

# Choosing The Right Path

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This week's article is being written slightly ahead of my usual schedule as tomorrow - Wednesday 7th as I write this - I fly out for Pro Tour Atlanta! It'll be my 11th or 12th PT event I think (plus or minus two, I really have no idea these days) but I'm much happier with my perspective going into this one. I think my understanding of the Limited game and this format is as good as it ever was, if not better, but at the same time I don't really have that burning desire to win any more. If this wasn't a team event I'm fairly sure I would skip it but luckily it IS a team event and the worst that can happen is that I get to spend some time with some great friends who I don't get to hang out with very often. It's a win-win situation for me really! We've done zero practice drafts so far as we all live quite far apart from each other and all lead very busy lives that don't leave a lot of time for **Magic**. All that means is that we have no expectations for the event, and likewise we don't feel that there's any pressure on us to perform. All-in-all I'm looking forward to the weekend immensely!

Like many players I enjoy reading the coverage so if you want to check out how we performed and who won the big event be sure to check out the PT Atlanta coverage.

In the mean time, we have a draft pick from last week that still needs some resolution so let's move swiftly onto that. It was a standard *Champions-Champions-Betrayers* booster draft. Throughout the first *Champions* booster your picks were:

1. Kabuto Moth
2. Befoul
3. Devouring Greed
4. Jugan, the Rising Star
5. Rootrunner
6. Orochi Sustainer
7. Order of the Sacred Bell
8. Nezumi Ronin
9. Orochi Leafcaller
10. Serpent Skin
11. Venerable Kumo
12. Guardian of Solitude
13. Pious Kitsune
14. Wear Away
15. Desperate Ritual

Pack two gave you the following picks:

1. Kumano, Master Yamabushi
2. Cage of Hands
3. Moss Kami
4. Scuttling Death
5. Kodama's Reach
6. Kami of the Hunt
7. Soilshaper
8. Marrow-Gnawer
9. Dripping-Tongue Zubera
10. Oni Possession

11. Kashi-Tribe Warriors
12. Orochi Leafcaller
13. Ore Gorgor
14. Field of Reality
15. Vigilance

You finally open up your Betrayers pack and find the following to choose between:





Which card should you draft?

## Evaluating your pool so far

Wow. Not good. Unfortunately a fourth pick Jugan was too strong a signal to ignore but this has meant your first three picks of the draft were all in a colour you *Out of the picture?* might not play. You were unable to solidify a second colour through pack one although black was looking like a promising partner for your green cards. Then you go and open Kumano. With only two black cards already taken you have to take Kumano but then you received nothing else playable in red. The second pick was basically devoid of playable cards except for white and blue cards and so you took the Cage with the hope of perhaps splashing it alongside the Moth.

At the end of the first two packs you have a bunch of playable cards -- lots of them in fact -- but clearly nothing resembling a deck yet. You're obviously playing green, and you have more playable cards in black but you've also got a potential splash in Kabuto Moth and Cage of Hands. Not forgetting Kumano of course! At this point in time the only thing you're 100% certain of is that you're not playing blue. You've got some very difficult decisions to make because of the situation this draft has left you in, but salvaging problem drafts like this is a crucial skill for anyone serious about drafting.

Before the *Betrayers* pack was opened you would've had time to look through the cards you had drafted to get an idea of what you hope the final deck might look like, so let's repeat that process here.

It's obvious you'll be playing green, so first of all it would be worth checking out how the cards of this colour line up. Everything listed in bold is a definite inclusion, everything else is just a possibility at this point in time:

1CC: Orochi Leafcaller x 2.  
2CC: **Orochi Sustainer, Soilshaper, Dripping-Tongue Zuberu.**  
3CC: **Kami of the Hunt, Kodama's Reach, Serpent Skin.**  
4CC: **Rootrunner, Order of the Sacred Bell.**  
5CC: Venerable Kumo.  
6CC: **Jugan, the Rising Star, Moss Kami.**

In all honesty that isn't a terrible selection of cards. There are eight definite playables and an additional five that will probably end up making the cut unless something extraordinary happens in the *Betrayers* pack. The curve isn't terrible although you certainly won't want more than one other card above the 4-5CC range. There's a small Soulshift/Spirit theme going on and you have plenty of solid creatures here too.

