

The caravel approached the center of the storm, the sails snapping in the wind. The air screamed as it slashed through the stones, standing dark out of the red sea. In the fierce storm, no sailing vessel would dare to pass the labyrinth of blades that faced the small ship.

A tall woman, her red hair glowing, stood upon the deck with the careful balance of a master martial artist stared fearlessly into the heart of the storm. "It looks like we'll have to swim!" she called out, her voice carrying over the roar of the waves and the scream of the wind.

"By the gods..." a man said, holding onto the rigging with the ease of a mariner. "This is unprecedented... this storm is unnatural..." His gray hair clung to his forehead under his sodden hat.

"I do not want to swim in *that*," a second woman said. She looked worriedly at the waves out of her one good eye. "We'll be drowned if we tried, no doubt about it."

A third woman, dressed in the dark silver and indigo armor of a knight, walked along the deck of the ship, the wind cutting through her soaked clothes straight to the bone. She knew that the caravel was too small to carry longboats or any rowing craft. Stopping abruptly, she made a decision. "Swim to the rocks," she said in a quiet manner, her words nearly lost in the howl of the wind.

The one-eyed woman nodded. Adalia Dravante was not without courage. "Well, guess we're gonna try," she said at last.

Mythra, further away, leaned towards the knight. "What was that, Lys?" she called over the wind.

The knight didn't respond, picking a rope off the deck.

The mariner, Aritz Arcturus nodded. "That's kinda risky, but we don't have boats, so..." Taking a quick breath, he leapt over the edge, hitting the water with a splash.

Lys glanced into the frigid waves briefly, then as lightning shattered the air, she leapt. The cold knocked the breath from her lungs. She gritted her teeth and swam for the nearest stone spire, her limbs numbing terrifyingly fast.

The distance to the nearest spire was at least a hundred meters, thought Adalia, judging with her fingers. She couldn't get across with magic. "Damn."

A glittering sword flashed in the glow of lightning as Lys stabbed her blade into the solid stone of the pillar, yanking herself out of the water with the spike. Then, her fingers shaking, she slowly tied the rope to the handle of the sword.

Mythra realized what was going on, and leapt into the water, her dress fluttering briefly in the wind before she hit the waves with a splash. Shivering, she rose above the surface.

"I'm not going to swim if I can help it," Adalia said. Seeing no one left to hear her, she leapt into the air, before hitting the waves anyways. "Agh!" she gasped as Mythra swam past her, her red hair blending into the dark red waters.

Aritz, holding onto the rope, looked at the two with an expression of disappointment. The rope was *right there*. With a shuddering sigh, his teeth chattering in the cold, he pulled himself forward. They needed to save their energy.

Her movements choppy, Mythra climbed onto the rock, gasping for breath. She glanced at Lys, the knight driving the sword deeper into the stone. Nearby, Adalia finally collapsed onto the rock, coughing up water. For a moment, the three huddled in silence, the rain and wind biting through all their clothing. Then, with a splash, Aritz pulled himself onto the stone as well. "He should be somewhere past this pillar..." he said slowly.

Lightning crashed down, and briefly, illuminated in the flash, the group saw a massive, giantlike form standing in the center of the inner circle of stones. Thunder roared constantly as lightning crackled around him, storm winds whirling everywhere. They shrunk back slightly.

Adalia swung her musket down, the arcanium bayonet fixed firmly. Luckily the part-Vastus hadn't noticed them yet. They had a brief opportunity.

The rope splashed into the sea as Lys untied it and withdrew her sword, showering the waters with sparks. "Follow me," she called out, before leaping into the water again. Fifty meters! Just fifty meters to the inner circle.

The other three swam after her, their forms tossed and hurled about by waves, their limbs freezing as they drew closer, and closer, until finally...

Lys huddled against the stone. In her hand, a small orb of light glowed briefly. It had no heat, but it seemed to cheer her up before she snuffed it out. "He's behind us," she said quietly.

The wind began to pick up. She turned to Aritz. "Sir, what is the plan?"

The experienced warrior turned into the wind to examine the enemy. "Seems he's a rather tough opponent... we can't group up. Storm Magic utilizes wind within itself, and extremely strong wind too. Keep out of the sea, there's lightning as well. His platform... I do not recommend approaching it. Strike him at range."

