



The Tea Witch's Promise (Purple Oak Oasis #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Falling for her brothers best friend was never part of Katies plan.

Tea witch Brew has always had a thing for his best friends sister, but the alliance between their families has always held him back from acting on it. But now things are changing, and its becoming impossible for him to ignore her.

Having known Brew for years, Katie has never considered him to be a serious contender for romance, but when hints of his true feelings shine through, she starts seeing him in a new light. Unable to resist her new feelings towards him, she realises shes ready to go up against everything to be with him.

Except that Katies older brother, and the rest of their families, might be against the match. Is that enough to put a stop to the budding relationship, or can they make it work despite the odds?

The Tea Witches Promise is a cozy fantasy romance with a brothers best friend m/f romance, an adorable and energetic dog, unusual magic, and a happy ever after.

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Katie

One thing that never changed no matter the season was how beautiful the farmlands were. I breathed in the fresh air, enjoying the crisp smell of winter. There was something wonderful about the way the frozen grass scrunched under my boots or how I could pretend I was smoking a pipe by blowing out air. Not that I'd ever tried it, but it had been one of the games we played as children in an attempt to imitate the old men who sat and played dominoes outside the taverns in summer.

A flash of black and white raced past me and up ahead and a smile came to my face at the sight of my dog, just as it always did. He was bursting with energy and eager to patrol the farm's lands with me so that we could fix any problems that arose with the workers before they became too big to handle.

He found an interesting hole to stick his snout in and tried to dig in the frozen ground, to no avail. His paws moved frantically and his tail was on alert, almost as if he expected the soil to start moving just because he wanted to.

"Banjo! Leave it!" I shouted, chuckling when he came racing back to me. He danced around my ankles and darted away again, snapping at the air as if he were catching an imaginary ball.

"I would throw one if I had one," I said. I could pretend to throw one, but that trick hadn't worked on him since he was a puppy.

He barked at nothing and ran ahead. Maybe he was telling me that I needed to bring a ball with me tomorrow. He could be quite a demanding creature when he wanted to

be.

His tail bounced up and down as he made his way along the familiar path. He knew exactly where he was going, and his confidence showed. No doubt he was used to our daily patrol from our farmhouse down to the Brewster Hall where the tea witches lived, and back.

Without missing a beat, he jumped over the stone wall that used to separate our lands and I followed instead of using the gate. An old habit that I hadn't got rid of. It wasn't exactly appropriate for a proper lady but I never claimed to be one, even if I was from one of the most important families in Purple Oak. Out here, nobody cared anyway.

The edge of the ward settlement came into sight and Banjo ran as fast as his legs could carry him towards a group of dogs loitering around the entrance. Their happy barking filled the morning air and while I was sure some people were cursing the ruckus, there was nothing I loved more.

I reached the dogs and went around them all, giving each of them a good morning scratch. They all responded well, as they should. Even if I had a familiar already, they'd be able to sense that I was a dog ward, and had the ability to form that connection with them.

Banjo pressed himself against my legs, like he wanted to make it clear to the others that he was my familiar, and I was his ward. Affection for him surged through me.

I crouched down to give him a kiss on the top of his head. "You're a good boy," I told him.

His tail thumbed enthusiastically against the ground.

Laughter came from up ahead and I looked up in time to see my brother appear from

the opposite direction. I got to my feet and flashed him a smile. It wasn't chance that we finished our rounds at the same time, it was something that had been measured and calculated numerous times over the years to ensure it was a fair amount of work.

"There's been an extension to the fields over by the tea plantation," Oliver called, gesturing towards the east. "I had to make a detour of seventy steps so our new meeting spot should be right about here." He came to a stop not far from me, but a little too far for us to have a proper conversation.

Was it petty to make me walk thirty-five more steps? Most definitely, but fair was fair. I crossed the last bit of distance and committed the new middle to mind.

He came to a halt. "Anything of note on your rounds?"

"There's a fence near the chicken coop that needs fixing, and Naida Miller said that there was a hard frost coming, so we should be wary of that tomorrow," I responded, glad I'd run into the nymph and that she'd thought to tell me. "Apart from that, it's the same as every day. You?"

"All good on my side too. Not sure what the point of patrolling is anymore. It's not like there are people trying to poach our animals or steal our things."

I shrugged. "I don't mind the walk. It's a good way to start the day and Banjo needs the exercise."

"I suppose." He stretched his shoulders and pulled the sleeves of his coat back, revealing the multitude of red scratches on his forearms.

I nodded towards them. "Those look new."

He sighed. "I did a training session with Howie yesterday."

"Why don't you wear a glove when you handle your owl?"

"Because I shouldn't have to. He needs to learn not to hurt me," Oliver said stubbornly. He held out his hands to fuss Banjo. "Aww, if only Howie could be as sweet as you, Mister Strings. Yes, I wish my familiar was this cuddly as you. Yes, I wish."

As cute as it was that my brother and my dog got on, it wasn't enough to distract me from the scratches on his arms. "Did you get it checked out?"

"I'm not going to bother the infirmary for some scratches. They're busy enough," he responded.

"And you'll be even more of a bother if you get an infection." I pushed him in the direction of the infirmary. "Come on, I'll go with you."

"You remember that I'm the older brother, right?"

"Yes, and if I appeared on our rounds with scratches all over me, you'd have insisted on me going to the infirmary too," I pointed out.

Oliver groaned. "Fine, fine. I suppose they are a little itchy. Howie's talons are so sharp."

I patted the top of his head, something that wasn't as easy to do as when we were younger. "There, there."

He smiled. "I'm the one who should be doing that to you."

"I'm not hurt."

“But I’m your older brother. It’s my job to look after you, not the other way around.”

I nudged his side with my elbow. “Don’t be patronising. I’m the one who has been looking after you all this time.”

He rolled his eyes, but I could see that he didn't fully mean it. Things became different for us the moment our parents died, and we'd been close ever since, even if Oliver tried to deny it sometimes.

The two of us set off in the direction of the infirmary with Banjo bouncing along beside us, no doubt thinking of all the scratches he was going to get once we were there.

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Katie

The chatter of voices rose from within the infirmary, along with the smell of cleansing herbs and whatever else they used to clean the medical building. Amongst it all was the scent of freshly steeped tea, one that I knew would hold the key to making sure Oliver's scratches healed right.

Banjo stuck close to me without needing a verbal command as we walked into the waiting area, unlike Oliver who was mindlessly touching everything he passed.

Someone cleared their throat behind us. "I just disinfected everything."

I turned around although I knew exactly who that voice belonged to. Slightly coarse, loud, and with a permanent hint of amusement, I'd recognise Brew's annoyingly charming voice anywhere.

As expected, he was standing in the doorway, filling it with his broad shoulders. His auburn curls weren't long, but they were unruly, which made it hard to take him seriously. "Hello, Fields."

Banjo darted towards Brew and jumped up, his paws urgently trying to get to the man he knew would fuss him. Brew laughed and conjured a small treat from his pocket. Without missing a beat, Banjo sat down obediently and fixed his big begging eyes on the tea witch. He whined and his tail wagged so fast that it was a blur.

I rolled my eyes. No wonder Banjo always loved seeing him.

"Good boy. Give me five." Brew high-fived my familiar and surrendered the treat.
"You're my favourite dog, did you know that?"

"I bet you say that to all the familiars," I responded.

He looked up and grinned. "Don't you know it, Katheryn Fields."

"Your charm is going to get you into trouble one day, Rooibos Brewster," I responded, throwing his own full name back at him.

"So long as it can get me out of it again," he said. "So, what brings you here? Girl trouble? Boy trouble? Or are you just here to see my handsome face?"

"Owl trouble," I said, pointing at my brother.

"It's nothing, just a couple of scratches. Katie is making a mountain out of a molehill," Oliver said.

I tried not to sigh. He could be such a baby when it was just the two of us, but in front of his best friend, he had to put on a tough act.

Brew clicked his tongue, his face suddenly getting a lot more serious. "Show me."

With a reluctant sigh, Oliver pushed his sleeves up. "Just throw some disinfectant on me and I'll stop taking up your time."

"It's fine, it's quiet at the moment." Brew examined the cuts. "I think a little bit of magic should fix you right up."

"Don't waste your magic on me," Oliver protested.

Laughing, Brew grabbed Oliver's shoulders and gave him a good shake. "Waste it on you? Never. You're my top priority."

With a sigh, Oliver shrugged him away. "What do you want?"

No wonder people always mistook us all as siblings. He was exactly the same with Brew as he was with me.

Brew grinned. "I met a cute new girl who said she's never seen a real owl. I promised her she could meet Howie."

I sighed. Of course, it had to do with a cute girl.

Oliver sighed too. "You and cute girls. You can't look at a cute girl without chatting her up."

"That's right. Speaking of cute girls..." Brew flashed me a smile. "What's up, Kitty-Kat?"

Oliver didn't waste a moment to jab Brew's shoulder. "Not my sister, Brew."

"Don't worry, your sister is not interested," I remarked, throwing Brew an unimpressed look. Maybe it would've been charming if I hadn't known him my whole life or just heard how he was using Oliver's familiar to pick up other girls. Unfortunately, I couldn't unknow that.

Brew shrugged, never all that discouraged by the rejection. "Shall I take care of the scratches?"

I followed the two of them into an adjoining treatment room.

A low pallet with a thin mattress laid against the wall, and Brew gestured over to it while he went to wash his hands. I wasn't sure what the nymphs had done to ensure the infirmary had running water, but I had to admit that it was useful.

Brew scrubbed his hands and up his arms, paying more attention to that than I'd ever seen him do to anything outside the infirmary. He could be laidback and full of jokes outside work, but when he was here, there was a hint of the serious Rooibos who laid beneath the surface of Brew.

He shook off his hands and dried them before carefully pouring himself a measure of tea. It looked weaker than what he drank at home, probably because the infirmary was paying for it, not the Brewsters.

"I would offer you some but you know I can't," Brew said, sounding apologetic.

"Nah, don't worry. I never developed a taste for it anyway," Oliver replied with a shrug.

Once Brew's cup was empty, he got to work. He placed a hand on each of Oliver's scratched arms and hummed a soft soothing tune, a classic tea witch healing song. I'd heard it so many times over the years and I found myself humming along without meaning to. Not that it would do anything if I did. Not being a tea witch, I lacked the required magic to get any of the healing powers from it.

A faint green glow enveloped Brew's hands as he sang, but there was no visible change to the wounds on Oliver's arms. It was nothing ground-breaking but it would reduce the risk of infection and make it all heal quicker.

"There, that should take care of that." Brew stood up and went to wash his hands. "I'm working with the dregs here." He gestured to the pot.

"Or maybe you're just not as good at healing magic as you like to think," I suggested.

He gave me an amused look. "Oh, Katie, Katie. I have the most talented hands in my family. If you gave me a chance, I could prove it to you."

"I believe I'm going to throw up," I said, fake-gagging.

His laugh sounded through the room "Throwing up? Sounds like someone is desperate for my medical attention."

"You know what, I'm suddenly cured."

Oliver gagged too, but it sounded real. "That was awful. Brew, leave my sister alone."

With a little shrug, Brew took a step back. "I know, I know. Anyway, that's you all sorted. Keep the scratches clean and if there's any sign of infection, pus, or festering, come see me right away."

"Wow, you sound like an actual health professional now," I remarked.

"I am an actual health professional," Brew said, leaning over with a goofy grin to kiss the top of Oliver's head. "Take care of yourself."

I burst into laughter, mostly from my brother's exhausted but amused expression. After two decades of friendship, we were both used to Brew's over-the-top personality.

Banjo barked, as always happy to contribute to the conversation. I fussed him between the ears and took his reaction as my cue to leave. If we stayed any longer, we'd only be subjected to more of Brew's ridiculousness and as amusing as that could

be, I had work to do, and I couldn't let myself be distracted by my brother, or his best friend, any longer.

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Brew

I rubbed sleep from my eyes as I made my way down to eat, preparing myself mentally for the day ahead. I had no idea what being in the infirmary would bring today, but it was bound to be busy. And I doubted Oliver and Katie would need my help again.

Cami's animated voice sounded loudly through the building, even before I entered the dining room. Which wasn't a surprise. Of all my siblings, she was the loudest and most like me. As expected, she was talking Earl's ear off with the latest gossip, something he was only capable of enduring as her twin. The rest of us didn't have the patience.

Mum was pouring tea from the traditional teapot with a small smile on her face. She had no idea I ever caught her doing it, but I was reasonably sure that it was because of how she felt being surrounded by her children, especially since Dad died in the same shipwreck as Oliver and Katie's parents.

"Morning, all," I said brightly.

I leaned in to kiss Mum on the cheek before turning my attention to the twins. I ruffled each of their heads, a special greeting I had just for them.

Cami swatted my hand away. "Don't do that."

"Do you know how long it took me to get it right?" Earl grumbled, already patting his short hair back down over his ears.

"It's part of my privilege as an older brother," I responded.

Mum sighed without looking up. "Rooibos, leave your siblings alone."

"Yes, Mum," I said, going to sit down in my normal seat.

Without missing a beat, Cami jumped in with an impish grin. "Yes, Rooibos , leave us alone."

"Shut up, Chamomile ," I returned, earning a glare full of daggers. I didn't feel too bad, if she didn't want to be full-named, she shouldn't have started it.

Mum set the teapot down with a little thud. "Rooibos and Chamomile are both beautiful names and we picked them with love. Do either of you have a problem with that?" She gave us both a stern look that we knew better than to argue with. It didn't matter that either of us were grown adults with jobs of our own, our mother was capable of putting us in our places effectively.

"No, Ma'am," we replied in unison.

"Good." She poured me a cup of tea. "Has anyone seen Jasmine? Shouldn't she be done with her night shift?"

I shook my head. I didn't envy my sister for the night shift, I hated it when I was on them at the infirmary. Luckily for me, it was Cousin Reese's turn this week.

The sound of a door closing came from the hallway, which I assumed was the errant daughter returning.

"I'm here!" Jasmine came into the room, looking exhausted. "Please tell me there's tea?"

I nodded and pushed her cup towards her spot at the table. "Hard night?"

She sighed. "Nothing to worry about, there was just a situation at the barracks."

"Trouble?" I asked, worry building up inside me. She was only a year younger than I was, but it didn't stop me being concerned about her, especially when she was dealing with the watch.

"Nothing I can't handle," she said, sitting down in her designated seat. Knowing my younger sister, she was telling the truth. There was nobody more capable in our family than Jasmine.

"Now that everyone's here, we can have breakfast. We give thanks to the god of the kitchen for the bountiful meal before us," Mum said. "And we ask his blessing for the tea that replenishes us."

I nodded my head along with the prayer and picked up my teacup. The scent of freshly brewed tea filled my nose and I drank it down despite it being too hot. The magic within me sprang into life, swirling around and spreading warmth through my body. It was much stronger than anything I drank while at the infirmary, and would start the day off nicely for me.

Jasmine let out a relieved sigh, already looking less tired than when she'd arrived.

With the tea prayer out of the way, I focused on breakfast and grabbed myself a thick slice of bread. I slathered it with butter and mixed berry jam. It was a luxurious meal, but I had a long day ahead of me. And despite what some people thought, I took my job at the infirmary seriously.

