

Price of the Cloth

Von abgemeldet

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Kapitel 1: Fallen Angel (DeathMask)

Angelo ran up the slopes of the Etna once more. By now he knew every stone and every crevice of the steep, winding path. When he had reached the crater, he was supposed to run a zigzag course among the fumaroles and hot spots on the ground.

When his Master told him to do so the first time so long ago, he had been utterly afraid. What if the volcano erupted while he was down there?

What if he mistepped and fell into one of the crevices because the mountain quaked and he lost his footing?

Eridanus Silver Saint Charon looked at him coldly and told him, "You have to be faster than the mountain. Remember that you are chosen to be a Saint of Athena. Moreover, your powerful cosmo marks you to be one of the most powerful ones. So you have to live up to your capabilities and become as fast as the light and as strong as any natural force."

"But what if I will be caught while I'm not ready?" he asked.

"Then you have failed. You'd better hurry to fulfill your potential, boy."

He had been mortally frightened, but Charon had insisted that he go. To be precise, he had virtually beaten him up the volcano. Physically, Angelo never had a chance against the tall and well-trained Eridanus Saint, but worse was the humiliation - he called him a weakling and coward.

"There is no place for weaklings among Athena's Saints. Then you'd better die before you disgrace these formidable warriors."

"Death is preferable to embarrassment. Death is preferable to weakness. Death is preferable to failure. Death is..." His Master had beaten these mantras into him.

Neverending hours, days and weeks of brutal training went by, and more than once Angelo wished himself dead rather than enduring one more minute, but the taunting words of his Master enraged him and forced him to go on.

* * *

Angelo stood at the range of the volcano and smashed large sized rocks into dust with only the tip of his finger. Now that he had mastered the first of the mental exercises, he was able to concentrate his Cosmo to destroy virtually everything.

It was almost getting boring, he thought, but his teacher had told him that his potential was far vaster than this, but he had to master his seventh sense to be able to use these other powers.

The young Saint-in-training sensed his teacher's Cosmo approaching. He turned around and discovered that Charon wasn't alone this time. A boy about Angelo's age accompanied him.

"This is Fabrizio," the Eridanus Saint introduced the newcomer. He spoke Greek as it was custom among the Saints of Athena. "You two will train together from now on. Time will tell who of you will earn the Cancer Gold Cloth - if any."

Angelo examined Fabrizio with a frown. The new guy had a shock of fiery red hair, freckles and bright green eyes that gave back his gaze aggressively.

"Don't think you will manage to get this Cloth that is rightfully mine," Angelo told him.

"Rightfully yours?" Charon laughed out. "First you have to prove yourself worthy to face the Test of the Cloth, and if you manage to pass it, then you can claim it is rightfully yours. How long have you trained here with me?"

"One year, Master Charon." Angelo felt the blood rise to his cheeks.

"And you're how old now?" Charon's purple eyes that contrasted so strangely to his flowing, turquoise mane seemed to pierce the boy like hot needles.

"Eight, Master Charon."

"You have yet to master your true powers before you can even think of attempting this test. Remember what I have told you - only the one who can go beyond death is able to attain the Cancer Cloth."

Go beyond death... Angelo sighed inwardly. He still didn't know what the Eridanus Silver Saint actually meant by this. Probably the real test was to find out the meaning of this and then find the hiding-place of the marvellous Cloth. But he would never allow that this new guy attained it, after all of the torturous training he had already gone through.

"I leave you now to go through your usual schedule while I try to teach Fabrizio the basics," Charon said and left his older disciple to himself.

Angelo grinned when he remembered his first time here. Fabrizio would virtually go through hell in the beginning, and with a little luck he would even give up soon. He really didn't need a rival for the Cancer Gold Cloth.

The boy concentrated, and a golden aura manifested around him. With one light touch he pulverized another rock, and he wondered what other powers might lie in store for him. Already he could run faster than his Master, and his plain destructive power surpassed Charon's as well. The only reason he had not killed the Eridanus Saint when the man decided to punish him again was that he still needed him to teach him what he needed to attain this Cloth.

* * *

"Concentrate!" Charon's subdued but still sharp voice made Angelo cringe. He didn't feel at ease at all in this dusky room with the dying old man on the bed.

"I think I can feel it," Angelo said.

"When the souls leave the body, they emit an aura called sekishiki," Charon lectured. "Your Cosmo gives you the power to manipulate this aura. Not many Saints of Athena have an affinity towards death - usually the Saints work with energies that are connected with the living world like those of Aries, Lion, Dragon and most others.

Only Cancer Gold Saint, Eridanus Silver Saint and Ara Bronze Saint are able to cross the threshold to enter the limbo that connects the world of the living with Hades' underworld. You will be a wanderer between here and beyond, and your most terrible power is that you are able to pull your adversary into the world in between.

Only the Death Saints are able to find their way through the limbo and back into the world of the living. The others will lose their way in the twilight world and inevitably end up at the Mountain of Yomotsu where they will fall into the Pit, a never-ending abyss without return, which leads them directly into Hades' Realm."

"What are the different powers of the Death Saints?" Angelo asked curiously.

"Ara Bronze Saint Lethe's attacks make the victims forget - they lose bit for bit of their selves until they pass away into the world beyond."

"I see." Angelo examined his Master thoughtfully. He had seen Charon attack an intruder once - a silvery torrent of energy seemed to sweep away his opponent, and when the attack had faded nothing of the other man remained. "So you do not simply dissolve your opponents, but transport them into this limbo, too?"

"That's correct."

"So what is the difference between these attacks if they all throw the enemies into the twilight world?"

