

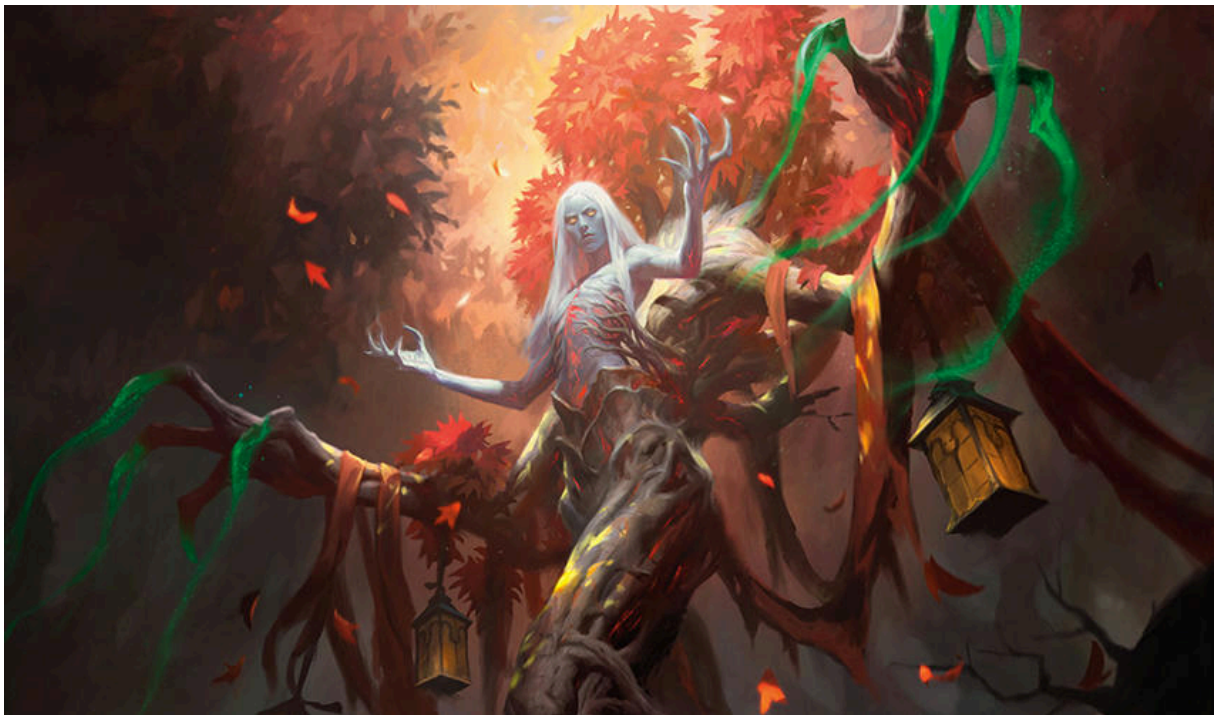
Tangles

Seanan McGuire

From set *Innistrad: Midnight Hunt*

There was something unique about the air on Innistrad. Maybe it was the horrors the trees had witnessed here, the blood that watered the soil on which they fed their thirsty roots, the bones that littered the riverbeds, but the air of this Plane was like no other. Wrenn and Six took a step—one of their last together—and put their massive foot down on the soil of Innistrad, deep within the Kessig forest. This was near the place where they had met for the first time.

Here? Wrenn inquired, asking without opening her mouth. How the question ached and burned at her, how it *ached*. This part was always painful.



Wrenn and Seven | Art by: Heonhwa Choe

Somehow, it hurt more this time than it had when she was parted from Four, who had been injured so badly in battle that they had barely been able to complete their last steps together before the valiant old tree had shuddered and expelled her from its heart, sending her to sprawl, bare-limbed and exposed, on the earth of Innistrad. It had been a new Plane to her then, but one she had heard rumor of before.

Those rumors, from the mouths of other planeswalkers, held that the finest trees grew in the Kessig forest, and after her time with Six, she was inclined to agree.

No. Close, replied the tree. Wrenn nodded their vast head and continued into the wood, away from the place where they had arrived, looking for a clearing large enough to support Six's glory.

Perhaps this parting hurt more because Six *could* keep going, *could* stay with her, but was choosing not to, and part of why their partnership had always worked so well was that she listened when the

big tree spoke. They were partners, not an owner and a tool. She had seen mages who treated their partners like beasts of burden and forced them to perform past the point of their own exhaustion. Wrenn's seed had been planted by a better parent, and she had been raised to respect those who served with her, even if her war was not their own.

