

Episode 3: The Dangerous Climb, the Long Fall

A. T. Greenblatt

From set *Zendikar Rising*



Sea of Clouds | Art by: Sam Burley

As Nahiri climbed, she smiled. The Murasa Skyclave loomed above her, growing closer with each step. Soon, all the hurts of this plane would be healed. With the Lithoform Core, she would erase the Roil and make Zendikar as beautiful and tranquil as it was millennia ago.

Like she remembered it.

She noticed the labored breathing of Akiri, Zareth, Orah, and Kaza behind her, but she didn't slow her breakneck pace. Not when she was so close to her goal.

Instead, she stonecrafting more and more stairs, which clicked and slid into place as she took them two at a time.

They climbed above the harabaz trees and soaring cliffs of Sunder Bay, to where air smelled clean and cold. They climbed to where droplets from the ruins' waterfalls met their sweat-soaked clothes and made the footing precarious. They climbed until Nahiri could almost touch the intricate carving on the lowest reaches of the Skyclave.

It was only then that Nahiri needed her companions. Zareth's sharp eyes, Orah's quiet steadfastness, Kaza's quick thinking, and Akiri's masterful line-slinging skills. Because around them, the Skyclave floated in pieces and chunks. Some areas were large enough for waterfalls, trees, and landings. Some were only as wide as Nahiri. Stray hedrons dotted the spaces in between the ruins, glinting in the sunlight.

Nahiri scowled.

She made those hedrons. Centuries ago, when she thought trapping the Eldrazi on Zendikar was the best course of action. Back when Sorin and Ugin were at her side whispering reassurances that they would always be there when she needed them.

Now, the hedrons were scattered and tilted at unnatural angles, and Zendikar carried deep scars of the Eldrazi's wrath.

It will all be rectified soon, Nahiri thought, gritting her teeth. She pressed on.

The higher they climbed, the more treacherous the landscape became. Sun glare struck in unexpected moments, the ruins rumbled and moaned under their feet, and the handholds were slick with water and algae. Eventually, not even Nahiri could tell which stones would hold them and which were like temperamental allies, looking solid and trustworthy until you put some pressure on them. More than once, someone in the party lost their footing and Akiri would snag them with her ropes or Nahiri with her lithomancy. It required instant reflexes, and by the time they reached the largest of the ruins, everyone's nerves were frayed.

"Which way now?" Akiri asked, coming up beside Nahiri.

Before them, the Murasa Skyclave was a maze of towering channels of carved limestone, where moss grew in the crevices and slender, dangerous bridges spanned bottomless drops.

It was here that Nahiri understood that this Skyclave was a death trap.

"Let's find out," she said, grinning. The ancient kor set a deadly challenge before her, and Akiri accepted it gladly.

Nahiri removed the key from her pocket. It softly glowed and pulsed in her hand. She held it up to the ancient ruins.

And the ancient ruins responded.

The stones at their feet began to shine and thrum in a syncopated rhythm with the key, and stones around the party lit up. Then the glowing stones stretched out in a single line deep into the ruins. Behind her, Nahiri heard Orah gasp.

"A path," said Akiri, with admiration.

"Yes," replied Nahiri, "but watch your step. This Skyclave is old. And it doesn't like visitors." She saw Zareth give Akiri's shoulder a squeeze, and Akiri put a hand on his. Orah exchanged looks with Kaza.

“Noted,” Kaza said, cheerfully.

Nahiri smiled. Proper adventurers.

They followed the lit stone path in silence, their instincts telling them that they were being led by ancient and powerful magic. Zareth, being the quickest and quietest of the party, often scouted ahead. He found traps full of poison and archways waiting to collapse and guided them around such threats safely.

These were only a fraction of the dangers in the timeworn Skyclave.

In the distance, there was always the sound of crumbling stone as hedrons crashed into the spaces around them. In the shadows of columns and crevices, they heard the scratching of unseen claws. But whenever the shadows got too close, Nahiri would make a hedron crackle with blue energy, and the shadows would retreat.

