

## Jackal 37

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### Chapter 37: Songs of War

Explosions, crackling lightning, and blades of wind collided above the sea in a grand display of power. The air around Mateth echoed with the songs of war. The sea itself seemed to have caught fire, most of Monticci's war caravels sinking into the sea. Corpses and wreckage alike bashed against the docks and ships, carried by the churning sea. The snow elves' longships bounced up and down on the tumultuous tide, each one filled to the brim with potent spellcasters and warriors.

Magic changed the face of siege warfare. Nikoletta's father had taught her that, and it stuck with her. Perhaps her father's emphasis on the power of magic was precisely why she had gone to the Order of the Gray Owl—that, and her mother had been a High Wizard of the Order. Nikoletta's love of magic had its foundations in her own spirit, though.

In ages long since passed, before magic was as prominent and as powerful as it was today, sieges were often long and drawn out. The invaders, superhuman or no, could seldom break stone with their hands. They would build siege weapons and batter them against the walls, or more often, simply starve out the defenders. It was a cruel and tedious process, as befitted an age before chivalry and knighthood.

A throwing axe struck the stone near Nikoletta, its deafening ring drawing her back to attention. Mina slapped her shoulder and shouted, "Nicky! Don't worry about the coast!"

Nikoletta nodded, looking back down to the invaders on the ground while crouching behind a parapet. Duke Enrico had taken command of the forces near the docks. He had asked for Nikoletta to remain here where she might be safer and helpful. That was despite her insistence that she should be alongside the spellcasters, being one herself.

Ryger commanded the troops managing the walls. Only a few mages remained on the wall's walkways, the bulk dealing with the coastal invaders. The enemy on the ground did not have an exceptional number of mages. Many of their number had ways to counter magic: the strange material known as Ebonice that Argrave had mentioned. The elven invaders stayed far from the tall walls, not daring to try tunneling or climbing. Their javelins and axes were accurate. Many good men and women had died before Nikoletta's eyes, head cleaved in twain by a thrown weapon.

"They're gathering their mages together!" Ryger shouted, loud voice breaking through the din. "Mages, prepare for an assault! Focus on me," the big man commanded, moving to a central point on the wall.

Nikoletta peeked above the parapet, being mindful of thrown projectiles. As Ryger said, the troops were bunching together, the lightly armored mages speaking amongst themselves in preparation for something. A good deal of warriors gathered together, shield and axe clenched tightly. The mages got behind them, and a great tempest began to swirl across the trampled crops.

Then, a group of Veidimen ascended into the air at a constant pace, a whirling gale beneath their feet. Nikoletta widened her eyes, taking an instinctive step away as they soared through the sky. One archer had the bearing to fire an arrow, and it struck one of the airborne snow elves, sending him spinning free of the magic lifting them. He slammed into the corner of the parapet, cracking it before tumbling down

to the ground. Their magic wore off at a certain height and the remainder alighted loudly on the center of the wall. They were only five.

"These bastards are insane!" Mina shouted from beside Nikoletta, moving towards the encroaching snow elves with hands outstretched and magic matrixes forming in front of her palms.

"Wait...!" Nikoletta tried to stop Mina, but her hands grabbed air. Many defenders stepped away from the cover of the parapets, panicked by the sudden intrusion. The elven invaders outside coordinated their attack with this occurrence. Without cover, some of the defenders were snagged by thrown weapons. Nikoletta stood, recalling something Argrave had told her.

*"Wind magic, for instance, utterly invalidates bows, crossbows, and other such ranged projectiles."*

She cast the D-rank [Wind Burst], and a gale surged from her fingers. The throwing weapons closest veered away wildly, all their accuracy gone. Nikoletta rushed forth, casting another spell, [Wind Wall], stopping another wave of axes and javelins tossed at their heads. With some reprieve from the relentless barrage of projectiles, Nikoletta diverted her attention back to those on the wall.

