

Zendikar: Battles in the Field and in the Mind

A. T. Greenblatt

From set *March of the Machine*

27. 04. 2023

Nahiri has only ever wanted to save her home. She stands at a vantage point atop one of the countless drifting fragments of stone in Zendikar's sky and takes stock of her plane.

Far below her, the Phyrexian invasion is gaining ground.

She sees the vanguard marching forward, spreading their viscous oil and their mechanical seeds as they advance, and the green earth beneath their feet withering and smoldering black as they move toward Sea Gate. They are conquering this plane, quickly, and soon Zendikar will be healed and at peace, like all the other planes to which Phyrexia has brought unity and order.

Good, Nahiri thinks.

She has tried to change her homeworld before, return it to its ancient glory and calm the Roil, and she didn't succeed. She tried to protect this plane from the Eldrazi and could not. But this time, she would not fail. This time, she would save Zendikar by aiding its transformation into its purest and most idyllic form.

She is wiser now too. She understands that Zendikar and its residents will fight the change and that if left to their own devices the misguided inhabitants of this plane *might* succeed in hindering the Phyrexians. So, she must help with the rebirth of her home, sculpt it, chip away at its impurities and impulses until only perfection remains.

Nahiri closes her eyes and with her lithomancy, feels through the scattered network of hedrons, the defense she created so long ago to keep the Eldrazi at bay. She needs a stronghold, a nexus for her new forged power. A satisfied grin spreads across her face when she finds it.

Yes, the Skyclave in Emeria will be the perfect access point to connect the entire hedron networks and tear open the rifts between planes, allowing the current trickle of Phyrexian invasion to become a flood. A cascade that will wash this plane anew.

She looks down at her own arms, freshly covered by the glowing, shining symbols of Phyrexia and where her hands once were, there are now two burning stone blades.



Art by: Zara Alfonso

She smiles.

For she has been sculpted too, into something better. She understands that now.

There is solace in line-slinging, despite the fresh horrors these new mechanical invaders have brought to her home. Akiri is grateful for this one unblemished thing even as she searches the floating ruins of Emeria in vain.

“The vision was not clear,” Tazri had said. “I saw stones reforming and the hedrons aligning , from which oil and corruption spread. In the center was a single figure. I felt our doom, but also our salvation.”

“Where?” asked Akiri.

“Not sure,” replied Tazri, flushing slightly. “Looked like somewhere above Tazeem. Lots of hedrons.”

It wasn’t much to go on. The hedrons in Zendikar were as scattered and numerous as secret tunnels and caverns were in Guum Wilds. But Akiri trusted Tazri, and her halo-blessed vision meant Akiri had to at least try. There was a small, guilty part of her that felt relief at being away from the battle at Sea Gate. To be climbing, swinging, and grappling through the thin, cold air once again.

She hears scrambling on the stones behind her and a moment later, her two companions meet her on the ledge she stands on.

“Anything?” she asks.

Orah shakes his head, the kor cleric keeping his own counsel. Kaza, shrugs. “Sorry, boss.” But even the typically cheerful human wizard looks deflated.

Akiri nods and doesn’t let her frustration show. Her companions—her friends—insisted on coming with her even though they knew that they searched for the slimmest of hopes. And they so desperately needed hope.

In the distance, Linvala glides on the wind. The angel catches Akiri's eye and Akiri shakes her head. "Keep your eyes sharp," Akiri says, and with one fluid motion, hooks another line into a cliff drifting fifty paces away.

Then, she's soaring again.

Here, in the treacherous space above the earth, in the empty spaces between footholds, she must focus, she must listen and watch. For at any moment something could shift and a reaction that is a moment too late, spells death.

When Akiri is line-slinging, there is no room for past ghosts or regrets.

With practiced ease, she makes her way across the gap, casting lines mid-arc, deftly snagging onto treacherous debris and hedrons, until she rolls onto a solid looking ledge.

