

Behind the flavor text of *Saviors* Tales From Beyond the Veil

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You can thank me for Arcane Week. Scott Johns is letting each of the "non-employee" columnists like AA, Mike Flores, Scott Wills, etc. choose some of the theme week topics in the coming months. I'm first, and my task was to pick a theme that would tie to this Feature Article on *Saviors of Kamigawa* flavor text. So... what to choose? Flavor Text week? [Did it](#). *Saviors* Week? The previous theme week was Fire Week in honor of [Saviors' code name](#) and besides... seems sort of obvious. How about Spirit Week? [Did that too](#). Man, choosing these theme weeks is tough.

The reason I decided on Arcane Week is that, crazily enough, it's a theme we haven't covered despite it being one of the key mechanics in Kamigawa Block. It ties into today's flavor text article too, because *Saviors* is the point in the story when the Kami War, the [ongoing battle between the mortal world and the world of the kami](#), reaches its dramatic conclusion. Since arcane cards generally refer to "kami magic" spells from the kami's otherworldly plane, it turns out to be a pretty decent link from my article to the week's overall theme.

As I said, today I'm writing about some of the stories behind the names and flavor text in *Saviors of Kamigawa*. For those of you who haven't read some of my previous articles on the topic, check out [my Fifth Dawn article](#) to see the process behind how names and flavor text generally get written. Then you can pop on over to [my Champions article](#) to see how we creative writers first approached the new and flavorful world of Kamigawa. And, heck, since you're doing all of that reading you might as well look at some of the [stories behind Betrayers of Kamigawa](#). It's okay, we'll all wait for you to catch up.

Purdy Pictures

I'll be honest: *Saviors of Kamigawa* was a weird experience for me as a creative writer. I had a lot of things going on in my non-**Magic** life, the biggest of which was buying my first house (during southern California's hottest-ever real estate market), then moving into said house. I had also started my gig at [Into The Aether](#), writing a weekly column for the first time in years. Add a family into the mix and... well... *Saviors* was a blur of late nights and frenzied activity, all of which is smeared across my mind like spilled cerebral stew.

I do, however, have quite a bit to say about my last visit into Japanese-inspired Kamigawa. Not only



that, I've asked the other *Saviors* creative writers--Rich Amtower, Susan Morris, Rei Nakazawa, and Alex Smith--to chime in with stories to make up for my stress-induced amnesia. Before I get to the tales, though, I'll mention perhaps the biggest highlight from *Saviors*, at least for us creative writers.

See, *Saviors of Kamigawa* was the first set in which card art appeared in Namebase, the system in which all creative writers log their names and flavor text submissions. Previously, all we writers had to go on were art descriptions, rules text, and maybe a helpful hint from Brandon Bozzi. The problems with this process were threefold:

First, those free-spirited artists like, say, [Matt Cavotta](#) would often deviate from the art description given them, painting a piece that randomly made some pieces of flavor text look brilliant and others off-base. Second, sometimes the art description would say something like "make this an abstract piece" or "this is a kami of torture... paint a creature of your own design." In these cases, we creative writers would flail about, hoping one of our names or flavor text snippets would match the painting that came in. Third, every so often--usually because a card mechanic changed in development--some pieces of art would get swapped, throwing us creative writers into a collective tizzy. Add it all up and we creative writers were submitting a lot of good card names and pieces of flavor text that never saw the light of day.

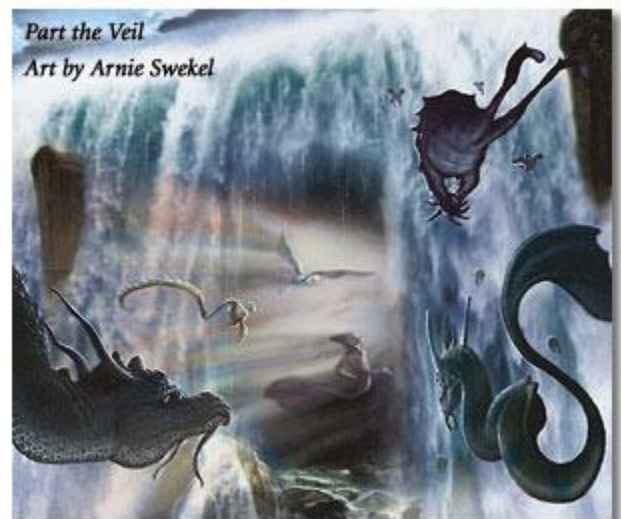
As a result, I can't quite explain the revelation of actually being able to see the cards while writing. Early in the names and flavor text process for *Saviors*, we could view sketches, much like you get in *Magic Arcana* installments. Later in the process, we would see finished paintings. Brandon and the other Wizards folks kept Namebase dynamically updated, meaning that any new art they received quickly made its way into the system. Suddenly each card had an important, additional place upon which to draw inspiration. Art has been a part of Namebase for *Saviors*, *Ninth Edition*, *Ravnica*, and *Guildpact* so far, and the giddiness of seeing what I'm writing about hasn't yet worn off.



