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"WAKE UP, MARK," the raspy voice boomed. And when I say "raspy," I mean a hundred rusty metal files in a blender. And when I say "boomed," I mean TNT exploding inside a subwoofer.

I'm a pretty deep sleeper, though. Noise doesn't do it for me. Fire does, however, so after quickly disposing of my burning pajamas, I was wide awake.

"Huh. I don't remember going to sleep in a fire cave that's faintly echoing with the screams of a million anguished souls locked in eternal torment."



"YOU DIDN'T. I HAVE SUMMONED YOU HERE."

"What? Why? This doesn't make any sense!"

"QUIET, PUNY MORTAL. IF WHINING WORKED ON ME, DO YOU THINK ANYONE WOULD BE HERE RIGHT NOW?"

"Sure, B.L. Zebub, fair point, but you *know* this isn't right! Our poker game is on *Thursdays*. And as we've established, I like to drive here myself so I can stop and get milk on the way home."

"THIS ISN'T PERSONAL, MARK. THIS IS BUSINESS."

"Whoa. Who-ho-ho-hoa. One, I had no idea that was a live salmon. Two, everyone knows there's an exception for the vernal equinox. And three, you still owe me twenty bucks from last week, so... let's just call it even, OK?"

"NICE TRY. THAT'S EXACTLY WHY I LOOK FORWARD TO SPENDING ETERNITY TORTURING YOU. THAT AND THE SUPERVILLAIN THING."

"Oh, that? That's just schtick. I'm not really a supervillain. It's just fiction I write for a silly website. It's a persona. It allows me to temporarily quell my insecurities and inferiority complex by inhabiting a personality that's fearsome and in control. It's overcompensation more than anything else."

"OH, PLEASE. WHO DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DEALING WITH? SAVE THE FLIMSY LIES FOR YOUR U.N. TRIBUNAL. OH, INCIDENTALLY, IF YOU NEED A LAWYER FOR THAT, LET ME KNOW. I'VE GOT SO MANY DOWN HERE EVEN *I'M* BEGINNING TO FIND THIS PLACE AN INTERMINABLE NIGHTMARE."

"See? A "lawyers in Hell" joke! I told you I was a hack! You can't believe anything I write!"

"QUIT GETTING META. THIS IS SERIOUS."

"OK, what's the problem?"

"THE FLAVOR TEXT ON FLARING PAIN HAS BEEN BUGGING ME FOR YEARS.

"That's a quote from Matoc, Lavamancer. He says 'I don't rub salt in wounds. I use sulfur.' So?"

"YOU CREATED THE LAVAMANCER MATOC?"

"Yeah."

"YOU WROTE THIS PIECE?"

"Yeah."

"SULFUR DOESN'T WORK THAT WAY! IT WOULDN'T CAUSE MORE PAIN THAN SALT WHEN RUBBED IN A WOUND! IT WOULDN'T DO *ANYTHING* WHEN RUBBED IN A WOUND! BY THE WAY, IT'S KIND OF ANNOYING THAT I ALREADY SPEAK IN ALL CAPS BECAUSE IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO DENOTE WHEN I'M YELLING. I'M YELLING NOW! AND THE ALL-CAPS THING JUST MAKES ME ANGRIER!"

"OK, Mr. Science Class. I'm sure you're the expert on rubbing sulfur in wounds."

"WHAT DO YOU THINK BRIMSTONE IS? BRIMSTONE IS SULFUR! I'VE BEEN RUBBING SULFUR IN WOUNDS FOR, OH, LET ME THINK, *ETERNITY*! EXCEPT FOR THE UNPLEASANT ROTTEN-EGG SMELL, IT DOESN'T HAVE ANY PAIN-ENHANCING PROPERTIES!"

"Ah. I see. All right, you got me. I needed something pithy that would fit on a single line. I figured 99% of players wouldn't know enough chemistry—or have the hands-on experience—to know better. It *sounds* cool, and that's what matters. That's why it's called "flavor text," not "science text." Anyway, you're way off topic. This is Fire Week."

"IT IS? I THOUGHT IT WAS BRIMSTONE WEEK."

