose around her, and she shivered in the cool evening air. As if on signal, a warm cloak plopped over her head like a tent. She smiled in the sudden green darkness. "Gee. Thanks, Shann."

"Don't mention it. I'm used to chasing foolish children who sit out in cold open fields, wearing no cloak to speak of, with night coming on." The queen of Tristaine was well into her fifth decade, but she curled onto the ground next to Brenna with the grace of a girl. "Stop worrying, Blades. A thorough scouting takes time. They'll be back soon."

"You're right." Brenna pulled the cloak off her head, static electricity crackling through her hair. "Did you have a chance to talk to Kyla, lady?"

"She helped me serve the stew." Shann leaned back on her hands, her gray eyes thoughtful. "There wasn't much talking.

She's still not able to speak of Camryn without tears."

Brenna nodded. Images of Cam's death still tightened her own throat without warning.

"But it seems Kyla's grief is taking a normal course, Bren. She's young and resilient. Her stillness doesn't worry me. She'll have time to heal, be it weeks or decades."

"You've been there, lady." Brenna watched the other woman's face.

"Oh, lass, I was a royal mess." Shann's smile held a note of resonant sadness. "I walked around like a zombie after Dyan was killed. I was all but unable to function, and the clan knew it."

"I don't think I could rule a tribe of wild women after a loss like that." Brenna pulled the cloak around her shoulders, trying not to imagine grizzlies or compound fractures. "Much less think clearly enough to get them through a crisis."

"An Amazon queen rules when she must, adanin." Shann's fingers brushed through Brenna's hair. "Whether or not she feels she's capable of it isn't usually a consideration, I promise you."

Let's not go there tonight, Brenna thought, her eyes closing at the gentleness of Shann's touch. Then a quiver of relief ran through her, and she sat up.

"Finally!"

"What? Ah." Shann smiled and stood. "Yes, here they come! And look, Brenna, both of them are dressed warmly. Fancy that."

Vicar and Jess loped through the high grass, riding shoulder to shoulder across the open field. Brenna stood next to Shann, brushing pine needles from her journal. She could feel Jess's exhilaration, even at this distance, in the rhythm of Bracken's swift rocking beneath her and the expanse of sky overhead. She wondered, not for the first time, how her lifemate had survived months of imprisonment in the City.

CATE CULPEPPER

The Amazon cousins were incapable of riding side by side without racing, so they indulged in that pleasure for the last quarter league. Vicar's roan, Talos, edged out Bracken with a small but undeniable lead, and held it long enough to claim victory.

The horses were still nearly at top speed when Vicar reined sharply, then threw herself off her mount. She crashed bodily into Jess with enough force to knock her off her horse and hurl them both into the high grass.

Brenna felt the impact in her teeth, and for a moment she was immobile with shock. Then she jumped to her feet and raced down the gentle slope of the hill, reaching automatically for the stethoscope that hadn't draped her neck since she left the City Clinic. She heard Shann bark out an order behind her toward the camp.

To her immense relief, she saw Jess rise unsteadily from the waving grass, her hand clasped to the back of her head. She took a staggering step and dropped to her knees, and Brenna's heart jagged painfully in her chest. But then she was close enough to see she was kneeling by Vicar's still form.

"Hey." Panting, Brenna came to a sliding halt beside Jess and clenched her arms tightly. "You all right?"

Jess nodded vaguely, her eyes on Vic. "What the bloody hell happened to her, Bren?" Jess was breathless and a little pale, but seemed basically intact.

"Let me see." Brenna nudged Jess gently aside and laid her hands on Vicar's sides. Her breasts rose with shallow but steady breaths, and her pulse beneath Brenna's measuring fingers beat a rapid cadence.

"There's no blood." Jess scanned the field for any threat and clenched her cousin's collar with unconscious force.

Brenna was relieved to see she was right. There was no bleeding or other obvious signs of trauma. She felt the back of Vicar's head carefully, then bent closer. "Vic, can you hear me?"

“Vicar!” As usual, Jess opted for a more assertive approach. “You open your eyes. *Now!*”

Vic stirred beneath Brenna’s hands, and her eyes opened. She blinked up at Jess’s pale features.

“I’m in hell,” Vicar croaked.

Jess blew out a breath. “Perverse wit intact. She’ll be fine, Bren.”

Shann reached them just as Vicar was lifting herself on her elbows.

“Blades? Are they—?” Shann stopped short, relief in her eyes. “Well, it seems they’re still among the living. I expected to find one of you poleaxed, at the very least!”

