
The Blight We Were Born For

Ken Troop

From set *Oath of the Gatewatch*

Zendikar nears its final hours. The machinations of Ob Nixilis, the demon Planeswalker, have freed the Eldrazi titan Ulamog from its prison and summoned its fellow titan Kozilek from Zendikar's depths. Both titans now ravage the land with their innumerable broods, and the Planeswalkers dedicated to stopping the Eldrazi—Gideon, Nissa, Jace, Kiora, and Chandra—have either been defeated or gone missing.

The remnants of Gideon's army are now left in the hands of Tazri, a human soldier who served as the right hand of the previous commander-general of the Zendikari army, Vorik, and has been serving Gideon in the same capacity. Tazri has been a brave and loyal soldier, and yet was unable to inspire the Zendikari the way the outsider Gideon Jura has. Now the vanishingly small chances Zendikar has in the wake of the combined Eldrazi assault rest in Tazri's hands.

Your hope cannot be betrayed when you have none to lose. That thought was Tazri's consolation these many years, and especially during the rise of the Eldrazi. Each setback and disaster in the long, slow defeat had been received without distress. What point suffering in a war you never thought you could win?

But she hadn't counted on Gideon. Just minutes ago, Tazri and her troops had watched in amazement as Gideon delivered the impossible. Ulamog, the great titan of destruction, now shackled and contained. Have we really won? It was the closest Tazri had come to feeling delight in a long time, the closest she could come. Vorik was right. He was right to choose Gideon over me. That thought was painful, but she was still stunned at the new, improbable futures opening up in front of them. They were going to win. Zendikar was going to survive. Gideon had willed them to victory.

Until Kozilek had risen. Until the god of tricksters had played the biggest trick of all. He had waited for Tazri to experience hope before destroying everything.



Aligned Hedron Network | Art by Richard Wright

With Kozilek's arrival, Ulamog had been freed. Both titans were now loose and amok amidst the Zendikari army. Tazri rallied her soldiers away from the collapsing Sea Gate, a reaction more reflexive than strategic. *We are going to die here.* All the preparations, all the victories and sacrifices, all the tales the soldiers told themselves of hope and redemption, all now reduced to the stark truth they knew in their bones. *The end is always faster and bloodier than you expect.* Kozilek had risen, and many horrific ends followed his wake.

They fled down the desiccated slope outside of Sea Gate, her soldiers keeping the barest semblance of discipline in their devastation and fear. Tazri aimed them toward the cover of thick-wooded hills inland, to regroup and plan. Hordes of Eldrazi still harried them from the sky, sea, and land, but the biggest threats to continued existence were the two titans loose at Sea Gate.

A loud rumbling bellowed behind them. Tazri and the soldiers turned to see what the rumbling announced. The towering obsidian figure of Kozilek filled the horizon. Impossibly gigantic, the titan ate up the light from the sky. It hurt to look at him directly for more than a few seconds, causing a sharp jab of pain behind the eyes for any who dared. Kozilek was striding at an angle toward them, and Tazri was relieved to see he would miss them by a few hundred feet.



Kozilek, the Great Distortion | Art by Aleksí Briclot

But as Kozilek moved over the horizon, a shimmering wave of *something* roamed over the land, a pulsating, translucent ripple emanating outward in all directions from the great titan. The wave rushed toward them, and Tazri didn't even have time to scream as it crashed upon them.

Time slowed. Insanity blossomed. Romoe's skin inverted itself, ripping and shredding on the sides of his body as he turned inside out, screaming only for a moment before mercifully dying. As the wave passed over Magain, he visibly became younger, transforming into a young stripling, then a child, then a baby, and then a small mote before vanishing, all in the space of several seconds. Debins turned to run and suddenly the left side of his body was gone. Half of him sheared away in a flat square pressed to the ground, a bloody stain where some invisible force had ground him into the bare earth. The other half of Debins floated free in the air, seemingly no longer tethered to the ground or reality. The half of his face that had not been squished had a look of profound surprise and horror, even as it floated higher into the air.



Reality Hemorrhage | Art by Chris Rallis

The wave hit Tazri. The angel's halo around Tazri's collar glowed with golden heat. Time, previously slowed, now *stretched*. Events and actions from her past and future flickered in her mind, became her mind, became her *now*. All her previous life, flickering, flickering into existence. All her *future* life, flickering, flickering into existence. Time and space stretched further, straining. Snapping. Reality stopped.

flicker

"Halt!" Tazri raised her hand, and the wagons in the merchant caravan rumbled to a stop. The guards had all seen the crows circling the hills to the west. Mahir would want her to press on, but something felt wrong. *That's why he pays me. To yell at me when I delay his precious cargo.* Mahir raised a flap from inside a tented wagon, but when he saw her face he sighed and let the flap drop. This was her seventh caravan trip with Mahir, and he had already made her captain of his guard two trips ago, though she had not yet seen a full twenty years of life. The youngest he had ever had, though of course he wouldn't tell her that. But she knew anyway. And she knew to slow down and pay attention when something was wrong.