Mum gave me a side-eye look but didn't say anything. Instead, she turned to Jasmine. "What happened at the barracks?"

"Two of the newcomers' familiars got into a fight. A bat and an owl are having some trouble sharing the same space, apparently," she reported. "I mediated and we sorted it, so it shouldn't happen again."

"Looks like Howie isn't the only owl causing trouble for his ward," I remarked.

"Is Oliver still struggling with his familiar?" Mum asked.

I nodded. "I tended to his wounds a few times this week. I'm not sure what's going on with this owl. Maybe there's something in the water."

Earl hummed. "Why would there be anything in the water? The water is the same as always, ask the Millers. They're the ones watching the stream."

"It was a joke," I said to my younger brother.

He looked down at his plate. "Oh."

Mum rubbed his arm affectionately. "Don't mind it. Speaking of wards, there's talk of hosting a ward ceremony."

"What's that?" Cami asked between bites.

"It's something for younger wards who don't have their ward tattoos yet. A chance to integrate them into the community," she said.

"What's that got to do with us?" Earl interjected, as always too blunt and earnest for his own good. "We're not wards, we're tea witches."

Jasmine reached down to pick up the napkin she dropped. "It's a community event, we all need to be on board to host something like it. They might need us to contribute

some funds. Since we live and work together with wards, it's not a bad thing to invest in the new generation."

I chuckled. "You talk like you're an eighty-year-old grandma, Jas."

"I'm just looking at things from the perspective of a leader in the community," she countered.

Mum nodded. "Your sister is right. Purple Oak Oasis only works because of the balance and cooperation between the four families. That's always been the cornerstone for our stability and the reason we get to be community leaders. We shouldn't do anything that could rock the boat."

"I know, I know. I never said I was against it. If the wards want to do a ceremony, we'll help. If you want, I'll talk to Oliver next time I see him in the infirmary. With how things are going with his owl, that might be later today," I offered.

"I believe Katie will be organising it," Mum said.

I felt a smile rise up to my face but I forced myself to keep a neutral expression. "Sure, then I'll talk to Katie instead. It's all the same to me which Fields I organise with."

That was a total lie. As much as I loved and appreciated Oliver, he was just a friend to me whereas I'd always seen Katie in a different light. Not that I would let anyone know because just like Mum said, the delicate balance between the four families should not be disturbed. And that meant that there was a very good reason for nothing ever happening between me and Katie.

Even if I wanted it to.

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Katie

Banjo was raring to go the moment I opened the front door. He loved being outside no matter the weather. Though luckily for me, the frosts Naida had predicted had already passed. I was sure they'd be back, the winter season was far from over, but I was glad to have a break from them for now.

I made my way down the path, slightly surprised to find Brew waiting for me at the start of my patrol route, even if I'd known to expect him.

He was leaning against a fence while three women stood a little closer than necessary, especially when one of them was old enough to be his mother, and they were definitely flirting with him while he was being his normal charming self. I couldn't blame them. Even if I'd never go there with Rooibos Brewster, there was no denying that he was one of the most eligible bachelors in Purple Oak. It was hard to think of anyone who would beat him. Though I suppose Oliver would be up there, as would Grey Steeper. And maybe Brew's younger brother, but Earl was barely twenty-two and had all of his adolescent awkwardness still.

I looked Brew up and down. I supposed it wasn't entirely unwarranted. He was tall, handsome, and from a wealthy family. He was a catch to anyone who hadn't known him for two decades. All I could see was the boy who used to pee in the stream or cry when the chickens came too close. Not exactly swoonworthy material.

He noticed me but didn't come over right away. Banjo didn't care and raced towards him, pushing his way in between the women so he could say hello to everyone, though he was mostly after the attention of the tea witch who was supposed to be

meeting me.

The women fawned over my dog who lapped up the attention almost as much as Brew had, his tail wagging so fast I worried he was going to damage it. Brew finished whatever story he was telling that was making the women giggle and they left, practically floating away on pink clouds.

I rolled my eyes. It was classic Brew. He never took anything seriously.

He skipped the last bit and gave me a goofy grin. "Hello, Katie."

"Hi, Brew."

"Ah, how glad I am to hear you say that." He rubbed his ear. "Everyone else is just Rooibos, Rooibos, Rooibos ."

I couldn't help but smile. "If it annoys you that much, maybe I should start calling you Rooibos too."

"Please don't. It's a stupid name." He pointed a finger at my face. "Don't tell my mum I said that."

"Never," I promised, knowing full well that Mrs Brewster was just as fierce as she was kind. And she was certainly fierce when it came to her children's names. Jasmine and Earl had gotten lucky, Brew and Cami not so much.

Brew gave me a relieved smile and fell into step beside me as I started my patrol around the farm that had been in my family for generations. He knew them as well as I did, considering he grew up a stone's throw away from here.

There hadn't been as many people here then. Just a couple of streets with the basics,

but people had started straggling in about fifteen years ago, and there'd been a surge of new inhabitants in the last couple of years. I wasn't entirely sure why, but so long as Purple Oak thrived, it wasn't really an issue. Even if it meant more patrol.

"Did you hear the Millers had their baby?" I asked.

"I didn't," he said. "What have they called them?"

"Firtan. Healthy baby boy. Naida told me when she came to pick up the wheat last night."

"I'll make sure Mum knows, she'll want to send a gift. And probably send Reese over to check everyone's healthy."

"I thought it was Zoe who wanted to specialise in midwifery?" I asked, hoping I'd gotten his cousins straight. I didn't know them as well as I knew the main Brewster clan, they'd only moved here about five years ago with their parents.

"She is, but she's still away."

"Ah." Now he mentioned it, I dimly remembered a meeting where Zoe had volunteered to negotiate a treaty with the Spire.

"So I'm told you're hosting a ward ceremony?" Brew asked, pausing to wave at someone passing.

"You're told correctly," I said.

He folded his hands behind his head which made him look even more carefree, especially considering he wasn't wearing a proper coat. Instead, he was out and about in a thin cardigan with short sleeves that did nothing to hide his muscled arms.

“Why are you wearing so little clothing?” I asked.

He flashed me a grin. “Are you checking me out? Do you like it?”

“No, I’m asking if you’re an idiot.”

"That's not nice," he teased.

"Neither is going out in the middle of winter without a coat. Aren't you cold?"

“I’m not. Don’t you know I run hot?”

I rolled my eyes at his poor flirting attempt. “You don’t. I remember winters at the Brewster Hall. You and Jasmine were always complaining that you were freezing.”

“I forgot you knew that.” Brew kicked a little rock out of the way. “I gave my coat to a young boy earlier today. He came into the infirmary with hypothermia because he’d been sleeping out in the cold without any real shelter. I wanted to do more for him but I didn’t really know how. So I gave him my coat.”

“Oh.” A wave of affection travelled through me. He was more than just a terrible flirt, and I knew that. “That was very nice of you.” And now I felt bad for teasing him about it.

He hummed, his usual bravado gone. “I know Purple Oak is thriving but there are still people here that are barely surviving. We need to work a lot harder to make this a safe place for everyone.”

A smile came to my lips. It was rare to catch Brew in a serious mood because he was always kidding around. He did such a good job at being a joker, it was easy to forget he had a heart of gold.

“Shall I tell you about the ward ceremony and how it'll make our oasis a better place?” I said, hoping the change in topic would cheer him up.

He watched Banjo playing up ahead with a thoughtful expression on his face. “Yes, please.”

"There are a lot of wards here that don't have proper tattoos." I shrugged my jacket partially off so I could show him the ward tattoo of Banjo, not that he hadn't seen it before. It was a miniature version of the border collie and it reacted to my touch, sitting up and cocking his head to the side in exactly the same way as the real one.

Brew's smile softened his features. "I've always loved seeing your tattoos."

Heat rushed to my cheeks. "W-What?"

"I just love the way they move. Back when we were younger and I didn't fully understand how we were so different, I used to pester Oliver to give me one too," he said, chuckling. "Especially when our cat died. I thought it was unfair that you and Oliver got to keep your pets with you while I had to say goodbye. So yeah, I love ward tattoos."

Oh, that meant he wasn't talking specifically about mine. That made more sense.

I pulled my jacket back on. "Well, I'm lucky that I have a really detailed tattoo that's bound to Banjo. When he passes on, I'll always have a part of him on me. Other wards aren't so lucky and have to make do with pawprints or just simple tally marks. And there are a lot of youngsters who don't even have their first tattoo."

"And that's a problem?" Brew asked. He didn't sound judgmental, just curious. Which was fair. Everything I knew about tea witches and how his magic worked came from what Brew and his siblings had told me, I imagined it was the same for him with

wards and how our magic worked.

"It creates tension between wards. There's a sense of superiority in the settlement at the moment which is affecting everyone's ability to work together. There simply aren't enough tattoo artists in the hub to keep up with the demand." I spotted a fence panel that looked worse for wear and gave it a good jiggle. It was loose and looked like it could give in entirely with one well-placed kick from the goats within. "Oh, this is going to need repairing."

Brew gave it a shake of his own. "Yeah, unless we want to be responsible for the first great goat disaster."

"The first great goat disaster?"

"Yes! Goats everywhere! Stealing food, nibbling on people's clothes, eating people's hair," he joked. "Goats can be a menace."

The image made me laugh and I gave Brew a good-natured pat. "Let's not inflict that on the good people of Purple Oak."

His grin made his eyes crinkle. "Boring."

"Isn't it our job to be boring and protect the people who live here?" I asked as I pulled out a handful of nails.

"Yes," he responded quietly, almost as if he didn't want me to hear him admit it.

"Hold these, please?"

He opened his palm and let me drop the nails onto it. I grabbed the hammer from my bag and turned my attention to the fence post. It didn't take long for the two of us to

get the slats firmly back in place. I gave the whole post a jiggle just to check that it wasn't going to move and stepped back to admire my handiwork.

"That's not going anywhere," I said, proud of the result.

He gave it a pat. "Nice work."

"You're a good assistant."

"Always happy to help." He gave me a soft smile. "I like it when you rely on me."

There was something strangely tender in the way he was looking at me and it was making my chest tight. It wasn't an unfamiliar feeling, I knew what it felt like to be flustered because of a cute guy, it just hadn't happened with Brew before.

I quickly looked away. I refused to become one of those giggly women falling for the Rooibos charm.

We set back in motion and I was grateful for Banjo's presence. He barked at some of the curious goats, almost slipped on a patch of frost, and entertained us with some demanding tail wagging.

Brew conjured a piece of dried meat from his pocket which he dangled in front of Banjo. I didn't know why he had so much snacking meat on him, especially because I'd never seen him eat it. My dog didn't ask any questions though and just pushed his snout into Brew's hand for a treat.

There was something about the way he gave it to Banjo that made my heart flutter. I didn't see him interact with very many familiars, but there was no doubt he was good with them. Or maybe he was just good with Banjo because he'd known the dog since he was a puppy and I'd proudly carried him over to Brewster Hall to show him off as

my new familiar.

Brew ruffled the top of Banjo's head before my dog raced off ahead.

"So, the ward ceremony?" Brew prompted.

"Right." I tore my gaze away from him and focused on the path. "I was chatting with my friend Carly, she and her dad are tattoo artists. They said they would like to do more ward tattoos but it's very time-consuming and they can't keep up with the influx of wards coming to the hub. There are talks of training more apprentices but for that, they would need support from the families."

Brew hummed. "Funds or space?"

"Both. They'll need a building to teach, and funds to afford time and loss of clients. In the short term, they'll be able to do fewer tattoos but once the apprentices are adequate, they'll be able to do their part."

"So you want to start a school?"

I nodded. "I suppose so, yes. You train people at the infirmary, don't you? So I thought you would be the right person to talk to."

"We do. Reese is the teacher in the family, but I helped work out the practicalities." He skipped ahead so he could bow down to me. "I would be honoured to help, my lady."

Banjo barked at him and I snorted. He was so goofy and despite his attempt at charming me, it did nothing for me which was a relief.

Brew was just Brew.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 3:10 am

Katie

Brewster Hall came into sight, stately as always with its pale bricks and glass windows. I hadn't always appreciated how beautiful a place it was until people had started moving to Purple Oak and I realised that some of them hadn't grown up in such beautiful homes and with plentiful lands around them. It was one of the many reasons we'd done things like open up our land for others to use, and why the Brewsters and Steepers had set up the infirmary where they could use their magic to heal anyone who needed it.

A loud shriek came from the air, breaking through my thoughts. Even without meaning to, I flinched back as the shadow of Howie descended upon us. Oliver had better get his familiar trained and in a more compliant mood.

Banjo barked loudly, though I wasn't entirely sure if it was because of the loud noise, or because he sensed the tension.

The young owl flapped his wings and collided into Oliver, almost knocking my brother off his feet.

I smothered a laugh, unable to help myself. I wasn't sure what it was about the bird, but Oliver seemed to have very little control over him.

"Ouch, you birdbrain. You have to slow down," he grumbled, earning new scratches on his forearm as the owl tried to perch on him.

Grandpa let out a disgruntled hum. "You're not teaching him right."

"I'll teach him however I want," Oliver countered as he gave Howie an affectionate stroke.

I just shook my head and gave a confused Banjo a pat between his ears, grateful that my beautiful familiar had been a delight to train.

"Maybe you should've left Howie at home," Grandpa suggested as we made our way inside.

Oliver gave his owl a gentle kiss. "No chance. This is a great opportunity to teach him how to behave in a crowd."

And a crowd it was. Even though there were only four families in charge of Purple Oak, it was a lot of people crammed into one room, even one as big as this. The long banquet table was already set with glasses of water and the Millers' daughters were in their usual seats, far apart from each other.

Taz raised her hand and I headed over to her, smiling in greeting.

"Hey. How's your mother?" I asked.

"She's resting," Taz replied as she brushed some of her short hair back. "Giving birth is hard work."

"I can't imagine. How's the newest Miller doing?"

"Well, I think. He cries at all times of the night. It doesn't make me want a baby."

I snorted without meaning to. Not having any younger siblings, I didn't really have any experience of it, but I'd seen enough babies around the settlement to know that they were loud and needed a lot of attention, which was one of the reasons Mrs Miller

wasn't here.

We exchanged a few more pleasantries before parting ways and I went to sit down in my chair in the middle of the table, while Oliver and Grandpa went to opposite ends. Considering all the arguments they had about Howie in the past week, that was probably for the best. Family disputes needed to stay at the farm. There was no reason to bring the other residents into them. Something I was willing to remind them of if they got out of hand.

The door on the other side of the room opened and the first half of the Brewster family sauntered in with the expected ruckus of Cami and Brew's heated discussion. It was no surprise that they had designated seats on the opposite ends of the table as well. It wasn't that they didn't get on, more that they did. That could cause just as many problems.

"Hey, all." Brew waved broadly before sitting down in the seat directly opposite of me. He looked directly at me, his smile changing into something I didn't really recognise. "Hi, Katie."

"Brew," I acknowledged before greeting the rest of his siblings, just so he didn't think he was special.

Because he wasn't special. I had no more interest in Brew than in any of the other members of his family.

The rest of the Brewster siblings arrived, including their cousin Reese, and Mrs Brewster who always looked like she meant business. I admired her composure with which she could enter a full room and be noticed right away.

