

Episode 2: Race to the Murasa Skyclave

A. T. Greenblatt

From set *Zendikar Rising*

09. 09. 2020

Nahiri was pleased, and also infuriated. Pleased because the ancient key was snug in her pocket, the solution to her problem close at hand. Infuriated because her most recent adventure with Nissa made it abundantly clear she could not visit the Murasa Skyclave alone and hope to survive. As much as she'd like to think otherwise, if Nissa hadn't been in the Akoum Skyclave with her, she wouldn't have been able to obtain the key.

Fortunately, standing in front Sea Gate's towering entrance, she knew where to find the best team of adventurers in Zendikar.

It had been a long time since she last visited Sea Gate. It didn't look quite the same as she remembered. The war with the Eldrazi razed the original city to the ground, and though Sea Gate had been rebuilt, there were still scars on its buildings.

And on its people.

Guilt hounded Nahiri as she strode through the streets, and she kept her gaze fixed straight ahead. She did not linger at the magnificent lighthouse towering over the city's entrance or peruse its open-air markets where humans, kor, and merfolk lingered and haggled at stalls. She barely glanced at the new war memorial as she passed it by—a huge circle platform, with six massive stone hedrons equally spaced, surrounded by pieces of the original Sea Gate's wreckage. Unlike the citizens of this city, Nahiri didn't need a huge monument to remind her of what she'd lost.

As she drew closer to the Guilds, the streets became narrower, filling with the scents of fresh fish and grilled meats from taverns. Hawkers and hungry mercenaries approached her but quickly changed course when they caught the look in her eye. She did not have time to waste with the ordinary adventurers. The key in her pocket weighed heavy.

When she arrived at the Sea Gate Expeditionary House and pushed through its wrought-iron door, she was struck immediately by the noise, the heat, and the smell of stale ale and travelers. It was not a large space and was crammed with people from all races, seated around batter tables with tankards or in heated debates as potential clients haggled with adventurers. And in the middle of the chaos, like an eye of a storm, sat Kesenya, the head of the expeditionary house.

She was a tall, proud kor in silver armor and rich purple clothes. Her white hair was plaited into a complex pattern, and around her neck, there was a brilliant red necklace, which could only be the legendary Dragon's Frill. She was surrounded by patrons and admirers all vying for her attention. When she spotted Nahiri, however, she immediately stood, offering some excuse or another to the people around her, and made her way across the room.

"Benefactor," she said, quietly, "always an honor to see you."

“I’m pleased to see my investment is flourishing,” replied Nahiri, in a low voice. “Let’s speak privately.”

“Of course.” Kesenya led her to a back room that was small but well furnished, with cushions on the benches and maps of Skyclaves on the walls. A fresh round of ale was brought in and set on the table.

“I’ll be honest,” said Kesenya, taking a seat across from her, “I’m surprised to see you here. You’re usually a little more aloof.”

“I am who I need to be,” Nahiri replied, with a slight edge to her voice. She touched the key in her pocket. “And now I need a brave and capable team to retrieve something very precious and very powerful.”

“You’ve come to the right place,” the other kor said. “I’m assuming you had a team in mind?”

Nahiri smiled.



Nahiri, Heir of the Ancients | Art by: Anna Steinbauer

Four adventurers sat before Nahiri in the private meeting room of the Expeditionary House. Akiri, a kor woman who was renowned throughout Zendikar for her line-slinging. A small human wizard with a large carved staff named Kaza, who was rumored to adore fire and had a mischievous twinkle in her eye. Orah, a kor cleric with a long white beard and a library’s worth of knowledge within his head. And Zareth, a merfolk with shock-red hair and a braided beard. Of the four, he was the only one not sitting at the table. Instead, he leaned against the back wall, arms crossed, watching her with an air of mistrust, and Nahiri knew instantly she would have to be cautious around him.

"I'm Nahiri," she said. "I've been on adventures worthy of legends. I'm asking you to join me on one of those expeditions now."

The adventurers didn't reply. They all wore expressions of various levels of skepticism.