At this point in time it's looking like black is the most likely candidate for inclusion. It's possible you might consider a green-red-white deck but I think Scuttling Death, Befoul and Devouring Greed are just too powerful to ignore. If we include the black cards the deck shapes into:

1CC: Orochi Leafcaller x 2.  
2CC: **Orochi Sustainer, Soilshaper, Dripping-Tongue Zuberu.**  
3CC: **Kami of the Hunt, Nezumi Ronin, Kodama's Reach, Serpent Skin.**  
4CC: **Rootrunner, Order of the Sacred Bell, Befoul, Devouring Greed.**  
5CC: **Scuttling Death, Marrow-Gnawer, Venerable Kumo.**  
6CC: **Jugan, the Rising Star, Moss Kami.**

That brings us up to twelve cards that will definitely be in and an additional six which potentially might be. The black cards add to the Soulshift/Spirit theme of the deck and give it a bit more power too.

At this point in time it's possible that either red or white might also get included in the deck, but it's unlikely that the black cards would be dropped entirely. This deck could do with some better early drops and looking at *Betrayers* your main options there would be Child of Thorns, Petalmane Baku and Skullsnatcher. I'm not typically a fan of the Baku but if this deck goes to three colours it might be a worthwhile addition. Child of Thorns is a fine one-drop and would probably make the cut. Skullsnatcher too would be ok as it's a Rat and would go nicely with the Marrow-Gnawer if that card were played. Takenuma Bleeder and Gnarled Mass are solid commons that could help fill out your three mana slot. Cheap removal would be nice too so you would definitely want to grab any Horobi's Whispers that might come your way (of course). Beyond that you might also look for any cards that further enhance the Spirit/Soulshift theme of the deck.

## **Narrowing the choices**

Here once again are the choices available from the *Betrayers* pack:

- Patron of the Kitsune
- Unchecked Growth
- Genju of the Fens
- Cunning Bandit
- Okiba-Gang Shinobi
- Moonlit Strider
- Phantom Wings
- Torrent of Stone
- Roar of Jukai
- Takenuma Bleeder
- Crack the Earth

- Ninja of the Deep Hours
- Blessing of Leeches
- Gnarled Mass
- Kami of False Hope

There are a lot of possibilities to discuss this time around so I'm going to dismiss a few of them quickly.

The first two to go are Ninja of the Deep Hours and Phantom Wings. The one colour you're definitely not playing is blue and neither of these cards are going to change that.

Second to go is Crack the Earth. Whilst there's a slim chance it might be playable in certain decks this obviously isn't one of them and so there's no point spending any time discussing this one.

Kami of False Hope and Moonlit Strider would also get the cut for me. The Kami should be fairly obvious but the Strider might actually be playable in this deck as it's splashable, has Soulshift and is in a colour you already have cards in. However, it's very defensive as a 1/4 and there are simply better picks for this deck from this pack.

I'd dismiss Takenuma Bleeder from consideration simply because there's also a Gnarled Mass in this pack. The Bleeder is a fine card but in this situation the Mass would be preferred as it's your main colour and it's also a Spirit. Both those facts outweigh the slight downside of its trickier casting cost.

Roar of Jukai would be chopped next. It's quite playable but I think Unchecked Growth is strictly better. Although Roar of Jukai has the potential to boost multiple attackers I don't find that happens very often at all. Unchecked Growth is useable on defence, it gives a bigger bonus and it can give one of the many spirits trample to allow it to deal all of its excess damage to the opponent. For those reasons I'd always go with Unchecked Growth here and it would definitely get the nod over Roar of Jukai.

Blessing of Leeches is the next easy cut. The few times I've played with it and against it haven't left me with a particularly strong impression of the card. It seems like a mediocre combat trick and in this pack Unchecked Growth is much more powerful and would definitely get picked ahead of the Blessing.

