

The Magosi Steps

Miguel Lopez

From set *Zendikar Rising*

Note: This is Part 2 of a two-part story. Make sure to check out Part 1 before reading on.

Morning found the Magosi Portage warm before the dawn, seasonable but no less uncomfortable. The caravan of two dozen merfolk traders milled about the portage's packing yard, their pillarfield oxen laden and hitched together, blindfolded for the coming descent down the stair. The sun trembled up from the far horizon, and Akiri made her first checks of the straps, harnesses, blinds, and guide lines that would see the merfolk's oxen down safely and calmly. The merfolk were Zareth's responsibility; they were nervous, but Zareth did his best to comfort them.

"If you fall, aim for the river," Akiri overheard him say as she walked by on her inspection of the oxen. She couldn't help herself from laughing, which prompted a series of concerned questions from the caravan-master, who Akiri then had to spend another quarter hour reassuring.

"Might be that if you blindfolded him this would be an easier trip," Zareth said, walking behind Akiri as she made a third check of the oxen.

"I think we'd forfeit the rest of our pay if I did that," Akiri said, tugging a strap tight. She checked the lines that held down the crates and bundles of goods packed on the oxen's back. "Though it would certainly make this easier."

"Any idea what they're carrying?" Zareth asked.

"Do you want me to guess, or do you want to tell me?" Akiri said.

"This one has fruits from the interior," Zareth winked. He produced a small handful of deep purple berries. "Want one? I think it's elvish. It has a nice buzz, like morning tea."

Akiri raised a finger to admonish him, but she stopped as Zareth nodded past her toward the approaching caravan leader.

"No more of that," Akiri growled, then turned to the caravan leader, smiling, reassuring him that all was well and that they were ready to depart at his leisure. She watched from the corner of her eye as Zareth walked off down the line of oxen, making small conversation with the merfolk traders, laughing with them, making small adjustments to the harnesses on the beasts, and otherwise making nice. She hated that she watched him with suspicion. Not with distrust, for she knew Zareth well and knew where his heart stood, but certainly with disappointment. She resolved to put a stop to it. But first, they—

The ground shook. A slight tremor, short, accompanied by a sudden burn in the morning's heat, as if the sun grew closer by fractions. The oxen stopped their chuffing and grunting. The merfolk stopped their nervous talk. Even Zareth paused, rooting himself to the shaking ground, hands dropping to the twin knives at his waist. From a humid dawn, calm save for nerves, the world suddenly made itself known. The shaking only lasted for moments, though it felt like an hour, a day, a heartbeat.

Akiri was the only one who did not look around in fear once it passed. She had been surprised, to be sure, but not afraid. To the contrary, as the merfolk whispered and talked in hushed tones about ill signs, as the caravan lead fretted about trying to calm the oxen, Akiri was calm. Resolute.

The Roil—gone briefly after the Eldrazi defeat at Sea Gate—was back. A hint of it at least: Zendikar's reminder that the Battle had only saved the people that lived upon it, not the world itself. The Roil, when it came, never proceeded anything small; it was a herald of Zendikar's incredible power, the strength of the world itself. Despite any fear Akiri felt when the Roil shook, she welcomed its trembling. If you lived through what the Roil did, you understood the scale of the threat before you.

Zareth strode over to her, hands still resting on his knife hilts. "I thought we stopped the Roil," he said. "You think it will get worse?"

"No," Akiri said. "Once it passes, it passes, remember? We should be fine on the steps—they're sturdy enough. The Umara is stable, which is why we only felt a tremor."

"Sea Gate?"

"Will likely deal with some tremor waves out from the Halimar and the ocean beyond," Akiri said, "but the city will stand."

Zareth looked to the merfolk and the caravan. "And us? Elementals? Or—"

His grip on his knives went white, though otherwise, he remained composed, calm, and cool.

"No," Akiri said. She reached out and, with a light touch, lifted Zareth's hands from his weapons. "The Roil has passed. Let it pass," she said. "All we have to do now is go down the stairs, on to Coralhalm, then to Sea Gate."

