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Playing It Cool: Part 2

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Welcome to the second half of our *Coldsnap* exploration for Limited play. We'll be continuing the examination of some of the themes and mechanics of this set, as well as go over a few of the more intriguing individual cards. We've got a lot of ground to cover today, so let's get started. First up: the powerful recover.

Recover

Aside from the occasional ripple chain or lucky cantrip, *Coldsnap* is quite bereft of card advantage. *Ravnica* block, by contrast, was loaded to the brim with two for ones; *Ocular Halo*, *Compulsive Research*, *Twinstrike*... Since *Coldsnap* is more deficient in this category, the cards that can provide this category of advantage are highly valued. For example, *Aurochs Herd* is absolutely incredible in Green, providing a continuous stream of theme. Anything that can get you a scrap of hand replenishment deserves some scrutiny.

Within that, the recover cards of *Coldsnap* deserve special attention. These aren't just the occasional bonus effect of a preserving *Swift Maneuver*. Recover spells are a potentially unending stream of recursion. Before getting into the recover cards in detail, I'd like to share a little story about a good friend of mine, whom we'll just call Boah Bile.

Now I like Boah, he's a good man. Whatever else you could say about Mr. Bile, you know he's got a fantastic sense of humorism. But *Magic*-playing Boah has a bit of an issue. You see, he loves sweeping, card-advantage-centric turns. Any time he can get some crazy million-for-one, he'll go for it. Boah obviously loves recover, in fact a bit too much. You see, he's got this leak in his game where he won't risk any recover card unless he's sure he could get it back. *Resize* simply cannot be a mere cheap instant. In practice, it becomes a four-mana trick that will not, under any circumstances, be removed from the game.

Maybe you know people like this. A chance to make a fancy play outweighs any other consideration, even if the simple 1:1 is the best move. So today, I'm going to give you the truth. There are times in a game where, no matter how fancy or special you think you need to be, the simplest move is the best. There are times when you must play like the most basic of players; the ones who look at the first line of text and ignore everything else. Certainly if you can power up a recover chain, you'll be in great shape against someone who can't. But, and this is a big but here, if by trying to go recover-crazy you *lose the game*, it might not actually be worth it. If the cost of winning a game is to throw out a *Grim Harvest* with no chance of a recover, then that's just the price you've got to pay. Of course we all know this already, but poor Boah, he sometimes forgets.



With that out of the way, I can say the recover spells do look a lot more appealing with recycling tacked on. All recover spells, however, are not created equal.

Krovikan Rot: A very useful card, but not quite as dominant as I originally thought. It turns out a lot of creatures in *Coldsnap* with power that low have sacrifice abilities built in, somewhat reducing Rot's effective targets. Nailing a *Goblin Rimerunner* or *Rimewind Taskmage* is effective at all stages of the game, but *Boreal Druid* or the *Martyrs* have a smaller window of useful destruction. There is some very interesting tension in the card. It's best in the early game, but that's the period where the actual recover ability is far less likely to be utilized. While *Gutless Ghoul* tricks can set up automatic recovery when you have lots and lots of lands out, at that point in time there will simply be far less reason to cast the Rot. This card is still excellent removal, and those utility creatures mentioned above are welcome deaths at any point. Just don't expect many decks to outright get crippled by your convoluted buyback.

Resize: Sick sick sick. Like *Krovikan Rot*, my opinion on this card has also changed since the opening days. However, while Rot has gone down some in my view, this simple-seeming spell has gone way up. Its strength comes from its extremely cheap casting and recover costs. Coupled with a large number of trampers in the set and the fact that Green's creatures already start out biggest on the block, the *Resize* drafter gets one highly efficient trick. It's the ultimate breaker in the mirror, and it turns their inevitable double blocks into massacres. Combined with any kind of sacrifice outlet like *Orcish Bloodpainter*, the damage you're dealing should be staggering. An easy first pick for any Green player.

Sun's Bounty: Another recover card with inexpensive costs, this one has a touch less board impact. Four life is nice and all, but the best White decks I've seen are quite aggressive. Cheap or not, a lifegain card is not what the White player is looking for when they're swinging with fliers and

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bears. Then you've got the issue of **Martyr of Sands**, a generally more effective life gain effect. No one's saying those cards can't work in tandem of course, and in fact they pair quite well. It's just that it's very rare turbo-lifegain wins Limited games. If there are some colossal hard-to-stop creatures waiting somewhere in your deck, the occasional lifegain may have an effect. With a pair of **Rimefeather Owls**, I would give this card a bit of a look. That's a rather extreme situation of course. For me, I just don't like cards that can't exploit a mana-screwed opponent. At least the little 1/1 BEATS FACE RAWRRRR!!!

