

Shards of Nightmares

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From set *Dominaria United*

17. 08. 2022

Shanna Sisay pressed her hand against the wall of her cabin and felt the *Weatherlight* 's soft warmth pulsing through its wooden hull. At least here it was still ordinary. At least here she couldn't see what she'd turned the great skyship into. At least here she didn't imagine the spirit of Captain Sisay judging her.

It'll be alright. Everything just needs to hold together for a little while longer.

"—all come apart," Tiana was saying. When Shanna didn't respond, the artificer's angelic radiance flared. "Captain, are you listening?"

"Sure, I am," Shanna said. "Things are hard on everyone right now, Tiana. The *Weatherlight* included."

"The *Weatherlight* wasn't meant to take this kind of strain," Tiana said. "Nothing was. All this Phyrexian garbage, it's corrosive. The crew can barely stay ahead of it. The ship's hurting, Captain. I can feel it."

"Without all this Phyrexian garbage, we'd have been shot down five times already. The Coalition needs us, and this disguise lets us fly right over Sheoldred's territory."



Art by: Piotr Dura

"The Coalition needs a ship that isn't wrecked!" Tiana's eyes flared with all the righteous fury of an angel pushed to the wall. "I've had to put off repairs to the powerstone motivator, and I can see fatigue cracks in the moderator rods—"

A screech like nothing Shanna had heard sliced through the air, chopping the rest of Tiana's words into ribbons, and the *Weatherlight* rumbled and lurched to one side. She shared a surprised look with Tiana for an instant before they dashed out of her cabin. When the Phyrexian garbage failed, it was up to them—and everyone else—to succeed.

"What have we got?" Shanna shouted as she ran into the cockpit. The helmsman, Botoño, was on the floor with a puddle of blood under his head, and Raff Capashen had taken the ship's wheel. Outside, the setting sun painted the clouds like fire.

"Bone dragon, I think!" Raff turned the wheel hard, and the *Weatherlight* swung into a heavy tilt. "It came from behind. I haven't had a good look at it yet. But if it can knock us around like that by yelling, I don't want to see what its claws might do."

"Then get us some altitude." Shanna braced herself against a railing. *It had all been going so smoothly!* "Whatever it is, we'll show it our claws."

Another screech slammed against the *Weatherlight*'s hull, and in it, Shanna could hear the dragon's fury that the skyship hadn't had the decency to go down without a fight. Ulaten and Anyxni, two of the newer cockpit crew, carried Botoño away as the skyship levelled out. With luck, he'd make it, and with a lot of luck, they'd only need that luck for him.

"There it is, up ahead!" shouted Velená at the weapons podium. "Serra's grace, just *look* at that!"

She pointed to a creature that looked less like a dragon than an assembly of bones flying in close formation. Only its wings were whole, with fibrous red membranes that reminded Shanna too much of the *Weatherlight*'s own disguised wings. It spat crimson lances that shimmered with magical energy toward the *Weatherlight*, and only Raff's quick reaction at the wheel kept the skyship from being speared.

"Velená, why don't you show that monster some of Serra's grace?" Shanna scowled at the dragon, as if her own fury could knock it out of the sky. "Powerbolt barrage, as focused as you can make it."

"My pleasure, Captain!"



Art by: Svetlin Velinov

A musical hum reverberated through the *Weatherlight* 's structure, deepening until it erupted into a crescendo of green bolts that sprayed out toward the dragon. Or, at least, where the dragon had been. It rolled and weaved in exactly the way bones shouldn't be able to, and their bolts pierced nothing but clouds.

"That's not going to work," Shanna said. "Raff, get us closer."

"I'll try to keep us out of claw range, but I can't promise anything." Raff slammed a palm against the wheel. "I *knew* I should've gone with the southern route instead."

"We're here now," Shanna said. There was no telling which route would've been safer, or if any of them were. Dominaria wasn't the place it had been only a couple of years ago, when the winds had been clean and the skies peaceful. These days, everything smelled of Phyrexian invaders.

