

Epilogue 1: Bring the End, Part

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From set *Outlaws of Thunder Junction*

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One Year Prior. The Invasion Tree.

All that remains at the end of the journey is catastrophe; Jace has his hands on the sylex, Phyrexia will succeed in their invasion, and all that is left is to desperately try to explain to his friends why annihilation is the only path to peace.

They're trying to talk him out of it, but they can only see what feels *right* and not what is *real*. They aren't listening. Jace's heart aches for the billions and billions who will survive to suffer and witness their own annihilation, and he wishes the one person whose moral compass was steadfast as stone were here to champion his argument; the Multiverse cannot persist if Phyrexia survives. We must let it start over.

Even if we win, thousands of planes die. If we lose, existence is forsaken. We owe it to the planes and generations that follow to gift them a Multiverse unpolluted by Phyrexia.

They must act. Jace knows he is a bomb. He's sixteen tons of pyrite; he's a field of upturned knives; he's a hammer surrounded by cobwebs, and at this moment, he holds his shaking hand four inches from the rim of the sylex. The cables that writhe from his arm, the appendages are *his*, but they recoil from the artifact. What is left of him is fascinated at the reflex; not even phyresis can exterminate the instinct of self-preservation. Which is not ideal. He needs to die promptly so Elesh Norn cannot detonate him.

The transformation is nearly complete; only an exhaustive amount of self-control has kept it at bay. With each passing hour, another cable snakes out of his arms and prods into the minds of his friends—and each time, he spends effort to force it out and quiet it. The appearance of the first was already alarming, but what made it unsettling was the fact that if he closed his eyes, he could still see out of them. He looks, now, at his friends, watching each of their faces turn to a mask of rage, disappointment, hurt. Jace can taste their sense of betrayal.

He knows how dangerous he will be when—not if—Phyrexia wins. After all, they already turned one of the most powerful people he's ever met. Even with his abilities, what chance does he stand? Even now, Jace feels his gift spreading wildly, senses the creep of oil as warm and welcoming as a hot spring. He feels the pull, smells the sulfur-warning of his demise. The Vraska he knows is dead, and he will be dead, and all will be one, so it is only logical to restart the Multiverse anew; sacrifice the few for the sake of the infinite, right Gideon?

My friends won't understand, Jace acknowledges. Their feeling of being deceived won't last long, at least. The sylex will take only moments to go into effect. With one last look at his allies, his friends, Kaya and Kaito, he thinks for a moment about giving them respite; commanding them to close their

eyes and sleep themselves to death but remembering that he's not that boy anymore. His last kindness in all their last breaths will allow them their agency.

He also knows the name of the last person to use the sylex. He knows what kind of man he was. Liliana once mumbled an old Dominarian adage at him in a moment of anger, hissing a name he didn't know with the venom of a curse: *"Keep your lids open, or you'll see with Urza's eyes."*

Jace knew it was an insult but never understood the context. Now, with his hands on the sylex, his fingers literally on the rim of Armageddon, that line between what is good and what is correct feels imaginary. Urza was not a righteous man, and, well, neither is he. But what is correct is only sometimes, in the moment, good. Maybe only someone like them could do something like this.

As long as we are all here, we cannot help but make it worse.

Jace grasps the sylex and, as he does, surrenders.

"Wipe the land clear. Bring the ending," he murmurs. "I'm sorry."

He cuts himself, and into the sylex he pours all the misery he can sense; the friends and planes lost to Phyrexia. Only true obliteration can cleanse.

Jace's body seizes, his eyes are alight, and whatever hold he had on matter and self is severed. He panics, tries to grasp for control, reaching for the reins of his own body, but the completion is final—Jace, the Phyrexian is here and has no space for trivialities of flesh.

A wall crashes down, and his conscious mind closes off from the waking world, smothering him in the familiar dark.

It's like falling, this disconnection. He blurrily wonders if the sylex worked as he gives way, departs inward and downward, swimming through the warm welcome of phyresis and retreating; not to death, not to a shining cloud with Gideon and Kallist waiting for him, but the vast interior of his mind.

His body remains, but Jace is gone.