"Nope."

"OH, I GET THOSE CONFUSED ALL THE TIME. IT ALL KINDA BLENDS TOGETHER AFTER A WHILE, YOU KNOW? WELL, HEY, HELL IS REAL FIERY. I EVEN SET YOU ON FIRE AT THE BEGINNING. THAT'S GOTTA COUNT FOR SOMETHING."

"Not a lot."

"WELL, UM, I CAN COMPLAIN ABOUT MORE STUFF. HOW ABOUT PYRITE SPELLBOMB? PYRITE IS FOOL'S GOLD. IT'S NOT THE LEAST BIT EXPLOSIVE!"




"Nice try. Can I go now? I need to buy some new pajamas."


"NO! SHOW ME SOME **MAGIC** DECKS I WOULD PERSONALLY ENJOY!"

"Fine, fine. Anything for you, B.L. Zebub."

Captain Obvious Pops in for Tea

I'm not going to win any Nobel prizes for theme complexity on this one. Every card in the deck (except for basic lands) has "fire" in its name. This is not going to come as much of a surprise, but that leads to a fast deck with cheap creatures and plenty of burn. Get some critters on the table and keep attacking while you fry any blockers to a crisp. The deck archetype has been around since **Magic** has; this one is just more thematic.

Most of the creatures in the deck have destructive tendencies. Ghitu Fire-Eater is a creature until it's a Shock. (Equip it with Sword of Fire and Ice to double its direct damage.) Bogardan Firefiend and Fire Imp are  2/1 creatures that deal 2 damage to a creature: The Firefiend on the way out; the Imp on the way in. Both effects are mandatory, so watch out or you'll burn one of your own creatures. (No one ever said playing with fire was safe.) Fire Imp is a *Portal* card, which may account for some of its weirdness. It's an Imp, but it's red and doesn't fly. It's also exactly half of Flametongue Kavu except for its cost, which kind of implies Flametongue Kavu should have cost  . But what fun would that have been?

Fire in the Hole 		
Main Deck		
60 cards		
23 Mountain	4 Blistering Firecat	2 Fire Diamond
23 lands	2 Bogardan Firefiend	4 Fire Imp
	2 Ghitu Fire-Eater	1 Fireball
	2 Keldon Firebombers	3 Fireblast
	3 Longhorn Firebeast	2 Firebolt
	4 Slith Firewalker	1 Ghitu Fire
	17 creatures	4 Seal of Fire
		3 Sword of Fire and Ice
		20 other spells

I feel a bit guilty for the Fireblasts, since they're just nuts. What's especially fun is to float mana, sac 2 Mountains to Fireblast, then play Keldon Firebombers.

Undying Dying

"THAT DECK WAS ACCEPTABLE BUT UNINSPIRED. TRY HARDER!"

Right-o. How about a card that B.L. Zebub and I can enjoy equally? Undying Flames seems like a nice, cozy description of Hell, and it happens to be based on Erratic Explosion, the first card I designed. Epic Erratic Explosion seems like good times to me.

Once you play Undying Flames, your only job is to not die before the epic effect wins the game. But you can't play spells. Oh, dear me, whatever will you do? There are a few options that can keep you busy. Just because you can't play spells doesn't mean you'll sit around bored for the rest of the game.

Channel. You can play activated abilities, and channel is an activated ability in your hand. It's very, very similar to playing a spell except it's not. Ghost-Lit Raider and Jiwari, the Earth Aflame can remove pesky opposing creatures from the board



so you can stay alive and keep your epic copies pointed directly at your opponent's head.

Activated abilities of permanents already in play. This isn't as helpful as being able to use (somehow) a card that you draw, but it seems like a fine time to point out that if you can get Ghost-Lit Raider or Jiwari into play before playing Undying Flames, they'll act as repeatable creature control instead of one-shot creature control.

Cycling. The other activated ability that works in your hand, you can cycle away cards such as Solar Blast or Slice and Dice to deal even more damage, Chartooth Cougar to fetch up a Mountain, or Decree of Annihilation to Armageddon. It'll be hard to lose the game when you get a free Erratic Explosion every turn and your opponent has no lands. Hm. Note what high converted mana costs Slice and Dice, Chartooth Cougar, and (especially) Decree of Annihilation have! Must be a coincidence.

