

Episode 5: The Two Guardians

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As Nissa braced to fight the people she once considered allies, she wondered if she had made a grave mistake ever leaving Zendikar.

Jace and Nahiri stood before her, breathing hard from their race through the Singing City. Behind her were the elementals of the Kazandu forest. Dozens and dozens strong.

If Nissa had never become a planeswalker, her chest wouldn't be constricting right now with the pain and guilt of past mistakes and lost friendships. She wouldn't be mourning Gideon's death. Or the loss of Chandra's love.

"How how are you traveling so fast?" Nahiri said. She was cut and bruised, and the rage on her face was unadulterated and brutally clear.

On her hip was the satchel with the Lithoform Core. It pulsed mutely through the fabric.

Nissa clenched her fists.

On the other hand, if she'd never left Zendikar, if she never tried and failed and tried again, she wouldn't be standing here in front of the Singing City, defending her home when no one else would.

"Zendikar is where I belong. It's the heart of my power and strength," Nissa said. "I know all the paths and how to use them. But you two"—she thought of the fern elemental Nahiri carelessly murdered in Akoum's Skyclave, and she felt the army of Kazandu's elementals behind her swell with her anger—"you will never understand. Leave my home."

Jace tried to reason with her, but Nissa ignored him. It was Nahiri she focused on as the lithomancer yelled, "This is *my* home, tree-dweller!"

The elemental army instinctively tensed and grew closer to Nissa, ready to defend her with their lives.

For a moment, Nissa was overwhelmed with gratitude toward these embodiments of Zendikar. Who found her in her exile. Who had taken her in when she was alone.

Jace went still. He raised a magical ward.

Elementals, these fragments of Zendikar's heart and soul, who stood by her, despite her mistakes and the damage she accidentally caused.

Nahiri lifted her hands, and the stones of the Singing City began to tremble.

Elementals, who taught her what being part of a family meant, what a family was supposed to be. Who came to her aid now, without her asking. *Hers* and not Nahiri's.

What would Gideon do? Nissa thought.

He would tell you it's time to make choices for yourself.

“Defend Zendikar,” she said to the elementals, in a voice lower than a whisper. But they heard. They understood.

And like a wave crashing on a shore, they did.

Nahiri always believed in the power of stone, the strength of it, that stone would outlast everything in the end. But for the first time in centuries, as dozens and dozens of elementals swarmed around her, she began to doubt the power of her lithomancy.

Like Nissa, the elementals moved with impossible speed.

Nahiri raised a column of stone a split second before a massive elemental shaped like a stomper crashed into her. It roared and, with a swipe of its leafy paw, smashed the pillar away. It snarled at her, and Nahiri screamed back. She swept out her arms, called on the stones, just as the leaf thing pounced. It was knocked away by a granite fist shooting up from the ground.

Nahiri smiled.

But her smile slipped away when she saw Nissa. The elf was standing midair on a mass of vines, arms outstretched, with ribbons of green energy swirling around her. And behind her

Behind her was an elemental like none other. It was massive, shaped like an eagle but with a body made of jaddi roots, twisting and swirling. It spotted Nahiri and, quick as fury, surged toward her, beak wide and talons extended.

Nahiri called the stones to defend her, but the creature’s talons sunk into her shoulders. Nahiri cried out, in both surprise and pain. It flapped its wings—once, twice—and began to lift her away.

Like hell, Nahiri thought, and snapped her wrists forward. Within moments, thirty glowing swords sunk into the jaddi eagle. It screamed and dropped her. Nahiri rolled out of the way and onto her feet, only to come face to face with a giant elemental made of water, complete with algae and fish swimming within it.

“You can’t be serious,” Nahiri hissed and jumped out of the way as it aimed a watery kick toward her head.

On and on it went.

Nahiri caught snatches of Jace swearing and casting illusions of fires and Eldrazi broods, the elementals instinctively recoiling from the mirage. She was impressed. He was using Zendikar’s fears both as a weapon and a shield. His tricks bought him enough time to dodge the barrage of beaks and maws, talons and thorns.

