Heat Wave

by Plzplz

Summary

An unusually warm summer gives Poppy an idea to try and help Branch find happiness. Branch goes with it because how often does anybody’s crush just fall into their lap like this?

Set some time before the movie would take place.

Notes

This is the first thing I’ve written, please be kind and constructive with your criticism.
Chapter 1

“EVERYBODY GET TO THE POND NOW!”
“RUN! RUN!”
“THERE’S NO TIME TO LOSE!”
“YOU’RE NOT GONNA WANNA MISS THIS!”

Poppy and the snack pack tore through their forest village, inviting people en masse to a party. It was unusual for Poppy to be so casual about it, considering she was the most festive (and most papercraft inclined) troll around. But a heat wave changes more than just the temperature.

It was hot and muggy and generally uncomfortable. On top of that, it had been days since a good, refreshing breeze swept through to move along the stagnant, heavy air, and thus, it was impossible to focus on anything besides how incredibly hot and sluggish one felt. Never mind crafting invitations, or even staying indoors where Poppy kept her scrapbooking supplies. The good stuff, not just her on the go book. And paper. And scissors, glue, glitter, stickers, and ribbons.

So when Poppy and the gang decided to shake up the hot, exhausted, and rather put out troll village with a party, they opted for making it happen as quickly as possible rather than planning anything. One way or another, it was bound to be a good time. What was important right now was to put all their energy into setting the tone for the party. Dancing, yelling, singing, jumping, death defying acrobatic feats- anything to get folks invested.

It worked. Trolls perked up and moved with increasing enthusiasm. A party! A party is exactly what they needed. The villagers formed a happy mob and scrambled to follow the promises of fun, food, and swimming.

As the snack pack pied piper’d everybody to the pond, Poppy slowed her pace, allowing her to survey the throng of partygoers from a growing distance. Her wide smile shrank slightly as she set herself to the next task- collecting the one troll who lived outside the village. It would be a challenge, but she’d never not been up to it before.

“Poppy, love, come along! We can only do so much without your boundless energy.” Creek had turned and come back for her. In Poppy’s circle of close friends, Creek was the troll she spent the most one-on-one time with. She admired his calm nature and felt he was a good balance for her exuberance. She was fairly confident that he felt the same.

“I’ll be there soon, I just have to run and get-“

“Branch?” He let out in what most would call a huff, if spiritually enlightened people did that sort of thing.

“Yup! I really feel like today’s gonna be the day. You know when you just FEEL something! I FEEL it.” Poppy wasn’t entirely sure if she was saying that for Creek or herself, but it never hurts to be optimistic. She turned to skip away.

“I do respect your dedication to including everybody, but...” Creek took a deep breath and slowly let it out. “Maybe just today, conserve the energy you’d expend on him and just enjoy the party. He’s told us, well, mostly you, for years that he’s not interested. Let him keep his negativity to himself, and focus on the good things all around you. Right in front of you.” Creek held his hand out to poppy and smiled warmly.
Poppy turned back to Creek and put her smaller hand into his. “I wouldn’t be the troll you respect if I didn’t give everything my all. Go on to the party and I’ll- WE’LL- be there soon.” With a grin and a goofy finger guns gesture, she twirled away, bursting into song. Today would be the day that Branch saw the world through her cupcakes and rainbows lenses, she could feel it.

Branch knew about none of this. As temperatures climbed higher and higher, he spent more and more time in the cool bunker, only feeling slightly smug about his insulated home.

Well. Maybe not slightly smug. Pretty smug. But you can only be so smug when there’s nobody to be RIGHT in front of. He cared about his troll brethren and was sure they were figuring something out for their current discomfort, but come on. Had he not said before how SAFE and NICE and SAFE and did he mention SAFE underground life is? He had. So many times. And now here he was, cool and collected, while he was certain others were reconsidering subterranean life. Maybe.

Either way, he was as content as he could be while staying in and slowly eating into his emergency reserves. He had close to eight years worth of food, it’d be fine.

He had seven years and 322 days worth of food, it’d be fine.

He had seven years and 321 days worth of food, it’d be fine.

It’d be fine, but he wouldn’t mind getting back to gathering and prepping, just to be safe. It’s important to get out and get fresh air, too, even if that does mean running the risk of bumping into a boisterous, possibly obsessive, earnest, delightfully fuchsia, beautiful- ANNOYING. It’s important to get fresh air and not run out of food, and nothing else. End of the train of thought.

Branch busied himself with packing a bag. He’d go get SOMETHING done. You can only have so much silence before your mind starts playing tricks on you, this quick trip would help him reset. As he double checked the contents of his rucksack and polished off a light lunch, he grew more anxious to get out of the bunker. A little sunlight on his skin would be nice. It could almost be considered chilly in the bunker, really. A little heat would be a good thing.

He rose up the elevator shaft, stepped out from his not at all camouflaged welcome mat, and looked up to see and hear Poppy bounding directly into his personal space.

“BRANCH!” Poppy landed and beamed. “What timing! We’re throwing a party at the pond, you should come and-”

“Okay first off, hi, back up, how hard is it to remember ‘two or three or sixty arms lengths,’ and second, no, and third, good god, it’s horrible up here, how are you even moving right now?”

By the power of Greybeard, it was HOT. Why had he wanted to leave? It was hot and Poppy was so loud and so close and she was so very close and her hair looked so soft and she looked so pretty and even if it was loud, her voice was so pleasant, and-


Branch took a step back and a deep breath to regain his bearings. He put on a stern face to compensate for any less than stern thoughts he might have had. “No, that’s not like, how hot works. It’s not this miserable in the bunker. You’d know that if you’d been listening when I pitched the idea of moving the village underground last time.”
“You know that’s a terrible idea though. There’s not as much room for dancing!”

“It’s safer and you won’t melt in the event of a heat wave. In fact, you’d be pretty comfy. Now if you’ll excuse me princess, I have things to do. Things that are NOT happening anywhere near whatever party you’re throwing.” Branch gripped the straps of his rucksack and walked past Poppy, intending to ignore her until she left. He couldn’t relax around her, she was just too interesti-

ANNOYING.

“Nonononono, tell me about this comfy bunker. It’s comfy? That’s not a word I’d expect you to use all willy-nilly!” Poppy grabbed his shoulder and spun him around to face her, again putting herself right in his personal space, again throwing him off balance.

“Its- I- it’s just not hot. Underground. And when it’s cold out up here, it’s not as cold down there. It’s what it is. I’m going no-“

“Show me! Branch, please?”

Branch noted the almost imperceptible strain in her voice. And he paused, really noticing the trail-trails- of sweat down her face. It had crossed his mind before, but it WAS hot out. He was already sweating, probably entirely because of the heat and not his close proximity to anybody who makes his chest feel simultaneously too full and hollow at the same time. And he’d only been out for minutes.

Maybe... maybe Poppy needed a little time to cool down. And maybe if she could see the advantages of a bunker, it’d sell her (and then everybody else) on following his very smart and very safe lead. And maybe she’d smile at him and thank him and hug him and they could be neighbors.

“I, uh. Fine. Now stop touching me and just, go, come this way.” They stepped down into the opening of the bunker, and as he lowered them on the elevator, Branch took the opportunity to tell her as many rules as he could before she’d be in his home. “Don’t touch anything. Don’t open any doors, don’t go through my things, don’t touch ME, Poppy stop touching me, seriously, you’re all sweaty-“

Branch was already feeling like he’d made a terrible decision. Poppy was buzzing because today was most definitely going to be the day she connected with Branch.
Chapter 2

Branch was unhappy with himself. His anxiety soared as Poppy’s eyes scanned the room, her face uncharacteristically still.

“So this is it, huh? This is where the magic happens?” She stepped off the elevator and moved to look more closely at a bookshelf.

“It’s where my life happens, and don’t touch anything. Nothing is for you to touch besides the couch, which is over THERE.” Branch dropped his bag to the floor and groused as he watched Poppy pull a book down.

“Right, mm-hmm, I just. First off, WOW. You weren’t joking about it being cooler down here. Wow!” Poppy put the book back in the wrong spot and moved to another shelf, poking at jars and sprigs of dried herbs. “Like, it feels AMAZING. And second, it’s. Well. It’s definitely where I’d expect you to live. This place-” She turns to him and gesticulated to the room, “definitely has the Branch vibe. Practical. Quiet. Little bit boring, but in a good, solid way.” She smiled politely.

“Thanks.” He said flatly. “I’m so glad I invited you in so you could tell me I’m boring.” He donned an obviously fake smile. “Well Poppy, this has been fun, you should probably get to your party now, so let’s just move back on over to the elevator and-“

Poppy continued browsing through pretty much his entire life while he talked. His kitchen was cute. The little teapot was cute. “You drink tea?”

“Poppy.”

“It’s just so cool down here, I bet you like a warm cup of tea, yeah? It’d be so snuggly and nice.”

“You need to leave.”

“You’re being rude. You invited me in and you’re honestly going to toss me out without offering a single drink or snack?” She continued to casually pick through the room, not looking in his direction.

Branch pinched the bridge of his nose and recalled a monster from one of his horror books. Something about if you invite it into your home, it’s almost impossible to get it out? Something like that. “Go. Go sit down. I’ll make you one cup of tea, and then you have to go.” He moved into the kitchen area and put the kettle on.

Poppy, probably sensing that she was on thin ice, touched nothing and sat on his green and brown sofa. “Soooooooooo.”

Branch remained silent. As if an awkward silence could get him to talk. He was made of stone.

Poppy put her feet up, laid her head back over the arm of the couch, and folded her hands over her stomach, making herself comfortable. “Sooooo.” She was trying to get him to crack.

As Branch put together a tray to take over, he looked between two tea blends he’d been using lately. One had a deep, earthy flavor. He was certain that it was not to Poppy’s taste. She’d probably have a sip or two, politely ignore the rest, and then leave soon after. The other was fruity and almost sweet. He wondered if she’d ask for a second or even third cup. Wasn’t she supposed to be watching over her people? What kind of future queen slacks off on a party she probably put
together?

He picked a tea and got two cups going, then headed over to sit down by-

“Oh come on, I have the one couch and you’re going to take up all of it?”

“It wouldn’t kill you to add a chair or two for when you have company.”

“I don’t HAVE company. That’s not what I do.” Branch roughly set the tray down on the low table near Poppy. She sat up and shifted to make room for her host.

As Branch grumbled and settled in next to Poppy, his anxiety spoke up. Why was he putting himself through this? They had nothing to talk about, nothing in common. She’d be bored beyond belief, leave, and probably decide to stop seeking him out and flinging herself into his quiet, boring ‘but in a good way,’ whatever that means, life.

As fantastic as all of that sounded on paper, it made him uneasy. Poppy was obnoxious, and loud, and too touchy-feely, and sort of a terrible listener, but she was also endlessly patient with him. And she was funny, when he wasn’t the butt of a joke. And she was so kind, and so pretty, and when she was singing just to herself, it was so soothing to overhear. Not listen to. Just be close enough to hear. He never listened on purpose.

“This is delicious, Branch! I don’t typically like tea, but this is fruity and really nice. I might have to have another cup or two. Oh Hair, did I mention how great it feels down here? I could stay forever!”

“That will NOT be happening!” Branch sputtered. “But, uh. You do see the advantages of a home like this. That’s good.” Branch sipped his tea, affecting a casual air.

Poppy slurped her drink and started pouring a second cup. “It’s nice. I really am sort of dreading going back up, knowing that this will be here and I’ll be hot and sweaty again.”

Branch stayed still and kept his eyes off of Poppy. He was dreading her leaving, too. His cheeks and ears purpled slightly thinking about her just not leaving. Maybe-

“You need to liven this place up a bit. I think,” Poppy took a sip as she collected her thoughts, “I think you need more plants.”

“I have plants.”

“Fun plants.”

“It’s fun having plants that have medicinal properties.”

She waved a hand, dismissing what he said. “Plants that are fun for other trolls.”

“No other trolls come here, and would you look at that, we’re back to where we were earlier in conversation.” He offered a tight smile.

Poppy’s eyes widened and she sprung up, whirling around the room. She gestured to a bare wall. “No, just look at what we could do here! Plants hanging down, bright flowers and vines! Some singing flowers, oh BRANCH, do you know how nice it would look and SOUND?” She turned to him, probably expecting him to agree.

“Poppy-” He put his cup down.
“We could get Satin and Chenille over to help with decorating. Warm the place up a bit—”

“You’re here to avoid being too warm—” Again, he was pinching his brow. She had to take a nice, quiet moment and shit all over it.

“Stop being obtuse, you know what I’m saying.”

Branch’s patience was gone. He stood up rigidly and stormed over to Poppy. “I know exactly what you’re saying, and I’m honestly wondering if you even hear yourself! WHY, in the name of Hair, would I have ANYBODY ELSE over!? I don’t DO company, I don’t WANT other trolls over poking through my things, drinking my drinks, sitting on my furniture, criticizing how I live. I like QUIET. I like PEACE. You want to invite the complete opposite of that into MY home and turn it into a singing technicolor nightmare, for WHAT possible reason!?” He stopped, fuming, waiting for a satisfactory answer.

Poppy looked stunned. Honestly, why? A fair percent of their relationship was him doing exactly this- blowing his stack when she just wouldn’t listen. She really should be used to this by now.

She tried to build a sentence a few times. “I- You and I- Branch. I just thought...”

Branch heaved a sigh. “Poppy. Let’s be done here, yeah? I’m tired, and you have a party to go and run.” He stepped around Poppy to go and put some of the tea blend she’d enjoyed in a bag. He may be tossing her out on her ear, but he could still do something nice on the way out.

Poppy let out a slow breath and spoke quietly. “I just thought that because you let ME visit, that maybe you’d be okay with more company. I thought maybe you were realizing how nice it could be.”

Registering the hurt in her voice, Branch pushed aside his own hurt feelings and spoke while continuing to bag up some tea. “I probably invited you in because the heat addled my brain. I can only imagine what it’s done to you and everybody else.”

Poppy rolled her eyes.

“Take this. And I guess thanks for visiting. This was—”

“It was nice, Branch. Even with the yelling, I’m glad you let me in. I really am dreading going up, though.” She chuckled as they awkwardly stepped onto to the elevator platform.

“I was going to say a terrible decision, but it wouldn’t be the first time we disagreed.” He threw the switch, and they ascended in silence.

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After sending Poppy off, rejecting one last invite to her party, squirming out of a (very pleasant but also awful and sticky) hug, and retreating back into his bunker, branch let out a breath. He felt like he’d been holding his breath for a while.

He quietly imitated Poppy. “I just thought that because you let ME visit, that maybe you’d be okay with more company.’ Hmm. Right.” He tidied up the odds and ends she’d moved around. “Of course that’s what it is for her. Just Branch suddenly wanting anybody’s company. Hmm.”

He meandered over to a small shelf hidden behind dull pink curtains, picked out a few favorite things, and took them over to his couch.
He decided against going out again for supplies. Instead, he spent the afternoon looking over cards and invitations that featured little scrapbook trolls. He told himself that it was only by chance that he’d picked up all the cards that had little paper Branch and Poppy figures standing by each other.
Poppy, back on the surface and under the scorching sun, stowed her tea in her slightly wilted hair and hustled over to the pond. Before she heard it, she felt the bass from DJ Suki’s enormous speakers. She quickened her pace, eager to get in the water for some relief.

Bursting through a final brake of grass, Poppy announced herself with flair that only she could achieve. Things could finally get to the next level.

Shifting into party mode, she tucked thoughts of her time with Branch away in the back of her mind. Despite the fact that he frequently rebuffed her friendship, she still wasn’t used to the sting of rejection. She immersed herself in the festivities and let dancing, hugs, and music be a balm for her hurt feelings. There would always be time later that night to wonder where things went wrong and what she could try the next time she visited. She hoped he’d let her visit again.

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Seven hours later, the party was officially over. Some trolls were staggering home to their pods. Others found cuddle buddies and soft tufts of grass. Not just a few had paired off and slipped away earlier in the evening for more intimate activities.

Poppy and the tired but cheerful remains of her crew congratulated themselves on a job well done. The village was in high spirits once again.

“You guys were amazing, as always. I can’t wait to scrapbook this. It was glitterific! Splashtastic!” Poppy gushed to Smidge and Creek as they strolled along the moonlit path back towards home.

“It came together so well thanks to your innate party instincts!” Smidge grinned. Nothing made her happier than her best friend being happy.

“Yes, you possess a special knowledge of how to make a lively and welcoming atmosphere.” Creek continued airily. “I felt so connected with every single troll in attendance. You could tell that everybody truly wanted to be there, and truly cared about the well-being of everybody else. One perfectly happy entire village.”

Poppy scoffed inaudibly. “Well, I mean, it wasn’t the ENTIRE village. But it was still a wonderful night. Thank you both again.”

“Not the entire village? Are you sure? I can’t think of a single person I was missing. I feel like it really was perfect with exactly everybody who was present.”

Due to the large shadow they were currently passing through, Poppy didn't notice his smirk. Never one to see or acknowledge ill intent, she responded earnestly. “You must not have noticed that Branch didn’t make it.” Her voice turned down slightly. “He just needed a little quiet time, but I’m sure he’ll come to the next shindig.” Her spirits lifted, her mind beginning to hum with ideas for the next gathering.

Now at the edge of the village, they came to an intersection. Smidge bid Poppy and Creek goodnight and peeled off towards her own pod. Poppy remembered Smidge saying once that she was always nearby. She still couldn't tell if that had been a joke.
Walking in comfortable silence with Creek, Poppy wiped sweat from her brow. "Mannnnnn, you think it'd let up at night. I spent so much time in water and already feel sticky again." Creek hummed in agreement. "Like. Just a breeze. A breeze would be amazing. I don't know if I'll ever know what dry feels like again- Oh! My tea, oh no!" Poppy stopped in her tracks and reached up to her hair. She pulled down a small bag and fidgeted while holding it up in the moonlight, inspecting it as best as she could.

"Tea?"

"Oh no, it's so damp..." Poppy poked at the bag, turning it over between her hands.

"I didn't know you liked tea enough to carry it around." Creek stepped closer, inserting himself in her line of sight.

Poppy wasn't listening. "Maybe he can replace it? I hope he's not upset. But he was upset when he gave this to me, so maybe he'll give me more anyways? Maybe I can dry it out, but wouldn't it smell like pond and sweat? That's no good..."

Creek cupped Poppy's hands in his and locked eyes with her. "Poppy. Normally I can follow what you're saying, but I'm rather lost at the moment. Take a deep breath with me, blow out the stress, and speak slowly."

Poppy did as instructed and composed herself. "Thank you. Branch gave me some tea. I wasn't even thinking when I put it in my hair earlier, and now it's all wet."

Creek chuckled. "I think you might be overheated and overtired, because, Poppy you're going to laugh, because you just told me that Branch gave you tea. Let's get you home and we can sort it out in the morning." Creek took the bag from her hands and nudged her in the direction of her nearby pod. "Goodness, the fun we have."

Poppy started walking. "But he DID! Like, today he still didn't come to hang out with everybody, and he did yell at me, but he also let me into his home and gave me this fruity tea. It was AMAZING! I mean, right up until he yelled at me."

"Mm-Hmm. I believe that you believe that, love. And look, here we are. Let's get you a quick drink and off to bed." Creek let himself into her pod and swept into her modest kitchen. Poppy trailed behind him, annoyed.

"That sounds great, but I'm not making anything up. I'll just have to tell you again later when you'll believe me." Creek held out a glass of water, a bemused smile on his face. "Thank you. Goodnight Creek." Poppy downed the drink and turned towards her room, knowing he'd leave her home soon.

Creek called after her. "Do some deep breathing and center yourself. You don't want to attract negative energy by generating your own, it will pull your heart chakra to the left." Poppy closed her door, effectively ending the conversation. Even as annoyed as she was, Poppy knew that he would forgive her sour mood and really listen to her in the morning, and was thankful for that.

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After an unscheduled night of wallowing in self-loathing and loneliness, Branch decided that he really did need to get out of his bunker. Not just for supplies, but also to get a break from the stale, lonely atmosphere that clung to him after Poppy left. No amount of overthinking, fantasizing, or even escape plan writing could fill up the enormous silence that she'd left behind. Today would be a day to actually accomplish things and exercise his muscles.
He set out before the sun was due to rise, planning on splitting his work between the early morning and early evening. An afternoon break in the shade would protect him from heat stroke.

Despite the fact that he knew about the recent rise in temperatures, and despite having been on the surface for a few agonizing minutes the day before, Branch still hadn't been fully prepared for the sweltering heat. As he trudged along a familiar route, he changed plans. He could spend the day at the pond digging in and around the water for roots.

Forty minutes into his task, Branch had collected an unimpressive pile of cattail stems and was panting and lethargic. Frustrated, he peeled off his vest and hung it on a stick, then turned towards the water, skin tingling in anticipation of the cool water.

"I can feel your anger radiating all the way over here." A serene voice floated over and immediately Branch's hackles were up.

He turned to his right and saw a self-righteous purple yogi sitting on a sandbank. Doing stupid yoga. Saying stupid things. Branch turned and flashed a disingenuous smile. "I guess you'll just have to move further away then, huh? Try a high ledge. If that's not far enough, try stepping OFF the ledge." He snapped his head away from Creek and back towards the water.

Creek smiled, moved out of his pose, and ambled over. "You know what could help with your terrible outlook on life?"

Branch ignored him and waded into the water.

"Meditation is the first thing that comes to mind. Emptying your mind takes a lot of practice, but the peace it brings is truly magnificent."

Branch muttered to himself. "I'm sure it's sooo hard for him to empty his mind. Please."

"You could come to one of my yoga classes and really get in touch with yourself and others."

Branch slid further out into the water and floated on his back. He looked over and noticed Creek holding something small and grinning. Ugh, such a smarmy face. So punchable.

Really, he was doing a good job of keeping it together today.

Creek looked around and then called out, almost loud enough to be considered yelling. "You could try drinking tea. It's not all dark and bitter, you know. Why, just last night, the princess had me over and shared a delightful fruity tea with me."

Surprise overtook Branch and he dropped below the surface. Flailing and gulping water and rapidly sinking, he couldn't be bothered to try and look any less shaken than he currently was. He floundered and struggled his way back up and broke the surface of the water, gagging and gasping. He splashed gracelessly to the shore, intent on going home as quickly as possible. Still breathless and dripping, he threw his vest into his backpack, slid the straps on, and collected his cattail stems.

"Goodness Branch, are you alright? You seem a bit troubled." Creek sidled up to him, smiling his jerk smile.

"I have better things to do than listen to you be the smartest kid in the room." He set off, marching back towards the bunker. Creek fell into step beside him.

"You know, maybe finding a partner or even a friend would improve your temper. Then again, how could anybody with that temper possibly find a friend or partner? Hmm, what a fun riddle.
Goodbye Branch, try and do some meditating or having a cup of tea.” Creek stopped walking and chuckled as Branch picked up his pace and fumed the rest of the way home.

Branch spent the afternoon laying on his bed, imagining he'd been invited to Poppy's for tea.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for how long this chapter took, health issues prevented me from getting anything of substance done.

I also dithered with a few things in this chapter because I don't want to make creek evil, just kind of an asshole to just one person. Life is more interesting in shades of gray rather than having people be all good or all bad
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Poppy was deep in thought.

After three hours of being too hot and sticky to sleep, she shuffled into her living room and began scrapbooking her thoughts.

Branch. Branch was always grouchy.

Her village. She was having to actually put work into keeping spirits high. Very unusual. She liked throwing parties, of course, but those were for fun. Lately it had been out of necessity.

Left on their own for too long, her people were grouchy, much like Branch.

The oppressive heat was making people grouchy. Was Branch just overly warm when out of his bunker? Would that explain the vest?

Poppy scratched down notes and tried to find connections, although she was self-aware enough to be a little embarrassed. Up in the wee hours making a web of things that miiiight be connected in order to solve a mystery that only she seemed to care about was sort of out there. A tiny bit obsessive.

Wait.

Branch did that. Branch was decidlily more fanatical about his own things than she was about him. She felt both reassured and... silly.

She took a deep breath and turned inward, trying to see what sat sizzling beneath her irritability.

She was uncomfortable, yes. But she'd been uncomfortable in the past and had always managed to be a ray of sunshine.

Poppy poked at the felt trolls scattered across her table. She nudged the miniature Branch closer to the other trolls, taking care to not have him actually touch any of them. She chuckled and could almost hear a tiny Branch shouting. 'Get away from me, I don't want hugs!'

Wait.

Poppy removed a tiny green vest. Hmm. Well. Huh. That was weird and pointless. She put it back on.

She groaned and pushed away from her table, limply swinging her arms around as she trudged towards the kitchen. A snack might help her. She went back and paced the room, popping a berry in her mouth every few minutes.

"Hey Branch, how's it hanging?" Not for the first time, she began a one-sided conversation to see where it would go.

"It's great to see you too. Hmm? My hair looks different? I started brushing it a new way, thank you for noticing!" Who was it going to hurt to just pretend to herself that he addressed her as a friend? Nobody.
"Hey buddy, while I've got you here, one quick question. Why are you-" she faltered, "ummm. Why are you the way you are?"

Ever courteous, Poppy ate a berry to provide time for a response.

"Mm-hmm... So. You're telling me... You're angry. And don't like being touched. I get that. We all know that. But I'm asking you WHY." She stopped and extended a hand to her invisible conversational partner. "What's hiding behind the anger?"

She resumed her walk while he stammered. Of course he didn't have an answer.

"Are you scared?" She imagined his eyes almost popping out of his head as he launched into a lecture on the dangers of Bergens.

"Okay yikes, slow down. I know everything you're going to say already. But the Bergens aren't in our village. They're not a reason for you to avoid US like a plague."

She closed her eyes and continued her march, trying to remember something her father had said when she was little.

"My dad told me once that there are two main reasons people get angry. One is because they're scared, and the other is..."

Poppy could feel that she was millimeters away from something big and paced faster. So close. It was hovering just outside her grasp. She swung an arm out while turning and smacked her knuckles on a bookshelf.

"SON OF A BUMBLEBEE! WHO PUT THAT THERE?! GRAAAAAH!"

Poppy popped her bleeding knuckle into her mouth and licked the small cut. Damn, that hurt.

Damn. Damn! She felt miles away from the train of thought that had been so close to delivering her to something important. DAMN.

Poppy gave up. Without even turning off the lights or tidying up her scrapbooking, she moved in a whirl towards her bedroom. She'd clean in the morning.

As she laid in bed again, she had to chuckle. So little had changed between her leaving and coming back. She was still frustrated and too hot and really not tired. She wished she could exist without anything touching her for just a little while.

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Too few hours and two too many cups of coffee later, Poppy was on a mission.

Her intuition rarely led her astray, and right now it was screaming at her to talk to Biggie.

She arrived at his pod and hammered on the door. "Biggie! Biggie it's me, can I come in?"

Poppy typically didn't worry about unimportant things like doors or knocking or boundaries, but one incident with Biggie where she walked in on- well, she still didn't know what it was- made her take care to always give him a warning.

A clatter came from inside. "Yes, one moment! I'll be right there!"

Poppy could hear a rush of things being stuffed away. She'd never judge, but clearly he wanted
some privacy.

The door flew open and Poppy was greeted with a warm smile. "Hello, do come in! What brings you over this morning? Need some tea?" Biggie moved aside to let her through.

Poppy smiled and made a beeline to her preferred seat. "No thank you on the tea, it's sort of way too hot to even consider that right now, haha." She made a mental note to find the bag from Branch later, then turned to Mister Dinkles, who was seated next to her, and cooed over the tiny worm. "I'm digging the linen suit today, you look very 'cool but too cool to even notice how cool I am.'"

Mister Dinkles meeped his appreciation.

Poppy turned to her host. "Biggie, I'm working something out and am hoping you could be a sounding board for me. I'm stuck on my own, but feel like you're just the right troll to help me out."

"Of course! Go ahea-"

Poppy sprung from her seat, produced a scrapbook, and shoved it into Biggie's hands. "So I'm thinking about Branch. Thinking about how to help him come out of his shell."

"Oka-"

"And I'm thinking about WHY he's so angry, why he's so gray, you know? Like, there's gotta be a reason. No troll is BORN like- like that. So. I'm thinking, I'm thinking real hard." Poppy gesticulated as she spoke. "I'm gonna get to the ROOT of it. And it's SO HOT OUT. And Biggie, lately everybody has been so moody. Like BRANCH." She stabbed a finger and the felt troll in the book before spinning back around to continue.

"So I'm thinking that maybe Branch is just too hot and that's why he's always angry? Does that make sense? Maybe he just needs to take off the vest. But Biggie-" she looked up earnestly at her dumbstruck friend. "I'm missing something in all of this and am hoping you can help me with the last piece. You're so smart about caring for others, I need you on this."

Biggie sat, eyes wide, saying nothing. Poppy waited.

"Poppy." He began slowly. "I think it's admirable that you invest so much in somebody who, uh- it's wonderful that you care so much about every troll in the village."

He rose from his seat and gently guided Poppy back to the couch. "I think the first thing you need to do is have a drink of water and take a few deep breaths."

Poppy fidgeted with her hands and kicked her heels on the couch while Biggie brought her a glass. He continued his thoughts while she drank.

"I agree with you that Branch has anger issues. Any troll can see that. And I think getting to the root of them could very well be helpful. Just. Have you really thought about it? He's rejected your hugs, cards, baked goods, and friendship many, many times. He needs help, but maybe you're not the troll for the job? This one job, you're wonderful for anything else, really."

Poppy wasn't sure she heard him correctly. Ha. Biggie wasn't really telling her that she wasn't the right troll for spreading joy. That would be silly. Because she definitely was, and besides- "I think I'm the only troll willing to even try and do the job."

"And I respect that about you. But maybe not every job, every troll, is worth a lifetime obsession."

Biggie held his hands out and spoke gently, his tone, face, and body all trying to soften the
message.

Poppy deflated. This wasn't what she'd anticipated. She wanted help, but got told yet again that her
quest was a fool's errand. Her eyes started to well up.

"Ooooooh, oh Poppy I'm sorry! Don't cry, I shouldn't have said such hurtful things!" Biggie
grabbed her shoulders and pulled her in for a tight hug, oppressive heat be damned. "I focused on
my thoughts rather than your needs, and I'm sorry. There there, let me wipe those tears away." He
produced a delicate embroidered handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes, then pulled her back to his
chest. "Let's start over and I'll give you a proper response for your questions."

"Oh Biggie, thank you so much, I knew you would help me." Biggie let go and Poppy stepped
back. "And thank you for the lovely hug, your arms might be magical. You always make me feel
so wonderful. I haven't had a good hug like that in days, ever since this terrible heat started up." She
smiled as she dabbed a finger at a little remaining moisture under the corner of her eye. And
then she jumped.

"BIGGIE YOUR HUGS ARE MAGICAL."

"Well than-"

"BIGGIE HUGS ARE AMAZING, BUT ALSO WARM."

"Uh-

Poppy grabbed his elbows and shouted again. "BIGGIE BRANCH NEVER GETS HUGS."

"Well not for your lack of try-

"I FIGURED IT OUT. BIGGIE I CRACKED THE CODE." Poppy, frantic and excited, turned
away from her alarmed host and spoke rapidly.

"Hugs feel good. SO good. Branch never gets hugs. I'd be miserable if I never got hugs, too. Maybe
he's too warm. That's why the bunker is cold. No, that's why he lives there. Chilly. And hugs are
warm. TOO warm for him. So he needs cold hugs. COLD HUGS. And maybe enough hugs can
make him feel better. And then we can go from there and get to the root of the problem."

"Poppy?"

She whipped her head around. "You beautiful, wonderful troll. Thank you, Biggie. I know exactly
what needs done, and I'm not going to give up!"

And with that, Poppy dashed out of the pod, on track to go home and come up with a way to pitch
this whole thing to her grumpy, gray, someday friend. She laughed to herself and she sped through
the village.

"Hey Branch, what do you think of us hanging out alone in your chilly bunker for a little while
every day- but get this- we'd also be hugging or holding hands or just doing SOMETHING to get
you used to being in contact with other trolls again? Uhhhhh."

She'd figure something out. She would. How hard could it possibly be to sell somebody on time
with HER?
Sorry for how long chapters take, I come and go on things so that I don't get tired of them.
Branch sighed and set down the book he was reading.

The past two nights had been spent brooding, and although Branch felt that that was a really appropriate pastime for him, it didn't mean he wanted to do it all day every day.

When he woke that morning, he picked a favorite book up off the floor by his bed and flipped through his favorite pages. His proclivity for reading romance novels was a secret he'd take to the grave, but he was a sucker for unrequited love stories, especially when the love stops being unrequited.

He closed his eyes and imagined himself the protagonist as he mustered the nerve to talk, REALLY talk, to the kind, effervescent, and beautiful woman he loved.

He sighed again and appreciated the pick up of adrenaline as his heart pattered in his chest.

THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP

Woah woah woah woah woah, that was not the thump of his heart. Branch shot up and dashed to his mechanical lift, already knowing who in Hair's name would be so thoughtlessly showing the whole forest how to find the entrance to his bunker. It was only ever one troll. He growled as he threw the switch and went up, mentally locking down all the tender feelings he definitely hadn't been feeling just seconds ago.

He slid open the eye slot and glared up at the pretty pink pest. "WHAT are you DOING?"

Poppy smiled down at him and waved. "Heyyyyy buddy, how's it-"

"No." He slid the slot shut.

"YOU DIDN'T EVEN LET ME TALK!"

Branch considered his options. Either endure whatever Poppy was going to put him through, or let her yell at his door for however long it took until she gave up. He knew from experience that giving up really wasn't her thing. He opened the hatch and stepped out.

"What?" Branch crossed his arms and waited.

Waited? Waiting is unusual. Other trolls typically have him always trying to keep up. Waiting was different.

Poppy rocked on her heels and started slowly, looking around everywhere but at Branch. "Soo0000000000000000-

"Poppy."

"Yes?"

"I really don't have it in me to play this game today. It's hot out."

Poppy grabbed his shoulders. "It IS, isn't it? What an excellent point."

Branch shrugged her hands off and stepped back. Poppy stepped forward.
"I have an idea so good it will blow your MIND, but it takes some explaining and-" her voice dropped to a whisper, "-I'm sure you don't want to be out in these conditions any longer than is necessary-"

"Why-"

"So let's go talk in your nice, cool, safe bunker." Poppy beamed at Branch, clearly excited about something.

"I'll give you three words to summarize before I go back in. Alone."

Poppy gave him a shrewd look. "Six."

"Two words left."

Poppy rolled her eyes and brushed her sweaty bangs out of her face. She appeared to be taking more care with choosing her remaining two words. After a couple moments, she looked back to Branch.

"Privacy," she said.

Branch lifted his eyebrows slightly, but maintained a cool face. "Interesting."

"Poppy."

Branch waited a moment, trying to figure out what she was saying without letting her go over her limit, but couldn't. "Cryptic."

Branch was interested in privacy. It was one of his favorite things, right up with safety and silence. He wouldn't give his brain time to consider his level of interest in Poppy.

He heaved a sigh. "Fine. Fine. Don't get used to this."

Poppy shot finger guns at him and gleefully followed him into the upper level of the bunker. "You've made an excellent choice, my man."

"I'm sure I'll regret it. Please don't talk until I can fully listen."

-----

When they were settled in on Branch's small couch, Poppy, grinning, twisted to look at him. "Are you ready? Branch. ARE. YOU. READY."

