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With the pre-release events for *Saviours of Kamigawa* just a few days away I wanted to take some time to discuss those events and how you might get the most from them. Prerelease events have the most fun, and the most casual atmosphere of any organised tournaments. Everyone is excited to get their first look at the new cards and it's almost always a sealed deck format so there's plenty of time to browse through the cards you'll be playing over the coming months. The thing is, just because it is a fun event doesn't therefore mean you have to play *just* for fun. Getting your hands on the new cards is great but who wouldn't want to be the one who took home a box of *Saviours* boosters should the opportunity present itself? Well, there are a few things you can do to give yourself a better than average chance of being in that position.

Be Informed

Prior to any set's release you can find out information on specific cards ahead of schedule. Sites like this one, and many of the different CCG magazines regularly preview cards and you'll usually find they preview the interesting ones that illustrate the new themes and mechanics in the set. If you think it spoils the fun by looking at them then by all means avoid them but there'll always be a ton of cards you haven't seen before the pre-release and being aware of a few doesn't really spoil the fun for most people.

By being aware of what the set is about ahead of schedule you can then think about the existing cards you'll be playing with and how they interact with that set. Already we've seen cards like Okina Nightwatch, Thoughts of Ruin and Kagemaro that are dependent upon the number of cards in your hand. It's not unreasonable to assume that this "cards in your hand" theme may well be present on numerous cards throughout the set; indeed if we look up 'cards' in the Orb of Insight we get 56 occurrences of this word in the set, so who knows how many cards will fit this theme!

If the theme does end up being big (I don't know, I'm not a Wizards employee and have seen just as many cards as you guys!) then the blue Soratami flyers from *Champions of Kamigawa* might suddenly find their value rising even more than they are right now as they're able to 'turn on' certain effects like those of this little guy that was previewed in Scrye:



A card like this would normally be very difficult to 'turn on', as getting seven cards in hand is quite difficult later on in a game. As a result anything that allows you to put cards in your hand is going to be worth extra consideration, and it's probably safe to assume that *Saviors* will indeed have cards that do just that. When you're building your sealed deck at the pre-release it'll be important to note interactions like this.

In addition to that there are other obvious interactions that can be gleaned from the set itself. The "Sweep" mechanic as seen on Barrel Down Sokenzan that Mark Gottlieb is previewing in his column today is another card that has the bonus of increasing the number of cards in your hand at instant speed. I can already envision people attacking with their Okina Nightwatch while having 1 less card in hand than their opponent. The opponent, believing himself safe, blocks with a suitable 3/3 monster and then Barrel Down Sokenzan comes into play returning three Mountains, killing another creature and taking down the blocker as the extra cards in hand make the Nightwatch a 7/6 again.

Know the Commons

The most important cards in any set for limited purposes are the commons. You'll see these far more often than the uncommons and rares and these are the cards that'll form the backbone of any deck. In the pre-release format for a minor set you'll usually get three boosters of the new set – in this case *Saviors* – and as a result lots of people will end up with multiple copies of some of the best commons.

Some of the commons will be previewed before the set but the previews often relate more to the uncommons and rares, as these are usually more interesting for constructed purposes. We don't care about constructed in this column though so it's the commons we're primarily interested in! When you're at the pre-release ask around your friends and get them to show you the cards they've opened; the ones not in their deck as well as the ones they're playing with. With each player opening 33 commons from the set it shouldn't take you long to identify all of the important ones. You

especially want to make note of any instant speed combat tricks, as knowledge of these will help you make the correct decisions during your games. If you know there is a Serpent Skin or Hundred-Talon Strike in the set you can play around them where it's possible to do so.

It's also being aware of the common finishers so you know when you might be facing one. If you face a player who seems to be being careful with his Spirits then you'll want to know if there's a Devouring Greed or Devouring Rage in the set for example. That way you'll know when you should be racing as hard as possible or when you should be using your removal.

Read the cards

This one sounds so obvious but there will be countless games at every pre-release that are lost simply because a card has been misread. In this format there are a few things you need to be aware of in addition to simply the card text – namely whether or not a creature is a Spirit and whether or not a spell is Arcane.

You'll need to be aware of both of these things, as there'll obviously be several new Soulshift creatures and several new Splice-onto-Arcane cards in the set as well as the usual array of Spirits and Arcane cards. Take this example (also previewed by Scrye) of one of the *Saviours* cards that's bound to become a staple common over the coming months:



I think that'll be playable in most decks as a cheap one drop and a little guy that can jump in front of opposing 2/1s. Its value will be very dependent upon the rest of your deck though. If you have the sort of deck where you can get three or four uses out of it it'll really be an excellent little card. It'll also function as a playable Instant speed Arcane card that can be used as a Splice vehicle itself and as an Instant speed trigger for any Spiritcraft effects. Paying attention to cards like this is especially important as knowing which of the new cards will trigger your Kami of the Hunt and whether you

have enough Splice targets to make that Glacial Ray splash really worthwhile could mean the difference between winning and losing.

The most obvious thing to be aware of is whether or not a spell is an Instant or Sorcery. If you leave this card (previewed in Lotus Noir) in your hand until your opponent's turn...



...you're going to be looking a little foolish. So make sure you know in advance which of your *Saviours* cards can be cast in your opponent's turn. Pay extra attention to any special clauses on them too; so many people read Indomitable Will at the *Champions* pre-release and just assumed Midnight Covenant was the same sort of card. In fact, the difference there is huge; if you could play Midnight Covenant at instant speed it would probably be quite playable!

