Summary

Creek hears Branch sing for the first time since their childhood. Because of this, he gains new motivation to help return his true colors, but it’s difficult when they can’t settle on equal terms. The two trolls have never gotten along, and it almost seems like they never will, until Branch is forced to give haven to the one and only yoga guru he can’t stand being around. It makes him feel strange, suffocating things that might be even more frightening than the Bergens attacking.

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Blood coursed hot and fast in Branch’s veins, goosebumps raising while he felt his ears about to be assaulted.
“W-Wh.. Wait,” he breathed hastily. How did it get to this point? Creek was going to eat him alive and Branch needed it with every fiber he possessed.
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This story takes place after becoming friends with the Bergens. Creek never betrayed the village and he is imagined to have a more gentle, understanding attitude, while Branch is colorless and haunted by depression.

Notes

To all of my readers, yes! I did change the title. It used to be 'Kissed in the Mist'. I spent a long time contemplating what a good title should be (like 4 months to be exact) and as my fiction evolved, I realized that I needed to change the setting of what I'm trying to portray. Hope you understand! and thank you for reading. < 3

Inspired by the works of PhoenixDiamond, PriestessofNox, and Lantherian.

All songs posted in the end notes. :)

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You can find this story on other platforms!

https://www.webnovel.com/book/13051013905481505/When-the-Falls-Turn-Amethyst
https://acts.webnovel.com/2018/63659293/index.html#OpstjwaY <----- My referral link if you're interested in joining!

https://www.wattpad.com/story/177623559-when-the-falls-turn-amethyst
https://www.deviantart.com/liet-avery/gallery/66993107/Fanfiction
A singular bead of sweat trickled down Branch’s nose and dripped. He swiped it away, frustrated, and furrowed his dark brows. It was impossible to concentrate on his cleaning task while a loud, pink troll scurried behind him babbling away about the next big, exciting party. All he had to do was dust the tunnels and take an inventory today.

Deep into the tunnels of Branch’s Fear Bunker there was a soft breeze, scattering the dust and small bits of debris that he was collecting into piles. He unconsciously pondered the need to have air vents if it was just going to make his life more difficult. Unfortunately, air was a necessity underground.

Branch sighed heavily and scraped the bristles of his broom along the top of the ceiling to loosen the dust build-up, getting more irritated by the second when a pebble bounced into his forehead.

“The food, the music, the glitter! And everyone is going to be there, Branch! Even you, right?!” Poppy clapped her hands together and laughed. Branch quarter-turned and gave her an icy stare over his shoulder. Poppy’s smile dropped quickly and she folded her hands to her chest.

“Poppy… you know I don’t do parties.” Branch set his broom against the wall and roughly patted his vest and pants down. “You ask me every party and every time I tell you NO. Do you even remember what happened last time you guys had a big party?”

Poppy tilted her head a bit and thought. “Hm… We were attacked by Bergens?”

“We were attacked by BERGENS!” Branch threw his arms out and looked at her credulously. “So are you actually serious right now?”

“Yeah, but – Branch, it’s different now! The Bergens are our friends and we don’t have to worry about that kind of thing anymore. Let’s live a little, come on.” Poppy pulled out a rainbow-colored, self-made fuzzy envelope from her hair and held the invitation out with both hands, smiling big at the grey troll. “It would do you good to have some fun, don’t you think?”

Branch stared at the invitation with disdain, knowing full well how much glitter was packed into the contents of such a tiny device. “Poppy...” he started again.
“Say no more, say no more!” Poppy thrust the envelope into Branch’s arms. “I’ll give you some time to think on it. The party doesn’t start for two more days so I hope you can muster up some of that lion’s courage and come hang out with us trolls!”

Without another word, Poppy turned at the heel and trotted down the hall towards the main room. She was out of sight in an instant and on the lift to the upper hatch. Branch listened to the elevator mechanism and sighed heavily again when he knew that Poppy was gone from the bunker. With extreme carefulness, he lifted the tab of his felt invitation and opened the glittering card inside.

The Troll Tree was scrap booked and personalized with tiny cut-out troll friends, waving in unison around the tree. Another pop-up double rainbow revealed behind that, waving a giant banner with Branch’s name written on it.

“BRANCH! BRANCH! LET’S CELEBRATE FRIENDSHIP WITH THE BERGENS! WHEEE!”

The sudden screech of Poppy’s recorded voice made Branch stumble back, but he wasn’t quick enough to dodge the fountain of holographic glitter that sprayed directly into his face.

Grinding his teeth together, he wiped most of the glitter away and tossed the card into the trash pile.

He wasn’t going to that party and no one was going to make him go. Not Poppy, not King Peppy, and not any other troll who dared come ask him! There was nothing worth celebrating, in Branch’s opinion. A Bergen-Troll Peace Treaty wasn’t going to undo or erase the decades of fear and death that the monsters pushed on their society. Branch was never going to forgive them and parties like this are what give the Bergens the upper hand. It wasn’t safe and no one was going to listen to his antics anyway, so there was no reason to bother with it.

Feeling satisfied with his mental defiance, Branch picked up his broom and strode through his bunker to start re-checking the inventory of his supplies. Only a few more days until this party was going to be full bloom so he had to use the peace and quiet the best he could. If he knew anything about outrageous troll parties it’s that they could last for days and Branch wasn’t looking forward to the headache. Perhaps it would be more bearable if he left the area and camped in the forest until it was over?

With a soft chuckle, he mused over the idea of running away for a few days. He knew of a nice place that no one ever visited. It would be the perfect getaway retreat. The shuffling of items on the shelves and the soft hum of the ventilation echoed through Branch’s bunker. He loved his home with his entire being, but it wouldn’t hurt to take a vacation while things got crazy above ground. Unfortunately, there was no doubt Poppy would be erratic about his disappearance. Though… It
would be easy enough to just apologize to her when he returned after the party.

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Troll Village was buzzing with excitement that couldn’t be contained while preparations came to their conclusion for their new Bergen friendship celebration.

Banners and rainbow colored balloons littered the area around the entire troll tree, woven straight into the leaves, courtesy of Poppy and Smidge’s handiwork. There were long tables filled with assorted fruit pastries and cupcakes made by Cooper. High beam strobe lights were placed around the main venue to compliment the cascading glitter that had been tossed onto every object within reach by Guy Diamond and the other glitter trolls. All the pods hanging from the tree had been repainted and decorated by Harper and Biggie. The Snack Pack crew was hard at work and loving every moment.

There was still an entire day before the actual celebration was supposed to begin but DJ Suki refused to resist the temptation any longer! “Who’s ready for a party before the party?!” She yelled into her microphone at the top of her disc jockey grub bug and flipped up the amp on her records. Attention was grabbed immediately. All the trolls cried out in joy and the entire village was rocketed by a beat with deafening bass.

“Hair in the air, hair in the air! Put your hair in the air!” DJ sang to her audience, getting the crowd pumped and loud.

The small creatures raised their hands up and swayed their colorful stalks of hair into the air, chanting along to DJ’s song. There wasn’t a troll around that wasn’t grinning ear to ear.

“Hair in the air, hair in the air!”

“I’ve got a fever coming on, and now it’s beating on my bones!”

“I feel like diamonds or some gold, so DJ play it that's my song!

Go, go, go, go, go”

“Put your hair in the air! Come on baby, let's go crazy!”
"We ain’t never gonna stop! Hair up!"

Only meters away from the singing and shouting was a lavish, beautiful purple pod pin-striped with yellow trim and small crystal jewels. Inside was Creek, sitting cross legged on a yoga mat in his living room, trying to meditate.

Eyes closed tightly, Creek refused to acknowledge the sudden outburst of noise, but his ears twitched at every smash and bash coming from outside.

“Ahh-mmm...” he breathed slowly, relaxing more into his pose.

“GLITTER BOMB IN THE HOLE!” a trolling yelled from outside, followed by an excruciatingly loud crash right at Creek’s front door. His entire pod rattled and Creek fell out of his position with a surprised squeak.

“You’ve got to be joking,” Creek growled, getting off the ground and storming to his door. He flew it open and poked his head out to find the deviant responsible, only to duck under another dangerous orb of glitter being launched straight at his face. The ball whizzed into his house and exploded in a torrent of blue and white glitters all over his living area. Creek looked stricken at his ruined abode then gazed down from his pod at Poppy and her daycare group of trollings on the forest floor. They were catapulting glitter bombs with a huge slingshot into the crowds of dancing trolls and splashing them against trees, laughing and jumping with every launch.

Creek regained his composure, smoothed out the strands of his bright teal hair and cleared his throat before waving down to the group.

“Hello, Poppy! Hello small, adorable trollings!” The purple hued troll forced a wide smile and Poppy looked up at him, waving back frantically.

“Hi, Creek! ISN’T THIS PARTY AMAZING?” Poppy yelled while her group of children tossed more glitter into the air. They squealed in unison after every successful throw.

“Well, yes. Your parties are always the best, my dear Poppy. But isn’t this a day too early? I thought that the party started tomorrow… you know, when the Bergens are actually here to participate since they are half of the Treaty?” Creek looked past her at the rest of the party scattered along the bottom of the Troll Tree. It was getting pretty heavy out there and it didn’t look like it was going to stop any time soon.
“A day early isn’t going to hurt anyone!” Poppy exclaimed.

“No, but…”

Creek’s words were lost to Poppy as her distractions increased. Cooper trotted out of the sea of trolls and stuffed a cupcake into everyone’s hands.

This conversation is a lost cause now, Creek thought to himself. His inner aura was restless and he wanted to meditate before all the shenanigans took place but it seems he was too late. There was a quiet spot in the forest that he loved to visit in times like this.

He turned back inside and shut the door behind him. After a few hours of dusting and sweeping up the glitter attack inside his pod, Creek took a quick shower and fixed himself toast with mixed berry spread before doing some much needed stretching before his journey. The trek into the forest would take the better part of the day but sleeping in peace under the stars in the middle of a refuge was worth the future ache in his legs.

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The sun was fully set by the time Creek arrived at his secret retreat. He squeezed himself through a rather stubborn tangle of bushes surrounding the enclosure and sighed happily at the sight of his waterfall. The vertical drop was gentle, small, and quiet enough to be hidden away from prying eyes.

Creek spent many nights here in wonderful solitude, allowing himself to drown in the white noise of the falls. The banks of the river were littered with opalescent stones and speckled with spring wildflowers. Blue fireflies buzzed around the flowers and looped through the forest trees in a lazy dance. Their color mimic the water, reflecting the deep night sky. It certainly wasn’t the grandest waterfall ever to grace Mother Nature, but it was Creek’s favorite nonetheless. No one knew about the location and nothing was ever disturbed. Small wild creatures came and went, leaving the area completely untouched and forever beautiful. It was like this place was made specifically for him.

Stepping lightly through the grass, Creek felt renewed with fresh energy. The mist of the waterfall drifted to him and he breathed in the positive vibes. The purple troll eyed some of the perfect tree roots to rest in before a group of fireflies shot through his path, giving him a start. They were headed towards the other side of the river, looking oddly excited. Creek’s curiosity peaked and he changed direction to chase them. There might be sweet sap or ripened berries nearby which would be a pleasant addition to his evening.
Following the bugs’ glow trail led him to the northern bend in the river. Creek’s breath caught in his throat from what he saw crouched on the other side just a couple yards away. The darkness of the night couldn’t hide the shadowy grey troll with coal black hair.

Branch was still, sitting on his haunches, hands on his knees, staring into the rippling water before him. His eyes were heavily lidded and it looked like he was drifting away in sleep if not for his lips moving. The once pursued fireflies settled into a slow, circular dance around Branch’s figure.

“*The complex ray shifting light... they skim cross my eyes and into the night... I’m swept away and my heart ensnared.*”

Creek dipped backwards behind the nearest tree to hide without nearly as much grace as his normal self had. His heart pounded in his chest and he tried to calm his chills with deep breathing. It wasn’t like Creek to let Branch stun him but the fact that the miserable grey troll was in his secret sanctuary could mean so many different things. How did he find this place?

And… was Branch just singing? Disbelieving, Creek peeked around the corner and was immediately awestruck. His jaw dropped slightly and his ears strained to hear the tune pouring from Branch’s mouth.

“*I was alone when you found me there... My troubling soul was too much to bear.*

*Slipping in and out of time...*

Branch was definitely singing. His voice was soft and cooed over the wind like a floating silk feather. His eyes were dark and looked sullen while he gazed at his own reflection in the moonlit river water. Creek could hardly trust his own ears. The angelic notes would have floored him if he hadn’t been clinging to the tree he hid behind.

“*It’s hard to find.. peace of mind.*” Branch sang, reaching out and brushing a small caress over one of the fireflies dancing quietly around him. It chirped in happiness and buzzed near Branch’s cheek, nuzzling him. They were enchanted with his voice as much as Creek was.

“You were storm and I a sail, caught in the middle of you.”
I was a fool and my heart... it fell, in and around you.

Trembling there in the midst of truth I… would have lost myself in your waves.”

The purple troll’s heart was wrenching with the pain of guilt and adoration. All this time Branch was hiding such an incredible singing voice but still endured the teasing and backlash from the entirety of Troll Village. It didn’t make any sense. The lyrics of the song felt like a hidden message and the sound was awfully depressing. Creek didn’t recognize the song at all and it churned him inside to listen.

“Slipped from my hands not a warning made, like steps in the sand they were taken away…

With the tide of the ocean’s rise.

You ran away to another land, and I chose to stay and wait for your return.

The time has come to pass us by.”

How long was he planning on hiding here in the brush? Creek didn’t have any idea on how to react on the situation forced upon him. The only thing that felt reasonable was to pretend that he hasn’t seen or heard anything and approach Branch with the same distasteful banter that they always seemed have.

Gathering up his inner strength and shaking his body loose of nerves, Creek dusted his khaki slacks then strode purposely out of his hiding spot and towards the river. He took no care in making himself quiet, letting the crushing foliage beneath his feet alert Branch of his oncoming presence.

Branch’s ears twitched from the sounds closing in and he shut his mouth tight, standing up quickly and looking out towards the forest with suspecting eyes. His firefly friends startled and scattered away, splitting their separate ways.

“Who’s there?” he called out. Branch slowly reached for his backpack behind him where he kept his hunting knife.
“It’s me, Branch,” Creek called out and stepped into the moonlight towards the opposite edge of the river bank, arms crossed. The grey troll grimaced at the ironic encounter but held his ground, folding his arms in return. Whatever this was going to be, he didn’t feel like getting pushed around tonight. His feelings were a confusing, jumbled mess. Any sign of weakness in himself and things could come crashing down around him.

Chapter End Notes

DJ's song is "Hair up" by Justin Timberlake, Gwen Stefani
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7CrtygGlQ4

Branch's song is "Siren" by The Honey Trees
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGu13wyTpj8
There was little time left before Branch could sneak out unnoticed. He rummaged through his bunker at a hurried pace, grabbing his weathered backpack and then started shoving essentials into the flipped top. He needed rope, flint, his knife, a compass… Branch mumbled through his survivalist’s list, picking up his journal as well and carefully wedging the book inside. The grey troll turned to grab another novel from the shelved wall and stopped, noticing a blue, hard bound book with shimmering silver trim. A coil of anxiety formed his stomach looking at the spine of the familiar item. He avoided it and let out a short breath, picking up something different and turning away from the bookshelf.

The book belonged to Creek. It was a simple story about small blue magical creatures past the confines of the forest where no one looked. The adventures promised happiness to the reader and every character was heartfelt and brave. It had been nearly 20 years since Creek gave the book to Branch as a gift. They were just trollings back then but those days were the darkest in their lives because of the Bergen holiday, Trollstice. Branch could remember everything so vividly no matter how much he tried to forget. Every time he saw the book he was reminded of how things used to be between the two troll friends. He was also reminded of how something so good and pure fell to pieces as easily as it was made.

“Branch, you’re my best friend. I hate to see you so colorless,” Creek whispered in a quiet, young voice.

Branch swung his filled backpack over his shoulder and headed to the kitchen. A familiar flashback was starting to fog his thoughts and he couldn’t shake the way it snaked into his mind’s eye.

“Branch, what can I do to make you happy? I’ll do anything for you.”

“There’s nothing you could have done, Creek. This is the way things are now,” Branch replied in
real time. He fought down the emotions that were peaking from his memories but it was the beginning to a losing battle. Branch held on to the edge of his kitchen table and gazed into the lines of the carved wood, eyes unfocused, lost in lost thought.

It was just three days after Trollstice. The night before Troll Village had finished their ritual farewells to their loved ones that had been chosen from the tree. They were never going to be seen again, and Branch’s grandmother Rosiepuff was among the many. Child Branch was sitting towards the outskirts of the village, avoiding contact with most of the trolls. He curled up in a patch of grass near the forest edge and hugged his knees, fresh tears leaking down his newly discolored cheeks.

Child Creek appeared at his side holding a blue book under his arm, looking over the grey trolling in sympathy.

“Branch, your color... It’s gone.” he stated the obvious. “Your hair is black.”

Branch said nothing.

The purple trolling shook his head and cleared his throat. “I, uh... I brought you this book, to cheer you up,” Creek said meekly with a mild blush. “I know you’re sad. Reading this book always made me happy so I wanted you to read it too. You love books.”

Again, Branch didn’t respond. He was empty of any emotion but sadness and frustration. Creek quieted his tone a bit, feeling awkward. “You’re my best friend... I’m your friend, right,” the trolling questioned. “We can support each other. I can help you get your color back.”

After a long period of silence, Branch frowned deeply and finally looked up at Creek, his eyes raw from crying. “I don’t WANT my color back! I don’t want you either!” the little grey troll said, voice raised.

Creek was stunned by the reply and fat tears broke from his eyes immediately. He replied fast before thinking things through, rattled by the shock, “Fine! Be a miserable ugly color for the rest of your life!” The purple trolling forcibly threw his book down at Branch’s feet and ran away with a choked sob, covering his face with his hands.

The days being alone turned into weeks, then months. Branch never tried to get his friend back. Their relationship turned sour the more they saw each other. As Creek got older, his attitude towards
Branch’s coloration got worse and the entire Troll Village picked up on the situation of the odd troll that had no color. The grumpy troll who hated rainbows. The mean troll that didn’t like parties. He was the literal black sheep that had no family and no friends. Branch blamed the Bergens for everything in his life and it led him to creating his underground bunker, not only to protect himself from another attack but to keep away all of the judgmental trolls that surrounded him. Poppy, of course, weaseled herself in because that’s the way she rolls but that’s another story entirely. He felt it was her royal duty to befriend every single troll despite the rumors.

Inhaling sharply, Branch straightened his stand and blinked back the moisture in his eyes. He wasn’t going to cry again. He wasn’t going to let it get to him. He just needed a quick vacation, right? That’s what he was doing. He was going out to a special place where he could savor peace and read to himself for a few days. That’s what he really needed to calm down.

After Branch double checked his items and secured his domain with extra, active measures, he climbed the elevator pad and lifted to the upper level of his bunker. He opened the exit latch and peeked outside. The sun was blazing high, it was still only about mid-day, and there were no trolls in sight. Feeling a bit more positive about his venture, Branch climbed out and locked the hatch. Out in the open, the breeze carried notes of music from the main part of Troll Village. Looks like they started early, he thought to himself, that’s perfect timing. He felt slightly antsy about leaving without telling Poppy, but the faster he got out the sooner he would be back.

He started a jog going North, away from the Troll Tree. There was a small path carved into the dirt that Branch made himself the first time he went out exploring. The creatures in this part of the forest were friendly enough and ignored the troll as he climbed through dense thickets and swung like a spider from tree to tree using his strong black hair. The sun was almost setting by the time he arrived at his favorite waterfall.

Panting from the trip, Branch collapsed at the edge of the river and cupped the crystal clear liquid, drinking deeply. “Oh, thats good!” he exclaimed, taking another drink. Smiling, he sat back and rested on his palms. The sunset was glimmering through the void between the trees and sinking ever faster. Nature was a beautiful thing and Branch could always appreciate it.

The darker it became, more fireflies stretched and drifted out of their nests. Another thing he enjoyed was the family of fireflies that remembered him every time he came to visit. They were all identical, fuzzy creatures but the ones that liked him would come when he sang. There were only a few songs that he could muster out. He didn’t know any happy go-lucky songs or songs that had a great beat, but whenever he felt like singing it was when he couldn’t stop thinking about his past and a certain.. purple troll. Tonight seemed to be one of those nights. In order to get the emotion out of his heart and mind, he had to sing it out.

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Present night.

The irony. The stupid irony of everything. Branch shuddered inwardly. It’s been too long since Creek has been so close to him. Usually there were undertones of malice and snide remarks with every passing encounter they had, but those had died down over the years and now they don’t speak at all. Personalities change over time, he admitted, but Creek felt different in this moment. The sounds of the waterfall nearby killed the silence and the wind shifted the leaves around them. The two trolls stared each other down, both questioning the motives of the other.

Creek was the first one to speak again, “What are you doing in my humble sanctuary?”

“Uwah – YOUR sanctuary?” Branch choked. “T-This place doesn’t belong to you, I don’t see your name written on it. How did you know to find me here?”

Creek scoffed and relaxed, pressing his palms together in a meditative pose. “As funny as that is, I wasn’t looking for you at all. This is my home away from home. I come here off and on when I need to get away from distractions.” The purple troll walked forward and leaped lightly onto a path of river boulders to reach the side of the bank where Branch was standing.

“Well, this is also somewhere I come to get away from things,” Branch said, moving a step back away from Creek’s position. “And I’m not leaving! You can’t make me leave. This is the only other safe place I know and I really don’t want to travel during the night.” Branch was getting more nervous by the minute. He could feel hear his heart pounding in his ears and his palms were beginning to sweat. “And uh, also.. how long have you been here, by chance?”

Creek mused to himself thoughtfully, looking almost too animated in doing so. “Oh, not long at all. I just arrived moments ago. Why do you ask?”

Branch rubbed the back of his neck and sighed, picking up his bag from the ground and going back to his sitting area. “Just wondering. It’s nothing.” He plopped down into the grass and resumed his fetal sitting position, back turned towards the other troll. He tapped his fingers on his knees and bit his lower lip. “Since I’m not leaving,” he made sure to reaffirm loudly, “could you not bother me? There’s plenty of room here for both of us. I won’t bother you, you don’t bother me. For two.. or three days.” Branch groaned under his breath at the stupid request. He already knew it would be impossible.

“It’s utterly impossible to not have contact while camping in the same enclosure,” Creek confirmed,
lifting a brow. “but ignoring your grey little mass is one of my specialties. You don’t have to worry.” Branch refused to respond to his antagonizing and kept his back turned, though he did notice his ears were hanging lower than normal.

Creek breathed heavily in regret. He ran his hand through his long teal hair and moved to sit down himself, merely yards away. Old habits die hard, he grumbled. It wasn’t easy being naturally nicer to the grey troll. He had such a fierce curiosity about Branch’s singing but any mention of it would make him bolt like a scared little rabbit. The main question he had was, if Branch could still sing even without his color, why does he try to hide it? Creek assumed that singing openly would solve a lot of his social problems.

Mother Destiny provides for Creek when he needs it most, and this situation seemed like a gift rather than a curse. There was a chance to mend the bond and his limbs tingled with the possibility. If he couldn’t do it now, then he can’t do it ever. It was a miracle that they both came to the same area away from the Troll Tree, at the same time for the same reasons.

After what seemed like ages of quiet, Branch stopped fiddling with his backpack strap and got to his feet, walking into the forest without a word. Creek was sitting cross legged with his elbows on his knees, eyes closed. His ears twitched and he cracked open one eye to witness Branch leave the area. What in the blazes was he doing now? Minutes later the grey troll returned with an armful of dry twigs. He placed them upwards like a tin pyramid and surrounded the twigs with heavy stones to create a campfire.

Branch’s mind was all over the place as he placed dead leaves and flint into the twigs and smacked two rocks together for a spark. Just act normal. Go about your normal routine, he told himself. Ignore Creek. Don’t let Creek know you’re not yourself right now. Not myself? Who says I’m not myself right now? I’m doing perfectly fine. He blinked when the campfire roared to life, his inner feud coming to a halt. Branch had no idea how chilled he was until the heat permeated his body in the best ways. It was extremely comforting, but didn’t release the anxiety from within his chest. He huddled closer to his fire and rummaged through his backpack, pulling out a novel and flipping through the pages with no real motive to read. His body was acting on its own at this point, but to be able to engross himself in reading was an impossible feat with Creek sitting so close.

Branch glanced up every couple of minutes where Creek was. He couldn’t help but look at the purple troll. Every time his eyes were closed. His body unmoved. Meditation was weird to Branch, but he could probably understand it… maybe.

The moon started to shift positions in the sky. Time was passing and they were reaching the deepest point in the night. A gust of wind came and flickered the campfire. Branch looked at Creek again and gnawed at the inside of his cheek, thumbing the corner of his current page. There was no way that troll was actually comfortable over there. The night was cold and Creek wasn’t anywhere near a fire. The guy was shirtless, for God’s sake. He didn’t bring anything with him all the way out here.
How was he going to survive?

“You can use my fire.” Branch said, breaking the drawn out barrier of silence. He blushed slightly and shoved his nose into his book. What the hell… he thought. There was a small shuffling of pebbles and grass and the next time Branch looked up, Creek was sitting across from him at the campfire in the same meditative position as before. His eyes were half-open this time, gazing at Branch through the flickering flames.

“Thank you, Branch. It is a bit chilly tonight, isn’t it?” Creek smiled warmly at him and it felt like lightning shot through the grey troll’s body. Branch grunted in reply as his breath was currently a lump in his throat. He tried to concentrate on a single word in his book. In all honesty, he couldn’t have read even one sentence this entire time.

Chapter End Notes

-waggles eyebrows-
3 days of Branch and Creek alone?
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

The words! They flow!
Sorry to anyone who actually does yoga, I don't do it myself. I didn't want to write complete crap and make anyone mad
I actually watched a beginner's video on it LOL

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was so dark… but he could see something. Branch was standing in blank area that felt forbidden, a void world. The darkness consumed all around him except for the soft glow of a figure standing with him. The light colored troll had no face, no name, and spoke not a word. The stranger seemed solid but clear. Branch reached out towards him and the mystery troll copied the same movement. They locked hands, fingers threading together. His skin felt smooth and warm and it was wonderful. The forbidden, anxious feeling that harbored inside Branch’s body melted away and he felt strangely happy for no reason at all. He felt so happy and relieved that he almost wanted to cry. He never wanted to leave this magical troll, but then suddenly there was an immediate force pulling at his back. Their hands were ripped apart and Branch started to panic, reaching out again desperately. He couldn’t say anything to stop what was happening, nothing would come from his mouth. The two were quickly spread farther and farther apart until Branch couldn’t see the glow troll anymore through the thick black shield.

Branch’s gasped, choking his vest with a tight fist, and his eyes snapped open. He stared up at a clear blue sky littered with soft white clouds, mind blanked. It was just a dream… He groaned quietly and blinked the dreamy visions away, gathering his reality again. Sitting up slowly from the grass, Branch rubbed his tired eyes then stretched his arms up and twisted his back. “Mm!..” He felt pretty good, despite staying up so late and falling asleep haphazardly. His nerves had been on edge because of the unfortunate circumstance with Creek, but after getting comfortable on the ground with his book he fell asleep with no problems.

“Oh, that’s right,” he whispered to himself. Creek was still around. The purple troll hadn’t bothered him like he asked so he almost forgot that they were sharing the river site. Branch scanned the banks and trees, confused when he couldn’t spot the guru. It wasn’t his responsibility to make sure Creek was safe… The troll could take care of himself. Creek came here on his own accord, so Branch shouldn’t be worrying. Should he really be wondering about Creek’s whereabouts like this?

Branch scuffled to his feet, going to the river to wash the grime of sleep off. He was getting irritated with himself and his inner battles. His heart felt one thing and his mind told another. He came here to get away from the noise of Troll Village but was met with another foe that prevented him from relaxing. The jumble of emotions rolling around inside were confusing, to say the least. There was no clear context for whatever was going on with him.
The grey troll dunked his head into the water and swished his face and hair around in it. It was colder than normal, but that’s to be expected since Fall was right around the corner. It would only be a month until the leaves changed color. He pulled his head out and swung his drenched black hair side to side like an animal. Then, he heard a deep chuckle from behind him and it made Branch jolt in surprise.