Branch, queasy, kept a flat face and stared straight ahead. "As ready as I'll ever be."

A scrapbook, apparently produced from thin air, landed on his lap. "Open it to the first page and follow along while I talk. I'll tell you when to turn, so don't read ahead." Poppy bounced off the couch and stood directly in front of him.

Branch opened the earthy green cover and read the title page aloud. "Project Mend Branch's Broken Heart: A Summary and Action Plan...?" Branch looked up, brow furrowed. "No."

Poppy's smile faltered. "Okay, maybe the title is rough, but hear me out. Turn the page."

Branch obeyed. "It's me."
"Yes, it is. As you can see from the picture, you are alone and in your bunker and wearing a vest. Turn the page."

"It's you and several other trolls who annoy me."

Poppy ignored his rude comment. "Yes, and do you see all the smiles, and how we're all hugging? Hugging is not just a fun activity, it fulfills a basic need for connection to other trolls! Turn the page."

"It's... the sun?"

"Correctamundo! To represent heat. Because hugs, while they are amazing, are warm. And I have a suspicion that- turn the page-"

"Me again, and the broken heart here is mine, I'm assuming?"

"-that you avoid hugs PARTLY because they're too warm for your body. PAGE!" Poppy was picking up speed and volume, clearly getting excited about her presentation.

"Poppy, stop-"

Poppy stepped forward and flipped the page to a picture of Branch and Poppy in the bunker. "So MY idea is that we try hugging in a cooler area to help you get the loving touch you're desperately lacking WHILE not getting too warm!"

For about ten seconds, Branch was unable to form a sentence. "I- this- too warm?! I don't- Poppy, this is-" Branch rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger and shut book with his other hand. "What is this supposed to be? Just tell me without the scrapbook."

Poppy took pity on her overwhelmed host and sat by him. She spoke softly. "I think you're too warm when you receive hugs, so want to try giving you hugs here. To help you get used to them again. Because they're good for us, and you haven't been able to enjoy one in so long."

Branch was tired and continued to massage his eyes. "I don't want a bunch of trolls down here digging through my things, messing up my storage, and-"

"Just me. Just one troll at a time, being quiet, not touching anything or anyone except you."

His eyes popped open and Branch snapped his head to left to face away from Poppy. This was. Well. This was something else.

Poppy continued talking. "I don't even have to mention it to any other trolls, if it would make you more comfortable. Privacy."

Needing to slow his rapid heartbeat, Branch pushed back. "What makes you think it's okay to come into my home and tell me you want to help me change everything about myself? This is incredibly insulting." Nailed it. Now he was back to being annoyed.

"No no no, not everything about you! Not even changing you, really." Poppy put her hand on Branch's arm. "Just meeting a need that hasn't been met for a very long time. And you could opt out if you felt like it wasn't good. And it's really hard to talk to you when you don't even look at me, but I feel like the back of your head is doing a great job of listening."

Branch's stomach was churning. This was so much not what he was expecting. This was- he looked down at the warm hand on his arm. He was sweating. This was mortifying. Branch tossed the
scrapbook on his side table as he hopped up and stepped away from Poppy, hoping that some distance would help him.

"Okay wait. Back up. Hugs down here because you think I get too warm on the surface?" He snorted and stepped in the direction of the lift, signaling the beginning of the end of the conversation. "How do you come up with this?"

Poppy was in front of him in an instant, blocking his path. In his face. "Look, it's just where I started, okay? This is mainly about the touch you're lacking. Don't toss me out yet, give me a chance!"

"Like one hug?"

"Like one week."

"A WEEK?"

"I actually have this in the scrapbook you gave up on, but hear me out. We could do one week increments, all on your terms. You choose what we do, I visit and we do that once a day for a week. After the week ends, you can do another week if you want to."

Branch considered this. A week was. Well. A lot of days in a row of Poppy being in his personal space. That could get very old, very fast.

But on the other hand, a week was a lot of days in a row of Poppy being here with him and close to him. Not even close. Touching. Branch turned away to hide his darkening cheeks.

"With all of this, you either get the brand new, singing, dancing, happy Branch that you're looking for- which I can already tell you is NOT going to happen- or you get the satisfaction of knowing that you tried."

"Yessir!"

"What am I supposed to gain from this? If all of it ends with me still the troll I am today, which I am FINE with, by the way, what do I get for putting up with you here every day for a week?"

"Ah, see, again, would have been covered in the scrapbook- hmm. For every week you agree to try this with me, which by the way I'm calling hug therapy-"

"Terrible."

"I would give you that many weeks of time without me hounding you. Two weeks of hug therapy-"

"A TERRIBLE name-"

"-could give you two solid weeks of me leaving you alone. So look at it like this- if this is really the worst possible thing, you could still stack up a lot of time with a GUARANTEE that I'll stay out of your business."

Branch wasn't sure how to feel about that. Yeah, Poppy was annoying, but she was also sort of a tiny bit, hardly even, really, special to him.

"Just an hour a day for one week. Take a chance on me, Branch. If you change your mind, I'm the first in li-"

"If you sing, I'm going to say no."
Poppy stopped and waited.

Branch stepped away from Poppy and pretended to examine the contents of a shelf. "All on my terms?"

"Yes."

"And we stop when I want to?"

"After each week, you can choose to keep going or stop."

"And you wouldn't tell any troll about this, so I wouldn't become some spectacle for your friends?"

"100% privacy guaranteed."

Branch thought for a few moments, then turned to Poppy. She looked optimistic. Honestly, if laughing were his thing, he probably would right now. This was so unusual and. Well. Sort of great. Kind of.

"Fine. We can start tomorrow, I guess."

"OH BRANCH THIS IS WONDERFUL!" Clearly out of her mind, Poppy bound over and glommed on to him. "You won't regret this, I'm going to hug you up so good!"

Branch gasped and flailed. "Tomorrow! Tomorrow! Not right now! Poppy this is NOT on my terms!"

Poppy gave him one more squeeze before letting go and hopping back. "Aah, I'm just so happy! I was so worried you'd say no, and then I didn't know what I'd have to do- I had a dream last night that you sat on my lap and woke up all 'woah hey, maybe if that's what it takes-'"

"Why-"

"And then I thought, 'maybe that's something he needs, like some really good snuggles,'"

"ABSOLUTELY NOT-."

"And I mean, we could try it ONCE just to see if you liked it-"

"Oh my HAIR-."

"Look, obviously we won't start there-

"Or ever GET to that point-

"But you'll have to keep an open mind while we do this, you know. Hug therapy- DON'T INTERRUPT- is a new thing for both of us. So let's go in on this at partners and work together, yeah?"

Branch turned and pressed his forehead into the earth wall. "You can't talk about me sitting on your lap and then tell me to have an open mind, as though me objecting to sitting on you is somehow closed minded."

"It is a little."

"I just don't want to sit on anybody."
"Well that might change."

"It really won't."

"Well not with a closed mind!"

Branch sighed at the fruitlessness of this conversation. What had he signed up for?

Poppy laughed. "Well I'm happy. What's a bunker appropriate way to celebrate?"

"Leaving. Letting me regret this in peace."

"Maybe-" Poppy coughed into her fist. "Uh, maybe some more of that tea you made the other day?"

Branch's mood soured as he remembered Creek. "Didn't you have enough the other night?"

"Well, see..." Poppy frowned and twisted her fingers together. "I sort of wrecked it... and then sort of lost it."

Branch's eyes opened and he turned to her. "Huh?"

"I went straight from here to the pond the other day, and the bag was in my hair, and hey, fun fact, wet hair makes for wet tea bags. I was going to try and dry it out, but haven't seen it since I got home that night. I'm really sorry for wasting that." Poppy looked at the ground.

Branch stood silently for a moment, not sure if he believed a smarmy jerk or the most sincere and beautiful troll he'd ever known. Well. It really wasn't much of a contest.

"I'll make some tea. Go... I don't know. Just don't touch things."

Poppy grinned and slid over to the closest shelf. She pulled down a reference book and took it over to the couch.

Branch was reeling as he prepped a tray. Honestly, he couldn't remember a better day. And he had a week of this coming up? As many as he wanted? He looked over at Poppy as she pretended to actually be reading his book on mosses.

Hair, she was something else. She was so kind. And she was so... warm. And her hands looked like they'd fit perfectly with his. His heart throbbed at the thought and he turned his attention to pouring two cups.

"Tea." He placed the tray in front of Poppy and took a seat by her as she set down the book.

"Thank you. Do, uh, do you only have books like this? For learning things? Not that they're not useful, but they're a tiny bit dry. Like. You know. A desert level of dry."

"Thank you for criticizing my books." He couldn't even be sincerely annoyed, he was a little too busy basking in her glow.

"No no, just, I know you'll want quiet when I come back, and thought I could read. But I might want something with an actual plot."

"I'll see what's sitting around."

They drained their cups in a comfortable silence, and a short while later Branch bid Poppy farewell.
"I'll see you tomorrow morning, first thing!"

"Right then. Goodbye Poppy."

Poppy shot her finger guns at him again and winked. "So long, pardner! Pew pew!"

Branch retreated into his home.

Tonight he would do three sweeps over this area to ensure anything potentially embarrassing was locked in his bedroom. Then he would write one or two or twelve escape plans that worked for two trolls. Just in case.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Branch was tired. After Poppy left the day before, he spent a good amount of time berating himself for agreeing to, ugh, hug therapy. Not only was there nothing to be gained, but he was going to exhaust and probably humiliate himself every day for at least a week for the sake of nothing.

He then spent the rest of the day and most of the night adjusting escape, survival, and evacuation plans to accommodate a second troll. Every plan that relied on stealth once outside the bunker had to be completely scrapped. Poppy was a lot of things, but quiet wasn't one of them.

Branch finished a final sweep of his book shelves to ensure that any embarrassing materials were cleared away. If Poppy was going to depend on his small personal collection to stay entertained, he didn't doubt that she'd ferret around for something juicy. He really didn't want her to find anything like that in his home. He blushed just at the thought.

And now he just had to wait. Branch was an early riser, and it only now occurred to him that "first thing in the morning" could mean two very different things to two very different trolls.

Waiting was unbearable, as it gave him more time to fret. Were they supposed to spend the entire hour hugging? That was too much. If not that, then what were they supposed to do between hugs? Poppy was exasperatingly vague about so much of this.

Why could she never just keep things simple? Branch paced throughout his bunker while he mentally chastised Poppy for, well, all of this. He regretted not looking through the scrapbook she made. Maybe it had actually served a purpose. Ugh.

THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP

Branch swore that he felt his stomach fall into his intestines. She was here! This was too soon! He needed more time to prepare!

"BRANCH! BRANCH CAN YOU HEAR ME? BRANCH COME UP AND LET ME IN! BRANCH! BRANCH! BRAAAAAANCH!"

"FOR THE LOVE OF HAIR!" Branch roared as he sprinted to the lift. He wasn't sure if she'd be able to hear his yelling over her own, but SERIOUSLY?! What's the point of a camouflaged entrance if some ninny is going to holler at it every day?

He shoved open the hatch and yanked Poppy inside before she had time to register what was happening.

"The yelling!" Branch shouted as they descended.

Poppy, already having regained her bearings, laughed. "You're one to talk, you're yelling right now."

"I'm IN the bunker!" They landed in Branch's living room. "Don't act like you don't understand why standing at my front door and being the loudest thing in the forest is a bad idea. Also," he pointed a finger at her, "you promised me privacy with this. How private will it be if every morning, any troll out and about can hear that you're here?"
"Okay okay, I get it. So how do I get in from now on?"

"You wait for me to let you in."

"But you can't let me in if you don't know I'm there."

Branch wouldn't admit it, but she was right. He glowered at her before turning away to go... There really was nowhere to go. Nowhere where he would be okay with her chasing him.

Poppy leaned in to his line of sight, grinning. "Sooooooooooooooooooooooooo. How about we get on down to the hugging?" She started skipping around him. "I'm so excited for you, I could hardly sleep last night!"

"Hu- I- how does this start?" His stomach was rolling again. This was too much.

She laughed. "This is the last time I'll mention it, but I DID go over ideas for it in the book I made. I figured we could hug a few times, and between hugs we- wow, okay, ahaha, why is your face doing that?"

Branch couldn't see how his features were contorted, but if they matched how he felt, he must look very, very sick. And anxious. And sick. If his legs hadn't turned to lead, he might have made a break for his bedroom. "D-don't laugh! You know I'm tolerating a lot to try this, all for YOUR benefit." He fumed and felt his cheeks and ears burning. This was the worst.

Poppy cupped his cheeks and simpered. "Oh Branch, this is so precious!" Emboldened by his inability to do much of anything, she pulled him in for a tight hug. "Today is day one of us finding your happiness!"

Branch simultaneously felt nothing and completely overwhelmed. He could feel Poppy's cheek on his, her arms around his shoulders, her chest against his. He could feel her hot breath on his ear as she said whatever it was she was saying. But also he felt. Nothing? As if she were hugging him from three miles away.

Was he awake?

Was he ALIVE?

Poppy's voice escalated in volume and cut in. "Branch? Branch! You have to hug back. Or at least try."

Branch tried to move his arms, he really did. He tried to do anything, but was frozen. His brain was zipping through every single daydream and fantasy he had of scenarios almost exactly like this. Alone with Poppy, and her holding him, and him holding her, and. And. And.

And that's where this was all going off the rails. How long has she been waiting? Oh no. HOW LONG HAS SHE BEEN WAITING WHILE HE JUST STOOD. His entire face was ablaze as his mind veered off and explored all the different, soul crushing things she was most definitely thinking right now.

"You're, uh. Really sweaty. Are you okay?" Poppy pulled back a little. "Oh! Your face! You, um. Branch, are you OKAY?!"

He pulled himself together enough to jerk out of her arms and hop halfway across the room. "That was fine. That was enough. I'll take one day. You stop bothering me and you. Just. BYE!" Words. What were words. He couldn't breathe.

Branch exploded. "You need to leave!" He needed space. Needed a way to jump start his thoughts again. Needed everything to just be quiet. He could hear his heartbeat in his ears, pounding like a manic troll had just found a timpani and was putting their whole soul into their performance.

Poppy reached her hand out towards his. His own hand moved before he could will it, and he saw his body betray his sick, twisting heart and slap her hand away. Everything was moving so fast.

Through an anxious fog, he watched Poppy skitter to the lift, heard a quiet "I'll be back tomorrow," and before he knew it, she was gone.

Branch laid down on his stomach and waited for things to calm down. This would pass, and then he could start overthinking things and hating himself again.

There would be none of this tomorrow.

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Poppy emerged from the bunker shaken. After a few minutes of wishing she could know that Branch was okay, she took off in the direction of the village, intent on finding one of her closest friends. She couldn't talk about what happened, but she desperately needed a hug.

Before Poppy realized it, Smidge was running by her side. The tiny troll called over in a cheerful voice. "Good morning, Poppy! Why are we running?"

"Smidge!" Poppy stopped short and dropped down into her friend's ready arms.

"There there, it's going to be okay." As Smidge squeezed and soothed, Poppy felt her stress dissolve.

"Thank you," she mumbled. Poppy pulled back and saw the concerned but patient face she was expecting.

"Would you like to get ice cream and talk about it? Would you like me to have a word with somebody? Would you like to eat ice cream while watching me have a word with somebody?" Smidge cracked her knuckles menacingly, smiling all the while.

As she got back to her feet, Poppy took a moment to form her answer. "I'll never say no to ice cream with you, but for now, for a while, I can't talk. Maybe someday."

Smidge nodded and held her best friend's hand as they walked and talked about what toppings they would be getting on their ice cream.

Poppy had a difficult time sleeping that night. She blamed it on too much ice cream, which would be a first, and not how upsetting her morning had been.

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Branch had a significantly less healthy way of processing his time with Poppy.

After the storm of noise and fear and an upset stomach had passed, he spent a few minutes intermittently touching his hand to a hot tea kettle to make sure his somatosensory system was in working order. He then laid on his kitchen floor and went down a list of all the ways he was
unpleasant, disagreeable, repellant, and just generally an unsavory troll to be around.

Of course Poppy left. He tried to picture what he looked like to her that scared her away so much. His heart clenched when he imagined what she must have thought, so he dwelled on that. He hit her hand. He HIT. Her HAND. Hair. He was awful.

In the past, she's tried to hug him when he's been snippy and mean, caked in mud and other squishy gardening substances, and soaked in his own sweat and grime after a long day of work. Never before had she been deterred.

He supposed that somebody having a panic attack in her arms and then getting violent was enough to finally lessen the appeal of a hug.

He rolled over and pressed his cheek harder into the cool floor.

She wouldn't be back. And that was for the best. He didn't need other trolls, and she certainly didn't need to keep wasting her time and attention on him.

This was fine. He could focus more on preparing his bunker for the inevitable breakdown of society and/or a Bergen attack. Either way.

This was fine.

It was fine.

He was fine.

He hated himself. And that was fine.

Chapter End Notes

I imagine that Branch goes through frantic phases and lethargic phases because of anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Like sometimes he'll compulsively plan and worry and stock up on supplies, and sometimes he does what's required to not die, but beyond that he just sits in the dark and hates himself.
Poppy wasn't an early riser. That didn't necessarily mean that she was lethargic in the morning, no, it just meant that she wasn't an early riser.

She had a predictable morning rhythm. She would wake from a restful sleep, greet the day with song, dance through bathing and perfecting her appearance, and make breakfast happen whenever and wherever in the village it happened. Always a good morning, always a spring in her step and a song on the tip of her tongue.

On what would be day two of Hug Therapy, Poppy deviated from all of that. She slept poorly, and after becoming fully awake well before she wanted, she flounced and floundered in her bed, tangling and untangling herself in her sheets over and over.

She didn't sing, she didn't dance. She was wrestling with her thoughts on top of being a touch groggy. After stepping out of her pod and returning a friendly 'good morning!' to a couple neighbors, she made a beeline for her father's place.

King Peppy, even with his quirks and his slightly deteriorated mental state, was a loving father who would do anything for Poppy. She felt like she could trust him to give her advice without needing to know too many details, and even if he ended up not being helpful, time with him would help her sore heart.

Upon arriving at his pod, she shoved the door open and smiled. "Hellooooo? Dad, are you home?" Peppy called out from his bedroom that he would join her shortly, so Poppy meandered into his kitchen and prepared two light breakfasts. One less thing he would have to do for himself. She looked around the pod, a little cluttered, a little hoarder-y, and made a note to come back with friends and help him clean up soon.

"Poppy, good morning!" Peppy's baritone voice boomed as he greeted her with a tight hug. "What a wonderful way to start the day. How are you doing, my sweet girl?"

"Good morning, dad. I've missed you!" Poppy pushed all the cheer she had into hugging him. He was, after all, the strongest, bravest, kindest, and most wonderful troll in the whole village. And the best dad ever, to boot. "I was wondering if you could help me with a project. Nothing huge, I just need to pick your brain a little."

The pair sat at Peppy's small dining table to chat over breakfast. "I would love to help. What's the project?"

Poppy chewed a bite longer than necessary to give herself extra time to phrase things. "It's... Slightly... Top secret. Just for now. But I'm wondering about getting help with a small piece of it, while keeping it a secret surprise." It was a bit of an oversell, she knew that. She could only imagine what Branch would say if he heard her call him a secret surprise. Oh man.

Peppy grinned. "Oh, I do love secrets. And surprises. Yes, tell me more."

"Okay! So. I need ideas for small ways to show affection. Like. Hugs, but smaller. And like holding hands, but smaller?" Poppy winced. This was not going to stay a secret from him. Who likes less hugs or less hand holding? Only one troll. She sent up a silent prayer to let this be one of
his less sharp days.

Peppy leaned back in his chair and cupped his chin, appearing to be thinking very hard. "I like a good riddle, you know. Keeps the mind fit. This... This is a good one. Small ways to show affection." A mischievous glimmer appeared in his eyes and he grinned slyly. "Whooooo might be needing small doses of affection, darling?"

Poppy diverted. "Dad, where did you get this bread? It's way fluffier than mine. I honestly dont know if I can go back to what's at my place after experiencing this." She gestured to the jelly and marshmallow sandwich in her hand.

"You know Hyacinth, a few pods down from me? She's started bringing me bread and other baked treats every so often. Really sweet woman." Peppy smiled and winked. "Helluva dancer, too. We may have slow danced a time or two. She's got real swivel-y hips. Real swivel-y."

"Thaaaaaat's fantastic, dad. I'll talk to her about bread. And maybe some time this week I can come help you clear up some more space for dancing in here, yeah?" Poppy smiled through her enormous discomfort. She didn't want to talk about her dad slow dancing with a woman who used to change her diapers, and she was definitely going to repress the way he said 'swivel-y hips.' More than all of that though, she really didn't want him to ride his other train of thought to the obvious conclusion that she was up to something with Branch.

"It's good bread." Peppy took a bite and they ate in silence for a few moments.

Poppy had dodged the bullet.

"I bet she would give you some to take to Branch."

Poppy was going to die.

"HA. HA. AHAHAHA. Dad." Poppy leaned over the table, leaving a hair's width between her nose and her father's. "I need you to not breathe a word of this to anybody. It's top secret. TOP. SECRET."

Peppy grinned and chuckled. "Don't lose your hair over it, my sweet girl. I won't say a thing." Poppy fell back into her chair, relieved. "I remember back when your mother and I used to sneak around for fun. There's just something about a secret tryst that really gets your-"

"OOOOOOOH MY HAIR DAD. NO. YOU HAVE THE WRONG IDEA ENTIRELY." Poppy sprang up from the table and dropped two plates into the sink before zipping to the door. "I have to go. Just the highlights here- I'm not having any sort of thing with Branch, also please don't mention any part of that to anybody, and please never be comfortable enough with me to discuss your romantic life, past or present. Also I love you. Also goodbye!"

Poppy ran out, not sure of which part of that visit was the worst. It was definitely a conversation for the books. The books you burned.

She slowed her pace as she got to the edge of the village, remembering that she needed to be inconspicuous. One quick song or three with friends would satisfy everybody, and then she'd go and figure out a way to make Hug Therapy not be a complete disaster.

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Branch, after spending the night hating himself and pouring his broken heart out into poems that would never see the light of day, took a moment to get real.
He knew that Poppy would be back even though yesterday had been an absolute shitshow. She would be more determined to make something work, and she would definitely get handsy again. He conceded that somebody inflicting hug therapy on another troll would HAVE to get handsy, but still. He didn't have to like it.

He needed to prevent that, but for the life of him didn't know how. He humiliated himself and then hit Poppy. Oh hair, he owed her an apology. His cheeks burned with shame just thinking about yesterday, how he exploded at her. And HIT her. Why was he like this?

A small, foolish, optimistic part of his brain chimed in. 'Poppy' and 'handsy' in the same sentence was a tiny bit thrilling. He knew it wasn't anything important or special to her, but that didn't stop his heart from pounding and sprinting into a million different 'what if' scenarios. He wasn't in charge of his heart. The poor thing had a mind of its own.

He considered practicing some maneuvers that had been useful for evading her in daily life, but only so much can be done in the confines of his own home. Mostly, entirely, because he typically just ran away before she could get close enough to do anything.

Wait.

WAIT. That was it. Branch let out a quick huff of air, almost a laugh, when he landed on how he was going to end hug therapy.

Poppy couldn't manhandle him in the comfort of his own home if they weren't even here to begin with. Better than that, there was no hug therapy without Branch. Yes. Perfect.

He put a day's worth of supplies in his rucksack and sped out of the bunker, uncharacteristically pleased with himself as he climbed a nearby tree and set up a small camp on a limb overlooking the entrance. He could wait her out when she arrived, then go back in right after she left. Brilliant. The sun was just breaking over the horizon, so he assumed he would have a couple hours to catch up on sleep before the show began. Branch made himself as comfortable as he could in the already muggy air and fell asleep with a smirk on his face.

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"BRANCH, ARE YOU SERIOUS?! OPEN THE DOOR. I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME!"

Branch snapped awake, momentarily disoriented before remembering what he was doing up in a tree.

He peeked down to see a very agitated princess fuming and stomping around. Delightful. Had it even been a full day since he told he to stop yelling at his door?

"BRANCH SO HELP ME-- EITHER LET ME IN NOW OR I WILL MAKE THIS SO MUCH WORSE FOR YOU!"

He was torn. On the one hand, he never got to see her like this. It was nice to know that even the happiest, friendliest, most beautiful, and kindest troll around could come completely uncorked. He smiled a little.

On the other hand. HIS BUNKER. HIS PRICACY. WOMAN. WHY.

He strengthened his resolve. It was either a few days of this, or more hug therapy, a definite lose-lose for them. This was painful, but the better option.
Poppy evidently lost her steam, as the yelling petered out. She stomped on his welcome mat a few times before plonking down in front of his big rock and wiping sweat from her brow. It was cute that she thought she could wait him out.

Hug time came and went twice. Both times he watched her flail her arms around and curse him out. Branch passed the time much more enjoyably. He had a handful of nuts for breakfast, made a few rough sketches of his pretty peeved princess, and fanned himself with them to try and keep cool. He watched her intermittently pound on his bunker and mutter to herself.

And then he won. Poppy stomped on his door one last time before heading off towards the village.

He didn't get many victories when facing off against Poppy, and that made this even more delicious. He got greedy and trailed her in secret, watching from above. Branch wanted to savor this.

"Poppy, love, I was just out looking for you. How perfect that we were brought together!"

Branch wanted to stab somebody. That grating, fake, smarmy son of a swampkin. Can he not have ONE good day? Seriously? He glared down and saw Creek approaching Poppy, who already looked significantly less annoyed.

"Oh, hey Creek. Yeah, uh, aha. I just came out to run an errand and things didn't shake out. It's fine." Poppy pulled him in for a tight hug. Branch rolled his eyes.

Creek put his hands around her waist and returned her hug. Branch just. He just. He really hated Creek.

He was no prize, he knew that. And that was a really generous way to say it. But he didn't suffer from any delusions about deserving time with Poppy. And at least everybody knew he was a miserable jerk. He was an HONEST miserable jerk. An honest miserable jerk who didn't try to inflict himself on other trolls.

CREEK, though. He was a snake. Always pretending that he was calm, always pretending to be so nice, always touching Poppy.

Branch pouted as he watched the pair chat and laugh. Then a few key words made his ears twitch.

"Why don't you come with me back to my pod? You've missed group yoga two days now, I could give you some pointers and help you find positions to melt away this stress."

Branch scowled. What a creep.

"Honestly Creek, that would be amazing. I'm handling this new thing and would really love some extra help from you. Thank you so much!"

This new thing? HE was the new thing! He was the new thing that had her stressed enough to go do yoga in private with- no- no, no. No. No. Stop that train of thought.

"I can sense tension, yes. Look here, do you feel how your hips are so tight? Yeah? I can barely get them to swivel here. Let's focus on that today, I'm sure it will help you feel much better."

Nope. Absolutely not.

Branch scuttled over to the trunk of the tree and hopped down, all while patching together a workable alibi for being so incredibly absent this morning. He stopped just short of the clearing.
Poppy was in, composed himself, and walked out.

"BRANCH."

His ears shot back. He was going to catch so much hell.

"Poppy? Creek. What are you two doing here?"

Poppy launched herself into his personal space before he knew it. "I was just out here looking for YOU, don'tcha know." Until right now, Branch was unaware of how terrifying a smile could be. "Did you forget that we were supposed to meet today to discuss some SECURITY things? In the BUNKER?"

"Uh, huh? Oh, yeah, I must have forgotten." He looked over at Creek. If he weren't currently terrified of Poppy's veiled rage, he might have been able to enjoy how unhappy Creek looked.

Poppy grabbed his arm and pulled him away. "Well Creek, maybe I'll meet up with you tomorrow for something, but this work I was needing to do today is pretty important. I'll catch you later!"

And with that, they were off. Poppy's grip on his arm was starting to hurt, but he wasn't certain she'd let up even if he said something, so he did his best to keep up with her while being jerked along through the forest.

When they got to his welcome mat, she let go and turned to him, still smiling. "Today seems like a great day for you to show me how to let myself in. Right now. Do it."

Branch obeyed. As they stepped down into his bunker and onto the lift, he felt as thought he might never see the light of day again. May Hair have mercy on his soul.

Chapter End Notes

One thing I'm noticing as I write these two is how they handle problems so differently. Poppy has this awesome support network, and she's been able to lean on her loved ones. Branch has Branch, so all of his negativity and fear just sits with him and festers. It's not something I'd even thought about until I was working through this chapter. Weird.

Also, I'm on tumblr and know nobody and it makes my heart sad. If you want to be friends, let me know? I'm WakeAndBakeCake. Find me!
Chapter 8

Poppy's voice was alarmingly calm.

"What the Hair is wrong with you?"

Branch wasn't sure he heard her correctly. He turned to see her looking for all the world like she'd just asked him for the time.

"Uh. Huh?"

And then the veil dropped.

"SERIOUSLY, WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU." Poppy jabbed a finger into his chest. "You have the NERVE to keep me waiting for HOURS," jab, "make me miss TWO hug times," another jab, "and then appear out of NOWHERE," jab, "not even a little bit sorry!" Jab jab jab.

"Ow, stop!" Branch grabbed her wrist to stop the stabbing. Poppy growled and smacked at his chest with her other hand.

"You are SUCH a jerk!"

"I'M a jerk?!" Branch grabbed her other wrist in time to prevent another hit. "I'm not the one assaulting somebody!" He held up her hands to emphasize his point.

Poppy threw her whole body back to try and free her arms. Branch pulled her in tightly to prevent an escape. Poppy kicked his leg.

"OW! What is WRONG with- OW!" Poppy kicked again, then grabbed his vest when the distraction made his control of an arm loosen up.

"Hug Therapy isn't going to work if you don't even TRY!" She shoved him back and yanked him towards her, shaking him.

"We TRIED and it FAILED!" Branch struggled to keep all of her angry limbs in check. Somebody, probably him, was going to get hurt for real.

"Why did you agree to this-" Poppy kicked again, "if you were going to bail after one day?!"

Branch, still holding her wrists, used an arm to back her up against a wall, then pinned her legs with his own. "I don't know!"

She jerked on his vest again, pulling his face right into hers. "You don't KNOW?!"

Branch needed to deescalate things. "Poppy. I want to let you go, but I need to know you're not going to hit me again."

"You- you-" Poppy stammered, slightly out of breath.

"I know I was a jerk." If he weren't in the middle of trying to not get clobbered, Branch would give himself a pat on the back for staying so calm. "If you can refrain from hitting me, I'll give you the apology you deserve. But I can't until you stop all of THIS." He pointedly looked at the hand that was still clutching his vest.
Poppy huffed. Branch watched and waited, losing himself in the details of her face. He’d never been so close, had never had the opportunity to study her so intimately. Her eyes closed and he marveled at her lashes. They were long and beautiful, especially so when fanned down across her cheeks. Slowly, her face lost the fiery glow that had been brought out by her fury, and he could easily see her glittering freckles. Most were gold, some were light pink. A very small few had a deep indigo tint. Absolutely gorgeous. His gaze dropped to her lips and his heart stopped. They were so pink and they looked so soft. He licked his own and imagined having the permission and courage to lean in just enough-

"I think I'm good now." Poppy muttered. Branch's eyes snapped up to meet hers and he felt his face ignite.

He dropped her wrists, leapt back, and looked away to try and hide his blush. "Poppy, I'm sorry for making you wait today. And I'm sorry for hitting you yesterday."

He peeked over and saw her frowning. Her cheeks were a little pinker than they'd been a moment ago. He braced himself for another round of fighting.

"Um, yeah. That was super rude." She rubbed the back of her neck. "I accept your apology. And uh. Sorry. For. You know." She waved a hand between them. "All of that."

"It's fine, it's- it's whatever." He turned and started to move away, desperately wanting to end the awkward conversation.

"It's not FINE." Poppy walked up by him. Apparently she felt the need to drag things out. "I'm angry at you, 'cause you WERE a jerk, but you didn't deserve that. And I'm sorry."

Branch didn't know what he was supposed to say, so he stood and waited.

And Poppy stood and waited.

And he stood and waited.

"Why DID you agree to this if you're so desperate to not do it?"

"I. Um." Seriously, what could he say? 'I've had a crush on you for years and the thought of getting to spend however much time I want with you made me lose my head' was not an option. Too honest.

Poppy heaved a sigh and rolled her eyes. "Whatever. It doesn't matter. You signed up for a week, you're doing a week. Go make some tea or something and we'll get down to business." She didn't give him a chance to say no before moving and flopping down onto the couch.

He didn't see any way out of it, so Branch prepared two cups and held one out for Poppy while he took his seat.

"Thanks. Maybe I can ask you to be my tea guy." Poppy chuckled to herself over a joke that Branch clearly wasn't privy to. "I can just outsource my entire kitchen. I can come here for tea and visit Hyacinth for bread."

Branch was completely lost. "That's not a well rounded diet. And I wouldn't give you tea every day."

"Whatever." Poppy took a slurp of her drink and then set it on the table. "So about yesterday." Branch tensed. "It wasn't a strong start. I MAYBE should have done something less big. So today-
stop looking so miserable- today we're going to scale things back." She smiled, apparently back to her perky self, and nodded to Branch. "I have faith that we can make this a good session."

"We packed a whole lot of touching into that fight, so maybe that can be enough for today."

"That doesn't count, that wasn't LOVING touch." Branch's cheeks darkened. She couldn't find less gooey words? "So today, for the rest of the week, let's just exist near each other and touch a little bit. Like, look. We're chatting comfortably-"

"Are we, though?"

"We are, and we could have had this entire conversation while holding hands. Gimme."

Not waiting for any sort of give from him, Poppy took Branch's free hand in hers.

"See? Now we can keep chatting and you won't get overwhelmed."

Branch was very close to overwhelmed. "R- right." His face and ears and neck were all hot. His heart was pounding. His tongue felt thick and heavy.

"Soosooooo..." Poppy started. "What's up with you?" She jiggled their hands.

He glared. She wasn't seriously expecting him to do this AND bear the brunt of a conversation he didn't want to have, was she?

"Woah tiger, easy there. It was just a question." She reached for her cup and took a sip before putting it back. "I'm doing alright lately."

"Uh."

Poppy smiled at him, waiting.

"Should we, uh, start a timer?"

Poppy's smile disappeared. "You know, my idea was that we could do this between hug times, since that would be a good way to know how long I was here. But I sort of can't expect you to return the beginning and end of session hugs, can I?"

"No."

"I'll figure something out for tomorrow. Let's do just a little more time today, I'm kind of tired." She laughed. "I can sing and dance for ages, but I guess trying to beat your face in burns a lot more energy." She laughed some more.

"Mmm, yeah, it's always funny when you come into my home and attack me. I'll cherish the memory."

Her good mood evaporated. "It wasn't my best moment."

"You don't say."

Poppy gave him a sharp look before pointedly ignoring him. Branch felt a little more confident. He was terrible at politely chatting about nothing, but Poppy being annoyed with him was familiar territory.

"Maybe tomorrow I can have a selection of weapons for you to choose from, then you can be even
more efficient with taking your frustration out on me."

He felt her grip on his hand tighten. "I said I was sorry."

"Well I look forward to how you apologize tomorrow."

"Maybe I'll bring a basket of muffins and a bouquet of flowers and throw them at your JERK HEAD."

"HOW INCREDIBLY THOUGHTFUL OF YOU." He was certain that she would break soon. She'd give up and leave.