Lands. You can play lands to your heart's content. If some of them happen to turn into creatures once they're in play... well, you can't be blamed for that, can you?

I'm a little worried that there might not be enough red mana sources in the deck because I went heavy on the colorless lands that do stuff. It's seemed OK so far when goldfishing, but you might want to keep an eye on it. Either Inner Fire or Seething Song can enable playing Undying Flames on turn 4; both together can let you do it on turn 3. Seething Song is more reliable, but Inner Fire has a greater potential upside (and deals 1 more damage when flipped up by Undying Flames).

Burn, Baby, Burn

Main Deck
60 cards

2 Barbarian Ring	4 Chartooth Cougar	2 Decree of Annihilation
4 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 Ghost-Lit Raider	4 Howling Mine
1 Deserted Temple	4 Jiwari, the Earth Aflame	3 Inner Fire
4 Forgotten Cave	_____	3 Seething Song
1 Mikokoro, Center of the Sea	12 creatures	4 Slice and Dice
6 Mountain		4 Solar Blast
1 Petrified Field		4 Undying Flames
1 Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep		_____
4 Stalking Stones		24 other spells

24 lands		

What can ruin your day? True Believer is easily burned away, but Ivory Mask is game over. Pariah on a Dawn Elemental or an indestructible creature is also impossible to deal with once the epic effect is going (otherwise Decree of Annihilation could answer it). The deck can be pretty fast, though, so any kind of disruption your opponent has better step up in a hurry.

Trump Cards

"BETTER. BUT WHERE IS THE WACKY?"

One more deck to make my old pal happy. Fire Week has made me fixate on one thing more than anything else: The cloyingly grating catchphrase "You're fired!" said by the cloyingly grating Donald Trump. I know there's a VIP section of Hell cordoned off for "The Apprentice."



Luckily for me, I happen to have an advance copy of next season's "The Apprentice." There aren't going to be any surprises as far as casting goes. In fact, I think you'll be quite familiar with the personality archetypes—oops, sorry, I meant "characters"—oops, sorry, I really meant "people"—on the show. When you see it, I think you'll agree that they're all quite legendary.

Donald Trump

Self-righteous and insane, this leader of his own little empire is impossible to get rid of. We've tried. (Konda, Lord of Eiganjo, hailing from Eiganjo Castle... aka Trump Tower).

Carolyn

No-nonsense advisor to Trump who's always looking for the right person for the job. (Captain Sisay)

George

Trump's wizened advisor has seen it all, yet still learns from the exploits of the wacky Apprentice wannabes. (Reki, the History of Kamigawa)

And the contenders for the position...

Chaz, the golden boy.

He's been captain of the football team, leader of the debate club, student body president, yada yada yada. Carries a sense of entitlement coming out the wazoo and believes that winning is his birthright. (Gerrard Capashen, hailing from Sungrass Prairie)

Rachel, the scrappy girl from the wrong side of the tracks.

She's had to scratch and claw for everything she's ever earned. That behavior is so ingrained, though, that she has a massive inferiority complex, thinks everyone (especially the privileged) disrespect her, and picks fights at every opportunity. (Fumiko the Lowblood, hailing from Forgotten Cave)

Derek R., the corporate climber.

He doesn't care who he has to sell out to get ahead, and he thinks that his betrayal of the (in his mind) "weak links" to help himself and his team is an admirable quality—it makes his team stronger at both ends. Doesn't understand why everyone hates him. (Iizuka the Ruthless, hailing from Mossfire Valley)

Priscilla, the killjoy.

Has no sense of humor whatsoever. Continually exhorts her team to "Focus! This is not a game, people!" Gets in a snit whenever her teammates have fun because she thinks she's the only one taking the competition seriously. (Masako the Humorless, hailing from Brushland)

Amy, the sweetheart... who's secretly highly vindictive.

