

# Episode 6: How Wretched Love

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From set *Tarkir: Dragonstorm*

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### Some Time Ago

Vraska was getting on his nerves.

“Jace,” she said. “You have to stop doing this.”

He forced his smile into something rakish. They’d been through so much. It made sense that there’d be friction, that the two of them might not see eye to eye, that the trauma they’d both sustained might have caused them to build new bulwarks through which the other would need to learn to bore. Jace told himself that Vraska wasn’t trying to annoy him. *She’s just trying to do what she thinks is right.*

Even if she was wrong.

“It doesn’t hurt him,” said Jace. Despite his best efforts, he couldn’t keep the defensiveness from his voice. “Loot is *fine*.”

“He keeps trying to hide from you.”

“He’s a child,” said Jace. “He doesn’t understand. That’s all.”

Jace saw Vraska’s mouth tighten, but she said no more on the topic, and, for that, he was relieved. He didn’t want to argue with her, didn’t want to spoil this morning they had together, peaceful in a way so many of their days were not. The last few months spent crossing the Multiverse had been hard. Without a spark, Vraska and Loot had to travel by Omenpaths, and Jace was forced to traverse the Multiverse without the ease a Planeswalker was accustomed to. They knew which Omenpaths would ultimately lead them to Tarkir, and from Tarkir to the Meditation Realm, thanks to Loot. Even with a map, though, the road was long and trying. Then, in a stupendous bit of bad luck—or had it been sinister design? He still didn’t know—Loot had wandered into a moth-covered door, and all manner of chaos had followed from that.

Jace told himself he needed to learn how to let go—if just a little. The fact that Vraska didn’t seem to understand the necessity of Jace’s actions wasn’t something he held against her. The gorgon sought redemption after the sins of her earlier life, having done evil in the name of the greater good and come out regretting her choices. Of course she’d be resistant to what he was doing. *Of course* she’d worry. Jace expected nothing less. And if he was being honest with himself, he knew what he was doing was wrong. There was just no other way.

Morning sunlight syruped through the blinds, gold as butter, limning Vraska’s long frame as she sat curled on a stool beside the window, face averted. She was so beautiful she made him ache. More than anything, he wanted her happy, wanted her *safe*. And for a while, they had been. Tarkir, despite its rampant dragon problem, could be a bucolic place, with its tight-knit communities and abundance of natural resources. Jace had thought they’d visit the Jeskai and see if their mountain settlements included inns in which they could stay, but Vraska, perhaps lonely for home, had suggested they

find accommodations in Sultai territory. Jace had relented, of course, and the two had been pleased to discover the local coffee could be made not just cold but also sweet and lavishly seasoned with cardamom and cinnamon.



Art by: Bruce Brenneise

Loot made a gurgling noise in Jace's arms, drawing his attention. He looked down at the odd little creature. Despite what he said to Vraska, Loot did not seem fine. Whatever dreams he was experiencing, they weren't kind ones. At times, he kicked like he was trying to squirm away from a heavy blanket.

Or perhaps from Jace's control.

But they were so close now. Everything, all the trials in the House, what they had done in Avishkar—all of it was to get here. Jace closed his eyes to Loot's discomfort and Vraska's ill-ease, reaching into the former's mind. As he did, the Multiverse unrolled like a map, Omenpaths like constellations, the planes themselves like stars, bright against the shining steel of the child's mind. What an absolute wonder it was. If only he could show Vraska, then she'd understand. Jace—

"I don't want you reaching into my mind right now."

He shook free of his reverie, startled by Vraska's proclamation, and, too late, Jace realized he'd said what he had only intended to think. The gorgon stared at him without expression, and he knew, he just knew what she was thinking and of whom she was thinking.

"It was different with Chandra. I would *never* do that to Loot."

"Do what? Nearly lobotomize him?"

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Gently, Jace returned Loot to the nest of blankets atop their bed. The Sultai innkeeper, perhaps more interested in being a chef than a businessman, had lent them a baby cot at no extra charge. In exchange, he'd only wanted to cradle Loot for a moment, declaring him adorable and a credit to his parents. All of this was said with the utmost sincerity, despite the clear physiological differences. Under different circumstances, it might have had Jace on guard. But the dead walked among the Sultai like they'd never left, so maybe they adhered to different standards here. Regardless, Loot had spent only half a night in the borrowed cot, and Jace and Vraska woke the next day to find him curled up between them, his hands closed around theirs.