"I. YOU." Poppy glared. "I know what you're doing. It's not going to work." She took a deep breath, exhaled, and turned back to him with the same eerily calm smile from earlier. "If you say one more mean thing, I WILL make you sit on my lap."

He believed her. Without breaking eye contact, he downed the rest of his tea and firmly set his cup on the table. He might be losing, but he could still be stubborn about it.

Something between five minutes and five hours passed with the pair holding hands and staring each other down.

"Fine. Let's be done." Poppy released him and stood to leave. "I'll be here first thing tomorrow. I'll let myself in. You can either be here and ready to go, or I can check out your whole bunker while I wait for you to get back."

"Don't forget my muffins and flowers."

Poppy smiled tightly one last time and disappeared up the lift.

Branch groaned. This had not the day he signed up for, but when was it ever when she was involved?

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Poppy ranted to herself as she stomped back home.

"'Don't forget my muffins and flowers.' What an ass. I'm GOING to bring muffins and flowers." As she walked, she yanked a few blades of grass from the ground and began angrily braiding them. "I'm going to make him so unbelievably happy someday. He'll thank me," she slipped the grass bracelet onto her wrist and grabbed another fistful, "and we'll be such GREAT friends. UGH."

Poppy crafted several more bracelets as she got closer to the village and decided to distribute them among her friends. Her mood immediately picked up at the thought of handing out gifts.

One thing led to another and when it was all said and done, Poppy had organized a camping party with the snack pack. She hurried home to pack a bag and make a dish to share. Muffins would work. She would even deal with the extra heat of her oven running if she could whomp somebody in the face with one in the near future.
Poppy excelled at making parties happen. Years of work and practice in making intricate cards and decorations had trained her muscles to create without her even looking, and that had certainly paid off today. A few tables were set up for food. The tables were adorned with swags of braided grasses, and the grasses had small, delicate flowers woven in.

She'd erected several poles to form two concentric circles, one around the perimeter of the clearing, and one closer to the center. Between the poles, Poppy had strung up more braided grasses. From the grasses, she'd hung the flower of choice for glowbugs. As the sun settled, the bugs would find the flowers she'd and feast. They would be happy, and SHE would get beautiful lighting for the sleepover.

On top of this, she'd strategically selected this location. The trees funnelled wind through this area, and while it certainly wasn't a windy day, any air movement that happened a ways out was directed here. They had the best chances of catching a refreshing breeze right here.

Poppy surveyed the clearing around her. Considering that she put this together on the fly, it was amazing. She chuckled. It looked great even if you didn't know she'd decorated in a rush. She gave herself a mental pat on the back. And SOME trolls think that this isn't real work. HA!

Her nose wrinkled at the intrusive thought. No. Nope. No. Tonight was about fun, friends, food, fun, singing, dancing, and fun. She busied herself with prepping a place for Suki's tremendous speakers, intent on enjoying life in the moment. She could pound her head against the brick wall that was Branch in the morning.

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"So Poppy," Biggie chirped before licking an errand glob of dip off a finger, "what did you decide to do about that thing with Branch?"

Poppy choked a little on her drink. She'd forgotten about visiting Biggie. She still needed to give him a thank you card for his help. Only slightly more pressing was the fact that she'd been sworn to secrecy regarding Hug Therapy.

She responded with almost no delay. "Oh, the security thing I mentioned the other day? Yeah, he's really vigilant about it. No better troll for the work, really." Poppy smiled at him as the conversation moved to matters her friends found more interesting than the village grump. She was confident Biggie understood that it wasn't a thing to discuss publicly. Trolls see his softness and compassion and overlook how clever he is, but the man will pick up what you're saying, or not saying, very quickly.

"That field with the purple flowers is in full bloom right now. We're going back again tomorrow to collect as many as possible for dying a few bolts of fabric." The group decided to help the twins harvest flowers.

They took turns being blindfolded for rounds of hide and seek. Poppy was found pretty quickly in each game. She really wasn't designed to be quiet.

"I volunteered to read to the children before lunch, but overbooked myself. I'm supposed to meet
with Sky Toronto's glitter team and give my opinion on glitter futures." Poppy volunteered to read in Guy Diamond's place.

Poppy and Fuzzbert laughed with Cooper at one of his rambling stories, this one about the time he spent two days thinking he'd died and was lost in the underworld, but in fact had just forgotten to open his eyes.

Poppy was the happiest she'd been in days. Song were being sung, Guy Diamond was rolling out some impressive new moves, and she was spending quality time with her friends. She stood under a cluster of glow bugs and contentedly soaked in the festivities around her.

"Will I see you at yoga in the morning, or will you be disappearing again to discuss top secret security details with Branch?" Creek had appeared at her side and silently offered her a drink. She took it, suddenly nervous and glad to have something to keep her hands busy while they talked.

"Thank you. And I, um." She took a sip to buy a few seconds to think. "It's just a new thing we're testing. It won't be forever, but you know how much attention is needed when you're getting something up and running." She could feel herself beginning to ramble. "And I don't even know if we'll end up sticking with this new thing, you know? But I definitely can't talk about it until we know one way or the other what's going on, and even then, who knows."

She looked over at Creek after realizing that she'd avoided doing so the whole time she was babbling. His eyes were a little wide, but he looked like he believed her.

"That seems like a lot of uncertainty for how much stress you're subjecting yourself to." His face softened into a look of concern. "If I could be candid with you, Poppy..." he was waiting for permission to say something she probably wouldn't want to hear. Honestly, he was so sweet.

"Yeah, please!"

He let out a puff of air he must have been holding. "You invest a lot of yourself in him. In Branch. Whether it's trying to drag him to events, or trying to hug him, or now this uh, security thing, you put a lot of yourself into him."

"I mean. This might not even last for very long."

"But even if it doesn't, you'll keep on seeking him out every day, putting yourself in his crosshairs every day." He reached out and took her hand in his. Poppy felt her pulse quicken. "And I know that you DO hurt when he yells at you and says cruel things to you. And I wish you'd stop doing that to yourself."

She was at a loss for words. Under the light of the glowbugs and through the haze of the summer heat, he looked ethereal. If not for the feel of his hand tethering her to reality, Poppy felt like she might be made of ether herself. "I, um." She knew she was supposed to say something. "I. Um." He rubbed his thumb over her knuckles, drawing her attention down to their hands.

"I care for you, Poppy. Very much. And I want you to be as happy as you deserve to be, every day." He stepped closer, let go of her hand, and tucked her bangs behind her ear. She looked up to meet his eyes. He was so close that Poppy could smell his fruity drink on his breath, and she felt certain that he could hear her heart pounding. "Please stay with me. We coul-OOMPH! AAH! OW!"

Creek disappeared in a Cooper colored blur. Poppy's head rapidly swiveled around as she tried to make sense of the disruption. To her right, Creek and Cooper were in a heap on the ground. To her
left, Suki and Smidge were running over ahead of the rest of her friends. 

"Cooper, I never even threw the ball!" Suki pulled him off of Creek while Smidge, who was trying in vain to not laugh, helped Creek to his feet.

Creek looked everywhere but back at Poppy. His cheeks were a dark purple and he was visibly upset. "Right, I need to check on something over by my sleeping bag." He was off before Poppy could do or say anything to try and take them back to moments before when he'd been saying such lovely things. She watched him fiddle with nothing and turned her attention to Smidge and Suki, hoping he would seek her out again later.

The night moved on with more games, more songs, and many more snacks before the crew all wore down and stretched out across the makeshift megabed they'd built. Poppy fell asleep listening to the twins growl at each other about their errand limbs, quietly excited about what tomorrow might bring.

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The snack pack rose with the sun, all chattering and eager to enjoy the day. A mostly sleepless night is easier on the body when you were up the whole time playing and partying. Poppy looked at her tidy stack of things to take home and was pleased. She's so good at sleepovers, she really should do them more often.

The friends enjoyed a breakfast of leftover snacks, discussed plans for the day, and busted out a particularly stunning rendition of ABBA's Dancing Queen before parting ways, agreeing to reconvene for yoga.

Poppy dashed away first, too excited for everything. It felt like ages since her last morning yoga session, and getting her stretch on was the best feeling in the world. And reading time! Oh, how she loved reading time. To look up from a riveting story and see the bright, happy faces of the children, it was the best feeling in the world. And picking flowers! Like, yeah she'd picked flowers a few days ago, but that was literally DAYS ago. She loved building beautiful bouquets and then giving them away- making somebody feel special was the best feeling in the world.

Poppy threw open the door to her pod, dumped off all her stuff in the living room, and hopped into the shower to freshen up. She'd be sweaty ten minutes later, but nothing got her pumped quite like a song or two in the shower. It was going to be SUCH a good day.

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Yoga started off well. Poppy loved to stretch and pop her joints alongside her friends, although she had to admit that the 'clear your mind' part of things had always been a challenge. Today was a little tougher than usual, especially when she would look over at Creek and remember the night before. She knew where things were going, she wasn't an idiot. But she was pretty sure she needed to wait for him to pick things up again. So if he could just stop being so freaking zen and ask her out, that would be fantastic.

She was anticipating him approaching her once yoga wrapped up, but when the time came, he slipped away before she realized he'd done so. Despite her disappointment, the perky princess kept a positive attitude. "No big deal, there's no rush. If he needs time to do it right, I'll give him time," she said to herself while rolling up her mat.

Poppy spent a few minutes chatting with her yoga classmates and friends before excusing herself, antsy to pick out a few extra wonderful books for the kids.
"Okay, so I'm gonna roll, but will meet up with you guys for flower picking and picnic lunches. Love you, bye!"

Poppy dashed home and raided her shelves. As she pulled down books and weighed her options, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was forgetting something. She kept going over a mental checklist of the day's itinerary. Yoga, story time, lunch and flower picking. Was she forgetting something? It felt like she was, but how are you supposed to remember what you're forgetting?

She shook the thought out of her head, found three stories that she was certain would entertain, and left her home, ready to spread cheer.

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Branch looked up at the open elevator shaft and growled. He'd spent most of the night and all of his morning designing a new locking mechanism, and while the extra time had been useful, the pettiness from Poppy was getting ridiculous. Exactly how long was he supposed to sit around waiting for her? Was assault really not enough of a punishment? She had to waste his day, too?

"So fucking vindictive. Never would have guessed." He huffed as he cleaned up some of his lines.

"'You can either be here and ready to go, or I can check out your whole bunker while I wait for you to get back.'" He ticked his head back and forth as he mimicked. "'Ha, NOPE. You won't get the chance, you gorgeous psychopath.'"

Branch immediately flushed. Thinking too long on whatever feelings he might have (for no troll in particular!) really wasn't something he wanted to do right now. SAYING anything was new. And terrible. And should and would not be happening again. She was rubbing off on him. Unacceptable.

Branch rapidly shook his head in an attempt to stop the train of thought that was already leaving the station. 'Poppy? Rubbing? DO go on!'

He slammed his forehead on the desk. Stop.

'Poppy rubbing off on you?'

SLAM.

'What about Poppy rubbing UP on you? Eh? Eh?'

Branch briefly contemplated jamming his pencil in his ear and ending it all right then and there. It wasn't the first time he'd considered it, he was sure it wouldn't be the last.

'When Poppy comes over, she'll try to hug you,'

Branch scrubbed his face with his hands.

'She's so soft, and so warm, and so perfect,'

He pinched his arms, trying to stop the barrage of invasive thoughts. He knew what was coming next.

'It's too bad that she's only interested in you because she feels sorry for you. She has no idea what a waste of skin you are.'
Here we go.

'It's too bad that you're completely unlovable.'

This again.

'Even if some troll WERE to love you, you'd just get them killed. That's a thing you do.'

Branch slowly set his head down on the desk. He wasn't going anywhere soon.

'Could you imagine being the reason that Poppy died? Do you do enough to keep her and everybody else safe?'

He brought his arms up around his face, silently walling himself in with his thoughts.

'You get so distracted with daydreams about an impossible romance that you won't be ready when the bergens find the village.'

He sucked in a deep breath and tried to let it out slowly.

'You're going to get everybody killed. When they get eaten alive,'

He took another breath,

"When they're being crushed and ripped apart and don't have air in their lungs to even scream out in pain,"

He held it in as long as he could,

"It will be because of you.'

Sobs. He couldn't stop them. Sad, quiet, whimpering cries poured out of him.

His brain supplied nightmarish visions of his peers in agony. His ears flattened, trying to block out the crunching, crushing, ripping torture that only he could hear. He couldn't look away from them.

His fingers dug into his arms, there would surely be bruises, as his mind's eye showed him all the trolls he would someday destroy. All the children whose short lives would end in hellish pain and terror.

He choked and gagged between sobs as they raised in pitch and volume. He didn't care. Nobody would hear. Nobody ever heard him.

He could see Poppy watching her village, could see her heart shattering over and over as she waited her turn. Her friends. Her father. Everybody she loved. Screaming, bleeding, dying.

His stomach rolled as he imagined leaving the bunker and walking out to a ghost town. He would be alone. He would be truly and completely alone, and it would be all his fault.

He sat at his desk and cried himself out. He felt so small and so weak underneath the weight of his own wretched existence. He couldn't protect them forever, the stress was killing him. He couldn't just fucking kill himself and speed up the inevitable slaughter. He was stuck existing and knowing in every second of every day that he was a failure, that he was dangerous, and that he would be alone until the day he finally got to die.

He cried. And he cried. And he threw up hot, bitter bile onto his new lock designs before pushing
himself out of his chair and onto the floor, where he curled up and continued crying.

Branch eventually fell asleep on the ground cold, fatigued, and heartbroken. Not for the first time, he wished that he could cease to exist before he would wake up.

-----

"Thank you all again for the help today!"

"Stop THANKING and keep PICKING. The sooner these baskets are full, the sooner we're done."

Chenille turned to her sister and jutted her chin out. "I just want to make sure they know that we appreciate them."

"The other seven times you stopped picking to thank them probably already did the job. Get back to work so we can get out of the sun."

A short ways away, Poppy and Biggie exchanged a look. Poppy whispered to her flower picking partner. "They're getting along pretty well today."

Biggie chuckled quietly. "They always can when it's for the sake of fashion. I can see why they want these flowers, the color is so beautiful." He tucked another handful of inky purple petals into his basket.

Poppy hummed quietly in agreement. The sweltering heat was really doing a number on her drive to sing and dance. This flower collecting expedition was far from the musical afternoon she'd been expecting. She looked up and around the field to see the same look of quiet exhaustion on her friends' faces. Cooper was napping. Or dead? Oh, nope, his leg twitched, he's fine. Guy Diamond had stopped posing as he picked. Even Smidge, with her tremendous strength, didn't have the stamina for hours of working under the hot sun.

Biggie loudly whispered over to her. "So Poppy, now that we've got a moment, just the two of us here, can you tell me what you decided to do as far as things with Branch?"

Poppy's stomach dropped.

"Oh Biggie." She couldn't move. "Oh no-"

"Poppy?"

Poppy laughed weakly. "Biggie I forgot- oh no- oh nooOOo000oo000-" Poppy took two rigid steps towards her friend before stopping abruptly and dropping down to scoop up two handfuls of now mashed flowers.

"Poppy? Poppy don't forget to breathe-" Biggie was right in front of her, his hands on her shoulders, doing his best to not lose it right along with her.

"I have to- I have to go. Now. NOW!" Poppy shot up and tumbled backwards away from Biggie, who was already moving in again to try and soothe her.

"I'll. LATER! I promise. Tell them sorry-" She jerked her head over towards the twins, "I have to- bye. Aah! Aaaaaah!"

And then she was off, tearing through the low grasses, hopping over roots and darting around larger rocks. She was certain- well, pretty sure- that this route would take her close to his bunker
entrance. She couldn't waste time going back to the village and taking her more familiar path to Branch.

Branch. Hair. "Fuck. Fuckity fuck!" She wheezed out a string of curses as she imagined what sort of wrath she would face.

Too late, she noticed a small green beetle directly in her way. Poppy tried to lengthen her stride and step over him, and it DID work, but only enough to spare the beetle. Poppy's poorly planted foot twisted and sent her tumbling to the side. "Aah!" She landed hard on her shoulder as her head smacked loudly on a partially embedded rock.

Poppy didn't move. She didn't want to. Her head was throbbing and spinning, so she wasn't inclined to try.

She laid in the dirt and waited. Waited for help, for her head to stop swimming... She didn't know. She tried shifting to at least be less uncomfortable, only to discover that her ankle was hurt as well.

"Heh. Awesome." She laughed dryly as her situation sank in.

She was injured. Duh.

Nobody knew where she was.

Eventually, the sun would go down. As thrilling as the night could be, she didn't want to be stranded and semi-lost when it came.

Poppy made up her tired, fuzzy mind to move. She didn't want to. She had to. But she really, REALLY didn't want to.

She made to extend her hair to a branch to pull up on.

"Aah! No!" Her free arm shot up and she clutched at her skull. Pain sliced down through her brain and neck. Hair was not a tool right now.

"For fuckssake." Poppy curled in on herself, passive misery rapidly transforming into panic.

"Okay. Okay. I'll go slow. Little bit at a time."

She gritted her teeth and prepared for how much everything was going to suck. "One... two..." she moved her hand from her still pounding head and pressed it firmly to the ground. "Three..."

And she was up. And it was bad. She stopped moving once she was on her one hand and two knees, waiting to see if the dizziness and throw up-iness would go away. She slowly bent forward and rested her forehead on the ground.

After a few minutes, she slowly, so slowly, raised her head up and looked around. A small stick would help. If she could lean on it, she could limp the rest of the way to Branch's place. He might be angry, but it would be a step up from stranded in the forest.

Her eyes landed on a perfect twig just a little bit to her left. Yes.

Poppy tested out her injured shoulder. It was rotten luck that basically the whole right side of her body was hurt, but she'd have to use this arm to lean if she wanted to keep weight off her ankle.

A small victory. It was sore, but not nearly as bad as her ankle. Or her head, it reminded her with a throb.
She carefully inched her way over to the twig. Her little beacon of hope. She could do this. "I can do this."

And she did. Another small victory. Poppy planted it firmly on the ground in front of her and gripped it with both hands, eager to not lose her momentum. The sun was starting to get low and she still had to actually find the bunker entrance.

"Urgh. AAH!" Poppy hoisted herself up and quickly wedged the top of the twig into her tender armpit. Her shoulder throbbed, but she ignored it as best she could and tried taking a few steps.

It was difficult, painful, and nauseating, but she was doing it. Normally, this would merit a song or dance, or at least a little twirl. Poppy would celebrate later, when she wasn't quietly terrified of dying alone. And could move more than a few steps without a dizzy spell. And when things just sucked less.

She set herself back on course, she was pretty sure, to the bunker. It was slow and miserable. She stopped every few steps to let her spinning head catch up. Her entire body was drenched in sweat. It ran down her face, arms, and legs in salty streams, making it difficult to keep her hands from slipping off the twig. Her ankle throbbed every time she tried to set her foot down, and she was starting to think that crawling might be the faster way to travel.

"A little longer. A little longer." The shadows of larger plants stretched out long in front of Poppy and the sky took on an insultingly peaceful gold tone. She was losing daylight quickly. She gasped in another breath. Just a little longer, she hoped, and she hobbled on.

A short while later, she realized that she recognized her surroundings. At this pace, she was maybe five minutes away from the bunker. Five minutes away from safety. Five minutes away from help. Adrenaline flooded through her body and she pushed on, almost giddy. She even started using her injured foot for small hops. The pain was bearable enough now, knowing that it could be mitigated soon.

She dropped to her knees in front of the entrance and started jamming her fingers in the small pile of rocks near it, looking for the trigger to open the hatch. The sun had just set, making it harder than it needed to be. "My fucking luck today..." Poppy muttered as she used her other hand to start checking in other nooks.

A dull CLUNK sounded from below and she could have cried. She made it. She just had to hop down and let Branch yell at her while he put her broken little body back together.

Hop down.

Hop.

Hair.

Poppy looked down the hatch. She could do this. What was a little more pain? She'd aim for landing on her butt. She could land, throw up, and then take the elevator down.

She slid her body over and positioned herself by the hatch. She took a moment to press her hands into her tired, sore eyes and take a few breaths.

"On three. One. Two."

She threw herself over and plopped down into the cool, pitch black bunker, landing on her left hip.
"Urgh..." she rode out the wave of nausea that the fall had induced, and reached out, feeling around for the switch. She closed her hand around something that felt right, gave it a tug, and heard it click into gear.

As she descended down into Branch's lair, she could only imagine what she looked like. What sort of disaster was going to arrive in Branch's tidy little living ro-

"ULP." Poppy gagged and covered her mouth and nose as the stench of... puke? Old puke? It had to be... pinched at her nose. The elevator stopped and she looked out into the living room, trying to see what the fuck was going on.

In the dim lighting of the luminescent mushrooms, she saw Branch on the floor.

Poppy's guts froze. What had happened? Was he okay? If he wasn't, how was she going to get help for him? For her? For anybody? She crawled as rapidly as she could across the room, straining her eyes to see any signs of life in her gray lump of a friend.

Upon closer inspection, she could see that he was breathing. Thank Hair. He looked like he was sleeping.

On the floor.

In a room where somebody had puked somewhere.

And his face was covered in... tears? Tracks of dry tears striped his grubby cheeks.

Poppy propped herself up on her left elbow and took a few moments to look at him closely. She started to piece together what she thought had happened.

"Oh Branch..." Poppy whispered as she swept her free hand across his forehead and down his cheek. "You're so sad..." her eyes tracked back and forth across his face, taking in all of his wear and tear. How much of his anger was just a mask over his sadness? What could she do to build a bridge and save him from this island he was stranded on?

She didn't know. She didn't know much of anything right now.

Poppy tucked her body in close to his and laid her head down on his arm. She'd let herself rest for just a few minutes before waking him up. She knew that he would take care of her soon.

Chapter End Notes

I rewrote this chapter three fucking times. I'm so sorry, ahaha.
Branch groaned. He could feel himself starting to wake up, which meant that he hadn't miraculously disappeared. Sigh.

He kept his eyes shut tight, trying to put off being fully awake for as long as possible. His body ached. He remembered...

"Ugh, no..."

Oh right. He'd cried himself to sleep on the floor. He was going to be so sore today. He quietly huffed and started slowly taking in the world beyond his body.

The room was a little chilly. Normal.

The room smelled like he'd puked all over his desk. Unfortunate.

There was something jammed into his right side. What could he have found to cozy up against? What would even be this warm?

Curiosity won out over the perpetual exhaustion brought on by existence, and Branch cracked an eye open to see what was wedged up by him.

He saw pink. Pink? That glaring shade of pink that could only belong to...

He barely whispered. "Puh! Po-P-Poppy?!!" What?

What?!

WHAT?!

He leaned up as much as he could without moving her to see what the hair was going on. He whipped his head around, trying to see if anybody else was here. Was this a joke? A prank? Why he looked down at Poppy, who was still deeply asleep against/on him.

Only now, he looked more closely. She looked like hell. He slid out from under her and yanked a glowing mushroom off his desk. He held it over his head and got a better look.

She was caked in dirt and sweat... he looked down her body and saw some rough scraps and a nasty looking bruise on her shoulder and upper arm. He'd have to clean and bandage that before it got infected. He held the mushroom closer and gently poked at various places, trying to get a better idea of how bad it was.

He didn't fail to notice that she didn't react to this, but continued his inspection. What the fuck happened to her?

He moved the mushroom down her body, looking for more damage. Her legs were scraped here and there, but fine otherwise. Branch coughed into his shoulder. He would ask Poppy if anything, um, under the dress, needed medical attention. He prayed that nothing did.

When he got to her twisted ankle, he sucked in a sharp breath of air. How had she even gotten here
on this? It was such a dark shade of purple, and it was so swollen. He gingerly moved her foot and watched her face as he did so. She grimaced, but remained asleep.

He would need to get something cold on that asap.

He looked up at her face again. So many questions. She looked beat, but he really did need some answers. Sorry, Poppy...

He set the mushroom down in front of her face and poked her cheek.

"Hey, wake up."

She did not.

He pinched her cheek. "Hey. Wake UP."

She continued to not wake up.

Branch started sweating. She didn't seem like the type to sleep through anything. He put his hand on her shoulder, trying to avoid the tender looking parts, and nudged her body back and forth.

"Poppy, seriously. Wake up. Tell me what happened to you."

His mind began painting a dreadful picture. Did she escape a predator? Perhaps a Bergen? He shook her more firmly.

"POPPY, this is SERIOUS."

The Bergens had found them. He knew it. How many villagers were gone? How many survivors were left? He could feel his heartbeat through his entire body. He needed to know more, dammit! What the fuck happened?!

His patience was gone. He hoisted Poppy up by both shoulders so that she sat on her hip facing him. He shook her. Maybe too hard.

"POPPY! HOW MANY BERGENS?!!"

Finally, she responded by throwing up onto his chest and slurring at him. "Shu' UP! 'M TIRED!"

He looked down into her angry, bloodshot, and rather dilated eyes and started connecting more dots.

"Poppy, did you hit your head?! What do you remember?" His hands jerked up from her shoulders to her cheeks, turning and adjusting her head, trying to find where she'd been struck. "Can you speak clearly? Can you see alright? What do you REMEMBER?"

Poppy's hands flew up and started slapping at his face. "Stop! Stop moving me! 'Mgunna puke!"

Branch growled and grabbed her hands. "Where did you hit your head!? Point!" He released one hand and waited impatiently.

Poppy glowered at him and pointed to her right temple. Right temple, right shoulder, right ankle, too. Ouch.

"I saw your shoulder and your ankle. Where else are you hurt?"

She gestured to her hip, smirking. "Can you kissit an' make it better?"
Branch's eyes narrowed. "This is serious, Poppy. What happened? Is the village okay? Who hurt you? Are there other survivors?"

He knew that she had a concussion. He knew all these questions were probably overwhelming her. But he needed information.

Poppy laughed dryly. "I fell."

"While a predator was chasing you?"

She laid back down on his floor and pinched her brow. "I just FELL. On the way HERE."

That. That couldn't be right.

"No, Poppy, I'm trying to, ugh." He needed small questions so she could give small answers. He stood up and thought about what to ask. While doing so, he removed his wet vest and used it to wipe off his chest.

"Why were you coming here?"

"Hug Therapy."

He wadded up the vest (puke side IN) and tossed it into his bedroom. He could wash it later.

"Was that this morning?"

"After lunch. F'rgot. Then remembered."

Branch looked at the small clock on his desk. It was half past one in the morning.

"You got hurt on the way to see me?"

"Yup."

"Were you being chased?"

"Nope."

He picked up the stinking, soaked papers on his desk and shoved them down into his wastebasket. He then moved the basket to a small closet. They really didn't need to keep breathing vomit fumes.

"The village is safe?"

"Yup."

"So you really did just fall on the way here?"

"Yup."

The more questions she answered, the more questions he wanted to ask. But the village was safe. And Poppy was safe. He would just have to be okay with that much for now.

"Alright then." Branch washed his hands and face in his kitchen sink, then pulled two small first aid kits off a shelf. "Let's get you fixed up. Stay awake, I think you have a concussion."

She blew a raspberry.
Branch rolled his eyes. Poppy was laid out on his floor, wounded, and completely at his mercy, but she didn't let any of that hold her back from being an antagonistic little shit.

He filled a pot with water and set it on the stove to warm up. He filled another pot with water and tossed in two rags. He'd keep something cold on her ankle while he worked elsewhere.

He squatted down by her feet and carefully wrapped her ankle in the first rag, then darted back to the sink for a glass of water.

"Uh, okay, let's just- Can you sit up and drink this?" He sat by Poppy and extended the glass out to her.

Poppy flapped her arms and rolled on to her side, then slowly pushed up off the ground. She locked her tired eyes with Branch's as she took the water.

Branch pushed the glass towards her face. "Drink this," He reached into one of the boxes he set out and retrieved a fat little wad of folded paper. "and swallow this. It will help with the pain a bit. I'm not sure about giving you anything stronger, sorry."

For the first time he could remember, Poppy did what he asked without any nonsense. She popped the little pill, downed the glass of water, and leaned on her left arm, waiting for directions.

Branch turned to check on the stove. No steam yet. He looked at Poppy.

"So, um. I have water. When it's ready, we'll clean up the dirt around your cuts scrapes."

"'Kay."

And that was it. Branch sat quietly and expected her to babble like she usually does. But she didn't. She just sat and stared at him. She looked almost bored. He always thought that if he could catch her being quiet, it would be a miracle, but the circumstances around this...

"Your head. Does it still hurt? Do you need to lay down? I'll get a few pillows." Branch dashed off to his bedroom before she responded and took a few moments to panic.

What if this was a permanent issue for her? Traumatic brain injuries are, well, traumatic! What if he missed something and she died, DIED, because he didn't take good enough care of her?!

He peeked around the earthen doorway to check on her. She was lying down again.

Should he take her to the doctor? It's so late, and she's hurt. There's no guarantee that they wouldn't wind up as some awful creature's midnight snack.

Should he get the doctor and bring her here? That wasn't a great option either. If HE got eaten, she'd still be wounded in his bunker and alone on top of that.

So it really was just the two of them for the night. Just for a few hours. When the sun came up, he could dash to the village and get the doctor.

He mashed the pillows he'd grabbed up to his face and tried to slow his rapid breathing. He could do this. He could help her. He could get through this.

After his roundabout pep talk, Branch got back on track with fixing Poppy. He got her propped up on pillows, changed out the rag on her ankle, and retrieved the now hot water from the stove. Time to just. Bandage up a princess. He took a seat by her and started wiping at her shoulder.
"Thanks."

Branch's brow furrowed. This would be easier if he didn't have to clean AND talk. "Sure." He replied.

Poppy stayed quiet as he worked, save for occasional grunts and noises of discomfort. Branch was almost done wrapping up her shoulder when her hug time bracelet went off with a delicate little ping. Two o'clock.

Branch tried to sneak a look at Poppy to see if she noticed. She was watching him. She definitely saw him look.

Her entire face widened into smirk and she extended a hand. "Oh Branch. You can hug me. C'mere."

He leaned away. "No, thank you."

Now Branch could feel her watching him. Could feel her smiling at him. It was unsettling. He finished fastening the last bits of gauze and moved to her foot to change out the rag again.

"Y'know, we missed Hug Therapy today."

Sigh. "We did. You decided to do all of this to yourself instead." He dabbed a warm rag on her scraped up shins.

"I could REALLY go for a couple good hugs."

Branch changed the subject. "You're speaking more clearly."

"You woke me up really suddenly. And by shaking me. And I got hit. Like. I'm a little woozy, but you should have seen me earlier. I'm already doing way better." Branch didn't respond. The chatter was a bit of a relief. "Buuuuuuut I could really use a few hugs. Since, you know," Poppy pulled her leg back and shoved his face with her foot. "I HURT."

Branch snapped. He grabbed the offending foot and gave her a hard yank and shouted. "DON'T KICK ME!"

"Ow!"

He began scrubbing the leg he held with more vigor than was necessary. "You always act so ENTITLED to me. Contrary to what you might think, PRINCESS," he looked at her sharply, "I'm not your TOY."

He dropped the rag in the hot water and started dotting a sharp smelling ointment over her cuts. "No more talking."

And for a few blessed minutes, that was that. Branch worked, Poppy stayed quiet, and his simmering fury slowly cooled.

-----

Poppy was bored. Tired, sore, and a little bummed, yes, but at this moment, she was predominantly bored.

Try as she might to lighten the mood, Branch wasn't having any of it. Dude couldn't even spare a hug.
Poppy watched Branch finish up the last bandage on her last leg and decided that he'd gotten enough quiet time.

"So what's next, doc?" She could see his silent sigh. If she'd been sure he wouldn't catch her, she'd have rolled her eyes.

He stood up and stretched out his back before responding. "I'm not sure. Sleep would be nice, but you hit your head..." He crouched down by her and leaned in close, looking for something in her eyes. "How do you feel?" He asked as he pulled back.

Poppy could only laugh, and so she did. She felt GREAT, obviously. But now Branch was scowling and his cheeks had gotten dark. Poppy never knew what was going to set it off, but she loved it when that happened.

She waved her hand defensively. "Oh stop. It's just a funny question considering EVERYTHING." She sat up to emphasize just how great (and not like she'd been stomped on by some tremendous animal) she was feeling. "I would love to sleep, honestly." Branch still seemed wary of letting that happen. "Or we could make up for today's missed Hug Therapy session..."

"Sleep it is." Branch quickly stood up and put away his first aid boxes, then took a few aimless steps in a small circle. "Um."

"What's up, buttercup?"

He twisted his hands together as he spoke. "Uh. You'll. Uh." His eyes darted to the arch leading to his bedroom and her eyes followed. No proper door, but Poppy supposed that he didn't need one since she was the first troll other than him to ever be down here.

She looked back at Branch and could have squealed. His face, and even ears, had turned a beautifully dark shade of gray. If she was sure he wouldn't react poorly, she'd ask about it.

He murmured something, she didn't hear what, and dashed out of the room.

Poppy was puzzled. Was she supposed to sleep here? In the middle of the floor? She called out to him. "You okay in there, buddy?"

He sort of called back. "J-just a second! Stay there!" She angled her ears around, trying to figure out if he was choking on something or being strangled, because going off the way he choked out that response, she assumed that one of those things was happening.

And then he was back in the doorway, looking slightly sick and twisting his hands together again. Still quite dark. It was traveling down his chest now. "Uh. My bed."

Poppy waited. She was tired, but patience was important with Branch.

Soon enough, he found his voice and continued. "Sleep. You'll, uh, in there. I'll- out here. One night ONLY. You're hurt-"

She heard enough to figure it out and threw him a bone. "That works for me. Thank you for all of this, Branch. Can you help me-" she gestured to her ankle, "get over there?"

He stuttered out a "y-yup," and was by her in an instant. Getting her to her one foot was easy enough, but with the shoulder he'd have to support being hurt, they had difficulty finding a way for her to walk without more pain.
Poppy huffed. "Okay, idea! Just carry me." Branch balked, but Poppy didn't see any other way. "It's not that far, and look at you-" she tapped/slapped (depending on who you asked) his bare chest with the back of her hand, "you're standing there all shirtless Mister Muscles-like, we both know you can carry me." She smiled at him, hoping the flattery would speed up the process.

He frowned at her. "You threw up on me."

"Don't change the subject." She poked his nose playfully and slung her left arm over his shoulder. "Away we go!"

Maybe. Branch hadn't moved. "This. This is how I'm- uh" He was struggling. Poppy realized that he was probably hitting his limit for time with any troll and tried to speed things along for his sake.

"One hand behind my back, one under my knees. Like a princess."

Branch deadpanned. "You ARE a princess."

"Then this shouldn't be a problem." Poppy let herself fall sideways into him, giving him the option to either stand firm and support her or let her plop unceremoniously onto his floor. She was really banking on him not letting her plop after all the work he just did fixing her up.

Branch pulled through and wrapped his arm around her back, one hand landing on her ribs and the other coming around her front and catching her hip.

Poppy turned and looked up into his face, expecting his usual grimace when she got this close. She was a little shocked to see him looking... not angry. Or even upset.

Just... looking at her. His eyes were wide and his mouth was slightly agape. It was so unlike his regular guarded visage, just like yesterday- well, closer to two days ago, now, when he'd pinned her. She'd closed her eyes to cool down, and opened them to see him looking so soft. One might even say vulnerable.

"Branch," she said quietly.

He exhaled a quiet response. "Yeah?"

