

# THE FIRST AMAZON



JOY DALY

*“Now rejoice!” exclaimed To-eyza;  
Women, ye are free!  
Nevermore shall husbands rule you,  
Beat, oppress, and then befool you,  
If you follow me!”*  
William Henry Brett

## **THE BEGINNING**

Smoke colored the sky grey, and the smell of burning wood and burning flesh made Queen Amazonia’s nostrils flare. She surveyed the ruins of her village from the mouth of the Cave of Gaia and vowed it would be the last time.

The women and young girls began to emerge from the rubble. Bruised, bloodied, hair wild, eyes hunted, they gathered before her, sinking onto the stones that ringed the entrance to the cave. Some moaned, some cried, but most were silent – the silence of suffering, and it was into this silence she spoke.

‘We will tend to our wounded and dead. But, before we restore our buildings, before we replant our crops or replace our livestock, before we rest again upon clean mattresses and take our leisure beside the fast-flowing waters of Thermodon, before anything else, we learn to defend ourselves and we learn to attack. With the Goddess’s blessings, the next party of men who enter our village to take what is not theirs will not take. They will give.

They will give their lives.

Long after Queen Amazonia was dust, and the sapling that she had planted outside the cave of Gaia to mark her oath had grown into a majestic bay laurel, her hunted village had become a thriving and wealthy polis of warriors, known throughout the lands as The Amazons.

## CHAPTER ONE

The sound of the baby's cry floating down from the mountains was loud in the crisp night air. Iphito quieted her horse on the gravel road that ran around the base of the range and listened. She was a tall girl of sixteen, with a long, blonde plait that turned silver in the moon's light. Her heavily muscled shoulders were clearly defined through the tunic that draped over her left shoulder leaving her scarred right breast exposed. It was her job to make this journey every night, her job to beat the wolves. The baby was still a hard ride away, and she dug her heels into the side of her chestnut mare sending thanks to Gaia for the full moon.

Below her in the neighboring polis, she heard men's voices carousing as they drank wine at the tavern, a place infinitely more entertaining for them than the androns at home. She sniffed her disdain. They could keep their men's rooms and their taverns, provided they left her alone.

The wailing was louder now, she must be close. Pulling at the horse's rein, she stilled and listened. The cries were coming from the outcrop of rocks that sat halfway up the slope to her left. She leaned forward and murmured 'Good girl, Phen,' into the horse's pricked ear before clicking her tongue twice to spur Phen forward. The moonlight played tricks with the ground and twice Phen stumbled into holes that appeared as shadows, but Iphito rode with the uneven footing as if planted on the horse's back, her eyes trained on the outcrop. 'Onwards Phen,' she urged, and the mare picked up speed.

Then Phen stopped and snorted, blowing air through her nostrils in a low, long sound. Her ears flickered and Iphito could feel her body quivering.

‘Is it wolves?’

Phen grunted and pawed the ground, her neck held high.

Iphito dropped the reins as she searched for bodies slinking through the sparse bush rooted into the slopes. With practiced ease she reached across her scarred chest to her back and unslung her bow. She slid out one of the twelve arrows in a cylindrical leather quiver strapped to Phen’s haunch. Notching it, she guided Phen with her heels looking for shadows that moved faster than the gentle breeze allowed.

There. Taking aim, Iphito let fly. The shadow yelped once and dropped, but there were dozens more and they were further up the slope than she, heading directly for the outcrop.

‘Faster Phen,’ she commanded as she dug heels into the mare’s sides.

Trained from birth to negotiate the rocky terrain, Phen leapt up the slope, closing the gap as Iphito continued to draw and fire at the pack. By the time she was down to her final arrow, she and Phen had galloped past eleven long, grey motionless bodies, but the remaining wolves were almost at the outcrop. Iphito drew again, released, and calculated that she was less than ten meters from the pack.

‘Attack,’ she commanded and Phen, against every instinct, galloped into the wolves. Iphito stood on Phen’s back, her sword drawn. She leapt, soaring over the pack to race for the baby.

The leader, a huge, grey male still had the scent of prey from the outcrop in its nostrils, but this new opportunity could not be ignored. Making a couple of low yips, he separated seven of the wolves from the pack to follow him upwards, leaving the remaining wolves to circle the horse.

