

The Betrayer of Kamigawa

Search

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First came *Champions of Kamigawa*, and it was indeed filled with all sorts of champions. Eight-and-a-Half-Tails is a champ. Meloku the Clouded Mirror is a champ. Seshiro the Anointed; Kumano, Master Yamabushi; and Kiku, Night's Flower are champions all.

Next will come *Saviors of Kamigawa* (translation for our British friends who have no idea what I'm talking about: *Saviours of Kamigawa*), and it will be filled with all sorts of saviors. Saviors such as, uh, Billy Bob the Unfortunately Short and, probably, Gertrude the Nervous Milkmaid. Yeah. You'll be blown away by the day-saving heroics of Jimbo, Who Likes Grilled Cheese Sandwiches. Oh, they'll conduct operas to praise the saviortastic savoring of Yolonda the Quizzically Bemused and Phil, Assistant Bowling Coach. And let's not leave out the legendary Goblin who has claimed lordship over the Sokenzan silver mine, because Eeny-Meeny, Mine Daimyo will undoubtedly be the chase rare of the set.

But where are we now? Right in the thick of the *Betrayers of Kamigawa* set. And who are the betrayers of Kamigawa? Some think they're the Ninjas. Nope. Some think they're the Humans who flip into legendary Spirits. Uh-uh. It's not the Patrons, or the green Samurai, or the Lover of Goats. But lean in close, because I'll tell you who the betrayer is. Ready? The real betrayer is...

Me.

Today I'm going to betray everything I believe in. I'm going to sell out my own people—the Johnnies—in an act of cowardly power-grabbing the likes of which haven't been seen since Gertrude the Nervous Milkmaid's grandfather changed his name from Howard the Militant Vegan to Howie the Cattle Rancher. I will turn my back on the Johnnies by embracing the deadliest, most reviled threat ever released in our—I'm sorry, ever released in *their* lifetime. At the same time, I will abandon my other constituency, the sprightly, doe-eyed legions who enjoy casual **Magic**, by wallowing in the muddy goodness of a high-powered (and expensive) tournament card. I speak, of course, of Cranial Extraction.



Seeing the Lite

But first, a quick detour. A reminder of what life should be like at House of Cards. A glimpse into the idyllic dreamland where I don't gorge on rare cards and tournament staples. A Lite deck.

Over two years ago, before I was the House of Cards columnist, a fellow by the name of Jay Moldenhauer-Salazar wrote it. He regularly featured "Lite" decks—decks with no rares in them whatsoever. When I picked up the mantle from Jay, I continued the practice and frequently included Lite decks here. It was difficult, though. I don't live in the real world. I'm camped out in Wizards of the Coast R&D, and I have a fully stocked **Magic Online** account (4 of every card, but I can't trade or play in sanctioned tournaments). Therefore, card rarity is oddly invisible to me; for my playtesting purposes, any card is as available as any other. I'm drawn to rare cards (which is really the whole

point of rare cards) since they're more apt than commons or uncommons to be especially narrow, or funky, or disrespected—all of which make me want to build decks around them. When Nate Heiss's Building on a Budget column appeared, that satisfied the no-need-to-take-out-a-second-mortgage niche on the website, so in the interest of a) not stepping on Nate's toes, and b) shrugging off the T-shirt of responsibility so I could skinny-dip in the creek of freedom, I stopped building Lite decks and let myself use whatever cards I wanted all the time. (As for whatever happened to Jay Moldenhauer-Salazar... well, no one really knows...)

Like anyone who breaks a diet, though, I felt guilty. Was a deck loaded with 30 rares really a "casual" deck? Sure, in the sense that it was amusing and entertaining and a fascinating creative endeavor. It was casual as opposed to tournament-level; it was casual as opposed to rigidly serious. But not all the decks could be easily recreated by you in your living room. That's OK—if a deck or even a combo gave you an idea for a deck you *could* create in your living room, I did my job.



Still, Guillaume Tardieu (which I believe translates to William, the French God of Tar) felt it was high time to show that rareless combo decks can still exist. He found an infinite mana combo that only uses 3 cards, none of them rare! Four cards if you count the victory condition that uses the infinite mana. Seven cards if you count the necessary three lands you need in play. Thirteen cards if you count the six cards you must have in your graveyard before you start the combo. Ah, who's counting?

