

Episode 4: Of Haunting Songs and Whispered Warnings

A. T. Greenblatt

From set *Zendikar Rising*
23. 09. 2020



Akiri knew the sensation of falling as intimately as the strength of her own hands. She didn't fear the rush of air on her face or the way her stomach leapt to her throat. She was the best line-slinger on Zendikar, and she learned long ago that sometimes, in order to climb, you had to fall.

But she had never fallen so far and so long before. She had never fallen without hope.

She could see the Murasa Skyclave shrinking above her as she plummeted. And if she closed her eyes, Akiri saw Nahiri's cool, indifferent expression and the Core in her hand, in that terrible moment before she was shoved off the floating ruin.

In those first few desperate seconds, Akiri threw her ropes and hooks at every floating ledge or slanted hedron within reach. But instead of tearing itself apart, the pieces of the Murasa Skyclave were moving. It was stitching itself back together like an impossible puzzle, and her hooks lost their mooring or were smashed before Akiri could save herself.

Soon the only thing around her was empty sky.

These are the last moments of my life, she realized. Grief and anger hit her like a punch. Akiri hadn't managed to save or protect anything she loved in those desperate minutes before Nahiri pushed her.

Zendikar. Zareth. She closed her eyes and thought of her friend and love, pushing away the image of his frozen, screaming face in the moment of his death, remembering him instead laughing, line-slinging with her, his bright eyes full of mischief.

Akiri held his memory close as she waited for the ground. She would see Zareth soon.

The impact knocked the breath from her. Her neck and limbs jerked forward painfully. Then snapped back.

Suddenly, Akiri wasn't falling anymore.

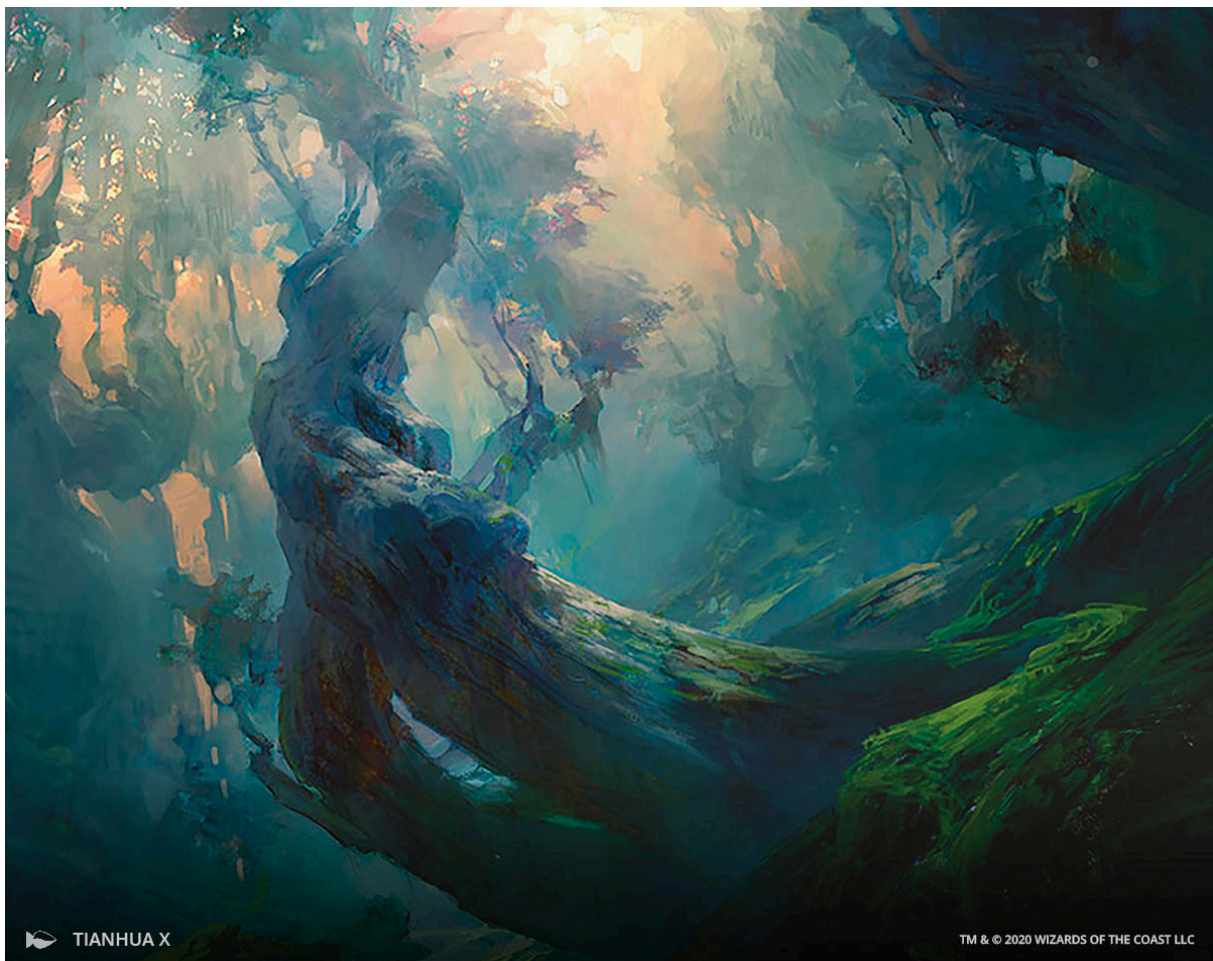
Strange, she thought. *Death is gentler than I imagined.* She anticipated feeling the limbs of the harabaz trees break against her body, at least, if she felt anything at all. Opening her eyes, she expected only darkness, but around her there was bright blue sky. Turning her head, she saw Sunder Bay several hundred feet below her, its trees swaying and thrashing against the relentless waves.

