

**MAGIC**  
The Gathering™

Kamigawa Cycle · Book I

**OUTLAW**  
Champions of  
**Kamigawa**

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## PROLOGUE

The Daimyo's child was born at sunrise. Lady Pearl-Ear of the *kitsune-bito* looked at the wailing, red-smearred newborn and then to the first spears of daylight streaming in from the open window. Which omen would prove more powerful, she wondered—a baby born in concert with the dawn of a new day, herald to an age of light? Or a dire warning that the Daimyo's legacy would be drenched in blood?

Amid a cluster of bustling servants, the midwife wrapped the infant in fine Towabara linens. She handed the child to Lady Pearl-Ear, then drew the bedclothes up to the mother's chin.

The unnamed baby went quiet in the fox-woman's arms. Lady Pearl-Ear's long ears stood up straight as she tried in vain to isolate the infant's aura. As a *kitsune*, Pearl-Ear's shallow muzzle had no visible nose or mouth, but her senses were still sharper than a real fox's. To her, a person's scent was inextricably bound to disposition—industrious people smelled of clean sweat and wood shavings while layabouts gave off waves of stale air and mildew. In this case, all she could sense was a normal, helpless infant in need of succor. She cradled the princess's head against her heart, the soft texture of her fur seeming to soothe the tiny child.

Pearl-Ear tried to relax as well. She had lived among the humans of Eiganjo for almost a decade, but their offspring still

struck her as remarkably small, too quick to cry, and distressingly hairless.

Nearby, the new mother lay exhausted. Lady Yoshino was the Daimyo's most favored concubine, and carrying his child was a special honor the bachelor ruler had bestowed upon her. The labor had been extremely difficult, and now Yoshino barely breathed as she slept among the sweat-soaked sheets. Pearl-Ear said a silent prayer as she looked down on her friend. She knew this appeal joined thousands of others, an entire kingdom beseeching the most powerful of the *kami* for the sake of their great leader's child and the lady who bore her. Pearl-Ear's own people in the woods honored the same spirits as the citizens of Towabara, and together their voices were a grand chorale that rang across the spirit world. The kitsune-bito knew the power of such prayer, and Pearl-Ear also knew that without them, Yoshino might not have survived at all.

The midwife's apprentice began cleaning up as the midwife herself bowed before Lady Pearl-Ear. "Mother and child are alive," she said. "Daimyo Konda must be told."

Pearl-Ear glanced down at the baby. "A child," she said, "but not a prince."

The midwife shook her head and smiled sadly. "Perhaps this princess will confound tradition and succeed her father." She glanced at the bustling servants, then added, "But no time soon, of course. Long live the Daimyo."

"I share your hope," Pearl-Ear said. She held the infant out with both arms, staring deep into half-opened eyes that had not yet learned to focus. "I would not put Lady Yoshino through another ordeal like this one for the sake of gender."

Pearl-Ear handed the infant back to the midwife. "Make mother and daughter comfortable. I shall inform the Daimyo." The fox-woman's ears folded back around her head and she gathered the sleeves of her voluminous robe around her. With a nod

to the sentries outside the midwife's chambers, Lady Pearl-Ear stepped out into the storm.

It was a short walk from the rear corner of the Daimyo's stronghold to the main entryway, but the winds were fierce and the sky was a scowling mass of grayish-yellow clouds. From the great stone parapet that overlooked the lower courtyard, Pearl-Ear could see that only a few hundred of the faithful maintained their vigil, awaiting the arrival of the Daimyo's child. Eiganjo's citizens had gathered in their thousands the night before, but fatigue and the growing tempest had forced most to withdraw. She wished she could spare a moment to tell them the news they had been waiting for so patiently, but they were so distant and the storm so loud that they would never hear her words.

The retainers on the central level's main gate recognized her and waved her on. She had made many visits to the top of the Daimyo's tower over the past two days, even though she had never spoken to Konda himself. His advisors received her cordially, but they would not interrupt their master, who had given word that the future of the kingdom depended on his not being disturbed.

Once the great gate closed behind her and the wind was at bay, Pearl-Ear let out her ears and loosened her robes. She paused, sniffed the air, and rotated her ears towards the main stairwell. Satisfied, she folded her ears back and darted forward, scaling the seemingly endless steps so lightly that her padded feet barely made a sound.

She passed dozens of courtiers and servants on the stairs, but most were too busy to take a second glance. Those that weren't never got the chance. She ran easily, weaving around obstacles and darting between soldiers and shadows alike. She could run this way for a week if she had to, with scarcely any sign of exertion, and she made excellent time as she ascended to the upper reaches of the stronghold.

The higher she went, the more sentries Pearl-Ear encountered.

Twice she was ordered to halt and identify herself, but each time the Daimyo's symbol on a slip of parchment allowed her to go past. Thankfully, these sentries were all familiar with the kitsune-bitō in general and with Lady Pearl-Ear in particular. They knew she was no threat and that she came bearing news from the midwife.