Zareth nodded, exhaling. "Then we continue the work."

"Then we continue the work," Akiri repeated. She looked past Zareth at the merfolk caravan, who had clustered around their leader and were talking with him in hushed, strained tones. "See how little we shook?" she called over to them. "The route we take down is carved into this same rock. There is nothing to fear."

The merfolk spread out among their oxen, talking among themselves. Their leader approached Akiri and Zareth.

"That was the Roil," the merfolk leader said. "Not just a quake. You can feel it, too, can't you?" he asked Zareth. The merfolk leader touched his jaw. "That sound here, before the shake."

Zareth nodded. "I felt it," he said. "It hurt, but it did not seem like a terrible one."

"In any case," Akiri said to the merfolk caravan leader, "this is the safest place you can be in all of Zendikar. From here to Sea Gate, we're on stable ground. Our biggest worry is the heat."

"And any raiders," Zareth said, interjecting, "those are worth worrying about as well."

The caravan leader balked.

"He's only joking," Akiri said. She shot a glare at Zareth. "You and your people will be fine, and we'll see you to Coralhalm by the end of the day."

The merfolk leader looked between the two of them. Akiri, reassuring, and Zareth, smiling. He shook his head and walked away, to tend to his other duties.

The caravan departed shortly after, the oxen lumbering one by one down the first step of the long switchback path.

On the steps, despite the press of the caravan, the roar of the Magosi gave Akiri and Zareth some privacy in their conversation.

“That was a bad one,” Akiri said. “I haven’t felt anything like that since the Battle.”

“My face felt like it was going to crack,” Zareth said, massaging his jaw. “I don’t blame these people for being scared,” he said. “Depths, that one has me worried.”

Akiri adjusted her hooks and lines. “Stay ready, Zareth,” she said, “I don’t think this will be an easy day.”

They both knew, having lived through it before, the nature of the Roil. Like a body struggling with fever, the Roil was Zendikar’s response to some deeper pain. The Roil was not the threat, though it could be terrible. The Roil was a warning.

The Magosi tumbled down. The steps continued down. The caravan, Akiri, and Zareth continued down, disappearing into the swirling mists that peeled off the Magosi and shrouded the steps in deep, humid fog.



Zareth San, the Trickster | Art by: Zack Stella

The caravan shuddered to a halt somewhere above the midway point of the steps, not yet an hour into the journey. Here, the mist of the tumbling Magosi was all-encompassing, drenching both beast and person. In this high summer, what should have been a cooling fog blanketing the steps was instead a humid, sticky mess, blocking any view out from the switchbacks. With a high wind, the vista was magnificent, showing the full stretch of the lower Umara River Gorge winding from the Magosi to where it spilled into the Halimar, and the distant light of Sea Gate beyond the inland sea; on this rare

windless day, the cliffside of the switchbacks dribbled with water. Opposite, a wall of mist showed only as far as the next switchback down. The oxen groaned and chuffed, and their handlers did their best to keep them calm. The roar of the waterfall was all-encompassing, surely as distressing to the caravanners as it was the oxen.

Akiri walked near the back of the caravan, talking with one of the merfolk there about Coralhelm and its cuisine—fish, shark, seaweed, crustaceans—what you would expect from a merfolk settlement (but, as the caravanner promised, unlike anywhere else. Better than Sea Gate’s delicacies, even, as it was closer to the source). Akiri resolved to try a certain stall the caravanner recommended when she heard Zareth calling her name from somewhere up the line. She excused herself from the conversation and hustled up to where Zareth crouched, talking with the caravan leader and his retinue around a fallen, moaning ox. The creature lay across the narrow switchback, blocking the entirety of the passage, dividing the caravan in half.

“Broke an ankle,” Zareth said. He offered Akiri a chunk of stone. “Looks like a loose cobble, probably eroded on account of all the wet.”

Akiri winced, taking the cobblestone from Zareth. “Poor creature.”