"Golamin, Rillem, ride out wide, north and south, one each. Use horns if anything looks remotely funny and then right back here. Don't be heroes. Something's wrong. Romoe, you're with me." The men nodded and Golamin rode north on the trail as Rillem rode south. One of Mahir's nameless twin bodyguards was driving his wagon. Tazri never could tell the twins apart, and they didn't speak her language anyway, so she just pointed at the tall cliffs to the east and mimed looking out. Neither twin was the brightest of men, but she expected he understood enough. She made sure the rest of the caravan drivers had their horns at the ready. She headed west on her horse, Romoe just behind her.

The middle of the Tazeem run was usually the easy part. The merfolk mostly kept to themselves, and while vampires made raids on the coast of Tazeem over from Guul Draz, they rarely came this far inland. Usually the only excitement in this part of the run was a rampaging baloth or the ground

falling away into a pit cave. But the crows knew something exciting was happening. Or had already happened. Tazri ignored the acid in her stomach and pressed on.



Needle Spires | Art by Jonas De Ro

They came upon the first corpse after they crested a large hill onto a flat grassy plain. The corpse had been split in half lengthwise. A very, very dead vampire. The edges of each half of the corpse were jagged and burnt. *A sword, a large sword, and presumably on fire.* Tazri didn't know who she hoped had won the fight, the vampires or the other side.

There were more corpses, and Tazri and Romoe dismounted, though they still held their reins. The horses were skittish. Five more vampire corpses, though the deaths were less violent; mere decapitations and bleed-outs instead of sundered corpses, with burnt flesh marking each jagged cut. Tazri had only fought against a vampire once, and she would have easily died were it not for the fact it was four versus one. The vampire had been faster than her, and stronger than her, and killed with sickening ease. She did not want to fight whatever was able to kill six vampires with a flaming sword.

They heard a female voice humming a strange melody before they saw the body the voice belonged to. The angel was lying against a tall outcrop of rocks, her body half-turned and twisted. Both wings on one side were ripped off entirely, the others bent and torn. Blood and a faint white glow gushed from her side. It was a lot of blood. There were bites and gashes on her arms and torso, and even more blood leaked from her neck. Three more vampires lay dead around her, one with a giant sword through his chest and one with his neck nearly snapped off. The angel turned her head to look at them, and though every part of her was ravaged, her halo still glowed a beautiful, lustrous gold.

The angel coughed, blood and more of the white glow sputtering up from her breath onto her chest. *How is she still alive?* Tazri had never before beheld an angel, and regarded her beauty and power in stunned silence.

"Can you...can you help me?" Each faint word haltingly uttered caused more coughing, more blood, more dying. Tazri, who had killed and seen friends killed often in her young life, who had never before shed tears during a fight, began crying.

"We have no healer." Mahir would never splurge for something so expensive. "Can we move you? Can you heal yourself?" Tazri knew the question was ridiculous, but the thought of someone killing nine vampires was ridiculous. Who knew what an angel could do?

The angel shook her head. "I am. I am dying. Might...days. Help." The angel stared at the sword at Tazri's side, still in its scabbard. *No . No!*

"If you can last, we can get you help, we can go back to Sea Gate or Coralhelm, find someone..." One, two, three horns blared in the distance. *No!*

"Tazri..." Romoe's voice, pulling her back.

"You can heal, we can find someone..." Tazri's mind raced, desperate for answers.

The angel's voice, weak and reedy, still cut her off. "The vampires...coming back. There are more. They have healers. They will keep me...alive, a...long time. Please. Help me. End. Me." The angel gazed once more at Tazri's sword, and then back at Tazri. Their eyes met, and Tazri beheld the pain and the longing there. The longing to be safe from fear and pain.

The horns sounded again, all of them.

"Tazri, we have to go back, right? Tazri!" The panic grew in Romoe's voice.

Tazri wiped away her tears. She drew her sword.

"Tazri? Killing an angel is bad. Don't do it. It's a curse. Everyone knows that. Tazri, we have to go. We have to leave her." Romoe sounded like the child he nearly was.

The angel grimaced, still staring up at her. Blood trickled out of her mouth. "He is...right. There is a...price. Killing me will cost...you. I cannot...cannot stop it. I am...sorry. Please...do it. Please do not...abandon."

The horns, a third time.

Tazri raised her sword. The angel's halo glowed a candescent white, a blinding, burning glow, and Tazri heard a beautiful voice inside her head, though she could not make out any of the words. Then the halo dimmed, and the glow died. The voice inside her head abruptly ceased.

The hilt of Tazri's sword became cold to the touch, and she left it embedded in the chest of the angel. There was a small, still smile on the angel's face. The acid and anxiety were gone from Tazri's stomach, but something else was gone, too. Something she couldn't quite name. She reached down to take the dull gray halo from the angel's eyes. It parted easily from the corpse with her touch. *All things beautiful tear so easily.* Tazri and Romoe mounted their horses and turned around amidst the cry of the horns.

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Tazri kept her head down, waiting to be called. She didn't expect to be here long. Word spread fast along the caravan roads. The last few attempts to get work had ended without them even letting her speak. Now she was reduced to asking for a *militia* position. Once upon a time she would have been enraged at the thought. Now she just sat on the bench, and waited.

