

Red Route

Miguel Lopez

From set *Zendikar Rising*

Note: This is Part 1 of a two-part story to be continued. . .

In Tazeem's deep Umara River Gorge, a lone pair flew by hook and line. The two, a battle-worn kor and a tall, lithe merfolk, were only ever still in the moments between swings. For those weightless heartbeats, it appeared as if the whole world moved around them; on Zendikar, this was possible.

The two had traveled for the better part of as many days up from their last rest, the Magosi Portage, itself some days up from the far banks of the Halimar, across which their home, Sea Gate, stood against the raging ocean. They chased rumors of a fallen hedron—an artifact of the world long gone.

This flight, the swing-and-leap in defiance of natural rules, fed one worry and hid the other: when a moment of inattention could send you tumbling to raging water below, esoterica was pushed to the side.



DAARKEN

TM & © 2020 WIZARDS OF THE COAST LLC

Clearwater Pathway | Art by: Daarken

Akiri's lead hook bit the well-worn anchor, the line tensed through her swing, and she fell with the confidence of someone who knew they would never land. At the nadir of her swing, the whole world was a rush of sound and color: the roaring river white and emerald below her, the stratified crimson-and-umber walls of the gorge blurring to either side, the hum of her kor line as it sliced the air. Flying, for Akiri, was simply a matter of holding on.

Akiri and her companion Zareth traveled up the Umara River Gorge, a long, stable, well-textured valley carved over millennia by the Umara River. With sheer walls plunging hundreds of feet from rim to river, the gorge bristled with natural and artificial anchor points, the best of them painted in bright colors for line-slingers eager to make good time. A stiff wind raced down from the gorge's heights, perfect for downstream navigation if one wanted to take the fast route to Halimar Bay. It was a canyon of flight, one of the few stable places in all of Zendikar. To a master like Akiri, traveling the gorge was easy as walking.

Akiri pulled through her swing, using her momentum to propel herself forward and up. A flick of the wrist, and she was free, soaring. A weightless moment between flight and fall critical for rest, to catch one's breath. Akiri did both, sighted her next anchor, and threw her following hook as she started to fall.

A small thing. A moment unwelcome: fear, the old friend, always there. Should the hook miss (impossible) or the earth break (quite possible, but unlikely given the rock that composed the gorge), then Akiri would not *fly*, she would *fall*, and that would be the end of her. Another kor swallowed by the Umara. Another kor who forgot what Zendikar thought of them now; even those born to walk tripped once in a while.

Akiri's following hook caught, bit, and held. She felt the impact resonate through her line, through her arm, and into her heart, and she swung up from the earth without fear. On this swing, she would not falter—she would fly.

Shouting behind her reminded Akiri that not everyone was so meditative in their practice.

Zareth, her old friend and companion, whooped and hollered each time he flew an apex, cheered when his lead or follow hook caught an anchor, and egged her on.

"Akiri!" Zareth shouted behind. "Go Red! Red Route!"

Red Route was a difficult, quick hookroute up the Umara River Gorge. Akiri knew it well—she'd set the route herself during the Battle, scouting and building the Red for her company of skilled line-slingers. Back then, it was to outpace hungry beasts and the Eldrazi broodlings that stalked the high places of the gorge; now, line-slingers ran the Red to settle bets and show off. A change for the better.

A few momentum-building swings, and she was ready. At the apex of her next swing, she held her throw, twisting in the air to look back at Zareth, her white hair whipping around her face.

Flying behind her, Zareth still looked like the lanky merfolk filch that tried to steal her hooks all those years ago, only now with a bit more age to his scale and his own set of hooks. Youth, though it quit most, never really left him.

"Follow!" Akiri shouted to her old friend. She fell, twisting, and flung both hooks out before her—Red Route had anchors on both sides, and she would need the strength in both of her arms to make the next set. She trusted Zareth to match her movements, if not her pace.

The fear was there yes, always. But the *freedom* !