You didn't click on this article to hear about the process, though. You want to know some of the stories behind the flavor in *Saviors of Kamigawa*. Fair enough.

The Weakening Veil

As I said, *Saviors* outlines the point in Kamigawa's history in which the Kami War had been raging for quite some time. Mortals and kami alike were marshaling their last stands in a final push to end the war. The mighty Eiganjo fortress had fallen. Mythical kirin and ancient ancestors joined the



fray. To quote Bill Murray: "Human sacrifice, dogs and cats, living together... mass hysteria!"

I don't remember who first thought up the idea that the constant war meant the weakening of the veil between the mortal and kami worlds. Scott McGough brought up the concept in a preliminary way within the Kamigawa novels, but he left it pretty fuzzy. Since I'm the one writing this article, let's say the idea came from me.

Yes, perhaps I noticed that an inordinate amount of cards in Saviors had something to do with weird happenings, even more so than in *Champions* or *Betrayers*. It was this card, I think, where the epiphany happened:

[Spirit War]

o3oW

Instant

Choose one - Tap all Spirits; or tap all non-Spirit creatures.

Art Desc

Color: White Spell effect

Location: battleground on the crater plains

Action: This spell creates a shockwave in the fabric of the barrier between the material and spirit worlds. Depending on who casts the spell, either all spirit-world creatures or all material-world creatures will be bowled over by the shockwave. Show a shockwave knocking over a large group of red-aligned ronin and bandits. You can also show several white-aligned kami *not* getting blasted by the shockwave, but only if the composition can handle it.

Focus: the shockwave between realities

Mood: fffffFOOM!

Notes: It can be a bit abstract.

Approx. Lines Available: 5

As I've said, the "Mood" line is almost always the most entertaining on a card.

Anyway, seeing the card concept was a bit of a revelation. Of course weird stuff like this would be happening in this third set, because this is the point where so much strain has been placed on the veil between worlds that the veil is, quite literally, ripping apart. I took this idea and submitted the piece of flavor text that was eventually accepted.



You can also see evidence of the weakening veil on Cut the Earthly Bond's flavor text, and I used this phenomenon to explain another mechanic I saw in the set, the "return to hand" effect I saw on so many *Saviors* cards:

[Viashino Sand Swimmer]

oR

1/1

Creature - Spirit

Haste

At end of turn, return CARDNAME to its owner's hand.

Art Desc

Color: Red

Location: your choice

Action: Show a small kami of lightning energy, your design what it looks like. This spirit should be about the size of a dog, and it should look very, very fast. Like lightning, it appears out of nowhere, strikes, then it's gone. It should look plenty weird, of course.

Focus: the small lightning kami

Mood: Zap!

Notes: Remember All spirit-world creatures need to have *energy objects* orbiting them.

Approx. Lines Available: 4

Comments: Stay away from direct hound or dog references, I'd rather not have to add the hound creature type to this guy.

As you know by now, Glitterfang was the only "return" creature that ended up with ripping-veil flavor text, but with Aether Shockwave and Cut the Earthly Bond I think it sets a nice backdrop to the events of Saviors.



Near Misses and Misses

I was looking at my invoice (an "invoice" being a list of final, accepted pieces of writing) of official credits for *Saviors of Kamigawa*, and I was struck by two cards: Batsudo, Hand of Retribution and Creeping Column. Here are the flavor text entries as they appear on my invoice:

Batsudo, Hand of Retribution: *"Risen from the weapons and armor of those killed by dishonor, [Batsudo] grew only more powerful with each of Konda's victories and only more hungry for vengeance." - Observations of the Kami War*

Creeping Column: *"If the kami willed it, the forest would crush us and leave no memory we had ever breathed." - Master Dosan*

That last one I distinctly remember, because my original submission had an extra sentence on the end that said something like "That alone is reason to hope" which was dropped for space purposes and which, in my mind, changes the whole meaning of the quote.