But Nahiri knew they were barely managing to hold back the relentless assault.

How is the tree dweller managing to do all of this? she thought.

And for one terrible moment, Nahiri wondered if Nissa was right. If elementals were embodiments of the plane itself, then Zendikar had given the elf an army to fight with. While Nahiri fought with nothing.

No, not nothing. She had strength and determination. She had mastered stone. She had survived for millennia. She was the guardian of the real, ancient Zendikar. She was the protector of the bedrock and foundation of this world.

And she would stop this madness.

With one fluid movement, Nahiri shoved an elemental made of rain and autumn-colored leaves away with a stone hand. She squared her shoulders, widened her stance, and lined up her shot.

Nahiri brought her hands together with a *clap*.

And sent fifty glowing swords flying right at the elf.

Nissa's eyes widened in surprise, but before the blades could strike, the giant jaddi root eagle appeared again—from where, Nahiri couldn't tell—and brushed all fifty weapons away with a sweep of its wing.

Damn it, Nahiri thought, calling the stones again. She tried to throw boulders at Nissa, to make the ground around the elf trap her, to send more swords. But Nissa's elementals defended her fiercely, as if they were more than just mindless tools. As if they knew they were fighting for their lives.

How can anyone live a good life if your world is broken and failing? Nahiri thought with a scowl. She attacked again. And again. And again.

When a giant griffin made out of the broken hedrons and the moss of the Singing City swallowed a dozen stone spears and seemingly grinned at her, Nahiri realized she had to try a different tactic.

She ran.

Dodging and blocking and weaving, Nahiri sprinted around the lunging paws, gnashing teeth, and striking thorns of elementals. She didn't stop until she reached the massive marble gates of the Singing City and pushed through them.

She had to protect the Core. The stones in this ancient city would help her do just that.

Jace had never before seen so many elementals in so many different forms. If they weren't attacking him, he would have been fascinated.

But they *were* attacking him, and it took his full skill and cunning to evade their blows and not damage them in return. He knew that if he hoped to win Nissa back as a friend and ally, he couldn't damage Zendikar.

He had to get the Lithoform Core. He had to find a way to broker peace between the two guardians of Zendikar.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Nahiri sprint into the Singing City. He knew that whatever the lithomancer was planning would not help any potential peace talks.

Sweeping up both hands, Jace raised an illusion: a cloud of mist, thicker than natural, thick enough to disappear into, confusing the ivy and lichen elemental looming in front of him. Buying himself some time.

Under this cover, Jace ran.

He slipped into the Singing City moments before an ear-splitting roar of destruction bellowed behind him. He turned to see a massive wall of stone crushing the marble gates of the city, blocking the exit.

Leaving Jace trapped within, where its eerie tune began to hum again.

Nahiri could hear the elementals pounding against the Singing City's walls, banging their mud fists and moss wings uselessly at the stones. The sound pleased her.

Nissa couldn't destroy her makeshift fortress, not while Nahiri was within it, using her lithomancy to hold it together.

Still, the thought of all those nature monstrosities attacking her made her skin crawl with dread. Being surrounded by walls and the haunting tune of unseen voices made her stomach lurch. It reminded her too much of being trapped on Helvault again.

She lifted her arms, summoning bedrock and sandstone. And like a dance, she made them rise, knit together, become stronger, harder than the original walls of the Singing City, building herself a massive, indestructible fort above the ruins.

Her body ached with the effort, but she refused to let that foolish elf get her hands on the Core. Not when she was so close to healing Zendikar, to returning it back to the stable, even world she once knew.

Within her fortress, the pounding of the elementals grew muffled and the City's song became a faint melody. Nahiri exhaled. She finally had a moment alone.

"Nahiri."

Damn it. She knew who it was before she even turned around. She recognized the pattern of Jace's footsteps on the stones. But she hadn't noticed them until now.