"Your hand-" his thumb had started rubbing small circles on her hip bone. It was sending her brain some very mixed up messages, if she were being honest. "It has to go behind my knees."

He jerked his hand off of her like he'd been burned, and in one motion, put his arm behind her legs and hoisted her up. "You shouldn't have tried to fall." He glowered at her. Poppy could feel the heat from his cheek on her forehead. "If I hadn't caught you, who knows how much more work I'd have had to do."

He walked her into his bedroom and she looked around as much as she could. It was another small, tidy room. Fewer shelves, more luminescent mushrooms, an actual door in one corner, maybe to a bathroom, and the bed was-

"DUDE!" Poppy exclaimed. "Your bed!"

She twisted in his arms to try and get a better look. Poppy didn't know what she was expecting, but it wasn't this.

It was literally a nest. Larger twigs and various vines woven together to form a soft round bottom and edges, and in the center, a pile of some seriously soft stuff. Downy feathers, what looked like
blankets of felted animal hair, and sheets here and there of soft, cushion-y mosses. Big enough to easily fit a few trolls, cozy looking enough for one to not feel lost in it. It looked, dare she say, luxurious.

"You didn't tell me you had THIS for a bed!"

Branch looked cross as he leaned over and set her down on a particularly fluffy spot. "Why would I tell you about my bed?"

"I'm just saying, if I slept in this, I would constantly be bragging and showing people." She laid back and wriggled down into a comfortable spot. "Wow. WOW. I expected something more rugged, I guess. But this is amazing."

Branch crossed his arms and snorted derisively. "Even I like being comfortable. You're ridiculous."

Poppy ignored him and closed her eyes. She was in heaven. If she had to break every bone in her body to earn trips back to this bed, she'd do it. She sighed and pulled a thick blanket over her belly. Heaven.

After who knows how long, she heard her him cough. "H-Hey. I grabbed this. Drink it."

She peeked up and saw Branch holding a glass of water. Poppy sat up (sort of) and drained the glass, thankful for his thoughtfulness. He took it and set it on the small stump table by the bed. "Goodnight. I'll go get the doctor in the morning, and we'll get you back to the village and out of my hair."

Poppy smiled flatly. "What a touching thing to say." She smoothed out the blanket on her lap. "Thank you again for everything. I don't know what I'd have done without your help." She decided to go for broke and held out her arms. "Goodnight hug?"

Branch shook his head and started to walk out of the room. "Call for me if you need anything that is NOT a hug."

Poppy laid down and sighed again. It was worth a shot. It always was.

With some effort, she rolled over and nuzzled her face into one of the many plush blankets. The whole bed, nest, thing, smelled like Branch. As she fell asleep, Poppy recalled him holding her and rubbing her hip, and the combination of smell and sensation, and probably mental fatigue, made for a night of vivid and restless dreams.

Chapter End Notes

My trolls tumblr is IGuessILoveTrollsNow. It's not thrilling, but I also won't post knitting or cakes there, so idk.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Poppy was tired. And sore. And tired. And so very sore.

She had no idea what time it was, but her internal alarm had gone off a while ago, and now she was stuck in bed, not even her own bed, sore, and unable to hit the bathroom without first shouting for help.

"Branch?" She said quietly. "Heyyyyyyy buddy." She wasn't sure what kind of mood he would be in and wanted to be cautious. So far, no response.

A little louder. "Heyyyyyyy Branch..." and she waited a moment.

Poppy took a deep breath was about to call out to him louder when a gray figure appeared in the doorway.

"Well helloooOOOOOH AAH!" He looked like death. "What happened to you?!"

His frown deepened and he stepped into the room. "It's been a long night. What's wrong?"

"Did you sleep at ALL?"


Poppy smiled weakly. Being embarrassed wasn't her thing, but. Well. "I need to use your bathroom."

Branch's eyes widened. "Uh, right. Okay." Poppy could almost see his brain putting together a plan. She was so glad he was taking care of her right now. "And have you tried walking, or..."

Oh for fuckssake.

"Branch."

His voice was a little high. "Have you tried...?"

Poppy sat up and snapped at him. "Just carry me to the bathroom and I'll take it from there!"

Branch scooped her up and ran her over to the bathroom, only slowing to let Poppy turn the door handle. After helping her get to her one good foot and lean on the wall, he darted out and called through the door. "I'll uh, make breakfast. Just shout when you need me!"

--------

After being seated in the one chair at Branch's desk, which also happened to be his dining table, Poppy watched him make breakfast. She had no idea what he was cooking, but still, it was fun to watch. While he may have been groggy and just going through the motions, Poppy was now fully awake and very excited for the day.

"It's neat that you're cooking." She chirped.
"Mm."

"I didn't know you could."

"Mhm."

"I mean, lots of trolls live alone and never cook. Like, I love him, but really don't think Cooper needs a stove."

"Hm."

"He is a lot more flammable than most of us, y'know?"

"Mhm."

"But our firefighters are good at their job, I think in part because of how often they're called to help him. So maybe it's not all bad."

Branch turned away from the simmering pot and scrubbed his face with his hands. "Poppy," one hand pinched at the crease in his brow, "please stop talking."

Poppy angled her head to the side and frowned at him. "I'm trying to be a good guest and keep the conversation moving."

"You could be a good guest by not trying to have a conversation."

"But I'm excited! I get to see my friends today!"

Branch rolled his eyes and filled two bowls. "Save the talking for them. Eat this. Then we'll get ready to go." He set her breakfast in front of her and leaned against the table to work on his own.

Poppy looked at her dish. It was an entirely unfamiliar sight. No sprinkles, no frosting, no candies anywhere, no berries, not a single neon color... She was pretty sure that the color brown was only edible when it was made of chocolate.

"Riiiiiiight..." she swirled the contents with her spoon and hoped that her stalling wasn't obvious.

"Y'know, this right here is why you need another chair." Poppy poked at Branch's thigh, causing him to scoot away from her.

"No. This right here is why you shouldn't come over. I only have one chair."

"But you have two bowls."

Branch ignored her observation. "Okay then. I'm going to pack my bag, then we'll head out. You're well enough that I don't think we need to bring the doctor here, but since you still shouldn't put weight on your ankle, you can't walk."

Poppy perked up. "Will you carry me like a princess back to the village?"

He snorted. "Absolutely not. I have a cart for moving larger things. You're going in that."

"Hey!"

He dropped his empty bowl by the sink and walked away, ignoring Poppy's indignation.
Poppy called after him. "I'm not supplies you hoard! I'm a troll, Branch! You can't just toss me in a cart!" He was silent. "Branch. Branch! Branch, I am a princess!"

He didn't respond, but Poppy could swear that she heard a low chuckle from the next room.

--------

After loading up his rucksack, rewrapping Poppy's ankle, changing her other bandages, and double checking that the stove was off, Branch helped Poppy hop ("you can call me Princess Hoppy!") on to the elevator.

Branch vowed to shut himself in- ALONE- for a solid week once this mess was over. Even though the troll draining him of his sanity and energy was Poppy, whose attention and company he almost always craved, he needed a fucking minute.

Getting her up through the hatch had been only slightly difficult, and that was only because Poppy was ridiculous. He exited first, then extended his hair down to her so she could hang on and ride it up.

It made sense that she would decide to start swinging, thus throwing off his balance. It didn't make sense to swing while considerably injured and imposing on somebody else and screwing up how they helped you, but it made sense that Poppy would do it.

For the second time in as many days, Poppy fell down into the entrance of his bunker. A hard learned lesson, but one Branch hoped would stay with her.

A second attempt proved successful, and Branch retrieved his hidden cart while she waited. It wasn't anything special, just a few short walls on a set of two wheels, but it would hold Poppy and the bag.

"How long will this take, do you think?" Poppy inquired while Branch maneuvered it near a stack of rocks she could step in from. He was done with using his hair to move her.

"The direct route is only a twenty minute walk." Branch was satisfied with his placement and with a few looks, communicated to Poppy that she'd be moving up the rocks with him. "But that's not going to work for us today. Lots of thickets of grass and roots to go over." He extended an arm out to her and she leaned into him, allowing him to carry half her weight as they stepped up. "So there's another route I have to take when using this, it's a smoother trip, but will take a little over an hour. Longer if you need breaks from the bumping or motion." Now at the top of the small pile, Branch held Poppy's hands while he stepped down into the cart and carefully pulled her down.

Once she was situated, Branch placed his bag next to her. As he climbed down, he quickly reflected on how relatively easy it was to handle her when focusing on a task. He tucked that knowledge away for the future.

Branch took his place at the front of the cart and set out, already imagining how this would end- in the village, with probably several trolls, and hugging.

The trip started well. It was hot, still early in the day and already so very hot, and he heard Poppy comment on the phenomenon. He pretended to not hear over the grinding of wheels on the dry dirt.

Poppy sang her own little songs about the majesty of nature, the dancing bugs, and the beauty of a new friendship. Branch enjoyed the private show, although he would fervently deny it if asked.

About fifteen minutes in, he parked Poppy in a shady spot and sat on the ground to catch his
breath. He was fit, sure, but the sun was bearing down on him, and his anxiety about being near so many trolls was chewing away at him. He just. He just needed a few minutes. If he could settle himself, it would be okay.

Poppy poked her head over the edge of the cart. "How's it goin', buddy?"

"Good, good. How are you feeling?" He stood and stepped up to look in at her leg.

Poppy waved a hand to dismiss his concern. "It's good! I'm good. Just excited to go home." She smiled at him. Branch looked up and had planned to respond, but lost his words when he saw her.

Her face was dappled with sunlight that had managed to filter down through the canopy of leaves, making her skin appear to glow in places. The breeze rolling through did little to cool him down, but it rustled her bangs in a way that framed her smiling face perfectly.

And that smile. Hair. Branch would do anything to make her happy. He wished he could stay and just look at her like this for the rest of his life. He could almost feel HIMSELF smiling, she was so damn beautiful.

"You alright?"

"Right! Yup. Just had to take a minute. Let's go." Branch whipped around and started pulling again.

Things would be okay. Poppy was safe. She'd go home. To the village. With all the other trolls. Who would see them. And probably hug him. And sing. And light off fireworks. And draw the attention of an enormous, hungry beast-

"Heyyyy-" Poppy's voice cut in. "Why did you stop again?"

Branch shook himself out of his thoughts and looked around. They'd barely moved. His mind was starting to get the best of him. He needed to shut this down.

"It was nothing." Branch started moving again.

Poppy, satisfied with the progress, started in on a new song.

Branch huffed. She already sang. That was enough singing.

"And every stop is neatly planned for a poet and a one-man band-"

"Pop-"

"HO-OMEWARD BOUND, I wish I was, HO-OMEWARD BOUND-"

Branch growled.

"HOME, where my thought's escapin', HOME-"

"Poppy-"

"Where my music's playin'-"

"POPPY-"

"HOME, where my love lies waitin'-"
Branch stopped and whipped around. "THAT'S ENOUGH! WAIT UNTIL YOU'RE ACTUALLY THERE!"

The singing stopped and Poppy stared at Branch with wide eyes.

"I can sing a different song..."

"Don't sing!" Branch snapped before turning away and moving again. He had enough to handle with transporting her, she didn't need to add to his work by possibly attracting some hungry monster. She was turning saving her skin into his full time job.

She didn't understand the risks she took every day. Why would she? She's never known any real consequences.

"Heyyyyy buddy..."

"No."

"You seem, ah, tense."

Branch ignored her. Of course he was tense. They were in danger. They were tiny and delicious. They were ALWAYS in danger.

They traveled in silence for a while after that. The sun rose in the sky, along with the temperature. As his shadow shortened, so did the fuse on Branch's temper. He estimated that they had about ten minutes left before he'd hit the fringe of the village.

He stopped the cart and walked around it to pull his flask from his bag. He was hot, and tired, and two seconds away from a full blown panic attack. In ten minutes, less if somebody was out searching for Poppy, the noise would start.

He stood next to the cart and downed some water while thinking of places to hide if a predator showed up.

Which would be worse? Hiding and watching everybody else get eaten, or being one of the first to go?

What if Poppy got eaten? He turned and looked at her out of the corner of his eye. His heart hurt just thinking about it. That beautiful smile, that intoxicating laugh, those infuriating hugs...

What if he took her back to the bunker? It was SAFE. She'd be safe. She'd laugh at him and call him crazy, but she'd be alive-

Before he could turn away, Poppy caught him staring at her. Damn.

"Heyyy bud-"

"Stop calling me buddy." Branch handed the flask to her. "You're sweating. You need to hydrate. Don't talk. Bergens."

"Okay, but hey, you're looking pretty freaked out, what's-"

"No! Don't talk." Branch was struggling to keep it together as he picked up the front of the cart and started moving again.

Then again, why was he trying to appear calm? They were going to die soon. He was going to get
eaten alive. Everyone was. His last moments alive were being spent trying to not look terrified.

Just a little bit further and they'd come across somebody. Just a few more minutes until he was trapped in the middle of an enormous celebration. How did trolls always know where a party was happening? HOW?!

A small pack of Trolls came into view. This was it. It was all over now. Branch's stomach twisted.

"Is that-"

"He's so crazy, let's go this way-"

"No, behind-"

"Oh! It's her!"

"Poppy!"

"POPPY!"

The four of them ran at Branch- well, Poppy- at a full sprint, then hopped alongside the cart while chattering at her. Branch had trouble differentiating who was saying what, they were all talking over each other so loudly and so quickly.

"You're alive!"

"Are you okay?"

"We've all been so worried-"

"-out all night looking-"

"Are you hurt?"

"Daisy, Flora, run and tell the others-"

Two dashed ahead of him, already shouting the news of Poppy's return.

"Let's get you to the village-"

"We're so happy you're back!"

"Can we get you anything?"

"Do you need a hug?"

"I'm sure he didn't-"

"You must have been so frightened!"

Branch glared over his shoulder as Poppy summarized for them what had happened while the other trolls sympathized and fawned over her. For a single second, they couldn't just be quiet.

Be quiet.

Be quiet! We're all going to die!
"BE QUIET!"

He couldn't focus on listening for larger animals if they were talking so much. He needed to be able to hear as soon as possible-

And then it came. The wave. Trolls flooded in from everywhere he could see, all clamoring to see for themself that Poppy was alive and hadn't been snatched up by a monster.

It was almost funny, their concern about her being eaten, but their current noise level was putting them at risk for that same horrific fate right now-

THEY WERE ALL GOING TO BE EATEN ALIVE!

Branch couldn't move. Already, several trolls had climbed into the cart to give her hugs, and more kept crowding in. They were going to be smothered!

He tried to slip away before getting trampled, or soon enough, eaten, but was trapped. Trolls were packing in closer and tighter to see Poppy. At least three songs were in full swing, and he could hear fireworks going off. He couldn't breathe. His vision started to blur. This was too much. So much. Was he dying? Was he being crushed and didn't realize it?

No, NO!

Branch started throwing elbows and pushing through the impenetrable wall of trolls, desperate for space.

"Get away! Don't touch me!"

A pair of wayward arms reached out for him. He slapped the hands away. "Don't hug me!"

Sooner than he thought he would, he got to the edge of the crowd and ran for cover in a cluster of taller grasses. He could hide here when the bergens came and ate-

He whipped around to look for Poppy. Was she okay?

His heart clenched. She was more than okay. Creek was holding her up.

Branch scowled. When had he gotten there?

He could see a few of Poppy's other close friends gathered near her. The one he liked- the big one- the twins, and the small one. She frightened him.

And fucking Creek. Already poking her nose and laughing with her like they had a secret. Barf.

Branch's shoulders slumped forward and he sat down. He couldn't leave without his cart. He didn't want to stay and watch Creek be the hero when HE certainly hadn't helped Poppy last night.

He poked at the dirt in front of him and drew little circles to pass the time. The crowd would go soon. And then he could leave. And be alone. Like he wanted to be. And nobody would ever bother with him again-

"Hello, Branch."

Startled out of his thoughts, Branch looked up to see King Peppy standing over him. Oh. Oh no. Oh-
"What?" He growled. He didn't have to stand. He wouldn't. Why was he HERE and not celebrating with Poppy?

Peppy smiled and sat down by him. Branch was entirely uncomfortable.

"Thank you for finding Poppy and bringing her home."

Branch went back to drawing circles. What was he supposed to say? "Hmm."

A few minutes passed with the two sitting in silence. The crowd around Poppy was moving away. Branch could leave soon. Was he allowed to go while the king was sitting right here? What was he supposed to say?!

"I'll have Poppy take you a token of my appreciation soon."

Well. He didn't need that. "Her ankle. She shouldn't walk." He stopped for a moment, wondering what else to say. "Don't send anything."

Peppy chuckled. What was so funny, exactly? Branch growled and started drawing triangles.

"I'm sure that she'll be eager to see you. She always is."

Branch's ears perked up a tiny bit, but he pretended that that wasn't thrilling to hear. "Hmm."

"You could visit her once she's settled in at home. She'd love that."

Branch looked up and saw that his cart was finally void of villagers. He had to go. Today had already happened too much.

He stood up and awkwardly turned to Peppy. Even if he didn't want to talk... Peppy had been the only troll besides Poppy to thank him. That was something.

"Uh. I'm going now. Tell Poppy bye." His cheeks darkened. That was too much. "Or don't!"

He ran, more than ready for the solitude his bunker promised.

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"I'm so glad you're safe! We've all been so worried-"

"Biggie cried-"

"I did."

"What do you need?"

"What can we do?"

"We love you so much, Poppy!"

"I'm going to cry again, I'm so happy!"

Poppy hadn't stopped smiling since those first four girls found her. She was with friends! She was home! Today was such a wonderful day!

"I'm so glad to be back! Thank you all for carrying me home!"
Satin handed her a glass of water and sat by her on her sofa as Chenille took her other side. "Of course, we're so happy you're safe-"

"We thought you'd been eaten-" Chenille cut in.

"RUDE." Satin leaned forward to glare at her sister before refocusing on Poppy.

"So, Chenille and I talked on the way over. You've been through Hair and back, we're sure, so it's time to pamper you."

"Yes!" Chenille added. "Smidge, Satin and I will help you get a bath and washed up. Then a facial!"

"Oh, you guys!" Poppy hugged them as best as she could. "That sound AMAZING. I'm so sweaty and grimy, I can't wait to feel like myself again!"

A consensus was reached that Biggie and Creek would hang out in the kitchen and prepare a few meals while the twins and Smidge took care of Poppy in the bathroom.

As Poppy was settled into the luxurious feeling bath, she let out a sigh. "Oh my hair, this is heaven." She tilted her head back, relishing the bath and company.

"So Poppy," Chenille started pouring cups of water down over Poppy's hair. "Tell us everything. Were you scared? How did Branch find you? What was it like in his bunker?"

Poppy giggled. Of course this bath was also an interrogation.

While Satin and Smidge removed the bandages from her legs and massaged her feet, Poppy told them about her harrowing trek through the forest and her arrival at the bunker.

Satin looked shocked. "So you just woke up to him, in your face, shaking you? I would have been so afraid!"

"Ha! It was more confusing than scary. I knew he'd help me."

Chenille began lathering Poppy's hair. "What happened next?"

"I'unno, nothing really. He bandaged me up and carried me to bed."

"How could you even sleep?! I would have been so afraid of him killing me. Or violating me-"

Poppy had to laugh at that. "Oh my gosh, no, nooooo. That so wouldn't happen." She waved a hand, dismissing the notion. "Even when he was shirtless and carrying me to his bed, he was- as much as he ever is- a gentleman."

Satin shot up. "Shirtless?"

Chenille hopped around the tub to stand by her sister. "When did that happen?"

Smidge moved up to Poppy's arm and continued massaging. Heaven.

Poppy looked down and away from her friends, trying to conceal her blush. She'd meant to leave the bit about her throwing up out of the story. It was a little embarrassing.

"Uh, he just was when I got there. It didn't matter."
"Oooooh," Satin teased. "So you got fixed up by a shirtless wild man?"

Poppy's eyes widened. "Well, ha, you make it sound-"

"Gross," Smidge interjected.

"And then he carried you off to bed-"

Poppy needed to shut this down. "Hey, woah, two seconds ago you said you would worry about him violating you-"

Satin dismissed her. "Yeah, because Branch is crazy and mean. But 'a muscular, shirtless man in the woods took you in, bandaged your wounds, and carried you to his bed' sounds exhilarating. It's just semantics."

Again, Poppy had to laugh. Satin wasn't wrong. She recalled the seconds in Branch's arms before took her to bed. Exhilarating might be a word used to describe that moment.

"But, since we're discussing shirtless trolls-"

Satin's voice dropped to a whisper. "Creek was freaking out all night while we were out looking for you."

"I've never seen him like that."

"He didn't stop to rest even ONCE."

"He was sort of a wreck."

Poppy looked at the closed bathroom door and wondered how he was feeling now. Would he stay with her after she was done getting cleaned up, or go home to rest? She felt selfish for hoping he'd stay with her, but that didn't stop her from hoping.

She reclined in the tub and tried to quiet her mind. A lot had happened in the past day, and her brain was just as tired as her body. She could think about handsome, shirtless trolls another time.

Chapter End Notes

The song Poppy sings is Homeward Bound by Simon & Garfunkel.

Be my friend on tumblr if you like lazy doodles and dick jokes.
IGuessILoveTrollsNow
Branch laid on his couch and moped.
He turned over and sighed.
He mashed his face into the cushion and whined.
After an unknown length of time passed, he got tired of being depressed on the couch and moved to his kitchenette.
He sat with his back against the stove and considered whether or not a cup of tea was worth the effort.
It was not.
He almost considered washing the breakfast dishes that he and Poppy had left behind, but quickly moved his thoughts elsewhere.
He scratched at the dirt floor and sighed again.
He crossed his legs and leaned forward, stretching his back a little.
He slowly popped his knuckles, then his wrists, then his ankles and toes.
He ran his fingers through his hair, untangling the smaller, more manageable knots.
To a casual observer, it would appear that he was doing a whole lot of nothing. In truth, Branch was currently working very hard to keep his mind as blank as possible. He knew that outside the thick, gray, hazy sadness that he was trying to maintain, there lurked a larger, more acute, and much more painful sadness.
So he busied himself with small, mindless activities and steered his brain away from any path that might lead him out of his fog.
He laid on the floor and compared the minute color differences between his glowing mushrooms.
He watched a fat little spider build a web underneath his counter.
He got chilly on the floor, so rolled halfway across the room to his bedroom.
At that point, he felt his mind change gears. He was now very aware of how he must look, and his cheeks flared up.
This self-consciousness, he knew, was the beginning of him thinking critically again. Branch stood up and shuffled over to his bathroom. If he was going to be miserable, then at the very least, he should get to be comfortable.
As he shrugged out of his vest and shorts, he turned on the water for his shower. The small room quickly filled with heat and steam, and Branch rolled his neck and shoulders, unsuccessfully trying to loosen the permanent knots in his body.
He could feel his thoughts bubbling to the surface and picked an easy one to deal with first. He stepped under water and latched onto one word.

Crazy.

He replayed what the trip to the village had been like. Now more removed from it, he flinched when he remembered his behavior.

They had been relatively safe. As safe as small, delicious creatures could ever be. Which, really, wasn't very safe. But his awareness and anxiety didn't fit with how it all played out.

But he knew how he looked. He knew how others saw him.

He was always so cautious, always telling others to cool down, to slow down, to just. Bring it in a little. Or a lot.

And he knew that because they'd yet (YET) to suffer from a tragedy, everybody thought he was just pessimistic. At best. At worst, and most likely, they all thought he was crazy.

One girl even said it when they stumbled across him and Poppy. "He's so crazy."

Branch put his face in the stream of water and exhaled. He wasn't crazy. Or maybe he was. He really didn't know.

Some days were good. He didn't panic, his brain cooperated and let him live a productive, quiet life, and he just got to be Branch.

Other days were... Less good. Countless hours had been spent carving warnings into his walls. Countless nights had been spent sobbing, shaking, thrashing, retching. He relived old nightmares. His brain supplied fresh ones. He felt alone. Utterly alone. And scared. So very scared. For his village. For himself. Of himself.

He shook his head, wanting to avoid THAT breakdown on top of everything else.

He conceded that he was probably crazy. But he didn't hurt any less when that word was used against him, whether to dismiss his concerns, or more often, just him entirely. Being whatever degree of crazy he was didn't make him unworthy of basic decency.

Slipping in behind that thought, his brain hissed menacingly. He knew there were other, more severe reasons that he didn't deserve basic decency. He accepted that and moved on with things.

So he hurt. He felt crazy, he looked crazy, they called him crazy. He came home, would lick his wounds, and would go out again, trying to protect them, getting hurt again. It sucked.

He grabbed a bar of soap (that he made! He was quietly very pleased with this recent batch), lathered up, and set it back down.

"Jerks," he muttered.

And that took him to the next unpleasant thought.

Creek. Fucking. Just.

Branch angrily rubbed at his face and growled.

"Just. The smug son of a- RRRGH."
His hands moved methodically down his body, scrubbing, as his mind moved down a well composed list of reasons for why Creek was just the fucking worst.

First off, nobody is as fucking zen as Creek pretends to be. And second, for being so much better than everybody else, Creek sure was a petty, smarmy little shit.

Branch's mind played through the most infuriating times that Creek had taken pleasure in tormenting him. So often, he danced around Branch and tripped him up with his hippie bullshit.

He stood up straighter and mimicked the purple pain in the ass. "I could feel your anger from across the pond! Do be careful to not pass it along to anybody, it's SO difficult to let go of anger once it settles in the aura." He rolled his eyes and dropped the act. "Dick."

And why, he wondered for the hundredth time, was Creek always singling him out? Branch knew. Creek knew. Branch knew that Creek knew. They both knew.

Poppy. Branch ducked his face back into the water, trying to hide his embarrassment from a nonexistent audience.

Creek knew that Branch liked Poppy.

Everybody knew that Creek liked Poppy.

But unlike Branch, everybody liked Creek. So he could go BE with Poppy, or at the very least, be open about his stupid feelings for her, without immediate rejection and becoming a target for ridicule. That was a luxury Branch did not have, and Creek took delight in reminding Branch of this as often as possible.

"Oh Poppy, you look so beautiful today. Branch, wouldn't you say that she's beautiful? Radiant? I felt my heart move just at the sight of her. What about you, Branch? Doesn't she just make you want to sing?"

Branch lashed out and punched his thigh several times.

"ASSHOLE. ASSHOLE!"

He leaned and pressed his forehead into the wall of the shower. "Idiot."

He just. He JUST.

He didn't understand why Creek even saw a reason to twist the knife that was already firmly lodged in his heart.

Creek regularly took time to humiliate him, to rub his chumminess with Poppy in his face, and to put a horrifying spotlight on Branch's insecurities.

Poppy, as kind and beautiful and loving as she was, was never going to return Branch's feelings, so why was he always in Creek's crosshairs? Why spend so much time belittling a guy who was no competition?

No matter how long he might dwell on this, Branch could never find an answer. He moved on to the last, biggest thought to wrangle.

Poppy.

He pushed away from the wall and stepped back under the water.
He just.

She just.

He didn't know why he couldn't let go of feeling the way he did, and it was maddening.

He was seven when she dropped into his life. And lap. He was just a lonely, tired, angry child when she fell out of a tree and onto him, and he'd been smitten ever since.

One afternoon of her doting on him, following him, and pulling him in for hugs ("I'm so sorry for hurting you! You NEED this hug!") was all it took for his small, broken heart to crack a little bit more and make room for her. And like she does in every other aspect of her life, in his heart she expanded to fill and warm the entire space.

She followed him through the forest, asking questions, singing songs, telling stories. She always invited him to spend time with her in the village, and even though he always refused, it made him giddy knowing that she wanted to be around him.

And here he is now, almost fifteen years later, and his heart is still broken, but the way he burns for her has fused small pieces of it back together. Or at least, he liked to imagine that loving her made him a better troll.

He watched water run down his chest in rivulets and almost laughed at himself. He was hopeless. But that wasn't anything new.

He imagined what he might even say the next time they ran into each other. His eyed widened slightly. He wondered if her perception of him had changed at all.

He'd been so nervous, so keyed up, that he was sure she could right now be telling her friends about the visit, her audience all shocked and appalled at how he lived, how he behaved, how he treated her.

He whined and turned off the rapidly cooling water.

He just. He hoped she would want to come back someday.

Branch padded out of the hazy bathroom and shook off much of the water still running down his body before sliding between a couple favorite blankets on his bed.

He nestled himself in a favorite spot and let his mind drift.

Maybe she would come back.

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Before she was out of the bath, Poppy's father arrived at the pod with one of the village doctors in tow. Her ears perked up at the sound of his voice, and she became eager to wrap things up and see him.

She was jammed into a favorite set of pajamas and hastily delivered to her couch. Her friends, not yet ready to leave, crowded into the kitchen to give her privacy. Peppy took a seat by Poppy and held her hand while the doctor got to work.

After a quick but thorough examination, Doctor Plum packed her bag and addressed the pair on the couch.
"You don't appear to have any lasting damage, but I suggest minimal strenuous activity and heavy thinking right now. Not seeing an injury and not having an injury are two separate things." Poppy was a little put out. She certainly FELT better than she had earlier.

"And your ankle..." the doctor poked and maneuvered it as she spoke, "while not broken, is badly sprained. You'll need to give it a break from walking, dancing, jumping, and frolicking for at least a week, maybe two."

Peppy and Poppy both gasped. Peppy leapt up and clutched at the doctor's arm. "Cavorting. Doctor, can my daughter still cavort?"

The grim look on her face said it all. Poppy knew. There would be no cavorting.

She swallowed the lump in her throat and put on her brightest smile. Her dad had been through enough while she was missing, he didn't need more to worry about.

"Well, I'll just have to rest really hard and get better soon! No worries!" She beamed. This was fine. There was so much she could do while not... doing things.

The doctor gave Poppy a final once-over, then a stern reminder to rest, and took her leave.

Poppy watched her father wave the doctor out, close the door, and sigh. He turned to her and smiled sadly before dashing to her and pulling her up slightly for a tight, warm hug.

"I'm so glad you're alright. I was worried sick, wondering if- well, best not to get into it."

Poppy pulled back slightly to see his face. "I'm here, I'm fine. Little dinged up, but fine." She smiled. Her stomach and mind were swirling with doubt, knowing she'd be benched from pretty much her entire life for a while, but really, it could be so much worse.

Peppy gave her shoulders a firm squeezed before he took her hands in his own. "True. You'll get through this with support from me and your friends." He nodded subtly to her kitchen door, and Poppy turned in time to see a couple noses jerked back out of sight. She chuckled.

"I'm really, REALLY fortunate. Mostly I can't believe how much food they were able to make on such short notice. Nothing but the best from them, right dad?" Poppy turned to see him smiling in a way that she might almost call... conspiratory. "Uh?"

Peppy, still smirking, lowered her back onto the couch before stretching out his back. Having known this man her entire life, Poppy knew that he took tremendous pleasure in keeping secrets.

"I'm going to go home, sweetie." He leaned down and kissed the top of her head before taking a few slow steps towards the front door. "Your friends seem to want to stay put for now, and I'm fine with doting on you in the morning." He put his hand on the knob before his sly grin widened. "Of course, that's assuming Branch doesn't get here first. When we spoke earlier, I left with the feeling that you would be seeing him again very soon."

Poppy's eyes popped wide open and she bent as far forward as she could. "What? What? Wait, what???"

But in a flash, her father was out the door and gone.

Poppy groused and tossed a throw pillow. "Ugh! Why does he need to mess with ME like that?!"

A hesitant voice drew her attention. "Poppy...?"
She turned to see Biggie holding a tray of snacks out for her. "We, uh, heard what she said."

Remembering her audience, Poppy tucked away her frustration and smiled. "That makes sense, it's not a huge pod." She waved her friends over and talked as they found seats around her. "I'll be okay. Better than okay. Look at how lucky I am right now- you're all here already, helping me feel like myself, bringing me the most amazing foods, and loving me. Two weeks will go by like nothing." She took a slice of cake that Creek held out to her and was pleased.

This would be okay, she told herself.

The afternoon passed quickly. The twins, needing to continue processing their petal harvest, left early on, taking Smidge with for heavy lifting assistance.

Friends and acquaintances, or as Poppy like to call them, future friends, cycled in and out of her home with well wishes, hugs, flowers, and meals. Poppy was thankful for Biggie being her host by proxy, receiving guests and organizing them in a way to keep everybody moving. She wouldn't admit it, but she was quite tired.

As evening fell and the stars came out, the flow of company slowed and stopped. Biggie, thoroughly depleted, gave Poppy one last big hug before heading out. "I'll be back tomorrow to help again, and Mr. Dinkles can be your snuggle buddy!"

That left Creek, who had spent most of the day on the couch with Poppy, keeping any food or drinks she might need available, and even helping her hobble to and from the bathroom.

Knowing he'd spent the previous night up and worrying, Poppy was extra appreciative that he'd held out and stayed so long.

"Thank you for today, Creek. It means a lot that you were here with me." She tipped her head back to rest it on the couch and rolled it towards him, flashing a sleepy smile.

He scooted slightly closer and smile back. "I'm happy to be here. You do so much for me, I certainly wasn't going to miss the chance to help you."

Poppy closed her eyes and laughed. It felt good to have them shut. She'd let them rest while they talked. "You're so kind."

Creek took her hand in his own and spoke softly. "You make me very happy, all the time. Just being near you feels like I'm standing in a beam of sunlight. I feel warm, and whole, and happy. And you give me that."

Poppy sighed. That was quite possibly the sweetest thing she'd ever heard. "You are wonderful."

He looked at her intently, licked his lips, and continued. "I've admired you for a long time, Poppy. You have so much love in your heart for every living creature, it inspires me to be a better troll myself. And, for a while now-" he looked away and cleared his throat.

Poppy's heart was pounding. She opened her eyes and turned to show that she was listening.

Creek started again. "I've, for a long time, wanted to ask you out." He looked into her eyes. "Because I like you a lot- more than I've liked any other troll. And being yours would make me the happiest man to ever exist."

Poppy was torn. Not emotionally, just between her excitement over the conversation and her desperate need to sleep. She made sure her smile was extra big and turned her body towards Creek.
"I like you, too! You're so kind and peaceful, and you have great advice for so many trolls. Creek, yes to this! Yes. Yes!" She knew she owed him more enthusiasm than this, but Hair help her, she was wrung out. "I'm all about this." She brightened her smile a bit more and he pulled her in for a hug.

"Thank you, Poppy. I-" whatever he was about to say was interrupted by a tremendous yawn. Poppy couldn't help herself, she yawned back. The pair looked at each other and laughed as they were overtaken by more yawning.

Creek leaned back on the couch and pulled Poppy up so that her head was resting on his chest. They laid together in the dimly lit room yawning, giggling, and stroking each others' faces.

"Goodnight, Creek." Poppy tipped her head slightly and kissed his chin.

"Goodnight, Poppy." He shifted and kissed the top of her head. "What a story this will be for our children."

Too tired and happy and tired to poke fun at the notion, Poppy said nothing. If Creek felt like they could have children someday, who was she to disagree?

Poppy woke to the sensation of being moved. Her tired brain worked to put together what was going on without help from her eyes.

She heard quiet footsteps... to her bathroom? No, she couldn't recall who would be here. Wasn't she in Branch's home? She remembered his bathroom being off his bedroom.