"You are not in a place to judge, my love," said Jace, his restraint fraying. He loved her. There was no question about that. Nonetheless he still abhorred the judgment in her voice, knowing what he did of her past. "You've never shied away from doing dark things in the name of a good cause."

Vraska flinched. "Some people need killing. But you were never a killer."

"I didn't kill her."

"You hurt her, Jace. You hurt her badly."

"She was in our way."

The gorgon rose to her feet. What got to Jace was the hurt in her face. Vraska looked as if he'd struck her, and Jace might have been sorry for causing her apparent pain if not for the fact she was the one who started this. He wasn't the one who brought up Chandra.

Vraska said, "You didn't use to say things like that. I've been searching for a way to ask you this for days now, and I haven't been able to come up with anything sufficiently diplomatic. So, I'll just say it. Do we really need to do this? We have each other again. We can be happy. The three of us. An odd little family. Isn't this enough?"

"It isn't," said Jace, hands held out as he walked toward her, his whole broken heart offered up in his voice. "Maybe for me, it is. But for everyone, for every plane? We can't afford to be selfish. Not when we're this close. It's going to be messy, yes, but it'll be worth it. I can fix it. I can fix everything—you know I can. Where did all this doubt come from? Am I the only one still having nightmares of what happened? Phyrexia broke the Multiverse. But with Loot's help, I think—"

His fingers brushed hers, and, reluctantly, Vraska allowed their hands to twine.

"The dead have suffered enough, don't you think? Let them rest. Let our pasts rest. Let it *die*, Jace."

He stared at her. He memorized the crow's feet that ran from the corners of her golden eyes like lines of poetry, memorized her philtrum, the divot that broke the bow of her upper lip, her cheekbones, how the light made the coils of her hair into a strange halo. For as long as Jace lived, he would not forget her as she was now: irrevocably altered but as beautiful as when they'd first met so very long ago. God, he wanted to listen to her. He wanted to believe her.

"I'm sorry," said Jace. "But I know what I have to do. Just wait. I'll put all this right, and it'll be like this never happened."

And then—

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### Later

How Loot had succeeded in crawling so far into the dragonstorm was a mystery that Jace would have to solve later.

“Loot,” he howled over the screaming winds. “Loot! Come out here before *we both die!*”

In answer, the little creature only burrowed deeper under the roof of what looked to Jace like a grotto someone had erected to preserve a memorial. Not that he could be sure. Whatever this place used to be, it was abandoned now, given up to the predations of the dragonstorms and whatever else lived in the deserts of the Abzan. He could see broken-down ruins in the sand whipping through the air, their blackened remains like bones picked clean by carrion birds. Jace shielded his eyes with an arm and got down onto his knees, squinting. Loot chittered at him to leave, and Jace understood via whatever innate telepathy Loot had that he was done with Jace. He was done being on Tarkir. He wanted to be returned to Vraska, wanted access to the coconutty confections the Sultai innkeeper had plied him with. More than anything, however, Loot did *not* want to be put under again.

“You know where I stand on this, Loot,” said Jace, sleeking his voice into something soft and reassuring. “I like the situation as much as you do, which is to say not at all. But we’re so close. We’re so close, and I promise you, once it’s done, I will never—*Come back here*.”

Later, Jace would return to this moment over and over, turning it in his mind, examining it from every angle, looking to see if he could have approached the situation differently, if there’d been a solution less brutal but just as effective as the one he’d chose, if Loot had looked frightened or if Jace had been quick enough to put the Fomori under before he registered what had happened. He would revisit his decision so many times, this memory of Loot running into the storm and then his own magic rushing after the creature, enfolding him, wrapping him in an unbroken blue light, that his recollection of that moment would wear smooth as glass, and, eventually, it became impossible to see anything but a reflection of his own intent.

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## Now

“Regardless, none of it matters,” said Jace, shoulders slumping. “We’re trapped in whatever this place is. Even Loot’s knowledge of the Multiverse is useless here. There is no logic. There are no actual roads. Walk far enough in one direction, and you’ll eventually be able to see your own back running down the path. It’s impossible—”

Narset closed her eyes.

This was the problem with so many people, especially those who thought of themselves as exceptionally clever: they couldn’t fathom a world that did not conform to their vision. Anything that diverged from their understanding of normal was wrong and illogical, a line of thinking that Narset knew to be a fallacy. The Multiverse was infinitely more complex than a mortal being could ever hope to comprehend, and this place, this dimension, this whatever it was, was a representation of that truth and others beside it. She was certain of this.