Reviewing *Betrayers*

The other thing I'd like to cover in today's article is a quick review of where the format stands right now. *Betrayers* has been around for nigh on four months now so most of you should be getting pretty familiar with it. I had a quick read through my initial *Betrayers* to see how things have changed since the set first hit and there have been a few re-evaluations that should be discussed.

In white everything is basically the same as we first expected. I don't think most people, myself included, really appreciated just how good Waxmane Baku actually is and for me it has leapt ahead of Torrent of Stone and Horobi's Whisper as the best common in the set. In the past few months the little Baku has won me so many games where a single point removal spell would not have gotten the job done.

Split-Tail Miko still comes in second here but I like Moonlit Strider a little more than I did previously. This may be because white's three mana Spirits – Kabuto Moth and Waxmane Baku – are just so powerful and always get killed on sight. When you draft white you will often find yourself drafting blue

along with it simply because green-white and red-white aren't particularly good combinations right now. As a result having a four mana four toughness blocker is quite relevant to help you stall the ground and if they do kill it you can usually get something useful Soulshifted back.

Overall white seems to have done best out of all the colours as it has plenty more playable commons in addition to these. I'm liking Heart of Light main-deck a lot more these days as it provides an excellent solution to big ground-pounders as well as annoying cards like Frostwielder and Matsu-Tribe Sniper than blue-white is traditionally unable to deal with. With the Miko and the Strider taking a high place in white's commons the colour has gotten a little more controlling. The good white decks tend to be the more traditional white-blue or occasionally black-white Spirit-control decks. The red-white aggro decks that were popular in *Champions* only drafts have mostly fallen by the wayside as a booster packs worth of Samurais has been replaced with the slower cards in this set.

Originally I put Ninja of the Deep Hours ahead of Shimmering Glasskite but the Glasskite definitely should be ranked number one in the blue commons. The Ninja is an acceptable card but the tempo loss it gives is significant and unless you can pull off a Soratami Mirror-Guard or Phantom Wings combo then you'll rarely get a second hit in with it. The Glasskite on the other hand has proven it's worth numerous times attacking unmolested past Kitsune Diviners and Matsu-Tribe Snipers alike. Sure it can be killed by being targeted with a 'free' effect first, but that's hardly a drawback. The three toughness means it can often put in adequate blocking duties when it first comes into play as well. The rest of this colour very mediocre. Cards like Mistblade Shinobi, Toils of Night and Day and Veil of Secrecy are all quite playable but none of these come close to white's third pick of Moonlit Strider. Blue takes it position as a support colour in the majority of decks as it simply isn't deep enough in this set to support a major part of most decks.

In Black, Horobi's Whisper still obviously rules the roost. I'd personally put Takenuma Bleeder ahead of Okiba-Gang Shinobi at this stage as I've rarely had the Shinobi get more than two cards out of my hand and although two cards is painful the opponent loses an awful lot of time and tempo to get those and sometimes that's been enough to swing the game against them. The Bleeder on the other hand is almost impossible to attack into on turn three and when it hits it hit's pretty hard. It's quite easy to race it as it's only really dealing two damage a turn in a race situation and for a three drop that's not great. But sometimes you aren't racing and then the Bleeder will deal a good amount of damage and probably wind up trading for something more expensive than itself. The Shinobi is still fine and Skullsnatcher is an acceptable two-drop in a set that doesn't have too many of them. Black fits in with almost any of the colours although the black-green Soulshift/Greed decks have been weakened a little as there really isn't too much in black for them. They do have Gnarled Mass in green but those sorts of decks tend to have quite heavy black components and the mana can sometimes be tricky with the Gnarled Mass in too.

Red seemed initially fairly weak outside of Torrent of Stone but Frost Ogre and Frostling have both proved their worth over the last few months. On top of those Goblin Cohort, First Volley and Blademane Baku have all been respectable as well although those last two creatures really need to both be in the same deck. Red has turned out pretty respectably and is still quite draftable even after losing a set's worth of Glacial Rays and Yamabushi's Flames. As I said the aggressive red decks tend not to have a white element any more simply because the best white card in the set is Waxmane Baku and red-white is not a colour combination that has a lot of Spirits. Instead the aggressive decks tend to be red-black or red-green although it's the red-black decks that are normally faster with the inclusion of Skullsnatcher and the Bleeder in this set. Red still makes a good companion for blue though as although Glacial Ray doesn't appear quite as often, instead there is the potentially powerful Ire of Kaminari, which routinely makes it around the table as a good late pick. If you pick up a Glacial Ray early on then blue is still a great colour to aim for to back it up.

The final colour to talk about is green. Gnarled Mass remains the best common in this colour but one of the more surprising cards for me is Sakura-Tribe Springcaller. In a world full of Feral Deceivers and

Order of the Sacred Bell who would have thought the four mana 2/4 would get a look in. The Springcaller's large toughness means he's a much better blocker than those other aforementioned cards the turn in which he hits play and the mana he generates has often proven very useful in tight games. He's obviously a lot better if you can get a Snake theme going as opposed to the more traditional Spirit theme but he's very playable in any deck. He's taken my spot for second best green common in the set. Green still has a fairly high number of weak cards but due to its current general unpopularity you can usually get solid picks from it fairly late in a pack right now.

That's it for this week. Unfortunately next week's column will be submitted before I get a chance to look at the new set in its entirety but hopefully that'll give me an extra few days to form some strong opinions on it before I start talking about it in two weeks time. In the meantime, go have a blast at the prerelease!

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