"The main difference is the level of the available Cosmo energy. As a Bronze Saint, Lethe will never be able to win a fight against you or me. She will always remain one of the lower ranks. If you win the Cancer Cloth, you will outrank all of the other Saints by far. Even the other Gold Saints will find it highly difficult to counter your kind of attack. You may very well become the strongest among them all."

"I think I might like that." Angelo said with a smug grin.

"It is time now. Follow him to the gate to the underworld! Concentrate!"

Angelo spread out his senses. The pale aura of the man's soul left the body and soared towards the sky, into the direction where Praesaepe waited, the doorway of souls. The star cluster was the physical representation of the gate that let the souls

pass into the limbo where they were once more clothed in an astral body and began their long march towards the Hades.

"Follow him!"

Angelo concentrated and followed the soul into the uncanny twilight world. Pale, dusky colours prevailed - a lifeless landscape of rocks, stones and eerie blue-green flames stretched out in front of him. The milky white comet of energy took the form of an old man who immediately began to walk towards the distant horizon.

Curiously, Angelo followed him, closely observed by his Master.

"Can you see the mountain over there?"

Angelo squinted his eyes. "You mean where all of those guys seem to go?"

"Exactly. In the crater of this mountain, the Pit of Yomotsu is hidden, and whoever falls into it will never return."

"Where does this pit lead?" Angelo wanted to know.

"It's the threshold to be passed to enter the Hades, the underworld that is reigned by the God of Death. Once within there, the souls are judged and led to their final destination - be it the Tartaros for the evil ones or the Elysian fields for the good. Not even we can return to the world of the living if we fall into this abyss, but we are at least able to walk freely through the limbo. If you send an opponent into this land, he will inevitably feel drawn towards the Mountain of Yomotsu and not be able to turn away from the lure of the darkness within."

"I see that you and I both seem to be solid compared to the souls," Angelo observed.

"This is because we entered the limbo bodily, while the souls have to leave their bodies behind to reach this place. Every opponent thrown into the twilight world will also be sent only with his non-corporeal essence, so you always have the advantage over him."

Angelo continued to walk the path the dead man's soul had gone.

"You do not need to walk here," Charon said. "Concentrate! You have power over this world. Imagine that you are able to fly! In a mystical world such as this the willpower is stronger than in the Earth Realm, and you know what you are able to achieve even there!"

Angelo closed his eyes and felt how his Cosmo expanded around him. It was an exhilarating feeling as he spread unseen wings and virtually took off.

"Stop!" The command hit sharp like a whiplash, and when Angelo opened his eyes he found himself floating in deep space, the Crab Nebula a distant speck of mist. Charon was nowhere to be seen, only his mental voice gave the young Saint-in-training a

vague assurance.

"Return to Praesaepe," Charon urged him.

Angelo concentrated and followed the distant tug of the Pit of Yomotsu. It wasn't actually a real tugging, more a faint echo to show him the direction, but it sufficed. In a split second, he had returned to the limbo.

When he landed next to Charon, the Eridanus Saint lashed out and hit Angelo so hard in the face that he staggered back. "This is for losing control over your powers," the older man hissed.

Angelo's Cosmo flared angrily, but he still didn't dare to strike back as he knew he could. Promptly, he was hit again.

"Never act from anger! It weakens you. You have to be in control of your powers every single moment of your life."

Soon, soon, he would kill the Eridanus Saint, Angelo promised himself. But not before the man had told him how he could obtain the Cancer Cloth. And he would get it, he was sure. Certainly, Fabrizio was still there, the second candidate, but Charon had given his training to Lethe, probably because he was weaker anyway.

Charon looked at his disciple and saw the cold rage in his dark blue-violet eyes. Angelo was strong, he thought. But was he really the one who should win the Gold Cloth? There was still the second candidate, Fabrizio. He had to separate the two after the boys nearly had killed each other during a training fight.

It wouldn't have been a problem if one of them had died, but they were at practically equal powers, and losing both at the same time was absolutely no option. The Pope had insisted the the vacant positions of the Gold Saints had to be filled as fast as possible, because the next Cycle of Holy Wars dawned faster than anybody had expected.

It was rare that two suitable candidates were found for one Gold Cloth, and it was a waste that one of them would inevitably die in the process. But whoever lost the competition unfortunately wasn't eligible for another Gold Cloth as the Cloths were attuned to their wearers by the stars under which they were born - and both Fabrizio and Angelo were born as prospective Cancer Gold Saints.

Charon remembered his discussion with Lethe when he had given Fabrizio's training over to her...

* * *

"What a waste," Lethe said. She was a petite young woman with long, silvery hair who didn't look as if she could have endured the barbarous training every Saint had to go through. But Charon herself had sent her through this hell, and so he knew that she had an amazing inner strength that let her survive when the others had faltered.

"I know. But only one of them can attain the Cancer Gold Cloth."

Wouldn't it be more merciful if I would take one of the boys and make him forget everything so that we can concentrate on the training of the other?"

"We are not here to be merciful, but to find the best candidate to become Cancer Gold Saint," Charon said matter-of-factly. "We have to train them to the best of our abilities and hope that the Cloth chooses the worthier candidate - and preferably before they have killed each other."

"It would be easier if we could manipulate them to become friends. Then one of them might give in for the sake of the other."

"I don't think this is a good idea. No one who is destined to become one of the Death Saints should become too attached to human frailties like friendship. He will see thousands of souls pass the final threshold and it will be better if he can watch them dispassionately. The last we need is an unstable Cancer Gold Saint, but you know as well as I what the ancient writings say."