Cutting those leaves you the following:

- Patron of the Kitsune
- Unchecked Growth
- Genju of the Fens
- Cunning Bandit
- Okiba-Gang Shinobi
- Torrent of Stone
- Gnarled Mass

All of those cards are potentially playable depending of course on what colours the final deck ends up being. Whatever the correct pick is, it will definitely come from that selection of cards. I'm going to pause for a second and check out the reader votes to see if they match up with this:

Which card should you draft?		
Unchecked Growth	1708	18.0%
Cunning Bandit	1490	15.7%
Patron of the Kitsune	1231	13.0%

Gnarled Mass	1075	11.3%
Genju of the Fens	858	9.1%
Okiba-Gang Shinobi	709	7.5%
Torrent of Stone	694	7.3%
Ninja of the Deep Hours	509	5.4%
Kami of False Hope	454	4.8%
Takenuma Bleeder	271	2.9%
Roar of Jukai	134	1.4%
Crack the Earth	127	1.3%
Blessing of Leeches	97	1.0%
Phantom Wings	66	0.7%
Moonlit Strider	55	0.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>9478</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Great stuff – the top seven cards match up perfectly!

I'm also happy to see both Genju of the Fens and Okiba-Gang Shinobi ranked at the lower end of those seven cards as they were the next cards I would be dismissing from the pack.

Both of them are perfectly playable and, if drafted, it's very likely they would make it into the main deck. However, even if this deck ended up as a two-colour green-black deck neither of these cards are the best picks for that deck. Okiba-Gang Shinobi is a little slow and this deck is pretty slow already. The deck also doesn't have too many great early drops that would be able to attack unblocked so there's no guarantee you'd be able to use the Shinobi's Ninjutsu ability. It does have a nice interaction with the Marrow-Gnawer but that's not enough to rate it any higher. The Shinobi is a fine card in a deck that can afford to trade the tempo loss for the card advantage. Unfortunately this deck isn't such a deck.

The Genju of the Fens meanwhile is simply lacking in power compared to some of the other cards. This deck might not have too many Swamps in its final build and the black Genju really needs a Swamp heavy deck to make an impression. You have to commit three mana every turn just to attack for two and although it's reusable it's definitely the weakest of the five Genju and is too weak to consider drafting it here.

So that narrows it down to:

- Patron of the Kitsune
- Unchecked Growth
- Cunning Bandit
- Torrent of Stone
- Gnarled Mass

For me this pick is all about choosing the path you want the rest of the draft to take. The thirty cards you have already drafted give you numerous options as to what your final deck might look like. At this point in the draft you should be having a long think about the direction you want the deck to take as your decision here is going to have a very big impact on that. As I see it you have the following options:

## **Green-black**

You could shoot for a two-colour deck that would utilise the playable cards you had in these colours already. You would have to try and draft enough cards from Betrayers to form a solid green-black Spirit themed deck.

You'd be wanting to cut the Leafcallers in this deck but would be including the Zuberu and the Kumo as well as the Marrow-Gnawer assuming you could get a couple of Rats (Okiba or Skullsnatcher) from the *Betrayers* packs. You'd need to draft around seven or eight decent green and black cards from *Betrayers*. That's not impossible, but it's not a given either. This deck would be the most consistent one but would also most likely be the weakest in terms of power.

I am a big fan of consistency in **Magic** and although it hurts to throw away Kumano and your Kabuto Moths it's certainly something that warrants consideration. If you were

determined to go down this route then you'd simply have to choose between Gnarled Mass and Unchecked Growth.



## Green-black-red

Although Kumano is your only red card so far it's such a **good** red card that you might want to consider splashing it. You're really going to rely on your Leafcallers to do this and you may want to cut one or more of the cards with BB in their casting cost to try and help balance your mana. If you do get enough playable cards there's a chance you could drop black entirely and just go with a white splash of Moth and Cage instead. You'd probably want to try and draft a couple of Petalmane Bakus to help out your mana requirements as your deck has enough Spirits to make this a viable strategy. If you weren't prepared to let Kumano go then this is perhaps the best route to take. You have to bear in mind that you got passed no playable red cards in the first pack at all, whereas you did receive some playable black cards. It's looking unlikely that you'd receive many playable red cards throughout the *Betrayers* picks but if the packs open in your favour you might. If this was how you envisioned your deck going, you would most likely shoot for Torrent of Stone as it's good removal, it's better than Unchecked Growth and is much easier to cast than Cunning Bandit.