"Tazri." She looked up at the deep voice. He was medium height but with a broad, strong build, with thick legs and arms. A fighter's build. Even the way he stood bespoke a natural balance and strength she associated with good fighters. Most militia she had come across were fat or old and could only dream of being caravan guards. It spoke well of this Vorik that he had such a capable soldier in his retinue.

“Yes. I’m here to see Vorik.” She hated the tinge of desperation in her voice, hated that she was eager to join a bunch of sedentary bureaucrats who probably regarded their plans for lunch as a major adventure.

But she hated even more the thought of not getting the work. Of being alone.



Fortified Rampart | Art by David Gaillet

The man smiled. A broad, easy smile that a few years ago might have quickened her heart. “I’m Vorik. Why are you here, Tazri?”

She hesitated, unsure of where to begin. Even *how* to begin. She just looked at him, and remained silent. There were other jobs, certainly, right? There were other militias besides Sea Gate. She thought furiously about who else she knew, who else could...

“Four years ago, you were the youngest caravan captain on the Tazeem roads, the prized jewel of Mahir, who so covets his talented workers. You were wicked with a sword...” he looked down briefly at her side, “...hmm, a mace? A brutal weapon, and difficult to wield well.”

A spark flared in Tazri and she rose to look Vorik in the eye. “I’m wicked with a mace, too. You can find out if you’d like. I don’t use swords anymore.”

“Fair enough.” There was the smile again, though this time she just found it annoying. She didn’t need to be reminded of the life she had, of what she had lost.

“And then Mahir fired you. As did the next five merchants who thought they were getting such a great bargain. The amazing Tazri, who was no longer quite so amazing. So again, Tazri. Why are you here?”

She wanted to tell him, *I no longer dream. It’s not that I don’t remember them. I just don’t have them anymore. I used to dream of places I had seen as a guard, of my parents, of fights and loves and fears. And now there’s an emptiness between when I go to sleep and when I wake up, and the emptiness is still there after I rise. It’s there right now, it’s always there, and I don’t know how to fill it. How do you replace something for which you no longer know the name?*

She wanted to say all those things, but she couldn’t, so she didn’t. She waited instead.

“As it happens, I like soldiers who don’t talk much. And I understand soldiers who need time to work through things. We all do, Tazri. I could use a fighter like you. And a leader like you. I know what you can be. Can you be that leader again, Tazri?”

Tazri nodded her head mutely. If she had been able to cry, she’d be bawling. But instead she just continued to nod, hoping desperately she could be that person again, while a part of her knew that Tazri was gone forever.

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“...hope. I have hope that that is not true. I have hope that there is still a chance for Zendikar. Gideon Jura, you have given me hope.”

Each time Vorik spoke the word, it was like a sword through her chest. *Hope*. Was this life’s revenge for her inability to help him?

You saved me, and now I cannot save you.

And he had saved her. She had worked for him for fifteen years. Fifteen good years where she had risen to truly be his right hand. She would never again be the leader she was back when she was young and everything was easy. Back before the angel. But with Vorik’s help, and Vorik’s patience, and Vorik’s trust, she had found other ways of being valuable. Of being valued.



Stone Haven Medic | Art by Anna Steinbauer

She was lost inside the morass of her own grief when Vorik’s words broke through her despair. “...when I am gone, you will lead these people. You will reclaim Sea Gate, Commander-General Jura.”

“No.” Tazri gasped, her mind whirling. She felt betrayed, by Vorik and herself.

How could you not choose me as your successor?

Why could I not figure out how to be the person I was? How could I let you down, over and over?

