

Epilogue 2: Bring the End, Part

2

Alison Lührs

From set *Outlaws of Thunder Junction*

02. 04. 2024

On Vryn

Jace blinks sweat and oil from his eyes and shivers from fever. The small room smells equal parts haunting and nostalgic, like he's a ghost come to call long past his exit. The light from a nearby lamp glares and reveals; it makes the few cables he has left wince. He feels embarrassed for his homecoming to be in such an unnatural state. Jace marvels as his mother leaps into action; she engages without pause or question.

Ranna Beleren kneels, her hand on her son's cheek and her other hand pressing a bundle of her cardigan against the wound in his chest. Jace lies next to Vraska on his mother's floor, both bleeding and broken. He draws in a wheezing breath and feels her hands on his forehead that is clammy with fever. At once, he is an adult and child, remembering how small he was the last time his healer mother attended to his fever. Jace realizes he's slipping, sensing his mother's cognitive dissonance through the touch of her hand. He bashfully retreats.

For a moment, he worries at what his mother will do in response to Vraska—a bloodied and mangled Phyrexian gorgon just landed in her living room. It takes a moment for Jace to remember his great fortune; his mother would have no idea what a gorgon is. There aren't any on Vryn. At best, his beloved looks like a snake monster, and at worst, she looks like a Phyrexian snake monster. If he weren't dying, he'd laugh.

"Save him first," Vraska rasps, and Jace sees her tilt her head to make steady and trusting eye contact with his mother. "My name is Vraska. Your son is more precious than my life. Please help him." Of course, she remembers his mother. Jace sometimes forgets she saw everything.

Ranna's brows are low, her expression focused and concerned. Her eyes flicker to Jace's (he sees his own in hers, their blue a clear and boundless lake) and hears in his mind a broadcasted question.

Is she your wife?

It is a question so huge that Jace coughs at the weight of it. His *wife*. He had never dared to think of her in such a small container. But when he imagines her wearing his family's colors, venturing across planes with his grandmother's earrings on a sensible chain around her neck, Vrynian nuptial bracelets on both their wrinkled and arthritic hands ... for a moment Jace loses himself in hope. His mouth is a hard line as he answers her in turn.

She is my world, mother.

Ranna takes a moment and nods. "No need for martyrs, both of you are getting fixed up. Now Vraska, I need you to count down from ten for me, can you do that?"

The pain is overwhelming now. It seizes Jace's muscles and pulls him under. His chest is on fire; his open sores scream at the cold air. Vraska weakly counts aloud next to him—

"Ten ... nine ..."

As Jace anticipates the eight, he sees Ranna cast a ward on her fingertips, a light cyan shimmer that glistens in the low light. She raises her hands, and both son and beloved rise with them. Jace wants to thank her, but instead feels himself drift into unconsciousness as Ranna whispers to them both a song of sedation, for the first time in decades singing her son to sleep.

He wakes in a bleary haze of incense and smoke. His mother's expertise is carefully knolled around the nexuses of his body: a horse skull at his feet, river rocks at each open sore from the cables, an upturned bell on top of the bandages of his chest. Jace is no healer but even he can sense the flow of energy from each object to each point.

And with a tired and anguished turn of his head, he understands where he is. Ranna had moved them both into a healing room he recognizes as his old childhood bedroom. There is the stain on the ceiling he'd stare at every night; there, high on the shelf, is a horseshoe from the first Pewter. The room feels so much smaller now as an adult. Ranna is kneeling over Vraska, a bright light shining over his beloved's skin as his mother kneels over, her hands aglow.

"I can't lower her fever," she says.

Oh. *That was me*, Jace broadcasts to her in response.

"You become a healer too in the last thirteen years?" she says with acrid marksmanship.

It was the best I could think of. I commanded our bodies to generate a fever to burn out the phyresis.

Ranna nods. "Your command raised both of your bodies' defenses to do what would have taken me two days of treatment." There's a "good job" in there somewhere; Jace can smell it. His mother has hardened up while he was away. She lifts her head, staring straight at Jace.

"Did Alhammarret fail to protect you?"

He doesn't understand. *Protect me?*

"From whatever killed him. We all thought ..." Ranna pauses. She looks so much older now. "We all thought you died with him. That's what both armies reported. So, what killed him?"