It is only because she is attuned to every movement that she catches the flicker in the distance. Akiri turns to see a lithe kor woman appear from thin air on an isolated fragment, her gray skin covered in dark, glowing symbols, spikes jutting from her shoulders, her arms ending not with hands, but with long, fire-bright burning blades. She has changed, but even from a distance, Akiri knows who it is. That figure, that face, has haunted her dreams since she lost Zareth.

Since she fell.

"What do you see?" Linvala asks, alighting besides her

Akiri can only point, horror pooling in her stomach. "Warn Tazri," she whispers. "Hurry."

Nahiri, the Planeswalker, has returned to Zendikar and Akiri understands in that moment with unbribled dread, the Phyrexian invasion has gained the upper hand.

They have been fighting ceaselessly for days uncounted and still, the Phyrexians keep coming. Tazri has fought enough battles to know that the struggle is as much on the field as it is in the mind. So, she keeps her jaw set and her voice clear as she shouts commands to the ragtag army of Sea Gate's fighters and does not let her exhaustion show. But the Invasion Tree's branches keep coming. White, cracked, metallic, and massive, the branches burst from the portals opening in the sky, and in the sea. From each new branch, a wave of Phyrexian invaders spill onto the battlefield.

Tazri sees the fear on the face of Erem, the kor warrior standing beside her as the newest surge of machine monstrosities rush up to join the already swelling forces at the base of Sea Gate. The slick, sickly looking oil that trails the enemy climbs up Sea Gate's marble columns that Tazri had so lovely planned and designed.

She comes up beside Erem and places a hand on his shoulder.

"The Eldrazi were scarier," she says, and he lets out a shaky laugh.

But her mind goes back to her vision. Her thoughts are never far from it, it seems. The clash of stone, the hair-singeing heat of unfettered power, the figure in the center of it all, only their outline visible. The feeling of despair, tinged with hope.

Secretly, she hopes Linvala and Akiri have found nothing in their search in the days since they left. That her vision is a problem for another day. She already has an army worth of problems before her.

The enemy is almost at the gate.

“Warriors!” Tazri shouts. “This is our home! We’ve killed false gods for it! No invader will ever claim it from us!”

Around her, her fighters rally and roar fiercely, hoarse and tired as they are.

Tazri screams her battle cry, turning to face the invaders. Then, she charges, running headlong into the fray.

Massive, warped seedpods strike the earth around her as she swerves and parries the strike of a Phyrexian warrior’s spear. Towering and more machine than flesh, the enemy moves in orderly rows, with mechanical precision. These soulless fighters with only one goal: total assimilation.

A ripple of horror settles in her, even as Tazri cuts down Phyrexian warrior after Phyrexian warrior.

“How are you doing that so fast?” someone says from beside her. Tazri turns a fraction. Erem is defending her flank.

“They have no imagination,” she says with a grin.

They fight well together, she and Erem. But still there are more seedpods, more portals, more branches. The enemy is relentless, perhaps endless.

No. No despair. Tazri thinks and doubles down on her offense,

Still, she is relieved when she sees the angel in the sky and when that angel comes to join her and Erem, wielding her staff with deadly precision.

“The lithomancer has returned. We spied her near Emeria,” Linvala’s voice is barely audible over the clash of weapons against machine.

“Good. We could use the help of a Planeswalker,” Tazri shouts and sinks her sword into another enemy.

“She has not returned as an ally.”

“What?”

But before the angel can answer, there is a terrible scream from beside Tazri. She turns to see that Erem has been speared through the leg by one of the invaders and is being dragged toward an open, oil-slick pod.

“No!” she shouts and runs through the Phyrexian holding the spear. She bends to help Erem up. But before she can grasp his arm, another seedpod slams into the ground, mere feet away, knocking her back. With a hiss, the pod begins to unlatch, allowing the Phyrexian monsters within to uncoil and spill out.

Tazri recovers quickly, but not quick enough. Erem thrashes and screams her name as two invaders drag him into the nearest seedpod and seal him within.

Tazri fights and fights to reach him, but there are so many enemies. Too many. And still, more come.

All around her, the brave warriors of Sea Gate are being overwhelmed.

