



The Tea Witch's Treaty (Purple Oak Oasis #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: An alliance with Growers Cove is exactly what Jasmine needs, but she doesn't expect to lose her heart in the process.

Jasmine has one goal in mind when it comes to the visiting dryads, and that's to secure an alliance that will bring tea to Purple Oak. What she doesn't plan for, is to fall for the charming head of the delegation.

The last thing that Ryburn wants is to leave Growers Cove and his oak tree behind, but with the pressure on to secure an alliance for his settlement, it seems that he has no choice. As he discovers more about Purple Oak, he realises that maybe he could be happy somewhere else after all.

Can the two of them form more than just an alliance?

The Tea Witch's Treaty is a cozy fantasy romance with an alliance forming m/f romance, only one tent, unusual magic, a pinch of steam, and a happy ever after.

Total Pages (Source): 19

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 3:01 pm

Jasmine

A red haze filled the sky, giving the day an eerie glow that I wished I understood. Was it going to storm? Did it mean that our crops were about to become waterlogged? I supposed that was immaterial given that it was approaching the end of winter and most of the fields weren't yielding anything anyway.

Even so, it would be good to be forewarned about what the weather would do next. Hopefully, my aunt and uncle would be successful in their mission to find a pair of weather witches to bring back to Purple Oak, that would give us at least some control.

A cold breeze snuck up under my coat, and I let out a small shiver. At least the worst of the cold weather was behind us now.

I pulled my coat tighter around me, shifting the weight of the heavy iron key in my pocket. It weighed just as heavily on my mind. The key was more than just the metal it was made of, but a representation of the responsibility my family held towards the village and those who live here.

Which included ensuring that the tea supply doesn't run out. Without it, our healers lose their ability to treat people, and everyone's well-being diminishes as a result.

I reached my destination and stopped in front of the squat stone building with a gazebo structure attached to it. Now I was looking at the tea sanctuary, I had to wonder whether what we were doing was enough. Considering we'd yet to have a properly successful tea harvest, I suspected meant the answer was no.

I let out a sigh and pulled the key out of my pocket, sliding it into the lock to let myself into the tea sanctum. Another gate blocked my path, but it was easy to unlock that one with the key around my neck. I stepped into the tea garden that lived at the heart of Purple Oak. Despite being the home to a not insubstantial number of tea witches, this hadn't existed at all until about ten years ago. I wasn't sure what the former Brewsters had done to get their tea, maybe they'd just relied more on herbal remedies and tisanes for their magic instead, though that was limiting in that it would only heal themselves and not others. For that, the tea plant itself was necessary. Which was why we needed more of it.

There was a peace in the tea garden that couldn't be found in very many places in the village. Only a select few people were allowed to access the garden and the precious resource we were trying to grow here. And as a Brewster, I was one of them.

My younger brother Earl was another. He was hunched over the desk in the corner of the room with an intense expression of concentration on his face. It was no surprise to find him here, it was quiet and there were minimal other people around. That was his preferred state of being.

I cleared my throat from a slight distance away so he didn't startle and ruin whatever he was working on. I'd made that mistake before and had to suffer the consequences. Considering we both lived in Brewster Manor, it was best that my brother wasn't angry with me.

Earl looked up, and I felt a pang of worry travel through me. He looked rough between the dark circles under his eyes and the scruff on his cheeks. It was still strange to me that my little brother was old enough to grow a beard, but he was twenty-two, it shouldn't be that much of a surprise.

"Hey, Jasmine." His voice was scratchy, probably also from the lack of sleep.

"Have you been here all night?" I asked, trying not to sound too much like I was about to lecture him about why that was a terrible idea, even if I thought it was.

He peered up at the sky. "Seems that way."

"What are you working on that's keeping you from sleeping?"

"This instruction manual." He gestured to the book on his desk, which looked as tattered and worn as him. "It's one I bought from a travelling merchant. It's from a farmer on how to secure a good tea harvest, but the manual got damaged, and I'm trying to decipher it." From the expression on his face, I could guess how well that was going.

I leaned closer to have a look, noticing that the manual wasn't just in a different language but also full of bleeding ink. I had no chance of making sense of it, and I was both surprised and impressed that Earl might be able to. "That's not good."

Earl sighed and rubbed his forehead. "No, I'm missing key instructions, which is making this a nightmare. We're never going to be able to grow tea if I can't figure it out."

"Could you ask someone else for help? Maybe an ink mage? I hear they're good at restoring books." I wasn't sure precisely how their magic worked, but I did know that they were capable of document restoration in some cases.

Earl hesitated. "Do you think that would be all right? It would reveal that we're struggling to grow our own tea."

I sighed and looked at the patch of dirt that had some green on it. There were tea plants, that was a fact. They were growing, that was also a fact. But it wasn't going well by any stretch of the imagination. If the rest of the village found out, would they

care? We got most of our supply of tea from merchants and that had always worked. Except that lately, they had been less punctual and were demanding a higher price.

If it kept up, we were going to be in trouble. The infirmary was the main reason that people wanted to live here, with healers like mine and Earl's brother keeping people healthy.

Losing that would mean losing far more than some people's health. Villagers would leave, taking with them the resources and labour they put into the village and leaving us without other vital things.

That wasn't something I was going to let happen.

I put my hand on Earl's shoulder. "Ask an ink mage, but maybe one who doesn't speak the language your book is written in, so they won't know what the manual is about," I advised my brother. While I didn't think the residents would turn on our family, it was still better to keep as many people in the dark about the tea problem as possible. Many of the tea witches in the village might already suspect, especially as they have to buy their own tea if they don't work at the infirmary, but at the moment, only the members of the Four Families know how much of an issue it is.

"All right, I will," Earl said. "I can go today..."

"No. You should go and sleep," I corrected him. "You can go find an ink mage tomorrow."

A conflicted expression crossed Earl's face and I knew from experience that he was considering whether it was worth trying to disagree with me.

It wasn't. I always won those arguments.

I crouched down next to one of the small tea plants to take a look, partly so I had a way to change the subject before he managed to talk me out of ordering him to bed. This plant looked young and strong, but some of the older ones were already shrivelled up. I grimaced. "It's really not going well, is it?"

Earl shook his head. "I'm not sure what we're doing wrong, but we're not managing to grow them to maturity. I did have one plant that I thought had potential, but even Brew couldn't get enough magic out of it."

"Ah." Our older brother was a talented healer, if he couldn't get the tea we'd grown to do much, then it was a good sign. "I've got a meeting with the dryads of Growers Cove coming up."

"What's that got to do with tea?" Earl asked.

"They have some. I've been writing to their Council for a while and I think we're going to be able to set up a trade. We have stuff they want, so we're hoping that we can set up a beneficial trade deal where we send them wool, leather, eggs, and meat, while they can send us some tea."

"That's good," Earl said. "But I'm not sure it helps here."

"We could ask them for advice," I responded. I wasn't sure how the dryads were going to respond to that, and there was a chance that they'd laugh in my face and tell me that they were keeping their secrets, but I had to hope they wouldn't.

Earl hummed. "Do you really think they'll want to help us with that? Because once we become self-sufficient, we won't have to rely on them anymore."

"Yeah, I'm a bit worried about that," I admitted. "But I'm sure we'll have other things we can trade them for. We could also do with more fresh produce coming into the

village. I'm sure there's something they need more than our reliance on them, we just have to figure out what that is."

He started to say something but his words were cut off with a big yawn.

I gave him a gentle nudge. "You should go to sleep before you pass out. And drink some tea to regain strength."

He shook his head. "I'm fine. And I'd rather not waste any tea that could be used for healing."

"And getting enough sleep and looking after yourself is how you can make sure you don't take up extra resources in the medical bay when you overwork and collapse." I could hear our mother in my voice, but I didn't mind that too much. It worked to get my siblings to listen to me, and our mum was amazing, I didn't mind becoming like her.

Earl got up and stretched his arms. "All right. Oh, my stomach just rumbled. I think I'm hungry."

"Tea, breakfast, sleep," I prescribed him sternly.

He chuckled. "For someone who is not a healer, you sound a lot like one."

"Even if I'm not a healer, the tea witch blood is strong in my veins. I am a carer. So are you, just look at you trying to look after the plants." I gave him a warm smile, proud of the person he'd become.

"Thanks, Jas."

"Any time. I can help you lock up, I'm due at the guard tower for a meeting," I said.

He nodded and started shuffling his papers into a haphazard pile so that he could take them inside and make sure they weren't rained on. I wasn't sure why he insisted on his desk being out here, but I suspected it was because he wanted to be close to the plants. Whatever the reason, I wasn't about to question it. Earl was brilliant but stubborn, and I knew there was no changing his mind, especially when it came to looking after his tea plants.

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Ryburn

The air was crisp as I made my way through the abundant hills of Grower's Cove. The grass and flowers bloomed even though it was the tail-end of winter. That was the power of dryads, something I often took for granted as an oak dryad myself, but now that I was leaving, I was starting to appreciate it more.

I'd never had a reason to leave my home before, and even though my mission to Purple Oak Oasis wasn't meant to be a long one, I could feel the worry seeping into every part of me, right down to my fingertips.

A handful of old strong oak trees rose from the top of the hill, looking down on the surrounding landscape with all of the majesty that they were owed. And one of them was my family tree, the one that three generations of my family had been bonded to as their home tree.

It was easy to spot Adair tending to the tree, a daily ritual that was part of being a dryad, and that my older brother took extremely seriously. Even when he'd caught the flu a few years back, he'd insisted on coming out here every day, even when I'd told him that I was more than capable of taking on the duty. Sometimes, it felt like he took his responsibility as the elder sibling a little too seriously.

I cleared my throat as I approached and Adair turned, waving me over to look at something on the tree. "Ryburn, have a look at this. Is this growth on our tree new?"

I crouched down to examine the base of the oak and ran my fingers over the bark. It didn't feel familiar, but that didn't mean anything and I couldn't really say with any

certainty one way or another. "Could be new,"

"I'll keep an eye on it," my brother said with a firm nod. "Are you all ready for your upcoming trip?" He stood up and brushed off his coat even though there was nothing on it.

"As ready as I can be. I've got my bags packed. I've got the tent, blankets, and provisions. Umm..." My mind went blank even though I'd gone over everything I was going to need for my trip to Purple Oak several times over the past couple of days.

"Tinder?" Adair checked, his tone making it clear that he'd already thought all of this through. No one could accuse him of ever being underprepared. It was one of the reasons he was a member of the ruling council despite only being twenty-seven.

"Yes, and tools to start a fire," I assured him.

"Good. Gifts for the ruling families of Purple Oak?"

I nodded, biting back the nerves rising up within me. "A box of tea, and some winter pears. I got them all wrapped up so they won't bruise. I also looked at the map and route again, just to make sure we won't get lost." It wasn't a long journey, just a few days, but there was still a part of me that worried about that eventuality. It would look very bad for Grower's Cove if we showed up late because we'd gotten lost.

"Sensible," Adair responded, and from his tone, I suspected that he meant it.

"I just want to make sure everything goes as the Council planned it. So much is resting upon establishing this trade treaty. I don't know why you didn't choose someone else to head this delegation."

"Because I trust you and I can't go myself, I need to be here to keep an eye on things.

Hazel is due any day, and I can't miss the birth of our child."

"Of course not," I agree.

"And you know how Mother Nature and her followers can be, someone needs to keep an eye on them too."

I nodded. I was very aware of how quickly things could change around here. While trees and nature took a while to adapt to new circumstances, the minds of people were much more fickle. And Mother Nature had a bit of a reputation for being able to sway her followers into doing her bidding.

"I'm just worried I'll mess this up," I confessed to my older brother.

"I understand. But I think you'll be the right person for the job," he assured me. "We're in a strong position. The tea witches need the tea, and if we're to listen to our scouts, a lot of their village relies on the infirmary in order to keep running. I have no doubt that they'll be amenable to our demands."

"Mmm." I tried to let his words sink in, but there were still so many things to worry about. "It's not the terms I'm worried about. It's me. What if we get lost on the way? What if they're insulted that I'm not an actual member of the ruling council?"

"Breathe," Adair ordered firmly. "Ground yourself." He pointed to the oak tree as if he thought I needed a reminder of how to do that.

I nodded and placed my hand on the same spot on the oak tree that I always did. I winced as an ache in my shoulder reminded me that it still wasn't healed after I slipped on some ice a couple of weeks ago. I bit through the pain and focused on my connection to the tree instead. A rush of power flowed through me, soothing some of the aches and eroding the stress. It was invigorating and made the tips of my

extremities tingle. There was nothing like getting a boost from my home tree.

I took a deep breath and let the tree's powers mingle with my own. Magic swirled within me, growing in strength as I fed what I created into the tree. On a quiet day, it would have been possible to hear the wood groaning in response, but there was too much wind for that to be the case today, so I just had to imagine it instead.

I broke the connection and took a step back, feeling a little more centred than I had before.

"Better?" Adair checked, though he likely knew the answer.

I nodded. "Yes."

"Good." He placed his hands on my shoulders. "I know you're going to do this well. Trust your gut, take your time, and stand your ground. Everything will be fine."

I really hoped he was right because a lot was relying on this mission being successful. The prosperity and future of Grower's Cove was in my hands.

Adair let go and took a step back. "Are your companions ready too?"

"I was on my way to check on them."

"I'll go with you. Not because I don't trust you, but because you chose some..." he paused, taking his time to search for the right words. "Interesting companions."

I instantly knew he was talking about my best friend. Everyone always thought Ford was a bit strange and antisocial, but that wasn't the real him. Once someone got past the first few meetings, he'd prove himself to be steadfast and loyal, if a little bit obsessed with his apple trees.

"I trust my companions," I said firmly.

Adair nodded. "Good, that's all I need to hear. You'll need people you can rely on for this journey, people who will speak the truth with you."

"Ford definitely will do that," I said, smiling when I thought about my blunt best friend. He never sugarcoated anything and it was one of the things I appreciated most about him. And why I needed him on this mission. It would be good to have someone who could truly tell me what they thought, as opposed to what they thought I wanted to hear.

"Excellent. Then I wish you a good journey, brother. And I look forward to your return, hopefully with a trade treaty in place."

"No pressure, then," I joked, hoping to lift some of the weight landing on my shoulders.

"None at all," Adair responded. "And maybe there'll be a new addition to the family to welcome you back."

"That would be quite the homecoming." I smiled at my brother. I knew how excited he was to become a father, but I had to imagine that he was nervous too. No doubt that was why he'd asked me to take this on for him, if he could trust me to see through the treaty, then he could focus on his wife.

I just hoped I was going to live up to his expectations.

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Jasmine

I opened the letter waiting for me at my desk and let out a frustrated sigh as I read the message inside. The head night guard was retiring, meaning that his replacement needed to be chosen. The most logical choice was Sonja Porter, she'd followed her parents' footsteps and joined the guards, and while she was only my age, she had proved herself more than competent when it came to organising the night shift.

A knock broke through my thoughts and I put the letter onto the stack of things for me to deal with later. "Come in," I called.

My office door swung open and Katie Fields stuck her head around the door. "They're here."

I nodded, trying to ignore the instant bout of nerves that sprung up inside me. I got to my feet, accidentally knocking over a stack of papers. I resisted the urge to tidy because I couldn't make the delegation from Grower's Cove wait. We had to make a good impression, which meant welcoming them in person and making sure they have everything they need as our valued guests.

Katie and I made our way through the village, with her dog Banjo bouncing along beside her as if this was the most exciting day of his life. Maybe it was, I couldn't pretend to understand animals the same way wards like Katie could.