"I guess we are," Raff said as the *Weatherlight* wheeled to keep the dragon ahead. As it righted itself, the dragon spat another brace of crimson lances. "Damn, hang on!"

Raff threw the *Weatherlight* into a hard dodge. It wasn't enough to keep one of the lances from tearing a hole in the starboard wing with immolating heat and a pyrotechnic roar. From the intensity of the impact, it was clear Tiana would be getting her wish for serious repairs after all, so long as they survived the next few minutes.

"It's left itself open! This is it!" Velena shouted. "Firing!"

Another barrage of powerbolts erupted from the *Weatherlight* 's cannons, and this time, the skeletal dragon was far too close to evade. A few went wide and others splashed against the dragon's ribcage and tail, but the rest of them sliced true into one of its wings, severing it with a snapping crack. The dragon howled and plummeted out of the sky. Whatever magic had brought it out of its grave wasn't enough to keep it in the air with only a single wing.

Shanna allowed herself an instant of satisfaction at the crew. They were all living up to Sisay's example.

"Captain, whatever you're doing, we've got to land now!" Tiana's voice thundered out of the speech tube. "If you don't put us on the ground, gravity will!"

Raff didn't wait to throw the *Weatherlight* into a sharp descent, and Shanna didn't blame him. It'd be an awful thing to shoot down a reanimated dragon only to fall out of the sky.

"You don't want to know how close we came to falling out of the sky," Tiana said. "So don't ask."

Shanna gathered a handful of dirt and squeezed her fist until her knuckles were the color of sunrise. In these last dregs of daylight, this stretch of Otaria, where the open plains gave way to rocky foothills, looked less like a refuge and more like a threat. Even Arvad, standing next to her, looked unsettled by it.

"Then I won't tempt fate," Arvad said. "That we're alive is satisfactory."

"It could've been a lot worse," Raff said, pointing north where the twilight weight of a mountain range was only just visible. "We could've come down in Pardia. That would've been fun, right?"

"We can talk about how fun it would've been once we're at a safe port," Shanna said. "Tiana, how long until we can take off?"

The artificer-angel whistled like a broken kettle. "That's the problem. We can't. Half the moderator rods are cracked. If we try to spin up the powerstone in those conditions, *bang*, no more *Weatherlight*."

"What about replacements? Spare parts?"

“The half that aren’t broken *are* the spare parts,” Tiana said. “I can’t make new ones with what we’ve got.”

“That can’t be it.” Shanna sweated from the feeling of Sisay, Jhoira, Ilsa Braven, all the former *Weatherlight* captains judging her from afar and beyond. “You’re saying we’re stuck here? Grounded?”

For a moment, no one spoke. The idea of losing the *Weatherlight* was a knife in all their backs. All their sacrifices, all those close escapes, all to end up here, like this?

“Maybe not,” Raff said as he stared at the mountains. “As long as I’m right.”

Shanna spun to face him. “Then for all our sakes, you’d better be right. What have you got?”

“I think that dragon was guarding something,” Raff said. “Something with a lot of magic, and not too far from here. I’m not sure what, exactly, but from the emanations I’m sensing, it might be something Tiana could use to fix the damage.”

“Might is better than can’t,” Shanna said. “Let’s check it out.”

“Are do you mean me, too?” Tiana’s wings curled around her. “You want me to leave the *Weatherlight* like this?”

“You said it yourself, you can’t make new ones here,” Shanna said. “If whatever Raff’s picked up is something you can work with, you should be there. Arvad will keep things under control while we’re gone.”

“The captain’s right,” Arvad said. “Go on. The *Weatherlight* will be fine without you for a little while.”

“Okay,” Tiana said. “Alright. Yes. Better that I be there, just in case. Wouldn’t want you to waste all that time carrying back something I couldn’t use anyway, right?” She smiled, but it didn’t erase the concern in her eyes.