Pearl-Ear slowed her pace as she drew near the uppermost chambers of the tower. She smoothed wrinkles from her robes, hoping that this time she would receive an audience with Konda himself.

Lady Pearl-Ear opened the door, which led to a small ante-chamber crowded with armed retainers. She recognized some of the Daimyo's most trusted warriors, including Captain Nagao, hero of Konda's second campaign against the bandits that plagued the southern countryside. Nagao came forward and saluted.

"The child is born?"

Lady Pearl-Ear's whiskers twitched, and she bowed. "I would tell his lordship first, gracious Captain Nagao."

Nagao smiled. He was a lean, leathery man with a hard, square face. "Do you think me a palace gossip, O fox maiden?"

"Never, sir. But Daimyo Konda is most particular about how things are done. I would hate to be the cause of a shadow on his esteem for you."

Nagao jerked his head, and the sentries behind him uncrossed their spears, leaving the exit behind them clear.

"Deliver your news, honorable Lady Pearl-Ear." Nagao bowed. "I will hear it soon enough from the palace gossips anyway."

A small laugh rose among the retainers but died just as quickly under the captain's withering glare.

She returned the bow. "Thank you, Nagao. I will tell the Daimyo how safe he is in your care."

Nagao's face tightened, and Pearl-Ear sensed a mild surge of frustration. To her, it smelled of burning hair.

“If you are able speak to him directly,” Nagao muttered, “I will thank you for your praise.”

Pearl-Ear hesitated for a moment, but Nagao had already turned away. Her ears swiveled after him, but she said no more and went into the chamber.

The huge square room was lit by a single torch in each corner. Sumptuous bolts of cloth hung from the ceiling beams like sheets of silver spider’s silk. Even in the dim light Lady Pearl-Ear recognized two of the three tall figures at the center of the room.

General Takeno, commander of the Daimyo’s cavalry, stood alongside an elderly, white-bearded wizard named Hisoka from the Minamo Academy. Beyond them was a hooded person facing away from Pearl-Ear. From the haughtiness of his posture and the scent of cold, pure rain, she immediately placed him as one of the *soratami* moonfolk. The three turned as one to face her, standing between her and the darkened doorway beyond.

“The child is born,” she said. She had been right: the hooded figure was a soratami, as they were known informally—one of the strange, ethereal denizens of the clouds above the Minamo Academy. Both the wizards’ school and the soratami had excellent relations with the Daimyo’s kingdom. She knew Konda took wizards and moonfolk into his confidence, but she hadn’t realized that both were represented here, on the most restricted levels of his stronghold.

General Takeno grunted. “Long live the Daimyo, and his child.”

“Most excellent news, Lady Pearl-Ear,” said the wizard.

“Our lord must not be disturbed.” The soratami frowned from beneath the folds of his hood.

“I bring most urgent news, soratami-san.” Pearl-Ear assumed he was male, but the voice was a husky whisper and the heavy robe masked both scent and features. The “he” could well be a she—the moonfolk themselves drew little distinction between the genders.

“His lordship gave strict instructions not to be disturbed. The future of Towabara—”

“Lies asleep in her mother’s arms.” Lady Pearl-Ear’s ears stretched out on either side of her head. “Surely a father would pause in his great work to learn that he is, in fact, a father.” And to inquire about the health of the mother, she added privately.

The soratami shook his head. “Your news can wait.” With a condescending wave, the moonfolk turned away from Pearl-Ear.

The fox-woman’s brow creased, but Takeno placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Write it down,” the general said evenly. “I will mark it with my own seal and it will be treated as a battlefield dispatch. I guarantee no one will read it before his lordship.”

Pearl-Ear started to nod, her eyes still fixed on the moonfolk’s back. Before she could answer, a powerful voice rolled out of the darkness beyond the far doorway.

“Send Lady Pearl-Ear to me.”

“Sir!” Takeno and the wizard bowed, stepping aside for Lady Pearl-Ear. The moonfolk stood firm, facing the unseen speaker.

“Daimyo Konda, respectfully—”

“Now.” The ruler of Towabara had a loud, ragged voice that had led a hundred campaigns. He was not used to repeating himself.

The moonfolk stepped aside but did not face Lady Pearl-Ear or even bow. She swept past the towering robed figure through the doorway and up another set of stairs.

Daimyo Konda was waiting for her at the top. The ruler of Towabara was over fifty years old, but he was as strong and alert as he had been at twenty-five. He wore his thin white hair long, and it flowed freely around his head from under his round skullcap. His mustache and beard both hung down past the center of his chest. He was dressed in a brilliant gold robe inlaid with rich red silk and dazzling gems. Though he seemed distracted, he was still brimming

with the famous stamina that had conquered a nation. Shouldering the burdens of leadership for so many decades had made him stronger as he aged instead of weaker, seasoning him like hardwood.

Lady Pearl-Ear bowed. "My lord," she began.