As he falls through the interior of his mind, he is sealing himself away, disconnecting from the surface. He can't tell if he wanted to retreat or if the Phyrexian version of himself compelled him.

Strange; this is what completion feels like? It is familiar. It feels like forgetting.

Jace wakes to something like consciousness in an empty plain of his mind, no seam of horizon in the distance, just seamless alabaster stone with a simple well at its center. He has been here so many times before.

The well of Jace's own mind is familiar and unnerving, if he lays his palm on the structure, it is as warm as his blood. He approaches, unhappy (not this again), and kicks his feet over the rim, allowing himself to fall further.

Inward.

Downward.

He safely collides with the surface of a warm sea. He swims to the surface, spits out salt, and blinks in the sunshine. The tide gently pushes him toward the shallows. The water shines turquoise and welcome; around his feet, he sees the shimmer of fish, and under his toes, he feels coarse sand and pulverized coral. There's a soft breeze that carries a lone albatross high above who says nothing but whose presence signals that Jace could only be in one place.

A facsimile of Useless Island rises like a gentle green beacon just behind him. The sight might be cause for alarm, but to Jace's relief he doesn't seem to have amnesia this time. He knows he's in his mind. (How—a bubble? A section of his consciousness kept safe from phyresis? Seems about right; he's meddled with enough monsters.) And he knows this version of himself is untouched. Jace looks down. He has no cabling or injuries; he seems whole. He looks out at the calm, clear ocean; it appears he made, deep inside himself, a holdout for his mind—a small, intact piece, hidden from the glistening oil.

But whatever moment he has to contemplate his existence is interrupted by an immense *pull*.

A riptide, yanking him violently back the way he came.

Useless Island grows small beneath him, the sea wide and far away. He yells in surprise and anger as he's yanked up. Wait, no, it was nice there—

Out of whatever liminal paradise he had retreated to in his mind.

Away.

Up to the sky.

To a hole up above, a round dark cavern that can only be the base of the well.

Jace is pulled upward still, slamming into the walls of the well, eyes shutting tight as he is jostled through the ice and oil, and he is suddenly ... awake.

In the physical world.

Back in his body. His feet stand on true matter, his skin shivers with panic. Breathing real air, blinking his own (two) eyes while still taking in the peripheral through the damned cables in his arms.

He's at the Invasion Tree? What happened? How much time has passed?

His body is not his; it is now complete. There's action and yelling, his allies shouting nearby—Jace concludes that only moments have passed since he activated the sylex. He's awake, and he's not supposed to be. Panic—everything is about to end, so why hasn't it?

Jace glances down and sees a sword sticking through his chest, the Halo within seeping from the wound it just carved.

Oh.

Alarmed, searing pain blooming through his entire body, he follows instinct and puts up an illusion around himself. If he's not dead, then the best option is playing possum. His illusory double easily pulls out the sword while the true Jace, painfully aware of his own faculties, falls to the ground with the sword still in his sternum. He vomits black bile. Spitting, shivering, his heart pounds with oil. He crouches, hands on the hilt, and with pragmatic courage pulls the sword out, invisible and anguished, doing everything he can to stay quiet (though what sounds emerge he smothers with a psychic wave). The sword lands on the ground, and he falls prone beside it, shaking, sputtering, the Halo in the blade pinning his psyche to control over his Phyrexian body. He watches, unseen.

Jace sends the illusion to Elesh Norn's side and is grateful that despite her dominance, she is still a psychic amateur. The Mother of Machines waxes poetic, "They are One. You, too, can be One. Only yield, and it will be over quickly."

He plays the illusion as quiet, controlled, cocky yet submissive, a convenient tool for somebody else's schemes, and Elesh Norn doesn't notice a thing. *That's how you see me, isn't it, you telepathic toddler?* The illusion smiles with arrogant mirth while the true Jace vomits once more. Oil bleeds through his gritted teeth. She is an arrogant, easy mark. If he weren't stabbed through, he'd give Norn a stroke.

Tyvar says no. Kaito passes with a casualness Jace covets. Kaya more or less spits on the invitation. “Enemies it is,” Elesh Norn concludes.