Her brain supplied a few more memories. She HAD slept at Branch's place, but he brought her home, sort of. She came home, she got a bath, she wasn't allowed to walk or think too hard, Creek stayed and-

She shot up into a sitting position. "Creek!" Wincing, but ignoring the headache brought on by moving so quickly, she whipped around, looking for him. "Creek? Are you there? Creek?"

A door flew open and Creek ran toward her. "Poppy, what's wrong? What do you need?" He stopped in front of her, waiting for an answer.

"No, sorry, nothing wrong, I just woke up and didn't know where you'd gone." Poppy laughed. "Didn't mean to alarm you, my bad."

Creek laughed with her and kissed the top of her head. "No worries, love. If you're fine, I'm fine." He gestured to the window, and Poppy turned to see the sun just peeking over the horizon. "I was going to try and get ready for my early morning class without waking you, but, uh-" he waved a hand towards her, "my bad."

Poppy laughed again and dismissed his apology. "No, it's good. I will happily go back to bed after you leave. Just, real quick, could you help me to the bathroom, then bed? I can probably hop if you need to go now."

Creek moved quickly and wrapped an arm around her, supporting her by her waist, and held her up while they moved through the room. It was a bit slower and more involved than Poppy thought it needed to be.

When she left the bathroom, she let him support her, but didn't move. "Hey, would this go a little
faster if you just carried me?"

Creek's eyebrows rose significantly. "Uh, maybe? I could probably lift you, but I'm not sure if it would go that much faster."

"It's just, it's hard, since the leg I can't use is on the same side as the arm I don't want to move. So like, I know you're already holding me A LOT, I just didn't know-"

"I mean, I COULD, but it would be rather difficult. We're the same size, Poppy." Poppy noticed his cheeks darkening and could feel him getting defensive.

"No, yeah, I know you could, but yeah, that was, yeah, no, my bad." She began to walk with Creek, and they made it to her bed in silence.

"Here we are. Can I get you anything before I leave? It's three classes in a row today, I had to reschedule a couple things." Poppy sat down and declined, knowing he needed to get going. That didn't stop him from running to and from her kitchen to bring her some water and a sandwich before leaving.

Poppy ate the snack and laid down. Her limbs and brain were sore and felt heavy, and she was looking forward this sleep like a hungry troll looks forward to a hot meal.

Slowly, she rolled to lay on her belly. She sighed, closed her eyes, and drifted off.

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As Poppy was dozing, Branch was worrying. He'd passed out after getting through the shower yesterday, then slept through the day and some of the night. A nightmare about Poppy's brain bleeding woke him up at an ungodly hour, and he'd been sick over it since.

He cursed the swarm of trolls that carried her off. He cursed himself for not following through and making sure she got to a doctor. He cursed all of the village doctors for not meeting them on the path. He cursed Creek for existing.

So here he was now, inching closer and closer to frantic, torn between desperately wanting to see Poppy and make sure she was safe, and desperately not wanting Poppy to know he was worried.

He paced. He made a new draft for a new storage room. He fished a book out from under his bed and read a few of the more distracting passages.

None of it could shake him from being so shaken. True to form, he couldn't stop fixating on everything that might have gone wrong. And what if she was never the same again? What if her head injury permanently altered her brain? What if she forgot he existed, and Creek turned him against her, and then she married him?

So he'd been floundering for excuses to go to town. He could use more... something, he was sure. And he had a small pot of salve for her face and arm. It would help with the bruising.

So. He should go. She doesn't need her face to be more bruised up. And he could help. And check on her. And see her. And spend time with her. And maybe she would ask him to apply the salve, and he could touch her. And look into her beautiful eyes. And she would look into his. And they would finally connect in a way that had never happened befo-

Maybe he could just punch himself in the face until his own brain stopped churning out such embarrassing stories.
Branch groaned and sat on the floor by his elevator.

"You're an idiot." He picked up a mushroom and halfheartedly tossed it against a wall. "You're so stupid."

For fifteen minutes, he sat with his head buried in his arms, quietly crying.

Why couldn't any one thing in his life be easy? Why did he have to regularly fuck up everything around him, and then be too paralyzed by fear and doubt to fix things? How could he preach responsibility with a straight face to other trolls, but be sitting on his floor right now, unable to be a fucking man and check up on the one troll in the world who is invested in him?

He was about to lay down and really focus on his shortcomings when an unfamiliar knocking rhythm came from above.

His ears jerked up and he tried to discern who the fuck would know he's here, and be here to see him on top of that.

Not Poppy, it wasn't her knock.

Not Poppy- but what if- oh no-

He snatched up his already packed bag and hopped on the elevator, cursing it for moving at such a safe and steady pace. He should fix that. Adjustable speeds.

At the entrance, he slid open the window to see his visitor, and was taken aback at the sight of-

"Hello! Are you ready to go visit my daughter yet?"

"P- Puh?!" Peppy? Was Poppy okay? Was this a last visit? Surely he wouldn't have stepped away-

He threw open the hatch and jumped out. "What's going on? Is Poppy okay? Is she hurt? Has she seen a doctor?"

Peppy smiled and gave Branch a wholly unwelcome hug. "Don't-"

"Come on, let's go."

And he just started walking.

No answers. No context. Just 'hey there, I'm at your secret front door, let's go for a stroll together.'

Branch fell into step next to Peppy.

"Why are you-"

"Have you met Hyacinth?"

Branch could not possibly care less about who Hyacinth was, but. He was Poppy's dad. So.

"No, I don't know who that is."

"She's my age. Beautiful soft blue hair, lavender skin, sharp eyes. Face of an angel." His voice dropped and he nudged Branch with an elbow. "Hips of a very talented sinner."

Branch had never been so uncomfortable. Was now a good time to run away?
"She dances beautifully. A lot like Poppy, but with more of the grace that comes with age."

"Oh, okay..."

"No troll since Poppy's own mother has moved my heart like this. It's nice, feeling that swelling in my chest again."

Branch stayed silent. He didn't want to give anything away on accident.

"I need your help this morning. I need to spend some time with Hyacinth before taking her to see Poppy, but don't want Poppy spending any large amount of time alone."

Branch nodded.

"The doctor told her she'll be down and out for around two weeks. And her head- things seem alright, but who ever knows with that stuff."

Branch walked and listened, still waiting for a point for any of this.

A warm hand held his shoulder, and Peppy spoke in a soft, but serious tone. "Stay with her today, please. I know that will be a lot for you to handle, but I know that under everything, she'll need you there the most."

Well. That was a hell of a favor to ask.

"She won't be alone, she has friends."

Peppy laughed. "Friends who will chatter, demand her attention, let her push herself too hard, and turn her period of rest into her being a point of interest in the village." Peppy stopped walking and turned rather abruptly. "You can take this seriously, and Poppy will listen to you." Peppy poked his chest. "YOU are the troll I need in there, because she is my little girl and I want somebody taking care of her."

The more Peppy talked, the more Branch realized that this wasn't negotiable. He sighed. At least now he had an excuse to see her.

A brisk walk took them to Poppy's front door. Right there, Branch's intestines decided that this would be a good place to fall out through his ass.

"Maybe I'll go, it's quiet, it's not a good time-"

Without even knocking- WITHOUT EVEN KNOCKING- Peppy threw open the door and shoved Branch in.

"Hello, sweetie! I found somebody while out for my morning walk!" Peppy, now seeming to give NO cupcakes about keeping things quiet for Poppy, called loudly as he moved through the room, looking for her.

Branch hissed. "Found me? You didn't find me, you-"

"There you are! Did we wake you?" He stepped through a door and out of Branch's sight. Branch was rooted to the floor. He couldn't even run away.

Peppy's booming voice carried through the pod, enabling Branch to hear half of the conversation. "Yes, he's by the front door. ... I DID tell you it seemed yesterday like he would be over. ... No, you look fine, I'm sure he won't mind."
He popped his head back through the doorway and called to Branch. "Come here, she needs help getting- wait, what?" He turned to hear what Poppy was frantically whispering.

Branch strained his ears, because sure, he wanted to be anywhere but here right now, but still. He wanted to hear Poppy.

"Okay, I'll have him wait." Peppy turned to Branch. "Sit on the couch."

Branch followed directions. He was so far out of his comfort zone that he couldn't even argue. This was all just.

Bizarre.

So he waited and looked around. Overly bright pink walls. Shelves of scrapbooks. Shelves of trophies. Her walls were plastered with pictures of friends. He even saw a few of himself. When had she taken those?! His ears darkened. He would have to be more careful when foraging.

Peppy's voice pulled Branch out of his own thoughts. "Come on over, she's ready."

"Uh, um-"

"Move fast, she needs to get back to sleep soon."

Branch grumbled as he stood. "She would still be asleep if we'd never come over."

In the few steps he had, Branch set his face into his characteristic scowl. He had enough control of himself right now to not outwardly show his discomfort, and would cling to this chilly exterior like his life depended on it to get through visiting Poppy in her home.

As he turned and stepped into the room, he saw more of the same ghastly shades of pink, several framed pictures (two of himself?! Why?!?) and in the middle of the it all, Poppy, sitting up in her bed, smiling brightly, in the most delicate and beautiful sky blue pajamas he'd ever seen. The soft color was an oasis for his eyes in the garishly bright pod. Hair, SHE was an oasis for his eyes. He looked back up to her face and felt his heart squeeze. Her smile made him feel so warm.

Her chipper voice startled him out of his thoughts. "Hi! What's up?"

"What's up?" Branch blanked. What was up?

"You wanted to see me?"

"Oh, right-" he frowned and took his rucksack off his back. "This-" he said, digging through the bag, "will help with your bruises." He stepped forward and set the salve on her bed, then quickly stepped back. "And that's it. Bye-"

Branch turned, hoping to make a hasty exit, his brain already warming up for a long day of self loathing, when Peppy's hand landed on his shoulder. A gesture that had felt almost fatherly on the walk over was now a death grip, with a thumb pressing hard into the side of his neck.

"Didn't you also tell me you would help me take care of her? I remember you wanting to help."

"Aww, that's so sweet!"

Branch couldn't twist out of Peppy's grip, but he could still talk. "I DON'T want to-"

"To risk you being alone while you're recovering." Peppy squeezed harder and continued speaking.
"It would be terribly unwise to take such a huge risk with your health, according to Branch. And I agree! You need somebody vigilant here, at least for the first few days."

"UH?!" Branch squeaked. He had just gotten out of one hour a day with Poppy, he couldn't- he wouldn't- he COULDN'T-

"Oh, um, dad, that's probably too much-"

"You need somebody here to keep an eye on you-

"But I don't think Branch actually wants to stay here that much-"

"I don-"

"If that were the case, he wouldn't have volunteered to be here-" Peppy's fingers dug in to the fleshy spot under Branch's clavicle and he caved.

"I WANT TO BE HERE!"

Relief was immediate. Peppy spun him back around to face Poppy. "There, finally we're all on the same page." He clapped and rubbed his hands before turning and addressing Branch directly. "I'll be back this afternoon, take good care of her!"

And then he was gone.

Branch was left standing next to Poppy's bed, drowning in anxiety, waiting for an order or to be consumed by fire. He prayed for the latter.

Poppy looked at him. "Uh."

He looked at Poppy. "Um."

Poppy coughed into her hand.

Branch hoped she didn't have the plague.

"My dad, uh, sometimes he makes choices for other trolls."

Branch waited.

"If you want to go, you can."

Freedom. Branch took a step towards the door.

"It would be nice to have you here, but I get it." She laughed, clearly uneasy.

He froze. He felt stuck between two equally powerful needs. If he left, he could enjoy solitude. Peace. Silence.

If he stayed...

He looked at her again. She looked like an angel that had been punched in the face.

He loved that face. And that face wanted him to stay.

Branch sighed, dropped his bag on the floor, and walked over to the bed.
He picked up the small jar he'd given her and held it out. "This should be put on over your bruises a couple times a day. It will help them heal faster."

Poppy took it and quietly thanked him.

Branch waited.

Poppy shifted in her bed.

"Put it on."

"I don't have a mirror."

"You don't need a mirror."

"How will I know where to put it?"

Branch pinched his brow and spoke in sharp, fast phrases. "Just. Poke your face. If it hurts, put it there."

"I'm not going to do that. I'll just put it on when I go to the bathroom later."

"You should put it on NOW so it can start working NOW!"

"I can't!"

"You- Why can't you ever- WHY ARE YOU LIKE TH-" Branch was struggling to not yell at the bedridden princess. His fists—oh, when did he clench them so tight?—he slowly loosened them. He stood up straighter. He took a deep breath through his nose and pushed it out through his teeth, which he then stopped grinding.

"Poppy," he said in a low voice, "it will help. Your face."

Very nice. That might have been his best work ever of deescalating things. He was a lot less angry than he'd been just moments ago.

"Can you just help me?"

And there goes Poppy, completely throwing him for a loop.

"What? No, I-"

She rolled her eyes. "Please? I lost my hand mirror last week and don't want to walk to one. If I need this, help me." She held out the jar, waiting for him to take it.

How long ago had his heart dreamed up this exact situation? Branch's brain quietly cursed him. "Be careful what you wish for," rang through his head.

"Uh. I." He looked from the jar to Poppy, who was now smiling. She had to know how hard it was for him to say no when she smiles at him like that.

"Branch," she said softly, "will you please help me?"

And his mouth spoke out of turn. "Yes," he coughed. And his body took the jar and sat down on the bed.
And so. Now. He just. Had to do. This.

He unscrewed the lid and started applying the thin, green salve to her face. His mind, in a protective move, shut down the usual frenzied chatter that guided him. The sudden silence in his brain was almost oppressive, but his body moved of its own accord, sweeping her bangs away, nudging her chin so he could see everything, and dabbing lightly over her darkly purpled cheek.

As his hand worked, his eyes traced across her face, drinking in the details. Her freckles appeared to sparkle more brightly against the darker skin. Her lips were slightly chapped. He loved them.

How many days ago had he been this close to her? This week from hell, he contemplated, was almost heaven-sent.

His eyes clicked up and met her own, but the contact, unlike other times he'd been caught looking at her, wasn't jarring.

His fingers absently tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and his hand settled at the nape of her neck.

Poppy ran her tongue over her lips and exhaled a thank you. Branch registered that at some point, they had both leaned forward considerably. Eyes still locked, Branch felt her shaky breath on his lips and licked them.

Poppy closed her eyes, and Branch couldn't hear anything over the rapid beat of his heart. He scanned her face again, and again, and again, praying to any deity listening to let him have this one good thing.

He closed his eyes and tilted his head slightly, chest exploding, and he-

Heard the clicking of a doorknob.

His body leapt away from Poppy before his brain had prepared a route, and he flipped backwards off her bed, awkwardly flopping onto to the floor. His throat, with no permission from him, let out an embarrassing squeak.

"Branch?!" Poppy gasped. "Are you okay?!"

The bedroom door opened, and Branch heard Poppy greet the last troll in the world he wanted to see.

"Oh- Creek! Hi!" Her voice was unnaturally high. "I didn't expect you back so quickly. Hi! How were the morning classes?"

Branch rolled over, trying to stand and look less foolish before he was seen.

Creek stepped into the room and sat by Poppy as he spoke. "Classes went quickly. My students knew I would want to be here and all agreed on short sessions today. I am truly blessed." He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her into his side. "Darling, what's all over your face?"

Poppy stuttered and gestured to Branch, who Creek had yet to acknowledge. "Uh, this is- what was it? Branch- he brought it." She waved at hand at him. "I forgot."

Creek now turned his attention to Branch. The serene smile he'd given Poppy grew into a wide smirk. "Oh, hello there! Didn't see you."
Branch growled. "I'm sure you didn't." He looked at Poppy and felt his stomach twist. Creek's coziness with her was nauseating.

Creek continued. "So, friend, what is smeared across Poppy's beautiful face? I don't really like ANYTHING that obstructs such a lovely view unless it has a purpose. Don't you agree?"

Asshole.

"It's for her bruises. Somebody has to take care of her." Branch nodded to the small pot that had been dropped on the floor. He couldn't remember exactly when that happened.

Creek's eyes flicked down to it before meeting his again. "Oh, lovely. How uncharacteristically thoughtful of you, Branch."

He turned to Poppy and kissed the corner of her mouth.

Branch felt bile rise into his throat. What- WHAT-

Creek stood up and stepped towards Branch, smiling bigger than before. "Hey chum, thank you for keeping an eye on my girlfriend while I was away. It takes a village, doesn't it?" He picked up Branch's bag and handed it to him. "I'll walk you out so she can get some rest."

He was going to throw up. Branch was going to throw up on Poppy's bedroom floor if he didn't move. "No need, I'll go."

Creek put a hand on his shoulder, clearly savoring Branch's misery. "No worries, I'm happy to do it." He turned to Poppy as they left the room. "Be right back, love."

The two stopped by the front door, and one was still smiling. Branch couldn't imagine what secret Creek was still sitting on, but he knew it was going to hurt.

Creek spoke lowly, too quietly for Poppy to hear. "I have to thank you for keeping her holed up at your place the other night."

Branch said nothing. He couldn't even if he wanted to.

"I was so sick with worry over the thought of having lost her that I finally got enough courage to properly ask her out. I might very well be the happiest man on earth."

Creek smirked and clapped Branch on the back. "You could say that you're the reason she and I are together now."

Even with all the nausea and bile and twisting of organs and shattering of hearts that Branch had felt a moment ago, he now felt completely hollow.

For the second time in as many days, his brain put out a thick, white fog to protect him from the barbs in Creek's words.

The front door was suddenly opened and Branch was nudged outside. He turned and heard Creek's last jab. "Let's let her rest now. The sooner she's all better, the sooner I can make her the happiest woman in the world." Creek winked. "Thanks again, friend."

And then the door was closed.

Branch was rooted in place for some length of time. He didn't know.
Slowly, slowly, he walked away, and into the forest, letting his feet take him over the familiar path to the bunker.

Slowly, he descended into his home, and slowly, he passed through rooms until he was by his bed.

Slowly, he took off his shorts and the vest that smelled slightly like the color pink.

Slowly, he crawled between two thick blankets of moss.

He breathed deeply and slowly, then pulled a blanket over his head and cried himself to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I have no excuse for taking so long to update. Please forgive.

Also, follow this link to see art, ART, that was inspired by chapter eleven. Solidburnreturned made me honest to goodness cry with it, and I still can’t believe that my story inspired fan art. Legit oh my guh. You should go swoon over everything they make. https://solidburnreturned.tumblr.com/post/177560597595/poppy-sang-her-own-little-songs-about-the-majesty

Thank you for reading and sticking with me even though I take forever to update! I'm IGuessILoveTrollsNow on tumblr if you want to connect and see more of my nonsense.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Poppy was a smart troll. She was clever. She was good at finding creative solutions for problems. She was good at communicating with others. Or at the very least, she could communicate until she got what she wanted.

All of that was fantastic, useful, important stuff. But right this moment, Poppy's biggest problem was with herself, and she knew from a lifetime of experience that she wasn't an easy troll to work with.

Since Branch's visit five days earlier, she'd been struggling to stay chipper. It was easy to express to her visitors- mainly Creek, who had been with her if not out teaching yoga- that she wanted to be up and moving and running and dancing and jumping and singing.

It was easy to talk about needing to be outside. Her pod was lovely, but it was the same pink walls everywhere she looked, all the time. A change of scenery wouldn't hurt. Arrangements were being made to get her out for a picnic soon, but HOW soon?

And even though her friends had difficulty understanding it, it was very easy to vent her frustration about the roaring headaches that she got when she tried to use her hair. A doctor had been sent for already, and again, she was told to rest for a while. Something something, "concussions can have lasting effects," something something, "we'll begin therapy if this continues." She honestly hadn't been listening very closely on account of... Y'know. The headache.

And while the tremendous and terrible heat had been an obligatory conversation topic for a while, temperatures were finally back to balmy, rather than broiling. Poppy badly wanted to get outside and soak this up while she could, before autumn weather started creeping in.

All of these concerns were things she could discuss with her friends. And boyfriend. She didn't remember making it quite that official. Agreeing to a date wasn't really the same as agreeing on titles. But she conceded that that's where it would have been heading, so why make waves over a small thing?

And she was happy! So happy, she would chirp, as she scrapbooked pages of her and Creek's relationship. It hadn't really been thrilling yet, but she was also stuck at home and not really interested in any normal "new couple" activities at the moment. Between her sore ankle and her sore brain, she mostly just wanted to be left alone when Creek came in for a kiss or snuggle.

All of that was easy to manage. Poppy stretched out in her bed, alone for the next couple hours while everybody in the whole damn village went and enjoyed morning yoga, and sighed. Again.

What she couldn't discuss with her friends weighed on her. And she couldn't even ask if they'd seen him around and risk giving away that she'd- well- what had she even done, really?

She rolled over to her side and justified her actions.

She'd sat in bed.

She'd let a friend help her with her dinged up face.
She'd closed her eyes.

Three completely NOTHING things, and she felt guilty about none of them, and if Branch were to appear here right now, everything would be just like it always is. She would tease him, he would take it poorly, she would wrassle a hug out of him, he would yell at her and run off.

And that was fine, and to be expected, because they hadn't DONE anything, and they were just good friends who enjoyed a game of cat and mouse. But with hugs.

Cats and mice that hugged each other.

Not cat and mouse in a way where one was like. Pursuing the other. She chased him for fun, but she wasn't CHASING him. She waved a hand in the air, banishing the very thought. PFFT. Nah. Not Branch.

She rolled to her other side.

BUT EVEN SO. He didn't get the credit he deserved for being so resourceful, and smart, and even occasionally sweet. Honestly, he was a good man, there would be nothing wrong with any troll pursuing him.

Like, obviously it should be a troll who knows him. One that has invested real time in him and genuinely cares, not just somebody who realized one day that he's a cutie and decided to throw themself at him. Poppy groused. She was getting off topic.

The point was, she had done nothing worthy of the guilt she'd been feeling, and she should let it go and move on with life instead of tripping over something between two and ten seconds of indiscretion.

Not even, really.

Whatever. She hadn't really thought of it since, because it was nothing.

But if she were going to try and remember what happened... Well, she could at least TRY. Again.

Poppy sat up. "So, he was there." She patted the bed by her leg. Thigh. Leg. It didn't matter.

She rubbed her cheek with a hand and lowered her voice, imitating Branch. "Smush smush smush, look at me, putting goo on your face because it couldn't wait a few minutes. Blah blah blah."

Her face heated up as she used her own voice. "Blah blah blah, he's looking at my face, blah blah blah blah-" she tuck her hair behind her ear, "he's really in my face..."

She huffed and closed her eyes. "My eyes were tired, so I- yeah."

And she sat. Because at this point, she honestly didn't know what happened in the moments before Creek returned from yoga.

Maybe Branch politely sat and waited for her to finish resting her eyes.

Maybe- she almost laughed at the thought- maybe he almost- because she'd felt like he was close-

Nah, no.

Poppy laid down, then immediately sat back up, frustrated.
Okay, but maybe he DID.

She huffed and rolled her shoulders forward, frustrated. Was it really that unimaginable that Branch could look at somebody— in this one scenario, her— and be interested? He was just as much a troll as the rest of them, colorful or not, and SURELY he had some of the same feelings and motivations that they did.

And good for him, honestly. If he was finally coming out of his shell, that was AMAZING.

And good for HER, honestly! Maybe Hug Therapy was making a difference! She sat up a bit straighter, enjoying this train of thought.

GRANTED, they'd only had two sessions, and YEAH, they hadn't gone well AT ALL, but Poppy couldn't help but feel the warm glow of pride in her chest. Obviously she had made a difference in his repressed, lonely, muddy life.

She grinned and clapped to herself before pulling one of several nearby scrapbooks closer, mind already reeling with possibilities and plans.

If two bad sessions had gotten him to maybe almost kiss her, then how far could she get with just one good session?

Poppy frowned at the phrasing. That wasn't. She didn't.

That is to say—

She has Creek, who is wonderful.

She quieted her mind and focused on cutting out small felt figures.

"I really like Creek." She said to nobody. "He's handsome, and we get along well, and I've liked him for a while."

Poppy continued cutting.

"He's been taking very good care of me, and he looks at me like I'm made of cotton candy and sunshine, and he's very kind."

Poppy sighed and set her scissors down. Her scrapbook plan felt much less exciting than it had a moment ago. She was probably due for a nap. Or a snack. Or to run screaming through the forest until her lungs exploded because Hair, did she miss running and screaming.

She closed the book, gently tossed it back to the pile of other scrapbooks, rearranged a few pillows, and flopped back into the fluffy heap.

She looked out the window. Same cheery yellow pod as the past few days. Glaringly yellow.

She looked around her room, scanning over pictures she'd taken, framed, and already oogled several times.

She was going to lose her mind.

Poppy rolled over and whined for a short while before closing her eyes, finally bored enough to nap.

Right then, she heard quiet knocking. From- her ear flicked towards the sound- her front door?
Who would be knocking? Everybody was at yoga right now.

Maybe-

Poppy shot up in bed and shouted. "Hello? I'm here!" She fixed her hair as best as she could without a mirror. "The door is open, come in!" She grabbed the glass of water on her bedside table and swished some in her mouth before drinking it all down. When had she last brushed? Gross.

She heard the front door click open and shut, and strained to hear who she'd just invited in. Maybe she could hear some low grumbles, or scuffing heels, or-

Without warning, Mister Dinkles' cheery face popped in through her bedroom doorway. "Hello, Poppy!" Biggie's sing-song voice rang out.

Poppy deflated slightly, but company is company. "Hi, Mister Dinkles! Hi, Biggie!" She smiled brightly as her massive friend entered the room and set a large canvas bag on the foot of her bed. "What brings you here? Did yoga end already?"

Biggie answered as he pulled her into a tight hug. "Probably not yet, but I skipped it today. Creek told us yesterday morning that you were struggling here, so-" he paused as he reached into his bag, "I thought this might help you cope!"

He held out a pair of knitting needles. Poppy almost laughed, because honestly, it was a cute hobby for Biggie, but. Uh.

She took the needles and smiled politely, knowing she was about to do a miserable job of showing appreciation. "Oh- thank you! I've never tried this before! It's always seemed a little more your thing than mine." Biggie said nothing, but smiled as he went back to his bag. "But this is a sweet gesture. Thank you for being so thoughtful."

Biggie politely ignored her refusal. "I know you've never done this before, but I'm bringing you more than a new hobby- I'm bringing you a goal."

"Oh, okay?" Biggie handed a folded sheet of paper to her, still not acknowledging her rapidly cooling enthusiasm. "It's warm out now, but this is the perfect time to begin making a cozy scarf for somebody you love."

Poppy looked down at the paper. Oh. Instructions. Suuuuuuuuper.

"I'll teach you what you need to get started today, and then your job is to make a scarf for somebody before it's cold out. This work will exercise your brain AND keep you entertained. And then you can give a gift!"

Well. Gift giving was definitely her thing. "Go on..."

Finally, he angled the bag in a way where she could look in. Yarn. Heaps of yarn in different colors, different sizes. Some were sparkly. Some were hairy. Some had lots of different colors.

Poppy pulled the bag closer and dug through. She wasn't particularly invested, but certainly wasn't going to NOT poke around in a massive bag of cozy things.

Almost immediately, she found a thick pink yarn that was just a shade lighter than her own skin. She pulled out a wad (wad? Ball? Whatever.) and smooshed it.
"Oh! This is so soft!" She smiled and smooshed it again. Maybe she could keep this yarn for herself and snuggle with it.

Biggie smiled and pulled two more lumps of the same yarn from the bag. "Lovely choice! Wearing that would be just like wearing a hug from you!"

He sat by her and spent the next forty-five minutes walking her through the first few rows of the scarf. Poppy had to give Biggie credit—this didn't suck nearly as much as she'd expected. She might even keep this up after he left.

Now that Poppy knew how to hold her hands and needed less instruction, they could finally talk about interesting things.

"So, how are things out in the big wide world? I feel like I'm getting abridged stories from all of you—PUH-LEASEEEE give me some details or like. Gossip. Or gossipy details."

Biggie laughed and poked Mister Dinkles' belly as he started. "It's been pretty quiet, to be honest."

Poppy frowned, not at all sold on that.

"Truly! Smidge and I were laughing over brunch the other day—oh don't scowl, SHE cooked, you know I was only there because I knew everybody else would 'have something come up' at the last minute—but we were laughing at the idea of your presence being the catalyst for much of the mayhem in our village."

Poppy rolled her eyes, but couldn't completely bite back her smile. Maybe she started some shit sometimes. Maybe.

The pair knitted together and conversed comfortably, reliving old stories, sharing small, silly secrets, and planning dishes for the upcoming picnic.

After another half hour, Mister Dinkles meeped his readiness to leave, and so Biggie packed up his work, got a snack and drink for Poppy, and left.

Poppy sat back in her bed and sighed, already lonely. She dusted crumbs off her hands, and looked at her very short scrap of scarf.

She picked up the needles, started again, and considered who should receive the finished product.

Somebody who wouldn't be receiving very stylish cold weather gear from Satin and Chenille, which took the whole Snack Pack off the list.

Her dad? Possibly, although he was more into earth tones...

Earth tones...

Well...

Poppy smiled. Her mind was made.

---------

Branch had never been better.

He was sharp.
Focused.

He had one thing and only one thing on his mind - survival.

He'd gone two and a half weeks now without his life being interrupted by nonsense, and they'd been the most productive two and a half weeks of his life.

His stores for the upcoming winter looked good. Better than they usually did by this time of year. As he rolled an apple towards his bunker, he smiled to himself. He was going to be so. Damn. Secure.

No Bergen would ever find him.

No predator would ever catch him.

And no troll would ever touch him again.

His smile faltered for half a second. He corrected his face.

No troll would ever-

The corners of his mouth jerked down.

He redirected his mind.

Today, he would cut up and dry out this apple. This would take up the rest of his morning, all of the afternoon and evening, and keep him busy well into the night. He would go to bed hours after he wanted, too tired and sore to think about anything that might ever make him sad-

His treacherous brain sped ahead, out of his control, and supplied the end of the sentence.

"-like how you're completely and utterly alone."

He shook the thought out of his head. Nope. Not today. He couldn't today. He was BUSY today.

He made it to an above ground shed hidden near his bunker and set himself to the task at hand.

As he worked through the mindless job of peeling, his mind did what it so often does and wandered.

He looked up and in no direction in particular. Just. He really wanted to know how things were going. He'd not spoken to another troll for two and a half weeks.

That's a little bit of a long time, even for him.

What if-

"NOPE."

He began counting strips in batches of ten. Counting would keep him focused.

And so he worked, and counted, and kept his fingers back, and counted, and worked, and wiped the slippery apple juice off his blade, and counted, and-

And really, two and a half weeks. Did nobody care? Really? NOBODY? He could be dead for all anybody knew.

His brow furrowed and he and put more force into his work.

He glanced in the direction of the village again.

What if this was the rest of his life now? Silence is golden, sure, but what good is gold to him?

And how much did anybody REALLY care if some new, uh, something or other, halted all the visiting, and checking in, and hugging, and inviting? Really, it's been two and a half weeks since he heard from anybody. And they all used to say that they cared about him, that they wanted to spend time with him, wanted to sing and dance with him.

Well.

They didn't ALL say that.

His cheeks darkened, entirely because he was working more vigorously now than he had been.

One troll said that. A troll who was just as inconsequential to him as anybody else.

He peeled faster.

One bright pink-

He flattened a hand against the apple.

Overly enthusiastic-

He set the edge of his knife in position to start a new cut.

Goddess.

His hand slipped and sent the knife gliding under skin. Not the apple's skin, but his own.

It took him about three seconds to register what he'd just done. When it hit, he let loose a string of curses, stabbed the apple repeatedly, and stormed away to go and glue his stupid fucking hand back together.

-------

Two blood-soaked hand towels, two rolls of gauze, two hours, and five and a half home brewed beers later, Branch was still angry.

He sat sloped back on his couch and looked down at his hand again. It was more lumpy and smushy than usual, what with the swelling and layers of bandages.

He wondered if he would be taken out by blood loss, which was definitely not being helped by the alcohol, or infection.
Branch tipped his head back until it hit the cushion and shut his eyes, wishing he could move to bed without actually having to move. His mind provided a heavily romanticized memory of the night he fixed up Poppy.

"If I were a princess, I could get a dirty idiot to carry me around."

He almost chuckled at the notion of a grubby, grumbling Poppy taking care of him, struggling to conceal her blush, obviously besotted.

Why had he been avoiding thinking about her, he wondered. It was one his favorite ways to pass the time, imagining and reimagining conversations.

He closed his eyes and pictured Poppy.

Pretty, pink, playful Poppy.

When he was younger, he used to imagine that like in a fairy tale, the love of this beautiful princess would change him into the man she deserved. She would look at this ugly toad, give him a kiss, and he would become... better?

He shook his swimming head and frowned. That was when he was younger and more idealistic. More foolish. And more selfish. He knew that no kiss, no amount of kisses, really, would change him. And despite what she believed, it wasn't Poppy's responsibility to change him. He had let go of the fantasy of becoming a better man for her a long time ago.

So... what did that leave him with? Hoping she would drop her standards?

Hope was too much, even. He'd almost violated her in her bedroom because his hopes had made him misread... everything.

He'd spent hours his first two days back from that morning reexamining his memory, and concluded that he had seen things through his own lovestruck lenses. Poppy, undoubtedly feeling tired and awkward when he invaded her space, closed her eyes to avoid the situation however she could. And he took advantage of that. He'd been millimeters away from-

He finished his drink and dropped it on the floor.

So. Hope was not only something he'd wasted too much time and energy on, but it almost made him fuck up enormously.

He sighed.

Hope was also pointless now, considering that Creek had snuck his way into her heart.

Branch muttered and poked at the most tender spot on his wounded hand. "Fucking asshole."

He was too tired, and wounded, and drunk, and sad to think about Creek. He let the dull anger in his chest burn a little, then refocused on himself.

He looked around the room. Trash was scattered around. Blood was drying on the table and a few places on the floor. There was a sad, drunk loser sitting on the couch, picking through and examining the shards of his broken heart for the thousandth time in his life.

He could almost laugh. He hurt so much, over losing something that he's made all on his own. He'd spent the last ten years-
Ten fucking years-
Nursing this fantasy that Poppy might ever love him back.
What a fucking joke he was.
His eyes burned as tears sprang up.
He had to move on.
He just wanted to be good enough for her.
And that was never going to happen.
He was never going to be the right troll for her.
His arms were never going to be her home away from home.
And he was tired. So tired.
Tired of hurting over her.
Tired of hoping.
Tired.
His heavy eyelids fell, and the last thought he had before falling into a dreamless sleep was of letting go of Poppy.

-----
Hours later, Branch still slept.
Poppy wasn't sure how long he'd been asleep, but from the look of the room, and like, him, she was sure that interrupting this sleep would do him no favors.

So she sat on the one available chair in the dimly lit room and watched her unwitting host, quietly hoping he would wake up to enjoy the surprise of a surprise guest. It was a good thing he'd yet to change the lock to the bunker.

But after sitting through one hug time and coming up on another, she was antsy. A girl, especially one who had walked out into the forest ON HER OWN (she was so pleased) for the first time in two and a half weeks, needed hugs.

She stood, stretched her back and legs, and reexamined the contents of the basket sitting on his coffee table.

Fresh bread from Hyacinth, some of Smidge's stoutberry wine- she'd been unsure about packing that, not knowing if Branch was a teetotaler, but looking at the discarded growlers on his floor... a few grass bracelets she'd woven, and most importantly, a beautifully crafted reminder that they still had 5 sessions of Hug Therapy to get through, and that she would arrive early the next day to pick up where they'd left off.