Aside from that one exception, though, Nahiri and her adventuring party passed through unmolested.

As if the Core wants to be found.

The thought made Nahiri smile.

The path ended at a massive wall, covered in tiles that formed a dizzying pattern of geometric shapes and lines. At the base of the wall, the glowing stone path flashed once more and then went out. There were no other entrances or routes in sight.

“What now?” Zareth asked, folding his arms.

“Maybe we can blow it up,” Kaza suggested, not hiding the hope in her voice.

“No,” said Nahiri. With one hand, she clutched the key to her chest. With the other, she placed her palm on the wall. She closed her eyes, feeling the miniscule vibrations under her fingers. In the speech of stone—that beautiful, silent language—she asked, “How do I get past you?”

The wall’s answer came in shifting vibrations, leading her down to where the tiles met the floor. She followed the stone’s invisible movement to a recessed and tileless spot at the very bottom.

A spot the exact size of the key in her hand.

Nahiri grinned as she slipped the key into the empty slot.

There, it pulsed and brightly glowed, lighting up the tiles in a chain reaction until the entire wall was aglow. Behind her, she heard the adventurers let out a soft gasp.

“Open,” Nahiri commanded in ancient kor.

And the entrance did. Folding up from the bottom tile by tile, as if a waterfall in reverse, echoing like rain in the empty ruins.

Moments later, the party found themselves standing before a grand cavern.

“That’s it?” Kaza asked, unimpressed. “Anyone could have done that.”

“Very few can read the runes,” replied Nahiri, “or speak the forgotten language.”

“Besides, no one is as insane as us to make this climb,” said Akiri. The kor woman was grinning, something Nahiri hadn’t seen her do before. She headed into the cavern. “Come on. Let’s claim this treasure.”



Lithoform Engine | Art by: Colin Boyer

Akiri had Orah and Kaza stand guard at the back of the cavern, near the exit. She knew they had been extremely lucky so far during this venture. But Akiri was too much of a seasoned climber and adventurer to expect that luck to last.

She'd lost her first traveling party to the Eldrazi years ago. She refused to lose her second one, too.

Be prepared, but quick on her feet. That was all she could do.

Together, she, Zareth, and Nahiri crossed the chamber to the center of the room, to the object that commanded all their attention.

The object that was impossible to ignore.

On a raised dais in front of them was a monolith of dark, polished granite, tapered to a point and split in the middle. Shafts of light streamed in through the ceiling, angling toward the monolith, and hedrons danced around it. Sharp crackles of dark lightning, flashing between the hedrons and the monolith, punctuated the silence of the room.

As they approached, the top of the monolith lifted away, and between the two halves of the granite, shining like a dark beacon, was the Lithoform Core.

If Akiri was honest, the Core didn't seem like much. It was small, something that could fit into her hand, though large enough that she wouldn't be able completely close her fingers around it. It shone like a small star, but it was unadorned, almost plain.

But Akiri learned long ago that sometimes the most powerful artifacts—or people—were the most unassuming.

Akiri stopped a few feet from the dais, tense and ready. She reached for Zareth's hand beside her, taking comfort in its warmth. Nothing about the Skyclave felt stable.

Nahiri kept moving forward.

Closer and closer she walked, until Akiri saw Nahiri's visage reflected in the monolith. Nahiri's expression was one of pure determination.

"This is it," Nahiri breathed. "This will change Zendikar forever."

Beside her, Akiri felt Zareth flinch. All his worries and his fears about the Core conveyed in one involuntary motion.

On an impulse, Akiri moved toward the dais, intending to take the Core, knowing that it was probably trapped. Zareth put a concerned hand on her shoulder, but she gave him a reassuring nod and kept going. She suspected that if she was quick enough, subtle enough, she could avoid setting off whatever deadfall laid in wait.

