

MAGIC
The Gathering™

Kamigawa Cycle · Book II

HERETIC
Betrayers
of kamigawa

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PART ONE



PRAYERS FOR A WINTER NIGHT

*Softly falls the snow
Blanketing fears, stilling hearts
Sleep, carry me home*



CHAPTER 1

All Towabara was abuzz. For the first time in years, Daimyo Konda would address his subjects directly from the steps of his mighty tower. The official proclamations were vague as to the content of this address, but they were very clear about its importance. Any able-bodied adult who did not attend would be called before the daimyo's feared civil enforcers, his *go-yo* squads, to explain why.

On the eve of the address, four armed soldiers retrieved Lady Pearl-Ear of the *kitsunebito* from her cell in the tower's upper chambers. They surrounded the small fox-woman as they marched down to ground level, but they always kept a respectful distance. If not for the clank of heavy iron chains around her wrists and ankles, the silent retainers would have seemed more an honor guard than jailers.

Pearl-Ear herself remained stoic and inscrutable, her wide eyes calm and her short-muzzled face held high. The chains did not noticeably hamper her graceful movements, though she was thin-boned and delicate under her white robes and pale gray fur. She furrowed her brow in annoyance when the metal links audibly scraped against one another, but otherwise she gave no

sign that she was even aware of her bonds.

The gate sentries saw the strange procession coming and opened the outer door. The sky above the courtyard was a dull, dusty yellow, and a stifling haze had descended. In the shadow of the great tower, the air was cool but stale, and it pressed on Pearl-Ear like a wet canvas.

Her escorts led the way to a larger collection of Konda's retainers in their finest dress uniforms. Pearl-Ear, who had been a member of the daimyo's court for more than twenty years, recognized none of the soldiers she saw. No surprise there: Konda was unlikely to assign watchdog duty to any soldier who knew and might sympathize with her. Although this was merely more evidence of her sad fall from the daimyo's good graces, Pearl-Ear reserved her pity for the soldiers themselves.

The Kami War had taken a heavy toll on all of Kamigawa, but it was the daimyo's retainers who had paid most dearly and most often. Of the thousands of soldiers assembled, Pearl-Ear calculated that more than a third had no military experience whatsoever and had been recruited simply to maintain the ranks.

Eiganjo Fortress included the tower and the walled courtyard around it. It functioned as a small city where civilian merchants and artisans conducted business alongside billeted soldiers and officers of the daimyo's army. Farmers, tourists, and foreign dignitaries came and went on a daily basis. In better times, there was a constant flow of goods and people to and from the tower.

After twenty years of war, Eiganjo was not so much a fortress as a last safe haven. Daimyo Konda's citizens and retainers lived crammed behind the tower walls like refugees. The only movement now was one way, into the city, then into the ranks of the

daimyo's army. There was a massive stable at the far end of the compound, currently half-empty. The vast expanse of arable plains to the north was barren, its fields either fallow or victims of assaults from the spirit realm.

Pearl-Ear straightened her back, struggling to keep her face from reflecting the misery she felt around her. The mighty walls of Eiganjo had become as much of a prison to the daimyo's people as they were to her.

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom and the haze, Pearl-Ear continued to hold her head high. Two decades of marauding spirits had reduced a once-thriving population to the haggard throng now assembled outside the tower gates. Where Konda had once been master of a realm that covered most of the continent and bordered on every other powerful lord's domain, now his entire kingdom was easily contained inside a single fortress. A nation of almost a quarter million had been reduced to well under a hundred thousand. The rest had either fallen to marauding kami or had fled when it became clear that Konda's kingdom was the front line of the war between the *kakuriyo* spirit world and the *utsushiyo* human one. Most of those who remained were now waiting outside the tower. Even Pearl-Ear, the disgraced former tutor of the daimyo's daughter, was mustered out for Konda's address.

Pearl-Ear craned her head back and tried to see to the tower's highest window, looking for any sign of Princess Michiko. The sulfurous haze prevented her, and she blinked away tears as she lowered her gaze. If she herself was obliged to attend the daimyo's address, wouldn't Michiko? Wouldn't the daimyo release his own daughter from her cell as he had the fox-woman?

