

## CHAPTER 53.



### BLUE BLOOD BROTHERS

When the mist had cleared, a gangly man stood before them. Below his hooded jackal cloak was a neck so thin, that its Adam's apple stuck out like a stone under a rug.

Queen Massoia charged, her beam of light fell from the sky, crystallizing into her broad sword. Coming to his senses, Azul joined his queen-at-arms, but then he remembered his oath to protect his young companions.

More like a warrior than a queen, Massoia clenched the weapon between her fist, slicing broadly back and forth. The man dodged every well-placed stab and blow. The last blow cut the man's cloak, as he narrowly avoided his assailant with cat-like agility.

He was trapped before the labyrinth wall. Then, like some Paleolithic god, Massoia swung the sword's hilt, bringing it upon the man with the

motion of a sledge hammer. His body was fell sideways in two like a piece of firewood. She held her adamant sword and it flickered from a solid mass, returning into pure energy.

To her surprise, the scraggily man, by altering his skin color at will, camouflaged his body to look like a stone. He uncovered Massoia's weakness with this deception. Now he knew that it was necessary for Muses to materialize as living tissue to injure their opponents, that the spirit and her weapon must abandon a transparent form for a temporary, corporeal form, during which time, as all living organisms were, she became vulnerable. Now the man knew when this ghostly woman would become flesh and bone.

The eyewitnesses thought the man had up and vanished before he reappeared like a shadow. His camouflage stripped away, he transported himself behind Massoia. Anyone else would be forced to turn around; but the spirit Queen simply switched her back to her front. She lifted both hands to drive her sword into the man like a stake. He welcomed the attack, as it was the moment of opportunity he needed to make his move.

At the last possible second, he bounded away, avoiding the downward motion. The ground broke beneath her prodigious sword and, for a fraction of a second, Massoia's body flickered to a solid mass during which time he removed his cloak, adding a cloud of dust to petrify the garment. It expanded

to a viscous netting surrounded by bursts of light. Like a matador, he draped his cloak over Massioia's figure, wrapping her body to the ground in a clump.

He stood over her body, nearly the size of a beached marine mammal. His tattoos exposed, the man's arms and chest looked as though the black ink was his original complexion while the indecipherable markings had been his skin tone.

"Hail Massioa, Queen of Freesia!" he cackled in a mocking tone.

"Lemme go!" Jack cried. He tried to push Azul aside to help the fallen Massioa, but Michael, who was slightly bigger than he, pulled and dragged him back into the Reading Room where it was safer. Azul followed after them, blocking the entranceway.

"Now, dear brother," hissed the man, "I will have what I came for." He moved closer to Azul, who said nothing as he kept his hands above his head in dueling position.

"Look to your Queen Muse," he said, throwing a glance to Massioia's writhing body. "That I was able to defeat her so easily should convince you of my power."

"Indigo—brother," Azul pleaded in a compassionate tone, "come back to us; come back to your family. I know Realm Mother can make you well

again. And Azure—Azure can convince the Council to be lenient. He can—”

“Azure is a fool!” Indigo reprimanded. “I am nearly Immagus now. Do you really think he or you can stand in my way?”

“No, but unlike you, they have not traded their souls for dark magic. Tell me, brother, was obtaining it worth shaming our family, hunting down innocent children, killing Crimson Sandman? No, Indigo, you are not Immagus. All you are is a murderer. And you will not have me rest with the Muses this day.”

“Azul—brother,” he taunted, directing his attention to the man’s birthmark, “the hand of Fate has scarred your cheek. What will you do now, offer him the other? Imagine what we could do if we combined our strength. No vermin can harm us. Together, Gaggatte can make us unstoppable.”

Azul’s unbroken stance was a firm response to Indigo’s boastful promise, and he could see Indigo was even more upset now. The man’s glowing palms signaled his increasing anger, and his pale blue eyes transformed, shining bright red like the red eye of a flash photo. The poison of Immagus magic was taking over what remained of his body. When he spoke, his teeth ground his G’s.

“The time for gallantry is over! Now get out of my way!”

“No!” Azul shouted. But by the time the refusal escaped his lips,

Indigo's red palms clapped the air, jolting Azul backwards, his burly mass tumbling into the Reading Room.