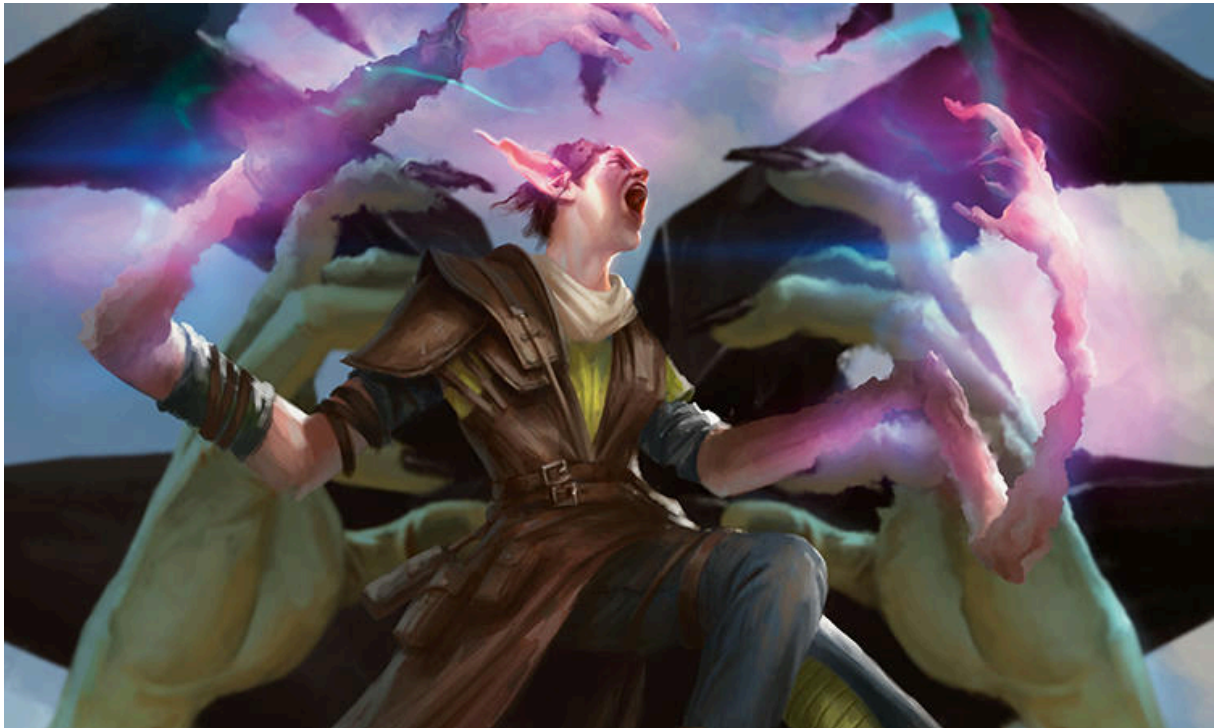
Both thoughts hit her simultaneously. Vorik had continued speaking, but she could not parse any of his words in her tumult. Automatically her mouth worked independent from her mind, carrying on a token display of resistance while she crumbled inside in grief and anger.

He's dying. He's dying and soon he will be gone. And then what will you have? Whom will you love?

And then, Zendikar will follow. Vorik will die. Zendikar will die. The only person who will not die is you. You died a long time ago. Soon everything will be empty and void, just like you.

The horrifying thought warmed her, filling her emptiness, if only for a moment.

flicker flicker flicker



Spatial Contortion | Art by Daarken

Tazri screamed as reality crumbled. Each memory, no, the *actual living* of her past was being experienced *now*, all moments occurring simultaneously, a kaleidoscopic display infinitely unfolding. The halo around her neck, the angel's halo, was now a candescent white, and the heat burned. Even as her mind sought refuge from the flickering onslaught of the past, it was assaulted by the future...

flicker

Tazri smiled widely as her master held Gideon in the clench of his fist. Gideon screamed, and a golden shield flickered into existence briefly around him before failing. Her master was the lord of time and space, and he would not permit such improprieties.



Call the Gatewatch | Art by Yefim Kligerman

The corpses of the other interlopers lay nearby. Here they had decided to make their final stand, and the stand was brief and laughable. There were the ashy remains of the fire mage, burning herself out in a futile attempt to harm Tazri's master. There was the drained husk of the elf, who had sought to meld her essence with the world and shared the world's fate as a result. And there was the mutilated corpse of the mind mage. He had conjured up hundreds of illusions as his final trick, and could only watch in horror as his own illusions turned on him, wielding their illusionary swords and puncturing his body through and through. As each one struck they spoke the name, "Kozilek."

Kozilek . The name filled her mind, filled her emptiness, had finally made her complete. She could barely recall the shimmering translucent wave that had hit her, that had killed all her false friends but left her alive, remembering nothing. All she had known as she regained consciousness was the name peeling like the sweetest bells in her mind. *Kozilek. Kozilek. Kozilek* . Everything had become so clear. She had fought for Kozilek and watched as her master's army had swept before them, culminating in this victorious day.



Kozilek's Return | Art by Lius Lasahido

Ulamog and his ilk were nowhere to be found. Perhaps they had been slain or departed; it mattered not. All that remained on the battlefield were the loyal armies of her master. And the last enemy. The last foreign invader to be eliminated, Gideon Jura.

She had not liked Gideon Jura in her previous life, before Kozilek had saved her. But there was even more reason to hate him now. The mere presence of his opposition offended. How could such a puny, frail vessel have the temerity to challenge the lord of reality himself? Gideon Jura needed to be punished.

Kozilek squeezed, and no mortal frame could withstand such pressure. Gideon Jura burst, and a bloody bag of ruptured flesh and broken bones fell limply to the ash-white earth below, there to join the corpses of his friends. Tazri cheered and leaped, ecstatic to be witness to such glory.

A strange thrumming grew in Tazri's ears. It was not coming from the air, or through the ground. It was coming from inside her. The thrumming grew and deepened, and only gradually did Tazri guess at the sound.

It sounded like laughter. The laughter of Kozilek.

The thrumming resonated throughout the sphere. Tazri shared in her master's joy, but could not perceive the cause of such mirth. Kozilek raised an arm, and there was a *ripple* in space, and Gideon Jura appeared once more before them, whole and resurrected. He was once more clenched in Kozilek's fist, but in his terror and screams it was apparent that Gideon Jura *remembered*. Remembered dying, and now he was to die again. Kozilek squeezed and Gideon Jura once more found the embrace of death.