They had taken another five steps when the tree spoke again, saying, *Here. Stop.*

Wrenn stopped. They drove their roots deep into the ground, and bit by bit, she began to pull herself out of the home that had been hers for so long. As she pulled, her awareness of the great tree dwindled, until she felt like a tooth that had been loosened in its socket, still part of the body but awaiting only one last sharp blow to knock it out entirely.

Then, with a final yank that she felt all the way to the bottom of her stomach, she uprooted herself and was no longer joined with Six. Six, who was no longer the majestic, towering treefolk he had become during their time together—trees had no gender as such, but dryads did, and upon discovering the concept in her mind, he had considered his choices and decided he preferred the masculine—was now a mature, healthy, beautifully twisting Innistrad oak, his branches reaching for the clouded sky.

Wrenn sighed and leaned her forehead against his bark, breathing in the familiar scent of him for the final time. "Someday," she promised. "Someday, a very long time from now, when Seven wearies and I have need of my Eight, I will return here. I will walk these woods again, and I will find you, old friend, and your acorns will have had time to grow into strong young trees, and I will offer them the choice I once offered you, and if one of them should accept it, I will consider myself fortunate beyond measure."

They could no longer communicate in silence, their minds separated for the first time. Six's consciousness would fade as he settled into the ground and rejoined the trees who were his natural companions and kin. Her partner was leaving her, and while she could still have pulled herself inside, this was what he wanted. She would let him go, for his own sake. The life of a planeswalker was no simple thing, even for one who heard the call unaided.

Still, she fancied she felt gratitude and joy through his bark, and she smiled as she pulled away. She would miss him. But that was the thing about the past; it was behind you. The future was ahead.

It was time to find hers.

After the better part of a day spent wandering the Kessig forest, following the whisper of treesong that told her there was a viable partner growing here, she was beginning to doubt the future's promise would ever be fulfilled. Her feet ached, and her legs were tired. They were things she always had but rarely had reason to use. Now they were so sore, they felt as if they were the whole of her, and still the treesong lured her deeper into the forest, urging her on, promising a compatible partner ahead.

Those lucky few whose Planes harbored native dryads tended to assume they could bond with any tree, that any woody vessel would be enough to sustain them. That wasn't so. As with any form of magic, theirs required a certain harmony to sing properly. The song of Wrenn's sapling filled her body. Any tree near her could hear it, and the ones who knew the harmonies would sing them in return.

Six had sung to her, once. Now he was a silent presence behind her as she moved deeper into the wood, and the new singer was either very far away or very weak, for their song was small and hard to hear.

Perhaps she should have been less respectful of Six's desire to come home and stopped at the first harmonious tree she saw once he announced his desire to be parted. But that would have been a cruelty, and her strength was not yet at an end. She could continue.

Determined to do as her kind had always done, survive, Wrenn walked onward, deeper and deeper into the Kessig forest, following the song of the tree that waited for her somewhere in the glades.

Teferi had not visited Innistrad before. It had always been a story told by other travelers, a rumor whispered in passing, until curiosity and time combined to make it a worthwhile destination. The locals were frightened people, with good reason, wary of strangers but generous of hospitality once convinced their visitors meant no harm. They were, some of them, desperate for any hint of hope, any kind word or possibility that life might be easier elsewhere. Unable to free them from their homeland and unwilling even to consider the logistics of such a wild endeavor, Teferi had begun to find their constant company wearing.



Art by: Heonhwa Choe

Relief came in an unexpected form, when cathars from the local church came charging into the inn with reports of a white witch seen in the woods. Here on Innistrad, it was not unreasonable to assume any unknown phenomena could pose a danger, and the hospitality he had been offered was enough that he felt obligated to offer aid. So it was with that he found himself at the wood's edge accompanied by and yet apart from a detachment of men, their swords and bows at the ready, searching for their so-called white witch and the terrible abomination she had supposedly summoned. He had no idea what the threat might be, only that it had been seen as enough to drive the cathars to the wood and provide him with exit from his hosts.