A large male launched itself at Phen, who rose on her hind legs and brought her hooves down to glance against its skull. The wolf dropped motionless, but that had given the second wolf time to latch onto her back leg. She screamed with pain and kicked out. The wolf lost its hold, and went flying, a piece of flesh in its mouth. The remaining wolves, catching the scent of blood, threw themselves at Phen. She kicked and screamed, using her front and back legs to lash out at the animals. Another three fell to the ground motionless, while a fourth crawled away, dragging its hindquarters. However, one wolf had managed to get within striking range of her soft underbelly and with a snarl it darted in.

Iphito could hear Phen screaming, but her feet didn’t falter as she scrambled to reach the baby before the wolves, her hands and knees bleeding, breath rasping. Then she was at the foot of the rocky outcrop and so were the wolves. With a snarl she swung her sword and struck.

The leader, a wily old male with countless battle scars crisscrossing his body, threw himself to the side as the blade shaved his neck and spun neatly to launch himself at the human.

Using her small shield as a club, Iphito swiped at his head, stunning him as she made solid contact. One launched from the left, and she angled her sword low to pierce it under its ribcage. Another flew at her throat, and she only just managed to bat it away with her shield as she wrenched her sword from the wolf at her feet.

The leader had regained his feet, and he eyed her warily, before making a guttural growl. At the sound, the five left attacked simultaneously, and Iphito's sword and shield slashed and smashed. She cut into the shoulder blade of one and concussed another. One latched onto her calf, another onto the bicep of her sword arm, while the leader waited for her throat. Her arm and calf were fire, and she was vaguely aware that Phen had stopped screaming. Ignoring the pain, she brought the shield in her left hand down to strike the skull of the wolf shredding her leg. It dropped away, and the leader gave a victorious snarl as it sprang for her exposed throat.

Iphito lost her footing, crashing onto her back and the leader sprang onto her chest, his long yellow fangs snapping inches from her face, hot ropes of saliva slathering her cheeks. Using her shield to fend him off, she gagged as she caught his rancid breath. The other wolf still had her sword arm locked in its jaws and she knew she would not see sunrise. She prayed that Gaia would receive her with a mother's love as her shield arm collapsed against the weight of the leader. Taking a last look at the glorious moon, she closed her eyes and prepared for death. Then she heard a whinny. Beyond the wolves stood Phen, dripping blood, a hole in her belly.

'Phen,' she cried and stiffened her shield arm.

Phen reared to bring her hooves smashing into the wolf that had hold of Iphito's arm.

The wolf let go without a whimper and Iphito swung her sword to pierce the leader through its side. It collapsed onto her chest, and she cursed and heaved it off.

'Phen, reins,' she called.

Phen hobbled across to stand over Iphito and dipped her head so that the reins dangled directly into Iphito's hands.

'Good girl,' said Iphito as she dragged herself upright. She caressed Phen's velvet nose and rubbed the distinctive white diamond of hair that sat squarely in the center of Phen's forehead. Phen nuzzled her face and nickered when Iphito blew gently into her nostrils.

‘Thank you Phen, my sister in heart.’ Iphito could see intestines bulging from the wound in Phen’s stomach and she groaned with shared pain. ‘I am sorry, my warrior, but our work is not done. We need to find the babe.’

Phen whinnied as if she understood, and Iphito patted her neck, then gritted her teeth. She hauled herself onto Phen’s back, giving an involuntary cry as her calf muscle spurted a gout of blood. ‘Forward,’ she said and Phen limped up the slope.

Then Iphito saw it. A small bundle wedged between two boulders in the outcrop. Nudging Phen with her feet, she guided the horse close. There was no noise and Iphito couldn’t believe that after all this, Gaia had allowed the babe to die. Then she heard the smallest of whimpers that built in strength until it was a full-throated wail. Landing heavily beside it, she unwrapped the swaddling cloth. As she expected it was a girl.

The baby’s tiny fingers brushed against Iphito’s cheek, before her hand dropped into the warrior’s bloodied palm. With surprising strength, the baby gripped Iphito’s finger and held on.