“Right! It’ll all be fine,” Raff said with a hollow chuckle. “Not a problem at all.”

“On closer inspection,” Shanna said, “this could be a problem.”

Nestled amid the low hills, where nature howled and skittered and a cool breeze carried no trace of Phyrexian invaders, a cloudy dome of oily black smoke crackled and roiled. Raff raised one finger and sniffed the air, while Shanna threw a rock at it. The rock slammed hard and fell to the ground with singe marks where it had hit.



Art by: Drew Tucker

“This never came up at the Tolarian Academy, but I might be able to deal with it anyway,” Raff said. After a moment’s thought and concentration, he summoned a blaze of magic and hurled it at the dome. It disappeared without even a fizzle, an ember in an ocean.

“Hmm.” He kneeled and scratched the ground with a stick. “Shanna, you’ve got that magical immunity. Maybe it’s as simple as you walking through.”

“Or as simple as vaporizing her when she touches it,” Tiana said. “Magic like this is something to be respected, not challenged. Definitely not with the captain’s life.”

“No one’s getting vaporized,” Shanna said. Least of all herself. “Let’s think about this. There’s got to be another way through.”

As Shanna studied the dome, looking for any hint of a plan on its roiling surface, she felt an unfamiliar twinge. Not the sensation she got when magic nullified itself against her, but a mirrored version of it with a sour taste rising on her tongue. Raff looked ill at ease as well.

“You feel that, Raff? Phyrexian?”

“If it is, they’re getting creative,” Raff said. “Maybe we should give this some distance.”

Before they could take more than a few steps back, a low and fast crack like miniature thunder bolted out, followed by the muffled roar of distant wind and what sounded like a mountain-sized horn backed by the whole world groaning. It only got louder as a howling blackness shot through with lightning manifested next to the dome, and as Shanna went for her sword, a tornado of rainbow and darkness emerged and solidified into a figure.

Human-like, maybe, but certainly not human. Humans didn’t tend to be swathed in a dozen twisting braids that could just as easily be hair or shadow, with too many clawed hands reaching out of the tumult and a body ending in only the suggestion of feet. All that hinted at ordinariness were the goggles on the figure’s head.

Shanna tightened her grip.

“Well, well, well, it’s you and you and you already!” The braided stranger pointed at Shanna, Raff, and Tiana in turn and laughed. “You’re lucky you didn’t listen to him, you know. It would’ve vaporized you, and you’d have deserved it. Didn’t your parents tell you not to play with deadly magic?”

“Whoever you are, stay back!” Raff raised his hand as patterns of magical light gathered around it. The shadow-stranger laughed, and with a gesture, the lights snuffed out like candles.

“My name that’d be telling. You can call me Braids,” she said. “You don’t need to impress me. You three, you didn’t get yourselves killed up there. That’s good enough.”

“Are you saying that dragon was your work, Braids?” Shanna took one step forward. “That you brought my ship down?”

“Oh, please, if it was mine, you’d have never survived to crash,” Braids said. “Blame the Phyrexians. Their war construct tore the roof off its hoardgrave, and it got just a *little* irritated. That wonderful, glittery, indefatigable construct. So full of potential, and also fiery death! That’s why I had to hide it behind there, to deal with it.”

Shanna traded a look with the others. Raff looked like the air had turned lemon-sour, but Tiana’s wings were fully extended, and her eyes were full of confidence.

“If there’s a construct in there, it’s definitely got the parts I need,” Tiana said. “We’re on an urgent mission. My skyship’s been grounded. I need to fix it.”

“Oh, I know, it was all very exciting when all that snapping happened!” Three shadowy claws emerged from Braids’s dark aura and clacked sharp nails together. “Snap, snap, snap. So exciting that I lost a bit of control! Which is very exciting, when you think of it like that. But now you and you and you are here, and so I think we can help each other!”

Shanna pursed her lips and lowered her sword. Whatever Braids was and wherever she’d floated in from, she hadn’t tried to kill them yet. If the *Weatherlight* stayed grounded, the Phyrexians certainly would. “What do you have in mind?”