Tazri squealed in delight. Now she understood her master's mirth. Her master wielded time and space. What consequence to manipulate a small part of such materials to ensure an impudent enemy be made to suffer? Again, and again, and again.

Another twitch, another *ripple*, and Gideon Jura was reborn again, and his terrified cries were delicious.

flicker

The storm raged. Fractal bismuth clouds burst charmed hedrons, while strangularities drizzled onto top-heavy asymmetries.

It wasn't working. None of it was working.

For the first ten thousand years after Kozilek's disappearance, Tazri had used her new powers to attempt the reconstruction. But Kozilek was a poor creator, nothing like his eldest sibling, and Tazri's gifts were a pale, stunted imitation of her master's.

At first she thought it was just a problem of talent, of improvement. Of course she couldn't re-create every detail of Zendikar the first time. It was impossible. But the hundredth time? The thousandth? If she kept improving each time, eventually, inevitably, she would create Zendikar, perfectly, utterly.



Wastes | Art by Raymond Swanland

And then he would come back. Zendikar re-formed would call to him, just like it did the first time. It had to.

It would just take time, and all the time there was was for her.

Eventually she came to realize the flaw in her logic. She was still too human, even after millennia. While she had undergone major transformations of body and mind during Kozilek's glorious reign, too much of her remained flawed, weak. In the wake of Kozilek's disappearance, her power and control was immense, all the strata of automatons were hers to control. But of course she couldn't achieve her quest with her will alone...she was human.

Humans should never aspire to ambitions of the gods.



Essence Depleter | Art by Chase Stone

But what if instead of seeking to direct the change, she merely provided the right environment for change? If she could just provide the right starting conditions, then eventually the materials would form into the right Zendikar, perhaps just the way the original Zendikar formed.

Again, all it should take was time.

Her latest obsession was with weather. But even her simplest experimentations did nothing like she expected. And any foray she made into more complex systems quickly spiraled into chaotic randomness. There were no patterns, no beauty, no chance of Zendikar reappearing.

She took a deep breath *why are you are still so human, stop breathing, you don't need to breathe* and went back to work.

She wanted him back. *Why did you leave me? Was I not a good soldier? We had won. Where are you now? Do you miss me?* She wanted his laughter again, his comforting presence. She wanted her emptiness to once more be filled. She would keep on trying, keep on improving, keep on understanding. She turned her face to the strange rain, feeling it fall on her simulated cheeks.

flicker

The stars and sun were long black and dead, and nothing moved nor stirred.

Tazri lay deep in the earth, wrapped in cocoons of energy and pattern. She had stored all the energy she could billions of years ago, determined to wait as long as she could.

Kozilek would come back. This she knew. She just had to be there when he did.

Most of the time she slept, but she needed to wake for periods of time to readjust her cocoons and make sure she did not perish during her next long sleep. She needed to conserve all the energy she could; to keep entertained, she told herself stories. Eventually she settled on her favorite story: the day Gideon died.

She would tell the story over and over, lingering on the deaths of each outsider, and then each and every death Gideon suffered on that near-endless day.

The story took so, so long to tell, and when she was done she would tell it again. Each time she said the words she would remember the warmth of Kozilek's laugh, how complete his presence made her feel.

Though she had not seen him for trillions of years, she knew she would. And then all would be right.

And in the void between, she had her sleep and her stories. They were all she needed until Kozilek returned.

"This is the story of the day Gideon died."

flicker flicker flicker

Tazri's mind was disintegrating under the pressure. What mortal could withstand a glimpse of infinity? A part of her, deep inside her ravaged mind, wondered how she had not already crumbled, surrendered to the vast void.

The glow of the angel's halo brightened.

There was something...*soothing* in that glow. Something buffering the horror, a salve removing the bitterest stings of insanity. But for the warmth and power of the angel's halo, she would have plunged into the gibbering abyss from which there was no return.

The halo around her neck pulsed and thickened, its light shining ever brighter, a near-infinite whiteness to fill the void.

The white light flashed, and the rest of the world disappeared.

Tazri stood? Floated? Existed. Existed in a featureless white plane. All her soldiers, all the Eldrazi, all Zendikar, all were gone.

Memories retreated from her mind. There had been a future, something...*horrific*. Like a fever dream from which there was no return, dark, never-ending, and terror throughout. She tried to hold on to the dream, but it disintegrated as she sought its reclamation. She was relieved at the loss.

A small part of the endless white in front of her *wrinkled*, coalesced. She saw a face first, a perfect face, and then below the face a body formed with arms and legs and four wondrous wings, two on a side, unfurled and wide.



Angelic Gift | Art by Josu Hernaiz

It was the angel she had killed twenty years ago. *An infinity ago*, some errant thought whispered. To her great surprise, Tazri started crying.

“Where am I? How is...” she gestured around at the expanse of white, “any of this possible?”

The angel smiled, and Tazri basked in its glow. More horror and memories receded from her brain, melting away in the warmth and love of that smile. Though neither the angel’s face nor lips moved, Tazri heard a gentle voice in her mind.