Anyway, notice anything about these two cards? *They don't exist in Saviors of Kamigawa!*

So what happened? Apparently, Creeping Column's mechanic changed at the last minute, becoming Rending Vines and losing space for any flavor text at all. Batsudo, meanwhile, also changed mechanic last-minute and became Katakai, War's Wage. The new mechanic needed flavor text to explain it (as I remember it, Batsudo was a creature who grew as you took damage), thus the current flavor text:



Speaking of missing cards...

As you know from reading my earlier articles, I was the one who originally conceived the five Kodamas, right down to each tree's personality and the order of monks who revolved around them. I was also the only writer obsessed with telling the story behind the Battle of Silk and its doomed order of monks. Yes, I am officially a Jukai Junkie. Imagine my disappointment, then, when no green legends named Kodama of the East Tree and Kodama of the West Tree showed up in the final *Saviors* cardfile, along with not a single of my Battle of Silk submissions.

I've seen similar disappointment expressed on the Message Boards, at least with regards to the Kodamas. In looking at the cards in the set, you could argue that Ayumi, the Last Visitor and Sekki, Season's Guide would have made worthy tree-spirits. I e-mailed Brandon to ask his reasoning, and here is his response: "Ayumi would have worked, and Sekki might have worked (though he seems more like a Center tree to me). Looking back I'm not positive why I decided to go in a different direction with them - I really wanted to see the cycle finished out. I have vague memories of some folks not liking the names of the first two Kodamas and some memories of folks worrying about

Kamigawa block names being too similar to one another, so that may have weighed into my decision. There were probably other factors as well."

I believe Brandon when he says he wanted to complete the cycle, especially since he specifically asked me to hunt down cards in *Betrayers* that would make good Kodama.

Luckily, I have found the answer. Recall my original descriptions of the East and West Kodamas:

East - Impulsive, headstrong, adolescent. The Spirit of the Eastern Tree values growth above all else, and lives with a blooming zest (sort of on the red side of green). Think of it as a "classic fey" who jests and pranks, seemingly everywhere at once in its part of the forest.

West - Gloomy, dangerous, feral. The Spirit of the Western Tree values the hunt above all else and lives by the creed "survival of the fittest." Think of it as a "shark of the forest," top of the food chain yet always on the prowl.

Given these sketches, I've decided to agree with folks who have speculated on the Message Boards that Kodama's Reach is meant to be the East Tree's card and Kodama's Might is meant to be the West Tree's card. Maybe that's a bit of a stretch, but it does explain nicely why only five cards in the block have the word "[Kodama](#)" in them.

As for the Battle of Silk, I decided to use my last Kamigawa web-story to round out the tale in my mind. Check out [the story](#) to explain how the Battle ends.

Assorted Flavors of Saviors

Of course, one of the most fun things about being a creative writer during the Kamigawa Block was naming and telling stories about the umpteen bazillion legends. For example, emboldened by my success with my flavor text for Kyoki, Sanity's Eclipse and Ishi-Ishi, Akki Crackshot, I managed to slip in another "string of titles" piece in the form of Mikokoro, Center of the Sea. Masumaro, First to Livefelt like it was the piece of flavor text I had wanted to write during *Betrayers of Kamigawa* and its "whose side are you on?" vibe. Descendant of Kiyomaro was a fun piece to write as a way of giving the flavor-textless Kiyomaro some backstory. Fun times, all.

Why be limited to my stories, though? Kamigawa is a land of legends and we had a terrific crew of writers working on the set. I've always felt a little guilty that these articles only showcase *my* writing, so I asked the other creative writers to share their own behind-the-scenes tales with me. Below are a bunch of cards, the person who wrote their creative text (either name or flavor text), and some thoughts from that person. Enjoy!



Maga, Traitor to Mortals (Rei Nakazawa) - "Maga was the Takenuma wizard with disturbing curiosity about oni that I mentioned in a past feature article. I wrote flavor text indicating him as such because his ability and picture had an "evil" feel that went beyond the typical Takenuma resident. Plus, he's the first black wizard (and first black human that's not a fighting-oriented class like samurai, assassin, or rogue) in this block, so I thought it'd be interesting if he was an exile from Minamo (before it was sacked, of course). The curiosity about oni seemed to be a good bet for why, especially given the 'bloodsucking' ability. Sadly, the card apparently looked better without flavor text, so it was dropped in editing. My name, however, which came from much the same line of logic, remained."