"Yes." There were many Cancer Saints throughout the Cycles who became emotionally and mentally unstable due to their experiences in limbo - they watched friends or loved ones die and tried to persuade them to return before they reached the Pit of Yomotsu and never succeeded... "It would be really better if we could leave the Cancer Cloth vacant."

"We both took an oath to support Sanctuary, to obey the Pope and to follow Athena - and the Pope ordered us to train this Cycle's Cancer Saint as it was always the duty of either Eridanus or Ara Saint throughout the times."

"Yes, Master Charon." Lethe bowed her head.

* * *

Angelo had been happy at first when the obnoxious competitor for the Cancer Cloth was given over to the Ara Saint. After all, she was one of the inferior Bronze Saints, and thus Fabrizio's training certainly would be inferior as well.

But only two or three days later, he began to miss the other boy. Okay, they couldn't stand each other, but on the other hand, they had quite some fun in their scarce spare time.

Angelo remembered the day when they sneaked into the village at the other side of the volcano and teased the children. It had been cool to be admired by the two cute dark-haired girls when they outperformed the other boys in every game and contest.

Of course, Charon had beaten them up soundly when he learned of their escapade, but it had been worth it nonetheless. Maybe he should try to sneak away and meet Fabrizio in secret, so that they could repeat their visit to the village - or better another

town farther away.

When he secretly jogged through the night, taking every possible cover, he suddenly ran straight into Fabrizio. They fell to the ground, at first afraid they might have been discovered, but when they recognized each other, they laughed.

"Mind you, I still can't stand you," Angelo started with a slightly aggressive undertone, before his voice became almost wistful, "but it was sooooo boring alone..."

Fabrizio grinned. "I was about to say the same thing," he replied wryly. "I wanted to figure out if we could meet somewhere during the daytime and sneak away to one of the villages to have some fun..."

"You, too?" Angelo asked astonishedly. "Hey, cool! But we should be careful, I really don't want to be beaten up by Eridanus Charon for this again - it's enough that he loves to beat me during the training..."

"I know what you mean," Fabrizio groaned. "Don't think Ara Lethe would go easy on me - she may look tiny, but she can be really mean, too!"

They commiserated a while together until they returned, but not before deciding to rebel a little against their teachers by secretly meeting and maybe even making some friends among the villagers.

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Charon looked sternly at Angelo, who stared back defiantly. "If you lose control over your powers it may mean death for you," he lectured. "You are lucky that your Cosmo enables you to survive even in the hostile environment of deep space! You could have gotten lost between the stars, and then the years of training would have been in vain because of one moment of carelessness."

"Yes, Master," Angelo replied and tried to look properly chastened, even though nothing but anger filled his mind.

"Soon you will be ready to face the Test of the Cancer Cloth," Charon said unexpectedly, and Angelo almost couldn't believe it. "I want that you are properly prepared."

"And what about Fabrizio? Won't he be tested, too?"

"Of course he will be. You will have to fight him for the right to attain the Cancer Gold Cloth."

'Fight?' Angelo barely managed to suppress the question. Of course they had to fight - but in the last time he had come to think of Fabrizio more and more as a friend and less a rival, especially as they didn't have to train together and fight each other anymore.

"You don't seem to look forward to it. Are you afraid?" Charon asked, and his tone of voice implied that he detested even the idea that his trainee might feel fear.

"Of course not," Angelo retorted heatedly.

"Good. Then I will expect you to win the Cloth or die bravely in the attempt. Death is preferable to failure."

Angelo lowered his eyes. Death was preferable to weakness... Should he allow himself to be killed before he acted weak in front of his Master's eyes when he didn't want to kill his friend? But what was friendship worth in the end? Would Fabrizio pull his attacks because of friendship? Would he risk the humiliation of defeat? Angelo had to admit that he didn't know.

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'So it is today,' Angelo thought and felt a strange feeling in the stomach. Was he afraid? Yes, he had to admit. Today was the day for which he had endured the years of horrible training. But would he really succeed? Or would his victory be taken away from him in the last second?

Eridanus Charon and Ara Lethe both stood at the training range in the crater of the Etna, the smoke and desolate landscape being the perfect frame for the fateful test. Both Saints wore their Cloth - Charon the silvery grey Eridanus Silver Cloth and Lethe the stunning white and silver Ara Bronze Cloth that looked more like the robe of an ancient high priestess than the battle armour it ought to be. But then, the Ara Saint rarely fought with her body; her mind was the truly dangerous weapon that could make her opponents forget their intents and even themselves, so that they ended as mindless shells while their souls soared straight towards the gate of the underworld.

"The Test of the Cancer Cloth is the following," Charon intoned the ritual words. "The Cloth you wish to attain is deposited at the inner slopes of the Mountain of Yomotsu. You have to open the gate to the twilight world by yourself and find the way without a soul to guide you. Then you have to climb down the slopes of the mountain, just until you reach the border of no return, where you have to fight for the rightful ownership of the Cloth. The Eridanus Silver Saint and Ara Bronze Saint will stand witness for this Test as it is written in the books since the first Cycle, as no other Saint is able to cross voluntarily into the twilight world and come back unharmed."

Angelo and Fabrizio exchanged an almost desperate gaze, but they both didn't want to let their years of training be in vain, and both of them knew it.

When Charon gave the sign that the Test began, Angelo summoned all of his power to tear a gateway to the limbo into the fabric of reality. He succeeded; but Fabrizio likewise crossed into the twilight world with ease.

They started their desperate race, and Charon and Lethe stood already at the crater that opened into the bottomless Pit of Yomotsu. The Box of the Gold Cloth sparkled on a ledge directly at the border of the line to final death.

