

Epilogue

Taking Flight

Gwyn inhaled deeply, an attempt to steady the whirlwind of emotions swirling within her. Roslyn was asleep. On Gwyn's lap. And she was cuddled all cute-like on a small pillow while munching on a strand of her own hair.

She'd been a mess of anxiety and nervousness ever since she woke up to find Roslyn in this position. When *she* fell asleep, they were both leaning against the opposite walls of the carriage. She didn't even *know* when Roz had somehow found her way into Gwyn's lap.

Things should have been fine.

This wasn't an unusual scene; sharing such close spaces had been normal for them, comfortable even. They always cuddled. They were cuddle buddies. The best of friends.

But everything had changed after that kiss.

At least for Gwyn.

And she had no idea how Roslyn was coping with everything so well.

They'd gathered everything and left the city almost immediately. The Tilorals were understandably filled with *rage*. The only people left in the city were a small number of volunteers from both Houses who would perform bare minimum upkeep on the properties. Now, there was a veritable army traveling through the snow to the dwarven city.

That she'd accidentally burned down an entire block of warehouses hadn't exactly been her plan, but it did require them to leave the city a bit earlier than planned. Luckily, she and Roz had said goodbye to their friends already.

It was all because of House Racine that they had to leave at all.

Amanda Levings had kidnapped her Roslyn. Gwyn still remembered the time she came by the manor in Strathmore. Gwyn had been so excited to meet another human, but then the woman had tried to make Taenya and Sabina out to be the bad guys and wanted to take her away.

As if.

What if that was House Racine's plan the whole time though? Was *Gwyn* the target and not Roz? Had Roslyn been kidnapped *because* of Gwyn?

That more than ever made her hate the politics in this kingdom. It was as if everyone were out to get them. And House Racine was leading the charge.

We need to get rid of them.

And they would. Gwyn would see to it. Right after they handled the people coming for the duchy. The plan was to reach Strathmore, get an idea of what the situation was, then rush to help her people. The last they'd heard was that the Republic was attacking, but nothing since. She was worried about Siveril and everyone else who was right in the path of the invaders. Although, the thing that had her the most stressed was how Roslyn refused to stay somewhere safe.

Gwyn could understand, Roz had been kidnapped. Even if she didn't admit it, Gwyn's best friend was scared. She'd refused to leave her side except for short stints, even asking her to go with her to the bathroom. That had been a bit awkward the first time, but now Gwyn was used to it.

Still, she was scared to take Roz with her. Scared that something could happen that would hurt her. But the other half of her was happy that she would have her there. And that same half constantly thought back to the kiss.

She let out a muffled groan of frustration, then looked back down in defeat. Her eyes immediately betrayed her as she couldn't help but look at Roz's lips.

Carefully, Gwyn extricated the hair from Roslyn's mouth, wiping it off before tucking it behind those long, slender ears. Roz, in her half-asleep state, opened and closed her mouth like she was trying to find the lost blonde lock. Gwyn stifled a giggle at the adorable sight.

She leaned back, trying to distract herself with the carriage's rhythmic movements, but found her gaze, and eventually her hand, inevitably drawn back to Roslyn's hair.

Gwyn sighed again.

It's going to be a long day.

Playing with Roslyn's locks was just something she did. It was as natural as breathing to her, a simple act that always seemed to anchor her. And as she allowed herself this small indulgence, her anxious thoughts began to quiet, lulling her towards sleep.

At least sleep wouldn't be so confusing like her poor, overworked heart.



Roslyn was woken by the soft sound of knocking, gently pulling her from sleep. She stirred, her first sight being her... friend's?... peaceful, slumbering face above her, an image that warmed her heart. With a tender smile, she carefully removed Gwyn's hand from her stomach and moved to the door, cracking it open to find Taenya on the other side.

“Hi,” Roz greeted in a hushed tone, mindful of her best friend’s rest. “Sorry, Gwyn’s still asleep.”

“That’s fine,” the telv woman said with a small wave of her hand “I was actually hoping to speak with *you*, if you’ll allow it.”