“Do you wash your hair this way every morning?” Creek asked, amused at the spectacle.

“I would appreciate it if you didn’t sneak up on me,” Branch grouched, grabbing his sodden hair and wringing out most of the water. He looked up at Creek through the dripping mess and noticed he was carrying a large leaf pouch filled with berries and pieces of sweet root. His stomach growled softly, painfully aware that he hadn’t eaten anything since leaving the village. A small blush came and went from Branch’s cheeks. He cleared his throat to mask his stomach, just in case, and flipped his hair backwards. The black magical strands resumed their soft position upwards, merely damp now.

“Being unaware of your surroundings is no fault of mine, dear Branch. I’m known to step lightly by many trolls,” he said. “But I doubt anyone else in the entire village has witnessed what I just had, so I’ll share my breakfast with you. A small token of good will from one troll to another?” Creek tossed the pouch into Branch’s hands.

Branch looked at the held offering then back at the purple troll, suspecting something was up. “We both know this is weird and unneeded, why are you REALLY bringing me this? Is it poisoned?? Are the berries laced and you’re trying to scheme something? Honestly, Creek. That’s insane, I don’t have anything that would be of value to you.”

Creek barked another laugh and wrapped his arms around his middle. “Oh Brother, you really think I would do something so inconceivable? I’m just showing you a nice gesture. If you keep making me laugh like this I might have to run to a bush before I piss myself!”

Branch rolled his eyes and stood up, shoving the pouch back into Creek’s bare chest. “I don’t need your good will, alright? I can get food myself. I can probably scavenge better than you can because I’ve been doing this my entire life. How many pastries and cakes have you had to catch in a claw trap? Too many, I’m sure,” Branch said smugly.

“Don’t act ignorant, Branch. You know that I live on a diet of vegetation,” Creek scoffed. “I don’t eat cakes, or pastries, or cupcakes, or any of that awful sugary mess anymore. Just keep it, I already had my fill.” Creek forced the food back on Branch and strode away before he could get rid of it again.
“It would be a waste of resources to throw it away, you know! That’s the only reason why I’m keeping it,” Branch yelled at his back.

“Yes, yes, of course.” Creek smirked to himself as he walked away to do start his daily yoga exercises. That pouted lip was almost adorable, he thought.

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Back at Troll Village, the party had persisted through the night and it didn’t seem like anyone was out of energy. A few known Bergens from Bergen Town showed up that morning, including Bridget and King Grisle Jr. Fresh food was made and more glitter was thrown in their faces during the extreme welcome montage. Grisle grimaced and wiped the flecks from his face, but endured the troll’s happiness because Bridget seemed to be having fun with it. He was personally interested in the party favors and games that they were going to play. They never had anything new or fun back in Bergen Town.

“Welcome to the Troll Treeeee!” Guy Diamond sang for their guests. The silver glitter troll ushered Bridget and Grisle inward to the village for the grand tour. He pointed at all the tree pod houses and the small tables and chairs and bouncy mushroom pads where they played Squish Ball. Everything was extremely tiny compared to the Bergens, of course. They resorted to tip-toeing through the village but didn’t mind taking in the sights of the troll civilization. Guy lured them around the tree for the third time before Bridget stopped him a moment.

“Uhm, where’s Poppy?” she asked Guy, concerned.

“Oh? Uh,” Guy looked around and shrugged. “She will be back soon, probably. Not to worry! You know how Poppy is. Always out there doing things for others.”

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“BRANCH! BRANCH! HELLO?!” Poppy banged violently for the twentieth time on the entrance hatch of Branch’s bunker. She huffed and paced in a circle with her hands on her hips, glaring at the fat metal padlock on the door. Smidge, her yellow right-hand friend, examined the padlock and shook her head.

“Oh my God. It’s definitely locked,” Smidge said matter-of-factly.
“I don’t understand, why would he lock me out?” Poppy cried, pulling on the padlock with both hands. “Arrghh! Branch! You have to be in here, I’ve looked everywhere else! Just COME OUT NOW!”

“Maybe he’s taking a nap?” Smidge said.

“Or MAYBE he’s sleeping,” Cooper said, butting in to the conversation out of nowhere.

Poppy rolled her eyes dramatically and pushed Cooper’s face out of the way. “Seriously, guys. We don’t have time for this. He’s never locked me out before. Branch is missing the best party of the year! He’s gotta have fun with us eventually. I even gave him the invitation!” She pulled at the lock some more and growled in frustration, then went to biting the metal with her teeth with abnormal savagery.

“Poppy, Poppy! Calm down!” Smidge dragged her off the door and held her back. “You know Branch better than the rest of us. He never comes to our parties, do you really think he’d come to this one?”

Poppy sighed and folded her arms. “I know... You’re right. I just thought it would be better to try and get him out finally. That guy is wound tighter than a rubber band ball. I was so sure that he was going to come this time.” She pulled out her schedule book from inside her pink hair and flipped through it. “Looks while we’ll have to come back later. We have to start setting up the firework display for tomorrow. I really don’t want to let Bridget down.”

Cooper bounced up and down with a large toothy smile, “Yeah! I love fireworks, lets go!” The three of them left Branch’s home, Poppy looking back over her shoulder with a disappointed frown.

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The tranquility of the forest gave ultimate peace of mind. Creek leaned forward slowly and reached with outstretched fingers. The flying fuzzy bugs were at play and nipped at the bubbles on the surface of the stream. Nature was good and pure today, the positive energy was abundant. Creek breathed deeply and settled into his balasana yoga pose, resting his forehead on the ground and laying his arms above him. He felt warm, as though he were bowing to Mother Destiny herself. Branch was just a dozen feet away, scribbling in his leather-bound journal and gnawing on a small gift of sweet root. The scratching of his writing utensil was sneaking into Creek’s ears, trying to invade and get his attention. No matter where Creek decided to position himself in the enclosure,
Branch was sure to be close by and he was curious if it was intentional.

The two trolls had gone back to not speaking a word to each other for hours. It seemed to be going well, but Creek still wanted to pry into the gloomy troll’s mind. It nagged at him continuously and he just had to get to the bottom of the secrets of Branch and what changed over the years. Thinking about the grey troll again for the umpteenth time, Creek peeked over at him from his downward position. Branch was glancing at him too and they locked eyes for half a second before Branch tried to pretend like that didn’t just happen.

Creek smiled slightly and started to sing, “I always feel like somebody's watching me, and I have no privacy.”

Branch stiffened and Creek watched him grip his pencil, the writing barred like the singing was a sudden onslaught of war. The purple troll changed positions in his stretch and sat up, raising his arms up high with his long hair.

“Woah-oh, I always feel like somebody's watching me. Tell me is it just a dream?” he continued innocently, looking up into the sky.

“Okay, that’s enough of that,” Branch said with obvious displeasure.

“Join me in some yoga.”

“I’d rather die than listen to— wait, what?” Branch looked at him and balked. “You want me to do yoga? That’s laughable.”

“It’s easy, you know. You don’t have to be scared.” Creek knew he was pushing Branch’s buttons with that comment. He was too stubborn and wouldn’t back down easily from a challenge. He didn’t know if he actually wanted Branch to do yoga with him, or if he just wanted to see if Branch would do it at all. The outcome could be interesting.

“No one is scared of yoga, Creek. It’s just weird.” The corner of Branch’s mouth twitched and he fiddled with his pencil. “I’m not cut out for something like that anyway,” he added quietly.

That gloomy, depressed response rubbed the purple troll the wrong way and he wasn’t going to let it slide. “Yes, you are! You won’t know if you don’t try it,” he said. With a swift movement, Creek
jumped up and swung out his teal colored hair and wrapped Branch around the shoulders and chest, dragging him on the ground to his position.

“What the fuck?!” Branch yelled, struggling against the hold and trying to dislodge himself with his own hair but to no avail. “I’m NOT doing yoga! I don’t even know how!”

“Language, Branch. Don’t fight it. Just be a good troll and let me show you some moves!” Creek grunted, grappling Branch into the ground with a supreme force. He flipped him onto his stomach, his hair split down the middle and wrapped around each of his wrists for extra measure.

“If this is your way of teaching yoga then I highly disagree!” Branch growled, pulling at the teal hair and clawing desperately at the ground to get away.

“If you would stop fighting, oof.. the inevitable, this wouldn’t be so unpleasant,” Creek huffed, moving his hands around the grey troll’s waist and squeezing him tight. Branch stopped his struggle for a moment and shivered, face pressing into the ground. Words were lost to him as his body suddenly caught fire. Creek lifted an eyebrow at the change in demeanor but didn’t let the troll go. “First,” he started. “We will find your body’s alignment, so up you go.” Creek pulled Branch’s hips up so that he was standing on his hands and knees.

The grey troll’s arms trembled as he stared at the dirt, unsure if he should try to fight again or let Creek continue to control him like a doll. “Just relax, Branch. I’m going to let you go now… so don’t move.” Creek released the hair confining Branch’s wrists and went to fixing the yoga position to perfection. “Palms spread wide… Arms straight.” Creek placed his hand at Branch’s core and pressed upwards to help straighten his back. Branch’s entire body flinched but he felt immobilized. “Breathe now, deep inhale and exhale. Connect with the energy of Mother Earth. Create that solid foundation with her and feel it with your entire being.” Creek kept one hand on his stomach and the other went to his thigh, applying directive force to help the position. “Don’t slouch your form. Keep your mind over your heart, heart over your pelvis, in perfect alignment,” he said, his voice getting softer with every commandment.

This was the scariest thing Branch has done in his life and he couldn’t fight it. The instant Creek used such dominant force over him its like Branch didn’t know how to fend for himself. He felt awkward. He felt ridiculous. He felt totally lost of power and he was letting Creek touch his body in ways that no other troll has ever touched him. His heart was slamming in his chest, blood throbbing in his ears. His whole face was burning hot with a blush that wouldn’t cease. How is this happening right now, he thought.

“This was the scariest thing Branch has done in his life and he couldn’t fight it. The instant Creek used such dominant force over him its like Branch didn’t know how to fend for himself. He felt awkward. He felt ridiculous. He felt totally lost of power and he was letting Creek touch his body in ways that no other troll has ever touched him. His heart was slamming in his chest, blood throbbing in his ears. His whole face was burning hot with a blush that wouldn’t cease. How is this happening right now, he thought.

“Breathe deeply now, Branch, and hold in the flowing positive vibes,” Creek whispered to him.
Branch inhaled slowly and closed his eyes, trying to calm his insane heart beats. Positive vibes, he thought. Even if Creek claimed to be enlightened with this sort of thing, Branch didn’t even know what positive vibes were supposed to feel like. What was yoga, anyway? Was this some sort of work out routine or something a crazy purple troll made up in his head? It would make more sense if it were the latter. He felt like he was throwing away his pride with this nonsense.

After many adjustments and different, awkward poses, Branch finally collapsed on the ground with a pant and held up his hand. “Please, I can’t do it any more. This is exhausting.”

Creek nodded and helped Branch up to his feet. His knees shook slightly but his body didn’t feel incredibly awful after the routine. He actually felt somewhat refreshed. Tired for sure, but almost energized. Creek held his elbow for support until the grey troll felt solid, then released him. “Namaste,” Creek said gently, palms pressed together. The guru bowed slightly and smiled at him. “Thank you for trying it out. I knew you could do it,” he added. “Easy, wasn’t it?”

Branch felt flushed all over again and turned his face away, “That was the first and the last time I’m ever doing yoga with you,” he said stubbornly.

Creek laughed and slapped Branch on the back. “We will see in the near future, my friend.”

Chapter End Notes

Creek's song - "Somebody's Watching Me" by Rockwell
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXSHs3fSyXE
Evening came to the trolls’ shared secret in the forest. Branch had build another small campfire and Creek was picking blue and red berries from a wild grove nearby. He plucked a rather large one from the bush he was scouring and inspected it for blemishes.

Co-inhabiting with Branch first seemed like something impossible, given their history, but neither one was going to submit and leave the area. Creek was probably the more stubborn troll as he would endure anything to prove a point. Though now, he wasn’t quite sure what that point was anymore since they were getting along. It was the first miracle of their relationship. He was clinging to the idea that this encounter was a sign from Mother Destiny, and it fueled the kindness he awkwardly wanted to show. The first words they spat was to ignore each another, but time and time again they bumped into one another, talked to one another, and now Creek was gathering food for the second time to share with the grey troll.

Back at camp, Branch was getting cozy in the grass with his sketchbook, using the light of the fire. His pencil glided effortlessly over the hard pressed paper, crafting a rough still life image of a cluster of wildflowers in front of him. The flowers were interesting enough to grab his attention. Their small furry leaves twisted and held each other up, each flower growing into a different hue in a spectrum of bright colors. Branch tapped the end of his sketch pencil to his lips, analyzing the plant another degree.

In the background he heard Creek’s whistle among the trees. Before too long the purple troll hovered back to Branch’s side, carried by a strong beetle by the fluffy tip of his teal hair. Creek stepped lightly on the ground then touched his forehead to the bug, thanking him for the help. It buzzed happily in reply then flitted away.

“I brought us some fresh berries,” he said. “Care to join me in savoring them?” Creek settled down next to Branch’s side, laying the leaf full of food between them and peeked over his shoulder at the artwork.

“Oh, uh… Thanks,” Branch said, taking some of the blue fruit and popping them into his mouth.
“That’s really good,” Creek smiled, pointing at the sketch. “I didn’t know that you were also an artist. Harper would be jealous if she saw this.”

Branch coughed on the juice from the berries and rubbed his chest. “There’s really nothing to be jealous about,” Branch said, swallowing a dislodged piece. “When you live alone, you tend to pick up a lot of different hobbies to occupy yourself.” He closed his book, a bit too quickly, and set it aside with his backpack. Creek looked a little disappointed as he scooped up his own share of fruit, slipping a piece past his lips. Branch’s attention zoned in on the movement of Creek’s mouth, then he blinked rapidly and broke away. His cheeks burned dark from the sudden awkward interest. That was weird.

“Living alone in your bunker,” Creek stated lightly.

“Yeah, in my bunker.” Branch arched an eyebrow at the troll.

Creek hummed to himself and adjusted his sitting, crossing his legs in lotus position before speaking again. “For the sake of conversation, what made you leave Troll Village and build your bunker away from everyone?” Creek asked slowly, taking another berry from between them and keeping his eye contact away from Branch.

Branch bristled slightly at the question, his heart rate picking up. “Because of the Bergens,” he stated flatly. “I was… worried that the Bergens would attack us again and I couldn’t stand to live where I didn’t feel safe, so I made my safety net underground. I ended up staying there because it was comfortable. This is common knowledge around the village, Creek.”

Creek processed the answer for some time before continuing his prodding, “You know, Branch, the party they’re having right now is because we’ve made peace with those giant brutes.”

“Yes, I know,” Branch said, more irritated. “but that means zilch to me. I won’t forgive them for what they did.”

“Even Poppy made best friends with that Bergen named Bridget.”

Branch prickled again by Creek’s comment and whipped a glare at the purple troll, “I won’t forgive them!” he repeated. “They killed my grandmother and ruined the happiness of my life. Just look at my skin, Creek. You were even the first one to take a jab at it.”
Creek looked his grey skin over as requested then pained slightly. His hands folded in front of him and he closed his eyes. “Your grandmother Rosiepuff, I remember her. She was a wonderful troll and was the most kind to all the trollings of our pack. She was taken away just like the other adults who were chosen on Trollstice. It’s not something we could stop at the time, but it’s over now.” Creek opened his eyes from the memories flooding him and let out a controlled breath.

Branch’s ears were drooping, his gaze starting lose its luster. “It’s never over,” he said stubbornly. “Not all the Bergens agree with the treaty and one day something is going to happen. I refuse to sit idly by, complacent before I’m eaten. I won’t forgive them no matter what anyone says. The Bergens took my grandmother and they took my colors.”

“Take them back,” Creek said quickly. “Take your colors back.”

“My colors are gone, Creek. Dead. Disappeared forever.” Branch’s hands snaked to his shoulders and he rubbed them, his body suddenly feeling too cold to handle.

“Your colors can come back, you just have to let it happen,” the purple troll pushed.

“Things will never be like how they were before, just accept it already. I have,” Branch said quietly.

“Branch, I...” Creek started, his thoughts starting to falter as he watched the depression eat away at Branch’s features like a starving beast. He grimaced and refused to look away no matter what it did to his psyche. “There’s still hope... Listen to me. The Branch that I knew from my childhood is there somewhere deep inside you. I saw him last night and I know I can see him again.” Creek said the words carefully but the context was painful enough for the both of them. Silence crept up around them and Creek could hear the distant chirping of fireflies nearby.

Branch stared into the flames of the fire with dark eyes, “Last night,” he repeated to himself. Hard realization dawned on the grey troll and he covered his mouth with his hand, eyes blown wide to life. He flicked his gaze up to Creek, full of fear now. “You heard me, didn’t you?” he asked quickly. “You heard me sing.”

Creek felt a shiver go through his body. He could feel Branch’s aura starting to escalate dangerously and he held his palms up in defense, “Calm yourself, dear Branch,” he said slowly. “Yes... I admit that I did hear you when I first arrived here, but it was... it was beautiful to hear you sing again. You shouldn’t be ashamed of it nor try to hide it from others.”
“What? No… No, no, no!” Branch jumped to his feet and threw his hands over his pointed ears, pulling on them anxiously. He paced around quickly in a jagged loop, chest heaving. “How could this happen? Why did it have to be you of all trolls?” He clenched his jaw tightly and glared back Creek with a newfound fury. “You lied to me when I asked you about it before. It must be really funny, right?! You’ve been having a good time toying with me, haven’t you? You’re the worst kind of lowlife!”

Branch went from zero to one hundred. That’s it. Creek was finished with this intolerable tyrant spitting whatever he pleased. He had been patient and tried to understand what the troll was going through but this was taking it too far. The purple troll got to his feet and strode menacingly to Branch, grabbing his wrist and yanking him close so that he could talk straight to his face. “How dare you, Branch,” he hissed.

“Let me go,” Branch demanded in a panic. He pulled at Creek’s grip but the purple troll was much stronger and his fingers wouldn’t budge. Creek tightened his hold and crumpled Branch’s vest in his fist.

“Listen to me for once,” he replied. “I’m sick of these games you keep wanting to play. Lowlife? Liar? My actions have been genuine but you still find it necessary to insult me.” Creek seethed when Branch turned his face away to avoid the icy daggers of his glare. The guru let go of the troll’s vest and grabbed his chin instead, forcing Branch to look at him. Branch tried desperately to escape his grasp, pushing his trembling hand at Creek’s chest and pulling at his forearm. Creek continued, unphased by the attempts, “We were all victims of the Bergens, Branch, but you’ve milked it for what it was worth and now this evil darkness is eating away at your soul. When are you going to realize that you’re not alone out here? When will you accept that, even with your grandmother gone, there are still trolls who love you? You are the one that is ruining your life, not the Bergens!”

“What a load of crap,” Branch said through his clenched teeth. “When will YOU realize that this is the way I am?! This is me and this is who I will be for the rest of my life. Why can’t you accept me for me? Why do you even care, Creek? You haven’t spoken a damn word to me for the last few years and tonight you suddenly know everything there is about me and the problems I have?!”

“Ugh, you’re so ignorant!” Creek released the troll and shoved him away, making him stumble back and land on his backside.

“Better ignorant than a selfish asshole!” Branch cursed back. They both panted from overwhelming feelings, the air was suffocating and stagnant. Branch rubbed the pain from his wrist and his heavy breathing turned into a small, restricted sob. Tears spilled from his eyes and he closed them tight, curling up into himself and hugging his knees to his chest. He hid his face from view, shoulders shaking softly.
“This is who I am,” he whispered, as if trying to reaffirm it to himself.

Creek buried his flaming emotions and tried to keep his doubts at bay. They pulled at him. He had to be right about this, for the both of them. He couldn’t remember the last time he lost his cool. All the meditating and positive vibes in the world couldn’t bring peace to his heart right now. “No, it isn’t,” Creek responded gruffly. This wasn’t the real Branch. He didn’t know about darkness or how to expel it, but he knew that it couldn’t be real.

Branch did a final sniffle and wiped his eyes, summoning his inner pieces back together, slowly but surely. “I’m leaving… in the morning,” he managed to speak out. “I knew that this was a bad idea. I’d rather deal with loud parties then be out here another day.” He weakly climbed to his feet and went over to his backpack. He stuffed his scattered things inside, along with his journal, and fluffed the outside of it before flopping down and using the bag as his pillow for the night. “Let’s forget this happened, alright,” he said quietly, facing away from Creek. “When we’re back home at the village, things can be normal again.”

Creek felt defeated even if he might have won the battle. This is what he gets for going to war without a plan. Maybe he didn’t know Branch as well as he once did, but his heart ached for that possible re-connection. They’re friendship was nonexistent so trying like this wouldn’t break anything between them, or so he wanted to believe. Unfortunately, the link between them was more broken now than ever before.

The night dragged onward, consumed by the whimsical music of nature. Night bugs skittered through the tall grasses and the white noise of the waterfall was always a pleasant backdrop. A small breeze picked up and Creek wrapped his arms around himself. He felt chilled to his core, but it wasn’t because of the changing weather. After a few hours, Branch managed to fall asleep by the dying campfire and the purple troll sat across the way, listening to the soft puffs of his breath while he slept. Creek already tried to sleep himself but his mind wouldn’t calm. He watched Branch’s back and his eyes wandered over to his ears and hair. The light of the fire reflected through the black strands and kept Creek’s attention for what seemed like an eternity. He fought with himself inside, gazing over the troll’s sleeping figure.

He thought about all the terrible things he’s said about Branch’s complexion. He thought about the insults that fell from his lips without giving it a second thought. Creek stared into the depth of grey that was Branch’s skin and tried to wrap his mind around the hue. It was definitely grey, but there was a tinge of blue inside. It was the farthest thing from a bright color, but in actuality it wasn’t an awful shade. Creek despised it because it wasn’t the deep cerulean blue that he remembered from their childhood. That’s the only reason why he hated it so much. Branch wasn’t ugly at all, like he’d told him multiple times before. In fact, he was actually one of the better looking trolls in the village.

His cheeks flushed a deep violet when he thought about Branch’s attractive features; rugged physic, strong jaw, definitely more intelligent compared to the other trolls. What in the world is wrong with
me, Creek thought to himself. He quickly shook away the weird turn his mind just took and rubbed his hands over his eyes. He felt so mentally tired and wished that sleep would take him fast.

Sunrise was approaching the horizon now, peeking light through the thicket of trees surrounding them. Creek lay on his back, wide awake, observing the diminishing stars. The concept of time was lost to the troll and he ended up staying awake all through the night. This stress couldn’t be good for his skin.

Chapter End Notes

Q_Q why do I do this
this was so fun to write XD hope you like the banter. please excuse any spelling or grammar errors.. I kind of edited this one quickly because I want to move on! Im sure you guys know how that feels haha

Branch spoke nothing to Creek that morning as he saddled up his backpack and stretched his arms up over his head. Without looking back at what was being left behind, he swung his black hair out and grasped the nearest tree, grappling himself through the forest as fast as he could muster to get back to Troll Village. He felt colder and a lot more empty today. That suited him just fine because it was better to feel this than what he’d been dealing with recently. He wasn’t angry anymore at the guru, just fed up with the situation entirely. He hoped that things really could go back to normal between them. The words that Creek said permeated Branch in an awful way and he was trying his best to stop thinking about them.

A few hours later when he stepped into the circle of the main village venue, the party was full blast with trolls and Bergens alike having wild conversation, dancing, eating, and ultimately breaking things in the area. Glitter and food were splattered in every direction. Confetti and paper streamers littered the Troll Tree and the grass below. He was instantly relieved that he wasn’t here for most of the party if it looked like this now. Branch took a mental head count, spotting Poppy with Bridget and King Gristle with their two royal Bergen guards and half the racket ball sports team. He also saw Smidge and Cooper, sitting on top of a large mushroom stage in the distance. They had large, devilish grins as Smidge lit a match-like twig and held the tiny flame to a row of huge, dangerous looking fireworks. Branch’s eyes widened and he felt his stomach twist. This was going to be bad.

“Wait, no! Don’t do that,” he called out to them. Before Branch could reach the two deviant trolls, the fireworks display rocketed into the sky with a deafening screech. It shot past the Bergen group, who yelped in surprise, and spiraled for the trunk of the Troll Tree in a dazzling display of rainbow sparks. The entire party stopped gasped to look at the spectacle, but then winced when a firework smashed into the bark.

“Oh my God!” Smidge cried out, grabbing Cooper around the neck and then they jumped off the mushroom to escape the falling pieces of wood.

Poppy watched with a stricken face as the whole right side of the great Troll Tree burst into blue and yellow flames. The fire violently licked up the trunk and through the leaves in the canopy. Trolls everywhere were screaming in disarray and leaping from their pods to the forest floor. The fires crackled madly, consuming everything in its destructive path, and danced over the branches to the
“Get out of the tree, let’s go! NOBODY PANIC! STOP PANICKING!” Poppy screamed as loud as she could through the sea of frantic trolls. But in reality, she wanted to panic and flee just like the rest of them. Everyone backed far away from the burning tree, many crying out as they watched their pod homes burn.

Branch yelled in frustration and darted around inside the confusion, trying to direct the traffic with his waving arms. “Listen to Princess Poppy, everyone back up! Stay away as far as you can!” Their Bergen guests backed up as well and watched the fire, though not as assaulted with grief as their tiny troll friends. They mumbled among themselves, wondering what they could do to help.

“I got this, I got this!” Bridget yelled out. She ran as fast as her stubby legs could carry, grabbing her Bergen guard Kevin’s hat right off his head. It was shaped perfectly like a bucket.

“Hey!” he exclaimed, covering his green balding head.

“I’ll bring it right back,” she said quickly. Bridget rushed over to the small lake that rested on the edge of Troll Village. They primarily used it for water sports but today it made Bridge the fire brigade. She dunked the hat into the water and filled it to the brim, then carefully waddled back to the tree and tossed a healthy amount onto the root of the fire. It went out instantly with a small poof and everyone sighed in unison. Bridget splashed the rest of up into the branches and the smaller flames dissipated. In actuality, the fire was small compared to the Bergens’ great stature so a single douse was good enough to bring the destruction to a halt. White smoke fumed from the damaged wood while black leaves and ash littered the grass below. Bridget shook the excess water droplets from Kevin’s hat and offered it back to him. He smiled and took it, covering up his balding once more.

Poppy jumped over to Bridget and hugged the Bergen around the ankle. “Oh Bridget, thank you! You saved our tree,” she whimpered, overcome with emotion.

“Of course, Poppy!” Bridget said. “But I don’t think some of your little homes made it...” And while saying that, a few burnt pods broke from their stems and crashed to the ground, shattering to wooden bits. The others dangled still from branches but weren’t salvageable at all.

“Oh darling, you’re so wonderful! You saved the day,” Gristle said with a huge gush, taking his girlfriend’s hands.
“Saved the day?! Look at this mess!” Branch gestured to the pods smoking and broken on the ground in front of them.

“Branch, let’s be positive for a minute. It could have been a lot worse,” Poppy interjected.

“This wouldn’t have happened if you would have listened to me about firework hazards when letting trolls use them in the village,” Branch bit off. “Those things were huge! Way outside the safety standards.”

“Of course I didn’t tell them to use such a big firework inside but what could I have done while I was entertaining our guests?” Poppy put her hands on her hips and stared Branch down. “Where have you been anyway? I banged on your bunker door forever! I can’t believe you locked me out.”

“Oh, I… I wasn’t there, actually. The lock was just a precaution, not directed at you necessarily but anything that wanted inside while I was gone. I spent some time camping in the forest because I couldn’t handle the noise… I told you that I don’t do parties, Poppy,” he said quickly as she started to look visibly upset with him.

“Hey now, you guys,” Bridget frowned. “It was an accident, don’t blame Poppy for this okay? She’s doing the best she can.”

Branch ran his hands through his hair and sighed rigidly. “I’m sorry. I’m just upset too. I shouldn’t have left like I did… I feel like I could have prevented this if I was here.”

Poppy pouted softly. She leaned and picked up a piece of wood from the ground while the trolls slowly gathered back to where she was standing. King Peppy sifted out of the crowd and placed his hand on his daughter’s shoulder in support, smiling softly. “Dangers happen in life,” he said to her. “We get knocked over, but all we can do is get back up again. Right, Poppy?”