She reaches the pod in time to hear Erem’s screams change. From within his metal prison, her friend begins to laugh. His voice morphing into something mechanical and twisted.

“Tazri!” shouts Linvala. “The city is lost. We must leave!”

“No,” replies Tazri, but her own voice is swallowed up among the terror and the distorted laughter. Nor does she fight as the angel wraps her arms around her and soars up into the air.

From above, Tazri watches in horror as her home is, again, consumed by creatures not from this plane.

Nahiri knows her plane is poisoned and understands that it will attempt to reject her antidote. And so, she isn't surprised when the Roil comes for her. She is running through the sky, leaping from stone to stone as she builds a path through the open air, all but flying, when the earth far below begins to rumble and shake, dislodging her rhythm. Cursing, Nahiri stumbles, and vaults to a nearby hedron to regain her balance.

The Roil has always tried to undermine her. It has always been unpredictable, unruly, and destructive. But she is wiser now, and more powerful.

The symbols on her body glow as she throws back her arms and begins to sculpt the earth beneath her. When the ground shakes and attempts to unbalance her, she smothers it with rocks so heavy and so thick that the violent shaking quiets to mere shivers. When it attacks her with geysers of water and magma, she throttles their escape routes, asphyxiating the turmoil so far down below the land that it will take a millennium for the magma to wrestle to the surface again.

Every change, every trick the Roil lashes at her with, Nahiri suffocates with her newfound strength.

Eventually the earth quiets. The Roil shudders like a gasping fish out of water, then finally stops. For miles, the landscape has become the gray uniformity of bed-rock.

Nahiri holds up her arms in triumph. Black oil drips down the burning blades that were once her hands. She laughs in delight.

What perfection! Before her Phyrexian conversion, she would have never been able to perform such a feat.

And so, joyfully, she turns to the Emeria Skyclave. She will not be stopped in her righteous mission. She cannot be stopped.

Akiri has been tracking the corrupted Planeswalker for days. She's witnessed the Skyclave's broken stone mend and transform into white metal. The hedrons align, buzz with power, and begin to glow with an unearthly light. There's oil now seeping from the cracks of the reforged stones. With each change to the Skyclave above, more enemies arrive below. They burst through portals, the Invasion Tree's branches horrifically long and gargantuan, turning the sky red and filling the air with the sounds of droning engines and footsteps as the Phyrexian army marches forward. Below their feet, the land transforms into cracked white metal, broken by thick red sinew-like veins.

Even at this distance, Akiri can see that her plane is dying.

"Any sign of the angel?" she says to Orah on the ledge below her.

"Not yet," he replies. "Kaza hasn't seen Linvala yet either."

Akiri grimaces and wills herself to be patient. The journey from Sea Gate to Emeria is long, even by wing.

If Zareth was here, he would have argued not to wait, to charge in after Nahiri and fight for their home. But Zareth is a memory and an empty hole in her chest that cannot be filled. Akiri knows Nahiri well enough to understand that facing her alone would mean death.

So, Akiri waits, but is not idle. Light on her feet and quick in the air, she line-slings, exploring the shrinking few uncorrupted pieces of the Skyclave, searching for a way in. That is how she finds an entrance on the west side, recessed and small enough to have been sheltered from the corrupting oil.

Finally, Akiri spots Linvala in the reddening sky. The angel's holding someone in her arms, and Akiri recognizes the glowing halo around Tazri's neck.

Orah and Kaza spot them as well, and with Akiri, the three adventurers stand to greet the new arrivals. Linvala alights and sets Tazri down. They both look windswept and drawn.

"I flew as quickly as my wings allowed," Linvala says.

"I know," Akiri replies, clasping both the angel and Tazri on the shoulders.

"You're sure Nahiri is here as our enemy?" asks Tazri, not quite able to keep the mixture of faded hope and despair from her voice.

"Yes. They changed her," replies Akiri, hesitating before adding: "And I know that expression on her face. She means to transform Zendikar."

"That's not proof," Tazri protests.