"What?" she whispered. She was suspended midair. Impossible.

"Got you!" someone shouted from above.

Akiri looked up again, squinting from the sun, and above her, she could just make out a slim figure leaning on a staff. They were standing on what looked like a ladder of branches. Though that seemed impossible, too.

"What?" she whispered again.



Forest | Art by: Tianhua X

Akiri felt herself rising and realized that there was a bramble branch curled tightly around her chest.

As she drew closer to the figure on the ladder, she saw that her rescuer was an elf woman with long dark hair, clothed in green. Farther down the ladder, a man with windswept hair and bright eyes was carefully climbing up.

The bramble gently set Akiri down on the ladder, a foot or so away from the elf.

"Thank you," said Akiri, after a moment. It was as much as she could manage.

"Are you alright?" asked her rescuer.

"Yes." Akiri glanced up at the Murasa Skyclave. It was nearly whole now, as if they had never sprung the trap. As if Akiri and her party didn't just fight for their lives. It was as if Zareth died for nothing.

"No," she whispered as her knees buckled under her.

"Easy"—the elf caught her around the shoulders, steadying her—"I have you."

"Who are you?" Akiri asked.

"I'm Nissa," she replied and, with a timid smile, added, "The slow climber is Jace."

Jace groaned as he came up beside them. "I'm out of practice. We don't have sky dungeons in Ravnica."

Akiri studied them for a moment. There was something about the pair that she wouldn't have recognized a few days ago, something she always disregarded as campfire myths. A sense of unspoken power, that they contained secrets as vast as the world. A feeling that they had one foot here and the other somewhere else.

Like Nahiri.

"You can travel to other realms, can't you?" she asked, recoiling from Nissa's grasp.

Nissa and Jace exchanged a look. "You know about planeswalkers?" Jace asked.

The myths called you walkers. Planeswalker. My demon has a name, Akiri thought as her chest constricted with grief. "I've met Nahiri. She's the one who pushed me." She pointed up to the Skyclave.

She noted that neither planeswalker looked surprised. They both were staring at the Murasa Skyclave.