Good, she thought. *They don't accept things at face value.*

"What has Kesenya told you about me?" Nahiri asked, leaning back in her chair.

"Only the basics," Akiri replied, slowly. She, Nahiri could tell, was their leader.

"She said you could travel to other realms. That stone obeys your command. That you're powerful enough to face down an Eldrazi alone," Orah said, leaning forward. "Is it true?"

I wish the last one was, Nahiri thought, bitterly.

"Yes," she said, after a pause.

Orah grinned, looking like a delighted child who discovered his favorite stories were real. Akiri looked behind her and exchanged a glance with Zareth.

"Then why do you need humble adventurers like us?" Zareth asked, straightening and coming to the table.

Because I'm probably walking into a trap, she thought.

"There's an ancient object called the Lithoform Core," Nahiri said. She paused, swallowed her pride. "And I need help retrieving it."

"Where?" Akiri asked, crossing her arms.

"In Murasa. In a newly risen Skyclave there," replied Nahiri, noticing how the name made the adventurers lean in slightly with interest. "You've heard of it, yes?"

They exchanged looks again. "No one's been able to climb that," Kaza said, sounding nervous.

"No one's asked the best yet," said Nahiri, smiling inwardly as they sat up a bit taller.

"What's in it for us?" Zareth said. Akiri shot him a look, but he raised a hand and said, "No—if we're putting our lives at risk, we should know what for."

Nahiri's nostrils flared slightly, but she tamped down her impatience. "The object I seek will heal Zendikar of all its scars. It will make this world a safe and prosperous place again, just like it was before the Eldrazi arrived." Nahiri took a long, slow sip of ale, pausing for effect. "Imagine the riches and fame that will come to the people who save this world."

"The damage to this world," said Akiri, "is immense."

"I lost my entire family to the Eldrazi," Orah said, quietly.

"I lost friends," Kaza said.

"We all lost someone," Akiri said, looking back at Zareth again, "and I think all of us dream of a safer world. It sounds impossible." Akiri turned and stared right at Nahiri, and Nahiri saw a spark of hope in her eyes. "But if half of your accomplishments are true, maybe there is a chance." Akiri leaned back, and that brief glimmer of hope disappeared. "That is, if we believe you."

"I don't," Zareth said. "What's stopping us from getting the Core without you?"

Nahiri smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "I have the key," she said, pulling it out of her pocket. It was like pulling out a small star, and she set it on the table. The key pulsed brightly, and the four adventurers instinctively drew back.

“Wow,” Kaza breathed.

Nahiri returned the key to her pocket, reminding herself to be patient.

“Before we decide, maybe you’ll humor me with a game?” Zareth said.

Nahiri’s eyes narrowed with suspicion. But if she was being completely honest, there was a small part of her that was also intrigued. “What sort of game?”

“Zareth,” said Akiri with a warning in her voice.

“A card game,” he replied, then turned to Akiri. “We do this with all our potential clients. Why should she be different?”

Akiri frowned, and Nahiri seriously doubted that they did this with any of their clients. But she was curious. “So,” she said, “tell me the rules.”

Akiri relinquished her seat to Zareth but put a hand on his shoulder as she stood behind him. He grinned up at her with affection, placing his hand on top of hers.

With his free hand he produced a deck of worn cards seemingly from thin air. “Adventuring parties like to call this little game *Conquest*.” With practiced ease, he dealt fifteen cards in a circle on the table. Then, he tapped the tabletop in the center of the ring, and the cards began to hover and spin in midair.

“It works like this,” said Zareth, “a card is chosen at random.” At his words, a card from the spinning ring slid into the center and flipped over. It was a beautiful drawing of an intricate motif of gems and eyes. On the center was a single word: *Cunning*. “And we have to tell a *true* story about how we accomplished the word on the card. If your story isn’t impressive enough, another player has a chance to capture the card.”

“Sounds simple enough,” Nahiri said. Too simple.

“Oh, it is,” replied Zareth, “but here’s the catch. If I win, you tell us exactly what that Core will do to Zendikar.”

Nahiri leaned back in her chair, steepling her fingers. “And if I win, you and your companions come with me to the Murasa Skyclave.”