All was in order. She should leave soon, she knew. Creek had arranged for a night out together, and she'd only barely convinced him to let her make a solo run out. She needed to get back before he worried too much.
But Poppy had desperately wanted to talk to Branch today. She'd imagined so many different conversations and had so many different favorites, based on how and where they bumped into each other, but him being asleep hadn't been considered at all.

She wanted some sort of satisfaction before going, and looked around the room again.

If she couldn't talk, maybe she could snag a souvenir? Poppy scanned the shelves, looking for something interesting that probably wouldn't be missed.

But- ugh. She didn't know what was actually useful to him. And he WOULD notice if a key herb or book walked off. Why couldn't he just have BUNCHES of odds and ends available right here? Taking one thing from a big stash was smart.

She scowled at him for never having shown her how to get into his storage rooms.

Then she had an idea. A damn good idea.

Poppy skipped as quietly as possible into his bedroom, her eyes set on his bed. Branch would probably never notice a missing blanket. He had SO MANY.

She climbed onto the bed and dug around, seeking something that was deliciously soft, but also small enough to jam into a gift basket and sneak into her pod.

She pulled up a soft, white, loosely felted fur blanket. Poppy sighed as she buried her face in it, already imagining warding off the chill of winter by wrapping herself up in this. It was perfect.

Now standing on the bed, Poppy folded it haphazardly, and snagged another of the same making on her way out of the room.

She tossed both blankets on the couch by Branch, unpacked the contents of the gift basket and arranged them to look nice on the table, then stuffed in her pilfered prize.

She turned to Branch, considering how he was situated on the couch. His head was tipped over the back, and his wounded hand hung limply over the arm. His vest had slid down over the other shoulder, exposing a bit more chest than she usually got to see.

She leaned in and examined him, noting the old and dull scars that were scattered over his body. He lived such a difficult life.

Poppy ran a finger over a particularly thick scar on the top of his knee, sad at the thought of him having managed it by himself. No doctor in town ever saw him. He certainly didn't have a friend to lend a hand. Not even a parent to kiss a boo-boo away. Her heart squeezed. He was so alone.

Without thinking, she tipped forward and kissed the scar. One boo-boo down...

She picked two more to tend to. Retroactive health care, she would call it. Poppy picked up his unbandaged hand and kissed a small scar on his index finger, then slowly set it back, praying she didn't disturb his sleep.

The last boo-boo she chose was on his cheek. Her own darkened as her brain simmered about the connotations of it all, but she pushed the thought away. She gave many, many kisses to her friends. This was no different, she asserted.

She slowly planted a knee on the couch, then put her hand on Branch's shoulder for support. She leaned over his face and took a moment to appreciate him. It wasn't every day that she caught him
NOT scowling. It wasn't any day, actually. This felt special.

And so she observed. He had strong features, really truly looking like the kind of troll who would live alone in the forest. His eyes, closed now, were usually so bright and expressive. Poppy was always taken aback at how sharp and deep they were when he made eye contact with her. She felt like there were entire worlds developed behind them, like she could get lost in his thoughts and feelings, if he would only let her in.

She moved down and smiled at his massive nose. How did that even happen? She often wondered what his parents must have looked like. More often, though, she wanted to boop it. Just. One quick little 'boop' and she'd be set for life, probably. She hummed a contented little 'hmm' to herself.

She looked at his mouth. His lips were chapped and rough. In the back of her mind, Poppy made a note to give him a jar of lip balm. At the front of her mind, she was stuck wondering about the last time she'd seen him.

She slowly raised her free hand and touched two fingers to his lips, perilously curious, her mind buzzing, trying to calculate the risks and rewards of poking at a sleeping man's face.

They were chapped and rough, but soft under that. Poppy licked her own lips once, twice, focusing on sensation, pointedly ignoring her conscience telling her to cut and run.

She tilted her head, breathing shallowly, watching him sharply.

She lightly slid her fingers across his mouth, then back and forth again more firmly, frustrated, knowing this wouldn't fill the gaps in her imagination when she thought about-

Well-

She-

Poppy stopped. She needed to stay on task.

She lifted her fingers from his mouth and ever so slightly tilted his head so she had better access to his scar.

It was right where his cheek met his jaw. Not a large mark, but she'd always noticed it.

She closed her eyes, took a slow, shaky breath, and gave it a small, quick kiss.

She pulled back, now watching his face. He slept.

Poppy licked her lips and noted that he tasted like sweat. And dirt. And sunshine. She gave herself permission to get one more quick taste, and kissed a different spot on his jaw, this time more slowly, wanting to not miss any flavor notes.

She moved further along his jaw and gave another kiss, her mind now too hazy to continue fabricating excuses. There were none. This was shameless self indulgence.

And so she indulged. She drug her lips along his jaw, down onto his neck, and back the way she came. She explored this path two more times, moving impossibly slowly after deciding to make one the final trip.

She couldn't, or rather, wouldn't ask herself why. Poppy, who could find a reason to do anything and everything, would flounder if she examined this. It would ruin everything.
She pulled back, heart pounding, breath shaky, tingling.

Branch's breathing matched her own, despite the fact that he still slept. His brows had pulled together slightly, his cheeks and ears had darkened to a beautifully smokey shade of purple, and his mouth had cracked open, making his heavy, puffing breaths more audible.

Poppy was transfixed. She watched him, imagining that this is what great painters and sculptors felt after having finished a masterpiece. Awe.

She drank in this more open, more vulnerable Branch, unsure if she would ever see him again, and was jolted back to reality when her hug time bracelet dinged.

Poppy slapped a hand over it, cursed quietly, and slowly backed away from Branch.

She had to go.

She needed to get home like. Half an hour ago.

Shit.

Shitttttttttttttt.

She loosely draped a blanket over Branch, snatched her basket, and prayed that the elevator machinery wouldn't wake him.

Once above ground, Poppy hurried home, ignoring the blend of guilt and exhilaration swirling in her belly.

She declined to go out with Creek that night, mentioning a headache that had developed on her walk. Creek, being the agreeable boyfriend he was, smiled softly and nodded before offering to stay the night and tend to her.

Poppy declined again, let him pull her in for a quick hug and a lingering kiss, and then closed the door on him.

As she laid in bed, wrapped up in her dirt and sunshine-scented blanket, Poppy closed her eyes and hoped that life would be less complicated in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading. ❤ This chapter is probably my favorite so far.
Branch was conscious.

He wouldn't call it awake. Couldn't. Wouldn't.

He sat motionless, eyes squeezed shut, body and head aching thanks to a combination of too much alcohol and sleeping upright.

And his hand. Ugh. It throbbed painfully with each beat of his heart.

He took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and groaned loudly. If he HAD to be alive, he would spend the day in bed. He'd drink some water, eat some anything, change his bandages, and go sleep in a real bed. Excellent plan.

He took two more deep breaths, mentally preparing for being fully awake, lifted his head, and opened his eyes.

Awful. Being awake was awful. Everything was awful.

He started to shift forward when an unfamiliar sensation made him look down. Sliding down his chest was... one of his blankets? He pulled his good hand out from under it and rubbed the fabric, curious, as though he didn't already know what this was or where it came from.

But. Well.

Where did it come from? He didn't get a blanket. If he'd been motivated enough to do so, he'd surely have been smart enough to just go to bed.

So- how-

He looked up and around the room, hoping an answer would be available, and saw an unfamiliar arrangement on his coffee table.

"What?" He reached forward and grabbed the envelope that sat at the front of the pile.

After a little fumbling to get the card out, he read it.

Of course.

He set it back on the table and pinched his brow.

Of course Poppy had been over. And seen him like this. And gotten the blanket.

Thay made perfect sense. Boundaries weren't her thing. She WOULD enjoy having the run of the place while he was unaware.

He halfheartedly growled, braced himself, and stood up, already changing his plan for the day.

He would shower. Pull himself together. Clean up the bunker. Just. Be less of a wreck when morning came.
He picked up the bread Poppy had left behind and took three large bites from a corner as he shuffled to the sink. Food. And water. Food and water.

After he downed the second glass of cold, clear relief and warmed a pot of fresh water on the stove, the familiar grind of working machinery filled the room.

"No-" he slammed the glass down and looked at his clock. It was morning. Not early, early morning like he'd thought, but real, other trolls are awake right now, honest-to-Hair morning. "No! Seriously?!!"

He had no options and no time. He couldn't rush clean anything- his head hurt too much- why-

And then she descended into the room. Branch froze, watching, waiting, and saw her polite smile spread into a grin when she saw him.

For all the grumbling he did, for all the pounding in his head and for how tense his neck and shoulders already were, he couldn't suppress his elation at the sight of her.

She was just as stunning as ever. More than ever. Like a sunrise over the pond, a flower in bloom, and a beautiful song all crammed into this one pink vessel.

His heart squeezed. He was done for, just like every other time he saw her.

Branch's throat went dry. He could only imagine how he must look- dirty, disheveled, delighted. He quickly schooled his face into his standard, albeit more tired and blood-shot, glare.

The elevator stopped and Poppy stepped off, eyes on him. She sauntered over and stopped directly in front of him. She smiled, blinked slowly, and spoke, her voice artificially sweetened for the gag, sounding like warm honey. "Hellooooo, Sleeping Beauty."

Branch said nothing.

"I came over yesterday to give you a gift, and was surprised to see a handsome prince in a deep, deep slumber."

He remained silent, waiting for her to get bored of the joke.

She continued. "Not even a magical kiss would wake somebody who was THAT asleep."

Branch did nothing. She scanned his face, scrutinizing, looking for any sign of him being affected by the teasing. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction.

Poppy then smiled and cupped his cheeks, smashing and kneading them as she chattered. "I'm just kidding. But for real, hi! Hello, Glad you're awake for Hug Therapy- it would have been SUPER awkward if you weren't. Let's do this- where would you like to start? Big or little hugs? I'm leaning more towards big hugs, personally. Some good, solid squeezes."

He was already floundering. She was talking so much. "Poppy-"

"Oh, he speaks!"

He croaked out, "Poppy, I'm tired."

She slapped her hands to her own cheeks and feigned surprise. "No!"

Branch stepped around her and sat at his desk. It was time to change his bandages. Maybe Poppy
would leave if it was too graphic for her.

"Hey, woah, yeah-

He smiled at the sound of her discomfort.

"I'll, uh. I'll get your water."

Poppy brought over the simmering pot and, with directions from Branch, collected a few fresh rags. When everything was assembled, she sat on the table and fidgeted while she watched.

There was a comfortable silence while Branch unwrapped and examined his hand. After some poking and- he bit back a smirk at the sound of Poppy's stifled gagging- cleaning in and around the wound, he picked up a new roll of gauze.

"I can help."

"Pass. I know what I'm doing. And," he couldn't resist poking at her, "I won't throw up."

"Fair. What CAN I do to help, then?"

Without hesitation, Branch replied. "You could go home and let me sleep, Poppy." He prayed that she wouldn't.

She laughed and poked at one of his ears. He twitched it away. "I could stay here and keep you company while you sleep."

"Hmm. Apparently, you already did that." He fixed her with a stern look. "I'll be changing the lock mechanism as soon as I have two working hands."

Poppy grinned and leaned over him, taking full advantage of the boost in height the table provided. "I guess I'll be stopping in as much as possible until that happens, then."

Branch packed away his medical supplies and firmly closed the lid of the box. "I guess I'll be setting more traps, then." Poppy rolled her eyes.

Hand now in clean, fresh gauze, Branch leaned back in his chair and took a moment to appreciate his guest. What a sight for sore eyes.

She shifted, moved his first aid kid to the side, and dangled her feet over the edge, occasionally brushing his thighs with her toes. Branch pretended to not notice and looked down at his hands.

"So," she began, "you never came back after-" she stopped and cleared her throat.

Branch's head jerked up, and he was both surprised and unsurprised to see her looking uncomfortable. The last time they'd seen each other had been.

Well.

He didn't know how she felt. Or what all she was thinking.

She frowned and cleared her throat. "Two and a half weeks is a long time to avoid me, even for you."

Relief flooded through him. He could handle her being reminded, again, that he's a miserable friend. That was better than her addressing anything else.
"I was busy."

She looked around the room, taking in the untidy shelves, stacked up dishes, and scattered, dirty clothes.

"Clearly."

A defensive flame ignited in his chest. Sure, he wasn't doing his best right now, but still.

"Sorry, Princess. I forgot that I'm your toy and am expected to wait on you hand and foot, neglecting my own life and survival. I'll keep that in mind next time you put yourself out of commission."

Her cheeks turned red and she glared at him. "That's not what I meant and I know you know it."

She stopped swinging a foot and used it to jab him in the shoulder several times. "Don't pick a fight with me today."

He grabbed her offending appendage and held it still. "Don't poke me, I don't feel well."

She lifted her other foot and stabbed at his other shoulder. "Yeah, I can see you've got a bad case of brown bottle flu."

Branch growled and caught it in the crook of his arm, careful to not hurt his hand for the sake of Poppy's shenanigans.

"Stop! One of us, probably ME, is going to get hurt if you keep this up."

Poppy huffed. "Whatever. Fine. Whatever." She yanked her feet back, planted them on Branch's thighs, and took a deep breath.

"That doesn't matter, because right now, today, we're doing Hug Therapy."

"Poppy, no-"

"Yes-"

"I have a headache-"

She wagged a finger in his face. "If I let you use that excuse once, you'll use it all the time."

Branch had to give her credit there, because he would. "My hand hurts."

"I'll hold your other hand."

Branch's cheeks colored a bit and he looked down at his lap. She made everything sound so easy.

"I'm really tired, Poppy."

He felt her fingers pulling at tips of his hair and assumed she was picking out chunks of grass and dried mud that were sitting at her eye level. It felt nice.

Poppy spoke softly. "Your hair is a disaster. What if you let me brush it out?"

Branch closed his eyes and tilted his head further forward, giving her easier access.

It made sense to let her do this. He'd mangled one of his hands. She had two. It made sense.
So Poppy sat on his table and picked, detangled, and, he was sure she was doing it, even if she would lie later, braided small segments of his hair.

Branch sighed. He couldn't remember the last time somebody had touched his hair. He was sore and tired, yeah, but... this was nice.

He leaned forward, laid his arms on the table around Poppy's hips, and rested his head on her lap.

As she worked through his knots, Poppy hummed a quiet, soothing song, and Branch melted into the coziness of it all.

He must have dozed off, because the next thing he knew, Poppy was scritching his scalp and picking up in volume as she tried to wake him.

"Branch, hey."

He pretended to still be asleep.

"Branch, I have to get going. Let's get you off to bed, okay?"

He kept his eyes shut, but squeezed his arms around her. A sleeping man could squeeze a pillow. It only counts as a hug if he's awake.

"Aww, thank you. But I know you're awake, you stopped snoring."

Oh. Well. If that hadn't given him away, his vividly purple face and ears would now.

"Let me sleep."

"You've been asleep for a while. I need to go home soon."

Branch groaned and sat up. He looked up at Poppy, who smiled brightly down at him. He could easily tolerate waking up like this more often.

Poppy turned to the side, stretched her legs out in front of her, and pinched one of his cheeks. "Your hair is suuuuper cute right now. Look in a mirror before you mess it up, okay?"

Branch, still trying to get his body awake enough to do things, only rolled his eyes as she moved around him and talked about plans for the next morning.

"I'll bring breakfast if you'll make tea, okay?" She squeezed his shoulders before skipping to the elevator. "Get some rest tonight, you can't just sleep EVERY time I'm here!"

Branch grumbled about her not ever needing to be over, but she rolled her eyes, threw the lever, and was gone.

After eating a tremendous breakfast and drinking half a pitcher of water, he shuffled into his bathroom.

In the mirror over his sink, he had to marvel at the work she'd done. Small braids here and there, some with small paper flowers woven in, and several segments of hair twisted and braided into hearts and flowers of different sizes.

Branch carefully picked out the paper flowers and set them on a shelf, making a mental note to move them to a safer spot later.
He left everything else. It had been a long time since somebody touched his hair. He wanted to keep it this way for just a while longer.

-----

Poppy entered her pod and called out apologetically. "Sorry, things ran long!"

Creek popped out from her kitchen. "No worries! I'm not done yet, you're fine. If you would get the table cleared, that would help quite a bit."

Poppy nodded and got to work. She tidied away odds and ends from her scrapbooking work and set the table for two, then peeked into the kitchen to check on how things were coming along. "It smells good in here--"

Creek rushed over to her, waving his hands in her face and juuuuuust on the edge of yelling, said, "Not yet! Stay out there, it's a surprise!"

Poppy laughed at her frantic boyfriend and backed out of the kitchen. "I'm going to go wash my hands verrrrrrrrrry sloooooooooowly. Then there's no stopping me from looking!"

Creek squeaked and she laughed again.

Poppy meandered through her living room, took a lap around the perimeter of her bedroom, and slowly selected which scented soap to scrub with as she stood at her sink. Ha, S sounds.

She had no idea what he was up to, but he'd been hinting at a surprise for the past few days, ever since she told him about needing to make a trip back out to the bunker to start village security meetings again.

"We'll have to do something special to celebrate you regaining your strength and independence!"

She'd squealed and started brainstorming for a big party, but he'd quieted her with a few kisses and told her he'd sort everything out.

As she'd been leaving this morning, he'd let her know that he was arranging a quiet lunch for her, just the two of them, and gave her nothing else to go on besides that.

Poppy had been both excited, because surprises are exciting, and a little put out. Quiet lunches (and breakfasts, and suppers) together had been most of her meals for the past two and a half weeks. She was hoping for something a bit... bigger. More exciting.

But he'd been so excited, and he's always been so wonderful, she trusted him.

And then, hey. Her morning had been spent at Hug Therapy. Not a bad time at all. Even if lunch wasn't as exciting as she wanted, it was a good day.

Creek called to her and Poppy skipped out to him.

"Okay, let me see my surprise!"

"Close your eyes first!"

Poppy obeyed and put her arms out, waiting for him to guide her to her seat.

Creek took her hands and led her over, got her settled, and gave her a last reminder to not look yet.
Poppy listened closely to him move back and forth from the kitchen. She heard him scooting plates across the tablecloth, apparently making more room.

Finally, he seemed still. "Okay, open up-"

Poppy looked.

"Oh!"

It was a little cake. A beautiful little cake. Creamy white butter cream, swirled and dotted with small flowers, and topped with a pile of bright, mouthwatering berries. It was precious and beautiful.

"It's- awwww! Creek, did you make this for me?" He grinned and nodded. Poppy was melting in her seat. Creek wasn't a baker, but he'd gone and done this, just for her.

Poppy hopped out of her seat and peppered his cheek with kisses. "This is so sweet, thank you so much!"

Creek returned her kisses and hugged her tightly, then smiled into her neck. "I'm glad you like it, but we don't have a ton of time for kisses at the moment. We'll need to eat quickly if we're going to get to the next stop on time."

"Next stop?" Poppy took her seat again and let Creek cut her a slice.

She took a bite- oh Hair, lemon cake with raspberry mousse?! She did not deserve him- and looked at him expectantly.

"I can't take time to say more. We have places to be today, Poppy." He winked and took a large bite, clearly relishing in her excitement and curiosity.

Poppy ate quickly and kept asking questions, hoping he would give something away, but he was impenetrable. She'd never seen him smile so much- which was saying something, since he smiled almost as much as she did.

After they ate and Creek tucked the remains of the cake into her fridge, he scooted her out the front door and took her hand, excitedly guiding her through the village.

They arrived at Smidge's pod, and before either of them knocked, the door opened.

"Hellooooo you two! Just finished!" Smidge stepped aside and waved them in, and Poppy followed Creek.

In the middle of the room was a table set for three, and in the middle of the table was a fruit tower.

"Oh wow! Smidge, did you do this?"

"No' by myfelf," Smidge said around the strawberry in her mouth.

Poppy and Creek joined her and helped themselves, and the three chatted and laughed and picked away at the decadant treats.

After a short while, Smidge rose from her seat and nodded at Creek. "It's time to go."

Creek nodded and looked at Poppy. "You heard her, let's go."
"Already?"

Creek grinned. "Come on, let's go."

Poppy was surprised that Smidge left the pod with them, but she and Creek seemed to know what was up. Poppy followed them to Guy Diamond's pod.

Again, before anybody could knock, the door opened. Guy gesticulated extravagantly and led them in.

Poppy was greeted by Biggie, who was standing by a table topped with several mimosas.

"You guys, this is amazing!"

The five of them sat at the slightly crowded table and Poppy sipped while she listened to her friends. She suspected that this was not the last stop, and wanted to save room.

And she was right. Soon enough, they left Guy's pod and the five of them went to Suki's, where they enjoyed more fresh fruit.

Then the six went to Satin and Chenille's pod, where Poppy was amazed by the rainbow tower of macarons.

Then the eight went to Cooper's mushroom, where they snacked on a variety of cheeses.

The day went on like this, with the growing entourage moving through the village, being warmly greeted, fed, and then shipped out to the next stop with new friends.

It was intimate, but still a boisterous marathon of partying the likes of which Poppy lived for. Poppy couldn't remember the last time she'd enjoyed herself so much.

As the sun was setting and the air cooled, she was finally taken to the center of the village. From a distance, she could feel the heavy bass of the music and see the crowd.

She whooped and shouted, and her posse followed suit, all jumping and screaming and cheering as they joined the festivities.

The night passed in a blur. Poppy danced through seas of trolls, led conga lines, and sang so hard that her throat stung.

While taking a short break and watching Smidge arm wrestle some poor fool, Poppy sighed. This was an amazing night. Maybe... maybe she could convince Branch to come? If he'd been asleep all day, he might feel well enough to party. Or she could just jump on his bed until he rolled out.

As she was working on a plan, her thoughts were interrupted by a tap on her elbow. Poppy turned and saw Creek with two cups of punch. He smiled and held one out for her.

Poppy took it and thanked him, despite knowing he couldn't hear her over the pounding music.

Creek leaned in and, between gestures and shouting, asked her if she'd like to move somewhere quieter. Poppy looked out at the party being held in her honor. She was hesitant to abandon it, but supposed that Creek deserved some of her time.

So she walked with Creek, holding hands and sipping her slightly boozy punch, until they could talk.
"Today has been amazing. I was completely surprised, and you did so much-"

Creek laughed. "Our friends did the majority of the work, but thanks."

"Well it was still amazing." She jiggled his hand. "Thank you."

She slurped her drink and laughed. "You're easily the best boyfriend I've ever had."

He pulled her close and kissed her cheek. "I'm the only boyfriend you've ever had."

Poppy giggled. "Also the best."

The two walked a while longer, discussing the day's highlights. The moon was out, and the noise of the party had faded. Poppy figured it must be slowing down.

"We should head back so I can say goodnight to everybody."

"I think they'll be alright." Creek tugged at Poppy's hand and steered her up a large branch. "I have one more small surprise lined up for you."

"Oooooh, can you give me a hint?"

He smiled and shook his head.

"If I guess it, will you tell me?"

He didn't answer, but turned her town a path she recognized. They were heading to his pod.

Poppy scanned the darkened neighborhood, looking for any signs of trolls in hiding about to pop out for an after party. She loved after parties.

A faint glow came from the windows of his pod, and they stopped on his front step. Creek kissed her cheek, took her cup, and opened the door.

Poppy stepped into his blue-green home and gasped. It was dark save for the glow bugs flickering on the ceiling, and it smelled sweet, like lilacs and fresh rain. A very Creek smell.

A massage table was set up in the center of the small room. Poppy looked at Creek, who coughed into his shoulder. "I thought you might, uh, enjoy?" He stepped up beside her and pulled back the sheet on the table. "I don't work at the spa, but I'm not bad."

Poppy smiled and hugged him. "You are wonderful. This is wonderful." She kissed his jaw. "Today has been wonderful. Thank you."

He squeezed her tightly and kissed her temple. "I'll step out while you get ready."

Poppy, in a bold moment, held him close. "Stay." She giggled into his neck.

Creek pulled back, tipped her chin up, and kissed her. Poppy closed her eyes and smiled. He kissed across her jaw and whispered sweet nothings while unbuttoning her dress.

While Creek lavished her with attention, Poppy smothered an intrusive thought- a nagging wish that his touch and presence were different somehow.

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Branch woke late in the day groggy and sore, but less so than he'd been earlier.

He rolled over to his belly and let the cogs in his brain slowly grind into action. If not for his dry throat and growling stomach, he would try to fall back to sleep.

So he stretched, popped his joints, was sharply reminded to be careful with his left hand, and tried to remember what leftovers were in his kitchen.

Bread. He had bread that was probably stale now. That was fine. That's what mayonnaise is for.

He shimmied to the side of the bed and picked up a book off the floor, wanting to read a bit to help wake up.

Laying on his side now, he held the book up with one hand and tried to focus his eyes on the words. He almost knew them by heart, it really wasn't necessary, but still.

His eyes were too tired. And sore. His eyeballs were sore. How? Branch vowed to never touch alcohol again and dropped the book back on the floor.

He rubbed his face with his hands, massaging away some of the pain, and ran his fingers up into his hair until they snagged on some knots.

No, not knots. Braids.

His cheeks darkened at the memory. Torn between humiliation at how he'd behaved and elation at having been petted and cared for, Branch pulled a blanket over his face and let out a strangled squeal.

Her lap had been so warm. And she'd been so calm, and her voice had been so soothing. And her hands- he shivered remembering how she'd tugged at his hair, how the sensation had prickled down his scalp and spine.

She was amazing. Amazing.

And he'd been so mortifyingly affectionate. Branch cringed at the memory. He'd just laid on her. And fallen asleep on her. And hugged her.

That she didn't scream and shove him away was less because she was a kind and magnanimous troll and more because he knew she would rub his face in it later. He could already hear her teasing voice, drawing out "huuuuuuuuggged me" and "practically a snuuuuuuggle" just to get a rise out of him.

And like the sick, sad idiot he was, he would shout and growl and wildly object, but still drink up the attention. He loved and loathed it when she set her sights on him. It was a sign of just how far removed he was from society, that he got a thrill in his belly from being tormented by Poppy.

Branch pulled the blanket off his face and sighed. "Poppy," he covered his face again and mumbled. "please see me."

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Poppy was warm. That was the first thing she noticed as she started waking up. Warm and somewhere soft.

She took a deep breath through her nose and the strong scent of flowers jogged her memory- she
was with Creek. Now the arm around her belly made more sense- Creek.

She opened her eyes and looked over her shoulder at the sleeping boyfriend curled up around her. Poppy smiled. He was so sweet. She laid her head back down and hummed a quiet 'good morning' song to herself.

Creek's arm tightened around her and pulled her closer to him. She felt him kiss her shoulder blade. "G'morning, love."

"Did I wake you up?"

"Yes, and what a wonderful thing to wake up to." He squeezed her and kissed the side of her neck. "Did you sleep well?"

Poppy shimmied around to face him and beamed. "I did! I'm so ready for today!"

Creek kissed her nose and chuckled. "What's happening today? Are we... staying here as long as possible?" Poppy giggled. "Or maybe... getting breakfast and then coming back to bed?" Poppy laughed a bit harder and patted his cheek.

"Security meeting," she answered, "then the day is wide open. I'm thinking that if it's still nice and hot out, we hit the pond? Yeah?"

Creek frowned. "Is it necessary to do that every day? Is he really unable to manage getting things done if you were to meet weekly, or even monthly?" He kissed her shoulder and ran a hand up her back as he spoke.

Poppy shifted away from him, physically trying to avoid what he was saying. Of course Branch could manage to keep the village safe if they only ever discussed it once a week. She was sure that right now he had half a dozen different village safety things going on that she was entirely unaware of. "It's a new thing we're working on, and it could be really big." Creek grumbled. "It's important to me."

Poppy poked at his pouting lip and smiled. "We can spend the whole day together when I come back, but this-" she wriggled and sat up, "this is necessary."

Creek wrapped an arm around her hips and held her tight. "Okay. Just. Don't stay if he's mean." He pulled himself closer to her and laid his head on her lap. "He's so mean to you sometimes, and you never deserve it. Come back quickly so I can treat you well."

Poppy chuckled and moved out from under him, then scanned the room for her errand clothes. "I promise to come right away."

She left the bedroom and plucked her dress off the floor. "You'll hardly even notice I'm gone!"

Creek called to her as she opened the front door. "I'll notice!"

Poppy laughed, blew a kiss he wouldn't see, and was gone. Her first stop would be Smidge's to mooch some fruit. She'd promised to bring breakfast, after all.

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Branch's hand throbbed as he finished washing dishes, but the pain was worth the results. He turned away from the sink and sueveyed the small room. Wouldn't pass a white glove test, no, but at least Poppy wouldn't see discarded clothes, crusted plates, and other evidence of his personal
crisis. Lifelong depression. Eh. Little from Column A, little from Column B.

Since waking yesterday, around six in the evening, pretty much all of his time has been split between cleaning this floor of the bunker and laying in bed to daydream. He'd showered quickly, but for the most part, that had just been him standing in hot water for ten minutes.

Poppy would arrive soon, he estimated, and he was ready. He would deny having been anything other than too hungover to be sensible, she would be gratingly cheerful, he would change his bandages and enjoy her squirming, and then grimace through whatever she had lined up for him.

He was out of practice for managing her, but confident that he could compartmentalize his way through it. Soft, fluttery feelings safely tucked away, cold indifference proudly on display. He chuckled at the rhyme and ate a handful of dry granola. He had no idea what Poppy would bring to eat, but didn't want to have to choose between staying hungry or eating ice cream.

And now he waited. It was a little past seven, which seemed early for Poppy, so Branch sat at his desk, pushed the first aid kit out of the way, and started designing a new lock. He envisioned something requiring a sequence to work through rather than the single lock that was in use now. Extra safe. Nobody slipping in to spy on him while he slept.

A draft and a half later, the elevator clicked into gear. Branch packed away his work, blew pencil shavings off his desk, and looked at the clock. Little after nine. Not terrible.

He set a kettle on the stove and downed a (third) large glass of water as Poppy stepped into the room.

"Gooooooood morning, you darling drunkard!"

Sigh. How was it that such a melodious voice could be so irritating?

"Not a drunkard."

Poppy set a covered bowl on his desk. "But definitely a darling."

Branch crossed his arms and leaned against his stove. "Definitely not."

Poppy stepped into his personal space and poked his nose. "You go ahead and think that." Branch waved her hand away and stepped around her.

"Move the bowl, I need to clean my hand." He nudged it aside and started laying out gauze and rags.

Poppy gagged. "You couldn't have done that before I came over? I took my sweet time getting here hoping to miss it." As she whined, she grabbed rags and poured some of the kettle water over them in a bowl.

Branch grunted his thanks when she set the bowl down and got to work. Poppy opted to hang out by the stove and whistle her way through making two cups of tea.

Suppressing a grin, Branch held up his oozing hand. "All done."

Poppy spun around to look. "Wow, that was fas- URGH!" She turned back to the stove and shuddered. "That's disgusting! You're an ass!"

Branch smiled as he actually did cover the wound. He didn't get many chances to have fun at
A few minutes later, he tidied up his work and Poppy set a mug of tea in front of him. "Be glad I didn't spit in it after your stunt."

"It's the least you deserve for sneaking in while I slept."

Poppy leaned against the table and opened the fruit bowl. "It's not sneaking if I come in through the front door. Anyhoo, here's breakfast, courtesy of a party that was thrown for me last night." She picked up a bright red piece of strawberry and waved it as she spoke. "I guess some trolls just really love me and missed partying with me. Hmm."

Branch rolled his eyes at her smug little wiggle. Of course there'd been a party for her. There were at least a dozen parties happening every day, this wasn't some rare occurrence.

Poppy spoke through her food. "YOU mus' haff miss't me too."

Branch took a slow sip of his tea and ignored her.

Poppy swallowed and grinned. "Since you gave me such a tremendous hug yesterday."

Just as he'd expected. Branch was honestly surprised that she'd taken so long to mention it. "What hug?"

She rolled her eyes. "The hug you gave me after I picked a ton of mud and stickers out of your hair."

Branch put on a thoughtful air and sat quietly for a moment. "That doesn't sound like something I would do."

Poppy snorted. "Well, you DID. And it was lovely, and I think we're ready to take Hug Therapy- don't make that FACE- to the next level and start doing some intermittent hugging! Isn't that exciting?"

Branch stood and crossed the room to look at a shelf. "I don't hug. I was tired-"

"Hungover-"

"And fell asleep."

Poppy crossed the room and planted herself in front of him. "We have to start hugging eventually. Hugging is in the name of the program. HUG THERAPY."

"I didn't choose the name."

"Hug me or else."

"You're a terrible therapist-"

"I'm learning on the job, now hug me or I'll sit on you-"

Branch snorted. "I could stop you-"

While dismissing her challenge, Branch didn't see the flash in her eyes. Her hand shot out and locked around Branch's left wrist before he could react.
Branch looked down to his hand, then up to Poppy.

Poppy smiled. "Hug me."

Branch scowled and tried to pull his arm back. "I don't hug."

Poppy squeezed his wrist. "Don't move around so much. I'm holding your hand the best I can. I wouldn't want to slip and squeeze your gaping, nasty wound."

"You're threatening me."

"Give me one good- by MY standards- hug, and I'll let you off easy for the day."

Branch growled.

Poppy stepped closer and put her free arm around his neck. "You'll learn to love this."

Branch didn't move. He would never love being obligated to give or receive a hug. Like he'd told Poppy numerous times, forced hugs were disingenuous. They don't convey the love Poppy says she feels for every troll; they're just an odd custom that puts you at risk for being mashed up against a flower-scented jackass-

He blinked.

He turned a fraction of a hair's width and sniffed discretely.

He scrunched his nose. "You smell terrible."

By now, Poppy had released his hand and wrapped her other arm around his neck. "I do not."

"No, you really do-" he tried to back away, but she held steady.

"That's so rude! Being mean to me isn't going to stop this, you have to hug me back!"

"I'm serious! I'm trying to place it- ugh, it's awful-" he took a full step back. Poppy moved with him.

"I don't stink!" Her voice rose, which was unnecessary, since she was right next to Branch's ear. "Hug me back!"

Branch turned as far away from her as her grip would allow. "No, I don't- why do you smell so BAD- like flowers, but bad flowers-"

"Oh!" Poppy laughed. "Uh. I might know what you're talking about. I, uh- ahaha, not that it's important, I stayed at Creek's- it was super romantic, actually-"

Branch's empty stomach squelched and he pushed on her shoulder with his good hand. "Let me go-"

Poppy threw herself backwards and jerked Branch by the neck. "Hug me back first!"

"You're hurting me!"

Poppy, arms still locked around his neck, with what seemed like nothing for a plan, used her full body to shove into Branch, sending him sailing backwards and down to the floor. He fell hard, and while that didn't knock the wind out of him, Poppy landing on his belly did.
Branch gasped and tried to breathe while Poppy clung tight and loudly made demands.

Whatever she was saying, he was having a difficult time comprehending. He needed to breathe. He needed to get away from the floral stench. He needed clarification about what he'd just heard.

He twisted in her arms and scooted to the side, dragging her with. "Get OFF! GET OFF OF ME!"

Poppy, for as empathetic and kind as she liked to tell him she was, displayed neither of those qualities. She dug her nails into his neck and back and continued yelling at him; it had become a constant stream of demands and speculation about what was wrong with him.