Fabrizio and Angelo raced down the slope - they didn't dare float down for fear of losing their concentration and directly falling down into the underworld. It was a close race, but it seemed that Fabrizio won more and more ground.

Angelo hurried desperately after his friend-opponent. Slowly but surely, the distance grew, and he became more and more frightened that he could actually lose. But suddenly, Fabrizio missed a step and fell. Only barely, he managed to cling to the Gold Box, that began to slide towards the edge, too.

Angelo watched the scene in shock. 'The Box!' was his first thought, and he grabbed it to hold it. The jerk displaced Fabrizio's grip, though, and the red-haired boy fell down into the pit.

Horried, Angelo watched his fall. It seemed to happen in slow motion, and the look of betrayal in Fabrizio's eyes burned into his mind so that he thought he would never forget is, ever. For a short moment he considered to jump after him, but then he caught himself. What good would this be? Now he only wanted to get out of here, and he scrambled upwards, the heavy box in tow.

Eons later, it seemed, he reached Charon and Lethe who had watched the scene dispassionately. No - not completely devoid of emotion... Lethe had a very sad look in her eyes when she turned to Charon, and her lips formed a single, silent word - goodbye.

"Why?" Angelo shouted at the Eridanus Saint. "Why did you make me kill my friend?" In a wild burst of rage, Angelo struck with all of his power, his flaring cosmo overpowering that of the Silver Saint by far, and Charon was thrown into the Pit as well.

When Angelo watched him fall, he felt neither relief nor satisfaction, but still he turned towards the Ara Saint. Reflexively, she lifted her arms: "Waves of Oblivion!" she shouted, then put her hands to her mouth as if to hold back the words she had spoken.

Angelo was too furious to deflect her attack and struck her down as well, before he raced back into the world of the living.

Lethe tumbled down the slope and came to a halt at the ledge where the Gold Box had stood. She had cracked several ribs, she discovered when she coughed blood, and sustained other injuries, both internal and external, but nothing was as grievous as the damage she had caused the young Cancer Saint by her thoughtless action.

Charon had been right, never should a Death Saint become attached to anybody else - the death of the Eridanus Saint at the hands of his disciple was foreordained; it was written in the ancient scriptures as inevitable and necessary. But she had loved him, secretly, and so she had exerted her powers in revenge for her beloved and made Angelo forget a piece of himself, the piece he tried to cling to most when the Wave of Oblivion washed over him: his humanity.

Only slowly it dawned her what this horrible mistake might have cost. Death is preferable to failure... Lethe began to cry and put together her last strength to let herself fall down into the Pit of Yomotsu.

- The End -

Author's Note:

Well, several people asked me why I named DeathMask "Angelo". Actually I had so many reasons, that I couldn't think of any other fitting name...

First there were two songs I played all the time during the time I wrote the stuff about DM: "Angel and Me" from Toyah and "Fallen Angel" from Alphaville -- the latter of course gave this story its name (lots of my stories or chapters are titled for my favourite songs).

Then I like Angelus from Buffy the Vampire Slayer a lot, and somewhat he reminded me of DM. As DM comes from Italy, it was logical that I'd chose an Italian name for him, thus turning Angelus to Angelo.

Well, and of course I just loved the irony to give such an evil guy a name like Angelo :))

*"I push the blade into your eye
Break the bars
watch you cry
Set myself free
It's the Angel and me
...and me*

*I run to the wind
I run to the river
There's blood on me
It's your memory*

*It's the smile of
It's the smile of
It's the smile of insanity..."*

("Angel and me", Toyah)

Kapitel 2: The Hephaesta (Shaina + Marin)

Fearfully, the girls looked around.

It had been maybe a month since they had been taken away from their homes all over the world and delivered at Sanctuary. In that time they had been given a crash course in Greek so that they could understand the orders of their teachers.

Today instead of their usual instructor, a faceless woman with flowing black hair appeared. She wore a white and silver armour and a silver mask that hid her face completely. Even the eyes were unrecognizable behind the cold metal.

"Look! Do you think she can see from behind that," one of the girls, a small five-year old with grass green hair whispered in Italian accented Greek to another of the girls.

In virtually the same instant she got slapped by the masked woman and the force of the hit threw her to the ground. "You are only to speak when spoken to," the woman said evenly. "What is your name, girl?"

The five-year old struggled back to her feet, but even as tears streamed out of her green eyes, she glared defiantly at the tall female Saint. "Maria Graziella."

"Well, Maria Graziella, I can see perfectly through this mask. - And my hearing is even better!" The woman turned to another of the girls who immediately froze before she could utter even a single sound. "So who are you?"

"Sanae," the red-head replied timidly.

"Maybe I should first introduce myself," the woman said. "I am Cassiopeia Silver Saint Regina, and I will be training you from now on. You have been chosen to be among the Saints of Athena and you will either complete your training successfully and attain a Cloth or die trying. I expect you to put all your heart and soul into this task and then we will get along fine. If you don't you will not survive long." Regina looked at the ten girls in front of her, one looking more terrified than the other. If one of them survived the training, she would be considered successful. As for the others -- weakness was not tolerated in Sanctuary.

Hesitantly, Sanae lifted her arm.

"You have a question?"

"Hai, Regina-sensei," she answered. The Cassiopeia Saint frowned and slapped her into the face. "Speak Greek! So, what do you want to know?"

"Ha-- yes, Mistress Regina. Why do you wear such a mask?"