Everyone exchanged greetings and more idle chatter surrounded the table while we all waited for the Steepers to arrive. I couldn't say I loved these meetings, but I knew

they were crucial to keep the hub running smoothly. And I was glad I was invited to them. It would be difficult to work the way I did for the good of the oasis while not being able to participate in the running of it.

But as it stood, all the power of the settlement resided within our four families and that responsibility weighed heavily on all of our shoulders.

It didn't take too long for everyone else to arrive which didn't cause too much of a disturbance since the Steepers always sat at the end of the table.

"It's beautiful weather today so let's keep it short," Mrs Brewster announced. "We'll start because we have some unfortunate news. There's a rat infestation in our tea stores. We're doing our best to get rid of them but they've already caused significant damage to the tea."

That was indeed bad news. Without tea, the tea witches couldn't perform their healing duties properly. The infirmary was always busy with minor maladies and injuries, but without tea, there could also be some bigger issues to the health of the surrounding areas. Especially when it came to plagues and other deadly diseases.

"If you need help, I'm teaching Howie how to hunt. I can assist," Oliver volunteered.

"Thank you," Mrs Brewster said. "We're planning on doing a thorough investigation so we can make sure we have enough tea to last us until the trader gets here or the new tea plantation can sustain us."

Mrs Steeper cleared her throat. "Have you had any news from Zoe or your brother?"

The mention of her family made Mrs Brewster stiffen. "No, not yet. I don't think it's cause for concern yet, they've only been gone five months. I wouldn't expect either of them back considering the enormity of their errands."

Reese nodded. "My sister and Stella are stubborn, I'm sure they'll be able to convince the Spire to lend us some weather witches. And my parents... Well, I'm sure they're just fine too."

I caught the little quiver in her voice but I admired her composure. If all my immediate family was somewhere else and I had no idea if they were safe and sound, I would be a mess. Especially as this was the first time Zoe and her friend had gone on a mission on their own.

"Speaking of making alliances," Taz interjected. "A dryad came to our mill. She said she was from Grower's Cove. They're a settlement for dryads and nymphs out east. They sound like they might be willing to enter an alliance with us."

"Grower's Cove?" Hana Steeper echoed from her spot by her mothers. "I heard they're fanatical."

"Fanatical or not, we should consider forming an alliance with dryads," I interjected, not afraid to speak up when needed. "While my family has specialised in growing wheat and corn for generations, the magic of a dryad's influence is not something we can capture. Everyone would benefit if we could grow more food."

Brew nodded. "Not to mention, our tea plantation. We need help, we need to be able to grow our own tea, then we'll be less reliant on the travelling merchants and what we can buy from them."

I flashed him a grateful smile. I knew he wasn't backing me up for the sake of it, he'd only said something because he believed it, but I appreciated the support all the same.

He returned it with a hesitant smile of his own, which was so unlike him that I wasn't entirely sure what to do with it.

Murmurs of agreement sounded through the room, distracting me from my confusion over Brew.

"It might be worth hearing them out," Jasmine said, looking at her mother.

Mrs Brewster nodded. "Then we should send someone to negotiate with Grower's Cove and see what they want. Let's decide who in our next meeting so everyone has time to consider it and volunteer."

So impressive.

The conversation moved on to less important topics and I could feel my mind drift. While I didn't doubt the importance of it all, most of it had nothing to do with me. I was a glorified fence fixer.

I made accidental eye contact with Brew who pulled a funny face, clearly distracted too.

"Behave," I mouthed at him, while smothering a laugh. It wasn't proper for me to laugh right now.

He made bunny ears behind his own head, his grin never faltering once. It was a good thing his mother was sitting far away because she would've scolded him for his silly behaviour.

I stifled a snort. He was such a goof. I hated to admit it but there was nobody who could make me laugh like him. And that was just Brew. He might flirt with anything that moved, but at the end of the day, he showed the real Brew to the people he cared about, and I liked that side of him a lot more.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 3:10 am

Katie

Warmth and friendly chatter radiated from the tavern, and it was a shame to leave it behind to step outside, even if I needed to.

There was a chill in the air that came with mid-winter, but even without a coat, I was impervious to the cold wind thanks to the influence of all the ale I'd drunk. It wasn't often that I let myself do this, but when I did, there was nothing better than a good pint or two. Maybe even three.

Banjo pressed himself against my legs, his fur soft and warm. He let out a dramatic sigh as if he was carrying the weight of the world on him when he had exactly nothing to worry about. It must be nice to be a dog.

I scratched him between his ears. "You're my best friend, Mister Strings."

A sound came from behind me. "I thought I was your best friend," a warm familiar voice said.

"In your dreams," I fired back, not even having to turn around to know who was approaching me. Nobody else had a voice like Brew, or his lame humour.

He hopped onto the low wall I was leaning against, his arms bare and covered with goosebumps. I didn't say anything about it now I knew why he no longer had a coat. Instead, I shrugged off my shawl and draped it over his shoulders. I leaned in and clumsily tied the ends of it into a knot.

I patted his chest, not completely unaware of the hard muscles beneath, but that was just because I'd had a bit too much ale. "There you go, Brewy, you look beautiful and now you won't be as cold."

He chuckled. "Is that right, Kitty-Kat?"

I nodded. "Can't have you walking around without anything on, I've still got long sleeves." I held out my arms to show him, even though he could see perfectly well. Banjo sat patiently, looking up at Brew in a way that suggested he was after a treat.

"Where's your coat?" he asked.

"Inside, I only came out because I needed a breather. And apparently, to be your knight in shining armour."

His deep laugh affected me in a way I hadn't expected. "Aren't I supposed to do that for you?" He shifted the shawl so that it fell in a way that covered him better.

"Only if you were trying to woo me, which you are not," I pointed out, leaning back against the wall and appreciating the quiet of the night contrasted with the noise of the tavern inside.

He gave me a curious look. "What makes you believe I'm not?"

I couldn't help but chuckle. "I'm too tipsy to take you seriously, Brew. How about we just look at the stars?"

A strange expression crossed his face, but he let out a sigh and looked up. "The stars are beautiful tonight."

It was certainly true. The lack of clouds made it bitterly cold but it was perfect for

admiring the stars. There were so many of them, all twinkling high in the sky. A tapestry of wonder that made me feel wondrously small and insignificant.

"How high up do you think they are?" I asked.

"I have no idea. At least as far as our lands stretch and back."

"Must be further." I stared up until my neck hurt. "Do you ever wonder what it would be like to fly?"

He chuckled and looked back at me. "Can't say I have. I like the view from here."

There was something strange in his tone and I made the mistake of looking directly into his eyes. His cheeks were tinted red from the ale he'd drunk, and he looked adorable with my shawl wrapped around him, but that wasn't what was making my chest weak. There was a softness in his gaze, a longing that almost looked pained.

"Brew..." I let out a breath, not really knowing what I wanted to say, or what I should. "What do you hope to accomplish with all your flirting?"

He looked away. "Nothing. I know it's only a nuisance to you but it lets me dream for just a moment."

He wasn't making sense. Maybe he was drunker than I thought. It wasn't like I'd been counting his drinks inside, I'd been busy talking to Carly and Taz.

I looked back up at the stars, finding it easier to talk when I wasn't looking at his face. "It's not a nuisance. I just don't get why you do it when you're not interested."

Brew made a soft snorting noise and hopped off the stone wall, landing slightly unsteady on his feet. He cracked his neck and undid the knot in my shawl so he could

slip it off. "I think I need to sleep, my head is spinning."

Concern sprang up within me. There was something bothering him, and it was unusual for him to be this flustered about anything. "Are you going to manage walking home?"

He spun once. "Of course, I know this place like it's the back of my hand. I could crawl home with my eyes closed."

"I think walking would be better."

With a smile, he came towards me and didn't stop until he was mere inches away. He was so close, I could feel the heat radiating off of his body and smell ale on his breath.

My heart beat faster and there was a part of me that recognised the feeling as one I'd never had around Rooibos Brewster before.

"Brew?" I whispered, trying to dismiss the feeling as just because of the ale. It wasn't because I wanted him to kiss me. It couldn't be.

He tapped my nose gently and wrapped my shawl back around me. He adjusted the way it fell over my shoulders in such a caring way that it did funny things to my insides. Every touch was like a whisper of care. It was warm from being around his body, and more than that, it smelled like him, even if that shouldn't be possible from the short time he was wearing it.

"There." He gave me a doting smile, but it wasn't like those he gave to Jasmine and the twins. Or even to Oliver. I didn't think I'd ever seen him look at anyone like this.

My heartbeat quickened from his proximity and the heat rushing up to my cheeks had

nothing to do with the ale. Instead, I found myself staring into Brew's dark blue eyes. Up close like this, he was truly handsome and I could see why all the giggly women were so crazy about him. Nice lips, a strong jaw, and slight stubble that I wanted to run my fingers over.

The thoughts surprised me. Maybe I was drunker than I thought.

Brew stepped back, breaking the spell he had me under. "Goodnight, Katie."

I swallowed hard. "Goodnight."

He sauntered away, only turning around when there were a good ten paces between us. He gave me a lopsided smile. "I never said I wasn't interested."

My chest tightened even more and I could almost feel my heart burst. Why did I almost believe him when he said it like that? Worse, why did I want it to be true?

I really had drunk too much if I was fantasising about Rooibos Brewster.

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Brew

The scent of tea filled my nose as I entered the warehouse where we stored it for the infirmary, and our own personal family use. My magic tingled within me, as if able to sense that I was so close to the source of my power.

The smell of the dried leaves was invigorating and I wanted to roll around in it like a cat getting high on catnip. It would garner some strange looks from my siblings and I was sure Mum would kill me if I did something so wasteful so I restrained myself.

That seemed to be one of the things I was getting a lot of practice with at the moment.

My gaze strayed to Katie on the other side of the room where she was having an animated conversation with Cami. Although it seemed mostly one-sided, which wasn't a huge surprise, Cami dominated pretty much any conversation she was in.

Katie looked over in my direction, and our gazes locked. For one moment, it felt like the world faded around me, and nothing mattered but my best friend's sister.

And then she looked away.

That was not a good sign.

I wondered how much she remembered from that night outside the tavern and how seriously she'd taken my tipsy confession. I'd been worrying about it constantly since, and I'd been dreading Oliver bringing it up. The two of them were close, there was no way she'd be able to keep quiet about me doing something dumb. But he hadn't said

anything yet.

Hopefully, she'd just brushed it off as a joke, the same way she did all the other times I'd flirted with her. As much as my feelings were true, it didn't seem mutual and I didn't want to make her uncomfortable. It was probably for the better that she didn't reciprocate, I didn't want to complicate our lives or those of the people closest to us. Like Oliver who would not be happy about me starting a romance with his one and only sister. And that was before I considered the delicate balance between the four families who ran Purple Oak. I couldn't pretend to understand precisely how it all worked, but Mum had been explicitly clear with me when I'd started showing interest in people.

The children of the other four families were off-limits. And that included Katie.

Jasmine marched into the warehouse and clapped her hands, putting an end to the chatter. When we were younger, I'd always envied her easy way of commanding people. She was so good at it, and it felt like I should be better considering I was the oldest. Now I was grateful for it. I didn't really want to be the one in charge, I was much more comfortable in the infirmary.

"It's going to be a long day so let's get started," my sister said.

"Loosen up, you sound like Mum," Cami responded.

I snorted but held back my laughter. I knew how my sister was and she meant business. There'd be no messing with her today. Everyone was going to do exactly what they were told.

Jasmine set her hands on her hips, in exactly the same way as Mum did. "And if you don't quiet down, Chamomile, I'll tell you off like Mum."

That shut Cami up instantly. It was impressive how full-naming worked, no matter who did it.

With everyone quiet and in line, Jasmine handed out the notebooks and delegated the tasks. "Earl and Chamomile, you are taking the right side. Katie and Brew, you're on the left. Any problems, call me over and I'll come check."

Hesitation crossed Katie's face, and I winced. She definitely remembered what happened at the tavern. That was unfortunate. The last thing I wanted was to make things awkward between us.

A part of me wanted to suggest a change in the way Jasmine was splitting the teams, but I didn't want to draw attention to what was going on between us.

I cleared my throat as I made my way over to Katie. "So..."

Katie cleared her throat and held up the scales. "I'll weigh, you write? Or I'll write, you weigh?"

"Ah, you know the drill." And she was going straight to making sure that we were on task. I shouldn't be hurt by that, especially when it was my fault there was something hanging between us, but it still stung.

"It's not my first tea stock day," she reminded me.

I nodded, not really knowing what else to say. It was true, both the Fields siblings had been helping out from a young age. That was how things were around here, they helped us, we helped them. That was the delicate balance that Mum was always talking about and it could not be upset.

I twirled the pencil. "I'll write."

Katie nodded and turned her attention to the shelves in front of her, selecting a bag of tea. "A-thirty-one," she said.

I looked down the list and tapped my finger against the page. "It's meant to weigh one pound."

"All right." She dropped it on the scale and added the counterweight. "One pound."

"Great, so this one is rat-free." I put a tick by it while Katie put the bag back on the shelf and picked up the next one, reading out the reference number attached to the tag.

"Also a pound," she said, moving on to the next before I could say anything.

We repeated the process several times over, checking the weight of the bags and noting down whether it matched what was in the log. It was incredibly tedious and monotonous, not helped by the heavy silence between us. I wanted things to be normal between us, but I could feel that she wasn't receptive to me flirting, or even joking, and I didn't want to make her even more uncomfortable than I already had with my revelation that my feelings for her weren't entirely friendly.

"Where's Banjo?" I tried after the latest round of weighing.

"At home. He's keeping Grandpa company," she replied, somehow managing to avoid looking at me.

"Ah."

We lapsed into silence again, but it wasn't comfortable. If anything, it was the complete opposite.

And I hated it. More than I could have ever imagined possible. Oliver might be my best friend, but I was also close to Katie, and feeling as if I'd lost her sent pain lancing through my heart. Life without her just wasn't the same.

I cleared my throat to try again. "How's Oliver getting on? With Howie?"

That got a little chuckle out of Katie, which felt like progress. "Disaster. Either there's something wrong with the boy or the owl because those two are not seeing eye to eye."

"One would think Oliver isn't an owl ward at all," I joked.

"We both know he is, we were there when he bonded with Rocky." Katie smiled fondly. "I was so glad when they bonded because up till then, Rocky's nightly presence had been scaring me a bit."

A smile pulled at my lips at the memory. "Me too. Rocky used to sit on the roof right next to my window and hoot all night. I thought it was there to kill me. I was so glad when Oliver tamed him."

Katie finally looked at me and scoffed. "You don't tame a familiar, Brew."

"So what do you do?" I leaned against a shelf, curious about her answer. I knew the basics of what being a ward entailed, and what she and her brother had told me, but we'd never talked about the real stuff.

She turned around to look at me, a seriousness in her eyes that I wasn't sure I'd ever seen before. "It's a bond that goes deep into your soul." From her expression, I knew she was thinking of Banjo. "It's like there's another living creature that is part of you." She touched her shoulder where her ward tattoo of Banjo sat.

"That sounds intense."