Roslyn cast a glance back at Gwyn, catching a moment of her snoring slightly louder than before—an endearing sound that brought an involuntary smile to her face. She turned back to Taenya who had a knowing look on her face. Roz’s smile fell. She didn’t want to leave Gwyn, but... she took a deep breath and nodded.

Taenya offered a soft smile in return, her gaze warm and free of judgment. Roslyn felt a sense of comfort in her presence, she knew the woman would do anything for Gwyn. “Sure, let me just grab my boots and coat.”

As Roslyn stepped out of the carriage into the brisk winter air, her breath formed tiny clouds in the cold. She surveyed the quaint snowy village the caravan was in, noticing the flurry of activity among the wagons and horses. Guards and servants bustled about, each engrossed in their tasks of preparation and organization, lending the scene a chaotic yet purposeful air.

“How long will we be here?” she asked the waiting knight.

Taenya shrugged. “Not long. The weather has been in our favor, so we’re taking advantage of it. We’ll be on our way shortly.”

She glanced back at the carriage she’d just emerged from. “And Gwyn? Is that why you chose not to wake her?”

“Exactly,” Taenya confirmed. “Sansa will wake her soon so she can relieve herself before we depart.”

Roz frowned, glancing over her shoulder back at the carriage... and Gwyn. “I should—”

“Roslyn, she’s fine. Let’s talk.”

There was a firmness there, one that she’d come to expect from the knight that filled a motherly role in Gwyn’s life. Taenya

As they moved through the village, Roslyn’s curiosity piqued, “What was it you wanted to discuss?”

Passing by another carriage, *hers* that was being used by Aleanora, Lorrena, and Sansa, they approached a supply-laden covered wagon. Taenya turned and hoisted herself up. Then, with a nonchalant gesture, invited Roslyn to join her on its edge. Despite an eye roll, Roslyn complied, settling next to Taenya amidst a stretching silence that grew increasingly uncomfortable.

“I’m fine, Taenya,” Roslyn finally broke the silence, her voice tinged with a mix of reassurance and exasperation. She’d had these talks with everyone so far. Khalan, Janine, Roderick... Everyone from her House had *something* to say, starting with ‘are you alright?’. She didn’t want it. Roslyn just wanted to move on. Everything was fine now that she had Gwyn back at her side.

Taenya, however, seemed lost in thought as her gaze locked onto something in the distance. When she eventually spoke, it was with an emotional weight that caught Roslyn off guard. “I love Gwyn as if she were my own,” she began, her voice heavy that made Roslyn suck in a breath. “These few years, having to step in, care for her... it’s brought us closer than I ever imagined. I know her mother’s out there, and it’s probably not right... but it was something I had prepared myself to do from the moment I found her crying in the middle of the road after the Flash.”

Gwyn had told her this story, and everything that came after. The lie. Raafe’s death. Her best friend spoke fondly of Taenya, not like someone who was just a knight. Gwyn *loved* Taenya like family. There was a reason she called the woman her aunt. To Gwyn, it may as well have been truth.

Taenya’s words flowed, filled with an emotional depth that spoke of her protective instincts towards Gwyn. “Sabina and I tried, well... I love Bina, but she’s better at feeling emotions than understanding them. But you’ve brought something to her life that we couldn’t,” she continued, her gaze now firmly on Roslyn. “Your presence has been a beacon for her, a source of happiness amidst all of the chaos that our world has thrown at her.” Gwyn’s chosen-Aunt took a deep, steady breath. “Our Gwyn’s a bit dense, and well, if I’m to be honest, you’ve only been slightly less so,” she said with a growing smirk. “But she’s cared for you for so long, Roslyn. I know you care for her too.”

Roslyn felt panic spike inside of her. She’d known people had these discussions, intellectually, she knew one day she’d have it with her mother when a suitor was chosen... but...

Oh, no.