“Mmm,” Zareth said. He looked at the ox, grim sympathy across his face. “They’ll have to put it down, there’s no way they can carry it out.”

Even as he spoke, the caravan leader’s slumped shoulders confirmed Zareth’s speculation. The leader spoke with his retinue and directed them to start removing the goods from the beast’s back. He turned, apologetic, to Akiri and Zareth. Behind him, one of his people moved to the head of the ox and with a quick, firm cut, put it to rest.

“We have to distribute its load out across the other beasts,” he said, “and then dispose of the body.”

Akiri nodded. “Do what you need, and let us know if we can help.”

The caravan leader thanked her then turned back to his people, leaving Akiri and Zareth to stand aside and watch. The caravanners hurried, but unloading a laden ox under normal circumstances was slow going—unloading one that had fallen and scattered its cargo across a narrow, switchbacked stair next to a thundering waterfall was another task entirely.

Zareth rested against the cliffside wall and drank from his canteen. Akiri joined him, leaning with her arms crossed. They didn’t talk, but watched the merfolk work instead.

“You’ve never been to Coralhelm?” Akiri asked Zareth.

“Not once,” he said.

Akiri did not ask why. Not her place. Zareth offered her some of his water, she took a sip, and passed the canteen back.

A scream split the roar of the waterfall, followed moments later by a chorus of them, and the wild bleating of oxen. Merfolk at the fallen ox turned and started to flee from the head of the caravan, shouting for others to flee as well.

Akiri and Zareth stood from the wall, starting toward the commotion, then stopped, frozen by what they saw.

It did not make sense to Akiri; Zareth knew what the creature was but did not yet believe it. The size of the thing that loomed in from the swirling mist. The water dripping from what must be its tongue, probing forward from the fog. The dark shape of the creature’s head obscuring the already diffuse sunlight, plunging the switchback into deep shadow. The appendage moved like low smoke creeping

across the floor of a burning house, rolling forward with a grace not given to things that large, in defiance of what rules bound other living beings.

Akiri and Zareth pushed forward toward the trapped and fleeing merfolk, moving toward the reaching, naked muscle of the thing that remained hidden in the mist and roar of the fall.

“Keep that thing away from them,” Akiri ordered Zareth. She loosed a loop of line from her pack and attached it to her slinger’s harness, then drew the Makindi-kor hook Zareth had given her.

Zareth drew his twin blades. “I don’t think we can fight this, Akiri.”

“We have to try,” Akiri said. She coiled, sprinted, and then leapt off the switchback, flying out into the open air and swirling mist to face the thing that waited beyond.

How would Akiri even begin to describe the monster that lurked behind the mist? Could she encompass its great bulk in a thought? The number of teeth that lined its maw? It was far too large; instead, she saw only moments of the coiling beast, and knew it to be a kind of serpent, one as large as the mighty river in which it hid.

The falling water of the Magosi exploded to steam as it drummed off the titan’s sinewy body. It should not have been able to move as it did, flowing up and down the Magosi without effort. This was a beast of legend, some *thing* that defied classification and stood alone, a being unlike any other, without community or kin. A world unto itself.

Is this what the Roil had warned them of this humid morning? Or was this thing, this colossal serpent, whose body stretched hundreds of feet up from some unseen pool at the Magosi’s base, the Roil itself in terrible, physical form?

The serpent drew its head back from the steps, tongue constricting a pair of merfolk who reached out to her before it swallowed them. Was this serpent a natural beast hidden for eons in the deep heart of Zendikar? Or was it another thing imprisoned and released during the Battle, dumped on this world to plague it? Did it matter to the people that it swallowed? The serpent plunged its head back into the switchback steps, hungry, searching for more.

The answer did not matter, Akiri realized; only the moment.

Akiri swung via an unseen anchor, having thrown her lead hook into the swirling torrent of the Magosi, trusting that the ancient tool would find purchase somewhere behind the water. She left her long knife securely strapped to her hip—she needed both hands free for this kind of line-slinging—and saw on her first pass around the monster that she would have to get close to this creature in order to wound it: its dorsal breadth was armored in thick, mucous-slick hide, split by rigid, spearpoint-tipped fins. Its endless coiling in the waterfall hid its belly and made it impossible to strike in the thundering column of the Magosi. Akiri, unlike the serpent, was still bound by gravity—she could fly by line, but if she swung too close to the falls, she had little doubt that the water would tear her down.