She turned to see Jace moving toward her.

"If you try to take the Core," Nahiri said, with deadly calm, "I'll add you to my collection of wall hangs."

That made him stop.

"I don't want to fight you," he said, raising his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "But please, let's go to Ravnica. I think Nissa will listen to us there."

"Oh, she'll listen," replied Nahiri, anger rising in her. "She'll listen and listen, and when it comes time to choose, she'll choose to let this world stay fractured and ruined." She clenched her fists and began to unbuild the roof of her fortress, giving her access to the open sky.

Turning her gaze upward, she called the hedrons she made an age ago. She called every single one marooned around the Singing City. There were dozens. "No, Jace. The Core won't work on another plane. It stays here."

"I don't want to fight you," he said again, and there was no aggression in his voice. But she heard what he wasn't saying. The silence half of that statement: *But I will.*

"Please," he said.

But Nahiri was done. Done with these weak planeswalkers who couldn't see what was clearly in front of them. Her hands shook with emotion, and she used that energy to pull the hedrons down from the sky and hover above Jace.

"Nahiri," said Jace, with alarm. The hedrons closed in around him and began to spin, confining him in their circle. "Listen, please!"

Nahiri was done listening. She rose into the air, her fury and hurt fueling her. With a twirl of her fingers, blue energy engulfed her hands and she sent it through the hedrons, trapping Jace within the dangerous ring. Then, she commanded the ring to close.

She wanted her face to be the last thing he ever saw.

There was movement from the corner of her eye. She knew its shape, its posture, its cool and silent danger.

Nahiri turned and was faced with her old mentor. Her sworn enemy. Sorin.

He was standing on the fortress wall, a dozen feet away from her, at eye level. His long black jacket flowed out behind him. He was smiling.

“What are you doing here?” said Nahiri through gritted teeth.

Sorin didn’t respond. He just lifted a hand in that dangerous way she knew so well. The slight movement that heralded a terrible attack.

No, not you, too. Nahiri bared her teeth and screamed. She sent a giant stone foot shooting up from the ground directly at the vampire’s chest.

Sorin disappeared in the rush of stones, and Nahiri exhaled. Then, an instant later, he reappeared, still smiling. Like nothing had happened at all.

Nahiri blinked, confused. She reached for the stones under Sorin’s feet and discovered that they weren’t supporting the vampire’s weight.

This is an illusion, she realized. This is Jace.

But this realization came a moment too late. A mist flooded in around her, too thick to see through. She heard her hedrons clatter to the ground.

Suddenly, her thoughts were not her own.

It worked! Jace thought as the hedrons hit the surrounding ground. He could feel Nahiri’s mind struggle against his control. He hated that it had come to this, but his choices were limited.

The Singing City’s eerie hum began to grow in volume.

Better hurry. He wasn’t sure if he could hold Nahiri’s mind and a silencing spell simultaneously.

Nahiri floated to the ground, and he commanded her to hold still. Cautiously, he approached.

Reached into the satchel on her hip.

Took the Lithoform Core.

It glowed like a beacon in his hand, pulsing gently with the promise of power.

The haunting song of the City swelled in volume, and Jace found himself filled with a sudden, inexplicable longing.

He saw himself wielding the Core’s energy, solving problems without needing to debate or fight with others. Without needing to throw himself or his friends in harm’s way.

With the Core, with a thought, he could easily change the world. All the worlds.

No, that’s not who I am. Jace pushed the temptation away.

He groaned as Nahiri’s mind thrashed against his control with renewed force. There was rage in her expression, in every line of her paralyzed body as she fought against him. His hold on her almost slipped, but Jace regained it at the last moment.

“Let me out of this fortress. Lower the wall around the entrance,” he commanded.

Nahiri’s mind balked at the order, but he heard the sound of stone toppling in the distance, the elementals’ attack growing louder.