I smiled and nodded and the people we passed, wanting to keep things open and friendly with them. I might have a lot on my mind, but that didn't mean I could ignore the villagers, especially when most of them probably had no idea how important

today was, or that the delegation from Grower's Cove could make a huge difference to our lives, so long as we could agree on the terms of an alliance between our settlements.

"Isn't it exciting that they've successfully grown their own tea?" Katie asked.

"I mean, they're dryads. If anyone can do it, it's them. But it's very promising and could be exactly what we need. If we can rely on them for tea, we would be in a much better position. Especially after winter, our reserves are always a bit bare." I grimaced just thinking about the state of our tea stores. Winter always took it out of them, but it had been made worse this year by the travelling merchants charging nearly double what they used to, and the quality and amount of tea they had went down too. I hoped it wasn't an omen of things to come.

"You always feel this way after winter," Katie said. "Brew told me last night that...nothing."

I snorted. "I know you're together."

She cleared her throat. "What?"

"You and Brew. I know, you don't have to hide it from me," I assured her.

"Did he tell you?"

I laughed. "Definitely not, but the two of you are the least subtle couple I've ever met. Don't worry, I haven't told anyone," I assured her.

"We don't really want it to be a secret," Katie mumbled.

I gave her what I hoped was a reassuring smile. I didn't envy them. They clearly

cared a lot for one another and yet were being forced to keep it quiet because our elders wouldn't respond well to two members of the Four Families being together. It was an outdated rule in my opinion, and one that was foolish considering the fact we all spent so much time together, they were just asking for trouble in telling us that we couldn't date.

Our conversation was cut short when the town hall came into view. The doors were already open, and the staff had done a good job of making it look presentable and welcoming. Though the biggest relief to me was that the delegation from Grower's Cove weren't standing outside it. Someone must have invited them in and hopefully offered them refreshments after their journey, as per my instructions.

It was always good when a plan came together.

I took a deep breath and stepped through the doors with Katie right behind me. There was some reassurance that I didn't have to deal with this delegation on my own, especially because I knew Katie was just as dedicated to the well-being of the village.

The reception room had a fire burning in the grate, warming it well, and there was a pot of steaming tea alongside a plate of biscuits on the table for our four guests. One of whom had already helped themselves, which reassured me that they'd been welcomed properly.

"Hello," I said as I walked into the room, hoping that I wasn't about to make a bad impression.

The tallest of the group, a man with dark wavy hair and broad shoulders, turned to face me. He seemed about my age, as did the others in the room. Which was reasonable. As much as it would be good to deal with people who sat directly on their council, I knew they wouldn't be able to spare them from the day-to-day running of Grower's Cove. There was a reason it was me and Katie here and not my mother and

her grandfather.

He held out his hand to me. "I'm Ryburn Silva," he said in a low, smooth voice that made me want to hear more of it. "Grower's Cove tasked me with heading this delegation."

"Jasmine Brewster, I belong to one of the Four Families that run Purple Oak Oasis." I introduced myself, taking his hand in my own. It was large, slightly callused, and pleasantly warm. A little tingle travelled along my skin, but I ignored it while I looked up at him. Or I tried to ignore it, there was something about him that was strangely captivating. I let go of his hand and coughed slightly in an attempt to regain my composure. "How was your journey?"

"It was good. We ran into no trouble and had no rain," Ryburn said. His eyes were slightly creased and a saturated brown that matched well with his dark hair and darker complexion. He looked like someone reliable and trustworthy, even if I couldn't explain why.

He wasn't looking away from me, which only increased the strange feeling of tension within me. Things weren't going to go well with the delegation if I was this distracted just by being in his presence.

Except that this wasn't just my role. Maybe I could get my friend to deal with the captivating dryad in front of me, that would save me from making any mistakes.

I stepped back, breaking through some of my haze in the process, and gestured to Katie. "Katie Fields," I introduced my friend. "She's also from one of the Four Families."

Ryburn nodded and gestured to the three other people who were with him. "These are my companions and advisors. Ford, Mallory, and Aster."

I gave them a nod in acknowledgement, but mostly kept my attention on Ryburn since he was clearly in charge. And he was very handsome. It was definitely because of the former reason and not the latter.

"We've prepared a room for us to talk in," I said, finally managing to tear my gaze away from him. This was not the time to be distracted by a pretty face, there was far too much riding on these negotiations.

I led them through into the next room where a large table was waiting for us. Katie brought the tray of tea and biscuits through with her, setting them in the middle of the table. Both were the best Purple Oak had to offer, with the biscuits coming from the most celebrated baker in town. I had to hope that the delegation from Grower's Cove appreciated the manner in which we were welcoming them.

Ryburn mouthed something to the man he called Ford earlier. The other man produced a box and held them out to Katie.

"Winter pears," Ford said without looking at me.

"Thank you," she said, opening the box to inspect them. She was around produce and food more than me, so she had a much better eye and idea of whether this was a nice gift. She looked impressed and nodded slightly, which I took as an indication that she approved. Not that I thought the dryads would send a poor gift to us. They wanted things from us too.

We all settled at the table, and I topped up each of their teacups while pouring fresh ones for me and Katie. My hands shook slightly as I did it, which I hoped they wouldn't notice. I liked to think of myself as cool and collected, but I wasn't feeling that right now.

"I don't want to waste your time with lots of pleasantries," I said, knowing from the

correspondence I'd already had with Grower's Cove that it was better to get straight to the point. "I'm going to dive right into it. We need a steady supply of tea and we have a lot to offer in return. Wool, leather, flour, other types of goods, and healing." I glanced at Katie, just to make sure that she and her family were still happy with this part of the deal. It would put a lot of extra work on their shoulders as one of the biggest farms in the village, but it was worth it for the overall well-being of the town.

At least, in my opinion. The impressive healers in our medical bay kept injury and disease to a bare minimum, which meant everyone could function at their very best. It was what made Purple Oak so prosperous.

"We could use all of those," Ryburn said with a nod.

Plenty of offers had been sent back and forth so far, establishing that we were open to negotiations with each other and had something the other wanted. In our case, we wanted tea. Though there were other resources from Grower's Cove that wouldn't go amiss too.

"We propose an exchange every month at a rate slightly below what the merchant caravans are currently operating," Ryburn continued.

"We'd need to test the quality of the tea first," I said. "And have assurances that deliveries would be consistent." There was no point setting up a monthly trade if we weren't able to guarantee that we'd get the tea we needed.

"Understandable. We brought a box with us," Ryburn said, setting it on the table.

"We'd also like your expertise for our own tea garden," I said, trying to rein in my nerves. My family discussed whether we thought bringing that up would be a good idea over the dinner table last night, but it was still hard to put it into words. "We will compensate you for that too."

A thoughtful expression crossed the dryad's face. "If you wish for our help, we'll need to see it to know what we're working with. We won't be able to tell you what we want in exchange until we know what it'll require of us."

"That's fair." I exchanged a glance with Katie who nodded for me to continue. "I believe this is a good start to our negotiation. I'm sure you're tired from your journey, so we'll let you rest. Rooms have been prepared for you all upstairs. Tomorrow, we can show you around the village, and I'll take you on a tour of the tea garden." Though if I was honest, tour sounded a little too grand considering the size of what we had, but I couldn't exactly say that out loud.

Hopefully, it wouldn't put them off working with us when they saw it.

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Jasmine

A thick morning fog hung over the village but that didn't stop anyone from getting up and starting their daily work, including me. There was only so much daylight in winter, and we needed to make the most of it. We had electricity thanks to the lightning witches and electric mages who lived and worked here, but we tried to be sensible with where that power was used, with most of it going to the infirmary after dark.

I held back a yawn as I arrived at the town hall. I needed to appear nice and alert for when I met with the Grower's Cove delegation, especially if I didn't want to spend the entire day being distracted by Ryburn again. My head wasn't usually so easily turned, and I wasn't sure what was different this time. Maybe it was the combination of him being handsome, a newcomer, and having a hint of power that wasn't necessarily unlike my own.

Katie wasn't there when I arrived, but her arrival was soon announced by Banjo bouncing up to me. His pink tongue hung out of his mouth, and his tail wagged faster than it had any right to.

"Hello," I greeted the black and white dog. "Where's your ward?"

Katie appeared a moment later, looking just as tired as I felt, but with a satisfied grin. That better not be because she spent the night with my brother. As cute as I found it that they were now a couple, I didn't want to know what they got up to.

"Ready for today?" I asked her.

She nodded. "Still planning the divide and conquer strategy?"

"Yes."

"Let's hope they're all right with the fact my family aren't dryads."

I shrugged. "They already know that. And wool is one of the things they specifically said they wanted, and you've got plenty of experience with sheep."

"True." She smiled at me. "Then we go ahead as planned."

I nodded. This was one of the advantages of the Four Families working together. My family had more experience with tea, Katie's with wool. The Steepers were also tea witches, but the Millers were nymphs who ran the water mills that made most of the village's flour. There was trust and respect between all of the families, and that meant that we could do things like this.

The two of us entered the town hall and I was pleasantly surprised that the Grower's Cove delegation was already up and in the dining area having breakfast.

Ryburn stood up when he saw us. "Good morning." He flashed me a charming smile that was enough to make anyone go weak at the knees.

Though a quick glance at Katie suggested she wasn't having the same problem. Maybe that was just because she was so taken with my brother.

"Morning all," I said with a nod, instantly reminded of my mother again. I really was turning into her, complete with her mannerisms and tone of voice. I wasn't entirely sure how I felt about that, but right now wasn't the time to have a complete crisis of confidence in myself. "Ready for the tour? I'll take two of you to the tea garden, and Katie will show the other two of you around the farms. But it's up to you who you

want to go with."

"I'd like to see the tea gardens," Ryburn said, holding my gaze for a fraction longer than he needed to. "Ford will come with me." He nodded to the other man, who was quietly eating breakfast and didn't seem interested in much of what was going on around him.

A giddy feeling filled me at the prospect of getting to spend some more time with Ryburn, especially when it was also with someone who didn't seem that engaged. It would be smart of me to insist that he went with Katie so that I wasn't distracted, but I couldn't bring myself to do it, especially as she was already chatting with Mallory and Aster about their plans for the day.

"We'll leave as soon as you're done with breakfast," I told him.

"I'm done," he said. "Ford?"

"Yes?" He looked up.

"Are you ready to see the tea garden?" Ryburn asked.

"I suppose." Ford wiped his fingers on a napkin and got to his feet. I couldn't say that was a glowing endorsement of my plans for the day, but Ryburn didn't seem too worried about it, which could mean that this was normal for Ford.

I waited for the two of them to put their coats on and led them outside. The cold air hit my face, and I had to hope that was enough to calm the racing thoughts I had about Ryburn, which definitely weren't appropriate to think about someone who I was supposed to be creating a trade alliance with.

It was only a short walk to the tea garden, and I mostly fielded some basic questions

about the village on the way. My hands shook as I used my keys to let us inside, a little nervous about inviting strangers into the sanctum. Luckily, some of the other tea witches were here to keep an eye on us in case things went south, not that I foresaw that happening. I had to remember that the planned alliance wasn't a one-sided thing. Grower's Cove wanted this just as much as we did.

"This way," I said, directing them to the small field we used for tea, though calling it that was a little bit of a stretch, it was more of a glorified large garden. I spotted Earl in the corner at his desk, which was also reassuring. Earl wasn't exactly a brawler, but he would protect me and the tea plants if necessary.

He got up when he saw us approaching and came to join us with a serious expression on his face. Ryburn and Ford studied the row of tea plants in front of us with unreadable expressions on their faces, which only made my nerves worse.

"That's it?" Ford voiced with a frown. "I don't know much about tea plants but even I can tell this is all wrong. The soil, the temperature, the spacing. You're not doing a good job here."

His unexpected harshness surprised me, and anger sprung up inside. Maybe we weren't managing to grow them, but we'd put a lot of effort and care into this.

Before I could lash out, Ryburn nudged Ford in the side. "That's a little too honest, mate."

Ford cast his gaze down. "Sorry."

The smile on Ryburn's face was more like a grimace. "I'm sorry. Ford can be a bit blunt."

His friend shrugged off Ryburn's comment.

"It's fine," I responded, not really knowing what else I could say.

"He's not wrong, though. I'm sure you tried your best, but I don't think any of these plants will see maturity. And I'm not a tea plant expert either."

I grimaced. That was tough to hear. There was a part of me that wanted to resist against what they were saying, but I had to concede that they were probably right. It would be better if either of them were tea plant dryads, but considering this wasn't something we mentioned wanting in any of our letters, it made sense that Grower's Cove hadn't actually sent one.

Earl cleared his throat. "What are the first changes we should make to the tea crops and when do you think they'll reach maturity?"

I was proud of him for asking. I was still reeling from the revelation, whereas he was already thinking about the tea plants and what they needed. This was why my brother was the one in charge of the tea garden and not me.

Ford crouched down and pushed his fingers into the soil. "I don't think these will reach maturity under these conditions. This field isn't draining properly, so you're drowning your plants. And I think the direct sunlight is an issue too."

Ah. Even with my limited knowledge of agriculture, I knew both of those things were bad. Maybe we should have asked one of the Millers to keep a closer eye on these. They weren't dryads, but their farm had a lot of wheat, and they knew just how to cultivate it.

One look at Earl broke my heart. He was clearly taking this hard, and if the members of the delegation hadn't been here, then I would have pulled him into a hug. That would have to wait for later.

Unaware or uncaring about the devastation he was dealing, Ford continued. "The plants are also too close together. They'll interfere with each other as they grow. No, none of this is right."

Ryburn hummed. "You're going to want experienced workers to get the results you're looking for."

That sounded about right. And potentially problematic. I'd already been expecting a high price for the exchange of knowledge about the plants we were trying to grow, labour was going to need a trade even more extreme. They might not even want to give it if they thought it might damage our reliance on them.

"I'll have to discuss this with the others," I said, not wanting to commit to anything prematurely. Maybe the others wouldn't think hiring workers from Grower's Cove would be a good use of our resources. Not that there was really anything to discuss when we didn't know the terms that Grower's Cove was going to place on us.

"Of course," Ryburn said with a nod. "I'd have to check with someone more knowledgeable before we can tell you what's needed to...start from scratch, basically." He gave us an apologetic smile. At least it was reassuring to know that he wasn't really enjoying telling us all of this.

I noticed Earl's expression falling even more and I hated that my little brother was so upset. We were aware that our tea crops were falling short, but starting over was worse than expected.

It would be better to leave it here for now and deal with it when Earl could recover from the shock.

"Why don't I show you some of our equipment?" I suggested to Ryburn and Ford. "And then afterwards, we can meet up with Katie and the rest of your group when

they're done looking at the fields and orchards."

"You have orchards?" Ford asked in a completely different voice than before. There was an actual spark in it.

I nodded. "We have lots of fruit trees. There isn't much on them at the moment, but they're bountiful in summer."

"Like apple trees?"

"Of course."

Ford's eyes lit up. "Can I see them?"

"Umm... I mean, Katie will be showing the others the orchard. We have other things to see."

Ryburn cleared his throat. "If it's not a problem, we can continue the tour with just the two of us? Then Ford can look at the orchard. Apple trees are his speciality."

While I didn't think being alone with Ryburn was a good idea, I also didn't want to deny a request. Especially because this was the most engaged Ford had been since he arrived. Hopefully, he wasn't about to give the orchard workers a list of things they were doing wrong too. Though I supposed it wouldn't matter if it meant our yield improved.

I gulped and nodded. "Yeah, we can do the rest of the tour with just us."

Luckily, most of the fluster Ryburn was causing seemed to be on the inside, and I could certainly keep it there a little bit longer. I hoped.