“I’m all right, lady.” Jess got to her feet, and Brenna watched her with a hawk’s sharpness. Her own heart was only now calming from tympani speed to a more bearable rhythm.

“Aye, me too.” Vicar winced and accepted Jess’s hand up. “Beat you by more than a head, Stumpy.”

“Move slowly, please.” Brenna steadied her. “We want to make sure everything’s still attached, so hold on to me until your head clears.”

“Did Talos misstep?” Shann looked past them at Vicar’s trembling roan, who stood only yards away.

“Is he hurt?” Vicar craned to see past Jess. “Why’s he shaking like that? No, lady. Talos didn’t throw me. Something knocked me flat.”

“Aye, me too.” Jess scrubbed the back of her neck. “You.”

“Come again?” Vic frowned.

“You smacked me butt over beanie, mate. You sure Talos didn’t find a gopher ho—”

“I don’t fall off horses, Jesstin.” Vic shivered hard and shrugged her leathers around her shoulders as she looked around the darkening pasture. “I told you, something hit me. Felt like a bloody elephant.”

Brenna met Jess's troubled gaze.

"Whatever this force was, it's disappeared as suddenly as it arrived." The calm assurance in Shann's tone soothed Brenna. "We'll scout the field thoroughly at first light. For now, Blades, let's get these bruised wanderers to a warm fire."

"I'm for that, lady," Vicar grumbled. "It's colder than Caster's tit out here."

"Shann!"

They turned to see two Amazons on the low hill at the edge of the camp carrying a pallet between them. One held a smoking torch over her head, and Brenna realized it was fully dark.

"Stand down, sisters. We're all right." Shann's clear voice carried well in the pure mountain air. She slid her arm through Vicar's. "Come on. We'll want a closer look at you both before we ply you with Aria's excellent stew. Your report can wait until after you've eaten."

Brenna waited, shivering a little while Jess retrieved the reins of the two horses. She put her arm around Brenna's shoulders as they followed Shann and Vicar up the grassy rise to the camp.

"You're sure nothing's bent?"

Jess grinned down at her. Given her penchant for risking life and limb, the greeting had become a joke between them.

"I'm fine, querida."

"Kind of odd about Vicar."

"Well, Vic's odd."

"Jesstin." Brenna squeezed her waist. "Seriously. She hit you with a full body tackle. I saw it happen."

"Aye, I felt it happen." Jess turned to look back toward the mesa gleaming in the moonlight across the field.

Brenna nodded toward the mesa. "Did you find anything bizarre up there?"

"No." Jess frowned and brushed Brenna's upper arm

with her rough palm. “But it’s a damn eerie village, Bren.”

“Really?”

“Deserted, as far as we could tell. Very old. And... strange. That’s the best I can do.”

“Lovely. A haunted village. We’ve had so little excitement.” Brenna rested her head on Jess’s shoulder as they entered the camp, craving the bonfire Shann had mentioned. It wasn’t really cold enough to justify her shivering, but she couldn’t seem to stop.



It had a terrible patience, born of silent decades craving Amazon blood to slake its thirst. It sensed that the generations of waiting were drawing to an end at last.

The passion uniting these mortals would be rendered poison. That’s how it would conquer them, how it had defeated two other clans, long before these women were born. It would make them spiritual cannibals, preying on their own kind, as their sisters did.

It had turned the light one against the dark one effortlessly, even at this distance. That was its particular genius, corrupting the love between women into a toxic weapon. These Amazons were ripe for it. Its time was coming again.

It settled into its coffin and slept.



“I can’t restrain myself, lass. It’s yer cute poutin’ lips—”

“*Jesstin.*” Brenna blew her bangs out of her eyes and glared into Jess’s blue ones, inches above her. “These tents are made of paper!”

CATE CULPEPPER

“Grrraded canvas.” Jess’s brogue twirled the words. “And it’s a *prrrivate* tent.” She bent her head again to kiss her.

“Squished up against fifty others.” Brenna put a finger on Jess’s nose to stop her. “And sound carries.”

The journey into the hills had been difficult in more ways than one. Whenever Tristaine settled in one place for more than a few days, they laid camp to provide reasonable privacy. While traveling, however, safety took precedence over comfort, and the entire clan was assembled in one half of the large meadow. Brenna had yet to adjust to anything extremely personal in close quarters.

“Just who do you fear might be listening, lass?”

“Everybody.”