Akiri reached the end of her swing, alighting on an outcropping on the opposite side of the Magosi, slightly above the level of the switchback she had leapt from. She pressed her forehead to the rock, lips not an inch from the damp stone. The day’s heat still radiated from the cliff face. The bass rumble of the water pounding into the rock somewhere far below could be heard even this high up.

The screams. Akiri could hear the caravanners and their oxen screaming. That brought her back—

To Sea Gate’s umbral night, and the terror there. The enemy was silent even in death. Her sword buried in the center mass of some wriggling thing, and it spat ichorous blood out on her as it died and didn’t make a sound. But the screams of her comrades echoed and clashed with the waves and roar of high magic.

— to the present with sharp purpose.

She can strike the head, maybe find an eye—surely the serpent has eyes—or some other soft spot in the creature’s thick hide. She can sink her lead anchor in the cliff face across the Magosi, swing with both arms, and land on the creature’s back. Once there, she can find a way under its guard: she might not kill it, but all she needs to do is buy enough time for the merfolk to flee.

Akiri turns around on the outcrop, braces, and jumps. With peerless grace, she throws her lead hook, aiming for an anchor point she sighted on her swing across. There is a weightless moment where Akiri fears that her hook will miss, or that even if it hits, it will fail to bite, and the single-point would skitter off the rock, and she would fall. She worries that time would slow during that fall, that she would feel every whip of tearing air as she plummets. She’d rather not fall at all, but if she’s going to, then please let it be fast.

Her worries vanish as her hook hits, bites, and holds her swing through the misty air. Hurtling forward now, she tucks her knees up, twitches free her lead hook, and with her free hand, draws her long knife.

Momentum carries her up and forward and she flies, shouting a war cry that slips primal from deep in her gut—that fear place, that anger place, that place crying out through her for some kind of stop to the pain of this world—and then she hits the back of the serpent, holding on to it by sheer white-knuckle obstinance and honed reflexes.

She throws her free hook up around a nearby spine protruding from the serpent’s back, where it loops over itself before catching its own line. Akiri wraps the line around her forearm, securing herself to the back of the serpent, able to move a radius around the spine as big as the slack she lets slip.

Knife in hand, Akiri springs gracefully forward, the crampons on her light boots biting through the serpent’s mucosal sheathe just enough to give purchase. The colossus does not notice; it is still focused on the caravan. The thundering waterfall threatens to sweep Akiri from the back of the serpent as she struggles up its body toward its head. She does not look down—she knows it is far, far too far—as being thrown certainly means the death of everyone upon the switchback, and *seeing* the vanishing distance is too much; the serpent moves under her, languid almost, its colossal form rising up the falling Magosi without any apparent effort. Akiri drops to her knees, holds fast to her anchor, and wedges her knife deep as she can into the serpent’s integument. This seems to have some kind of an effect: the bloodless wound twitches closed and snaps the blade of her knife in two, easy as one would break a twig.

Akiri holds on. The serpent rises into the falling column of the Magosi. The water hammers down, buffeting her. All she can hear is the roar—the roar of the world, of the beast itself, of *pain* unimaginable and, cruelly, not endless, but ageless—before the segment of the serpent, she clings to burst free of the water. It is as if Zendikar itself attacks her: the world’s anger is in the wind of the falling river that hammers her, the bitter cold, and the beast itself.

