

Theomancy

PART TWO

Kallie

Neither the chill of the cool mountain wind in that rosy-fingered dawn nor the icy glares of the nearby, bronze-clad soldiers made Nikaia flinch or shrink as she stood before the gates of the temple. She could still remember a time when such courage and assuredness had been foreign to her—but that was another life, now. Nikaia had come to Delphyne on a heavenly mission. She could feel her reborn goddess's touch at her back, urging her onward.

What had she to fear?

Sure enough, after a long wait, the soldiers' commander returned to them, and, with an unhappy sigh, announced: "They may pass. The Pythia commands it."

An uneasy ripple passed through the waiting soldiers. Nikaia noted well their unhappy glances at her and her veiled retinue. Her companions had disguised themselves so they could pass unmolested through Sellenic lands, but in a time of war, those who hid their faces were natural objects of distrust. Every one of the temple guards suspected her companions for what they were.

Hamaza warrior women.

Nikaia smiled serenely as the hoplites stepped aside to allow them passage into the sanctuary of Apellon - god of the sun, music, healing, and truth. It was just as she had foreseen.

They passed quickly between the Temple of Apellon's columns and beneath its marble sculptures. Nikaia knew intimately the layout of a Sellenic temple, even if now it seemed almost quaint to her. She had been a quick study in the ways of the Hamaza, and she had learned that nothing was more sacred than worshiping under the wide, open sky. This temple, famously, had a distinctive feature: the adyton, an underground chamber buried deep into the mountainside, all the better to channel the potent oracular gases that flowed up from beneath.

Leaving her companions behind her, above ground, Nikaia descended the steps into the chamber until the air grew thick and unhealthy. At the chamber's heart, atop a vent from which wispy fumes billowed, there was a strange, tripod throne, and on that throne sat a tall, perilously thin woman draped in red, flowing robes, with eyes that seemed to see from this world into the next.

The Pythia, by title. The oracle and high priestess of Apellon.

"Greetings," the oracle said, as she turned her ethereal gaze upon Nikaia. "Nikon of Kichyros."

Nikaia's smile was undimmed. "That is no longer my name," she replied. "I am called Nikaia. What is your name?"

"Nikaia," the oracle repeated. "Fascinating. I am Phemonoe. Welcome."

She spoke with a strange, slow, dreamlike quality. Perhaps it was something in the air. It took a long moment for the significance of

the priestess's greeting to dawn on Nikaia.

"You know who I am?" she asked.

"Oh yes," Phemonoe told her. "I have foretold your coming."

"I see," Nikaia nodded thoughtfully. "If you know who I am, I am surprised you allowed me to enter the temple."

Since the Hamaza invasion, Sellenic temples had become fortresses—even this one, deep as it was within the heartlands of the Sellenes. After Diohostra's magnificent conversion, word of Hamaza theomancy had spread. To allow a woman like Nikaia inside a temple was, to most Sellenics, unthinkable.

"I foretold that you would stand here in my chamber," Phemonoe explained. "I foretold that we would speak just like this."

"You could have had the gates barred to my passing," Nikaia pointed out.

Phemonoe shook her head. "There is no meaning but futility to be found in defying the fates," she declared. "Besides, how could I resist the opportunity to speak with the last priestess of Dio... of Diohostra."

Nikaia noted with a certain pleasure the way Phemonoe tried—and failed—to pronounce the wine goddess's former name. After Diohostra's reconsecration into the Hamaza pantheon as the newest daughter of the Queen of the Endless Sky, her very existence had been unwritten and rewritten. None could deny it. Not even an oracle.

"I am honored," Nikaia replied smoothly. "We have much to talk about, you and I. Although I suppose that, too, you have foretold."

Phemonoe shook her head. “The future is not an open book, to be read at will,” she told her. “Many things remain obscure to me. The outcome of our conversation is one. The outcome of the war between our peoples is another.”

Plainly, the Pythia’s wisdom extended beyond her oracular gifts. There was, indeed, only one reason Nikaia would have made the long, hard journey to Delphyne.

The war. The invasion.

It was all that was on anybody’s lips. Riding out from the steppe, the Hamaza and their warrior women had washed over Sellas’s eastern colonies like a tide. Cities and gods had fallen—but then the onslaught had been stalled. The Sellenes were not without martial strength and, moreover, the Olympians themselves had been roused to intercede on their followers’ behalf. When the gods waged war, nature itself was their weapon. Apellon had brought forth raging sun and terrible drought upon the Hamaza’s conquered lands, while Zenios the thunder-king had drowned the steppe in torrential rain that churned the dusty earth to impassable mud. The Queen of the Endless Sky had not, of course, abandoned her daughters, but despite her blessings and protections, the Hamaza war machine had ground to a halt.

Nikaia was here to break the stalemate.

“Then let us speak,” she proposed, “and discover the outcome for ourselves. But first: I bring a gift. A token of my high regard for the Pythia.”

