

Two

Descent

Get your ass topside now! I didn't put all that rusting effort into this ship to see it fall apart around me!

Alyce, The Age of Wanderlust Act III Scene 2

Spring

Surreal.

It was the only word that came to mind as Sloane Reinhart leaned against the rail of the *Wanderlust*, her eyes tracing the line where the cerulean sky kissed the shimmering sea far below.

The vessel, a marvel of artifice and engineering, cut through the air with a grace that belied its size, its sails billowing with a magical wind that no earthly breeze could match. They weren't going overly fast, maybe at the top end of what a blimp could fly, but it was enough. The hum of the anti-gravity domes and the engines that provided thrust were a reassuring constant, it was almost like listening to the engines of an airliner. The only difference was that she was quite literally outside with the wind gently flowing through her hair.

Beside her, her towering telv friend shared in the awe of their flight. The woman's golden eyes, usually so sharp and guarded, were wide with childlike wonder as she took in the view. "Even seeing through Tiberius's eyes didn't prepare me," she murmured, her voice nearly lost in the rush of air, "I never imagined that I would see the world like this with my own eyes."

Sloane smiled. "This is pretty new to me as well. Back on Earth we had big metal tubes. We saw this view through windows."

Nemura nodded, her eyes not leaving the scene before them. "I remember you describing it. The woman paused for a second, then lightly nudged Sloane's shoulder. "We've come so far."

Her friend put a lot of meaning in those four words, prompting Sloane's mind to meander through their recent past in Rosale and the pivotal moments that had paved their path to this point.

In Nornport, Sloane, alongside Aila, had established the second Reinhart Center, one focused on true artificed devices. The collaborative efforts had birthed revolutionary magitech such as her the Excerpt Readers and the spatial storage pouches.

Manabound - Crucible

Their journey to Calling had been fraught with peril, the land teeming with monsters that tested their mettle at every turn. Yet, through each confrontation, their resolve had only strengthened. The entire group, paladins included, had become stronger and closer for it.

It was during that time when Sloane refined her core. And what a bittersweet experience that was. She'd *seen* Gwyn, her baby all growing up. It brought her comfort that her daughter was doing well, but to be taken away too soon had left her longing for the day they reunite.

And then, there was Mariel. The act of adopting the young necromancer had been a decision borne of compassion and necessity, creating a new familial bond where blood did not matter. Mariel had brought an unexpected light into Sloane's life, her presence a constant source of joy and wonder.

She had two amazing and strong daughters, and she couldn't be prouder.

Each memory was a thread woven into the tapestry of her journey, culminating in this moment aboard Alyce Maxwell's skyship. "We really have."

Mariel was likely off with Nell, who had taken it upon herself to help continue her daughter's religious studies like the paladin Yemina did during the time they spent in Swanbrook. Mar was devout in her beliefs, but her magic and desire to have a family meant that her time as a priestess-in-training was over.

She wasn't sure where Stefan was, but Alyce was likely in the engine room with the ship's chief engineer or with the captain.

Sloane stood there, lost in thought, until she realized Nemura had walked away. She turned around, seeing the woman talking with one of the crewmen while Vesper lounged out of the way. Nemura must have felt her gaze because the woman waved.

Sloane smiled and returned the gesture.

All over the deck, crewmen were hard at work. She leaned back against the railing, observing the crew's diligent efforts to maintain the skyship's course. The blend of magic and mechanics was a symphony of efficiency and ingenuity, and she couldn't help but marvel at Alyce's achievement. She may have helped a bit, but this was all Alyce. Every cable and panel, every rune and gear, worked in harmonious synchronicity to create something that Sloane thought was amazing.

That woman is a genius.

With a final glance toward the horizon, Sloane pushed herself away from the railing, her resolve firming. The sea below no longer held her captive with its mesmerizing beauty. It was time to reengage with the reality of their expedition, to reconnect with those who shared this vessel's journey.

"I'm going to check on Alyce," Sloane declared, turning to Nemura with a determined look in her eyes.

The telv woman turned from the man she was talking with and waved a casual hand, signaling her understanding.

“Alright. I’ll be here, then I’ll probably go see what our Blade is up to.”

