

**MAGIC**  
The Gathering™

Kamigawa Cycle • Book III

**GUARDIAN**  
SAVIORS  
of kamigawa

Scott McGough





## PROLOGUE

Princess Michiko stood among the ancient cedars of the Jukai forest, staring patiently up through the thick canopy of leaves. Though the horrors and strife of the Kami War had spread to every corner of her nation, here at least was one place where the wind was soft and pale yellow light streamed placidly through the trees. The war would find her again, she was sure of that. The serenity of the forest's edge would not last, but while it did she meant to come here often to appreciate this one tranquil place left in all the world.

Michiko continued to watch the canopy overhead, gracefully balanced atop a small grassy mound. Beside her stood her friend Riko, a slight young woman who wore a student's robe and carried a short bow with all the confidence of a professional soldier. Riko's eyes continuously scanned the surrounding area, but they also passed over Michiko herself as often as possible.

Four kitsune warriors also accompanied Michiko and Riko. The foxmen blended into their surroundings so well they were almost invisible, but Michiko always knew they were there. She had been a frequent target for attacks and abductions lately, and her kitsune hosts back in the village were not about to let her come to more harm while she was their guest.

Michiko was grateful for the escorts, but there had been no further attacks on her since they had escaped the massacre at Minamo Academy. She welcomed the kitsune's protection, but it was maddening to sit idle while her nation and the entire world tore itself apart. The elders were keeping her safe, but they were also keeping her from doing any good.

Riko shifted her weight and flexed the fingers on her bow hand. "Any sign, Michiko-hime?"

The princess slowly closed her eyes. She shook her head. "Not yet."

Riko's voice betrayed the archer's scowl. "He won't answer. And I'm glad of it."

Michiko opened her eyes. The kitsune were treating her as a gifted child, but a child nonetheless. They included her in their council meetings and they listened politely when she spoke, but her arguments rarely held sway.

So Michiko had called upon her allies outside the forest. After taking her mentors' dire warnings into account, Michiko had sent a messenger to Toshi Umezawa in the Takenuma Swamp. She had retained the ochimusha's services, and he had proven himself both reliable and effective. The kitsune who had met him didn't object to his abilities, however, but his character. Indeed, when he and Michiko first met, Toshi had impulsively kidnapped her and held her against her will. Fortunately, he had seen working for the princess as more valuable than ransoming her. Toshi was an opportunist and a mercenary, but he was at least a competent one.

In her message, Michiko requested that Toshi provide some general information about the situation in the marsh lands and requested that he to come to her for a new assignment. It had been several weeks since she sent it, and so far Toshi had not replied.

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Michiko was anxious to see him, but not for his report on the criminal goings-on in Takenuma. Toshi had laid his hands on the great prize her father had stolen from the spirit world, the Taken One, whose abduction sparked twenty years of Kami War. When she had seen Toshi with it in his arms, she had longed to reach out and touch it herself, to feel its power and perhaps finally understand the spell it had cast on her father.

But the Taken One was too powerful and too unpredictable. Her guardians and Toshi himself had cautioned her to keep away, and Michiko never came within arm's reach of the prize. Since then her thoughts had often returned to the rough-hewn disk with the etched figure of a serpent across its face. She felt it was the key to ending the conflict that had erupted between the spirit world and the physical one. It was the key, and she herself was somehow tied to it.

So she waited for Toshi's reply, or better still, Toshi himself. Only he could tell her what she needed to know, and she could feel their time running out. Toshi was cunning, so she expected he was still alive. She had also worked diligently to improve her skill with the messenger kanji, so she was sure that it had reached him.

He would have to reply soon. When she pictured the world, Michiko saw waves of violence and conflict all rolling toward her and her peaceful patch of forest. Not even the kitsune could keep her safe forever.

Something rustled in the trees, then a strange black symbol burst through the canopy. Michiko's heart raced. She recognized the same messenger kanji she had sent to the swamp and felt a small rush of pride. It had returned just as she had intended. And if it had found Toshi, it might also bear his response.

The queer black bird fluttered through the beams of sunlight

toward the princess. The kitsune warriors and Riko all tensed as they prepared for a fight. Two of the fox samurai stepped between Michiko and the symbol with their swords drawn.

Well clear of the kitsune blades, the messenger kanji stopped and hovered in place.

“Deliver your message,” Michiko called.

The thick, inky strokes of the kanji pulsed as purple light twinkled along their edges. A clear voice rang out, its words tinged with a touch of amusement.

“Princess,” Toshi’s voice said. “Nice work with the kanji. Unable to visit you at present, but I promise I’ll see you soon. As for general information . . . it’s a complete nightmare out here. But don’t worry. I’m working on it.”

The kanji deflated back to its original size and began to crumble. The light breeze blew ash and grit back into the thicker reaches of the forest, where they disappeared into the gloom.

“He’s working on it,” Riko sneered. “We can all relax. Toshi’s working on it.”

Michiko frowned. “Riko,” she said. “Toshi rescued all of us from Minamo, and from the forest myojin before that. Surely you appreciate just how much Toshi is capable of.”

Riko held Michiko’s stern eyes. “I do, Michiko-hime. I’m not scoffing at his abilities. I’m afraid of what he can do, not what he can’t.”

“I have paid for his services,” Michiko said. “So whatever he is or isn’t capable of, he will do as I ask him. That’s why I wanted him here.”

“And I’m sure he’ll come. You asked him for help . . . that’s like a delicious smell to Toshi. He’ll show up when we need him least and profit from it, like he always does.”

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Michiko did not reply, but turned back toward the village. The kitsune samurai spread out before her, gliding through the forest without disturbing a single twig.

Riko was underestimating Toshi. Michiko had seen him confront the most powerful adversaries and win through guile instead of force. He was capable of great deeds, and not just in scope. If she could just talk to him, he could help her understand the Taken One, and she could help him understand the rewards of working for the common good. He was a criminal, but he was a learned and loyal criminal. He could yet be redeemed.

Michiko sighed as she headed back to the village. There were so many dangers on the road ahead that redemption was a remote possibility for any of them. Survival was a far more pressing concern.

Behind her, a great bank of clouds covered the sun, and the princess's bright, quiet haven descended into shadow.