

## THE AMAZON TEMPLE QUEST

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extract from chapter 1

Lysippe was aware of riding too fast for the terrain. This was no level steppe with soft, forgiving grass; it was an alien mountainside littered with loose white rocks. But her fleeting worry that Northwind would sprain a tendon passed as he galloped down the trail. He was the most sure-footed horse in the whole world, and she'd trust him with her life. All the same, her sister was right. Riding off alone and unarmed into strange hills was a stupid thing to do.

She slowed Northwind and wiped her nose on her sleeve. "I am a real Amazon," she whispered under her breath. "I *am*. Tanais is just jealous because her father was a Scythian. The Gryphon Stones are real, as well. When Mother gets back with one, Tanais will have to believe." As if in answer, Northwind tossed his head and whinnied. Lysippe laughed, and some of the hurt faded. "You understand, don't you, my friend?"

The sunlight and pure air, cool with the scent of the sea, cleared the final echoes of the argument from her head. She was about to turn back to the cave, when Northwind whinnied again. The little horse's neck arched, tight as a bow, and his small ears pricked as he stared down the trail. Lysippe caught her breath. The light reflecting off the rocks was bright, but she could make out another horse and rider coming round the bend below in a cloud of white dust.

Her heart pounded with joy and relief. She pushed Northwind into a trot. "Mother! Did you find it..?"

Her words trailed off as the rider came into focus. Instead of the tightly-braided hair of the Amazons, the rider's head was encased in a helmet moulded to look like a face with two slits for eyes and a blue crest on top. He wore a dusty cloak thrown back over one shoulder to reveal a tunic belted at the waist. A sword swung at his hip.

While Lysippe stared in surprise at the rider's hairy legs, he stared back at her through the eye-slits of his helmet, taking in her close-fitting Amazon leggings and her hair that she liked to wear loose to show its unusual golden highlights. Still staring, he reined in his horse, untied a little pouch from his belt, and signalled to someone behind him.

Lysippe saw movement out of the corner of her eye and turned Northwind, suddenly uncomfortable. She'd ridden a lot further down the mountain than she'd intended. But the rider's eyes, cold and blue through his helmet slits, held her gaze. By the time she'd completed the turn, there were several men on foot between her and the cave, moving faster through the rocks than a horse could safely go.

She wheeled Northwind off the path to get round them. But the helmeted man shook some green powder from his pouch and threw it towards her. The air sparkled, blinding Lysippe, and another bare-legged man rose from the rocks right in front of her, his sword flashing through the air. The flat side of the blade hit Northwind on the muzzle. Surprised and dazzled, the little horse reared and lost his balance on the steep scree.

Lysippe's first memories were of sitting on her mother's horse in the safe circle of Oreithyia's arms. She'd had Northwind since her legs grew long enough to ride astride and he was an unbroken colt. In all those years, she'd fallen off just a handful of times. So her first reaction as she tumbled over his shoulder was to blush with shame at falling off her horse in front of a stranger. But there was no time to be embarrassed. As she scrambled up to remount, a heavy weight knocked her flat again. Before she'd recovered her breath, her arms were pinned behind her back and a cord wound tightly about her wrists.

"What are you doing?" she said, more surprised than anything. "Let me go!"

Her captor lifted her to her feet and chuckled. He said something in Greek to the helmeted rider, too fast for her to follow, and the rider replied in the same language.

"...should be another one...check up there..."

Lysippe's breath was returning, and with it her senses. She waited until her captor relaxed his grip, then sprang away from him.

"Tanais!" she shouted. "Tanais! Watch out!"

She twisted her hands as she fled, trying desperately to get the rope off, but the knots were too tight. She could barely see what was happening through her mussed hair and wished she'd let Tanais braid it for her. But from the shouts behind, she knew others had

joined the chase. Northwind was back on his feet now, snorting and shaking his head. She took a run downhill at her horse and vaulted as high as she could.

It wasn't easy with her hands tied behind her, but she would still have made it if the helmeted man hadn't urged his horse past her and grabbed Northwind's dangling rein, dragging him round in a tight circle and making her miss her jump. Lysippe's ankle turned on a loose stone and she fell awkwardly, her bound arms trapped beneath her. The helmeted man jumped down from his horse and put one foot on Lysippe's chest.

"That was stupid," he said, speaking slowly and clearly in Greek, as if to a small child. "No one likes a stupid slave. Apologise to your new master, and maybe he'll be kind."

As she stared back at him in horror, the man she'd got away from earlier came over, dusting himself off. He had brown curly hair and green-flecked eyes. He slapped the helmeted man on the shoulder and chuckled as he looked down at Lysippe. "An unexpected bonus thanks to you, my friend! Not pretty, and those yellow eyes don't do her any favours. But she's plenty young and strong enough for the silver mines if no one wants her for a house slave. Tall, too. Some people like that. Let her up, Alchemist, and let's go see what other booty we've caught today."

*What is the secret of the gryphon's glare? Find out how Lysippe and her sister escape the slavers in "The Amazon Temple Quest".*