Akiri and Zareth's happy shouts echoed up the Umara River Gorge. Ahead, there was danger—that was a given across Zendikar, and especially so considering they had been dispatched by Sea Gate to follow up on rumors of a fallen hedron—but for now, that seemed very far off.

Together, Akiri and Zareth flew.



Akiri, Fearless Voyager | Art by: Ekaterina Burmak

Later that evening, Akiri and Zareth made camp atop the high rim of the gorge. The hazy, burnt-orange sun spread like a cooked yolk across the horizon, and the sound of the Umara far below was a gentle, constant roar. The plains atop the gorge stretched to the horizon, split only by jagged, spear-blade mountains rising in the distant north, where the planes gave way to low foothills and, eventually, the bruised darkness of the Bulwark. Mountain roots hovered across the horizon, as if one had taken a double handful of rocks and sand, threw them into the air, and froze the silicate rain in fall.

That, Akiri thought, is likely not far from the truth.

Akiri sat against the trunk of a small, windswept tree and spread slinger's paste over her tired arms. Zareth stood a way off, watching the sun set. Before the sinking orb, he was a dark silhouette, his shadow long and sharply defined.

To be on mission once more with Zareth had shaken her in ways she had not expected. His recent return to Sea Gate was welcome but carried with it heavy reminders. Reminders of what had been done not only to Tazeem, but to all of Zendikar. Reminders of those who had committed the act; people

who could dance between worlds, dip their brilliant light into them for a moment, then move on with ruin in their wake.

The sun sank, and the day cooled. Akiri recalled the chill in Sea Gate under Ulamog, in the shadow of the beast free of its ancient chains.

Akiri shivered. How long had that thing been jailed under the earth, and what had its jailing done to the world made into a prison? And who made her world the world-eaters' prison?

An overwhelming burst of anger barely contained: *This is why*, she thought. *Sea Gate, and the climb to Murasa. This is why you're doing this—remember!*

A life of reminders was as exhausting as the Umara Red Route. Akiri exhaled the tension. Better to breathe. To note that it was a nice evening, if humid. The sky was clear but for a hedron shards of Emeria, one low enough that its trailing waterfall veil was visible, a sparkling lace springing endless, spilling into the open air. A patch of green growth huddled beneath, an oasis in the grass. Birds drifted around its bulk, alighting with piercing cries only just audible under the churning Umara. Zendikar the prison, Zendikar the ruin. Zendikar the wounded world still could be beautiful.

"Akiri," Zareth called back to her, "the thing we're chasing after."

"The hedron?"

"Why do you think it fell?"

"If I had to guess"—Akiri looked up toward the sky, toward Emeria—"it simply fell."

Zareth grunted. He followed Akiri's gaze. "Nothing that ordered would fall without a reason."

"That's true," Akiri said.

The scholars back at Sea Gate quibbled over the nature of the hedrons and the mechanisms by which they remained suspended in the air. They sat with telescopes and mapped their minor oscillations and movements, hired expeditions—some that Akiri had even led—to charted courses by which one might ascend into Emeria, and argued over the naming of layers and skymarks; but did they *know* why they remained in place or why they fell? No, no more than they knew what their function was, or who had made them.

Akiri was not afflicted with those scholarly fears. The libraries and study halls of Sea Gate were useful to her only in that they had food and drink freely available for the rangers, line-slingers, and adventurers of the Expeditionary House. Did she wonder? Yes, of course she did. Did she fear? No more than one would fear a sudden death; yes, and no.

"That hypothesis would put you in vaunted company, Zareth," Akiri said. She stood and tossed Zareth her pouch of slinger's paste. He caught it. "When you come back to the Gate, I can introduce you to some scholars who study the hedrons," Akiri said. "They'll surely have some good books on the subject. Good resale value." Akiri spoke with mirth, and gently.

Zareth laughed. "Hey now," he said, "*allegedly*."

Akiri believed him. That Zareth fled years ago; the one who returned to Sea Gate and its Expeditionary House now was a different person, in a different time.

Well, she hoped.