Jace winced. They should be trying to find a solution for Zendikar together, not fighting against each other.

He could take the Core to Ravnica right now. He should. Nahiri claimed that the Core only worked on this plane, but he wanted to test that theory, safely away from this already damaged world.

He also knew that if he disappeared with the Core without telling Nissa, he would lose her trust forever. He both wanted her friendship and needed her in the battles to come.

Jace wrapped the Core in his cloak and sprinted out of the Singing City, running as fast as his exhausted body could. The haunting song was growing louder now, stealing into his bones. Jace ran faster, faster than he realized he could. He needed to get to the entrance before Nahiri regained herself and sealed it up again. He needed to reach Nissa.

He crossed the ruined marble gates an instant before his control on Nahiri's mind slipped and stone walls slammed up against the ancient city.

Safely on the other side, he thought with some satisfaction.

He didn't see the giant limb of roots and green buds until it was on top of him. Until the elemental pinned him down with one of four massive hands and leaned over him, blocking out the sunlight. Jace gasped, recognizing Ashaya.

"I need to talk to Nissa," he shouted. But Ashaya just increased the pressure on his sternum.

Balling his fist, Jace created an illusion of fire around them, wild and consuming, hoping to create enough of a distraction to escape.

But Ashaya wasn't fooled.

The elemental calmly reached into Jace's cloak and pulled out the Lithoform Core.

"Wait," Jace groaned. But the elemental didn't.

It examined the artifact for a moment before tossing the Core over its shoulder.

And into Nissa's waiting hands.

She should destroy it.

That was Nissa's initial thought as she held the Lithoform Core in her hands for the first time.

Listen to me.

The thought was not hers, though the voice sounded familiar. She looked over to where Jace was struggling under Ashaya's grasp. His expression was pleading.

Tentatively, she allowed Jace into her thoughts.

Nissa, please, we need to stop this, Jace thought. *Call off the elementals.*

If we stop, Jace, Nahiri will take the truce as an opportunity to overwhelm us. You've seen how ruthless she is.

There was a loud crash as the thick walls around the city began rearranging themselves. Nahiri appeared atop the stone chaos. The elementals flooded around her at once.

Please, Jace thought. *Let's go to Ravnica. We can study the Core there together.*

What makes you think we won't accidentally annihilate Ravnica? Nissa replied. *I've seen the damage the Core can do. We should destroy it.*

Nahiri said it won't work outside of Zendikar. It'll be safe to test it there.

In the distance, Nahiri began trapping elementals in prisons of stone, her movements focused, precise, and furious. Nissa's breath caught as four impenetrable walls shot up around a river elemental.

Nahiri is not known for her truthfulness, Jace.

Gritting her teeth, Nissa thrust out her hands and sent a wave of green energy straight at Nahiri.

Listen to me.

Nahiri screamed a battle cry and deflected Nissa's energy with a massive bedrock wall.

The Gatewatch. We can use this, thought Jace as he struggled against Ashaya's roots. *There's something you don't know. I . . . we have other battles to face, Nissa.*

The Gatewatch failed. We were supposed to protect the things we love. We couldn't even protect each other. Nissa's heart ached with the memory of Gideon's smiling face, at those tender and hopeful moments with Chandra. How, for a little while at least, among the other planeswalkers, Nissa felt like she belonged somewhere. *You were like a family to me.*

A hundred feet away, Nahiri fought her way forward, moving closer to where Nissa stood, while elemental after elemental fell victim to the kor's relentless attacks.

No, no, no. Nissa couldn't lose this fight. The Core in her hands grew warmer.

Listen to me.

"I am listening to you Jace," she shouted. "You aren't listening to me!"

Not him. Me.

The Core was flashing urgently in her hand. Nissa realized why the voice sounded so familiar. There was something in its cadence, as if the pulse, the vibrations and breath of Zendikar that she knew so well, had found its words.

Who are you? she asked.

I am me. I am you.