The four adventurers exchanged looks again, and Akiri gave Nahiri a single nod.

“I’ll start,” Zareth studied the card intensely, as if struggling to find a suitably cunning story. “One time, I met a book trader who was more thief than scholar. I pretended to have a rare and dangerous spell scroll, and while we bargained, I stole back the tomes he *borrowed* from the Sea Gate library. He never noticed.”

The *Cunning* card flew into Zareth’s outstretched hand. Nahiri raised an eyebrow, and he smirked. “I’m known as the Trickster.”

Meaning, I can’t trust you, Nahiri thought, eyes narrowing.

“My turn,” she said. Again, a card disengaged from the ring and floated to the center. On it was the word *Foe*.

Nahiri smiled. This was an easy one. “There was someone who was like a father to me. But after centuries, he betrayed my trust. Not long ago, I fought him during a world-ending battle. And I won.”

Zareth and the others stared at her.

“You’re not really that old,” said Kaza.

“And there’s been no battles of that scale since the Eldrazi,” Orah said, slowly.

Nahiri took a long swallow of ale, smirking. Calmly, she stretched out her hand, and the card snapped into her palm. “Not in this realm, no.”

For a moment, Zareth’s self-assuredness seemed to waver.

Good, thought Nahiri.

“I want to play, too,” said Kaza as she scooted her seat closer to the table. Her card read *Victory*.

Kaza launched into a tale about how she once destroyed an entire Eldrazi brood with a handful of spells and one well-placed exploding vial. But Nahiri was only half listening. She suspected there was more to this simple card game, and she waited for the trap to spring.

It didn’t.

Until she felt something. The fingers touching her pocket were light, the barest whisper. She wouldn’t have noticed it at all if the floor wasn’t stone and she couldn’t feel the Trickster’s movements through it. But when she looked up from her cards, both of his hands were on the table again.

“Your turn,” Zareth said with a sly smile.

The upturned card read *Power*.

Nahiri leaned back, studied her opponent for a long moment.

Then she snapped her fingers and turned all the cards to granite. Zareth and Kaza jumped in surprised and dropped the cards they were holding. They clattered noisily to the table. Nahiri reached out her hand and the entire deck flew into her open palm.

“I win,” Nahiri said as she stared at Zareth. “Now, give it back.” She held out other her hand.

Stunned, Zareth fished the key out of his tunic and handed it to her without a word of protest.

Beside him, Kaza crumpled with laughter. “Oh, she got you, Zareth.”

“She did win,” Akiri said, “though the word *fair* can never be applied when playing with you.” She wrapped an arm around his shoulders. To Nahiri, she said, “When do we head out?”

Nahiri stood. She won, but for some reason, the victory didn’t taste sweet. She headed toward the door. “Tomorrow. First light.”



Zareth San, the Trickster | Art by: Zack Stella

Zareth cursed himself for returning the key to Nahiri. The others teased him for losing so spectacularly to the strange kor woman, but they let up when he didn't answer back with his usual sarcasm.

Instead they let him be as they finished their ales and went to prepare for the journey ahead. But Zareth didn't leave. No. He sat in the Sea Gate Expeditionary House and nursed another drink as the hours slipped by and the crowded room emptied out.

Who gave Nahiri the right to change his world anyway?

It was close to midnight when he was the only one left.

Well, him and Kesenya. Which suited him just fine. Zareth wondered if the house leader ever slept.

"Don't you set out in the morning?" she asked, coming up next to him.

"Yes," he replied, "but I want to enjoy this evening, just in case it's my last."

Kesenya studied him for a long moment. "Liar," she said.

"Fine," Zareth said. "This object we're seeking in the Murasa Skyclave—I'm worried about it."

The house head didn't say anything, just gestured for him to continue.

"She said she was going to change Zendikar with it," said Zareth, "return it to the way it was before the Eldrazi were imprisoned here."

Kesenya gave a small laugh. "You make that sound like a bad thing, Trickster."

“You’ve seen those ancient ruins,” he replied sharply, the anger he’d been bottling up all day beginning to leak out. “Do you think there will be any place for people like us in a world of fortresses and armies?”