"And wonderful. And devastating." Her hand drifted to her shoulder where her other ward tattoo rested, the one for the family dog she'd first bonded to when she was thirteen. "They never leave you. Their soul is always linked to yours. Even in the darkest moments you know they're there. That's a ward bond. There's no taming involved, it's a union of souls."

"It's beautiful." She was beautiful, especially when she talked like that.

"Mmm." From her expression, I could tell she didn't want to talk more about the intensity of the bond, which meant that I needed a change of course for the conversation if I wanted to keep it going.

"I wonder what kind of familiar I would have if I was a ward," I mused.

Laughter returned to Katie's eyes, and I almost sighed with relief. "That's a hard one."

"Because I'm so loveable? Maybe I'd have a dog too," I mused.

She shook her head. "A cat. No, a fox." She snapped her fingers. "A squirrel. You have squirrel energy, Brew."

I laughed. "I don't know if I should be insulted or not."

"Squirrels are fun."

A warmth filled my chest but it came with a bittersweetness. So that was how she saw me. Just a fun man, not that I could blame her. I hadn't exactly put my best, most gallant, foot forward when it came to her. I was all jokes and lame flirty remarks, no wonder she thought of me as a fun raccoon.

I wanted to insist that it should be something different and to try and get her to see me differently, but I knew that wasn't my best course of action. It would be better if I just left the situation as it was. There was no need to make things more complicated between us than they already were, even if I wanted to.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 3:10 am

Katie

The cold air hit me the moment I opened the front door, leaving no doubt in my mind that winter was well and truly underway. Not that the white frozen grass wasn't already an indication.

It crunched under my boots as I walked, almost making a shrieking sound, and my breath came out as a white cloud. Some of the icy wind found its way under my coat, sending a deep chill throughout me.

I reached underneath to pull my shawl tighter around my neck, only for the overwhelming reminder of Brew's scent to fill my nose. I must not have worn this shawl since the night at the tavern, and it still lingered there. It was musky, grassy, and slightly sweet. There was something comforting about it, like having his scent around me made me feel as if I could face anything, especially the cold of the winter morning. I took a moment to breathe it in, even if that was going to risk making me more confused about my feelings towards him.

Banjo barked happily into the morning, stealing the rooster's job of waking everyone up. Though I imagined that a lot of people would already be awake, especially with those who did the night shift starting to return to their homes.

"Shush," I told Banjo, glad to have a distraction from Brew's scent.

He wagged his tail and bounced along the path, pausing at the fork in the road with an expectant look on his face. He was such a demanding dog, I was certain that some days he thought I was a sheep who needed herding sometimes.

Banjo immediately went on alert, his tail high in the air and his stance saying that he was ready for anything. It was only when my brother appeared from the other side of the farmhouse with a basket of eggs in his hand that he relaxed.

"Eggs?" I asked.

"Hana asked me to bring her some," he said.

I raised an eyebrow. "I thought the Steepers got their eggs at the market?"

He sighed. "I lost them in a bet with Hana the other night at the tavern," he admitted.

"What? When?"

"I don't know, it was when you were outside with Brew."

"I wasn't outside with Brew," I deny a little too quickly.

"Huh, well you went outside, and then he did. I assumed you were just talking about something. He must just have gone home."

I touched my shawl without thinking. Why did I feel the need to deny my conversation with Brew to my brother?

No, that was a dumb question. I knew exactly why I denied it. "We should get going," I said, waving vaguely to the path.

He nodded, suppressing a yawn as he did. "I hate winter. I miss the sun. If only it was summer."

That made me laugh. "Like summer guarantees sun. With the weather all over the

place, we might have a cold summer too."

"Let's hope not, for the sake of the crops."

"Or let's hope one of the Brewsters is successful in bringing a pair of weather witch twins back with them," I said.

"Mmm, that would make a difference. Though I don't understand how weather witch twins even work."

"No one does," I responded. "But they work, so that's what we need. The Spire said they had some, so maybe Zoe will be able to bring some back."

"Maybe." He didn't seem convinced but not bothered by it either. He whistled with his fingers and held out his arm.

I winced at the sight of his unprotected coat. His skin was easily fixable by the tea witch medics, but the fabric of his coat wasn't going to be as straightforward to mend. But I had to remember that Oliver was responsible for his own clothing and belongings.

A gust of wind made me shiver and I didn't notice Howie's presence until his shadow was on my face. He descended in absolute silence, not a feather out of place. His talons curled into Oliver's arm, instantly drawing blood.

"Ouch!" Oliver grimaced in pain. "Gently, Howie, gently."

I wasn't sure if it was my imagination, but the owl looked guilty and gave Oliver a little affectionate peck. While it wasn't perfect, it seemed like they were getting used to each other.

Banjo barked demandingly at some birds flying overhead and went off to the left just like we did every day, eager to get out on his patrol.

"I'll see you in the middle," Oliver said as he turned right.

"All right, but your detour to the Steepers' house doesn't mean I need to do more steps," I told him. "You lost the bet, not me."

He sighed dramatically. "Fine." He waved and disappeared onto his patrol.

I nodded and followed my dog through our lands for my daily inspection. As monotonous as it sounded, there were always some fences that needed to be fixed, complaints to be heard, and unexpected issues to handle. That was the nature of the job and my purpose as one of the leaders in the community. If there was nobody to listen, things festered and could quickly upset the order in the settlement.

I hadn't really understood the importance of it when I was younger, but it had become a welcome part of my day since.

With my brisk pace, it didn't take long for me to reach the ward settlement where I was supposed to meet Oliver. He wasn't there yet but another familiar figure came my way, hands deep in his pockets and a scarf wrapped tightly around his neck. It was a bit of a comical sight, thick scarf, no coat, but it certainly suited Brew.

I raised my hand, waving to get his attention. He smiled in response and crouched down to greet an excited Banjo barrelling his way. His deep laughter vibrated through the morning air and my familiar's tail knew no stopping.

Banjo pressed his nose deliberately against Brew's pocket and it made him laugh.

"Oh, can you smell the jerky?" He held out a piece of dried meat and dangled it

alluringly in the air.

Banjo sat down obediently, his gaze locked onto the treat. He was so focused, his tail even stopped wagging. He was only ever so still when he knew he was going to get a delicious treat.

"Catch!" Brew tossed the treat in the air and Banjo snapped it up before it had a chance to land on the ground.

Adorable.

"Hey, you," I said when I reached the two of them, realising as I did that it sounded kind of flirty, which I needed to be careful with. I didn't want him to think I was assuming anything just because of what he'd said when he was a little tipsy.

Brew smiled. "Hello, Katie. Out on your morning patrol, I see."

"Same as every day." I cleared my throat. "You on your way to the infirmary?"

He nodded. "I have an early shift today. There's an influx of the flu in the ward settlement so we have a lot on our plate."

It was rare to see him serious like this but when it came to the infirmary, he always was. It was because of this that I knew he wasn't just a jester who made everything into a joke, which begged the question... Had he been joking outside the tavern?

I looked up at him, only now realising how tall he really was. Had he always been this tall?

"Brew..."

A shriek cut through my sentence and Oliver appeared from around the bend, running with his hands covering his head. Howie was chasing him in what was either a game or a fight, it was hard to tell.

"That doesn't look good," Brew remarked dryly.

"You might have to treat Oliver again," I replied.

"It seems that way." He let out a breath of white air. "I should go and get to the infirmary so I'll be ready for when your brother comes in."

For some reason, that felt like an excuse to get away from me although I saw no reason for why. If he was truly interested like he said that night, why was he avoiding me? The Brew I knew wasn't someone who would give up so easily on something he wanted, which could only mean that it had just been more of his typical empty advances.

I knew it.

A tightness gripped my chest but I ignored it. I had no reason to be upset, I didn't even feel the same way. Brew was Brew, nothing more, nothing less.

I whistled to get Banjo's attention and patted my thigh. "Heel. Come on, Banjo-boy. We're leaving."

"Katie..." Brew's words died on his lips and he just raised his hand. "See you around."

"See you," I responded, a little too dazed to be able to say anything else. What had been on his mind? It was impossible to tell, and I didn't want to push him further than he was willing to go.

Even if that was leaving me disappointed.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 3:10 am

Katie

The living quarters of my best friend's house were a lot smaller than the farmhouse I lived in, and despite having been here many times over the years, I was always surprised when I was reminded of it.

The room was simultaneously a dining space and tattoo parlour at the same time, which was remarkable since four people also lived here.

And all of them had familiars. Though as far as I knew, Carly's dad's horse didn't come inside.

My best friend leaned over a frame with a stretched-out pigskin, practising her tattoo skills by drawing a little piglet. I didn't know if that was cute or morbid, maybe a bit of both. Her cat watched on with disinterested attention, though I knew Zipper well enough to be sure that he wouldn't like it if Carly moved from her spot.

She set her tools down and let out a satisfied sigh. "Maybe you'll let me do your next ward tattoo if I keep practising," she said.

"You know I will," I promised, reaching out to touch the top of Banjo's head. I didn't really like thinking about the next ward tattoo because of what it would mean for my beloved dog. "I was ready to let you do my last one, but your dad said no."

"I remember. He said no when I wanted to do Gus' last year too. But how wrong could a goose really go? But apparently, I'm not allowed to practise on my brothers." She rolled her eyes. "It's not like I'd do anything outrageous, those two are walking

advertisements, and with how often Hugo takes his shirt off, that's a lot of potential wards we could reach. Did you know he's been caught with the son of the Black Sheep tavern?"

"What? No." I tried not to laugh, but her older brother was always getting himself into trouble, normally over a guy. "Last I knew, he was with the heron ward. What's his name? Davy?"

"Who knows? I can't keep track." She shrugged and set aside the pigskin. The ward tattoo of Zipper stretched on her upper left arm, as if responding to the fact she was no longer using her tattoo equipment. "So, are there any updates on the ward ceremony? Dad's starting to fret about whether we're going to be able to get it done."

"We're still discussing it, and the tattoo artist apprenticeship," I said, glad that I could deliver such news in a casual setting because she was my friend. It would be so much worse if this was a formal report to someone I didn't know, especially because I wasn't really telling her anything.

"I didn't expect it to be an easy discussion. Improving the wards doesn't exactly benefit the tea witches, does it?" Carly shrugged.

"It does benefit them. If the wards are happier and more settled, they can contribute more. And if they get their ward tattoos in part thanks to Purple Oak, hopefully that will make them loyal to our settlement," I countered.

"Hmm."

"Besides, it isn't just tea witches who run things here," I reminded her. "I'm a ward, and I'm from one of the families. And the Millers are nymphs."

"I know," Carly responded. "I just hope you reach a conclusion soon. There are so

many wards without tattoos and animals that aren't familiars. It's becoming chaotic down here."

I grimaced. She wasn't wrong about that, and if the familiars weren't officially familiars, then it could cause all kinds of problems, including messing with the laws that governed respecting the familiars bonded to other wards. "I'm aware. Don't worry, I'll keep pushing for this issue."

"Thanks, Kat. I appreciate it."

I smiled at her, hoping she felt reassured. I was going to do everything I could to ensure that the ward ceremony and tattoo apprenticeship went ahead. I knew that it was an important part of what our community needed. And if I had to, I was sure I could convince Brew to support me on it.

Brew .

Carly cleared her throat. "All right, what's the face for?"

"Face?" I echoed.

"Yes, you were sitting there all fine and then you got a confused look on your face. What's with that?"

I sighed and considered how much to say about what was going on with me and Brew. Or wasn't going on, which felt like a much more accurate way of describing the current situation. "What does it mean when a man says he's interested in you but then starts being weird and kind of avoiding you?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, I can't say I have much experience with dating men."

"Right. Well, what if a woman did that to you? What would it mean?"

"Maybe that she's embarrassed? I don't know, I can't say I've had a confession like that before." She gave me a bit of a cocky grin. "I'm usually the one doing the confessing."

I sighed. "You're no help."

"Never claimed I would be. I'm a tattoo artist, not a love expert."

"You know a lot of people," I pointed out. "And Hugo's your brother."

"I wouldn't ask him for any advice, he'd be about as useful as a tattoo needle without any ink."

I sighed and ran a hand over my face. "He was tipsy when he told me he was interested. Or rather, I think he told me he was interested. Maybe I'm getting it all wrong and he was simply drunk and saying something he didn't mean. Or he thought I was someone else. Maybe I'm overthinking it."

Carly chuckled. "Likely. Maybe you could ask Hugo for advice after all, he's got lots of experience with men. And drinking, so that works on both fronts."

I shook my head. "No, I'll just figure it out myself. It probably means nothing. I mean, this is Brew we're talking about.

"Wait, Brew as in Rooibos Brewster?" Amusement danced over Carly's face.

"Yes."

"Huh, took you long enough, I figured you'd catch feelings for him much sooner

seeing how he's always making eyes at you."

"I didn't say I had feelings for him," I responded.

My best friend just laughed and got up to sort out some of her inks. "Why would you be bothered about if he'd confessed to you or not if you didn't?"

I opened my mouth to protest but then shut it again, not really sure what I could convincingly say to the contrary. "It doesn't matter anyway. He can't leave his house without some woman batting her eyelashes at him. He could have anyone he wants, why would he be interested in me?"

"Because you're great. You work hard, you have an adorable dog, and you're smart." Carly said, her gaze travelling up and down my body. "And you're easy on the eyes, objectively speaking."

I snorted. "Objectively speaking?"

"Well, you're not my type but I know good bone structure when I see it," she said, flashing me a grin.

I was lucky to have Carly as my best friend, she always knew how to cheer me up.

A door slammed upstairs and someone ran down the rickety stairs, causing lots of ruckus. I only caught a glimpse of Carly's younger brother before he stormed out. A quacking goose followed him at a leisurely pace, sort of raining on his angry parade. Gus snatched the goose up, left the house without saying a word, slamming the front door so hard it made the whole building shake.

"What's that about?" I asked.

Carly's smile fell away. "Gus has got this stupid thing in his head. He's been saying he wants to leave."

"Home?" It took me a moment to fully comprehend what she was saying. "He wants to leave Purple Oak?"

She nodded. "There's a settlement for bird wards a few days away called the Nest. Gus said he wants to go there, and try his luck. Dad won't have it and they've been arguing for days. The more they fight, the more I worry he'll actually go."

I didn't know what to say that might be helpful. If Oliver brought something up like that, I would do everything in my power to make him stay too.

"Is Gus not happy here?" I asked instead. "Is there something I could do that would make him stay?"

Carly shook her head. "I don't think so. He's just restless, I know the feeling. Don't get me wrong, I don't want him to go either but he's an adult and he hasn't been happy in a while. Maybe this is the right choice for him?"

"It's a shame when the right choice might end up hurting your loved ones though," I said.

"It is, but your loved ones also shouldn't stop you from making the right choices. If they do, they're not worthy of your love."

I couldn't help but smile. "Are you sure you're not a love expert after all?"

"I am sounding very wise, aren't I?" Carly quipped with a grin. "Maybe you should just talk to Brew. You have a mouth, right? Use it. Now if that's not good love advice, I don't know what is."

I gasped. "Carly!"

"I meant to talk. You're the one who made it dirty," she said, but her sly smirk made it clear she made her insinuations on purpose.