Art by: Kai Carpenter

So, Narset did as she had done before when she was young and Ojutai bade her to study with him: she let go of her preconceptions and allowed herself to see what she had refused to witness before. In doing so, the realm stopped fighting her.

But it wasn't enough. She could feel the reality of this place skip and shudder, flashing into new configurations as her companions endeavored to make sense of what they saw, like an animal trying to crawl away from a predator.

"Stop thinking so hard," said Narset in strangled tones, opening her eyes again, struggling to parse what she saw, what she understood now of this place. "It's our thoughts that are trapping us in this shifting space. I need both of you to empty your minds."

"I'm sorry," said Jace. "But what are you talking about?"

"Just wait."

"Wait for what?" said Jace.

Narset swallowed a noise of frustration. "Please. I need you to trust me. Clear your mind. Wait."

"You've said that already," said Jace. "What are we waiting for? *Why* are we waiting?"

"For this place to—" Narset jammed the heels of her hands into her eyes, vexed again.

She felt a hand settle on her shoulder, warm and reassuring, even though the face of the archangel remained as blank as marble. "We'll do what you say."

"Fine," sighed Jace, gathering Loot into his arms.

In a moment, Narset felt what she'd been hoping would happen: a sense of the world breaking and rebuilding itself once more, cracking apart, only this time, when it pieced itself together, it wasn't using *their* expectations as scaffolding but something else's. *Someone else's.* Narset stared in unashamed awe as the mirror-sheen sky, the endless stairs, and the polished surface of the water collapsed together into featureless silver. Then, all at once, it separated again, revealing two figures that Narset would have known even in death, twined around one another, their horns touched, their brows rested together.

"No. It can't be," whispered Elspeth hoarsely.

*Stay away*, came Ugin's voice, less a sound than a reverberation traveling through their bones. He was as massive as myth—no, larger still. The spirit dragon felt bigger than worlds, than hope; feathered wings closed protectively around his counterpart, scales like blue ice. Whatever had driven Ugin here, however, had eaten at his luster, and his scales were dull as was his gaze. Still that surprised Narset less than the desperation in the dragon's voice. As Ugin raised his head, so did his olive-gold twin, the latter as perfect as polished bronze. For a brief, wild moment, Narset found herself wondering if Ugin's opposite was parasitizing on him, if the grinning monstrosity staring down on them was the reason why the spirit dragon seemed so threadbare.

"Well, well, well. What is this? A present, my dear brother? Were you only lulling me into believing I was trapped for an eternity, with only your tedious self as a conversational partner? I'm touched. You *do* love me," purred Ugin's companion, his massive head cocked, attention fully on Narset and her companions. "I think I know you. I think I know all three of you. The memory of who you are lingers on my tongue like the taste of old blood. Come now, my friends. Come tell me who you are."

*Do not heed my brother's lies. Leave before his claws enter you.*

"You in particular," he continued, head swinging to look upon Jace, who stood behind Elspeth and Narset. He only succeeded in moving partway, chains materializing from seemingly nowhere, lashing him to the ground. "I feel—I feel like we were intimate friends once. That you, perhaps, were an accomplice, someone who knew all of my secrets and whose secrets I knew."

"How is he alive?" Elspeth's voice thinned with disbelief. "He died. People saw him die. And yet, there he stands—"

"I'd rather you didn't talk about me like I wasn't right here," said Bolas contemptuously. "But, yes, I live. Without my memories, but I am very much alive, as you can see."

"I don't understand," said Elspeth again, eyes flicking between Jace and Narset.

*We had an agreement, Beleren. Why have you come here?*

"Did you now?" laughed the other dragon.

"Jace," said Elspeth. "Say something."

In answer, the mind-mage set his furred companion gently down, stroking Loot's cheek before he unfolded again, his face almost entirely empty of emotion. If Narset hadn't been looking, she might have missed the guilt flitting through Jace's eyes, like a stone thrown across a lake. "I didn't want to come back."

"That's not an answer," said Elspeth. "Tell us what is going on."