## CHAPTER TWO

Helena, the fourteen-year-old sentry scrubbed at her eyes and stifled a yawn as she sat atop the artillery tower above the primary gate. She had spent her day grinding Valeriana in the large, cool herbal room at the rear of the Healers Academy, and as she watched the moon make its journey across the sky, she worked her fingers against the stiffness.

In addition to their day jobs, every Amazonium between the ages of fourteen and fifty spent one night in the month guarding the fortified perimeter of Amazonium, and Helena swallowed another yawn before once more focusing on the paved thoroughfare that stretched off into the distance. And right there, at the silvery horizon, she caught a smudge of movement. She scrubbed at her eyes and stared hard as somebody on horseback rode towards them.

Pulling the salpinx from its bracket on the wall, she blew. The shrill blast reached the towers positioned a stadion away on either side. Their sentries, all selected for their sharp eyes and young years, blew their own salpinx so that the perimeter rang with the sound of trumpets.

The women behind the head-high, rock walls stepped up onto the launching blocks and with flawless skill earned from years of drills, unslung their bows and notched their arrows. Standing tall, they stared down the moonlit road at the vague outline of a horse and rider.

Helena watched as the horse came closer and although she was a Healer sworn to honor the Hippocratic Oath, her fingers quivered with tension as she held the arrow taut against the string. Then the moonlight picked out the star on the horse's head, and the long golden-silver braid of the woman slumped across its back.

'Stand down,' she shouted. 'Iphito is the rider and I think she is injured.'

‘Stand down, it is Iphito,’ passed along the line as some vaulted the wall to run to the horse. Three large brass bells were mounted in the towers. The Healer’s Bell had a lighter tone than the Attack Bell beside it, which clanged loud and deep. The third bell with an almost shrill peal was a recent addition after fire had decimated one of the outlying districts in the polis. Helene fumbled for the rope that dangled from the Healers’ Bell and tugged hard.

As it continued to toll across the polis, the women responsible for the welfare of horse and human tumbled from their beds. None grumbled as they shrugged into cloaks before heading for their stations.

Phen had carried her unconscious mistress and the precious bundle swaddled in homespun wool back to Amazonium with only her memory as a guide. When the guard clustered around to take Iphito from her back she gave a tired harrumph, and they all placed a single hand upon her body, communicating their love and respect.

The head groom, Eowyn, a stocky woman in her fifties was the duty officer for horses this month and she galloped to the now open gates and slid from her gelding in one smooth move.

‘Let me through,’ she commanded and ran a practised gaze over the mare. Gathering the reins with large, calloused hands, her voice was soft with sympathy as she said, ‘Come Phen, let’s get you home.’

The stables at Alcippe were at the other end of the polis, alongside the river Thermodon. It was a long, tortuous journey for Phen and whenever she stumbled, Eowyn crooned softly in her right ear. With the moon beginning its downward path, Phen clopped heavily over the cobbles to come to rest outside her manger, and Eowyn lit the clay lamp that sat on a shelf just inside Phen’s stable door. “You are home, my girl?” she said as she caressed her muzzle.

The flickering, smoky light from the olive oil, showed the intestines bulging from the hole in Phen’s belly and Eowyn’s gaze travelled to a small, stone house built opposite the stables. Isla, Chief Hippiatros and miracle worker wouldn’t be able to do anything with this. “I am so sorry my friend. You are beyond miracles.” She cupped her hands to cradle Phen’s muzzle. ‘Iphito would be here if she could,’ she breathed into the mare’s mouth and Phen gave a small harrumph.

Then Phen dropped to her knees and rolled onto her side, her flanks shivering.



Eowyn sighed and made the sign of Gaia, a circle bisected by a cross upon Phen's forehead. 'Brave warrior, loyal friend. Go to your loving Mother. She will reward you well.'

Phen's brown eyes hazed over and Eowyn called to the Goddess to receive Phen's spirit. She lifted Phen's head to rest in her lap and stroked her muzzle until it cooled.

The hospital was a rectangular, mud-bricked building. Four orderly rows of beds, twenty long, with fresh mattress ticking and white cotton sheets were empty except for an old woman in her fifties who had an infected heel and a young girl of six who had been complaining of stomach cramps. Both were sleeping soundly.

