

Episode 1: In the Heart of the Skyclave

A. T. Greenblatt

From set *Zendikar Rising*

02. 09. 2020

Nahiri studied the rising Skyclave before her where it floated vast, imposing, and ruined. She remembered when it was beautiful.

She stood on one of the impossible precipices of Akoum, a jutting of rock extended like a long, gravity-defying finger. A lava field was spread out before her feet, and the hot air carried the scent of molten metal. Ancient kor strongholds like this one had begun appearing all over Zendikar in the aftermath of the war with the Eldrazi. Suddenly, these grand, crumbling structures were revealing themselves after being lost for centuries. As they rose, so did the secrets they carried within.



Mountain | Art by: Chase Stone

Nahiri smiled. With those secrets, she was going to change the world.

"I remember you," she told the Skyclave floating in front of her, "and all of your power."

Now it was just a simple matter of reaching the ruins. Nahiri raised her arms, eager to begin stone crafting, eager to climb.

But she was too focused on looking up, looking ahead. She didn't notice what was happening below. She'd foolishly thought that defeating the Eldrazi had slowed the chaos of Zendikar.

So she didn't see the Roil begin.

It started as bubbles in the lava field. Like a monster awakening, it began quietly and quickly became undeniable. What was first a murmur became an earsplitting roar as the Roil shook the earth, traveling up through the slender stone ledges, filling the air with raw heat and ash so thick it made Nahiri's breath catch. There was an earth-shattering *crack* and, suddenly, the rocky ledge under her feet crumbled.

She fell.

"No," she hissed as she plunged. "NO!" She was the master of lithomancy, the guardian of this plane, and she would not be undone by a simple earthquake. With one smooth motion, Nahiri twisted in the air and stretched out her arms, calling on the stone that was an extension of herself.

And the stone responded. Her freefall slowed to a stop midair, until she was floating. She took the chaotic swirl of magma and rocks below her and bent the elements to her will. Her will—not the Roil's. She gathered that power, that raw energy around her, and used it to create. She twirled streams of lava, loose rocks, and askew hedrons with her lithomancy, moving like a dancer. With a few snaps of her wrists, a pillar began curling upward. Nahiri hovered above it, traveling up with the pillar as it shot into the air, growing taller and taller until the Roil came to a shattering stop.

Only then did Nahiri alight down on top of her creation, even closer now to the Skyclave. She smirked at the treacherous ground below her.

"I win," she said and tried to feel pleased by the victory. But it was a bitter win. The Roil was a symptom of a deep sickness in Zendikar. A sickness that Nahiri had inadvertently helped spread.

And lately, the guilt of her failures haunted her.

The stone always told her when another planeswalker was near. But Nahiri didn't turn when she felt the stone hum their warning. There was someone behind her on this pillar in the sky.

"Akoum is still as beautiful and unpredictable as ever," Nissa said, coming up beside Nahiri, staff in hand, and peering down at the lava field.

"Nothing I can't handle," Nahiri replied. She didn't know if that was true, but she wasn't about to admit it.

"It's not that. I this place " Nissa stammered. Nahiri raised an eyebrow as the diminutive elf struggled to find words. Nissa took a deep breath and said, "What I mean is, I grew up with the Roil. It's not something you can tame."

"You don't know me, then," said Nahiri, with a prick of anger.

Nissa raised a placating hand. "I meant no offense. I saw you during the battle with Nicol Bolas. How you command the stone. You were amazing."

"You were there?" Nahiri asked, uncoiling a bit at the compliment. "Oh, yes, the tree. I remember." Nissa flushed with embarrassment. That encounter did not end well for the ancient tree of Ravnica.

Nahiri redirected her gaze back up toward the Skyclave. "There are some battles I prefer to never fight again."

"Yes," Nissa said, "and some battles that still need to be fought." She was calmly studying Akoum stretched out before them, vast and tumultuous, but her voice was thick with emotion. "Why did you ask me to come here, Nahiri?"

"When I was young, this land was peaceful. There was none of *this*." Nahiri gestured at the ground, wrinkling her nose in disgust. Far below, there were bubbles rising from the lava again, heralding another earthquake from the Roil. "The Eldrazi caused an unspeakable amount of damage to this plane."

Guilt swelled in Nahiri again. She should have never listened to Ugin and Sorin. She should have found a different plane to trap the Eldrazi in millennia ago.

"Yes," Nissa said. "I can feel Zendikar's hurt. It haunts me." She stared at something far in the distance, but her face was full of grief.

"I might have a solution," Nahiri replied, inclining her head toward the Skyclave. "Something that will heal Zendikar."