Pearl-Ear could not credit the daimyo with the callousness it

would take to exclude his only child, but then again, she could not credit his imprisoning Michiko in the first place. A few short months ago, Princess Michiko had secretly left the tower in direct disobedience of her father and her tutor, exposing herself to the myriad and very real dangers of the Kami War and the open countryside. Disastrous circumstances prevented Pearl-Ear from bringing Michiko-hime back immediately, and when they did return Konda's forbearance had melted like a cobweb in a blacksmith's forge. He blamed Pearl-Ear for the string of catastrophes that had occurred while Michiko was outside his protection, and he was furious at Michiko for defying him.

Even now, Pearl-Ear could understand Konda's anger but not his inability to control it. He locked his daughter in one of the tallest rooms in the tower and threw Pearl-Ear into a cell of her own far below. Pearl-Ear, who had stayed on as a kitsune ambassador to Konda's court for decades precisely to be with Michiko-hime, was now barred from seeing the princess . . . or anyone else, save the soldiers who guarded her.

The sudden beating of a heavy drum interrupted Pearl-Ear's thoughts, and a murmur went through the crowd. The soldiers all snapped to attention without the slightest sound or glance from their officers. The air seemed to vibrate throughout the courtyard. Daimyo Konda was coming.

The great double doors swung wide, and a procession of heralds marched through in lines of three. The first row wore huge drums bound across their chests. The second three carried short poles, between which hung a long bolt of cloth with Konda's sun and moon standard woven in. The final trio, young girls in white robes, scattered white flowers behind them as they exited the tower.

There was a pause as the last few petals fluttered to the dusty ground. Then, Daimyo Konda himself emerged to the thunderous roars of his army, accompanied by his most trusted general and a small platoon of bodyguards.

Konda was well into his seventies, but he hadn't visibly aged since the birth of his daughter twenty years past. His long white hair almost glowed in the dim light, cascading past his shoulders. His beard and mustache were likewise white, healthy, and strong, following every turn of his head like a long cavalry banner at full gallop. He was dressed in a fine robe of gold brocade with dazzling silver moons embroidered across its front.

In the poor light and the great distance Konda's eyes seemed perfectly normal, but Pearl-Ear knew his pupils floated and meandered around the sockets like blind fish in a bowl. Even when he had condemned her to her lonely cell, even when his face was mere inches away and all his attention was focused on her, his eyes drifted lazily back and forth, sometimes floating outside the boundaries of his face. Much had changed about Konda during the twenty years of war with the kakuriyo.

Pearl-Ear tore her gaze from Konda long enough to verify what her ears told her was true: though the citizens of Towabara shouted and stamped their feet along with the soldiers, their fervor was hollow and listless. Their situation was too grave and Konda had been too long detached from the lives of his people. He had once been the nation's greatest joy, but all Pearl-Ear sensed now from the people was the painful weight of desperation and a dour wave of fear. Whatever their ruler had gathered them to say, she prayed that it would give the people hope.

His herald called for silence. Konda stepped up to a podium and raised his arms wide.

“Children of Towabara,” he said, his voice deep and powerful. “You are all welcome here. As cruel fate has deprived me of my own daughter’s trust, I take great solace in the love and obedience you have shown me today.

“I have brought you here to reassure you—not by words, but by demonstration. Our enemies are strong. They are numerous, and relentless. It is the power of our nation that excites them, the fear that we will become more powerful than they. When I began to unify the tribes and city-states of this land under my protection, other great daimyo behaved in exactly the same manner. They would rather attack than accept the wisdom of joining a greater cause, would rather viciously and spitefully wound the great state that seeks to lift them up. The kami and great myojin of the spirit world are frightened, my people. Frightened of you and me and the strength we represent. I thought I could turn aside their fear and their anger long enough for them to see our inevitable victory, for we are the future of Kamigawa. I thought this, but I was wrong.”

Audible gasps of disbelief ran through the crowd. Konda gripped the podium and leaned forward.