“It’s so very simple, even you three should be able to manage it,” Braids said. “I help you get inside the barricade, and you help me kill me.”

“Why can’t important things ever be behind locked doors?” Raff said as the three of them and Braids stood in front of the roiling, smoking barrier. “You’d be surprised how easy it is to pick locks.”

Shanna steeled herself by thinking of everyone who was counting on her, back at the *Weatherlight* and out in the world. Of course, it couldn’t have been as easy as a simple magical barrier that Raff could dispel with the right preparations. No, it had to be some monstrosity from beyond who’d shattered herself into pieces. She didn’t pretend to understand how that chaotic magic worked, how Braids could split herself into two separate beings when even something as simple as a worm couldn’t, or why a being like Braids needed Shanna’s help to swallow a wayward copy of herself. Magic rarely made sense to her, and Braids made even less sense than magic.

“Let me guess, they keep you around to ask the foolish questions.” Braids threw a handful of dirt at the barrier and smiled as the clump sizzled into steam. “Think about it too hard and you’ll crack your brain like an egg. Such a great noise that’d make. All you need to know is that I need to reabsorb that version of myself. See? So simple even simpletons like you can comprehend.”

Shanna squeezed her sword’s hilt and saved her frustration. Dealing with Braids’s shard wouldn’t be “killing,” really, but it didn’t sound like the easiest thing either way. As long as it got the *Weatherlight* off the ground and her crew to safety, it would be worth it.

"I suppose it wouldn't keep you out either way," Tiana said. "You don't look like the sort that'd be slowed down by a lock."

"Why protect yourself with rusty machines when screaming nightmares can do the job even better?" Braids laughed at that with hollow barks that set Shanna on edge. "My shard-self had the same idea. Lucky for all of us, I have a little bit of experience with nightmares."

While Braids went to the cloud, Shanna looked back at Tiana. She'd wrapped her wings around her and looked like she'd just awakened from a blood-chilling dream. What kind of nightmares did angels reckon with?

"It'll work out," Tiana said. "Serra's grace is with us."

"I hope that's all we need," Shanna said. "Alright, let's get to it."

"That's right, you and you and you, all the more chance that at least one of you will survive the way through!" Braids gave them a smile loaded with an uncomfortable number of teeth. "You'll all walk your paths alone until you reach the other side, and don't get lost. You can't just wake up in there when you find trouble."

"I'd have felt a lot better if you'd said 'if,' instead," Raff said.

"You think you're going to navigate a storm of screaming nightmares and get through unscathed?" Braids's laughter was loud enough to awaken dead war machines. "You'll be lucky to not come out gibbering. Exciting, isn't it?"

It wasn't the first word that Shanna thought of, or even the thirty-seventh. Besides, her true terror—losing the *Weatherlight* and losing the war—was already in front of her. She couldn't imagine anything in a nightmare that would be worse than the reality she was staring down.

Half a dozen shadowy tendrils unfolded from Braids, swayed for a moment like branches in the wind, and lanced into the barrier like predators striking prey. The barrier hissed like water dropped onto a hot pan, and it screamed with a battlefield's agony. Waves of dread crashed against Shanna, Raff was covering his ears and whispering something she couldn't hear, and Tiana kneeled as if it would wash her away.

After a moment, the noise and tumult ceased. Four gaps had opened in the barrier, smooth sided and narrow. Braids smiled with rainbow teeth.

"There you are, a corridor for everyone and all the lovely nightmares you could ever hope to meet," Braids said. "Don't anyone try to follow someone in. I mean, I really want to see if sharing nightmares makes your brains dribble out your nose, but there'll be time for that later. You'll need to deal with my shard-self first."

Shanna kneeled, grabbed a handful of soil, and wiped it between her palms. The more connections she had to the world outside, where nightmares only occasionally came true, the better off she'd be at saving the *Weatherlight* and her crew. Failing at that was the only real nightmare.