Poppy smiled and nodded at her father, then turned to face the troll village. They looked scared, unsure, and quiet. “Listen up, everyone,” she said to them. “It’s going to be alright, I promise. We’ve had worse things happen to us and this is just a little remodeling project now, amirite?” She laughed nervously when the trolls quirked their heads, confused. “What I mean is,” she continued, “we’re going to have to rebuild the pods that we’ve lost. Let’s clean up what we can and take a note of whose pods were damaged and THEN,” the pink troll paused dramatically, “we can have a sleepover until they’re rebuilt! Help your fellow troll in need and let’s pair up so everyone has a place to sleep tonight.”
The crowd of trolls clapped excitedly and shouted in unison, “SLEEPOVER!”

“And in the meantime,” Poppy said turning to her Bergen friends. “We’ll have to put this friendship party on hold until later on.”

Gristle waved his hand, “Not to worry, Poppy. We, Bergens are worn out anyway, you guys party harder than expected. We’ll come over again for the next party.”

As soon as Branch left the waterfall retreat, Creek followed him out. He felt dazed but managed to match the grey troll’s speed through the forest and arrived back at the village just after the tragic events of the fire. He wanted to get into his pod and lock himself in bed for a good nap, but his heart sank as he gazed up at the smoking wood. He could feel the magical aura of the tree was damaged, but not irreparable fortunately. No doubt that this work was done by a lot of fools who had no sense for control. His thoughts felt clouded while he listened to the backdrop of Poppy’s announcement. How these trolls got all their energy in crisis was beyond comprehension.

Creek rubbed his tired eyes, then he spotted it; his pod among the wreckage of others. Creek went to kneel down at his pod, mouth open slightly in shock. He picked up a few small pieces of the lavender-painted wood and stared over the rough scorch marks. The entire pod was destroyed, caved in on itself from the fall out of the tree and most of it was burnt black. Carefully digging through the debris, Creek tried to find something that was worth saving but none of the items were recognizable. The entire place was broken and ashy. His beautiful home went from lavish to trash and he was away for just a few days. He thought about all the beautiful things he’d collected over the years that adorned the walls. He ached over the books and study material he wrote that carried secrets to peace and tranquility. It was all gone now. He had nothing. Everything that he held dear was destroyed.

Behind him, trolls who were also pod-less were pairing up with friends and family, carrying their saved possessions with them. They looked happy, despite their shared circumstances. Creek’s mind reeled thinking about the possibility of not finding someone who would take him in while his pod was built. The purple troll was the meditation master and yoga guru among the norm. He gushed positivism in the village and everyone liked him, apart from Branch, but even with that he didn’t feel he had a single, real friend besides Poppy. She was the queen-in-training, of course. Sometimes Creek wondered if it was her royal duty to befriend people. The rest of the trolls seemed to just tolerate Creek’s presence.

“Hey, Creek. Are you doing okay?”
Speak of the pink devil. Creek blinked back the fog in his eyes and got to his feet, turning and forcing a smile at Poppy who looked deeply concerned for him. “All is well, dear Poppy. It’s such a shame what happened but I am glad that everyone is safe.”

Poppy smiled back, leaning in and giving him a brief hug. “Yeah, I’m really glad no one got hurt. Have you figured out where you’ll be staying while the Fuzzlings go about their repairs?”

“Ah, well... no, not yet,” he said slowly, pressing his palms together. “To be quite honest with you, I’m not sure there is a place for me, but I have an idea —,” he was cut off when Poppy grabbed his hand.

“Oh, that’s nonsense!” Poppy said, dragging him abruptly back towards her friends, Biggie, Satin, Chenille, and Smidge, after waving them down out of the crowd.

“Wait – wait, this isn’t necessary,” Creek babbled with a small blush. “Poppy!”

“Hey guys! Hey,” she shouted happily. “Real quick question. Does anyone have room for one more troll? Creek here needs a place to stay. It looks like his pod was burned down, too.”

“Oh no, you were affected too?” Biggie turned and said with a frown. “I would invite you in, but there isn’t enough room between myself and Mr. Dinkles.”

“Meep,” the tiny green worm confirmed from Biggie’s hold.

The twin trolls Satin and Chenille folded their arms and looked at one another. “Awe,” they said together. “We don’t have room either,” Satin continued. “Our pod is full of designer clothes, there would be nowhere for you to sleep.”

“Besides, Satin snores in her sleep. Do you really want to be subjected to that?” Chenille grinned slyly as her sister huffed in annoyance.

Poppy laughed a little and looked worriedly at Smidge. “Uh, what about you Smidge? I know you have a bigger pod.”
“I would, Poppy,” Smidge said sadly, “but Guy Diamond’s pod caught fire too and we already agreed to bunk up. He’s still out trying to salvage some of his things. Why can’t you do it, Poppy?”

Poppy rubbed the back of her neck, “Because I already agreed to be roomies with Harper. She was the first one to come up to me.”

Creek held up his hand at the group and stepped in, “Really, everyone. It’s quite alright, I can manage without a sleepover. I did just spent the last couple days camping in the forest for meditative purposes. I can do it again easily.”

Poppy looked at him and quirked her head, “You were camping in the forest?” she asked.

He looked at her and laughed slightly, “Indeed. I was trying to find peace for my aura, like always. That’s… a normal thing.” Creek avoided her eyes nervously, wondering if he was in trouble somehow.

“Oh, that’s weird because Branch was camping too.” she said, eyeing Creek down with heavy suspicion.

“Oh! Branch!” Biggie said suddenly, holding up his finger from the idea. “Why don’t we see if Creek can stay with Branch in his bunker?” Creek stared at the big blue troll, absolutely appalled at the idea.

Satin laughed and nodded her head. “I agree. That little troll has so much room down there!”

“No, no, no,” Creek shook his hands in front of him frantically.

“Oh my God. That’s a great idea!” Smidge exclaimed.

The Snack Pack turned towards Branch’s direction immediately. He was across the field, crouched down at the base of the Troll Tree with a set of tools and a blueprint unrolled at his feet. He was twisting a small screwdriver into the wood, obviously hard at work creating a new safety mechanism that would prevent another fire catastrophe within the village.
Creek tapped the tips of his fingers together and bit his lower lip. “Do you REALLY think that’s a good idea? He seems incredibly busy and I don’t want to impose.”

Poppy watched the nervous reactions of Creek and lifted her brow. “I know that you two haven’t really gotten along much, but if you guys camped together then it can’t be all that bad.”

“I did not say we camped together,” Creek said in a hurry.

“It’s totally obvious Creek, and you don’t have anywhere else to go. I don’t know what you two were doing out there together, but let’s just get this over with, shall we?” She took Creek’s hand again and he was dragged mercilessly to where Branch was crouched. He tried pulling out of her grasp but she was stubborn and he didn’t want to go against the word of the future queen of their village, but this was something that he absolutely didn’t want to do! There was already enough tension between him and Branch.

“Branch! My main man, my best troll buddy, how are you doing?” Poppy said happily, yanking Creek up to her side. Creek refused to look at the dark troll, still trying to release himself from Poppy’s vice grip. How did she have such strength in times like this? He blamed his lack of freedom on lack of sleep.

Branch placed his screwdriver down and stood up, wiping his hands on his slacks. “Doing alright...” he said slowly, eyes shifting from Creek then back to Poppy. “What are you planning? What is this?” Poppy was so easy to read when she wanted something from Branch. Usually it wasn’t awful and Branch would give in without resisting, but with Creek obviously being held hostage he didn’t know if he wanted to take part.

“Planning? No, nothing being planned. I just have a favor to ask you,” she giggled, trying to keep the topic light. Branch crossed his arms defensively, unamused. Poppy dropped her happy charade and returned the grumpy look, then gestured to Creek. “Let him live with you while his pod is fixed. You’re the only one that has room, everyone else is booked up.”

“You’re joking,” Branch said flatly.

“I’m not joking,” Poppy said, getting slightly irritated.

“She’s not joking,” Creek added in, finally able to wrestle his hand out of Poppy’s. “It is true I have nowhere to go. I already said I would live outside among the wild.”
Poppy snapped a glare at the purple troll, “I’m not letting you live outside! You don’t know how long it’ll be before you even get your pod back. There are so many homes that we have to build – it could be weeks!”

Branch chuckled and put his hands on his hips. “I don’t think you have the survival instinct to last that long outside anyway, no offense.” Creek couldn’t help but scowl at the comment, his opinions totally being undermined by both trolls.

“So you’ll let him live with you?” Poppy asked hopefully.

“No. Absolutely not. Find someone else,” Branch said, waving his hand to usher them away, then turned to go work to his project. Poppy grabbed the grey troll and flipped him back around to face her.

“Branch!” she yelled, frustrated with his stubbornness.

“I said no! It’s a horrible idea, I’m not doing it.”

“It’s not horrible, it’s just Creek! Help your fellow troll in need!”

“It being Creek is precisely why it’s a horrible thing,” Branch said through the grit in his teeth.

Creek stood on the sidelines of the feud wondering if he could just quietly walk away while they talked about him like he wasn’t capable of handling his own situation. It was aggravating, to say the least. He wasn’t a poor, forgotten animal. He could do this on his own and he didn’t need either of them to help him.

“BRANCH!” Poppy shook the grey troll’s shoulders violently. “You better let Creek live with you until his pod is built or, so help me, you will NEVER see Gary again!”

Branch stopped and squinted his eyes at her, his frown deepened, “Is that a threat?”
“You bet it is,” she said hotly. “I know all your hiding places, too. Don’t think I won’t find him.”

Creek leaned in and whispered to Poppy out of curiosity, “Who is this ‘Gary’?”

“Oh, that’s his silly remote he uses for all his safety gadgets,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“It’s not silly, he’s my child and I won’t let you use him in your blackmail,” Branch said, though they could see now that his stance was starting to falter the more he thought about Poppy taking away his remote control.

Poppy grinned to herself with a new idea, placing her hands over her heart. She flung her hand out and gestured to Branch, face now solemn and full of emotion. “Do you remember everything I’ve done for you?” She questioned him, voice started to draw out deeply.

Branch panicked inwardly knowing full well what was about to happen and he took a full step back from the pink troll about to burst into song.

“For all those times I stood by you, for all the truth that I made you see,” she sang to him, pupils expanding like furry, depressed Swampkin.

Branch refused to give in. He couldn’t let Poppy win like this. This song was hitting below the belt and she knew it, too. His lips pressed into a thin line and his ears started to fold backwards, staring Poppy down with ungodly defiance. A dark blue blush started to fill his cheeks.

“For all the joy I brought to your life, for all the wrong that I made right!

For every dream I made come true, for all the love I found in you,

Be forever thankful, baby – I was the one that held you up… Now never let me fall,” she sang to him with full, beautiful notes, taking Branch’s hands in the passion.

“I’m the one that saw you… through it all!”
“Argh, fine! Fine! He can stay at the bunker, just please stop singing, Poppy!” Branch caved immediately and pulled his hands away, letting Poppy have her merciless victory. Poppy cheered and slapped Creek on the back.

“Easy win,” she laughed. “Branch can’t stand mushy songs for some reason. Welp! I’ll let you guys get to it then. I gotta go help with the clean up management. I’ll owe you one after this, Branch.” Poppy kissed her palm and blew the love towards Creek and Branch, skipping away back to the waiting Snack Pack looking exceptionally happy.

The two male trolls stood there next to each other and watched her, both of them feeling incredibly awkward with what just transpired.

“Look here, Branch,” Creek said finally, placing his hands behind his back. “I don’t need to move in with –”

“Don’t go against Poppy’s wishes. She’s the princess.” Branch said firmly, his voice sounding prickly but defeated. He bent and picked up his tools and blueprints, walking away from the purple troll. “I have things I have to do. Meet me at the hatch of my bunker when you’re ready,” he said over his shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

oh no, the poor tree! Don't worry, its not that bad. <3

Poppy's song - "Because you loved me" by Celine Dion
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nq8TasNsgKw

I slightly changed the lyrics to match the story.
Deep inside Branch’s survival bunker, at the lowest level, the grey troll was sitting at his work bench under a phosphorescent crystal light. He sat on a swiveling stool, measuring long boards of fresh cut wood on the table and marking numbers against the grain lines. Branch nailed the pieces together and started to sand the surface smooth with slow, specific hands. He lifted the end of the large construction and inspected it, pointed ears twitching when a soft knocking sound echoed through the tunnels from outside. He let out a heavy, pained sigh and set the item back down. His heart hammered inside his chest and he clenched the edge of his table, trying to will himself to answer the knock on his door. Branch didn’t want to feel trapped in his own home, but that’s what was happening. Poppy was asking so much out of him. He thought that she would understand when he resisted letting Creek stay in his bunker but his feelings didn’t get through to her. This was going to turn out worse than what happened out at the waterfall if he didn’t take some counter measures. He hoped that if he provided enough to Creek that they wouldn’t have to see each other until it was time for him to leave.

Branch pulled himself away from the table and left his work area, walking through the hall to the main room slowly, passing his stock of mixed supplies that adorned endless rows of shelving. He looked at the elevator and up the drafty, dark shaft where it traveled, trying to swallow the nausea brought by his anxiety. The knock sounded again from above, a little louder this time. Branch knew exactly who it was waiting for him, of course, and that made it more frightening.

“Just be normal,” he said to himself, rubbing his face roughly. “It’s only for a couple of weeks. It won’t be that bad. It’ll be fine. It’ll be easy,” Branch chanted to himself, climbing onto the elevator lift and throwing the lever. It throttled and started to climb, the platform rising up the shaft for a good minute before settling into place in the upper room. The small enclosure was just a misleading area for whatever wanted to break into his bunker. It was covered in dust and it was dark. The floor around the elevator was speckled with home-made traps for the unlucky attacker. At the low ceiling was his entrance hatch, light glimmering through the cracks of the wood around the edges. Branch slid open the peep-hole and glanced outside, “Who is it?” he asked.

“It’s me, obviously” Creek said dully, leaning over the door from outside so that Branch could see him through the tiny hole. “You told me to come here but you still ask who it is?”

Branch rolled his eyes and started to unlock the hatch. “It’s just precautionary,” he replied gruffly. He flipped open the panel and Creek grimaced, looking into the dark hole that Branch stood in. Taking a breath in, he jumped through the hatch and landed with a soft thud, the dirt pillowing up around his feet.
Creek quirked an eyebrow, vision adjusting to the dim light as he looked around the desolate room. “You actually live in this disgusting hole?”

Branch did a haughty laugh then rolled his eyes, shutting the door and making sure it was secure. “Up here? That’s a good one. Of course not.” He pulled the lever on the elevator and it lurched, taking the two trolls downward. Creek stumbled then steadied his feet, confused on what was happening at first. As they traveled down, he became totally engrossed by the sight before him. They passed entire rooms and storage units carved into the ground, illuminated by strong flicking light from below. There were dozens of shelves packed tight with numerous items, some of them totally unknown to the guru. He knew himself to be knowledgeable of different things, but Branch was giving him a run for his money and he became suddenly uneasy with that prospect. How much was this troll hiding under the tough hide? They finally settled at the main room and Creek stepped off the platform, looking around him with his mouth slightly agape.

Branch strode past him and gestured to his living area, “Welcome to my home,” he said, his voice strained while he tried to hide his displeasure of letting a new troll in his bunker that wasn’t Poppy. “I’ll show you where your room is and other areas that you’re allowed to be in. Otherwise, I’d like for you to not touch anything and keep to yourself until your pod is finished.”

“I have a room? I was actually suspecting that you would put me out on the floor or somewhere equally depressing,” Creek mused.

Branch was devoid of humor and looked at him blankly. “We can arrange that if you want to sleep on the floor instead,” he quipped.

“Ah, no… My room is fine,” Creek said, rubbing the back of his neck. He didn’t quite feel like testing the capabilities of the troll while he was in his domain. The most surprising thing was that Branch’s bunker was unlike anything the purple troll thought it to be. He imagined something dark, drab, or even dirty because they were legitimately standing inside a giant cave in the ground, but Branch had turned the place into something warm and cozy.

Branch grunted slightly and waved for the purple troll to follow, leading him down the left corridor to an oak wood door. The wood was sealed with a pleasant, brown stain and the handle was made from chiseled stone. The more hand-made things that Creek saw, the more his mind reeled that Branch was the one that made them all. He knew that the dark troll lived alone and had carved out this bunker after the tragic events with his grandmother’s passing, but the extent of labor and craftsmanship that Branch actually retained was unthinkable. Creek was trying a difficult battle to not be impressed.

“This here... is your place,” Branch breathed, his hand fidgeting on the door handle when Creek quietly stepped a little too close to his turned back. Creek’s natural scent reached his nose and the
hair on his neck and arms stood on end. He flung the door open and quickly moved inside, allowing Creek to follow him in. There was a plain, large bed with the same oak wood border and a white bedspread with two pillows that looked to be stuffed with feathers. At the side was a clothing chest and a nightstand with a shimmering crystal lamp atop it. There were also empty racks mounted on the walls and a filled bookcase with a comfortable lounge chair in front of it.

“Wow. This is very nice,” Creek said softly, looking at all the furniture while more realization slammed into him that Branch had probably made this entire room with his bare hands.

“It’s all I could put together on short notice,” Branch said quickly, his cheeks feeling a sudden rush of heat. “The washroom is the door across from yours, and the kitchen is further down this same hall. You know where the exit is, so that should be all you need. Take your time settling in.” Branch avoided Creek’s eyes, turning away abruptly and leaving Creek in the room, snapping the door shut behind him.

Creek watched the door for a moment, lost in thought, then went to the nightstand and touched the surface of it gently. He closed his tired eyes, feeling the positive energy pulsing from the grain into his fingertips. The whole room was giving him a peaceful vibe and he felt overwhelmingly blessed by Mother Destiny, once again. He felt his inner aura being tugged, telling him to try and get closer to Branch. Creek wasn’t sure what he actually wanted from the grey troll. Did he want his friendship again? Did he want closure? He just knew that he wanted more than what was there. Creek’s heart started to beat faster and he bit his lower lip, feeling slightly excited. Whatever ‘more’ that he craved was possible while he stayed in this room. He was resistant, and possibly even scared, when Poppy dragged him over to the grey troll earlier today, but now he was grateful for her stubborn act. Creek shifted over to the bed and touched that as well. The bedding was incredibly soft but the right amount of firm. Suddenly, exhaustion reared its head and took the purple troll in its unyielding jaws. Pulling an all-nighter was not something he normally did and it felt like he were made of heavy sand. He leaned in, face forward, and fell onto the bedspread with a small bounce on impact. It felt like heaven and he was so tired… Without moving from his collapsed position, sleep overcame the troll in a matter of minutes.

Branch wandered towards his kitchen after much pacing between the living room and his work room. He needed to do something to get rid of his anxiety but his heart wasn’t in the crafting mood anymore. He rubbed his hands over his face multiple times and then went into the kitchen, pulling out a chair from his dining table. He sat in it and then abruptly planted his face into the table, arms covering over his coal black hair. His heart was screaming inside and he couldn’t make it stop. He could smell Creek clearly now. The purple troll’s sweet scent was in his home, stuck in his nose, concentrated with no outside breeze to sweep it away. The guru smelled like fresh herbs and candied mint and it made Branch’s heart beat. This kind of thing didn’t make any sense to him. Despite the smell being similar to everyday things he loved, he absolutely hated that it was coming from the one he didn’t want to be around.

After many moments, Branch lifted his head with a slow exhale and straightened the mess he made of his hair. Dusk was approaching and dinner would probably make him feel better. He thought to
himself about what would taste good, then thought about what Creek would eat. He told himself he
didn’t want to make unnecessary contact but he knew that Creek had nothing, including essentials
like clothing and food. That’s the whole reason why he was staying here. Poppy would never
forgive him if he didn’t take care of Creek like he agreed. Neither of them have had a proper meal
since coming back home to the village. Root vegetables should be fine then, Branch thought.
Potatoes were something that everyone liked.

Scuffling around the kitchen always took Branch’s mind off ill thoughts. He pulled out his cookware
and started cutting leafy herbs into a pan, dicing bits of red potato and onion with them. After a lot of
back and forth, cooking dinner just for sustenance turned into cooking dinner for Creek for the first
time. He was nervous and wanted a good taste and presentation. “If he doesn’t like it, then it’s not
my problem,” Branch muttered, fighting with his thoughts while he threw in fresh sliced tomatoes to
his creation. On the other hand, he really hoped that Creek liked it. After a few hours of slow prep
and cooking, Branch ended up with a vegetarian red potato provençal and the juicy tomato smell had
him smiling. He didn’t cook every day but he wasn’t bad at it. He really outdid himself tonight and
there wasn’t a soul in troll village that wouldn’t devour this.

After placing the table for two, Branch left the kitchen to Creek’s bedroom and stopped outside it.
He stared at the door, that unwillingly feeling swelling up inside again. He couldn’t hear any
movement inside.

“Creek?” Branch knocked on the door lightly. “I made some food,” he offered, his cheeks heating up
with embarassment. The words felt weird to him. He’s never had anyone stay in his home before,
ever cooked for anyone but himself, and now he was knocking on a door he installed himself. This
definitely was weird. Branch waited for a reply but none came. Getting impatient, Branch knocked
again. Still, nothing. “I’m coming in,” Branch warned. He opened the door with his jaw tight and the
first thing he spotted was Creek planted face down, horizontal across the bed. His usual, perfectly
combed teal hair was mussed on one side and his body looked dead to the world.

Branch rushed over to the purple troll and touched his bare back, shaking him gently while he
worried something might be wrong with him. “Hey, hey! You alright?”

Creek’s eyes cracked open slowly, his vision glazed over. “Mm...” he hummed, unmoved from his
position.

Branch leaned in and pulled Creek’s shoulder back so that he could look better at his face. “It’s
barely been two hours and you look like you’re about to die. Are you sick?”

“Br.. Branch,” Creek breathed, still completely encompassed by sleep. The purple troll lifted a hand
and touched his thumb to Branch’s cheek, caressing it. Branch instinctively slapped Creek’s hand
away and he moved backwards in shock, the skin on his cheek electrified from the small touch.
Creek startled from the violent assault and sat up quickly, blinking and looking at Branch’s mortified face.

“I fell asleep,” he said, his voice fogged, raspy and almost questioning.

“That much is obvious now,” Branch said bitterly.

“What are you –“

“Dinner is ready if you want to eat,” he cut him off, not wanting to talk about anything further.

“Dinner?” Creek swayed slightly, then supported himself with his palm on the bed. He felt even more exhausted than before, having been ripped mercilessly from such a deep level of comfort. “Alright. I will be there... in a moment.”

Branch watched his vulnerable movement silently then walked back to the door, uneasy thoughts filling his mind that were ever conflicting. “Sure,” he said, leaving the room with a stiffened walk. He didn’t know what else to say, honestly. He knew that he wasn’t going to venture into that room again while Creek was in it, that was certain. He felt pain in his heart again. Branch rubbed his hand over his chest, trying to ease the throb away. “It’ll be fine,” he mumbled to himself again. “It won’t be that bad.”

Branch waited for Creek at the dining table and the purple troll managed to make it there on his own, pulling out the second chair and settling into it without really acknowledging Branch. He still looked like he was in a dream world while Branch set a plate full of food in front of him. The air was stifling and thick for the grey troll. The smell of sweet mint wafted through his senses. He flinched from it unnecessarily and he couldn’t remember actually shoveling any food into his mouth. He couldn’t taste anything that he was eating, but he didn’t feel disappointed as his eyes wandered back to the troll sitting across at the table. Creek ate quietly, half lidded eyes cast downward. Branch was grateful to not have to put up with idle dinner conversation because he was never good at it. Creek talked a lot usually and this was a nice change of pace. The back of his mind worried still about Creek’s well being since this wasn’t normal behavior. After they cleared out the food and Branch tossed the dishes into a sink full of fresh water, Creek got to his feet slowly and thanked him for the meal.

“I suppose I’ll take care of the next one,” he said softly. “I’m turning in first.” Creek turned out of the kitchen and went back to his room without receiving a reply.
Creek crawled into the white covers of his borrowed bed and reality was lost again. He drifted deep into an unknown world, blurry dreams with no plot coming and going in rapid succession until he settled on a single vision. The area was black with nothing inside it except himself and another. There was a soft outline of a troll surrounded by a thick dark cloud that coiled and shifted around his form. The troll glowed with a gentle pulse inside, but he was almost as dark as the world around him. He had no face or distinct features, but Creek wasn’t scared. The guru felt a loss of breath, the two watching each other intently before the clouded glow troll stepped forward, reaching out with his hand. Creek mimicked the movement and their fingers intertwined. Heat crept up his arm from their palms and the ultimate feeling of peace enveloped him. The mystery troll was swept by a gentle breeze, the dark cloud blown away like it was a mere irritation leaving behind the most radiating, positive aura that Creek had ever witnessed in his life. As quickly as the glow troll came to him, it left abruptly. The aura was ripped from his hand and his troll was taken away, leaving Creek feeling empty and crippled. Darkness swallowed him then, his senses muddled in distress.

Just before he felt he couldn’t feel any lower, Creek’s eyes opened and he awakened slowly from his dream. His mind clung desperately to the weird scenario that just played behind his eyes, not wanting to forget any of the details. It was so different, unlike anything he’d ever experienced before. It had to mean something more. Creek rolled onto his side and spotted a small clock sitting on the nightstand. The hands read just past six in the morning. He wondered if Branch was awake this early. Feeling refreshed, Creek slipped out of the bed and stretched his back and arms with a low hum. He had to visit the twins, Satin and Chenille, today to get some clothes, considering the only thing he owned now was the solo pair of tan pants he was weathering through the seams. That could come later, he wanted to do something for Branch before the day’s dramatics started with the little grey troll.

Chapter End Notes

Sleepy Creek is adorable.
“Hey there, Dumpy Diapers. What’re you up to this fine, sunny morning?"

Branch grimaced inwardly when he looked over his shoulder at the precipitating white mass that had just appeared in his garden. Cloud Guy sauntered up behind Branch and leaned up against the makeshift scarecrow staked into the ground, crossing his skinny blue arms, smiling pleasantly at the dark troll.

“Not much, Guy,” Branch said in a detached tone. “I’m working, as you can see.” With a sharp yank, Branch pulled a rather tangled weed protruding from his row of lettuce heads and tossed it with the rest of its brethren. He had already sweat over an hour crawling through the dirt tending to his vegetable garden, so his level of patience was thin. The tiny patch of carefully fertilized and sowed land was only a five minute walk from his bunker, nestled in a hidden enclosure away from prying eyes. Fall was upon them and he had to get his supplies packed for the winter before they got ruined. Branch was a natural early riser due to the multitude of chores he worked on; gardening, crafting, hunting, scavenging, and the like. This gave him a lot of quiet reflections since most of the village was still asleep at this time. It wasn’t normal for Cloud Guy to come bother him so soon in the day. The sun had barely peeked over the horizon. The air smelled suspicious with this visit, but he could spare a minute to humor the puff of cumulus. “Can I help you with something?"

“I don’t need help with anything. I’m perrrrfect,” the cloud purred. “You, on the other hand, need some help. I sense trouble in paradise, little amigo.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re excused, sir.”

Branch rolled his eyes dramatically and smoothed over the clean soil with his glove, feeling for more leafy intruders. “Cloud Guy, as much as I’d love to chat I never have have time for this. If you want something just spit it out, or go away. Preferably the latter.”
“Harsh man,” Cloud Guy mused with a smirk. “Actually, I was just curious about the little purple predicament that’s roaming around inside your batcave.”

“That’s Creek, obviously” Branch said, ignoring the prickling that started to crawl up the back of his neck. Creek had only stayed there a single night, how was it possible that he knew about him already?

“Oh, I know it’s Creek,” Cloud Guy said, his grin spreading wider.

“… And?” Branch urged him, frowning at the possibilities.

“Who would have thought that a sour puss like you would wanna play house with his bitter rival,” the cloud quivered with excitement. “THE famous Creek. Rival by day, but so dashingly handsome at night. Intelligent and articulate to boot, and that accent –!”

“That’s enough!” Branch glared at Cloud Guy ludicrously and then stood up from the ground. He peeled off his gloves and slapped his dark work pants of dirt violently. He was thoroughly done talking with this air head, especially if he was going to continue gushing about Creek. He didn’t owe Cloud Guy anything and he wasn’t going to give in to his tricks this time around. Everything was a joke and it could be too much sometimes. Visions of Creek caressed his thoughts and his heart did a subtle acrobatic. Shoving the awkward feelings aside, he gathered up his gardening tools and briskly turned heel, walking away from the cloud with hard defiance. Things were bad enough for Branch already, he didn’t need extra harassment about sharing his bunker with Creek.