"Does she have the Core?" Nissa asked, her hands balling into fists at her side.

"Yes." An image of Nahiri's cruel face flashed again in Akiri's mind. And Zareth's dead one.

"We can still catch her," Jace said, beginning to climb again. "Hurry."

"No, Jace!" said Nissa. "Look!"

Akiri followed to where Nissa's finger was pointing. In the distance, she could just make out a white-haired figure running through the air, as if sprinting down a flight of steps. Akiri recognized the stonecrafting. The sight of Nahiri made Akiri's stomach twist.

Nissa thrust forward a hand and shot out dozens of thorn arrows at Nahiri. But the distance between them was too great. Nahiri had plenty of time to block the attack with a flick of her wrist and a well-aimed boulder.

Akiri flinched, readied her ropes. *Wait*, she thought. *Not yet.*

She heard Jace exhale behind her, and Akiri turned to see him staring at Nahiri in the distance. He extended three fingers out in the stonemason's direction, like an attack, and Akiri held her breath.

Nothing happened.

Then Nahiri stumbled, clutching the sides of her head. Jace's mouth twitched.

Nahiri regained her balance within moments and slid to a stop on the stone stairs. She turned toward Jace.

Even from this distance, the malice in Nahiri's glare made Akiri's skin crawl.

"Look out!" Akiri shouted, pushing Jace out of the way before a boulder slammed into him.

Then she was falling again. But this time with Jace in her grasp.

Akiri was the best line-slinger in Zendikar for a reason, and she'd been expecting Nahiri's attack. Within seconds, she tossed the rope in her hand and secured the hook on the ladder of vines. She used her momentum to swing out of the way of another boulder and, with three quick hand-over-hand motions, hoisted herself and Jace back up onto the bramble ladder.

When she looked across the sky again, Nahiri was gone. Akiri exhaled, both relieved to be out of Nahiri's sight and furious that she got away.

"That was " Jace said to Akiri, getting his bearings, "impressive."

"Nahiri hired my party for a reason. We are were the best in the world," replied Akiri. With a pang of worry, she wondered where Kaza and Orah were.

Please be alive , she thought.

"We need to follow her quickly!" Nissa said as she began climbing down the brambles.

"Oh, if it's speed you want," Akiri said with cold certainty. She was Akiri, the Fearless Voyager, and she was the master of this domain. This was *her* home. She began to whirl another rope.

Between her line-slinging and Nissa's vines, they flew down, past Sunder Bay and the canopy of harabaz trees, toward Murasa's infamous imposing cliffs. Akiri swept like a bird through the air from those dizzying heights, despite needing to aid Jace. This time, her falling was practiced, controlled, though her heart was heavy with grief.

She could not let Nahiri get away.

But they were still too slow. By the time she, Nissa, and Jace reached the wide, forested plateau beyond the cliffs, Nahiri was gone.

Nissa clenched her hands and leaned against a massive jurworrell tree. There, she stood still, closed her eyes, head cocked slightly to one side.

"What is she doing?" Akiri whispered to Jace. Jace shrugged.

"Listening," replied Nissa. After a moment, she opened her eyes. "She went north, but I can't tell exactly where. Did Nahiri tell you where she'd go next?" she asked Akiri.

Akiri shook her head. Now that she was on the ground again, the memories of Zareth hounded her. She had spent too much time with mysterious planeswalkers. She understood now that they were as dangerous as the Eldrazi. "Thank you for saving me again," she said, gathering up her ropes.

"Where are you going?" Jace asked, alarmed.

"I need to find Orah and Kaza."

"Who?"

"My friends. Hopefully Nahiri didn't kill them, too." Akiri swallowed hard. She didn't know what she'd do if she lost her entire second adventuring party. Her second family.

"We could use your help," entreated Jace.

"Well, you can't have it," replied Akiri. "Working for Nahiri was one of my greatest mistakes. She used the Core Zareth"—Akiri took a deep breath—"I'm done helping people from other realms." She wasn't sure where Nahiri had come from, but it wasn't from the Zendikar she loved.