Akiri drags herself forward. Holding her anchored radial line taught, she looses a free hook and flings it forward, catching a spine closer to its head. Anchored in two places, Akiri searches for a way forward and finds it: there, perhaps forty feet ahead, are the rills and ridges of the serpent’s dorsal beak, the upper part of its wicked maw—a forest of handholds and hook-anchors for her to find purchase, and surely vulnerable parts for her to wound in her effort to drive the serpent away from the caravan and—

Zareth. She hopes he is alive, she hopes he can save those Merfolk still trapped on the stair. Akiri sheathes her broken knife and scrambles up the rising, coiling, writhing back of the titan serpent, pulling hand over hand up her newly set line. A moment at her next anchor to catch her breath, to unhook her radial and sight her next point, then to throw—

And her line caught the anchor. Akiri grinned. Her first. "Good," the slinger captain nodded, her voice a gravel-tint growl. "See it set? Give it a pull to be sure. Put all of your weight on it, kor; you need to trust the line will hold you up!"

—and climb once more. Hand over hand. Find grip wherever you can. The stink of the serpent this close to its head disorients her. A wind named Rot and Hunger beats against her, a swirling, nauseating gale, but still Akiri climbs on; this far up, every movement of the creature threatens to throw her. How many sizes larger than her is just the head of the serpent? Surely, if it could swallow one of the merfolk's oxen whole, it could devour her without noticing.

Akiri holds on as the serpent lunges once more at the switchbacks, snapping up an ox. It pulls back, dragging a tangle of merfolk with it. They fall before Akiri can do anything to help them, their screams lost in the roar of the Magosi.

Everything lost in the roar of the Magosi.

Akiri draws her broken knife, her target spotted: Eyes. Black, featureless orbs peering out from alongside its mouth, at least two on the side that she could see, likely mirrored on the side she could not. A strike there to blind it, to distract it, to send it reeling back from the switchbacks and to the depths behind the Magosi—that was the plan.

Akiri does not see the second head rising from the base of the mighty tumbling waterfall. Smaller, but still larger than her, it moves swiftly up against a current that should have battered it to pulp, mouth yawning open.

The serpent had not ignored Akiri. To the contrary, during her heroic struggle, it had watched her from below with its second head, and whether cruel or curious, it had allowed her to get this close before striking.

Akiri raises her broken knife to strike, but before she can, it is slapped from her hand by the thick, stinking tongue of the serpent's second head. She turns in time to see it lunge for her—fangs the size of her forearm, white and bloodless gums, a gullet lined with smaller teeth—and is saved only by her preternatural reflexes.

Akiri jumps, keen eyes sighting an anchor she can fly from.

The second mouth catches her in mid-air, teeth and buccal barbs skittering off her armor. Akiri cries out in surprise, and then fear, and loses her anchor.

The second mouth flings her to the side, into the open air.

Akiri is no longer flying.

Akiri is falling.



Verazol, the Split Current | Art by: Daarken

Zareth knows the name of the serpent: Verazol. All the merfolk in the caravan recognized it as soon as its head loomed in from the mist. Verazol, the Scourge of the Umara, the demon of the Magosi, the death of the Halimar. He remembers the little coral statuettes of Verazol some merfolk keep in their homes; as a child his family had one as well, back when merfolk had homes and not only places to live.

Verazol was a legend, a myth, a god to some. They can't stop it: try to kill a river or destroy an ocean. Raise your arm and strike down a world. Sure, there were some who could do that—

A night of fever and ash dust lit only by fire and the chromatic explosions high above, each blast like a dawn in a heartbeat.

— but not Zareth, and even with all her grace and skill, not Akiri.

So Zareth runs. He scrambles back up the switchback, away from Verazol's lashing tongue, shoving some straggling merfolk before him.

"Leave it!" Zareth cries, hauling the merfolk away from their frantic attempts to turn their oxen around. "Leave it! Run!"

The oxen bleat in panic, stumbling backwards. Zareth has enough space to press himself into the cliff face and avoid their lumbering progress, but one of the merfolk is not so lucky. Zareth reaches for the fallen merfolk, but Verazol's tongue snaps forward from the mist, a rippling trunk of steaming muscle, and snatches the fallen caravanner.

Zareth takes a step back from where the fallen caravanner had been not seconds before. The Magosi roars in its thunderous, endless tumbling. Running makes sense, but for one soaring reason:

Akiri.

