

Semu Danat took in the vast city below him, breathless. He leaned on the railing, feeling the intricate grain of the dzana wood beneath his fingers. He was amazed at how far he could see. Though not as large as the capital, Idzatsi was said to be the largest port city in the world, and yet from all the way up here, it looked so small. From his perch, he could see practically the whole city, from the gates in the west to the docks in the east. Columns of smoke rose from the chimneys of houses, crowded together in small neighborhoods sectioned off by the main roads. In one neighborhood, the houses bore woven fabrics and carved symbols, signifying the Kyezean district. From the east, he caught a scent of saltwater on the wind as he looked out to the docks—a vast maze of shops, markets, and shipyards. Three large trading ships sat in the harbor, backlit by the setting sun. Semu almost thought he could make out a fourth approaching.

The central district was the hub of the city. Markets blanketed the outskirts of the district, forming a ring around the government and administration buildings. At the very center of the city, where Semu now stood, was the Danat hall—the vast, five-towered complex where city administrators met and auratic mages trained.

In the far distance, towering above the city, Semu could see Keep Sana'e. It sat on a large plateau to the south that overlooked the city, and seemed to tower over it, as if taking it upon itself to be the city's guardian.

"It's quite the view," Semu said. "I could get used to this."

"Try that on your own time," Tadzaya said. "When there's not an ice mage to catch."

Semu turned to her and sighed, smiling. "When did you become the responsible one?"

"Me? The responsible one?" Tadzaya snorted. "You're the one who's always on top of things."

Semu sighed. In a way, she was right. Ever since he and Tadzaya had joined the Danat council, Semu had taken the initiative in almost every mission they'd embarked on. Obviously, someone had to. And yet...Semu still saw himself as a simple man. He'd always had big dreams, but nowadays, he was starting to realize just how much his duties as a Danat were starting to affect his life.

Being up here, in the wind tower of the Danat hall, enjoying the view, reminded Semu of simpler times. Times before he and Tadzaya had been wrapped up in this search, and in the war. Times where he could simply sit and enjoy the view—without worrying about what he would see. Semu often longed for those days.

Unfortunately, such simple times would have to wait. He turned to the city once again. “Hand me that talisman.”

Tadzaya reached into the pocket of her plain, red-orange robe—her mark as the Danat of Flame—then withdrew an ornate wooden talisman, suspended on the end of a small rope. She dropped it into Semu's outstretched hand, and Semu examined it. The small wooden object was shaped almost like the clouds of a cyclone. On the surface was a carved picture of two angular eyes, joined by what appeared to be lightning. Below it was an inscription, written in the old Velden script. The translation, according to Zidano Danat, was “Windsight”.

Semu closed his eyes, breathing deeply. Five seconds passed.

Then, something erupted within Semu. He felt as if he'd just been shocked, and sensed a vast, churning power within him. His aura. Every auratic mage had one, as the name itself suggested. A raw scrap of primal energy, residing within his person entirely. There were five types of auras—one for each Velden element—and Semu had access to the second type, the one

that could harness wind. Thus, when he ignited his aura, he was able to interact exclusively with wind artifacts, which included the talisman in his hand.

Subconsciously, Semu split his aura in two, taking the smaller portion and pushing it up his arm, into his hand, and through his fingers. The wind picked up around Semu—the side effect of channeling his aura—as Semu pushed the small piece of magic into the wooden talisman. When Semu opened his eyes, the carved inscription—the picture of the two eyes, plus the script—had begun to glow a pure silver. Semu focused, then spoke. “*Kuudzii uupii neyetsi*,” he whispered. “Give me sight.”

The talisman flashed, recognizing the required incantation. The wind picked up and Semu blinked as it swept in his face, roaring in his ears, then stopped. Semu’s hands began to glow. He gasped softly, watching as his whole body became alight with a light silver outline. Silver—the color of his aura. He turned to look at Tadzaya, and found she, too, was glowing—except this time, with a red-orange light. The color of the flame aura.

Semu looked across the city, and found it alight with color. Of the thousands of people, hundreds stood out, glowing all different colors—red, silver, deep blue, and green. They glowed from afar, dotting the city. Several were lumped together in the training grounds below the tower, and others wandered amid the neighborhoods at the outskirts of the city. All of them bore one of the same four colors—red, silver, deep blue, or green. Flame, wind, rain, and stone, respectively. Only one of the five was absent. Teal blue, for frost. That one was nowhere to be found.

Nowhere but where Semu was now looking. Shining out from the northwest, a teal blue light shone brightly, standing out to Semu’s Windsight. He recognized the hue immediately. “There,” he said, pointing. The ice mage they were tracking seemed to be sheltering in place along the outskirts of the city. Semu swept his gaze around the entire city, just to be certain. Sure

enough, there were no other teal lights. “He’s definitely the one.” He paused, frowning. “It’s strange,” he said. “We’ve always wondered if there were other ice mages in Idzatsi. Good ones, who didn’t go bad after Tradz attacked.”