Lewd suggestions or not, talking to Brew was actually good advice. If we could talk about this while tipsy, then we should be able to talk about it sober. And if he wasn't capable of doing that, then I guessed I'd know where I stood. I didn't like the thought of that which should tell me all I needed to know about the state of my own feelings, no matter what I told my best friend.

Katie

There was a chill in the meeting room that couldn't be combated by the fire roaring in the hearth. I pulled my shawl closer around me, which did nothing to help distract me from Brew sitting opposite me. If anything it made me more aware of him.

It was ridiculous. My shawl didn't even smell like him any more and he was doing everything he could not to look at me, which gave me ample opportunity to look at him. Though that was concerning. He had dark circles under his eyes as if he hadn't been sleeping well.

Was it because of me? Or was something else going on that had taken the pep out of his step? I hated the idea that I might have done something to upset him, though I didn't know what. Maybe it was because I hadn't said anything about the night outside the tavern. But that couldn't be it. He wasn't being serious then, was he?

I closed my eyes and tried to regain some control over myself. Carly was right that I clearly needed to talk to Brew, especially if I couldn't even be in the same room with him without spiralling over what was going on between us.

Mrs Brewster knocked on the table to get everyone's attention and bring the meeting to order. I was almost relieved that we had to talk about serious things. That would take my mind off Rooibos Brewster for at least a little bit.

Even if he was in the room and would be part of the conversation.

"Does anyone want to start?" Mrs Brewster asked, looking around the room.

Unsurprisingly, nobody said anything, probably because we all knew that she had something important to talk about.

"All right, so the tea," she said.

I sat up straighter. Having helped the Brewsters with the stock check, I knew the basics about the situation, but I wanted to hear the outcome. And it was going to impact the entire settlement. Tea was the source of power for the tea witches, and without it, they wouldn't be able to run the infirmary. I was sure there were other things they wouldn't be able to do, but I had no idea exactly how the magic worked.

"We've been through the warehouse and sorted out the situation with the rat infestation. We're looking at having about two months' worth of tea left, three months if we ration it," Mrs Brewster said.

"Though we're expecting the trader soon," Jasmine said.

"If nothing goes wrong," Mrs Steeper interjected, a serious expression on her face.

Her wife nodded. "The trader has been late in the past and they're not the most reliable. We need our own plantation to succeed more than ever. That's why the meeting with Grower's Cove should be a priority. If the dryads can assist us, it'll be worth whatever they demand from us. I suggest Grey goes to negotiate with them."

Upon hearing his name, Grey looked up with a hesitant expression. "Me?"

No one answered his question. It was a bit of a surprise that his aunts hadn't talked to him about it. The Steepers always seemed close, but maybe there were some complicated dynamics going on. I wasn't sure what had happened to Grey's parents, but he'd lived with his aunts and cousin for as long as I could remember.

"I can negotiate too," Jasmine said.

Brew snapped to attention, looking at his sister with a look that said he wasn't keen on her dealing with the dryads from Grower's Cove, but that was just the protective brother in him. He'd felt protective over his other siblings ever since his dad died along with my parents.

It was always sweet to see him like that and warm affection for him settled in my chest.

"All right," Mrs Brewster said. "Grey and Jasmine can take the lead on the negotiations with Grower's Cove."

Discussions continued into the logistics of that, and I found my mind drifting. I wasn't needed for any of these discussions, being neither a dryad or a tea witch. It was at times like this that I wished my ward tattoo of Banjo was somewhere on my hands so I could entertain myself by watching it. Maybe that was where I'd get my next ward tattoo for that purpose.

Without meaning to, I stole a glance at Brew. He had a serious expression on his face as he listened intently. It was making his forehead wrinkle. If we were still children, I would've smoothed those out with my finger because he always said he worried about looking old.

He noticed me staring and smiled with just his mouth, a hollow echo of the signature Brew grin. That wouldn't do, but it gave me hope that I could manage to get the right kind of response out of him.

I brought my hand behind my head to make bunny ears. It was silly and childish but it brought a little spark to Brew's eyes. They crinkled as he made some bunny ears of his own and inflicted some on Earl sitting next to him who was giving us confused

looks.

Jasmine turned in our direction, giving me a strange look that I couldn't decipher, but she didn't say anything and carried on with her part of the conversation about the dryads.

I leaned back and put bunny ears behind Naida's head, making Brew grin in response.

Now that was the mischievous Brew I knew. Still, his smile didn't last and fell away quickly. Something was definitely up with him.

I should talk to him. Even if this wasn't about what happened outside the tavern, maybe giving him a chance to talk would be good and he could let me in on what was bothering him. Perhaps we could even fix it together.

The meeting finally came to an end and I sprung up from my seat, determined to find out what was making Brew frown like this. I made my way around the large table, cursing my position at the far side because it put me on the back foot.

Outside, Brew's long strides had already carried him past the gates of the property. Since I didn't want to cause a scene with all the others around, I could only quicken my pace so much. I caught up with him but he was no longer alone. Two women had snared him with small talk and coquettish smiles that did nothing to hide their intention.

While I usually waited and let them do their thing, I didn't have the patience for that today. I barged in on their conversation, slightly out of breath but determined all the same.

"Brew, a word?" I said, hoping my behaviour wasn't too brusque.

He looked surprised but nodded, which made the two other women slink away. One of them squeezed his arm before she did and mouthed something that I couldn't make out.

They really were everywhere.

"Friends of yours?" I asked.

Brew hummed. "Patients. I treated one of them for a lung infection earlier this winter."

While it was a likely story, that didn't stop me from being annoyed at how familiar they were acting around him. They didn't know him, not like I did.

"Do you never tire of all the attention?" I asked, cursing inwardly as the question slipped out. This wasn't the way I wanted this to go.

"I like talking to people and it's part of my role to be friendly to everyone so they'll tell me what troubles them," he said with a little shrug. Knowing him, he truly meant it too.

The infirmary was lucky with a dedicated healer like him, even if his response made me a little jealous.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" Brew asked, reminding me that I'd come running after him.

Heat rushed to my face and I avoided looking directly at him. It would be easier to ask this when I wasn't feeling overwhelmingly embarrassed.

"It's about that night outside the tavern," I said, quietly hoping that might be enough

to jolt his memory.

Brew hummed but didn't say anything. He was going to make me say it, wasn't he?

I finally looked at him but got distracted by fresh snow fluttering down on us. It was only light but big snowflakes were settling on his unruly auburn hair. It looked a little like snow settling on a tree.

"Katie?" he prompted.

"Do you like me, Brew?" I knew it was direct, but life was too short to waste on unfounded worries. My heart pounded as I waited for his response, and I hadn't realised just how much it actually mattered to me.

A lopsided grin tugged the corner of his mouth up. "Of course, I like you."

"Not like a friend. I'm asking if you have feelings for me."

"I know what you're asking." A gust of wind made his curls dance. "The answer is yes, Katheryn."

He said it so simply and yet with such intent, it made my heart pound like it wanted to burst right out of my chest. How could he admit something like that so casually? Did it not worry him?

I looked up in his blue eyes, searching for answers. They were bright and he looked unburdened. How long had he been feeling this way that a confession was taking weight off of his shoulders?

He took a step forward, his smile kind and intimate. And very different from the way he looked at other people. How had I not noticed this before?

"Does that surprise you?" His voice was a low murmur, and I could sense a little promise there. Perhaps because I hadn't run away from him. If anything, I was leaning in.

I swallowed hard. "Does Oliver know?"

He snorted. "Do I still have all my teeth?"

"I think he's more of a scratching-eyes-out person," I murmured.

"Mmm, if he could set Howie on me, he would for this. But no, Oliver doesn't know. I wasn't going to ruin our friendship over something that I didn't think would ever happen."

My breath caught in my throat. The way he was wording things seemed deliberate, as if he was testing out whether that was something that was going to change.

"How long have you felt this way?" Maybe I should have gone with a different question, but this was the one I really wanted the answer to.

Brew tapped his chin. "How long have we known each other?"

Now he was asking complicated questions. I counted back the years since Oliver and I had first come to the farm, back when our parents were still alive and well.

"Eighteen years or so?" I guessed. "I was six, you were eight. Oliver declared you his mortal enemy in the morning and you were best friends before the sun went down."

Brew chuckled at the memory. "Then I've felt this way for eighteen years minus one day."

"You're not going to convince me it was love at first sight." That had to just be a line.

"Maybe not love, but I definitely felt something." He scratched the back of his head and offered me a hesitant smile. "Don't overthink it, Katie. I don't expect you to reciprocate. I don't expect anything at all. I simply like you."

Strange how he was the one consoling me when I wasn't the one who'd spent the past eighteen years repressing feelings and having them rejected at every turn.

"I have to get to the infirmary," he said. "I'll see you soon, Katie." He lingered for a moment, almost as if he wanted to say goodbye in a very different way. Or he wanted me to say anything.

But everything was so confusing that I didn't know what to say. So I just let him leave and tried not to dwell on how painful it was to watch him walk away.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 3:10 am

Brew

I sipped from my cup of weak tea, relieved when it restored some of the depleted magic in me. It had been a long day which wouldn't have been as much of an issue if we weren't rationing tea. I hoped the merchants would visit soon or that we could strike a beneficial alliance with Grower's Cove. While I could survive just fine without tea, a life without the magic that was second nature to me seemed somewhat bleak. And that was without considering the effect it would have on the infirmary.

And therefore on life at Purple Oak.

Everyone at the infirmary was trained in basic medical aid, but none of that could compete with what we could achieve with magic.

A knock sounded on the door and Hayley popped her head around the door. "Hey, how are you? That last patient looked like it took a lot out of you."

"It did," I confirmed, holding back a groan when I got up from my seat. "But I'll be fine. No need to do your thing."

The empath mage gave me a concerned look. "Are you sure? You know what happens if you let your emotions take over."

"It's fine," I assured her, and not just because I didn't want her using her empathy magic on me. I didn't fully understand how it worked, but I knew it did wonders for some of the patients here, and I'd rather she saved her strength for them.

"All right," she agreed. "But if you want, I can go get one of the others to finish up for you. There's only one other person in the waiting room."

I shook my head. "They've been healing for hours too. I've got this." I cracked my neck and tried to ignore the strain in my body. In reality, it was probably better if I didn't use any more magic. I'd been drinking tea all day, so if I felt this bad, then there was a good chance I was heading towards overexertion myself. But there was always so much to do and I didn't want to be the one who let it slip past me unnoticed.

"If you're certain," Hayley said.

I nodded.

She gave me a concerned look but didn't say anything as I made my way to the waiting room. It was always calmer towards the afternoon and got busy again when night came. But that was going to be someone else's problem. Earl would be here to take over for the night shift along with Grey Steeper, and I could get some rest.

My gaze landed on the lone person sitting in the waiting room, and concern filled me, stopping my ability to think straight.

Katie .

I hurried over, trying to get a hold of my emotions and failing miserably. It was like admitting how I felt about her the other night had unlocked a new level of worry inside me when it came to the dog ward.

"Katie? Are you hurt?" I asked.

She looked up, her whole face softening when she saw me. "No, not me. I'm here with Oliver. More training scratches from Howie."

Relief washed over me but I still felt a bit dizzy. I hadn't seen her since I admitted my feelings to her and this was not how I expected our next conversation to go. Though I wasn't exactly sure what I expected, or what I even wanted. I should have lied about my feelings to her, then things could have just gone back to normal. But the way she'd asked had made me think that she wanted to hear the truth.

And the selfish part of me had really wanted her to know.

But I shouldn't be focusing on that right now. If Oliver was hurt, then he needed my full attention. "Where's your brother?" I asked, looking around for my best friend. The last thing I needed was him walking on me making a mess of things with his sister.

"Oh, Hana is treating him now," Katie said, waving vaguely towards the room Hana saw patients in. "I'm just waiting for him."

"You're a good sister." I resisted the urge to pat her on the head like we used to do as children. I might've done so last week but I didn't want to make her uncomfortable now she was aware of my feelings. I would only be overstepping.

Katie let out a thoughtful hum. "Am I though?"

"Of course. The bond you two have is so strong and I would know, I'm kind of the expert on sibling bonds," I attempted to joke.

She chuckled. "You do have plenty of them."

The conversation stalled and for once, I wished there were other patients here so I had something to do. Instead, I stood in awkward silence while Katie fumbled with her shawl.

Memories of the night outside the tavern flooded back and I vividly remembered how warm it had felt to have her smell wrapped around me. And the care with which she'd put it on. She'd been so close to me that it had been hard not to kiss her.

Except that kissing her when she had no idea how I felt would have been all kinds of wrong.

"I don't think I've ever seen it so quiet in here," she said eventually, breaking the growing silence between us.

"It's unusual. We saw lots of patients earlier." I waved towards the chalkboard with lots of names crossed out behind the nurse's station.

"Long day?" Concern entered her voice as she looked me over, almost as if she was trying to check on my well-being. I had to admit that I liked it, even if I was trying to be careful not to read too much into it.

I nodded. "You could say that."

"You should make sure to relax later. There's the weekly bonfire. I was planning on having a drink or something. Are you going?" A strange expression crossed her face.

"I wasn't planning on, I'm really tired," I said before realising she might be extending an invitation. "But I suppose I could swing by. Maybe a nice drink after work is exactly what I need."

"It is." She got up from her seat and bridged the distance, pausing right in front of me. "If you work too hard, you're going to need a healer yourself." She put a hand on my chest, making my heart race.

Was this her way of showing concern? That in itself wasn't so strange, we'd been

friends for a long time, and I was fairly instrumental in the successful running of the settlement. There was just something in the way she was looking at me, head slightly tilted and eyes narrowed, like she was really seeing me.

As much as I wanted to think that it was more, the rational part of me was trying to remind myself that she could just be being friendly.

Or maybe she wasn't as impervious to my feelings as I thought and had come to see me. Good sister or not, she wasn't Oliver's keeper and he didn't need hand-holding for a few scratches given to him by his familiar.

Hope swelled in my chest and I took a hesitant step closer, my heartbeat quickening. "Katie..." My voice cracked as I said her name. "Are you worried about me?" I put my hand over hers, hoping she wasn't about to pull it away.

Her cheeks flushed red and she quickly averted her gaze. "Well, it wouldn't do anyone any good if you hurt yourself. You're important. I mean, your role here at the infirmary is important."

I couldn't help but smile. She was so adorable and she'd never been a very good liar. I didn't want to jump to conclusions but she certainly looked a little flustered. If I'd caused that, and it was good flustered, that would make me a very happy man.

The door opened behind us and Oliver stumbled out of the examination, yanking me down to earth. I'd almost forgotten the main reason I'd stayed away from Katie.

She jumped back, putting some distance between us that was probably entirely necessary if I was going to regain the ability to actually think.

He smiled when he saw me. "Hey, Brew. Funny running into you here, huh?"

I chuckled. "Yes, what a coincidence. How are your arms?"

"Oh, it's not my arm this time." He turned around, exposing the scratch marks on his neck. "I tried to get Howie to land on my head. Stupid idea, don't know what I was thinking."

As a healer, I shouldn't judge people for how they got their injuries. As Oliver's best friend however, I got to judge him hard which was exactly what I was doing right now.

"You're an idiot," I said affectionately.

Katie cleared her throat. "If you're all fixed up, we should go."