For the first time he could ever remember, the house head didn’t look sure. “It’s not that simple. Nahiri is more important than she seems.”

Zareth shook his head. “All I’m asking you to do is find a buyer for the Core who is rich and stupid. Someone who won’t actually *use* it,” he said. “I’ll handle the rest.”

Kesenia hesitated, conflicted. “Get me the Core, and I’ll consider it,” she said, finally.

Zareth smiled. It wasn’t a yes, but it wasn’t a no either. It was good enough for him.

For now.



Forest | Art by: Sam Burley

When they finally arrived at Sunder Bay on Murasa, Akiri was the first to dismount her griffin and put her feet on the ground. The formidable cliffs of the island rose above them, and a forest of giant harabaz trees surrounded them. But Akiri’s focus was fixed on the Murasa Skyclave which loomed high above the harabaz trees’ intricate tangle of branches. The ancient floating ruin was massive, covered in greenery and small trees where waterfalls streamed down. Its pieces shifted in the air currents, and even from the limited viewpoint of the ground, Akiri could tell it was going to be a dangerous climb.

She smiled. She loved a challenge.

“Whoa,” Kaza said, staring up, “that looks tough. Good thing she hired us.”

"This will be one for the legends," Akiri agreed.

"We should get moving," Nahiri said, hopping down from her griffin. "The Lithoform Core is near."

"How will we know where to find it once we get up there?" asked Zareth, arms crossed. Akiri shot him a warning look. Throughout the journey, he had been pestering Nahiri with questions about the Core, never quite hiding his disapproval.

Nahiri gave him a withering look. "I'll know." She turned and strode to where Kaza and Orah were going through their packs.

"That's not an answer," grumbled Zareth, but quietly so only Akiri could hear. "I don't trust her." He reached out for Akiri's hand and intertwined his fingers in hers.

Akiri sighed. She could see the tension in his posture, feel the worry rolling off him.

"I know," she said, "but I get the feeling she's extremely protective of Zendikar. I can't believe she'd harm it, though I don't know why exactly." There were many things in this world Akiri didn't understand, and Nahiri was one of them. She squeezed Zareth's hand once, firmly, before letting go and making her way to the others. A moment later, she heard his long strides behind her.

"How big is this Core exactly?" Orah was saying as he slung a coil of ropes over his shoulder.

Nahiri frowned. "I'm not sure."

"Well," said Kaza, cheerfully, "I could probably levitate it if needed. Or blow it up. I can *definitely* do that."

"Noted," said Nahiri with a small smile.

"And how do we know this Core will even work?" said Zareth.

Nahiri turned toward him and went still, her whole expression and her posture becoming as hard as stone. For one terrible moment, Akiri thought she was going to attack Zareth. She instinctively coiled, about to move into action.

But Nahiri was quicker.

With one blur of a movement, Nahiri withdrew the shining key from her pocket, held it up toward Zareth, and spoke a word Akiri didn't understand. Akiri rushed forward but was halted by a flash so bright that she needed to shield her eyes.

"Zareth!" she shouted, panicked.

It took one, long, agonizing second for her vision to clear.

When it did, Akiri noticed two things.

First, Zareth was standing in the same place, unharmed and blinking, too. Akiri exhaled, relief flooding through her.

Second, there was a large, angry stomper hovering mid-leap behind Zareth, frozen in place. Its mouth was open, exposing its long fangs, and two of its six legs were inches from him, ready to pounce. It was clear that the ferocious beast was hunting to kill, and it was stopped at the last possible moment.

Akiri reached for her ropes, ready to lasso that beast and tie it down.

But before she could, the stomper began to melt away into sand. Within moments, there was no trace left of the creature except a handful of black grains.

"That," said Nahiri, tucking the key away, "is just a taste of the Core's power."

“Where was this Core when we were fighting the Eldrazi?” asked Akiri, her voice hushed with wonder. “We needed it then.”

Nahiri went still again, but this time, her face was full of guilt and pain. “We should move,” she said, stiffly. “We shouldn’t stay on the ground.”