"Raff, Tiana, I'd better see you both on the other side," Shanna said. "We've still got plenty to do."

Up close, the barrier was a gibbering storm that felt impossible. Shanna took a deep breath and stepped through the gap that Braids had made for her.

It started with darkness deeper than sleep, deep enough to mock the concept of light. Shanna made her way forward because there was no going back. She couldn't turn around any more than she could step back into the past, and neither direction appealed to her.

Between blinks, the corridor transformed from that unlightable darkness to the *Weatherlight* 's familiar passages. It wasn't a surprise Shanna would find nightmares here, in the hub of her besieged life.

Another blink, and she was no longer alone. Centuries-dead Sisay stood before her, half flesh and half bone, wreathed in smoky shadow and carrying the same sword Shanna wielded. Sisay's own sword. The most regular reminder of her ancestor's deeds, and of the example Shanna was driven to exceed.

"Foolish legacy," Sisay said with a smirk that dissolved into a dead rictus as it crossed her face. "What do you think you're doing?"

"What I have to." This wasn't her ancestor and didn't deserve respect. "Get out of my way."

"Why, so you can further poison my memory? I gave you the power and the dream of the *Weatherlight* , and look what you've done with it."

Sisay stabbed at the bulkhead, and oil mixed with clotted blood poured forth. More holes tore themselves open, and tentacles made of Phyrexian detritus whipped out. Everywhere they touched the *Weatherlight* 's wood turned livid and rotten, polluted by Phyrexian corpse-poison.

"I'm fighting to save the world," Shanna said. "Just like the real Sisay did."

"The difference is that she was successful." Sisay stabbed the wood again, and the false *Weatherlight* screamed. "When she lost the *Weatherlight* , it was the price for destroying Yawgmoth and saving the world. You're losing it for the grand and noble cause of smuggling trinkets from here to there. Are you too scared to confront the invaders, legacy? Or are you a waste of her blood? Do you at least have the courage to show me that you can fight at all?"

Shanna scowled at the mocking nightmare, and in an instant, the tip of her sword was at Sisay's throat. The nightmare only smiled, her teeth jagged and cold. It would be so easy to slash the neck of the thing that tore her ancestor's face to ribbons, to slice it into nothing and bury it.

The same way she'd buried all her other fears. The same way she'd forced Tiana to swallow her own worries when she'd come to her before the battle. The same way the land would reclaim the *Weatherlight* if the crew couldn't get it back in the air.

Shanna pressed the tip of her sword into the nightmare's neck. Instead of blood, gray smoke whispered out.

"It's not just my courage that matters," Shanna said. "It's everyone's. We're stronger together. If you understood anything about Sisay, you'd understand that."

"But right now, you're alone." The nightmare-wearing half of Sisay's face tore into a predator's grin. "Your friends can't help you. Face it, without you around to help them, they're probably dead already."

Nightmare-Sisay's jaw unhinged like a snake, and in her throat's darkness, Shanna saw awful things. Raff cut in half on a bed of entrails, Tiana's skin hanging loose next to her polished skeleton, the *Weatherlight* 's crew corrupted into Phyrexian monstrosities with oil for eyes and twisted metal tentacles wrapped in barbed wire, and through it all screaming, screaming, screaming.

"No!" Shanna roared with a dragon's fury. "NO!"

There was no artistry to Shanna's assault, only brutality. She struck at the nightmare-Sisay again and again, slashing and thrusting with her sword and her screams, severing bones and piercing clouds of smoke until there was nothing left of the nightmare. Nothing that her eyes could see, at least.

The false *Weatherlight* dissolved around her, and the shadowed corridor reasserted itself. This time, the darkness wasn't complete. Her sword shone bright enough to light the way.

"We're in this together," Shanna whispered, and she charged ahead, unyielding.

By Shanna's reckoning, she'd been walking down the corridor for half an hour after dispelling the nightmare-Sisay with no hint of the world beyond. Despite the darkness, she wasn't afraid. If she died here, she'd die on her feet while trying to save her crew. What better end could a captain ask for?