Taenya either didn’t notice her flaring panic or chose to ignore it. Knowing the woman, she was probably feeling just as awkward as Roslyn did at that moment as she continued, “No matter how dense she is, what happened was obviously hard hitting enough to jostle her into realization. I know something happened before she brought you out of the warehouse and before... she burned everything down...” She took another deep breath, mumbling something to herself that Roslyn didn’t catch. “I just want you to know that I’m happy for you two, but Roslyn... please don’t hurt her. She doesn’t have much else other than you. Her mother is taking far longer to get here than any of us thought possible and there’s still so much that could happen... You and I both know you have obligations to your family, and I’m not asking you to choose, but it’s okay for you to pursue what your heart tells you despite the politics. And no matter what, know that Sabina and I will support you two. I’m sure Gwyn’s mother will as well, for what it’s worth.”

Roslyn nodded solemnly, her voice firm with resolve. "I promise, Taenya. I won't hurt Gwyn."

After a moment steeped in shared concern and unspoken agreements, Taenya stood, breaking the contemplative silence. "I'll have Sansa wake Gwyn up," she announced, her tone lighter, perhaps in an attempt to ease the tension that had enveloped them moments before.

As Taenya moved away, her figure gradually blending with the bustling activity of their makeshift camp, Ilyana, one of Gwyn's trusted ladies-in-waiting, approached Roslyn with a gentle smile.

Roslyn smiled, hoping the young baroness wasn't about to pull the same stuff as the others.

"Would you like to ride with me when we get started?" Ilyana inquired, her voice laced with a friendly invitation. "The carriage has got to be boring. I know you'd rather be with Gwyn, but Sabina and I convinced Calista to go try to get Gwyn to go flying. You two could really use some fresh air."

Roslyn smiled. Gwyn's people were really more of a family than retainers like those of her House. It was refreshing, and something only Gwyn could have pulled off. "I don't have a horse," she admitted.

The baroness's smile widened, understanding and solution ready. "You can ride Layla," she offered. "We both know Gwyn won't mind."

After a brief moment of consideration, Roslyn shrugged, a smile tugging at her lips. Gwyn, she knew, wouldn't mind sharing something so precious with her. *Plus, if she's off with Calista, I could use a bit of time outside, too.*

"Sure," she said. "I'll be ready to go."



Gwyn emerged from the carriage dressed and ready. Calista was sitting on her haunches, looking down at Sabina and two Shadow Guards she recognized from the raid on the Racine manor: Nasha and Liza. The sound of Liza's light laughter mixed with the more growly chuffing of Calista made it obvious that the three were engaged in a conversation only they could hear. Gwyn loved how her sister had found people she could easily converse with other than herself. The Shadow Guard, with their telepathy, were the perfect group for it.

She heard the snort of a horse and turned. The sight of Roslyn, gracefully mounted on Layla and accompanied by Ilyana made her neck heat up. She lifted a hand in an awkward wave.

"Hey, sleepy head," Roslyn called out, her smirk bridging the distance between them.

Gwyn's cheeks tinged with color at the affectionate tease. "Hey yourself," she retorted, approaching Layla to deliver a gentle pat. "Take care of her, girl," she whispered to the horse, whose snort seemed to acknowledge the request. Stealing a glance at the older teen watching them with a goofy grin, she couldn't resist adding, "Have a fun ride with the barbarian lover."

Ilyana's startled reaction was exactly what she was going for. "W-What are you talking about?" she exclaimed, caught off guard.

A laugh escaped Gwyn. "I found your stash of books you left in that satchel you put next to my stuff," she confessed. "I have to admit... I may have stolen one or two."

Roslyn's eyes widened. "I'm going to read that when we get back in the carriage."

Ilyana's face couldn't go redder if she tried. "T-Those are mine! Gwyn!"

Gwyn laughed. "I'm teasing, Ily." Gwyn patted Roslyn's foot. "Have fun you two."

Roz smiled down at her. "You too, Firebug."

Gwyn turned her attention to Calista, walking away and chuckling as she heard Roz questioning Ilyana's literary choices. Gwyn knew her friend was more interested in reading the same things rather than focus on teasing Ilyana's fascination with a series that featured an Aviran woman's encounters with barbarian men and women.