Lys nodded, holding up her sword. "I have no ranged attacks. I will wait until I see an opportunity." Throwing her arms up, she stabbed her sword into the stone above, and kicked off the ground, using the blade as leverage to flip into the air, her sword slashing out as she landed onto the pillar's top. Before her stood the part-Vastus.

He was massive, at least three times the size of an ordinary human. From head to toe he was armored in plate. She quickly ran through everything she remembered about him.

He was a former pirate captain. His name was Xander.

Lys and her allies were escorting a cargo from the Oculon in Casseia, along with an Oculon researcher, Oriole Cassandra, to a rendezvous in the Silver Sea with a warship of Logres. But as they traveled through the Blood Sea, they'd encountered a storm unlike any they'd ever seen. There, they'd rescued some stranded pirates.

The pirates had revealed that Xander was their former captain, driven mad by a mutiny led by his own adopted son. They'd tried to kill him before he rampaged into the Emerald Sea, but had only landed a single cannonball before his spell *Heaven's Wrath* had hurled their ship upon the rocks. Now, it was only a matter of time before he entered more civilized areas.

Lys blinked. The rain slashed across her face as she tried to find the crucial point. The weakness in his armor, where the cannonball hit him. Somewhere on the torso...

The part-Vastus slowly turned to face her, his hands glowing with Storm Magic circles. Her eyes widened as her heart started to beat faster. Settling into a crouch, she prepared to fight. The electricity was palpable in the air. “Everyone... out of the water,” she said, breathing in.

Aritz was already on one of the nearby stones, while Mythra quickly climbed onto her own spire. Adalia quickly stepped out of the water, still on the base of the rock.

Xander breathed in slowly, his breath rattling through the iron of his armor. The wind quieted for an instant. “Who dares... attack my crew... traitors...” He lifted a single massive hand. “Feel the wrath of the storm...” The wind screamed as it picked up wildly, the waters roaring as they crashed into the stones.

Aritz stood, fearless. But something was off... his own wind magic was reacting oddly. Nearby, Mythra slid across the top of her spire, trying to keep her balance.

The giant’s hand rose above him, and for a single instant, the storm froze.

“Heaven’s Wrath.”

The air rushed into his palm, an orb of storm magic forming between his fingers, expanding as it grew in power and intensity.

Aritz grinned. If that was Xander’s best attack then—

The orb exploded in a massive shockwave of raging winds and crashing lightning.

The mariner yelled out as he was blasted off of the ring, crashing into a rock. With a ring, Lys stabbed her sword into the ground, but just a second too late as the explosion slammed into her, hurling her backwards, before a bolt of lightning slashed right through her.

Bright, agonizing pain flooded every inch of her body, and she opened her mouth to scream but suddenly choked on seawater as she fell into the freezing waves.

Adalia gasped as the explosion detonated right above her, tearing stones off of her spire that crashed no more than a few feet away from her. But now was her opportunity. The storm died down as a pause formed. For a second, sunlight cut through the heavens,

illuminating Xander's bloodshot, strikingly blue eyes, before the clouds snapped shut again. "*Emperor's Wrath!*" Adalia yelled, a meteor of Metal Magic forming overhead. "*Decay Bolt!*" Violet Poison Lightning Magic slammed into it, electrifying it before she hurled it towards the giant.

The meteor crashed into the giant's armor... but there was no sign of damage. Sparks of violet electricity danced across its surface, but Xander himself barely reacted.

Adalia cursed. How were they supposed to fight something like this? But they couldn't give up! Aiming, she fired a dozen bullets of Metal towards the gaps in his helmet.

The giant held up a single massive gauntlet, blocking the bullets. Another Storm Magic circle appeared in his off hand. "Die... filth..."

"ADALIA!" Mythra screamed in warning as she landed back on her own pillar.

Aritz got up weakly, hearing her scream. "*Blazing Sweep!*" he called out, hurling a slash of magma towards the captain's torso.