Icefall: Well clearly *this* is a card that exploits their poor mana draw. The question to us is, is this card still playable if their draw is reasonable and balanced? Surprisingly, the answer is yes. In a rather slow environment, with cumulative upkeep no less, multiple land destruction spells can be quite effective. A lot of decks are pretty mana hungry these days, so losing just two lands can give a Red player the advantage. Beyond that, there are some rather specialized lands you wouldn't mind killing, like **Mouth of Ronom**, **Scrying Sheets**, or just a general snow-covered. Adding that up with the occasional artifact creature you'd like to remove, you have a surprisingly flexible spell.



What really sends it over the top is (of course) that extremely inexpensive recover cost. Four mana is a lot to spend on a casting, but that is somewhat offset when you can remove a card of your opponent's as well. With a two-mana recover, your development doesn't have to be noticeably cut, especially in the later stages of the game. Admittedly, **Icefall** is less effective at that later stage, but even a slow Rain of Salt can be quite damaging to a player, especially if they're extra-reliant on snow lands or a third color. With all that said, there are a lot of decks that simply will not care about land destruction, even of the repetitive variety. Fast White decks or Green decks with heavy fixing won't even feel the loss of a single land, and those colors are far less reliant on snow permanents anyway. As such, maindecking **Icefall** remains a risk. It's a rather dead draw when you're in a losing situation, and if you're winning, another threat works just as well. **Icefall** works best in controlling decks with lots of sacrifice outlets. These are decks that will be able to stay alive and fire off a multitude of **Icefall**, like some R/B decks for example. In most Red decks, playing a controlling archetype will be a bit of a toss-up. At the very least, it's a fine sideboard card, as there are enemy decks particularly vulnerable to **Icefall**. It's up to you how and if you want to incorporate this card in your deck, but **Icefall** is far better than the 13-15th pick I've seen it go.

Controvert: The advantage of **Controvert** is that it costs as much as **Surging Aether**, so leaving four mana open won't necessarily indicate whether or not you're holding the bounce or counter (or both). That's about as far as I can go with **Controvert**'s pros. Four mana is a lot to keep open for a Blue deck, which as you may note, contains a lot of creatures with mana-necessitating activation costs. **Surging Aether**'s advantage is that it can be used aggressively i.e. on your turn to clear the way for attackers. Sure, the *existence* of this card could allow you to make a convoluted bluff with a skipped **Rimewind Taskmage** activation, but that play doesn't require you to actually have **Controvert** near your deck. It's not the worst card, because it is a hard counter and those are rarely unplayable, but in this environment, it's not ideal. The recover ability, while a bonus, is still a touch too expensive to put this card in the “quality” camp.

Garza's Assassin: When Aaron Forsythe spoiled this card, all I could think of was, “Wow, what a Limited bomb”. That was a slightly premature label; the full set wasn't anywhere near released yet. Having seen **Coldsnap** in action, I can attest to the veracity of my original impulse. **Garza's Assassin** is excellent, both as a cheap man or removal in a color that sorely appreciates it. Don't let the triple Black fool you; I've seen plenty of decks that pack 10 Swamps or more. A turn 3 Assassin is eminently viable, but if you need to wait to turns 4-6, you'll endure.

Now regarding the recover cost, it is a rather steep life payment. However, consider that **Garza's Assassin** frequently kills two creatures, or knocks off a creature and a spell. Those two cards of theirs could easily deal more than half your life total. Then reflect on how Black has a fair amount of lifegain effects, from **Feast of Flesh** and **Gutless Ghoul** all the way up to **Soul Spike**. Finally, and this is my favorite part here, the recover is *free*. That means no mana to use, which is an incredible boon to any Limited deck. Being able to do things, *while doing other things*, is an exceptional advantage. Of course you could be a yellow-belly scaredy-pants coward who doesn't want to pay the recover cost. That's perfectly alright - we are certainly not about making judgments here. You can simply let GA go, safe in the knowledge you have doubled your halved life total, while their best creature remains dead. For me, I just like killing stuff.

Grim Harvest: While I wouldn't call this spell the best recover card, it's probably my favorite. **Grim Harvest** is extremely synergistic with a set that promotes a lot of creature sacrifice, while still being available as a straight up **Raise Dead**, should the need, um, arise.

Grim Harvest is one of those cards that would look unremarkable in a different set, but shines in the environment it finds itself in. Black has, at common, two creatures which sacrifice that you would enjoy getting back. **Gutless Ghoul** is great with recover in general, while **Disciple of Tevesh Szat** plus **Grim Harvest** has the potential to “Wrath, targeting you” in the very late game. Creatures with cumulative upkeep find themselves dying on occasion, which luckily for you happens to be a very controllable death. A Grim in the grave means you can get your formerly tied up mana back, ready to begin the cycle anew. Clearly this card is only as good as your creatures are, but with a flattened power band, your army should be reasonably parallel to theirs. This card is simply efficient early and excellent late; a great characteristic for any spell. **Grim Harvest** is not a card I'd auto-first pick, but I certainly want 1-2 in all my Black **Coldsnap** decks.