## Green-black-white

If you assume the green-black-red deck drafts Torrent, then you should also think about what happens if you draft Patron of the Kitsune. It's another expensive bomb, and while it isn't as powerful as Kumano it's Orim's Prayer effect combined with your superior creatures should allow you to win the majority of games. It's obvious that Kumano is better than the Patron but what you need to ask yourself is whether the combination of Kumano + Torrent of Stone is better than the combination of Patron of the Kitsune + Kabuto Moth + Cage of Hands? Similar comments apply here as they did previously; you didn't get passed any playable white cards in pack one and you will be stretching your mana base considerably to do this. It's also worth bearing in mind that white is a fair bit deeper than red in *Betrayers*. Split-Tail Miko and Waxmane Baku would both make excellent additions to this deck for example. One final consideration is that the Patron would be yet another six-drop in a deck that already has its share of expensive guys. If this were your preferred route then the choice is between Patron, Gnarled Mass and Unchecked Growth.

## Green-red-white

Forget about the black – just play the red and the white together! The black cards are good, there's no disputing that, but are Befoul + Scuttling Death + Devouring Greed really that much better than Kumano + Moth + Cage? The latter group are theoretically more powerful but you do have to fit two colours into the deck in order to be able to cast them. This option is certainly possible although I personally would be very hesitant to dismiss Befoul and Devouring Greed at this stage. This route

does give you the greatest choice from the pack though as any of the remaining cards would be playable in this deck. I think you'd have to lean more towards Torrent of Fire over the Patron though simply because you'd probably only want to splash the white cards if you could get away with that.

## 4-colour special

Forget about casting costs, just throw ALL of the good cards into the deck and hope that those Leafcallers stick around to make it work for you. Play the green-black spirit deck but put in Kumano and the white splash as well. I'm sure there are some players out there who would favour this route and it may well work for them. Clearly you're trading off consistency for power here and if someone throws a First Volley or Frostling at one of your Leafcallers you could quickly find yourself unable to cast the majority of cards in your hand.

## Other opinions

Before I let you know my answer, I'm going to get a couple of other people to go through their thoughts first. Only a couple of comments this week as most Pro's are off in Atlanta already, but both Tim and Ken are known for their limited expertise so I'm grateful for their comments.

**Tim Aten:** Aten (center) with GP Chicago '05 Champion teammates Pelcak and Szelfier  
Fortunately

and unfortunately, "drafts gone awry" happen to be my area of expertise. In this case, it seems like the only things we're certain about are that we're playing green and that we'll probably be running a secondary and tertiary color, facilitated by the Kodama's Reach and the \*shudder\* Orochi Leafcallers. This pick seems rather important, not just because there are a lot of quite powerful cards, but because what we take will dictate the direction of the rest of the draft.

There's really no way we're playing blue, and none of the black cards in the pack are really first-pick caliber. After eliminating those and all but the best option(s) in each color, we're left with Patron of the Kitsune, Unchecked Growth, Cunning Bandit, and Torrent of Stone. I think we should eliminate Cunning Bandit and Torrent of Stone from the mix next. Red isn't particularly strong in *Betrayers*, and from the looks of things, our neighbors weren't really passing too much of it anyway. Cunning Bandit would probably only enter play early enough to be relevant if we draw a Leafcaller, and Torrent would never be spliced. An unspliceable Torrent is a fine splash if necessary, but it wouldn't be better than Patron or Unchecked Growth. It seems as though that Kumano will be relegated to the realm of hate/raredraft.

That leaves two excellent cards, Patron of the Kitsune and Unchecked Growth. Patron of the Kitsune is the clearly superior card; whether or not we take it depends on our odds of playing white, which I consider to be quite good. It seems like we'll be black/green splashing Moth and Cage of Hands. Due to the nature of our mana fixers, splashing a double-white card should be no problem. B/G/w isn't set in stone, either; we could be G/W "splashing" Scuttling Death, Befoul, and Greed. Either way, Patron of the Kitsune is far too good to pass if you're leaning toward white in any way. It seems as though there are Leafcallers in our future...