Nissa blinked. "You do?" she blurted in surprised, and then awkwardly added, "Sorry, I mean, you're not exactly known for healing. After what you did on Innistrad "

Nahiri raised an eyebrow. "Says the person who set the Eldrazi free."

"I didn't—"

The elf stammered, but Nahiri raised a hand.

"We've both done things that have caused great damage. Let's try to undo some of it."

Nissa blushed and nodded. "Why now? I mean, you're old enough "

To remember when this Skyclave was built , Nahiri thought.

Nahiri hesitated. "No matter how far I've traveled," she replied, finally, "or how long I've lived, this place has always felt feels "

"Like home," Nissa said, quietly.

Nahiri's lip quirked upward. "Exactly." She pointed to the Skyclave before them. "Our answers are up there." She smiled mischievously. "Shall we race to the top? Best Zendikari wins."

Nissa didn't respond. She just broke into a sly smile, stretched out her hands, and shot long thick vines upward. The brambles streamed toward the Skyclave, almost too quick for the eye.

But not faster than Nahiri.

In a blur of movement, she used her lithomancy to create a stairway, and then she was running almost as fast as she crafted, grinning madly. She glanced back and saw Nissa struggling to keep pace, slowly falling behind, and laughed. Plants were no contender in this place of stone.

Nahiri didn't make many mistakes, and she rarely repeated them. The benefits of millennia of experience. But the Roil, the damn Roil

The ground began to shake again, and the vibrations swelled louder and stronger until Nahiri's staircase cracked under her feet. She sprinted faster, but she was not fast enough. The stairs crumbled and suddenly, Nahiri was falling again.

She reached out to the stone, preparing to quell the Roil again, when something caught her around her torso, stopping her fall.

“Got you,” Nissa murmured. Her hand was outstretched and the other was curled tight around her staff. Nahiri looked down to see that she was saved by a vine.

Silently, she seethed as Nissa’s vine lifted her up and placed her gently on a makeshift ladder of brambles.

“Thanks,” she said, not meeting Nissa’s eye.

“Shall we try again?” Nissa asked, nervously, staring at her hands. “Best Zendikari wins?”

“No, let’s just go,” Nahiri said, anger seeping into her voice.

They climbed in silence with Nahiri swallowing down her growing guilt with every step.

She had neglected her home for too long.



Nissa of Shadowed Boughs | Art by: Yongjae Choi

The first thing Nissa thought when they finally reached the Skyclave: wow . Even broken, neglected, and hidden for centuries, there was still a breathtaking beauty to the floating fortress. All around her, there were tall pillars and archways, partial ceilings with intricately carved patterns, elaborately tiled floors that mosaicked into pictures. Of course, there were floating rocks, cracked stonework, and ruined edifices, but it was clear to Nissa that this place had once been a beacon of civilization.

The second thing Nissa thought: *it’s going to take years to find anything here*. Now that they had made it, she realized just how *big* the Skyclave was. Though they were standing in an ancient courtyard of sorts, Nissa could see a dozen different archways and entrances leading into the belly of the fortress.

“Thousands of people must have lived here,” Nissa said.

“Tens of thousands,” Nahiri said, coming up beside her.

Nissa hesitated, worried that the question she wanted to ask would annoy Nahiri, that it would shatter any chance of forging a bond with this self-assured, ancient kor. Not that Nissa was particularly good at making connections. It seemed the harder she tried to reach out to someone, the larger the mess she made of things. She wished she were more like Gideon with his cool confidence and steady charm.

Well, what would Gideon do? she thought. *Start acting like him if you want to be more like—.*

Like he was. And suddenly, the grief of his death hit her in a fresh wave.

Gideon wouldn't hesitate.

So, Nissa took a deep breath and asked, “Nahiri, how are we going to find what we need in such a vast place?”

Nahiri's lips quirked in amusement. “We start looking.” She began to walk ahead, jumping nimbly over the places where the floor cracked or there was simply a hole to the sky.

“And what exactly are we looking for?” Nissa asked, hurrying to catch up.

Nahiri hesitated. “I'll know it when I see it.”

Nissa's heart sank. “You don't know?”

Nahiri opened her mouth to answer, but the damned Roil would not be silenced.

Once again, waves of disruption shook the Skyclave. Nissa stepped back quickly as the ancient stones around her began to shift and crack. She thrust out her staff, ready to create a safety net of vines.

But Nahiri was quicker.

She spread her hands and held the fortress together with what looked like a sheer force of will, though Nissa knew lithomancy helped.

When the rumbling stopped, Nahiri scowled as if the Roil were a personal attack.