“And?”

“And yet...there’s only one. That bad one, up in the northwest. It feels...sad.”

Tadzaya didn’t say anything for a long time. Then, she finally said, “Well, we can’t solve problems by wishing they were better.” She paused for a moment. “Let’s go find him.” She turned to leave.

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Semu and Tadzaya rushed through the gravel streets, winding through crowds of people and past peddling merchants. The view from down here wasn’t quite as spectacular as from the Danat hall, the towers of which Semu could still see rising in the distance behind him. Semu and Tadzaya were rushing through the Northern District. Crowds choked the narrow streets, pulsing this way and that, making it difficult for the two Danats to navigate. Normally, a crowd would clear for two Danats to pass, but Semu and Tadzaya had thrown on cloaks to conceal their faces and clothes. Starting a rumor that two Danats were running to the northwest would not give them the element of surprise they were hoping for.

A buzz of chatter hovered over the crowds like a swarm of fleas. Many of them gathered around messengers—scouts from the front lines, sent to deliver updates about the war against Tradz. Semu and Tadzaya didn’t pay them any heed—they’d received the reports early this morning. The setting sun cast long shadows to the west, through which Semu and Tadzaya ran, jumped, and ducked, weaving their way through the city, gravel crunching under their feet as they ran.

Semu, to conserve his magic, had disengaged his Windsight talisman shortly after leaving the tower. His aura was quite limited—every spell or expenditure drained some of his aura, limiting his powers. Once all of his aura had been spent, it would need to be recharged somewhere else—a process that could take the better part of a day, for its full effects. As such, Semu had decided he didn't need to use the talisman for the entire duration of his and Tadzaya's mission. For now, the two of them would simply make their way to the last point they'd seen the ice mage, then activate the talisman again to make sure they were on the right track.

A bell rang in the distance, signaling the setting of the sun. Semu had always been amazed how far the sound of the city bells—which were stationed in the docks to the east—could travel through the city. He'd heard they could sometimes carry all the way to Keep Sana'e.

As the bell rang, Tadzaya ducked into an alleyway to the right. Semu followed suit, skidding into the dark space and stopping to catch his breath. As he did so, the stench of mold threatened to overpower his senses. Quickly, Semu pulled out his talisman again and activated it. The wind rushed around him, drowning out the scent for a moment, then stopped as he and Tadzaya began glowing again. "Where is he now?" Tadzaya asked.

Semu checked around him, looking out into the street, toward the city block they'd last seen the ice mage at. No glow emanated from there. "He's moved," he said, turning back to Tadzaya. "He's probably just going about and—" he stopped short.

Further down the alleyway, behind Tadzaya, stood a slim figure in a dark robe. His outline glowed a singular teal blue. The figure raised something in the darkness, pointing it at Tadzaya.

"Down!" Semu shouted, leaping to push Tadzaya to the ground.

As he did, he heard something *crack* in the air, as if a pane of glass had been shattered into pieces. In midair, Semu felt his cloak rustle as an icy cold *something* shot above it, missing Semu by inches. Semu and Tadzaya crashed to the ground, then Semu rolled to his feet, and pulled out his wand.

The long shaft of wood bore intricate carvings, and felt light in Semu's hand. Fashioned out of *dimuhi* wood, the weapon was designed to help Semu channel his aura through it with ease. To the side, Semu saw that Tadzaya had produced her own wand. The wind in the alleyway picked up and Semu pointed his wand, focused, and channeled a blast of wind straight at the ice mage.

The mage raised his own wand, a shorter black one, and swung it as if to parry. As he did, a flash of blue light erupted from the wand, molding into what appeared to be some kind of barrier. It deflected Semu's wind gust, which flew off and struck a brick on the left wall, which smashed like pottery.

Semu gritted his teeth. For some reason, ice mages were the only auratics who could use their aura to directly block attacks. That part of their powers had always made Semu a little jealous. It was time to end this. He focused, then shouted, "*Tsa'ese!*"

A bracelet on his arm glowed silver. Just like the talisman, Semu had several other Velden artifacts on his person, most of them bracelets or necklaces on his arm or around his neck. Each had a specific incantation, and produced a specific effect. As Semu activated this one, wind rushed in his ears and he leaped to the ground, taking cover as a torrent of wind blew down the alleyway, fiercer than any storm Semu had ever known. He needed to hold onto the wall to keep from being flushed down to the end of the alleyway. He managed it, barely. The ice mage

was not quite as lucky. Not anticipating the sudden rush of wind, he cried out as he was blown back, carried by the wind, and crashed into the wall at the end of the alley, dropping his wand.