The large, oil fed lamps flickered light over the white mosaic floor tiles and cast dull, mustard shadows on the frescoes of Gaia against the plastered walls, decorated with pictures of Gaia. The lamp smoke drifted up to the shuttered windows cut at the roofline and the only sounds, other than an occasional snore from the old woman, was the terse commands coming from one of the four operating cubicles at the rear of the hospital.

Aphiles, Senior Healer and Governor of the Healers' Caste was standing over Iphito, grateful that the girl lying on the table was unconscious.

'Closer,' she ordered.

Doris, a fourth-year apprentice, had been summoned by the same bell as Aphiles. She flicked her blonde braid over her left shoulder as she inched the lamp towards Iphito's calf, careful not to touch her skin with the flame. Her smooth, round face creased as she assessed the damage, making her look older than her fifteen years. 'Is that better, Governor?' she asked, her voice as gentle as her hands.

Aphiles nodded as she examined Iphito's leg and reached for the medical tome devoted to wounds. It was stacked with the others along a shelf that ran the length of the side wall, and again she sent thanks to Cannenta, her now long dead predecessor.

Cannenta had been scouring the Thessaly Agora for rare medicinal herbs and the prized red wine for which Thessaly merchants were famous. Instead, she had spotted leather bound books, stacked in tottering columns on the edge of a trader's table. A quick flick through showed carefully reproduced medical texts, lectures, research notes and essays from the Hippocratic Corpus. It had cost the silver allocated for the year's supply of wine, and there had been an uproar upon her return. But, as the books proved their worth in fractures, maladies, head wounds and poisons, Cannenta was forgiven, and the books had become the cornerstone of all future healing.

Aphiles flicked through the pages as she continued to inspect Iphito's injuries. It would require Hippocrates knowledge and Gaia's goodwill to save the girl and she prayed now, 'Blessed Mother, guide your humble servant and preserve this girl if it is Your will.' She made the sign of Gaia across Iphito's forehead and turned to business. As she sniffed the wounded leg and arm of the naked girl, the lines on her face deepened.

'I smell wolf. We must work quickly.' She bustled to the bottles and pots of medicines racked in neat, straight lines on the back wall of the cubicle. 'Yes, this, this, and this,' she said as she handed bottles, bandages and cloths to her young assistant.

Doris placed them on the portable workbench and wheeled it to Iphito's right side as Aphiles returned to her patient.

'The Amaracinum first,' said Aphiles.

'Yes Governor.' Doris chanted a prayer to Gaia as she unstopped the bottle and inhaled its contents. One of the first lessons at the Healer's Academy was to smell all medicines first, and her keen nose detected unripe olive oil and balanim. She soaked a clean linen cloth with the liquid and handed it to Aphiles. Iphito lay with her palms upwards and Doris brushed the one nearest to her, tracing the calluses and scars as Aphiles scrubbed her wounded arm. "It is strange that I, who desired the yellow sash of the Healer, was granted my wish by Gaia, and yet Iphito, who coveted the red sash of the Warrior was awarded the Rune of Priestess at the Knowing Ceremony."

"Why is this strange?" said Aphiles as she wiped Iphito's arm. "Iphito challenged the Goddess and won. I think your word choice is poor."

"I apologize Governor. Maybe I should have used the word, ironic. It seems ironic that Iphito, the Champion of the Warrior Caste, the darling of Amazonium, must rely on the goodwill of Mother Gaia if she is to make her seventeenth year; the Mother that she spurned."

Aphiles spared a glance at her young assistant before she held out her hand for a new cloth. "She did not spurn Gaia, she challenged her. And our Mother respected that challenge and gave Iphito what she desired."

"Still, it is..."

"Check the lye, Doris."

Doris unstopped the bottle and sniffed the liquid. She could smell ashes from the wild fig tree's branches and a little oil in the watery mixture. 'It is fine, Governor.'

"Why are we using this?" As Aphiles asked, she began pouring it through a strainer over the bite marks while Doris placed a bowl under Iphito's arm to catch the liquid.

‘It is used for cleaning and healing the flesh,’ said Doris promptly.

‘Very good,’ said Aphiles.

Once again Aphiles rubbed the wound with linen, while Doris used the mortar and pestle on the bench at the back of the room to mash together a poultice of unripe figs and honey to draw out infection.