She is still out there, somewhere, trying to fight this monster.

Zareth turns to face the mist behind which the legendary serpent lurks. He can't leave his friend again, even if he was afraid—even if they couldn't win this fight, he would fight by her side.

To be a bloom of the coming spring.

With almost deliberate care, Verazol probes its head in from the waterfall mist. The tip of its beak parts the water like the armored keel of a ship, gouged and scarred by legends and beasts that it had consumed in years long gone. Zareth's knives, deadly at their scale, are useless splinters against Verazol. Still, he raises them, and then stops. Somehow, through the roaring water, he hears a sound that chills him to the bone. A horrible sound, colder than any brine depth or howling wind.

Akiri, screaming.

Akiri's first fall was from a short height to a soft mattress stuffed with raw lambswool. This was a planned fall, the first part of any line-slinger's training. Learn to feel what *falling* feels like.

Her second fall came along a slingers' practice course in the far north of Tazeem. Sturdy anchors lined both sides of the shallow canyon, which was filled with still and deep water, a lake fed by numerous natural springs. There, Akiri learned how to suppress and—in time—ignore the fear of falling for the precious seconds one had at the *top* of a fall. At height, should an anchor fail, a line snap, or a throw miss, you had a window of time to save yourself; slingers learned not to waste that time being afraid.

Her third fall—not counting the hundreds she endured in that distant canyon—was her first real fall. One hundred feet up the face of a sheer escarpment in the Bulwark, chasing down a band of skilled raiders. She was upon them when the kitesail she wore on her back caught a blast of the stiff Bulwark updraft, snapped its locks, and flung her into the air. To this day, she refused to wear a kitesail: yes, it had saved her from that fall, allowing her to glide safely to the ground once she regained control of it, but it had thrown her from safety first.

Her fourth fall was this one.

She doesn't panic (she does, but she tamps down on the panic, suppressing it with decades of training and gut-level experience).

She sights her closest feature (the wet, mist-shrouded switchback steps next to the Magosi. The serpent's body slides in and out from the switchbacks and the waterfall column. She doesn't have much room to work with).

She throws her hook (twenty feet? Thirty? A long throw, in any case).

It bites, and Akiri holds through the swing that follows, slamming into the switchbacks well below the caravan and the bulk of the serpent's body, still some hundred feet above the gorge floor. Winded, she manages as gracefully as she can to untangle herself from the line and scoot back from the edge. A quick inventory shows nothing broken, but her legs are covered in cuts and barbs torn from inside the smaller mouth of the serpent. She pulls the barbs out and tosses them aside, ignoring the pain. She can walk, and once she dresses these wounds, she can start up the switchbacks to—

The air changes. Cold when she landed, the air suddenly runs hot and thick with reek.

Akiri looks up from her triage.

The main head of the serpent looms down from above, plunging Akiri into shadow. She reaches for her knife, but stops, remembering she'd lost it in the fall.

With nothing, Akiri freezes.

The maw yawns wide.

Zareth slides to a stop at the edge of the switchback, leaning over as far as he dares, hoping as much as he dares that Akiri made it. What he sees send a curse tumbling from him, snatched away by the high cliff wind.

Verazol has Akiri cornered. Her swing took her to a switchback about forty feet below, and now the larger head of the great serpent hovers just level with her, its titanic body spilling and undulating out into the open air. Worse, Verazol's second head made for them, smaller but no less monstrous at Zareth's scale.

Zareth steps back from the edge. He curses. He bought the caravanners some time, but buying them time would not stop Verazol from attacking until it had eaten its fill. Alone, he didn't stand a chance against the legendary serpent; together, he and Akiri didn't stand a chance, but they could at least make it out alive.

A distraction. Something to distract Verazol so they could escape. One of the dead oxen, already near the edge of the switchback.

Zareth curses again, paces, curses at the terrible plan forming. He slams his knives into their scabbards, clips them secure, and claps his hands.