“Who do you think would possibly object? Half the tents in the camp are rocking on their pegs, any given night.”

“I *know*,” Brenna muttered. “That’s how I know sound carries.”

“Welp, we’ll get drowned out in the roar of the orgy, then.”

Jess timed it well, her lips meeting Brenna’s before she could respond, and after a moment, she began to relax beneath her. Her shoulders eased back against the blankets as Jess tasted her, a soft, sweet exploration of lips and tongue.

Then Brenna let her head fall back, and the kiss ended with an audible, wet pop.

“Look, remember, I lived alone in a single unit for five years, okay?” She tapped Jess’s chin sternly. “I’m still not convinced that civilized people engage in wanton carnality in communal settings.”

“Ach, City girls.” Jess groaned and toppled sideways, sprawling on her back. “May Gaia grant the deprived wenches more carnality, please.”

Brenna rolled on top of her long, lean form, and Jess

whoofed in protest. “Maybe we should keep looking, Jess.”

“You’re still fretting over this mesa, Bren? I doubt we can justify that, not with snows coming.” Jess blinked at her. “Are you picking up anything clear about the village?”

“You make me sound like a metal detector.” Brenna sighed. “No, nothing clear. Just a vague uneasiness. Like I’ve tried to tell Shann, I’m not sure when I’m sensing something or just having a fit of the creeps.”

“It was your senses that helped us escape the valley with our lives, adanin.” Jess’s long fingers brushed through Brenna’s hair. “You saw the flood before it wiped out our village. You saw Caster’s attack before her soldiers found us. You saw a crossbow bolt headed for my chest and saved my life before it struck.”

“I didn’t see it in time to save Camryn,” Brenna murmured. She laid her fingertip on Jess’s lips. “I know. I just get nervous with Shann basing all her plans for Tristaine on what I *think* I see. I dreamed about this mesa, and we found it right where I thought it would be, but...what if it turns out to be a dormant volcano that goes undormant or something?”

“We’ll pitch Vic in. A sacrifice to appease the gods.” Jess’s hands coasted over the planes of Brenna’s back, then moved beneath the thick quilt to cup the swells of her hips.

“It would just be nice if Tristaine could stay put for awhile.” Brenna rested her chin on Jess’s sternum, shifting slightly as strong fingers began to knead her shoulders. “We don’t want to go through all this again next winter.”

“Tristaine has always been a wandering tribe, Bren.” Jess tickled the backs of her thighs, and she tittered. “Amazons have always moved deeper into the wilderness as the Cities spread and grew. On this continent and others.”

“You know, almost everyone in the City still believes Amazons are a myth.” Brenna smiled, and Jess lowered her head to nuzzle her throat. “Lord knows I didn’t believe in you

CATE CULPEPPER

guys until a certain criminally insane Amazon warrior was assigned to my ward.”

“Better watch out for us psycho-butch Amazons.” Jess licked the smooth skin between Brenna’s neck and shoulder, warming it with her breath. “We can be bloody irresistible.”

“Jessssss...” Brenna felt her nipples rise, two volcanoes nowhere near dormant. She listened to the quiet night around them, biting her lip. Maybe the women and children in the surrounding tents really were asleep, but they might just be eavesdropping in courteous silence. “You know how... enthusiastic we get. And loud.”

Jess rolled again, carrying Brenna with her, and resumed her neck nuzzling from above. “I promise, lass, I’ll restrain meself.”

“It’s not—*hoo*—it’s not you I’m worried about...”

“I’ll restrain you too.” Jess laid a wet line of kisses along the taut skin of Brenna’s throat, then moved lower.

“Jesstin. Jesstin. Honey? You know I’ll...oh...*Hoo!* You know I’ll do *that*. Jess, come on, everyone will hear.”

“Brenna.” Jess lifted her head and peered down at her. “You’re really telling me I can’t make love to you because you’re afraid you’ll make too much noise?”

“Will you lower your voice, please? I have been *trying* to tell you that for—”

“*Ah, sweet goddess, yes!*” Jess yelled. “Brenna, *yes*, more, you wild *banshee*.”

“*Jesstin!*” Mortified, Brenna struggled beneath her, trying to clamp a hand over her mouth.

“Yes, there, *again!*” Jess pinned Brenna’s flailing arms and bayed, “*Yes, again*, there. Ah, Brenna, you hot-blooded *demoness o’ loove...*”

“*Mmrf onna ill oo!*” Brenna bucked like an outraged dowager, then heard a swift footstep outside their tent. She froze in horror.