Aphiles applied the paste deftly, then turned her attention to Iphito’s calf. ‘Help me raise her leg, Doris.’

Doris moved to the side of the table and lifted Iphito’s wounded leg, while Aphiles wheeled the portable frame to the bottom of the table and strapped Iphito’s ankle to it,

‘The bleeding bowl and sea sponge.’

All the utensils were washed and stacked on the shelves next to the rack of medicines and Doris went unerringly to the glazed clay bowl used for bleeding to draw a sea sponge from the pile. ‘Shall I fetch water?’ she asked as she placed the bowl on the work bench.

‘Please.’

Doris bustled into the main hospital area and filled the pitcher from one of four wooden pails set on the administration counter, spilling a little in her haste. She had no way of knowing the time as the only clepsydra in the community rested in the Assembly Chamber. But judging by the white-washed ceiling, which were grey rather than inky black, she guessed that dawn was coming.

The Night Administrator, a plump woman of nineteen with buck teeth that gleamed in the flickering lamp light, mopped up the spill as she said, “Phen has died.”

Doris made the sign of Gaia upon her chest. ‘Iphito must not know of this until she is mending.’

‘Then Iphito will live?’

With the Goddess’s blessing.’ Doris turned from the counter and water sloshed from the pitcher as she hurried back to the operating room.

Aphiles had placed the bleeding bowl under Iphito’s ragged calf while she abraded it with a sponge, and a copper smell was thick in the air. ‘Light,’ she ordered.

Doris placed the pitcher on the workbench and grabbed one of the lamps to hold it flat on her palm, close to Iphito’s wound.

‘It is important to restore the humours as soon as possible,” muttered Aphiles. Blood flowed into the bleeding bowl as she continued scrubbing. ‘Sluice it,’ she said.

Doris trickled water from the pitcher into Iphito’s wound. Gradually the water turned pink and finally it ran clear.

‘Good,’ said Aphiles. ‘Now for some Quercus.’

Doris unstopped a bottle and handed it to Aphiles who doused Iphito’s calf.

‘Some dried irises.’

Doris removed the lid of the wooden box, catching the scent as she held it close to Aphiles so that the Healer could pack it into the wound.

‘Dressing, quickly.’

Returning to the shelves at the back of the room, Doris rummaged through a crate, filled with linen and cotton bandages. ‘Do you want a roll or compress?’

‘Both and bring the sutures. Her calf is going to need stitching.’

The first-year Healers had come and gone with fresh pails of water and fruit and the Night Administrator had been relieved before Aphiles declared herself satisfied.

The two Healers’ eyes were red rimmed from lack of sleep and lamp smoke, and Aphiles, almost forty, rubbed her lower back as she shuffled sore feet in her sandals. ‘Very good, Doris. Clean up and then you may get some sleep, I think you have earned it.’

Doris’s ears turned pink at the praise. ‘Thank you, Governor,’ she said as she helped two junior healers move Iphito from the operating table to a portable bed and billowed a sheet over her form, just beginning to move a little.

The healers wheeled Iphito into the ward, chattering to each other as they deftly transferred her to the bed closest to the front door and the fresh air.

Iphito, barely conscious, moaned at the movement and sunk into the soft ticking. She could feel the draught of Acorum working, and already the flames of pain licking her calf and arm were dying. So, she would live to fight another day. She sent thanks to Gaia as she struggled to remember last night. How had she made it back to Amazonium? Phen. Phen must have brought her home – clever Phen.

‘Phen,’ she murmured.

The two girls’ chatter stopped, and they exchanged glances over her head.

Iphito clutched at the Healer with her unwounded arm. ‘Phen?’

The girl pretended not to hear and already Iphito was drifting away. ‘Phen?’ she whispered as she sunk into sleep.

It wasn’t until dusk that Iphito woke and for a moment she was confused. Then she remembered. ‘Phen?’ she called; her voice crackly.

The Day Administrator adjusted her brown sash and squared her shoulders, before she made her way to Iphito’s bedside and held her hand tight. ‘I am sorry, Iphito.’