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Ryburn

Purple Oak was more impressive and vibrant than I'd expected it to be, even if they didn't have dryads to care for their plants and crops. The people and animals who lived here looked happy and well-fed, and there was a carefree feel in the air that I imagined was probably something to do with the infirmary run by the tea witches. Having the ability to heal injuries and sickness likely meant that people didn't spend their time worrying about what would happen if they broke their leg.

Or slipped on ice and threw their shoulder out. Mine twinged in response to my thoughts, or maybe I was just made aware of the pain because I was thinking about it. The latter was more likely. We had healers at Grower's Cove, but they were limited to non-magical methods for the most part, and the one I'd seen had simply told me not to use my shoulder much. As if I had any choice in that.

There was no doubt in my mind that healing was something Grower's Cove could benefit from if we could get an alliance set up.

A small black cat appeared in front of me, making me jump. It had a curious expression on its face, as if it was equally surprised to find me in its way. That was another thing that was so different, there were so many animals around. Not little birds and reptiles like back home, but domestic pets, familiars, and livestock. It was nice, even if unexpected.

The cat meowed and raked her sharp claws down my leg. It stung surprisingly much, and I jolted back, trying to shake the little creature away.

Jasmine bent down and pulled the cat off me. "Stitch, that's not very nice," she chided the animal, but it wasn't harsh.

"Is that your cat?"

"No, it belongs to a friend. I think. No, it could just be a stray cat." She tickled the cat between its ears which made it purr, like it hadn't just drawn blood. She looked up at me and tucked a strand of dark hair behind her ear.

I swallowed hard and tried to ignore the way her large brown eyes drew me in.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, getting to her feet.

I cleared my throat. "I'm fine."

"I can take you to the infirmary if you want," she said. "Maybe my brother is free."

"Would you not heal me yourself?" The question slipped out without me thinking about it.

She wet her lips, drawing my attention there without meaning to. I squashed down all feelings of attraction towards the woman in front of me. We were supposed to be working on the alliance, not thinking about other things.

"Healing isn't my forté," she responded. "My brother is the medical prodigy in the family."

"I thought he was the one trying to grow tea?"

"Oh, that's my younger brother," she responded. "Brew is my older brother. Well, Rooibos, but everyone calls him Brew."

"For Brewster?"

"Yes."

"So, two brothers?" I asked.

"And a sister. Cami is Earl's twin. Chamomile, but don't call her that."

I raised an eyebrow. "You're all named after tea."

"It's a Brewster family tradition. Though Uncle Ceylon was overruled by his wife when it came to my cousins' names."

I chuckled. "Fair enough. I do know a dryad called Dandelion."

"Are they a dandelion dryad?"

"No, but I think their parents hoped they would be."

She laughed, a wonderful sound that filled the air around us. "That's unfortunate."

The cat brushed itself against my legs, seeming to demand more scratches. I leaned down to give it a couple of pets. Either I did it wrong, or it decided that it had enough of me and disappeared off into the night.

"You'll either wake up with her on your pillow, or you'll never see her again," Jasmine joked.

I looked after the cat. "So I should keep my window closed?"

"It's winter, you probably should anyway," she pointed out. "But there's always a risk

of cats climbing in through your window here."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"I used to want to be a cat ward when I was little," she said, looking off in the direction the cat disappeared. "Before I realised how magic works."

"I can't say I ever thought about it," I admitted.

She gestured for us to continue walking, which I assumed meant she was far from done with our tour. I was glad of that, and the fact that Ford had left us alone. As much as I knew it was foolish to think about Jasmine that way, if we were back home, I'd be working up the courage to ask her for a forest stroll or dinner. Considering the job I had to do, asking her for something like that would be an absolute mistake.

"So you never wanted to be anything other than a dryad?" she asked me.

"Not really. But I suspect growing up in Grower's Cove was different. Most of the people I know are dryads or nymphs. It isn't like here."

She nodded. "There's always been a mix of magic here."

"How did that come about? I've heard that a lot of villages are mostly one thing, but you seem to have a bit of everything here."

"We're an hour or so ride from the sea, which I think helps. But it's mostly because the areas grew into one another. The Millers are connected to their stream, so settled there. The Fields' farm, and Brewster Manor, have been in our families for generations. The village kind of grew from there, becoming something bigger." She shrugged as if it wasn't important. And I guessed in some ways it wasn't.

"So that's why you're the Four Families?" I checked. "I don't really know what that's about." She led me down a path which bordered a field of sheep.

"Oh, I didn't realise you didn't know. So the Four Families are the ones in charge of running the village, they're the four estates that grew together. So us Brewsters, the Fields, the Millers, and then the Steepers, they're also tea witches. We each have our own specialities and influence, which keeps everything balanced and everything running smoother." She fiddled with the sleeve of her jacket. "Katie is a Fields, they're wards who tend to the biggest farm in the area. They mostly tend to their flock of sheep."

"So she's a sheep ward?" I checked.

"Oh, no. She's a dog ward. You've seen her familiar with her. Her brother is an owl ward, but their grandfather is a sheep ward. I'm honestly not really sure how it works."

"Me neither," I admitted. I'd not really spent much time around any wards. Or tea witches for that matter.

"I'm a Brewster. We're tea witches and have a lot to do with the infirmary."

I chuckled. "Meaning, you own it."

"No, no, no. The infirmary is run jointly by us and the Steepers, also tea witches. So we don't own it, we co-own it," Jasmine said with a guilty expression on her face.

"No wonder this place is called an oasis with so many tea witches."

"Oh, we can't take all of the credit," she said quickly. "It's everyone working together that makes Purple Oak so wonderful. I wouldn't want to be without any of the wards,

nymphs, or other people who live here."

That was a fascinating statement coming from her. I liked that she was able to see the value in others, especially as it was something so often forgotten. There were a subset of dryads and nymphs who wanted nothing to do with other types of magical beings. I'd often found the line of thought to be deeply flawed, and thankfully, the Council was open to working with others.

"So, yes. It's not just the infirmary and the tea witches, it's the farms and the wards, the power and the electric mages, the nymphs and the mill..."

"The mill?" I perked up. That was something we didn't have at Grower's Cove, but there'd been some talk about building one, it just never got done because no one actually knew where to start. A lot of the older people didn't think it was necessary and called it a way of dishonouring the plants that sustained us. I thought it was an outdated point of view. "Wind or water?"

"Water. We'll pass the main mill in a bit. It's an old building that has belonged to the Millers since before the settlement became a thing."

That was information to file away for later. If we could leverage our alliance with Purple Oak Oasis to advance our own settlement, that would be even better than getting supplies and resources. There was nothing more important than being self-sufficient, something I had a feeling Jasmine understood, given her request for advice about their tea garden. It was the missing piece of the puzzle for them to become a truly powerful village. Maybe even grow into a town.

Jasmine looked at me, her brown eyes wide but shrewd. There were some obvious brains behind them. "So what's Grower's Cove like? You have a council, correct? But you're not on it?"

"No, my brother is on the Council. I'm representing him."

"Why didn't he or someone from the council come personally?"

I didn't answer right away, unsure how much I could share about the current clash of powers back home. It was probably better not to let them know there was some friction, so I just opted for a neutral diplomatic answer.

"Since he named me as his representative, I have the power to make decisions in his name, so it's the same thing."

"Hmmhmm," Jasmine said, clearly not entirely convinced.

She was very switched on, it wouldn't be this easy to pull the wool over her eyes. What a woman. If only we weren't tasked with this treaty, maybe I could pursue her.

Instead, I was going to have to make awkward demands for the sake of Grower's Cove.

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Jasmine

There was a tense atmosphere in the negotiation room that had nothing to do with the fact that one of our pig farmers just passed by with a wheelbarrow full of fresh fertiliser. It was a smell I was quite familiar with, but the people from Grower's Cove seemed a little taken aback. It looked like Aster's eyes might be watering.

That wasn't what was causing my nerves, though. Over the past few days, I'd been getting to know Ryburn, and some of the other members of the delegation, and that was making it harder to be all business, even though I knew I should be.

It didn't help that talking to Ryburn was only making me more attracted to him, not less. He was charming, and smart, and knew when to be honest and when to be kind. If he lived in Purple Oak, then he was the kind of man I'd want to go on a date with. But he didn't, so I couldn't, and it was best for both of us if I ignored what I was feeling. I'd never been good at casual.

I cleared my throat and tried to chase away the thoughts so I could focus on more important things. "So, we're agreeing to the proposed exchange," I said. "Ten pounds of tea every week in return for a week's worth of wool, leather, and flour."

Ryburn nodded. "Yes."

"I know we originally proposed that deliveries should be once a month, but perhaps we should revisit that," I said.

"I believe once every two weeks should be doable," he said. "So long as deliveries are

as frequent on your side."

"Of course. We could each send a trade delegation once a month. The first will be from Purple Oak Oasis, and we'll send your goods, and our people will bring yours back with them. Then Grower's Cove will send the second with tea, and take goods from here back with them."

"I think that's agreeable," Ryburn said.

"Good." I took a deep breath and tried to still my beating heart while I approached the next part. "We also want to compensate extra for workers to be brought in for our tea garden." Despite wanting to appear strong, I looked over at Katie. She nodded her encouragement. No doubt Brew had been able to convince her of the importance of us getting our tea production working for us. If she needed persuading at all.

Ryburn met my gaze, distracting me for a moment with how dark his eyes were. There was a hint of nervousness lingering within them that snapped me out of it. "We've considered whether that's something we wish to trade for."

I resisted the urge to look away. "We can come to an arrangement for a fair price," I promised. "We could discuss more about what the labour would be worth in wool, leather, and flour."

Ryburn cleared his throat. "We'd actually like to trade labour for labour."

I glanced at Katie, confused where their sudden request came from, but she looked just as surprised. They wanted labour from us? This was the first I'd heard about it. Then again, I supposed they had no idea we'd wanted anyone for our tea garden either, so perhaps it was fair that they got to blindside us, even if I didn't like it. I hadn't seen this coming. I prided myself in being able to anticipate requests like this, but this was taking me off guard.

"What labour?" I asked, hoping it wasn't going to be anything too outrageous.

Ryburn moved his arm in a way that made it seem like he was uncomfortable. "We think getting your tea farm to maturity will take a lot of time and skilled workers, and it could take months. Probably years."

I nodded. "It's not a small project." My intention had always been for the alliance between our two settlements to last that long anyway, so I failed to see the issue.

"It isn't," he agreed. "Which is why we'd like to ask for a project of our own. We want labour and knowledge to build our own water mill."

Surprise hit me. "That is unexpected."

"Is it? Just like you want the control and security of your own tea farm, we want to be able to mill our own grain. We believe it's a fair exchange." He spoke quickly, as if he wasn't entirely sure about whether he was doing this right. I could relate. While I'd shadowed my mother in meetings like this before, this was the first one I was in charge of myself.

This was a new request that I wasn't prepared for. Or in a position to decide by myself because the mills belonged to the Millers and they would be the ones who would have to oversee building a new one. I didn't think they'd have a problem with it, but it wasn't my place to agree to something on their behalf.

"It will have to be discussed with the other families," I replied carefully, trying my best to keep my composure. This had never come up in conversations before, but maybe that was because they hadn't seen the impressive watermill yet.

Until Katie and I had shown them around Purple Oak. Had that been a massive mistake?

"We can discuss the labour for labour once we've had time to look at the proposal," Katie said, jumping in the moment she saw that I was a little flustered.

Ryburn nodded. "Of course. If we agree to the labour trades, then we could up the frequency of goods exchanged once a week, and the workers could go with them. Or if you think that isn't acceptable, we can set up a trading post between us."

It took me a moment to snap back into the conversation. "I think our initial plan can stand if we're exchanging once every two weeks. We can arrange different routes and times so we don't fall prey to bandits or anyone ill-minded."

Ryburn nodded. "I see your point. Trading in the middle of nowhere could be inviting trouble. That brings us back to the mill. We are very keen on that."

"I can understand that," I said. "We'll talk with the other families tonight and give you a decision tomorrow. But if we agree that it might be a possibility, then we will need to travel to Grower's Cove to assess the land suitability and how much labour it would take to build it." That was the same logic they'd used about the tea garden, and I doubted this was going to be any different. It would probably be one of the Millers that went, which was disappointing for me. I'd love to see a different settlement and how they ran things.

Ford didn't look up when he spoke. "Mother Nature isn't going to be happy about that."

"Who isn't going to be happy about what?" I asked curiously.

Ryburn answered. "Mother Nature. She's our spiritual leader. She isn't too keen on outsiders entering Grower's Cove."

That sounded a little suspicious, and not just because it was the first time any of them

were mentioning her.

"We will have to insist on a visit. Not just to make assessments for the mill but also to make sure it is safe for when we send our people." I hesitated. "And we want to see your tea farm. Just so we know what results to expect from our own."

And to make sure they actually had their own tea plants and weren't selling us tea from someone else. While I didn't think that was possible, dryads had too much pride for that, it was still something to consider. The world wasn't all daisies and sunshine.

Ryburn looked a bit uncomfortable but nodded. "It makes sense that you want to visit. We can arrange that. You can travel with us when we depart."

That was soon, and we weren't entirely prepared for that, but it would give us time to figure out how to approach this new proposal. And if it was even feasible. While I knew very little about building and construction, building a mill from scratch was likely going to be a very costly project. It might not even be possible.

I would have to consult one of the Millers and hope they gave a positive answer, or this treaty might be over already.

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Jasmine

A large bonfire roared in the middle of the field, and despite the frozen ground and the ink black sky, lots of people had come out to drink, chat, and laugh. The atmosphere was great, and I liked that the delegation from Grower's Cove were getting to see our village like this, but I was also a little worried about them mixing with the villagers. But realistically, I knew it wasn't like we could ban them from partaking. Although it looked like only Ryburn and Ford had come. Maybe the others were elsewhere, I hadn't spent as much time with Mallory and Aster, they could be elsewhere.

I pushed all thoughts of the delegation from my mind. This was a social event and I wasn't meant to be working, which meant that I should do my best to enjoy myself and unwind, just like I'd normally done. I got myself some ale and joined my friends and brother who were also enjoying a break from their duties.

"I bet I could throw a ball further than you," Brew exclaimed, flexing his arm and pretending to throw one.

Oliver laughed. "I don't believe it. I've seen you try to lift something. It's not a pretty sight."

"Uhh, I lifted up Katie last night and I didn't hear her complaining."

Horror coiled through me at Brew's statement, especially since he made it in front of Katie's brother. Oliver's expression was one of distaste, and he finished his drink in one go, with good reason.

I would've done the same if we weren't in public. Even if I wasn't on duty, being part of the four families meant I was never really off. If something happened, people would turn towards us for guidance and help.

Some exaggerated giggling reached my ears and it was no surprise to see Taz Miller saunter up to us. Tall, perfect bronze complexion, and with the most charming of grins, she couldn't go anywhere without some woman fluttering their eyelashes at her or making indecent proposals. She didn't do anything for me, but I knew I was an exception based on the reactions of the other women in town. And Cami's. My sister had done some pretty dumb things to get Taz's attention.

"It's cold today," Taz said when she reached us, clearly not bothered by the attention. She was likely used to it.

Oliver hummed in agreement. "Settle something for us. Who do you think would throw a ball the furthest? Me or Brew?"

Taz pulled up one eyebrow. "Obviously, Jasmine."

I laughed. "I wouldn't, but I appreciate the vote of confidence."

"You're probably stronger than you think you are," she said, giving me that signature charming grin, the one that was so disarming because it wasn't meant as anything but a genuine smile.