The corridor ended with the abruptness of sudden death. Between blinks, it evaporated, leaving her on solid, familiar dirt under a roiling cloud shot through with lightning. Below her, the ground bowed into a mud-bottomed crater where the half-sunken hulk of a Phyrexian war machine shrieked like an uncoiled hinge as it tried and failed to free itself.

It was more nightmarish than anything she'd seen in the corridor.

"Captain!" Shanna whirled to find Tiana nearby, alive and unruffled. "I'm so thankful you're alright."

"What about Raff? Did you see him?"

"No, I was alone in there, and I'm thankful for that, too." Tiana shuddered. "Some things shouldn't be shared. But I'm sure he'll be—"

Without a flash of light, a thunderclap, or roar, Raff wasn't there one instant and was the next. He appeared close enough to Tiana to make her yelp with surprise, and Raff in turn fell to the ground, gasping for breath.

"He's being, alright." Shanna offered Raff her hand. "Come on. Are you okay?"

"Okay? I thought I'd never get out of there!" Raff said as he hauled himself up. "I was walking for hours and never getting anywhere."

"Hours?" Tiana furrowed her brow. "It was minutes for me."

"It sounds like time was a bit unmoored in there," Shanna said. "Here's hoping it hasn't been years outside."

Before they could gather themselves any further, the air filled with a thrumming tune that started like a military march only to detour into warped playfulness. Shadows gathered from across the barrier's inside and congealed into a single form. It looked like Braids but faded and wrong, like a distorted shadow that had been burned onto a wall and then slithered off it.

Shanna stood firm as it approached. The shard of Braids, the thing she'd been sent in to kill. It had to be.

"Now that's a disappointment," Shard-Braids said with a voice that drilled. "Those nightmares should've made powder out of your fool brains. I must be out of practice."

"I'm an illusionist," Raff said. "I'm used to dealing with things that aren't real."

"Yes, well, I'm as real as death," Shard-Braids said. "And that's what you'll get if you don't leave now. Don't think it's a kindness. I'm itching to see if you survive the way back out."

A storm of shadows slithered out from the barrier's walls, and Shanna tensed herself. She could only hope that they'd be as easy to defeat as the nightmare-Sisay. Rather than pouncing to attack, the wisps of darkness coalesced into the original Braids's grasping, rainbow-and-shadow form.

"There you are or there I am, is it?" Braids chuckled. "Did you really think you could hide? Stop being foolish and come back to me, or I'll break you."

"What did she promise you three?" Shard-Braids sounded desperate, like a dream that knew it was a figment. "Don't be ridiculous, she's using you!"

"We don't have time for this," Shanna said. "Figure things out!"

"No, I won't!" Shard-Braids screamed, and the barrier rumbled and flashed with lightning. "If you're here with her, then I'll just have to kill you all!"

Shard-Braids pointed at Shanna with four flickering, shadowy hands. Nested cubes simultaneously black and transparent erupted from her fingers and hurled themselves at Shanna, only to spatter against the faint golden light of Shanna's magical immunity: Sisay's most enduring gift to her descendants.

Before the light had settled, Shanna charged and cleaved the space where Shard-Braids had been an instant before. Now she was behind her, with a palm against Raff's head. He was frozen mid-spellcast, his face twisted in terror.

"You're easier to play than gutstrings," Shard-Braids said. "And you thought you'd seen all the nightmares I had to offer."

Shanna charged again, and Shard-Braids only smiled like someone who knew the situation was entirely under control. That smile lasted until Tiana struck from the opposite direction, her open palm blazing with angelic power. One touch was enough to make Shard-Braids scream, but not enough to keep her from twisting around to spray a beam of darkness at Tiana's face.

It never made it. Raff's unfinished spell knitted itself together and crashed into the beam with a storm of mutual annihilation, while Raff dodged out of Shard-Braids's reach. He gave Shanna all the opening she needed to skewer Shard-Braids on the tip of her sword.