The Martyrs

The Martyrs, on the surface, have one glaring liability: they are 1/1. It saddens me when my guys can't effectively get into combat. There was a time when non-mana 1/1s would hit the sideboard on principle, but **Onslaught's**

Sparksmith altered that narrow view ever so slightly. These days, 1/1s have been on a serious upswing. From creatures whose sole duty was to deal damage like **Sneaky Homunculus**, we have cards that can actually affect permanents, like **Elvish Skysweeper** or **Minister of Impediments**. These little guys have a lot more appeal because they can do something useful all the way into the later turns.

So where do the Martyrs fit into this spectrum? Well they're certainly no Sparky, but thankfully very little is. The Martyrs are fairly efficient at whatever particular effect they do. The question we have to ask: is what they do actually worth investing a card?

Of **Martyr of Bones** and **Martyr of Sands**, the answer is "rarely". **Martyr of Bones** is a decidedly narrow niche sidebar card. Since its effect on the game is so random (not every deck cares about their graveyard), we have to examine it as a 1/1 that can kill itself on command. Unless you have some incredible recover engine in full effect, it's a blank 1/1, and those usually are far more effective as an 18th or 19th land. Pick one up for your sidebar certainly, but since these are frequent 15th picks, you won't have to bend over backwards to accommodate.



Martyr of Sands suffers from a similar problem, except White has a redundant recover spell, and lifegain still doesn't jibe with White's core strategy. I know 3x seems like a lot of life, but you really have to ask yourself what you're staying alive to find. As noted above, most White decks want to end the game as quickly as possible, not prolong the match. However, there are rumblings of the **Martyr of Sands/Grim Harvest** deck. This concoction purports to repeatedly gain obscene amounts of life, then win through a difficult to stop flier or decking (42 cards or **Jotun Grunt**). This kind of deck seems like a big risk, but early results appear to make it a viable stratagem. Ironically, this is the kind of plan **Martyr of Ashes** was designed to stop. I don't like this kind of deck personally, just because there are a lot of options to diffuse it. However the combo/control style is up many a player's aisle, making it a legitimate archetype for **Coldsnap** drafting.

Martyr of Spores and **Martyr of Frost** are roughly analogous in quality. Both are adequate at promoting their decks' main aims. Green decks appreciate ways to discourage blocking, even if it's a particular trick that's seen coming. In addition, with the higher concentration of trample creatures, a dedicated Green deck can use the Martyr to push through a lot of damage; very helpful in the race situation where chump blocking is prevalent. Green can sometimes have problems with utility creatures like **Rimewind Taskmage** or **Disciple of Tevesh Szat**, which the **Martyr of Spores** won't overcome. But for aggressive Green decks, where the other half can supply some utility, the Martyr can have a place.

Martyr of Frost's viability can be determined simply by figuring out how badly you want to get to the late game. This Martyr is practically guaranteed to negate a spell out of the opponent's hand in the early stages, when your hand is flush and their lands are short. However, in the late game the situation is the exact opposite, and at that time, the Martyr is a rather horrid draw. Can your deck endure the possibility of a dead draw later to promote the early game now? This is actually a rather fundamental question to draft decks in general. It will affect mana ratios and often, in a card like this, inclusion or exclusion. There's no set guideline here, but certain cards and strategies do seem to dominate the late game. **Rimefeather Owl**, **Rimescale Dragon**, and the Ice Ice Baby himself, **Heidar**, **Rimewind Master** all look amazing when your mana is accessible and abundant. Should your deck contain one of these gems, or maybe just a stream of **Aurochs Herd**, then the **Martyr of Frost** has some appeal. Otherwise you can leave this guy on the bench, confident in the knowledge you'll be minimizing a worthless draw later on.

Then there was one. One **Martyr of Ashes** to be precise. This guy is in a whole other league compared to his brethren, a wizard with built in card advantage, instead of the reverse (looking at you Sandy Bones). **Martyr of Ashes** for a single point is a fine answer to a mass **Surging Sentinels**, even in the late game. **Martyr of Ashes** can also catch an obtuse player with his pants down, an ability I always appreciate. It's not a pure **Wrath of God**, of course. Clearly a lot of decks can minimize the effects of 2-4 points of ground-based damage, usually by reducing the number of creatures they play or playing them in a different order.