Deathmask Nezumi (Susan Morris) - "Upon seeing the Deathmask Nezumi I was reminded of two things: the man with the skull painted on his face in *Live and Let Die* (a James Bond film), who definitely used fear tactics and the appearing invincibility of death, and the deathshad moth in *Silence of the Lambs*. The deathshad moth started me on the name, and both started me thinking about what it means to wear the face of death into battle. The *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai*, says that to accept death and to fear it no more is the mark and strength of a true warrior. It's a commitment to violence, a commitment to destroy one's opponents whether or not oneself is also destroyed. How do you fight something like that? Perhaps the Deathmask Nezumi understands this better than most, for certainly warriors see not his death in the painted skull of his face, but their own."

Shape Stealer (Alex Smith) - "I had just written the [background story for Kiki-Jiki](#), so had my eye out for mirrors in the upcoming set. I think Kiki-Jiki would have been unhappy without a cameo appearance in *Saviors*, too."

Captive Flame (Rich Amtower) - "I have always felt...at a loss, let's say, when I'm working on **Magic** cards. I see other writer's suggestions, and I feel impending panic setting in because I just want my submissions to live up to their talent. Of course, nothing kicks in the old writer's block faster than panic, and I start taking myself wayyyyyy too seriously. My trick for fighting writer's block is to dive headlong into nonsense, just to get *something* onto the page. Imagine my surprise to find that same nonsense is the text that gets chosen for *Captive Flame*."

Bounteous Kirin (Rei Nakazawa) - "One of the main questions I had in my mind throughout this block was about the 'good' kami. Just as the oni represented the epitome of evil, surely there were kami who were kind and benevolent and actually liked humans (on their own, as opposed to being bound to them, as Yosei and the other dragons were). But the definite feeling was that *all* the kami, with those few exceptions, were fighting against the humans. So the question I had was: Why? The most likely answer I could come up with was that they were doing so unwillingly, that the 'kami nation's' anger was so severe (or else O-Kagachi's power was so strong) that they had no choice but to go along. The odds against the mortals was so overwhelming anyway that I wanted to give a sense that they weren't *totally* alone when it came to the kami (even if it was sort of a moot point). Given Bounteous Kirin's ability (and the fact that it's legendary, meaning more likely to be capable of independent thought), the card was a good place to try out my theory with flavor text."

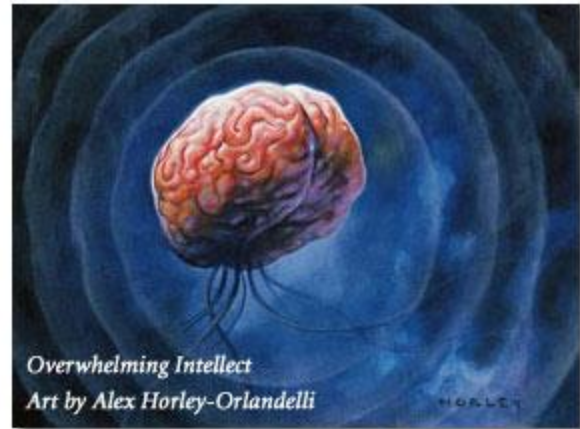


Hand of Honor, Hand of Cruelty (Rich Amtower) - "The instructions for this card were simple: Two lines, link to white (or black) samurai. I imagined these two fighters, perfect mirrors for one another, facing off on a battlefield, the last soldiers standing among hundreds of dead, and I wanted more than anything to capture the tension of that standoff. I knew the text should be parallel somehow, with slight variations to reflect the black/white qualities, and I wrote *tons* of different takes on this final encounter. Unfortunately, I just couldn't pull it off. The text that got accepted was the last take I wrote for both cards, and while I lost the epic-ness of their battle, I did find a nice way to show how two samurai could have such completely contrary codes and still *be* samurai. All in all, I'm pretty happy with that."

Akki Drillmaster (Alex Smith) - "This card was too funny to have serious flavor text. So, what's he actually saying? 'Move it!!!' ...in Japanese."

Briarknit Kami (Susan Morris) - "The Briarknit Kami is not the first to use thorns for the defense of herself and hers. I had been thinking about the card, and how she knits coats of thorns into the flesh and bark of her companions to protect them, when I was reminded of a story. The story focused on a girl whose brothers are turned into swans. To return them to their natural forms, the girl must knit briars together into shirts for them without making so much as a sound until her knitting is complete and the brothers are wearing the shirts. This story is useless save for the imagery. A coat of thorns, if worn the right way out, is a proper defense. Thorns woven, grown, and knit into and out of your own flesh by the Kami's clever hands are perhaps creepier, but every bit as effective and very much more the green kami's organic style." Thus the name.