**Ken Krouner:** Cards to consider: Krouner, making Top 8 at Worlds '02  
Patron of the Kitsune, Cunning Bandit,

Unchecked Growth, Gnarled Mass, and Okiba-Gang Shinobi.

This is a rough one. I can almost guarantee draft errors were made in the first 2 packs.

While I didn't see the packs, I can only imagine there were ways to avoid being so unclear as to your third color by pack three. My gut tells me to go black. While your best card is red, and your white cards are in general more powerful, you have Marrow-Gnawer which went from decent to awesome with the addition of *Betrayers*. You also

have 5 cards in black as opposed to 1 and 2 in Red and White respectively. Also, Green and Black are so deep in this incredibly deep pack you can likely get 2 picks out of it. This is very helpful since you are already short on playables and don't really have the tools to go 5-color. So I think we can eliminate Bandit and Patron.

I like the Shinobi, and it is a Rat for the Marrow-Gnawer, but honestly the card isn't quite as good in Green-Black as it is in White or Blue-Black. Also you are likely to see one later on. In a pack this powerful it may even lap. So goodbye Shinobi.

Unchecked Growth is the more powerful card, but with Devouring Greed, Soil Shaper, and Kami of the Hunt, I think this deck wants Gnarled Mass more. While Growth helps all these cards too (it helps Greed because it pushed through damage and helps a spirit survive combat), I think the Mass just helps them more. Also your early game is pretty weak.

Gnarled Mass is the pick for me, though I wouldn't fault anyone for taking Unchecked Growth.

You can see the two differing approaches taken by these two players here. Ken is going down the green-black route to the point where he doesn't even really consider the red or white cards too much. If this is the route you want to take this is definitely the right way to do it.

Tim also dismisses the red cards from consideration, but he is thinking about moving down the green-white-black route. You can see how his choices differ from Ken's because of this decision.

## My Choice

My personal preference is for a two-colour deck. I'm a big fan of consistency and I think that with the GGG of Jugan and the BB of Greed and Befoul you don't want to put any further strains on the manabase of the deck. Going into *Betrayers*, I would hope that you could draft Skullsnatcher and Takenuma Bleeder to add to the early aggression of the deck and that you could grab a Child of Thorns or Gnarled Mass to further increase the Spirit count of the deck. Horobi's Whisper is the best you can get but it's unlikely you'd get passed one beyond the 2nd or 3rd pick. I would be more inclined to go with either Patron of the Kitsune or Torrent of Stone if either of those colours had been available in the first pack but with both of them cut off completely I wouldn't expect to receive anything else great in either of red or white for the remainder of the draft.

Almost all the green uncommons are very good in this deck – Budoka Pupil, Genju of the Cedars, Forked-Branch Garami and even Loam Dweller and Lifespinner would all be great additions. With the green being passed so late in pack one it's not unrealistic to hope to get passed something decent from that selection. However if the good cards didn't come I would still consider the option of splashing the two good white cards from *Champions* to help fill out the deck.

Given my choice to try and focus on green-black the only decision left is whether to take Unchecked Growth or Gnarled Mass. I like Gnarled Mass a lot in this deck; it's exactly the sort of creature you're looking for really. It's a great Soulshift target for the Rootrunner and Scuttling Death and it's a solid early drop that will put pressure on the opponent, which will let your array of finishers do their job. On the other hand I'd also note that this deck is rather lacking in the combat trick department and the Growth really is an excellent trick. It will give +4/+4 and trample more often than not and I agree with Ken's statement that it will help keep a Spirit alive and deal damage to an opponent, thus setting them up for a game-ending Devouring Greed. I also think that Gnarled Mass is a common that will most likely make it around the draft table to you if there is one opened in any of the packs to your right. Even if it doesn't Takenuma Bleeder is a slightly weaker alternative that could still fulfil the same role.

I really want to have a couple of Gnarled Masses in this deck but I think that Unchecked Growth is a better pick right now as it's slightly more powerful and you're unlikely to pick one up later on in the

draft whereas there's every chance you'll be in a position to get a Gnarled Mass or two later on. I'm going with the reader's vote this week and selecting Unchecked Growth as my pick from this pack.

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