“Start climbing the trees,” Akiri said. She gave Zareth and the others a quick nod. “I’ll catch up in a minute.”

Akiri pretended to check her gear again as the others began to make their way up the harabaz tree. When they were out of sight and she could barely hear them, she let her shoulders slump. This *would* be an adventure for the legends.

“If any benevolent god is listening”—Akiri whispered to the cliffs and the trees. She rarely believed in more than being prepared and being quick, but today felt different—“please keep my party safe today.”

It wasn’t much of a prayer, but she didn’t like to bother the gods. Akiri slung her lines over her shoulder and began to climb.

From the corner of her eye, she saw something move. She tensed, turned, and spotted a dark spot swelling under one of the nearby trees, right where Nahiri had used the key. It looked like a tentacle of black sand. It grew slowly, twisting its way around the trunk, withering leaves, branches, and bark, transforming them into something rigid and unmovable.

Like stone.

Akiri shivered.

There were many things in this world she didn’t understand, and this was one of them.

Quickly, she began to climb.

When Jace arrived in Sea Gate, he wondered if he was beginning in the right place. He knew from what Nissa told him on Ravnica that Nahiri was here, on Zendikar. And he deduced that Nissa returned to this plane as well. The question was, of course, where?

Sea Gate, he reasoned, was a good place to start.

He hadn’t been here since the battle with the Eldrazi, when the city was practically razed to the ground. Then, the lighthouse tower at the entrance had been shattered and corruption had spilled all over the city’s streets in Kozilek’s wake.

Now, the lighthouse was rebuilt, tall and proud, and the streets were gleaming and clean. Jace walked through them, hoping that he’d run into Nissa, that he’d be able to make things right with her again. She was his friend, and though he wasn’t always a good friend, he wanted to try to be a better one.

I wish Chandra was here, he thought. He had tried to find her before coming here, but with no luck. And Jace suspected he didn’t have much time before Nahiri acted on her plan.

So, lost in his own thoughts, Jace didn’t react at first when someone called out to him.

“Hey, hero,” shouted someone from behind him. “You were one of the defenders of this city during the war, right?”

Jace turned and saw a woman approaching him. She wore light armor of leather and metal, colored red and gold, with a leaf-green cloak. Her hair was black and pulled back in a braid, and her face was lined, but her bright green eyes shone. Or one eye rather. The right half of her face was a twist of scars that Jace recognized as wounds from corruption. Her right hand was curled, and she had a slight limp.

"Yes, that's me," Jace replied.

"Thought so," she said with a grin. "I remember that blue cloak. I was fighting not far from you."

"You were?" Jace searched his memories, but there had been so much chaos that day. So much ruin.

"Yeah. I was holding back a swarm of broodlings. Was doing great too until the corruption got me." She shrugged.

"I'm sorry," he said, unsure of what to say. Suddenly, he wished he and the other planeswalkers had been quicker, more decisive during that fight.

The woman gave him a curious look. "Don't be. I managed to help a dozen people escape before they got me. And if I had to make that choice again, I wouldn't change it." She grinned and Jace had to admit it was a charming smile. "My name's Mara. I'm on my way to the memorial. Would you care to join me?"

"I'd be honored," Jace replied, and he meant it.

Together, they walked to the massive platform with its six upright hedrons. Together, they knelt at the base of one. He could hear Mara murmuring, asking the friends she lost in the fight for forgiveness. For not being able to save them. For outliving them.

Jace's chest constricted. He didn't know which of his friends he should beg forgiveness from.

He thought of Nahiri and how she was so desperate to turn back the clock for this plane. He thought of Nissa who blamed herself for trying to do what was right for the world she loved.

He thought of Gideon, who gave himself up willingly for this plane.

"I am guilty, too," he whispered, softly, so softly so that Mara next to him couldn't hear, "but I will make it right."