Over a traveling dinner—a thick stew of harvested wild onions, chopped tubers, smoked meat, and sprigs of herbs found nearby—Akiri and Zareth recovered from the day.

"You were good up the Red Route," Akiri said to Zareth as he stirred the low-boiling stew, "but you need to work on your follow-hook disengagement—we'll take the Green Route tomorrow, so you can practice."

Zareth nodded. He tasted the stew, then sprinkled some more salt into the broth. "It's my shoulder. Broke it in a fall learning to sling." He rolled his shoulder, a movement that Akiri could tell was genuinely limited, if exaggerated to prove a point. "Otherwise I'd take the title for fastest up the Red," Zareth said with a smile.

Akiri thought not, but didn't say. Instead, she pointed to the hooks attached to his harness. "Those don't look like normal hooks. Where did you pick those up?"

"They're Skyclave. From the kor that run the Trenches in Ondu," Zareth said. He reached over to his harness and unclipped one from its line. "Brave line-slingers find them in the ruins," he said, tossing the hook to Akiri. "That's the only place you can find them. You have to be brave, or dear to someone who is."

Akiri examined the hook, turning it over. It was covered in a fine and regular etching, a geometric pattern that looked to Akiri like a winding, spiraling labyrinth. Angles and corners, diamonds and perfect squares. Not natural, but not of any make that she recognized—save for what it could not be.

"Did you find this one?" Akiri asked.

"No," Zareth said, "it was dear to someone brave." A sad smile crossed his face. "Anyways. They'll never let you down," Zareth said.

"And yet," Akiri said, raising an eyebrow.

"My shoulder, I know. Don't believe everything anyone says, right?"

Zareth's clever smile. Akiri knew it well; Mirth lurked around every corner. Likely how he fell.

"It's beautiful," she said, passing the hook back to Zareth. "The pattern carved into it?"

"Just like those on a hedron's face." Zareth nodded. "I saw many of them in Ondu—landbound at one, even." He turned the hook over, and a small smile crossed his face. "Here," he said, offering Akiri the hook, "you take it, I have others."

"Thank you, Zareth," Akiri said, taking the hook. She reached over to her pack, pulled her main line, and secured the Skyclave hook to it. She did not need to ask Zareth where his supply came from—*In fact*, she thought, *I might be better off not knowing*. She stowed the hook in her pack and returned to her seat with a waxed canvas case from which she pulled a map. Akiri rolled the map out on the dry ground and pinned its corners with some nearby stones.

Zareth ladled out their dinner and sat opposite the map. "Tomorrow or the day after?" he asked.

"Tomorrow," Akiri said. "It is only six miles to this waterfall," she said, pointing to a marked but unnamed fall on the map. "The hedron should be at its source."

"Do we need to worry about them?" Zareth asked.

For a moment, Akiri was confused, but then—

The skinless titan, eclipsing the sun. Waterfalls of ocean water spill from its looming form. It spreads its arms as wide as the horizon, and Sea Gate shakes and shimmers with heat.

—she knew.

"No," Akiri said, "they're gone from this world. We won." Her throat was dry as dust, even now, at the thought of them.

Zareth ate, regarding the map—but not really looking at it, Akiri noticed. Looking *through* it. She knew that look, the faraway way that caught those who had seen things no one should—

Nighttime stained orange with fire, the stink of quick-rotting dead and the screams of the living. Her sword heavy and slick with steaming blood. The Eldrazi killed with a touch—some with their mere presence. Comrades crumbled to white ash, choking the air she struggled to breathe. The first rush of the brood beasts nearly overwhelmed them, but somehow, they held, and the air sizzled with energy and the next wave crashed into them.

—she remembered how inexperienced Zareth had been during the Battle. He had been pressed into the liberation of Sea Gate because he could hold a spear, assigned to her unit because so many had been killed. He was tall for his age then, and the other conscripts thought him older, more experienced.