Nikaia reached into her traveling bag and produced a small, stoppered, ceramic jug, sealed with wax. She broke it open and, despite the oracular fumes, priestesses sighed fondly at the scent of fine wine, impossibly rich and delicate. Nikaia produced a pair of

cups and began to pour.

“Thank you,” Phemonoe nodded, taking a full cup as Nikaia offered it to her. She took a sip and closed her eyes to savor it. “This is truly a rare vintage.”

“Diohostra herself blessed the vines,” Nikaia told her. “And infused the wine with droplets of her divine nectar. There is no finer stuff.”

“I’m grateful, truly,” Phemonoe said. “Our vineyards have taken a turn for the worse of late. They languish without a wine god to nourish them.”

“I suppose I owe you an apology for that,” Nikaia laughed a little as she drank from her cup.

“Then, it truly was you who brought about her conversion?”

“It was,” Nikaia confirmed. “And I should be clear that I am, in fact, not at all sorry for it.”

“Is that why you’re here?” Phemonoe asked. She took another drink and swayed briefly as the wine hit her stomach. Diohostra’s blessed wine was beyond potent. “To force me to bring about that same conversion on Apellon?”

“Force?” Nikaia laughed again. The wine was buoying her mood. “No. No, not at all. I am here, priestess, to persuade you.”

“Persuade me to betray the object of my devotion?” Phemonoe scoffed, although Nikaia was sure she could detect a certain curiosity within the oracle.

“You know,” she began, “it isn’t just wine that’s better among the

Hamaza. You would be surprised, I think, to learn how you could benefit from joining us.”

“As you have, you mean?” Phemonoe shot back pointedly. Nikaia noted she was still drinking from her cup.

“Well,” Nikaia smiled. “Perhaps not exactly as I have.”

Indeed, it was hard to imagine anyone finding life under the Hamaza more beneficial or more transformative. Nikaia was now a highly esteemed priestess with a flock of acolytes of her own, sent to her to learn of Diohostra and her rites. A converted goddess like Diohostra was bound utterly to the Hamaza pantheon, yet still had one foot in her Sellenic origins; her new cult required proper foundations, with adherents who understood her symbols, her festivals, her myths. Nikaia’s guidance was indispensable, and besides, her wholehearted conversion to the Hamaza faith had been received with deep respect and approval.

Her new status represented a stark change from her former life. But not even close to as stark as the change that had been wrought upon her body.

Thanks to Hamaza magic and herbalism, Nikaia’s rebirth was almost as dramatic as Diohostra’s. In recent months, her body had changed in ways she’d never believed possible. She now had a woman’s face and a woman’s figure, albeit still in the spring of its fruiting. She looked pleasing in women’s dress. Now that her hair had grown long, it was rare that anyone mistook her for the coarser sex. Certainly, the Hamaza women she was surrounded with accepted her as one of their own. They rejoiced in her transformation.

As did Nikaia herself. She had found each and every change to be for the better. They brought her closer to her goddess’s new radiance.

“Yes,” Phemonoe mused as she looked over Nikaia, though her eyes were becoming hazy. “I see you have done well for yourself indeed.”

Nikaia noted the way her eyes passed over her body, pausing to admire the many gold bangles and torcs, wrought in Hamaza styles, that now adorned her Sellenic robes. Tokens of her new status.

“Come now,” Nikaia chided. “These are mere trinkets. I’m speaking of something far more important.”

“Oh?”

Nikaia sipped at her cup. “You know, amongst the Hamaza, you would be treated very differently.”

“And how so?” Phemonoe took a sip too. Then another.

“Unlike our people,” Nikaia told her, “the Hamaza exalt women. A priestess of your vision and wisdom would be nothing short of a queen.”

“Am I not already exalted?” Phemonoe shot back. “This temple is my domain. Powerful men come from all over Sellas to hear my words.”

“You are not,” Nikaia retorted. “This place is a bird’s cage. These men keep you here as a prisoner, for if you refused them, you would be nothing. They make you drain your strength to furnish them with prophecies, and leer at you as you do. Do not tell me that the famous Pythia, with all her farsight, does not see this.”

“That is...”

Phemonoe lapsed into silence. She was not yet fully persuaded, but Nikaia could see her words had lit a certain spark within the oracle. As she sat and drank deep from her cup, a strange expression passed over her face. It was as though she was intoxicated with the possibility Nikaia had placed before her.

Or also, perhaps, intoxicated with something else.

“You would have the freedom to take a better lover, too,” Nikaia added rakishly.

“Apellon doesn’t demand my chastity,” Phemonoe replied. She tried to raise an eyebrow, but she was drunk enough that she could not quite pull it off. “I sleep with men as I please.”

“That’s precisely what I mean.” Nikaia grinned at her. “You deserve a better lover than any man.”

Phemonoe looked at her in surprise—and then, pleasingly, she blushed.

“I... had heard that lying with other women was the Hamaza way,” she remarked slowly. “I have sometimes thought... but, be careful, Nikaia.” Despite herself, Phemonoe giggled. “Your words might be attempted as nothing more than a subtle attempt at seduction!”