Crafty editing makes her seem like a darling until episode 5, when her true colors start to show. Takes *everything* personally. Suspicious to the point of paranoid. Questions everyone's actions looking for hidden plots. Holds grudges over slights no matter how imaginary or trivial, and dishes out explosive payback. (Michiko Konda, Truth Seeker, hailing from Flooded Strand)

Karyn, the martyr.

Extremely averse to conflict, she throws herself on her sword at every opportunity. She deflects blame from other people to herself, and inserts herself into personal arguments between contestants.

Favorite phrases are “There’s no need to yell,” and “It was probably my fault.” (Opal-Eye, Konda's Yojimbo, hailing from Forbidden Orchard)

Helen, the highly competent professional.

Her leadership and coordination skills are through the roof. She facilitates communication between teammates, ameliorates personality conflicts, and enables her team to perform to the best of its capacity. She’s fired in Week 2. (Atalya, Samite Master, hailing from Secluded Steppe)

Derek C., the loose cannon.

Doesn’t take the competition that seriously. Injects chaos into the proceedings whenever possible. Will happily hurt his own team if it’ll hurt the other team too. Figures that he’s better at holding up under adversity and mind-boggling failure than most of the other competitors, so why not create those situations and make everyone else panic? (Heartless Hidetsugu, hailing from Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep)

Steve, the coaster.

Gets by on good looks and charisma. Doesn’t think too hard. Slavish devotion to the gym. Plays by intuition; forethought and strategy aren’t his strong suits and he’s never needed them before. Openly invites competition because he figures he’ll probably win—he usually does. (Iwamori of the Open Fist, hailing from Wooded Foothills)

R.J., the crook.

Steals, lies, and cheats with no remorse; he calls it “shrewd business tactics.” Takes any advantage available, and creates one if necessary. Has no problem with theft because “possession is nine-tenths of the law.” Fiercely loyal to his own team, whom he “helps” this way whether they like it or not; out to destroy the other team in any way possible. “It’s not personal, it’s just business.” (Godo, Bandit Warlord, hailing from Ravaged Highlands)

Wally, the thinker.

Thoughtful and contemplative, Wally has a Zen-like calm that serves him well in high-pressure situations. Everyone else resents his seeming detachment and considers him aloof. Speaks softly but forcefully, and when he offers ideas, they are compelling enough that the rest of his team must begrudgingly accept them. Has saved teammates on more than one occasion, which just heightens the resentment. (Isao, Enlightened Bushi, hailing from Tinder Farm)

Jack, the veteran.

Has plenty of business experience under his belt. Knows the tricks of the trade and has strong motivational techniques. Continually frustrated by the impulsiveness and relative business naiveté of the other competitors. Doesn’t understand why they don’t respect him as an elder statesman and listen to his opinions. Equally frustrated by the arbitrariness of the tasks, which actually have very little to do with business skills. (Takeno, Samurai General, hailing from Abandoned Outpost)

Jerry, the hustler.

Fast-talking and overconfident, manages to find a way out of tight spots and make everyone else forget that he was at fault. Has talked himself out of three boardroom firings, and is so good at it that he realizes he doesn’t need to contribute too much to his team during tasks. Rumors abound among the other players that his prior experience wasn’t as a businessman—it was as a con man. (Kentaro, the Smiling Cat, hailing from Windswept Heath)

Lars, the stand-up guy.

Honest and noble, he genuinely gives his best effort to help his team at all times. Shoulders more than his fair share of the work when his teammates realize this “weakness.” It’s unclear whether he doesn’t understand the others are taking advantage of him, doesn’t care that they are, or doesn’t know how to rectify the situation. Since he visibly does the brunt of the work on tasks, his head is on

the chopping block whenever his "team" loses. (Nagao, Bound by Honor, hailing from Battlefield Forge)

Danielle, the psycho.

Impulsive and heedless, she doesn't take direction, makes incomprehensible decisions when she's in charge, and seemingly doesn't hear anyone else talk. Conversations with her devolve into screaming matches within minutes. Simply put, scares the rest of the competitors. (Jeska, Warrior Adept, hailing from Pinecrest Ridge)

Skyler, the enigma.