She'd only been a handful of years older than Zareth when the Eldrazi burst upon the world, a kor who thought herself invincible because she had learned to fly as her ancestors did, with hook and line and Zendikar itself as her wide-open playground. She was quick with a sword, an adept warrior in a band of champions. Even then, her skill and grace had won her acclaim across Zendikar and had given to her a sense of being beyond herself. With her kin and loves by her side, she did not fear when she first heard the news of the titans bursting from the earth. What were they but another chance to cover herself in glory? She and her band would join the forces of the Living, fly triumphant in the face of these things others called “gods,” and save the world.

She had thought.

“Akiri,” Zareth said, breaking her reverie, “I am sorry to have left the way I did.” He spoke softly, a whisper Akiri did not know him able to voice. “I couldn’t take the quiet. I thought that I would be free of it all if I went far away. Away from Sea Gate, and Kaza, and Orah. Away from all of it”—the small muscles of his jaw pulsed as he spoke through old pain—“away from you.”

The sound of the ocean never still. The rough, gutter fights of human, kor, and merfolk against dust-making Eldrazi drones and lesser spawn. Above, the crack and flash of the walkers’ magic blasting apart more terrifying beasts.

She could be mad at him. Akiri could have raged at him for how he left and for the things he stole. For how much Kaza had wept for him. Orah certainly cursed Zareth for his flight and threatened to kill the boy if he returned, but that was Orah being Orah, and Akiri knew he was only dramatic in his anger—it hid his love, and his fear. She could be mad at him; in her own young life, Akiri learned hard the cost of leaving without saying goodbye, but she also had come to recognize what a gift it was to be able to forgive. On Zendikar, their wounded little world, healing was not done passively: it was a practice. Whether remaking the world or mending the self, healing was work. Same with forgiveness.

“Zareth,” she said, “I’m happy to have you back.”

Zareth looked up from his work. For the first time since he swaggered back into Sea Gate days ago, she saw the Zareth she knew.

“I’ve never had a place to come back to,” Zareth said. “It’s nice. Feels like things might be getting better. Being back at Sea Gate showed me that we did something more than survive.”

“We do more than survive,” Akiri said. “We saved the world. Now, we bring power to its people, and then we live.”

Zareth smiled, small. Some time passed in quiet before the two of them returned to their meal. Together they sat under their tree atop the Umara River Gorge, and the waning light of the sun slipped below the distant horizon, and they talked about nothing important at all.

The next day they reached the site of the fallen hedron. The waterfall—reported to have dried up—spilled at a steady course.

“Well,” Zareth said between breaths, bent double over his knees, “there’s nothing here.” He stood and looked around the small summit of the spire they had ascended. Bowl-shaped, the amphitheater summit cradled a pond sprung from no visible source, which fed a shallow stream that spilled out above the gorge below. The summit was shrouded in mist, and the day’s light was overpowering in the high air. Little vegetation grew save for patchy, twisted grass. It was less an oasis than an excerpt, a slice of land that appeared utterly out of place for the place that it was.

“Hey Akiri!” he shouted. “Where’s the big rock?”

Akiri stood a little way off, toward the edge of the pool that fed the waterfall they had spent the better part of a day ascending. Save for the white chalk on her hands and forearms, one could not tell she had just led and set the day’s climb. A frown furrowed her face. Hands on her hips, she looked around, just to be sure. Some spell, perhaps? Or a lingering effect of the Roil that hid the hedron from their sight?

The pool that fed the waterfall was a chromatic beauty, and it was the only feature of note atop this bare summit. Mineraled in brilliant reds, blues, greens, and yellows, the crystal-clear water was still as a held breath. It didn’t take any deep investigation to see that Zareth was right.

“It’s not a rock, it’s an artifact,” Akiri called back. Three days of hard travel, line-slinging, and this final climb to find nothing. Not even a big rock.

“That’s a pretty pond, at least,” Zareth said.

Akiri grunted. It was a pretty pond. “Don’t drink from it,” she said.

“Poisoned?”

“That’s possible.” Akiri scuffed a small stone from the bank into the pond. It skipped into the water, then vanished. “More likely to be magic,” she said.

