

The Rise of Kozilek

Kelly Digges

From set *Oath of the Gatewatch*

The merfolk Planeswalker Kiora has gone to great lengths to defend her world against the Eldrazi. She stole the divine weapon of a god on the plane of Theros and brought it back to Zendikar. She remembered the old stories of the merfolk gods, and how the trickster god Cosi—a garbled memory of the reality-bending Eldrazi titan Kozilek—made a fool out of Ula, the sea-god, who was really the titan Ulamog. With Ulamog rampaging across Zendikar, Kiora was inspired by the old stories of Cosi’s tricks to face off against what she thinks of as Ula, god of the sea.

The other Planeswalkers who are fighting the Eldrazi think they are trapping Ulamog, but Kiora has no intention of stopping there. She has her god-weapon. She has mighty allies of the deep. Her course now is clear.

Her battle with a god is finally at hand.

Kiora descended smoothly from the dizzying heights of Sea Gate, standing at the tip of a massive suckered tentacle, gripping the bident that was going to kill a god.

Planeswalkers were supposed to have *vision*.

She wasn’t angry. Not really. She hadn’t gotten this far by relying on others to see things her way, and she wasn’t entirely sure why she’d bothered trying to convince them. But the thought of facing Ula was so grand, so intoxicating. And she had a weapon that could do the job. Surely *someone* would want to share in that triumph!

Kiora’s gills opened as the giant octopus’s tentacle plunged beneath the surface. There, waiting for her in the shallow waters that lapped against Sea Gate, was her own army, the one the dry-walkers had dismissed: five of Cosi’s own tricksters and a legion of sea monsters.

“What’s the plan?” asked one of the tricksters, in the peculiar language used by merfolk underwater. Shen, his name was.

“We split up,” said Kiora. “We don’t have as much time as we thought.”

“Something wrong?” asked another of the tricksters, Yesha.

“Not at all,” said Kiora. “Ula is—Ulamog is coming here.”

“Says who?” asked Shen.

Tricksters were notoriously skeptical, keenly aware of how easy it is to make a claim—and how difficult to prove one false.

“A ruin diver named Jori En,” said Kiora.

“I’ve heard of her,” said Shen. “She’s trustworthy.”

A careful choice of words. Jori might be reliable, but she was no devotee of Cosi.

“It gets better,” said Kiora. “You remember those other worlds I told you about? The ones I can travel to?”

The tricksters murmured affirmatives. She wasn’t sure how much of it they believed, but it was plain enough that the bident came from nowhere on Zendikar.

“Well, according to the scholars up in the tower, we may not even need to kill Ulamog. If we hurt him enough, he might leave Zendikar behind and trouble some other world.”

The tricksters didn’t rejoice—she hadn’t expected them to—though probably not for the same reasons as the softhearted elf up in the tower.

“If he can leave, he can return,” said Yesha.

“If he leaves,” said Kiora, gripping her stolen god-weapon, “I can follow.”

“So what’s the plan?” asked Shen again. He was the least patient of the five, the most likely to question her—a truly devoted worshiper of Cosi. Kiora liked Shen.

“*Their* plan is to lure the titan into some kind of hedron trap,” said Kiora, “and bind him to this world, as he was before. No doubt it’s an appealing notion for people who can pack up and leave when it’s finished.”

The tricksters made sounds of disgust.

“Our plan is to kill him if we can, and drive him off if we can’t,” said Kiora. “Fortunately for us, their plan and ours are compatible...to a point. We’re going to hit Ulamog hard with everything we’ve got, and if that means we take advantage of their diversion, all the better. Tola, Inash, Runari—you stay here. Help the other world-walkers with their hedron trap, and pitch in on killing Ulamog if they come to their senses. If not...do what you have to do.”



Kiora, Master of the Depths | Art by Jason Chan

The three tricksters nodded and swam away. Kiora sent a command out to half of her sea monsters, a gentle reminder that these merfolk issued commands in her name. She put the odds of that working

at about even—tidal chances, merfolk called that, sometimes in and sometimes out. But the tricksters should be safe, at least.