“Was I being subtle?” Nikaia did not attempt to hide the slow, appreciative glance she gave at Phemonoe’s body. “I promise you, Pythia, I did not intend to conceal a thing.”

Phemonoe’s cheeks turned as deep a red as the wine she was drinking. She tried to hide her face in her cup, but Nikaia noted that she did not seem even slightly repulsed by her suggestion. Clearly, the oracle would be at home amongst the Hamaza.

But that was for later. For now, the oracle's cup was almost drained. She was ready.

"And that's not all," Nikaia said, after letting Phemonoe's mind settle. "You know, it's not just you who would be better if you accepted my offer. Your god, Apellon, would be too."

Phemonoe looked up at Nikaia sharply. Her face registered offense, but it didn't reach her eyes. Those remained hazy and distant. It was as if she was trying to summon her indignation, but it wouldn't come.

Nikaia allowed her smile to become a touch more smug. Diohostra's sacred wine was powerful indeed.

"That's blasphemy," Phemonoe pronounced slowly.

"Is it?" Nikaia pressed. She could feel her goddess's gifts flowing through her: the boldness, the confidence, the inspiration. It was irrepressible—Phemonoe was caught up in it too. The energy in the air between them was riotous. It was the kind of mood that moved men to shatter taboos. "When I first saw Diohostra transformed, my thoughts were the furthest thing from blasphemy, I promise you. They struck through with awe.."

Phemonoe swayed a little from side to side, and her eyes widened as she stared rapt at Nikaia. She could not help her curiosity. "What was it like?"

With that, Nikaia knew she had her. It would have been more prudent of the oracle not to drink the wine—but she was not a worldly sort. If poison had crossed her mind, she had surely discarded the thought upon seeing Nikaia drink. But Diohostra's wine was more than just a poison.

"It was miraculous." Nikaia made her voice a thrilling whisper.

“You have never seen magic of the sort, Phemonoe. But just imagine it: the threads of fate themselves, rewritten. A goddess birthed anew. Beautiful. Powerful. Terrible.”

“That... that sounds...” Phemonoe slurred. She was hanging on Nikaia’s every word now, caught up in drunken excitement.

“I’ve never felt closer to her,” Nikaia added. “And she had never looked so majestic. Her body. Soft. Curved. Elegant. Bountiful. It just seemed so right. At that moment, it struck me as ridiculous that women like us waste our devotion on male gods.”

“Male... gods?” Phemonoe’s eyelids were drooping now. She couldn’t think straight. As the wine goddess’s favored, Nikaia was energized by the wine. Not so for Phemonoe. To her, it was soporific. Entrancing.

“Think about it,” Nikaia urged. “Aren’t their myths and stories all replete with tales of violence? Of wrath? Of infidelity and worse?”

Phemonoe nodded slowly, her face souring. That seed of disapproval was the first step, but the next was the truly decisive one.

“Imagine it, oracle,” Nikaia instructed. “Imagine Apellon, but gifted with female form.”

The other priestess let out a sudden gasp, and her eyes shot wide and shone with inspiration. Taken together, Delphyne’s oracular fumes and Diohostra’s blessed wine made for powerful visions. All Nikaia needed to do was lead them in the right direction.

“Wouldn’t it feel right?” she suggested. “Does the sun not nourish the world as a mother her children? As the muses sing in female voices, should not the god of poetry also? Imagine it, Phemonoe. Imagine how bright her light could shine, if it was not hidden behind thunderclouds.”

“I... I...” Phemonoe drained her cup, and then swayed more unsteadily than ever as a vision seized her. “I see it!”

“Yes!” Nikaia shouted, feeding her enthusiasm to the drunk prophet. “She could be beautiful, in harmony with the vastness of the sky. She could be perfect.”

Phemonoe began nodding emphatically. It was clear she could not stop. “Yes. Yes!”

“Imagine her,” Nikaia insisted, “lyre in hand. Playing for you. Hair, long and flowing. Beckoning you to her bosom. Imagine her beauty, Phemonoe. Don’t you yearn for it?”

“Yes!” Phemonoe cried, twitching and thrashing as the sudden madness of prophecy overtook her. Her cup fell from her hand, and her eyes became as large and round as the sun itself. “I see it. I see it! It... it is foretold!”

That moment was exactly what Nikaia had been working towards. With the wine to soften her will, it had taken only a little guidance to lead Phemonoe to this epiphany—to fill her head with images and associations that her own vivid imagination made real and alive. Now, Phemonoe’s disposition for prophecy would take her the rest of the way and convince her: this was not merely an idea. It was the future.

And Phemonoe already believed that there was no denying the future.

“Then,” Nikaia said, after allowing the weight of Phemonoe’s newfound conviction to sink in. “Will you join me, Pythia?”

She rose to her feet and held out her hand. As unsteady as Phemonoe looked, there was no doubt or reluctance in her wide,

shining eyes as she took it.

“I will,” she replied. “What must we do?”