"I'm not from another realm," said Nissa, quietly. "I was born here. In Bala Ged. My tribe my tribe was almost wiped out by the Eldrazi. And I feel the devastation everywhere in this world." She straightened and looked directly at Akiri. "This is my home and always will be. And I refuse to let Nahiri change it into her dead stone vision." She spoke softly, but there was a fierce determination in her voice, in her position.

For the first time, Akiri noticed how the entire forest seemed to bend itself around this diminutive elf. Like it was waiting for her to give a command.

"You should know then," said Akiri, "the Core corrupts and kills. Beasts, trees "

People , she couldn't bring herself to say.

Nissa's expression was pained, but not surprised. "So, you don't have any ideas on where she might have gone?" she asked.

"None," Akiri answered.

"I might," said Jace, looking guilty. Both women looked at him with surprise. "I peered into her thoughts," he admitted. "She's going to the Singing City."

Akiri knew the legends around the Singing City. It was said that those who wandered in its ruins went mad.

"I think looking into her mind was the right call," said Nissa, gently. Her brow then furrowed. "But why does she want to go there?"

"Because it was built by the ancient kor," Jace replied.

"What?" Nissa and Akiri said in unison.

"Well, it's a logical conclusion," Jace said. "They built the ancient cities of this world." But Nissa's eyes were closed again, listening.

"I can get there faster on my own," she said.

"Nissa, wait," Jace said, alarmed.

But it was clear to Akiri that Nissa was not waiting for anyone. There was already a tangle of jurworrell roots rising up under her, lifting her into the air. "I will stop Nahiri and destroy the Core," she said, looking down at Akiri. "I promise." But this time, behind that quiet determination, Akiri heard anger.

Akiri nodded. "Hurry."

"Nissa," Jace said, but neither woman paid attention.

Like a line thrown with purpose, the roots swelled and rushed forward into the forest.

Then Nissa was gone.

“Nissa!” Jace yelled after her. But there was nothing where she had stood, except the hum of the forest and the looming trees. He turned to Akiri. “Can you take me to the Singing City?”

“Yes, but I won’t.” Akiri latched a rope to a thick jurworrell root above her. She needed to find the griffins she and her party had ridden to Murasa. She hoped Kaza and Orah would be at Sunder Bay, waiting for her.

Please be safe, she thought.

“Please, Akiri,” Jace said, coming up behind her.

“You’re not great at listening, are you?” Akiri said, lifting herself off the ground. “I’ve lost enough for one day.”

One lifetime. Zareth.

“My apologies,” Jace said. “I’m usually a decent listener. It’s been a trying well, a trying few years, if I’m being honest.”

Yes, it has. Akiri pulled herself on the root and looked for the next anchor point.

“Wait, your friends are Kaza and Orah, right?” Jace said.

Akiri stopped, stared at the man in blue. “What about them?”

Jace closed his eyes and pressed his fingers to the side of his temples for a moment. “I’m sensing two figures down at the bay. I’m assuming they’re your missing party. Though I can’t say for certain.”

Akiri grasped the rope and slid to the ground. “How are you doing that?”

Jace shrugged. “I’m a mage. I’m good at illusions and thoughts.”

“That’s how you could read Nahiri’s mind?” she asked. Jace looked guilty, and Akiri recoiled at the idea of her thoughts being read by this otherworld stranger.

My mind is my own, she thought angrily, just in case Jace was listening. *Stay out of it.*

She began climbing up again.

“What if I promised to take the Core somewhere else? Somewhere beyond Zendikar?” Jace called after her.

What does that even mean? Akiri wanted to ask but stopped herself with a small shudder. The Eldrazi were from somewhere beyond Zendikar. It was better not to know.

“Will the Core no longer be a danger, then?” she asked, instead.

Jace nodded.

That made Akiri pause. *Zareth would have wanted you to save Zendikar.* The thought made her heart ache. Stealing the dangerous object and sending it to another world? Zareth would have loved that. And, Akiri had to admit, it was a good solution. With a sigh, she turned back to Jace.