The cathars spread out, searching for signs of the witch they had been told lurked within these trees. Teferi watched them go before strolling into the trees on his own. No local witchling was going to present much of a threat to him, and he wanted to understand this forest if he could. Woodlands were different on every Plane, but they had certain commonalities—oaks and elms, for example, could be found almost anywhere that had trees, and the scent of their leaves never varied as much as he would have expected it to. Perhaps if he'd been more attuned to natural magics, he would have understood the reasons. Perhaps it would be a good thing to discuss with the next nature-aligned mage he encountered, assuming they were in the mood for conversation. It was always enlightening to learn more about the working of the Planes, which could be so very different and so very harmonious at the same time.

“This way,” called one of the cathars, voice followed by the sound of footsteps crackling on leaves as they set out, presumably chasing their quarry. As none of them were in sight to notice his lingering, Teferi felt no pressing need to follow.

Something flickered on the edge of his awareness, other than the trees, other than the departing cathars. He spun around, peering into the shadows. He saw nothing there. After a moment’s pause to frown at the empty path, he resumed his wandering, more slowly now, taking his time to study his surroundings.

Perhaps that was why he heard the woman.

She was speaking softly, voice low and gently pitched, with rounded vowels that matched no accent he knew. He adjusted his path, heading for the voice, not yet calling the cathars to join him, and paused when he saw the figure standing in the shadow of one of the great oaks.

She was pale, so pale that she looked like she’d been sketched entirely from aspen bark, a white wraith against the darker trunks of the oaks around her. Her hair was long, loose, and even whiter, bone-bleached and stark. Her forehead was resting against one of the trees, face obscured by the angle, and her words seemed to be aimed at the tree itself.

Teferi walked toward her, hands out and open, fingers spread to show that he was shaping no arcane symbols, readying no spells. Given her coloring, she was likely to be the cathars’ “white witch,” but she seemed more like a gift from the wood, for none could understand the natural world like a dryad could, even as there was space for misunderstanding between those of flesh and bone and those of sap. His foot, placed without looking, snapped the smallest of fallen twigs, and she whirled, eyes gone wide, pressing her back to the bark of the tree she had been speaking with. As she did not meld into it, he thought himself safe to continue approaching, and moved closer, stopping at a respectful distance and offering her a shallow bow.

“Forgive me the intrusion, but you seemed unwell,” he said. “May I offer aid?”

“Stay back, mage,” she said, voice sharp as a broken branch, but still soft, as if half the heart had been cut out of it. “I can defend myself.”

“I’d rather not fight,” he said. “It’s a dull way of meeting people. The locals are more than battle hungry enough for the both of us. May I assume you came seeking a moment’s peace?”

“I came looking for a tree,” she replied, narrow eyed and wary.

“Look no further.” Teferi spread his hands, indicating the trees all around them.

The dryad laughed, wryly. “If only it were so simple. But no. None of these trees are strong enough to hold me.”

Teferi frowned. “Forgive me, but I was under the impression that a dryad was born with their tree, grew in tandem with it, and never left it.”

“They are,” she said. “I mean, we are. I mean, there was a great fire once. It devoured the trees of my people, until I found a way to pull it into myself. It burns there still. It burns me now. It grants me the flexibility to move from tree to tree, if the tree can contain the fire. When it was still new and bright, the inferno led me to a tree whose song knew my own. We came together, and we were One.” Her expression softened. “With One, I learned that those of us who have no roots to anchor us can walk as we will, not limited to a single Plane, and when she was done serving her time as my partner, I allowed her to take root on another Plane, and found another tree to sing with.”

“You have no tree now.”

“No.”

“Are you trapped on this Plane without one?”

“I need a partner to travel,” she admitted. “But Six grew weary, and this forest was his beginning, so he asked if I could take him home before he stilled, and he was good to me. He carried me far. I carried him home and listened for the song that would allow me to continue my own journeys. And I thought I had found it, so I traveled toward it until I could go no farther, and now I fear the fire will have me.”

Teferi frowned, trying to sort through the puzzling phrases, as footsteps in the trees heralded the presence of the cathars. “I think the mage went this way,” one yelled.

The dryad looked to Teferi with sudden loathing. “So you were a lure to call and catch me, then?” she demanded, hands balling into fists, air above them going red-hot with flickering fire. “I’m not so easy to kill when I have something left to burn.”

Teferi put his own hands up. “Peace, please. They’re not with me.” Then he grimaced. “Well, they are, I suppose, but I’m not with *them*. If we go deeper into the wood, we can slow them down. Can you walk?”

Wrenn nodded. “I can’t leave this Plane on my own, but I can walk.”

Teferi stepped over and offered her his arm. “Then we walk.”