"No, but this is!" snaps Akiri and points at the Skyclave looming before them, it's thrumming hedrons and dripping oil. Then to the dead landscape below. "A few days ago, the land was green. It was full of life. The more hedrons connected, the quicker the enemy arrives. Nahiri is going to destroy our home if we do nothing."



Art by: Thomas Stoop

The two adventurers stare at each other for a moment.

"She is correct, Tazri," Linvala says quietly.

Tazri nods, her fists clenching at her sides.

"Sea Gate" Akiri begins to ask. But the expression on Tazri and Linvala's faces answer her question.

"We are the only ones left to stop Nahiri," Tazri says as she surveys the Skyclave, transformed and reeking of the Phyrexian invasion.

"Within is our final hope to save our home," Linvala agrees. "We cannot fail. The only question that remains is how to proceed."

For a moment, no one speaks.

"We found a way in," offers Kaza.

"And it's not corrupted yet," says Orah, pointing at the small entrance deep within the cliffside of the Skyclave.

"I'll take you there," Akiri says, handing Tazri a rope. "Don't touch the oil."

"I know." Tazri grits her teeth.

Akiri leads her companions, traveling between the rocks and through the air that is no longer cold and clear, but sickly warm and choked with the smell of grease.

The entrance into the Skyclave is foreboding, a rough gap in the stone leading into a darkness with no end in sight. Akiri coils her ropes as she says: "I don't know what horrors await us within. I don't know what Nahiri is planning, but she is relentless. You might die or be changed. Anyone who does not want to go, should leave and not feel ashamed."

She looks at Linvala, Tazri, Orah, and Kaza in turn. They all meet her gaze and do not move.

"Zareth would never forgive us if we let her win," says Kaza, quietly. Orah nods and Akiri's chest aches with memory of her lost friend's infamous stubbornness.

Still, Akiri hesitates.

"We did not defeat the Eldrazi to be destroyed by this," says Tazri through a clenched jaw and strides into the dark.

At first, Tazri wonders why the passageway is so quiet. From the stories she heard in the taverns from adventurers, the Skyclave tunnels should be filled with terrifying creatures and dazzling wonders from the ancient kor civilization. They say everything moves in floating, fragmented cities in the sky. Everything is treacherous, you can't trust where you put your feet.

But here in the dark of the Skyclave that Nahiri is corrupting, all is still.

"Something's off," Orah whispers, his gray eyes surveying every crack and every corner as they walk.

"Yeah. We usually get attacked by now," agrees Kaza.

Before her, Tazri can just make out Akiri's tall silhouette. The kor woman moves with stealth and caution and Tazri finds herself grateful to have such an experienced ally by her side. Despite her anger and her grief, Tazri's glad she asked Akiri to explore the ruins after she had her vision.

Far down the tunnel, there is a flicker. Something shining briefly red, then gone.

"Wha—" Linvala begins, but Akiri silences her with a gesture. The line-slinger inches forward. Behind her, Orah and Kaza draw their weapons. For the first time, Tazri wishes the halo around her neck did not shine so brightly in the dark.

There is a flicker again. And then a longer one, closer now. Lightning fast, though Tazri can just make out the form of a humanoid, red and black and hunched. Then, for agonizing seconds, there is nothing. They don't move, Tazri barely breathes.

"Where did it go?" Kaza whispers, eventually.

Something roars behind them.

The five adventurers turn to find a huge creature, like a giant twisted tree, mouth wide and devouring, eyes filled with rage. Its remaining ragged leaves are black and its bark has been replaced with strips of dull metal. Oil, instead of sap oozes from between its metallic bark.

The corrupted elemental raises its limbs and Tazri rolls, the impact missing her by inches. She rises to a knee, draws her sword, and snarls.

With her years of battle experience, Tazri understands that the creature's attacks rely on its massive size and that if it lands a blow, its limbs would crush them like a boot on a twig. There's a thunderous crash as thick bough smashes into the stones a hand's breadth away from Tazri.

There's no way she can deflect and parry *that*.