Unfortunately, not everyone in Sea Gate was so forthcoming. Many people came up to him, but they were mostly vendors or solo adventurers looking for a patron. He couldn't make it ten steps without someone trying to get his attention. At first, he inquired after Tazri, a fierce general in the battle against the Eldrazi and his friend. But he learned she was away in Guul Draz hunting down some terrible beast. Then, he redirected the conversation to ask if they'd seen anyone matching Nahiri's or Nissa's description, but the adventurers shook their heads and the merchants launched into another sales pitch.

Eventually, Jace grew so frustrated that he cast an illusion to disguise himself as a merfolk with a long white beard, wearing muted browns and greens. He passed through the streets of Sea Gate then, mostly overlooked, though this time, he peered into the heads of some of the more scarred and serious-looking adventurers, hoping for glimpses of the other two planeswalkers.

He found nothing.

Perhaps that's why when he stepped inside of the Sea Gate Expeditionary House, he realized he was looking in the wrong place the entire time. The room was filled with adventurers in bright new gear sporting the house emblem—a jagged red outline of the Dragon's Frill. Everyone laughed loudly and boasted of the most recent successes.

"Can I help you?" asked a man, by the door.

"I'm looking for the head of the house," Jace replied. The man raised an eyebrow and looked Jace up and down.

"Right"—Jace dropped the disguise—"I'm Jace Beleren. Tell her we need to talk."

The head of the Sea Gate Expeditionary House sat across from Jace in one of the private rooms, and Jace could immediately sense her wariness.

I wonder why? He fought the urge to peek in her head.

The room was comfortable with soft cushions and tea set before him. There were maps on the wall and ink and parchment in the corner for contracts.

"I'm here to help," he told her. He realized he was going to have to earn her trust. Somehow.

Kesenia raised an eyebrow. "Help how?"

Jace relayed what Nissa told him about the Core. He stressed that he wanted to find a reasonable solution. Explaining that he, Nissa, and Nahiri have worked together in the past.

"Except, I don't know where Nissa or Nahiri are at the moment," Jace finished.

Kesenia's expression was unreadable. Knowing he shouldn't, but growing desperate, Jace glanced at her thoughts.

Zareth was right, she thought.

But instead, she said, "I'm afraid I can't help you."

Jace pulled back slightly, surprise. "You aren't worried?"

"I *am* worried," she replied. "She took my best adventuring party."

And they are looking for something that maybe shouldn't be found, she thought.

"Zendikar is a beautiful place," Jace said, evenly. "I want the chance to reason with Nahiri before she changes it. But I need to know where to look."

He saw a moment of indecisiveness flicker across Kesenia's face, and Jace dared to hope.

Then her expression hardened.

"I'm sorry. I can't help you," she said, standing. "This house takes the privacy of its patrons seriously."

"I understand," Jace said, then quietly, mostly to himself added, "unfortunately, this world is quite large."