"I am a Saint of the Goddess Athena. Since the dawn of time, Athena defended Earth

from the evil schemes of other Gods. She was supported in this by an army of young men, her Warrior Saints, who fought for her not using arms, but only their bodies. Sooner or later, there were also young women who wanted to join the ranks of the Saints. At first, Athena refused to let women join her Saints, because they reminded her too much of the Amazons, a female warrior tribe who was fathered by Ares, one among the Gods whom Athena dislikes most. But as time passed and more and more women asked to be allowed to fight for her, Athena decided to give in - under one condition. The women fighting for her had to give up their femininity and hide their beautiful faces behind masks. From that day on, every female fighter wore a mask just like mine and no one was ever allowed to see her face again."

"No one?" a brown-haired girl mouthed. She, too, was slapped for her insolence of speaking out of turn, but still Cassiopeia Regina answered the question.

"No one. Once you take up the mask, it will become a part of you - you sacrifice your face to the Goddess. The mask gives you some advantages, though. The material filters the air you breathe so that you will not be affected by gaseous poisons. Also you can dive under the sea indefinitely. The male Saints can stay under water for a long time, too, but they have eventually to surface to breathe. You don't. Moreover, your eyes are protected from all kinds of dangerous radiation, while infrared light is being enhanced so that you can also see in the night."

"Cool!" it came from one of the girls, but Regina wasn't sure who it was. So this time she only glared in the vicinity of the offender. It was probably the green-haired girl again. She was a spirited young lady, and Regina had high hopes that she would be the one to survive the training.

"From the time you receive your masks you will only take them off to wash or eat. And make sure that no one watches you during these times! For a female Saint to be seen without her mask is a greater embarrassment than being seen stark naked! And mind you, if I ever catch anyone of you bare-faced after the masking ceremony, you will run naked 50 kilometres through Sanctuary, up to Athena's statue and down again so that you remember the lesson."

Fearful silence greeted the Cassiopeia Saint again. Timidly, the red-haired Japanese girl lifted her hand once more.

"Yes, Sanae?"

"And when do we get our masks?"

"As soon as the Hephaesta has forged them for you." Regina smiled, but of course every emotion was hidden behind the silver metal. Actually, this was another advantage the female Saints had - no one could read their faces in battle, a fact that had given many of the girls quite an edge against the males. "Follow me."

Regina left the hut that was used for instructing the young Saints-to-be, and the girls filed hurriedly out after her. If they had learned one thing by now it was that immediate obedience led to better treatment by their superiors.

"We will now go to the Hephaesta. She will take measure for your masks." With measured strides, Regina walked to the solitary hut that stood about halfway around the hill with the Zodiac Temples. A tiny rivulet flew next to the hut, and steady smoke streamed from the chimney. As none of the girls dared to pose a question at the moment, Regina decided to volunteer some information.

"The Hephaesta was a Saint once, too. The Sculptor Bronze Saint. Since the first female Saint entered the ranks, the Sculptor Cloth was only worn by women. Every Sculptor Saint throughout history had an affinity to smithcraft. With her Cosmo alone, the Sculptor was able to alter metals, an almost invincible weapon against armours, shields and swords. The only kinds of armour a Sculptor Saint cannot influence are the Cloths of Saints. It is said that this is because a Cloth is not simple inanimate matter, but a somehow living entity. So when Athena's demand for masks had to be met, the Sculptor Saint was chosen to create them. But as it was considered unwise to let a Saint only do work and not fight anymore, it became custom that the smith for the masks was the retired Sculptor Saint who passed on her Cloth to a worthy successor."

Regina went to the door and announced her presence to the smith.

"Come in, Cassiopeia Regina," a husky female voice answered. "Whom do you bring?"

Regina entered the smoke-filled smithy. "I bring you ten maidens who are destined to take the mask in the service of Athena," she replied the ritual words. Destined was a neat euphemism, Regina thought with a tinge of bitterness. They never had been asked whether it was their own free will to serve Athena. They had been spirited away, and now they didn't have a choice anymore. Only between succeeding and death, just like it had been with her, Regina. Like it had been with her fellow Saints... With the Hephaesta, too.

"Then let them be cleansed so that they are pure and clean to receive the gift of the Goddess that marks them as her faithful servants." The Hephaesta stepped out of the smoke, and one could see that one of her legs was crippled, just like it was said of the God who was her namesake. She had deep orange hair that was caught in one, long braid down her back to keep it away from the fire and she, too, wore a silver mask, a last reminder that she once belonged to the Saints. With a curt gesture, she waved a servant to her, a likewise masked girl who carried a bowl of fresh water, a white piece of cloth and a towel.

Regina motioned the red-haired girl to stand in front of the Hephaesta. Anxiously, Sanae stepped forward.

The smith looked solemnly at her, the impression even stronger as she was just the impassionate silver mask facing the girl. "What is your name?"

"Sanae, Mistress." The answer was only whispered.

The Hephaesta dipped the cloth into the water and gently washed the girl's face. "Hereby I cleanse you from your past and all former ties. I cleanse you from all former

obligations and also your name." The smith seemed to look deep within her. "A new name shall be given you, I will inscribe it into the mask you will wear, so that you are newly born, newly named and from now on only bound to the Goddess."

Sanae-not-anymore staggered back, completely confused. She had sensed a strange energy flowing through her when the woman looked at her, and now she felt strangely empty.

One after the other, the remaining girls underwent the very same ceremony. Finally the Hephaesta motioned the servant to put away the bowl, before she fetched a pair of tongs and took a glowing piece of metal out of the fire. Nine more pieces waited to be worked, too.

With a hammer and a steady stream of Cosmo energy, the Hephaesta turned the first piece of metal into a shining mask. While cleansing the girls, her Cosmo had given her the precise measurements and also the insight which markings the mask had to bear. Except for the clanging of metal on metal and the whisper of the flames, an utter silence filled the smithy.