The Core flashed bright and sharp as she neared, as if in warning. She thought she detected the barest of whispers coming from it, like hushed prayers. Or threats.

For Zendikar, she thought, and swallowing her nerves, Akiri reached out.

"Careful." Nahiri's hand clamped over her wrist in an instant. Akiri turned to look at Nahiri. The crackling lightning overhead illuminated her face, and there was a new and dangerous glint in her eye. Something that Akiri hadn't seen before, not even when Nahiri faced down a stomper in Sunder Bay.

Years of line-slinging had taught Akiri when to push forward. And when to hold back.

Wait. Watch, she thought, and stepped down to stand beside Zareth again. She found his hand and squeezed it. He squeezed back.

Better to leave the ancient artifact to the ancient stranger, she thought. And a small part of her was relieved that it wasn't her on the dais.

With her breath caught in her throat, Akiri watched as Nahiri raised a palm under the Lithoform Core, curled her fingers around it, and slowly pulled it toward her.



For a moment, there was only silence. Just long enough for Akiri to release her breath. Just long enough for her to hope.

Then, there was a deafening *crack*, and the surrounding chamber was disintegrating, falling, tearing itself apart.

Good luck's run out, Akiri thought. She turned and shouted, "Nahiri, we need to leave—*now*!"

Before her, Orah and Kaza were already running. Behind her, she saw Nahiri sprinting down the steps of the dais, shoving the Core into a satchel on her hip. Beside her, Zareth kept pace with Akiri's long strides.

But even as she ran, Akiri could feel the floor trembling under her feet, and she realized that this was not only the Murasa Skyclave's trap at work.

The Roil was shaking the earth and the sky as the Skyclave tore itself apart. Perhaps it was reacting to the magic unleashed. Perhaps it was just bad luck. Akiri didn't know.

Ahead of her, the floor beneath Orah and Kaza shifted and rolled like a wave.

"Look out!" she shouted, but another thunderous *crack* drowned out her warning.

The stone floor shifted and splintered, and Kaza and Orah were hurled back. The ground they stood on tilted to sharper and sharper angles until the wizard and the cleric were scrambling to hang on by their fingers.

Then the floor shuddered. Kaza and Orah cried out, losing their tentative grip. They fell, disappearing from view.

"No!" Akiri shouted. She skidded to the edge, too slow, too late to help.

One agonizing moment later, far below, Kaza appeared, hovering on her magic staff, with Orah clinging to her waist.

Akiri exhaled, relief flooding through her.

"Keep going!" Zareth shouted. But she wasn't sure if he was talking to the separated members of their party or her.

Both, she thought, and ran.

Fear twisted Akiri's stomach as she sprinted and the structures around her shattered and gave way to empty sky. Would Kaza and Orah make it out alive? Did she lead her party to their deaths?

No, they were good, talented people. This wouldn't be like her first adventuring party. They would be safe.

She had to believe that.

Now, she had to focus on making sure Zareth and Nahiri reached safety, too.

Because all they could do now was try to get out of the Skyclave alive.



Akiri, Fearless Voyager | Art by: Ekaterina Burmak

Nahiri ran, fighting to hold together the ruins with her lithomancy just long enough for them to cross the precarious stone bridges. The temptation to planeswalk away to safety flashed through her mind. But no, she was done with abandoning Zendikar in its time of need. The Murasa Skyclave offered her a challenge, and she would rise to meet it.

In her satchel on her side, she thought she sensed the Core whispering, but Nahiri didn't have time to listen.

Because the Skyclave was tearing itself apart without the Core. And the Roil, the damn Roil, was whipping up winds around them and making a dangerous situation a thousand times more chaotic.

She couldn't hold together the Murasa Skyclave and hold back the Roil at the same time.

At least, not yet.

So, she ran behind Akiri and Zareth, anger coiling inside her.