Sloane navigated her way across the deck, her steps steady despite the gentle sway of the ship. It really felt like being on an airliner, just with more wind. Sloane, herself, had done the runes that helped to mitigate the strength of the winds that swept over the deck. She wouldn’t want to be anywhere near it, otherwise. The crew moved with ease around her, their faces set in concentration as they tended to their respective duties, ensuring the *Wanderlust’s* continued grace through the skies.

On the navigation deck, a world of levers, wheels, and dials greeted Sloane, the complex apparatus of the ship laid bare before her in a dazzling array of technological prowess and magical artifice. But it wasn’t Alyce who captivated the space; instead, Mariel stood at the helm, her curiosity alight with wonder as a helmswoman guided her through the intricacies of the ship’s control.

Sloane hadn’t even seen Mariel come up here. She was about to say something about staying with one of the group, before she noticed one of the paladins standing off to the side. The man nodded and Sloane felt better. In fact, she should have known better; Mar was a great kid.

A man’s voice from below shouted and Sloane turned, seeing the captain poke his head out of a door as he called out for the ship to turn a few degrees starboard. The helmswoman acknowledged the order by repeating what was said and the man nodded to himself before disappearing.

Mariel’s fingers hesitated above a series of runes etched into the console, her focus absolute as she absorbed the helmswoman’s instructions. The ship responded to her tentative touch with a gentle thrum, acknowledging her command with the grace of a living creature.

Sloane leaned against the railing, her gaze lingering on her daughter as she observed the joy and concentration that danced across Mariel’s features. She smiled. Mar had come so far, and every day she continued to push herself, to learn new things. She was so strong and Sloane couldn’t be prouder.

The helmswoman, one of the few people that wasn’t a sun elf amongst the crew, caught Sloane’s eye and nodded to her before returning her attention to the young woman.

The helmswoman, a moon elf with streaks of silver in her raven hair, spoke in a calm, measured tone, her words weaving through the air like threads of guidance. “Now, gently adjust the yolk to the right,” she instructed, her hands hovering near Mariel’s in case intervention was needed.

Mariel complied, her movements cautious yet confident, and the ship banked smoothly to alter its course. Sloane turned her head and watched as the horizon shifted, unveiling new swathes of sky and sea, and Mariel’s eyes widened with delight.

Manabound - Crucible

“Excellent,” the helmswoman praised, her smile genuine. “You have a natural touch, young one.”

Sloane felt a swell of pride, her heart warming at the sight. She stood there and watched until Mariel's lesson concluded. As she finished, the young necromancer turned to her mother, her eyes alight with excitement. “Did you see, Mom? I flew the ship!”

Sloane stepped forward, her arms open for an embrace. “I saw, Mar. You were amazing.”

“We need one of our own. Think we can get Alyce to build us one?”

That made Sloane chuckle. “I think that may be too expensive even for us right now.”

Instead of frowning, Mar's face turned serious. “You're right. Let's see what Gwyn has going on then we can come up with a plan. I think we should get one before we go to Blightwych. I don't actually want to stay there, but like you said, we *should* go there.”

Sloane nodded and guided Mariel back down the stairs. “Makes sense. We have the Archive now, so we can get Aila to put an order in for us when the time comes.”

The Archive was not much more than a mana-based data storage service at the moment. It was based in Marketbol with Adaega Merbaker, the human woman from an alternate Earth, and Elodie, a sun elf woman who was one of Sloane's top financial advisors and now the guildmaster of the Marketbol branch of the Artificer's Guild.

Sloane had taken a while to finally connect to it from her slate, which was basically a runic version of a tablet, but when she did, she'd logged on to see that Adaega and Aila had already been communicating for weeks.

Now, Aila and Adaega were working on creating a true messaging platform that would take the place of what they were doing now. Elodie being the girl with the capitalist heart wanted to establish the platform as a service of the guild that they could charge fees for use.

They weren't anywhere near establishing such a platform, so for now it went into the ideas box. It would be years before they got everything set up enough for them to really start *expanding*. First they had to work with the various nations to establish policy. Elodie and Adaega were already working on that for the Sovereign Cities, or Sovereignty as the unified nation was being called.

Recently, they were discussing where to establish a third center, but Sloane already knew where that would be. It was also another reason she needed to eventually go to Blightwych. Ismeld, her friend who was a member of the Knights of Haven's Hope and also the granddaughter of the King of Blightwych, had promised she would set up a center based on Sloane's notes she'd entrusted to her.