Finally, the servant came with a bucket of cold water and motioned to the red-haired girl to stretch out her arm. The one formerly known as Sanae did as she was told and was completely taken by surprise that she didn't even scream when a silver dagger flashed and bit deeply into her hand, letting her blood flow into the bucket and mingle with the water.

The Hephaesta let the mask fall into the water and cool. It took only seconds and the mask was finished. The servant quietly took it out of the water and dried it with a fresh cloth before she passed it back to the Hephaesta.

"Come here," she said to the red-head whose hand was already covered with a bandage, and her words parted the almost oppressing silence of the solemn rite. "Take up the mask that was hardened in your blood and holy water, take up the new life in the service of Athena and take up the new name that marks the beginning of your new life: Marin."

The Hephaesta put the mask over the girl's face, and it fit perfectly. Much to Marin's surprise it didn't even need a string to keep it in place, it just stayed on her face as if glued on. When she let out the breath she had held in anticipation, she discovered that the material didn't hinder her breathing at all - nor did it hinder her sight. It was a strange feeling at first, but as if by magick she could still blink and even move her lips, even though the mask was completely unmoving from the outside.

One girl after the other was given the mask and a new name.

Stoically, Regina watched the ceremony and pondered where the Hephaesta got all the names from? Surreptitiously, she wrote them down. Sure, she had to memorize them sooner or later, but she wanted to be on the safe side. Marin... Nimue... Omikleia... Ariana... Verdandi... Alineth... Astara... Esther... Idurah... She wondered which of the girls would finally live to obtain one of the vacant Cloths.

Finally the last mask was given to the tomboyish green-haired girl who was named Shaina.

After Cassiopeia Regina herded her flock outside the smithy, the Hephaesta breathed deeply. She always wondered whether it was such a good idea to go through all the ceremony so early, when most of the girls wouldn't survive the training anyway, but then, they had to wear the masks to be allowed in Athena's service.

Long time ago, she had belonged to another group who was initiated by another smith who also was called the Hephaesta. She couldn't remember her original name, and she had but forgotten the one she had been given then (hadn't it been Charis?), but she still remembered how much she was awed by the ceremony.

Of course that Hephaesta also had a crippled leg, and she had wondered how that might have happened. Only when the old Hephaesta died and she as Sculptor Saint had to pass on her Cloth to her successor to follow in her footsteps, she had learned the secret of the smiths. In exchange for the power to see into the girls and the ability to create their masks, Hephaestos, the god of fire and patron of smiths, always demanded that price.

The Hephaesta sighed. All the Greek Gods were a jealous bunch...

- The End -

Kapitel 3: Burning Ice (Camus)

"It's cold and dull here," Josse complained. "I want to go back home!"

"Little one, you were chosen to become a formidable warrior", Aquarius Gold Saint Hyperion said. He was a stout man with short, bluey black hair and almond shaped dark brown eyes that betrayed his Inuit heritage, but still he spoke Greek like all Saints of Athena.

"But I don't want to! I want to go back to my friends." Josse frowned deeply. He had been given a crash course in Greek, but he still wasn't comfortable in that language. Unfortunately he would be immediately beaten when he spoke in his French mother tongue, and so he tried hard to articulate himself in the alien language.

Hyperion sighed. The little boy with the indigo blue hair looked defiantly at him.

"It's an honour to be chosen," the Saint explained patiently. Only dimly he could remember the time when he had been simply snatched away from his loved ones and was thrown into this world of neverending training and fights.

An honour... Well, he had been born into one of the interims when everything seemed to be quiet, none of the Gods stirring, but all signs told of the next Holy War approaching. Probably in Josse's days Athena finally would be reborn and he would truly become a fighter who battled alongside the most revered Goddess.

He, Hyperion, had read the old scriptures that told of the Holy Wars, the last of them more than two hundred years ago which ended in the death of all but two of the Saints, but which still sealed the defeat of the evil God Hades. Hyperion sighed mentally. He would have loved to fight in an epic battle like this, but he hadn't been destined to.

Afterwards the two remaining Saints began so rebuild the holy order by searching and training the most eligible young men. Many of the Cloths stayed vacant for a long time, but it seemed that more and more young Saints were found in the current days so that a whole new generation stood waiting for the new Holy War to come.

But it wouldn't be *his* war anymore, Hyperion thought. He was slightly sad that all of his training was mostly in vain - only of use to teach his successor - but all of the Saints during the interim shared the same fate.

"An honour! That's what the other guy said, too, when he taught me this awful Greek language," Josse spat. "But I don't see anything honourable in freezing to death here or beating up lumps of ice."

"You will learn to come to terms with your destiny in due time."

"But why me?"

"Because within you there lies a power that separates you from the other children of your age. In fact, this power separates you from all other men and makes you a holy warrior of the Goddess Athena."

"But I have been taught at home that there is only one God. I don't believe in fancy Goddesses."

Hyperion sighed. Obviously it was easier to teach the young Saints-to-be languages than the proper religious background. Admittedly, it had taken quite some time until he had come to terms that there was a Greek Goddess to revere and not Anguta, but he had managed as well. He even chose a Greek name after he had won his Cloth - the name of the Titan who fathered Eos, the Goddess whose Latin name christened his most powerful attacks.

"This God you were taught to believe in appeared quite some time after the reality of the Greek Gods," Hyperion began.

"But why are nowadays all of the teachings about him and not about Athena and the others?"

"Well..." Hyperion sighed once more. He was mainly a teacher of the art of battle and not of religion, and Josse had a keen and inquisitive mind.