Shanna found more resistance than mere shadow. Her sword blazed with fire and ice, fear and pleasure, and in Shard-Braids's scream, Shanna heard lingering nightmares. As Shanna jerked her sword back, the original Braids descended from above with a predator's smile. Braids's teeth gave way to a swirling void of a throat as her jaw first yawned wide then tore open with the eagerness of poorly stitched clothes, like an earthquake fissure, like an avalanche that buried the shard whole. With a sizzling screech, the barrier fell away and the stars gazed down on them.

"Was was that it?" Shanna blinked in surprise. "It was that simple?"

"Oh, no," Braids said. "I was holding her back. You and you and you'd have been ugly corpses by now otherwise. Especially you."

"That's, well " Raff fell to the ground in a heap. "Tiana, you don't know how lucky you are not having to worry about sleep, or nightmares!"

"I wondered if I was missing out," Tiana said. "I don't think I will for a while. I think I need to start gathering parts."

For a long moment, nobody spoke. The world's silence was a balm that lasted until Braids shattered it with applause.

"Now then, now then, if you want to lie down here and die, I'm happy to help you along, but if you still want my help with your ship, you should really get organized! I promise I won't even kill anyone, even when they really deserve it. I mean, look at how I haven't killed any of you yet!"

"That's encouraging," Shanna said, sheathing her sword. "Come on. Let's gather those parts and get out of here."

Shanna walked behind everyone else as they traced the path back to the *Weatherlight*. Aside from not wanting to be between Tiana and her skyship, she wanted to keep a close eye on Braids. Not that it would matter, given everything she'd seen, but vigilance was always preferable to the alternative.

"You really wouldn't rather fly, Tiana?" Raff asked. "I'm sure you'd have everything ready once we caught up."

"I would." Tiana unfurled her wings for a moment, then tucked them back again around the armful of parts she'd scavenged from the dead construct. "But I wouldn't want to leave you alone, either. Or risk dropping anything on your head."

"Alone with a mystery like me, you mean?" Smoky snake heads unfolded from Braids's shadowed aura with hissing laughter. "I'm so touched, angel. I mean it. Come on, touch me and find out what happens!"

"Nobody's touching anyone," Shanna said.

"Yes, yes, it's going to be so exciting!" Braids said. "The sort of exciting where you make sure you said goodbye to your loved ones first. You *did* all say goodbye before you started winging around the world, right? I'd be tickled to make some extra visits if not "

"All we need is to get back in the air again," Shanna said. She thought of her loved ones every time the *Weatherlight* struck a blow against the Phyrexian invaders. "That's all that matters for now."

"The sooner, the better." Tiana put one hand to her head. "I don't know what it is, but I'm getting a terrible headache."

As they passed a bowed-over tree that Shanna remembered being not too far from the *Weatherlight*'s crash site, a pair of bobbing lights appeared around a curve in the trail. Shanna grasped her sword's hilt, and when she recognized Velen's voice shouting, her grip only tightened.

"Captain!" Velen was accompanied by Arvad and Elmeagraun from the *Weatherlight*'s engine room, and they all looked ragged and wrecked. "Thank Serra we found you! It's awful!"

"What happened?"

"The *Weatherlight*, it's—"

Arvad shouted before she could finish. "Too late, get down!"

A flurry of sickly green powerbolts rained down, digging craters and setting trees alight. There was no time to scatter. Shanna threw herself to the ground, singed from a near miss. Velen and Elmeagraun weren't so lucky and melted into puddles an instant before Raff finished casting a protection spell. Arvad grunted with pain, but the sort of grunt that told Shanna he was still in the game.

Braids howled with laughter. "Wouldn't you know, just like wax, except wax never screams like that!"