"You," he calls to a group of merfolk. "The second head is coming. Help me with this. We'll distract it so we can run," he cries, pointing to the dead ox.

The caravanners hesitate, but Zareth had protected them, so as one, they hurry to help. With great effort, they shove the ox's corpse over the edge of the switchback. It tumbles, end over end, and slams into Verazol's main head, bouncing off to continue its long, long fall. Verazol's main head screeches, rears back, and looks directly up at them.

Zareth rolls back from the edge, pushing himself up into a standing position. The merfolk start at first to talk concernedly, then to shout, then to scream, as Verazol's main head rises from below. Serrated mouth open wide, breath a furnace-hot blast, Zareth sees in Verazol the rage of Zendikar incarnate, twisted by the terrible *things* that had been imprisoned here. The serpent's black and featureless eyes reflecting the unliving, aberrant Eldrazi—those terrible beings Zareth's people once called gods—and the Roil. The prison and the prisoner, both irrevocably poisoned by the other. Now it was his turn to face it, and he knew what he had to do.

Zareth tries to even out his breathing, to stay still and coiled as the merfolk around him run, panicking, trying to clamber over one another and get away. Zareth keeps his vision through the crowd on the movements of the great serpent, ready, waiting.

Verazol rears back and lunges forward.

Zareth sprints toward the serpent—two, maybe three steps, shouldering aside one merfolk caravanner who gets in his way—and then dives. Verazol's split maw scrapes by on either side of Zareth's leap, coming so close that barbs snag on his clothing, but do not catch him, do not stop him.

Zareth jumps into the open air and falls his first real fall.

Akiri watches from below as the serpent lunges at the switchback. She cries out as the whole cliff face shakes, as the great gout of shattered rock and dust explodes out from the force of the titanic creature's strike. She watches in horror as merfolk and pieces of merfolk fall with the tumbling rock and shattered steps, as oxen and a spray of glittering trade goods and crafts bound for Coralhelm arc out into the open air.

Her cry strangles short when she sees him.

Zareth, falling.

He flashes past her silently. She sees his eyes are closed and that he has no slinger's harness or line. Akiri stumbles forward, ignoring the serpent as it gorges itself on the poor caravan above, and tumbles off the edge, hook and line in hand.

She falls, catching Zareth's outstretched hand, pulling him in close to brace just before her trailing line catches an anchor, jerking both to a breath-stealing halt.

They swing, both gasping for air, Akiri groaning in pain and Zareth silent. Somewhere far above, the terror gorges itself, but down here, it is just the two of them. They could not even see the body of the colossus; down here, an indeterminable distance to the ground, the roar of the Magosi was all-encompassing.

Some time later, Akiri realized Zareth was talking to her. She couldn't make out what he was saying through the obliterating sound of the Magosi. He shouted again, and Akiri could not hear. Finally, he put his lips to her ear, and spoke once more.

"I had no choice."

And Akiri knew he was right. She was furious, but Zareth was right, even if his reasoning began and ended at the day's tragedy. Zareth did not have a choice, she did not have a choice, none of them did; the serpent would have killed them had they stayed, would have killed everyone who didn't run from it. Zareth forced her hand, made her save him, and in doing so, gave her some cover from the shame. At least her friend was alive. At least they could still fight.

Akiri wanted to tell Zareth that it was okay, that he had done the right thing, but she could not, as there was no possible right thing for him to do, no space for anything more than brutal calculus; Zareth's choice meant their effort would continue, but his choice had been a terrible one, and he would carry with him the spirits of the dead he'd doomed. Akiri remained silent and held her friend as he sobbed like he did that dawn after the Battle. The same two people, again the only survivors.

"There was nothing else you could do," Akiri said, whispering to Zareth and herself. The brutal truth of this moment: in Zendikar, they did not have any choice but the grim options presented to them. To change their options, they would have to change the world.

The wind, some time later, drove the mist and heat and great serpent Verazol away.

Akiri and Zareth made it to the bottom of the Magosi. They waited a day, but no one else followed.

They avoided Coralhelm on the road back to Sea Gate.