In a desperation move, Branch grabbed a nearby jar of pickled something and threw it at the wall. The crash of breaking glass and spray of brine shocked Poppy and she scrambled away from him. "What the FUCK is your PROBLEM?!"

Branch sat up and scooted away from her. "What the fuck is YOUR problem?!!" He was going to throw up. "You- you-" he stood and jabbed an accusing finger towards her. "You fucking STINK, like that purple ASSHOLE-"

Poppy hopped to her feet and yelled in return. "Don't call my boyfriend an asshole!"

"Your boyfriend IS an asshole!" Branch was going to throw up.

Poppy shoved him. "YOU'RE the one being an asshole! What is your PROBLEM?! Why can't you hug me like you did yesterday?!"

"You didn't smell like-" Branch waved his arms.

"Don't-"

"And you didn't grab me without permission-"

"All you had to do was hug me back-"

Branch rubbed at where she'd scratched his neck. "Am I bleeding?!"

Poppy slapped his hand down before he could look. "Knock it off."

This was sensory overload. Too much was happening. Too loud, too fragrant, he hurt all over, he- his stomach- his heart-

Poppy, giving zero shits, kept at him. "Just hug me back and I'll take my love-scented self out of here."

Branch looked at the floor between them. His heart was heavy and cold. Fiery hot bile slowly rose in his throat, giving him a fair warning that he was definitely going to throw up. That seemed about right. Why not just throw up, too.

Poppy reached out to him and Branch stepped back, directly onto a shard of glass.

Throwing up dropped down the list of priorities.

He hissed and lifted his foot. Poppy gasped and reached out to him again. "Oh Hair, are you okay?"

In-fucking-credible, he thought, how she had just assaulted him and now had the nerve to ask that.
Branch looked down at his bleeding foot, then glared at Poppy.

She hopped across the room to retrieve his first aid kit, then came back. "This is okay! Here, I can help, let's get you away from the glass-"

Branch couldn't handle this- couldn't be around her right now. He had too much inside that needed out- he needed to scream, and cry, and throw up, and then scream and cry more.

Certain that there were better ways to do this, but unable to think of any, Branch stretched towards a shelf, grabbed another jar, and threw it on the ground.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" Poppy shrieked and leapt back. "Stop!"

Branch threw another jar. "Go away!"

Now standing across the room, Poppy yelled again. "We're not gonna be able to walk through here! St-"

Her command was interrupted by another smashed jar.

She kept shouting, and Branch kept destroying his life's work, and Poppy started crying.

"You're scaring me!"

"Good! Go away!" Branch yelled, no longer able to hide the tears welling in his eyes, not bothering to conceal the thickness of his voice, and heaved a clay pot into the center of the room. "Get out!"

Shaking and crying, Poppy left. After hearing the hatch open and slam shut, Branch paused his rampage to let out a loud sob, then resumed clearing the nearest shelf.

He threw jars, shredded reference books, and smashed two small boxes he'd carved on a whim. He didn't care. He'd destroy the entire bunker and make a new one.

When the fire in his chest had died down to cinders, Branch limped his way to his first aid box, then to the bathroom.

He sat on the floor and cried hot, angry tears while pulling flecks of glass out of his feet and shins, all work that was made harder with the loss of one useful hand.

Slowly, he moved to sit in the shower, set the water to the hottest temperature, and sobbed freely, coughing and gagging. A small blessing, his tears and snot and spit were quickly washed away by the scalding water.

Branch kicked the wall in front of him and howled, then kicked again.

Much later, when the water ran cold, Branch still sat. Cold, wet, slowly going numb, his thoughts cooled with his body and his brain turned back down a most familiar path- survival.

So he shut off the water, covered his new wounds, and removed his sopping clothes.

His tired mind provided a workable task list. Sleep. Clean. Survive.

All things he could, and would, do.

Chapter End Notes
So, this is probably silly, but I'm excited! I posted chapter one a year ago today, and wanted to celebrate that. Happy birthday to this story!

The plan was to upload the ENTIRE next chapter, but uh. That was just not going to work. Ahaha. I'll edit this once I finish writing the rest.

So here's the first part. It's snuggly and sweet and I really enjoyed writing it.

Also! My heart explodes, because there's more Heat Wave art in the world! Holy crap! I feel so lucky!

Thank you for reading and supporting this story. I'm awful at responding to you in a timely fashion, but it fills my heart with joy seeing your excitement and speculations and comments. Thank you so much.

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Okay, now I'm updating this on March 10th with the rest of the chapter. I know you just finished and are feeling suuuuper bummed, I get it. I swear it gets better.

Let this art inspired by the first segment of this chapter cheer you up! It makes me so happy!
"I just don't know wh- what I did so wro-o-ong!"

Poppy sobbed and hiccupped on Biggie's couch. "I only wanted to hug him and then he st-started throwing thi-i-i-ings-"

Biggie pulled her into another tight hug. "I'm so sorry, Poppy. You must have been so frightened."

She buried her face in his chest and squeezed back as hard as she could. "Do you- do you think he's okay? I'm worried!"

Biggie hesitated. "I'm sure he'll be, er, fine. He's resilient, you know."

Poppy sat with her friend and cried until she was out of tears, all the while taking comfort in hugs, tea, tissues, and cuddles with Mister Dinkles, who, while supportive, was significantly less concerned than Biggie.

She blew her nose and dabbed at her eyes. "I'm sorry for coming over and crying all over you, I just- you're the only one who knows what's really going on, and I don't want to bother you, I'm sorry-"

Biggie shushed and squeezed her knee. "You don't need to apologize to me, I'm glad you're not alone with this!" He refreshed Poppy's tea and pressed for more information. "Not even Creek knows? That's a bit of a surprise."

Poppy sniffed. "Well, it's supposed to be a secret, I can't really tell everybody, y'know? You knew before it was a thing, so you're kind of grandfathered in." She chuckled.

Biggie hugged her again, and Poppy appreciated his compassion. Really, she couldn't have chosen a better confidante for this. Creek was so serene and good at helping others find peace, but he could be a teensy bit difficult about her friendship with Branch. Most other folks had a difficult time with Branch in general.

She wrung the handkerchief in her hands. "I just don't understand what made him freak out like that, Biggie."

He sighed softly and did his best to console her. "Poppy, he's- I don't mean this to sound hurtful, but he's different. Not BAD, just- different. You won't always understand why he does what he does."

A spark of irritation lit up in Poppy's chest. "Yeah, I know he's different, but he's more like us than not!"

"But maybe he just doesn't have the same needs-"

"No, Biggie, he hugged me yesterday. One day ago!" Branch could deny it and Biggie could doubt her, but Poppy knew that she was right. "He hugged me after I braided his hair, and it was sweet and beautiful, and there's nothing in the world that could make him SO different that he doesn't need hugs."
Biggie took a slow sip from his cup and shifted in his seat. Poppy knew he was looking for the kindest way to say something. He was wonderful like that.

"I don't really know how to ask this, Poppy-" Biggie cleared his throat. "Are you still doing this for him, or has it become about you now?"

She stammered. That was. He- she wouldn't-

"All about ME?" Poppy gaped at her friend. "How am I making helping HIM all about ME? I'm doing my best over there and he's giving me NOTHING!"

Biggie put his hands up to stop her. "Okay, but that's it right there. You're upset that he's not giving YOU anything."

Poppy opened her mouth to disagree, but was stopped with an uncharacteristically stern look from Biggie.

"If he does need hugs, that's wonderful, but you still have to remember that he's different- don't interrupt- he IS different, Poppy." He covered one of her hands with his own and continued. "You do this a lot with him, where your start with a goal of doing a nice thing, and end up frustrated and hurt because he doesn't reciprocate the way you want."

Poppy quickly flicked through her memories to pull up examples to argue with, but the more she looked at the past through this new and uncomfortable lens, the more she realized that she DID regularly turn helping Branch into Poppy Wanting Something From Branch. Her cheeks darkened with shame and embarrassment.

Biggie pulled her close for another hug and squeezed. "You're a wonderful, thoughtful friend and listener, Poppy. Everybody agrees on that. You just have a blind spot with him and take things a bit too far." He pulled back and rubbed her arms. "But now that you're aware, maybe you can reel it in a bit, yeah?" He chuckled and she offered a small, forced smile. Poppy didn't think it was very funny.

She watched him fix a small plate of berries and a cookie for Mister Dinkles, and halfway listened while he told her about his recent dealings with a florist- all good, of course. It was nice of him to distract her rather than focus on her failures.

"Mister Dinkles, say what you will about me, but you need to eat!" Biggie huffed and set the plate down on the coffee table. After meeping something that Poppy would never dare repeat, the disgruntled worm left the room.

"I swear," he whispered to Poppy, "he's been so ornery lately. Can never do anything on anybody's schedule but his own." Biggie added another berry to the plate and smiled. "He'll come for it when he's ready. He always does. Patience, you know."

Poppy sulked and stayed a while longer before deciding to go home and focus on her problems. Distractions had been nice for a while, but Poppy was a woman of action.

Before Biggie sent her off with a tight hug and a plate of treats, Mister Dinkles quietly reentered the room and left again with his cookie. The friends said nothing out loud, but smiled together. Worms could be such silly creatures.

Poppy hurried through the village and was able to be generally sociable on autopilot before getting to her pod. She pulled out the scrapbook she'd made to track progress with Hug Therapy and took it to her bedroom.
After flipping through the first pages, Poppy covered her face with her hands. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment as she remembered her initial theory about Branch's aversion to hugs. "Oh Hair, that's. Well. Lesson learned there, don't try and fix somebody when I haven't slept. Eeesh."

Her mission had been to help him be happy, with loving touch being one possible tool. How had she flown so far off course? How did she go from such a noble and selfless start to what she'd done today?

She sighed and extended a tendril of hair to retrieve a picture off the wall. It was small, but the weighty frame made it feel heavy in her hands.

It was a photo of Branch. Of course. Poppy had borrowed Biggie's camera that day, hell bent on getting a picture with her saturnine sweetie. His frustration when she told him that had been hilarious. She could still hear him shouting. "Wha- I'm not- You- Don't call me that just because you like alliteration, Poppy! And get that camera out of my face or I'll throw it in the pond!"

Poppy poked at a purpley-gray cheek in the photo and giggled. Getting a rise out of him was one of her favorite pastimes.

But that's the problem, isn't it? Poppy frowned. She'd always assumed, even with the snapping and grumbling, that Branch was having just as much fun with their constant repartee as she did. If what Biggie said was true, then maybe Branch felt more like prey than a sparring partner.

The contents of her stomach lurched when she remembered the kisses she'd given him the other night. In this new light, one where she's not as altruistic as she once believed, where their relationship is less give and take, but rather just her being a domineering ass...

Poppy covered her face with her hands and hunched over. She'd been terrible. Branch flinched at even having to hold hands, and when she caught him unguarded- no, defenseless- she'd been so- oh hair. Knowing the liberties she'd taken with him, he would be mortified if he ever found out.

And today, she could have just let go when he asked, but dug in and refused. And look at what happened there.

Tears welled up in her eyes, but Poppy blinked them back. She didn't have the right to sit and cry when she'd been the villain. She had the responsibility to be better.

Thinking back to her time with Biggie, Poppy set herself to revising plans for Hug Therapy. She pulled the scrapbook into her lap and began adding pages. She could, and WOULD, turn this into a learning experience. She would do right by Branch, make up for past mistakes, and move towards a better, brighter, happier, huggier future.

After a few hours spent editing pages, creating a small armada of new felt Branches and Poppies, and quietly muttering through several different versions of an apology, there was a knock on her door. Poppy hurriedly tucked away loose papers and supplies and called out an overly cheery "come in!" as she stowed the scrapbook under her bed.

Creek stepped into her pod, smiling brightly. Poppy gasped and clapped her hands over her mouth. "I completely forgot to go back to you! Oh, I'm so sorry!"

He chuckled. "No worries, although coming to yoga tomorrow might help with your wandering mind." He poked her nose and continued. "How would you like to come with me to watch Guy and Fuzzbert get Cooper unstuck from-"

"That sounds great!" Poppy could make up for forgetting him by spending the rest of the day
together. As she left the pod with Creek, her mind quickly and efficiently scheduled the hours between now and the next time she'd go to the bunker. "So, what's he stuck in today? Wait, don't tell me, I want to be surprised."

------

For the next day and a half, Poppy was the most charming and attentive girlfriend in the world, only leaving Creek's side thrice to collect supplies she would need for an apology tailored for Branch.

"Poppy, are you listening?"

"Oops- huh? Yes, I am, but what? I'm listening, what's up?"

Poppy had not been listening. She'd been considering one of many possible outcomes for the next morning while curled up on her couch with Creek. She didn't think he'd notice, he'd been talking about his heart chakra for a while. Like, A WHILE.

Creek pulled his arm out from behind her and faced her, concern written plainly across his face. "You've been distant since yesterday. What happened with Branch?"

This observant motherf-

Poppy rubbed his knuckles with her thumb and dug deep for her most reassuring voice. Who knew what her face was saying. "Creek, you are so considerate, always looking out for me-" where was she going with this? Who knew! "And I'm so lucky to have you in my life."

She stopped. Was that enough?

"Okay? Is there more to that?"

Hair.

"Aaaaaand, I am fine, my brain is just a little full of things I'm working through from the last-"

"Fight-" Creek cut in.

"Security meeting," Poppy finished firmly. "Ideally, we'll have come to an agreement on things by the end of tomorrow."

"So you DID fight."

Poppy faltered. "Well, we- it's not- it was a disagreement, but we're both mature adults, Creek. You don't give him enough credit." She picked invisible lint off her dress and avoided eye contact. "He's a surprisingly amicable troll once you know how he operates."

Internally, she could only laugh. She certainly didn't know how he operated.

She could feel how skeptical Creek was and hoped he'd let it go.

"So tomorrow you'll have this sorted out?"

"Ideally."

He stood up and took a few slow steps towards her door, stretching his legs as he went. "How about we plan on something for tomorrow then?"
Poppy smiled a bit too wide and followed to see him out. It was probably expected that she ask him to stay, but honestly, some time to collect herself would be good. "That sounds perfect! I'll come find you once this business is sorted out and we'll do something together."

"Wonderful! I'm already looking forward to it." The two shared a quick smooch and then Creek was out the door.

Poppy watched him from the window until he disappeared past a nearby pod, then ran around her house in a frenzy, eager to consolidate everything for the morning and get decent sleep.

She was going to apologize Branch's grumpy gray buns off, and he would forgive her immediately, and then they'd be best friends. She could feel it in her happy little bones.

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Morning came early. Very early.

Maybe it was just that Poppy had slept poorly, but she was pretty sure that the sun had just risen like, two hours sooner than usual. That made sense. They were heading into the season of longer nights and later mornings, but Poppy was sure of it. The day had just started much too early.

But she could work with this. As dim light seeped into her pod, the quiet of the new day was full of possibilities.

Poppy chose to not disrupt it today, opting to go through her morning routine silently. She showered in silence. She dressed and only mumbled to herself once, debating on whether or not to wear a nicer dress than usual. She opted for something casual. Comfortable.

As she packed a basket with the necessities for her visit, Poppy tried to ignore the pounding in her chest that had grown so loud it filled her ears. She was nervous. Bordering on panicky.

She could talk positively. She could plan for eleventy thousand different ways that this would turn out in the best possible way. But she could only do so much, being one half of this thing.

It could all go down the tubes so quickly, like it did so often.

She sat by her basket and leaned back on her heels. She took a few deep breaths to try and soothe herself. Her stomach felt shaky.

Poppy covered her basket, slung it up and into the crook of her elbow, and tried again. Deep breath in. Slow breath out.

This would be good.

She smiled.

This could be alright.

She stepped out of her pod into a slightly foggy, silent village. The still air felt almost magical, brimming with cool dampness and the feeling of something just beyond her ability to perceive. She relished the sensation that she might be walking a thin line between her everyday life and something otherworldly.

Poppy wished she could share this with Branch. Even he couldn't stand with her in this dewy dawn and deny feeling something big inside.
With a final tug on her doorknob, Poppy set out, moving quickly and quietly, all the while going over a checklist of what to do when she arrived at the bunker.

If everything went according to plan, she could- no, WOULD- breathe new life into this struggling friendship.

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The bunker had been as still and silent as Poppy expected, although it was a very different kind from what she'd just travelled through. Above ground, it felt alive and inviting, but down here.

Woof.

She felt like she was trespassing. Which, technically, she probably was. He'd never extended an invitation or anything for her to come back.

The air was dense and rank with heavy smells of vinegar and iron. Poppy set her basket on the floor and quickly tiptoed through the bunker, needing to first and foremost make sure that Branch was safe. The glass had been cleaned up, and Poppy could see a mop and bucket that hadn't been out before, so clearly he was well enough to have made an attempt at cleaning the stone floor.

She peered into the dark bedroom and saw a mess by the bed. Blotchy, dark gauze was littering the floor, and the first aid box was sitting on his bedside table, contents scattered around the room.

She moved towards the bed slowly and silently, just barely making out a Branch-sized lump breathing, but just- she needed to see-

Poppy lifted the corner of a blanket and let out the breath she’d been unaware she was holding. There he was. Sleeping and looking like none of the sleep he’d been getting lately was any good. The dude looked tough.

But Poppy could help.

Now sure that he was alive, and knowing she'd have time to work before having to be confronted by her unwitting host, Poppy sneaked out of the room and started in on her apology.

Step one- muffins. She pulled a bowl of mixed dry ingredients and a bottle of measured wet ingredients from her basket and prepared a breakfast that she didn't think Branch could turn down- granola muffins.

It was the most bland, boring food she could imagine, but this wasn't about Poppy, so she turned on his oven, only made a small amount of noise while locating a pan to bake in, and moved to step two while the room warmed up.

Step two- flowers. She'd made three small bouquets to leave through the bunker. Nothing too grand, nothing over the top. Three small bundles of white and yellow flowers, pleasant to sniff, but not overpowering.

Poppy checked the oven. Not quite there yet.

Step three- gift. Branch was a difficult man to give a gift to, not just because he would usually discard it immediately, heartlessly, but more because he was a very practical creature and Poppy just couldn't see any joy in receiving canning jars or vegetable seeds.

So she'd opted for something symbolic. Something whimsical enough that she was happy to give,
but practical enough that he could (hopefully) find a purpose for, and something that carried meaning for both of them.

In her stealthy moments away from Creek, poppy had made a small, cross stitched sign and put it in a small, simple frame. A wreath of mossy greens with small, pink flowers surrounded a simple message.

NO
MEANS
NO

She hoped that this, along with her carefully crafted apology, would help him see her dedication to this new leaf she was turning.

Poppy checked the oven. It seemed warm enough. Quickly and quietly, the words of the day, she mused, she mixed up his muffins. So bland. She pulled a jar labelled CINNAMON- GROUND from the shelf over his sink and added added some to the bowl and stirred. Boom, better muffins.

With those baking, Poppy started to improvise. She crept back and forth from the bedroom, stealthily refreshing a glass of water, picking up used medical supplies, and tidying up the first aid box. Who liked waking up to a mess? Nobody.

And now she just had to wait, which was nice. She had a little more time to get ready. Mentally. Emotionally. Good.

She might throw up.

She opened the oven to check on the muffins. The room smelled warm and spicy, but they still looked a little soupy.

She closed the oven and washed her bowl and bottle.

Poppy checked on Branch again. Still asleep, but when she pulled the blanket back, he rolled over huffed a bit. She squeaked and ran out of the room, back to the oven.

She was ready to talk, just.

She wasn't entirely sure she would be able to make words happen when the crushing weight of her guilt was compounded by Branch's anger. He never hesitated to tell her that he was unhappy with her.

She checked the muffins again. Close. Maybe five more minutes.

Trying to work out some of her nervous energy, Poppy danced silently in the kitchenette to a song in her head. It helped a little.

She moved in a small circle, shuffling her feet and wiggling. It was more silliness than anything else, but it felt better to do something silly than stay still.

Poppy did not notice the sounds of movement behind her.

A low, froggy voice broke the silence. "Poppy?!"

She screamed and spun around to see Branch, bed-headed and bedraggled, leaning against the arch of his bedroom door, holding-
"Why do you have a machete?!"

"Why are you in my bunker?!"

"What was your plan with that thing?!"

Branch looked at the tool in his hand and glared back up at her. "I heard noises, I didn't know it was YOU here." He tossed it back into his room and turned, already hobbling. "Get out."

Poppy fretted and almost chased him, but stopped at the door. "I can't go yet, there are muffins baking."

He didn't respond, but slammed the bathroom door.

Poppy checked the muffins. Maybe one minute left. Maybe two. She would have to work fast to sell him on even hearing this apology.

She hummed nervously until she heard Branch grumbling again and sped back to the bedroom. He was crawling back into bed, cursing quietly and shaking out pillows and blankets as he moved around.

"So, okay, just hear me out-"

"Where's my gauze?"

Poppy hotfooted it to his bedside to help. "I tidied up, it's back in the box, and look, fresh water, and I'm making a healthy breakfast for yo-"

"Don't mess with my things."

Poppy opened her mouth to argue, to justify cleaning up, to tease him for being so messy, but didn't. That wouldn't help at all.

She took a deep breath and smoothed out the hem of her dress. "I can hand it to you, it's right here."

Her hand hovered over the box, waiting for instructions.

Branch huffed and scrutinized her. His face and chest were both a dull shade of purple. "So. You're here."

Poppy nodded silently.

Branch laid down and rolled away from Poppy.

He said nothing.

She remembered the muffins and left to pull them from the oven.

Poppy arranged a few on a plate and fanned them with a towel. When these were cool enough to eat, she'd take them to Branch.

Sooner than she'd hoped, they were ready. She walked into the bedroom one more time, feeling as though this must be how knights from the storybooks of her childhood felt as they descended into dragons' dens, willing to sacrifice their very lives to befriend the lonely creatures.

Branch had shifted to face the doorway and watched her approach.
"I don't want anything you made. It will be disgustingly sweet."

Poppy blinked at the unneccessary barbs. Ouch, but okay. She saw this coming and held the plate out for him to see.

"They're granola muffins with a hint of cinnamon. No frosting or sprinkles or chocolate. No sparklers, no candy filling, no unnecessary frills."

He stayed silent while she set the plate on his bedside table. "I'll leave this here."

Poppy waited for any response and fidgeted, hoping, unrealistically, that he would give her an easy way to start apologizing.

"So," she began, "In addition to the muffins, I brought flowers."

He didn't react. She didn't expect him to.

Poppy twisted her fingers. "I did some thinking about us. Or, well, me. And you. So us. Sort of more me, but definitely also you."

He looked... confused.

"I may have been- uh-" she cleared her throat. "I have been a bad friend to you." Poppy looked at her toes. Watching him watch her was terrible.

Poppy's voice was thick. "The last time I was here- you- um," she cleared her throat again. "I should have let you go when you didn't want to hug. That- I was wrong."

She chanced a look at him. His eyes were wide and his left ear flicked. Beyond that, he was still.

"I realized that I do that to you a lot. I don't listen. And so, I get why you're angry a lot."

She looked at her hands. One finger was almost purple from how hard she was squeezing it.

"I thought you were usually like. I don't know. Playing?"

Branch sat up and turned to face her. He didn't look like he was about to say anything, and having gotten past the hardest part, Poppy began to find her footing in this awkward situation and kept going.

"I thought you were like, play angry. Pretending, because it's always been so fun for ME, the way we talk and joke, that I thought you liked it, too. Like, friend flirting? Y'know?" His ears turned purple to match his face.

Poppy started to babble. "But I realized that you probably don't feel that way and are ACTUALLY angry at me a lot, and that. Woof. Branch." She reached out to put a hand on his shoulder, but stopped and pulled it back.

"And I just. I got so excited when you hugged me the other day-"

"I didn't-"

"Well I thought you did, and I just- I didn't want to move backwards, y'know?"

She took a drink from his water- she'd get him a new cup- and moved to the next part.
"So, also, Hug Therapy- about that-" he frowned, oh Hair, "I got off course with it."

Poppy pulled a scrapbook from her hair and held it out. "I made it more about hugging than helping. But if you look, I made some important changes in my plans here that I think would be good-"

She flipped through several pages, showing off tiny sets of Poppies and Branches enjoying each others' company. Poppy and Branch on a walk in the forest. Poppy and Branch baking a cake. Poppy and Branch having a picnic. Each page with a notice that Poppy would adhere to how Branch wanted to spend their Hug Therapy time, and that the image provided was just a suggestion.

"I wouldn't force you to do anything anymore, it would ACTUALLY be something helpful instead of stressful!" Poppy turned the pages to show off the mission statement. It was pretty straightforward. "Help Branch be happy" surrounded by tiny rainbows and clouds of hearts.

"And-" she thrust the book into Branch's lap and reached up into her hair, "this. I made this. To show you that I'm serious about doing better. See? We could hang it down here, if you wanted."

Branch, looking thoroughly flummoxed, took the small frame and read it before setting it down on the scrapbook and rubbing his forehead with both hands.

Poppy frowned. She'd tried so hard! "Not good?"

He heaved a massive sigh. "No, Poppy. just a lot." He gestured at the pile in his lap and shook his head. "This is a lot to wake up to. I need a minute."

Poppy stood and waited. She didn't really know what else to do.

Branch flipped through the scrapbook, occasionally scoffing at something she wrote, but he seemed... not angry. So. Good?

"How do you find time to do these?"

She'd not expected that question. "Oh, it's easy when you've got enough practice under your belt! So, see the you on this page? Same pose as the you three pages back. I cut them out at the same time. Pretty smart, yeah?"

He nodded quietly and muttered. "Not bad, no." He scratched a shoulder and looked around the room aimlessly. "Uh, I don't know what to say, Poppy."

"Say what's in your heart!" Poppy could feel it. This was going so well! He was a hairs breadth away from forgiving her.

"No, no thanks." He set her cross stitched work aside and closed the scrapbook before setting it down on the bed. He rolled his shoulders forward and looked down at her knees. "I'm just... so mad."

Oh.

"I'm glad you finally see how obnoxious you can get-""

Oh no.

"But I can't believe that even you would think that this collection of- I dunno-" he shrugged vaguely, "weird stuff just. Fixes things."
Poppy deflated. Oh. She'd not thought that he would be so direct while stabbing holes in her heart.

Branch's face hardened as he laid down and scooted away from Poppy. "We both know that in two weeks- no, probably two days- you'll be back to jumping on me and telling me that it's for my own good."

Poppy could have cried. This was so far from what she'd anticipated. What was she even supposed to say?

Branch rolled away from her, ending the conversation, and Poppy knew she was supposed to leave, but-

But her legs stopped working.

She'd just told him that she would do better, and he didn't believe her.

How was she supposed to fix this if he didn't want it, too? Her chest felt hollow. This was- this felt horrible.

Poppy sniffed and garbled out an apology. "I'm so sorry, Branch." She wiped a few tears away. "I'm so sorry. I've been horrible to you, and you were so patient with me, and I'm so-o-orry..."

Even though she was doing her best not to cry, Poppy was full on crying now.

That made sense. She failed a lot.

She'd failed to be a good friend. She'd failed to help Branch find happiness. She'd failed to save their- whatever anybody could call it- and now she was failing to keep it together and just leave him alone.

She was a failure. And a jerk. And OBNOXIOUS. He'd said that- obnoxious. And he didn't want to deal with her anymore.

Poppy sobbed and tried to wipe away more tears, but they just kept coming. She couldn't stop. Couldn't leave. Couldn't spare Branch the discomfort watching her weep and drip and cry and snort up her snot and tears.

She looked up and saw Branch watching her, horrified.

"I'm going, I'm just-" she didn't know what she said after that. If life had subtitles, hers would say [inaudible]. "-and then I'm gone, I swear-"

Poppy took a wobbly step backwards and wiped her nose on her arm. Gross, but oh well.

"Poppy-" Branch started.

"No, I know, I'm sorry, I'm going-" she took a few more steps away from the bed and waved at him.

"Stop-"

She forced a laugh. "I know, I'm trying, it's okay, it just won't stop, it's fine-"

Through tears, Poppy saw a blurry Branch approach, moving quickly and unsteadily. "Hey, calm down-"
Trying to back out faster now, Poppy moved aimlessly until her shoulder bumped into a wall- that's what she gets for not watching where she's going- and Branch caught up to her.

"Jheri fucking curl Poppy, stop moving! Stop!"

Instead of trying harder to leave, Poppy just leaned against the wall, covered her face, and cried. "I'm so sorry, Branch. I'm so sorry, go back to bed and-" she gagged a little on some snot, which was great, because she wasn't humiliated enough, "I'll be out in just a minute, it's fine. I'm really sorry."

She could feel Branch moving frantically by her, but didn't register what exactly he was doing. Her focus was elsewhere while she struggled to pull herself together.

Then there was a hand on her shoulder. Poppy froze. Maybe she was losing it, but Poppy swore she felt the beginning of a hug happening.

Time suspended itself while Branch pulled her close. He seemed to moved slowly, but Poppy was certain that everything was happening very quickly. The stillness and silence of it all, compared to the chaos she felt a moment ago, was surreal.

Poppy tried to ground herself.

She looked around the room. Bed. Mushroom lamp. Scrapbook.

She listened closely and could hear her heartbeat pounding, and her heavy, wet breathing.

She felt her shaky knees and Branch's warm cheek smushed into her own.

This. She. Felt.

A lot better.

Branch squeezed her and questioned tentatively. "Are you... okay?"

Poppy nodded silently.

"Will you cry again if I let go?"

She had no way of knowing, so shrugged.

They stood like that for a while, long enough that Poppy was sure now that the hug had helped.

"So-" she cleared her throat.

Branch let go and stepped back. "I didn't know what else to do- I didn't mean to-"

Poppy waved her hands apologetically. "No no no, I'm sorry, I know you don't like hugs, you didn't have to do-"

"Stop-"

"I wasn't trying to make this all about me, I swear-"

"I know, just slow-"

"I'm leaving now, I swear-"
"No, you can stay-"

"I'll get out of your way-"

Branch rubbed his temples. "POPPY, STOP TALKING."

Poppy stopped talking.

Branch gave her a sharp look. "Don't talk until I tell you to talk, please. Just. Just stop for a minute."

He limped back to his bed and sat down before digging through his first aid box. "I have a headache, so please, just, WHEN you talk, do it quietly."

Poppy nodded and watched him pull a small, folded paper pill from his box, pop it into his mouth, and chase it with some water.

Poppy could watch him just exist like this forever. He was fascinating. She hoped he'd forget about her so she could stay a bit longer.

"Come here-"

Damn.

Branch pushed her scrapbook away and gestured to the spot beside him. "Sit if you want."

Poppy sat. She hadn't forgotten how comfortable his nest-like bed was, and was quietly elated to get to be in it again. A small silver lining for all the doom and gloom of the day. She quickly made herself comfortable, pulling a small pile of brown, downy feathers close until she was surrounded.

"You good?"

She nodded.

Branch nodded back.

Poppy waited.

Branch ran a hand through his hair as far as he could get it before hitting a tangled spot and giving up. He folded his hands in his lap and mumbled. "I don't know what to say. I just wanted to help."

Poppy wasn't sure if she was allowed to say anything yet, so she waited.

"Um, you can-just, don't cry- you can talk."

Poppy smiled awkwardly. This was all so incredibly awkward. "Thanks. It helped a lot."

Branch smiled awkwardly and nodded. "Good, good."

They fell into another uncomfortable silence, both fidgeting and hoping the other had anything to say.

"So. Um." Branch was a deep shade of purple as he floundered. "The other day-"

Poppy nodded. "I'm sorry about that-"

"No, yeah, I can see that. I was- ah-" he tried brushing through his hair again, and his hand got
stuck again, and he gave up again.

Poppy took a chance. "Would you like me to fix that again? I don't mind doing it."

His ears twitched. "You don't have to, I'm sure it's not fun. I don't like doing it. It's- you can if you WANT."

"Yes!" Poppy winced in unison with Branch at her outburst. "My bad. Yes, yes, I would love to help. Here, just- lay down somewhere so I can get at it-"

The two moved awkwardly around each other until Branch was spread out on his belly. He rested his chin on his crossed forearms and waited for Poppy to get situated.

Poppy dove in, tugging at knots and teasing out snags. It was nice to have something to focus on besides her crippling guilt.

Branch hmm'd occasionally, and Poppy could aalmost see his back muscles unclench as she worked. This was nice.

Then Branch cleared his throat. "So, the other day."

Poppy mm-hmm'd and continued working.

"I- it was a wild day."

She agreed.

"And you- you're not usually like that. Not that bad."

Her cheeks burned. The last thing she wanted was for the focus to be shifted back to what a jerk she'd been, but he had every right to tell her off. She listened.

"And it was just a- uh, a tough morning. But- that's not an excuse- I-" he cleared his throat again. "I'm sorry. For- for- the jars. And the yelling."

Poppy froze. This was- he wasn't really-

"I know you're sorry too- and you SHOULD be- but uh. I am, too."

He turned his head slightly and spoke into the crook of his elbow. "I'm surprised you came back at all."

Poppy suppressed the overwhelming urge to hug Branch and sing at him about her feelings. She really didn't want to get thrown out right now.

The two stayed quiet after that, with Poppy only occasionally giving Branch directions to turn or move so she could work on his hair. It was nice, the way they existed so peacefully.

Eventually, Poppy has Branch roll to lie on his back so she could focus on the area around his face. He obliged, crossed his arms over his chest, and focused his gaze on a mushroom on the ceiling.

Poppy's hair dangled down over his face, and she just. It had been so nice. And Branch was a little tense since having to move. And if he wanted her to stop, she would...

She extended a tendril of hair just enough to tickle his nose, then pulled it back up.
Branch sniffed, but remained otherwise unaffected.

Poppy smiled and did it again.

He closed his eyes and crinkled his nose before she retracted her hair.

Poppy left him alone for a few moments while she started an elaborate braid from his temple.

And then she slowly reached her hair down again.

Before it touched his face, though, his good hand shot up and snatched it.

"Oh! I'll stop now, I swear!"

Branch held the hair tight, but rolled his eyes up to meet hers. "How do you braid?"

Poppy faltered. She'd expected anger, or mild irritation at least, but this was different.

"Uh. It's. Okay, let go and I'll show you."

Branch obeyed, and Poppy manipulated her hair to show him. Nothing wild. Slow and simple. Then she untwisted her hair and gave him a little more to work with. "You can try if you want."

Branch braided slowly and Poppy turned her attention back to her own work. She looked back down occasionally to check on his progress. He was doing well. That made sense, he was a quick learner. It was a little clumsy, but between one bandaged hand and being a novice, it was alright.

"Not bad work, mister."

He harrumphed.

"It feels good."

His cheeks darkened and he mumbled in agreement.

Poppy prodded for a bit more. Things were so nice. She'd stop if he wanted. "Thanks for letting me stay. I'm enjoying this."

Branch cleared his throat and crossed his arms again. "It's- it's not bad. I don't mind this."

"Oh, THANK you, Branch-" Poppy snorted and laughed. Honestly, he could be ridiculous. "My heart is aflutter knowing you don't mind this, really-"

Branch turned dark purple and glared. "What am I supposed to say? Don't laugh at me!"

Poppy covered her mouth to stifle another peal of laughter. "You're- I'm sorry, it was just funny how you said it. Like, we have this sweet moment where we're getting along, and you're like-"

Poppy lowered her voice, "I suppose this is acceptable, I don't think you're entirely terrible, Poppy,' and it's FUNNY."