Objectively, I could really see why Cami had been so smitten with Taz Miller. But she had my attention for a different reason.

"Did you discuss the mill project with your family?" I asked her, curious what the verdict would be and if she would tell me.

Taz hummed. "We did. I think we'd have to see the stream and the area before we could make any decision. The amount of trees and accessible stone nearby would greatly influence the duration and difficulty of the project."

That made sense and wasn't something I had considered. That was why it was so good to have multiple people in charge.

"We're planning to travel to Grower's Cove in a few days," I said. "You or someone you trust could join us."

She nodded. "I think I'll go myself. I don't want to leave such an important judgement call to someone else. I guess I could ask Naida, but I can't imagine she would enjoy that. You know how she is with new people."

I chuckled at the mention of her sister. "Yeah, Naida is like Earl on that front. Adorable homebodies."

"Exactly, so I'll come with you," Taz said, turning when someone called her name. She waved back and gave us a quick apology before running off to put out a fire or bat away another romantic candidate.

I left Oliver and Brew bickering about who was better at what to check on the delegation from Grower's Cove. And maybe I just wanted to have another chat with Ryburn, but that was neither here nor there. I was just being a good host. Nothing more than that.

"Hey, how are you enjoying the bonfire?" I asked, offering them both what I hoped was a welcoming smile.

"It's wonderful," Ryburn said, smiling in return. "Lively."

Ford looked sort of past me. "Are you not worried about causing a forest fire?"

"No, we have lots of water and sand on hand, the field is large enough, and there are members of the fire guard present. They'll be able to contain it," I assured him, understanding his worry. "We only built the fire a couple of hours before we lit it too, so we can be as sure as possible that no small creatures have made their home in it."

Ford didn't look convinced. "Fire can travel far on the wind."

Ryburn cleared his throat. "I'm sure they know what they're doing, Ford." He turned to look at me. "He's just worried about the orchard."

"So you liked the apple trees?" I asked Ford, curious if that was getting his approval or if he'd have more critique and commentary.

He put his hands in his pockets, still not looking at me, but there was a slight smile on his face. He reminded me of Earl in a lot of ways. "They were all right. Two had a bit of stunted growth, a few could do with more pruning, and some were too close together. But they seemed happy."

Ryburn chuckled. "Coming from Ford, that's high praise."

"Oh, good. We have some dedicated workers tending to the orchards." I spotted the woman who managed them near the bonfire and pointed her out to Ford. "That's Marie, she's in charge of the fruit trees. I'm sure she'd appreciate having a chat if there are any pointers you'd be happy to give her. She wants the trees to thrive."

Ford didn't say goodbye as he rushed away with determination so fast that I barely even registered that it was happening.

"Oh, I didn't mean—" I gave Ryburn a wry smile. "I didn't mean for him to go right

away."

Ryburn just shrugged. "That's Ford. It's just apples, apples, apples."

"Are all dryads like that? I mean, I'm assuming he's a dryad?" I asked.

"Yes, he's an apple tree dryad. But no, we're definitely not all like that." There was an affectionate smile on his face that made me think that Ford was more to him than just someone he was travelling with.

"What kind of dryad are you? Or is that rude to ask?"

He grinned. "If you guess, I'll tell you." He leaned back against the fence, seeming more relaxed than when we were hashing out the details of the trade alliance.

"Oh, I feel like I'm approaching a trap," I joked.

His smile tugged the corners of his mouth up. "It's not a trap. I'm curious about what you think."

"All right, give me a moment." I took it as an opportunity to check him out even more thoroughly than I had before. Impressive broad shoulders that looked like they could carry a lot, sculpted arms from manual labour, and good posture.

Ryburn cleared his throat. "My eyes are up here."

I snorted and looked up at him. "And are your eyes going to tell me what type of dryad you are?"

A sparkle appeared in them as he leaned closer and moved his eyebrows up. "Maybe. What do you think?"

"Well, they're brown, so I'm going to guess... What plants are brown?" I racked my brain, begging it not to let me down. I wasn't a nature type, but I had some basic knowledge from spending time with the Fields and Millers. But right now, it was just blank.

Ryburn chuckled, a warm, lovely sound that made his Adam's apple dance. "I'll put you out of your misery. I'm an oak dryad."

"I wouldn't have guessed, but I know very little about dryads," I said, but now that I thought about it, I could see it. Ryburn was tall, strong, and he looked quietly reliable. If his brother resembled him, I could see why he was in the ruling council of Growers Cove.

"I also have some chestnut tree in my lineage. And if my grandmother is to be believed, potentially some reed. Maybe that's the vibe you're picking up on," he joked, raising his arms and pretending to sway with the wind.

I burst into laughter and it mixed with his, a sound that was music to my ears.

Why was he so attractive?

"So dryad type is hereditary?" I checked to make sure I'd understood it correctly.

"More or less. But almost every dryad family has multiple plants mixed into it, so there's still an element of luck to it."

"Interesting."

"Not particularly," he responded.

"That's just because you're used to it," I pointed out. "I bet there are things about

being a tea witch that I find boring, but you'd think was fascinating."

"I think a lot about you is fascinating, Jasmine," he responded softly.

My cheeks heated in a way that had nothing to do with the bonfire, but thankfully, I doubted he could tell, the light of the fire was far away, giving me the comfort of the gloomy evening light to hide in.

But there was no hiding from myself, or the knowledge that if Ryburn lived in Purple Oak, there was so much more I'd like to get to know about him.

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Jasmine

The kitchen table was a mess of items that I was collecting for my trip to Grower's Cove. It wasn't very far, we'd only have to make camp twice, but I wanted to be prepared properly. It wouldn't be my first time travelling or camping but I wasn't as experienced as some others, like my cousin Reese who was setting off for one of her tours of the surrounding villages for trading and healing.

And that was without considering how important this journey was. It could make the difference between sealing our alliance and not.

"Fire kit, saw, tea, spare socks, bedroll, tent," I listed as I checked to make sure I hadn't forgotten something crucial. Or missed something on the list Reese had made for me.

The floor creaked behind me, and I turned, noticing my brother Brew sneaking in. He tensed and relaxed when he noticed it was just me.

"Your relationship with Katie isn't going to stay secret for very long if you're so obvious about coming home," I said.

He chuckled awkwardly and joined me in the kitchen. "Why are you up so early?"

"I'm preparing for my trip." I waved at the table, which should make it fairly easy for him to tell what I was doing. Love had clearly addled his brain.

"The sun isn't even up yet."

"And?" I counted everything on the table again, just to make doubly sure that I wasn't missing something.

Brew yawned and leaned against the wall. "You're stress-Jasmining. I can tell."

"I'm not stress-Jasmining," I deflected even if it was true. I was definitely overthinking this. There was just so much pressure on this deal and while we were going to survey Growers Cove, we also had to make a good impression. This had all sorts of potential to go wrong. "That's not even a thing," I muttered.

Brew chuckled and filled up the kettle so he could make himself some tea. "It's definitely a thing. And I've known you your entire life, I can tell when you're stressing out."

"Oh the first five years don't count, you can't remember them."

He shrugged, not seeming to care much. "It's a couple of nights under the stars, it's not that big of a deal," Brew said, cavalier as always. "As long as you have a blanket and some tea to heal scrapes, you'll be fine."

"That's easy to say for you, you're a healing genius. My magic isn't nearly as effective," I grumbled. It wasn't exactly something that I liked to admit, but my family was well aware that I lacked when it came to magical prowess. Tea would give me a boost and I could use it to heal myself of minor ailments, but that was about it.

There was a reason I was stepping into our mum's shoes and occupied myself with running the oasis. At least that was something I did have talent for.

"What are you so worried about? You're awesome," Brew said, revealing the sensitive and caring side underneath his bravado. He grabbed two mugs and filled

them with tea, handing one of them to me.

"Thanks." I sighed and cupped my hand around the warm mug. "I guess I'm worried about messing up this alliance. They're asking us for a mill, which is so much more than we were expecting. It's not unfair, not when it'll take three years for the tea crops to grow to maturity, but it's still a lot. I'll be asking so much from the Millers, and their people for tea, something they don't benefit from directly. Will they think this is worth the trade?"

Brew nodded and took a sip of his tea, instantly looking more alert as a result. "Taz is going with you to assess how much work and resources it will take. And she knows better than anyone how valuable the medical bay is to maintain a good life and workforce."

That was true, and it was reassuring that someone else from the Four Families would be travelling with us. That way, I wouldn't have to deal with these issues alone.

"What else is troubling you?" Brew asked, watching me curiously as if he was certain there was going to be something.

I hesitated, not sure if I wanted to voice the next concern out loud. Then again, my brother was one of the few people who would understand my struggle. He'd also found himself attracted to someone he shouldn't be. Not that I thought my attraction towards Ryburn was anywhere near as serious as how he felt about Katie. I knew Brew, he wouldn't be acting like this if he didn't think she was special.

"I can't stop looking at Ryburn," I blurted out before I lost my nerve. Even though he and Katie had long given in to temptation, I knew they managed to resist their attraction to each other for a while.

Since I only had to spend a few more days with Ryburn, maybe their strategies would

work for me.

Brew grinned and put on a childish voice. "Ooooooh. Jasmine is in love ."

"I'm not in love! He's just cute. Ah, forget I said anything." What was I thinking?

Something crashed in the cloakroom, and we hurried towards the noise, finding Cami tip-toeing in with the same guilty look as Brew.

She froze when she saw us and grimaced. "Oh, no."

"What's wrong with all my siblings?" I wondered out loud.

Brew tapped his foot, giving her his best stern-man impression. "And where have you come from?"

Like he hadn't just done the same. I smothered a laugh. It was rather amusing.

Cami plucked a leaf out of her hair. "Nowhere. It's a long story. I don't want to talk about it." She hurried through us, dashing up to her room before anyone else could catch her.

So another dating disaster, clearly. I didn't understand what was making Cami so desperate that she kept putting herself in these weird, elaborate situations but there was a lot I didn't understand about my sister.

Brew and I exchanged a look and shrugged. We were used to it.

"So, tell me more about Ryburn. What about him means you can't stop looking at him?" Brew asked, grinning and clearly pleased the interruption hadn't made him forget about our previous conversation.

I sighed and drank some of my tea. Despite my lack of magical prowess, I felt the restorative power within me leech away some of the stress. "I don't know. I just get distracted by his smile and his eyes and I can feel my thoughts floating away when I stare at his arms. Not important. I want to know how I can resist it."

"Thinking about sheep works. That's an old tip from Oliver."

"Why does Oliver need to resist an attraction?" I asked. "No, never mind, I know he's been into Hana for forever."

Brew let out a strange squeak that he quickly covered up with a cough.

"You know something. Is he no longer into Hana? Did something happen between them? They kissed. They're together." I gasped when Brew's forehead crinkled. "They're together! Oliver Fields and Hana Steeper? What is wrong with all of you? You're not supposed to fall for someone from the other families."

"And you're not supposed to get fluttery around the head of the Grower's Cove delegation, but here we are," Brew countered.

"What's wrong with all of us," I corrected my earlier statement, frustrated by the truth in it. We were going to upset the delicate balance of power if this continued.

He shrugged. "Do you want the serious answer or the medical answer?"

"How is the medical answer not the serious one?"

"Because the medical answer is that your body wants babies."

I wrinkled my nose. "No thanks."

"I think babies are cute," he responded.

"Then go ask Katie to have your babies."

"Don't think I won't."

"Rooibos!"

"Hey, no need to full name me, Jas." He finished his tea.

"A secret relationship is one thing, a secret baby is another."

"I know. We're careful. Ish. Speaking of, you should take some of this with you." He pulled a dusty tin of tea off the shelf and set it down.

"What is it?"

He cleared his throat, suddenly looking a little less comfortable. "I am so not used to having this conversation with my sister."

"Brew?"

"If you give in to temptation, drink it afterwards."

"Brew!"

He shrugged. "If you don't want a baby, then you've got to do the things that prevent a baby. If you come down to the infirmary before you leave, I can get you some contraceptive tea instead."

"I'd rather die."

"Suit yourself. I look forward to being an uncle." He grinned and headed out of the room, leaving me staring at the dusty tin. I should leave it behind. I wasn't going to give in to my attraction to Ryburn, so I wasn't going to need it.

Despite promising myself I wouldn't, I still picked up the tin and put it in my bag. It was better to not need it, than to need it and not have it.

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Jasmine

It was so early, the night guards were still manning the gates leading out of the village. There were more guards than usual because some of them would be travelling with us to make sure this journey went along without any hiccups. And to protect us from any unfortunate occurrences on the road.

Not to mention the fact that Reese also had a group of guards going with her caravan. It was a little chaotic. I took a deep breath and headed over to one of the night guards, glad to see Agatha Porter directing the guards about. I left her to it and drifted over to her daughter, Sonja, whose bat familiar was hanging from a branch above her.

"Hey," I said.

She flashed me a relaxed smile. "Hi, Jasmine."

"Is everyone here?" I knew Sonja well enough to be certain she'd listened to everything her mother said about what was going on today, and she'd know the answer.

"We're just missing Ronnie and Sika but knowing them, they'll be here soon," she said.

I nodded, taking her at her word. Sonja was reliable and very good at her job. If she was confident the two missing guards would be here soon, there was no reason to doubt it. "That's good. Are you coming with us?"

She shook her head. "I'm needed for the night shift," she responded. "But Margot is one of your guards." She nodded over to where a double of their mother stood behind Agatha, looking proud with a hawk perched on her shoulder.

"Ah." I didn't have as much to do with Margot as I did with Sonja, so I wasn't sure exactly how that would go. But the Porters took their positions in the guards and scouts seriously, and I doubted the elder daughter would be any different.

True to Sonja's word, Ronnie and Sika appeared. She barely looked awake and yawned widely, causing the bird nestled on her shoulder to look into her mouth as if it was expecting food. She quietly joined the rest of the guards, unlike the frantic man arriving with her.

"Sorry, sorry! The baby wouldn't stop crying," Ronnie exclaimed, the dark bags under his eyes proof that he was telling the truth. He tripped over his own feet and bumped into the donkey that was pulling the cart with medical supplies.

Spooked, the animal moved forward and almost knocked me off my feet. I stepped back to avoid being trampled, right into a muddy hole. Great. What a chaotic start to the day and to make matters worse, my backpack was already starting to hurt my shoulders even though I'd tested it to make sure I could deal with the weight. I clearly hadn't considered the continuous strain, and we hadn't even gone anywhere. This was going to be a long journey, and I refused to make my belongings anyone else's problem.

Reese jogged towards us and calmed the donkey down with a few pats and a firm tug on his halter. She shouted something and directed a few people, moving some of the chaos further ahead. I felt relieved and wished she was coming with us the entire way so she could be in charge of the journey. Instead, that burden was falling on my inexperienced shoulders.

If I was lucky, Ryburn would take the lead since he'd already made this journey once.

I approached him, hoping to find out where he stood on that. He was chatting with Ford but turned in my direction as soon as he noticed me.

A smile lit up his face as I approached, and a rebellious part of me hoped that it might be because of me, and not just what I represented in terms of his hopes for the alliance between our two settlements.

"Good morning, Jasmine," he said.

"Morning. Are you and your people ready for the journey?" I asked.

"We are." He glanced past me at my cousin and her caravan. "Are they all coming with us?"

"No, Reese is only travelling with us for a little bit. They'll be visiting nearby villages that we offer medical help to," I explained. "It would be Reese and her people who would travel to Grower's Cove if healing was part of the deal."

He hummed thoughtfully. "Not you?"

"No, I have way too much on my plate for that. I keep my younger brother organised, there are family meetings, I coordinate with the day and night guards. And that's just some of the things that I'm keeping in the air."