"I'm ready," he said.

She turned to me and gave me a small smile. "Later?"

I knew she wasn't asking about a hypothetical time ahead. I nodded, causing a smile I didn't think I'd seen from her to spread over her face.

I waved the siblings out, doing my best to keep my usual composure when Katie passed right under my nose. She even touched my arm on her way out and smiled in a way that made my whole stomach flutter.

And just like that, all my reservations melted away. There'd been plenty of reasons why I hadn't pursued Katie but that was when I thought she wasn't interested.

But she wouldn't have suggested any of what she just did if she wasn't. Not when she knew how I felt which meant there was now a possibility that I could have everything my heart had desired for as long as I could remember.

Katie

The roaring bonfire reached up into the night sky, the orange glow illuminating the faces of the people who had either come to add something to the flames, or were simply hanging out. Sparks lifted up into the air, carried away in the light breeze and adding to the atmosphere.

Over on the other side, a group of sound mages were making music that could be heard under the chatter of everyone around. Many of the younger members of the settlement would come out to the weekly bonfire to spend time with friends, have a drink, and just enjoy the atmosphere. It wasn't a particularly exciting event, but I always loved it, especially when it was cold and dry like this.

I got to the front of the brewer's queue and handed over a couple of coins. He handed me a tankard in return, overflowing with pale ale. I took a sip before moving away, so I didn't waste anything going over the rim. It was cold and refreshing, a perfect way to end the day. Though I also wouldn't have been opposed to a hot drink, but with the merchant not having visited yet, everyone was running a bit short on tea, and what we had left was being rationed for use in the infirmary. It was much more important to keep the settlement in good health than it was to have tea at a social event.

I headed back towards the fire, looking out for my friends so I could know where to sit. Though that was a lie. I was mostly looking for Brew. He'd told me he was coming, but I hadn't seen him yet and there was more than a small part of me that was desperate for that to change. Maybe I should have been clearer about what I wanted when I was at the infirmary earlier rather than trying to be subtle. He deserved better than that, especially after he'd been so honest with me when it came to his feelings.

This was far more complicated than I'd expected it to be. Then again, I hadn't given much thought to what it would mean to have a relationship with Brew.

I took a shaky breath. It seemed that my mind had gone from basic interest to something serious in a matter of days, and I wasn't sure what to do with that.

Thankfully, I spotted Carly over by the fire with one of her brothers and started to make my way over, only to realise that the discussion was of the heated variety and didn't seem to be going very well. It was only when I was a few feet away that it took a real turn, and Gus got to his feet and stormed off.

I grimaced. It seemed like things weren't going much better with him.

"Mind if I sat?" I asked.

Carly looked up and gave me a weak smile. "Sure."

"Everything alright? I saw...whatever that was with Gus." I waved in the direction the goose ward had stormed off in.

She sighed and rubbed her forehead. "I tried to convince him to stay again, but he's made up his mind. He's leaving for the Nest tomorrow."

"I'm sorry." I gave her arm an encouraging squeeze and held out my tankard. "Here."

"You're sweet." She took a big swig from my beer and sighed. "I wish I could stop him but he's a grown man. It's only fair that he's allowed to make his way in the world. I just worry about him. You know Gus, he's too trusting, and he's got a heart of gold. I don't want him to get taken advantage of. But I also can't tell him that because he'll be insulted."

"I'm sure he'll be fine." It was an empty reassurance because I knew nothing about where he was going, and I didn't actually know Gus all that well, but it came from a good place.

Carly nodded and shot me a pained smile. "I should go apologise. If he's leaving soon, I don't want to part ways on bad terms."

"That's a good idea."

"You're going to be all right without me?" She handed back my tankard.

"I'll be fine. Go talk to Gus."

"Thanks, you're a good friend, Kat." She got to her feet, a surprised expression on her face when she locked eyes on someone. Maybe Gus had come back on his own. "I see why you're going to be all right now," she joked.

I twisted around to follow where she was looking, my gaze landing on Brew.

He raised his tankard in my direction, causing my heart to flutter like a fickle leaf in the wind and my feet acted on their own accord, carrying me to the man who was making me feel all sorts of unexpected things.

At least Carly had a mission of her own to go on, so I didn't feel too guilty about the fact I was leaving her on her own.

The fire only illuminated one side of Brew's face and made his jaw look even sharper than it already was. The glow of the flames was bringing out the red in his curls which were flattened for once instead of sticking up all over the place. I could tell he'd made an effort, but it did make him look a little less Brew.

"Hey," I said, pausing a few steps still between us, though it was harder not to close the distance than I expected it to be. "Your hair is different."

He reached up, touching it gingerly. "I tried to make it neat. Did it work?"

"Sort of." I stepped forward, very aware of the heat radiating from him now that we were closer together. I reached up and brushed a rebellious strand on his forehead out of the way. "There, now it's neat." My words came out as more of a whisper than I wanted them to.

For a moment, the firelight made it seem as if Brew was blushing, but he hid it behind his tankard. "How's Oliver's neck?"

"My dumb brother is fine." I sighed in exasperation. "I don't know what he was thinking, letting Howie land on his head. He's going to give wards a bad name."

That made Brew chuckle. "No, never. Everyone knows how awesome you and Banjo are. Speaking of, where is he? I have treats in my pocket that won't eat themselves."

"He's at home, he's not the smartest when it comes to staying safe when the fire's going." And there was a part of me that didn't want to be distracted while getting to the bottom of whatever it was lingering between the two of us. "Why do you always have treats in your pockets? Do you love jerky that much?"

"Oh. No, I carry them around for Banjo." This time, Brew was definitely blushing. "I told you, he's my favourite familiar. I want him to like me."

My breath caught in my throat. Of all the reasons I'd ever considered for the amount of jerky Brew carried around in his pocket, I'd never once thought that he was doing it because of my dog.

Because of me .

I didn't think I'd ever heard of anything more endearing. No wonder my heart was racing whenever Brew looked at me, he'd been showing me how much he cared in dozens of small ways that I'd never even noticed, and not expecting anything in return. I suspected that if he hadn't confessed to me outside the tavern, and I hadn't asked him what he'd meant, I could have gone my whole life without knowing about whatever this was between us.

It was a miracle that I'd never been affected by him before, because now that I was caught by his charm, I couldn't look at him without picturing him in ways I'd never seen him before.

Or maybe I was finally really looking at him and not the face he showed the world.

I touched his arm, an intense feeling crossing over me at the contact. Had I truly been this blind to everything between us? "The fire is getting a bit big. Want to go for a walk?"

He nodded. "Sure, lead the way."

We made our way past the brewer's stand so we could drop our tankards into the empties bin he provided. He'd take them home to wash before the next even, but only if everyone returned them like they were supposed to.

I gestured in the vague direction of the farm, not that it really mattered to me where we were walking. This wasn't about going anywhere specific, I just needed to get away from everyone we knew and the chance that someone was going to start asking us questions about what we were to one another before we got a chance to work it out ourselves.

And that was especially true considering that our families wouldn't be best pleased. They were always telling us about the careful balance between the four families who kept Purple Oak running, and how we couldn't do anything to upset that balance. But then again, if they didn't want us to develop feelings for one another, then they shouldn't expect us to spend so much time together. It wasn't even like Brew and I would be the first. Reese and Taz had a brief courtship a few years back that never went anywhere.

We strolled into the night, leaving the chatter and crowd behind us. I instantly felt the chill of the night without the bonfire's heat and Brew wrapped his scarf around me without saying anything.

"You're going to get cold," I said.

"Worth it," he returned, looking at me with that longing glint in his eyes again.

My stomach flip-flopped and I slipped my arm through his, bringing us closer together. "There. I'll share some of my warmth."

It was such a lame excuse but Brew looked pleased in a way I'd never seen before. I never doubted that he was genuine about his feelings but it was different experiencing it first-hand. And realising that this was nothing like the way he was when he was charming the other residents.

I breathed out. I was going to have to face this head-on if I was going to untangle the complicated web of feelings within me. "Brew? Why do you like me?"

He let out a soft hum. "I like everything about you. I admire how you worked through your parents' deaths, and how close you are with your brother. I like how much you love Banjo, and how you deal with the problems of the occupants of your land. You're responsible, but you always have time for a bit of mischief. And you're

confident. You'd never let anyone stand in the way of what you thought was right."

That was a much deeper answer than I expected. I thought he would say something lame about liking my eyes or my smile, something typical for a man trying to charm a woman.

Brew pulled me a little closer to him. "And I like your smile."

I snorted. "Of course, you do. I have a great smile."

He stopped in his tracks, his face illuminated by the silver moonlight. "You do. You're beautiful, Katie. Inside and out."

My heartbeat quickened and I wasn't even upset about it. The charm of Rooibos Brewster was too much even for me, and there was no reason to resist. Not when he was looking at me with such devotion.

I took a step closer to him and touched his chest. "If you're going to keep saying such sweet things, I might kiss you."

His lopsided grin brought a sparkle to his eyes and he bridged the gap with that signature confidence of his, not once wavering or hesitating.

But I supposed there was nothing to waver about. I was giving him signals loud and clear that I wanted this.

My eyes fluttered closed as his lips met mine. Everything around me became about Brew. His warmth and smell enveloped me, all grassy and sweet, and it made my head spin in the best way.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and deepened the kiss. His hand landed on the

small of my back, pulling me tighter against him so that warmth spread through me that was nothing to do with the temperature outside.

I broke the kiss and looked into his eyes, seeing a lot of the same things I was feeling reflected back at me. I didn't say anything, I merely leaned in and kissed him again, eager for more.

This was better than I could ever have imagined, and I was going to savour every moment.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 3:10 am

Katie

Banjo raced ahead of me excitedly as we arrived at Brewster Hall. I had no idea if he knew that we were specifically coming to see Brew, or if he was just excited at the prospect of being around any of the Brewsters.

I shifted the basket of eggs on my arm so that it carried easier, and checked that Brew's scarf wasn't going to fall out. This had to be the lamest excuse in the world to see Brew again. Still, I needed some explanation for visiting unannounced that wouldn't raise any suspicion in case any of the others were around and asked questions.

I let myself in through a side entrance like I always did and rang the old cowbell to announce my presence. If I was lucky, Brew would be the one to greet me first. If I was unlucky, it would be Mrs Brewster. As much as I admired her, I did not want to run into her while I was trying to have a secret dalliance with her son. That would be too awkward.

The door opened and to my relief, it was Brew who stepped into the room. His face lit up right away and made his eyes crinkle. "Katie. Hi."

Banjo raced up to him and said hello with all of his paws.

Brew chuckled and crouched down to fuss him. "Hello, Mr Strings, it's good to see you."

A low happy rumble came from my dog in response, making me smile.

"What are you doing here?" Brew asked, looking up at me with a curious expression on his face.

I showed him the basket of eggs. "The chickens were very productive this morning. I was bringing some over for your family."

It was a total lie. Especially because Oliver had lost all of the eggs in a bet with Hana Steeper not that long ago, so we didn't really have any to spare but here I was anyway. But the chickens would lay more tomorrow.

I also presented him with his scarf. "And your scarf from, umm, the other night."

He stepped closer to accept the garment, his gaze fixed on me. His smile twisted his lips up as he paused only one step away. "You beat me to it, I was going to come fetch that later since I don't have eggs to bring over."

Heat rushed up to my ears. I should have known he'd seen through my egg excuse. I would be embarrassed except that it was clear he was happy to see me.

"Care for some tea?" he asked, gesturing further into the house.

I hesitated, not sure if I was ready to face the rest of his family. There was coming to the door with eggs to see Brew, and there was being caught in his kitchen together.

"Everyone else is out," he assured me.

"Oh." I unwound my scarf. "Then I suppose a cup of tea won't hurt."

The expression on his face suggested that he knew I wasn't actually talking about tea.

I followed him through to the kitchen, not that I needed a guide. I'd spent enough of

my childhood years running through these walls. I was fairly sure some of the dents in the door frames were my fault.

Brew held the door to the kitchen open for me like a true gentleman. "I would say welcome to my humble abode but we both know there's nothing humble about our homes."

I couldn't help but laugh. This was one of the things I'd always liked about him, how down-to-earth he was. He knew just how privileged we were growing up as children of the four families, but it never went to his head. Instead, he made sure to pay back his luck tenfold to the people who relied on us. Like giving his coat to the boy in the infirmary. No one would have blamed him if he hadn't done it. They likely wouldn't have thought anything of it. But that wasn't Brew, he'd wanted to care for people for as long as I could remember.

Banjo raced past us both and sniffed around the room as if looking for something.

"There's a raw bone for you," Brew said, reaching into a pot and pulling it out. "Mum was going to use it to make stock, but we won't tell her what happened to it, will we?"

My dog sat down in front of Brew, perfectly still except for the uncontrollable tremor of excitement. Brew gave him the bone and he raced over to the hearth, sitting down so he could chomp on it happily.

I put my eggs on the side, deciding to leave the basket. That would give me a new excuse to swing by Brewster Hall if I needed it.

Brew filled a kettle with water and set it on the stove. "Won't be long."

An awkward silence filled the kitchen while Brew fumbled around, getting mugs from the cupboard and fussing over the boiling kettle. It was quite a miracle that my

sheer presence had managed to silence the loud and boisterous Rooibos Brewster.

A laugh escaped me and I quickly covered my mouth, not wanting him to think that I was laughing at him when really it was the situation. "You don't have to be nervous around me."

Brew slumped against the counter. "Sorry. I don't know how to behave."

"You didn't have a problem at the bonfire."

He ran a hand through his curls. "I just want to do this right."

As if he couldn't get more endearing. On my way over here, I'd been wondering if this was a fun little fling for him or if he was serious. Everything he'd said suggested the latter, but there was a part of me that still doubted it. Probably the part that had known him for so long and seen him flirt and charm his way through Purple Oak. His reaction to me meant that I no longer had to wonder, I could read the genuine intent on his face clear as day.

The kettle came to a whistling boil and he poured the water into the teapot he prepared. He did it with practised ease, the muscles in his forearm tensing slightly from the motion. Steam rose up from the pot, carrying the scent of the leaves. The smell of grass and tea filled the room and it was like being hugged by Brew all over again, answering a question I didn't know I had about where it came from.

"Smells nice." I crossed the distance so I could smell the tea. I didn't have it often. Tea was expensive, especially as it was mostly bought from outside the settlement. And as I wasn't a tea witch, I had even less of a reason to drink it.

Brew gave me a funny look. "Katie..."

I stared up at him. "Yes?"

He brushed a strand of my hair behind my ear, a tender gesture. "I'm glad to see you. I've been thinking about you."

There was that forwardness and bluntness I liked so much about him. For someone who could turn anything into a joke, there was no beating around the bush, no playing games. He wanted me and there was no denying it.

I slipped my arm around him, marvelling at how easy it was to change from being friendly to more intense. "Then we've been in each other's thoughts."

He looked so ridiculously happy about it, it made his eyes sparkle. I reached for his face and traced his jaw, touching the slight stubble that I'd been looking at. He lowered his head, his lips parted slightly as he captured me in a soft kiss.

Butterflies rose in my stomach and my whole body felt like electricity was running through it. It tingled and tickled in a way that I hadn't experienced with anyone else before.