Guillaume's combo is similar to the Forbidden Orchard-Intruder Alarm-Lifespark Spellbomb infinite mana combo. It doesn't use rare cards like the Orchard and the Alarm, so all that's left is Lifespark Spellbomb. The idea is to have Krosan Restorer enchanted with Aura of Dominion. Sac the Spellbomb to turn one of your lands into a creature, which must also give you threshold if you didn't have it already. Now you have a scenario in which it takes 2 lands to untap the Restorer via the

Aura (one land for mana and one land because it's a creature), and the Restorer then untaps 3 lands (those two, plus one more you tapped for an extra mana). Each iteration thus gains you 1 mana, and eventually you funnel it all through a Goblin Cannon.

This is an extremely fragile combo. You have to find all the pieces. You have to achieve threshold. The Restorer and the Aura are both very easy to kill. If Goblin Cannon is countered, the Lifespark Spellbomb effect will wear off and you'll need to find two more pieces to the combo before trying again. That being said, it's a cheap deck to assemble and it's beautiful when it hits. The decklist below is the same as Guillaume's except that I replaced 2 Long-Term Plans with 2 Fabricate and 4 Probe with 4 Moment's Peace. Careful Study might be even better.

Fillet Dominion Lite! .txt

Main Deck
60 cards

7 Forest	4 Krosan Restorer	4 Aura of Dominion
9 Island	4 Steel Wall	2 Fabricate
		4 Goblin Cannon

4 Lonely Sandbar	4 Thought Courier	4 Lifespark Spellbomb
4 Tranquil Thicket	4 Wall of Mulch	2 Long-Term Plans
24 lands	16 creatures	4 Moment's Peace
		20 other spells

Can I Borrow a Cup of Brain?

A personal message to my integrity: You sucker! I can't believe how gullible you are. Oh, I had you fooled. Fooled big time. But don't feel bad. From the moment I met you, I knew I would destroy you.

Cranial Extraction may be the worst card ever printed for combo decks. I was playing against someone who got out Energy Chamber, Coretapper, and Skeleton Shard on the first four turns. Then I played Cranial Extraction. I don't *know* my opponent was playing a Darksteel Reactor deck. I didn't even get to name Darksteel Reactor, because my opponent conceded immediately. He didn't even wait for me to possibly guess wrong. No, Cranial Extraction just single-handedly annihilated his entire plan. He could have still conceivably beaten me with Coretapper beatdown and (I'm guessing) Death Clouds. But in reality, the game was over.

So how could I be embracing the card that is the size-13 boot that stomps on fun, squishing its gooey guts out between the treads of its sole? Why would I want to track fun guts into the room? Because I can make it work for me. I can use it not (just) to disembowel goofy decks but to be a key component of goofiness itself. It might even learn something.

First up is Canopus Rex's deck that was inspired by the tales from the last Reject Rare Draft. Paul Sottosanti's charismatic wielding of Booby Trap inspired Canopus to discover the sick, sick Lantern of Insight-Booby Trap combo. Assuming your opponent doesn't have a Sakura-Tribe Elder or some other shuffle effect sitting on the board, having the top card of each library revealed means your "guess" on Booby Trap will be a pretty high-percentage play.

That's 10 damage. Where's the rest come from? Canopus Rex's plan was to use Psychogenic Probe and lots of effects that make your opponent shuffle his library (Rootwater Thief, Soldier of Fortune, etc.) The most compelling of these was Mindblaze. It's Booby Trapesque, and it's another 10 damage if you have Psychogenic Probe on the board. The key for me is that Mindblaze interacts with Lantern of Insight as well. You don't want to guess with Mindblaze; you want to know you've got it right. If you play a second-turn Extract, for example, you'll see exactly what's in your opponent's library, so you'll be ready for a dead-on Mindblaze. But your opponent will draw some cards before you can get the Mindblaze off, so you're back to guessing. If Lantern of Insight were in play, however, you'd see every card your opponent draws, so you have perfect knowledge of what's left in the deck. No guessing required!




This is where Cranial Extraction comes in. It causes your opponent's library to get shuffled, so it triggers Psychogenic Probe. It gives you a clear look inside your opponent's library, so you're set up to Mindblaze. And yes, it can kneecap your opponent's deck by removing the part most likely to slap

you silly. Sometimes that alone wins the game. Usually it just buys you time—time you need if you intend to win with Mindblaze and Booby Trap.

Here's my take on an Online Extended version of the deck. Note that in this version, Booby Trap isn't included because it's not online. Also note the fetch lands, which are *not* a combo with Psychogenic Probe. They are good with Sensei's Divining Top, as well as to help the mana fixing in a 3-color deck, so they're still in there, but it might be a bad plan.