Seems to have his own agenda, which doesn't necessarily include playing the game. Never says anything during boardrooms. Occasionally comes up with brilliant ideas, occasionally seems to be vacationing on Mars. Doesn't get a lot of camera time. (Rune-Tail, Kitsune Ascendant, hailing from Tranquil Garden)

The rest of the deck is filled with Apprentice-appropriate things and events:

Konda's Banner: Trump's empire... and self-promotion.

Liar's Pendulum: Lying? On a reality show? What are the odds?

Culling Scales: Another person is fired during a boardroom each week.

Rebuking Ceremony: The boardroom.

Browbeat, Chastise, Threaten: What Trump & company do in the boardroom; what team leaders do during tasks.

Pariah: The one who's fired.

Well of Lost Dreams: Yeah, getting fired will crush your dreams.

Miren, the Moaning Well: And make you cry. (Nice "well" sub-theme.)

Renewed Faith: A boardroom reprieve can bolster your spirits!

Test of Endurance: One of the weekly tasks. (Win and you're not getting fired!)

Shared Triumph: Winning a task with your team.

Panic Attack: A panic attack? On a reality show? What are the odds?

Time of Need: Trump apparently needs to find his Apprentice. A lot.

Day of Destiny: When the Apprentice is hired.

Final Judgment: Ditto.

Call to Glory: Ditto. (Hey, it's important.)

Other goodies that didn't make it in but are oh-so-flavorful include Demoralize, Breaking Point, Guilty Conscience, Insolence, Reward the Faithful, Stand Firm, and (my favorite) Narcissism.

And what about the deck we wind up with? It's a legend-themed, Samurai-themed, lifegain-themed deck. Atalya and Gerrard, with help from Miren, Chastise, and Renewed Faith, can get you up to 30 life to flip Rune-Tail and (maybe) up to 50 life to win with Test of Endurance. You're more likely to win with Samurai beatdown, however, as the deck packs quite the stable of legendary Samurai that help out other Samurai, as well as cards that can pump up them all up.

You're Fired!



Main Deck

60 cards

1 Abandoned Outpost

1 Battlefield Forge

1 Brushland

1 Atalya, Samite Master

1 Captain Sisay

1 Fumiko the Lowblood

1 Browbeat

1 Call to Glory

1 Chastise

1 Eiganjo Castle	1 Gerrard Capashen	1 Culling Scales
1 Flooded Strand	1 Godo, Bandit Warlord	1 Day of Destiny
1 Forbidden Orchard	1 Heartless Hidetsugu	1 Final Judgment
1 Forest	1 Iizuka the Ruthless	1 Konda's Banner
1 Forgotten Cave	1 Isao, Enlightened Bushi	1 Liar's Pendulum
1 Miren, the Moaning Well	1 Iwamori of the Open Fist	1 Panic Attack
1 Mossfire Valley	1 Jeska, Warrior Adept	1 Pariah
1 Mountain	1 Kentaro, the Smiling Cat	1 Rebuking Ceremony
1 Pinecrest Ridge	1 Konda, Lord of Eiganjo	1 Renewed Faith
4 Plains	1 Masako the Humorless	1 Shared Triumph
1 Ravaged Highlands	1 Michiko Konda, Truth Seeker	1 Test of Endurance
1 Secluded Steppe	1 Nagao, Bound by Honor	1 Threaten
1 Shinka, the Bloodsoaked Keep	1 Opal-Eye, Konda's Yojimbo	1 Time of Need
1 Sungrass Prairie	1 Reki, the History of Kamigawa	1 Well of Lost Dreams
1 Tinder Farm	1 Rune-Tail, Kitsune Ascendant	
1 Tranquil Garden	1 Takeno, Samurai General	17 other spells
1 Windswept Heath		
1 Wooded Foothills	19 creatures	
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24 lands		

One of these days I might actually *watch* an episode of "The Apprentice," but I've already spent my week in Hell. Maybe next season. Maybe not.

UNTIL NEXT WEEK, HAVE FUN WITH FIRE, PUNY MORTALS!

Mark

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