

THE CLINIC

TRISTAINE BOOK ONE

by

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2006

CHAPTER ONE

The steel doors at the end of the cell block parted with a resounding crash.

“They’re not taking you, Jesstin.”

“Stand down, Cam.” Jess rested her hand on the younger woman’s shoulder. “It might be another interrogation.”

“They bring you back bloody from those,” Kyla hissed. Her brown eyes flashed both anger and fear as heavy footfalls moved down the stone hallway. “And what if it isn’t, Jess? What if they’re here to—?”

“Then tell Shann I died Tristaine’s true daughter.” Jess eyed them both. “We can’t fight bullets and truncheons with our fists, adanin. Save your strength for the real battle.”

“All right, Amazon.” The lead guard waited until the five other armed staff gathered close to the small cell. “Stand away from the door.”

“We’re all Amazons, you dim City prick,” Kyla spat.

“Watch your mouth, little whore.” The guard nodded down the hall, and someone threw a switch to open the barred gate.

It was still moving when Camryn flew at the men with the deadly ferocity of a warrior twice her age. Jess cursed and dove after her, and Kyla was only a heartbeat slower. The next moments were filled with roars of alarm and the thudding of clubs on flesh. It finally took a shower of mace to restrain Jess and force the younger Amazons back into the cell.

“I wouldn’t pull that shit where you’re going, banshee.” The red-faced commander jutted his chin toward Jess’s sisters,

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who lay gasping and raging on the concrete floor. “Not if you want to see those two alive again.”

The beating that followed seemed senseless. The guards didn’t fire questions at Jess, as they had in the past. They simply battered her until she couldn’t stand. She swayed on her knees, bleeding from a cut over one eye, until a cudgel smashed into the side of her head and took her down. As her senses faded she heard Kyla’s voice calling her, choked and despairing.

As long as they leave Kyla and Camryn alone, Jess thought. As long as they’re okay, we can give Shann time.

She was unconscious when she was transferred to the Clinic.



Biting cold woke her.

Jess surfaced through the familiar, unpleasant haze bestowed by blows to the head. She found herself strapped into a jointed chair, a kind of recliner, equipped with arm and ankle cuffs. Her long body lay full length on its padded surface, and the cuffs were tight but not biting. She figured if she hadn’t been freezing and aching with fresh bruises, she’d be comfortable enough.

Another intense light flooded over her, courtesy of an arc lamp suspended over the recliner. It took Jess several tries to squint her eyes fully open. She still wore Prison blacks, a standard-issue sleeveless shirt and slacks, and she was barefoot. Her wrists were cuffed to the chair at her sides. Her ankles were similarly bound to the base of the recliner.

She shifted, wincing at the pain in her side, her gaze ticking methodically around the small, antiseptic room. A detention cell, judging by the heavy steel door, empty except for the reclining restraint and shelves of medical supplies, and cold as a Fed’s heart. The frigid air smelled astringently sterile. With a nostalgia that was almost grief, Jess longed for the light pine spice of Tristaine’s mountain breezes. She wondered if this eye-watering chemical stench would burn it from her memory forever.

Jess knew where she was. Horror stories of this place abounded in the Prison population. Tales of the research done here had even reached Tristaine. If half the rumors about the Clinic were true, Jess might have opted for execution over transfer, given a choice.

She shivered and craned her neck. She couldn't see the cooling unit in the wall behind her, but judging from the chill blasting through the cell, it was cranked high. She lay still and concentrated on her breathing. The crease between her arched eyebrows faded as she relaxed. Jess knew she wasn't badly hurt. She was cold and hungry, but she'd been hungry for weeks. She still had a pulse. She could wait this part out.

Camryn and Kyla were relatively safe, the young idiots. They'd been arrested in a brazen attempt to free Jess, mistaking their adolescent selves for the seasoned warriors celebrated around Tristaine's storyfires. If Shann hadn't been sick with her own grief for Dyan, she would have realized Cam and Ky couldn't abide the thought of Jess rotting in a City Prison. The women of Tristaine were adanin, sisters, and they watched out for each other.