“Yes, my children, wrong. The armies of the kakuriyo have abandoned any semblance of honorable warfare. They strike from ambush without warning, without regard to youth or innocence. Recent events have proven that they will stop at nothing, not even the use of their ultimate weapon on troops performing a mission of mercy in the name of a father’s love . . .”

Konda’s loud voice trailed off, and his mind seemed to wander as his eyes drifted across his face.

“What about the Spirit Beast?” someone shouted. “Three thousand dead in a single stroke and a hundred acres swallowed

whole. We all felt the tremor, Great Lord. What power do we have in the face of that?"

The speaker had dared too much. Pearl-Ear had pinpointed the man's position in the crowd seconds before the soldiers nearby fell on him and rendered him silent.

"My brother died in that folly, daimyo."

"And mine. No one can tell me how or why."

"Do you even know, Konda?"

The voices began to come from all around the courtyard, faster than the guards could find and muffle them. The daimyo had claimed the kami were frightened, but Pearl-Ear heard true fear in the voices of Konda's subjects as they cried out for their sons, brothers, wives, and sisters who had fallen.

A flash of bright white light crackled across Konda's body. "Enough." Though his voice was smooth and even, it was loud enough to shake the fortress walls and drive half the audience to their knees.

Among the groans and gasps, Konda continued. "I will not be shouted at by you rabble like an absent-minded servant. We have all suffered from this war. Why this has happened is not as important as our response.

"I am your lord and master, and more, I am your protector. I have assessed the threats we face, new and old, and I have devised our answer to those threats." He raised and lowered his arm, and the drummers beat out a new tattoo. Across the courtyard, the great main gates opened to reveal a massive company of mounted soldiers. Beyond the cavalry, five thousand infantry stood at the ready.

"The go-yo and the Eiganjo battalion have proven themselves capable of protecting this city. The rest of my army will ride forth

into Kamigawa, driving the kami before them. No longer will my retainers sit and wait to be attacked. If the kakuriyo seeks total warfare, we will fight it on our terms, not theirs.”

With a grand flourish, Konda waved his arms. A line of strange shapes soared out from behind the tower, matching rows of twelve on each side. With their huge, flat wings gracefully beating the air, huge moths spread out over the courtyard below, the pale yellow light glittering on their powdered wings. From their specially designed saddles, armored moth riders guided their steeds through their circling pattern as they soared and looped overhead.

The daimyo paused, and Pearl-Ear realized he was waiting for a reaction from the crowd. He was expecting a surge of applause, a riotous cheer from ten thousand grateful throats. Instead, not even the soldiers responded. Most were too busy eyeing the crowd, eager to pounce on anyone who broke the silence with more catcalls. The rest looked as pale and as frightened as their civilian peers.

Konda’s face darkened. He raised one fist and the white light crackled around him once more. “Behold,” he cried. “The kami send their most titanic beast to crush our resolve. When that beast comes again, it will not face mounted cavalry. Mere men cannot stand against the ultimate expression of the spirit world’s ire. No, to protect us against the marauding kami and the hostile myojin, I give my children Yosei, the Morning Star, mighty spirit dragon, guardian of the Eiganjo and all its loyal citizens.”

Konda’s fist opened. The stale air above the courtyard began to spin. It formed a dense ball of yellow fog, illuminated from within by the same crackling light that adorned the daimyo. The fog thickened and spread, rising higher into the yellow sky until

it was as large as the courtyard. As it passed over the moths, the great insects shuddered.

The spirit dragon Yosei burst from the fog like a snake slithering free of its leathery egg. He was long and slender. His forearms were folded flat along his streamlined body, and his scales bristled along his spine. His head was round, but his snout was flat and broad with whisker-like barbels on each side of his wide lips.

The white dragon coiled himself like a spring, spiraling higher until his hind legs and tail pulled free of the foggy dome. When he was whole and clear, Yosei's head darted down into the column created by his own coils. He emerged barely fifty yards over Konda, and there the great dragon stopped.

The daimyo gazed up, as did every other person in the courtyard. Pearl-Ear glanced at Konda then back up at Yosei, captivated by the huge beast. The dragon's barbels resembled Konda's long mustache, and when the daimyo nodded, the dragon nodded back.