“Maybe that’s what happened to the hedron?”

“Absolutely possible.”

They stood and let the wind fill the silence. It whistled, lonely.

“What now?” Zareth asked.

Akiri looked back to Zareth, and then past him. The whole of Tazeem spread out, hazy through the golden mist of the wind-whipped fall. Hidden beyond vision was her answer.

“We go back to Sea Gate,” Akiri said.

No beacon could be seen this far out, but one could imagine it and the city beneath. Shining, distant, but full of promise. A glittering city at the mouth of Halimar Bay.

“We still have work to do,” Akiri said. “Back there. Up there.”

Zareth peered with her, looking for the easterly horizon. “In the meantime, it’s a nice view,” he said. “Not all bad, even if the work is not done.”

Akiri gave him a soft smile. “Come on then Zareth,” she said. “Let’s go home.”



Umara Skyfalls | Art by: Jesper Ejsing

Though distant from Sea Gate and no more grand than a single long hall and some outbuildings, the Magosi Portage was a beacon of civilization this far into the interior. Atop the mighty Magosi waterfall, the portage was the major rest stop for travelers and traders taking the safe route up or down the Umara, and a common base camp and waystation for explorers.

Constant about the portage was the low rumble of the Magosi itself. The tallest waterfall along the gorge, the Magosi Falls formed where the Umara River took a single, sheer step three hundred feet down. Some ancient geologic trauma rent the world here, lifting one section of it up and tearing another down. Impassable for centuries, surveyors out of Sea Gate had carved a series of switchbacks into the wall after the city's liberation; vertiginous, it nonetheless allowed travelers to make a relatively safe ascent from the lower gorge to the upper. The Magosi Falls echoed the story of Zendikar: something old had done something terrible to the world, some people died, most lived, nothing changed, and Zendikar continued its shuddering and shaking, riddled with planar fever. Then, the world and its people adapted.

Akiri and Zareth, for the first time in days, spent an evening seated about a table on sturdy chairs, eating food that had been served to them, that they had paid for with coin and credit from trade goods they'd brought back from their expedition. They even had cold drinks and listened to music played by a valiant group of merfolk trying to overcome the low and constant roar of the Magosi waterfall. Dozens of kor, merfolk, and humans milled about the portage's main hall, eating and conversing, haggling over small goods and swapping news and rumors they'd accrued on their travels. Outside the stamp and call of docile pack beasts—hirable for the trek to the next portage climb many miles away—carried in on the wind with their heady fragrance.

“Civilization,” Zareth sighed, finishing his cup. He crunched on some ice and rubbed the back of his neck with his hands. “I think I’ll take another one of these,” he said, rattling his cup, “and then go for another wash—I forgot how nice hot water is on the scales.” Zareth grabbed up their shared purse and tugged at the drawstring to open it.

Akiri, finishing her food, nodded toward the pouch. “You’ll have to use your coin-hunting to find anything in there,” she said. “We spent the last of that on this meal and the supplies we need to get back.” Akiri cocked an eyebrow and looked to Zareth’s pack, which rested on the large table next to her own gear. “The last of what I know that held, in any case.”

“Hey, you won’t let me lighten any pockets here,” Zareth said.

“We’re representatives of Sea Gate, Zareth. We’re not hungry conscripts anymore.”

“Right. We are thirsty members of Sea Gate, Akiri,” Zareth said. “The scholars get their maintenance taxes; I don’t see a difference in us getting our share.”

“The scholars earn those taxes through their work,” Akiri said, as she busied herself with clearing her kit from the table. “Same as we earn ours. Now, to that point.” Akiri reached into her main pack and fished out a small purse which she tossed on the table before Zareth. It landed with a heavy thud and the sound of gold.

“You didn’t,” Zareth laughed. He grabbed the purse, opened it, pawed through, and pulled out a coin.

“I found us work. Pays half now and half at the end,” Akiri said. “A caravan bound for Coralhelm, set to depart tomorrow.”