Jess wondered how long her respite would last before someone came for her and this bleak nightmare continued. She was too cold to sleep, so she allowed herself the rare luxury of remembering home. To her lifelong dismay, she had no control over her tear ducts. She hated it, but she cried easily and always had. Her mentor, Dyan, taught her warriors never to shed tears before an enemy. Jess didn't risk remembering Tristaine now unless she was alone.

Her shoulders relaxed against the leather surface of the restrainer, and her breathing deepened as her mind filled with images. Nothing drawn out, just quick flickering images of her sisters and her village.

All the clichés of poetry applied to Tristaine: sunlit meadows and craggy, brooding peaks, surrounded by the lush thickness of old-growth forest. The mountain air was as crisp and

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pure as chilled wine and vibrant with birdsong. A river coursed through the center of the village, wending between their cabins and lodges. Its quiet, rushing music nurtured the daughters of Tristaine, even in their sleep. Through the long, bleak City nights, Jess still ached for that reassuring whisper.

She summoned faces, and they came. Shann and Dyan, sitting quietly in meetings of Tristaine's high council, listening more than speaking, their hands joined loosely on the oak table. Dyan's scarred knuckles, her blunt fingers stroking Shann's wrist. Kyla's sweet, rich soprano, raised in song at a harvest festival dance.

Camryn's younger blood sister, Lauren, following Dyan around everywhere she went like a worshipful puppy. She blushed crimson whenever Dyan spoke to her and raised her hand to hide her crooked front teeth when she smiled.

Jess's eyes filled as more brutal memories surfaced. Riding a routine patrol on a moonlit mountain trail, at Dyan's side. The ambush by City soldiers, and Dyan falling under a deadly spray of bullets. Little Lauren dying seconds later. Jess shivered and shook her head slightly to banish those wrenching images.

She heard the pneumatic pump over the door whoosh as a young blond woman elbowed it open. She was carrying a clipboard, and she wore a white coat. Some kind of healer. Jess blinked rapidly, stinging the cut over her eye.

"What the—?" There was surprise in the girl's voice. The white coat was too big for her, and she wrapped it more tightly around her shoulders as she went to check the cooling unit behind the jointed chair. Jess noted that she moved like an athlete, in spite of her diminutive size.

She studied Jess's restraints silently for a moment, and her green eyes narrowed when she saw the emerging bruises on the prisoner's face. Then she sighed and blinked at the steam her breath made in the cold air.

"My name is Brenna. I'm your medical advocate." She

consulted the form on her clipboard. “Who left you in here like this?”

“Hello, Brenna.” Jess flexed her sore jaw. “I’m Jesstin.”

Brenna blew tousled bangs off her forehead and slapped the clipboard against her thigh. “Well, this tells me exactly jack. You came in when, last night?” Without waiting for a reply, she snatched the penlight out of the breast pocket of her white coat, thumbed it on, and moved the beam across Jess’s glassy eyes. “Were you examined on arrival, Jesstin?”

“No. I’m all right.” It would have sounded butch if her teeth hadn’t been chattering.

Brenna measured Jess’s pulse at the throat and frowned at her bloodshot eyes. “How long since you’ve had any solid sleep or a decent meal?”

“A while.”

Brenna muttered something derogatory about Prison health-care services as she palpated the base of Jess’s jaw. Judging from her contusions, both fresh and faded, her patient had been beaten more than once in the recent past. Brenna wondered uneasily what this prisoner, with her mild brogue, had done to merit such abuse.

For her part, Jess wondered when the Feds had started handing out hypodermics to school kids. At least this girl had good instincts. Her touch was light and careful, and her green eyes had that same look of focused concentration that Shann’s held when she tended Tristaine’s wounded. She doubtless had excellent training. City dwellers were tested for aptitude in childhood, then educated rigorously in a single discipline. Jess hoped this Brenna had held no dreams of teaching or practicing law.

Jess tightened as Brenna’s fingers probed a tender area low on her right side, and Brenna instantly shot her a look of concern before continuing. This little pixie didn’t seem callous enough for Government work.

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“Were you given anything for pain at the Prison?” Brenna asked.