Kiora turned and swam away from Sea Gate, out into the open ocean. Shen and Yesha fell in with her, along with the other half of her armada. They fought their way through the cloud of swimming Eldrazi spawn that surrounded Ula, and then they were free, with nothing but water ahead of them.

“What about us?” asked Shen. “Where are we going?”

“Out and down,” said Kiora. *Out* was a merfolk compass-point, always away from the nearest coast—though Kiora sometimes used it to describe that direction only she and those like her could move, out from the world and away from the shores of reality.

“You going to tell us why?” asked Shen.

“It’s important enough to turn Kiora away from Ulamog,” said Yesha. “That’s good enough for me.”

That shut Shen up, at least, but Kiora could see him out of the corner of her eye, jaw set, eyes dark. The tricksters didn’t follow Kiora because she was a Planeswalker, or even because she was powerful. They followed her because they wanted to be a part of the story she was telling, a story about stealing a weapon from one god and using it to fell another.

They swam through that sullen silence for a long time, past the continental shelf and out over open waters. Behind and beneath them were Kiora’s sea monsters, restlessly snapping at one another as they swam. They were bored, ready for action. Kiora didn’t blame them.

“This is far enough,” said Kiora, and the trio came to a stop.

Shen and Yesha waited.

“For thousands of years, we and our ancestors unknowingly worshiped the Eldrazi titans,” said Kiora. “I’m sure there are some who still do.”

Shen grumbled at that. Many merfolk assumed that if any of their people still held the Eldrazi in reverence, the tricksters must surely be among them—when in fact nothing could be further from the truth.

“We who have kept the faith of Cosi know that there’s nothing special about gods. There’s no such thing as divinity. There’s only power. And anything with enough power, especially something ancient, can lay claim to the mantle of godhood. I stole this weapon from a being who called herself a god, and it is a weapon worthy of one. But let’s remember that the Eldrazi aren’t the only things our people have worshiped as divine.”

She looked down, into the abyss that stretched out beneath them. Shen’s eyes grew wide.

“After all,” said Kiora, “what else do you call a being who may have been alive to see the Eldrazi imprisoned to begin with? What else do you call the one whose every move commands the tides themselves?”

Now Yesha understood, too. Kiora saw it in her eyes.

Kiora held the bident out in front of her and channeled every bit of power she had in her. The bident began to glow—blue, then white, until the glare of the thing was blinding. Kiora spread out through the currents, the tendrils of her awareness reaching out like squirming tentacles. She lost herself, a speck floating in a vast and hungry sea, and Zendikar’s oceans opened themselves to her. Nearby—close to the speck, much too close—was Ula, a great dark blot spreading an ink-stain of dead, senseless corruption.

She reached farther, then. Across the sea. The shapes of the continents revealed themselves in negative space, the ridges and valleys of the seafloor reaching up between them. Somewhere out there, swim-

ming across the wide, dark sea, were her sister and a few dozen other merfolk, but Kiora couldn't pick them out from the whales and the krill and the flotsam. Past them, then, or past where she hoped they were by now, to the far-off shores of Murasa.

There. She found him, coiled tightly in the depths, dormant. Slumbering. Kiora had never dared to call upon him—had not been sure, if she was being honest, whether she even could. But she was not calling him now, not really, or at least not alone. The bident was calling. He would answer.

In the distant darkness, an eye opened.

Kiora came back to herself, opened her own eyes. She had no idea how long it had been, but she felt the way she would after hours of swimming. The bident's glow faded, but didn't fully dissipate, pulsing gently in a slow, steady rhythm.

"What is this?" asked Shen. "Why call to him, if Ulamog is so close? What good does power do us if it's an ocean away?"

"None at all," said Kiora. "That's why I didn't call him."

The water grew very cold, and very still.

"I *summoned* him."

Yesha balked.

"What makes you think you can even—"

Then he was there with them, a vast and churning darkness that blotted out what little sun filtered down to them.



Lorthos, the Tidemaker | Art by Kekai Kotaki

Lorthos!

She summoned, and he came! Kiora would have laughed, if it had been a little less terrifying.

The great bulk moved, rotated, a whole landscape of barnacles and scars and heaving, rubbery flesh flashing by beside them. It was dizzying, like flying. At length, an enormous beak rolled into view, a maw that could swallow a whale without chewing.