He can feel time wasting and the Halo coursing. Jace doesn’t know if he’ll be cured or if this antidote will just allow him to be conscious of his passing. He’s too weak to fight back; the end is still here. But there is hope in the wound in his chest—Jace can’t save the Multiverse anymore, but he can save *her*.

Vraska would be alright with it if it’s Norn, he justifies as, uninvited, he quickly skims Elesh Norn’s mind. The experience is unpleasant, like washing his hands in the stringy slime of spinal fluid. But it’s Norn’s assignment that arrests him.

Go home, commands the Mother of Machines, *go home*.

It takes a moment for Jace to parse the command. She’s no psychic, nor is she half the researcher Bolas was; Norn’s wants are simple and straightforward. But Jace still hears the whispers of how his Phyrexian self would translate the wish—return to Vryn. Fix what you broke. This is your atonement.

(For Jace remembers, now, what he must atone *for*.)

(Even after he regained his memories, Jace sealed Vryn behind a wall. With adult eyes, it was so much clearer what Alhammarret made him do, what influence their crimes had. How much of the war they ignited, how the sphinx delighted in erasing Jace’s mind so the boy may produce yet another match.)

The effort of reading Elesh Norn’s mind breaks his concentration—Jace feels the tide from earlier begin to pull him back, safe and away, and he feels his consciousness begin to retreat down into the well. He mentally clings, sputters, and feels his body begin to planeswalk to the location Norn has assigned him.

He cannot go there.

He *must* go there.

Jace’s breath squeezes and condenses as he invisibly crawls into the Blind Eternities, waving away the illusion he leaves behind, and as his body rises and his mind recedes. He feels the senses of his distant body and seizes at the terror of nostalgia: the scent of petrichor, of charged ozone, rain on scrublands, the pattering of mist off the immense curve of a mage-ring.

He manages to yell “No !” as phyresis reclaims its hold and rips out the pin of Halo. His body exits the aether of the Blind Eternities and steps onto the wet soil of a plane he hasn’t seen in years. The riptide yanks Jace’s mind away once more, away from consciousness and into the wide inner ocean of his psyche.

The phyresis pushes him away further, and he loses his control, careening back into the recesses of his mind and away from his body—Jace crashes into the mental waters of the shallow sea with a splash.

He stands, gasping, spitting out salt, and slaps the surface of the water in anger. He wades to the beach, cursing, and emerges overcome with fury. He doesn’t know what he can do; the Halo allowed him to return to consciousness once, but it was a temporary solution. In here, he can only control his mind, not the body beyond.

Jace crouches on the sand, desperate to think of a solution. How can a prisoner escape a jail cell with no door?

You set it on fire, his mind helpfully suggests.

A distant recollection burns to the surface, and he hears it there next to him on the beach. “*The brain is the seat of the body, and the body heals or withers at the brain’s lead.*”

It is an old memory, a complicated one, distant and echoed through decades and layers of forgetfulness, but its wisdom provides the answer. He needs to make himself sick, he needs to force his body to fight what his mind cannot.

Jace stands, plants his feet in the flour-soft sand of the beach. He tightens his core, exhales, and feels his eyes ignite as he holds out his hands to the horizon in telepathic command.

THE OIL IN YOUR VEINS IS A VIRUS.

Nothing happens immediately, but he sees out on the edge of the horizon that the sky begins to deepen and buckle, turbulent and periwinkle.

YOU ARE FEVERISH. YOU ARE DEADLY ILL.

Lightning crackles through the sky, and Jace feels himself pulled forward, his toes scraping the sand as he's lifted and pulled. He doubles down, focusing the entirety of his will on his task. If he is to survive, he must force his body to fight off the virus of phyresis. He urges it to allow him back inside—

YOU ARE BREATHING, AND YOU ARE ALIVE.

YOU ARE FIGHTING AN INFECTION AND WINNING.