Grog's Revenge




Main Deck
60 cards

2 Bloodstained Mire	_____	4 Cranial Extraction
4 Island	0 creatures	2 Darksteel Ingot
3 Mirrodin's Core		4 Eradicate
2 Mountain		4 Extract
2 Polluted Delta		2 Fabricate
2 Shivan Reef		3 Lantern of Insight
2 Sulfurous Springs		2 Lobotomy
4 Swamp		4 Mindblaze
1 Tendo Ice Bridge		3 Psychogenic Probe
2 Underground River		4 Pyroclasm
_____		4 Sensei's Divining Top
24 lands		_____
		36 other spells

This deck needs Booby Trap; it's just not the same without it. Adding four more 6-mana spells means the deck gets even more top-heavy, but it also means it's easier for you to win. I'd try something like this and see how it played.

Headaches



Main Deck
60 cards

4 Island	_____	4 Booby Trap
4 Mirrodin's Core	0 creatures	3 Cranial Extraction
2 Mountain		4 Darksteel Ingot
3 Shivan Reef		2 Eradicate
3 Sulfurous Springs		3 Extract
4 Swamp		4 Fabricate
1 Tendo Ice Bridge		3 Lantern of Insight
3 Underground River		2 Lobotomy
_____		4 Mindblaze
24 lands		

3 Psychogenic Probe

4 Pyroclasm

36 other spells

Deconstructionism

Here's where things get out of hand. One of the most interesting cards in *Betrayers* is Sway of the Stars. The most obvious uses for it are to blink out a creature (such as Hikari, Twilight Guardian or Anurid Brushhopper) before resetting the game, or to play Sway of the Stars while you have mana floating so you can play some kind of threat after drawing a new hand of 7 cards.

I'm not a "most obvious uses" kind of guy. Well, OK, I am—I've already gone the blinky creatures route. But is there a different path? A weirder path? An infinitely more annoying path?

Yup.

See, when I was pondering Sway of the Stars, I was still thinking about the Mindblaze deck. And what jumped out at me was Cranial Extraction. Let's say I play Cranial Extraction to remove a key element of your deck from the game. Later, I play Sway of the Stars. You're going to essentially start the game over, but with an abridged (and thus weakened) deck. Meanwhile, Sway has helped me by shuffling Cranial Extraction back into my deck! My deck is the same every time, both pre- and post-Sway (I race to 10 mana, removing more and more of your stuff from the game along the way, then play Sway), but yours gets increasingly decrepit as we go. As a bonus, the first Sway makes you lose 13 life, while it keeps my life total about even—I'm not even going to bother playing Sway the first time unless I'm in danger of losing the game.





How your deck works determines how many times I have to reset the game. I played against a Door to Nothingness deck that just took one Sway and one Cranial Extraction to end it. I played against a Zubera deck that took *three* Sways (and I almost pulled the trigger on the fourth, which I was holding, because I had 10 lands in play and was down to 2 life before stabilizing). When that game ended, the only possible threats left in the opposing deck were a single Thief of Hope, one Ashen-Skin Zubera, and a Hearth Kami. Every other creature and damage source was sitting forlornly in the removed from game zone—and the remaining Thief and Zubera were in the graveyard. That was finally the point at which a Solemn Simulacrum could swing in 4 times for the win.

How does the deck jump up to 10 mana? The usual way: Sakura-Tribe Elder, Kodama's Reach, and Solemn Simulacrum. (I tried Heartbeat of Spring in here too, but it was never necessary.) How does it shorten opposing decks in preparation

for the next go-round? Cranial Extraction, Eradicate, a Quash, a Splinter, and my favorite of the bunch: Scrabbling Claws. It's a good soulshift countermeasure, but usually it just looks like it's wasting time. My opponent doesn't realize the future devastation it's setting up until long after it's done it's thing. The inestimable Hideous Laughter keeps me alive and puts opposing creatures in the graveyard to Scramble away.

The end result is a deck that uses plenty of the most powerful and ubiquitous cards in the current Standard environment—there are a lot of tournament staples in there. But the way they all come together to wrest control of a game and win are pure oddball. I just feel bad for all the combo decks that get in its way.

Disassembly Line  

Main Deck
60 cards

8 Forest	4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	3 Cranial Extraction
4 Island	4 Solemn Simulacrum	2 Diabolic Tutor
4 Mirrodin's Core	_____	2 Eradicate
6 Swamp	8 creatures	4 Hideous Laughter
2 Tendo Ice Bridge		4 Kodama's Reach
_____		1 Quash
24 lands		3 Scrabbling Claws
		4 Sensei's Divining Top
		1 Splinter
		4 Sway of the Stars

		28 other spells

Until next week, have fun being betrayed.

Mark