The heat above her hands flickered and went out, and her fingers, as she slipped them into the crook of his elbow, were as cool as untouched wood and less pliant than he would have expected them to be. But they bent as fingers were meant to bend, cupping his flesh, and when they began to walk, she was nimble as any other.

They hadn’t gone far when he winced and sighed, closing his eyes. “Are you well?” asked Wrenn.

“We’re being followed,” he said. She tensed. “No, not by the cathars, and don’t bother to turn around. It was following me before, and I saw nothing when I looked.”

“Not everything on Innistrad is visible,” said Wrenn. “The soil does not encourage the dead to rest.”

“Do the dead intend us harm?”

“Anything that would follow travelers in the wood without approaching them means no good,” said Wrenn. “I would assume it means us harm, yes.”

“That was my fear.” Teferi turned, slowly to keep Wrenn from stumbling, and scowled into the gloom behind them. “Show yourself.”

Nothing materialized. But the shadows, which were already deep, deepened and grew heavy with the feeling of an unseen presence. Whatever it was, it meant them no good; the aura of malice radiating from the deepest dark was palpable enough that even Wrenn, who had little connection to either the dead or spiritual worlds, stiffened and narrowed her eyes.

“It isn’t of the trees,” she murmured. “It has no song.”

“Show yourself,” repeated Teferi, flicking his fingers in a quick series of curling, spiraling lines that ended with a raise of his hand, palm pointed toward the deep shadows. Blue light flared from his skin, and when it faded, a figure lurked where the malicious presence had been. It was a warped and twisted parody of a humanoid, caught somewhere at the intersection between man, beast, and tree. Its mouth was a gaping maw filled with angular teeth that had never grown in the jaw of anything living.



Art by: Piotr Foksowicz

It hissed, the sound deep and guttural, and Teferi reacted without thought, raising his hands and unleashing a torrent of flickering blue magic. The shape writhed and surged forward, accurately interpreting this as an attack, and Teferi's eyes widened. Any simple ghost or wraith would have been banished by that blast, thrown forward into time and leaving them unthreatened. He muttered a soft phrase and shoved more magic through his fingers, as the specter shoved back, hissing still, and finally vanished in a burst of terrible, necrotic energy.

He turned back to Wrenn, lowering his hands. She had fallen when he yanked away so sharply, and watched him from the ground, a delicate, displeased ghost of a woman. "You have my apologies," he said, kneeling to offer his hands. "But the thing is gone, for now."

"As is our path back," she said sourly, as she allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. "Look what you've done, mage."

Teferi looked over his shoulder. The path was gone, or rather, the path was replicated, transformed from a reasonably straight line cut through the trees to a tangled ball of identical paths, each one branching off in a different direction, until it seemed they must run out of separate ways for them to go. The distinctive crackle of time magic hung over it all.

"Oh," said Teferi, faintly.

"Yes," said Wrenn. "Oh." Then, with more anger in her voice, she said, "The tree that called me is gone. I can't hear it anymore. Do you know what you've *done*?"

"I'm afraid I don't." Teferi looked at his hands, then at the air, still crackling blue in spots. "Which is worrisome. You came here looking for a tree. Can't you take refuge in one of these?" He indicated the trees around them.

"If only," she said, a hint of manic laughter in her voice. "These are fine, mature trees that would carry me far if they were suitable partners. But none of them sing to me. None of them can carry my fire. The tree that called me was a sapling yet. Too young to hold me. Too small to contain the burning."

Teferi frowned. "So we find you another tree, before you burn to nothing."

"It doesn't *work* that way," protested the woman, voice growing even more ragged. "Dryads walk the Planes with our trees to keep and anchor us. Because my heart is made of fire, when I walk, my tree walks with me. I can have no partner too small to accommodate me, nor can I convince any unsuitable tree to carry me into the Plane. I *must* find a tree, and I don't have as much time as I would prefer!"

Teferi frowned, following the thread of her story in the things she wasn't saying. He began to walk again, and she followed, too sensible to remain behind alone. "Peace, friend," he said, finally. "You need to find a tree. I need to find a way out of this mess I've made. Perhaps we can find these things together?"

"It's not as if there's anything else to do," said the woman. "But as I said, my time is short."

Teferi nodded, pondering. "I understand not wishing to admit weakness to a stranger, but it sounds as if you say that without a tree, you will die."

"I can defend myself!" she snapped, the air around her hands growing hazy with heat as she tapped into what mana she had remaining to her. "Do not try me, mage."