Gwyn turned her attention to Calista, walking over and checking the saddle's fit with a practiced eye. "You ready? Saddle not too tight?" she inquired, trying to keep the excitement out of her voice. Calista stood up, shaking herself lightly, and turning her head to look at Gwyn with one slitted eye.

'It's fiiiine! Let's fly!'

'Have fun you two, try not to stray too far,' Sabina's mental voice filled her head.

Gwyn and Calista both rolled their eyes at the same time, causing the two sisters—draconic and human—to laugh.

Climbing atop Calista's back, Gwyn settled in and clipped on the strap that would keep her from falling to her death in case anything happened. "Alright. Let's do this."

Calista unfurled her majestic wings and Gwyn leaned forward, preparing for the impending rush. Attuned to the subtle cues of her companion, she sensed the gathering mana, a prelude to their ascent. With a graceful surge, they were airborne, the landscape below very quickly receding into a blur of colors and shapes.

Gwyn laughed. Finally, finally, she could fly with Calista without her mind elsewhere. Without the worries and fear that had kept her from enjoying it before. It was *everything* she thought it would be.

As they climbed higher, a figure darted into her peripheral vision, striving to match their pace. It was Rhion, lagging yet determined. Calista's amusement at his efforts echoed through their bond, a shared moment of sibling jest. *'He's such a slowpoke!'* Calista's thoughts resonated with a playful tone, stirring another laugh from Gwyn.

"Yeah, let's slow down for him!" Gwyn called out, her voice carried away by the wind. She deftly manipulated her [Arcanomancy], weaving a barrier to shield herself from the relentless gusts then used her [Pyromancy] to keep herself warm. The magic maintained a thin veil against the elements, allowing her to communicate more effectively as they moderated their speed.

As Rhion caught up, Gwyn waved at him followed by Calista raising a clawed foot herself. The drak'valan nodded before flapping his wings once and pushing ahead.

The world unfolded below them in breathtaking vistas and Gwyn loved it. It was so much better than the flights she remembered back home. The sprawling landscape was a tapestry of white snow covered ground, trees, and textures. Viewed from the sky, it was even more magnificent. The tiny and persistent caravan below carved a path through the wilderness. She squinted to try and catch sight of Roslyn on horseback but couldn't see anything more than dots.

The sun started to go down when they had to return, much to both Gwyn and Calista's collective regret. The two of them lay together next to Roz and excitedly told her all about it. Her friend was, of course, amazing and sat there, eating up everything Gwyn said. It was great.

Following the caravan from above, Gwyn and Calista resumed their aerial journey the next day, marveling at the approaching mountains. Their magnificence was overwhelming, casting long shadows and painting a picture of serene majesty. It was during this leg of their journey that Calista's sharp eyes spotted a wisp of smoke curling into the sky—a sign of a campfire.

Gwyn signaled to Rhion, who was keeping pace, pointing towards the intriguing sight. The agreement was silent but understood; they would investigate. After informing the caravan of their discovery, they watched as the knights, men-at-arms, and Roslyn advanced on horseback towards the source of the smoke.

Knowing her best friend was going too was all she needed to stay close. She and Calista would provide aerial support. Her mana was at the ready and she would send magic down as if they were a fighter jet if needed. No one would hurt Roslyn again.

But as the mounted group neared the site, Calista's clearly saw something she didn't. *'Gwyn! Hang on, we need to go down there!'* she urged, her curiosity mirrored by Gwyn's own.

As Calista initiated their descent, her wings tucked in, transforming their flight into a swift dive towards the camp. Gwyn, though tense with anticipation, trusted her sister implicitly. As they neared,

Calista's wings unfurled, capturing the wind with precision that allowed them a graceful landing that could only be described as stylish.

Surveying the camp, Gwyn's eyes immediately took in the sight of about twenty armored winged drak'valans gathered around several campfires, a sight both imposing and intriguing. The presence of these dragonkin in such numbers was unusual, and it piqued her curiosity and concern alike.