*He and I have cheated death before. There was no guarantee he would not be called back into this world if he was permitted to die. So, I have made this our prison, and our prison it will remain until my brother dies millennia from now. It is the only way I can keep the Multiverse safe from his machinations.*

“Well, don’t sing all my praises at once, brother dearest—”

“Master Ugin,” breathed Narset, overwhelmed by the urge to sink to her knees, to prostrate herself before him. “Please. The Multiverse needs your assistance. The dragonstorms have grown in intensity. They’ve spread from Tarkir to the other planes. Soon, all will be devoured if nothing is done. We’ve come to you seeking assistance, so, please, help us.”

*I cannot.*

All the air seemed to vanish from Narset’s lungs.

When she spoke again, her voice was ragged. “Then tell us how to quell the dragonstorms. If you can’t help us yourself, at least tell us what we must do to stop them ourselves. Surely, you can do that. Please. I do not know how long Tarkir will continue to stand—”

*I am sorry, but there is nothing I can do. What is left of me is devoted to the task of keeping my brother contained. You must leave. Even this interaction puts his captivity in jeopardy. If my brother escapes, the dragonstorms shall be the least of the Multiverse’s worries.*

“I feel so loved,” said Ugin’s brother smilingly. “You’d risk the destruction of everything to keep me company?”

“No,” said Elspeth, stepping forward past Narset. “I refuse to believe this. You can spare us a few moments of your time. It will cost you and Bolas nothing and will buy us everything. We are not—”

“Bolas?” said the dragon in question, named at last, a sickly light irradiating his eyes. He turned to Ugin, his grin feline and ravenous. “Is that *my* name? And what did they say yours is? Ugin, was it? Ugin and Bolas. Oh, those names have such a mythic quality to them. Such stories they must have told about us. Yes, I think I’m beginning to remember now—”

*Leave. Ugin roared. Leave now before it is too late—Wait. Jace Beleren, what are you doing?*

Too late, Narset registered the rippling in the air just above Ugin’s plated skull and the stillness of the man standing behind her. She’d thought Jace was as overcome as Elspeth and her. *After all, this was an unprecedented epiphany, wasn’t it?* Everyone knew Nicol Bolas was dead, and Ugin, well, no one knew Ugin’s whereabouts. It made sense that Jace would have been shocked into stillness.

*But Bolas had called him accomplice, hadn’t he?*

Even as those thoughts whirled through Narset’s mind, Elspeth was taking wing, arrowing toward that distortion in the air. She heard Jace sigh, his illusionary double melting to embers, the mind-mage corporealizing a hair’s breadth away from the enormous gem suspended between Ugin’s horns.

“For what it’s worth,” said Jace haltingly. “I am very sorry for this.”

His eyes were blue and without sclera, and, even as fast as Elspeth was flying, it was not fast enough. Jace closed his hands over the gleaming jewel suspended between Ugin’s horns, and light exploded out, a prismatic incandescence that seared Narset’s vision white.

Almost instinctively, Narset flung up a protective veil over herself, racing forward before the light even began to dull. She saw Elspeth unsheathe her sword, saw her swing, the arc perfect, and under different circumstances, it might have cleaved Jace’s head from his shoulders, but then the realm itself heaved up and away. The mind-mage was six feet away, enveloped in a celadon fire, his expression doleful.

“What are you doing, Jace?” snarled Elspeth, undaunted, reversing so she could prepare for her second strike.

"What I must. What I need to," said Jace, voice turned plaintive. "What if I say that I can reverse everything? I can stop Phyrexia from ever having killed our friends. I can restore your humanity, make it so that you never died, Elspeth. Narset, I can make the dragonstorms right."

"You don't even know how they work," said Narset rather sensibly.

"I'll learn," said Jace, staring down at the palms of his hands as if he were seeing them for the first time. He twitched his fingers, and, in answer, the realm shuddered. Bolas's laughter crept through the air like the smoke from a thousand burning villages. Narset collected reams of her own magic, gathering them between her hands until she could feel it burning there like a flame.

"Elspeth, take the gem before he can give it to Bolas."

For some reason, that only made the dragon laugh harder.

The archangel flashed her a wild bright grin, an expression gorgeous and feral. Narset had heard stories of how some angels had to warn their charges not to be afraid and how others led armies against impossible adversaries: she understood now how such things were possible. Her heart soared with frantic hope even as her magic wrapped around Elspeth, closing tight, protecting her. Narset kept running, trying to keep pace with the archangel, uncertain as to what else she could do, but she intended to find out.