Fifty feet away, Nahiri smashed a stone foot into an earth elemental, catching it by surprise. It crumbled to its knees.

Nissa shot a tangle of vines at Nahiri's ankles. *Why are you only speaking now?* she said to the Core.

Nahiri dodged the vines with one elegant twist and jump, landing neatly on her feet.

There was a small rumble in the land's rhythm, in its air. Nissa realized Zendikar was laughing. The chuckle from the Core matched the land's pulse.

How? she asked. This was impossible. Confusing. Nissa didn't have time for a new mystery right now. Nahiri close and coming closer.

But if this was Zendikar, really Zendikar

Nissa, please! Let me take the Core! Jace thought. Nissa ignored him.

The object in your hand is a very old piece of me. It's full of power, the voice from the Core replied.

Nissa frowned, aimed a fresh attack at Nahiri. *Why? Why would the ancient kor create this?*

To undo damage.

Thirty feet away, Nahiri batted aside the second vine attack with a fence of sandstone. She stalked forward, stopping her advance twenty feet away from Nissa.

"Give me the Core, Nissa!" she shouted.

Will you help me, Jace? Nissa thought. Jace nodded once, but even at a distance, she could tell he was planning something.

A moment later, she felt tendrils of power slip into her head. Nissa realized in one horrified instant that Jace was trying to take control of her mind.

She snapped the mental link between them and silently asked Ashaya to make sure Jace couldn't move. The elemental complied, piling all four limbs on the mage. Jace groaned.

"I knew this plane when it was whole," Nahiri shouted, "and you want to cling onto the broken pieces of it!"

Nissa studied her adversary, unsure of what to say. Nahiri was dusty and bleeding, but her anger and determination were indomitable. In that moment, Nissa realized how alone she was.

What would Gideon do? she thought, then caught herself. *No, what would I do?*

Trust your strength, whispered the power in her hands.

"Broken doesn't mean weak, Nahiri," replied Nissa. "Broken doesn't mean that there isn't beauty or redemption."

"So says the broken planeswalker," retorted Nahiri, "who destroys everything she touches."

Nissa tightened her grip around the Core. The words stung but not as badly as they once would have. Because behind Nahiri's cruel expression, Nissa saw fear.

And in that moment, Nissa knew exactly what she would do.

I will protect my home, my family. I will try and try again until I get this right.

"Broken doesn't mean a life is not worth living," Nissa said, standing tall, staring straight at the lithomancer. "You are what Zendikar once was, Nahiri. I am what it is now."

Doubt flickered across Nahiri's face. It quickly faded and Nahiri snarled, raising her hands.

Scores and scores of hedrons appeared, hovering in the air behind her. They began to twist and flow in a complex pattern, the energy sparking between them.

Every elemental on the battlefield cowered and shrank away. Nissa understood in that moment that Nahiri would destroy them all before she'd admit that she was wrong. She would dampen the essence of Zendikar's spirit just to tame it. If Nahiri was allowed to do whatever it was she planned, Nissa would be mourning the loss of yet another piece of Zendikar's battered soul.

In her hand, the Core shone like a beacon.

The hedrons spun around Nahiri faster and faster, gathering power. Like a storm just on the edge of breaking.

What if I destroy, Nissa thought, *like Nahiri?*

Trust your strength, her home whispered.

Nissa closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and imagined a better Zendikar. One not defined and hurting from the wounds of the Eldrazi. One not oozing from the poison they left behind. A healthier world, but still fragmented and dangerous and beautiful.

The Core warmed and hummed in her palms. She felt Zendikar's leylines stretched out before her. And easily, so easily, Nissa's magic merged with the Core's power.

She set it loose.

There was a flash. There was a dull roar. A gust of wind struck Nissa, knocking the breath from her body, smelling of ash and rain. Of earth and streams. Of magic, ancient and terrible.

The power from the Core collided with the hedrons in a shower of sparks and energy. The dull roar became a screaming bellow. The light became blinding. The air rushed away.