She had no idea how large or small it would be, but she knew Ismeld would do right by her. Sloane also didn't even know anything about this supposed barony Mariel had recently inherited. Which was an entire other can of worms.

Gwyn had somehow convinced an entire kingdom that she was a princess. When Sloane had learned that people automatically figured this made Sloane a *queen*, she'd thought long and hard about how to fix the situation in a way that wouldn't negatively affect her daughter's position.

In the end, she'd fake abdicated her non-existent throne in favor of becoming the grandmaster of a new guild. The Artificer's Guild.

It was a lot, but here she was now on the way to yet another nation on the way to Gwyn.

As they reached the lower deck, they spotted Nell engaged in a deep conversation with Stefan, their heads close together as they poured over a series of maps and documents spread out on a makeshift table. Mariel's eyes lit up at the sight, and she quickened her pace, eager to join them.

"I'm going to hang out with them for a bit," Mariel announced, her voice brimming with excitement. Sloane gave her a nod, her heart swelling with pride at her daughter's growing independence and curiosity.

"Be good, and remember, we're guests here," Sloane reminded her gently.

Mariel nodded, a serious expression crossing her face for a moment before she turned and skipped over to Nell and Stefan. They welcomed her with open arms, and soon she was engrossed in their discussion, her laughter mingling with theirs as they included her in their plans.

Sloane watched them for a moment, a smile tugging at her lips, before she turned and continued her journey toward the engine room. The thud of her boots on the deck resonated through the corridor, a steady rhythm that guided her through the labyrinthine bowels of the ship.

As she entered the engine room, the heat and noise enveloped her, the air thick with the scent of oil and magic. The room was a hive of activity, with engineers and artificers moving about, adjusting dials, monitoring gauges, and making adjustments to maintain the delicate balance of power that kept the skyship aloft.

Alyce was there, her hands deep in the guts of a control panel, her focus absolute as she worked to fine-tune the ship's systems. Her assistant, a young sun elf woman with a keen eye for detail, handed her tools and components, each exchange a silent dance of efficiency and expertise.

Sloane approached, her presence unnoticed amidst the din of the engine room. She leaned against a bulkhead, watching Alyce work, her admiration for the woman's skill and dedication growing with each precise movement.

Manabound - Crucible

After a moment, Alyce straightened up, wiping her brow with the back of her hand. She turned and caught sight of Sloane, a tired smile spreading across her face.

“Everything’s running smoothly,” Alyce said, her voice tinged with pride. “Better than smooth, actually, and we’re making great time. At this rate, we’ll reach Lehelia ahead of schedule.”

Sloane nodded, her gaze drifting back to the plant that was feeding mana and power to the anti-gravity domes and engines. “Mariel wants me to commission one of these from you.”

Alyce’s smile widened, her eyes reflecting the glow of the runes around her. “I bet she does. I can make it happen, you know. You’d jump right up to the top of the list—after Tanyth gets a couple, that is.”

“I’m not sure I can afford one. Yet. They’re expensive.”

The woman chuckled. “You’re not wrong. They’re rusting pricey. Luckily, I don’t have to worry about that.”

Sloane smirked. The *Wanderlust* had been financed by the kingdom for Alyce. The steampunk woman’s relationship with the king was cute, and it was like both of them were afraid to take the half-step that was needed to be together. Although, if Sloane had to put money down on it, she’d bet on Alyce being the one that made the first real move.

“Don’t smirk at me like that. I know what you want to say. Tanyth doesn’t need a gearjunkie like me messing up his pretty life.”

“He is pretty, though.”

Alyce rolled her eyes. “Did you hear where we are currently?”

“I remember when the captain mentioned we were outside of Rosalian waters. We’re over the open sea right now.”

Alyce pursed her lips. “I should probably go check in. I imagine the sights are going to be amazing once we hit the Arros Strait. It’s where everyone is going to see us.”

The Arros Strait was the narrow band of water that separated Ikios proper from the island of Astrarest. From what she knew, it appeared to be almost the size of Taiwan. Along the coast were some of the wealthiest cities and towns on Ikios. It was a major shipping artery as the seas were much less turbulent within it.

“Alright, talk to you after?”