Wait! sent Kiora, holding out the bident once more. She channeled the thought through the bident, but it wasn't a command, not like when she demanded that her lesser sea beasts obey her. It was a plea. *There are interlopers in your sea, great one . Will you fight them with me?*

The beak opened and closed and opened again, but the great octopus did not swallow her whole.

I am not weak, thought Kiora. *I summoned you here, and I bear a weapon that can hurt them. Together, you and I can teach these creatures a lesson in humility.*

These were constructs of civilization, *weapon* and *lesson* and *humility* , but surely something within Lorthos knew that he was power, and power must defend itself.

The beak closed, and the vast intricacy of Lorthos's enormous body flew past them once more. At last, his eye rolled into view, shining blue, the eye and the bident pulsing together in time. How small three little merfolk must seem to him! Insignificant motes, dancing in darkness, daring to speak his name.

Then he turned and sank beneath them, exposing the top of his mantle. Suction drew Kiora and her tricksters in, and they swam with it. Her lesser sea creatures backed away to the edges of her awareness, trying to stay out of grasp of those enormous tentacles.

"Grab hold of something!" said Kiora. "This isn't going to be gentle."

Shen and Yesha found resting places among the ridges of Lorthos's skin. Scars deep enough to hide in, barnacles bigger than the biggest clams she'd ever seen—the scale of him was almost incomprehensible. *And Ula is bigger still.*

Kiora took her place at the top of Lorthos's mantle, her bident still pulsing in rhythm with his eye. Shen took a place near her, no doubt ready to take up the bident should she fall. She caught his eye and winked.

Not yet.

Then Lorthos rose, and Kiora rose with him.

She didn't need to tell him where to go. He knew, could sense the intrusion of the Eldrazi titan in his seas. He couldn't know of other worlds, likely had no idea what the Eldrazi were. But he knew power—and he knew a challenge.

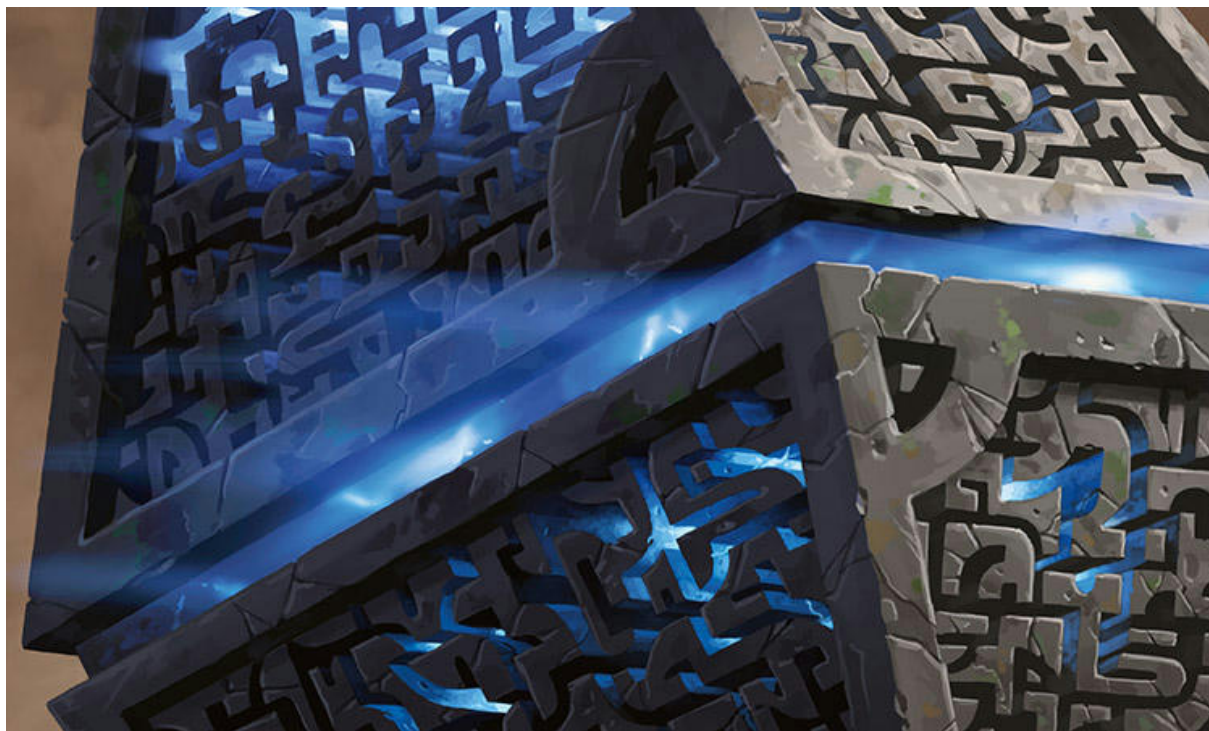
Lorthos lunged forward in bursts, expanding and contracting like a massive heart. Kiora gritted her teeth. Traveling by octopus was always like this, but this was worse—he was so damned *big* . Still, she couldn't argue with the results, as each surge pushed them hundreds of yards forward.