"Tell me why!" The boy looked challenging at the older man.

"In the world where I was little, no one knew this Christian God of yours at all. The Inuit - my tribe - pray to different Gods. But even I had to acknowledge the truth of Athena, for she is the one who cares about the Earth and defends it from the evil Gods like Hades, Seth, Ares, Apophis, Keelut, Poseidon, Ahriman, Louhi, Asmodeus, Whiro, Belial, Ate, Tlacolotl, Amatsu Mikaboshi..." Hyperion listed the enemies of the battles that Athena and her Saints had fought from the dawn of time - not only against foes from the Greek pantheon, but against all forces of evil. It was written in the books at Sanctuary, and he had read them all.

"Hm." Josse frowned deeply.

"Why don't you just train and keep your doubts for later?" Hyperion hoped that time would eventually do away with all of the questions of the boy.

"I hate this country. Only snow and ice and nothing else!"

"When you have finished your training and gained your Cloth, you are free to go wherever you like," Hyperion promised. "But the lands of neverending snow are not dull if you manage to look properly."

"You sure?"

"Of course. Just look around!"

"There's snow and ice. So what?"

Hyperion laughed. "I should have expected - you came from a warm country and never had the chance to appreciate the beauty of the cold. It is a pity that I have to teach you in Greek. My native language has about thirty different words for 'snow'. I would love to make you understand the richness of this land which only very few persons can truly appreciate." He looked over the Siberian landscape. It wasn't Alaska, but still very close in appearance.

"Little one, watch the play of the sun over the crystals... The ice isn't plain white to those who are able to see; it consists of myriad shades of light blue, green, grey, turquoise and even violet."

Josse squinted his eyes. His Master had a point, he had to admit. The sunlight glistened from the plains as if they were made of uncountable numbers of tiny diamonds.

"You have to embrace this land, the icy cold, because you will be a warrior of the ice. Currently there is only the Aquarius Saint who fights with the cold, but it might be important that there is also another Saint whose attacks are based on freezing. This is the Cygnus Bronze Saint, whose Cloth has been lying dormant in the eternal ice for millennia. Should the need arise, when the next Holy War comes up, it will be your duty to teach the future Cygnus Saint as well as your successor."

Hyperion looked at the boy who stared at the snowy plains as if he dared them to challenge him. "Josse?"

"Huh?"

"That's *Yes, Master*," Hyperion reminded him. "Have you listened to what I have told you?"

"Sure, Master..."

Hyperion wasn't 100 percent convinced of it, but then, he had still some time to teach the boy everything - at least he hoped so.

There was this old woman in Sanctuary, who was called the Pythia by some, who said she foresaw death and destruction, betrayal and pain - and that they didn't have much time to prepare for the rebirth of hope which would be destroyed in the cradle. Most people in Sanctuary thought the old Pythia was daft, of course, but maybe there was still a grain of truth in her predictions.

He certainly shouldn't tarry too much with Josse's education.

* * *

"Aurora Thunder Attack!" Josse shouted, und his Cosmo expanded and turned into a

rainbow wave of energy that crashed into a mountain of ice. When the rumbling of the ice ceased, a huge hole marred the mountain.

"Wonderful, Josse," Hyperion smiled. "Now you have finally mastered this attack and can use it at will."

"What's the next thing you are going to teach me?" Josse asked eagerly. Over time he had become not only very fond of his Master, but he came to like the training, too. It was exhilarating to develop powers that went so far beyond those of ordinary humans.

Josse remembered when Hyperion read to him the accounts of the deeds of Athena's Saints in the former Holy Wars, and even when he was reluctant to believe them in the beginning, now he yearned to become one of them.

"At your speed you will have surpassed me really soon," Hyperion laughed. But it would not be one day too late, he thought.

During the last year, the news from Sanctuary had gotten increasingly disquieting. Not only it was said that Athena had been reborn, but there had been also been an attempt at her life - supposedly a successful one. But the most alarming thing was the fact that a fellow Gold Saint, Sagittarius Aiolos, was said to be the assassin.

Hyperion couldn't believe that any of his colleagues could raise his hands against the Goddess, but the news had been reported by the Pope who was beyond doubt.

"But Master, your powers are immeasurable!"

"Not anymore, young man. I've been a Saint for more than twenty years now, and the only reason that I have kept my Cloth was that there was no imminent danger ahead. Now that the next Holy War is near, I am not strong enough to defend Athena anymore and I have to pass on my knowledge, my powers and my Cloth to a worthier man."

"Hm... I don't feel so worthy yet," Josse said. Sure, he had grown in the last two years, and the rigid training gave him a well-trained and strong body, but he would never become as wise and erudite as his Master.

"You will be, you will be. And now watch while I show you the secret of my most powerful attack."

Hyperion raised his arms over the head, and Josse watched intently. The older man's Cosmo glowed almost like the sun, it seemed, and then the image of a young woman in Greek clothing, who carried a water pitcher in her hands, appeared behind him. "Aurora Execution!"

Golden energy poured from the pitcher and past the Aquarius Saint. The blast was accompanied by waves of rainbow light that shone even more magnificent than the light curtains of the Aurora Borealis that painted the Siberian night skies with fairy-

tale colours.

When the attack hit Josse's training mountain, the ice crumbled to fine snow, and the boy stared at his Master in awe.

"That's *beautiful!*" he sighed.

"It's like nature herself - beautiful and deadly," Hyperion nodded. "Now it's your turn to try it, young man."

"Yes, Master." Josse mimicked his Master's pose. "Like this?"

