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Dark Mirror Milk Saucer

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Swimming With Sharks
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I was trying to brainstorm for an angle on this preview article and decided to go with “see how screwed up the color pie is?” because we don’t normally think of black as the haste color. The only relevant black creature I could think up off the top of my head was **Blazing Specter** (which is also red, the default haste color, which actually strengthened my argument), but as usual, Gatherer beat me down like a hapless control deck in a room full of **Jackal Pups**. It turns out that there are actually a fair number of hasty black fellows that have seen tournament play, including **Akuta, Born of Ash**; **Ashen Ghoul**; and – wait for it – **Ichorid** (yeah, I know, I know). So not only is black a reasonable haste color, it also has a soft spot for the four-slot.

So haste was a no-go for “unusual angle.” Black might not be our go-to color for haste, but especially at four mana, there is more than enough precedent for it to at least be unremarkable. So I reached, grasped, stretched, and ended up with... a pun?

Vampire Cat?

Well, this lady can certainly toy with and chomp the average Rat, but that, too, is nothing particularly unusual, especially for a tournament-viable – I mean I *assume* she is tournament-viable – four drop.

Yeah... well, *no*, actually. There is absolutely nothing clever I could come up with so I went with what I know.

Confused yet? That’s my bad. [Here’s](#) the card:



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Mirri, *Cat Warrior* was a **guileful** member of the crew of Gerrard Capashen's *Skyship Weatherlight*, and what should have been a fine card out of *Exodus*. She was never played even to the legitimate second tier and, despite her **White Knight**-like laundry list of abilities, never found the mass adoption you might expect from a creature with her reasonable size-to-mana cost and relatively attractive overall package. I suppose it was a by-product of her era; creature decks in those days were beating down with two-power threats for *one* mana, and three toughness put her on the wrong side of **Incinerate** (and a fair percentage of **Kindles**). Perhaps it was a question of opportunity cost; Green creature decks wanted **Spike Feeder** on **1** **1** **1**, and even though that creature was -0/-1 Mirri's junior with only two abilities (and only one that really mattered), even under pre-Classic rules, that one ability was positioned correctly in the world of burn decks to make **Spike Feeder** the "right" green choice on three, with the next-best option, **Uktabi Orangutan**, responsible for smashing **Cursed Scrolls** and **Nevinyrral's Disks**. Ironically, even though **Spike Feeder** is back, and **Uktabi Orangutan** is alive in spirit (**Viridian Shaman**), I'd wager that *Cat Warrior* would probably be played as a singleton or two-of ahead of both (main) in today's Standard. We now have better options for both **Spike Feeder** and **Uktabi Orangutan** (even if they cost one and two more mana, respectively), but on three, Mirri might fit on the curve while working nicely with the underplayed **Gather Courage** and the sometimes overplayed (but nevertheless devastating) **Glare of Subdual**.

Mirri the Cursed echoes the original card in a couple of ways thematically.



You've probably already guessed.

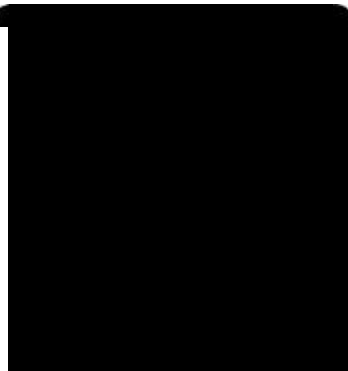
First of all, there is the twisted color, the angle where something went terribly backwards, the red to Akroma's white, the flaming hair to... *oh, you've probably already guessed*. Green and black are enemies; check. Secondly, there is the array of abilities. We don't think of green as a vigilance color (even though there are a couple of other green creatures with this ability) but Mirri, *Cat Warrior* somehow has it, just as Mirri *the Cursed* picks up haste. We don't think of black as a first strike color, either, but it seems the vampiric version of the **Legendary Cat Warrior** has not forgotten how to quickly use her claws just because she's dead (or undead, or um, *cursed* I suppose). A very interesting reversal is located in Mirri's bottom-right corner: 3/2 from 2/3, opposite again, the new lady's black to the old animal's green.

Thematically, Mirri the Cursed also echoes another member of *Weatherlight's* sky sailors, **Crovax the Cursed**: same crew, same mana cost, same undead theme, same *title*, improved "Vampire" +1/+1 ability. **Crovax** (until he grew up to become the **Ascendant Evincar**, anyway) was about the weakest legitimate Vampire that you might consider playing. Getting **Crovax the Cursed's** +1/+1 ability online in a competitive setting would require an extravagant setup, dedicated resources, or, I suppose, a series of really poor decisions; on balance, *Mirri the Cursed's* improved vampire ability means if a creature's going to fight her, it better kill her dead, all the way.

The template for **Magic** Vampires is of course the **Grandmother** original, **Sengir Vampire**. **Sengir** was initially placed in opposition to **Serra Angel** (a lofty foe, in every sense) but would not consistently get +1/+1 counters because so much of the initiative was in the opponent's hands (in addition to electing not to block, he could just keep blocking with a creature that would survive, like **Wall of Air**).