Among them, a drak'valan with striking violet scales turned to face the newcomers. Recognition flashed in her eyes as she exclaimed, "Gwyn!"

The recognition was mutual.

"Neira!"



Spring

Sloane's footsteps echoed softly in the grand corridor, her pace measured as she walked alongside Alyce, with King Tanyth completing their trio on Alyce's other side. The winter had been a season of both small and large achievements, not to mention way too many nights filled with tireless work. They had brought the *Wanderlust* to completion, a feat that felt as surreal as it was exhilarating. It was a testament to their combined skills, determination, and the unforeseen bonds that had formed among them.

Throughout the colder weeks she had been deeply involved in strategizing with Adaega and Aila through the Archive whenever she wasn't working on the ship or spending time with Mariel. Their focus had been on expanding the Centers and laying the groundwork for the golem business—a project that Aila was particularly eager to spearhead. Together with Elodie and Adaega, they had devised plans to mitigate any competition from the terrans in Dayton, ensuring their efforts in Ikios would remain unparalleled.

Elodie had thrown herself into establishing a branch of the Artificer's Guild in Marketbol, proving once again her dedication and leadership. Aila, meanwhile, was on the hunt for a suitable guildmaster in Nornport. She had plans to collaborate closely with Alyce upon her return, weaving their expertise together to strengthen the guild's presence within the kingdom.

After discussing Dayton, Alyce was not looking forward to working with them.

Today, though, marked a pivotal moment. The king was scheduled to give a speech on the official launch of the world's first sky ship. The day's significance wasn't lost on Sloane as they

approached the grand hall where it would take place before all of the most important people within the kingdom. People that now included herself. The Grandmaster of the Artificer's Guild.

All of that was great. Wonderful even. But it didn't do anything to help her nerves. The anticipation of their imminent departure to Lehelia hung heavily in the air, and with it, a mix of excitement and the anxiety of facing obstacles they still had to traverse.

Alyce's sudden nudge, gentle yet jarring, pulled Sloane from her reverie. The questioning glance from Alyce, tinged with concern and curiosity, prompted a sheepish admission from Sloane. "What? Sorry, lost in my thoughts."

King Tanyth's laughter, as smooth and comforting as a well-aged wine, broke the momentary lapse. Sloane couldn't help but marvel at the king's bachelor status, given his evident charm and the intriguing dynamics with Alyce. Perhaps, she mused, the journey ahead would offer an opportunity to delve deeper into the nuances of the two's relationship.

And Sloane was definitely one who enjoyed a bit of juicy gossip about her friends. Back in college, she'd gotten it all from her sister and her college friends. It was something that fell off as she got older, and being able to connect with other women since arriving had been a blessing.

Another benefit of the Archive, that.

As they continued down the hallway, the trio's conversation ebbed and flowed with the ease of companions who had shared in the trials and triumphs of a season's labor. Alyce and Sloane entered the hall together, while the king waited with a few of his advisors to be announced.

The two humans, moving with a shared rhythm born of recent camaraderie, found themselves shown to a pair of chairs strategically placed just behind the dais from where King Tanyth would soon address his subjects. The hall buzzed with anticipatory murmurs, a blend of nobility and dignitaries gathered for the occasion. Amidst the sea of faces, Sloane and Alyce settled into their seats, the significance of the moment not lost on either.

Alyce leaned closer to Sloane, her voice a hushed whisper that carried a mixture of excitement and solemnity. "Can you believe it? In just a week, we'll be setting off. Tanyth is nervous. It's really sweet."

Sloane nodded, her eyes scanning the room before returning to meet Alyce's gaze. "Everything's ready on my end. We've left instructions for the guild, and the inn is prepared for our departure. How about you?"

"My second's got the reins while I'm away. It's only for two weeks, but it feels like I'm entrusting her with a lifetime's work."

Sloane smiled and she gently patted her friend's leg that was bouncing in place. "It *is* your lifetime's work. Yours and Kat's. You brought it to fruition."

"It *does* look a bit different than I imagined."

"The perks of magic."