Jace blinks, a flicker of consciousness to whatever his body is doing on the outside—

—his ears aren't quite ringing, but buzzing with static—

—his body is under a turbulent sky, packed tight in a crowd, his ears are ringing, and he's pressed against a long line of his Phyrexian compatriots. He sees hundreds and hundreds of people on all sides, his own cables staring and scanning and focusing a pulse of psychic damage outward, his body feels the patter of rain and hears a strange thrumming, some strange planetary heartbeat, and recognizes with deep and passionate guilt it is the sound of the mage-rings. He hasn't heard it since he was a child. But it's when he looks up that he realizes the context of his surroundings; Phyrexians at his side march forward, a path of bodies cleared for them, and *he* is the one who cleared it.

Below him on the field of Vryn are people, each twitching, gasping, their limbs hitting the ground, a grand mal multiplied. Twenty soldiers seize in front of him, their minds singing to Jace's in a static cacophony. The mental volume is too much, too loud, and it takes a moment for Jace to realize the buzzing, the static, the spell that initiated the seizures came, came from him.

He cancels the spell and draws an unsteady breath through his nausea. His heart breaks and his hands shake. Haunted, Jace sees his truth in the suffering in front of him. This is who he really is, an unstoppable power untethered by shame, this is who he always could have been.

The tide pulls once more, his consciousness drifts, the Phyrexian version of himself rises to the surface as Jace is pulled back, and to stop the shift, Jace commands his body as forcefully as he can:

YOU ARE ASLEEP. YOU ARE ASLEEP. YOU ARE ASLEEP.

And suddenly.

He is.

When Jace returns to consciousness, he arrives with a collision, gasping back to wakefulness, his body and mind united again, lying on his back in a ravine. There are other bodies, mostly Phyrexian, on all sides. The rain has soaked through to his skin. His chest burns from the residual Halo, his arm puckered with open gashes from the tubes he pulled, but mostly what Jace feels is fever. Hot vertigo

and hazy hallucinations play at his vision, his muscles shiver with chills, and his brow sweat mingles with rain. He has pushed his power to new limits, and he is so proud, weak, and powerful at once.

But then he remembers the lines of victims dying on the ground. How that was his fault. How easy it was to seize, to demolish, to murder. *It was easy because you've killed Vryn soldiers before. Alhammarret would be proud.* The voice he hears is his own, the delusion of sickness, and Jace shivers to hear its judgment: *did you forget who you are?* Whatever of him that wasn't burning with fever dropped to the ground. Jace had put on the illusion of a savior so well, convinced his friends he could carry the sylex, that they could save the Multiverse, a pleasant fantasy that stood in stark contrast to the score of soldiers he was able to seize with ease into damage and death. Yes. He had forgotten.

Fever comes as a distinct and new wave, and Jace exhales away his own feverish voice in his mind. He is freezing cold, clammy with sweat, and in the delusion of self-induced encephalitis, he stands to his feet, uncertain where to go next. He feels his body fight back, the oil calling to him again, but not this time—Jace digs his heels into the oil-soaked earth and broadcasts to his own mind an assertion: **I AM IN CONTROL.**

He blinks, breathes. He *is* in control. He *is* . And as Jace revels in his reclaimed agency, he grasps one of the cables in his arm and rips it out. He screams, blood mixed with oil pours from the wound, and he can feel his bare skin hot with fever.

The pull of the oil is weakening, but so is his heart, his lungs; the wound in Jace's chest now leaks blood rather than oil. He is dying. Still, several of the bodies continue to seize; Jace quiets them into a dreamless sleep. They rest on the soft loam of rain-drenched earth, limbs tucked into nearby sagebrush, heads cushioned by patches of long-rooted weeds. Jace distantly recalls the names of each plant he sees, remembers being taught long ago which ones were cures for what. A mage-ring hums far overhead, and it is the only sound on the wind, the Phyrexians long since retreated. He is the only one alive and awake on the battlefield and the sensation haunts him, it makes him think of accomplishment, the low approving purr of a sphinx.

Another memory grips his pounding heart to jolt him back to the present.

Vraska.

Against reason, fever, wound, the oil in his veins still encouraging him to retreat to the inward sea again and close his waking eyes for good, Jace yells in pain and begins to planeswalk.

He needs to get to Ravnica. If he can save himself, maybe he can save Vraska, too.