Nikaia took her by the hand and led her back up into the temple, where the idol of Apellon was to be found. Phemonoe was unsteady at first, but a quick prayer to Diohostra lightened her steps and, as they walked, arm in arm, it was almost as if they were dancing together. Diohostra had many aspects, but the one Nikaia felt most blessed by at that moment was Diohostra the ecstatic goddess, the wild goddess, filling the two priestesses with a frenzied eagerness that defied all reason.

Only one of the goddess’s chosen could have kept her head amidst such divine madness. Phemonoe was utterly hers.

She proved faultlessly obedient as Nikaia guided her through the preparations for the Hamaza ritual, and did not so much as question the participation of the other Hamaza warriors as they provided the necessary reagents and offerings. With her compliance assured, Nikaia’s thoughts turned to the task ahead. She had studied dutifully at Irtasduna’s side, but this was her first time actually performing the conversion ritual.

And Apellon was sure to be no easy prey.

The idol and the altar. Those were the two focal points of the ritual. The idol, a magnificent gilded bronze statue, stood at the heart of the temple. But instead of a conventional altar, the temple also housed the Omphalos of Apellon, a strange, stone artifact covered in knotted carvings that the Sellenes believed to mark the very center of the world. Those two objects anchored Apellon’s essence. Those two objects would need to be magically remade in order to transform the god.

It was a fearsome task. There was nothing for Nikaia to do but

trust in her preparations. Once all was ready and the magic circle was laid, she signaled for Phemonoe to begin. The oracle threw herself down before the bronze idol of her god and, while Nikaia's Hamaza companions poured offerings and libations out beside her, began to chant:

“With golden light and radiant fire,
Apellon, come, fulfill my desire.
To Delphyne's peak, to this humble shrine,
Bless us with your presence divine
By the lyre's strings and wisdom's light,
Guide us through the darkest night.
O Lord of Sun, with hearts full and true,
Apellon, rise, I summon you!”

Coming from the lips of the god's highest priestess, the power of those words could not be denied. They carried all the way to Olympus, and echoed there with such faith that the god himself was moved to action.

Nikaia trembled as she felt Apellon's coming. As the sun passed directly overhead, its rays passed through an opening in the roof of the temple and fell upon the gilded bronze idol. All at once it was lit up, bathing the sacred space in sunlight and filling it with a radiant, sacrosanct warmth. The statue itself seemed to glow so blindingly that Nikaia could not bear to look directly at it, and the air itself trembled with strange, impossible music.

It was almost enough to make her want to throw herself down and beg for Apellon's mercy—almost. But her goddess and the Queen of the Endless Sky, the highest deity of all, had given her a sacred charge. Now that the moment had come, she would not back down. Nikaia closed her eyes and focused on the words of the Hamaza stone-shaping spell she had been taught:

“Sky-Mother! Under your gaze, even mountains bend,

Shape this stone with the divine might you send!”

Stone-shaping meant nothing, of course, to a bronze idol. But the idol was not the object of Nikaia’s spell. Her magic was meant for the Omphalos.

Like a rushing wind, Nikaia felt magic flow down from on high and, working through her, pour into the carved stone artifact. When Nikaia opened her eyes again, she felt a surge of adrenaline as she saw the Omphalos’s surface begin to shift and writhe. The knots sculpted across its surface moved like flowing water, winding and unwinding, twisting and turning—and all at Nikaia’s command.

Emboldened by her success, Nikaia raised a hand and cast it out toward the idol of Apellon in a magnificent gesture.

At once, the stone obeyed her. The Omphalos’s knots came away from the sacred stone and flew through the air like striking serpents. In an instant, they were upon the idol, wrapping themselves around it in ties as intricate as any sailor had ever worked.

They were binding it. Binding the vessel of a god.

And not a moment too soon. A mere instant later, it became clear that the glowing idol had been filled with Apellon’s essence. Its mouth opened, and the temple was filled with the great god’s booming voice:

“I have come, far-sighted, Pythia!” Apellon cried. **“Your devotions ring sweet in my ears, and I must—”** The god made to lift an arm, to gesture at his oracle, but found it bound in place by the marble knots Nikaia had woven. **“This... trickery? Here? What has become of my sanctuary?”**

Apellon’s gaze was uncomfortably piercing and keen as it fell upon Nikaia. To hold a wrathful god’s attention was terrifying—but

just as Irtasduna had done against Diohostra, Nikaia held firm.

"I beg your forgiveness for my trespasses, Light-Lord," Nikaia said smoothly, bowing her head. "And I pray that, once you take your rightful place beneath the Sky-Mother, you see my piety for what it is."

"Hamaza!" Apellon hissed, as he saw the telltale jewelry adorning Nikaia's clothes. **"Traitor!"** he added an instant later, once he had registered who she was. **"So you mean to deface me, as you have done my sibling? Your shamelessness knows no bounds. But... my oracle? She would never betray me, how did you..."**

He turned his head to search for Phemonoe and found her prostrating at his feet. She looked up at him with eyes that were wide and drunk, and registered nothing but a fervent enthusiasm for what was being done.

There was no mistaking it. She was a willing participant in her god's unmaking.