Michael, who was startled by the noise, screamed in terror. Jack, who was standing against the wall, gripped his quill even tighter, the feather being the only light they had.

Jack wanted so badly to hurt Indigo; his friend's kidnapper, Mr. Sandman's executioner—but found that, after reading the *Book of Destiny*, he knew the honor at stake in this sibling face-off.

Azul rose to his feet, backing away on defense. Apart from his chest pain, he was ready to duel again, as most of Indigo's blow was absorbed into his stinging palms.

"You are weak," Indigo snarled, standing in the doorway, "and weakness must be punished."

He flashed a glare at Michael and then at Jack. Azul used his brother's distraction to craft a weapon. It was time for telecreatis; the guessing magic. Like rock, paper, scissors, if Indigo's guess was better than his guess, Azul would lose, which in these higher stakes, would mean death. The key to victory was to get close to your opponent, just as Indigo had done with Queen Massoia. Had Indigo tried such a maneuver at even an arm's distance, Massoia would have time to anticipate the move, following it with

a devastating counter-strike.

But we come to Azul, who knew he was to confront this familiar foe. He sweated droplets before his hands moved forward. The minerals from his waist pocket expelled forth, trailing behind the blue glow of his palms. The rock and metals congealed in midair as several ninja stars flew as fast as bullets. Predicting this offense, Indigo lifted his beet red hand, blocked the volley, and deflecting their mass into one larger projectile. The former Intuit soldier vaulted over the spiky missile, and it crashed into the wall, raining down glitter and stone.

Indigo performed a handspring and somersaulted backwards. From mid air, he threw two spikes down like saber teeth. Avoiding the darts was impossible for the slower Azul, so he countered the spikes with a blast of acid mist, dissolving them. If Indigo kept this assault going, he would either run Azul to exhaustion or deplete the man's remaining magic.

Beyond the doorway, the chanting of Massoia's spirit minions approached. Indigo was unmoved, anticipating this intrusion as well. His hands high, a film of sooty ink from his palms flew like Frisbees. Soon the chamber wall was covered from top to bottom, and around all sides. The Muses hit the outer wall like a fly hits a window. So much for the cavalry riding in to save the day.

The chamber room was pitch black now, save for the glowing palms of the combatants. It was hard to see what was happening. Suddenly, a noise rocked the room, sending Michael stumbling on to Jack, knocking the Book and the quill from his hands. Now there was one less light in the gloom. Jack and Michael became pinned to the wall's inky surface. All they could see were four glowing palms, a blue pair and a red pair, waving in countless motions, and leaving behind streaks of light like plasma lamps.

In such darkness, finding the quill would be difficult, and with Michael constantly tugging on his arm, Jack found that it became impossible. Understandably, he was terrified and Jack was too, though he continued in spite of the fear, feeling around the fly paper surface that was the Reading Room's floor. Then, to his surprise, his fingers found the feather. The room lit up the instant he grabbed the quill, and he screamed at what he saw.

"Look out!" Jack shouted.

And the warning was enough for Azul to roll away from Indigo's deathblow, though it was not enough to save him from the magic that shattered every bone in his arm. Indigo stepped onto Azul's fractured wrist, and his brother howled in pain.

With the last of his magic, Azul conjured a dagger, stabbing his

brother in the shin. Indigo displayed no pain at this. He disintegrated the dagger, taking up its remains into his hand to make a sharper dagger of his own. Azul focused all his energy, bending Indigo's blade backward, but its tip grazed his neck, drawing blood.

Unsticking himself from the wall, Jack picked up the Book from the ground, and held it to his chest. Using the volume as a battering ram, he charged at them, pushing Indigo from Azul's body.

With the help of the other muses, Queen Massoia escaped her trap. She and her brood rushed towards the entrance like the water from a broken dam. Indigo grabbed Jack and Michael, and whirled a hole into the ceiling, leaving a dust cloud behind for adequate smokescreen. The blow from Massoia's sword dismantled the inky shielding around the Reading Room. She and her minions burst into the room and, when the gloom evaporated, only Azul's unconscious body remained. Indigo had vanished, taking Jack, Michael, and the *Book of Destiny*.