“I don't know exactly what we seek,” she said, striding ahead, anger lacing her voice. “The ancient kor weren't exactly *descriptive* in their texts”—she stopped suddenly in the middle of a vast mosaic in the center of the courtyard. She squatted and placed a hand against the floor. “The stones will know more.” Nahiri closed her eyes, and Nissa waited, unsure of what to do. From where she stood, she couldn't tell what the tile mural was supposed to be.

Jace would know, she thought, but then quickly shook the thought away. She didn't want to think about Jace or the battle with Nicol Bolas and its toll on Ravnica or the shattered state of the Gatewatch or Gideon's death or Chandra.

Especially not Chandra.

After a minute, Nahiri opened her eyes and rose. “All the best things are hidden in the heart,” Nahiri said with a smirk. She pointed to a particularly dark and forbidding archway. “That looks like a promising place to start. Let's go.”

“How will we know if we're on the right path?” Now that Nahiri had moved away from the center, Nissa could see that the mosaic depicted a sun, with rays shining out from the center. Or something like a sun.

Nahiri was already far ahead, but she called back, “When something tries to stop us from getting past.”

Nissa halted, heart pounding with unexpected panic. Suddenly, this expedition seemed like a terrible idea. What if her attempts to help Nahiri only ended up hurting Zendikar again? Like so many of her mistakes in the past. Once again, she was following someone else's lead. When was that going to change?

What would Gideon do?

"He'd help however he could," Nissa whispered to herself, "but he wouldn't follow Nahiri blindly."

Zendikar was her home. Not Ravnica or any other plane. She belonged here and was the voice of its soul. She had a responsibility to care for it and all the living things in this world.

So, Nissa took a steadying breath, tightened her grip on her staff, and followed.

From the outside, the old Skyclave looked flat and wide, like a stone archipelago floating in the air. From the inside, it seemed like it was looming and bottomless. Nahiri kept a hand on the wall as the passageway went down and down, sometimes becoming steps, sometimes revealing other passageways with untold mysteries.

But Nahiri didn't fall for the Skyclave's bait. The stones under her hand whispered of a great power below, and Nahiri was going to be the one to find it and claim it. Behind her, Nissa moved almost silently, like the child of the forest that she was. Occasionally, her staff clicked against a stone or she would gasp softly when a stray light found its way in through a crack and illuminated their surroundings.

They continued traveling down until they came to the main meeting halls of the ancient kor, where they would gather in the thousands and show off their wealth and artistry. And the halls reflected it. Literally. When the tiles caught the sunlight that snuck in, they sparkled like rare gems. The ceilings were breathtakingly tall, and the carvings on the pillars intricate and detailed.

Yes, it *was* beautiful, Nahiri admitted to herself. But it was also a painful reminder of all this plane had lost. Especially as the Roil kept making the ancient fortress tremble as they traveled within its belly; a constant, pestering reminder that Nahiri, the guardian of Zendikar, had failed to protect her home.

So, Nahiri didn't look too closely at the grand halls or the beautiful carvings. She just kept moving forward, always looking ahead.

The passageway halted abruptly in front of a pair of huge, but collapsed, doors.

"Looks like a dead end," Nissa said, walking up and putting a hand on the door.

"Maybe for you," Nahiri replied and widened her stance. "Stand back."

With one powerful motion, Nahiri brought her hands together with a *clap*, and the massive doors flew apart, booming as they slammed against the stone walls to the right and left of them.

"Let's go," Nahiri said and strode toward the threshold. Nervousness pricked at her, and alarmed whispers followed her from the stones. Beyond, there was a deep darkness, full of the unknown.

But Nahiri would not be stopped. Not now.

"Wait," Nissa shouted from behind her, "there's a fe—"

Something fast and hard slammed against Nahiri and pinned her to the wall. She groaned but immediately commanded the stone wall behind her to punch back.

It did, with a sharp, jabbing column, smashing into whatever was holding her and causing it to groan loudly and let go. Nahiri rolled to the side, coming to her feet in a single fluid motion. She clenched her hands and bared her teeth. Now she was angry.

With barely a thought, Nahiri summoned seven swords, radiating heat and glowing red as if just drawn from a forge. They floated around her, giving Nahiri an ungodly halo. And casting some light on her attacker.

Before her, heaving and furious, was the biggest felidar she had ever seen.

Its hairless body was covered in razor protrusions; its massive antlers swept back over its head. Its talons clicked as it prowled in front of her; its wet, colossal canines slick with saliva in anticipation of fresh meat.