The snow elves on the walls were massive. Each was near or as tall as Argrave, yet unlike him their frames were full and robust and covered in plate armor. The fact that they tried such a ridiculous gambit was a testament to their resolve. When the defenders rushed to confront the intruders, they proved their strength.

The first of the knights approached the Veidimen cautiously, shield held out. The vanguard of the Veidimen stepped forward decisively, swinging his axe at a perfect distance. The knight received the attack with the top of his shield, but the axe's beard hooked onto the shield. The snow elf pulled, unbalancing the knight and jamming his round shield into the man's face. The knight fell onto his back, and then was quickly dispatched by an axe to the head.

Though the snow elves only numbered five and were quickly surrounded, each one was a ruthless force. They jumped from opponent to opponent with a military efficiency, never allowing the defenders to take advantage of their numbers. The mages had no opportunity to avoid friendly fire. Nikoletta prepared some magic, but she stopped herself. This force of five men could not hope to seize the walls alone. They were a distraction. She turned back to watch the mages.

*They're preparing to launch more!*

"Mages!" Nikoletta shouted. "More of the elves are being launched over! Disengage, prepare wind magic to block them in the air!"

There was some hesitancy as the command did not come from Ryger, but the knight-commander promptly shouted, "Do as she says!" He went forth to meet the Veidimen, his greatsword held out before him. She had thought Ryger was a large man, but he seemed short and stout compared to the giant elves.

The mages came behind Nikoletta and collaborated, preparing wind magic. When more of the elves came ascending towards the walls, a great tempest rocked forth, wind blades and fell gales working in tandem. The elves held their sheening black axes out, and though the magic was dispelled, their brief

wind magic countered their momentum. The elves could not make it to the top of the walls, and they slammed against the side impotently. One managed to grab the ledge, pulling herself up.

Something red flashed by Nikoletta's peripheries, and then a woman stepped forward, kicking the elf trying to climb up with a steel plate boot. The invader fell from the wall, flailing and yelling as she dropped. The new arrival bore a giant zweihander and had a plumed tellerbarret. She peered over the side of the parapet, sword on her shoulder.

"These elves have guts. Nothing like the forest-dwellers," the woman snickered. She turned back to Nikoletta and adjusted her hat. A chain dangled from her left hand, most of it hidden beneath frilly clothing and plate armor. "I'm Melanie. You'll keep the flying squirrels away, right?"

"Right," Nikoletta nodded.

"Good." Melanie smiled, the scars on her pretty face twisting. Her red hair swayed behind her as she ran to the five on the wall. She grabbed a knight's head and used him to launch herself in the air, twisting gracefully before slamming down her blade on one of the Veidimen. He received it with his round shield but was forced back many steps.

Ryger was locked in combat with a female elf, trying his best to maneuver his sword past her shield. His blade snaked past the top, glancing against her helmet, but she bashed him with her shield. She swung, but Ryger blocked her axe with the greatsword's guard. He kicked her shin and then grabbed the shield, trying to force an opening.

They were deadlocked for a moment, but then Mina materialized out of thin air from behind, breaking free of an illusion spell. She held her hand to the Veidimen's knee and cast a spell, cutting past the armor and sending the elf staggering. The snow elf lunged at Ryger, grabbing him by the shoulders and pushing him to the edge of the wall. Ryger's back arched as he struggled not to fall, but the snow elf locked her leg behind him, and they both fell off the wall into the city below.

"Knight-commander!" Nikoletta shouted vainly, looking over the edge. She could see movement, but neither stood. They were both probably wounded badly. She could not help but think of how long she'd known Ryger—since when she was young to now.

Nikoletta brushed aside her bubbling thoughts, looking back out to the elven mages. With their second wave stopped by her efforts, they did not dare to recklessly waste more lives.

On the battlements, the red-haired mercenary Melanie helped the knights regain their composure. A hook attached to a chain hung from her left hand. She whirled it about like a sling, and then sent it at one of the Veidimen. It was blocked, but the hook sunk into the wood.