“We are outside of time, Tazri. Outside of the domain of Kozilek. In the throes of Kozilek’s field, for you all time was compressed to *now*. It was just the shortest motion to come outside of *now*, to be free of time. You are safe here.”

At the mention of the word *Kozilek*, Tazri flinched, though she could no longer remember why. The name struck a chord in her, a ringing of dark bells that thrummed not just through her head but through her entire body, the deepest parts of her bones. She could not tell whether the feeling was great horror or great delight.

It was both. An abyss threatened to open up again before her, one into which she could plunge and never return...

The angel’s face was once more in front of her, smiling, bringing her back to herself.

“You have been gravely injured, Tazri, for many years. It is time for you to be restored, past time.”

She remembered her crime. She was plunging the sword into the angel, delivering death to a creature of such purity and beauty—how could that not be punished?

“You should be healed...”

“No!” The ferocity of Tazri’s response took her by surprise. When was the last time she had felt anything so clearly, so strongly? So *purely*.

“The sacrifice was mine to give! You told me there were consequences, and I did it anyway. I paid the price, and I paid it willingly! You cannot take that away from me!” The immensity of what Tazri had lost these twenty years became fully realized. Never to know confidence, or desire, or joy. Never to be fully engaged in the present, striving toward a better future. Never to know *hope*.

She had lost so much. *It was my choice to make!*

“Tazri, you have suffered for an eternity. You have suffered *enough*. You are forgiven.”

“I don’t need your forgiveness!” Tazri snarled.

“Not my forgiveness. Yours.”

Twenty years ago, Tazri had killed an angel and something had broken inside. Now something was *connecting*. Re-forming. Becoming whole. Tears flowed freely from Tazri, and more than tears—all the emotions dormant for years rushed back. She buckled under the onslaught. *How can I survive this?* A pause, and then, *You have survived through much worse*. She took strength from the confidence in that voice, only slowly realizing the voice was hers.

“Kozilek’s field is passing through you, Tazri. Time will resume. You will resume.”



Make a Stand | Art by Magali Villeneuve

Reality was starting to intrude in the white space of Tazri’s mind. Kozilek. Ulamog. The titans freed and running amok. Gideon and his friends lost or dead. *How could Zendikar win? How could Zendikar survive?*

“Kozilek can influence time and space, Tazri. This is true. This is its purpose. But time and space are merely two dimensions in all the panoply of what is.”

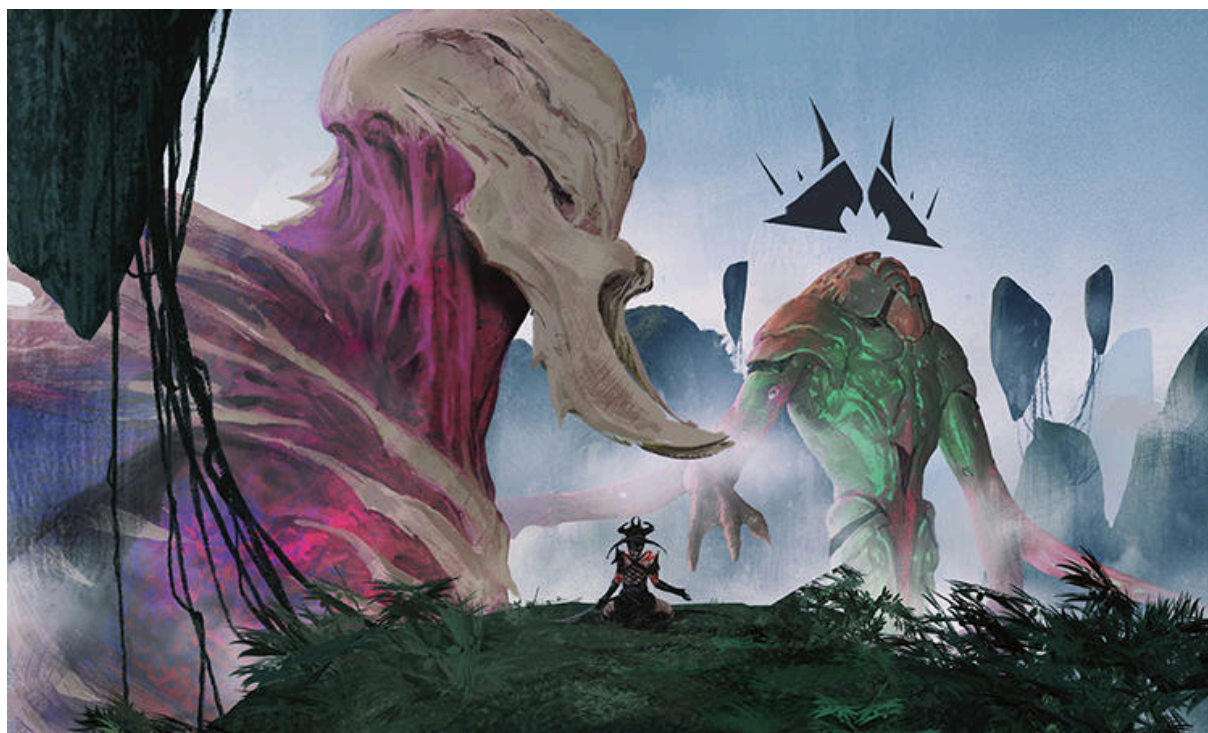
The voice was starting to fade, as was the white light pervading her senses. Reality, true reality, was beginning to appear on the outskirts of her perception.