“Hey, hey, hey, don’t run. My bad, Branch.” Cloud Guy floated through the air and caught him in a mere second, keeping up with the troll’s breakaway pace.

“I’m not running, I’m busy,” Branch grunted.

“I know what you’re on about,” Cloud Guy continued. “This is a touchy subject, amirite? This guy makes you feel things you’ve never felt before. You don’t know if you ‘hate him, tolerate him, or actually enjoy his company’. I’m here to explain these things for ya, free of charge.”

Branch stopped abruptly, causing Cloud Guy to bump into his back with an ‘oof’. The grey troll turned and squinted at him. “That’s oddly specific...”
Cloud Guy grinned and pulled Branch’s leather bound journal out of his fluffy body, holding it up with a little shake. Panic flashed through Branch’s face and he quickly grabbed at his journal, dropping his tools all over the ground, “How did you get that?!” but the cloud was faster and whipped it out of reach, moving backwards a step safer.

“Cool your fans, grabby hands. I’m a Cloud… Guy. I seep in anywhere I want and borrow things undetected. Oh, and I broke into your bunker too,” he said nonchalantly, shoving the stolen journal back into his body. Branch thrust his fist into the puffy white depths and felt around for his book, but to no avail. All he could feel was a cold breeze and the reverberating giggles of a perverted vapor of water. “Please be gentle,” the cloud cooed at him.

“Argh! Unbelievable.” Branch pulled his hand out in frustration and continued the walk back to his bunker, abandoning his tools on the ground. “You know what, just keep the stupid thing! Get back in the sky and do whatever clouds do. Float around, make it rain, whatever it is. I have nothing to say to you.” He practically sprinted the rest of the way home and lifted the wooden door in a hurry, but the cloud was faster, yet again. Cloud Guy slammed the hatch shut right before Branch could jump into the den, making him yelp when his feet almost got caught.

“No, sweet lover boy. I’m not letting you get away so easily this time. I really think you should listen to what I have to say.”

“Oh please, you’re out of your damn mind,” Branch bit off. “The only I love I feel is when I imagine wringing out your neck.”

Cloud Guy stepped languidly around the troll and wrapped a slender arm around his stiff shoulders. “I don’t physically have a mind, if you think about it,” he said lightly. Branch scowled and crossed his arms tightly, tapping his fingers impatiently on his bicep. Unphased, Cloud Guy held out his other hand in front of them with wide, shining eyes, “Once upon a time,” he whispered ominously with the gesture. “There was a beautiful forest. A couple of cute, dancing fireflies. A magical waterfall…” Branch’s entire body shuddered involuntarily and the cloud tightened his hold on his shoulders. “Oh, is that familiar?” he asked innocently.

“W-What do you…” Branch’s tongue stumbled and his defenses faltered. How far into the journal did this creature read? Cloud Guy possibly knew absolutely everything that had happened between him and Creek over the last couple of days? Of course he did, he was a cloud and could be anywhere in the sky at any time. He probably had a front row view with popcorn in hand! Branch suddenly felt embarrassed and exposed. It was true that he was having different kinds of thoughts about his situation with Creek. The purple troll has been pleasant enough to him. He couldn’t feel the malice and there weren’t many pokes about the hue of his skin. It’s almost like Creek had a personality makeover and Branch missed the unveiling event. The unexpected acts of kindness, the
small smiles, and the quiet glances that Creek made were like molten daggers that drove straight into Branch’s chest.

Cloud Guy took Branch at the shoulders and shook him roughly, pulling him out of his momentary stupor. “Under this grumpy, unattractive exterior is a sickeningly romantic troll who’s ready to find his mate this spring, and I know the perfect one to compliment you!”

The statement shocked the grey troll and caught him completely off guard. “MATE?” he yelled. “Is that what you’re trying to rile me up with? I wouldn’t be caught dead mating with anyone! You’re seriously wasting your time if you think I would take part in the troll mating season, especially with Creek! I wouldn’t touch that ass with a ten foot pole.”

Cloud Guy raised a seductive eyebrow, “What if he’s your soul mate? You wouldn’t be able to refuse that bubble butt then, buddy boy.”

The hysteria was never ending. Branch paled out and covered his mouth with his hand. The amount of delirium that he was being subjected to in this conversation made him want to puke. He tried his best to quell the tornado inside his stomach, forcing out his words. “No, that’s insane,” Branch said through his fingers. “I’ve known Creek since we were small, there’s no way something like that is possible. If we were m-ma... meant to be, it would have happened already.” His face was on fire and his stomach lurched again, the word ‘mate’ repeating over and over inside his head like a ticking time bomb. He’s met every troll in Troll Village and he already concluded at a young age that he didn’t have a soul mate. Not everyone had one since the Bergens began feasting on trolls. It was entirely possible that his potential soul mate was already long gone. A million and a half irrational thoughts tumbled through him, but the only thing he wanted now was to get into his bunker and get away. His mind’s eye flashed a vision from the night before, when Creek reached out and pet his thumb across his cheek.

“Oh Romeo,” Cloud Guy smirked knowingly and side stepped away from the bunker hatch, glancing at it for a split second. “Soul mates are serious business and work in mysterious ways. Sometimes it takes awhile before you realize who they are. I should know, I have at least four of them.”

Branch made a callous laugh, moving his hand to his aching belly. “What would you know about troll soul mates? You’re more ridiculous then I give you credit for, Guy.”

Cloud Guy grinned wickedly then latched both arms around the grey troll and hugged him fiercely, causing Branch to make a repulsive face. In the next moment, sounds of rustling and thumping came through the ground. Branch turned his attention to his bunker when the door opened from the other side. ‘Speak of the devil and he doth appear’ Branch thought bitterly, eyes grazing over Creek’s perfectly combed teal hair. The purple troll climbed out of the bunker carefully before being
surprised to see them there at the entrance.

“Oh, Branch, I thought you were asleep still,” he said with a nervous smile. The two trolls stared at each other, making Branch swallow thickly. Creek immediately flicked his eyes to Cloud Guy’s arms draped around Branch. Cloud Guy smirked at the purple troll and leaned in, nice and slow with puckered lips. He planted a large, wet kiss on the grey troll’s face, earning another queasy look from his hostage.

“Could you NOT, Guy?” Branch groaned, struggling to get out of the endless clutch of a hug. It was annoying how toothpick thin the cloud’s arms were but how strong they held with minimal effort. How were his arms even attached to his body?

“You realize you are in public? What is this, even?” Creek asked perplexed, gesturing at the two of them. “I heard a loud noise and came to investigate but...” he stopped when the entire state of Branch’s distressed face combined with the smug look on the cloud unconsciously switched something inside him. It was primal, the way he felt his aura heat with possessive emotions. Branch continued to pry himself out of Cloud Guy’s arms but they only squeezed him tighter, making him grunt in frustration.

“What does it look like, pretty boy?” Cloud Guy said coolly. “Branch and I were just getting a cozy before you so rudely interrupted.”

“That’s disgusting,” Branch said with a wry face.

“He obviously doesn’t like what you’re doing, let him go at once,” Creek said tightly, flexing his fists at his sides. The threads of his control were unraveling at an alarming pace the more he let Cloud Guy’s irritating facial expressions bare in. He never particularly liked this cloud, so Creek never paid him any special attention. They got along appropriately because they were never were together, so Cloud Guy’s taunting games were cheap and boring. Until now, that is.

“A little hypocritical, aren’t you?” Cloud Guy chuckled. “Why don’t you make me let go?” the cloud challenged, hinting that he knew more about Creek’s actions then he let on. He leaned in to give Branch another kiss and the grey troll shrunk away from it in terror.

“Ugh, please stop that,” Branch grimaced.

“Let him go,” Creek commanded again, his voice darkening. The creature was crawling under his
skin like a parasite. He would never admit it out loud, but there was now something he hated more than the lack of colors in Branch’s skin.

“Little Branch was just about to accept my proposal to be his mate for this coming Spring match-making,” Cloud Guy said proudly.

“Okay. Now that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard you say all day,” Branch muttered.

“Branch deserves more than an irritating, no-class fool like you,” Creek growled, surging forward and taking a sharp swing at the white mass, but his fist merely whiffed through the soft air. Cloud Guy made an appreciative ‘ooo’ sound and let Branch free from his hug, the grey troll stumbling some.

“Nice hook there, that could have been painful,” Cloud Guy drawled, sucking his legs and arms into his torso and levitating towards the sky. “This guy totally ruined the mood. I’ll be back with a promise ring, Branchy-poo, wait for me!” Cloud Guy winked at the two trolls then disappeared into the wavy breeze.

Branch breathed heavily in relief as soon as the cloud was out of sight, “Thank God, he’s gone.” He mumbled a string of curses to himself, ignoring Creek and to go back and fetch the gardening tools he left laying in the grass. He scolded himself on being way too lenient in most situations. The next person to mess with him was going to get clocked right in the jaw, no questions asked, no matter who it was. He’s gotten pushed around by Creek, Poppy, and now even Cloud Guy? Sometimes he wished that he was the one that caused the troubles.

Creek followed after Branch, still somewhat irritated with Cloud Guy’s antics. “He wasn’t being serious, right?” Creek asked slowly, touching the tips of his fingers together while he tried to find the peace within himself. He could feel his energy flickering like a vibrant flame. It was normal for him to become easily angered at stupidity, but not being able to get his feelings in order after the fact was uncomfortable. There wasn’t any legitimate sense to the way he lashed out at Cloud Guy. He regretted letting violence get the better of his actions, but seeing how close they were when Creek was attempting to repair the bond with the dark troll… His temper was with himself more than with the cloud.

“What kind of idiotic question is that?” Branch irked. “Cloud Guy was just being a nuisance, as usual.” Branch picked up his spade hand shovel and inspected it with a frown. “Also, I don’t need you to come to my rescue like I’m some damsel in distress. I was perfectly fine.”

“You didn’t look fine,” Creek countered defensively. “You are the only troll I know that despises
“Yeah, well,” Branch flustered, rubbing the tingles out of the back of his neck. “Just don’t pay any mind to it. He caught me with my guard down and I’ll be damned if I let him do it again.”

“Do you normally let your guard down around Cloud Guy?”

Branch turned his blushing face away when he saw Creek’s pained, concerned expression. “N-No, not normally.. he was just poking his nose into my private business. It’s too early to be dealing with this kind of stuff,” Branch murmured. Creek pressed his mouth closed and kept the rest of his thoughts to himself, kneeling on the ground next to Branch and picking up the rest of the gardening tools for him. Branch studied Creek’s action curiously but said nothing about it.

They made their way back to the survival bunker and Creek helped him put his supplies away in one of the upper compartments of Branch’s living room closet. He used his coarse black hair to push back the items securely on the high shelf. Creek was standing just a step behind him, holding out the tools one by one while Branch took them to put them in their proper place. It was a different kind of feeling, having someone there who wanted to help him with such a minuscule task. He didn’t need help, but Creek was a stubborn mule and insisted. The smell of soft, sweet mint glazed over Branch’s senses, causing him to slam his palm into the closet door frame for immediate support. Creek blinked at him, confused. Branch removed his hand and chuckled nervously, “I thought there was a spider,” he lied, grabbing the last item out of the purple troll’s hand and shoving it unceremoniously into a random box before snapping the door shut. He brushed passed Creek and moved to his writing desk near the main hall.

Creek pulled a fine tooth comb out of his hair and brushed up the long locks with a hum, “It’s practically midday,” he said. “The designer twins should be awake and running about by now. I’ll be some spending time replacing my personal items.”

Branch grunted in response, focusing more on the next chore he had to work on. He had pulled out his checklist clipboard from the desk and was flipping through the pages. He’d lost a lot of ground this morning and there was still so much to get done. Weed pulling, done. Next was preserving the hoard of berries he’d picked last week and rotating them into his winter stock.

“Branch, make free time for this evening,” Creek said, slipping his comb back into his bright hair.

Branch glanced up at the troll and raised an eyebrow, “Make time for what?”
“I’ve prepared a small gift to share with you, in return for letting me use your spare room. It’s only appropriate since I know you were forced into this.”

Branch went back to his clipboard and thought about protesting. “It’s not necessary to give me anything, I’m just helping a fellow troll in need... for Poppy. But if it’s something small... I guess it wouldn’t hurt.”

Creek smiled at the grey troll and strode to the elevator, “Perfect, I’ll be back before dark.” He jumped onto the pad and threw the lever, rising up to the exit.

Branch thumbed the corner of his checklist, feeling the all-too-familiar coil of apprehension wrapping around him. It felt slightly different this time, more captivating. Creek had a present for him? That was weird. Everything about the company they shared was weird. It really was nothing like how he remembered it. Creek was supposed to be a vile, relentless bully at every corner of conversation. The Creek that he invited into his bunker was different. He was still sarcastic and had many saucy comebacks, but there was kindness and understanding laced into his expressions. He liked that Creek wanted to help him. He liked that Creek wanted to defend him from Cloud Guy. Branch was interested, but also scared of this new Creek. He was also scared because he was interested.
Chapter 8

Satin and Chenille tapped their chins in unison, pondering Creek’s current outfit while he twisted around in front of a long mirror. There were all sorts of colorful clothes and unique accessories littering the floor of the twins’ pod, most of which Creek had absolutely no interest in. Although right now, the deep royal purple robe he adorned felt perfect. The material was high quality, pristine, and soft on his skin. The feathered collar was big and puffy, cradling around his neck, and the length dropped just hovering above the ground at his heels. Holding his sleeves in front of him, Creek inspected the arm length and hummed to himself. When it came to making clothes, no one in Troll Village was better than the twins.

“I’ll take this one too,” he concluded, shrugging off the robe carefully and folding it neatly over his arms.

Satin smiled big and put her hand on her hip. “I knew you’d like that one, it goes so well with your complexion.”

“We actually modeled that robe after your image,” Chenille chimed in.

Creek raised his brows and placed the item with the rest of the clothes he was buying from them. “Did you? What do I owe the honor,” he asked.

Satin waved her hand, “My sister and I knew that you were going to come around so we made it especially for your taste. You’re our best customer after all, Creek.”

“Yeah, and it’s actually such a shame about your beautiful pod,” Chenille pouted. “Can’t believe that all of your stuff got burned with it.”
“Ah… yes, it is a shame,” Creek said, pained slightly. “But all is well, I’ll have my home back soon enough.”

The twins shuffled their feet and looked at one another before Chenille nudged her sister with her elbow. Satin rolled her eyes and put her hands behind her back, “So, uh, Creek, we were wondering about something.”

Creek looked at them warily then nodded, “Yes?”

“How is it, living with him?”

Not expecting that question. “Pardon me?”

“You know, the unhappy troll. How can you live with Branch underground? You guys are like, totally polar opposites. What’s it like?”

Creek frowned and folded his arms, looking away from them to gather his thoughts. “It is… normal, I suppose. It’s not bad at all. We’re getting along, for the most part.”

The twin trolls looked at each other, taken aback, then moved to pick up Creek’s clothing order to place it in a big bag at the center table.

“He’s just so unhappy all the time,” Satin said quietly. “I guess, maybe sometimes I worry?”

“I’d be careful. Better hope that stuff doesn’t rub off on you, Creek,” Chenille snickered. “I don’t think Troll Village can handle two grey trolls, they don’t even like one.”

Creek snapped a glare at the coral blue troll, making her jolt slightly. “I think I will be perfectly fine,” he grated. “I’ve got to head out now. Thank you for your help, loves.” Creek picked up his bag and gave them a short wave, leaving the fashion twins’ pod with a sour taste in his mouth.

“Did I say something wrong?” Chenille asked, confused.
“Ehh, probably,” Satin shrugged.

Creek reminded himself that their thinking wasn’t out of the ordinary. Just a week ago, Creek thought the same thing. No one in the village liked Branch’s skin color, but it’s not like his unhappiness was a contagious disease. That’s what irritated Creek enough to break his usual, calm demeanor. He regretted letting that side of him out of the cage, especially around Satin and Chenille, and practically anyone else in the Snack Pack. If Creek acted as anything but a pure, spiritual guru then he was sure there would be wild concerns. He was also irritated at himself because more often than not, he was quick to lose all the peaceful vibes he sought to keep.

Whipping out his long, teal hair, Creek stepped along the wooden path inside the confines of Troll Tree and pulled himself up into the leaves above. His next destination was a small tea shop pod just on the other side of the foliage. He landed gracefully outside the entrance and adjusted his bag under his arm, doing a dusty pat-down before entering the pod. A tiny bell on the door jingled, announcing his arrival. In the far corner of the shop sitting at a two chair table was Poppy, sipping on a cup of what looked like hot chocolate. She looked up at the door and smiled, giving him a wave. He smiled back and made for the table, plopping down into the chair opposite of her.

“Hiya, Creek,” she smiled warmly again. “How’s it going? This is so good, do you want to try some?” She offered her cup to him and he politely declined.

“No thank you, Poppy dear. I hope I haven’t kept you waiting too long,” Creek said, setting his bag down on the ground beside his leg.

“Nah, not too long. I ordered your usual favorite, it should be ready soon.” Poppy set her cup down on its saucer and reached into her fluffy, pink hair. “I summoned you over because I have a favor to ask.” She pulled out a dark colored, leather journal with a steel lock planted over the front cover and offered it to him. Creek took the book and tilted his head, inspecting the weathered engravings and crumpled page edges.

“… This is –,” he said, looking up at her.

“It’s Branch’s diary,” she said. “Cloud Guy gave it to me.”

Creek put the book down on the table immediately as if it were made of fiery coals, staring at it. “Does Branch know that this is here?”
Poppy spluttered and laughed, “Of course not, he’d lose his mind if he knew I had it! He knows that Cloud Guy stole it, so I’m sure the guy is scheming right now to get his journal back. We should prevent something drastic from happening, though. Branch can be a little harsh. Since you’re living with him for awhile, I just wanted you to take it back to him before Branch makes Cloud Guy dissipate permanently.”

“That’ll be easy enough, I suppose.” Creek recollected the scene of Branch and the annoying cloud earlier that morning. ‘So this is what that was about,’ he thought. It didn’t quite help his opinion on the white puff.

“There’s something else, too,” Poppy said in a more hushed tone, “I have reasons to believe that...” she stopped, biting her lip and looking around the shop to make sure that her words were private. “I believe that Branch is somehow, er...” her cheeks colored slightly, “imprinted... by you.”

Creek sat back in his chair and furrowed his brow, “Imprinted? I haven’t hurt him at all,” he said defensively.

“No, not like that.” Poppy blushed more and fanned herself, then picked up her hot chocolate to take a quick drink before continuing. “I read some of his journal... I couldn’t help it. I would do anything for Branch to make him happy in the end, even if it meant snooping through something that wasn’t meant for me.” She pouted and looked at the journal, feeling guilty about it. “He wrote things about you in it. He’s... emotionally conflicted, simply put. There’s also this strong smell that he only gets when he’s around you. Not like body odor, but something more special. The way he describes it... it’s beautiful. It makes me think that you could be his soul mate.” Poppy dipped her gaze back into her cup and her finger tips fidgeted.

“That’s impossible,” Creek refused, frowning. “That’s the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard you say, Poppy. I don’t smell anything from him, he is not my mate. Not in a million years. I don’t have a soul mate. I’ve never met them and I’m assuming they were taken on a Trollstice long ago.”

“I figured something like that,” Poppy nodded. “You don’t act like you’ve found your true mate, but I think it’s because Branch is unhappy. He isn’t emitting a scent for you because he physically can’t... given his circumstances. Branch has shut himself down as a troll in more ways than one.”

Creek pressed his hand to his forehead, unable to accept what the princess was telling him. He knew of soul mates, every troll did. It was the most sought-after moment a troll could have when two soul mates came together. Once upon a time, Creek had dreams about his potential lover and how compatible they’d be. Their every day lives would be filled with romance and their beautiful auras would mingle together in perfect harmony, bringing the ultimate feeling of happiness. Every troll
couple would envy them. Years flew by, Creek grew up, and he never found his mate. He’s met every Troll in the village only find the other half of his soul just didn’t exist. It was a painful ache to bear in his heart, but through meditation and calming practices he was able to get over it and move forward. His love life was nonexistent, so he focused his love on destiny, nature, and the energy flow of the universe.

Cutting through the building tension, one of the waitresses came to their table and placed a steaming chai tea latte in front of Creek. The small green troll with vibrant orange hair smiled cutely at him. Creek sighed and thanked them while keeping his eyes averted, not wanting to partake in small talk. The waitress pouted and scurried away back behind the counter, letting him sip the creamy tea and bask in the delicious spices. It helped him calm immediately.

“This is all just an assumption based on what I’ve seen, Creek,” Poppy said, trying to help him with the idea. “I could be totally wrong, too. I just wanted to let you know, in case something happens.”

“I am one hundred percent certain that Branch is nothing more to me than anyone else in this village. He’s a regular troll, nothing special. What could possibly happen, princess,” Creek said, his tongue becoming stiff while he focused on his latte. “The fact that you would think someone like me would bed a troll like him is appalling, in itself.” Creek’s heart clenched at the words, his criticism unwelcome even in his own mouth.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” Poppy shook her head. “Just be careful, and be careful with Branch. You can’t deny he’s different, Creek. He’s anything but a regular troll. I don’t want either one of my best friends to get hurt,” Poppy concluded, picking up the journal and reaching over the edge of the table to slip it into Creek’s clothing bag. “Please just take this back to him, will ya? He’ll probably be more freaked if I did it. It’s so hard to lie to his face, he sees right through me.”

Creek nodded with his lips on his cup, letting the liquid burn his tongue in an effort to quell the uncomfortable squirming inside him.

Poppy stood from the table and patted Creek on the shoulder, “Okay then, I’ll see you later. I have royal business to attend to, as always! Oh, and the Fuzzlings are almost finished drawing out the blueprints for all the new pods. They’ll probably want to go over it with you, so make sure to talk to them before they start building.”

“See you, Poppy,” Creek said, watching the pink troll leave the shop. Now it was just him, alone with his tea and his mind.
Dusk fell upon the Troll Village and everyone was turning in for the night. Creek thought about putting off going back to Branch’s bunker but decided that it would be pointless to avoid the grey troll. There was no reason for him to be so concerned about what Poppy said. Being stubborn never bore any fruit, though it was incredibly hard to shake such a bad habit. He made it down the elevator shaft while holding the multiple bags of his market haul and stepped gingerly to his room, pushing through the door and dropping the purchases on his bed with a grunt. His savings were practically run dry since he’d replaced most of his important items. Digging through the bags, Creek pulled an outfit and finally ditched his old khaki trousers in the trash. He slipped on a loose, long sleeve white shirt and simple black slacks. It gave off a modern, Victorian style that he was quite fond of.

“Finally,” he breathed, stretching in the new clothes. Giving his hair a quick brush with a comb from his new bath set, Creek opened his door and peeked his head out, on the lookout for a short, black-haired troll. Creek heard some thumping around when he came into the bunker, so he knew Branch was somewhere inside… Now came the hard part; returning the journal without getting caught in the angry crossfire that was meant for Cloud Guy.

Creek had no idea where to start searching. Branch’s bunker seemed like a maze outside the main chamber. He felt somewhat nervous, tiptoeing around opening doors and looking around corners. This place never ceased to amaze him when catching quick glimpses of the stockpile of supplies and furnishings of each room. They were all different, but they made sense. If anything irreversibly tragic were to happen, Branch being prepared would be an understatement.

Ears strained for any echo of sound to help him in his search, Creek made his way down one particularly warm tunnel that felt different from the rest. Aesthetically, it was the same as the rest of the bunker but the energy felt different, making the skin on his arms tingle. The wooden door at the end was open ajar and light spilled from the crack.

“Branch?” Creek called out, walking to the door and opening it the rest of the way. His eyes widened when he saw the many rows of shelves packed tightly with all different colored books, filling in every crevice of the room. It was a small library, lit by bright yellow luminescent crystals that mimic candlelight. The sharp glowing stones were wedged into the ceiling and into the bookshelves, creating an atmosphere that was breathtaking. Smack dab in the center of the room looked to be a large nest of pillows and thick blankets that was twice the size of his own bed. Branch probably spent many comfortable nights nestled in, reading his books when he wasn’t working.

“What are you doing in here?” Branch asked sharply.

Creek blinked, seeing now that Branch was on one side of the room holding a stack of novels in his arms. He stepped into the library, gripping Branch’s journal tightly in his hand. “I was looking for you,” the purple troll said.
“You could have waited,” Branch grumbled bitterly. “I asked you to keep to your own room but here you are, snooping around unsupervised. Figures as much.” The troll set his books down at the small desk in the corner of the room and strode over to Creek. “What do you want?” Creek rolled his eyes at Branch’s hostility, holding out the heavy leather journal to him. Branch looked at it then gasped, snatching it swiftly from Creek’s hand, “My private journal! Why do you have it?!” He turned his back to him and inspected the book, trying to discern if it had been broken into or tampered with.

“Po – … er, I found it. It dropped out of the sky. A gift from destiny, you could say,” Creek lied. He grimaced at his own incompetence, almost saying Poppy’s name. Poppy was an awful liar, but he was one as well. “I remembered that it was yours because I saw it while we were in the forest, you had it then. I’m assuming you’d want it back?”

Branch pet the cover of his journal lightly and hugged it to his chest, breathing in relief. “Yeah. I was really starting to worry there,” he laughed weakly. “It looks fine, everything is fine,” he mumbled to himself, moving back to his desk and placing the journal in one of the drawers.

Creek took a moment to admire the library some more, walking to the main bookshelf and reading along the spines. Everything was alphabetical by title, of course. He was surprised, but also expected that kind of particular attention coming from Branch. There were so many subjects and topics, things he’s never heard of… *Lighting and Cooling, Little Women, The Lighting Thief, Lord of the Flies, Les Schtroumpfs…* Creek stopped, his heart wedging up into his throat. The deep blue spine with silver linings was frayed gently at the edges from multiple readings. Creek pulled the book from the shelf and stared at it in disbelief. This used to be his book. He’d read this exact story a hundred times over when he was young… and then what did he do with it? Creek wracked his brain, mouth pressing thin. He remembered trying to give it to Branch, but it was rejected. But the book was here, in Branch’s home, twenty years later. What were the actual odds of him coming here to find this?

Branch came back from his desk, rubbing his arm slightly, “Thanks, and I’m sorry, Creek” he said stiffly. “I didn’t mean to say you were snooping, I know that was rude.” Creek was quiet and the grey troll shuffled slightly. Branch noted Creek’s change in demeanor when his apology was ignored, then glanced at the blue book in his hand. If Branch had color, all of it would have drained from his face in that moment. Suppressed memories came flooding back, suffocating his mind.

*I know you’re sad.*

*Reading this book always made me happy so I wanted you to read it too.*

*You love books.*

*You’re my best friend… I’m your friend, right?*
“You kept this?” Creek whispered, looking up at him. Branch sucked in a shaky breath, eyes darting from the book to Creek’s stunned expression. His stomach twisted painfully and his palms began to sweat. Reaching out a shaking hand, Branch tried to take the book from Creek but this time, the purple troll held it back swiftly.

“That’s not what you think it is!” Branch said in a frenzy, biting his lower lip and trying to go for it again. Creek switched it to his other hand and held the troll back.

“It’s exactly what I know it is, Branch. Why did you keep this?! Do you not hate me??”

Branch made a loud, frustrated noise and stepped back, wringing his hands together. “I don’t hate you, Creek! I’ve never hated you. You just… No, you’re the one that hates me!”

“I don’t hate you, Branch.”

“You hate me because you can’t accept who I am.”

“How could I accept this state of you? This is not who you really are, regardless of how long you’ve been in this slump. You were not born grey!”

“Here we go again,” Branch grit his teeth, his temper rising. “Look, I don’t have an excuse fitting enough for you about the book. You threw it at me and I kept it. There’s nothing else to it. Sorry if that fucking bothers you.”

“Ugh.. Don’t be sorry,” Creek grimaced with a sigh. He dropped his arm and slipped the book back into its space on the shelf, letting his fingers linger on the spine for a moment. “I’m not upset that you kept this... I’m happy.”