There is no atonement that can soothe the lines in his mother's face. Vryn spent thirteen years thinking he was dead when the truth was far more meaningless. What hell did he put her through?

Jace's chest hurts. His lip trembles.

Ranna narrows her eyes. "Show me what happened."

Her request makes Jace's heart ache, not because of the wound Elspeth left in his chest, but because she knows him still. After all this time, his mother knows her son and his gifts.

So, he does, all in one go. All of what happened the night he first planeswalked, a broad glimpse of the last thirteen years. Ranna gasps and falls back to her seat. What he shows her is an accelerated summary: *Alhammarret, betrayal, forget, forget, forget shame, remember love, love, mom, this is my love, save us, we did not ask for this.*

Ranna audibly swallows. "He lied to you, and you forgot ... everything? Even us?"

Jace doesn't have the strength to nod. His mother blinks, visibly thinking, eyes darting as if reading something midair, and Jace realizes he does the same thing when working his way through new information—the familiarity aches.

But it's Ranna's next question that catches him off guard. She presses hard with her bundled-up cloth against the wound on his chest and asks him steady and deadly, "Did you kill him?"

He cannot respond, he cannot move, but Jace's expression darkens all the same.

Ranna nods for him. "Good."

Jace awakens, his arms bandaged, his chest glowing with a compress that smells floral yet astringent. The pain is muffled, broad, and difficult to pinpoint; there must be a spell masking it. He takes a rasping breath and blinks; the fever is still here, but the small pile of metal and cables in the corner says that his body is still fighting off the phytosis.

Vraska is asleep on the table next to him. Jace *feels* something nearby, a frantic and lively energy, like midsummer sun, and notes a long orange feather lying across her forehead. He can see the edges flicker, a plasmid curl that continues down the feather's edges as a long-lit candle. He watches it burn without burning as Ranna enters with a tincture in one hand and a bowl of soup in the other.

"What does that do?" he croaks, noting the pinion.

"It's a phoenix feather. Can you feel it? It was on you before, while you were unconscious." Ranna smiles. "It is an alternative to organ replacement I developed. Full living tissue turnover, sears out the affected organs, accelerates necrosis, then turns that dead tissue into a living replacement. Bet you thought you were the only prodigy in the family."

"Didn't know I had a family for thirteen years."

"Well. You do." Ranna pauses, considering. "And you've done well. Vraska is beautiful," Ranna says, regarding her with a smile. "Is she kind?"

Jace smiles. "She is kind to those who deserve kindness."

"Then she's wise, too." Ranna sets both soup and medicine at his side. "At this rate, I'll be able to wake her tomorrow. Keep doing your part, kiddo. It's helping."

Jace hadn't stopped his mental commands to them both. *You have a virus. Burn, fight. Eliminate the virus.* The commands run on a loop in the back of his mind. It tires him, but he tries not to think about it.

"I'm sorry I didn't come sooner," he says quietly. "I was ashamed I forgot you."

Ranna nods, her mouth tight. "I'm ashamed of who I became after you died—left."

Jace is glad for a moment his parents just assumed he was dead. He notices the empty liquor bottle on the table behind her.

She coaxes another plate of metal from Vraska's skin and quickly places a hand on the spot to bathe it in light. "Think that means we're square."

She locks her feelings away so easily, Jace thinks, but perhaps he always knew that. "Where's dad?" he asks.

She shrugs a little. It's a small and empty gesture. He understands.

“We separated. He went for the frontier as a mage-ring engineer. I joined the army as a field medic. Healing the living felt more useful than developing healing theory alone. It’s been one Armageddon after another around here. All kinds of militia taking over, then getting killed, then another taking over ...” she pauses, shakes her head, exhales an even shakier breath. “Jace ... this war came for you too early. I should never have let you near that sphinx.”

She takes his hand. They share a charged look. “But even if you didn’t become his apprentice, the war would have come for you, too. The wars always come.”

He knows. He knows. He knows.

He’s well enough now to walk to the bed his mother set up in the living room. It may have been two days, or it may have been two months. He can’t really tell. Mostly he sleeps—a deep and restorative oblivion. Best he’s ever slept in his life. He blinks back to wakefulness after his second nap that day, automatically reminding his body to turn off the warning flare of pain from his still-healing injuries. Vraska’s voice from her seat at the dining table makes him stir.