Overwhelming Intellect (Rei Nakazawa) - "Due to the art, we were encouraged to try to be funny with this one. Other writers, for example, went with Gleemax references. My flavor text, eventually accepted, was one of the many attempts to make a 'my brain is full' joke. One of my other jokes is somewhat more oblique, but one I swear I'll get onto a card someday. See if you get the reference: 'Will I ever cast that spell again? Hah! My wizard council would have to be hit by a horsecart first!' - [blue Jushi POV]."



Rushing-Tide Zuber (Rich Amtower) - "Because I'm relatively new to the world of **Magic**, I felt pretty nervous about how much creative freedom we had in generating the ideas that drove the world of Kamigawa. When I was at a loss for ideas, I would look back at previous sets and see what concepts had been introduced, and then I would look for ways to expand on them. I loved the zuber from the previous set (and I had a partial hand in their flavor text as well), so I wanted to tie this card back into the overall plotline both by referring back to the destruction of the Honden and by tying their mechanic into the narrative. It's almost as if these zuber, trapped in the mortal world, look for ways to be 'killed,' to return to the spirit world and to bring what they have learned with them."

Twincast (Alex Smith) - "Sometimes you have to search for inspiration, and sometimes it's right there in front of you. 'Nuff said!'"

Kitsune Bonesetter (Susan Morris) - "This name was inspired by the excellent movie *Zatoichi: the Blind Swordsman*. The eponymous character is a wandering bonesetter--a traditional kind of healer. To me, the word bonesetter evokes a simple, age-old manner of healing--one that is brutal and visceral, but always effective. This in turn reminds me of the card--a lone wanderer with a century of experience silvering his fur calmly healing, protecting, and setting things right, just as he always has."

Ayumi, the Last Visitor (Rich Amtower) - "It's funny. I wrote a dozen different takes on this card, all of which tried to reflect this kami's function: nature reclaiming the civilized places for itself. After the first round of rewrites, we were asked to expand the ideas beyond just that basic function, and I focused on the permanence of nature, the idea that whatever man might build will, in time, fall to ruin and return to nature. The flavor text reflects that inevitability. Oddly enough, Jay asked me to proofread his [Ayumi story](#), and when I read the final flavor text for the card, I was jealous that I hadn't thought of that idea. It wasn't until much later that I remembered that I...er...had. Yeah, I know. But in a sense, I'm proud that I couldn't recognize my own flavor text. More than anything, I wanted my writing to fit seamlessly into the world of Kamigawa, and I figure that's a pretty good sign that I succeeded."

As you can see, we creative writers are a mixed lot of varying styles and sources of inspiration. That's part of what makes the names and flavor text process, I think, so cool.

Wrapping Up

As I said in the *Champions* article, I entered the world almost completely unfamiliar with Japanese lore, which was both exciting and wholly intimidating. Now, after three sets, I find myself reluctant to let the mythos and stories I've learned so well disappear. It's hard to get my mind around the fact that no more "[Meet the...](#)" tales are on the horizon, and I've seriously contemplated writing some fan fiction to flesh out some of the untold Kamigawa stories I have in my head. Which is all to say that I'm hopeful **Magic** will someday return to Kamigawa. I'm also hopeful that if it does, I'll be there at my keyboard, logging into Namebase as a creative writer.

Flavorfully yours,

-jms

Jay's full *Saviors of Kamigawa* credits:

Card names: AEther Shockwave; Araba Mothriders; Celestial Kirin; Curtain of Light; Dense Canopy; Eiganjo Free-Riders; Erayo, Soratami Ascendant / Erayo's Essence; Ghost-Lit Raider; Ghost-Lit Warder; Homura, Human Ascendant / Homura's Essence; Into The Fray; Kashi-Tribe Elite; Kuon, Ogre Ascendant / Kuon's Essence; Miyomaro, First to Know Honor; Matsu-Tribe Birdstalker; Mikoro, Center of the Sea; Moonwing Moth; Murmurs from Beyond; Nightsoil Kami; Pure Intentions; Reki, the History of Kamigawa; Rune-Tail, Kitsune Ascendant / Rune-Tail's Essence; Sasaya, Orochi Ascendant/ Sasaya's Essence; Secretkeeper; Spiritual Visit; Stampeding Serow; Undying Flames.

Flavor text: AEther Shockwave; Akki Underling; Descendant of Kiyomaro; Eiganjo Free-Riders; Glitterfang; Hail of Arrows; Inner Calm, Outer Strength; Inner Chamber Guard; Masumaro, First to Live; Mikokoro, Center of the Sea; Moonwing Moth; Okina Nightwatch; Promise of Bunrei; Reverence; Sakura-Tribe Scout.