Iphito bit her lip, so it bled. If she hadn't set Phen amongst the wolves, if she hadn't pushed Phen up the slope after she'd seen her mare's grievous wounds, if she hadn't tried to save the babe. She struggled to get up, to visit her sister of the heart one last time, whisper thanks into her ear and stroke her soft muzzle but sunk back into the bed as she remembered. Horses were valued alive and dead. The domestics would have worked quickly to lever Phen's body onto a wagon hitched to a team of oxen, to transport her to the slaughter yard. There they'd salvage Phen's sinew for bowstrings and her gut for stitching wounds. Her mane would be cut close to the neck and placed in a wooden chest; later it would be woven into rope and winter cloaks, while her hide would be scraped and salted, ready for drying and then tanning. Phen was gone. She turned her head away from the administrator as tears soaked the pillow. 'And the baby?' she whispered.

'See for yourself.' The administrator pointed to the crib at the foot of the bed and helped Iphito to sit up. The infant sucked greedily on the spout of the baby bottle, dribbling goat's milk down her chin in her haste.

Iphito watched her for some time and the pain in her heart shifted a little.

'She is a strong mite. Very strong. I will be surprised if Gaia does not make her a warrior when her time comes.' The administrator smiled and squeezed Iphito's hand.'

'A warrior,' echoed Iphito. 'It is fitting. The bravest of warriors gave her life to save her.'

'But you live,' said the administrator.

'I speak of Phen, and she made a vow. If it was the babe's destiny to become a warrior, she would see to it that the warrior became the greatest the Amazons had ever known. Her tears slowed. 'Bring the babe to me,' she ordered.

Although Iphito was still weak from loss of blood and her stitched arm ached badly, when she was handed the baby, she sat up straight in bed and held the girl to the Heavens.

'You shall be called Alexis, defender of womankind.'

Alexis gurgled and as Iphito lowered her, she managed to grab a handful of Iphito's hair and tug at it.

Iphito laughed although it hurt to do so and hugged the baby to her chest. 'Maybe I should have called you Ataktos, you are a little naughty I think.'

Alexis gurgled again.

### CHAPTER THREE

During the last day of her month long stay in hospital, Iphito instructed a Healer to bind her calf from knee to ankle. Then, she strapped on her sandals and ran until almost lunchtime to reach Amazonium's outskirts and Alcippe. Here, the river Thermodon first appeared, choppy and white as it gushed from the mountains before it widened into a broad course of water that flowed through Amazonian and provided fresh water for all. This is where the horses were kept, where Phen had lived – and died, she shook her head and pushed the thought away. The mangers ran down the main thoroughfare, opposite the quarters for the grooms, while the side streets were lined with buildings full of leather halters and reins, treatment rooms and barns for hay, all stocked to the brim with equine goods to keep a horse ready for war.

The walkways and thoroughfares were paved in palm sized stones bordered in iron, to toughen the horse's hooves and frogs so that they could negotiate the rocky terrain that surrounded them with ease, and Iphito's sandals made a slapping sound as she ran. Crossing a wide bridge, capable of taking a team of oxen and cart, she made the right bank of the river, breathing heavily, perspiration trickling down her back, her calf and shoulder throbbing. She ignored the pain as she continued across the lush, green paddocks dotted with shady trees.

A young colt frisked beside her until she stopped to lean against the fence posts of the arenas. It flitted off on stick legs and she smiled as she watched it go. As soon as a foal finished suckling, the journey to battle horse began and a large part of that preparation was had in these arenas. Here the horse was taught to accept a bridle and bit, to accept a rider and the whip if necessary. This was done without breaking the horse's spirit or the bond of love and trust between the horse and the human. It took careful handling, careful whispering, and the Grooms from the Domestic Caste were masters. A light tap on Phen's flanks with her

heels or a soft command in her ear had proved all Iphito had ever needed to be at one with her horse.

‘Phen,’ she murmured, and the grooms and horses became misty.

‘Iphito, is that you?’

Iphito blinked hard and moved her lips in a semblance of a smile before she turned to face the enquirer. It was Eowyn, and for this Iphito was grateful. Eowyn would understand.

‘How are you?’ said Eowyn as she stood beside Iphito, resting her arms on the fence as she gazed at the horses rather than the young woman.

‘I am fine, and in need of a new horse now that Phen has ...’