So, she changes tactics, striking the vulnerable points; the vees of its limbs, its face when she can, its roots when she can't. Her fellow adventurers do a beautiful job of keeping it distracted, but it's only when Akiri sinks one of her hook-lines into the creature and uses the rope to pull it off balance, does Tazri get the opening she's waiting for. She thrusts her sword into the creature's gaping mouth.

It does not make a sound as it dies. And somehow, that unsettles Tazri more than any death scream.

"Well," says Linvala, folding her wings and brushing the hair out her eyes. "How unexpected."

"Oh gods," Orah says in a strangled voice. Tazri turns to see the cleric holding up his right hand. The tips of his fingers are covered in a sickly black oil.

"Orah" Akiri takes a step forward. But Orah recoils.

"They're coming," he says and nods down the tunnel.

In the distance, there is another red flash. Then another.

"For Zareth," Orah says, and meets Akiri's gaze. "For *us*." With that, he charges into the Skyclave, staff in hand.

The five adventurers fight like demons. The elementals they meet are mighty and strangely familiar, with massive fronts and gleaming moss. But they have been all changed into a subversion of their former selves. Once guardians of Zendikar, now zealots of Phyrexia. Tazri and the others defeat one Phyrexianized elemental, then two, then four. But there are too many for the one adventuring parting to withstand.

"Run!" Akiri shouts and leads them down an empty passageway. For the second time in recent memory, Tazri flees from an enemy instead of facing and defeating them. Shame burns in her. *Nothing else matters if you don't stop Nahiri*, she reminds herself, and runs faster.

Eventually the tunnel opens to a wide room, old, vast, and once beautiful. It is covered in ancient kor designs. But Tazri only absorbs a glimpse of her surroundings before they are swallowed by red flickers from all around. Within moments, she and the others are surrounded by dozens of red and black, oily elementals that were once the very soul of Zendikar.

There is no way out.

"We can't die yet," Orah wheezes and holds his weapon in his left hand. His right is brittle and white, his veins the darkest black.

"Not for a long time," Kaza agrees. "I have plans after this."

The elementals close in, twisted and relentless. Tazri's sword does not waver, but she clasps the halo around her neck and prays to anyone listening. She can feel the acrid smelling oil oozing from the elementals' skins.

There is no way out.

Then, from her left, there is a blinding light.

With a collective gasp, the elementals stagger back, confused and alarmed. Tazri looks and sees Linvala radiating with light and charging forward. The elementals part before her, like water before a prow. Only then does Tazri see the door at the far side of the chamber.

"Run!" Linvala shouts and they do. Around her, Tazri is vaguely aware of the sounds of metal plates striking stone, but she does not look away from the doors, does not slow her pace.

She grabs the handles and with a half-formed prayer, pushes.

The doors open and Tazri almost crumbles in relief.

Quickly, the five adventurers barricade the entrance with anything they can find. Rocks, bones, broken pieces of wood.

"How?" Tazri asks the angel as she jams another piece of timber under the door handle.

"I glimpsed the exit a mere moment before the elementals arrived," replies Linvala with a sly smile. But that isn't what Tazri was asking. The angel's light

Later, ask again later. Focus. Survive now. she thinks.

It's only when she is certain their enemies cannot get through, does Tazri stop to survey her new surroundings.

She inhales sharply.

Around them are the carcasses of every living creature that didn't survive the Phyrexian transformation. Half changed corpses of metal and flesh, rotting, oozing, reeking of decay and corruption. Beasts and elementals, everything that once called this Skyclave its home, is now perverted or eradicated.

Tazri doesn't wonder why the tunnels are so quiet anymore.

Nahiri indoctrinates another elemental before it even crosses the threshold. When she first entered the Skyclave, the tunnels were crawling with them. Zendikar's heart, Nissa called the creatures. But what does that foolish elf know of hearts?

That first elemental she faced was massive, all leaves and thorns, heaving a rock for a weapon.

Nahiri stared down her enemy and laughed. With her new powers, with her arms as blades, she is a weapon. Within minutes, the soft green thing was under her boots, turning black as the blessed oil of change transformed it into a believer of Phyrexia. Endless were the elementals and the other creatures that arrived to stop her as she worked in the heart of the Skyclave. One by one, she converted them all.