Jace comes home, and his home is smeared with blood.

Ravnica is at war, again, legions of his compatriots clutching their faces and storming the streets. Boros angels swarm the skies above like hornets, rampaging Gruul beasts burst through barricades and trample the Phyrexians in their way, it is the War of the Spark all over again, but rather than a god-pharaoh at Ravnica's helm, Jace knows it's his beloved they will puppet to victory.

He dodges a battalion of Azorius peacekeepers, ducks into an alley out of sight of a wave of Orzhov thrulls armed with polished golden spikes. Jace finds a quiet doorway, closes his eyes as he clutches the wound at his chest, and *reaches* . His mind skims bridges and walkways, past the clatter and feeling of battle, skillfully dodges the consciousness of the dying and feels his way for the mind he loves more than any other. It only takes a moment, *there* —but what he finds is a facsimile; it is *her* , but it is thin. A piece.

Jace holds his hand to the hole near his heart and bolts.

The war rages, the Phyrexians are being pushed back, a racket of panicked invaders broadcast to his mind their worry that the leader is dead, that the Ravnicans have a device that can electrocute the oil, that they must flee—

It is noise. All Jace can care about is the quiet crystal ringing of Vraska's mind, whirring and fainting in the distance. He clammers over rubble, scans for an empty house, and barges in to climb its stairs. His blood trails as he runs, he heaves himself up to the rooftops, summons a soaring drake to fly low enough that he can grasp. It barely works. The thing protests as it carries him, but it does the job enough—Jace sees Vraska splayed on the rooftop below.

He can't help the sound he makes.

Her body is a mess of broken burned chrome. What parts aren't skin have turned bluish and burned, as metal scalded from the inside out. Her nails now claws, her tendrils a tangle of wires, every recognizable part as distorted as his own. Vraska is unmoving, but Jace knows she is still alive.

He kneels, cradling her, using what is left of his will to raise her to his lap in panic. "Can you open your eyes for me?" He says, soft and charged. His alarm tremors through his hands—they are bloody and flecked with his own oil, but he caresses her cheek all the same. "Can you breathe?"

She doesn't respond, so Jace lets himself in. Just at the edge of her mind, in case that is easier for her, and he hears in response a familiar scoff.

Don't flatter yourself Beleren. You don't literally take my breath away.

He lets out a harsh exhale of relief and holds himself close to her. It is a miracle she is still present—how did she persist through phyresis without a telepath's gifts?

"What can you remember?"

She explains.

As she speaks, Jace gathers that she isn't aware of the outside, that she's speaking to him from the same sort of bubble, much like the one he kept himself safe in.

He stays with her for a while.

He follows her invitation inside the fullness of her mind, marvels at her self-preservation and unconscious ingenuity—how it turns out she hid in the secret recess he made for her so long ago. Vraska saved herself, because of course she did. They draw close, they remember one another, and as Jace holds his beloved, he wants to hold on to this moment for eternity, negate everything else but the curl of her tendrils and the crow's feet of her eyes.

Vraska is worth ten thousand planes.

It's settled. There will be no penultimate party for either of them. Jace sets her back on the rubble. He swings a leg over and lowers his forehead to hers—a cannon aimed at a house of glass—holding her face in his hands. If he could (mostly) reverse his own phyresis, then surely he could do it to her; that was his hypothesis, at least. It will be the most difficult telepathy he's ever done, and Vraska has no idea what's coming. Perhaps that is for the best.

He warns her, "Brace yourself. This part hurts."

She answers from behind a metaphorical door, bemused, barely conscious, fortunate, and naive, "You've always got me."

Jace kisses her forehead and knows that to command her to fix herself she needs to be fully awake. He remembers his promise long ago, their plan to sabotage Nicol Bolas, the latch that still holds the rest

of her back. There's only one way to do this, and it's going to test his limits. He braces himself with a sharp breath—

"I love you, too, captain."

And then, with a master's steadying breath, he closes his eyes and performs five miracles at once.