"So, do you have time to travel to Grower's Cove?"

"Not really but I have to go. There's nobody else who could do it." I thought about that, briefly considering if my sister Cami could've done this instead. But then, she wasn't the best at dealing with people and might've already insulted or hit on someone

from the delegation.

Though I guessed I wasn't doing so well on avoiding the last part myself.

Ryburn cleared his throat. "Well, I'm glad you're able to come along."

I rearranged my backpack, giving my shoulders a second of respite. "Me too. Shall we get going?" I proposed because the weight wasn't going to get any lighter.

He nodded and turned around, waving and shouting at his people to get them moving. His usually smooth and even voice took on an admirable commanding quality that got the Grower's Cove delegation on their feet.

I gave Reese a thumbs-up, and she got everyone on our side in motion, meaning our journey had officially started.

Ryburn

Travelling in the winter months was always difficult. It wasn't just the cold that posed a problem, but the fact that the nights came in fast, meaning the travelling days were shorter than they could be in summer. But at least we were at the tail end of the season, and the weather had stayed surprisingly good for us, making it possible. I wouldn't have liked to do a longer journey than this one, but a few days wasn't so bad.

Night was already starting to fall as we approached the flat clearing we'd used to make camp on the way to Purple Oak. It was a good thing Jasmine's cousin and her healing caravan had already gone their own way, or we would've had to find somewhere different to spend the night. Or a few people might've had to sleep on a slope.

I gestured for everyone to set things down for the night. We still had to pitch tents and build a fire before we could even face the possibility of relaxing and eating.

I let my bags fall down, grimacing at the relief. A pained groan escaped me as my shoulder pulsed, the burning sensation was making it hard to focus on getting camp set up.

Jasmine came my way, looking understandably worn. If she wasn't used to travelling like this, it would have been a long journey already, and it wasn't over yet.

"Do you want to divide duties or is it every man for themselves?" Jasmine asked, looking a bit unsure of herself.

"Since this is hopefully the start of an alliance, we could work together to make camp." I looked up at the sky. "I'm no weather witch, but that looks like it might rain."

"I agree." Jasmine dropped her bag. "I have some firewood on me."

"You've been lugging around firewood?" I asked, even more impressed with her than I already was. She might not travel very much, but it was clear to me that she didn't want to slack on her responsibilities.

"Is that not right? I wasn't sure if you would be okay cutting down trees since you're dryads so..." She conjured a bunch of logs and dropped them on the ground.

How endearing, even if it was misguided.

"Cutting down the right trees can help a forest flourish. And I don't think you have enough for a fire that'll last the night," I said eventually, gesturing vaguely at Ford. "He usually takes care of the firewood situation. If you have one or two people to spare who won't mind following his lead, we can get that going as soon as possible."

Jasmine looked a bit embarrassed, which only made her cuter. "Yeah, of course. Wow, I feel dumb."

"Don't, I think it's very thoughtful and I appreciate it. But being part of nature doesn't mean not interacting with it. At least, not for me. There are some purists who refuse to cut down trees or plants, but you won't find many of them making treaties with other settlements."

She sighed. "Reese is going to pay for this when we get back, it was her idea to bring all this with me. My back is killing me so I really need a cup of tea."

"For magic?"

She nodded. "I'm not the greatest at healing magic, but it will replenish me. And the basics on other people if they need it."

"Ah. Well, there's a stream just down the hill. That's why we camped here last time. We need water for dinner, as well as tea."

"Then we can send some people to fetch water while others set up tents. Once we have a fire going, we can cook up something hot."

I nodded in agreement with her suggestion, and we got to work. There was a lot to do and a lot of people who had never worked together before. I delegated the dryads on my side, sending them off for firewood while Jasmine got her people moving on setting up tents and doing a perimeter check.

It was something we hadn't done last time we camped, which was definitely an oversight on our part. Just the fact that we travelled without guards wasn't great, and something to talk to my brother about. We shouldn't have come across on such an important mission without thinking about security. Seeing the way the guards from Purple Oak interacted with one another only drove that home. They were taking instructions from both Jasmine, and the woman she'd introduced to me as Taz Miller, but were also working in a way that suggested they were used to being a unit.

It was just one of the many things in which Grower's Cove would benefit from this alliance. They were really well organised and there was an abundance and togetherness there that I didn't see at home. If we didn't need the mill more, then I might have been suggesting that we tried to get Purple Oak to train some guards for us, though I could entirely understand why they wouldn't want to do that in case we became hostile.

The main thing that had become clear to me during my brief visit to Purple Oak was that they had a lot of things we could benefit from, and I was sure there was still more we could learn. It wasn't that I believed Grower's Cove had nothing to offer, we clearly had plenty, especially when it came to the cultivation of crops, something it seemed that Purple Oak was struggling with.

As apprehensive as I'd been about being the one to make the alliance, there was a part of me that wondered whether it wouldn't be terrible to be one of the people going back and forth. There was lots I liked about Purple Oak, and it wasn't as if I really had anything tying me to Grower's Cove other than my brother. And with his baby on the way, his attention was going to be on his family, not on me.

My gaze slipped to Jasmine where she was putting up her tent with surprising confidence. I wasn't sure what I expected, but from the way she'd been talking, I'd have thought she'd struggle on the journey, but that was far from the case.

A strand of her dark hair fell out of the plait she currently had it in and she pushed it out of her face. She looked up, catching me watching her. For a moment, I considered looking away and pretending I hadn't been, but then she gave me a small wave.

I returned it, a smile coming to my lips as I did. It would be foolish of me to lie and say that my desire to be a liaison between Grower's Cove and Purple Oak had nothing to do with her. She was smart, fierce, and seemed to get more beautiful with each passing day.

She went back to setting up her tent, which made me break out of my trance. I'd been attracted to people before, and I could have sworn that it had never been this distracting.

I focused on getting my tent set up, although my tarp didn't look as waterproof or efficient as the ones made from animal hides that Jasmine was pitching. Maybe

something else that we might eventually trade for because it would definitely improve travel. Leather had been on the list for us to trade tea for, but I imagined most of what we had coming would go towards making shoes.

Once Ford returned with lots of wood, it didn't take long to start the fire and get people cooking. Just in time because the darkness fell unexpectedly quickly and made everything disappear but a handful of tents and the fire roaring in the middle. The large pot of stew bubbling in it was emitting the most delicious aroma, and even though we all gathered around it to eat, I could tell there was a divide between the two groups.

It made sense, but I was hopeful that would be different in the future.

Jasmine filled a metal kettle with water and tea and set it on the fire to bring it to the boil. Once it was done, she distributed it to her people before settling down with a cup of her own. She did a double take and got back up, bringing the kettle over to our side of the fire.

"Would you like some tea?" she asked Ford.

He looked startled. "Erm, I don't have anything to trade for it."

"No trade needed," Jasmine assured him. "Just allies sharing a drink."

To my surprise, my friend nodded and held out his cup. Even though he didn't look Jasmine in the eye, I was fairly certain he was warming up to her.

She gave Mallory and Aster some tea too, before stopping in front of me. "Tea, Ryburn?"

I met her gaze, feeling like I could get lost there. "That would be nice."

She smiled and poured some into my cup.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome." For a moment, I thought she was going to say more, but she just smiled and headed back over to her seat, setting the kettle back down in the fire.

She picked up her cup and drank some of it down before rubbing her neck. Her hand glowed with green magic. Illuminating her features in the darkness. It was only when I saw that a couple of the other people in her party were doing the same that the pieces clicked into place.

I knew tea witches could heal with tea but it wasn't until this moment that it really dawned on me how important of a resource it was to them. No wonder they were willing to trade with Grower's Cove and how lucky we were that we'd started growing our own tea.

Otherwise, none of this might be happening.

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Jasmine

The fire crackled, and little bits floated up where they turned into ash as soon as they hit the cold air. A lone owl somewhere hooted, but that was the only sound out in the dark. It was so quiet now that everyone had gone to bed. I should be sleeping too, but even with a blanket, it was too cold in my tent. I didn't know how anyone else was dealing with it.

Maybe they were used to it while I hadn't gone a night without a burning hearth in a long time. Most of my camping trips had been in the summer months too, when it had been warmer. Hopefully, a cup of hot tea would warm me up enough to fall asleep.

Something rustled behind me, and I turned around, surprised to find Ryburn coming my way.

He looked surprised to see me. "I didn't expect to see anyone else up. Can't sleep?"

I shook my head. "I'm cold, and I was craving some tea. What about you?"

"My shoulder is giving me some trouble. I'm not used to sleeping on the ground like this."

"What's wrong with your shoulder?" I asked while shuffling to make space on the log for him. There was plenty of space around the fire, and if he didn't want to sit next to me, then he didn't have to.

But he did, sending a small thrill through me and making me think that I definitely

wasn't imagining whatever it was between us.

"I slipped on some ice a few weeks ago," Ryburn said as he rotated his arm. "I'm still recovering from it."

"Was it a break, a pulled muscle, or a ligament issue?" I asked, unable to stop myself. I didn't even know why I was asking, it wasn't like I was a healer. I'd just heard Brew talk about this kind of stuff often enough that at least some of it had sunk in. Whether I could actually do anything about it was another matter.

"Ligament." He shrugged. "It's not a big deal. Your water is boiling."

I nodded my thanks and pulled my kettle off the fire, pouring some of it over the waterlogged leaves in my cup. They were starting to get weak, but I knew they'd still bring a bit of relief. We didn't have a ready enough supply for me to get fresh ones out.

I cupped my hands around the cup and let out a sigh. That was my third cup of the day and it was everything my aching bones and joints needed. I didn't know how my cousins could be on the go like this all the time, this was much harder than expected. Maybe Reese and Zoe were just made of sturdier stuff than I was.

I sighed when the smell of the tea filled my nose, and I could feel myself rejuvenate just from that alone. There really was nothing like real tea when it came to healing powers.

Once the tea was cool enough, I drank the whole cup. It woke up my magic, and I pressed my hand against the back of my neck and shoulders, channelling the power. Heat travelled up, and a faint green glow was emitted from my hand as it took away some of the pain from today.

I realised Ryburn was watching me with rapt attention and a different kind of heat sprung up to my cheeks.

"Was that weird?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It was amazing. So if you drink tea, you can also heal yourself? I thought it was just others."

"Only some tea witches can use their powers on others. It's not very easy." She grimaced. "I'm not particularly good at it, sadly. That's why I'm not a healer."

He gave me a playful grin while rotating his arm. "That's a shame, otherwise I could've asked you to take a look at my shoulder."

"I can still do that." I got up and moved behind him, putting my hands on his broad shoulders before I fully thought it through. This was foolish of me. I didn't know enough about healing to be very good at it, which meant he'd probably realise that this was just some attempt to get him to let me touch him.

Ryburn relaxed slightly under my touch, reassuring me that even if he did see through my suggestion, he wasn't against me touching him.

His muscles were well-defined and clearly the result of hard work. Even if I shouldn't, I let my hands wander with not quite enough self-restraint.

Another reason why it was a good thing I wasn't a healer.

Ryburn let out a funny sound.

"Should I stop?" I asked, sliding my hands back up to his actual shoulders.

He shook his head. "No, that feels nice."

I kneaded the hard muscles that connected his shoulders and neck, enjoying how Ryburn was leaning into me. I let my hands wander again, sliding them up his neck and into his hair. I wasn't entirely sure what had taken over me. I normally had more restraint, but something about Ryburn was testing that to the extreme and I wasn't even sure what to do with that.

He relaxed into my touch, tipping his head back and looking up at me. The firelight reflected in his eyes, illuminating something in them that sent a thrill through me even as I continued to massage his scalp with my fingers.

He reached up to touch my cheek, his hand surprisingly warm given how cool the air around us was. Then again, I was feeling rather warm myself.

I dipped down, pressing my lips on his while the world around us disappeared. He tasted of herbs and something sweet that made me crave more. He twisted around and pulled me closer, deepening the kiss.

I pressed myself against him, eager for more now that I knew exactly what he tasted of. This was only going to make it even harder to not think about him that way.

Something cracked in the dark and snapped me back to reality, reminding me that we weren't alone and what this mission was.

I stepped back, suddenly self-conscious. This trade alliance was possibly the most important thing I'd been in charge of, I shouldn't mess it up because Ryburn was attractive. Even if this was going to make it even harder to ignore.

I cleared my throat. "Erm, I should probably go to sleep."

"Yeah, me too." He touched his neck, seeming a little uncertain of what to say.

"We'll have a long day ahead of us," I said, knowing fully well that I wouldn't be sleeping any time soon if my racing heart was anything to go by. I supposed there was one way I might be able to deal with the tension within me. It might be good if I was going to stand any chance of focusing on tomorrow's journey without constantly thinking about Ryburn's lips.

Or maybe it would make it worse. There was really only one way to find out.

"You're right," Ryburn said, looking a little sheepish. "Thank you for the massage, I feel, umm, better."

"Anytime." I cursed myself for the response, mostly because his gaze dropped down to my lips again.

"I hope you sleep well," he said, his voice gruffer than it had been before. He scratched the back of his neck and cleared his throat. "Good night, Jasmine."

Something in his voice made me want to throw caution to the wind, but to my relief, he was already retreating to his tent. It was good that one of us had some self-restraint because who knew where this would have gone. Except that I knew the answer to that, and it wasn't necessarily good for the alliance, even if I had a feeling it would be oh so good for me.

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Jasmine

It was hard not to think about Ryburn and our kiss when the two of us were travelling with one another for the entire day, but I was doing a reasonable job of avoiding him. Likely made easier by the fact he was clearly trying to do the same. Not that it stopped me from admiring him from a distance or him from stealing glances at me.

Everytime our eyes met, my stomach fluttered but I squashed the feeling down. I wasn't going to give in to my urges and risk sabotaging this alliance. Even if I suddenly understood why Brew and Katie gave into their attraction despite not being allowed to. If anything, it was making it harder not to give in rather than easier.

There was relief when we made camp again because that meant we were only one night away from arriving at Grower's Cove. Then all Taz needed to do was assess the mill situation and we could finalise the trade agreements which would be such a weight off my shoulders.

And after that? Who knew what would happen then. Maybe then I could give in to my attraction to Ryburn. Or I might never see him again, and this crush would fade. Whatever happened was fine with me, as long as I didn't do anything dumb before the alliance was in place.

Like kissing Ryburn again.

My lips tingled just from thinking about it, and the urge to linger around the fire in case he decided to do the same was strong.

I was proud of myself for avoiding temptation when I crawled into my tent. It was likely going to be another cold sleepless night again, but nobody said camping was fun. It really raised my admiration for my cousins and aunt and uncle who did a lot more travelling than I did.

I tossed and turned, trying whatever I could do to wrap myself up to get warm, but the chill from the frozen ground was making it impossible to actually sleep. After what felt like hours, I gave in and went out to the fire before my toes froze off.

As I feared, Ryburn was already there. He was sitting on a log with his blanket around his shoulders, which gave me the chance to turn around before he saw me, but my cold feet carried me towards him against my will. Or with my will. There was only a very small part of me that was actually resisting this, the rest wanted it a lot.

He looked up, looking tired himself. "Cold again?"

I nodded and wrapped my own blanket tighter around me. "I don't know how anyone else is managing to sleep. Is your shoulder hurting again?"

"It is. Carrying a backpack isn't good, and the hard ground isn't doing me any favours." He rubbed the affected muscle and grimaced.

I almost offered to massage him again, but bit my tongue instead. That was how we got into trouble last time, and I didn't want a repeat of that. Except that I did. I just knew that I shouldn't.