Or killed them and left their bodies outside the chamber, if she was feeling impatient.

This time they will not stop me. This time I will heal Zendikar. Nahiri thinks as she pours more of her power into the Skyclave's core. She is simply trying to do her best to help her home. Always has.

When she first arrived in this central chamber, days ago, she used her joy of her new transformation and her new strength to realign the hedrons and widen the rifts between planes. Millennia ago, with Ugin and Sorin, she had drawn the Eldrazi from the Blind Eternities to Zendikar by using the hedron network. Now she did the same, joyously calling to Realmbreaker across planes.

Her newfound joy was powerful indeed, but it was not enough.

By the second day Nahiri resorted to old tactics and poured all her anger into the transformation, nearly reforging the Skyclave whole and expanding the hedron network across vast swathes of the plane. She was shocked, though, when a few days later, her anger ran dry and still the work was not done. So, she channeled her pain, her grief from the betrayals, the losses, the loneliness over the millennia. She was just trying to do the right thing. She is always trying to do the right thing.

All around Zendikar, the hedrons began to reconnect and thrum with power.

And so, Nahiri learns that grief is as powerful as rage. But it isn't endless either.

The work is almost done when Nahiri expends the last of her grief. Her new network spans across oceans, the boundaries between planes have become fragile and thin. She is so close.

But for the first time in her long existence, the ancient Planeswalker is empty of rage, grief, and pain. Nahiri has nothing left to give.

No. She has one thing left to offer.

She steps into the grand, beautiful network she's built and fuses herself with the stones in the center, becoming its keystone, the heart that binds her work here together.

There, Nahiri begins to pour her very essence into her glorious creation.

The only path left to them is forward, as terrible as it might be. There is another set of doors across the room. Tazri approaches. She can hear the hum of power and shifting stones on the other side.

"The Planeswalker's in here," she says and moves to open the door. But she hesitates.

Nahiri's too powerful. What hope do we have? Tazri knows the battle is as much in the mind as it is in the field. But still, she cannot push the thought away. Behind her, Linvala and Akiri hesitate, as if wrestling with doubts of their own.

It is Kaza who steps up and places her hands on the handle above Tazri's own.

"We have no other home," she says and pushes open the imposing stone doors.

Tazri gasps at the tableau before her. Her vision gave her some warning about what to expect and yet to see it with her own eyes; the ancient kor chamber transformed into a grotesque mixture of cracked white metal, red sinew, and gray stones. Glistening oil running in streams on the floor. Tazri has witnessed too many horrors to frighten easily, but the sight of Nahiri, compleated and embedded in the Skyclave's heart, makes her blood run cold.

"Tiny elementals. Cute," Nahiri says when she notices them, her lips curved with a lazy smile. But then her gaze fixes on Akiri and her eyes narrow with recognition. "You."

Akiri says nothing. Instead, with the quickness and surety of a line-slinger, Akiri throws a knife at the Planeswalker's throat.

The knife does not even make it halfway across the room before a stone slams it into the ground.

"You cannot stop me," Nahiri snarls. The room begins to tremble.

Tazri rushes at the corrupted Planeswalker, drawing her sword as she runs. She dodges oil slicks, jutting stone, and cracked metal. A slab of granite hurtles toward her from her left and she ducks. Another flies at her from the front and she rolls, and comes smoothly to her feet. She does not stop moving.

She's close, she can see the burning veins on Nahiri's arms. She raises her sword with a roar. *For Zendikar*, she screams without words as she brings her weapon down.

She doesn't feel the stone shift under her until it's too late.

Suddenly, she is flying toward the ceiling at bone breaking speed. She rolls off the platform at the last moment and lands on the floor with a loud *thud*. Tazri groans, more from shock than pain. Inches away there's a pool of black oil and it's growing, reaching toward her. She scrambles to her feet and charges again.