They hit a dead end. Before them, islands of tree-covered ruins floated with nothing between but empty sky and a few hedrons. With a masterful throw, Akiri flung her rope and latched onto a drifting ledge.



“Quick!” she said, before swinging over to the massive tilted platform below them. Zareth threw another rope, and Nahiri readied hers, but a huge swirling vortex of winds in the distance caught her attention.

Her momentary delay was too long. Before either she or Zareth made the jump, the Skyclave shuddered and shifted again.

Nahiri struggled not to fall as she watched the platform on which Akiri stood sail away from them.

“Hurry,” said Zareth, holding out his arm to her. And Nahiri realized they were going to have to swing over together.

Nahiri considered refusing. This trickster, who has no love for her, might let her fall. But despite his tricks, she knew Zareth had enough honor not to murder in cold blood.

Nahiri grabbed the rope beside Zareth, and as he prepared to swing, she whispered in his ear, “I know you want the Core for yourself.”

Surprise crossed the merfolk’s face, but before he could respond, Nahiri commanded the stone underneath them to give them a push.

For one gravity-defying, heart-pounding moment, all Nahiri saw was sky. Wide and unforgiving.

Then they dropped to the platform. Nahiri rolled to a graceful stop. Zareth’s expression melted into pure relief when he saw Akiri. She pulled him to his feet and gave Nahiri a small nod.

They were running again.

The noise was relentless as the gust of stiff wind that tore at their faces and their clothes and the Skyclave crumbled around them. The delicate stone bridges broke and fell, and the hedrons spun out of control, missing them by inches.

This was Zendikar in its most ruined, dangerous, and nightmarish form, and Nahiri *hated* it.

Still, she kept running, kept dodging, kept escaping.

Until the vortex appeared.

It sprang up without warning in a space through the floor of the floating ruin. Like a tornado, it ripped into everything and everyone around it. Seconds before, Zareth had swung down to a landing on the

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other side of the chasm. Nahiri no longer saw him. Akiri stood, paused with the rope in her hand as the whirlwind of stone and dust whipped to a frenzy around them.

“Go!” Nahiri shouted. With a small nod, Akiri slid down the rope.

Nahiri turned, and with legs braced, arms outstretched, she grimaced and faced the vortex.



I will bend you to my will, she thought. Like she did to the Roil in Akoum, like she did with Sorin and so many other enemies in the past. She stretched out her fingers and let her rage and her guilt pour out of her with her magic.

Piece by piece, the vortex slowed and then stopped, becoming a frozen, harmless thing.

Nahiri smiled, victorious.

But it was a short-lived triumph. The vortex swelled again. Like a dam on the edge of bursting, it contained so much anger and force it pushed Nahiri back, until she could contain it no longer.

And Nahiri went flying off the ruin's ledge.

There was only sky around her, blue and cold. Nahiri twisted midair and saw Akiri's rope inches away. She reached out her hand.

And missed.

She was free falling.

Nahiri's heart seized in her throat as she summoned every shred of power she had left to stop her plunge. Until something caught her arm.

“Got you!” Akiri gasped and grinned. She hoisted Nahiri to the platform with Zareth's help.

Nahiri's cheeks burned with shame. “Let's go,” she said, and shifted the floating ruins around them into a bridge. She dashed across it. Behind her, the raging rush of chaos and destruction grew louder, grew closer.

Nahiri bared her teeth. Now she knew for certain she couldn't heal Zendikar with her lithomancy alone.

The Core in her satchel was whispering again, but Nahiri wasn't listening. She was sprinting, and she was planning.



Cinderclasm | Art by: Campbell White

Nahiri landed on a wide stretch of the Murasa Skyclave that was still unbroken, followed closely by Zareth and Akiri. It was the first place they reached that wasn't crumbling or shaking. It took a moment for Nahiri to realize what was wrong.