“I’ll take you to the entrance of the City so you can help Nissa,” she said, cautiously, “but no further.”

“Thank you, Akiri,” Jace said with relief.

If he was reading her thoughts, she found no sign of it as they made their way to the Singing City.

It was only much later, after she reunited with Orah and Kaza at Sunder Bay, that Akiri realized she never told Jace her name.

Jace followed Akiri through the tangled, towering jurworrell trees until they gave way to a forest blighted by the Eldrazi. Here, the sickly, blackened landscape made Jace's stomach clench with guilt, though he noticed there was new, tender life struggling to grow in the mire.

He pressed on.

He followed her as the trees broke against towering cliffs, as tall as Murasa's Wall. He followed her as they scaled the cracked stones, where the low growls of unseen beasts hiding in the cliffs' caves sometimes made the rocks under his hands vibrate.

Jace followed Akiri onto the Na Plateau and into the dense forest beyond. He was relieved he didn't have to make this journey alone, as the jaddi trees became denser and darker as they neared the city.

Akiri was silent through the whole journey except to whisper, "Look out for wurms" or "There are goblins around here. Stay as silent as you can."

Jace could tell she was holding her grief and worry close, trying not to show it, even though her pain was obvious to him. Perhaps because he had been holding close his own painful secrets.

They came to a break in the forest. Before them was a graveyard of a city beyond age. It was as if one of the massive Skyclaves settled on the earth. Its stone towers were broken and toppled, and its walls were covered in flora and moss. The air smelled dank and dusty, and everything was eerily humming. The gate at the entrance was made of marble—dark and huge and twisted and beautiful, curling and entwining in a complex pattern like the jaddi roots. It loomed before Jace and Akiri.

"Any advice?" he asked.

"Don't go mad," she replied.

"Right." Jace straightened his cloak. "Thank you for your help. And I'm sorry about your friend. I know what it's like to lose someone close to you."

Akiri nodded, her jaw clenching with suppressed emotion. She turned and began to walk away, but then paused.

"I hope Nissa's luck holds better than mine," she said, over her shoulder. And then she was gone in the shadow of the trees.

"Right," Jace said again, and made his way to the gate.

It was unlocked.

Inside was a maze of ruins. Moss covered rooms and corridors stretched out before him with no end in sight. Jace's heart sank. It was apparent that this was not going to be easy. As much as he adored a challenge, this wasn't the time to get lost.

Everywhere, there was a low, slightly off-key humming Jace couldn't quite ignore.

On his right, something moved. Jace immediately threw a magic ward up around him. He followed the sound around the corner and saw a white-haired figure facing away.

"Hello, Jace," Nahiri said, without turning. "Of course you're here."

"I've come on Nissa's behalf," he said.

"Naturally."

“She says that Core will destroy Zendikar.”

Nahiri turned and faced her, scowling. “This from the person who released the Eldrazi on this plane.”

Jace gritted his teeth. He was *also* one of the planeswalkers that accidentally released the Eldrazi. “She thought she was doing what was best.”

“Like she is now?” Nahiri raised an eyebrow, and Jace had no answer. “Unlike that fumbling tree-dweller, I know I’m right.”

“Like you were when you trapped the Eldrazi here?” Jace replied.

Nahiri’s expression clouded over with anger. “How dare you.”

“We don’t understand the Lithoform Core,” he said, evenly, though he kept a tight hold on his magical ward. “Give me the Core, Nahiri, and we can unravel its mysteries together. On Ravnica.”

Nahiri paused, and, for a moment, Jace hoped.

Then she widened her stance.

“Never,” she snarled. And with a thrust of her hand, she brought the stones on either side of him together.

The stones smashed through Jace’s barrier but were slowed just enough so that he could dodge out of the way. He rolled to his feet, bracing again for the next attack, creating a dozen illusionary Jaces around him.