So with all this stack of setup, there is really only one question: *Will this card be any good?*

This is a tougher question to answer than it might seem, especially since a lot of you have already crossed poor Mirri, **Gnarled Mass**-like, off the playables list. I have had a peerless track record on Constructed preview cards since I've been on this column, from **Spell Snare** to **Ohran Viper**, and even some of my ostensibly weak allocations like **Heartbeat of Spring**



have gone on to, you know, define and break multiple formats. A lot of readers doubted the grandeur of **Serra Avenger**, but we know [how she turned out](#). On pedigree alone I'd guess that Mirri will be one of the good ones, just because wiser heads gave her to *Swimming With Sharks*, but let's break her down on the numbers, anyway – you know, for the kids.

A 3/2 body for four mana is no unconditional All-Star, but combined with haste, power and toughness adding up to five has had great success in recent months (see **Giant Solifuge**). Mirri doesn't have the Solifuge's biggest upside – that is, the ability to dodge targeted removal – but her palette of other powers might balance the scales favorably anyway.

The first strike bit is an important remainder on this card because of Mirri's improved "Vampire" trait. If you pick the right spot or the right fight, Mirri will grow to 4/3 immediately, and the opponent will not be able to do much about it in the short term (though I suppose chump-block-into **Wrath of God** has essentially no downside).



Flying is always welcome, and it kind of speaks to the trample on **Giant Solifuge** or **Ball Lightning**.

You can actually look at Mirri as a burn card, or as part of an overall burn suite. She might shine in Rakdos (at least in certain matchups where Rakdos does not currently shine), and even in straight black she can be considered a very reasonable component of a deceptively focused strategy... Think back to the days when **Diabolic Tutor** stacked **Laquatus's Champion** on top of **Corrupt** to get the idea of what kind of quasi-interactive black tempo and "face" plan might be available even in Standard with the right modern analogues.

There are drawbacks, to be sure, and the base toughness of two is the biggest one. Even if she gets her toughness to three, she is still not out of the woods in Standard, let alone broader formats. Mirri has to get to four toughness before she can successfully withstand the most basic removal spells: **Last Gasp**, **Volcanic Hammer**, and **Lightning Helix**. Unlike last set's **Serra Avenger**, which was the victim of misplaced criticism because of the mere existence of targeted removal spells, Mirri will tend to concede tempo to these cards if they start sticking. For her to achieve the value presupposed by her inclusion in a Constructed tournament deck, Mirri demands both planning and tactics.

One of the things I like about **Serra Avenger** is that she is essentially Keiga for the new – now "current" – Standard. The way Keiga worked in last year's Blue Control and 'Tron decks was to play out at six mana as a threat and answer that was as big as three of a beatdown deck's creatures and could take another man with it even if the worst occurred; **Serra Avenger** comes down at six, too, but generally after a **Wrath of God** has done the first two-thirds of Keiga's former job. Mirri, with her twice-over mana cost and smaller frame, is kind of like **Serra Avenger** in that she can kick your opponent's ass in more than one way.

My conclusion is that Mirri the Cursed, correctly positioned, is a viable card that will reward players who can correctly "pick their spots," the latest in a long line of tactical creature cards that reward gamesmanship, reading, and poker skills more than strategy and the same-ness that defines the majority of matchup-driven Constructed interactions. Like many players skeptical of change, Chris Pikula and I didn't initially like the morph mechanic. Randy Buehler kind of chuckled and said that Chris of all people should love morph (at the time, Chris was the only well-known **Magic** player to have seen a World Series of Poker final table)... Morph brought bluffing from the realm of gamesmanship and moved it into the game itself!



Mirri can be a deeply rewarding threat when she is deployed at the correct time, but when you play such a potentially vulnerable creature in the *wrong* spot, you just end up on the wrong side of a bad resource exchange. Luckily, Mirri comes in the correct color to shape the game to the point that she can attack most profitably. With **Planar Chaos's** reworking of the color pie, Mirri may also reverse black's fortunes in Standard in particular. The onetime king of the format is in a clear last place position right now, behind even green, but on the other hand, **Wrath of God** is the clear best card in the format. What happens when you give the worst color the best card? Might the scales balance differently?

When they see new cards, a lot of analysts just see minus signs. They look for reasons not to play cards. Many times they naysay and wag their fingers because they lack the vision or the skill to make the clever or quirky threats work. I try to take the opposite position. I try to see possibilities and find reasons why I might *want* to play a new card, to find a home in an existing archetype or the excuse to build a new deck, to find a role to play that opens the vistas of potentiality.



To me, Mirri is deceptive because there are few cards that look like her that have been successful in the past. There is no **Dark Ritual** to set her up on the second turn, as there was when **Blazing Specter** won the World Championships, and as many games progress, she will become more and more fragile; on balance, she rewards a skill set that most tournament **Magic** players simply haven't developed yet, that of playing the *man*, not the matchup, establishing a game of chicken or a scorched earth war where the guy with the last creature standing might be the last *player* standing. Mirri is not an obvious inclusion in the same way that **Blastoderm** or **River Boa** were in years past, but



then again, neither was **Ichorid**... and we all know how *horrible* that hasty four finished last year's Extended season.

*Mike has been a leading voice in the game's strategy for as long as there has been a **Magic** Internet. He is the former editor of The Magic Dojo and a sometime Pro player. Michael J. Flores: Deckade, is a compilation of Mike's first ten years of strategy and theory (i.e. before he joined **magicthegathering.com**), and is available at <http://www.top8magic.com>.*



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