“—don’t understand how they knew it was him.”

His mother makes a neutral noise. “The general recognized him, he was ... influential, when he was younger. We can’t let him out on the street, or if he does, he needs to disguise himself. There’s a warrant for his execution.”

They’re talking about him. What he did. Jace decides to remain quiet and listen.

“... it wasn’t us, Ranna.” Vraska is steady, but he hears her anger at the injustice. “We weren’t in control. How are we supposed to be held accountable for actions we did not choose?”

“You’re not. I think you just start over.” His mother pauses. There’s the sound of pouring water, of a single plunk of sugar in a cup. Vraska murmurs a thank you.

“How did you meet Jace, Vraska?”

Please *don’t say the real answer*, he wills.

“On an island.”

He sighs in relief.

“He was handsome, funny. Curious to a fault.”

Jace feels himself blush.

“He’s always been curious,” says Ranna. “One time he wanted to know what I did at the hospital, so he followed me in secret. I only found out when he bumped into me mid-surgery with *my* lunch in his hands.”

Vraska grins with mirth, all teeth. “What a *scoundrel*.”

Jace can’t see them clearly from this angle but sees the tiredness in both their silhouettes, how their shadows stretch wide and solid up the wall in the lamplight. Even in the quiet gaps of conversation, these two women command the entirety of the space.

“He always meant well. We didn’t figure it out until much later, but he was using his magic much earlier than we suspected. One time when he was young, he was so upset our building’s cart-horse was ill, he illusioned up a copy of the horse and tried to put tack on it. Of course, we had no idea Jace was the one who made it. This was before we knew he was a telepath, let alone an illusionist. We found

him with the horse and assumed he had come across some spy-spell. Poor Jace, he was so mad when the saddle kept falling through its back.”

“He created a fully coherent illusion as a *child*?”

Ranna nods her head, a smile on her lips. “Oh, yes, the block’s horse was Pewter. Jace was so upset when he died. Kept that double around for weeks. I think he loved the copy of Pewter more than he loved the actual horse.”

Vraska goes quiet. “Ranna, thank you for all of this.”

“How is today?” His mother always asked that as a way to ask patients what their pain level is. Jace remembers her asking that every day he returned from school.

Vraska becomes small. “... I remember too much. It wasn’t me, but I ... killed, hurt, so many people. I’m not sure how to go back to being guildmaster again.”

Ranna takes her hand. “I’ll tell you what I could never tell my son,” Jace hears, unseen in the other room, “The old you is dead. You can never be that person ever again.”

Jace’s breath catches in his chest.

“You are your son’s mother,” Vraska says gently. “Thank you, Ranna.”

Vraska sounds comforted by that; Jace is anything but. The old him is dead, his mother is right. The Living Guildpact, the oathtaker, the pirate, the sphinx’s weapon of war. That person died when Phyrexia stole his body to kill his countrymen.

He is someone else.

They stand at the edge of the uncanny, a broad bluish triangle that looks and feels and smells so familiar, their hearts beat to the same rhythm as its pulse. It is new and familiar at once, and the strangeness of seeing a physical manifestation of what was once private and individual feels decadent, perverse. Jace feels Vraska grow stiff and uncomfortable the closer they get. They heard about the portal through Ranna, who came home excitedly to talk about the very nice kor she met at the hospital, and now they stand before it, an Omenpath. Jace has illusioned them a different face to avoid suspicion (and his warrant).

Vraska looks at the Omenpath with disdain as she inspects the edges. “They aren’t supposed to exist.”

Jace had half expected to find optimism in the portal, a way to connect the Multiverse further, but now, standing in front of it, all he can see is consequence. “Everything we did as the Gatewatch we could only manage because the threats were contained. Look at what Bolas and Tezzeret did with just one portal. Now this ...?”

“On this scale there’ll be conquerors collecting planes, cretins smearing violence across the Multiverse, and no way to stop them. No way to corral and curb. No way to punish.” Vraska looks at him. “Jace. We have to do something.”

Jace understands, but his exhaustion weighs too heavily. The wounds too fresh. “Why us?”

She looks exasperated, but all Jace can do is take her hand, squeeze it to remind her what is real, here, now.

“We got out with our lives, Vraska. That’s enough for me. I want to think about what’s next for us.”