"Great Apellon!" Phemonoe sang, eyes shining as she was overwhelmed by the presence of her god. "Forgive me! But I see now. Nikaia has shown me the way. The sun has yet to truly rise. Let us adorn you in true majesty."

"You have done something to her!" Keen-eyes Apellon perceived at once, though it did little to soften his wrath at the betrayal. He drew himself up as tall as he could. **"Hear me, oracle! Remember your vows. You swore to guard the Omphalos! Would you see it so defiled?"**

Nikaia sensed she should intervene to stiffen Phemonoe's resolve. "Oh, Apellon!" she cried out. "We do not defile your artifact. We set it free! The bindings cruel Zenios placed upon your Omphalos served only to tether you to the earth in ignominy. He

holds you back, as he does all his sons and all his people. Behold, as we unmake these anchors and set you free to take your place with the rightful Goddess of the Sky.”

It wasn’t true. At least, not exactly. Not yet. But it was a potent myth, and one well-suited to become true once Apellon was converted. Nikaia noticed the way Phemonoe nodded fervently as she accepted her words as scripture.

“You pervert my temple with your lies!” Apellon shot back. He kept struggling and straining against the marble knots that bound him, but the magical circle kept him too weak to break free. Too weak to stop what was coming. **“Just wait, barbarian. The light of my truth will soon cleanse it away!”**

It was no empty threat. Apellon’s light—the sun’s light—was the stuff of many myths. It brought with it truth, clarity, epiphany, inspiration, prophecy. That same sunlight now beat down on the lands the Hamaza had conquered, causing a drought that drained them of their plenty. Of all Apellon’s many aspects, it was as the god of the sun that he was perhaps most potent.

But Nikaia knew that the sun was nothing to fear. It was merely another of the sky’s children. Her heart firm with faith, she began to chant the words of the spell Irtasduna had taught her:

“O Lady of the boundless blue,
Grant us the warmth we seek from you.
From the endless skies where storms reside,
Let golden rays now swiftly glide!”

At once, the bright sun above responded to her spell and beat down upon the temple with an impossible heat. Nikaia grinned. Even here, in the heart of Sellas, the Queen of the Endless Sky was not to be denied.

And Apellon himself bore the brunt of it.

Once, Nikaia would never have believed that a sun god could be overwhelmed by sunlight. The very idea would have struck her as an obvious contradiction. Now, she knew better. Apellon was the god of the sun, yes, but now his essence was wedded to an idol. To a mere gilded statue.

And like anything made of metal, the statue could melt.

Sure enough, as gold rays of sunlight bathed it in merciless heat, it began to melt. The gilding coating the idol's surface was starting to soften and flow, steadily dripping from Apellon's limbs and wicking down the contours of his finely sculpted form as the minutes wore on. The god, for his part, was locked into an expression of muted, dawning horror as he felt his own essence changing with the idol, becoming strangely soft and malleable.

Ready to be reshaped.

Soon enough, all the gold that had coated the statue was nothing more than a glowing, steaming pool around its base. That struck Nikaia as auspicious indeed. To the Hamaza, gold was considered highly apotropaic. Now, it was as if Apellon was entirely unguarded against her magical interference. Beneath the gold, the newly-revealed bronze was glowing hot and so soft it was already beginning to warp and distort beneath the pressure of the marble Omphalos knots that wound around it.

It was time to begin.

"Phemonoe!" Nikaia called out. "Offer up your prayers. Let us give form to your goddess."

At once, the oracle began to pray. In a clear voice, she sang out prayer after prayer, hymn after hymn—all of them taken from the

liturgy of Apellon's cult, but altered, perverted, to reflect Phemonoe's newfound, drug-induced fixation on femininity. As she chanted, Nikaia brought her focus to bear on the stone bindings she had placed on Apellon's idol. Responding eagerly, they began to squeeze tighter and tighter, compressing the soft bronze and forcing it into a new shape.

Nikaia grinned wildly as she saw that the ritual she had devised was going to work.

The enchanted stone bindings were like a potter's hands, pressing on the bronze as easily as soft clay—and just as carefully, too. Nikaia wielded her magic deftly, squeezing around Apellon's waist and shoulders, making him slighter there while leaving his chest, hips, and thighs all pronounced. With Phemonoe's prayers fuelling her efforts, Nikaia found it remarkably easy to manipulate Apellon's form, and in just a few moments, the sun god looked far more like a fair nymph than a comely youth.

And all Apellon could do was stare at himself in mute shock. He was stupefied by the fact that it wasn't just his body that was changing. It was his very essence.

His godhood was transcendent, yes, but right now it was bound to the material. It couldn't help but yield to Nikaia, myths and legends warping to conform to the now-feminine curves of his sculpted, bronze body. Metal ran down the back of Apellon's neck in great, flowing rivulets, becoming as long, curly hair, and every harsh angle of his face melted away into a far softer, gentler, more feminine countenance.

When he tried to let out a cry of defiance, even Apellon's voice was no longer his own. It was soft. Dainty. Girlish.

And between his legs, his member dissolved into a woman's opening.