Yosei's head shot forward toward the open gate. The rest of his long, graceful form followed the exact path of his head, curving down and around itself until the tip of his tail vanished through the gate and rose into the sky, out of sight. A trail of dust and yellow fog followed in his wake for a second, then dispersed.

"Yosei will not rest," Konda declared, "until he finds and destroys the Great Spirit Beast. In sending their most dreadful spirit against us, the kami have shown us their true power. I cannot allow such a display to go unanswered, and I will not allow another loyal subject of this realm to die when I can meet their greatest force with an even greater one.

"For Yosei serves me, as I serve you, and together we shall

Heretic: Betrayers of Kamigawa

defeat our enemy. The kakuriyo is in its death-throes. When it is done thrashing, our entire nation will stand supreme.”

Now the soldiers did cheer, and soon the citizens joined in, swept along by the fervor Yosei inspired. A chant of “Konda, Konda!” rose over the cheers, and the daimyo bowed his head. The drummers began to play an exit processional. Konda turned and disappeared into the tower, followed by his bodyguards. In the courtyard, the crowd and soldiers continued to exult.

Pearl-Ear did not share their joy. Instead, she peered upward once more, straining in vain for a glimpse of Michiko-hime in the tower above.

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Princess Michiko was not at the window of her lavishly furnished cell during her father’s address. She did not see the crowds, the soldiers, or the dragon, and though her thoughts often turned to Lady Pearl-Ear, she did not look for her tutor through the thick haze outside.

Instead, Michiko sat at her writing desk, busily inscribing the same complicated symbol on a blank scroll with a stiff-bristled brush. Lost in concentration, she muttered to herself as she traced the same lines over and over until the ink-soaked paper all but dissolved under her efforts.

She had seen no one but soldiers since her imprisonment—not her father, not her tutor, not her most intimate friend. She was well fed and given free access to any books in her father’s library, provided he approved them beforehand. She had read voraciously over the long months of her captivity, first a series of historical tomes about Kamigawa then scholarly texts about

different spiritual practices. The daimyo had refused to supply any information she requested on the kami war, but he seemed content to let her complete her formal education on her own.

Apart from her books, Michiko was completely cut off from the outside world. The castle was well warded against any spells that might be cast to communicate with her, and the physical barriers of wall and sentry deterred any other kind of contact. Her friends, her mentor, her servants, and her father were all out of reach.

Michiko continued to trace the symbol. Fortunately, she had made acquaintances that her father didn't know about. One of her books detailed the practices of kanji magicians, who used special symbols to focus their magic. A seasoned kanji mage could burn wood by carving the symbol for fire into it or induce fever by chalking the right character on her victim's front door. By combining different symbols into the same kanji, even more powerful spells were possible.

The princess glanced down at the disintegrating sheet of parchment, still muttering to herself. When she had started practicing, she would often stop after the symbol for "messenger" before going on to the kanji for *hyozan*, or "iceberg." Since taking her brush in hand several hours ago, she had not paused at all, blending the two symbols together in a series of smooth, practiced motions, chanting all the while.

The symbol under her brush twitched. Michiko's eyes widened, but she kept tracing and chanting. It was beginning to work. She struggled to remain calm and to keep her rhythm steady.

There was a wet cracking sound as the kanji tore itself free of the paper and rose into the air. Michiko slid back in her chair, unwilling to breathe for fear of disrupting the ritual. She edged

over so that she was between the floating symbol and the open window.

The messenger symbol did not try to leave, however, but floated before her as if waiting. Michiko took a breath and spoke softly, but clearly.

“Find him in the Takenuma Swamp,” she said. “I have a new commission for him and his reckoners.”

The symbol bobbed in the air. Michiko drew another breath and went on.

“Tell him I am in my father’s tower. I am a prisoner. Rescue me, and the reward will stagger the greediest of hearts.” Michiko paused, remembering her previous encounter with this would-be savior. “Even his.

“Go now,” she said. “Tell Toshi that I will be waiting for him.”

The messenger symbol rotated in the air before the princess then shot out of the open window and disappeared into the gloom.