It was hard arguing with myself and I knew I was playing with fire when I sat down next to him. I should leave more space between us, but some things weren't worth fighting.

He looked at me, the shadows of the fire dancing on his face. He cleared his throat.

"Do we need to talk about last night?"

"Probably. I shouldn't have..." I paused, aware that there might be people who could be listening and that I shouldn't say exactly what we did. "I shouldn't have done what I did."

Ryburn looked at me. "Do you regret it?"

"No." It came out as a whisper. "But we shouldn't do it again. This trade alliance is too important."

"I agree. I'm glad you feel that way too." He sighed and leaned back, drawing attention to the way his muscles moved, even under his clothes.

To distract myself from that, I diverted the conversation to a safer subject. "Are you looking forward to being back home?"

"I am. I've missed our family oak tree. I'm not used to being away from it."

"What does that feel like?"

"Kind of hollow, like something is missing. But it's not too bad. What about you? How is it being away from Purple Oak?"

"It's unexpected. I'm not used to being out of my element. Everything aches, and the lack of sleep isn't helping."

He shrugged the blanket off his shoulders. "If you're cold, you can use my blanket. I'm not going to be getting any sleep in my tent anyway."

"You can't sit out here by the fire all night."

"I'll be fine."

I shook my head. "I can't take your blanket."

He chuckled. "Well, it's not like we can share it."

"Can't we?" I glanced over to my tent which was just about big enough for two people. And I knew my bed roll was nice and fluffy which might even help his shoulder.

"Jasmine..." My name almost sounded like a groan. "Is that a good idea?"

"It's a terrible one," I responded.

He laughed. "Fair enough."

"But getting a good night's sleep is essential," I said, holding out my hand to encourage him up. I wasn't sure which of us I was trying to convince.

He looked at me, the silence hanging between us. I could see the conflict on his face, but also the sparkle of interest in his eyes.

Slowly, he reached up and took my hand, letting me guide him back to my tent while my heart hammered in my chest.

I was telling myself this was innocent and that we were too tired for anything to happen, especially because we agreed the kiss last night was just a one-time thing, but I was reasonably sure that was a lie I was telling myself so that I didn't go back on what I really wanted.

He held the tent flap open for me and climbed in afterwards, pulling the front of the

tent closed and shutting the world out. And then there was just me and him, the sound of our breathing, the sweet smell of grass and smoke, and his shimmering eyes in the dark.

He shuffled closer, and I leaned in, abandoning all caution and reservation when his lips pressed on mine. His large hands grabbed hold of me, his touch burning into me and awakening a heat in my lower belly that was hotter than the fire.

I pulled him down onto my bedroll, sighing when his leg pressed between mine. He kissed me more while slowly rocking into me, the friction of our clothes both delightful and frustrating. There was no more time for thinking about whether this was a good idea or not, the only way I was going to be able to stop was if he wanted to.

One of his hands pushed under my shirt, and I could feel the desperation in his movements. I hadn't been the only one holding back.

Ryburn sat back to pull off his jumper and shirt, revealing the taut muscles beneath. I slid my hand over his bare chest, marvelling at the definition. I could feel his heart pounding under my touch and it only made me more excited to know that he was just as affected as I was.

He laid down next to me again, his lips finding mine even in the dark. With every kiss, every graze of his hands, I could feel my senses waking up. Desire grew within me, and I pushed my own clothes off, searching out the warmth of Ryburn's body instead.

This was what I'd been craving.

I pulled him on top of me, groaning when I felt him twitch against my leg. He was hot and ready, and I wanted to feel him inside me.

"Are you sure?" he whispered, his breath ticklish against the sensitive skin of my neck.

There were lots of reasons why we shouldn't but right now, I couldn't think of any. And we'd already come this far, would pulling back now really make a difference? The bell was rung, the milk was spilt, the cat was out of the bag. Whatever way I looked at it, there was no denying the way it felt to be with him like this.

I kissed him with all the intensity in the world as I pulled him down on me. Hovering over me, he guided himself into me and pushed into me with more restraint than necessary. I trailed my hands up his strong arms and angled my hips up, causing him to groan and sink deeper into me.

"Yes. More," I encouraged, tugging on his arms so he would give in.

He inhaled sharply when his hips met my thighs, and for a moment, neither of us moved.

"Are you all right?" he whispered, the concern in his voice gravelly and deep.

I nodded and grasped his arms. "It feels good."

He hummed, a sound that came from deep within his throat. He leaned down to kiss me more, the movement causing him to push even deeper into me.

I wrapped my legs around him, encouraging him to keep moving. Every time he pushed into me, the heat in my lower belly spread until my whole body was warm and electrified.

I was definitely no longer bothered by the cold.

A moan escaped me, and I muffled it by pressing my mouth against his shoulder, worried someone might overhear. I could hear his breathing get more rapid and felt his movements get more erratic.

I met his thrusts with my own, moaning as every press of his hips sparked pleasure. I could feel his muscles flex and contract, and I dug my fingers into him as my own release built.

"I'm getting close," he moaned in my ear. "I need a moment, or it's going to be over."

I nodded and unwrapped my legs from around him, hissing when he pulled out. The cold air was a reminder of the lack of contact, but it didn't last long because he pressed his hand between my legs, reapplying pressure. A gasp escaped from me as pleasure sparked down to the tips of my toes and up my spine.

"More?" he asked, his other hand reaching up to my nipple.

I could only nod and sigh while my thoughts got lost in our kisses and the friction from his fingers. Pressure built in my lower belly, and I pulled him back down on me. With a soft grunt, he pushed into me while his hand stayed in place and I wrapped my legs around him once more, wordlessly begging him not to stop.

He kissed me hard, his tongue searching out mine, and the heat lashed free. I moaned against him, glad that he was there to block some of the sounds. His breathing grew ragged, and his whole body tensed as he came along with me.

It was a good thing I had that tea. I was going to need it after all.

It took a moment before either of us managed to speak.

"Was that all right?" Ryburn asked.

I nodded, all warm and fuzzy. "Very all right. You?"

"Yes, although this was definitely not sleeping either."

I chuckled as he settled next to me and pulled both our blankets over us. "No, but I'm nice and warm now."

"Oh, good." He pressed his lips on mine again for a much softer kiss and rested his head on my shoulder. "We really should sleep though."

I nodded and snuggled into his embrace as finally, the haze of sleep took hold of me. I wasn't sure what consequences this would bring but I was too tired and too satisfied to care. That was a problem for tomorrow.

Jasmine

The last of the trek towards Grower's Cove gave me plenty of time to think about last night, and the fact that Ryburn hadn't snuck out of my tent until it was nearly dawn. I hadn't had nearly as much of a problem falling asleep when there was someone there with me, even if I'd lost more time sleeping to wandering hands. His and mine.

I was feeling a lot brighter today, though. Even if I had had to surreptitiously make myself some of the morning after tea. Hopefully, Brew didn't know how much was left in the tin when he gave it to me, or if he did, that he didn't think to check it, because I didn't want to have to explain to my medically knowledgeable brother exactly why I'd needed it.

I tried to distract myself from thoughts of Ryburn by looking around me. It was clear we were growing closer to Grower's Cove even if I couldn't see the settlement yet. There was something in the air and not to mention, the plants looked more lively and lush, more so than they should given the time of year. There were fields of flowers even though it was nearing winter, and trees bearing an abundance of fruit. I never thought that Purple Oak Oasis was lacking, but this was on another level. This was a haven.

I glanced back at Ryburn and found him already looking at me. He quickly glanced away, but not before I caught his knowing smile. Was he thinking about last night too? It was a silly question, I knew he was going to be. It had been reckless and fuelled by something I hadn't felt in a while. That need that only came with thoughtless attraction, when the only thing that would do was someone's touch. I liked to think that I was a restrained person, but there'd been no denying an entirely

different, and completely irrational, part of me had been in control last night.

And was kind of still in control.

We needed to talk about it, especially considering the last thing we did before going to my tent was saying that we weren't going to do anything about it in case we damaged the alliance we were trying to build. That was a hard thing to focus on when all I could think about was his lips against my skin, and the way it had felt for him to pleasure me.

I groaned and rubbed a hand over my face. I was well and truly distracted.

It didn't take long for Grower's Cove to come into view. From a distance, it looked just like any other settlement. Clusters of houses with smoke circling up from chimneys, lots of fields and greenery, all situated next to a humongous forest. There were people out on the streets, while others were tending to the fields, and children played freely.

Children's laughter was always a good sign. I might not want to have kids, but that didn't change the fact I thought they could be great, and how well a community thrived could be seen in how much joy there was for the children raised by it.

Ryburn and the others from Grower's Cove guided us down the main road, while other people stopped to watch us as we passed. Some waved while others didn't look too pleased to see us. I could definitely tell there were some negative feelings from some of the others. Presumably, those who followed the Mother Nature person they'd told us about. That wasn't such a good sign for our alliance.

If there was resistance to trading, that could complicate negotiations even more than me and Ryburn sleeping together.

My cheeks got warm just thinking about it. It had been a while since anyone had made me feel like that, and if I was honest with myself, I wanted more of it. It was foolish on so many levels. Not just because of the alliance, but also because he lived somewhere entirely different than I did. How was I even supposed to date someone with an entirely different home?

I pushed the thought aside. It wasn't for now. I could talk to Ryburn and maybe we could figure something out. If not, then at least it had been fun. Even thinking it, I knew that it wasn't enough.

We reached the heart of Grower's Cove that was marked by a large wooden building where a man that looked like Ryburn was waiting for us. They hugged in a way that made me fairly confident they were siblings because I'd had a hug like that from Brew.

"Welcome to Grower's Cove. I'm Adair, I'm on the Council," the man introduced himself, confirming he was indeed Ryburn's brother. "Thank you for travelling all the way here. We're happy to have you."

That was a smooth welcome considering one of Ryburn's people only ran ahead earlier today to alert them of our presence. Then again, maybe they had predicted this from the start.

I would have if it was the opposite way around. There was just something about being able to see people in their own home, it built trust.

Adair opened the building for us. "You must all be tired from the journey so we'll let you rest tonight. No official business until morning."

I nodded, knowing I spoke for everyone else when I agreed. "We appreciate that."

"Tomorrow, after breakfast, we'll show you around our Cove. Well, my brother will," Adair said, clapping Ryburn on his back.

My gaze went to Ryburn, and our eyes met. A smile appeared, drawing my attention to his lips and back to last night. The thoughts distracted me so, I didn't realise Adair was speaking to me.

"Sorry, can you repeat that?" I said, flustered when everyone was looking at me expectantly.

Ryburn smothered a laugh, probably because he knew exactly what had flustered me.

Adair cleared his throat. "I was just saying that we have facilities if you want to wash up."

"Oh, that's great. Thank you."

"If you need anything else, all you need is to ask. With that, we'll leave you to get settled." He nodded his head and left the room. I met Ryburn's gaze, wondering if it would be possible to get him alone so we could talk, but fearing that wasn't going to be possible.

He cleared his throat. "Do you want to go for a walk?" he asked me, gaining a strange look from Taz as he did.

"A walk would be good," I said. "My brother advised me that a short stroll after a long walk was good for the leg muscles."

Ryburn smiled. "I'll meet you outside."

Taz shook her head in amusement. "You're not fooling anyone, Jasmine."

"I don't know what you mean."

She snorted and picked up her pack to head into what I assumed were sleeping quarters. "Tents aren't soundproof you know."

A flush rose to my cheeks and I started to stutter out a protest, but failed miserably.

"It's fine. Go have fun," she said.

"The alliance..."

"Is fine. They want a mill, we want tea. You don't think either of our settlements are really going to let this go because you slept with the liaison? If it's going to be a problem, you're replaceable. Isn't that why you have three other siblings?"

"Hardly." But I saw her point. Neither Ryburn or I were indispensable. We could be replaced if this proved to be too difficult for one or both of us. We just had to hope that it didn't.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 3:01 pm

Jasmine

I stepped out of the building to find Ryburn waiting, giving him a small smile. "Hey."

"Hi," he said.

"So, you wanted a walk?"

"I just wanted to get you alone," he admitted.

"Alone alone, or alone alone?"

He laughed. "Whichever you want, Jasmine."

I swallowed hard. What did I want? Taz was right about the fact that either of us could be replaced, but that was a future thing. Right now, I was the one in Grower's Cove, and I needed to remember that.

"So." He cleared his throat. "What do you think of Grower's Cove so far?" He waved a hand outwards. Even here in the built-up part of the settlement, it was possible to see the plants everywhere. I wasn't entirely sure how they were managing to keep everything so vibrant in winter, but I supposed that was the power of dryads.

"It's absolutely beautiful," I said earnestly. "It's truly something to behold. I don't think I could've imagined this."

"That's what happens when a lot of dryads get together," he said with a fond note in

his smile.

"You sound proud of your home."

He scratched his neck. "I am."

"And your brother seems nice."

"Adair is great. He's going to make a great father," Ryburn said. "He had his baby boy while I was away."

"I'm sorry you weren't here for it."

He shrugged. "It isn't a big deal," he responded.

"So now you're Uncle Ryburn. That must be weird." I thought about my own siblings and how strange it would be if one of them had a miniature version of themselves running around. Considering how Brew was talking about babies the other day, it was clear that I'd be finding out sooner rather than later. I just had to hope that he and Katie decided to tell people about their relationship first or there could be some awkward conversations coming.

"Uncle Ryburn," Ryburn repeated with a chuckle. "I guess I am. That's going to take a while to get used to it."

We lapsed into a tense silence, one which felt like both of us wanted to say something but weren't.

"So about last night," I started, not sure exactly where I was going with that yet.

Ryburn's lips curled up. "Yes, last night. That was unexpected. But great."

"It sure was. I don't usually get caught up in that. I mean, not when I'm on official business." I rubbed my arm. "I just wanted to make sure things aren't going to get awkward between us or impact the negotiation."

He nodded slowly. "Right, the negotiation. No, we can't let anything get in the way of that."

"Good, so we agree."

A sparkle appeared in his eyes, and he shifted his weight towards me. "What exactly are we agreeing on here? To not let things get awkward or not to do it again?"

My gaze dropped down to his mouth, and I instantly got flustered. Heat rushed up to my face as if I was sitting in front of that fire again with his lips on mine and his arm around my waist. My attention dropped even further down to his hands, and thoughts of how they'd touched me filled my mind. My whole body heated and it was easy to get caught in the thought of what might happen if I let a repeat happen.

Maybe even one where we had access to a bed and the chance to get clean first. It hadn't mattered much last night when everything had been about the way it felt and the need that had grown inside me, but I really would have rathered that I was cleaner the next time I slept with him.

The thought startled me. Not because I was thinking about the two of us together, that was inevitable after last night, but because I was thinking about it with such certainty. Like it was something that was going to happen.

Except that it couldn't.

I cleared my throat and moved back. This was exactly why I couldn't let myself get caught up in this attraction.

"We shouldn't do anything that puts the trade alliance at risk," I said, not sounding quite as firm as I wanted to. "Even if it sounds like we both want to."

He looked at me the same way I'd been looking at him. "And what if it doesn't put the trade alliance at risk?"

"That's playing with fire," I replied, even though I was instantly tempted. "We should be sensible. There's too much at stake."

He hummed. "I know you're right, but that doesn't stop this feeling from going away."

"What feeling?" I asked, knowing my question was inviting trouble.

Ryburn's gaze lingered on my lips this time. "The feeling that I want to kiss you again. Desperately."

My breath caught in my throat and I made a little sound I didn't recognise. "You can't. We shouldn't. Which I know are two different things."