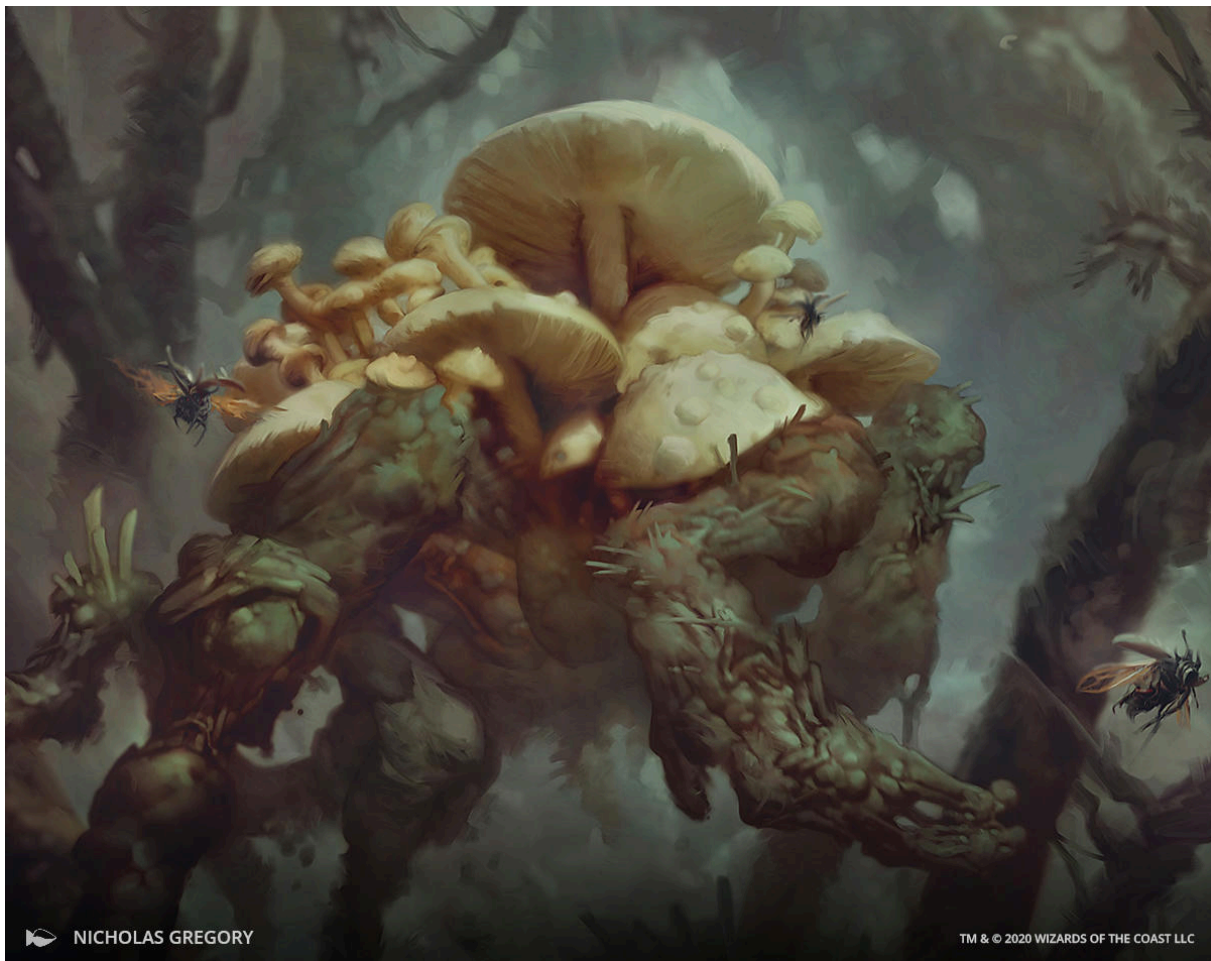
"Yes. If you need lodging, here's the address of a respectable inn," she said, grabbing a quill and a scrap of parchment from the table in the corner and writing it down quickly. "Best of luck." She held out the parchment.

"Thank you," Jace said, taking it, heart sinking. He wondered if he should use his power to force her to tell him what he wanted.

But no, that was crossing a line. Jace could almost hear Gideon chiding him for peering into Kesenia's thoughts. He could almost see Gideon's disappointed frown.

He left the expeditionary house, head racing, trying to figure out his next strategy. He was halfway down the street before he looked at Kesenia's note.

On it was the address for Scholar and Sea Inn. But scrawled on the bottom of the parchment, there was a single word: *Murasa*.



Swarm Shambler | Art by: Nicholas Gregory

Jace had traveled to many planes and many places, but Murasa was different from any island he'd ever been to before. He wasn't sure he liked it.

For starters, the cliffs around him were dizzying, taller than the highest towers of Ravnica, and their sheer white stone face promised danger. Around him, massive harabaz trees soared up into the sky and the roots spanned like arches around him. His boots sunk slightly into the damp, coarse sand on the ground and the smell of brine and kelp was almost overwhelming.

Jace shivered. The Sunder Bay reminded him too much of being trapped in the jungles of Ixalan. He wished he'd been able to bring Chandra or another member of the Gatewatch with him here, but no one had answered his call.

Fortunately, he could see the Skyclave above him, though it was far up, and the trek looked treacherous.

"Well, I do love a challenge," he said. If his time on Ixalan had taught him anything, it was how to build calluses on his hands.