“Like hell,” Nahiri growled and sent all seven swords straight at the creature’s heart. The felidar reeled back, but between its paws and its armor-like protrusions, it managed to deflect the worst of the attack.

It snarled and lunged at Nahiri with unnerving speed, mouth wide.

But before it collided with her, the felidar was halted mid-leap. It took a moment for Nahiri to realize that Nissa was standing between her and the foul beast, shoving it back with more strength than it seemed possible.

“No you don’t,” Nissa grunted as brambles began to wrap themselves around the felidar. But the beast shook and reared up, swiping its massive paws. One connected with Nissa’s shoulder and sent her flying with a shout and a harsh *thud*.

But Nissa had bought Nahiri just enough time to craft chains of stone and snake them around the angry, distracted felidar. With a yell, Nahiri yanked her arm back, and the stone chains snapped to tightness and pinned the monster to the floor,

“Eat this,” Nahiri growled as she leaned low, spreading her fingers. Behind her, seven radiating swords appeared again. With a smirk and a flick of her fingers, Nahiri drove all seven blades into the felidar, making certain to hit its vulnerable points this time.

The creature shrieked once, a long and terrible cry, and then went limp.

Nahiri walked over to where Nissa was getting up from the ground and offered a hand, pulling her up to her feet.

“It was like the felidar was waiting for us,” Nissa said, rubbing her shoulder.

“It probably was,” Nahiri said, as she crafted another glowing sword for light. “It was guarding something.” She grinned, sending the sword down the darkened corridor before them. “Let’s go find out what.”

That uneasy feeling that they were somehow on the wrong path didn’t leave Nissa the further they traveled in the Skyclave. Despite Nahiri’s reassurances, she still wasn’t sure. She could hear the plane’s life force humming to her. It also sounded unsure. Or maybe that was just her?

At least they didn’t run into any more hungry felidars on the way.

The dark passage they traveled went down and down. The Roil flaring up now and then, dogging their steps.

Until it didn’t.

The Skyclave opened up into a cavern-like chamber. There were long, thin, golden-tiled arches that could serve as walkways, crisscrossed and intertwined like a spider’s web. The chasm below the walkways had no visible bottom, though here and there, stray shafts of light managed to slip through at

sharp angles. The air smelled stale and musty, though to Nissa's relief, there were moss and ferns in some nooks.

Nissa smiled as she moved to a cluster of ferns growing in an unlikely clump on the side. This was the Zendikar she knew and loved, even here in this strange, dead, kor stronghold.

Nahiri, on the other hand, was frowning, clearly unsure of where to go next. Because it was no longer a straight path forward, Nissa realized. Nahiri crouched down and placed a hand on the floor, closing her eyes. She stayed like that for a long minute.

Finally, Nahiri scowled. "The stones aren't saying which way to go."

"Why not?" Nissa asked. She didn't think stones could deny Nahiri anything.

She shrugged. "We're close now. Might as well choose a path at random."

Nissa hesitated. This definitely didn't feel like the right solution.

What would Gideon do?

"No," Nissa said, quietly.

"What?" Nahiri turned to look at her, her face full of surprise.

"Wait—"

Nissa crouched down to one of the ferns. Its leaves were as large as she was, but its flowers were tiny, delicate, and blue.

"How is it possible for plants to thrive here?" Nahiri asked, coming up behind her.

Nissa smiled. "You'd be surprised at how many things thrive in unlikely places on this plane."

"How—"

Nahiri began to speak again, but Nissa tuned her out. She rested a hand on the top of the fern, like a parent's hand on the head of a child. She closed her eyes and felt its life under her fingers, felt its struggle and its pride in surviving in such a foreboding place. Nissa smiled at that strength and that pride. And she called it forth.

She heard Nahiri give a gasp as the elemental emerged into existence. It was a tall thing, twice her height, green and vibrant as its life force, its head a mass of fronds with small chains of blue flowers entwining its arms and neck.

"What is *that*?" Nahiri said, taking a step back.

"A friend," Nissa said as the elemental knelt so it was almost eye level. She wasn't about to explain that before she became a planeswalker, before she joined the Gatewatch, these were the first creatures to accept her as she was.

She grasped the elemental's six-fingered hand, saw its love for her in its eyes, and for the first time in a long time, Nissa felt like she belonged.

"We need to find the Skyclave's heart," Nissa said to the elemental. "Can you help us?"

The elemental blinked slowly, then with a groan, raised itself up to its full, towering height and began leading Nissa by the hand.

"Let's go," Nissa called over her shoulder. She caught sight of Nahiri gaping at them and had to suppress a laugh.