The wind died down and the alleyway quieted. Semu stood up, then felt a wave of nausea. The artifact he'd just activated, whose glow now faded, had drained quite a bit of his aura, an effect he felt in his body any time he was directly channeling his aura. Semu grunted, holding his head and shaking it so he could clear it. Aura fatigue wore off, over time. He looked down the alleyway, surprised to find that the ice mage was still glowing teal blue—he'd forgotten to turn off his Windsight.

Doing so now, he turned to see Tadzaya holding onto the wall opposite him, visibly shaking. "Could you warn me next time you decide to go all-out on one of them?" She hissed.

"Isn't the incantation enough?"

"Like I can hear it over the wind gusts that are constantly drowning your voice out anyway!"

Semu shrugged, grinning. "Sorry about that," he said. "I'll try to refrain from saving us next time we're ambushed in an alleyway."

Tadzaya socked him in the arm. "Let's go check on the target."

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The ice mage was not quite what Semu would have expected. He'd worn a thick black cloak while fighting Semu, which had concealed most of his features. Behind the hood, his face was lean and somewhat pale. A slight shadow of facial hair blanketed his chin. Semu had heard of that trend—it was apparently a popular style in Tradz, the country of this mage's nationality. Below the cloak, however, the man appeared to be wearing standard Unutian clothes—a plain

shirt with worn trousers. This man had apparently come very well prepared to disguise himself as an Unutian.

The man slowly blinked his eyes open, and saw Semu and Tadzaya leaning over him. He struggled, but Semu and Tadzaya held his limbs hard-pressed against the ground. He looked around, sputtering, then focused on Semu.

“Your name,” Semu said.

The mage looked from Semu to Tadzaya, then to the side of the alleyway. Semu had placed the mage’s wand on the ground there, and sealed it in place with one of his Velden spells. He could feel his aura draining from it, though only slowly. It was enough of a sacrifice for the time being.

The ice mage gulped, then sighed. “My name...Tyon Handis. Frost-caller of Tradz.” His voice was layered with a thick Tradzic accent.

Tadzaya whistled. “Handis? *The* Handis? The Frost Reaper?”

“No,” Tyon said. “No me. The reaper...” he struggled with his words. His Unutian didn’t seem to be very good. “My brother.”

“Brother?” Semu said. “We just caught the Frost Reaper’s *brother*?”

“You break in to spy on Danats,” Tadzaya said, getting back on track, “and expect not to get spotted doing so?”

“I...I was wish...” the ice mage stuttered. “I was hope for to see him.” He looked to Semu.

“You got what you wished for,” Semu said. “I don’t know why you expected not to get caught.”

“They is tell me...” he paused. “Perhaps not.”

“Who told you what?” Semu asked. Something inside him, strangely enough, stirred—like a piece of his aura sparking within him, spinning around and churning. He frowned at that.

“They tell me...thunder caller.” his eyes fell on Semu. Semu frowned, confused. *What now?* Tyon continued to watch him.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Tadzaya asked.

Tyon said nothing, instead continuing to gaze at Semu. His eyes seemed to plead with Semu, as if begging him for something. It was almost like Tyon knew Semu, or at least...knew something about him.

Semu looked away from Tyon and up to Tadzaya, unsettled. “Well,” he said, “I think we need to get him up to the Danat hall. Zidano can help us get a trial scheduled.”

Tadzaya smirked. “Who’s the responsible one now?”

Semu shrugged, saying nothing. He reached into his pockets and pulled out a length of rope. He and Tadzaya removed Tyon’s cloak, then rolled him over and tied his hands behind his back. That done, Semu had him stand up, and Tadzaya pulled him down the alleyway, into the street. The sun had long since set, and the sky—along with the alleyway—was darkening quickly.

Before he left, Semu picked up Tyon’s cloak and folded it, then caught sight of something on the ground—a small wooden box, about the size of his palm. He frowned, and knelt to pick it up, curious. He didn’t recognize the wood type, but from the snowflake carved on the top, he could tell the box was Tradzic. Silently, he undid the latch and removed the lid.

A wooden charm awaited him inside. This one was plain, and simple in design. It zig-zagged, almost like a lightning bolt.

Semu flipped over the lid of the box, finding a message carved on the back in the Unutian common script.

Life was complete. Then thunder struck. The time will soon come, thunder caller.

What?

“Semu! You coming?”

Semu started, then closed the box and slid it into his pocket. “One moment!” he called.

He got to his feet, dusted off his cloak, then turned to make a final visual sweep of the area. On a whim, he engaged his Windsight once more, just to be certain no one was nearby.

Sure enough, there were no more teal lights. The only ice mage here was Tyon, out on the street, held captive by Tadzaya.

As Semu looked down, however, he jumped. His own aura no longer glowed silver.

Instead, it glowed a stark yellow.

It was gone in an instant, switching in a heartbeat back to the regular color. Semu let out a gasp, then, profoundly disturbed, mentally shut off the Windsight. Fighting aura fatigue once again—he’d need to spend a good hour recharging—he walked down the alleyway and into the street.

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End of story