Why is there lava here? she thought, perplexed, studying the area before her. Then realization struck her—the Roil had changed the landscape of the Skyclave, like it had done to so many other areas on this plane. Nissa said that the Roil had begun as a reaction to the Eldrazi, Zendikar's way of fighting the sickness within it. Now, it seemed, it was trying to fight her.

Is this what it calls a fight? Nahiri smirked.

The floor before her exploded in jets of fire and ash. It knocked Nahiri back, and an immense, furious elemental emerged from the ground, as if it was born from the lava itself. Its massive chest and fists radiated heat, crackling fire as its coal-red eyes turned and glared at Nahiri. The look was full of hate.

Nahiri stretched a hand behind her, and a moment later, a glowing stone sword emerged fully formed in her grasp. If this *thing* wanted a fight, she would give it one. Gladly.

Zareth was quicker, though. With unflagging courage, he charged the elemental, trident in hand. An arc of energy shot out from the weapon and surrounded the creature, striking it full in the chest.

The elemental didn't even flinch. It cast its calm stare upon Zareth, raised both of its fiery fists, and brought them down on the merfolk.

But as quick as lightning, Akiri was there in front of Zareth, arm raised, the gauntlet on her wrist flashing, a bright disc appearing as a shield between her and the monster. The elemental slammed both fists down on the magical shield. Akiri groaned and crumpled. The creature growled in frustration and raised its hands again.

Nahiri saw Akiri and Zareth bracing for another blow and knew they would not survive the next one.

Lifting one hand in an arc while grasping her sword in the other, Nahiri raised the earth and rode it up into the sky. She barely heard the whispering as she pulled the Core from her satchel.

The motion made the elemental pause, look away from the prone figures before it, and stare straight at her. Or rather, at the Core in her hand.

"Is this what you want?" Nahiri shouted.

The elemental growled and stalked toward Nahiri, fists balled, looming closer.

Nahiri raised her sword, but she knew it wouldn't be enough. She alone wouldn't be enough against this abomination created by the Roil. She lowered her sword. Looked at the Lithoform Core in her hand.

Should I? she wondered.

The Core continued its whispers, but she wasn't able to make out the words.

But words were not important. Actions were.

She heard Akiri cry out from a distance, and Nahiri shifted her glance toward the sound. Zareth was running toward the monster. No, she realized, he was racing toward her, trident pulled back, energy dancing between its prongs. His face was set in grim determination.

In the same instant, the elemental growled at Nahiri and lunged.



That was when Nahiri decided.

She raised the Core and easily, so easily, channeled the power in her hand.

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The world cracked with dark energy. Then turned white. Color washed away in the brightness, sound became lost in the roar, and for a moment, there was nothing. Nahiri saw nothing. Heard nothing.

Felt nothing.

Her world was clean.

When the light from the Core dimmed, everything around Nahiri had turned to ashen gray. There was nothing but silence, and the elemental was completely gone.

Nahiri smiled, victorious. She had won.

Akiri's agonized voice broke the silence. "Zareth!"



Wasteland | Art by: Adam Paquette

Akiri was on her knees, holding the cold, stiff body of the person she loved. She blinked, blinked again, wanting this to be a mistake, a cruel trick. It had to be.

Zareth's hand was curled up into a claw, grasping for something. His mouth was wide in a silent scream. But it was his eyes that would haunt Akiri's dreams for months to come.

Zareth's eyes, which were always bright and full of emotion, had no light in them at all.

"Zareth " Akiri gasped, holding the body of her friend, her love, close. This couldn't be. It couldn't

She felt Nahiri's shadow fall over her. She glanced over and saw that the Lithoform Core was on the ground, a few feet away from where Akiri knelt in the ashes.

Nahiri moved to pick it up, but Akiri was faster. Within moments, Akiri was on her feet and stumbling back from the strange, ancient kor woman.

"What is this *thing*, Nahiri?" she demanded. The Core was warm, glowing softly in her hand, like a clear sky on a perfect line-slinging day.