Alyce chuckled softly. "Rust, I can't wait until Kat sees her." The pink haired woman's eyes were settled on the large wooden scale model of the *Wanderlust* that was displayed on a table in the center of the hall. A beautiful piece that captured every detail except the glowing of the runes and the gravity domes that sat at the four corners of the keel. The domes were Sloane's greatest contribution. She'd increased the efficiency of the gravity manipulation by ten-fold, which was the entire reason the ship could fly for so long without having to recharge.

Their whispered conversation continued, a private bubble amidst the public spectacle. "And Mariel? Is she excited?" Alyce's tone softened at the mention of Sloane's daughter.

Sloane's smile widened and she was unable to keep the pride out of her voice. "She's thrilled. Honestly, I think she's more excited about the trip than the title at this point. And she's taken to you."

Alyce's laughter was a soft chuckle, her eyes twinkling. "She's a great kid. So much determination. She's as geared up for this adventure as we are."

As the king was announced and made his way to the podium, Sloane and Alyce's attention shifted forward, their conversation pausing for the speech. Yet, even as they listened to the king's words, their thoughts remained on the imminent journey, a tangible excitement for the adventure that awaited them and the realization of a dream long held.



In the grand hall, filled with the murmur of anticipatory chatter and the soft clinking of glasses, Mariel found herself relishing the anonymity that the crowd provided. She wore a beautiful dark blue dress her mom had got her, that, in her opinion, really helped in looking the part of nobility that she now was.

With her mom occupied and seated behind the dais alongside Alyce, Mariel saw an opportunity for a little mischief—or at the very least, a chance to sample the forbidden fruits of the adult beverage selection that her mom always denied her.

Swiping a glass of bubbly wine from a passing servant's tray, she raised it to her lips, her eyes sparkling with the thrill of her minor rebellion. She took a deep breath, then took a sip.

And grimaced.

It was far less sweet than she had anticipated. Nevertheless, determined not to be deterred by the unfamiliar taste, she bravely took another sip, then another, until the glass was empty. *Definitely a bad idea.*, she thought, the bubbles tickling her nose and the alcohol warming her cheeks.

The room suddenly hushed, and Mariel's attention was drawn to the entrance as the king made his grand appearance. King Tanyth, his regal bearing unmistakable even from a distance, strode confidently towards the dais. His presence commanded the room, and as he passed, small smiles and nods were exchanged with the attendees who lined his path. Mariel, momentarily caught up in the spectacle, straightened up and tried to blend in with the decorum of the moment.

"Lords and ladies of the realm, esteemed guests," the king began, his voice resonant and carrying easily over the hushed crowd. "Today marks a significant moment in the history of Rosale, as we stand on the cusp of innovation and exploration unlike any before."

As the king continued with his opening remarks, Mariel's adventurous spirit couldn't be quelled for long. She placed her empty glass down on a nearby table and meandered over to a display of finger foods, her curiosity piqued by the assortment of exotic treats. She was about to reach for a particularly tasty looking treat when a shadow fell over the table, and Mariel turned, startled by the sudden company.

Standing next to her was an orkun woman. The orkun's tusks jutted from her lower lip, and her skin bore that familiar light green hue. Yet, it was the woman's eyes, sharp and discerning, that held Mariel's gaze.

Caught off guard but never one to shy away from a potentially interesting encounter, Mariel offered a tentative smile. "Uh, hi there. Are you enjoying the party?"

"I am. You seem quite at home here," the orkun woman observed, her voice carrying a hint of amusement. "Might I inquire whom you know at this gathering? You seem a bit young to be on the guest list."

Mariel, slightly taken aback but recovering quickly, responded with youthful bravado. "Oh, I'm here with my mom. She's over there," she gestured vaguely towards the dais where Sloane and Alyce were seated, "somewhere behind the king, probably discussing all the boring details."

The orkun's interest piqued, her gaze sharpening. "Boring details? Hmm. In my opinion, this is quite the reveal. A flying ship. Quite fascinating times we live in."

Mariel nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, it's pretty incredible. My mom and her friend have been working on it all winter. I can't wait until we get to ride on it."