But Nahiri was sprinting down the corridor. Swearing, Jace dropped the illusions and raced after her.

Down he ran through ancient corridors, catching glimpses of spiraling arches and broken courtyards. Down he ran, following the footprints Nahiri left in the dust as she rushed through narrow passageways and winding halls.

Down he ran on twisted, broken stairs. Into the belly of this ancient kor city.

It was here that the strange humming of the city became an unsettling song. It sang a requiem for something Jace could not name, its lilting harmonies and deep vibrations filling him with such sadness and longing that he considered stopping his pursuit.

No, I have to stop Nahiri, he thought, hearing her footfalls ahead of him. They were slowing. He pressed on.

Deep in the city, the melody became louder, more complex and distorted, more insistent. Jace gritted his teeth. He could see the outline of Nahiri in the distance. The haunting song made his joints ache.

I have to reach Nahiri. Jace stumbled forward through the curling corridor.

But each step was worse than the last. The music swelled, the haunted singing rising, demanding his full attention. Jace stumbled, groaned.

I have to find . . .

He saw there were now blue arcs of magic around him, flashing in time to the music. The song drowned out all sound, all thought. Jace fell to his knees, hand clamped around his ears.

I have to . . . I have to . . .

He struggled to focus, grabbed onto the thought. *Not. Go. Mad.*

It was risky, untried, but Jace was desperate. He let go of his ears and attempted a spell, one that he'd been meaning to test out, but hadn't yet. A spell that was delicate and dangerous. A spell that blocked out any sound entering his ears.



Maddening Cacophony | Art by: Magali Villeneuve

The singing reached an impossible crescendo. Every fiber of his body spasmed, his mind screamed for relief, beginning to slip away.

Then, mid-note, the song stopped.

Jace exhaled. His spell worked.

Within seconds, his mind cleared and his joints unlocked. He could see Nahiri crumpled on the ground before him, hands over her ears. He got to his feet and rushed over to her, sweeping out his hands, enlarging the radius of his spell to encompass Nahiri.

She groaned and covered her eyes. Jace held back, unsure of what the lithomancer's next reaction would be, wary of an attack.

He reached out telepathically. *Are you okay, Nahiri?*

She stumbled to her feet, rolled back her shoulders, and glared at Jace. *Are you expecting a thank you?*

Naturally not, Jace smiled inwardly.

She scowled and stared at her feet. *I didn't hear it before. The singing. Then, when I did, I thought I was too powerful for it to affect me.*

Jace nodded. *This plane has always been full of surprises.*

The Core and I are not leaving Zendikar, Jace. Her stance straightened with a sharp, defiant look on her face.

Okay. Jace realized he needed to change tactics if he was going to get through to Nahiri. *Where are you going then?*

To the center of the city . To activate it.

Jace waited, crossing his arms.

Nahiri rolled her eyes. *Runes said there's a magical focal point there that can channel the Core's energy all over Zendikar through the leylines.*

This caught Jace's interest. *Making the transformation universal?*

Nahiri nodded, wariness in her expression.

Jace saw then how Nahiri imagined her healed plane. It was Zendikar transformed. Vast, beautiful cities with thousands of people crafting, selling, thriving. Intricately carved archways and complex, breathtaking architecture was everywhere. And, most of all, the plane was stable. Safe.

It reminded Jace of Ravnica.

I won't hinder you, Nahiri, if you promise not to use the Core until we study this mechanism in more detail.

Nahiri paused, considering, then nodded. *I have no desire to harm my home.*

But Jace could see her thoughts and knew that Nahiri's definition of harm was not the same as his or Nissa's. That she would raze cities and armies to achieve her goals.

He also knew that if he was ever going to unlock the mysteries of the Core, he was going to have to understand how it was activated. That if it was going to be a useful weapon in the battles to come, its mysterious power had to be quantified first.

And he knew they would need every weapon the planes could offer when they faced Nicol Bolas again.