As of yet, the god—no, the goddess—remained formless. The bronze, still red-hot, was soft and unset. She was a liminal being, forced to straddle the threshold between archetypes. Yet there was no mistaking her for the masculine god she had once been. Her form, though still crude and lacking detail, was undeniably that of a woman. Phemonoe, her high priestess, immediately began to celebrate the change.

“My lady!” she sang. “You have never been more perfect!”

“A... lady?” Apellon said slowly, looking at herself in wonder. “I am no... I... I am?”

Nikaia knelt and bowed her head in a show of supplication. “Great goddess of the sun, your beauty is a light.”

A strange expression passed over Apellon’s face. It was as if she knew that she should be offended, but instead found herself entirely flattered by Nikaia’s praise. Nikaia smiled. Vanity well-suited the goddess.

“You are not worshipers,” Apellon said, plainly cautioning herself as much as them. **“I will not be fooled. This is no gift. It is... it’s...”**

She could not bring herself to say that it was a curse or a humiliation. A goddess could not deny herself so plainly.

“I beg you, my lady,” Phemonoe cried. Her enthusiasm for her new faith was remarkable. To have the Pythia as a convert was a prize indeed. “To listen to us. Doesn’t it feel right? You nurture the land with a gentle light, like a mother to her children. You embody perfectly the grace and beauty of all the muses together. As the sun to the moon, you are such a perfect match for your divine sister.”

“I... **my sister?**” Apellon frowned. Nikaia could sense her coming to terms with the small but decisive shift in identity that change implied.

Apellon and Artimite. The two twin sisters born to Leta, the goddess of the golden spindle. The moon and sun, her dual daughters. There was no refuting it. It might have only become true minutes ago, but true it still was—eternally.

“**No... no, that doesn’t matter.**” Apellon shook her head and set her resolve, though regardless of her intent her voice was enchantingly warm and musical. “**What matters is that you are my enemies. Enemies of my father and my people. With one hand, you pretend to offer gifts and flattery. With the other, you bind me and strip me of my dignity. I will free myself, and then you will regret your trespasses!**”

Nikaia was no longer afraid. Subduing and converting the god was proving intoxicating. She was keen to move on to the next stage of the process.

“Let us make amends, sun goddess,” Nikaia replied. “Let us adorn you in the riches of the steppe. A fitting bride-price from the Queen of the Endless Sky.”

“**A bride-price?**” Apellon was aghast, and redoubled her struggles against the marble knots that held her. “**How dare you!**”

It was too late. Nikaia’s Hamaza companions were already bringing forth the required treasures, along with the other reagents of the spell—and in any case, the ritual could not be resisted. A maiden goddess like Apellon was drawn towards marriage, and the natural affinity between sky and sun was great. The very force of myth was on Nikaia’s side.

“My sisters!” Nikaia called out, to the Hamaza accompanying

her. "We begin."

Without hesitation, they sprang into action. A pair of them began to pour out urns onto the surface of the Omphalos; anointing it with blood and milk, both substances hissing violently from the heat as they trickled down onto the ground and met the bubbling pool of molten gold at the base of Apellon's idol.

The other Hamaza, meanwhile, opened huge wooden chests that were full of golden jewelry wrought on an inhuman scale by the very finest goldsmiths. Taking up pieces of it, they braved the fierce heat of the glowing, bronze idol and started to fix the ornaments around Apellon's form like they were adorning a bride for her wedding day. Nikaia did her best to hold the goddess firm, but there was only so much she could do; as Apellon writhed and fought to break free of her bindings, more than one of the Hamaza warrior women grunted in pain as their hands were scaled by burning bronze.

But none of them flinched from their duty. Their faith was sound.

Soon, Apellon's arms, neck, thighs, and ankles were all glittering with golden bangles and disks. She shone more brightly than ever—but it was clear to all that this was a twisted offering, made to bring Apellon's essence deeper under the sway of Nikaia's faith.

Now, no Sellene would have recognized Apellon. But the Hamaza would.

She looked just like one of their chief goddess's many brides.

"Apelka, daughter of the Queen of the Endless Sky," Nikaia intoned. A new name for a new pantheon. "I now pronounce you her bride also, according to our ways."

Once more, she called upon her deity to lend strength to her spellcraft. The sun beat down hot on Apelka's idol, and the marble knots unwoven from the Omphalos began to tighten again, impressing on the molten god like a blacksmith's mold. Again, it worked to reshape the form of Apelka's idol—although, this time, as much as physical pressure, it was the weight of myth that was transforming Apelka.

She was no longer the proud, Sellanic sun god Phemonoe had once prayed to. She was simply the Queen of the Endless Sky's daughter.

Nikaia's wedding ritual had made it so. And now, with each passing moment, Apelka became more and more feminine. The golden adornments gifted to her were melting in the sun's raw heat, but instead of flowing away, they began to coat her skin, replacing the gilding that the goddess had lost. As it set into place, it brought into sharp relief all the details that the molten bronze had been lacking: individual locks of hair, lines of musculature, wrinkles and pores. It wasn't Nikaia's magic—at least, not directly. It was simply the sublime, divine power of the goddess's new mythology making concrete everything that Nikaia had implied, with no less detail and artistry than the original sculptor.