“You’re – what?” Branch was confused now, the purple troll taking him for a loop.

“Well, it’s not that important, but” Creek rubbed the worried lines from his face with both palms then folded his arms loosely. “I’m happy, Branch. I’m glad that you’ve been taking care of my favorite story this whole time.” He didn’t want to go too far into details because he wasn’t sure of his own feelings on the matter, yet.
“Taking care of… I wouldn’t go that far,” Branch sighed. The grey troll pulled a random book off the shelf without looking then moved around the large mound of bedding on the floor, dropping into a pillow that was almost as big as him. “If you don’t have anything else, you can leave now.” Branch idly flipped through the book, his face devoid of expression.

“I did ask for you to keep your evening free,” Creek said, taking the liberty to jump into the mountain of pillows with him.

Branch yelped in surprise, bouncing slightly from the impact, “What the hell? Get out of here!”

“My gift, Branch. I haven’t given you my gift, I believe it’s time to share it.” Creek ignored his protests, feeling mischievous. He reached into his hair and pulled out a black velvet bag with a loose drawstring. He settled into a comfortable position then offered the bag to Branch, who looked at it cautiously.

“What is it?” he asked, unsure.

“Why don’t you open it?” Creek said with a slight smile.

Branch rolled his eyes and accepted the bag, pulling the drawstring and carefully letting the contents out onto his lap. His gift was a pair of thick, clear glasses with long-stemmed handles, and a slender dark bottle filled with liquid. There was no label or discernible markings that told him what was inside it.

“This is… interesting,” he said, quirking a brow at the items. “What is it?” he asked again, more sarcastically.

“It’s wine, you uncultured barbarian.” Creek reached over and took a glass and the bottle from him, unscrewing the lid. “I made it myself. Only few trolls in this village have access to pleasures like alcohol. I own a private stock with King Peppy for safe keeping. I’m assuming you’ve never had a drink like this, so I’ve mixed it with fresh pressed berry juice so that it goes down easier.” Creek poured the liquid slowly until his glass was half full, then handed it to Branch so he could fill the second one. Setting the bottle aside, the purple troll tipped his cup up and nodded to Branch to try it.

Branch blushed slightly and held his glass by his fingertips, feeling as though he were holding something rare and expensive. He knew about alcohol, but he’d never tried any and he didn’t know anyone that had. The aroma wafting from the deep red liquid smelled strongly of fermented
raspberries. The grey troll watched Creek take his first swallow and he looked thoroughly happy with his drink. Swallowing slightly, Branch brought the cup to his lips and took a daring gulp.

He was hit with a flash a sweetness, then an unexpected fire flew down his throat. Spluttering, Branch made a wildly grotesque face with his tongue sticking out. “Oh God!”

“Good, isn’t it?” Creek laughed at him from behind his glass.

“Yeah, if you’re into drinking poison,” Branch said, his mouth overrun with a dry, bitter aftertaste.

“It gets better the more you drink it. Wine is an acquired taste, my dear.” Creek swirled the liquid in his hand gently and hummed, sinking back into the pillows before savoring the wine again.

Branch scowled, unwilling to be beaten by a mere beverage. If Creek could drink it, then so could he. Taking a breath in, the troll took another large dose and forced it down. This time, the fire wasn’t as harsh and the sweetness of the berries lingered longer on his tongue. Poppy was the only one who ever gave him gifts. She never had any particular reason to give him presents but he always seemed to end up with chests full of useless scrapbooks, cards, and knickknacks that shed endless amounts of glitter all over his bunker. Creek’s present was unique, but it wasn’t a bad thing. After a few minutes of sipping, his body started to feel warm and lax. He picked up his book and sifted through the pages idly, pondering if he had the patience to read while Creek was with him. The purple troll was quiet, already finished with his first glass and pouring a second. He seemed content enough to lounge in Branch’s reading nest and do absolutely nothing.

Branch wasn’t sure how much time had passed or how much he’d drank, but he was starting to feel incredibly drowsy now. His book wasn’t interesting at all. He sank into his body pillow and stretched his arms and back, feeling hot but in a pleasing way. His face burned and he was light-headed. He thought about all the things that had happened up to this point and how unreal every event had been. His life was being a lot more dramatic than he wanted, but for moments like this he could probably handle a few hectic days. For the first time in a long time, Branch was feeling good. Dazed and satiated, Branch drifted over his thoughts and breathed slowly.

Creek’s mouth twitched, his eyes closed as he lay in the pillows. He heard the shift in the cushion as the grey troll became more comfortable. It gave him a wonderful sense of accomplishment, knowing that his wine was melting away trivial worries in the troll. There was no doubt that they were feeling the same slow burn. Slowly, his chest started to swell with a feeling he didn’t recognize, wrapping around his heart and pressing him forward. He was being pushed, over and over, in a direction that didn’t make sense. Creek’s eyelashes fluttered and his lips parted slightly.
A quiet melody spilled from Creek’s tongue. He couldn’t have stopped it and he didn’t want to. His vocal cords vibrated pleasantly with the thrum of his heart. He was buzzing like a firefly, encased in a simple, comfortable bliss that wasn’t easily come by. Warmth spread over every inch of Creek’s body and he sunk deeper into the pillows. He let his head fall farther back, sighing.

“You're folded into me…”

“Early in the morning when it's too cold... You're careless on your feet,” he sang softly to himself, closed to the world. “Swaying in the hallway like a lost soul.”

Branch blinked through his fuzzy eyes. He sat up gingerly and looked over at the purple troll by his side, his pointed ears twitching to Creek’s random musical venture. Why was he singing all of a sudden? It sounded so… smooth, and peaceful. Branch was usually quick to shut down any troll that tried to sing around him so everyone assumed that he hated music, but that wasn’t the case. He hated obnoxious, loud, erratic music that gave him headaches. But Creek… he got his attention. It was so rare to hear a sound that he enjoyed coming from someone else. He was weak to soft, poetic sounds and his body shivered at the notes.

“Lasting the fall, onto the spring... Nothing at all, still everything.”

Creek’s singing wasn’t new to Branch, he’d always catch snippets of it. Creek had an accent that was easily noticed above other trolls when they sang in the village, but this was the first time that it really penetrated his stubborn ears. The sound snaked through his head and caressed his chest like a heavy wave. His fingers clenched into the thick blankets he sat upon. Unconsciously swaying in time with the slow words, Branch moved his hand to his brow, feeling significantly lighter than normal. He wasn’t sure if it was intoxication or if Creek’s singing was physically affecting on his body. It was absolutely lovely. It was wonderfully weightless to listen to him. There was an incredible awareness wrapping him up in a hot blanket of new desires, helping bleed out the cold that he harbored at his core.

“Love, stay patient... Baby, everything takes time.

The ending will be worth the waiting.

Soon it will be crystalline.”

Branch found himself moving closer to Creek, closer to the song, twisting towards the troll and leaning forward. His eyes were hazy while he dragged them over Creek’s face. He admired the long lashes resting on silver freckled cheeks. He watched Creek’s lips as he sang and felt the octaves crawl over his dark skin. There was something special woven into his voice that Branch couldn’t ignore. It made him tingle, pulling him inward. His thoughts were clouded by wine, unable to
comprehend exactly what he wanted or what he was doing.

“Went from black and white, snapping into color like a drug dream.”

The corner of Creek’s mouth turned up into a small smile, totally unaware of how Branch was closing in on him, shifting through the mounds of blanket and pillows undetected. Branch’s eyes flickered at the smile. Never in this world would he tell the purple troll, but he found that smile to be brilliantly handsome. Creek was utterly attractive and Branch always had to be on guard. He had perfect skin painted with the most beautiful, soft lilac color. Any troll would kill to have a hue such as his. It was a bright glow of color that you could never get tired of looking at. And his hair… Branch moved his attention up to the mass of vibrant teal strands laying over the back pillows.

“The blinking of your eyes,
Stirred up something in me that you can’t see.”

The familiar scent hit Branch then, strong and unyielding. Sweet mint leaves caressed his nose, followed by an earthy, herb-like after effect. His body crumbled inwardly, losing sight of the single tendril that bound him to his strength. Creek’s hair was the merciless culprit emitting this incredible scent that tortured him in the worst ways. His heart hammered in his chest, mouth agape, as soft pants started to escape his throat. It took no time for the rest of his coherent thought to melt away. Branch lost his mind completely. Without another second thought, Branch closed his eyes and buried his flushed face straight into Creek’s full bodied mane, sucking in a sharp breath through his nose. He took in the sweet smell with everything he had and it traveled through him like an icy breeze. His body shivered again in excitement and he moaned softly, totally enveloped. Nothing else smelled as perfect as this.

The library suddenly became very quiet, right before he felt a warm hand reach up and touch him on the shoulder. “Branch…?” Creek was looking up at the grey troll, bewildered, his cheeks full of color.

Branch bolted upright out of Creek’s hair, blown with panic when he realized what he was doing. “O-Oh... God,” he stuttered. He just smashed his face into Creek’s hair! Troll hair was magical and sacred to the individual. It was an extremely intimate gesture to touch another troll’s hair, even more taboo to touch without asking. He had no words, no excuse, for the unnatural impulse that caused him to cross that line. He started to back away from the purple troll, stumbling slightly. “The smell… I-I… I couldn’t –.”

“Wait,” Creek said quickly, sitting up and taking Branch’s wrist before he bolted away. “Please wait!
“S’not okh… not okay,” Branch blushed horribly when his tongue tripped over itself, covering his face with his free hand. “I’m so sorry, Creek. I d-don’t… don’t know why,” his lower lip trembled dangerously and Branch bit into it harshly. He was so embarrassed, overwhelmed, and muddled. He felt weakened and exposed. Creek could do or say anything and Branch would probably shatter like glass. It was frightening feeling for the purple troll to have that kind of power over him. Pressure built behind his eyes as he felt like crying in frustration, unsure of himself.

Feeling somewhat sluggish, Creek still managed to pull him back in. In a single fluid motion, Branch was pressed up against Creek’s chest and the purple troll wrapped his arms around him tightly, one at his waist and the other around his back. His hand guiding the back of Branch’s head, allowing his cheek rest at the crevice of his shoulder.

“Shh… Shh.. It really is alright, I promise,” Creek hushed him, doing his best to keep from quivering himself. “Everything is fine, love.” Branch choked slightly on an oncoming sob, but he merely leaned into the hug and fought back the tears stubbornly. He gripped Creek’s sleeves and cursed at himself when the silk fabric smoothed along his hot cheek, his heart was fluttering uncontrollably.

The long-sought connection that Creek craved was right there. Right there! It was prime, ready to be grabbed and tangled up in his hand. He wasn’t going to let it go and he wouldn’t let Branch run away. Creek certainly knew that the berry wine would help Branch relax, but he wasn’t prepared for the fortune of Branch’s unruly actions.

Branch had breathed in his preciously kept hair like it was source of life. He’d never experienced someone scenting him in such a way. Buzzed with alcohol, the grey troll was raw and rampant in his emotions. Poppy had told Creek about this at the tea shop, but he didn’t actually believe that Branch could smell something so strong emanating from him. He thought it may have been a fluke, or some other explanation entirely. It couldn’t be the scent of a soul mate, it couldn’t be. It was impossible, right?

Their childhood used to be intimate before Branch lost is colors, having fun together without a care in the world. They were inseparable best friends and hugged closely like how they were doing now, played with each other’s hair, and talked about everything from rainbows to coloring books. His old feelings were surging inside him, strong and willing. His aura flickered with a needy want. He wanted to keep Branch to himself and be everything that he needed, in every sense of the word. He wanted to make Branch happy again. He wanted Branch’s colors to finally return. If that meant touching and smelling his hair, then by Holy Mother, he was going to let him do it again. He didn’t believe they were mates, but he could be more than an estranged acquaintance. It was time to stop playing the mindless games where they pretended to hate one another.
Feathered breaths from the dark troll tickled the edge of Creek’s ear. Branch was clinging to his biceps, no longer trying to push away. Creek moved his hand from the back of his head and let it travel slowly down his back, trying to press the fear out of Branch’s shaking aura. Curiosity picking at him, he turned his face towards the black stalks of hair by his cheek and inhaled slowly, trying to derive something more than any ordinary essence. Branch had a weak smell of fresh shampoo, but there was nothing else remotely close to what could be considered the scent of his soul. Creek tightened his jaw when he felt slightly disappointed. It’s almost like he was hoping for more.

After transiently rubbing his back up and down, Branch seemed to relax. One more moment passed before Creek found his courage to take the first step forward. “Hey, Branch,” he said tenderly, keeping his hug sturdy with a small squeeze. Branch’s ears perked up and he made a small noise, clearing up his nose. “How about it, will you be my friend again? I want to... start over.” Looking to the other side of the nest of pillows, Creek dreaded rejection. He eyed the bookshelf, searching for the treasured book that he’d given Branch when they were little, willing it to help him. ‘Mother Destiny, please don’t let me down tonight,’ he thought desperately to himself.

Branch was quiet at first, unreadable. His grip on Creek’s arms had loosened and he did a small sniff, clearing up his nose. He was obviously thinking about the prospect of letting Creek back into his life. Their past wasn’t the prettiest and it would take time to forgive and forget the jagged path they walked to get to this point. There never would be an appropriate time to ask for his friendship like this. The wait almost killed him, but then grey troll nodded and let out the heavy sigh he’d been holding. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

Creek cracked the biggest smile he’s had in days. He made a low a chuckle and unwrapped Branch, putting his hands on his shoulders to get a look at him. His face was still slightly red, either from the alcohol or embarrassment. Branch kept his eyes away to the side, but Creek could see that they were slightly pink and puffy from old tears. “Don’t let it go to your head,” he said with a frown, but his voice betrayed him. There was no hint of bitterness to be found.

“Not at all,” Creek replied, still smiling. “Being the first time you’ve had a solid drink, I think we should get to sleep now, there’s been enough excitement for one day. You will feel better in the morning.” Creek got up first and steadied his stance among the pillows, taking Branch’s elbow and helping him to his wobbly feet. If he ever let Branch drink his berry wine again he’d have to watch his consumption next time. It was amazing how a little amount could affect him so much. Leading the grey troll slowly with a strong hand, they left the warm cocoon of the library and made it to Branch’s bedroom without any problems. Branch didn’t say anything and didn’t fight him while he was being carted around. His aura felt neutral and uncertain, but Creek accepted it for what it was. He felt so sincerely blessed and anything more would be a rarity.

Branch took the door handle and paused before going inside his darkened room. “Creek...” he said quietly, “Thanks for the gift... it was nice, I really liked it. Goodnight.” Then he went inside, the door clicking gently shut behind him.
Creek beamed to himself and clenched his fist to his chest, his energy rebounding in a massive surge. He practically trotted back through the bunker and started straightening up the place, beginning with the little library. He capped the rest of his wine mix and fluffed out the nest of pillows and folded the blankets. Then he went to the kitchen and made sure it was tidy, free from clutter or dishes. Roaming from room to room, humming a harmonious tune, Creek did his best to expend his happy energy by cleaning and straightening what he could. Branch’s bunker was already tidy but Creek wanted to make sure that he didn’t wake up to any extra chores when it was entirely possible that he might have a headache later. The coming days could be awkward ones, or they could be amazing ones. That all depended on Branch. There was so much more that Creek wanted to learn and he wasn’t going to mess up the only chance that the grey troll had given him.

Chapter End Notes

Creek's song - "Crystalline" by JOME
https://youtu.be/irC5X8RX3-0

I actually really love this song. If you're into music genres like this, hit me up and I'll give you some more!
Chapter Notes

I have like this bad habit of writing bits that are three chapters ahead rather than writing what should be next. that’s why it took so long for this to come out lol on the brighter side, next chapter will be soon because it’s already half completed! hoorayy~

btw I love all your comments and kudos thank you so much <3 <3 <3 they keep me going.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Poppy squinted her eyes and tapped her chin, inspecting her current volunteer project. Fall season was in full bloom, the breeze getting colder. Dried leaves of changing colors were drifting down from the forest canopy, littering the pathways and clinging to passing troll hair. Unfortunately, colder weather was something that fuzzlings couldn’t stand so construction of the new pod homes was slow going. They needed more helping hands, so Poppy was putting the finishing touches on the outside of the first completed pod. There were still so many other pods that had to be built, but each one was going to get equal parts of the same love and attention. Cutting corners wasn’t something she liked to do when it came to helping her friends.

Dipping a large brush into a paint can, Poppy slathered more vibrant strokes into the wood panels. It was one of the highest hanging pods inside the tree, sitting closest to the sun. She didn’t know which troll this home belonged to, but it made her smile thinking about how happy they were going to be when they got to see how beautiful this was. The other side of the Troll Tree was still healing and there was a glimpse of the damage from this high position in the leaves, but soon enough there would be regrowth. Flowers and other greenery would replace the scarring come next Spring, blooming to an incredible view.

“Psst… Did you read it?”

Poppy squeaked, turning around quickly from the question and splattering yellow paint onto the trunk of the bough she was standing on. Cloud Guy was peeking out from behind a pyramid pile of different colored paint buckets, looking back and forth around them quickly to make sure the area was clear of eavesdroppers. Poppy snorted and covered her mouth, grinning at his current geddup. Guy was wearing thick black sunglasses, a chocolate brown fedora and a long matching overcoat.

“Playing detective today, Cloud Guy?” she giggled and placed her paintbrush aside.

“I’m undercover,” he whispered. “I’ve got business with the troll princess. Very important business.
You wouldn’t happen to know if she’s free for some well played shenanigans?” The cloud wiggled his eyebrows at Poppy over his sunglasses and she giggled again.

“I may have some time, if only for you,” she said teasingly.

“Perfect,” he said, surging forward and taking her hand in his to blow an airy kiss on the back. “Did you read the you-know-what that I gave you? I worked hard to get that, tell me you read it, oh gracious one.”

Poppy bit her lower lip and side glanced, the thought of Branch making her feel guilty. “I did read it… I shouldn’t have, though, and you shouldn’t have taken his journal, Cloud Guy.”

He shrugged at her, “Taken, not taken, it’s all past now. You know exactly why I did what I did, Princess. Branch isn’t going to do this on his own, he needs his friends to give him a little helping hand.”

“Ugh, you’re so right about that,” Poppy pouted. “What do you think we should do? Do you really think that they’re soul mates? I talked with Creek and it doesn’t take a smart troll to know that he’s not thrilled about the idea.”

Cloud Guy smirked and moved in closer to her, “I don’t think, Poppy. I KNOW. It’s time you and I play –,” he looked around again dramatically. The fuzzlings were far away, doing their own thing, obviously not giving a single thought towards the two of them.

Poppy raised her brows, apprehensive. “Play…?” she urged him.

“Match-maker,” Cloud Guy said with chaotic grin.

Poppy’s eyes blew wide and she made a small squeal, bouncing in place with her fists clenched. It was taking every bit to not scream in excitement. “Match-maker!” she cried quietly, falling into the ploy of being secretive in their plot.

Cloud Guy grabbed Poppy and jumped with her into a nearby clump of leaves. He made an animated attempt at pressing against the tree, peeking out of a small opening to make sure no one saw them hide. Poppy was grinning so big her cheeks were starting to hurt. She bit her lower lip and continued to bounce on her heels in a crouched position. The cloud turned back to her, holding his
“First thing, they need a date,” he started.

“Branch and Creek?!” Poppy squealed.

“Branch and Creek on a date,” he chuckled mischievously. “I’m thinking a big party, with cupcakes and glitter and –”

“Branch doesn’t like parties though,” Poppy interjected. “Or glitter. Or even cake, honestly. Creek doesn’t like cake either.”

Cloud Guy made a dramatically disgusted face, “What kind of troll doesn’t like cake? Cake is delicious. BOTH OF THEM?”

“Pffh, I know. I’ve got some weird best friends.” Poppy rolled her eyes with a scoff. “We need something fun but more low-key that they can do together. A party but not really a party?” She frowned, confused at her own train of thought.

Cloud Guy pondered with her, his lips pursing. “Hmmm…”

They sat together in their hiding spot, staring at one another with scrunched faces.

“This is harder than I thought,” Poppy grumped.

“I’VE GOT IT!” Cloud Guy yelled suddenly. “An autumn festival!”

“A fall-themed Carnival?” Cloud Guy gasped with her. “I can see it already. Cotton candy, balloons, games, rides!”
“Perfect!” she cried. “There’s so many things they can do together with something like that.”

Poppy and Cloud Guy did a high five with a triumphant laugh.

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Back at the Survival Bunker, the cover of sleep was finally being shaken off with the morning. Branch stretched long and deep in his bed, groaning softly. The covers felt soft and cool against his bare skin. Sitting up gingerly, the grey troll rubbed his hands over his eyes before glancing around his room. He managed to take off his clothes before getting into bed last night, but didn’t put on any pajamas or even a bath robe. He pulled his sheet higher up his naked body, silently thanking his intoxicated self for keeping the door shut. Creek was the first thing that wandered into his mind. It felt awkward having to worry about other trolls seeing him naked in his own home. Poppy was smart enough not to barge into his bedroom, but Creek had already proven that he’ll run through every door in the bunker trying to find him. Nakedness wasn’t uncommon in Troll Village, but he was no sparkling glitter troll and did his best to shield innocent eyes from his rough physic.

Memories from the night made him squirm, which in turn made his entire head throb. It almost seemed like a weird dream, but the sluggish feel from drinking wine confirmed that they really did share some embarrassing moments together.

He agreed to let Creek be his friend… a real friend again, just like how they used to be. Branch gripped the edge of his sheet in both hands, chewing on his dried lower lip.

“Branch, you’re my best friend,” Creek’s young trolling voice echoed through his ears.

“You were my best friend, too,” Branch whispered back, letting his memories fly free. He wanted to remember how it used to be. Was it really possible for them to go back to that time?

“Dance with me, Branch! You’re a beautiful dancer!”

Branch smirked to himself, remembering how the purple trolling used to be obsessed with his mediocre footwork. They always danced together, and for long awhile, Branch believed every word that Creek said.

A flickering vision of a cute, purple trolling danced in front of his eyes. His smile was big and
looked carefree and wild, his teal hair fluffy and unkempt. A smaller sized Branch grabbed his hands and they twirled together in a tight circle through the long grass. Branch was a brilliant cerulean with royal blue hair, cheeks touched with color as they giggled and laughed until they were completely out of air.

Creek collapsed on the ground, rolling onto his back with heavy breaths. Branch flopped next to him the same way and they both looked up at the clear blue sky through the old Troll Tree canopy, not a care in the world.

Creek smiled over at the blue trollling and grabbed his hand, entwining their small fingers together. Branch looked over at him and returned the smile, shaking their fists with another giggle.

“*I’m stuck to you like glue,*” Creek said, squeezing his hand.

“That’s alright with me,” Branch replied. “*I like glue.*”

“That’s ‘cause you like to make stuff all the time.” Creek leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek before getting up to his feet, pulling on Branch’s arm. “*Come on! It’s almost supper time, Mrs. Rosie is probably looking for us.*”

“Okay, okay,” Branch said, clambering to his feet.

Branch never gave it much thought back then, but he knew… He totally used to love Creek. He loved Creek in a way that didn’t have words and he never felt the same about anyone else. He was more than family, more than just a trolling’s best friend, and there was no need to overthink it. Their childhood was happy and simple, and the more that Branch thought about it, the more he missed it.

A soft knock sounded on his bedroom door, bringing Branch back to reality. He pulled his sheet high over his chest and shoulders, staring at the doorknob across the way.

“*Branch, are you awake?*” Creek called from the other side, rather quietly.

Branch cleared his throat and looked around frantically for his pants. “*Yeah, I’m dressing, don’t come in!*” he called back. With a jumbled movement, the grey troll wrapped himself in his bed sheet like a lame toga and crawled out of bed, hobbling over to where his clothes were strewn on the floor.
“It’s almost noon, but I took the liberty of making breakfast. I’ll wait for you in the kitchen?”

Branch’s ears twitched and he gawked, “Noon?! Crap, I slept in way too late. There’s so much to do!” He dropped his sheet and yanked on his old, patched up work pants, stumbling when his foot caught inside the leg.

Creek had his ear pressed to the door, listening to the grey troll fumble around in the room. He grinned and tried to imagine what it looked like. It wasn’t actually noon, but much earlier in the morning. He couldn’t let a brand new day start off without giving Branch a good tease. It was harmless enough and he’d feel better when he found out the truth. As if on queue, Branch cursed Creek’s name when he spotted his clock, “Damn it! It’s not even noon, you liar! It’s barely eight o’clock. Can’t believe it. Stupid. Ugh.” Creek chuckled at the broken muttering.

They met up in the kitchen, Creek sitting with his legs folded in his chair and Branch eyeballing the spread that he’d made. The grey troll slipped into the chair on the opposite side of the dining table, stomach growling in excitement. There were several mounds of steaming, fluffy pancakes and colorful cut fruit dishes to compliment. Creek unfolded his legs and sat up straight, scooting in closer.

“Is it alright?” he asked gently.

Branch looked over their breakfast again and nodded, swallowing a bit. “It looks… great.”

Creek smiled and picked up a fork, spearing a couple of pancakes and laying them onto his plate. “Dig in, then. At first I didn’t know what to make, but I remembered you’re a fan of pancakes. We used to eat them a lot.”

Branch copied Creek’s movement, stabbing his own pancake from the center dish and pulling it to him. He glanced up at the purple troll, watching him cut his breakfast into smaller pieces then topping it with chunks of strawberry. His eyes were soft and pleasant, giving Branch a relentless flux of butterflies. He gripped his fork tightly and fought down the fluttering.

“Why did you do this?” he blurted out.

Creek stopped his knife and looked up, then made a small complacent smile. “Why not?” he countered easily. “You made me dinner once before, so I made you breakfast. That’s what friends do. Give and take. It’s not complicated, dear Branch.”
“This is weird,” Branch frowned, casting his gaze back down to his plate.

“Weird, maybe, but it’s a good weird,” Creek said lightly, taking a bite.

“You don’t think you’re doing too much?” he asked quietly.

“No, actually. I’m not doing enough.”

Branch coughed slightly on a bit of pancake, not sure how to take that response. He looked back up at Creek to witness him slipping a strawberry past his lips, watching Branch with a fresh intensity. A small shiver crept through his nerves, unable to look away while Creek licked a fleck of juice from the corner of his mouth.

“I have business today as well,” the purple troll continued casually. “Can you leave your evening free again?”

“You’re not going to try to poison me again, are you?” Branch rolled his eyes and stabbed at his plate.

“So cheeky,” Creek drawled. “No, no more wine. You’ll like this, I swear.”

Branch raised an eyebrow at him, “Another gift?”

“It’s well deserved.”

“That’s not necessary,” Branch said tightly.

Creek pressed his mouth into a thin line then sighed, “Just let me do this, Branch. Could you not fight my kindness at every step?”

Branch scowled, then shoveled a heaping fork full of food into his mouth so that he wouldn’t say
anything he would regret later. Creek chuckled at his stuffed face, appreciating the attempt.

After breakfast, the two trolls cleaned up the kitchen together in an odd, pleasing mutuality. Creek insisted on scrubbing the dishes while Branch dried them and placed each item in its proper spot. It was things like this that had the grey troll reeling mentally. A week ago, the two of them hadn’t even been on speaking terms. Now they were together, sharing meals, settling into every day like they’d been doing it for years. Branch wondered how long these simple pleasantries were going to last. Nothing in his life was ever good for longer than a moment. Dread started to seep into his consciousness while he put away the last dish and gave a short, silent nod to Creek as he left the bunker. It was only a matter of time until something terrible happened and they’d be thrust back to square one.

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“This is far from acceptable, I want a complete do-over,” Creek said, tossing the schematic back to Fuzzbert. The paper scroll sucked into the body of hair and the lime green troll bristled in irritation, turning heel and going back to the other fuzzlings. They wiggled at each other and made a series of small chirps, discussing things in their own language.

Creek tried to repress the negative mixture of emotions that plagued his aura. He stood at the south side of the great Troll Tree in the middle of the fuzzling construction zone. Multiple pod shells were hanging around them, only about ten percent to completion. The table in front of him held many different blueprints scattered along the surface, catered to each troll who’d be receiving a pod.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Creek turned away from the furry group and starting the way down the wooden path towards the market side of the tree.

“Hey, Creek!”

The troll stopped and turned to see Poppy running up to him, waving her arm. She had a few spare leaves floating in her pink hair and Creek picked them out for her, dropping the bits over the edge of the path. She looked like she’d been rolling around in the bushes recently.