The Veidimen tried to pull Melanie towards him with the hook in his shield, but she jumped, pulling herself with the chain. She flew through the air with tremendous speed. Her boots slammed into his breastplate, and he was launched into the other Veidimen. After a brief tumble, she landed atop him. She pulled the hook free of his shield and used it to slice open his throat. The mercenary did not wait to watch him die, rising to confront the three remaining.

The knights surrounded the Veidimen like a pack of wolves, lunging forward to nip at their heels with their swords. Once more, Mina's illusion spell shattered, and she appeared in the middle of the three's

circle. Nikoletta's heart soared with unabated worry, and she broke into the fastest run she ever had. Mina cast a wind spell, sending one of the elves staggering into the crowd of knights where he was promptly killed. She tried to duck away to safety, but one of the snow elves turned and swung his axe in the same movement.

Nikoletta pushed through the crowd and jumped between Mina and the axe, casting a D-rank ward. The black Ebonice axe broke through the barrier with ease. It struck her leather armor and the enchantments shone brightly, rebounding the axe. The snow elf recoiled, and Nikoletta caught Mina and slid away. Above, she heard the sound of a chain swinging and striking metal.

She stood, leading Mina away from the battle. "Stop doing dangerous things, Mina," Nikoletta insisted into the girl's ears.

"All around us is danger," the young woman panted. "If I do nothing, Monticci will lose everything. You'll lose everything."

"You're part of that everything. A big part of it," Nikoletta said.

"Ugh...", Mina grunted, face red. "Grave was right. After this is over, you and I have to have a talk. A long one."

Nikoletta stared at Mina for a time, and then nodded intently, unable to discern what she meant. Behind her, the two Veidimen remaining finally fell to superior numbers. The mercenary Melanie finished the last of them, jamming her zweihander into his stomach and casting him to the ground.

Nikoletta gave a sigh of relief as the largest crisis they'd faced on the walls came to an end. She broke away from Mina, striding towards the mages and commanding, "Mages, keep an eye on the enemy! Ensure this doesn't happen again."

She heard words of confirmation and saw some nods and was content to go back to watching the enemy for further movements. However, she spotted a message carrier running across the walls towards their position and kept a wary eye on the man ahead.

"You did pretty good, little miss," said the red-haired mercenary Melanie, coming to watch the invaders just behind her. "Lots more could have died without the right organization there."

Nikoletta did not know how to respond, but she kept her eye on the messenger running towards them. Evidently, the man was seeking her out. She broke away from the wall, staying within cover but moving to meet the man.

"Young lady Monticci," the man shouted, coming to a stop. "The Duke... has been injured," he panted. "He designated you to take command of the forces at the dock should this occur."

As Nikoletta processed the news, Mina stepped forward. "I'll come with you."

"But knight-commander Ryger isn't..." Nikoletta looked over at where the man had fallen. She could not help but whip her head to Melanie. "Mercenary Melanie. You're the best fighter here, but do you have any experience leading troops?"

The woman nodded, a smile on her face. Nikoletta returned the nod, and then said, "Make sure the garrison does not fall. Monticci rewards the worthy generously."

"I know. That's why I'm here," Melanie said, hefting her giant sword over her shoulder.

"But how can we trust her?" Mina stopped Nikoletta.

"Do you believe the snow elves have human agents?" Nikoletta rebutted. "Lead me," Nikoletta ordered the messenger, following close behind as he ran across the walls. Her father's condition dominated her thoughts.

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 38: Scorched Earth**

Argrave swished water through his mouth and spit it out into the snow as he walked. Ahead of him, a neatly cobbled stone road winded across an endless field of white snow. His cane clicked against the stone as he moved. The center of the road had black crystalline objects embedded in them, faintly shining in the daylight. Argrave put his feet on one of the black crystals, and he felt heat emanating from them.