They meet eyes.

What is next? Jace remembers his mother's question, *is that your wife?* The vision he holds of her in Vrynian formals, his family's blues and patterns complementing the green of her skin. He imagines a child of their own. The look in her eyes says that she imagines a similar future.

"You'd make a phenomenal parent." She says.

"So would you."

"We'd need to ..."

"Adopt," Jace says quickly. Then smiles with a blush. "I don't think it would work."

"Adopt," Vraska nods quickly, wincing an acknowledgment, "I think we'd know by now if it did."

She snorts a laugh. Jace can't help but smile in turn. It feels good to see her laugh again, especially good to see her laugh at the impossibility of their coupling. The Multiverse is miserable entropy, but there is meaning in the clasp of their hands.

As if reading his mind, Vraska's lips purse. "Does it make sense to raise a child in this Multiverse?" She says, worried. "Is repair even possible?"

"I'm sick of repair," Jace sighs. "What is the point of repair when everything will fall apart anyways?"

His beloved, the woman who would be his wife, looks to the Omenpath with a haunted expression. "The Multiverse is too broken to fix."

Jace thinks of fire. The phoenix feather that brought Vraska back to him. "So, what if we do something other than fix it."

A tempting and heinous idea pulses in the background of their world as a heartbeat. It is urgent and unrelenting, and once they both realize the other was thinking it, the contagiousness became impossible to look away from. They dream of abominations, of revolution. The ease and allure of phoenix feathers.

Over the months they spend on Vryn, Jace and Vraska talk, and over time, accept that their old lives have ended.

They talk about how one war will forever follow the others, and how this Multiverse bends only toward suffering. Suffering their kind accelerates.

And they talk about how sometimes at night Jace still feels the power of the sylex dancing across his nerves.

They agree that the most just option is the one that clears a future for all, and they mourn that the cost of that freedom will be high. Repair does not clean. Restoration does not erase. But rebirth ... rebirth does both.

The telepath and the gorgon dream of phoenix feathers.

Nothing dies , she says, *it only transforms—*

—because change is the only constant , he finishes.

Their intention crackles in the coals and spreads its wings from cinders.

Nine Years Ago on Thunder Junction

Jace is achingly young, barely twenty, wandering red dirt in the shade of a great tumbleweed, its curves stretching high above into a broad sky. Wild horses graze in the distance, and it makes him feel empty. He searches for a plane that reminds him of a place he ought to know but can't remember.

Tezzeret sent him here to find something the great dragon Nicol Bolas was afraid of. From the tone of the assignment, Jace gathered Tezzeret couldn't get inside.

So now, Jace stands at the great entrance to the Fomori vault. He closes his eyes and puts a hand on the door, uncertain what good telepathy will do where telekinesis seems more helpful.

And yet, to his surprise, he feels a mind deep within the vault, sleepy with torpor, childlike and quiet. There's a barrier between, something that prevents him from psychically reaching inside.

When Jace returned to tell Tezzeret what he found, the leader of the Infinite Consortium only scoffed.

"Great, another weird kid."

They never talked about the Fomori vault again.

Two Years Ago on Ravnica

But years later, in a moment of curiosity, Jace remembered what shouldn't be forgotten and found the answer he was looking for in the months after the War of the Spark over tea with a dear friend.

"I've heard of that vault, yes. There are others like it, on planes across the Multiverse. Relics of an ancient empire long lost to history. Lost to *most*, anyway," Tamiyo had said, setting her cup down and taking a scroll from her satchel. "Would you like to hear the story?"

All three of their conspiracy, Ranna, Vraska, and Jace, stand in the living room. They are healed and brimming with purpose, dead set on their destination.

Jace kisses his mother goodbye, and he can smell alcohol on her breath.

"Once a week," Ranna says, squeezing her son's hand.

"Once a week," he affirms, squeezing back, a great sadness in his eyes.

Vraska hugs Ranna, "I am so glad to have met you. You gave us a second chance. Thank you."

She nudges Jace. "I'll give you a moment," she says and walks to the kitchen, out of earshot.

"Mom. Thank you. You saved us."

"You saved me," she replies with yet another hand squeeze. "And you abandoned me ... I don't know if I can forgive you for that. But I know it wasn't your fault."

"Then who's to blame? For me forgetting, for Dad leaving, for the war ..."