‘She died brave, she died with words of gratitude for her service, and she died with your name in her ears,’ said Eowyn and squeezed Iphito’s hand briefly. ‘Phen is with Gaia now and will be well-rewarded. She was a fine warrior and an even finer spirit.’ Eowyn stole a quick glance at Iphito and then looked away. The girl still mourned. ‘Remember Iphito, this life is brief for all living things, but that is not so in the next life. You will enjoy the love of your horse once again; of this you can be sure.’

Iphito wanted to thank the woman who had ushered Phen’s spirit into the next world, who had whispered her name in Phen’s ear, but her throat tightened.

Eowyn waited a moment or two for Iphito to compose herself, then said, ‘You are in need of a horse who has similar qualities to Phen, and I have a number of mares and geldings that may suit. I will instruct the grooms to put them through their paces.’

Iphito nodded, knowing that none would be like Phen and winced as her calf stiffened at the fence, but her eyes didn’t leave the arena, watching for the horse which would replace the being which she had cared for above all others. And finally, she had narrowed it down to Brutus and a mare with a sweet nature and a wicked speed. But something about Brutus’s spirit, the glint in his eye, the prance of his feet, decided her.

‘It is Brutus,’ she said to Eowyn.

And Eowyn smiled. ‘I have just won the bet with my second. She picked the mare as your choice, and I knew it would be Brutus. Thank you, Iphito. No night duties for me for a month.’

Iphito smiled and shook Eowyn’s hand. ‘Glad to be of service,’ she said.

It was almost a month before Iphito made her way to the stables at the rear of the Academy to resume her nightly duties with her waiting unit. Other than a slight limp that was noticeable when she was tired, she felt and looked as good as new.

The warriors from her Knowing year, Myles, Achilla, Enyo and Rosilda threw their arms around her, punched her in the stomach, pulled her braid, then wrestled her to the ground. Their friendship over the four years of training in the Warriors' Academy, their shared suffering at the Rite of Two to One, and the subsequent unit they had formed in battle and in duty had made them sisters of the heart and sisters of success. On the field, they had already achieved legendary status for the number of enemies slain, and in duty they'd recovered more babies than any other unit since records had begun almost a hundred years ago. But recoveries had been few and far between while Iphito had been convalescing.

'I wish I knew how you did it,' said Rosilda as she and Iphito led their horses from the stables, ready for the night's work.

'Do what, Rosie?'

'Find them so easily. While you were *pretending* to have injuries, we only managed to save eight babies, and that was between us. You can do that on your own.' Rosie pouted, a slightly pugnacious tone in her voice.

Iphito shrugged, 'Just luck I guess.' She stood at her horse's head and allowed him to inhale her breath while she cupped his muzzle. He was not Phen, but still they had bonded. She slung herself lightly onto Brutus's back as her unit, already mounted, steered their horses for the mountains of the surrounding towns.

'May Gaia guide you,' they called to each other as they began the long night of riding and hoping.

'May Gaia guide you,' echoed Iphito as she felt hands, her own and yet not, guiding Brutus up and towards the east. This was how it always happened, and she could no more explain it to Rosie, than to herself. The Goddess had wanted her to be a Priestess, and it seemed that although she had defied Gaia's will and won her challenge to be a warrior, Gaia had not accepted defeat. She would serve the Goddess anyway.

The moon was waning, and Brutus was tiring before she again found a bundle, crying weakly, wedged in a rocky crevice in the mountain. This time there were no wolves, and she sent thanks to Gaia. Another baby. Another girl for Amazonium. Iphito dismounted, unwrapped the swaddling cloth of the babe and gasped. This had never happened before. The weak light of the crescent moon was strong enough to show a piece of skin where no skin should be. She almost dropped the infant in her shock, catching him by his foot, his club foot. And she understood why she was holding a male child. He had been rejected by his father because of his deformity, as female babies were rejected because of their sex. Quickly



rewrapping him, she made to shove him back into the crevice. Males were forbidden within Amazonium.

‘Stop.’

It was so loud, so compelling that she straightened to look around, her arms instinctively pulling the boy to her scarred chest.

‘Look at the child,’ the voice said.

And even though Iphito did not know where the voice was coming from, she obeyed. Peeling the cloth back, she looked long into his face – and fell in love.