She stood up when suddenly the ship lurched, sending tools clattering and both women grabbing onto nearby surfaces for stability. “That’s some strong turbulence,” Sloane commented, steadying herself against a console.

Alyce's face set into a mask of determination. She looked over at her assistant who was patiently waiting for them. "Let's check the absorbers. They shouldn't be letting this much through."

Sloane followed the two as they hurried to the otherside of the engine room where Alyce slid under one of the panels. Her hands moved deftly over the runic configurations, while Sloane scanned the area, her **[Runic Knowledge]** and **[Artificer's Insight]** kicking in to assess the situation.

"Here," Sloane pointed out, her finger hovering over a section of the complex runic array. "If we tweak this sequence, it should enhance the absorbers' efficiency without drawing too much extra power."

The ship jerked again, causing Alyce to bump her head against the panel, letting out a string of curses that left Sloane baffled. She wasn't sure rust worked quite that way...

"Engraving pen," Alyce said, reaching a hand over her shoulder without looking. The assistant placed the tool in her hand within moments and Alyce went back to work.

Alyce finally nodded before working with Sloane to adjust the runic sequence. The ship's tremors began to subside, the previous shaking replaced by the steady thrum of the engines. "That should do it," Alyce confirmed, her voice carrying a note of relief. "We'll need to monitor the power levels, but we should be more comfortable now."

Emerging from the engine room, both women were visibly relieved but also showing signs of their exertion. Sloane, noticing the sheen of perspiration on Alyce's forehead, suggested, "Thirsty?"

With a grateful nod, Alyce followed Sloane to the tiny mess hall, where they each grabbed a mug of water. The cool liquid was a balm to their nerves, and they shared a quiet moment.

Their respite was cut short by the ringing of the ship's bell, a clear signal that drew immediate attention from everyone aboard. Alyce and Sloane exchanged a quick, understanding glance. "I have to go. Crew will be moving to stations," Alyce said, setting her mug down with a sense of urgency.

Sloane nodded. "I'll wait a bit out of the way before I come."

Alyce gave her a quick, appreciative smile before dashing off, her figure swiftly disappearing among the crew members who were now bustling about with renewed purpose. Sloane remained behind, finishing her water and gathering her thoughts, ready to offer assistance or step back as the situation demanded.

She sighed. They'd learned what to do during an emergency, and if there was any chance of combat, Sloane and Vesper would be on the deck to help. Nemura's sole responsibility would be to keep Mariel safe. Her daughter would help with her magic if possible, and if not she would be taken somewhere safe. Stefan along with Nell and her paladins would be on damage control unless they were needed to fight something.

After a few minutes, Sloane decided it was time to venture out and see the situation for herself. The hallways were less crowded now, the crew focused on their tasks. She made her way to the deck, a place that had quickly become one of her favorites on the ship.



Ressa moved along the deck with her crossbow at the ready—not that she needed it. However, she couldn't let her magic use be known. She was currently in her sun elf illusion, and maintaining that took a lot of effort and concentration. She'd only use magic as a last resort.

She stepped closer to where Alyce Maxwell and the skyship's captain were speaking. They were using a simple device that Alyce called a spyglass. She smiled as she recalled Reinhart making fun of the other terran for it. She called it cliché and said she could make something better but Alyce wouldn't have it.

As she neared the two, she overheard them talking about what they were seeing.

"It looks like a migratory flock of something," the captain said. "Birds?"

Alyce shook her head. "They're too big to be birds that far away."

That made Ressa jerk her head back toward the distant cloud of what appeared to be hundreds of birds. They certainly looked... too large, even from this distance, and their flight pattern was too erratic for any ordinary avian species. She squinted, trying to get a better view, but without a spyglass of her own, she was at a disadvantage.

"They're not birds," Ressa finally said, her voice low, drawing the attention of both Alyce and the captain. She jerked in surprise as they both turned to her. She sighed and held out a hand toward the terran. "May I?" she asked, gesturing toward the spyglass.

The woman nodded and handed it over.

Ressa peered through the spyglass, adjusting the focus until the distant figures could be barely discerned. When she saw the four legs, her stomach dropped as recognition set in. She had received a report on what the paladins from Dawn's Rise were fighting in the Sovereign Cities.

"Gryffons," she muttered under her breath, her hand tightening around the instrument.