Ranna shrugs. She looks so tired. "No one. There's no blame or reason. I'm sorry, kiddo. The world bends toward misery."

He hugs her again. "Not this time. We're going to make it all right, Mom."

"If anyone can do it, it's you, my miracle." She kisses his forehead.

Vraska returns, and they clasp hands, prepared to planeswalk for the first time in months.

"Ready?"

“Ready.”

Jace steps forward into oblivion, and Vraska takes a step onto the carpet.

Her eyes are wide. Jace feels it as something akin to his ears popping, like the pressure had ascended and some gap was left in midair where Vraska stood. He steps back into Vryn, feeling for Vraska’s shoulder. She lurches forward, her hand to her heart, her throat, her head, tapping and feeling for something that isn’t there. She staggers, winces from the pain, and just as Jace leans to help, she lets out a gasping sob.

“I can’t feel it. I can’t feel it anymore.”

“Feel what?”

“I can’t planeswalk! Can you?”

Instantly he allows his body to shift, standing half in and half out of the Blind Eternities, his feet and legs vibrating with his own cerulean glow. Vraska closes her eyes, concentrates, and gasps. “It’s gone.”

She collapses into a nearby chair, and Jace draws close, whisking her into an embrace.

Vraska’s breath is too fast, her arms shaking with fear. Suddenly, she presses her forehead to his. “*Find it*,” she commands.

Jace understands innately what she means. He opens his mind to hers and dives in.

He searches, scours every part in every door she leaves open, but nothing. That *thing*, her spark, whatever it is that allows her the gift they share, it isn’t here.

As he emerges, it’s his tears that signal to Vraska it is truly gone.

She openly weeps, and it is the first time Jace has heard her cry. He thinks of her collections, all the wonders she loves from her travels, and all the places they were supposed to go together.

“I don’t know who I am without it,” she whispers in his arms.

The old you is dead.

We can never be those people again.

Jace weeps with her at the meaninglessness of it all and vows to make meaning of their own.

Ranna remakes their bed. Vraska unpacks her bag. The calamity they conspire takes on new urgency.

She turns her grief into purpose with furious alchemy, takes over the wall by the bookcase, and plots as if her life depends on it.

And Jace, charged with intent, gets to work.

Twelve Months Ago on Eldraine

Jace likes Eldraine; the rules that govern this plane are joyous and chaotic at first glance but crystallize into perfect sense when you learn how to look at it. He admires the logic inside its whimsy.

He came to this jail to find a prisoner—knocking the guards unconscious is easy enough, so easy he doesn’t even need to be invisible to do it. The guards’ armor clangs against one another as they collapse into a shared dream. Stepping over a body, Jace runs his fingertips along the stone walls. He walks

down the long row of sealed doors and casts an illusion to borrow a face, his features blurring and washing away, leaving the most frightening and helpful visage he knows.

It has to be someone no one else can trust, Vraska had said. *Someone no one would ask questions about.*

Jace had met Ashiok once. Once was enough.

He slows his gait and puppets the illusion; a lilting glide, elbows raised, hands delicate despite the claws, chin tilted upward. Jace remembers something Judith of the Rakdos once said in confidence: a great performance is *never* facsimile; it must always be built from a truth. The more he wears illusions, the more convincing he becomes; Jace has found so many truths this past year. In this moment, he coaxes a sense memory powerful and virulent to the surface; the blood-slick, whites-of-the-eyes sensation of *knowing* that you are terrifying. He's felt it before—the feeling of others being afraid of him. Jace hated it then, but now, perhaps, there's power in being monstrous.

It's a role he'll need to be comfortable with—this won't be the last time he wears this face. Well, half of a face.

Inside the cell at the end of the row of doors is Eriette, the wicked witch.

Jace as Ashiok smiles without eyes and curls his fingers around the bars of her cell.

Eriette smiles back. "Well, my dear, what took you so long?"

Six Months Ago on Ixalan

Vraska hates that she's here without him. She won't stay long. *Ixalan next*, she had planned. *Let's give our friends something to do*, Jace suggested in turn. He had followed several strangers through several Omenpaths to find the one that she could take safely—Vraska was getting better at not being annoyed for needing help.