“At least that is on the way,” Zareth said. He plucked a few more coins from the purse, tied it, and stood. “Early morning departure?”

“Would it be any other way?”

Zareth laughed. “Fine then, I’m off to find another drink.” He stood.

“Zareth,” Akiri said, stopping him. She upended the coin purse, and pebbles spilled from it. Zareth laughed, held his hands up.

“Caught me,” he said. “Let me get your round, then?”

“And some of those dumplings,” Akiri said. “The ones with the sauce in them.”

Zareth left and returned with drinks and food. He sat, passed her share across the table, and the two of them set to eating.

Later that evening, as night had truly fallen and the crowd had grown larger, Akiri and Zareth sat out on the Portage’s cliffside deck, finishing one last round of salted, fried food and cool drinks. They had spent some good time catching up—actually catching up—and maybe it was the cool drinks, or the casual atmosphere after so long on the road, but in the course of otherwise light conversation, Zareth asked Akiri a question that would mark this moment as the night’s coda.

“When we return to Sea Gate,” Zareth said, “you plan to volunteer us for some secret mission. An expedition into one of the Skyclaves.” Zareth leaned back in his chair. “That’s why we were out here following up on that hedron, right?”

Akiri did not deny it. “Murasa,” she said. “Sea Gate thought we might find something useful from a freshly fallen hedron, but that assumed there was a hedron there to find.”

“What is there to find in Murasa?” Zareth asked. “Those Skyclaves are all old and dead.”

"I don't know," Akiri said. "Our patron is willing to spend good coin on a bet that something waits up there. Something powerful."

"Who is this Akiri?" Zareth asked. "Willing to stake her dream for a better world on a hunch."

Akiri nodded. "The money is good," she said. "No one spends that amount of coin on a hunch. It's a bet—a bet that what we find in Murasa could help us fix our world."

"I know it's my pattern but," Zareth leaned in, lowering his voice, "we could leave in the night, and head for some other land. You and I together, with your skill and my charm? We wouldn't want for anything."

Akiri shook her head. "This is our world, all of its agonies and sickness. Fixing what has been done to her is our struggle, our charge, our *place*," Akiri said. "We can't leave."

"We might not return," Zareth countered.

"Yes," Akiri said. "We have the same fight as any bloom after a long winter: a hundred of us might wither in the late cold, or be cut by a jealous gardener, but there are too many for spring not to come. We have to try, no matter the cost."

"And if we find nothing?"

Akiri sipped her drink.

"Hope, at least, I suppose you can bring that back," Zareth suggested. "Give people something to dream about."

"Hope? No," Akiri said, not unkind, but firm. "People cannot make a fervent blade from hope, or shape that feeling into a tender knife." Akiri shook her head. "I don't want to give people hope, I want to create power for our people. Find a way to give our people—all of Zendikar's people—the means by which they might shape a weapon from their pain and use it to heal this world for good," she said.

Zareth leaned back from his conspiratorial hunch. Akiri was rigid, serious.

"Look, I think I've had enough," Akiri said, breaking the rigidity that had gripped her. She indicated the empty mugs and plates. "I'm going to bed. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"I'll be there, Akiri," Zareth said, quiet.

"Will you?"

"You asked me to be there," Zareth said, "so I'll be there."

Akiri regarded Zareth for a moment, a long moment. Zareth did not see Akiri the Fearless Voyager, decorated veteran and storied line-slinger, but Akiri unnamed, the young kor officer who pulled him through the darkness at Sea Gate. Her gray skin caked in the flat ash of their dead friends and the decayed landscape. Her eyes, lit by firelight, blank with terror—but still pulling him forward. Akiri who pressed a dead man's spear into his hand and told him that he needed to *fight* the things that killed the world with a touch, otherwise no one would be left alive when the Battle was done.

"I'll be there, Aki," Zareth said again.

"Good," Akiri said. "Good," she repeated, quietly, as she left.

The night dragged on long, and Zareth spent none of it asleep.