Alyce's eyes widened at the mention. "Gryffons? Here?" Her voice carried a mix of disbelief and concern. "They were supposed to be two hundred kilometers north of here."

Oxylus

There wasn't much known about them, but those on the ship had been briefed on the various flying monsters they may come across. Gryffons were some of the most dangerous due to their size and cunning.

Ressa handed the spyglass back to Alyce, her expression grave. "Yes, gryffons. They're a good distance away, but if they've altered their path, we could be in their trajectory."

The captain looked from the gryffons to the front of the ship. "In order to avoid them, we'd have to fly south of Astrarest. That appears to be where they're heading."

"Will they automatically attack us?" Alyce asked, but it seemed like she knew the answer.

"From the reports I've seen, they don't attack indiscriminately. Only when their territory is in danger," the captain said slowly.

Alyce looked around, frowning. "Then what if we just ignored them? They're passing by, and so are we."

Before they could delve further into their tactical discussions, Ressa caught sight of Sloane Reinhart and Nemura Kho'lin stepping onto the deck, their expressions serious as they approached the gathering. Alyce, spotting them, beckoned them over, her expression urgent as she relayed the situation regarding the gryffons.

Reinhart assessed the distant flock with a critical eye. After a moment of silent contemplation, she turned back to Alyce and the captain. "We should be able to increase our altitude if needed. It'll strain the engines more, so we should only do it if required. But once we're clear of their path, we can descend to sea level to conserve energy and allow the mana capacitors to recover," she suggested, her voice steady despite the growing tension.

Ressa had worked with the *Wanderlust* for some time and she still had no clue what some of the things Alyce and Reinhart said meant. She did know a general idea of how the ship worked, mainly so she could report it back to her superiors in Vlaredia. There were four small dome-like blisters protruding from the hull split between either side of the ship at the aft and the bow. She didn't know the specifics, but they were how the ship maintained its flight in a way that even Alyce Maxwell hadn't thought of. The only thing she knew about them was that the higher in the sky the ship was, the more mana those things drew to keep them aloft.

Making sure the ship had enough power to keep them in the sky and not plummet to their deaths was something that kept what Alyce and Reinhart named the engineering team very busy.

Alyce nodded in agreement. "I agree. It's our best bet to avoid a confrontation."

Manabound - Crucible

The two had built a pretty strong relationship over the past season, and Ressa knew that they both trusted each other's judgment. She wondered if that ease was something common amongst terrans. Ressa knew better than most that you couldn't trust people so easily.

Nemura, her gaze flitting between the crew members and the distant gryffons, chimed in with a note of caution. "I'll stay on deck and help with any defense preparations. We should secure as many people below as possible. In the event of an attack, we can't risk noncombatants getting caught in the crossfire. We'll need every capable fighter on deck, armed and ready."

The captain looked around. "I'll let Lieutenant..."

Ressa knew she should have listened further, but as the captain started to enact the plan she found herself watching Nemura head toward the paladins and Reinhart's adopted daughter that were coming upstairs. The Blade was there too, but he seemed more content in staying out of the way. She wondered what he was doing, he tried to appear as if he were a simple attendant, but Ressa knew that all of the time he spent talking to various crewmembers was anything but innocent.

She watched as Alyce and Reinhart moved away. The two shared a quiet conversation, but then Reinhart unfastened the weapon she carried on her thigh and gave it to Alyce, followed by a belt with several pouches on it.

"Captain," she said, getting the attention of the man next to her. "Why do you listen to them? They're not Rosalian. Or in the navy."

It was something that confused her. She thought she knew the answer, but she hadn't heard any orders that stated the captain should obey Reinhart or her retainers.

The man gave her a sympathetic look. "Lady Alyce trusts them, and between you and me..." he glanced around before leaning close. "I've been to the training yard where the Grandmaster practices her magic. If there's anyone on this ship I do not want to piss off, it's her."

Ressa frowned. She knew Sloane had strong magic, but that couldn't be it. Soldiers obeyed their superiors, not just people who were strong. Reinhart wasn't a soldier... but Nemura was, yet she was sure the captain didn't know that fact. She could understand heeding the advice of the paladins, the Rosalians respected them immensely.