"Exactly. Now you have to concentrate your Cosmo until you reach the ultimate power and you tap your seventh sense. This is the most formidable power of every Aquarius Saint throughout history, the Aurora Execution. The energy you set free is able to flatten whole mountains or to freeze an opponent into oblivion."

Josse closed his stunning ultramarine blue eyes and concentrated as he was told. The power washed over him like a golden flood. "Aurora Execution!" he shouted and felt how the energies were released through his body.

Finally he dared to open his eyes again. "Did it truly work, Master?"

Hyperion gave him a wry grin and pointed at the large hole in the ground right in front of them in which the dark polar sea churned. "Next time you should better choose a target first."

"Oops."

"Furthermore it might be useful if you didn't close your eyes but look where you direct the Aurora Execution..."

"Of course, Master," Josse said embarrassed.

More time passed, during which Josse tried to perfect his attacks.

* * *

"Now try it again." Hyperion demanded.

"Aurora Execution!"

Everything looked perfect - pose, the Cosmo, the effect; and Hyperion nodded in satisfaction. Josse was as strong as he had been in his youth, probably even stronger. He had needed far more than only a couple of attempts to master this final attack of the Aquarius Saint.

"You mean I really did it?!" Josse chimed. He almost couldn't believe that he was now able to evoke the deadly rainbow light of the Aurora Execution at will.

"Yes, and I'm very proud of you. Now there is only one final test left for you to prove that you are in fact my successor."

"Which test?"

"Your Test of Cloth. I would prefer to spare you this test, but it needs to be done. But I have confidence in you that you will succeed."

"And what would happen if I failed?"

"Then you would die."

"But - Master!" Josse looked at him in alarm.

"You mustn't fail. I don't think it is possible to find and train another Aquarius Saint in time for the next Holy War."

"And what is my task in this test?"

"You only need to survive." Hyperion raised his arm and Josse was bathed in golden light. The boy was too surprised to react when he was imprisoned in a Freezing Coffin. "I know your powers, and this Freezing Coffin I created around you can be shattered if you manage to surpass your current limits. Let your Cosmo burn and prove that I have chosen right."

Out of his icy prison, Josse stared at Hyperion half in shock, half deeply hurt. Had his Master betrayed him in the end? No, this couldn't be... But how could he free himself from this icy sarcophagus? He couldn't move a millimetre. How was he supposed to launch his attacks when he couldn't assume the proper poses?

His Master walked away, Josse noticed. Panicky, he tried to move, to somehow wriggle free of the ice, but to no avail.

Think, he told himself. When physical force didn't work, he needed to concentrate his Cosmo. Slowly, but surely the cold of the surrounding ice crept into him. It was far colder than even the lowest temperature nature produced in the Siberian plains, and he knew that he had to break free soon or forever be imprisoned in this coffin, his soul evaporating while his body stayed intact, waiting to be found.

With all the determination he could muster, Josse enflamed his powerful Cosmo, but the Freezing Coffin held him like a vise. More... He still needed more... He didn't want to die here and disappoint his Master, he vowed. Once more he increased the power output of his Cosmo.

* * *

The splinters of the Freezing Coffin crashed down, and Josse fell to his knees, panting heavily. When he raised his head, the shimmering box of the Aquarius Gold Cloth

stood right in front of him. An envelope with a golden seal that bore the symbol of the zodiac sign Aquarius was attached to it.

With trembling fingers, he opened the envelope and unfolded the letter it contained.

"I taught you everything I could", the note read. "The Cloth is now yours, and I will retire to the icy plains as is my duty, now that I have outlived my usefulness."

"Hyperion!" Josse called in horror. He left the Cloth Box behind and ran over the icy plains in search of his Master.

He had never felt so cold before, even in his first days in Siberia. Nowhere his Master's warm and reassuring Cosmo could be sensed. Josse's eyes streamed hot tears when it dawned to him what Hyperion had done.

It was an old Inuit tradition that the old ones who weren't able to be useful to their tribe anymore would go out into the cold, lest they'd be a burden for their loved ones.

"Hyperion! *No!* There is so much I still need to learn..."

Suddenly Josse got the impression that his Master's Cosmo touched him fleetingly from the gates of beyond.

"Do not worry, Josse. My time has passed. Now it is up to you to carry the burden of the Aquarius Cloth. I couldn't have chosen a better successor - you are just, patient, dutiful and understanding. Wear the Cloth with honour as I have done and I will be content when I enter the world beyond."

"But Master Hyperion..." The Cosmo of his Master faded away, and Josse sank to his knees in silent mourning. "Farewell, my Master..."

After a while of aimless wandering around, Josse found the Hyperion's body under a drift of freshly fallen snow. His Master's face was serene and his lips showed a smile that hinted of a death that was welcomed, not feared.

But if his Master truly hadn't feared death, why was it that he, Josse felt a if he was torn apart? Hyperion was already frozen solid, and his disciple decided to bury him deep under the eternal ice of the Siberian plains.

Still it was somehow unbelievable - these kind eyes that didn't shine anymore when he, Josse, had completed some difficult task, these lips that would never form words of praise anymore, these limbs, that were now still and frozen solid... It was so unfair that he had left him alone.

Josse still wasn't sure which name he should choose when he formally announced the Pope that Aquarius Gold Saint Hyperion had passed on his Cloth on to him. He had wanted Hyperion's advice on this, but now it was too late. Too late... Now he could never tell Hyperion how thankful he was for all of his training, how much he had meant to him as a replacement father.

The new Aquarius Saint vowed that he would never allow any student of his to become as attached to him as he had been to Hyperion. He wanted to spare them the pain when he had to cross the border to death to allow his best disciple to attain his Cloth.

- The End -