The floor tilts, and a tendril of braid stone whips across the backs of Tazri's knees. She cries out, hitting the ground hard. Again, she stands. Again, she attacks.

From the corner of her eye, Tazri sees the Orah and Kaza frantically dodging flying debris and razor-sharp stones. Kaza throws firebomb spells when she can, though she doesn't get many chances. Akiri and Linvala charge, both flying, one with wings and the other with hooks. But they too are pushed back with rocks and the sheer ferocity of Nahiri's attacks.

A massive stone slams into Tazri's hip mid-jump, knocking her down.

From the center of the room, the Planeswalker smirks.

Tazri cannot touch the oil, she cannot reach Nahiri. Her hair and skin singe with the heat of the Planeswalker's power. She fights, but she knows in her heart it is in vain. The image before her is exactly that of her vision, but there is no hope.

Zendikar is lost.

The halo around her neck begins to burn.

Linvala is only five paces away, but her voice sounds as if it's traveled a thousand miles as the angel begins to scream.

Suddenly, everything becomes bright.

At first, Tazri doesn't understand. The chamber glows with an iridescent light. Akiri gleams, and Kaza, too. Orah's face is an expression of shock as he clutches his infected right hand, watching the oil burn away. Tazri looks down and is stunned to find that she is shining with an incandescent glow, too, the halo about her neck brighter than ever before.

Linvala, however, radiates. The light spilling from her is just like the momentarily illumination in the chamber with the elementals, but stronger, unfettered now. Tazri can barely look directly at the angel.

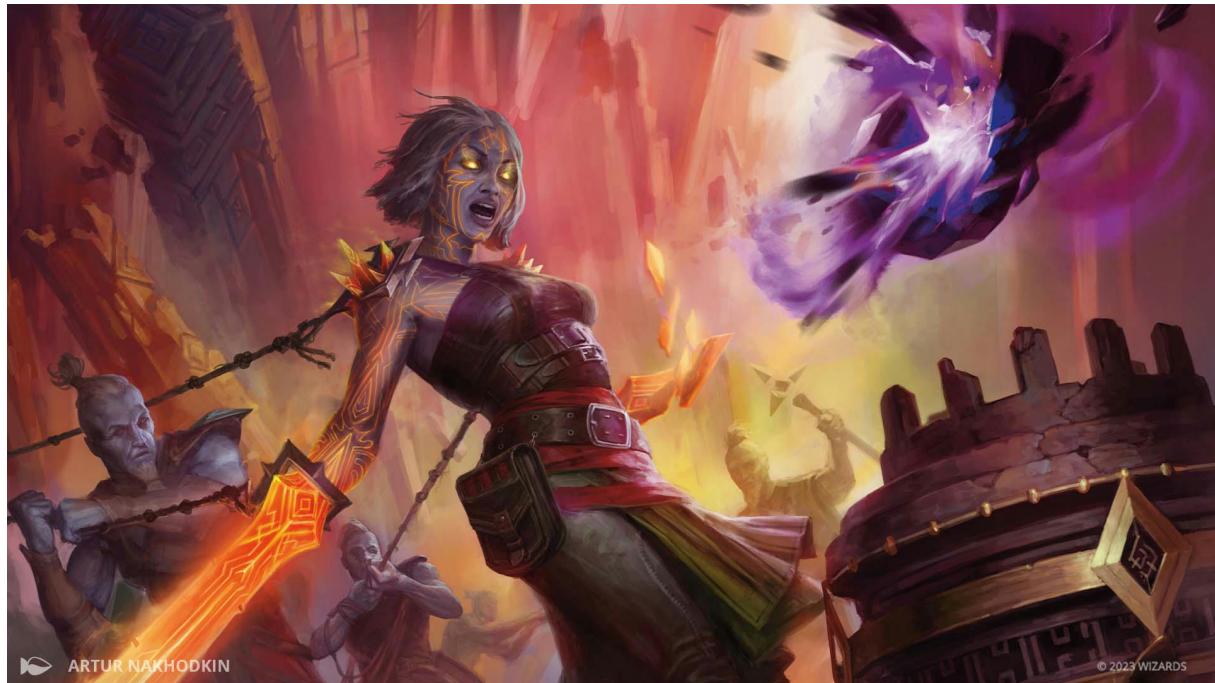
Within her stone tomb, Nahiri screams and the Skyclave trembles with her strength.