"You clean your mouth every morning and night. A human ritual?" Anneliese inquired. She and Argrave had been talking nonstop during his tenure as a god's mortal agent in Veiden. She was an endlessly curious person, and Argrave was fascinated by a culture that was largely absent in 'Heroes of Berendar.' They had been exchanging questions every waking second.

Argrave smiled widely, deliberately showing all of his teeth. "No, a personal ritual. I have been blessed with veritable pearls for teeth, and I wish to keep them that way," Argrave said with exaggerated cheer. He turned his head back to the road. "You know, I'm surprised to find paved roads in a desolate place like this. No offense, of course," he added. "The roads are heated, even. I thought I would likely die from cold."

"They are new. Collaborative efforts by many mages melded the earth to form these roads. After, craftsmen placed those hot crystals to keep the snow from building up." Anneliese knelt down and pointed, carrying on her explanation with expertise. "When the snow melts from the crystal's heat, it seeps into the road through some purifying minerals. Aqueducts below the surface carry it to the cities' wells."

Argrave's brows furrowed in contemplation, but he smiled. "That's very fascinating. You know much about most things in this place."

Anneliese stood up, staring up at him with her amber eyes. "It is as I told you. I enjoy understanding and learning about the world."

"Looks like I chose the right tour guide to Veiden, then." Argrave nodded. "Come to think of it, that's probably why you wanted to come with me on my fool's errand."

"It wasn't the only reason, but yes, it was the largest factor." Anneliese nodded. "What you're doing is important. I want to be a part of it."

"That's it?" Argrave pressed. "You want to come with someone you barely know to be a part of something important?"

"I do not think I can be satisfied waiting here in Veiden, honing my magic quietly," Anneliese shook her head. "Maybe what you said about me achieving great things got to me. Maybe I also want to leave behind a legacy. All I know is that I want to do this."

Argrave nodded. "Well, you won't be dying. There'll be no legacy. You'll be a living legend; I'll make damn sure of that."

Anneliese nodded, and then she carried on down the road. "What do you hope to find in Veiden's capital, behind the Ice Wall?"

"Besides Galamon's family?" Argrave turned on his heel and continued walking. "Lots of druidic magic. As much as I would love to waste away my days reading a new culture's writings, I'm on a schedule. I need to get what's useful to me. Berendar has no druidic magic—it's exclusive to Veiden. Beyond just learning it, I could propagate it and make a fair bit of money. I don't think such a thing would be unethical in the face of a world-ending calamity."

"Rowe manages all of the spellbooks in Veiden. You will not be able to take them without his permission."

"So I'll get it," Argrave said without much concern. "I can trade illusion magic or the process for creating enchanted items, both of which the Veidimen lack. Such things would bolster your forces and make the future battle with Gerechtigkeid easier."

Anneliese nodded. Argrave rubbed at his stomach as they proceeded down the road. He noticed he was gritting his teeth, and not from the cold. Anneliese watched him.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

Argrave paused in the road as a cold wind blew by, sending Anneliese's incredibly long hair waving about in the wind. Once the wind settled, Argrave said, "No, I'm not, if you care to know the truth. Guilt gnaws at my stomach. I feel like I'm going to vomit."

"Over Mateth?" Anneliese pressed.

"What do you think?" Argrave said snappily. "Came all this way, did everything I could to try and change what I viewed as an inevitability. I get to the end, and I think I've won—I've done it. All this, only to have that victory flavored with death and misery. And for WHAT?! What does this achieve?" Argrave held his hands up. "Bupkis. Nada. Makes me sick. And back there I just... threw in the towel, because it was the 'strategic thing to do,'" Argrave did a hand-puppet impression of himself.

"Stood there like a drooling idiot, smiling and nodding," Argrave continued his rant. "No resistance. And I tell myself, 'Dras already made up his mind, you can't change that,' or, 'the battle is already happening, and you can't change that.' The simple fact is, I didn't even try. And now, try as I might to think of something I might do to change the outcome, my mind's just drawing blank. I missed my window."