A loud sound made us jolt apart, just in time as the door swung open. Jasmine came through it, surprise appearing on her face when she noticed me. "Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Katie brought eggs!" Brew shouted, almost knocking the teapot off the side.

Jasmine looked at me and shrugged. "Thanks, we could use some more."

"Mmhmm." I touched my lips.

"Brew, I was actually looking for you," she said.

"I was on my way out anyway," I lied, eager to get away before Jasmine figured out exactly what she just walked in on.

"Actually, I wouldn't mind your input too, if that's all right?"

"Oh, sure. Brew just made some tea."

She frowned and looked between us. "Why did he make tea if you were about to leave?"

I looked at Brew, a little panicked.

"I was confused about what Katie said," he lied. "There's enough for three."

"Tea is good," Jasmine said, pulling out one of the chairs at the table. "I wanted to ask you about the dryads delegation from Grower's Cove. They're coming here, but Grey and I can't agree on what sort of gifts we need to make sure they have, both here, and for them to take back home with them."

"Gifts?" I prompted, going to take a seat opposite her. Brew handed me a teacup, his fingers brushing against mine as he did and making me feel all kinds of tingly in response. It would probably be best if we didn't touch while members of his family were in the room. I cleared my throat. "I thought we wanted to establish a trade alliance."

She nodded. "We do, but I heard that the leader of Grower's Cove is notoriously hard to impress and negotiate with. Some offerings might smooth out the process."

Brew frowned as he joined us. "Didn't they approach us? Shouldn't they present us with gifts?"

Jasmine let out a long sigh. "You would think. I want to give them some leather and dried meat since we have a lot of livestock. Grey wants to bring them some flour, but I think that could be insulting since they probably grow their own wheat."

I pondered over her question before replying. "What if you had both ready and when you take them on a tour of the Millers' mill, you can ask if they have one themselves? If they don't, you can offer them the flour, but if they do, you know not to." It might not be the right response, but it felt like it could strike the right balance between what the two of them wanted. I imagined it was tough trying to work together, though I didn't know how well Jasmine and Grey actually knew one another.

"That's a great idea. Thanks." She took a sip of her tea and leaned back in her seat, seeming a lot lighter than she had a few moments ago. "So, this is finally happening then? You two are together?"

Brew choked on his tea. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, it's still a secret then? Don't worry, I won't tell anyone." Jasmine smiled reassuringly at me. "I'll leave you to it then. Never mind me. Thanks for the advice, Katie."

She got up and left the room, taking her tea with her and leaving the two of us alone, save for Banjo. But he was too busy with his bone to care about the current conversation.

I stared after her. I really thought we would've been able to keep this between us for a lot longer. "Will she actually keep it quiet?" I asked Brew.

"I assume so, but we're going to owe her big time."

"Mmm." I looked down at my tea. "Maybe we should aim to be somewhere more

private and with less chance of a sibling walking in next time we want to kiss."

"What are you suggesting?"

I sighed and rubbed a hand over my face. "I have no idea."

"I could climb through your bedroom window," he suggested, a cheeky expression on his face.

"You can't do that."

"Can't I?" He grinned. "I believe that's a challenge I'm going to have to accept."

"Brew..."

"Katie," he responded somewhat sternly. "Just leave it unlatched for me."

I shook my head, mostly amused that he was even thinking of trying that. "All right. Fine, if you want to climb through my window, be my guest."

"Don't think I won't, Kitty-Kat."

I laughed, mostly because I knew that was exactly what he was going to do. Rooibos Brewster would never have it known that he backed down from a challenge, even if we were the only people who knew it had been made.

Katie

My back ached from a long day out in the bitter cold, and I couldn't wait to get into bed and finally rest. I flopped down onto it, with Banjo seizing the opportunity to jump up with me.

"Hey, get your muddy paws off of that," I chided, trying to rescue my blanket before it became necessary for me to spend half a day in the laundry room.

He gave me the saddest eyes of betrayal and I gave up on my attempts to save my bedding. We did this every evening and I never won, I didn't know why I was even trying at this point. He let out a happy rumble and buried his face into the folds of the blanket, his tail wagging while he took up most of the bed.

I stroked his head, enjoying the way it made the magic inside of me glow. There was nothing quite like being recharged by the love of my familiar, and I wouldn't be able to work such long days without Banjo by my side.

"You're a good boy," I said, scratching the base of his tail. It was his favourite place for getting scratches, and I loved being able to give that to him.

Something thudded against my window but I ignored it, writing it off as the start of heavy rain or a lost bat or bird. The noise sounded again, and I remembered the challenge Brew had set himself.

Maybe it wasn't a bird after all.

I got up from the bed and Banjo instantly shuffled to take up my space. He did it with his eyes closed too, as if that would trick me into believing he did it in his sleep. I knew better, but I was also far too curious about whether Brew was keeping his promise.

I opened the latches and the cold wind blew the window open. I shivered as I looked out, surprised to find Brew standing at the bottom with a goofy grin on his face.

"What are you doing there?" I called down, worried that someone might see him. Luckily, Grandpa Jon was likely already asleep and Oliver's training grounds were on the other side of the house.

Brew waved. "I came to see you. Come down!"

"Are you already admitting failure?" I teased.

"Absolutely not." He reached up and used the overgrown ivy and ledges on the side of the house to climb his way up. It was a good thing my bedroom was only on the first floor because it looked dangerous and I was already starting to regret the challenge I accidentally made.

I reached out to him and pulled him in through the window before he fell. Banjo looked up but didn't move from his position on the bed. Instead, he wagged his tail when he saw it was Brew.

Rubbish guard dog.

"You could have used the door," I said. "I was only joking when I said you could climb through my window, you could have hurt yourself."

Brew shrugged, sitting up. "You said to come up so that's what I did. And I didn't

want to rouse suspicion."

I snorted. There were definitely some holes in his logic. "I think a strange figure climbing in through my window is a lot more suspicious than you walking in through the front door. You're here all the time."

"Oh, right." He chuckled sheepishly. "Hadn't thought of that."

Amused, I leaned in so I could kiss him. His lips were cold which made me wonder how long he'd been out there and what he would've done if I hadn't opened my window. His arms wrapped around my waist and he pulled me down to join him. His lips moved against mine as he returned my kiss with such intensity that it took my breath away. It hadn't been that long since we saw each other but I'd missed him.

I never would've imagined that I would be so infatuated with Rooibos Brewster, but the evidence was right here, making my heart pound and setting my body on fire. His tongue flicked against my bottom lip, and my pulse quickened as I melted into his embrace. I pulled him closer by the back of his neck and he groaned, his eyes darkening.

"That's not what I came here for but I'm not complaining," Brew murmured against my lips, his voice lower than usual.

I shifted in his lap, pleased to feel how much my kiss had affected him. He groaned when I moved again and looked almost apologetic. If only he knew how much I didn't mind it. I liked that I was doing this to him.

"What did you come here for then?" My voice was hoarse from the kiss, making me sound more sultry than I intended to.

"I wanted to ask if I could take you on a secret date," he said, his hands sliding down

to the small of my back.

I kissed him softly. "I would. When?"

"The day after tomorrow? I have the early shift, so we could go for dinner, or a walk, or something else. Anything you want, I just want to spend time with you."

He was so damn earnest, it was impossible not to be charmed.

"I look forward to it." I moved in his lap, pleased when it caused him to groan again. Maybe it was a good thing he'd kept his promise and climbed through my window, because he wasn't the only one affected by how close the two of us were.

I pressed my lips against his, kissing him deeply as I trailed my hand down his arm. I wanted to move it under his shirt, but I wasn't sure how he'd respond to that. Or I did, but I wasn't sure if he really wanted that.

"Katie," he murmured against my lips.

"Mmm?"

He broke away from me and started peppering kisses across my throat, each one leaving a tiny trail of fire in its wake. "You don't know what you're doing to me," he murmured.

"Oh, I do," I responded, shifting on his lap.

He leaned his head against my shoulder, his breathing shallow.

I pulled back so I could look at him properly. I cupped his cheek in my hand, making sure I met his gaze so he could see that I meant what I said. I wanted him, he needed

to know that.

I leaned in to kiss him, but a knock on the door made us both freeze.

"Katie?" Oliver's voice carried through the door and he knocked again.

I groaned. "Seriously?" I muttered.

"What's he want?" Brew asked.

"No idea." I cleared my throat. "Just a moment!" I shouted back, jumping up and almost kneeing Brew somewhere delicate.

A panicked expression crossed his face and he headed to the window, but I reached out and grabbed him before he could.

"You'll break your neck," I whispered hastily. "Just hide." I pushed him towards my changing screen, assuming that would be safe from Oliver's scrutiny.

"Is everything all right in there?" my brother called.

"Fine." I winced at how high and un-fine my voice sounded. I smoothed down my clothing, relieved that I wasn't Brew right now and didn't have something else to hide. Satisfied that I was in a reasonable state that didn't make it look like I'd just been about to undress my brother's best friend, I made my way over to the bed and sat down, patting Banjo. "Come in."

The door shrieked open and Oliver came in with a sheepish smile. "Did I wake you?"

"No, I was just getting ready for bed." Technically, that wasn't a lie, though it hadn't been for sleep. "What do you want?"

"I need some help. Advice. I wanted to ask Brew but I haven't seen him in a few days. Not sure what's going on with him."

I glanced at my changing screen, knowing exactly why Brew had been avoiding Oliver. It was my fault so the least I could do was help my brother.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

Oliver patted Banjo's head before sitting down in the only chair in the room. "If you knew something was wrong, but you really wanted it, would you do it?"

I suddenly felt very hot and bothered, but not in the same way I had a few moments ago. "What do you mean?"

"So I have a friend and he's caught feelings for the wrong person. He knows people wouldn't approve of the relationship and that it might complicate things. Should he still go through with it?" Oliver asked.

"And this is about a friend of yours?" My voice shook and I resisted the urge to look back at the changing screen. Had Brew talked to Oliver about me without telling him it was me he was talking about? That didn't seem likely, but it was one of the only explanations I could come up with.

Oliver sighed. "Fine. You always see right through me. It's about me."

Relief rushed through me, and I felt my whole body relax. "Oh, thank goodness."

"What?"

"Nothing. I'm just relieved. Excited, I mean. You've got feelings for someone?" I wanted to ask who but I didn't really want to fall down that rabbit hole because my

secret was standing three feet away behind a flimsy partition.

"Someone I shouldn't have feelings for," Oliver muttered.

"I think you should follow your heart," I said, letting my statement hang in the room.

"So you would put your heart over your duty?"

I gulped, realising that somewhere along the line, I'd actually decided that was the case. "Yes. Now if that's all, I'm actually really tired."

"Of course. Thanks for the advice, Katie. You're the best sister anyone could have." He patted my head the same way he patted Banjo's and left the room.

I was so not a good sister.

The moment he was out of the room, I put on the latch and leaned back against the door. I closed my eyes and let out a loud sigh.

"We have to tell him, don't we?" Brew asked as he stepped out from behind the changing screen.

I nodded. "If he's already figured out you're avoiding him, and he's also starting to get feelings for someone, then it's for the best. Even if that does sound like an awkward conversation."

"I can do it," he offered. "I should do it, I'm the one crossing a line."

I snorted. "Hardly. We're both responsible." I pushed away from the door and made my way over to him. I wrapped my arms around his neck. "Unless you're not interested in something serious enough to tell my brother about."

"Oh, I am," he responded. "You're my future, Katie. Just you."

My mouth went dry and I waited for panic to set in, but it didn't. Being with him felt right, and that included a potential future together. "All right, talk to him. And soon, because I'd much rather not feel guilty every time I kiss you."

"I'll talk to him tomorrow," Brew promised.

"Thank you. And if you can get him to admit to who he's got feelings for, I really want to know now," I joked.

"There's only really one candidate," he said.

"You?" I joked, only for dread to rise up in me. "It better not be you. That would be awkward."

He chuckled nervously. "I don't believe so. I'd put my bet on it being Hana Steeper."

"Ooh." The pieces fell into place. "He did take her eggs last week."

Brew raised an eyebrow. "Like you did?"

"Oliver is actually who gave me the idea," I admitted sheepishly. "He said he lost them to Hana in a bet, but if he was using them as an excuse to see her, that makes a lot more sense."

"It does. But I don't want to talk about Hana and Oliver right now," Brew said.

"Hmm, and what do you want to talk about?" I murmured.

"How much I want to carry on what we started, but that we're going to wait until after

I've talked to your brother," he murmured.

"I hope another kiss isn't off the table."

"You know it isn't." He leaned in and brushed his lips against mine in a tender kiss that conveyed the truth behind everything he'd said to me before. He was serious about us, and there would be no going back now that we'd seen what we could be together.

Not that I wanted there to be. Every part of me knew that this was right, and I intended to listen to myself.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 3:10 am

Brew

I finished wiping down the surfaces of my examination room and took a moment to refresh myself from the cup of tea sitting waiting for me. I hoped nothing too serious was going to come through my door today because I was close to the end of my rations.

Jasmine and Grey had better be successful with their negotiations with Grower's Cove. We needed a steadier supply of tea coming into Purple Oak, and the infirmary in particular.

I stepped into the waiting room to see my next patient and found Oliver waiting in one of the seats. Nerves tingled through me as I approached my best friend, something I hadn't felt since I accidentally broke one of his toys when I was twelve.

"Hey, Oliver," I said, glad that my voice wasn't shaking. "More bird trouble?"

He held up his arms which were covered in scratches. "I'm going to figure it out one of these days."

I patted him on the back. "I'm sure you will. Let me take care of that for now." I wanted to suggest that he used a falconer's glove, at least until Howie gained a little more control over his talons. It was kind of irresponsible for him to be using up so many resources because he couldn't get on with his owl.

But considering I needed to fess up about my feelings for his sister, I chose to keep my mouth shut.

I led him into my treatment room and he hopped up onto the bed without being asked. I looked at my teapot and debated whether I needed more for what was ahead of me, but I decided against it.

I took a deep breath and considered the best way to approach this. My nerves were making my hands shake despite the tea I'd already drunk, and they weren't helped by the fact I had no idea how Oliver was going to react. He was normally even-tempered, but he was protective over Katie, and for good reason.

At least we were already in the infirmary if he decided to take it out on my face.

I sat down in front of him and put my hands on his arms. Magic pulled through my veins, filling me with a warm glow that only ever came from the healing magic of tea. I directed it to his wounds and a green glow started to form there. I'd done it a few times by now so I didn't need to hum the song that included the right rhythm. Which meant that it was now time for me to do what I needed to and confess.

"Oliver..." I kept my eyes on his arms, just to make sure I didn't make any mistakes. "I need to tell you something."

"That sounds serious," he said.

I took a deep breath. "It is." I searched for the right words, not sure how to broach this subject. I could always blurt it out but that didn't seem like the most tactful approach. "I've fallen in love," I said eventually.

He raised an eyebrow. "Well, well, well, I never thought I'd hear you say that," Oliver said, his voice tinted with amusement. "Go on, my friend. Tell me more. Who captured the heart of the most eligible bachelor Rooibos Brewster?"

This was torture.

"Katie," I said, unable to look at him.

Oliver chuckled. "Katie who?"

"Katie," I repeated, finally looking up at him. "Fields."