Slowly but inexorably, Lorthos and Ula converged on Sea Gate.

Kiora's sea monsters spread out around them, acting as a screen against the waves of spawn. Her mind was pulled in dozens of directions at once, trying to maintain control of this vast armada as its members were injured, their dull instincts shifting from fight to flight.

The water grew shallower as they approached, and soon each of Lorthos's pushes lifted his passengers out of the water, blinking in the sun and air, only to send the ocean crashing back down around them. Then it was too shallow even for that, and Lorthos pulled himself along with his tentacles. His mantle broke the surface and stayed there, raising great waves in the little harbor and giving Kiora her first clear view of the enemy.

The other Planeswalkers' plan was working. Ula stood within a ring of hedrons, which glowed brightly with binding, blinding light. His arms and tentacles thrashed, batting at his assailants and his prison, but he seemed to be trapped.



Art by Craig J Spearing

Look at him! *This* was the face of a god? This dull, bone-white blankness? He looked so stupid, flailing around like a cuttlefish caught in a trap. Why had anyone ever thought this pathetic creature was worthy of reverence? Just because he was big? Ha!

He really was big, though.

Here, so close and drawing closer, the enormity of her foe began to sink in. He towered above the water, nearly as tall as the lighthouse even though he was partially submerged. Set against an Eldrazi titan, even Lorthos looked small. In a head-to-head fight, the great octopus of Murasa probably wouldn't stand a chance. Good thing he had her to help him.

Then something went—wrong. The power coursing through the network of hedrons went red, then black. It flared on one of the hedrons, a dark flash. Then, one by one, the hedrons began to fall from the sky.

Kiora didn't know what had happened, or how. Maybe the hedrons had been rotten, or defective, or whatever it was hedrons got when you left them lying around for a few too many centuries. Or maybe he had simply broken free. Whatever the cause, the effect was clear: Ula was free of his prison.

Forward! she urged Lorthos, though he hardly needed her to tell him. She grinned and risked standing, steadying herself with the bident. At last, she would punish Ula for what he had done to her people and her world—for the destruction since his release, for the millennia of deception before it, for being the festering rot at the heart of this plane for so very long.

"Ula!" she cried. "Turn and face me, you wretch!"

Shen looked at her like she'd gone mad. It was gratifying.

Ula did not turn toward her, but away, to lumber along the sea wall, toward the shore. *Coward!*

The water began to churn, turning choppy and violent. At first she thought it might be her own fury, channeled unconsciously through the bident. But no—no, this was something else. Something else was happening and she didn't know what it was and then she saw it and *oh gods and monsters—*



Art by Lius Lasahido

The alien shape that rose above the landscape was horribly familiar. A crown of jet-black blades rested upon the nothing that ought to be the thing's head—impossibly flat, impossibly black, like holes in space. A mantle of shining carapace spread out beneath them. His enormous hands reached out, grasping, two swords of obsidian reaching back from his forearms.

Cosi.

With one lurch he was in the water, sending a wave surging across the bay. Another and he stood before Sea Gate. He raised one enormous arm and swung, and the gleaming white stone of the sea wall seemed to stretch beneath it, to melt, to flow out and around in spiraling squares the color of oil on water. Kiora watched helplessly as the Halimar Sea, its water level held high above the ocean by Sea Gate itself, began to pour through the gap, cascading around Cosi's arm in impossible geometries.