And, as plain as day, Apelka was no longer Sellenic. She was Hamaza.

It was subtle but undeniable. Her features and her garments all now bore a remarkable likeness to those of Nikaia's companions, and the gold coating her idol now seemed a shade darker, as if tanned by long hours spent riding under the bare sky. Even her lyre was subtly transformed, becoming the long-necked setar that Hamaza musicians were so fond of. But a semblance of her former self remained in the sunny warmth of her countenance, and the musical peal of laughter in her voice as she spoke:

“O, my beloved oracle,” Apelka said, turning her head to look at Phemonoe. **“My earlier words were spoken in madness. You have only my deepest gratitude for unchaining me from this land, and setting me free to rejoin my queen mother.”**

Phemonoe was overcome. She pressed her forehead to the ground in awestruck worship of her goddess. The vision Nikaia had guided her to was now made flesh.

It had, indeed, been prophecy all along.

“And you, wine priestess,” Apelka addressed Nikaia next. **“You have consecrated our marriage beautifully, and I look forward to rejoining my ecstatic sister at our mother’s side.”**

Nikaia bowed her head in modest thanks. It was nothing short of miraculous to see all of the deity’s former anger, loyalty and stubbornness completely gone, replaced by an all-consuming euphoria with her new station and pantheon. With the conversion assured, Nikaia relaxed her spellcraft and allowed the marble knots to slough off Apelka’s physique and shatter on the ground. At the same moment, she noted that the Omphalos itself had changed shape, transfiguring into the same kind of suggestive, yonic, protruding sculpture as Diohostra’s altar. That would serve well for the last stage of the ritual: reconsecrating Apelka’s godhood in carnal, marital bliss.

Then, without warning, the sun went dark.

At once, Nikaia cursed herself. She’d hoped they might have had longer. But with the Sellanic pantheon now vacant a sun deity, it stood to reason that the sun would no longer shine so kindly upon their lands. Outside, a strange, weak, cloudy twilight prevailed.

And that, the remaining Olympians could not possibly fail to notice.

“We must away!” Nikaia barked to her companions. “Prepare the carts and horses! Load the idol, the stone, and the treasures. Phemonoe, you shall ride with me. We leave at once.”

Most of them saluted and sprung into action. One, a junior acolyte, protested: “But the reconsecration-“

“It will have to wait,” Nikaia replied instantly. It was not ideal to delay it, true. But if they remained at Delphyne, their doom was assured. Hopefully, Apelka’s newfound love for her divine mother would keep her constant for now. Despite the gravity of their situation, a wild grin came to Nikaia’s face. “Watch out for thunderbolts!”

There were no more questions. Nikaia, and the Hamaza with her, moved like a well-oiled machine, loading all of the temple’s sacred objects onto their carts while Phemonoe mollified the soldiers outside. But so focused were they on their escape, none of them noticed a small bird—a cuckoo—perched in a temple alcove above as she took wing and flew back up toward her home, the looming Mount Olympus.

Harea, wife of Zenios and Queen of Olympus, had been watching the whole time.

* * *

As the Hamaza made their flight from Delphyne, riding their horses hard down through the valley that led away from the temple, only Nikaia and Phemonoe, the priestesses, were even slightly aware of the divine drama that played out in the skies overhead. To them, the meeting of rival gods was palpable as a crackling tension in the air. They could feel it on the backs of their necks, raising their hairs, and in their bellies, as the metaphysically unsettling clash of deities

churned their stomachs. The rest of Nikaia's companions remained blissfully unaware of what was going on far above their heads.

All they could see was a storm.

But concealed within that storm, there was a huntress.

When Harea had brought word to Olympus of Apelka's corruption, it was light-footed Artimite who had been first to spring into pursuit. Keen-eyed, bow in hand, the mistress of the wilds had no trouble tracking the fleeing invaders from high above. Her talent for the hunt was prodigious, and her desperation to save her sibling lent extra swiftness to her strides.

Even as she struggled to remember the god her twin sister had once been, she remained determined to smite those who had stolen her with one of her legendary arrows.

No horse could outpace her. Dancing between clouds, Artimite was almost close enough to shoot when a great figure descended from the uppermost edge of the gathering storm to block her path. The woman—the goddess—was taller than any mountain and glad in a veil of coruscating lightning. Beneath that were long, flowing, fantastic robes made from silk, wool, linen, cotton—the fabrics of a hundred conquered lands, all woven and knotted together in rainbow splendor. On the upper half of her face was a dazzling, golden mask, wrought into a crown as it passed up over her head, and in her hand was a lightning bolt that stretched from one horizon to another, wielded as a lance.

At once, Artimite knew her foe for who she was. The chief deity of the Hamaza, and the goddess keen to subsume all others into her twisted faith.

The Queen of the Endless Sky.