Anneliese stood by quietly as Argrave proceeded. "It's just a reminder of how useless I am. Impotent. I can't..." Argrave's voice trailed off as a lump grew in his throat. "I settled for second best. Couldn't find the perfect solution. I should have gone to that council Dras held even if I was coughing blood. Now I just have to sit by, hat in my hand, and come back like some sort of savior when I didn't

change *anything*. What good am I? Nothing changes; time's still a flat fucking circle." Argrave tossed his cane to the road and threw up his hands.

Anneliese waited in silence for some time. She picked up Argrave's cane and handed it back to him. "That day Dras summoned us... he told you to come at your leisure. Do you think that was not deliberate? By the time you two spoke, the vanguard was likely already moving."

Argrave opened his mouth to answer, but closed it quickly, expression pensive.

"From the beginning, Dras would never have abandoned his ambition of earning a foothold on Berendar. The battle may have been already underway while the two of you spoke that morning." Anneliese stated, her passive tone making the words sound cold. "It's probably why Dras removed me from the council-- if I brought news of his intentions to you, you might've done something. At least... that's my conjecture."

Argrave could only stare for a moment. He swallowed, and then took the cane. "Hah..." he weighed it in his hands. "That does... seem like something he would do. Now I'm here, isolated. He gave me free rein of the whole place..." Argrave spread his hands to the snow fields and the forests beyond them. "...because he knew I could do nothing to stop it. I have no allies here. Could send a useless letter, at most. Maybe not even that. He takes Mateth, then holds it until Gerechtigkeits comes."

"Why are you so certain Mateth will fall without your help?" Anneliese pushed.

"Because..!" Argrave began, cutting himself off before he could say, 'it always happens.' "Whatever," he finally said, lowering the cane to the ground. "Galamon was right. I'll get lost if I focus on 'what if's.' Have to keep moving forward. Have to get used to this."

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A spear of ice surged through the air. A few people on the docks jumped backwards moments before the spear pierced the docks and sent wood splinters whistling through the air and into the water. Once it settled, some people moved past it while readying magic, but one of the men that had jumped shouted, "Watch out!" moments before the spear of ice exploded into smaller fragments. The closest turned into a veritable fine red mist, and many others reeled away with shards of ice stuck in them.

All of the people on the docks were solely dedicated to defending against the onslaught. The magic attacks from the Veidimen aboard their longships came in concentrated waves—a few seconds of intense power, followed by many periods of silence. Their strategy was effective, too. A few seconds of intensity was much harder to hold back than a steady wave which one could adapt and adjust to.

The area between the docks and the longships was no man's land. The force from each clash was enough to set the sea churning. The tides roared against the docks, and the longships tossed and turned in the tumultuous sea. Their oars worked to push them closer to the docks that the warriors aboard might seize the city.

Nikoletta and Mina worked their way through Mateth. Nikoletta was taller, but Mina was much more agile. They wound through the alleyways as they made their way to the docks. When both emerged, a mage spotted them, and after leaving a ward behind, he waved them over.

"Young lady Monticci," the man greeted loudly. "The messenger reached you, good."

“Bracco,” Nikoletta returned, running to the man. “Where’s my father? How is he?”

“He’s in the customs office,” Bracco responded promptly, pointing at a building very close to the docks. “He’s being tended to by the best healers, but he’s unconscious.”

Nikoletta looked at the building, and as she did, another wave of spells rocked the docks. She instinctually ducked, shielding Mina with her arm and falling back. Bracco was considerably less fazed.

When the battle calmed, Bracco said, “If the Duke hadn’t concentrated mages near the docks at the last second, we would have fallen apart in a matter of seconds. Initially, the best of their mages started to freeze the oceans while their warriors walked across. It was the strangest form of battle I’d seen. Their ice magic is extremely potent. Furthermore, archers aboard their boats have magic-dispelling enchantments.”