The two titans moved toward one another, and for a mad moment Kiora thought they might battle for the privilege of devouring Zendikar. They brushed past each other, slow and smooth as icebergs. The moment passed.

Cosi turned toward her.

The world seemed to bend around him, as though he were its center. Those perfect black shards above his head seemed to draw in light itself. She couldn't understand the shape of them, or whether they were even solid. Where they overlapped, they seemed to merge together. They weren't objects, or even shapes—they were holes in space, and they captivated her.

Who had taught her that gods could be defied? Whose example had led her on this collision course with a god—with two? Cosi stories had shown her that Ula could be tricked, beaten, brought low. But there was one thing she'd forgotten in her rush to confront Ula, one thing that every Cosi story had in common.

Cosi always won. Not the mortals who followed his example. Not the dolphins who chattered his praises. *Cosi* always won. Kiora had tricked Thassa, had thought to humble Ula. But Cosi had tricked her.

A movement out of the corner of her eye brought her back to her senses. Shen stood next to her, expression slack, eyes black. Around his head floated a crown of obsidian shards, like Cosi's.

He lunged for her.

Kiora stumbled backward across Lorthos's craggy skin. Shen kept coming, reaching for her—mindless, lost. The bident lodged against one of the great octopus's scars, and she was stuck. She only had a moment to decide.

The bident was a god's weapon, yes. It had vast power, some of which, no doubt, she had yet to even glimpse. But it was, in the end, a weapon, and could serve as any other weapon would.

She raised the bident, and its twin points buried themselves in Shen's chest.

Shen's eyes cleared, and the shards above his head vanished. He looked at her, hands clutching numbly at the bident. He tried to say something, or ask something, but all that came out was a kind of low, whistling moan. Blood seeped out around the points of the bident.

She kicked him away. The bident slipped out of him easily, bright-red blood splashing against Lorthos's skin. Shen fell away from her, slid, tumbled into the water, and was gone.

Cosi towered over her now, his writhing tendrils and Lorthos's tentacles entangling furiously. Kiora pumped power into the bloodstained bident, bolstering Lorthos for the fight, but the octopus was hopelessly outmatched. Cosi's arms rotated impossibly, bent strangely at that hideous double elbow. The obsidian blades that extended from his forearms scooped low into the sea and rose above her, seawater cascading from them. These, truly, were the weapons of a god. Compared to them the bident was a trinket.

One massive blade, then the other, slammed down into Lorthos's body. The second one missed Kiora by less than its width. Blue blood, almost black, welled up around them.

Kiora stared up at Cosi, but Cosi didn't stare back. He couldn't—no head, no face, just a vast and alien presence towering above her. He'd attacked Lorthos because the octopus was the only foe anywhere close to his size. Kiora and her precious bident were insignificant, beneath his notice.

She understood, finally, where she had gone wrong. Cosi hadn't tricked her. Cosi had no understanding of the little story she'd been telling—the one that cast the tricksters as loyal dolphins and the other Planeswalkers as fools and herself, laughably, as Cosi.

Thassa had hated her. Cosi couldn't even see her.

With a wet and horrible sound, Cosi pulled his arms apart. Lorthos's body shuddered and split, fountains of dark blue blood splattering into the water. The bident's light went out. Kiora lost her footing and fell, as Cosi let the two uneven halves of the ocean's mightiest champion slide from his blades.

As she fell, the bident slipped from her numb fingers. She watched, helpless, as her greatest trophy tumbled away.

She'd killed Shen. Probably the other tricksters, too, and dozens of her noble ocean behemoths. Lorthos, bringer of the tides, perhaps the oldest and greatest creature of Zendikar's seas. She'd killed all of them. They'd believed in her, believed in her little toy, believed in her stories. And they'd died for it. At least her sister had left her, thank the gods. Thank whomever.

Cosi blotted out the sun. No—not Cosi. *Kozilek*, massive and impossible, a twisted mockery of the idea of gods.

She hit the water, and blackness claimed her.



Art by Zack Stella