He chuckled softly, which made him even more endearing. "I'm not going to."

That was a good thing so why did I feel so disappointed? Especially because I wanted to wrap my arms around his broad shoulders again, tangle my fingers in his hair, and kiss him until neither of us could breathe.

"It was a long day, you should get some rest," Ryburn said sensibly, leaning back to break the tension growing between us.

I swallowed hard. "Yes, you're right. See you tomorrow for the tour."

He smiled at me, revealing dimples. "I look forward to it, Jasmine."

My heart fluttered at the soft look in his eyes. "Me too. Good night."

I watched him leave, feeling a pang of regret as he made his way further away from me and the possibility of us sleeping together again disappeared along with him. There was a part of me that wanted to call out and tell him that I'd changed my mind, but I managed to keep control of it. I was going to have to satisfy myself by thinking about it. At least until after Taz had made her assessment and the alliance was in place, maybe then something could happen, but only then.

Jasmine

I woke up with fresh determination to make this trade alliance work, no matter how distracting Ryburn was, or how good he looked in his fresh set of clothes. Hopefully, I looked better too, now that I'd had a wash and changed into something that I hadn't spent three days travelling in.

Though maybe that was a danger in itself. We'd given in to temptation while travelling, now we were somewhere with working showers, it was going to be even harder.

I looked over at Ryburn as he led me deeper into Grower's Cove. Was it sensible that the two of us were going to inspect the tea plants on our own? No, but there was so much to see and do, it made sense to split up. After all, that was what we had done when they visited us.

I just needed to keep my head clear and stop thinking about Ryburn's nice eyes, or his smile, or those muscled arms of his.

"I can feel you looking," Ryburn said in a low, inviting voice.

"As if you're not doing the same," I murmured.

He laughed. "Oh, definitely. And I think I actually missed sleeping in a tent last night."

I snorted. "You can flatter me all you want, but we both know that's a lie."

"It was. But I did think about sleeping in a tent a lot last night."

"I don't think what you were thinking about was sleeping."

The corner of his lips quirks up into a smile. "Perhaps not."

The tea fields came into view, providing a nice welcome distraction from the conversation that was making me more hot and flustered than it has any right for. This was what I'd come for. If we could make this alliance work, our healers would be able to keep doing their work without having to exhaust themselves as much.

"Here we are," Ryburn announced, waving his hand to the neat lines of green bushes that stretched as far as I could see.

"Wow, that's a lot of tea." It was a far cry from the small garden we had and definitely put on perspective how big the plants could grow.

He nodded. "There have to be a lot of plants to make even a small amount of tea. And some of them aren't mature enough to harvest yet."

"It's amazing."

"It is," he agreed.

He guided me into the adjoining building, and it didn't escape my notice that we were alone again, and away from prying eyes.

I shook the thoughts out of my head and tried to focus on the tea. Tea, tea, tea, that was what I was here for. To avoid falling into temptation again, I didn't look at him and concentrated on the box of tea leaves instead. They were dark and dried, exactly how they should be. I brought some pieces to my nose and just the scent of it had

magic tingling through my body. It was grassy and bitter and reminded me of home.

"Can I brew some?" I asked, eager to drink some more of their tea. The small batch they brought as a gift had been excellent, and I wanted to make sure this was just as good.

And I kind of just wanted a cup of tea right now.

"Of course." Ryburn got the kettle from the stove and set it on a placemat. He grabbed some cups from a top shelf which gave me a great look at the backside of him. He really was tall and well-built, something that I knew firsthand.

He brought the cups and caught me staring at him.

"If you keep looking at me like that, I'm going to have a hard time staying sensible," he remarked, his gaze dipping down to my chest.

"Says you. You're the one who is devouring me with your eyes," I remarked, heat sparking up within me at the idea of touching him again. I couldn't blame him for that, it had been what I'd been doing too.

He scratched the back of his neck but didn't look away. "I just keep thinking about it."

"Me too." I bit my lip, drawing his gaze to it. "You're doing it again."

"I'm sorry, you're just distracting. I'll behave." He cleared his throat and turned his attention to the tea cups. "Do you have to brew the tea a special way?"

Grateful for the change in subject, I also focused on the tea. "No, it's just the regular way."

I dropped two spoonfuls of tea into the teapot and poured hot water over it. There was something so beautiful about watching dried leaves unfurl, but I put the lid on so the heat couldn't escape instead. Though maybe I should watch, it would give me something to focus on that wasn't Ryburn.

"There are some teas that need different preparations. Grey Steeper likes to make sakura tea in the spring."

"With cherry blossom leaves?" Ryburn checked.

"Mmhmm. I don't particularly care for it myself, but he does it every year without fail."

"I didn't realise you had sakuras in Purple Oak."

"Oh yes, I think we've got three or four. It would probably make more sense to call our home Sakura Oasis rather than Purple Oak."

"Why is it called that?" he asked.

"Oh, because of the purple oak tree."

He frowned. "I don't think I saw it when I was there."

"I didn't show it to you. It's in a sacred grove, not everyone is allowed there. It's usually just for important ceremonies when we need to thank the tea gods for their bounty. Stuff like that."

"Ah."

"But we used to sneak in all the time when we were kids," I said. "If you ever come

back to Purple Oak, I can show it to you." I met his gaze and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. It was the first time either of us were really floating the idea of a future where we awa one another, and I was nervous about how he might react.

"I'd like that."

"I would too." I distracted myself from my traitorous thoughts of a future that probably couldn't happen by pouring tea for us both. Once it had cooled a little, I took my first sip. My magic reacted instantly, surging through me and making my hands tingle. My sharpened senses allowed me to pick up on more of the tea's subtleties and distinguish earthy notes and aromas, no doubt derived from the soil they grew in.

This was quality tea.

Ryburn looked at me. "And?"

"It's really good." I drank a little bit more, surprised by how steady my magic stayed. It wasn't usually so present and emboldened by that, I got up from the table.

"Where are you going?" Ryburn asked with the cutest confused look.

"Take your shirt off."

His eyebrows raised up. "I thought we were behaving."

"Not for that. For your shoulder."

He looked surprised but did as I asked, pulling his shirt off to expose his bare chest. I could see the muscles I felt that night and stared for a few seconds too long before remembering what I was supposed to be doing.

I stood behind him and hummed the song my father taught me before he died, the one designed to help with channelling the magic correctly. As far as I knew, Brew still sang it when he was healing people.

I pressed my hand against Ryburn's bad shoulder, and a faint green glow appeared from where we were touching. My fingers tingled like pure electricity was running through them and I drew on as much power as I could before I got dizzy.

It was only a few seconds, a poor showing compared to what some tea witches could do, but I could tell from the way Ryburn held his shoulder that it had helped in some way.

He turned to look at me, his lips twisted up in a smile. "Wow."

"Good wow?"

He nodded and reached up to touch his shoulder. "I could feel your magic."

"You were supposed to," I pointed out. "Does your shoulder feel a bit better?"

He rotated it a couple of times and nodded. "It does. Thank you."

"It'll only help for a little while. I'm not very good at it." I smiled apologetically.

"If this is what not very good feels like, I think Grower's Cove would benefit massively from some tea witch healing because this is much better than anything we have." He rotated his arm. "Yeah, this feels great. You're amazing."

"You're welcome."

He grinned and snuck his arms around me, pulling me into him. "I mean it, you're the

most incredible woman I've ever met."

I melted into his embrace and pressed my lips to his, even though we just agreed that we shouldn't. I just couldn't resist, not when I could feel the warmth of his hands and see the longing in his eyes.

He was craving this just as much as I and it was foolish to pretend otherwise.

"Does the tea meet your expectations?" Ryburn asked with a smile.

I nodded. "It exceeds it. I really hope Taz will come back with good news about the mill because I think both our homes will benefit massively from this trade deal."

"I agree and not just because I want to keep seeing you."

The thought of seeing him more regularly sparked excitement and hope in my stomach, along with worry. I wanted to spend more time with him but that would also make resisting whatever this was between us a lot harder.

I brushed my fingers down the side of his face. "So we're not fighting this?"

He looked up at me. "Once the trade alliance is in place, there's no reason for us to resist. And I think we could be great together."

That was an excellent point, one I hadn't thought of myself. If everything went without a hitch, there was no reason why I couldn't pursue this.

"We might not see much of each other, even if the negotiations are successful," I said softly, not wanting to dash his hopes. "It's really exceptional that I leave Purple Oak. I'm my mother's right hand, I oversee a good amount of the day-to-day running of the village. I can't be gone for long periods of time. And you seem important here."

Maybe sporadic and casual is all right for you, but I don't think it's my thing."

"I'm not that important," he murmured.

"Your brother is on the Council, and he's just become a dad. Aren't you going to be busy too?" I reasoned, not sure why I was taking a sledgehammer to this before it even had a chance to get off the ground.

Ryburn looked at me with a broken expression. "I suppose I am. I just really like you, and it feels like there's something here."

I touched his cheek and dipped down to kiss him. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Trade alliance first, then we can talk about us."

He wrapped his arms tighter around me. "I like that. Us."

My heart fluttered at the way he said that and I selfishly felt myself wishing that Ryburn wasn't as attached to his home as I was to mine. Maybe if that were the case, something could blossom from this.

I just had to hope this wasn't a situation where I was going to return to Purple Oak with a broken heart.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 3:01 pm

Ryburn

A light breeze brushed past me as I stood under our family oak tree, my hand pressed against the trunk. It was a cold day, but the winter sun shone brightly, illuminating the sprawling greenery of Grower's Cove surrounding the hill.

Calming magic pulsed through the tree and into me, but it wasn't enough to truly break through all of the thoughts I was having. I felt like I was at a tipping point where whatever decision I made would define something major about my life. The worst part was, I didn't even really have anything to decide on.

"Ryburn!" Adair's voice did break through my thoughts, and I pulled back from the tree, breaking the connection.

"Hey," I said.

He jogged the rest of the way up the hill and clapped me on the back. "I believe congratulations are in order. Purple Oak and Grower's Cove have come to an official arrangement."

I nodded weakly. "That's correct."

"And you got them to agree to help us build a water mill? That's far beyond what we expected."

"I saw an opportunity, and I know you and a couple of the other councillors have been pushing for something like this."

"It was well done," he said with a proud nod. "But if it went so well, why aren't you celebrating? It wouldn't have happened without you."

"I am celebrating."

Adair raised an eyebrow. "With our tree? I know I take my duties seriously, but even I know this isn't celebrating." He gave me a knowing look. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Ryburn."

I leaned against the tree, taking full advantage of the magic. "I promise, it's nothing."

"Remember just after I started dating Hazel when I thought I'd messed things up because I'd gotten her birthday wrong?" he asked.

I frowned, not entirely sure what he was getting at. "Yes?"

"I used the same nothing as you're using now."

"I don't remember that," I muttered, trying to think of what to tell him without revealing that I nearly messed up the whole thing.

"If you don't tell me, we can't figure out how to fix it," he said.

I laughed. "You sound like Mum."

"I'm a parent now, it unlocked something."

There was really no fighting this, he was going to find out sooner or later. It could

even be that Ford was paying more attention than I thought and accidentally spilled the beans. "I'm really happy that the negotiations went well," I said slowly. "But I'm also a little sad because that means the Purple Oak delegation is leaving."

Adair clicked his tongue. "I'm not following."

"I've got a little thing for, umm, Jasmine," I confessed, preparing myself for a lecture about how inappropriate and unsensible that was.

Instead, Adair took me by surprise by chuckling. "The lead of the delegation?"

I nodded.

"Ha, finally. You found someone you liked. And what exactly is the problem?"

"That she's going back home. Weren't you listening?"

"It's not like she lives halfway around the world. Can't you spend time with her when you're over there?"

I screwed my eyes shut. "She said she doesn't want something sporadic."

"Sporadic? You could be there most of the month. Or all of it, if you wanted to be."

"What are you talking about?" I was trying to follow, but I was more confused than I wanted to be about what he was saying.

Adair plucked some dead leaves off the oak tree. "Well, someone will have to oversee the dryads going there to grow their tea. I figured you'd be the right man for the job. Didn't I tell you this?"

"No!"

He chuckled sheepishly. "Sorry, must be new-parent brain. But what do you think? It's a lot of responsibility, but I can't just ask anyone. I put you forward to the Council, and given how well the alliance mission went, they were more than willing to approve you for the position. You can say no, obviously, but the job is yours if you want it."

The possibilities bloomed within me, almost as fast as my spiralling thoughts. As much as I wanted to spend more time with Jasmine, it wasn't that simple, was it?

"What about my duties here?" I asked slowly.

"It'll be fine. We can get George to step up. He's not as good as you, but he'll do."

"What about the baby? Shouldn't I help out with him?"

He chuckled. "You can help when you're here. Maybe you'll come back once a week, or once a month, or just for the holidays. The choice is yours. You'll always have a home here, but if you decide you have a home in Purple Oak at some point, that's also all right."

"The tree..." I looked at the family oak tree.

"It's not an issue now, but if you decide you want to stay in Purple Oak, then we can harvest some acorns for you to grow your own. That's how it's supposed to work."

"But..."

"Do you want to go or not?" he interrupted, giving me a look that meant he knew my answer already.

I nodded. "I do. I liked Purple Oak, I think there's a lot we can learn from them."

"And the pretty girl lives there," Adair said with a childish tone as if he hadn't just become a father and we were teenagers again, dealing with the first blooms of attraction.

He also wasn't wrong. I would've still considered taking the job without Jasmine, but it certainly made having to be away from home much more appealing. I just hoped she saw it the same way and wasn't looking forward to getting rid of me.

"Then I'll be delighted to tell the Council that you're accepting the position. I know you're going to do a great job."

"Thanks."

"And if things go well with Jasmine, then I look forward to getting to know her properly. Maybe she can come to the baby's tree bonding ceremony."

"That's for family," I pointed out.

"And it's two years away," Adair responded. "So yes, if you're together, then she should come."

I nodded, a little overwhelmed by the thought. I liked Jasmine, and I certainly thought that what we had could potentially last, but it was something else to hear my brother say it. I guessed it made sense, he'd met her himself, and he knew that she was well respected in Purple Oak.

But none of that was why I liked her. Except that wasn't entirely true either. She was so dedicated to her village, and so intelligent with how she thought and considered things. That was the kind of person that anyone could respect, and it only made her

more attractive to me.

Jasmine

Nerves tingled through me as I made my way up the hill. I could already see the large oak tree and the man standing underneath it that was making my heart race and filled me with dread. This was not how I imagined I would feel when I was about to return home with the trade alliance secured. I should be celebrating, not moping.

And yet it was hard not to, especially when this could spell the end of what I had with Ryburn. I didn't want that to be the case, but I wasn't naive enough to think it was going to be as straightforward as I liked him and therefore it would all be perfect.

Ryburn smiled when he saw me and I could tell from his nervous expression that he had his own mix of feelings about this situation.

"Hey." I gestured to the oak tree he was standing under. "Is this your family tree?"

He nodded. "Isn't she beautiful?" He touched the trunk, an expression of reverence on his face. Was that how I looked when I talked about tea? I didn't think so. The bond between a dryad and their tree was different from my connection to my magic. From how he'd described it, there were some similarities to how Katie and Oliver had talked about their ward bonds with their familiars, but it was different at the same time.

"She's gorgeous." I reached out to touch the tree, holding back before I did. "Wait, can I touch it or is that a big no-no in dryad etiquette."

"It's not something you should do without permission if you know that it's someone's

home tree. But I'm a Silva, I can give you permission." He gestured towards the tree to make it clear that was what he was doing.