She knew this plane would lead next to Thunder Junction, which was something to look forward to—at last, she'll work alongside her illusion-masked partner in crime. When Jace had suggested his disguise for their task, she teased him it was a face too fun to pass up, and sure enough, through nights of rehearsing in the living room and scaring his mother half to death, they all agreed he had the right choice. Turns out, he's a good actor. Luckily, so is she.

The floating city of High and Dry is just as she remembers it, bustling, creaking with the waves. It's a place she feels glad to return to. She feels most herself here. It takes less than an hour of searching its creaking-ladder walkways and hunting its docks to find who she's looking for. She's relieved; if they weren't here, then they'd be on the *Belligerent* in the middle of the sea.

Breeches is easy to hear, and Malcolm is easy to spot.

"GIANT MUSHROOM," the goblin hollers. "GIANT MUSHROOM. TOO MANY OPINIONS."

"Sentient," the siren patiently corrects. "It was *sentient* —"

Vraska grins and steps out. "Hello, boys. You sound like you need a job."

Their response is enthusiastic, brimming with happy tears, an equal yell from both siren and goblin.

"CAPTAIN!"

Last Month on Ravnica

Jace prowls the Golgari undercity. He's been following his mark for some time.

Proft and Etrata are bargaining with Izeni.

How can we manifest it? Vraska said. *There's a detective back home who can project his psychic print into reality*, Jace had recalled. His love had nodded, pinning a note to the wall. *We need to discern how his abilities differentiate from yours*, she said. *Get in his head.*

Jace now watches their conversation from the shadows. Standing just far enough in the light to be caught, he waits as a lure. At last, the detective glances up, eyes narrowed, and Jace takes off. He feels Proft's alarm, how he gives chase behind him—Proft is spry, faster than Jace expected, but running just as planned. Jace's cloak flares behind him. He readies a lead pipe and dodges around a corner just as he senses the detective's desperate reach.

Jace turns, swings the pipe as best he can, and feels satisfying contact as he knocks Proft to the ground. Vraska would be so proud of his violence. Jace smiles. He kneels, extending his hand, his eyes set alight, and the mental link is made.

Presently on Thunder Junction

The heat of the desert is thin and stinging. It makes Jace shed his cloak as a tithe to the rock and sand. He leaves it folded and forgotten on the sandstone block he rests on under the scraggly shade of a fragrant pinyon pine. There's no sound in the meeting place they had decided on, or at least no people—the skitter of a bighorn sheep on the rockface up above clatters through his attention, but only moments later all he can hear is the beating heart of his anticipation. She's coming.

A rock tumbles in the distance, and Jace sees Vraska as she carries their prize down the rock and scree of a shady hillside.

He's alive, impossibly. They had suspected he would be in a state of suspended animation but didn't expect him to be so young. Vraska carries him now, roly-poly as a toddler, and the boy (Tamiyo's text said it was a boy) seems all too happy to take in the world around them. He holds onto her desperately, and Jace wonders if he cannot remember his own parents.



Art by: Gaboleps

“Hello *again*,” Vraska says with knowing mirth. “Thanks for taking the rubber mask off.”

“Ha, ha,” Jace says, smiling despite the false laugh. They hug close. “What, don’t want to kiss me without eyes?”

“It’s the lack of a nose, I feel like I’m kissing the inside of your face. This is better.”

“Fair. Is this ...”

“He’s had a big day,” Vraska says softly, bouncing the Fomori treasure on her hip. She lets him down, and Jace finds himself instinctively kneeling and holding out his hand.

“Hi there,” he says. The child perks up in attention—it understands him, good. “My name is Jace. What’s your name?”

The child chirps a bit, and Jace is pretty sure that’s as close to spoken language as they’ll get for a bit. “I’m a telepath, that means I can read minds. May I read your mind so I can say your name correctly?”

Uncertain at first, but then with happy compliance, the child nestles its head under Jace’s hand.

Jace’s eyes light up, and he gasps.

“What is it?” Vraska kneels, worried, as the child flinches slightly in response. Jace shakes his head in assurance.

“It’s alright! I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you both.”

A tear slides down his cheek. Awe overtakes him. “His name is Loot.”

Vraska snorts. “Were his parents Plunder and Ransack?”

“Vraska.”

“Sorry, Loot.” She pats him apologetically, but the offense seems to have gone over his adorable head.