“They don’t keep analgesics at the Prison. Your hands are cold, Brenna.”

“Jesstin?” Brenna straightened. “You’re supposed to answer my questions as simply and briefly as possible. If you’re insolent, or too familiar, or uncooperative, there’ll be consequences. You know that, right?”

“Right.”

“Great, we understand each other.” Brenna pulled a thick blanket from the stand beneath the restraining chair. “You may be bigger than me, but in your condition I could deck you with one punch. Don’t forget it, please.” She flipped the blanket out and settled it over Jess, then tucked it around her sides with that odd gentleness. “Okay. I’ll find someone in maintenance to turn down the damn cooler. We’ll make you comfortable enough to rest. Sound all right?”

“Yes’m.”

Brenna glanced at Jess warily, but her sky blue eyes were guileless. She nodded and left the cell.



Brenna slapped her clipboard on the executive secretary’s desk. “Charlotte, I need to see Caster.”

Charlotte batted heavy eyelids at her. “Goodness, Brenna. Is there a problem with your patient?”

“Yes. Is Caster in?”

“Well, she is, but generally she’s not available on demand, you know.” Charlotte smiled sympathetically, and her penciled eyebrows rose. “Military Research is really nothing like the Civilian unit, sweetie. Now you’re working with the top scientists in the City, and you can’t expect them to be at the beck and call of every entry-level—”

“It’s quite all right, Charlotte.” An elegant woman with a silver cloud of hair and a patrician carriage emerged from the

office behind the desk. “My door is always open to my staff, particularly this brilliant young medic who’s so vital to our current study.”

“Oh, well, that’s fine then.” Charlotte flushed. “Brenna, you are so incredibly lucky to be working with Caster. You know she received *another* Government citation only last week? Let me bring you two some coffee. It won’t—”

“Thank you, Charlotte, but we can’t take you away from your busy desk. Come, Brenna, walk with me.” Caster took Brenna’s elbow and steered her gently down the richly carpeted corridor. “I hope you’re not in need of a caffeine fix, dear. I can take only so much fawning before noon. Now tell me, how are you finding your first days with us?”

“I have some concerns, Caster.” Brenna drew a breath. She wasn’t easily intimidated, but the scientist’s regal aura demanded deference. “Our test subject was transferred from the Prison last night, and not only was she badly beaten before arrival, no one—”

“Ah, our Tristainian is here at last.” Caster beamed. “Do you know what lengths we had to go to in order to secure a subject for this study, Brenna? Why, it took months of planning and coordination with a dozen different Federal agencies.” She paused, and the fingers on Brenna’s arm tightened. “Jesstin is fully functional, isn’t she? No bones were broken, no organs ruptured?”

“I haven’t done a full physical, but there was nothing critical on initial exam. However, whoever did the transfer just dumped her in a detention cell, Caster, and she lay in restraints for hours without medical attention. And some idiot cranked up the cooler in there so high she—”

“All quite deliberate, Brenna.” Caster smiled at her stunned expression. “For this study, our subject must be kept in a state of constant vulnerability. For some prisoners, psychological duress is enough. But Jesstin, as you’ve probably noticed, is quite a formidable physical specimen, and she doesn’t frighten easily.

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It's vital that she understand we have complete and utter mastery over her fate, and unfortunately, the only way to remind her of that is through punitive dominance."

"Punitive dominance," Brenna repeated. She pulled her white coat closely around her and folded her arms. "I...I see, Caster. I'm sorry, it's just a very...different way of handling things than the protocols I'm used to."

"I'm sure it is, dear." Caster slipped an arm around her shoulders. "You came to us from the Civilian unit, and their clinical approach differs greatly from ours. On the C.U., you worked primarily with petty criminals, artists, religious zealots, and the like, testing new medications. Here, your patients will be felons. Murderers, political dissidents, arsonists. Prisoners who present a genuine, ongoing threat to Government security."

"All right, Caster." Brenna hated the meekness in her voice. "Thank you for explaining. I guess I'm still getting used to my new role here."