Then there was nothing at all.

Nissa opened her eyes slowly, terrified of the silence, the sudden emptiness she felt around her. Even the Core had gone quiet and dull in her hands.

What she saw made her breath catch in her throat, and panic rose up in her chest.

The Singing City was gone. Flattened into dust. So was a large swath of the forest. All reduced to ash.

Across the battlefield, the elementals were lying motionless in the dust.

“No,” she whispered and rushed to the nearest one. A large jaddi tree embodiment, with delicate yellow flowers twining around its limbs. She dropped to her knees beside it, putting a hand on its rough bark skin. “No.” Not again.

Not again.

The elemental stirred under her hand.

It opened its eyes, blinking sleepily, and got to its feet, at first a bit shaky, but with more strength and confidence each passing second. It took her hand, gave it a squeeze, and Nissa felt it growing taller. Stronger.

Tears pricked the corners of Nissa’s eyes as all around the battlefield, elementals were rising, dusting themselves off, becoming fuller, more vibrant. She felt herself dropping the Core, heard it hit the ashy ground. But it didn’t matter. The ancient artifact had grown silent. Its light had gone out.

It had served its purpose, Nissa realized, smiling. It had undone damage. She closed her eyes and listened.

She heard Nahiri picking herself up painfully from the ground. A dozen feet away from her, Jace was doing the same. Farther away, tender green jaddi roots were sprouting in the ruined forest. Farther than that, rich, unbroken earth was supplanting the diseased wastes that remained from the battle with Emrakul. And farther than that, Bala Ged was blooming again, growing, the forest coming back at speeds that only magic could accomplish.

Zendikar was healing, turning into something healthier, stronger than it was before the battle with the Eldrazi. Though the scars were still there, they were memories now, not its defining features.

For the first time in a long time, Nissa let out a genuine laugh, and she heard Zendikar laughing with her.

Trust my strength, she thought.

Nissa called up her vines and grinned as they grew and twirled underneath her, raising her in the air. She turned east, and moving as quick as the wind, she followed the leylines of the land, flying through the forest, toward Bala Ged, traveling as only she knew how. Rushing forward, ahead, all while Zendikar hummed happily in her ears.

Nissa was finally home.

Jace picked up the inert Core and watched Nissa disappear. He considered calling after her but realized that it was no use. Mistakes were made here today and more than a few were his. Now, he understood how Nissa felt after the war in Ravnica.

Around him, elementals were standing tall and healthy, swelling with vigor. But one by one, they melted back into the land, or disappeared into the jaddi trees.

Something brushed against his boot. Startled, Jace stepped back, looked down.

In the dust and wreckage around him, vines and young shoots were sprouting up from the destruction. Thriving and growing at a remarkable rate.

Like a life bloom after the Roil, he thought. He'd read about life blooms but had never seen one.

"Is the power gone?" Nahiri asked, coming up beside him, kicking a vine.

It took Jace a moment to realize she was talking about the lightless Core in his hands. "I don't know."

"It wasn't hers to use," Nahiri said with disgust.

"I think she was precisely the person who should have used this power," replied Jace.

Nahiri scowled.

"We need to apologize to Nissa," he said. "We were wrong."

Nahiri scowled. "You think you can fix this?" she snapped. "With an apology? You made enemies again today, Jace. But that's your nature, isn't it? Whenever you try to do good, it just makes things worse."

Jace didn't reply. He didn't try to argue as the ancient kor turned and planeswalked away. He was beginning to realize some battles weren't worth fighting.

But some were.

Nissa, he thought. *I'm so sorry. I should have listened better.*

He had caused so much damage here, both to his friend and to the home she loved. And he knew the terrible guilt he felt in this moment would not lessen with time.

So, as Jace stood in the dust of Zendikar with the dead Core in his hands, with new life clinging and wrapping its tender shoots around his boots, he hoped what Nissa said was true.

That broken things could be redeemed.