The fern elemental led them through the maze of archways, pausing only when the Roil struck again, and Nahiri had to use her power to keep the arches whole. But it never hesitated for long, as if something was beckoning it forth through this relic of a fortress.

Eventually, they came to a landing, a small platform with a narrow bridge to a darkened entrance beyond. Nissa moved to cross it, but Nahiri grabbed her sleeve.

“Wait”—she hissed and pointed—“look.”

Nissa followed Nahiri’s finger up and on the ceiling above was a giant geopede suspended by some invisible force. It writhed its long carapace against its unseen restraints, giving the planeswalkers below an unadulterated look at its hundreds of squirming legs.

Nissa shuddered. Geopedes reminded her too much of snakes. A snake with little snake legs. “Any idea what will spring the trap?”

“No,” Nahiri said, “send the Fern Thing first.”

“Don’t call it that,” replied Nissa, tersely. Why could no one understand that elementals were living, feeling creatures? That they weren’t just tools to be summoned, used, and die on command? No, Nissa wasn’t going to send it to its death knowingly. She turned to the elemental. “Can you disarm it?” she asked, nodding up at the trap.

The elemental looked doubtful, its huge, bright brown eyes looking between her and the squirming creature above.

“I won’t let it harm you.” Nissa raised her hand up, sending vines to create a makeshift net under the geopede. Carefully, the elemental reached up its giant, leafy hands and tapped the underbelly of the geopede once. The creature hissed and wriggled.

For a moment, the invisible trap held.

Then it didn’t. And the massive creature fell.

As soon as it hit Nissa’s net, though, she closed her fist, and the vine snapped around the monster. She pulled her arm back, and the vines yanked the geopede to the ground, slamming it into the floor. The monster shrieked and twitched. Then it went limp and expired.

Nissa grinned. *Take that, not-a-snake.*

She didn’t expect, however, for Nahiri to smash it again with a stone fist. Nissa and the elemental jumped back in surprise.

“What?” Nahiri asked, grinning. “This is Zendikar. Everything born on this plane is hard to kill.”

For a moment, Nissa was about to argue. She couldn’t help but think of her first home on Bala Ged and how most of her tribe and all that she knew was wiped out so easily by the Eldrazi.

Then she realized Nahiri was talking about them—Zendikar’s two planeswalkers.

Nissa smiled. Maybe they *were* going to heal this plane. Together. “True. Let’s go take this Skyclave’s heart.”



Inscription of Insight | Art by: Zoltan Boros

The heart of the Skyclave was aglow. Ancient runes covered every surface, every inch of the stone walls, floors, and ceiling. The runes shone with a golden light that pulsed with their footfalls as the two planeswalkers entered the room. Nissa’s fern elemental—or fern monstrosity as far as Nahiri was concerned—trailed behind them.

But it wasn’t the runes that interested Nahiri, it was the dais in the very center of the room, in the heart of the heart. And in the middle of that, there was a small tile, glowing like a star.

“What is that?” Nissa asked, by her side.

Nahiri smiled. This was promising. Very promising. And it filled her with more hope than she felt in a long time. “A key,” she replied

“A key for what?”

“To unlock the true power we seek.”

Nissa frowned. “I thought you said that we’d find something to heal Zendikar here.”

“I said the ancient kor texts are not always clear,” Nahiri started, briskly, “but the object we seek is both powerful and dangerous. It’s an orb. It roughly translates to *lithoform core*. And it’s the last one in existence.”

The fern elemental shifted uncomfortably, and Nissa looked skeptical. “How do you know that?” she asked.

"Says so," Nahiri said, walking up to the dais. The runes flashed brighter, more intently as she drew closer, as if to beckon her on. "In the writing around us."

Nissa trailed her. "You can read the runes?"

"Of course," Nahiri replied, "I *am* an ancient kor."

"Oh. Right." Nissa blushed and hung back with her Fern-Thing as Nahiri approached the dais. She heard Nissa whisper to it, "Stay close to me."

At the foot of the dais, the runes around Nahiri flared once, then dimmed. Before her, the key glowed brightly, almost welcoming. But she didn't reach for it yet. Instead, she placed her hand on the cool marble on either side of the key and listened to the stones, felt their power, searched for any traps.

She found none.

So, slowly, gently, Nahiri reached for the key and picked it up.

It shone brighter in her hand, greeting her like a long-lost friend.

"Well, now that we have the key," Nissa said, "I suppose we need to find the lock."

"Yes," Nahiri said, head tilted in thought. "Runes say Murasa. In a Skyclave there."

"It's never easy, is it?" Nissa said with a sigh, "What else do your runes say?"