"And your name, young miss?" the woman inquired, her demeanor friendly yet commanding.

Flushing slightly at the oversight, Mariel straightened up. “Oh, I apologize. I’m Baroness Mariel Reinhart.” The moment the name left her lips, the orkun’s eyes briefly darted towards the dais, and Mariel could swear the woman’s gaze locked onto her mom before returning to her with a renewed interest.

“Reinhart? That’s a peculiar name for a raithe family,” the woman remarked, a hint of curiosity in her tone.

Mariel shrugged, a playful smirk on her lips. “What can I say? I’m a peculiar girl.” Seizing the moment, she reached over for another glass of wine, determined to enjoy the night to the fullest.

The orkun chuckled softly, her voice low and melodic. “Perhaps young ladies should pace themselves,” she advised, deftly plucking the glass from Mariel’s grasp and draining it herself in a single, fluid motion. She placed the empty glass back on the tray with a grace that was quite surprising.

As the woman turned to leave, Mariel, ever bold, called after her. “I didn’t get your name.”

The orkun paused, turning her head slightly to offer Mariel a conspiratorial wink before melding back into the crowd.



A week had flown by, each day brimming with preparations and final touches to the *Wanderlust*. The morning of departure dawned crisp and clear, heralding the start of an adventure that had been months in the making. Sloane, accompanied by her team, made their way toward the docking area where the skyship, a marvel of engineering and magic, awaited them.

As they approached, Vesper, acting as a mechanical beast of burden, carried the group’s supplies. The travel satchels, cleverly enchanted to hold far more than their outward appearance suggested, were securely attached to her frame. Mariel, bubbling with excitement, walked closely beside Sloane, her eyes shining with anticipation.

A step behind, Nemura and Stefan conversed in low tones, their faces set in expressions of solemn determination. Nell, along with her five paladins, formed a protective rear guard, their armor catching the morning light as they moved.

Upon boarding, Sloane and Mariel were shown to their shared cabin—a cozy space that promised to be their home for the duration of their journey. After quickly settling in, Mariel’s excitement got the better of her, and she dashed off to join Stefan and Nemura on the deck, eager to watch their departure from the best vantage point.

Oxylus

Leaving Mariel to her excitement, Sloane made her way to the helm, where Alyce stood in deep conversation with the helmswoman and the Wanderlust's captain. The helmswoman, with her hands poised over a control setup that resembled a modern yoke more than a traditional wheel, nodded at Alyce's instructions. The captain, an experienced sun elf with a keen eye, oversaw the crew's final preparations.

"Alyce," Sloane greeted, her voice breaking through the buzz of activity.

Alyce turned, a smile breaking across her face. "Sloane! Just in time. We're about to take off."

Sloane glanced at the crew bustling around, their movements a well-choreographed dance of efficiency and skill. "I can see that. I'm still amazed by all this," she admitted, her gaze wandering over the deck.

Alyce chuckled, her eyes sparkling with pride. "Wait till you see her fly. This is nothing like your Earth's planes. You're going to love it."

Their attention was drawn back to the helm as the countdown began. Alyce took her position beside the helmswoman, a woman whose focus was absolute as she gripped the yoke.

"Ready?" Alyce called out, her voice carrying across the deck.

"Ready," the helmswoman confirmed.

Alyce began the countdown, her voice steady and clear. "Three... two... one..."

At zero, the helmswoman pulled back on the yoke while simultaneously pushing a lever forward. The ship responded immediately, lifting smoothly off the ground as if buoyed by an unseen force.

Sloane watched, awe-struck, as the ground fell away, the sky opening up before them. "This is incredible," she whispered, barely aware she'd spoken aloud. They were on a sailing ship in the air, just like all of the games and movies she'd grown up on.

Alyce glanced at her, a wide grin on her face. "Told you. There's nothing like it."

As the Wanderlust gained altitude, Sloane's thoughts drifted to the journey ahead. The excitement of the takeoff mingled with a sense of purpose and determination.

They were on their way to Lehelia. Then Avira to Gwyn.