His smile fell away and he stared at me, too stunned to speak. After a while, he cleared his throat and nodded. "I see."

I focused on healing his wounds while I waited for him to say more. I had no doubt that it was coming. I had siblings, and even though I knew Oliver was a great guy, I'd still have questions I wanted to ask if I discovered he was in love with Jasmine or Earl.

"Have you told her?" he asked slowly. "Does she feel the same?"

I swallowed hard. "I think so? I hope so. Before you get mad, I promise I did my best to stay away from her." I took a shaky breath. "I never meant to pursue her. I thought she wasn't interested in me at all but when I found out she was, I couldn't help myself."

"Hmm."

I closed my eyes and tried not to worry too much about losing my best friend over this. Oliver was a good guy, and he knew that I was too. He wasn't about to cut me off just because I'd fallen for Katie.

"The heart wants what the heart wants, that sort of thing?" Oliver asked cautiously.

"Yes!" I let go of his arms, my magic and energy entirely depleted. "I don't know how this happened or why she even likes me but I'm kind of over the moon and I

really hope you're happy for us."

Oliver sat in silence for a bit and I could tell his mind was breaking. After a while, he just nodded. "I mean, it's not my place to tell either of you what you can or can't do. I just hope you're not going to have wandering eyes or hands."

"I've not looked at another woman in years," I said, only realising what I'd just admitted.

He frowned. "Just how long have you been pining for my sister?"

I sighed. "Years. It's been hard."

"As your friend, I feel for you. As Katie's brother, I'm not impressed." Oliver pulled a disappointed face that made him look like his grandfather. "I guess you can't control who you fall in love with."

Ah. Of course. He was having trouble with that himself. Though I wasn't supposed to know about that because he had no idea I was in the room when he'd told Katie.

I clapped him on his back, hoping to shift the attention away from me. "Right, I heard you were interested in someone."

Oliver narrowed his eyes at me. "How do you know that? Did Katie tell you?"

I let out an unusually high squeak. Probably should have thought this though. "Yes, she did."

As much as I liked being honest and telling the truth, I didn't think Oliver needed to know that I'd been hiding in Katie's room. I didn't want to get my eyes scratched out even if nothing happened between us beyond a couple of heated kisses.

Oliver gave me a weird look but didn't say anything. "So what made you go for Katie even though you know you shouldn't?"

"She let me and I hoped you'd forgive me eventually," I replied honestly. It wasn't exactly a good plan but that was the one I had.

He gave me a pensive look. "What about the families? My grandpa can't be the only one who harps on about balance."

I groaned. "No, Mum talks about it a lot as well. I hadn't thought that far ahead and it's not like they can force us apart. I'll love who I want to love."

"You're really in love with my sister?" he checked.

I got up from my seat, pretending I needed to tend to the kettle and tea. It was far too early to talk about things like love but that didn't mean my heart wasn't heading that way.

"It's too early for that," I said while I cleaned my cup. "We're having our first official date tonight."

Oliver hummed. "I think I'll wish you good luck then but I don't want to hear how it goes."

"Fair." I pointed at him. "If you ever want to date one of my siblings, I give you my blessing. As long as they're willing."

He chuckled. "Thanks but I've got my eye on someone else."

"Yeah, what was their name again?" I asked, realising that with everything going on, I hadn't even asked.

Oliver hopped off the bed and gave me a grin. "I didn't say."

"You're not going to tell me?"

"You harboured secret feelings for my sister for years," he responded.

"Fair enough." There was a part of me that wanted to ask him if it was Hana, but I knew better than to push my luck. I stepped out of his way and took off my imaginary hat. "Good day to you, sir."

For the first time since Oliver got here, he smiled. He took a few paces, turned around and nodded. "Be good to her."

"I will," I promised.

"You'd better, or I'll set my attack owl on you."

I chuckled dryly. "I wouldn't want to mess with Howie, I've seen the damage he can cause."

"Just remember that," he said in what I was reasonably certain was supposed to be a menacing tone.

I nodded and said my goodbyes to him, relieved over how the confession could have gone. It really could have been worse. But the most important thing was that now Katie and I could enjoy our date completely guilt-free.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 3:10 am

Katie

There was something exciting and naughty about sneaking out at night even though nobody would've thought twice about me leaving through the front door. Despite still living at the farmhouse I grew up in, it wasn't like Grandpa or Oliver kept tabs on where I was going and who I was with. And even if they did, they weren't really going to think anything of me going to spend time with Brew.

Banjo followed me to the door with an expectant look on his face.

"Not tonight," I told my familiar. I gave him a good scratch and directed him back to his bed by the hearth.

He gave me a confused look but flopped down. It wasn't like he never stayed home alone, he was just trying his luck at a late-night walk. My heart ached at the sight. It was hard to leave him behind, even if I knew he was capable of it, but I wanted some alone time with Brew, and some of what I hoped was going to happen wasn't suitable for Banjo's eyes.

"I'll be back soon," I promised.

He whined, but finally let me go. I was going to have to get him a good bone from the butcher tomorrow to make up for leaving him.

A cold breeze blew around me as I walked through the fields, but there was no doubt it was a beautiful night. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and all the stars were on full display, shining in the sky like gems.

With every step, I could feel the excitement in me grow. I was going on a date with Rooibos Brewster. I had no idea what we were doing but I had some hopes, and I was looking forward to it no matter what.

I arrived at the gate where Brew was already waiting for me. His hair was flattened again and he was carrying a big basket with him. A smile sprung to his face when he saw me and he let out a breath of white air. How had I never noticed how handsome he was? Or how happy I always was to see him?

"Hey." I pressed my lips on his cheek.

He hugged me with one arm. "Hi. You made it."

"I wasn't going to miss it."

"No Banjo?"

I shook my head. "I left him at home. I didn't want him to get in the way if..." Heat rushed up to my face and I pointed at the basket, eager to change the subject. "What's this?"

"I heard there's supposed to be some falling stars this week, I thought we could have a picnic and see if we could spot any," he said as he opened the gate for me. "They say that it's good luck to see them with someone."

I smiled at the thought. "That sounds really nice. Cold, but nice."

"I brought tea. And lots of blankets," he said, gesturing to the spot he had prepared.

True to his word, there were blankets stacked on top of pallets. He even brought some pillows in a wheelbarrow and extra scarves.

"You thought of everything," I said, already melting inside. This was the most effort anyone had put into a date before it had even started.

Brew held out his hand and we sat down on the pallet. I tucked myself under the blankets, making sure there was enough room for Brew to slide in. He handed me a cup of hot tea that warmed me from the first sip. It was cosy, intimate, and perfect.

I leaned my head against his shoulder as we looked up at the stars. "Do you know any of them?" I asked.

"Not really," he admitted. "I did go to the library to see if there was a book I could borrow, but that place is a mess, I'd be surprised if there even is one."

"Mmm, maybe we should hire someone to actually look after it," I said. "Maybe an ink mage?"

"Maybe. But we're not supposed to talk about family business while we're on a date," he said.

"That's a good rule," I agreed. "But one thing before we do. Oliver."

"Ah, yes. I talked to him earlier. I thought he was going to set Howie on me for a moment, but he understood."

I let out a relieved sigh. "That's good." I shuffled closer to him and put a hand on his chest, feeling it rise and fall as he breathed.

It was strangely comfortable to be here with him. Or maybe it wasn't strange at all. I'd known Brew for years, and that included knowing that he was a good guy, even if he did charm everyone.

"I have another question," I said cautiously.

"Mmm?"

"The people you flirt with..."

"I'm not really flirting with them," he pointed out. "They flirt with me, I'm polite back. Believe me, I only have eyes for one person."

I swallowed hard. "Good. Because I don't think I'd be able to deal with it otherwise."

"Jealous, Katie?"

"Yes and no."

He chuckled. "You've no need to be," he promised. "You're everything I need."

My breath caught in my throat. "You really believe that, don't you?"

"Absolutely."

"I can tell." I touched the blanket lying over us. "This is the perfect date."

He looked at me, his face silver from the moonlight. "I wanted to make sure we had a great time."

"I am. You're so sweet." I touched the side of his face. "You know you don't have to keep flattening your hair for me? I love the way your curls look." I ran my hand through his hair, teasing the strands and enjoying how close it made me feel to him.

"You do?" He grimaced. "I always thought they looked messy."

"They're carefree, like you. And I happen to really like you." I leaned in to give him a gentle kiss, delighted by how warm his mouth was. He tasted of tea and honey and promise.

His hand touched my hip. "I really like you too."

I pulled him closer to me but it wasn't for warmth this time. I wanted to feel him, wanted to know if his heartbeat was going as fast as mine. He locked eyes with me and touched my cheek before capturing me in a deep kiss.

I returned it instantly, showing him that I wanted this just as much as he did. The blanket fell away but I didn't feel cold anymore. There was a burning heat in my lower belly that was spreading through my whole body.

"Katie. Oh, Katie." He nipped at my bottom lip. "You're driving me crazy."

I placed my hand on his thigh and moved it upwards. "Good, that's what I want."

He groaned and twitched from my touch, even with layers of fabric between us. A tingle of excitement travelled through my body and ignited something within me that wouldn't be easy to quell. The only thing that could satisfy me was Brew.

He kissed my neck and my wrists, worshipping every bit of exposed skin. I wrestled out of my coat, desperate to feel his lips in other places. He realised what I was doing and shifted so that he could move my coat away, his own joining it.

I sat up, taking the opportunity to straddle him, pressing my body against his and searching for more of the connection between us. I captured his lips with mine and kissed him with barely restrained passion. I wanted him more than I'd ever wanted anyone before, and I didn't care if he knew it.

In fact, I wanted him to know it, because only he'd be able to satisfy me.

I moaned into his mouth as his hands slid under my shirt and touched the sensitive skin of my stomach. His fingers were cold, slightly rough to the touch, and set my body on fire. I shivered as he grazed my nipple and ground against his lap.

His throaty moan made me quiver and I moved again, pleased when it evoked the same reaction. I was quickly becoming breathless and I wanted him to feel the same way. I reached between us and fumbled with his buttons until I could touch him.

He gasped and grew even harder. The look on his face was adorable, so dazed and yet present. He kissed me passionately while I teased him until he pulled my hand away.

"Pause or it's going to be over soon." He kissed my lips hungrily. "I'm not done with you yet."

His hand snuck between my legs and he pressed it exactly where I was aching for him. A groan escaped me and I muffled it in his neck, which made him breathe harder. His fingers moved at a steady rhythm until I couldn't take it anymore. I got up from his lap and undid my belt with shaky hands. The cold wind only made my body more reactive as I stripped off my clothes.

Brew's eyes widened and a small smile quirked his lips up as he admired me. He practically threw off his shirt and pulled me back onto him with desperation. I guided him into me, moaning in delight when he thrust upwards.

I didn't know if this was all chance or if we'd been inevitable from the start but it was exactly right. Brew and me, me and Brew. I hoped this would never end.

I kissed him with all my might, grateful that the universe had brought us together and planning to make the most of every moment.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 3:10 am

Katie

Banjo barked and scratched at the door, desperate to get out for our morning walk. I rolled my eyes as I pulled my boots on, something I was clearly doing far too slow for my familiar's taste. He could be an impatient dog at times, but I loved him even then.

He nudged me in the side and looked longingly at the door, as if it would magically open if he stared hard enough.

"You were never like this when it was just you and me," I chided him. At least he was excited about the change in our morning routine. I couldn't blame him for that, I liked it too.

I opened the door and Banjo raced out, leaving a trail of perfect footprints in the fresh snow, making it easy to see where he'd gone. The falling snow collected on his fur as he raced to the figure waiting for us at the end of the path. Sometimes, it seemed like Banjo was the happiest out of us all about this new relationship. Though that was only because he only really communicated joy and impatience.

With a smile, I left the farmhouse, shutting the heavy wooden door behind me, and made my way over to Brew. Snow had settled on his curls as well and I dusted it off, although it was mostly an excuse to touch him. With how fast the snowflakes were falling, his head would be covered again in no time.

He glanced around and stole a quick kiss. "Good morning, Katie."

I kissed him back, taking advantage of the early darkness. "Good morning."

Banjo barked too and pressed his snout against Brew's pocket.

"He's becoming very demanding," Brew joked as he pulled a piece of jerky out. "Do you want this, Mr Strings?"

I couldn't help but smile and watch with affection. It was so precious how he treated my familiar, I would never tire of it.

We set in motion and Brew kept me company for the first part of my patrol which was always devoid of people. It was my favourite part of the day, some quiet and private moments for just us.

I slipped my hand into his, enjoying the warmth even through our gloves. Banjo continued to bounce along up ahead, trying to catch the falling snow and then being surprised when it melted as soon as he caught it.

"Did Jasmine say when the dryad envoy was arriving?" I asked.

"A couple of weeks, I think," Brew responded. "And then we're going to have to be on our best behaviour."

I laughed. "All right, so you're going to have to climb through my bedroom window again instead of taking me to empty fields," I teased.

"I'd take you anywhere," he joked.

My cheeks heated at the insinuation, but there was no word of a lie in it. "At least Oliver is covering for us. It would be a lot harder if he wasn't."

"He's probably hoping we'll do the same when he finally asks Hana on a date."

"Do you think he's going to?" Even though it had been a couple of weeks since my brother had told us about his feelings for her, he didn't seem to have done anything about it yet.

"It's only a matter of time. It was for us," he said.

"Mmm, true."

We reached the second fork in the road, and disappointment flooded through me, just like it did every time I had to part ways with Brew. I checked around to make sure there was nobody around before giving him a quick kiss.

He smiled and savoured it. "One of these days, we should tell the families about us so we can stop sneaking around."

I nodded. "We should. I don't want this to be a secret forever but right now, I'm enjoying being Kate and Brew instead of Katheryn and Rooibos."

"I know. I'm sure they'll take it just fine."

"It's not just the families I'm worried about. What will the single women of Purple Oak say when they hear that you're taken?" I teased.

Brew chuckled and took a step closer. "They'll get over it. I only have eyes for you."

"I know." I touched his face, lingering as long as I dared. "And I for you."

"Of course, I'm very handsome," he bragged, the light tone of his voice making it clear he was joking around.

I squeezed his hand. "I'll see you tonight, handsome ?"

"You will. Just one moment." He pulled me into him and nuzzled into my neck, inhaling deeply. When he let go, he looked even more in love. "That'll keep me going for the day."

He was so adorable, I couldn't understand how there'd been a time when I hadn't been in love with him. He was everything I'd ever wanted in a partner and I knew that our relationship was going to last, regardless if we had the approval of our families or not.

I waved until he was out of sight, amused by how Banjo kept following him. He didn't return until I whistled for him.

I fussed him between his ears. "I know, you want to spend more time with Brew. I'll let you in on a little secret. Me too."

Banjo cocked his head like he usually did when he was trying to work out what I was saying. I patted him, enjoying the boosts of energy I got from our magical bond.

"One day soon," I promised my dog, watching the departing figure of the man I loved. Our families were going to have to accept us, because there was no doubt in my mind that he was the one I wanted to have a family of my own with. And nothing anyone could say was going to change my mind about that.

* * *

Thank you for reading The Tea Witch's Promise , we hope you enjoyed it!