First, and most immediate, as soon as he says her title aloud, the door to Vraska's psyche holding her safe within, protected from phyresis, bursts open, her personhood launched to the surface of consciousness, and in their shared connection, it blazes with brilliant white light. He contains it, the light of his love netted and protected, and with mental agility, Jace catches her before the rest of her complicated mind can infect and take hold. In the waking world, Vraska's eyes flare open. She gasps, her muscles start to convulse.

Meanwhile, in the realm of the interior, he erects a barricade, a long and solid wall between her mind and the poison that altered her body. The wall is made of everything he loves of her; scales and chitin, teacups from other planes and beautiful dresses from this one, planks from sailing ships and the stone only she can generate, it is a monument to Vraska's strength and will, and behind it, he gathers and corrals the miasma of Phyrexian filth.

Simultaneously, another part of him broadcasts the message to help her save her own life, the same hypothalamic command that reverberates in his own mind:

YOU ARE FIGHTING AN INFECTION. YOU ARE FEVERISH. YOU ARE BREATHING AND ALIVE. THE OIL IN YOUR VEINS IS A VIRUS.

And a fourth part of Jace lifts Vraska's body with all his might, his muscles at last giving out from exhaustion, the hole in his chest pumping blood free from oil once more, and with a dying man's determination, pulls her into the Blind Eternities. He doesn't even know where to go, but he realizes as they step into that liminal forever that despite his efforts, despite the most complex telepathy he's ever done, both are too weak to go on. Without help, they will die.

And finally, the fifth part of Jace's mind remembers that he knows a healer, and he has known her all his life.

Carrying his beloved, he returns to the plane he had just left.



Art by: Fajareka Setiawan

The Blind Eternities for Jace have always appeared to him as a mind does: endlessly intricate layers of glass, curving and overlapping, both mathematic and emotional at once. The mind is not a logical place; we each contain a madness of biological impulse and nature-trained response. The aether of the place between places always appeared to Jace the same way, as a chaotic and beautiful place as illogical as it is fragile.

Vraska is in his arms, and he feels her open her eyes as they traverse the aether. She first looks above and behind him, perhaps seeing his version of the Blind Eternities for the first time, but then her eyes briefly meet his.

The agony of his physical state makes Jace falter. He trips over a cable detaching from his back, screams as it tears some skin along with it. Blood drips and patters into the aether below as he pushes forward still to the one place where they'll be safe. The one place he could always retreat to, the place he thought of first when Norn told him to go home.

From the Blind Eternities, Jace steps through a doorway that opens with the smell of violets.

He trips forward once again, cable detaching and blood splattering behind them, and both he and Vraska collapse onto a handwoven rug on another plane.

The rug is old, an indigo handwoven thing, with elaborate circles and simple horses, and as Jace rolls onto his back, he feels awful for bleeding all over it. The room they landed in is smaller than he remembered; whitewashed panel wood, a low ceiling with exposed bare beams, and a homemade bookcase that takes up the entire span of the wall, opposite of which is a long horizontal window that jitters with rain. There's clutter everywhere, and a pair of glasses on top of a pile of books near his face.

Vraska is flushed with viridian, breathing, but coughing. Jace wheezes alongside with fever of his own. He tries to move his hand to grasp hers, and as he does, a hunk of metal flakes from her fingers. She looks like hell, and so does he, cables falling and sores opening, but she's alive, so she is beautiful.

He smiles, and it takes the last of Jace's effort.

"Impossible," says a voice he hasn't heard for decades.

He looks up and sees a mature woman with brown hair frizzed with gray and his same clearwater eyes. She's short, slim, wiry as a runner with a face as sharp as a marten. The woman stops, her expression unreadable, and she drops a healer's text on the table. Ranna Beleren, ever in control, hides her alarm at the bleeding monsters that fell into her living room.

Ranna approaches tentatively, her right fingers pinched at a pointed cluster of azure light—a scalpel spell wielded as an impromptu defense—but she halts as Jace's eyes match with hers.

"*Jace*?" she whispers his name like it's a curse.

He is too tired to talk, so Jace speaks directly to the woman's mind just as the fever and exhaustion overtake him.

Please help us, Mom. I'm so sorry.