Konda sat cross-legged on a raised platform, inches from the floor. He clutched the handle of a sheathed sword, cradling the weapon across his lap.

"You have news."

Pearl-Ear bowed again. "You have a child, my lord."

Daimyo Konda nodded. A strange, feral grin split his fine features and he croaked out a dry laugh. "A girl."

Pearl-Ear paused. "Yes, my lord. The princess sleeps soundly, alongside Lady Yoshino."

"Princess. Yes. But that no longer matters." The Daimyo either would not or could not focus his eyes. He stood facing Pearl-Ear from the center of his small chamber, but his rich almond pupils listed from side to side like a rudderless ship. In the dim light, it even seemed that Konda's eyes were floating outside the boundaries of his face.

The Daimyo smiled again, and let out a long wail, his voice rising and falling as his thumb worked the hilt of his sword.

Distracted, Lady Pearl-Ear's own eyes focused on the space behind the Daimyo. A small stone shrine had been built against the far wall, in the space usually occupied by the shrine to the Myojin of Cleansing Fire. Now the only representation of the Daimyo's patron god was the ornate mural that covered the northern wall, depicting Konda and the myojin leading the Daimyo's troops into battle, side by side as equals. Both wore expressions of righteous fury in the face of their enemies. Above them, the great sun spirit Terashi illuminated the heavens.

Now, a new shrine featured a square granite pedestal topped by a marble column. A rough stone disk hovered several feet above the column, smoking slightly in the cool air. A strange shape had been



carved into the disk's face, something with the head and horns of a beast lying curled into a fetal position.

Konda stood, his vacillating eyes still straying across his face. He held the sheathed sword out toward Lady Pearl-Ear, its blade parallel to the ground.

"Don't look at that," he said. "It's mine."

Pearl-Ear shuddered. "Forgive me, my lord. I meant no harm."

"I am beyond harm now, Lady Pearl-Ear. I am beyond most of what you comprehend. But my will is still law in Towabara. Let my enemies tremble!"

Pearl-Ear bowed to hide her expression. "Long live the Daimyo." She looked up and said, "If I may, my lord, Lady Yoshino—"

"Has given birth, yes, yes, yes. So you have said, Lady Pearl-Ear of the kitsune-bito. But I have also created something this night. I have also given birth. I am father and mother to this entire nation. My children are legion, and will one day sit on the throne of this world and the next. You have noticed the changes to my shrine."

Pearl-Ear paused, thrown by the sudden shift in the conversation. The Daimyo was not asking; he was observing.

Lady Pearl-Ear lowered her head and bowed. "I have, my lord."

"Remember it well, for you will never look upon its like again. It is a monument to Towabara's hope. It is the doorway through which I will secure the future. It is the symbol of my divine destiny and of my people's good fortune."

"Wonderful, my lord." She was catching something strange and foreboding from the Daimyo. Something about his eyes and the nauseous excitement that came off him in waves had raised an almost overwhelming urge to bolt from the room.

"I have dared much, Lady Pearl-Ear. I have risked my life and all that I have accomplished for the sake of my people. And I have won."

Pearl-Ear raised her head. "If I may ask, my lord . . . what have you won?"

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Daimyo Konda's vacillating eyes suddenly stopped and fixed on Pearl-Ear. "Lasting peace," he said, his face split by a mad, leering grin. "The rule of law, ensured by the power to enforce it." His wandering eyes began to glow softly in the dimly lit room. His mouth widened, revealing square, sharp teeth. "Permanent prosperity. The best of all possible worlds for my children, and their children's children." Konda's voice remained low and ragged, but Lady Pearl-Ear heard a sound like a kettle's whistle behind his words. She winced inwardly, careful not to let her discomfort show.

"Now, Lady Pearl-Ear, the glory of my beloved Towabara will never fade away." The Daimyo turned to face the marble column and the floating stone disk. He threw his arms out wide and cried, "Behold! The new spirit of my kingdom!"

Pearl-Ear stood and stared . . . at the Daimyo, at the shrine, at the unsettling figure scratched into the disk. On the north wall, the mural showing Daimyo and kami seemed to move in the flickering torchlight as the painted and etched figures relived a glorious victory.

Daimyo Konda still held his arms aloft. "You may go now, Lady Pearl-Ear. I will see my other new child presently. And you need not worry. Though my manner may be strange and my thoughts confused, I am finally at peace. Go, Lady Pearl-Ear. Tell the world that soon everything will change for the better."

"My lord." Lady Pearl-Ear silently backed out of the room with her head bowed until she reached the top of the stairs. As she turned to go, she stole one last look at the odd tableau.

The Daimyo stood, silently exulting. The stone disk floated and smoked over the new shrine. And on the north wall, the Myojin of Cleansing Fire wept, real tears sizzling as they splattered against the cold granite floor.

Pearl-Ear fled down the stairs, past the Daimyo's retainers, and back out into the storm.