"Peace, dryad," he said. "Peace, and names. Mine is Teferi. Yours?"

She straightened, some of the wariness leaving her expression. "They call me Wrenn. I have heard of you, mage. Your legend travels farther than your feet."

It had the cadence of a proverb. Teferi smiled. "Good things, I hope. Things that lead you to believe I wouldn't injure an innocent."

"None who walk the Planes are innocent," said Wrenn. "Still, most of your tales have been less than terrible. Many call you a kind man. I will trust you for now." The heat haze around her hands vanished. "Yes. Without a tree, my journey will be finished here."

"Can you listen for another, do you think, if I lend you my support?"

"I can listen, but you'll have to lead the way."

Teferi looked around the twisted maze the Plane had become, devoid of cathar and spectral presence, and sighed. "As well as anyone can, I suppose I shall."

They had been walking for the better part of the afternoon, following the twisting path. Neither of them was familiar enough with the area to know which of the bends had been introduced when Teferi banished the monster. Some of the nearby trees looked dauntingly familiar, and Teferi reached out, spark flaring, and flinched as the shell of his own spell knocked him back, so similar to what he'd done to Zhalfir, and yet not similar in the least. He could feel the passage of time around them; Wrenn was getting weaker, still searching for the treesong that would save her. Time was marching onward. They were still in phase with Innistrad.

They were just stuck.



Art by: Isis

“We’ve been here before,” said Wrenn. “We’ve made a big loop.”

“No,” said Teferi, despite his own suspicions. “We never turned around. We’ve been walking south, or roughly south, this entire time.”

“Can you hear the treesong the way I can?” asked Wrenn. “Do the trees whisper their desires to you, making you understand what they wish? If yes, then I will believe you. If, as feels more likely, no, then you have no way to contradict me, and I’m tired. We are almost back where we began.”

Teferi eyed her, looking for any sign of levity. She looked calmly back, eyes open and unguarded. Near as he could tell, she spoke the truth. He stopped in the middle of the path, feeling the time swirling around them, and there, right on the edges of the working, flavoring without tainting it, was the remainder of the lurking presence. It was *right there*. He should have been able to tear this spell down without a second thought!

And instead, it endured, trapping and taunting them. Wrenn pulled her hand away from his arm and stepped over to a rotting log, still graceful despite her clear increasing weariness. She sat, back slightly slumped, and said, “This is not the ending I envisioned to the story I was seeded to.”

“It’s not an ending,” Teferi protested. “It’s a spell gone wrong. Surely you’ve seen spells go wrong before.”

“Yes, and when it happens to me, I pick them apart until they dissolve in my hands.” She trailed off, frowning at the look on Teferi’s face. “What?”

“Pick them apart *how*, exactly?”

“Everything that comes from you remains of you, forever,” she said. “The water that passes through the soil into the roots of the tree is still a part of the clouds; the story that maps your footsteps is still a part of who you were, and who you were is forever part of who you are and will be. If the spell endures, you can gather it close, find the places where it became tangled beyond your intentions, and pull it into pieces. Those can be released harmlessly, back into the mana that is all things.” Wrenn blinked. “Is this not how your people see the roots of magic?”

“No,” said Teferi carefully. “We view our workings in somewhat less organic ways. It’s an interesting idea.”

“Magic lives. Can you see your spell?”

“I can.”

“Can you touch it?”

He grimaced, remembering the sting of brushing his fingers against the magic, but admitted, “I can.”

“Can you hold it?”

“Not on my own.”

“Ah. Your roots are too shallow. Here—I’ll help.” She hummed, a single clear, carrying note, and the natural magic of the wood swirled around him, bright and growing, bolstering the sparks of his own time-tied working. “Now can you hold it?”

Teferi reached for the spell again and smiled as it failed to push him away. “I can.”

“Good. Now, you have to remember that you best undo a tangle by moving through it. There’s always an entry point, a place where the branches don’t quite interlace. Use that to enter its song. Find the place where it fails to find perfect harmony with itself, and you can unmake it.”

Teferi frowned, but didn’t want to argue with her, not when she had faded so far within the grasp of his own snarling time magic gone awry. He took a breath and felt for the distortion, for the snag she had described. When he found it, it was not a note out of place or a failure to harmonize; it was a second hand ever so slightly out of tune, an hourglass throat allowing the barest trickle too much sand. It was so slight he could have overlooked it a thousand times if he’d been studying the spell in the normal way, at a slight remove, without Wrenn’s natural magic feeding his own. Now, he ran the hands of his awareness over it and when that slightest weakness bent before him, dug his mental fingers into the opening like splitting the skin of an orange.