“I don’t understand. Please, help me.”

“Kozilek, for all his power, for all his dominion, could never do what you did twenty years ago. Such dimensions are unmasterable, unknowable, by him and his ilk. But not by you. You, who loved. You, who sacrificed so much for a sentient being you never knew. You, who had mercy for a dying angel and were willing to pay the price. Time and space are meager domains compared to the kingdoms of love and mercy.” The voice was merely a whisper now, and the whiteness reduced to a small sphere around them. The form of the angel was dissipating.

“You will not remember much from your interlude here. You cannot and still remain whole. But remember this. *You can win.* You will win. There is no other option.” And then that beautiful voice was gone, and reality reasserted itself with rolling thunder and flame.

Lightning and fire struck from the skies into hordes of Eldrazi surrounding the ruined dam of Sea Gate. Everywhere Tazri looked she saw dead friends, corpses that a second ago were alive and running; now they were strewn like debris in the wake of a storm. Tazri couldn’t understand what had happened. She had been running away from catastrophe, and turned to see the dread figure of Kozilek...and then there was a blank space, a momentary blink, and now her soldiers were dead, and only she was alive. She scanned for Kozilek, but he was already far in the distance walking away from them, as if he had somehow teleported a great distance in an instant.



Witness the End | Art by Igor Kieryluk

The fire and lightning were joined by ambushes of earth, rising up out of once-even ground to crush and pulverize Eldrazi. Tazri saw four figures behind her, with the lead figure a familiar merfolk. *Noyan Dar*. Noyan raised his arms and wind-funneled fire swept from surrounding infernos, channeled into incinerating blasts against large Eldrazi. One of the large Eldrazi twitched and a shimmering field interposed between itself and the earth’s fury. The sweeping earth and fire disappeared into the shimmering field only to reappear from another shimmering gateway that sprang into existence behind Noyan and his roilimages. Tazri didn’t have time to shout a warning as the fire and earth swept through the roilimages, obliterating them.



Maw of Kozlikek | Art by Daarken

Obliterating them all except one. A spur of rock and earth launched up from the carnage, carrying Noyan Dar with it. It catapulted him hundreds of feet into the air, and despite his prodigious powers, Tazri could not imagine anything but a fatal end to his flight. He plummeted, flailing, attempting to weave a final spell, when a dark figure swooped in and intercepted his flight close to the ground.

With the dark figure came hundreds more, waves of troops flying and running, slaughtering Eldrazi spawn in scores. Tazri could make out the terrifying figures of vampires, but also humans, kor, elves, and merfolk. She saw Munda and several others she recognized. And the flying figure who had saved Noyan was...



Drana, Liberator of Malakir | Art by Mike Bierek

Drana. Tazri had never liked the vampire queen. Cold, imperious, her presence reminded Tazri of a crocodile. Calm and placid until it was all teeth and aggression and you were dead. Tazri did not trust Drana, but she was ecstatic the vampire lord was here now. Drana dropped Noyan onto the ground and landed in front of Tazri. The anger on both their faces was plain, but there was something different there, too.

They both were uncertain, hesitant. *Kozilek*. *Kozilek upsets all equilibrium*. Tazri couldn't imagine anyone else being struck by the same shimmering wave that had struck her. Otherwise they would be dead, presumably in some horrific way, though Tazri still could not fathom how she had survived, or why she couldn't remember anything about the experience. But one didn't need to have been directly in the wake of Kozilek to feel its effect. All of reality trembled before Kozilek.

The arrival of Drana's and Munda's troops had temporarily turned the tide of battle. For the first time since Ulamog had broken his chains, the Zendikari were not beset by Eldrazi horrors. But the situation was still dire. They were nearly surrounded, and more than half of them had already perished. Without a clear plan, one in ten would be lucky to survive. Then Zendikar would be truly lost. Amidst this chaos and loss, someone needed to take charge.

There was a brief moment of doubt. *Who am I to be that leader?* And then the doubting voice was silent, replaced by a voice twenty years gone, but intimately familiar despite all that time. *I am Tazri. I have bled and battled for Zendikar. I have trained under Vorik for fifteen years, learning the shape and sweep of high command. I am here for my people and my land. I am Tazri, and that is enough.*

Somewhere deep in her mind echoed the sound of a sweet, pure voice, and Tazri felt giddy as she assumed command.

"Drana, how many people do you have left?"

Drana looked at her and said nothing, either still stunned at the events of today, or unwilling to acknowledge Tazri's lead. Perhaps both.