"There's a little bit of the core's power in this room," Nahiri said, "and also, in this." She held up the key. "I—"

She stopped. She felt the faint rumbles of the Roil again. She'd been paying attention, feeling the earth though she was miles above it. Learning to predict the unpredictable episodes.

Nahiri gritted her teeth. The Roil, the damn Roil.

From her expression, she could see Nissa felt it too. "Show me," Nissa said.

So, Nahiri spoke the words, the ancient language she hadn't used in millennia. She felt the power stir under her feet, felt it rising, answering her call. Then with that freshly drawn power, she set it loose toward the shifting and shaking earth.

There was a blinding flash in the room, and Nahiri shielded her eyes. Far below, she felt the Roil hesitate, then, like a monster pierced through the heart, the Roil shuddered and stopped completely. She heard grinding noises around her and felt the Skyclave knit itself back together, though not completely. The runes hadn't contained *that* much power. But still, this ancient and broken fortress was mending itself.

Happiness bloomed in Nahiri, and she clutched the key to her chest. She had found it. She had found a way to heal Zendikar.

Then, behind her, she heard the Fern-Thing scream.

"No!" Nissa shouted. She felt the elemental's pain before she understood what was happening. Before she saw its green limbs twist and wither, before she heard it give a heart-tearing scream, before she saw its bright eyes go dark and it crumble away into ash.

Nissa reached out with her power, with her hands, trying to stop the elemental from dying, but it was no use. She was left with fistfuls of ash. "What did you do?" Nissa yelled at Nahiri.

“What?” Nahiri asked, turning around. Nissa saw that she was holding the key to her chest and *smiling*, like she just won a battle. “It stopped the Roil.”

“You murdered the elemental!”

“Your plant?”

My family. Nissa didn’t say. *A piece of Zendikar.* Because the elementals *were* Zendikar, and if quelling the Roil with the core meant their death, then Zendikar was in mortal danger. Nissa stared at the ashes in her hands, felt anger and grief well up inside her. Over this mistake.

Over all her mistakes.

What would Gideon do?

“He wouldn’t let this continue,” Nissa whispered to herself, straightening, squaring her shoulders back.

“What?” Nahiri asked, puzzled.

“Is this your solution?” Nissa asked. She wasn’t shouting anymore, but there was a quiet fury in her voice that made Nahiri pause.

“Look around you—this Skyclave is healing. The Roil stopped below us, and the land is calming. People will be able to rebuild here!” Nahiri said gesturing at the Skyclave’s repair.

“At the expense of Zendikar’s *life*,” Nissa retorted. She reached out her awareness to the plants and moss that grew in the corners and cracks of the Skyclave, but they didn’t respond. Nissa knew then that everything that lived in that ruined fortress was dead.

“You don’t know what Zendikar was like,” Nahiri said, her voice tight with anger, “you don’t know how stunning and bright its people and cities used to be.”

“And you don’t know what Zendikar is like *now*. It’s still beautiful, Nahiri”—Nissa reached out her hand—“give me the key.”

Nahiri didn’t respond. Instead, she set her jaw, widened her stance, and spread her arms.

Nissa didn’t think, she just reacted—dodging the pillars that suddenly jutted out of the floor, avoiding them by inches. She didn’t think as she released a mass of vines to deflect the stone swords that came flying toward her. She didn’t think as she commanded the vines to snake around Nahiri’s ankles and pull her to the ground.

Nahiri fell with a groan and a curse. But before Nissa could attack again, the other planeswalker raised a wall of stone between them that Nissa couldn’t breach, despite creating lashing brambles as thick as tree trunks. Her brambles hit the stone uselessly over and over.

After a few minutes, the wall between them turned to glass, revealing a bruised and seething Nahiri on the other side.