Shanna had no words for any of it as she helped Arvad to his feet. The *Weatherlight* loomed above them, and a glance was enough to know it wasn't the *Weatherlight* anymore. Its spike-studded hull was knotted like burned muscle, and cables like intestines hung dribbling with viscera that said the *Weatherlight* she knew was dead.

"Arvad, what happened?"

"Some problem in the engine room," Arvad said. "A malfunction that spiralled on and on. What matters is the *Weatherlight*'s turned against us."

In a distant recess of her mind, Shanna heard Tiana say, *I told you so*. She wasn't going to dwell on that, not when only one thing mattered.

"Tiana, can you bring it down?"

"Bring it down?" Braids gasped with mock outrage. "This is a better show than anything I could've hoped for."

"If I can get the powerstone, that should do it." Tiana's eyes burned with resolve that made her tears shine.

"Then let's go." She grabbed Tiana tight and gave her a pleading look. *I'm so sorry.*

Though the *Weatherlight* fired more volleys as Tiana and Shanna ascended, its attacks went wide, as if still getting used to being a monstrosity, and it couldn't keep them from its rancid hull. Though slick with Phyrexian corruption, Tiana had no trouble carving a hatch open.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Shanna said. Instead of the soothing wood she remembered, the *Weatherlight*'s interior was overgrown with mossy flesh, eyes wreathed in teeth, and jagged spines, more than one of which had speared a crew member's arm or heart or head. "How did this happen so fast?"

"It was happening for weeks," Tiana said in a low monotone. "Some things start slow, and finish all at once."

In the engine room, raw meat had grown around the machine frames, with the exposed Thran metal skeleton here turned black and acid burned. The powerstone, still in its cradle, was the only source of light and the only uncorrupted thing. Slimefoot clung to it, its cap singed and trailing hyphae.

Three razored tentacles growing from the meat stabbed and snapped at Slimefoot until Shanna drew their attention. All three were impaled in heads that Shanna recognized, and which recognized her.

Botono, the helmsman Raff had replaced in the storm of battle. Ulaten, who'd always had a joke to pierce the most stressful situations. Anyxni, with a spirit that never gave up. Shanna had never seen defeat in their eyes before now.

"Captain " they groaned and wheezed. "You left us to die "

The head-tentacles whipped forth, and before Shanna could dodge or slash them away, they licked her neck worse than acid and fire combined. It was betrayal distilled into a poison.

That shard of Braids hadn't had any idea what real nightmares were.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there when you needed me." Shanna dodged another strike as her sword bit through the tentacle wearing Ulaten's head. It wept black oil instead of blood. "I know it hurts. Let me end it."

"You killed us " They spoke sharper than swords.

"The Phyrexians killed you," Shanna said. "Don't think I'll forget."

Shanna felt the razor's pain the way she saw through frosted glass: only the vaguest impressions were there. She'd have time for pain later. One thrust, and Botono's death was final; another, and Anyxni's spirit disappeared like desert rain.

There was no triumph to it. The only triumph in nightmares was waking up from them. Shanna and Tiana traded a long, wordless gaze that said everything necessary and worked to free the powerstone from its cradle. It was warm to the touch, and still full of possibilities.

"Slimefoot, are you okay?" Shanna didn't expect an answer from the thallid, but the way it shivered and took a step forward told her what she needed to know. "Come on, let's get out of here."

"And how," Tiana said. "This wreck won't stay flying much longer."

There was no resistance on the way back to the hatch. Shanna hoped it was thanks to some remnant of the *Weatherlight*'s spirit fighting on. Tiana paused at the edge, her hand pressed against the corrupted bulkhead, fighting back tears.

"First the Great Machine, and now this," Tiana whispered. "What kind of angel am I?"

“One who’s going to keep on going, to make sure it doesn’t end like this,” Shanna pressed her hand to Tiana’s shoulder. “Right?”

Tiana squeezed Shanna and Slimefoot close and leapt out of the hatch. As they fell, the *Weatherlight* with its transformed hull and veiny wings shuddered, turned away, and flew off.

It was a defeat, but it wasn’t the end.