He swept his arm around to indicate the skyship. "She knows more than she lets on, this is all new to us. To any military. She has mentioned that it is different than even her world, both Lady Alyce and Grandmaster Reinhart have a broad understanding of what this type of warfare *means*. Even if they do not understand tactics and strategy, they provide valuable insight."

She sighed. "I believe I'll take your word for it, Captain."

Oxylus

He smiled and patted her shoulder. “Not everything has to be about who is in command, crewman. Someone who became a grandmaster of a Guild is bound to be intelligent, and she obviously keeps quality company if her paladins are anything to go by. It doesn’t hurt to hear the advice of those around her. I don’t *have* to accept it, but Lady Alyce *does* have overall command here. If she agrees and I don’t I will advise her accordingly.”

Ressa nodded, reasonably satisfied with his answer.

While the empire wasn’t a true meritocracy, the military strove to advance the best and brightest. Those who were not capable often fell by the wayside quickly. Nepotism only took people so far in the imperial forces. She had no problem taking orders from those above her. But every officer knew that those outside just didn’t get it. Most civilians did not know how to wage war. They didn’t know what it took to fight for your life while commanding others to do the same.

These things took training. Which, she begrudgingly agreed that no one really had outside of terrans. Perhaps it was her anti-Reinhart bias rearing its head again.

“Get into position, crewman. We’re going to need all hands if this goes south.”

Ressa smirked. “Hopefully it doesn’t. It’s a long drop to the ocean.”

The captain frowned and looked around as if she’d said something he’d forgotten. “I suppose you’re right. Times are changing, aren’t they?”

He walked away without another word.

Ressa couldn’t agree more.



Sloane watched the approaching flock—pride?—of gryffons warily. There were a lot more than she’d first thought, their silhouettes stark against the reddening sky, casting an ominous pall over the ship’s deck. The tension among the crew was palpable, every eye fixated on the creatures, every muscle taut in anticipation.

“Captain, we should ascend,” Alyce said, her voice steady despite the undercurrent of anxiety.

Sloane nodded, turning to Nemura. “Nem, go below. Stay with Mariel. Keep her safe.”

Nemura’s hand found Sloane’s shoulder, her grip firm. “You too, Sloane. Stay safe.”

“Always,” Sloane replied, a tight smile crossing her face before turning her attention back to the sky.

Manabound - Crucible

The captain's voice cut through the tense silence, a clear command resonating across the deck. "Increase altitude. Let's get above their flight path."

The ship responded, the hum of the anti-gravity domes intensifying as they climbed higher into the evening sky. But some of the gryffons adjusted their altitude as well, their massive wings beating in unison as they ascended alongside the *Wanderlust*.

The crew remained silent, the only sounds were the ship's engines and the distant cries of the gryffons. The tension was almost unbearable, a collective breath held, waiting for a sign of what would come next.

Then Sloane saw him—a young sun elf crewman, no more than a boy, really. His hands shook as he clutched his crossbow, his knuckles white with the effort of holding it steady. His eyes were wide, fear evident in every line of his face.

"Easy," Sloane called out, moving toward him. "Hold your fire. They haven't attacked."

But the distance was too great, her voice lost amidst the sound of the engines and the wind. She looked to Nell, desperation in her gaze. "Stop him, Nell. He's going to—"

But it was too late.

The bolt flew from the crossbow, its path true. The enchanted projectile struck one of the gryffons, eliciting a piercing screech that echoed through the sky. In an instant, the dynamic changed. The gryffons' cries turned angry, vengeful. They turned toward the ship en masse, their eyes blazing with fury.

Sloane's heart sank as she realized what had just happened. They were no longer mere observers; they were now participants in a battle they had sought to avoid.

The captain's voice rang out again, this time tinged with urgency. "Prepare for engagement! All hands, to your stations!"

The crew sprang into action, their training kicking in despite the fear that gripped them. Sloane found herself beside Alyce, the two women sharing a grim look of determination.

"We need to protect the ship," Sloane said, her voice firm despite the turmoil churning inside her.

Alyce drew the caster Sloane let her borrow and nodded. "I'll coordinate with the engine room. We need every bit of power we can muster."

Sloane watched her friend hurry away before turning her attention back to the sky. The gryffons were closing in, their cries a cacophony of rage that filled the air.

She knew they were outmatched, these magnificent creatures far more at home in the sky than they ever could be. They would fight, defend the *Wanderlust* and its crew with everything they had.