A terrified cry tore through the air. Narset stumbled and swung around to see Loot on the white sand, screaming like his heart was broken beyond repair. She had no idea what he was, who he was, or how even he'd come to be in Jace's company, but Narset knew a frightened child when she saw one.

"I've got you," she said, rushing up to the creature's side, gathering him into her arms. Loot shook as Narset pressed him to her chest, no different from any Jeskai child, and the waymaster couldn't help but think of how many more children would be wailing like this if the dragonstorms kept spiraling further out of control, how many orphans it would make, how many sons and daughters of Tarkir would need to be told their parents were gone, their lives irreversibly changed for the worse.

*Stop them*, begged Ugin. *Before it is too late.*

Bolas bellowed with laughter. "Don't stop on our account, please!"

Above them, Elspeth descended on Jace like a storm herself, the light striking her sword like lightning, fearless, indomitable, but ultimately useless. Jace was simply never where her weapon was. Each time she struck, he was elsewhere, an inch out of reach. He stuttered back through the air, his face contorting with frustration, an arm wrapped around Ugin's softly pulsating gem.

"Elspeth, stop. I can't control this place if you keep distracting me—"

"You will not release Bolas."

"I don't want to release Bolas!" howled Jace. "This has nothing to do with him!"

"Then why are you—"

"Because this is a hub," yelled Jace, winking out of existence and reappearing behind Narset. His tone was plaintive as he said, "The elder dragons never realized it, in their arrogance, but Loot's mind showed it to me. This place is a substrate to all of reality, touching countless worlds and moldable by sheer force of will. If I take control of it, I can fix everything. I can make it so that the Phyrexians never did what they did to Vraska—"

Narset said. "Jace, you can't."

“*Why not?*” His voice splintered even as it crested into a roar. “Why can’t I fix this? What is the *point* of these powers if we don’t use them to make the world *better*? We Planeswalkers have rewritten realities for worse reasons. Why not save the woman I love from her pain? Why not restore the people we’ve lost? And who are you anyway to tell me what I can and cannot do?”

“Because there is no going back, Jace. There is only the future. Our future together,” said a cowled figure, emerging from seemingly nowhere.

Narset froze. She knew that voice. Except it wasn’t *possible*. The last she had heard, the gorgon was one of the many casualties in the Phyrexian war, her soul lost, her body transformed—

The figure shed her hood. It was Vraska herself. Only not as Narset remembered her. Gone her poise, gone her merciless grace. Gone the woman who’d once stood as queen of the Golgari Swarm. This Vraska was exhaustion. This Vraska was heartache made flesh, her grief bare and bright on her worn face.

“Vraska, I can *fix this*—”

“No, darling. Stop it.”

“I can *fix you*.”

“If we kill him now,” said Elspeth, swooping down to land some distance from Jace, sword still out. “We might still be able to avert calamity.”

“Touch a single hair on his head, and I will end you,” hissed Vraska, eyes only for Jace.

Jace said, “I promised you that we’d have better worlds than the ones we inherited. I won’t let you down. Just trust me. All of you. *Please*.”

The world blurred and deepened in hue, becoming the blue of the mind-mage’s magic, a color like the noon sky above a perfect memory of love. Narset heard Jace chuckle shiveringly, and, briefly, it appeared as if Jace might have done the impossible. Narset felt the realm expand like an animal drawing its first breath, and when it exhaled, her vision became kaleidoscopic, filled then with the glimpses of the futures that they’d lost: she saw dead friends alive again, saw worlds unbroken, saw planes made innocent of their pain. All it would take was a thought. Jace only needed to steer it toward his desires, and, as Narset thought this, she saw his only ambition, the thing he’d sold them all out for:

Vraska, happy and unscarred and safe.

*What we would do for love*, Narset thought sadly.

Obedient to its new master, the Meditation Realm attempted to recreate itself in the image of Jace’s desperate hopes, but for all the power he’d thieved from Ugin’s gem, Jace was still only human. Narset saw the strain on his face as the power coursed through him. It wanted only to follow Jace’s commands, but like a wick, he was burning at its touch. He gasped, the last of his endurance failing, and Narset stared in horror as the horizon broke into mirrored fragments, revealing a nothingness that ate at the eye, a void that poured toward them, unmaking reality—Jace included. His mouth opened in horror.

“No,” whispered Jace. As the emptiness rolled over him, he shattered like glass.

“Run!” bellowed Elspeth.

Narset, a wailing Loot in her arms, did as she was told.