For her to expose herself in this way was a risk—but a calculated one. She had come to watch over her agents as they fled with Apellka's idol. If they escaped and later secured the sun goddess's place in the Hamaza pantheon, it would all be worth it.

Which meant Artimite had no choice but to force the issue.

The goddess of the hunt notched an arrow from her quiver and raised her bow.

"This will be for them," Artimite growled, indicating the horse-drawn carts in the valley below. **"Or for you. Make your choice."**

"Hail, huntress," the Queen of the Endless Sky said. Her imperious voice made the wind howl and the clouds roil. Already, Artimite felt over-matched. **"I have heard songs of your prowess, and I have grown fond of what I have heard. I'd hoped you might join my daughters and I. You have no love for men. Would you not be more at home at my side?"**

Artimite drew her bow. **"If you thought I would be tempted by such an offer,"** she snarled. **"You thought too little of my resolve. Of my loyalty. My people have their faults, 'tis true. But I will not be swayed."**

"You are just as valiant as I had supposed." Under her crown-mask, the Queen of the Endless Sky smiled. **"Then, we are at an impasse. You will not join me, and nor will I step aside."**

Artimite nodded grimly and prepared to loose an arrow at the goddess's heart. She could tell at once that the Queen of the Endless Sky was no idle deity. She surely knew how to wield the lightning lance she held in her hand. But Artimite's followers told that her arrows never missed their mark and, strengthened by their faith, she had reason to hope that, with one well-chosen shot, the entire war between Sellas and the Hamaza might be brought to an end.

Then a beam of sunlight pierced the gloom. Unbound from her idol, Apellka herself descended from the skies to join the other goddesses.

And placed herself squarely between Artimite and the Queen of the Endless Sky.

“Sister,” Apelka said, smiling beatifically. **“Can you not see that there is no need for us to fight?”**

Artimite lowered her bow in shock. **“Broth... sister?”** Her stomach churned from seeing her sibling this way. **“What... what are you doing?”**

“Making service of myself, to my mother and my wife,” Apelka replied. **“As is only natural, my sister.”**

“But you’re...” Artimite wasn’t sure what to tell her. That she was her brother? That she was a Sellanic god? **“You’re...”**

Those things weren’t true. Not anymore. Even Artimite was losing track of the old, rotted myths as they wore thin. As they passed from the lips of one worshiper to another, the stories were already changing. She and Apelka were still twins, yes, but now she found that she could remember them being separated at birth. Raised under distant skies, by different mothers. It barely made sense, and yet...

“Join us, sister,” Apelka beckoned softly. Now that the offer was coming from her sibling’s lips, it sent a shiver down Artimite’s spine. **“Won’t you let us be together?”**

“Come back with me,” Artimite pleaded in reply. **“You can still be saved.”**

It was true; she could sense it. Apelka had not yet been reconsecrated. Her essence remained in flux. If she would only listen...

“I couldn’t bear to leave my queen’s side,” Apelka told her firmly. **“Not on our wedding night.”**

Artimite all but recoiled as Apelka pressed herself against the Queen of the Endless Sky’s body with the fondness of a lover. The Queen’s free hand came to rest on the sun goddess’s hip, holding her possessively and making her squeal like an untouched maiden. Artimite could not stomach it. She and her twin had always been so close. They had been everything to each other. Now that they had always been sisters, their bond was even more consuming. Apelka had enjoyed dalliances with mortals, yes, but those were meaningless. Over in the blink of an eye.

To see her in the arms of another goddess was heart-rending.

“You could share it with us,” the Queen of the Endless Sky offered again. **“It would be wondrous.”** Artimite couldn’t tell if the smile on her face was loving or mocking.

“Moon and sun,” Apelka added, as she planted a kiss on her new mother’s chest. **“United together, beneath the sky. Together, we could populate the night with jewels.”**

Artimite whimpered. She did not know what to do.

The hunter goddess’s rage called upon her to raise her weapon and draw her bow once more. She tried it, hands shaking. But Apelka was in the way. And in her heart of hearts, she knew that she could not bear to hurt her sister.

The Hamaza had won the day.

All Artimite could offer was a parting shot.

Before she fled back to Olympus, Artimite trained her bow on the horizon. With a tear on her cheek, she took aim at the fleeing Hamaza women. They had now put a great distance behind them; to any other huntress, they would have been as specks of dust. But Artimite could see them. She could even pick out the priestess who had corrupted her sister.

She let her arrow fly.

It was an unfathomable shot. The distance was far, far too great for even a marksman of Artimite's skill. And yet somehow, by some miracle, the arrow flew true—over ridges and hills, between trees and bushes, for league after league. It was aimed straight at Nikaia's heart.

For just one moment, Artimite permitted herself to think that she had done it. That Nikaia would fall, and her horse with her, and that it would be enough to forestall their flight with Apelka's idol.

At the very last moment, a gust of wind blew. The arrow skewed wide. It hit nothing.

Artimite turned her back and departed for Olympus, leaving her sister in the Hamaza goddess's lustful, maternal embrace.

And even her keen eyes did not spot the tiny cuckoo bird that had made the wind blow.

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