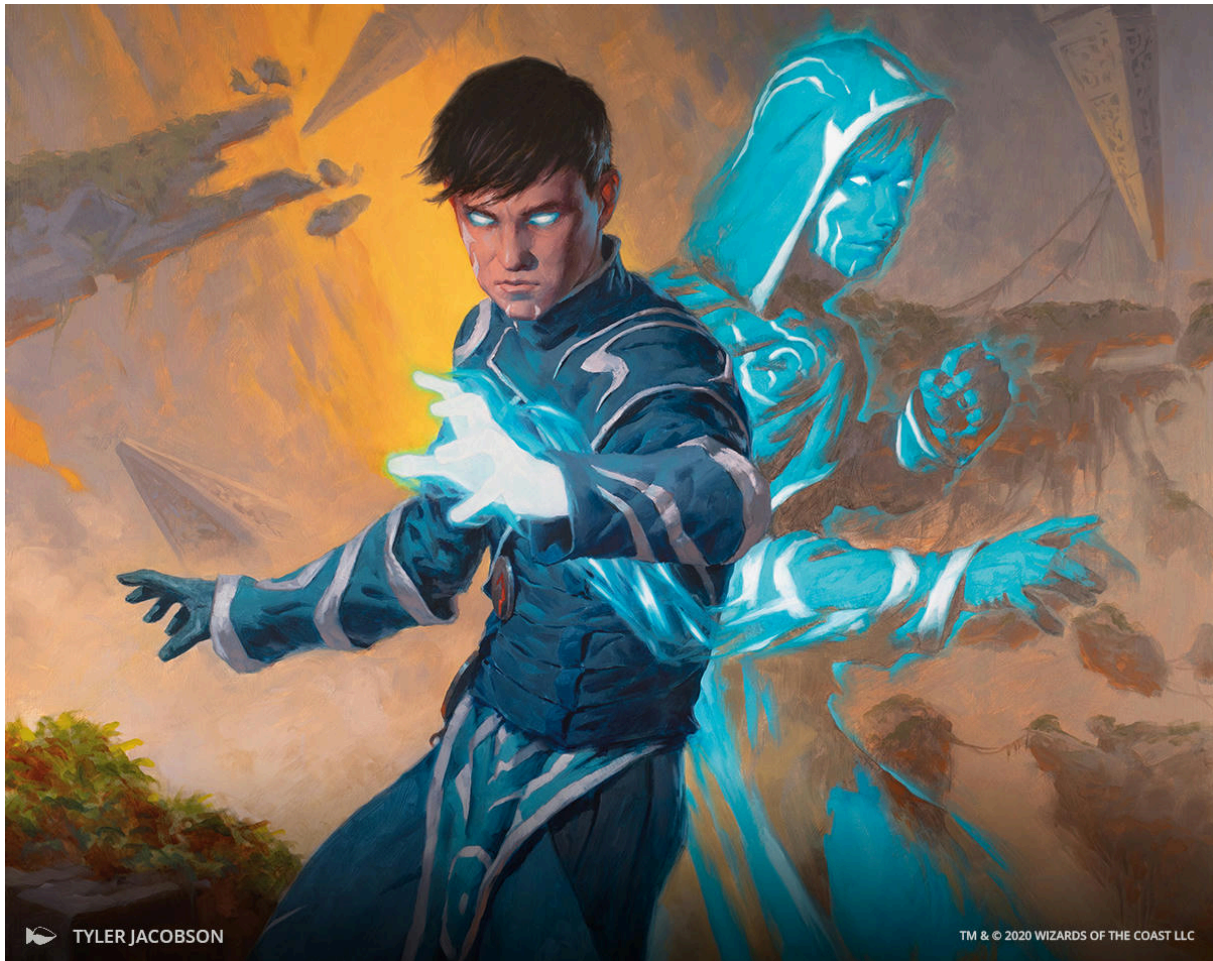
“I can’t just stand by and let this plane tear itself apart!” Nahiri shouted, “I am the guardian of Zendikar!”

Nissa looked at the other planeswalker and realized she was a fool to hope that this ancient, uncaring person could help heal her home. “So am I.”

What would Gideon do?

He would get help.

So, Nissa planeswalked away.



Jace, Mirror Mage | Art by: Tyler Jacobson

Ravnica, the plane of cities. Or rather, one large, world-spanning city. Nissa could see the beauty in it: the elegant floating towers and marble-paved streets, the autumn trees contrasting with the gray skies. She could admire the beauty and still remember its war-ravaged streets.

Still remember how the spirit of Vitu-Ghazi fell.

It was best not to be recognized, she reasoned, so she didn't linger long on the streets before arriving at Jace's home.

She was led to Jace's inner sanctum, with nothing more than a polite bow and a dark look from the guard at the door. She supposed she deserved the anger of Ravnica's citizens. Though, it stung.

Maybe Chandra was right. Maybe she *was* a walking disaster.

Nissa didn't want to think about Chandra. Especially now that she needed Jace's and the others' help.

Inside the sanctum, the room was brimming with books and scrolls, magical objects that she had no name for scattered around the massive place. Light streamed in from tall, arched windows, but there were still dark corners. It took a moment for Nissa to find Jace perched up on a ladder, against the furthestmost wall, reading a book from the top shelf.

"Be with you in a moment," he called.

Nissa knew that "a moment" could mean a few seconds to an hour with Jace. But she was too nervous to interrupt him, so she waited.