"*Storm Cannon!*" With an enormous explosion, a massive beam of whirling winds and lightning blasted the entirety of the top of Adalia's pillar off, hiding her in dust for a second. Then the giant hissed in pain as the magma struck his right torso, just under his lifted arm. The glowing red-gold light revealed then the exact point of his weakness, a cracked section where the cannonball struck it.

Adalia gasped for breath, having ducked below the pillar just in time. "Holy..."

The giant turned his attention to Mythra, running from spire to spire to try to get a closer shot. With a glare of determination, Adalia climbed back atop the pillar to follow her, Mythra's red Flare Magic dancing across the surface of the stones, hissing in the rain.

Xander raised his hands again. "Who... dares..." he said. In a flash of lightning, his eyes blazed blue again. "...attack my crew..."

Mythra gasped. The exact same words. "He's going to attack again!"

"...traitors..." the giant said slowly. Another Storm Magic circle glowed in his left hand. "Feel the wrath of the storm..."

Aritz aimed. While he was charging... they had to bring him down! With a series of explosions, darts of magma flashed towards the one weakness in Xander's armor.

A sphere of red flare suddenly enveloped the entire stone platform as Mythra snapped her fingers. "Oh no you don't!" she said as she tried to contain the crazed pirate captain. Adalia raised her arms again, firing off another meteor.

"Heaven's Wrath." Again, they were just a second too late! The massive explosion tore through the flare, dissipating the entire sphere in a flash, devouring the magma blasts. The meteor of metal vanished into the winds—and then the storm struck!

Lys held her breath in fear from behind a pillar of stone, the winds exploding all around her. Blood dripped from the corner of her mouth where she'd bitten down in the convulsive agony of the lightning, a lichtenberg bruise running down her face. Adalia crashed into the sea near another pillar next to her, while Aritz yelled out his defiance, shielding himself from further away.

Just in time, Mythra ducked beneath a spire, electricity arcing past her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lys moving.

It was now or never. Leaping from the pillar, Lys channeled all her energy into her jump, and she exploded off the stone, flying high into the air. For a single moment, everything froze as she cleared her mind of everything but a single strike. Her sword glowed. *"Perfect Zero!"* Everything in her vision went white, leaving only the arc of her sword, the devastating strike glowing with all the colors of the starlight.

Just a second too slow.

The giant turned, and her slash slammed into his armor just two inches above the cracked portion. The blade dug deep into the steel, sparks flying as it tore through, metal screaming—and snapped.

Her eyes widened as she fell, frozen in shock.

"Storm Bolt."

Lightning and wind lanced down towards Lys, yet she didn't even attempt to defend herself.

Aritz screamed in fury as he fired a bolt of his wind magic, but the attack was weaker than he anticipated, his mind feeling stretched and taut. But it had to deflect the lightning bolt. It had to. To save Lys, the fearless knight from the same kingdom. It just had to—

Too slow.

The lightning speared through her again, slamming her into the waves. She vanished silently, and then... she was gone.

“LYS!” Mythra screamed. Aritz stared in shock and anger. She was dead. Lys, the one who had offered her help to everyone who asked for it. Lys, the one who trusted him. This was his battle plan, and he had failed her. His useless Wind Magic had failed to save her.

Adalia attacked in soundless rage. Twin meteors of metal and lightning flashed towards the giant’s torso. Xander roared as he bent over in sudden pain. “*Rain Lightning.*” A massive ten-shot barrage exploded out of his palm, firing devastating bolt after devastating bolt in retaliation.

But his aim was suddenly thrown off by a beam of flare that cut through the wind and rain, smashing into his weakened side. Mythra blazed with fury, her red flames dancing all around her.

Aritz slammed his fist into solid stone, knocking off a piece. Using his magic, he picked it up to hurl it at the giant, but suddenly it became uncontrollable. The entire spire shattered, and the last thing he remembered was his own wind howling *downwards*, all around him, before a sudden sharp pain pierced his head and he collapsed.

Meanwhile, on the deck of the caravel, Fritz paced back and forth. He had no duty to help the crazies. So what if the pirate captain did what mad pirate captains do? None of them had ever treated him well. He just wanted passage through the Blood Sea. It didn’t matter if they died. It...