"No more storms or disasters," Nahiri said, sounding so calm, so reasonable. She moved closer, "No more hellish monsters. This is our chance."

Akiri took in the surrounding devastation, the corpse on the ground. "Our *chance*?"

Nahiri didn't reply. Just took another step forward. Then another.

Akiri stumbled back, aware that there was a ledge behind her, dropping into empty sky.

"Zareth's chance?" she shouted, pointing to the corpse. "No. This ends here." She couldn't let Nahiri reach her. She couldn't let her get the Core.

Zareth was right about Nahiri. He was right.

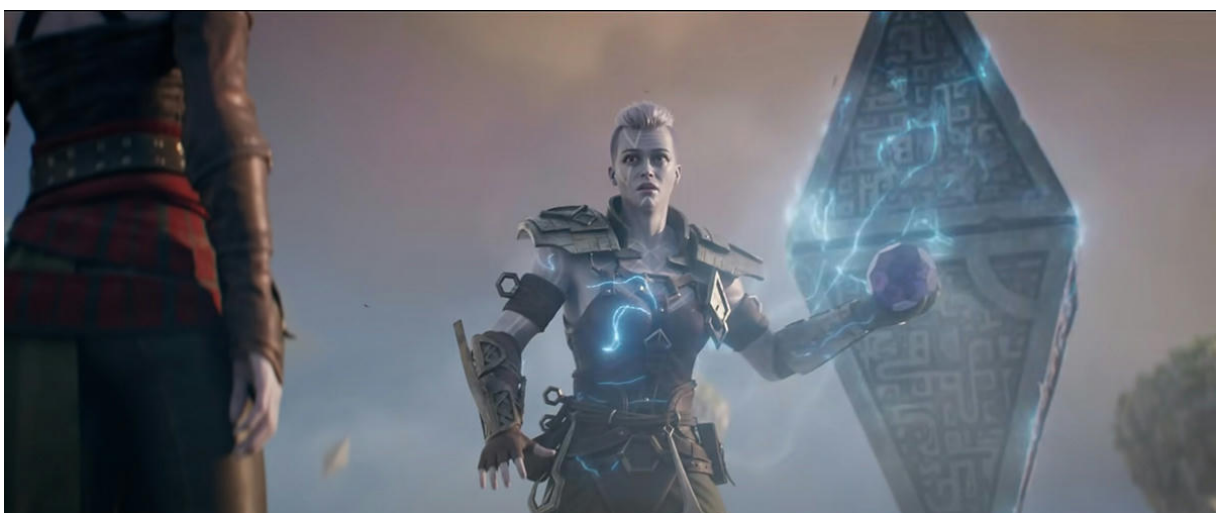
Nahiri kept advancing. Fear clamped around Akiri's broken heart, and when the ledge was almost at her heels, she stopped.

"No," said Akiri and held the Core over the edge, ready to drop it, ready to be free of this terrible, deadly prize.

But Nahiri's gaze fixed on something past her. Akiri turned and spotted a hedron rising behind her, just within rope's reach. She'd only have to sling a line

The hedron sparked and dark energy reached out from it, coursing through her, and Akiri found herself unable to move. She watched, frozen, as Nahiri came closer.

And closer.



Calmly, Nahiri took the Lithoform Core from her nerveless hand.

Nahiri reached up and touched Akiri's cheek. It was only then that Akiri realized her cheeks were covered in tears.

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"I'm sorry, Akiri, I really am," said Nahiri, and she sounded truly regretful. But what Akiri saw in Nahiri's face was only determination and ruthlessness.

She wanted to scream, but her voice was lost. She wanted to reach for her ropes, but her muscles wouldn't respond. Akiri could do nothing as Nahiri planted a hand on her shoulder. And pushed.

Akiri toppled back.

And fell.

The last thing Akiri saw was Nahiri standing, with a cold, calculated look in her eye, and the Core hovering over her outstretched palm.

Then there was only sky. Endless and cruel.