Branch did not look amused. "Well, how would YOU say it?"

"I would sayyyyy..." Poppy considered it, then resumed her Branch voice. "Poppy, this is lovely. I'm glad you're my friend. Thank you for coming over today, I missed you terribly and you're my favorite troll in the whole world.""
She chuckled and watched his ears flick rapidly. Poppy assumed he was building up a scathing retort.

"You're-"

Poppy smiled. "I'm?"

Branch sat up and turned away from her. "You're ridiculous." He picked up a vest that was wadded on the edge of the bed and put it on. He wouldn't turn to look at her. "This- it-"

He hunched forward and crossed his arms. "Today-"

Silence.

Poppy coaxed. "Today..."

He looked at her over his shoulder, calculating what to say.

Poppy smiled.

Branch murmured. "I'm glad you came over. Go away."

Poppy scoffed and got off the bed. Only Branch could say something nice in the same breath as something rude.

"I'll go, don't worry about seeing me out." She smiled, picked up her scrapbook, and left Branch alone in the bedroom.

As she collected her dishes from by his sink and loaded her basket, she called back to him. "I'll be back tomorrow for some more Hug Therapy! Think of something you want to do!"

Poppy stepped onto his elevator, threw the switch, and left, overjoyed with how the morning had gone.

Chapter End Notes

I'm a disaster, but I'm alive.
"This is stupid."

Poppy snorted.

"Make one more sound and I'm going home."

Poppy bit her knuckle and tried to comply, but it was obvious that she'd crack soon.

Branch growled. "This is a waste of time, and payback shouldn't be a motivator for your visits!"

Branch stepped out of the hula hoop and threw it. Out of the clearing beyond a few thick shrubs.

"Why would you do that?! That's not yours, you can't throw it!" Poppy ran after it, cursing him as she went.

Branch sat on a rock and waited for her to come back. She'd chew him out if he actually left, but he certainly wasn't going to help her find the damn thing.

Soon enough, Poppy returned, hula hoop in hand, face bright red from exertion and probably rage. She tossed the hoop on the ground at his feet and yelled.

"You said yesterday that it would be MY turn to pick what we did today, and I picked hula hooping. Try again!"

Branch considered his options. He could continue to humiliate himself and try again. He could yell back at Poppy and let things escalate into a screaming match. Or, and this was far and away the best choice, he could do neither of those things.

Branch blinked up at Poppy and frowned. "Show me again, okay? I feel like if I watch enough, I'll figure it out."

She glared for a moment, then sighed and sat down next to him, bumping him hard with her shoulder and sniffing dismissively. "You're so full of it. But whatever. Clearly this isn't your thing, so fine. Be a quitter. See if I care."

The two sat in silence, and Branch could almost feel in the air that Poppy was close to snipping at him again. He waited. Getting her this angry was a rare and entertaining treat.

"I didn't want to do this today for payback, you know."

Branch shrugged.

"But-" her voice took a shrill tone, "could you really BLAME me if I wanted to get back at you for that hike?!!"

"No, don't start-" Branch rubbed his eyes, but it was more to conceal his smile than anything else. She would never forgive him.

"Hey Poppy," she started in her insultingly inaccurate Branch Voice, "I just gotta get out of this
bunker. Tomorrow, let's do a quick hike and grab something I need. It's an easy trip, downhill the whole way."

"I said downhill the whole way OUT-"

"You never mentioned having to go UPHILL the whole way back!"

"Shouldn't that have been obvious?"

Poppy got up to her feet and loomed over him. "Do you know how many times I was struggling over a steep area on the trek out and thought, 'gee, I sure hope we're not coming back this way-nah, I shouldn't worry, Branch is so smart, he'll surely have some tunnel or easier way to get back. He's not crazy enough to hike UPHILL for two solid hours-"

"I don't know how else we would come back, Pop-"

"So we get there, after three hours, load up our backpacks, and I'm sweaty, and filthy, and tired, and you're standing there, smiling, telling me we get to go back the way we came-"

"There's no other way! You can't hold that against me-"

"I fell THREE TIMES!"

Branch didn't respond. She HAD fallen three times.

"And rather than help me get back up, rather than extend a hand for me to hold, you said 'hey, don't make so much noise, you never know what predators are listening.'"

Branch looked away sheepishly. He'd considered offering her a hand, but had been too nervous about holding it for the whole walk home.

Poppy glowered at him. "Even YOU are not so socially unaware to not consider that, and I'm still mad at you for it. Explain yourself or hula hoop!"

Branch stood up, which was difficult with Poppy standing directly in front of him, and deflected.

"I'm SOOOO sorry that you had a difficult time walking on your own feet, princess-"

"It's not-"

Branch shrugged and continued teasing. "But I promise- the next time that WALKING, in the forest, where we live, proves to be too much for your dainty little ankles to handle, I'll pick you up and carry you wherever you need to go."

"You are so-"

Poppy was interrupted by the chime of her hug time bracelet, which signaled the end of the day's hug therapy session.

"Ooooh, bummer, session is over. I'll see you tomorrow, Poppy." Branch turned to walk away from the peeved princess, thrilled at having ended the morning with the upper hand.

"Oh, wait, hey, tomorrow I help my dad, remember?"

Branch stopped and looked back. "Oh, right-"
Poppy picked up the hula hoops she'd scattered and smiled. "But, I'll be back the next day. Any ideas on what we should do?"

Branch never knew. He'd probably just do more winter prep. Autumn was in full swing now, and he needed to be ready in case winter- or the Apocalypse- came early. He ran a hand through his hair while considering his options.

Poppy interrupted his thoughts. "Hey, no worries, you can tell me when I get here- also, I'm leaving a hoop for you-"

"Don't."

"You can practice with it!" Poppy beamed at him as she started jogging towards the village. "You'll get so much better if you give it real effort! Bye!"

Branch waved and called back cheerily. "I'm going to put it in my burn pile!"

Poppy's indignant squawk as she disappeared around a thick tree trunk was delightful. Branch smiled as he picked up the ugly orange hoop she'd left behind and considered which store room would house the damn thing.

Several minutes later, after adding something to a rarely visited corner in a rarely visited room, Branch was back above ground, on his way to collect persimmons to peel, string up, and dry. Considering that they were roughly half his size, it was difficult work, but the effort would be rewarded when he could show Poppy the end result.

Branch tsk'd dismissively. Poppy.

Two weeks had passed since he'd stepped on a chunk of glass. In that time, Poppy had been over to see him almost every day, trying to be of assistance.

Trying.

She'd spent two days helping him reorganize a cellar. It would have taken him one day, but Poppy kept getting sidetracked.

The visit after that, she'd made a pie while he wrote a work timeline out, because planning is better than nothing. The pie had been terrible. Inedible. It was a crust, normal enough, filled with whipped cream, sprinkles, and nothing else. Watching her eat her share had nauseated him.

They'd spent two weeks like that, alternating who got to choose the activity for the morning. Branch had been practical- planning, cleaning, even building a small prototype for a new main lock. Poppy 'accidentally' knocked it off his desk after she realized that it would keep her out of his home again.

Poppy's days to pick what they did had been a crapshoot. One day, she brought over a stack of scrapbooks documenting her life lately (Branch often wondered at how she found time to do so much crafting) and made him look through them with her. He'd tolerated it well enough, but when they hit a chapter titled One Month~ and Branch had to flip through page after page of Creek's face mashed against Poppy's, things went downhill.

Branch clipped a fruit off the tree with more force than necessary, his mood souring at the memory.

Ultimately, throwing the book had been a mistake. He could admit that much.
Poppy picking it up and hitting him with it had been HER mistake.

And even after getting swatted on his arm and back, that hadn't hurt as much as Poppy storming out, shouting at him that she wouldn't be back the next day. "I have better things to do than sit in the dark with you! I'm gonna do yoga with Creek, and then we're gonna have the most fun date EVER, and I'm gonna take pictures of EVERYTHING!"

He spent the rest of that day, and much of the next one, slamming around bins of dried beans and grains in a storage room. It needed to be rearranged anyway.

Poppy came bearing gifts the next time. Bread, canning jars, and a card.

Branch had pulled a good sized piece of chocolate from a small, secret pantry and set it out for her. They both silently appraised the offerings, accepted them, and Poppy left.

Several days later, she'd come after a difficult, nightmare riddled night. She gasped at the sight of him, made tea that he never got to drink, and put him back to bed.

Branch sat and looked at the nine persimmons he'd cut down. Being that he wasn't that fond of sweets, he usually only collected four or five. He was sure that with Poppy's frequent visits, having more on hand wouldn't be a bad idea. He sat and began cutting the skin off the first. It wasn't terrible work, just tedious.

The scar on his left hand from the apple peeling accident was a vivid reminder to stay focused. He moved it just a little further away from his blade and kept working, spending the rest of the day peeling and hanging fruit.

That evening, as he crawled into bed sore and tired, Branch made a mental list of what else needed to be stocked up on now that Poppy was a regular guest.

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Poppy grunted and teetered through a cramped pod, trying to not crumble under the weight of boxes she'd been so confident she could carry in one trip.

"Hey, somebody clear that spot-"

Suki shoved a pile of clothes closer to the wall. "Clear!"

Poppy dropped the stack and sighed as they fell over and their contents spilled out across the floor. Helping her dad get organized had seemed like a much more manageable job before he'd shown her his closets. How he'd ever been able to collect this much miscellaneous stuff without her knowledge was a mystery. One she hoped to never have to solve again.

"Okay, dad-" Poppy waved vaguely at the room around them. "What- what do we do here? What stays?"

Peppy looked around, taking in the chaos of an entire home crammed into one room, and sighed. "The important stuff?"

"And, which stuff is the important stuff?"

"I won't know until I see it, sweetie." He smiled unapologetically.

Poppy considered sobbing. It had taken over an hour just to get this far. "Okay, no worries! Plan-
we're going to sort this into different rooms and go from there. Smidge-" Poppy pointed to Peppy's bedroom. "All the clothes go on the bed. Suki, get all the holiday decorations into my old room. We'll start there, and I'll get all the books and loose papers rounded up in whatever corner I can get to first here."

Peppy stepped out, promising to return with something tasty for an early lunch.

The three women started working, speaking minimally as they (well, two of them) huffed and puffed and sorted out a man's entire life.

"Who needs THIS many decorations for Sprained Ankle Rememberance Day?" Suki grumbled as she carried a third armful of banners and table centerpieces.

"Dad told me something about wanting to more for the holiday after MY sprained ankle."

"Oh, sorr-"

"Don't be, he's gone overboard with it. I'm dreading it when spring rolls around."

Poppy finished collecting papers and helped Suki with her work. Smidge joined in soon after.

"Hey, I'm putting Smacksgiving stuff over here."

"I've got a banner here for Sisters From Other Mistres Day, should I put it with the Brothers From Other Mothers Day stuff, or start a box specifically for banners?"

"Put it with the brothers stuff, there are too many banners to make a box for all of them a realistic thing."

"Good point. Okay, we'll do- what, family holidays? That theme for a shelf?"

"Shouldn't it be more friends based? It's not TECHNICALLY a family holiday-"

"Hey, look at this!" Smidge waved a photo in the air. "It's from last Smacksgiving when the twins got into it."

Poppy gasped. "Oh my Hair, somebody took a picture of that? It was a nightmare!"

Smidge looked at it again and laughed. "Yeah, your dad took a picture of that. I love it. I'm keeping it."

Poppy snatched the photo and hid it in her hair. "Nobody is keeping it, it's going in the trash. You know they'd be horrified to know this exists."

Smidge muttered to herself, and the three fell into a good rhythm.

"So, Poppy-" Suki handed her a punch bowl. "Guy was telling me that Branch was really crappy to you the other day. You feeling better?"

Poppy was taken aback. "Why was Guy telling you anything? I didn't- I'm fine, he wasn't bad-"

Smidge interrupted. "Guy knows because Creek told him."

Poppy huffed. "It wasn't Creek's business to tell anybody!"

"Sooooo, are you doing okay?"
"I'm FINE, we had a disagreement." Poppy checked the trigger on a t-shirt cannon to see if it still worked. It did not. "That happens sometimes when you spend a lot of time with somebody."

They worked in silence for a few minutes before Poppy grumbled.

"Just, how much does Creek tell you? Like, I can tell you about my life, too, but I figure that not every detail needs to be discussed in depth with everybody I know."

Smidge and Suki looked at each other.

"Well-"

"The thing is-"

"Mostly he talks to Guy-"

"Which might as well be talking to everybody-"

"Because we hear a lot from HIM-"

"So what all have you heard?" Poppy sat on a bean bag chair decorated to look like a bride and groused.

Smidge nervously unfolded and refolded a stack of festive napkins. "Nothing Creek wouldn't say to you, Poppy."

Poppy looked at Suki, who pretended to be really focused on scratching her arm. Poppy turned her gaze back to Smidge.

"So. What all have you heard?"

Smidge tried rolling the napkins. "Just. Well. Just that he's unhappy about the daily meetings."

Poppy wasn't surprised. Creek had been slowly getting less and less diplomatic when talking with her about her mornings in the bunker. Every time he asked for any sort of update, whether it was about what changes he should look for in the village, or when they would be wrapping this up, Poppy was swamped with frustration, followed immediately by guilt.

"I know that. He tells me that."

The room was quiet.

"Does he say anything else?"

Smidge looked at Suki.

Poppy looked at Suki.

Suki looked at Smidge.

Smidge nodded her head.

Suki shook her head.

Smidge nodded harder.

"OH COME ON, I AM RIGHT HERE."
Smidge and Suki frowned, both apparently unwilling to start.

"So, Suki heard from Guy last week..."

"It's worth pointing out that Guy is good at dramatics-"

"A good point-"

"So this might be mostly him wanting to have something interesting to say, you know? Great at
telling stories, not built for reporting the news."

Poppy smiled, but it was strained. "Yes, we're all imperfect in our own special ways. What did he
tell you?"

Suki stacked party hats. "Just- it sounds like he's worried about Branch hurting you, y'know? He's
kind of a mean dude, I could see it."

Smidge waved a hand. "But it's GUY saying it, so I'm sure Creek was talking about feelings-"

"Exactly. It doesn't sound like him to say 'if he puts a hand on her, I'll remove one of his chakras
totally,' right? That's a Guy thing. Well. Not the chakras, that's something Creek says. But I'm
sure Guy said that, y'know?"

Poppy frowned. It was an alarming thing to hear if it were true, and an aggravating thing to have
being spread around if not.

Regardless, she'd HAVE to make sure Creek knew that Branch wasn't dangerous, but that he was
actually pretty good-natured when she went over. Some days, one could even say he bordered on
friendly.

And Creek shouldn't have to worry for her safety every single day! Hair, she couldn't imagine how
stressful that must be for him.

Poppy adjusted her skirt over her knees and affected a light, unconcerned voice. "Well, thank you
for letting me know. I am certain that I'm not in danger, but the concern, while misplaced, is sweet.
He's very sweet."

Slowly, awkwardly, the conversation steered towards easier topics, and when Peppy returned with
a s'more casserole that Hyacinth had baked for the girls, the heavy atmosphere dissipated entirely,
making for a much happier afternoon and evening.

Poppy walked home as the sun set, sweaty and grubby, but happy. It has been a productive day.
She'd gotten to go through old scrapbooks with her dad, and she'd made his life significantly easier
and more comfortable.

Branch would be so proud of her when she told him about reorganizing an entire pod in a day.

-----

Branch woke early, like usual, and after getting through the bathroom and into a fresh (mostly
fresh) set of clothes, hurried to check the weather.

He opened the hatch and took in the world around him. The sun was up, but veiled by thin, gray
clouds. His ear flicked. Slight breeze, but warm out for the time of hear.

Branch took a deep breath. Humid. Terrible for his drying persimmons, but altogether perfect
conditions for getting something important.

He ducked back down underground to prepare his rucksack, adding extra food and a change of clothes. It was a tiring, arduous hike, one he wanted to start and finish as quickly as possible.

Branch began scribbling out a note to leave on his desk, but was startled when his elevator clicked into gear. Poppy must have come early and called it up.

He crumpled the paper and tossed it, only barely missing the wastepaper basket. He'd just tell Poppy the situation, she'd say or do something annoying, and they'd part ways.

"Gooooood morning! How was your yesterday? Why are you- woah, hey, don't push!"

Branch stepped onto the platform and threw the lever, not giving Poppy a chance to get out into the bunker and delay him.

"I have a thing to do. You should go back to the village and do... uh, Poppy things."

"I could help! Is it-" she noticed the extra full rucksack, "Branch- how much of the trip is uphill?"

"You can't help, and I need to leave now. I'm not taking time to put together a second bag for you."

They stepped above ground and Poppy poked his arm. "Then don't, I'm sure it'll be fine. I have so many fun things to tell you from yesterday-"

Branch walked away. Poppy hopped along beside him and told him six stories about her friends, each sold as being even more hilarious and interesting than the last.

"The clouds are like, kinda cool looking today, dontcha think?"

"When are you heading back home? You're not built for what I'm doing today."

"When we come back later." Poppy tried to pinch his cheek, but Branch slapped away her hand before she got him. "I can't come out tomorrow, I need to head up a parade, so if we don't hang out today, that's three days in a row that we miss out on helping you find your happiness. We can't afford to waste time!"

Branch grimaced. 'Helping him find his happiness' had been something Poppy talked about every time she came around now. A while back, she'd shown him a list of suggested activities to help.

"So maybe when I'm back in TWO days, we can try-"

Branch tuned her out. She wasn't going to say anything of value while on this subject, and his mental energy was better spent focusing on the task at hand.

There were two paths he could take today. One was direct, but hard work due to challenges posed by the terrain and fauna. He would be able to get home in the middle of the afternoon and spend the rest of the day recuperating.

The other looped around a wide swath of forest and was an easy walk, but took almost twice as long.

"And just imagine how much fun you'll have at the Trampoline Festival when you're happy!"

He growled. Short path. He didn't have the wherewithal to listen to a full day's worth of Poppy telling him about his shortcomings.
Through a patch of forest. Down a rocky ridge. Through some difficult roots, then crossing a shallow portion of a drying up river.

Thunder rumbled ominously overhead, but as far as Branch could see, the sky was the same plain, dull shade of gray all around. Boring. Boring and safe.

"Do you think it'll rain? We haven't had any in ages."

"Anything is possible, but I hope it holds off. I've done this in drizzle and it's doable, but there's a new, loud, ridiculous variable with me today, so who knows-"

"Are you talking about me?"

"So, see that tree? We'll need to use our hair to anchor ourselves there and slowly move down the ridge. There's another spot about halfway down that we can-"

"Am I the variable? That's rude-"

"The variable needs to listen or she's going to fall down onto a bunch of rocks and get spla-"

"I know how to climb DOWN, Branch, I'm not stupid."

Branch looped his hair around the sturdy sapling and snapped back. "I didn't say you're stupid, but you're definitely not CAREFUL."

They descended slowly, snipping at each other whenever their eyes met.

After ten long minutes, they reached the bottom, and Branch pulled a canteen from his bag.

"Drink?"

Poppy scowled, but accepted it. "Thank you."

As they rested for a few moments and regained their breath, droplets of rain hit them here and there. Branch commented on needing to move soon before the riverbed was too soft to be safe.

Branch explained how the area they were passing through was likely a swamp long before the trolls arrived, pointing out the thick, vine-like roots that they were passing through. Poppy listened with little interest.

As the two moved through a tricky area, the rain picked up. The shelter the massive trees overhead had been providing was soon negated by the puddles and mud springing up beneath them.

"Move faster, Poppy, we need to move faster."

"I'm-" Poppy stumbled over her feet, "TRYING. You didn't tell me-"

"I TOLD you it was hard!" Branch reached out and grabbed Poppy's elbow to support her. "I told you you couldn't do it!"

Poppy leaned into him and climbed over a thick root. "You think I can't do ANYTHING!"

Branch looked at her pointedly. "Hurry up. We're almost through these roots, but still have to get across the river. It's going to be worse than this soon."

Poppy slipped and landed on her knees. "Frosting!"
Branch moved ahead, but kept turning back to check on Poppy.

"Isn't there-" Poppy whined, "don't you have like, an emergency hideout around here? You have things like that all over-"

"Yeah, I do."

"Okay, so let's-"

"It's on the other side of the river. Move."

Poppy moaned. Branch couldn't blame her, he was miserable, too. The ground was slick, the sky was dark enough that the already tricky work of navigating around the roots was even harder, and rain kept obstructing what little vision he had.

He turned in time to see Poppy's head smack against a heavy, dead vine. This had been a mistake. He should have been more firm about making her stay behind. If she got hurt, he was in no position to be of any real help. And while it was less likely, if HE got hurt, she had no chance of getting to safety. He was an idiot.

An idiot who didn't have the luxury of time to dissect all of his flaws right now. Branch backtracked and let Poppy hang on to him as much as she could.

Finally, after both of them had suffered through enough stumbling and scrapes, they reached the edge of the trees.

Branch pointed and shouted over the noise of the wind and rain. "Those trees! We get over there and we're good!"

Poppy look at the narrow channel of river between them and the other clump of trees, visibly scared. Save for what was raining down all around them, there was no water, but it was still a lot of dirt that was rapidly turning into thick mud. It wasn't much to cross, only as wide as the village four, maybe five times over, but it was enough that Branch worried.

Like the ridge from earlier, but now with the added fun of everything being slippery, Branch and Poppy looped their hair around a tree and slid down the bank, both tense, wanting to hurry, but afraid to move faster.

Finally down on flat ground, Poppy looped her arm through Branch's and chucked as they moved. "Hey- ha, won't this be a great story to tell our friends someday?"

Branch scowled and pulled a leg up out of the sloppy, sucking mud. "No."

They moved slowly, occasionally slipping. The ground was getting less and less walkable the further they went, and any delay in moving would send them sliding down, getting sucked in and stuck. Twice so far, they'd found a large, flat rock and scrambled onto it to rest their legs for a few moments.

Branch looked at where they were and estimsted that they'd crossed two thirds of the river. They were so close.

"Let's go." He climbed down off the rock and extended his hands out to help steady Poppy. Hair help her, she looked close to giving up. "Hey, hurry up. We're almost there."

Poppy looked up at the trees they were moving towards, almost tearful. "Branch, this sucks."
"I know. Now come down, I don't want to get stuck. We can rest when we're out of the mud."

Poppy slid her legs over the edge of the rock and plopped down, nearly dead weight, letting Branch support her when she hit the ground. "The next time we hang out, I'm choosing what we do."

Branch pulled her along and tried to ignore her chatter. She was wasting energy trying to make conversation.

"We'll make friendship bracelets for the snack pack, and give them out at a slumber party-"

"I'm not going to a slumber party."

Poppy shrugged as well as one can when practically being drug by somebody else. "When you're happy, I bet you'll want to."

Branch growled. "What if that never happens?"

"It will, that's what this is all about."

Branch turned and looked at the soaking wet idiot on his arm. It hurt him on an average day to hear her talk about some aspirational ideal Branch that he would never be, but today, between the stress, exhaustion, and frustration of the morning, it was a stab in his heart.

Branch jerked his arm out from Poppy's and stepped away from her. "Why am I not good enough?"

Poppy gawped at him. "Wha- hey, no-"

Branch kept walking, not wanting to get sucked down into the mud, but shouted over his shoulder. "You come and see me every day, and you tell me every day how great-" he slipped on a hidden rock, but caught himself before falling. "How GREAT things will be when I'm happy."

Poppy stood, arms still extended, expecting him to grab her and keep pulling her along, and said nothing.

"What if I'm never happy?" Branch turned and yelled louder as the rain picked up, coming down in sheets. "What if you're wasting your time on me?"

Poppy looked blindsided. "I'm not wasting my time! I'm helping you! That's not-"

"When are you going to realize that there's no magic switch that will change me?" Branch was fully screaming now, letting out frustration that had built up in him for... he didn't know how long. "You keep thinking that you'll dig deep enough to find somebody you actually like under all of this, but I'm ME, Poppy! Why am I not good enough for you the way I am?!" For just a moment, Branch was thankful for the rain, for how well it hid the hot tears that ran down his cheeks along with the cold water.

She didn't respond. And honestly, what could she even say at this point?

Branch turned away from her and started slogging through the mud again. "Get moving or you'll get stuck, and I'm not coming back to help you if you do!"

Branch moved on and blinked away angry tears. He could reorganize his life around her, bite his tongue a dozen times a day to try and not hurt her, risk his stupid life just so she can come along with him on an errand, and it didn't matter. He loved Poppy, had for years, but she only ever saw him as a work in progress. A charity case. Not good enough. And he would NEVER be good
enough, because there wasn't some perfect, happy, cheerful version of him waiting to come out. He was Branch, and Branch was not enough.

He heard Poppy calling out and ignored it. They could fight when they were safe.

He was close to the bank, maybe five minutes away. Branch, curious to see Poppy's progress without his help, turned to look, acknowledging her for the first time since he yelled at her.

"What the f- POPPY!" Could she hear him? Was she moving? He turned and hopped towards her as quickly as he could, trying to jump before he could get sucked down into the ground. "Poppy, MOVE!"

There was no way she could hear him yet, the rain was pounding down so hard he could barely hear himself.

She'd noticed him moving back to her, though, and started waving her arms.

After a few more minutes, he was close enough to hear her crying.

Had she moved at all since he let her go? This was his fault.

"BRANCH, BRANCH I'M SO SORRY, I'VE BEEN TRYING, I'M SORRY!"

In front of her now, he could see that she'd sunk down too far. Mud was halfway up her thighs, giving her no room to wiggle out, and there was nothing close enough for her to hang on to and pull herself up with.

Branch paced around her, not wanting to stop and get pulled down as well, not sure how he could get at her without putting himself at risk.

Poppy sobbed, apologized, and cried for help, pretty much in a loop, and Branch saw no other options than to dive in and hope for the best. Maybe he'd be able to help Poppy, or maybe they were both about to get stuck and... he didn't want to think long term right this moment.

"Hold my hands!"

Branch and Poppy held each others wrists and he pulled hard. Poppy pulled up on him, but even with both of them straining, he couldn't feel any movement.

"Are you-"

"No!"

He let go of her hands and looped his hair around her waist, moving side to side as he knotted it, and tried pulling again, ignoring the strain on his neck. Still, she didn't budge.

"Okay, okay, new plan. We'll dig you out!"

They scraped and shovelled mud away from her legs for a few minutes, quietly, weakly cheering each other on, but every handful of mud removed was immediately replaced by more. There was no getting ahead of it.

Poppy started crying more forcefully. "What's gonna happen? What if you can't get me out?"

Branch didn't want to explore that possibility, so he grabbed the sides of her face, covering many of her freckles with large, muddy handprints. "I'm gonna get you out. I won't leave you."
He moved around behind Poppy to stay ahead of the mud that threatened to hold him down and hooked his elbows beneath her arms. "Hold on tight!"

Branch grunted and strained, then locked his arms around her chest and tried again. Nothing.

Poppy cried harder. Branch considered doing the same as he stepped away and walked around her again, looking for another way to help. He adjusted the rucksack on his back, as it had shifted when he'd tried to pull her up.

"Wait, Poppy-"

Branch took the bag off and slung it over Poppy's shoulders. "Hold this, I'm gonna pull you up over my back-"

He squatted by her, pulled one of her arms over his shoulder, and held it firm. He passed his other arm between her legs, trying to get as much of her weight on him as possible.

Branch shouted. "Wiggle your toes, feet, anything, on three! I'm gonna stand up!" He hoped he could stand up.

"One!" Branch shifted his sinking feet.

"Two!" He took a last deep breath and shakily blew it out.

"Three!"

Branch strained and tried to straighten his legs. As if a Poppy stuck in the mud weren't enough to try and lift, now she had his heavy bag on, as well.

"Ffff-" Branch wanted to curse, but couldn't spare the energy.

He felt something in his back pop painfully, but there has been a budge. Poppy had moved, however little.

"Branch! Keep going! It's working!"

He took a quick breath and lifted again, putting the sharp pain out of his mind. Poppy moved more, and with one more mighty yank, she was free. Branch staggered away from the holes her legs left, enough to be sure he'd be setting her down someplace safe.

Poppy's feet hit the ground and she hopped back on Branch, wrapping her arms around his neck for a tight, poorly timed hug. "Thank you, Branch, thank you so much! I was so scared, thank you for coming back for me! I'm so sorry that I've been a bad friend, I-"

Branch shifted his bag onto his own aching back, grabbed Poppy's arm, and started moving again. The rain had yet to let up and he was in terrible pain. This was not the time or place for a conversation.

Quickly, they crossed the riverbed. Thanks to the unmitigated terror Poppy had just experienced, she was able to keep up with Branch.

They struggled through a messy, slow climb up the bank, and finally, FINALLY, Branch could see safety right in front of him. If not for Poppy there to witness it, he would have cried from relief.

"There, that one!" Branch hauled Poppy to her feet and drug her over the wet sand, relishing the
security he felt as they moved onto grass and firm earth again. Heavenly.

They came up on a thick, squatty tree with light brown bark. Branch showed Poppy the rocks to climb, and the path ended at a knothole just a little bit shorter than he was. He shoved it hard with his shoulder once, twice, the third time with Poppy's help, and it popped open, sending them both toppling into the shelter he'd hollowed out.

Branch scrambled to his feet, closed the entrance, threw off his rucksack, and collapsed.

"Branch? What's going on? Are you okay?"

He sighed. In the pitch black, Poppy was confused and frightened. Go figure. "I'm fine. Look through my bag. There's a jar with a couple glow bugs. Let them out."

Poppy felt her way around the small room and fumbled with his bag.

"It should be close to the top. Give the bag a shake and they might light up."

Poppy shook, the alarmed bugs lit up, and were immediately released from their jar. Three bugs didn't provide much light in the small space, but being able to see at all was comforting enough.

Branch groaned. Now that he didn't have to worry about dying, his back- it had to be a pulled muscle- was killing him. He needed to roll over. Slowly, slowly, he pushed up, then flopped over onto his side. Nice. Halfway there.

"Woah, woah, are you hurt?" Poppy crawled over to him. "When did you get hurt?"

Branch finished rolling, closed his eyes, and sighed. "Picking you up."

It wasn't that bad, compared to other mishaps. He'd suffered worse, and often didn't have the luxury of a safe place to hide, or a storm to justify sitting around. Pulling a muscle in his back sucked, but it could suck a lot more.

His thoughts were interrupted by quiet, wet sniffles. Poppy was crying. He panicked slightly. Was it going to be loud like that time at the bunker? No, he didn't need that right now, please no-

"Hey, what's wrong?" He looked over and there she was, sitting against the wall with her face buried in her knees. "Poppy, hey! Stop crying. What's wrong?"

She croaked back at him. "I'm allowed to cry!"

"What? Okay- fine, go ahead and cry, but while you're doing it, tell me WHY."

Poppy wiped her face with her hands. It... it replaced the muddy tears on her cheeks with watery mud. "It's A LOT, Branch! You-" she waved at him, "you got hurt helping me, and I needed help in the first place because you yelled at me about what a jerk I am to you, and-" she sniffed loudly, "and I'm so sorry for making you feel like you're not good enough!"

Poppy sobbed, and Branch felt awkward. Had he taken a moment to consider that they'd be stranded together, he wouldn't have yelled at her. It. It wasn't worth the trouble he'd made.

"I, um." He wrote poems. He read thick, complex books. He knew how words worked. And yet, that's all he had right now.

"I don't think you're not good enough, Branch."
"Hmm."

She shuffled over and sat next to him. "Really. I DO like you the way you are. I just- I don't know. I thought that since you signed up for all of this, that you wanted something different."

She looked at him, fully wanting some sort of explanation.

"Um. You really didn't give me any room to say no." He frowned. She hadn't, but he'd agreed to this whole... everything, because it meant spending time with Poppy. That didn't need to be divulged, though.

Poppy nodded her head and wiped an errand tear away. "Sorry."

Some time passed, and the only thing that kept it from being silent was the pounding rain outside. Poppy's hug time bracelet dinged lightly for the third time since they met up earlier, but they both ignored it. Poppy shifted away from Branch and leaned against the wall.

"Should I- um. Should I stop visiting you? For real and serious, do you want me to leave you alone?"

Branch couldn't imagine anything worse. She was loud and impulsive and grating, but his heart squeezed at the thought of going back to only occasionally bumping into her in the forest.

"I- ah, Poppy. I don't mind being with you." He could feel his face heating up, and silently thanked the glow bugs for being so dim. "I like the time we spend together. Most of the time."

Poppy fidgeted with her dress and whispered. "But I keep hurting your feelings."

Branch went out on a limb (ha) and slid a hand closer to her. "I just. I'm pretty sure that I'm not gonna change, Poppy. If you could be okay with me the way I am, it wouldn't hurt."

Poppy was still and silent. Branch supposed that he was asking too much, to be enough for her. His bravery from seconds ago felt much more foolish now that Poppy didn't reach back out to him.

He pulled his hand back quickly, cleared his throat, and tried to recover. "So do whatever. I don't care."

More silence. The room felt heavy. His heart felt heavy. The world felt heavy. Branch closed his eyes, intent on escaping this living hell with some sleep.

"I like you the way you are."

Branch didn't respond, but heard Poppy scoot closer to him again.

"You're a lot of good things, y'know? You're smart, and careful- I wish I could be more like that. You don't know how often I bump into things or lose stuff."

Poppy chuckled quietly. "And you've got sharp edges, but you really are kind. You didn't leave me to die out there."

Branch opened his eyes and gave her a sharp look. "Well OBVIOUSLY I wouldn't do that-"

She grinned. "No, you wouldn't, but you're kind in other, smaller ways, too."

Branch rolled his eyes, but hoped she'd keep going.
"You make me tea I like. And you listen to me talk, even though we both know you don't really want to hear a lot of what I say."

"Hmm."

"You gave me a hug when I was crying in your bunker. That was like. The best hug ever. I really needed that one."

He knew that every third thing Poppy saw was the best thing ever, really, but hearing her say that about anything relating to him... Branch couldn't not try again.

"Uh. Do you- do you need a hug now?"

She looked over at him, eyes wide, and nodded slowly. "Only if you don't mind. I don't want to make you do it-"

"I don't mind." Branch moved to sit up, but was painfully reminded that he would not be sitting up for a little while. "Ah! Ow- okay, uh-"

"Oh, no, stay still! You don't have to get up for me."

Branch cursed everything. For fur's sake, he wanted this hug, and he couldn't! His luck. Only his luck.

"If you're okay with it, I could lay down here- my legs are kind of sore from bending them a lot, too-" Poppy moved and stretched out next to him. "Could this work? Just- like, a side hug?"

Branch nodded and moved his arm, giving Poppy room to get closer. She settled her head just under his and threw an arm across his chest, snuggling in to his side and giving him a tight squeeze. Branch squeezed her back with the one arm and wished he wouldn't have to let her go.

Well after any hug would have ended, they stayed wrapped up around each other. Poppy shifted a few times, getting comfortable and, as she put it, "soaking up all the heat he was giving off."

Branch kept his hand on her arm, tracing his fingers up and down, enjoying feeling her soft, flocked skin. He was drowsy, but didn't want to miss a moment of this.

"Branch."

"Yeah?"

"I like you. The way you are."

Poppy couldn't see it, but Branch smiled.

"I like you too, Poppy."

Chapter End Notes

A friend cheered me on through writing, it's thanks entirely to her that this is done already, ha.
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