He suddenly stopped as a massive explosion tossed the entire ship around. The storm clouds intensified. They were alive... right? Suddenly, he remembered the knight. The one they called Lys. She had been the one to fish him out of the waters as he was drowning, and now her face as she told him “If you don’t want to fight, Fritz, then don’t,” glared accusingly at him from his memories.

“Fine!” he shouted into the storm. “I’ll rescue these idiots!” With a flick of his hand, his staff flew into his palm.

A brunette poked her head out from belowdecks, trying to wipe her glasses off. “I’ll come too!” she said.

Fritz looked at Oriole for a moment. “You’ll just slow me down,” he said at last, before leaping off the ship onto a glowing platform of Healing Magic.

On her spire, Adalia huddled behind a shield of Metal Magic, trying to guess the giant’s next move. She had to do something. Nearby, Mythra dodged a bolt of storm magic. Her eyes widened as Xander started charging up *Heaven’s Wrath* again. Once more, and none of them would survive. The red-haired woman lifted her arms. The storm clouds would interfere... it wouldn’t work. She dropped her hands, her heart growing cold with despair.

Just when all hope seemed lost, a scream of defiant anger filled the air. “EAT SHIT!” Fritz shouted as he charged up his attack. Blue flames danced all around him, blazing wildly. “PIERCE THE SKIES— *NEVER ENDING BLAZE!*” With all his might, he threw his staff towards the giant. The arcanium weapon blazed with the brilliant blue light of Inferno Magic, creating a massive spear of devastating power, parting the wind as it flew.

Xander gasped as the spear drove into the hole in his armor, scraping by the steel shards surrounding it. He dropped to a knee, roaring in agony as flames burnt him from within. The clouds started to part.

Mythra glanced up *Clear skies*, she thought, almost exhilarated. She threw her hands to the sky. “*Heavenly Blaze!*” An Arc Sphere of Flare Magic flew into the sky, and briefly, everything seemed to pause. Xander’s blue eyes, surprisingly calm, looked up into the air at the twinkling red light. The wind seemed to briefly die... and then a massive beam of Flare Magic crashed down onto the entire stone platform from above.

An explosion shattered the air as crimson flames ignited on solid stone, the giant silent in the raging inferno, his steel armor reflecting their red light, but also the blue of the skies as the clouds entirely parted, the storm giving away as Xander slowly slumped down, his armor clattering to the stone, once and for all.

Several hours later, Aritz awoke in a soft bed. Fritz was sleeping quietly in a chair, seemingly exhausted. The mariner glanced at his own hands. A strange magic circle filled his palm, and his ears suddenly filled with a rushing sound he recognized as his own heartbeat.

Awake, finally?

He glanced around, but there was nothing that could have spoken.

Heh. You weren't quite satisfied were you? Well, to attempt to will the world around you with the basic form of wind... is futile. Wind cannot force rocks to move... it cannot bend blades of light. But there is one thing that all know... but forget...

Gravity.

He froze, staring at the black and purple circle in his palm, which suddenly closed and vanished, like an eye. Looking up, he noticed that he was in the infirmary. There was another bed—he stared in both relief and shock at Lys's unmoving form. She still clutched her broken sword to her chest, the painful red lichtenberg bruises on her face and neck still visible.

Aritz stumbled over, feeling both guilty and afraid. "I'm sorry..." he said, his voice cracking. "Knight Arie... I did what I could, at the time..."

He stepped back suddenly in surprise as she cracked open one violet eye, its glow muted. "And that was enough..." She breathed in a single quiet breath, the air fluttering by the razor-edged splinters of her blade. "It's all we can ever do..."

He nodded. "...You have a point." But she was already asleep.

Fritz opened his eyes. "Up already? You had at least four fractures, you know."

"Thanks," Aritz said, knowing who had healed him.

"Don't just thank me. Oriole got the pirates we rescued to bring stretchers to carry the lot of you back—otherwise, you'd be dead anyways." He stood up with a yawn.

“Aritz!” Mythra said. “You’re awake!” She stepped down the stairs, looking, in Aritz’s opinion, as beautifully elegant as ever in a different dress. “We have a meeting to get to—the pirates have a plan to get us out of this sea safely.”

He nodded. Before he left, he threw one final glance back at the unconscious knight. Then he turned away and stepped into the light.