“Hello, my princess,” Creek smiled.

“Thanks for that,” she grinned. They exchanged a small hug and Poppy jerked her thumb in Fuzzbert’s direction. “So, what’s wrong with it? I watched you reject your pod plan.”
“It just isn’t… quite right,” he forced out, trying to think of a legitimate reason that would satisfy her. There really wasn’t anything wrong with the pod that they wanted to build him. In actuality, the fuzzlings were very keen to every troll and their individual needs. From what Creek saw in the plan, it was completely fine, perfect even. The pod resembled everything that he had lived in before and he should be happy and excited about getting his old home back. Except, he wasn’t. His inner being was pulling, telling him to delay construction. Creek knew it had to do with living with Branch… but he couldn’t possibly tell Poppy that he wanted to stay in the bunker with the grey troll. He definitely couldn’t accept that irrational thinking for himself.

“Okay, but what’s not right about it?” Poppy pressed on. “We should talk to them about the changes you want, that way there aren’t any delays, you know?”

“I have things to take care of in the market, love” Creek dodged, biting the inside of his cheek and turned to leave, briskly walking away from her. “Just tell them to work on the other homes until I’m ready to discuss the plans.”

Poppy frowned, suspicious of his behavior. Catching up to his pace again, the pink troll poked him in the arm. “Alright, I’ll tell them to hold off on your pod, but you have to tell me what’s up with you.”

Creek kept his eyes forward, refusing to budge his expression. “What ever do you mean?”

“You’re acting funny, Creek! How are things with you and Branch?” She smiled knowingly when the mention of the grey troll caused Creek’s face to harden.

“I guess I can’t hide it from you,” he sighed, slowing his walk.

“No, you can’t,” she agreed wholeheartedly.

After a long pause, contemplating what to say, Creek pressed his hands together in another attempt to calm himself. “You were right about the scenting,” he said. “He definitely smells something from me, but I can’t get anything from him. It’s very confusing, to say the least.” Poppy’s eyes widened and she opened her mouth to say something, but Creek stopped her with a raised hand. “Don’t take it for more than what it is, love. There has to be some other explanation. I just haven’t found it yet.”

Poppy put her hand on his back in reassurance. “Alright, I won’t pester about it. You’ll let me know
though, if something does happen?” She smiled at him again and Creek felt weak to her flow of positive emotions.

“Of course,” he said. “You are the only one I talk to about anything.”

“You can always talk to Branch, too,” she offered. “About what he smells.”

Creek laughed at that and shook his head, “Maybe when trolls sprout wings and fly, Princess.”

“We do ride flying bugs, though!”

“That only covers half the requirement,” he countered.

After some much needed playful banter, he bid his pink friend goodbye and she returned to the fuzzlings’ construction to relay his instructions. Creek looked onward to the market, the colorful shopping pods glistening in the sunlight with a peaceful radiance that he loved to bask in. Shopping always gave him joy and taking part in the daily commerce was one of his favorite pastimes. It wasn’t about having personal items. He loved the interactions between trolls, the bartering, and the endless gifting possibilities. He had a specific thing in mind that he wanted to pick up for Branch, but he wasn’t sure if he was going to find the perfect one. The purple troll reached the center of the market, waving at all the passerby that greeted him.

He spotted the quaint little pod, uneasy while he walked up the wooden steps to the front door. The colorful sign hanging inside the window read ‘MM Critter Clinic and Adoption’. He took a deep breath and opened the door, slipping inside the small lobby. There wasn’t much to it, only a few waiting chairs and a side table with two or three scrapbooks. Across from the front door stretched a long white counter top with a single troll manning the station.

“Ah, Creek! I’m so glad to see you, finally,” the critter-narian greeted him with a wide smile full of perfect teeth.

Creek walked up to the counter and took the bright, lilac hued troll’s hand in a handshake. “A pleasure as always, Milton,” he said graciously.

The troll beamed at him then proceeded to shuffle through some paperwork that was settled at his desk. “Just a moment and we can sign you in to see the little patients.” Creek nodded and watched
him sift through his work, admiring his deep butterscotch hair and perfectly kept blue sweater. Milton Moss was a handsome, gentle troll and he loved to visit him from time to time just to say hi. It was such a pity that Creek couldn’t be romantically involved with the guy. Sometimes Milton was just too nice and he also had an unhealthy obsession with critters. That was something Creek couldn’t bring himself to deal with on a day to day basis. Today, however, he hoped it was going to work in his favor.

“Sign here at the bottom, please,” Milton said, pointing at the correct document. Creek scrawled his name on the waiver and then the lighter troll went around the counter to the side door where he kept the adoption kennels. “Right this way,” he gestured.

Creek followed Milton into the other room and was bombarded with a strong array of barking, squawking, chirping, and the like.

“Do you have a specific creature in mind?” the troll asked him casually, waving at the excited, bouncing critters and blowing air kisses to them.

“A firefly, actually,” Creek said, looking around at all the different kinds of bugs that lined the walls of the room, rattling in their kennels. There were fuzzy worms, sheepbugs, young caterbugs, beetles… all of them bright and rambunctious. Branch definitely wouldn’t appreciate something so loud. One of the traits he appreciated in the grey troll was that he was quiet. He deserved a letter-bearer that was also quiet and serene like him.

“Excellent choice, our fireflies are just over here,” Milton said, showing Creek to a small hanging dome cage with two creatures buzzing around inside. The apprehensive guru stepped closer to the cage and inspected the flies. They stopped their twirling play time and looked back at Creek, one of them tilting its head to the side, questioning. The other one chirped softly and blinked its huge eyes.

“They’re not blue,” Creek observed in disappointment.

“Blue?” Milton asked. “Heavens no, these are normal yellow lampryidaes. You won’t find any blue ones here in the village. Those cute little buggers only live out in the wild, deep in the forest where no one can see. They get their blue-tone lights from eating a rare breed of wild amelanchier alnifolia most of their life. It’s such a wonder how they’re able to find berries like that.”

Creek raised his brows at the scientific terminology, utterly confused. “Is that so?”

Milton poked his finger through the bars of the firefly cage and cooed to the bugs. They chirped at him happily and nuzzled his finger, making him gush. “Aww! These darn little guys.”
“They are cute,” Creek agreed. “I was really hoping for a blue one though...” He didn’t know what to do now. Yellow wasn’t the greatest color, in his opinion. It had to be blue, just like the undertone of Branch’s skin. “I apologize for wasting your time, but these aren’t quite what I’m looking for.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to check out any other critters?” Milton asked, pulling his finger out of the cage and walked with Creek back into the main lobby.

“No, no. It’s quite alright, love.”

“Until next time then, have a wonderfully positive morning!”

Creek forced another smile at the critter-narian then waved himself off.

He’d only been in the pod for a few minutes and despite all the happiness that bled from the clinic in glittering torrents, Creek was feeling cruddy. His stubbornness was about to get the better of him, he could feel it in his core. He couldn’t go back empty handed tonight and all he wanted was a bloody firefly. The stupid creature had to be blue, there were no other choices suitable.

The purple troll jumped down the entry steps and almost tumbled on the last plank, realization slamming into him. Turning his direction quickly, Creek whipped out his strong two-tone hair with a grin, grasping a nearby branch and swinging out of the market plaza with great speed. He let go at the apex of the launch, spinning through the air and dropping down through the leaves with a laugh. How could he have easily forgotten? Branch had shown him exactly where the blue fireflies were, a week ago when he first caught him singing. The flies surrounded the troll like a precious halo, illuminating the night while dancing to his song.

Last night, Creek tossed and turned in bed dreaming about Branch and what he could do that was special enough to make him happy. He’d mulled over so many different things, most of them weeded out because he had to step back and think, is this practical enough for Branch? Would Branch find this bothersome? The grey troll was plagued by unhappiness but his likes, dislikes, passions and annoyances, those were all real and still inside him. Creek witnessed the beautiful spectacle of wild, dancing fireflies and he blasted himself for not appreciating it at the time. There was no doubt that this was the best gift he could give and the euphoria that came when he imagined Branch’s reaction made his entire body tingle.

If Creek was going to travel out to his favorite tranquil hideaway then he had to hurry. Picking up the pace tenfold, the purple troll darted through the trees at a breakneck pace, sprinting North bound out
of Troll Village. Doubt started to chew in the back of his mind. He prayed that his Holy Mother would give him the strength to make it back to the village before dark because he didn’t want to keep his friend waiting for him.

Chapter End Notes

Milton Moss is a freakin doll. If you haven't watched Trolls season 3 on netflix then do it!!!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Vibrations of laughter penetrated the confines of Branch’s bunker. The survivalist’s pointed ears twitched and turned inward, attempting to flatten out. With the afternoon always came the usual annoyances. No matter how hard he tried to fortify the walls of his home, he could still hear all the sounds from above ground. Voices he could handle, no problem. It was low, unknown bumps that caused him to squirm with nausea. He couldn’t ascertain the source so his mind always flew to blame his most hated enemies, the Bergens.

Branch tightened his fist on his screwdriver when another thump, louder this time, vibrated through the carved walls of his work room. He resisted the urge to curl up at his desk, trying to focus on fixing his newest Bergen-proof invention. It was going to be a major breakthrough for the village… if it only would cooperate with him. Growling in frustration, Branch tried to force fit a misaligned screw through the side of the complicated contraption.

He could hear laughing… so it couldn’t be the Bergens. The Bergens and Trolls had a peace treaty, as Poppy said. They couldn’t be coming… Anxious feelings and irritation combined made his palms sweat and his breath heavy. Branch set the tool down and wiped a damp hand over his pants. The destructive thoughts in his mind were consuming. He’d do anything for a solid distraction right now to get away from it. Creek had been gone from the bunker for a few hours already and if he was completely honest with himself, he kind of missed him.

Creek’s presence transformed into something Branch never thought to expect. Despite his protests, he got forced into including the purple troll in his daily life. At first, the mere thought of speaking to him would throw him into despair, but with each passing hour, he grew more comfortable with Creek. It’s the first time he’s ever shared his home with another troll and it wasn’t as bad as he imagined. Creek always tried to help him in different ways. Sometimes his enthusiasm was awkward and Branch didn’t know how to respond, but he could appreciate the efforts. He knew that the guy was trying hard, but he didn’t know why. Trying hard to be his friend? Did Creek have a secret, ulterior motive? It seemed doubtful. There was nothing Branch had that would be interesting enough to want. Branch was reclusive and unsocial. He worked day in and day out, protecting himself from a potential attack. He had no friends, no family, and he liked it that way. In the face of everything, he
still missed the damn troll.

Branch winced when a sharp rap on his door sounded. He fumbled his screwdriver and set it down quickly, clearing his throat, “C-Come in,” he called.

“BRANCH, HEY THERE!”

The door burst open and though he expected a humble hello from Creek, he was greeted with a loud, bouncing pink troll entering dramatically with a cartwheel. Branch jumped backwards out of his stool and it clattered to the floor while he braced himself against the table.

“Poppy?! How’d you get in here,” he gasped.

She leapt up to her feet and laughed, dusting her hands together. “Oh please, you can’t keep me out. I mean… unless you have a giant metal padlock attached to your front door, but you didn’t this time. So here I am!”

“Here you are,” he repeated with distaste. “Should I make my anti-Poppy lock a permanent thing? You could at least knock before breaking in.”

“What are you talking about? I did knock,” she said, gesturing to wooden door behind her.

“No, Poppy, I meant the front door!” Branch slapped his forehead, wondering if Poppy really was an airhead.

“Sheesh, Mr. Grumpy Pants. I’ll try that next time, okay?”

Branch stared at the pink troll blankly. “I’m sure you will… so, what do you want, your Highness?”

She grinned to herself and sauntered up to Branch, looking especially suspicious today. Red flags waved sporadically through his head, but Branch straightened and stood his ground while she met his stance.
“As your loving, caring, queen-in-training, I’ve come to cordially invite you to –,”

“Stop right there,” Branch said loudly, holding up a finger to her face. “No,” he concluded.

“I didn’t even get to finish!” Poppy pouted her lower lip and shoved his gesture away.

“I don’t need you to finish to know what the answer is. It’s the same answer every. Single. Time.” Branch knelt to scoop up his stool from the ground, then sat down on it with his arms crossed over his chest. She couldn’t get everything she wanted in life, especially from him. He’d already done her plenty of favors and all he wanted was peace and quiet. He’d fight her to the teeth if that’s what she wanted.

Poppy’s brow furrowed menacingly and she put her tiny hands on her hips. “I don’t care what your answer is, you’re coming to the Autumn carnival even if I have to drag you there by your hair!”

Branch sighed through a lip trill and asked, “A carnival huh? When is that even a thing?” That was something different. Usually he was invited to some get-together to celebrate something that didn’t need to be celebrated. His curiosity peaked, but his rejection would stand firm.

“I made it a thing just today,” she said smugly. “Everyone is going to show up and have a wonderful time. That includes you. It’s a new holiday initiation and all the trolls need to be there. It’s going to be beautiful with the weather we’ve been getting.”

“’Holiday initiation’,,” Branch mocked, quoting the air with his fingers. “Sounds pretty fishy. I guess the only way I’m going is if you drag me there because there’s no way I’m participating in such a stupid party.”

“First of all, it’s a carnival, not a party. Secondly, don’t test me because I will do it,” Poppy huffed.

“You know Poppy, carnivals are also known as a Bergen buffets,” Branch smirked, picking up his screwdriver and turning his back to the princess. He rolled the tool in his hand and tapped the tip on his desk, waiting for her to counter the snarky comment. She didn’t at first, making a depressed little whine. Branch frowned and his shoulders sagged. Poppy had to be tired of this same old song and dance just like he was. Sometimes he got kicks out of refusing all the nonsense she threw at him, and sometimes he felt guilty that he always refused.
Poppy reached into her pink stalk of hair and pulled out a deep orange envelope, then held it in her hands for a moment to admire the color. “Will you at least accept the invitation and think about it?” she asked. Branch peeked over his shoulder, seeing the envelope with a sharp grimace.

“There’s no glitter!” Poppy said quickly. “I didn’t put glitter in it this time. I know you don’t like it. Just please take a look?” She stepped closer to him and held out the invitation gently. “I made this just for you...”

Poppy gave him the biggest, wettest eyes he’d ever seen her make in a long while. He hated that he was weak to the princess in so many ways. It probably had to do with her being the only troll that gave a damn about him. Branch rubbed his hand over his face and snatched the orange invitation. “Fine, but this doesn’t mean I’m going.” Poppy squealed through her teeth and stepped back, smiling wide and giving the grey troll some space. Carefully lifting the tab, he prayed that she wasn’t lying about the glitter but prepared himself mentally for the shiny surprise.

The card inside was simple, a lighter brown tone littered with drawings of leaves. The reds, orange, and yellow tones were very pleasing to the eye. Branch’s favorite season was Fall because of the darker shades of Earth and the cooler weather. He appreciated the art immensely, but bristled up to hide the fact. Poppy was incredibly conniving when she wanted to be. He opened the card and his eyes widened, noticing there wasn’t anything inside but two slips of deep red paper and some golden written words ‘You’re invited!’ No glitter, no pop-up felt trolls, no screaming or recorded music. That was entirely odd.

Branch looked up at her in surprise and she just smiled at him, nodding towards the red slips. Setting the card aside on the table, Branch inspected the glossy papers, finding that they were actually tickets to the event.

“Tickets?” he asked. “Why do I need a ticket to get in if all the trolls have to be there?”

“They’re tickets for something else,” Poppy said. “There’s going to be games, rides, and so many other fun things to do. But you need a plus one! You can use it to ask them to go with you and you can play at the carnival together! You don’t have to do anything else with the rest of the village. It’s like a private... er... thing. A two-for-one thing... yeah.” Poppy whistled lightly and ignored his questioning look.

Branch quirked up his eyebrow and set the tickets down with the rest of the invite. “Um, okay... But I’m not going, Poppy. I’ll say it as many times as I need to get through that cotton candy brain of yours.”
“But why, Branch? Why won’t you go? Tell me real the reason.” Poppy continued to pout like it was going to be the end of the world. Looks like the little pink troll still had some fight left in her.

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“Bergens,” he said roughly. “That is the real reason.”

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“Nah-ah-ah. They’re your friends.” Branch ran a worried hand through his black hair and turned his head to the side, biting the inside of his cheek. His anxiety was starting to bubble up again from all this Bergen talk. “The loud noise will bring them straight to us, and the ones that aren’t your friends are going to bring disaster to the village.”

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“We’ve had louder parties before and nothing happened. This will a whole lot more low key, I promise! No Bergens are invited and none are going to show up.”

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The grey troll tightened his jaw, feeling his defiance starting to waver. It was true, in the last party no one was eaten, even during the chaos when the Troll Tree caught fire. Was she actually going to get what she wanted this time? There was no where for him to run. “Well… even if I did go, I don’t have this ‘plus one’ that I’m supposed to bring,” he said nonchalantly.

The grey troll tightened his jaw, feeling his defiance starting to waver. It was true, in the last party no one was eaten, even during the chaos when the Troll Tree caught fire. Was she actually going to get what she wanted this time? There was no where for him to run. “Well… even if I did go, I don’t have this ‘plus one’ that I’m supposed to bring,” he said nonchalantly.

Poppy clapped her hands together loudly, making Branch start. “Oh! That’s so easy,” she said happily, aware that the conversation was tilting in her favor. “I can think of SO many trolls that would love to spend the holiday with you. But, I’m leaving it up to your choice. Just think on it, okay? You’ll find them. They’re right under your nose. Oh, and uh, it’s not me. I’m not going with you, I’m paired with someone already.” She giggled and bit her lip. Poppy tried to squeeze in a subtle hint for him, reaching forward and tapping Branch on the tip of his nose. “Boop!”

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Branch recoiled from the touch then rubbed his fingers into his tired eyes, sighing heavily for the umpteenth time. “Alright, whatever. I’ll think about it, but only if you leave. I have a lot of work I have to do.”

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“You’re always working, Branch,” Poppy said, rejected. “but I’ll leave. Take a break sometime, the rest’ll be good for you.” She stepped back and paused before leaving him to his thoughts. “The carnival won’t be for a week, so you have some time. Don’t feel rushed or anything, and please actually think about it Branch. Don’t ignore it or run away like you did last time!”

“You’re always working, Branch,” Poppy said, rejected. “but I’ll leave. Take a break sometime, the rest’ll be good for you.” She stepped back and paused before leaving him to his thoughts. “The carnival won’t be for a week, so you have some time. Don’t feel rushed or anything, and please actually think about it Branch. Don’t ignore it or run away like you did last time!”
Branch rolled his eyes when she stalked out of the room. He got up quickly and snapped the door shut behind her, swallowing slightly when he heard Poppy make a frustrated noise on the other side. He held the door knob tightly, leaning his forehead against the grain. He could hear the pink troll muttering to herself outside as she walked away, 'Bergens, Bergens, when will he – stupid Branch – just trying to be nice –'.

Guilt struck again, straight in the stomach. Poppy’s persistent antics were really irritating sometimes. She wouldn’t understand that it wasn’t just the Bergens that he was afraid of. He didn’t like going to parties because he couldn’t stand the judgmental trolls that occupied them. They were going to stare at him and his colorless form. They were going to whisper things about him behind his back, just loud enough so that he could catch it. There wasn’t any escape from the torment that came with being an outcast. Someone who was loved and adored by all, like Poppy, could never understand his reasoning.

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Eyes searching, Creek hummed softly into the breeze as he waited for the small, nocturnal creatures to make their appearance. The tall surrounding grasses shifted, adding rustle to the symphony of the forest. Soft thunder cracks rumbled among the clouds in the distant sky. He hummed a little louder, watching the rippling waves of the dark river. The moonlit waterfall sparkled like diamonds, creating ambiance that only existed here in the den of tranquility.

It was evening, the sun had set beneath the horizon, and Creek was disappointed. He’d underestimated the lengthy travel and wasn’t going to make it back in time like he wanted. Making it this far, he forbid himself from going back without a critter. The wild fireflies were attracted to Branch’s angelic singing voice, but he hoped that his own singing would be enough to at least grab their attention so he could reason with one to go home with him. It was a shot in the dark, hoping that an unbound, critter of freedom would submit to being domesticated.

Taking a soft breath, Creek tilted his head up and reflected on what his heart was feeling. A good song to sing to attract the flies… a good, loving song that they would enjoy, but he felt… empty.

In the midst of nature, guided by his Mother of Destiny, full of goals, hopes and dreams, Creek was still empty inside.

Creek smirked through a pained expression, clasping his hands together tightly, fingers laced. He knew what these negative emotions were and he spent every day of his life trying to subdue the evil wave that threatened to change his aura. The empty, lonely feeling that plagued his energy was strong and relentless. Even so, he had to fight on.
“I sold my soul to the Devil, he said ‘You don’t need your heart’, in this world full of trouble where the madness won’t stop.” His voice was strong, the pure notes falling to the wind of the coming storm. “And they take advantage, and they run for the hills... ‘Cause a life is harder when they swallow the pills of being lonely.”

Stinging pressure formed behind his eyes as he looked forward, vision falling out of focus. The dark trees and foliage swayed slowly, their shadows dancing around him. “Is life worth living when you need to get by? I'm still lonely.

“I was the king but not the king of anything.

Call me Mr. Righteous even if I always sin.”

Creek’s eyes closed then, arms hugging around his middle in a desperate attempt to hold himself together. His heart was a wretched thing, shattering at the mere prospect of believing that his life could be nothing more than an annoying flicker among many. Everyone had problems, that wasn’t uncommon. As time went on, he found it more and more difficult to sing and dance away his troubles with the rest of the trolls. Instead, he chose to meditate and pull the positive energy from nature and other life forms around him. He worried heavily that, eventually, it wouldn’t be enough.

He knew the dark truth no matter what he did to snuff it out. He shared fake smiles and felt fake happiness. In the midst of other trolls, he locked away his heart and pretended, no matter what it did to his inner being. He didn’t have a single troll in his life that actually knew the real him. His entire personality felt warped around the constant need to please, and yet, there was no fruit bearing from his efforts. What was the point in being nice to one another in such a way if it was so painful under the surface?

“I am such a pitiful individual,” Creek joked to himself. “It might be easier to just let the darkness take me. At least when you’re grey, you don’t feel the need to pretend.”

A soft buzzing drifted over his rounded ear, tickling it. Creek turned his face slightly and looked over to see the shining blue firefly floating just inches away. Its large, round eyes blinked, then it peered down at the wetness of Creek’s cheeks. He’d been crying and he hadn’t even noticed. The firefly reached out with one of its segmented legs and gently swiped a tear away from Creek’s eye, tilting its head with a low sounding chirp. The purple troll gave a look of surprise, smiling at the gesture.

“What a daring creature you are,” he said quietly.

The bug fluffed itself and flew in a haphazard circle around him, streaming bright blue afterglow.
Reaching into his pocket slowly, Creek revealed a few berries that he’d collected on the way here. He held them out, flat on his palm as an offering. The fly noticed the berries and immediately came straight back, landing on his forearm and nibbling the fruit with delicate incisors. There were other fireflies fluttering in the area, but none were taking interest in Creek like this one was.

Creek inspected the bug, judging its size and color. It was smaller than the rest of its pack, body about the size of his outstretched hand. He noticed that it was a girl, its shorter antennae curled inward at the ends. The fly stretched out it’s back legs and groomed her wings under the hard black shell covers, totally at peace on Creek’s arm. He had to admit, the bug was adorable. He’d never been one to take to critters but this one was incredibly charming.

“Have you met Branch?” Creek asked the bug, touching its foreleg to get her attention. The firefly cocked its head, blinking its large eyelashes. “The colorless troll. Black hair, about my height?” he tried.

Suddenly the firefly jumped from his arm and she spun around in a circle in the air, chirping enthusiastically. Creek smiled again and climbed to his feet quickly, “Great! You like him right? You can be with him if you come with me. Come with me and be his companion. I swear you won’t regret it.” The firefly buzzed excitedly in the air, zooming forward and latching on to Creek’s shoulder. He laughed and stroked the bug under her chin. “Wonderful,” he crooned to it. “You are just wonderful. Perhaps we may even get to hear him sing again with your help, little one.”

A fresh gust of wind billowed through the enclosure and Creek placed his hand on firefly’s shell protectively. He looked past the trees at the darkened clouds in the distance, fallen leaves whipping through the air and swirling in the grass. The other wild fireflies had retreated back into the forest, taking cover from the winds.

“Time for us to leave,” Creek said, glancing at the bug. She flickered her blue bulb in response and dug her feet into his shirt, clinging securely. Creek nodded and moved quickly to the edge of the forest clearing, spotting some rhubarb bushes. He inspected a few leaves then plucked a rather large one that was almost bigger than his entire body. Sprinklings of rain began to fall around him, and Creek grimaced, smoothing down his long hair and covering his head with the leaf like an umbrella. It was sturdy enough and he hoped it would last.

The trip back to Troll Village was nasty one, considering he sprinted the entire way to try and beat the rain. Luckily, he was relatively unscathed and dry because of the leaf. Creek rushed through the hatch of the survival bunker, securing it quickly before an onslaught of water poured into the upper room. Panting heavily from exertion, he tossed his soaked foliage to the ground and then pulled open the collar of his shirt, looking down at the abnormal lump that was his chest.

“Sorry love, you can come out now,” he said.
Big, cute eyes poked up from inside his shirt and peeked around at the room. The blue firefly crawled out onto his shoulder and ruffled its wings. Creek rubbed the underside of its head in affection, then pulled the lever of the elevator to go down into the main room. It was just past midnight. He definitely regretted asking Branch to free up his evening for him. Hopefully the troll didn’t wait up for him this late into the night.

The azure glow of the firefly illuminated the passageway as they reached the lower level. Creek wiped his grimy feet then tiptoed to his room, opening the door quietly and ushering the chirping bug inside. It buzzed around the room in curiosity, checking out the furniture and sniffing items. It settled down on one of Creek’s pillows and looked back at him, blinking.

“That’s a good critter,” Creek said fondly. “I will bring you a treat if you wait patiently and don’t make a pigsty of my bedroom. You’ll meet Branch again soon enough.” The fly tilted its head in a questioning manner before skittering around in a circle and snuggling up into the pillow.

Creek closed the door then made his way through the halls, looking around for the grey troll. Thunder clapped loudly through the bunker, the echo startling him enough to grab his chest. Being underground already unnerved him, but the creepy sounds that filtered in from above were almost too much. He looked in the kitchen and the small library but couldn’t find Branch. He stepped cautiously around the bend and came to Branch’s room, noticing that the door was cracked open. He debated pushing it open, just to see if he was sleeping or if he was awake.

Creek’s ears picked up a soft whimper coming from within. Steeling his decision, he swallowed his nerves and stepped inside the drafty hollow, eyes adjusting to the darkness. The only light seeped from the main hall, casting a dim beam towards the bed. Branch was there, bundled up in the center of his bed like a cocoon. He was making soft, distressed noises and shifted under the covers.

“Branch?”

Another crushing rumble of thunder echoed through the drafty halls, causing Creek to snap the door shut behind him quickly. Branch’s cowering form was shadowy, but he could still make out the shivering under the sheets. Swallowing thickly, the purple troll gingerly stepped towards the bed from across the room, his palms sweating through his fists. To be completely honest, his was on edge because any other day, Branch would skin him alive for being inside his bedroom like this.

His friend was in pain… He couldn’t just abandon Branch to fend for himself like this. He felt protective and needy. His inner being was itching to help any way he could, even if Branch hated him in the morning. Trying to ignore the incredible gnawing inside his stomach, Creek focused in on the scared troll. He reached the side of the mattress and held his hand out to the trembling shoulder,
pausing in hesitation.

“Branch,” he called out quietly. “I’m here.”

The bundle of sheets stiffened suddenly, trembles coming to a halt. Branch’s ears flicked back in alert, then he eased slightly into the plush covers when he realized who it was. The second of relief passed as quickly as it came and he grit his teeth together when another shiver coursed along his skin.

Creek was in his room? It was so late at night already, he’d assumed that the troll wasn’t going to come back tonight. He had waited for awhile, sipping coffee in his library and feeling anxious about what gift he was going to receive. As the night dragged he laughed at himself for waiting, ending up in his room wracked with fear. His thoughts were a blur, thinking of nothing but Bergens and how the entire village was going to be eaten alive.