With the outer layer shucked aside, it was easier to “see” the ways in which the spell had become distorted, the interaction of that dreadful presence and his own clear blue mana. Time was bent, a smashed clock, in the middle of what should have been a simple working. Bit by bit, he straightened and unbent the cogs, repairing the spell’s original intent, and when he was done, it no longer stung his fingers. He could touch it as easily as anything intact.

He raised his head, and the path was back as it had been, not straight, but not a tangled and forbidding labyrinth, either. The way was clear. The feeling of time magic gone awry no longer hung heavy in the air. Wrenn’s magic pulled away from his own, and he turned back to her. She was watching him with weary eyes.

“Your legend travels virtuously,” she said. “You deserve the songs they sing of you.”

“Not all of them,” Teferi said, success paling before past failure. “The place I come from originally, Zhalfir I lost it.”

“You *lost* it?”

“Yes. The entire continent, through a spell much like this one. I’ve never been able to undo what I did.” Then he brightened. “But if we find you a new tree, perhaps—”

“If our paths meet again,” she said, and stiffened, attention going to a point behind him in the wood.

Teferi cursed himself for a fool. If the presence had not been fully banished, removing his spell might have allowed it to return. Even if it had been, the cathars could still be haunting this wood. He turned slowly, ready for an attack.

Instead, he saw a tree like every other tree around it, a tall, mature oak with healthy green leaves and spreading branches. Then Wrenn was brushing past him, her eyes on the trunk, seemingly unable to tear them away. He wasn't sure she was breathing. He also wasn't sure dryads needed to breathe. The laws of nature were somewhat different where the daughters of the glade were concerned. They walked in their own definition of the real.

Wrenn was walking, step by unsteady step, toward that tree. When she was close enough, she raised her hands, fingertips brushing the bark, and whistled. The sound was low and sweet. If Teferi hadn't been watching her, he would have taken it for birdsong. She cocked her head as if listening and then dove into the tree itself, vanishing into its body like a fish vanishes into clear water. The tree gave no sign that any of this had happened, and Wrenn was gone.



Art by: Mila Pesic

Teferi blinked and took his own steps toward the tree. He had almost reached it when the bark rippled and Wrenn's head poked out. The sight of a perfectly normal tree with the head and shoulders of a woman protruding from the side was only mildly disconcerting, and no stranger than anything else that had happened this day.

"You are a miracle, mage," she said, blissfully. "A miracle and a mistake in the same moment is a more commonplace thing than you might think!"

"What do you mean?"

"Ask the song," she said, and withdrew back into the tree, which began to shake and tremble, like it was pulling itself out of the ground. Then, as Teferi watched, it unfolded into the model of a man, a slumbering treefolk in the process of waking. Wrenn reappeared as the tree unfolded, jutting from its chest like the figurehead on a ship, most of her body still contained within the bark, a beatific smile on her face.

In an instant, Teferi understood. “This is the sapling that sang to you.”

“You bent time. Trees turn time into wisdom, and this one knew I was near. It gathered all the time it could contain.” She paused a moment, cocking her head to the side like she was listening. “Seven says they are grateful for what you’ve done, even if you didn’t mean to do it. They were calling for me but thought I wouldn’t have the chance to listen. They want to see the Planes.”

“And you can show them?”

“Your legend travels farther than your feet. My legend travels only precisely as far,” she said. “You have my gratitude.”

“As you have mine, for helping me to dismantle my own tangle.”

“Then we are well met, mage, and I wish you all peace in whatever you came here to find. I will aid you if I can, in the future, but for now, I have promised Seven lands outside of Innistrad, and I must keep my word.” The tree—or treefolk, or vessel, or whatever it had become—was still growing, towering above the other oaks, bearing Wrenn away. She waved to Teferi, then leaned back into the trunk behind and around her, closing her eyes. The great treefolk took a step forward and then another as the trees bent away from them and back to conceal their form. When all the trees sprang back, dryad and treefolk were gone.

For the first time since entering these woods, Teferi was alone. He smiled at the empty air and turned to go back to the village he had come from. He could tell the cathars the danger had been dealt with, and he wouldn’t be lying. Perhaps this hadn’t been the peace he was seeking, but it had been a lesson unsought, and a new ally found, and those things were better than peace, especially to a man whose feet could travel farther than his legend.