But the angel's light has stunned Phyrexia's power. Suddenly, the boulders and white metal shards hang suspended, unmoving. The oil about their feet is drying up. Nahiri curses as the burning runes on her body grow dim.

Go. Attack now. A voice whispers, from below her chin. Tazri touches the halo around her neck and obeys.

One last time, she charges the Phyrexian Planeswalker.

Her allies—no, her friends—run alongside her: Kaza throwing spells to distract Nahiri as Akiri launches her grappling hook, tangling the lithomancer's arms. Tazri spots her opening but knows her sword will be useless against the metal and stone encasing the Planeswalker.



Art by: Artur Nakhodkin

Use me , whispers the halo. Quick!

Tazri yanks the halo off from around her neck and in one desperate movement, hurls it at the entombed Planeswalker.

There is a flash. There are screams—Nahiri's, Orah's, Linvala's, perhaps her own. Then, the radiant light is gone.

For a moment, there is only silence.

In the center of the room, the keystone breaks and Nahiri crumbles from her stone and metal embrace. She collapses onto the floor with a groan. For the briefest of moments, Tazri swears an expression of horror flashes across her face when she sees her sword-for-hands.

Then, the Planeswalker recovers, getting to her feet, a snarl contorting her features. “No.” she says and raises her arms.

But she is no longer the linchpin, holding this perverted Skyclave together by power and will alone.

Before Nahiri can unleash her attack there is a thundering, deafening *crack* from deep within the Sky-clave. A look of surprise flashes across the Planeswalker's face, before everyone, including Nahiri, is knocked from their feet.

Akiri knows what total collapse sounds like, feels like. Panic catches her breath and for a moment, it's almost like she's back on that other Skyclave with Nahiri, minutes away from losing Zareth.

But no, this is different. She's here, fighting for her home, and the floor she's standing on is collapsing. She needs to move. Now.

So, Akiri runs. She grabs Tazri's halo from the ground, and then Tazri by the waist, and uncoils her ropes. A second before the floor gives out entirely, she lets her hooks fly and they are arcing through emptiness. They land hard on stone outside the chamber. Above them, there's another ear-splitting *crack* and the ceiling begins to tumble.

They sprint forward, swinging across gaps and dodging, all action and reaction. Akiri glances to her left and sees Linvala soaring beside her, still glowing with radiance, but dimmer than before. She glances right and is relieved that Kaza and Orah together, flying on Kaza's magic staff. Just like that other Skyclave.

Focus. Akiri shakes the memory away and runs faster. There is no room for the past or distraction now. The tunnel they walked through hours before is barely stable, loud crashes ring out around them.

But Akiri can see the sky ahead.

She grabs Tazri again. "Jump!" she shouts.

Then, they are falling. The wind rips mercilessly at her hair and clothes. Her stomach clenches at the sudden emptiness. The rapid descent. She feels Tazri's death grip around her waist tighten.

But Akiri is a master line-slinger and midway through their failing arc, she lets her rope fly. They latch onto a spinning hedron and in an instance, the dangerous fall becomes a smooth arc.

They glide and land safely to a ledge where the drifting ground is stable for the moment.

Only then does Akiri look behind her.

The Emeria Skyclave is falling to the earth. The corrupted Planeswalker trapped within.

"Do you think we stopped her?" Tazri says, her voice tired and hoarse.

Akiri gazes out at the vast invasion occurring below. The mechanical soldiers stumble slightly, no longer marching in neat rows. "Perhaps," she says.

For the line-slinger has faced this foe before and knows that she is more stubborn than stone.

But Akiri looks up. Zendikar's sky is no longer red and greasy. Now, it glows with a soft iridescent light. Though the odds are stacked against them, they have found their slimmest of hopes.

And with it, she and her friends will fight to save their home.