*Boom.*

Another crack from the storming shuddered above the trolls. Branch sat up quickly and grabbed the purple troll, hurling him into the bed and throwing the sheet over their heads like a protective dome.

Creek squeaked in surprise, trying to sit up from his awkwardly tossed position. “What in the blazes – ?!”

“Shh!” Branch put his hand over Creek’s mouth, eyes wide in horror. “Don’t alert them!” he whispered frantically.

Shoving his hand away, Creek looked at him credulously through the darkness, “Alert who?!”

“SHH! Shut up! Stop talking!” Branch squinted his eyes closed and whimpered, grabbing his pointed ears and tugging on them in distress.

“Branch, what’s going on?”

*Boom.*
The dark troll flinched bodily and went back into his fetal position, face down into his pillow. “Please... please,” he whispered. “The Bergens will find us. They’re coming.”

Creek flung the sheet off his head in frustration and Branch gasped when he was dragged bodily against the other troll’s chest, the two of them face to face on laying on their sides. Branch struggled together momentarily, but the next oncoming thunder forced Branch’s hands to come up and cling to the purple troll. They clawed into Creek’s shirt tightly and he curled inward towards warmth of the other. His breath was short and ragged, heart pounding with dread.

“Please,” he panted. Branch didn’t know what he was begging for now.

This was something Creek wasn’t prepared for. The guy was obviously going through an episode, triggered by noise that resembled Bergen footsteps he guessed. He’d never imagined that Branch was conflicted in such a way. How many times in his life did he lock himself in his bunker and go through this alone? “It’s a thunder storm,” Creek said slowly, his grip around the frightened troll tight and unyielding. “There are no Bergens. Do you hear me? It’s thunder, not Bergens.”

Branch’s face pressed silently forward, his legs bending upwards in an effort to curl into himself again. Creek grunted and pried his leg between Branch’s knees, their lower limbs tangling until both bodies were flush. Chest to chest, hips together, ankles entwined. He crushed his arms around his body until there was no possible space left between them. He could feel the fearful energies plaguing his aura and he tried to absorb what he could. He hoped that his warmth would fight back the chills and bring at least a little comfort.

The next sound of thunder was softer this time but still, the bunker rattled. Branch flinched again, but said nothing and remained in his frozen position inside Creek’s arms. He was scared enough not to feel awkward or angry about being hugged like this. Creek’s hugs... were so strong. They were solid and tight, and heat emanated from the purple troll.

They lay quietly together on the bed, listening to the tempest carry on its way over the forest. Creek lost track of time and he found himself wondering how many minutes had passed. He thought about how familiar this scene was, wandering down the broken path of their past. There was a time when they were younger, Branch was scared of a storm just like this. He didn’t understand what thunder was at the time. Creek had been there in his bed, just like this, and they were hugging one another in mutual comfort. There were many times that the two trollings would spend the night in each other’s pods, having sleepovers and playing games. Whenever the rains would come, young Creek would always plan to be there so that his friend would never feel alone and overwhelmed. The song they sang together in bed was a soft spoken lullaby, always bringing a gentle smile to the small, cerulean troll.
Branch made a small sound, shrinking away from another roar from the storm.

“*I can feel your heart beat...*” Creek sang softly, trying to pull in Branch’s attention “*Fear is growing in your eyes.*”

The grey troll responded immediately, shifting slightly. He took in a sharp breath, body tight with apprehension. Creek quietly thanked that he didn’t pull away. He wondered if Branch remembered the song, and wondered if it would soothe him like it did in the past. “*But you are never alone, and soon there will be clear blue skies.*”

Branch’s chest thrummed, the sweet melody penetrating to his core. He did remember it. His senses were being bombarded with a mixture of anxiety and bittersweet memories. The perfume of mint and herbs was making its way between them. Branch breathed the aroma deeply, eyelids fluttering to the wave of peace that washed over him. He’d never understand why Creek’s scent had this power over him, but he didn’t hate it and didn’t want it to ever leave.

Creek felt his friend’s body relax into him and he smiled, continuing their lullaby.

“*With the night, comes the ghost. When the lights disappear, know that I won’t let go,*

*and if dreams become real? You should know... there’s no retreat and no surrender,*

*and you should know... not here, not now, not ever.*

“When you're cold, when you're lost, and you fall from the light,

*I will stay by your side with the song for the night...*

“*Tonight we'll find some peace of mind knowing you'll be safe asleep tonight with the song... for the night.*”

Branch lifted from Creek’s chest to finally look up at him, their eyes locking together. Through the dim lighting he could see the soft features of his face and the upturned corner of his mouth. The lavender hued troll was so attractive and his heart twisted. He couldn’t believe that they were like this right now. So many times already Creek has embraced him, keeping him grounded when he needed it most. Every passing moment with him became something more… something he felt like he wanted. He liked the warmth between them. He liked Creek’s hands gripping his back. He liked the way he smelled.
“Did you like the song?” Creek whispered to him.

Branch blinked through the fog of his admiration and swallowed, unable to tear his eyes away from Creek’s gaze. “Yeah,” he said.

“Do you feel better?” the troll asked him, his voice traced with concern.

Branch nodded slowly, taking another deep breath of the strong, minty essence.

Creek moved a hand up and brushed his thumb over Branch’s blushing cheek. “I was worried about you.”

Shivering from the touch, the dark troll reached and took Creek’s wrist, staring into the light colored eyes that were bearing straight through his walls. Their faces were closer now, soft puffs of breath mingling together. His irises were lilac, beautiful, just like his skin. Gorgeous, like his hair. He could lose himself in that deep expanse that was more dazzling than a meadow of wild flowers.

“Creek...” he whispered his name in yearning. Branch closed the distance between them and kissed his lips. It lasted only a second and the purple troll became wide-eyed. Branch let out a shaky whine, desire coiling tight in his body. His heart hammered up into his throat, wanting to do it again.

Granting the silent wish, Creek took his chin, tilting his face back up to kiss again. It was bolder, stronger, and their rationality was fleeting. Through a sudden kindle of fire, the second kiss became hungry. Their lips crushed together in a hot frenzy, enticing a low keen from the back of Creek’s throat. Branch’s hands flew up and thrust through the thick teal locks of Creek’s hair, then he angled his lips to dive deep into the purple troll’s opened mouth. He tasted like the minty sweetness he smelled, the lithe, spiced tongue driving him dizzy with need.

It was overwhelming for Creek, and he couldn’t do anything but grip Branch’s shoulders for support while his mouth fought in a losing battle for dominance. The grey troll was devouring him like a starving beast and he leaned backwards under the pressure. Following the movement, Branch pushed the troll to his back and climbed over the top of him to attack his lips with new demands. Creek matched every rough lick and tormenting suck he could muster. He moved his hand to Branch’s chest and caressed up from the center, fingers splaying around his throat until he grabbed the back of his neck tightly. Another thrill of excitement charged through their kiss, stealing the rest of Branch’s breath and forcing him to pull away with a heavy gasp for air.
Panting hard, Creek tried to flex his hips under the grey troll, his entire body lit with heat. Branch stared down at him, flickering over his wet, abused lips and darkened eyes with pupils blown into something carnal and unfamiliar.

Creek rose up to take another kiss, but Branch retreated quickly and jumped out of his bed, leaving the troll in the cold. He trembled on his feet, standing at the edge.

Creek bolted forward, sitting up in the bed. “B-Branch?” Creek said nervously, the words almost choking him while he yanked himself out of his lusty haze.

“Get out.”

“What?”

Branch turned on his heel and glared daggers into the guru, his eyes shining with oncoming tears. “I said, GET OUT!” he yelled at him. “GET OUT OF MY ROOM!”

Creek scrambled out of the bed and stepped a few good feet away from the grey troll, pulling on his tousled shirt with his hand. “Please, wait just a second,” he tried to reason. “Let’s just talk about this.”

Branch’s hands became fists, shoulders tightening. He turned and stalked over to Creek, grabbing the troll and steering him towards the bedroom door roughly.

“Wait! Branch, don’t do this – !”

Branch ignored his protests and yanked open the door, shoving Creek into the hallway unceremoniously then slamming it violently in his wake. He turned the steel lock just in time, the door handle rattling as Creek tried to open it again with a growl.

“Don’t run from me, you coward!” Creek yelled back.

Branch bit his lip and sank to the floor, dropping his flushed face into his hands.
Minutes ticked by. He couldn’t have gone away yet. He was still there, waiting. Heavy rain was the only thing either of them could hear. Then, there was a small shuffle, Creek lifting himself off the oak wood and straightening himself. “Just to be clear,” he said, his voice deep and coarse, “you kissed me first.” He was angry, Branch could hear it. He listened to the footsteps stomp down the hall, frustrating tears spilling over his cheeks, then he glanced over at the clock on the wall. It was two in the morning and he’d never felt so awful since losing his grandmother Rosie.

Chapter End Notes

Creek's 1st song - Lonely by Yoe Mase
https://youtu.be/S9eJgMOf4m0

Creek's 2nd song - Song For the Night by Stanfour
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eojrcq6AFwY
eyy guys~ sorry it took so long for this chapter. I cant tell ya how many road blocks I hit with it. I hope that it ties up some loose ends. There's a TINY SMIDGE of NSFW so if you aren't into that kind of thing I would totally skip the first half! lol

Next chapter after this is going to a whole new area of story so be prepared! leave a comment if you enjoyed it <3 i love all of your feedback thank you so much. ;u;

They had kissed.

Branch smothered his face deeper into the pillow, sucking in the lingering scents left behind.

He kissed Creek and he freaking enjoyed it.

Arousal licked up his body and he squirmed on the bed, rolling inside his covers again and again. The clock read four in the morning and he cursed when he glanced at it for the hundredth time. His mind was conflicted, angry at the world but begging for it to consume him. Teasing erotic fantasies of the light colored troll kept slinking around, mocking his lust, and Branch chewed his lower lip. Pieces of his skin burned with Creek’s afterimage. It’s like he could feel his fingers digging into him all over again.

Branch caressed his palm down his stomach and paused at the hem of his pajama pants, swallowing heavily. He wasn’t so much of a hermit to not know what these urges meant. Branch’s body was getting ready to mate and it wasn’t even Spring! Feeling this kind of heat outside of mating season? The mere thought of another troll giving him sexual desire was ludicrous, yet here on his back he lay, engrossed with Creek. Yes, Creek, the one guy that should be the farthest away from the most intimate part of his mind. Biologically, he did feel subtle urges and hints whenever that time of year came around, but nothing like this. This was severe, frightening, and exciting. Why did it have to be Creek of all trolls?

Control wavering, his hand slid farther down, feeling gentle kisses speckle his nerves. Phantom lips dragged over his body, carving trails of fire. A guttural groan escaped as Branch dared to palm himself between the legs. His thighs trembled and spread instinctively, the sweet friction lifting his hips off the bed. The troll shivered bodily and ripped away from his crotch in harsh denial, twisting his wicked fingers into the blanket.
“I can’t believe it,” he hissed, turning over in bed again so that he was on his stomach. His body throbbed relentlessly and Branch moaned again in grievance, grinding his lower half into the mattress slowly. He had to do something to get rid of these sensations without actually going through with the act. He refused to submit to his erratic hormones. He’s never pleasured himself before and he wasn’t going to start now, especially with Creek as the source. Self stimulation just wasn’t an option. He absolutely refused. There was no reason for someone like him to be dabbling into something like that. He wasn’t desperate enough. As far as his rationality was concerned, if he was ever going to have sex it had to be with destined mate, who didn’t exist.

Alluring images of Creek stripping off his clothes wiggled their way in again, so real he swore he could feel the whiff of air as his pants were thrown away. Imaginary Creek rubbed his hands over his muscled pectorals slowly and squeezed seductively. His mind’s eye gawked at the wide expanse of his naked chest and pale mauve nipples. So many years of seeing Creek shirtless and he’d never appreciated it until now. The delicious purple colored skin extended downwards and his fantasy filled in the gaps. His hip bones were sharp, leading to the prominent v-shape below his belly button. Was his pubic hair soft and two-toned like his head hair? He bet it was. He wanted to know. He wanted to touch it.

Branch could hardly contain the thrill running through his blood. His self discipline was definitely being tested. Creek had tasted so good, felt so good, and he wanted him. He wanted the damned guy so badly and he hated himself for it. He hated that he acted without thinking, a single kiss setting off a wild chain reaction of eagerness that he didn’t want anything to do with. How could Creek kiss him, anyway?! Not a single push back or anything that would be considered a ‘get off me you crazy pervert!’ The conniving bastard took advantage of the situation like it was walk through a park. He didn’t know how many other innocent trolls Creek had wrapped around his pinky but Branch wasn’t about to be one of them. Creek wasn’t that charming and Branch wasn’t that easy. Creek was attractive, but that was all he had going for him right now.

Branch pushed the guru away when he saw those sexy, inviting eyes, trying to save his own sanity and self worth. He almost took the invitation. It was scary to think that they could have gone so much farther than kissing. Creek looked at him like he slapped him in the face. Branch supposed he might as well have, considering the way he bolted from the intimacy and rudely shoved the troll out of his room. He did run away and Creek was right, he was a coward. Whatever pieces of friendship they had managed to pull together could be dust to wind because of this. He was so utterly afraid of these uncontrollable feelings and when it was time for them to talk, he didn’t know what he was going to say. How was he going to explain exactly why he jumped his mouth with such ferocity?

Grunting at his own confusing insensitivity, Branch kicked the covers off and slipped out of bed. He held his hand to his swirling stomach and released a shaky breath, walking to his closet for a change of clothes. He couldn’t sleep like this. His body wasn’t going to cooperate with him until he dunked it in a bucket of ice. Branch pulled a pair of cotton slacks from the rack and then went to his bedroom door, unlocking it carefully. He peeked out into the hall and trembled from another brushing influx of weakness. He just had to get to the bathroom without any confrontation. Easier said then done when the bathroom was right across from Creek’s bedroom.
On the other side of the bunker, the purple troll was having emotional issues of his own. “The nerve of him!” Creek yelled, pacing circles around his room with a decorative pillow gripped in his fist. “Absolutely unbelievable,” he said angrily, twisting the pillow in his hands with a growl then throwing it back at the armchair it belonged. The blue firefly watched Creek walk back and forth, amusement in her large eyes. Creek turned to the critter and jabbed his finger at it. “He doesn’t deserve you, you know,” he said. “I’ve half a mind to take you back and forget this whole thing!” The firefly shook her head in refusal, jumping off the bed and buzzing away.

Creek sighed and dropped down on the lounge chair tiredly, folding his legs underneath him. His rounded ears twitched in irritation as he tried to pick apart the situation in an effort to find a solution. He was angry, no doubt about that, but that kiss was something else. It surprisingly passionate and he couldn’t stop replaying the scene. Creek’s toes curled when Branch’s tongue invaded every crevice of his mouth. It was hard to believe that Branch didn’t have any prior experience in that area. He’d never heard of anyone but Poppy getting close to the grey troll, and there was zero chance Poppy taught him how to kiss like that.

Of course, he’d swapped spit with willing trolls before. There were a few fearless individuals who were more attracted to his beautiful color than anything else and Creek had been desperate for a little bit of love. It’d been awhile though, years really, since he let anyone pull him in like that. How was Branch able to twist him and make him willing?

Shaking his head abruptly, Creek tried to clear out the heated images. He couldn’t forgive Branch for what he did, not yet at least. You don’t just kiss someone then run away from the consequences. Unfortunately, Creek put his heart into that moment. He shouldn’t have but he was caught off guard, caution thrown to the air. Whether Branch meant to or not, pulling away crushed his confidence and he was bitter for being such a fool. Creek was a weak individual when it came to presenting his heart to whoever reached for it. His chest ached and his stomach turned, knowing that Branch didn’t actually reach out to him but most likely used him instead. It was normal to seek comfort when you were in distress, and that was exactly the position Branch happened to be in.

Just then, soft padding in the hall caught Creek’s attention. He jumped up from his chair and rushed over to the bedroom door, plastering a strained ear to the wood. The washroom entry across the way creaked open and closed slowly, followed by an echoing squeak of the tap while Branch filled his freestanding tub with water.

Creek sighed and beat his forehead against the oak surface, mentally preventing himself from going out and trying to talk. It wasn’t even sunrise, they both hadn’t slept yet, and Branch was about to take a bath. He should just leave him alone and wait until later. He should just wait. Waiting would be fine, but his gut was telling him to take the chance now while it was there. Creek buried his uncertainty and opened the door to stare at the washroom across the hall. Light spilled from the crack at the bottom. The sounds of cascading water slowed to a stop and everything was quiet on the inside. Creek moved forward and hung his head slightly, closing his eyes momentarily. He touched the doorknob and tested it quietly. Unlocked.
“Branch, I know this is a really bad time,” he said softly. “but I cannot set it aside anymore. The sooner we talk, the better it will be. It is obvious neither of us can sleep with this dark cloud hanging over our heads. Will you talk with me when you’re done bathing?”

His attempt was met with silence. Creek listened for something… anything at all. He started to become anxious, worried about the grey troll inside. There was no telling what could be running through his thoughts right now.

“Don’t ignore me,” he pushed grimly. “I’m not… mad at you. I hope you don’t think that. I want closure. We need closure. There is a reasonable explanation to what happened and we should discuss it. I’m not leaving here until you give me some kind of answer!”

Creek listened carefully again, trying to discern anything from inside. There will still no sound at all. Not even a swish of water. That was entirely odd.

“Branch? Are you alright in there?” he called out louder.

Nothing.

Why was it so quiet in there?

He squeezed the handle tightly, palm sweating. No... He couldn’t be. He couldn’t be doing something so unthinkable. Creek’s eyes widened to a terrifying realization. He yanked the door open and rushed into the bathroom quickly.

“No, Branch! It’s not worth it! You have SO MUCH TO LIVE FOR,” Creek cried out, skidding to a halt just before bumping into the carved porcelain tub.

Branch was soaking in his icy bath, the water leveled just above his waist. He had his hands in his sodden black hair, wringing out the soap bubbles after he just had his head submerged underwater to wash it. They stared at each other in shock before Branch snatched a nearby towel to cover his private areas.

“Creek! What the hell, man!” he cried out, blushing furiously. “Don’t you knock?!”
Creek turned away on his heel and covered his eyes, flushing red all the way down his neck. “I thought that – I thought you were – I was just checking,” he stammered.

“Thought what, exactly?! Must you feel the need to crash through every single door of the bunker trying to bother me? I’ve got no privacy even in my own bathroom!”

“I thought you were trying to drown yourself,” Creek muttered admittedly.

“Why the fuck would I do that?!” Branch said exasperated.

“Well considering the current circumstances between us, it was a bloody plausible thought!”

“Don’t inflate yourself too much Creek, you might pop. Dramatics with you aren’t worth killing myself over!”

Creek growled and lowered his hands into fists, keeping his eyes shut tightly. “I was just worried, Branch. Is it so hard to accept that I was worried after you pushed me away? I came to check on you and you didn’t respond to my calling!”

Branch bit his tongue, trying to think of another comeback. Just then, cutting through the growing tension, the tiny blue firefly flew free from Creek’s room and zipped past the troll, barreling into Branch’s chest happily with an array of excited noises. Branch dropped his towel and caught the critter, gasping in surprise at the familiar creature in his hands.

“What the –? Tilly, is that you?” he said, holding up the fly to inspect her. The bug chirped in response, surging forward again to nuzzle Branch in the cheek. It tried to latch onto the troll’s face with all six of it’s tiny legs but he pulled her off with a huff. “Why are you here,” he asked, utterly confused. “How did you know where to find me?”

Creek peeked over his shoulder, but Branch shot him a quick glare that made him avert his eyes again.

“I brought her here,” Creek explained. “That fly… I brought the firefly here from the clearing where I saw them dancing for you. She was going to be my gift to you, a friendly companion and letter
bearer. I noticed you don’t have a flying critter for letters so…” he trailed off slowly, almost feeling silly about all of his efforts now. His plans were ruined after all that’s happened and he doubted that Branch would appreciate the firefly now.

“I don’t have a letter carrier because I don’t socialize enough to actually send letters to people,” Branch said with a sigh. He stared at the critter, pressing his lips together. Tilly the firefly blinked her large, happy eyes, staring back in admiration. ‘So that’s why he was late,’ Branch thought to himself. Creek made such a long trip just to get this critter for him? He wasn’t even aware that Branch already knew the critter personally and they had an established history. That was quite the strike of luck, considering.

“Keep your eyes to yourself,” he grumbled to Creek. The purple troll nodded silently in response. Branch then shooed the firefly away momentarily to pull himself out of the tub, cursing as his limbs were practically numb from the icy water he bathed with. The fire inside him had completely died down, thankfully, but now he had to deal with a different kind of nuisance. Drying quickly, the grey troll slipped on his slacks and tightened the draw string around his hips. He brushed past Creek, the firefly following and settling on Branch’s bare shoulder as he strode out of the bathroom. The guru lifted a brow at the critter as it rubbed against the troll’s neck affectionately.

“Let’s sit in the kitchen,” Branch said.

Branch’s kitchen always gave the troll a little sense of peace. He spent a lot time sitting at the small circular table nestled in the center, either contemplating life or just sipping tea to pass the time. They reached the room and Creek slipped into the far side chair while Branch fumbled around the jam-packed cupboards. He grabbed his own wrist to still his nervous hand, pulling two small white mugs from the shelf and filling them with hot water and home made tea bags.

Creek accepted his mug from the dark troll and gazed into the steaming liquid, passively noting the soothing aroma. Branch settled into his own chair across from him, rubbing his hand over his tired face and dipping the tea bag repeatedly in his cup to hurry the steeping.

They sat together in an anxious silence, unsure where to begin. Both trolls were exhausted and sleep deprived for different reasons.

Creek took a deep breath let it out slowly, finally tearing his eyes away from the table. He looked conflicted. Branch stiffened and waited, gripping his cup with both hands.

“Why did you kiss me?” he asked quietly.
Branch frowned deeply. He just had to get straight to the point, didn’t he? There was no proper answer for that. Honestly, he could try to lie to Creek and say he was just using him to get his rocks off, but where would that put his honor? Creek knew him better than that anyway, it would be completely out of character. Indeed, why did he kiss him?

“I don’t know.”

“Do you hate me?” Creek questioned again, baring straight into him like hot daggers. Branch wanted him to look away so badly. He couldn’t handle the exposure to those searching, lilac eyes. Did he hate him? What kind of question was that? No, of course not. He’d never really hated Creek at all, even when the jerk made fun of his colorless skin and black-out hair. They’d gotten into verbal scuffles numerous times but in the end, he never hated the purple troll. Been irritated with him, sure. Sick and tired of his teasing antics, definitely.

“I don’t hate you,” he managed to say without breaking eye contact.

“Then, do you… like me?”

Branch squirmed slightly and rolled his eyes, feeling a betraying blush creep up to the surface of his skin. He took a quick drink of his tea and huffed dramatically, trying to play it off. He didn’t like him. There was no way he did. Just because he didn’t hate him doesn’t mean he liked him. “Why am I the one being questioned here anyway, what about you, huh? Why did you do it?”

Creek resisted a smirk, feeling a bit more resolute now because he preferred a grumpy Branch over a quiet, unsure one. His reactions were almost cute, the way he wiggled in his chair. Creek felt it may be time to be forthright. “Do you want the straight truth?”

Branch snorted, putting his drink aside and folding his arms tightly across his bare chest. “Just say whatever you think is necessary to get this over with.”

Creek rubbed his hand on his forearm, looking to the side. His words were catching in his throat now, and the longer he waited the harder it became to talk. The feeble determination he just had was gone in an instant. He open and closed his mouth, swallowed, gripping his arm, then swallowed again. “Branch, I…” he started, feeling utterly vulnerable. If the grey troll was anything like his best friend from the past then he would understand him, right? The fear of being harshly judged was almost too overpowering. He didn’t want to regret opening up his heart, but would being truthful make Branch flee?
Branch watched him intently. His dark features were difficult to read, but then he unfurled his arms and sat back farther in his chair, looking more relaxed than before. “It’s alright,” he said, trying to give him some reassurance. “You can say it.”

Creek shivered inwardly at the invitation and took it before he chickened out again. “I kissed you because it simply felt nice when you did it,” he whispered. “You made my aura blossom, made me yearn for more. It’s been so long since anyone’s given me that kind of attention I guess I just… went with it, not caring that it was you. I was captured in a blissful moment and I don’t regret it at all. You were amazing, really.”

Both trolls blushed heavily with the innocent confession and Branch cleared his throat, unsettled in his chair. “It wasn’t that good,” he bit out. “You can’t possibly have me believe that you’re not fawned over like an idol and necking it out behind every shrub and rock in Troll Village. Everyone knows that you’re the most charming and the most handsome troll to ever grace our miserable presence. I’m nothing compared to that.”

“You’d be surprised how wrong you are,” Creek sighed, swirling his drink in his hand idly. “Some trolls may look at me from afar, but that’s as far as it goes. My love life is as barren as your life above ground, my dear. My presence is nothing but a beautiful flower painted on the wall.” The grey troll was frowning grimly, still disbelieving. He supposed it was difficult for him to accept since he always believed they came from different positions of status in the village.

Creek nodded to Branch, urging him to talk. “Do you really think I’m the most charming and handsome?” Creek let his ego slip, grinning at the contorted disgust that Branch flashed on his face. “If it weren’t for that depressing complexion of yours, you’d be quite fetching yourself, you know,” he continued. “Anyway, I’ve told you my reason, now do explain yourself.” Creek brought his tea up and took a long drink, relieved that some of the weight was finally off his shoulders.

“You smell!” Branch huffed.

Creek choked and spluttered. “Pardon?”

Branch’s anger was starting to bubble up again so he clenched his teeth to keep it at bay. Explain himself how, exactly? He hated that there was no sensible explanation to the pull that Creek had on him. He felt frustrated because he didn’t know anything other than the feeling of being victimized by the mass of teal hair growing out of the troll’s stupid head. “You smell!” he said again loudly. “You’ve got this perfume, or this smelly shampoo, or something! I don’t know what it is Creek, but,” he raised his hands to his face, hiding the insistent redness that ceased to leave. “But it… it smells incredible. No, I hate it! It’s not incredible, not in the slightest. Every time you come near me I can
“smell you and I lose my damn mind! It pulls me in and I have no control over my actions!”

Trying to keep his composure during Branch’s outburst, Creek pushed him to continue, “What do I smell like?” he asked slowly. Poppy’s voice was ringing in his ears. I believe that Branch is somehow, er… imprinted by you. The way he describes it… it’s beautiful.

Branch rubbed his face roughly then laid his palms on the table, trying to calm down. “Dried spices…,” he exhaled. “Mint leaves soaked with rainfall. It’s so pure and refreshing… easier to breathe than air itself. Just thinking about it makes me crave it.”

They blushed again in unison, Creek almost losing it over the blatant poetry falling from Branch’s lips. Who knew that he was capable of speaking in such a way?

“Then I will do my best to not burden you with it,” Creek said. “I’ll stop hugging you. I’ll keep my distance so not to bother you with my scent until I’m out of your hair and into my own pod again.”

It was that easy? Creek was going to leave him alone finally, just like that? Instead of happiness, a sharp pain drove through Branch’s chest and he pressed his hand to it. There was a part of him that hated Creek’s quick compliance.

“With that, I only ask you one thing,” Creek continued. “Don’t run from me anymore.”

Branch stared at him, jaw tight.

Creek reached across the table and grasped Branch’s free hand in his own. The dark troll immediately began to burn up inside, the contact sending a barrage of tingles through his skin. He didn’t pull away immediately but his heart quickened.

“I’ll do whatever it takes,” Creek said seriously. “I’ll do anything to make you happy, Branch. Anything you want to keep this friendship going. If something happens again that would compromise us, don’t run away. Talk to me instead. I’m your friend, right?”

Branch shivered and tried to breathe normally. Those words felt so familiar to him, so painfully familiar. Shaking his nerves fiercely to clear the coming fog of memories, Branch slouched in his chair. “Yeah, alright. Alright… Will you let go of my hand, then?” he sighed. “Why are you so adamant about this? I have nothing to give you, Creek. I’m just a grey, grumpy old troll with nothing
Creek smiled slightly and released him, folding his hands in his lap. “Your companionship, whether it’s grumpy or not, is well received compared to what the rest of the village has offered me.”