So, with a placating smile, he turned to Nahiri and thought, *Lead the way.*

Nahiri and Jace traveled through the maze that was the Singing City, their uneasy truce hanging heavy in the space between them. Nahiri stayed close to Jace, making sure to keep within his spell range. She never wanted to hear those mad, haunted voices again.

As they walked, she kept one hand trailing the mossy stone walls, asking them for the way to the city center, and the other on the satchel on her hip. The Core under her hand felt warm, and she felt its thrumming power. It made her smile.

But it also still whispered, something just low enough that she couldn't make it out. Perhaps when she had a moment, after she restored Zendikar to its former beauty, she would try to decipher the whispers' meaning.

Fortunately, Jace stayed silent, perhaps seeing in her fuming thoughts, as she repeated the mantra *never again, never again*.

The vibrations of the stones led them down seemingly endless corridors, through empty courtyards, and back up again on cracked and twisting stairs. She was so close now. So close to finding the focal point in the center of the Singing City. So close to finally fixing all the damage she helped create so long ago.

When they emerged from the last staircase, they found themselves in the middle of an ancient garden, now overgrown and overtaken with jaddi roots, ferns, moss, and bright purple flowers. There were still stone trellises and dried fountains and the ghosts of paths between them.

Jace raised his hands and lowered them slowly, dropping the silencing spell. The eerie hum of the city returned but grew no louder.

"What now?" Jace asked.

She pulled out the Lithoform Core from her satchel. It shone in her hand with the promise of power. Its whispers became frantic, furious.

"Can you hear that?" Nahiri asked, holding up the Core.

"Hear what?" Jace asked, frowning.

"Nothing," said Nahiri, quickly. "Let's move."

"Where?"

Nahiri pointed to a large stone gazebo-like structure before them. Even from where they stood, she could see that it was collapsed and ruined. But wasn't everything in Zendikar?

She tucked the Core back in the satchel and strode forward.

Something was wrong. The feeling grew the closer they came to the ruined building, and Nahiri realized the gazebo had completely fallen in on itself, crushing whatever was inside.

"No," said Nahiri, and she ran forward, putting her hands on the collapsed entrance. The stone vibrations told her the damage was fresh.

"What are you doing?" asked Jace.

"Fixing this!" said Nahiri as the rocks around her began to shift and move. She could undo this damage. She had to.

"Don't bother," said a voice from behind them. Nahiri spun and saw Nissa standing in the ruins of an ancient garden, staff in one hand and the other curled into a fist at her side. She stood tall and firm, and there was a calm, yet dangerous, look in her eyes.

"The focal point," Nahiri said, through gritted teeth, "was here."

"It was," Nissa replied, coldly, "until the elementals destroyed it."

"You made your creatures do this?" shouted Nahiri. It would take her days, if not weeks, to undo the damage to the magical channels here.

"I don't *make* them do anything," Nissa replied. "I help them, and they help me. I'm Zendikar's guardian, and they are the living embodiments of this plane." Behind her, a giant elemental appeared. Its limbs were formed of roots and leaves, and its head had massive antlers that looked like swept-back wings. "Isn't that right, Ashaya?"



Ashaya, Soul of the Wild | Art by: Chase Stone

Nahiri scowled, but the appearance of such a formidable elemental made her pause. Both she and Jace stepped back.

“Nissa.” Jace raised his hands in a pacifying gesture. “I promise I won’t use the Core or let anyone else use it,” he said looking at Nahiri, “until we understand it.”

“And what does your word mean when the other party won’t respect it?” replied Nissa. She was staring right at Nahiri.

“If she doesn’t,” Jace said with infuriating calm, “she’ll find herself in an impressively believable illusion of the Singing City. Except this time, I won’t hold back the song.”

“Meddler,” Nahiri hissed. She silently swore never to trust anyone ever again.

“I don’t want to fight you. I really don’t,” Nissa said to Jace and Nahiri. “We’ve all fought enough. We deserve some peace.”

“I agree completely, but “ Jace said, “I think Nahiri has a point. The ancient Zendikar was beautiful. I saw her memories.”