This turns out to be an interesting trait. If you lead with Mountains, around turn 3 your opponent should start expecting you to play **Goblin Rimerunner** or **Sound the Call** or **Surging Sentinels** or whatnot. Skipping a third turn play might raise an eyebrow or two, but will probably be shrugged off. Skipping a *fourth* turn play, on the other hand, should get their alarm bells clanging. Most people like to play **Martyr of Ashes** the turn they're going to use it. This is generally the right play, since it minimizes your opponent's window of killing your Martyr and/or saving their creatures. Simply playing lands for a few turns without doing anything else often indicates this play, or perhaps you having poor mulligan skills. Odds are an opponent won't overextend, presumably because if you really *are* bad at keeping hands, they should win the game anyway. You can use that fear to keep slow hands you wouldn't otherwise, safe with *their* knowledge of the **Coldsnap** environment. Now admittedly this is an advanced play, and risky besides. It depends a lot on your opponent thinking in a manner just so. If it's your opponent's first draft with **Coldsnap**, or they simply don't think much of you, they'll disregard your move (or lack thereof) entirely. We'll get to these kinds of details more in the bluff episode, but for now, you can play your Red decks with a slight cushion on keeping slower draws. This does come up from time to time.



Cards of Interest

Coldsteel Heart: My appreciation for this artifact goes up with every *Coldsnap* draft I do. Snow is an exceedingly valued characteristic in a card - the word "supertype" has never been more accurate. The Heart gives you this component of mana and accelerates you besides. The Green decks can find and increase their chillified mana with **Boreal Druid** and **Into the North**. For the rest of us, non-Green acceleration is limited to **Thermopod** and **Rite of Flame**. That's a rather pathetic pool to draw from, which is why **Coldsteel Heart** fits so well into so many decks. Acceleration is quite valuable in this format, and the color fixing is no small treat either. While mono-colored decks are viable, you will occasionally dip into a third color. Beyond everything else, **Coldsteel Heart** reduces the risk of that move substantially.

Shape of the Witigo: This rare won't come up much, but **Shape of the Witigo** plays a bit differently than similar auras. Unlike, say **Mythic Proportions**, Shape inlays the counters directly on the creature, then sticks around to increase or decrease those counters at your leisure. That minor distinction makes the card far more powerful, negating their **Ronom Unicorn**, and allowing you double duty with something like **Surging Aether** or **Perilous Research**. I bring this up because I humorously tried to salvage a game versus their Shaped up creature off a **Mystic Melting**. That went well; I love card advantage at negative 40 life. I can't be the only one who's made this mistake, right? Right...?

Rime Transfusion: This is a card I hesitate to maindeck, even in a Black deck loaded with snow-covered. Dedicated snow decks are going to tap it with **Rimewind Taskmage** or just kill it off with **Skred**. That's a bit too much risk for me, especially if making a creature enchanted just means it can be blocked by **Ronom Serpent**. However, the Transfusion is an excellent sidebar card. Giving a creature a potentially gigantic boost in power along with unblockability is more than some decks will be able to handle. It's a great bonus for a creature those particular decks might otherwise dominate, such as a **Bull Aurochs** or **Krovikan Scoundrel**, against an opposing Green or White deck.



Lightning Storm: This is perhaps my favorite card of the set. It's not the most obviously powerful, but through planning and careful play it can be exceptional. This environment, via cumulative upkeep and a lack of discard spells, promotes playing lands. It's a fine impulse, but this card is the penalizer. A red player's discretion in playing lands yields huge dividends later on through a three-mana instant that can deal seven or nine damage. Sure they can play chicken with you, but *that could be playing right into your lands!* It's a real smile inducer when you casually send three damage to their **Ohran Yeti**, and they attempt to put five on your **Greater Stone Spirit**. But oops, you've discarded your hand and sent 11 points to their head, winning the game and the match. Any card that *punishes* them for trying to survive is aces in my book. Most often they're not going to take the risk, and allow you to **Urza's Rage** whatever target you please. Either way, the caster should be in great shape.

At the moment, *Coldsnap* is being compared to *Ravnica* block unfavorably. Rav block was lauded as one of the most complex and innovative Limited environments of all time; it's certainly near the top. Of course *Coldsnap*'s 155 cards is going to look meager to *Ravnica* Block's 600+. However, for a mere quarter of the size of the previous environment, *Coldsnap* has a surprising amount of depth to offer. We've been enjoying the *Coldsnap* experience, not as a replacement, but alongside *Ravnica*'s own style. *Coldsnap* provides a far different set of tools to work with, which in turn provide new challenges and new game experiences. For those holding a torch for RGD, your loyalty is commendable, but be sure to give *Coldsnap* a spin now and then. Success here requires an entirely new skill set, and expanding one's repertoire is never a bad thing. That mastering this environment leads to a plane ticket to Kobe, Japan is no unpleasant incentive either...

Have there been any *Coldsnap* cards your opinions have changed on? Share them in the forums. The community will certainly appreciate it. Next week is dedicated to the most lovable band of demon-worshipping arsonists you ever did see. A very popular death cult! Until then, thanks for reading.

-Noah Weil



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