With a smile, I ran my hand over the oak's bark. I didn't know much about trees, but it seemed big and sturdy, a lot like Ryburn in that regard.

A rush of wind made the branches and leaves move. Or maybe it was the magic they shared because even though I wasn't a dryad, it felt like the tree was protecting him.

Seeing them together, it was just a painful reminder that there was a good reason we had almost no dryads in our town. They weren't known for travelling, especially not when they had a home tree like this.

I swallowed bitterly. "I should go to bed soon. We're leaving tomorrow at first light."

"Are you looking forward to being back home?"

"In a way. I had to push some of my duties on other people, including my sister, and who knows what chaos she's caused while I was gone. But yeah, I missed it. Home." I didn't usually ramble, but then again, I wasn't usually trying to hide how sad I was to be leaving. I'd come to really enjoy Ryburn's company, and I wasn't ready to say goodbye.

He scratched the back of his head and cleared his throat. His expression was harder to read than I expected it to be, especially after spending the time with him that I had recently. "There's something I wanted to run by you."

"I'm listening." And curious. Maybe he was going to suggest that we spent the night together. It wasn't the best idea for me to say yes, but if he asked, I knew I wouldn't say no.

"I know you said you didn't want anything casual or sporadic, but what if I was spending a lot of time at Purple Oak?" He fiddled with a bit of fabric from his jacket. "My brother wants me to stay on as the leader of the workers going back and forth."

A rush of hope made me breathless. "Really?"

He nodded. "I'd need to return to Grower's Cove sometimes. But I'd be spending most of my time in Purple Oak overseeing the work there."

"What about your tree? Won't you miss it?" I didn't want to say yes and take him away from something that was such an integral part of him, especially when I could tell from the way he talked about it how much care he had for the tree in front of me.

"I will, but it'll be here when I return. And it's not like there aren't trees in Purple Oak."

"I don't know enough about how dryad magic works."

"I can be away from my tree," he assured me. "And I can even find a new tree to be my home tree."

"You can?"

He nodded. "This is my family tree, it's the one I've been bonded to since I was two years old, but it's not the only tree I can have in my life. It's hard to explain, especially because I've never had a reason or the urge to bond to another home tree, but from what other dryads have told me, it's possible. Most of them say they know when they've found the right tree."

"Oh."

"I'm not saying that I'm going to be looking for a new home tree in Purple Oak straight away, because I'm not. But if a time came where I wanted to, then it's an option."

"I see." I took a deep breath. "What does this mean for us?"

His expression softened as he looked at me. "We could see where this goes, if you're up for it."

I closed the gap between us, not really thinking about my answer because I already knew it. I wrapped my arms around his neck, my eyes fluttering closed even as his arms tightened around my waist and his lips met mine.

The kiss was intense. Not in exactly the same way as the others we'd shared had been, this was a different kind of emotion completely. It was a need that neither of us had dared to put into words. It wasn't physical, it was about what was going to come on a completely different level.

"Is that a yes?" he murmured against his lips.

I threaded my fingers through his hair. "That's an absolute definite yes."

His grin lit up his entire face, and he kissed me again before he suddenly pulled back. "Oh, anyone could see us."

I shrugged. "And? I was only holding back because I didn't want to jeopardise the trade alliance. But with negotiations over, I don't care if anyone else knows. Unless you want to keep it quiet?"

His grin said it all. "Nope."

He kissed me thoroughly, not letting go of me until it was utterly dark and we made exciting promises and plans for the next time we saw each other. It made the prospect of returning to Purple Oak much less intimidating.

Jasmine

There was a sense of relief when Purple Oak Oasis came into view. I'd missed it, more than I expected, and not just because of the call of my duties. The guards at the gate were familiar, the smell was familiar, the people I loved were here. This was home, being away from it had underlined that.

And there was a large part of me that was relieved that I wasn't going to have to choose between my life here and the prospect of a new relationship. Ryburn was going to be here most of the time once everything had been set up properly, and I wasn't going to have to choose.

I just had to hope he loved it here as much as I did.

I paused in front of the town hall and let my bag fall from my shoulders. "Never again."

Taz chuckled as she put her stuff down. "Not even to see your dryad?"

"He's not my dryad," I denied.

She raised an eyebrow.

"Yet," I conceded.

"Mmhmm." She wagged her eyebrows. "I'm happy for you. You deserve some fun or someone to love, whichever it is. You work too hard. This will be good for you."

I looked up at the town hall. "I wish you hadn't said that because I was kind of thinking of catching up on paperwork."

"Absolutely not, Jas. That's insane. You should go to the tavern, have a drink, and relax. This alliance is a big deal, and you did it."

"We did it," I emphasised. "It wouldn't have been possible without you coming along and agreeing to build that mill. That's going to be years of hard work."

She shrugged. "I was in need of a new challenge. It sounds fun."

"And you call me a workaholic."

"Takes one to know one," she said with a grin, waving for someone to take our bags and take them inside. "Besides, Grower's Cove was beautiful."

"Are we going to lose you to them?" I half-teased, but I was also a little worried about that.

Taz shrugged. "Never say never. But I doubt it. My family is here, and the mill. I want a new challenge, not a new life. But that's enough about work. You and I are going for a drink to celebrate."

I thought about protesting but it was hard to say to Taz Miller. And she was right, I did deserve a night off. There was nothing that couldn't wait until morning and I would do a better job with a clear head anyway. Which meant not drinking too much.

The walk to the tavern was only short and I could hear the excited chatter from outside. The smell of hops and beer greeted us, strangely comforting despite the fact I didn't spend that much time here. People were already chattering at us and offering to pay for our drinks even if they didn't need to, and it was only a couple of minutes

before two women instantly swept Taz away. She shot me an apologetic look as she was pulled to the bar, but I just shrugged and waved away her concern.

I didn't mind and went over to the table in the corner that was kept reserved for us. Brew and Katie were sitting at it, being the most conspicuous couple in the world. It was a small miracle that people hadn't caught on yet.

They smiled when they saw me and shuffled to make space.

"Welcome home," Brew said, giving me a one-armed hug. "How was the trip?"

"It was..." My thoughts conjured the tent, the sights of Grower's Cove, the meetings. So much had happened in the past week and a bit, I didn't know how to sum it up. "Eventful."

He grinned. "I'm going to guess from your demeanour that the trade alliance went through?"

"It did. Taz will be building them a mill, they'll be helping us cultivate a tea garden. We're going to grow our own tea right here in the heart of Purple Oak, Brew. Can you believe that?"

"It sounds surreal, and I'm so excited for it." He gave me a proud smile, looking more like our late father than ever. "Well done, Jasmine. The village is lucky to have you."

Katie nodded in agreement. "I've seen the strain there is on the infirmary and what happens when the workers can't get healed in a timely manner. This is huge."

Their praise was making my heart swell and the enormity of this whole thing sank in properly. We established a treaty with Grower's Cove that was going to directly benefit us in many ways. And even though I'd been distracted, I still made it happen.

"So, did you drink the tea?" Brew asked with a grin.

"That's none of your business." I leaned on my arm. "But I might have to swing by the medical bay for some contraceptive tea going forward," I mumbled. There was no point in not telling him. He'd know the minute I turned up to the infirmary anyway.

The two broke into laughter.

"It's a good thing there's no shortage of that," Katie said, looking adoringly at my brother.

"That's too much information," I said, although I wasn't naive. I knew what they got up to when they were alone.

Someone called Katie over and she gave us an apology as she got up to deal with someone who was likely one of her workers. As much as Taz told us to relax, the work never really ended.

The owner of the tavern brought a tankard of beer over and I took a sip, sighing at the lovely bitter taste.

"So, how were things around here?" I asked.

Brew chuckled. "You mean, did things fall apart while you were gone? The simple answer is no."

"And the complicated answer?"

"There were some hiccups here and there, but nothing that wouldn't have happened if you were here."

That was as much a relief as confronting. I worked hard to make sure everything ran smoothly, it was a little disheartening to know that perhaps I wasn't as indispensable as I wanted to be.

A gust of cold air came in and I turned to see who had entered the tavern, smiling when I spotted Cami. She looked surprised to see me and came over, sliding onto the bench.

"Didn't realise you were back already," Cami said, taking my mug so she could take a big sip of my beer. "Oh, I needed that."

"Get your own," I chided, managing to sound like I was five.

She chuckled. "Why would I do that when I can just annoy you instead?"

It was remarkable how it only took Cami ten seconds to wind me up. It was a skill only little sisters had, that was for sure.

I took a deep breath, centering myself before I said more. "How did you like working with the guards?"

Cami shrugged. "It's fine. Not particularly exciting, but yeah. Fine."

"It's not meant to be exciting, it's an essential job we need to do, and we can't afford any mess-ups." I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose, already worrying about what mess I would find when I visited the barracks. This was why I couldn't leave Purple Oak for long stretches at a time.

Brew held out his hands. "No need to get wound up. I'm sure Cami did everything all right."

Our sister nodded. "I'm not our mother's right hand, but even I know how important security is to our town. I'm not going to mess up something so important."

"Sorry. I'm just a little stressed. Don't get me wrong, I'm really pleased that the trade negotiations went well, but now we'll have a lot more to organise. I don't really know how I'm going to do it all."

"By delegating," Brew said sensibly. "For instance, why not let Cami handle the guard reports from now on. That's something off your plate."

I hesitated, wishing I had a reason to say no, but it was a good suggestion. And if I didn't let go of a few things, I was going to drop it all.

"If you wouldn't mind?" I asked Cami.

"No, I can do it. You'll see." She took another sip from my beer. "Now, I heard you had to take the special tea with you on your trip. Did you use it?"

I scoffed and hit Brew's arm. "Why did you tell her?"

"I didn't! She noticed the tin was missing," he denied. "And it's not like anyone else besides you would've taken it. Mum doesn't need that tea anymore."

"Why were you even looking at it?" I asked Cami. "You've always said you're only interested in women. Unless that's changed?"

"Definitely not. Men are not my thing. No offence, Brew."

"None taken, I don't think," he mumbled.

"So why were you looking for the tea?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I'm just observant. That's the kind of keen observations I'm going to be bringing to my duties with the guards."

"Earl could have taken it for someone," I muttered, even though we all knew it wasn't Earl. He was more interested in tea plants than people.

Cami's eyes twinkled as she leaned forward. "Well, tell us all about it. Not the yucky details, but who is he? I assume it's a he if you needed the tea."

"Fine, but only because you're going to find out soon enough." Like when Ryburn returned to Purple Oak and we were able to start seeing one another properly.

The bartender came over with a beer for Cami just in time for Katie to return and for all three of them to listen to me talk about Ryburn, keeping the so called yucky details well and truly to myself. There were some things that could stay private, even from inquisitive siblings.

I couldn't help but smile. Yes, this was home, and I wouldn't change it for anything.

Jasmine

I'd been awake for several hours longer than I'd needed to be, making sure that everything was right for today. If anyone asked me, I'd tell them it was because I wanted to ensure that everything was perfect for the first group of dryads to arrive from Grower's Cove, but that would partly be a lie. I wanted that to go smoothly, but what I really wanted was to see Ryburn again.

A chill wind swept through the air, and I felt bad for them having to travel, and for the Purple Oak workers who had headed in the opposite direction with Taz in order to build the promised mill. Hopefully, they'd get a warm welcome on the other side and be well looked after. I was certainly going to try and make sure that was the case for the dryads coming here.

I wrapped my coat tighter around me, shivering as I waited by the Purple Oak gates. According to the messenger, the Grower's Cove workers were supposed to arrive any time, and I was impatient for that time to arrive.

Movement caught my eye, and excitement bubbled up in me when I saw the caravan. I resisted the urge to run out towards them because there were witnesses, and I was here as a representative of the Four Families. I wasn't exactly ready for them to know that I was fallible enough to fall for someone I was supposed to be working with, even if I knew I hadn't done anything wrong.

It was torture watching them approach and not being able to hurry them along, especially when I was waiting for one of them in particular. I had no idea if Ryburn had told the other dryads he was travelling with about us, but that was a conversation

for later.

My heart skipped a beat when the caravan finally reached us, and the guards waved it through the gates. Ryburn's eyes met mine and he headed straight over until he was standing in front of me, just as handsome as I remembered. Or maybe more so.

"I made it," he said with a relieved sigh.

"You did," I replied, no longer able to resist. I leapt into his arms, and he kissed me as if we hadn't seen each other in years when it had only been a few weeks.

Faint applause sounded in the background, and someone even whistled on their fingers. I ignored it all, too swept up in how right it felt to be in Ryburn's arms and feel his lips against mine. So much for keeping our relationship quiet for now.

But I didn't care. This had been worth the wait.

He pulled back but didn't let go of me. "I've not stopped thinking about you."

"Me either. I counted down the days and now you're finally here."

"Now I'm finally here," he repeated, leaning down for another kiss. "This is everything I've been looking forward to."

Someone cleared their throat, and it wasn't a surprise to find Ford a few steps away from us with a bit of a furrow on his forehead. "Are we going to stand here all day? We need to unpack."

His bluntness jolted me back to the duties I was supposed to be doing, and I let go of Ryburn. "Hi, Ford."

"Jasmine," he said.

"I didn't realise you were coming."

He shrugged. "Your apple trees need help." He walked past and through the gates.

"He's consistent," I murmured.

"You get used to it," Ryburn promised.

"Oh, I know. Earl is similar with his tea plants. You'll learn about that soon enough."

Ryburn chuckled. "That's fine by me. If he's particular about them, then it'll mean they get everything they need."

I beamed, glad he already had such a good impression of my younger brother. As much as I wanted to stay and talk to him for longer, I had work to do, and I peeled away from him to hand out instructions. The food needed to go to the storage rooms, and we'd prepared a dorm for the workers and a welcome dinner so they would feel right at home. I was sure things would change as they all spent more time here, but it was a good start, and would hopefully mean things went smoothly.

There was a lot to do, but I felt giddy about the prospect because all of this was going to make Purple Oak a better place.

Once everyone was sorted out, it was just me and Ryburn, just like I'd planned it. Cami and Mum had been surprised when I'd asked if I could take the afternoon off, though less so when I told them why, and they were covering for me anywhere that I absolutely needed to be today. I took his hand in mine, enjoying the way it felt to have it in my own.

"There's something I want to show you," I told him.

He gave me a curious look. "Oh?"

"It's a surprise. I hope you'll like it." I pulled him with me through the town, not at all caring that people saw us walking hand in hand. News and gossip travelled fast in a place like this, and by tomorrow, most people would've heard about our kiss at the gates anyway.

We made it to the heart of the village, and I heard Ryburn gasp behind me when the purple oak came into view. Even from a slight distance, it was an impressive tree. It had been here for longer than the village and had been a sign of good luck and prosperity for my ancestors.

I grabbed the key from inside my pocket and opened the gate, gaining entry into another place that was off limits for most people. Even I had to ask for the key, but the look of sheer awe on Ryburn's face was worth it.

"This is beautiful. I can't believe I didn't see this last time," he whispered, approaching with reverence. "Can I touch it?"

I nodded. "Go ahead. I know it's not your home tree and you can't visit it without me, but I hope this will make you feel a little bit less hollow when you're away from home."

He put his hand against the tree and smiled at me. "You're amazing. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I want you to like being in Purple Oak."

"I do." He let go of the tree so he could touch my cheek. "And I like you. A lot. I'm glad we're going to be spending a lot of time together."

I smiled and tangled my arms around him. "Same."

I had no idea exactly what the future held, but I was sure there were good things ahead, for Purple Oak, for Grower's Cove, and for us.

* * *

Thank you for reading The Tea Witch's Treaty , we hope you enjoyed Jasmine and Ryburn's story.