“See, even the meddler agrees with me,” Nahiri said with satisfaction. Finally, someone was seeing reason.

“Jace, we talked about this. The elementals—”

"Will grow back. Everything grows back."

"Not everything," Nissa said, quietly.

"The Zendikar I know is strong, unbreakable," Nahiri said.

"Think of the stability," reasoned Jace. "How people on this plane will be able to prosper without fear of the next Roil."

Nissa took a step back. Then another. "I trusted you," she said to Jace. The horror and hurt on her face were plain.

"Nissa," Jace pleaded.

"You don't want to fight me," Nahiri said, putting a hand over the Core in her satchel.

Nissa stared straight at her. "Don't try."

But Nahiri was done listening. She had faced elder dragons and immortal vampires. She would not be stopped. Not now. Not by someone so small and tender and unsure. Not when she was so close.

With a flick of her wrists, Nahiri created dozens and dozens of glowing swords. One for every instance of her rage in the last thousand years. With a second flick, she hurled the swords directly at Nissa.

But before any of her weapons could make contact, a blur knocked all the swords from the air.

Something collided with Nahiri and knocked the breath from her body, smashing her to the ground.

She rolled and got to her feet, preparing to strike back. But what she saw made her pause. Beside her, she heard Jace suck in his breath.

Nissa was floating several feet in the air, her hair streaming out behind her, green energy coursing through her. Even from a distance, Nahiri could feel Nissa's anger, her intent to protect this broken Zendikar at all costs. Because before Nissa was Ashaya in their full power.

The Soul of the Wild seemed to swell with strength, with the drive to protect. Its gaze was fixed on Nahiri, its eyes glowing green with energy, and it raised four of its twisted branch-like limbs, bringing them down on Nahiri with a fierce *crack*.

Nahiri rolled out of the way just in time. With a sweep of her arm, she raised stones around her and smashed them against the elemental. But the rocks broke upon the branches like glass, and the creature didn't even flinch. It turned its massive head toward her.

The elemental raised its vast arms again.

"Run!" Jace yelled behind her.

Nahiri always thought retreating was for cowards. But Ashaya was unrelenting. *I need to protect the Core. Above all.*

So, she ran.

Together, she and Jace dodged and leapt and sprinted through the ancient garden, using every illusion and counterattack they knew. But it still wasn't enough. Ashaya was too vast, too quick. Jace and Nahiri were knocked back and tripped by roots at every opportunity, until all they could do was skid toward the stairs, back into the belly of the Singing City.

The haunting singing flooded their ears. Jace immediately cast his sound blocking spell again, and together they ran back through the moss-covered corridors. Occasionally, moss elementals would stand

in their path, but they were smaller and weaker and easily deflected by Jace's counterspells or a well-aimed fist of rocks.

Nahiri's fury fueled her escape. But for the first time in a long while, she also felt a thread of real fear. She had underestimated the elf.

When they reached the entrance of the city and saw the old marble gates, Nahiri exhaled, picked up speed. She was almost there.

But then she spotted a small, familiar figure standing at the entrance. And this time, Nissa and Ashaya were surrounded by dozens and dozens of other elementals.

Nahiri and Jace both skidded to a stop.

"How," Nahiri panted. "How are you traveling so fast?"

"Zendikar is where I belong. It's the heart of my power and strength," Nissa replied. "I know all the paths and how to use them. But you two"—her face filled with fury, and behind her elementals born from the flora of Murasa began to rise—"you will never understand. Leave my home."

"Nissa, wait!" shouted Jace.

"This is *my* home, tree-dweller." Nahiri braced, called the stones around her, and she felt the Singing City behind her tremble in reply. "This has been my home for *thousands* of years. And I will not let you win."

Nahiri spread her fingers and raised the stones, calling on all her power for the attack.

But the elementals were faster, surging forward like a furious horde, toward Jace and Nahiri. And in that moment, Nahiri understood.

The battle for Zendikar's soul had begun, and it would be a ruthless fight.