"Well, the good news is your essential role hasn't changed." Caster nodded at a passing colleague as they moved past a tastefully appointed atrium. "You're still in charge of ensuring your patient's physical welfare. You're to treat any illness or injury Jesstin incurs, to the best of your ability, in order to keep her properly healthy for the rigors of clinical trials. You're not to give her anything for pain, however."

"Nothing?"

"Strict unit policy. In fact, I want you to apply a small pain stimulus yourself, dear, during the first examination. No doubt you did this occasionally in the Civilian unit."

"Yes," Brenna said.

"While Jesstin should look to you as her medical advocate, she shouldn't be led to believe your role with her is entirely benevolent."

They had reached the doors leading to the laboratories and treatment rooms, where plush carpeting and carefully nurtured

plants gave way to cold tile and disinfectant. A uniformed man with a studied bearing of command came through them briskly.

“General Lorber!” Caster lifted a hand to one breast.

“The good doctor.” Lorber’s eyes crinkled above his walrus mustache. “I hear our mighty Amazon is finally in residence!”

“That’s right, General. In spite of the best efforts of some sadly deluded civilians, clinical trials will open right on schedule. Oh, I’m so glad you stopped by.” Caster beckoned to Brenna and put a hand on her shoulder. “I’d like to present our unit’s new medical technician, who comes to us with the most glowing professional references imaginable. Brenna, General Lorber is the Clinic’s Military liaison.”

“Miss Brenna.” Lorber’s large freckled hand devoured Brenna’s. “With a Clinic team of such breathless beauty, how can we fail?”

Caster tittered girlishly. “The General is our own Roman warrior, Brenna, surging into battle against the rapacious Amazons of old! We couldn’t have a more valorous ally.”

Lorber’s fleshy thumb drew lazy circles over Brenna’s knuckles. She smiled up at him politely and slowly tightened her grip until he stopped. “It’s an honor, sir.”

“If you have a moment, General, I’d love to show you our latest estimates on the value of Tristaine’s timber rights.” Caster bestowed a parting smile on Brenna. “Run along and see to our illustrious patient, dear. And remember, I want you to feel free to come to me at any time, yes?”

Brenna watched the flirtatious brush of Caster’s hand on the General’s arm as they strolled back toward her office. She noted the distinguished Roman warrior avoided her eyes. She started to push through the double doors, then reversed herself and took a detour to the staff lounge. She checked to make sure she was alone, then opened her locker and pulled out a small silver flask.

She tipped it twice, whispering invectives. That brief lapse of professionalism worried her. Angering a General was

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simple stupidity. She couldn't let emotion goad her here. Her job was keeping her patient healthy, then cashing paychecks from the most prestigious research facility in the City. She would not make waves.

When Brenna pushed the heavy door of the detention cell open, she was relieved to note some improvement. While still cool, the cell's temperature was bearable. The prisoner lay quietly under the blanket, but she opened those disconcerting eyes when Brenna approached her.

"What do you say we start again?" She folded her hands behind her. "I'm Brenna, I'm Clinic staff. I'm going to take care of your health needs during the research study and be your medical advocate while you're in clinical trials. Remember that I have the authority to discipline or disable you at any time, if necessary. Understood?"

Jess swallowed. "Would this be a Military study or Civilian?"

Brenna heard the dryness in her throat, and she lifted a blue decanter of water and fit the bendable straw between Jess's lips. "This is the Military Research unit."

For a moment Jess was still, and then she pulled hard on the straw. The cool water sluiced down her sandpapered throat in a welcome flood, but she hardly tasted it. She would have preferred organ harvesting or the morgue to this. A Civilian study would probably kill her too, eventually, but Military research meant the Feds planned to use her against Tristaine.

"Caster is the scientist in charge of your project. She'll explain everything you need to know later." Brenna replaced the decanter on the table, and her voice took on a practiced, soothing cadence. "You just need to concentrate on following directions, Jessin, and obeying rules, and you'll be fine. All that clear?"

"Clear," Jess said. She smelled whiskey. Wonderful. Clinical trials, Military research, and a Government pixie with a fondness for spirits and access to long needles. The luck of Tristaine's women hadn't turned yet.