Nikoletta turned away from the customs building, deciding to take Bracco’s word that her father was fine.

“Their archers aren’t using enchantments. It’s Ebonice,” Nikoletta declared, walking closer to the docks and surveying the scene. “That’s also why attack magic isn’t working. It dispels magic on contact.” She watched the longships steadily moving closer, and she took a deep breath.

*Father can’t command, but he’s taught me a lot. I need to calmly assess the situation. Think back to what was planned.*

“Nicky, I can use illusion magic to project your voice. The higher-level spellcasters will naturally resist it, but they’ll notice it. It should help you command,” Mina contributed, coming to stand beside her.

“Our advantage lies in our position. Their advantage lies in their Ebonice arrows. They suffer because they’re at sea,” Nikoletta muttered to herself, rubbing her chin with her gauntleted hand. The sky cracked with another volley of spells. Nikoletta could see faint black lines in the air, and where they touched, wards and spells alike broke apart. Few struck the mages themselves, but they broke defenses and allowed spells to penetrate.

“Bracco,” Nikoletta said, determination lining her voice now. “Send off someone to retrieve a group of archers—twenty at least. Even if they need to be pulled from the walls, bring them here. Instruct them to scavenge the arrows with the black arrowheads, then wait for my command to fire.”

“Young lady Monticci, bringing such a large contingent of—”

“No arguments. We’re fighting a losing battle, Bracco,” she retorted back quickly. “Our mages are fighting them to a standstill, but they have warriors aboard their ships. Once the magic begins to run dry on both sides, they will proceed to the docks mostly unimpeded as we lack a naval force. We can’t remain at a standstill. Something needs to tip the scales.”

Bracco bowed in acquiescence. “Understood, young lady.” He rushed off to do as she asked.

Nikoletta stepped forward, her feet meeting the wooden docks. “Mina,” she motioned. “Get that spell ready.”

Mina nodded quickly and walked to Nikoletta, giving her a thumbs up as a spell matrix hovered in the air. Nikoletta inhaled, and then shouted out.



“Mages of Mateth! I, Nikoletta of Monticci, will be assuming command in place of my father. Focus only on defending! Use wind spells to disrupt their arrows and ice spells!”

Because Mina was casting the spell, Nikoletta heard her own voice echo out across the docks. There was a great stir of movement on the docks as people acknowledged and conveyed her orders further.

Though most narrowly stuck to the idea of using magic solely for combat, large-scale and simultaneous usage of magic had another effect that her father emphasized. It could affect the environment. Earth magic was the most prominent example of this—one could morph the earth to their whims, forming cover and the like. Nikoletta wished to target the snow elves’ largest disadvantage on this field: their ships.

The next volley of spells came, and from Mateth, a great tempest rushed forth as the combined efforts of many mages created a fell wind. Though much of the Ebonice soaring through the air diminished the wind before it could reach the longships’ sails, it did stir the water, sending a great wave away from the shore. Several of the flying projectiles lost much of their accuracy, and the brutality of the attack was reduced greatly.

Nikoletta shouted out once more, “Keep doing as I said!”

The time between assaults was longer this time as the longships brought their boats under control. Some even fell overboard from the wild waves jamming against their ships, and that bolstered Nikoletta’s confidence.

The longships lowered their sails, and many of the oarsmen dedicated time to scooping buckets of water from the ships and depositing them back into the ocean. Once things had calmed, a vague moment of quiet set over the two sides, each waiting with dread.

Nikoletta noticed a man climb up one of the masts on the longships. He held his hand out, and a spell matrix formed. She saw the air around stir with red, as though a crack had formed in the air. Nikoletta’s eyes widened.

*The phenomenon known as ‘mana ripples’ form before the onslaught of an A-rank or higher spell. Different pulsations appear for different types of magic,* Nikoletta’s brain echoed, recalling a lecture in the distant past.