"Nissa!" Jace said when he finally caught sight of her. "Why didn't, I mean, I thought you wouldn't, I mean, why"—he stopped himself, slid down the ladder, and came toward her—"I mean, I'm happy to see you're all right." He reached out, remembering at the last second she didn't care to be touched. He withdrew his hand and gave her a warm smile instead.

This caught Nissa by surprise. She thought he'd be furious with her, like the rest of Ravnica. But relief that he wasn't, that he was pleased to see her, washed over her as he led her to a table.

"Come, sit," Jace said. "What can I do for you?"

Nissa wasn't sure how to begin, so she just said it—"Zendikar's in trouble."

"The Eldrazi?" Jace asked, alarmed.

"No, no," said Nissa quickly, "nothing like that. It's Nahiri."

"Nahiri," Jace said, brows knitting together. "The *other* guardian of Zendikar?"

"Yes," said Nissa. Suddenly, she felt exhausted. She wasn't sure how she was going to explain this all to Jace, who had never felt a connection to a life force. "She's trying to heal the plane."

"Yes, you mentioned that she asked to see you. But I don't understand. That's what you want, right?"

"Yes, but there's this ancient orb—"

"Elven or kor?"

"Kor. But—"

Jace was already moving to the shelves. "I think I have a scroll about that—"

"Jace! Listen," Nissa said, with more force than she meant to. "Please."

Jace paused and looked surprised, but he sat back down and nodded. Nissa felt a small flush of pride at this victory. Jace never listened to her. Maybe channeling Gideon was working after all.

Nissa recounted what happened in the Skyclave in Akoum, what Nahiri told her about the lithoform core, and what it did to the fern elemental. Jace listened quietly, intently. She had to pause and take a few steady breaths as she described the elemental's death.

"I know you don't have a connection to elementals," she said, "but they're important to me. Not that the Gatewatch isn't " She couldn't meet Jace's eyes as she said this.

"No, I don't truly understand elementals," Jace said, "but I know they are important to you. How can we help?"

Nissa exhaled, relieved. She felt a wave of gratitude that though she routinely made a mess of potential friendships and relationships, she could still rely on Jace and the others when she needed them.

"Well, I need Nahiri to destroy the lithoform core when she finds it. And I don't know how to convince her to do that"—Nissa's shoulders hunched slightly—"I miss Gideon. He'd know how to reason with an ancient, angry stone crafter."

Jace's face was a complex array of emotions. "I miss him too."

"What should I do, Jace? I don't think I'm strong enough to fight Nahiri on my own if I had to."

Jace steepled his fingers. "If we bring the lithoform core here—"

"No!" Nissa said, half rising out her chair. Jace stared at her in surprise, and honestly, the force in her own voice surprised Nissa, too. "You haven't seen the damage it causes, Jace."

"Yes, but if we can study it," Jace said, rising and moving toward his shelves again.

“And who will be your test subjects?” Nissa asked with growing alarm. She was losing him.

“I suspect the lithoform core is channeling Zendikar’s power—”

“Jace!”

“Then its power can become malleable—”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Perhaps based on the wielder?” Jace plucks a scroll from the shelves. “This should—”

“You’re not listening!” Nissa shouted, sending out a vine to knock the scroll from Jace’s hand. He stepped back, surprised.

Nissa could feel her face flush with anger, and her heart thrummed against her chest. This was going all wrong. She lost the Gatewatch and she was going to lose Zendikar’s elementals. Her families.

What would Gideon do?

“Nissa, what are you thinking?” Jace asked, standing before her, trying to catch her eye.

What would Gideon do?

Gideon would seize the moment.

“I will not lose both of my families,” Nissa said as her expression turned into something more than determination. “I’m going to protect my home. With or without the Gatewatch’s help.”

“Wait—”

Jace began, but Nissa didn’t wait. She was done waiting. With one breath, one movement, one thought, Nissa planeswalked back to Zendikar.

The only place she’d ever belong.

Jace stood in his now empty sanctum and planned.

He should have listened better, convinced Nissa to stay, to rejoin the Gatewatch. Guilt gnawed at him for the secrets he was keeping about Nicol Bolas. He was the only one who knew the truth.

That the ancient, terrible dragon was still alive.

And every day Jace kept that secret was a lie of omission to his friends.

But he could make it up to them. He would.

He considered what Nissa said about the core and wondered if it was somehow connected to the Roil. If it was, what could Nahiri do with such power? What could the Gatewatch do?

A great deal, Jace realized.

So, he planned—knowing that soon he’d be on Zendikar.