As the first gryffons reached the ship, the alarm bell's clangor resounded through the skyship, its urgent peal sounding a call to arms that set hearts racing and adrenaline surging. Crew members scrambled to react, their faces set in grim determination as they prepared to repel the monsters.

Sloane took a deep breath, pulling mana through her core, feeling its potent energy coursing through her channels as she prepared to unleash her power. The deck vibrated with the concussive blasts of the rudimentary deck cannon that Alyce designed as it sent explosive rounds hurtling towards the encroaching gryffons from its spot at the bow. Crossbowmen let loose volleys of bolts, each one aimed with deadly precision, while Sloane extended her hand, sending streaks of glowing **[Mana Bolts]** slicing through the air.

The crew fought with a desperate intensity, but the gryffons were relentless. Their screeches filled the air, a cacophonous symphony that underscored the battle's chaos. Then, with a thunderous crash, one of the massive beasts landed heavily on the deck, its talons scraping the wood as it lunged towards the defenders.

Nell and another paladin were upon it in an instant, their blades flashing in the sunlight as they struck with lethal precision. The gryffon managed a feeble swipe, its claws skittering across a raised shield before it was dispatched, falling onto the deck with a loud thud.

Sloane took aim once more, her **[Mana Bolt]** finding its mark and sending one of the monsters spiraling towards the sea. Another large gryffon descended, but the deck cannon managed a solid hit. The beast slammed into the deck then tumbled over the side, falling away. But then, a shuddering impact rocked the *Wanderlust*, tilting the deck perilously as a crewman's horrified scream pierced the air, trailing off into silence as he vanished over the side.

"What was that?" Sloane cried out as the ship's speed started slowing.

A crewman, clinging to the rail, dared a glance over the edge and yelled back, "It's the propeller! It's been damaged!"

Sloane's heart sank. The propeller's loss meant more than just impaired mobility; it was a critical blow that could jeopardize everything. The antigravity domes could keep them aloft, but they would have to land and make repairs.

But that wasn't the worst part.

The ship was vulnerable now, like a wounded beast in the sky, and the gryffons, sensing their advantage, pressed their attack with renewed ferocity.

The crew rallied, fighting back with everything they had, but the situation was dire. Sloane knew they needed to act fast to prevent the *Wanderlust* from becoming just another casualty in the vast, uncaring sky.

She turned to the captain. “We need to do an emergency dive!”

The man turned, but before he could respond another wave of gryffons descended. Sloane put him out of her mind as she unleashed a torrent of [**Mana Bolts**] towards the monsters, her face set in fierce determination.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the sight of one of the beasts struggling as it clambered onto the deck. Sloane’s eyes caught the looming threat just as it stalked toward an unsuspecting sun elf crew member, her back turned to the imminent danger. It was the same woman who had been speaking to Alyce and the captain earlier, and she didn’t see it.

“Watch out!” she shouted, but her warning went unheard amidst the clamor.

Cursing under her breath, Sloane started moving to the side as she cast her [**Arcane Barrage**]. With precision born of necessity, she directed the lethal volley toward the deck in front of the gryffon. Wood splintered as the barrage found its mark, the gryffon recoiling under the onslaught, granting the sun elf a precious moment to evade its deadly grasp.

Before relief could settle, a new crisis erupted. The captain’s order cut through the tumult: “Dive now!” The *Wanderlust’s* nose pitched downward in a desperate maneuver to evade.

The sudden descent threw almost everyone to the deck. Sloane’s breath caught in her throat as the world tilted violently. The hum of the domes got louder, too loud. “Reduce the antigravity power!” she screamed, but her voice was swallowed by the roar of engines and the howl of wind.

In a blur of motion, the sun elf she’d just saved dashed toward the navigation deck, intent on relaying Sloane’s command. Yet fate struck swiftly, a deafening explosion ripping through the air, upending everything.

And she knew—she knew that one of the domes had overloaded.

Time seemed to stretch, an eternity compressed into heartbeats. Sloane felt the disorienting tug of weightlessness, her surroundings whirling in a maelstrom of chaos. As the wall of the ship hurtled toward her, a flood of thoughts cascaded through her mind—Gwyn, Mariel, the future they were fighting for.

Then, impact.

Pain.

And darkness.