*They were probing us,* Nikoletta realized. *Once their initial push failed, they were probing to be sure no one was present that could counter high-ranking magic.*

“Everyone! Prepare your strongest defenses!” she shouted in panic, voice shrill.

The red pulses started to grow larger, and then the man’s hand blinked once. Fire conjured from air swirled together to form a great ball the size of an elephant, and a deafening boom echoed out as it shot forward. It twisted, scattering flames everywhere. The water beneath it turned to steam as it proceeded.

Mina grabbed Nikoletta’s waist and pulled her away in a desperate panic. The effort brought them both to the ground. The titanic fireball tore through the wooden docks like butter. It collided with the stone, erupting into a great tornado of fire. Wood splinters, scalding water, and fragments of stone exploded

everywhere, and fire rushed over Mina's back. Nikoletta held her hand up and cast a D-rank ward. Mina rolled off from atop Nikoletta and cast her own ward, reinforcing what was there.

Both of their wards shattered, and Nikoletta recoiled from the impact. She leaned up and shielded Mina with her body, as she knew her enchanted armor would better protect against the flames. She felt the intense heat roiling over her back and setting her hair aflame. Slowly, though, droplets of water started to fall. She stared down at Mina's face, breathing heavily as the fire faded. Once the heat had vanished, she dropped to her back, extinguishing the fire on her hair. Her back stung with unimaginable pain, and the leather armor felt fused with her skin.

Nikoletta lifted her head, grunting in pain as she tried to adjust her armor and heal herself. The docks of Mateth were gone. The wooden constructions had been completely destroyed. Much of the stone foundation was crumbled and falling into the sea. An enormous amount of water had been sent elsewhere, and a flood rushed forth to replace that which had been displaced. The longships rowed away, resisting the pull until the water was level enough for them to proceed.

The dead and dying were everywhere. Nikoletta came to her feet unsteadily, her healing magic working to heal the burnt skin on her back. Grayness consumed the edges of her vision, and she struggled to stay conscious. She looked for people to help or to command, but everyone was scattered. The only few that survived hid behind B-rank wards, other survivors sheltered alongside them.

Then, from far above, a roar echoed out across the city. Nikoletta turned her head to its source: the sky. Above, she briefly witnessed a flash of gray cover the sunlight. She followed it with her eyes, and then she placed it. It was a gray wyvern. Something fell from atop it, dropping through the air.

She witnessed another mana ripple in the air—a teal one, this time. It grew larger, shaking the sky, until it turned the azure sky teal. Nikoletta lost herself to despair, unable to process what was happening. An avatar appeared in the air; it resembled the upper half of an armored knight, but it was formed of quickly moving wind.

The avatar raised its fist in the air. Nikoletta's breathing quickened, and the contents of her stomach pushed against her throat. She was crying, she realized. The fist came down.

It did not aim for Mateth.

A golden ward appeared before the fist, but it shattered like a thin layer of glass. The avatar of wind struck the water around the longships. The water sunk and then exploded upwards, tossing the closest longships into the air as though they weighed nothing. The water surged outwards, battering the already-damaged docks and casting a shadow of falling droplets over Mateth. The few ships that were not launched airborne were overturned by the fierce waves, their armored warriors sinking into the depths from the weight of their armor.

Nikoletta watched this scene, shaking as water fell on her as though it was raining. One of the longships landed on the walls of Mateth, splitting in half and sending the warriors aboard to their deaths from the height.

"S-rank magic," she murmured, shaking. She felt a pair of arms around her, and realized Mina was holding her and pulling her away.

The figure above descended to the ground, his hands alive with a spell matrix as he slowed his quick descent. A short old man wearing a decadent gray robe landed, surveying what was once the docks of Mateth.

Tower Master Castro remained vigilant. Above, the gray wyvern circled like a seagull waiting to feast.