He heard it before he saw it. Something large was tearing through the fauna behind him, its heavy footfalls making the ground quiver. Jace turned just in time to see a huge, ravenous monster emerge from the trees. It had six gnarled legs, a crablike torso, and its back was filled with large pale mushrooms.

"Oh, not now," hissed Jace and turned himself invisible.

The massive creature halted, turning this way and that. It brought its grotesque forearms together with a loud *clap* , causing the clusters of mushrooms on its back to quiver and shake. Then, it turned its massive body toward him.

And charged.

Jace rolled out of the way. An instant later, the creature smashed into a tree behind him.

Damn it , Jace thought. *New plan*. He dropped his invisibility and created an illusion of himself, placing the other Jace as far away from himself as possible. The monster paused, looking between the two planeswalkers. It brought its forearms together again in an earsplitting *crack* . Jace covered his ears, wincing. When he looked up again, the creature was staring straight at him.

It wasn't fooled.

It's using echolocation , he realized a moment too late.

The monster charged. Jace slid out of the way, avoiding it by inches.

"Why does everything on this plane want to kill me?" he murmured as he put two fingers to his temple and attempted to overthrow the beast's mind.

But whatever was controlling this monster, it wasn't its head.

And it was close to him now. Too close. Jace could smell the waves of rot rolling off it. Panic swelled up in Jace. Why didn't his mind control work?

Oh! It's controlled by the mushrooms on its back! But the realization came too late again. The creature lifted its massive twisted forearms over him.

Jace threw up a barrier and braced for impact.

The impact never came.

As suddenly as the monster arrived, so did something else.

At first, Jace couldn't make sense of what it was. Fighting the monster, there was a second creature that could have blended in with the trees around it; its torso was thick and gray, but its limbs were identical to the massive tree roots above him.

The second creature struck the monster once, twice with a sickening *thwack* , dislodging a few of the bulbous mushrooms on its back. The monster shrieked and recoiled.

What are you? Jace thought.

His savoir advanced, hitting the monster again and again and again. Jace realized it was like the embodiment of the harabaz trees around him. Giant, overarching, and indomitable. The answer hit Jace like a punch.

It's an elemental. Jace spun around, searching for the other planeswalker.

Sure enough, Nissa was perched in one of the great trees, hand outstretched, looking every bit the guardian of this plane.

The expression on her face was absolutely murderous.

Within seconds, the harabaz elemental destroyed the monster, its mammoth body crumbled to the ground, broken and inert.

"Are you all right?" Nissa asked, jumping down from her perch as lightly as if it were a mere step down, not a twenty-foot drop.

“Yes,” Jace replied. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. Her gaze slid to the harabaz elemental that was prowling in front of the monster’s corpse as if daring it to try again. “I’ve never summoned a harabaz elemental before. I think Gideon would have liked it.”

“It *is* impressive,” Jace admitted.

“*It is* Zendikar,” said Nissa, stiffly. “Of course, it is.”

Internally, Jace kicked himself. “I didn’t mean to imply—”

“I know,” she said, softly. “The elementals are just really important to me. They were there for me before anyone else was. I can’t let Nahiri harm them.”

Jace put a hand on her shoulder. “I don’t pretend to completely understand,” he said, “but these elementals mean a lot to you, so I’ll help you protect them.”

Nissa broke into a smile, the first one he’d seen from her in a long time. It made his heart lift.

“Thank you,” she said. “Nahiri went up there.” Nissa pointed up to the imposing Skyclave.

“How do you know?”

“Zendikar told me.”

Jace’s brows knitted in confusion. He would never understand this plane. “What’s the best way to get there?” he asked

“My vines,” replied Nissa, but then looked embarrassed. “They’re not as quick as Nahiri’s stone craft. It won’t be easy. Are you ready for this, Jace?”

She bit her lip and twisted her hands in front of her. Jace realized she was expecting him to refuse.

Jace’s stomach twisted with guilt. It was true, the old Jace would have said no. The Jace that hadn’t survived Ixalan with Vraska.

And for the sake of Nissa’s friendship, for the sake of the Gatewatch and the battles to come, he had to do this.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m ready.”