“Drana!” Tazri’s voice lashed out, without anger, but with clear imperious command. Drana’s eyes narrowed, and a hint of a predatory smile returned, but she answered. “A thousand. Strong warriors, but fighting Kozilek spawn is not easy. Power and strength alone are not...sufficient.” That same haunted look appeared in Drana’s eyes again, though the unnerving smile did not leave her face.

“Noyan, how many roilmages are there?” If Drana looked uncomfortable, then the powerful mage Noyan Dar looked truly lost. “They...they are dead. Almost all of them. And the ones who survive cannot do much. I...” Noyan Dar broke down sobbing. Tazri wanted to cry with him, to mourn all the dead, but the living needed a different response.

“Noyan, you cannot do anything for them now. I promise you vengeance for the dead and hope for the living. Noyan!” Noyan looked up.

“Yes, Tazri. Yes. What do you need from me?” Noyan’s grief was replaced by anger. Anger and purpose. *Perfect*.

“I need a rift, a big rift between us and the Eldrazi swarming around Sea Gate. Everyone still at Sea Gate is either dead or dying. We can’t do anything for them. But there are still thousands of us here.”

“Yes, I can do this. But I will need time, especially doing it alone.”

“You won’t be alone, but get started. Munda, prepare the troops. We are getting out of here. If they can’t move, we’re leaving them.”

Munda did not hide his anger or anguish. “You cannot...”



Allied Reinforcements | Art by Matt Stewart

“I can. I will. If we stay here, we die. The gravely injured face the same fate no matter what we do. We need to live. Zendikar’s only hope rests with us.” Munda stopped, peering closely at her. He was unused to a forceful Tazri. But he had served alongside her. He knew her. He nodded and went off to prepare everyone else.

“Drana!” The vampire queen had been giving her own orders to her vampires, but she slowly turned, smiling languidly the entire time.

“Send flying scouts and see if there are any large groups of capable fighters still left. And be on the lookout for Gideon. We need him and the others back.”

“Bah. The warrior is dead. Or will be soon.” Drana’s voice dripped with scorn.

“No, he’s alive. And we will find him.” Several soldiers around her perked up, hope flaring in their eyes where before had been despair. Tazri was amazed at how confident she was. But she was certain Gideon was alive. She needed Gideon for them to have a reasonable chance of winning this war. Therefore, Gideon was alive. The logic would have struck her as bizarre and faulty just yesterday. *Irrational confidence is the greatest gift a leader can give her people.*

“Get those scouts moving, Drana.”

“My my, such the little general. Yes, General Tazri, but of course! One question, though...why should I listen? If I wanted to listen to random opinions, I promise I find mine the most compelling.”

General Tazri ...said in scorn, but Tazri admitted she liked the sound of it. Time to roll the dice. She approached Drana close, put her lips to the vampire’s ear, and whispered.

“You are more powerful than I am, Drana. More powerful than probably all of us.” Drana’s smile turned coy. “Your people talk, Drana. We know what you did, what you can do. But you know while the vampires of Guul Draz follow you, the rest of Zendikar never will. There’s too much fear of vampires. Too much fear of *you*. So I will lead. Think of me as a figurehead if you want. We can kill each other later, once all the Eldrazi are dead. But until the Eldrazi are dead, I *am* going to lead this army. I need your help, though. *Zendikar* needs your help. Please.” Tazri realized she was holding her breath in, and slowly released it. *No more fear.* Not ever again.

Drana moved away from Tazri and stared at her, her smile gone. In Drana’s eyes Tazri felt the presence of something ancient and alien, an intimidating look that would have had her on her knees in terror an hour ago. *I have lived for an eternity, little vampire. Your brief interlude of existence is the merest morning dew.* Tazri didn’t know where the thought came from, didn’t even understand what it meant, but the thought comforted her, and she smiled.

Drana’s face grew uneasy, and she looked away.

When Drana looked back, she was all smugness and superiority again, her wicked smile once more in full display. But Tazri knew it was an act. *Time to push.*

“One more thing, Drana. I need you to funnel energy to Noyan Dar. He doesn’t have any roilmages to help him, so you need to be his energy source. I need you to make it happen.”

Tazri could feel the anger from Drana, could see reality unfolding in many different ways, some of them quite short and bloody ends for herself. But she focused on the outcome she wanted, the outcome she *needed*.

After a long pause, when Drana said simply, “As you command, General Tazri,” both of them knew Drana meant it. *At least for now.*

The Eldrazi were beginning to mass again along the Sea Gate front. Although both Ulamog and Kozilek were occupied elsewhere, there were enough spawn here to make life increasingly difficult. “Noyan! I need that spell now!”

Ulamog and Kozilek loose and rampant. Half of the Zendikari army destroyed. Gideon’s whereabouts unknown. And Tazri had lost near half of her life in a dormant fog that only today had been lifted, all due to an act of mercy that had cost her near everything.

Tazri thought about all of it, and discarded it. *This is where I want to be. This is what I was meant to do.*

The battle for Zendikar had not been lost. The battle for Zendikar was now truly beginning. And Zendikar was going to win. She heard the beautiful voice of an angel sing, and General Tazri smiled.



General Tazri | Art by Chris Rahn