“You’re still in there,” she says, referring to the blue light in Jace’s eyes and his faraway gaze.

“We knew he would be a map but ... gods, I didn’t realize it would be like this.”

“Can you see it?”

“It’s ... It’s the entire Multiverse. I can see every plane as a point of light, and within each point, more in turn where those connect with other places ... They’re Omenpaths. Vraska, it’s in real time. I can see planes being born from the World Tree, planes dissolving into black holes of aether. It’s the way to get from every point to every point. Vraska ... you can use this to travel the Multiverse again.”

He can feel her tense. “It maps the end point of every Omenpath?”

“Every one.” He squeezes her hand with his free one. He shivers.

“What is it like?” Vraska asks.

A soft and delicate smile breaches his face. He huffs a laugh and doesn’t bother to hide his veneration. When he replies, his gaze almost looks through her. “It’s like looking at eternity.”

Jace finishes and wipes his eyes. He keeps his attention focused on Loot.

“You did so good. Thank you, Loot.” He makes close eye contact, and Loot draws close. “Loot, we need you to know that Vraska and I will protect you with all of our strength. We’ll keep you safe,” Jace promises. He looks to his beloved and sees Vraska nod, warm and earnest. Loot chirps with fresh affection.

Jace then flickers a look to Vraska. “And I imagine *you* could use some quiet.”

“Mostly a bath,” she smiles with a kiss.

So, a bath they seek.

They find it in a nearby four-horse town at an inn that doesn’t ask questions.

In the quiet of their room at the inn, Jace holds Loot, sleepy and content on his lap. He lovingly runs his thumbs over the child’s forehead. The child had gently given the invitation, and Jace made sure he was comfortable in return. Looking through his mind was overwhelming. Where the usual interior was crystalline and delicate, Loot’s was vast, solid as steel, and, as far as Jace could tell, endless. Jace closes his eyes now, skimming the map in the child’s mind and quizzing Vraska on her travels.

“How about a plane with someplace called Qarsi? You been there?”

Vraska brings over her coffee. “I have! It’s a palace and the settlement around it. Purple banner in the kitchen.” She smiles, and in a happy half-tune adds to Loot, “He knows how to get to Tarkir.”

“What’s Tarkir like?” Jace asks.

Vraska sits on the bed next to them and gently nuzzles Loot’s snout to his delight. She plays with her voice as she speaks, rubbing her tired feet but directing the answer to Loot with warmth and child-friendly intonation. “Tarkir is beautiful, massive. There are great big mountains, thick jungles, wiiiiiiiide, open steppes, and lots of different peoples. But if you know Tarkir, then it means *you* know how to get us restocked on the *good* tea.”

“Do they have good coffee?”

She grins and purrs with dangerous promise, “They have coffee that is *cold*.”

“Wait, seriously?”

“I had it in Qarsi. They use a spell to chill it, then put sweet cream on top.”

Jace narrows his eyes. “Where?”

A brief mental exchange, two glass steins nabbed from the bar, one solo planeswalk, and twenty minutes later, Jace returns from the aether with two full steins of sweet, cold coffee and six bundles of fresh food. Vraska and Loot cheer at his arrival, and Jace disperses the meal.

For the first time in decades, Jace remembers the fortune of family. The scent of fish curry and braised pork and sticky rice and fermented noodles waft downstairs to mingle with the tobacco and whiskey and piñon of the saloon below. Jace smiles and kisses his beloved as the child in the room giggles, alone no longer. This moment is portent. It is an omen.

Tomorrow the three of them will walk through a portal that shouldn’t exist to a plane that won’t see them coming, which is just what Jace wants. They will pack their bags for their journey, shake off the dust of one plane, and hoist Loot onto their hips. Jace and Vraska will pull down their sleeves over the scars from their phyresis, kissing their way up the healed wounds on their arms. The scar tissue is their pact. It is the shared acknowledgment that not only do bad things happen, but they also happen without cause. This Multiverse is a maelstrom without end. There is no hope of eliminating the cruelty and injustice of existence. But in those scars, in that pact, their strange little family carries with them the hope they have chosen.

Jace will walk forward into the Omenpath, sanguine and resolute. He will hold tight to the hand of his beloved and his ward and walk into the Blind Eternities of a miserable Multiverse and say to himself with resolution and phoenix fire:

Ours will be better.