“That’s also hard to believe,” Branch chuckled. “You’re telling me you don’t enjoy being showered with glitter and cupcakes? You don’t like to jump into the song and dance with Poppy and the Snack Pack?”

A surging warmth blossomed inside Creek and he smiled, laughing as well. “Not really, no. Sometimes it’s more of a bother than anything. This troll likes his meditation over parties.”

“I think you and I are the only ones who actually enjoy peace and quiet,” Branch mused.

The tension in the room had melted away, leaving the two with a softer cushion of understanding. Tilly crawled from her resting position on Branch’s shoulder and jumped onto the kitchen table to clean her curly antennae, unphased by any of the conversation. Branch reached out and dragged a finger along her black shell fondly and the critter purred to him.

“So,” Creek said, savoring the small smile that was playing along Branch’s lips. “This firefly already has a name?”

“Yeah, her name is Tilly,” Branch said blissfully, stroking the critter. “I’ve actually known her for a couple years now. She comes to me whenever I’m out in the forest gathering medicinal herbs or collecting supplies to refill the bunker. She’s the friendliest critter I’ve ever known and she loves to listen to me s-si –“ Branch faltered, clamping his mouth shut.

“You’ve got a lot of interesting secrets,” Creek said. He thought about how mind boggling it had been to catch the grey troll’s singing voice. He was jealous that the critter has heard him sing probably a dozen times over. He was serious when he said he would give anything to Branch if he wanted it, and he’d give anything to hear him sing again.

“It’s been awhile since you’ve known me,” Branch said. “It’s not really a secret to you now though, is it?”

“I’ll admit, I like finding out the bits and pieces I’ve missed out on.”
“That was something you chose to miss,” Branch said bitterly, starting to withdraw into himself again. He stopped petting the firefly and his smile was gone.

“Tilly and I agree that your singing is beautiful.” Creek knew he was pushing too far now. It was entirely obvious that the topic was bothering him, but he wanted to troll to understand it was alright. It was okay to let that side of him out. It was totally natural as a troll to want to sing.

“You will never hear it again,” the dark troll frowned.

“That’s quite a pity,” Creek said, picking up his mug and taking a small drink. “It would be such a treat to hear that siren’s call again. I don’t know why you choose to hide it.”

“It is what it is.”

“Another bone-melting kiss is out of the question as well?” Creek teased with a smirk, watching his innocent friend shatter into an embarrassing mess.

“Creek!” Branch yelled, a prominent blush flooding his distressed features once more. “I’m totally done with you now. I’m going to sleep.” He stood abruptly from his chair and ignored Creek’s giggles, beckoning the firefly to crawl up his arm so that he could take it with him. “And don’t come barging into my room,” he warned hotly.

“I’ll take care of the dishes,” Creek said, smiling still. “Sleep well, Branch.”

Branch huffed in reply, feeling nauseous from the crazy butterflies in his stomach. He almost wanted to take another bath because the heat was creeping its way back in, but he hoped that his exhaustion would be enough to sleep on.

Creek gazed at his bare back as the troll left the kitchen and walked back to his room, whispering to the blue firefly as he left. The purple troll sighed happily and ran his hand through his hair, straightening some of the lazy strands. He was so relieved, feeling his aura settle down into its natural state of equilibrium. Things could have been a lot worse and he thanked his divine Mother up and down for letting it go so smoothly. Fatigue was starting to slam into him as time was catching up. Creek pondered to himself for a minute more before gathering the mugs from the table.
Chapter 12

Omg HIII! It's me! I'm here!
Sorry for the wait you guys. I hope everyone had a great holiday. I was away, doing family things because of thanksgiving, xmas, new years, etc. Now that it's all done and over with I can get back to writing about my two favorite troll boys. <3 ive also edited the tags because there will be more bits and more story and more characters to come.

(It's been 84 years so I still hope that my readers are alive)

please enjoy and leave a comment! thank you :D

Morning came as it always does, but a fresh dousing of Autumn rain continued its assault across the forest, blocking out the sunshine with puffy dark clouds and shaking the trees with strong winds. Miles away from Troll Village, on the outskirts of Bergen Town nestled next to the city garbage dump, was an old trailer home occupied by an unlikely duo. It sat alone in the darkness, a single dingy widow glowing from inside. The travel tires were both flat and the stakes sunk deep into the ground, tilting the house to the left. A shadowed figure scaled the brick wall of the city with agile movements and swung over the top. It dropped lightly on the other side and hurried through the collected garbage and metal scrap that blended the trailer into the background of the dump. They walked up the rickety three-step stairs and banged on the door.

On the second knock, the door swung open wide. “Hurry, hurry! Get inside, you big lump!”

A flash of lightning illuminated the storm as a skinny, green Bergen wrapped in a black overcoat rushed into trailer house. The entry way was cramped and damp from the rain and the man sighed, shaking off his coat and hanging it on the rack by the door to drip dry. In front of him stood the previously reputable and most prestigious Bergen Town royal cook, Chef. Even in her years of exile, the Bergen still donned her tailored kitchen outfit and traditional white hat. Her baby blue hair was longer now, frayed and tangled around her neck because frankly, she just didn’t give a damn anymore. Clinging desperately to the golden years of living in the palace, Chef thought of nothing but revenge on the tiny Trolls that ruined her entire meaning to exist.

The older female had her bony hands on her hips, staring down the younger man with her beady yellow eyes while he situated himself.

“Where the hell have you been, Carl?” she barked. “I’ve been waiting on your report for days!”
“Good morning to you, too... and the name’s Kevin, remember? It’s really difficult to get out when you’re always on guard duty at the palace, you know.” He straightened his deep red jerkin and twisted his sleeves before pulling his bucket hat from the back of his pants and covering his receding hair line. He patted down his palace uniform and Chef glared at him harder while he took his sweet time, a low growl coming from her throat. “King Gristle Jr. likes my company, apparently,” he said, ignoring her impatience.

Kevin the Bergen, one of the more intelligent folk to dwell within the center city, wasn’t easily flustered by Chef’s abusive name calling or selfish antics. He was the third ranked castle guard among many loyal servants and armed staff, trained to be civil and solid even under the heaviest of pressures. He’d worked for the original King Gristle more than twenty years ago when he was just a child, and has been a part of the royal society his entire life since then.

Recently, however, Kevin stumbled upon the banished cook when he caught her trying to break into the castle to steal utensils from the kitchen. Instead of reprimanding her actions, she somehow roped him into her schemes to capture the Trolls. It took many moons to get him to go along with her plans but now here they were, shackled up inside a small tin can and slinking behind the King and Queen’s back, pushing high treason, and trying to find trolls that they weren’t technically allowed to eat. Kevin was definitely interested in feasting on the trolls as he did years ago with the old king. He missed the magic of Trollstice and believed the talk of inner happiness was just a ploy in letting the creatures run away from their true purpose. A lot of what Chef said made sense to him, but not to mention he had an old admiration for the aggressive woman.

“I don’t want to hear your excuses, just give me the details. Did they take you to see the trolls or not?” Chef snapped at him in her usual, prickly manor.

Kevin smirked, his jagged teeth gleaming. “What do you think?” He revealed a crumpled scroll of paper from inside his shirt and handed it over to Chef. She snatched it quickly, glowing with excitement.

“Excellent,” she screeched, unraveling the scroll and looking over the images printed inside. She turned turned away from Kevin and inspected the paper closely, flattening it out on the tiny kitchenette counter. It was a map of the forest surrounding Bergen Town, red marker lines drawn in a haphazard connection from the location of their trailer to a prominently drawn circle smack dab in the middle of the green imagery.

“The new Troll Tree is only ten kilometers from here,” Kevin explained, looking over her shoulder. “There’s no information about the next time Gristle and Bridget are going to visit the Trolls either. You’re free to do what you want without their conflict until I hear something more.”

Chef cringed at Bridget’s name, rolling the map up quickly with an angry scoff. “That disgusting, no
good, worthless idjit. I’ll have to write up a special plan to destroy her as well, but first we take the main prize. Capturing the trolls are more important.” Whipping around to face her Bergen counterpart, she tapped the edge of the map on his wart-covered nose. “Good work, even though you’re slow,” Chef grinned.

“I am honored to receive such praise,” Kevin made a deep bow, extending his hand outwards. Chef made a dramatic show of gushing and gave her hand so he could kiss the back of it.

“Still mannered as always,” she smirked, then Chef slapped him away abruptly and sat down on the worn-out recliner in the corner of the living area, holding the map to her chest as if it were a precious jewel.

“How soon are we going to leave?” Kevin asked, going to the window and moving aside a single blind to judge the level of the rain. “The weather will probably clear up sometime this afternoon.”

“Too soon, don’t get ahead of yourself. I need a few more days to patch things together,” Chef replied. “At least a week more. The plan must go perfectly! I’ll call you when it’s time and you’d better not be late again. It won’t matter if you walk out because this will be your last job as a servant to those idiots.”

Kevin grunted and moved to pour himself a drink by the end table, taking a quick swig from the tiny glass. After a silent moment of thought, he placed the glass down and observed Chef gawking at her map. “Once I leave the palace I can’t go back,” he said slowly. “I will have nothing if this falls through. I’m trusting you to pull this off otherwise we’ll both be incomparable to the trash outside.”

“You’re worrying too much,” Chef said with a comforting croon. “After we get the trolls, we’ll use them to create our new kingdom and all of your troubles will be over. You can trust me, Cody.”

“For the last time, my name is Kevin.”

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*Flowers blooming, wind blowing, and the sun shining warmth around him. Branch laid on his back in the middle of an endless field of multicolored daisies, breathing in the soft scents and letting the scenery penetrate his core. It was beautiful. He felt beautiful, happy, and carefree. Then, there was a rumbling sound at the edge of the horizon. Branch sat up quickly and looked in its direction, finding a familiar, shimmering troll sitting next to him in the field. They were glowing, filled with white and*
had no discerning features. I know you, Branch thought. The glowing troll smiled and Branch’s heart weakened to its perfection.

The troll held out their hand for him to take, palm up. Branch didn’t hesitate, sliding his own with theirs and smiling back. A fresh gust of wind blew their direction and whipped around the two trolls. No, not again, he thought with a panic. He didn’t want to let go this time and squeezed the trolls hand for dear life. He needed this troll. He didn’t know why but it just felt right. They needed to be together. Branch squinted his eyes against the harsh weather then gasped when the bright glow from his companion was wiped clean like the swirling drift of a cloud. Underneath the mystery was Creek.

Creek smiled the same smile, their hands joined together. His lilac eyes were bright and his purple skin was flawless. Branch stared at him, unable to comprehend the message. Within the center of Creek’s chest, there was a dark pit.

Anxiety. Fear. Sadness. The darkness pulsed and grew, but Creek’s happy expression remained the same, gazing only in Branch’s direction.

Branch made a feeble sob, shaking his head. Stop, Creek! Stop it from growing!

He couldn’t move or speak. Nothing he did could stop Creek from being swallowed by the black hole completely, along with the meadow, sky, and everything, sucked in with lighting speed. Branch was left alone with nothing... in a world of nothing.

In the back of his mind, he heard a small sound.

Chirp. chirp.

Something was there?

Chirp. chirp.

Branch’s consciousness dragged to the surface, his ears curving towards the chirps that echoed inside his dreamland. He cracked his eyes open and breathed in slowly. “Mmm,” he murmured. Tilly chirped again, the blue firefly crawling across his pillow in front of his face. She touched her forelegs to Branch’s cheek and poked at him. The sleepy troll groaned and rolled away from the critter,
tightening the bed sheet around his shoulders. What a terrible dream… but with every second that passed, the details fled his mind. He tried to think about it more but couldn’t remember what happened or who he was with.

The bug huffed and skittered over his form, nestling inside of his hair. She started to chew the black locks, teasing the strands. Branch brushed Tilly off his head, annoyed. “What do you want,” he said groggily. The critter purred happily and wiggled at him, revealing a folded letter attached to her shell with a thread of string. Branch rubbed his eyes and squinted at the letter, sitting up on his elbow to get a better look. He frowned instantly and scoffed, untying the paper from the firefly’s back and giving her a gentle rub under the jaw before opening it. It seems Creek wasted no time using his firefly to send him a note, even when they were living in the same home. How ridiculous.

My dearest, loveliest Branch, good afternoon!

I know this is super sudden to ask, but I need you to bring my yoga mat to the east of Troll Village near Daisy Meadow for my amazing yoga class, being held in the purple studio 4 pod. I know you’ll be coming out of the bunker sometime soon to collect rain water and mushrooms so do this on your way! Thanks-a-bunches!

Love, Creek.

Branch stared dead-eyed at the letter, reading it multiple times before setting it down slowly. The corner of his mouth twitched. He’d be an idiot to believe that Creek actually wrote this note, it sounded too much like Poppy. He turned his attention to Tilly and lifted a brow, gesturing to the paper. “From Creek, eh?” he asked her, knowing full well that the critter couldn’t actually tell him. The bug fluttered her big eyelashes at him and lifted off the bed, buzzing out of the bedroom.

Dragging his reluctant body out of the covers, Branch stood up and yawned deeply. The air felt cool and the floor chilled his feet. He noted the changing temperatures and thought about pulling his slippers out of storage. There wasn’t much time left until he’d have to switch his entire wardrobe to something warmer to fight off the winter. Because of reoccurring heavy snows, it was rare for him to leave the bunker unless he needed to fix something or gather seasonal items. Most of the trolls kept to themselves when the weather was harsh, which didn’t bother him at all.

After yawning himself awake, Branch got dressed quickly in his usual green garb of vest and patched trousers and wandered into the kitchen to scrounge for a bit of bread and fruit. The letter rang true as he thought about all the new tasty mushrooms that were undoubtedly sprouted all over the woods from the rain. Branch shoved the rest of the food in his mouth and went to Creek’s room, crumpling the note in his pocket. He paused at the door and grimaced, really contemplating what he was about to do.

Branch had a suspicious inkling that Poppy comprised an annoying plan hidden inside this favor, but what could the harm really be? He’d bring the yoga mat as requested and then dip out as fast as
possible before anyone could see him. There would be no swindling in any merry-making they were planning for the day. He couldn’t remember if today was a holiday or not, but to be fair, they had a different holiday once a week. The entire ordeal smelled fishy but if Poppy wanted him to bring her a yoga mat then he couldn’t refuse the princess. Branch wished she wouldn’t take such a round-a-bout way of asking him to do things.

“Let’s get this over with quickly,” he breathed to himself, opening the door.

After a quick scan, Branch found a dark blue mat that was rolled and tied in the closet. Luckily for him, he didn’t have to touch too many of Creek’s possessions to get to it. It was awkward enough already for the antsy troll. His bunker was his own, but it felt wrong to be in there while Creek was away.

Hugging the mat under his arm and an empty woven bag slung over his shoulder, Branch climbed the elevator to the upper level and snuck out of his bunker, glancing left and right to avoid anyone who might be in the area. The rain had long since stopped and the forest smelled strongly of vegetation and wet dirt. It was extremely pleasant to Branch and made him excited to be outside. He darted behind a big brush of bushes and pecked through the dripping leaves, staying quiet and suspicious of everything. His destination wasn’t too far away, but he was going to take his time gathering mushrooms along the path. Crouching down to a particularly full patch of fungus at his feet, he smiled and inspected the plush caps before breaking them off at the base and dropping them into the bag he brought.

His stomach cramped from being anxious about meeting Poppy and he tried to calm it by sampling some of the mushrooms. Of course they would taste better cooked, but the earthy, soft texture and strong smell was relaxing.

After gathering a few dozen more mushrooms in his sack, Branch arrived at the fourth studio pod at the upper East side of the Troll Tree. Right below him under the large branches, he could see bits of Daisy Meadow through the foliage in the distance. The wild flowers were scattered and dying from the colder weather. Much of the area was suffocated with yellow and orange fallen leaves. There would be all sorts of scavenging critters and bugs over there, digging through the leaves to find the hiding treasures of Autumn food. Branch’s interest was piqued again, but he clenched his jaw and turned his attention back to the pod in front of him.

Branch walked up the wooden steps and grasped the long handle. His hand was shaking. Biting his lower lip, he forced himself to pull open the door quietly and walk inside. The main hall was scarcely decorated with a couple of photos and flower pots. There were four black doors, two on the left side and two on the right. It was painfully obvious to see which one was occupied because rampant shouting, laughter, and thumping of a dozen troll feet reverberating through the back door on the right. Branch laid his bag of mushrooms on the floor next to the entry way and tried to solidify himself for whatever was going to rush his way.
“It’s going to be fine,” he whispered reassuringly. “It’s fine. You’ll be fine.”

Branch opened the second door, grasping the yoga mat tight under his arm. The grey troll stepped inside the large studio room and shut the door behind him, a little too loudly though. Before he could search for his fluffy, pink princess, dozens of eyes stared in his direction. Everything became painfully quiet with a unison of gasps. Branch couldn’t breathe as his whole world froze in place while the multitude of colorful trolls expressed their surprise...

_Run now. Run away._

His feet wouldn’t move. They were sinking endlessly in the wooden floor and his knees rattled together. This isn’t what he wanted to deal with at all!

“Branch? What are you doing here?”

Branch startled and looked up at Creek, who had walked over to him. His eyes were concerned and confused, hands folded together with apprehension. The purple troll was donning a pair of white leggings and nothing else, showing off his attractive expanse of skin and defined muscles.

“I... I don’t – I just,” Branch choked on his emotions, his palm flying to his chest as he heaved a shaky breath. The hand pressure relieved nothing as he felt the numerous trolls digging their curious and judgmental eyes every which-way into his flesh, pulling and ripping him apart from the inside out.

“Oh, you came!” squeaked a familiar voice. Poppy ran up to Branch’s other side and gave him a quick hug, almost knocking him over. “And you brought Creek’s yoga mat that he needed, right??” The pink troll smiled big at Branch and he looked down at the rolled mat under his arm and nodded weakly at her.

“Yeah... here, take it,” Branch tried to push the item off on Creek, keeping his vision cast downward.

“But I don’t need it. I obviously already have mine – “ Creek started, but Poppy side-stepped and elbowed him in the rib cage. “Ack!”
“Oh, oops! Didn’t see that coming. Anyway, if that’s the case; Branch, why not stay awhile then? We always have room for one more,” Poppy said quickly, taking Branch’s arm and pulling him farther into the studio room near the rest of the yoga class. “Creek was just about to go through our stretching exercises, we’re still only halfway through.”

Whispers and murmurs started to unfurl among them, some making disapproving faces and others snickering behind their hands. Poppy whipped around and shot them a serious glare. The letter’s true intentions were pieced together now while she was trying to get him to participate in another group activity. Poppy was probably tired of making him invitations and resorting to scheming and betrayal was the only way she could get what she wanted.

“Wait, no. I should uh, get going,” Branch said quietly, trying to pull himself away from Poppy’s grasp. “I can’t do this.” He couldn’t be in this room with all these trolls who disliked him. There was too much stress. Too many whispers. He thought he was going to explode with all of the unwanted attention.

“No no no no,” Poppy said. “You’re already here! Just sit down. Sit!” Poppy grabbed his shoulders and forced Branch to the ground at the edge of the class next to Guy Diamond. Branch’s knees buckled easily and he collapsed, sitting on his calves. Poppy unfurled the deep blue yoga mat and laid it down neatly next to him, giving it a gentle pat. “There we go, all set. That’s all you need! Creek, please continue.”

Branch shivered bodily and hugged himself around the middle, telling himself not to throw up. That would definitely be worse than anything.

Creek looked dumbfounded at the princess, “Poppy, my dear, he really doesn’t have to –“

“Creek, please continue with the class,” Poppy repeated, returning to her own pink colored mat that was nestled between Smidge and Harper. Both of them were astounded at her ability to control the grey troll. “Everyone is welcome here, right?” Poppy added. Her two friends nodded vigorously and smiled.

“The more the merrier, as I always say,” Harper said.

“R-Right, of course,” Creek said, showing Branch an apologetic frown then returning to his position at the front for his demonstrations.
Branch glanced over at Guy Diamond, who gave him a tiny smile and a small wave. He averted his eyes again and stared at the glossy wood floor, his heart pounding relentlessly in his chest. He would be the happiest troll if he could die right then.

Fear. Embarrassment. So much fear and regret. He wasn’t friends with these trolls and swore he could hear what they were thinking. What’s the ugly grey troll doing out in the open? Why is the nasty, mean troll here? He’s going to ruin the fun. Sully the happiness. Destroy the mood and possibly rub his grey off on anyone near him. He could imagine them scooting away from him, leaving him isolated at the corner of the room. He was under lock and key by the princess and his fighting tongue was heavy with lead. Usually Poppy gave him the choice in participating in group activities (but of course, he always said no). This was different. He was being forced to deal with the crowd and it was killing him inside. Couldn’t Poppy see that no one wanted him here but her? He didn’t want to be ‘that guy’, messing with their activities and ruining their day. Branch had enough things to worry about in his life, he didn’t need to add extra guilt to the platter.

A gentle, natural tune filled the void of the studio pod. Creek turned up the twinkling music from his radio box and set it aside for a soothing background sound. He walked to his deep violet mat on the floor and stood on it. All attention was on him now, the star of the stage. Branch lifted his head slightly to watch the troll class. Most of them were smiling, totally enraptured by Creek’s presence. The light colored troll straightened his two-toned locks and took a deep breath, raising his arms above his head and pressing his palms together while lowering his body to the ground, sitting down on his knees.

“Release, friends. Let your tendrils of negativity loosen their grip and release the energy into the sky.”

The troll class raised their arms up with him and stretched a sigh. There were subtle comments and bits of giggles. ‘Oh, I love this part!’ Biggie whispered. ‘Oh yeah, get it. Get that stretch!’ Smidge grunted, going above and beyond with her small arms and gritting her teeth with the strain.

Branch looked over at Guy Diamond again because he felt his eyes prodding. The silvery glitter troll gave him an encouraging nod to join in, discreetly pointing at the blue mat by Branch’s side. The dark troll swallowed and shifted his trembling position on top of the mat. He closed his eyes, unable to look anywhere around him while he lifted his arms up with the rest of the class. Branch stretched and tried to think of absolutely nothing at all. He didn’t want to know anymore. He didn’t want to feel the eyes or hear the thoughts. He wanted to run but he couldn’t, so blending in was the better option. His survival instincts were finally beginning to take over and his erratic emotions were shutting down.

Another audible gasp sounded when a couple of trolls noticed Branch joining the group stretch. Creek cleared his throat loudly to grab their attention. It didn’t look like Creek was happy about the circumstances of his yoga class, but Branch felt a little more secure when the guru refused to let
Branch be a free side show. “Downward now,” he said sternly, leaning forward with his arms straight until his upper half was lying flat against the ground. “Release your negatives into the earth for our Mother to cleanse.”

The rest of the troll class followed in suit. Branch swallowed slightly and attempted to mimic the movement. He’d seen Creek do this position before while they were camping at the waterfall. It didn’t look that difficult... With his nose pressed against the floor and his palm on top of the other, Branch sighed and released the breath he was holding for who knows how long. He felt his muscles stretching along his stiff back and shoulders straining. It felt good, honestly.

“Hold the position, I need to help a few.” He heard Creek say. Branch kept his eyes closed. The yoga mat smelled like cheap plastic. It was a different, bumpy kind of texture too.

Creek gently rose and walked towards his class, his bare feet padding without a sound. One after another he checked each troll’s positioning. He went to Smidge and patted her arms, whispering for her to relax more. He made a comment to Harper and she giggled, adjusting her legs until Creek gave an approving nod. He walked to Cooper and put his hands on his hips, arching a brow when he noticed the fool was fast asleep with a snot bubble oozing out of his nose.

Closer now. Branch could feel Creek getting closer to him and his heart did a somersault. As if on queue, wafts of mint flavored aromas penetrated Branch’s senses while Creek knelt next to him. He shivered bodily and tried to ignore it, but his lips opened and he released a single pant. Branch cracked his eyes open and spotted the tips of Creek’s hair almost brushing the ground in front of his face while the troll leaned over his body. Blast his hair and everything attached to it, Branch thought bitterly. Creek moved and whispered to him, “Good form, for not having done it before. Try to align this more, though. It will feel better for your upper back.” There was a gentle touch to the back of Branch’s head at the very base of his hair line. “Right along here…” Creek guided his finger tip down the dip of his neck and over the bump of his spine. Branch shivered again and his eyelashes fluttered. A small noise of pleasure escaped his throat and his fingers dug into his yoga mat.

Creek retracted his hand quickly and stood up, his cheeks blasted with heat. Saying nothing of the matter, he returned to his own yoga mat and continued with the demonstrations. Branch sighed in relief when the minty smells evaporated and he tried to act like he didn’t just have his eyes roll backwards. He started praying that his behaviors went unnoticed by everyone else. There was nothing he could do about the pull that Creek had on him. Between being controlled by Poppy and losing control by Creek, Branch was sick of being around both of them.

Each stretch and each different position had different reactions from the group of unruly trolls. They laughed when they became tangled and laughed when Guy accidentally let loose a poof of glitter while he was bending over.
“It’s a blessing and a curse,” he said with a defeated shrug.

“I believe we’re done for today, after that,” Creek said with an exhausted sigh. “I doubt we can recapture the mood after it’s been ruined in such a way.”

“Nice one, Guy!” Smidge laughed triumphantly, jumping up and down.

“Ahhh… This session was quite wonderful, wasn’t it?” Biggie said pleasantly, rolling up his extra large yoga mat. “I can’t wait until we do it again next week. I also can’t wait to get home to Mr. Dinkles!”

Through the colorful sea of chattering trolls, Poppy’s ears perked up and she made a dramatic O-face. “Oh, Biggie! You left Mr. Dinkles alone at home?”

“Heavens, no,” the big blue troll waved his hand. “He’s with King Peppy right now. Peppy is such a good babysitter, I’m sure they’re reading stories together or sipping hot tea as we speak.”

Just then, Creek bustled through the troll class as they were packing up their belongings and filing out the door, looking almost distraught as he reached Biggie. “Where is he,” he asked. “Do you know where King Peppy is right now? I really need to talk to him.”

“Well, uh… no, I don’t. They could be anywhere right now, but King Peppy said he’d meet me at the bakery to pick up Mr. Dinkles after yoga class. They should be headed that way right about now. That cute little worm loves his after-lunch cookies and –”

“Thanks.” Creek brushed past Biggie and Poppy quickly, not looking back or giving any explanation to his sudden awkward behavior.

“That was weird. I wonder what’s gotten into him?” Biggie asked with a pout.

On the other side of the room, Branch was still sitting on his mat with his face in his hands, waiting for the rest of the trolls to vacate the area so he could manage to pull himself together. Guy Diamond observed the dark troll and decided to sit down next to him with a light whistle, dragging his eyes away to watch the rest of his friends in the Snack Pack leave the studio.
“Not a fan of yoga?” Guy asked lightly.

Branch visibly stiffened on the defense but didn’t respond.

Guy drummed his glittering fingers along the wood boards, then crossed his arms and leaned forward so that his face was tilted down, leveled with Branch. “Your hair is a little bit more shlumpy than normal. Do you want to talk about it?”

Branch grunted with distaste, “My hair is always like this. If you’re going to make fun of me could you do it at a distance?”

Guy Diamond made a toothy grin and shook his head, “I’m not going to make fun of you. I’m just curious, that’s all. I think it’s amazing that you’re even here!”

“I’m not here by choice,” Branch said grimly.

“Ah, but you’re still here, all the same,” Guy mused. “I think that if you really didn’t want to be here, you wouldn’t be. I can’t count on both of my hands how many times I’ve seen you stomp away from something you didn’t want to do. Poppy means well, you know. She always has some kind of agenda –”

Branch growled and lifted his head, his obvious displeasure of talking was written all over his face. “What’s your motive,” he asked harshly. “Is there something you want from me?”

Guy Diamond chuckled and clambered to his feet, rubbing his hands on his knees then resting them on his bare hips. “That’s better now, isn’t it?” he asked, ignoring Branch’s threatening expression. “Feeling grumpy is better than feeling sad sometimes. See you later.” Guy tossed him a seductive wink then walked away with a shake of his hips.

Branch blinked slightly then averted his eyes from the silver ass that Guy was trying to put on display. His ears twitched and he smiled quietly, agreeing with what the glitter troll said. It was true, he felt better when he was grumpy. Guy Diamond had an annoying, overbearing personality like the rest of the lot, but Branch had to give it to him. He had a good head on his shoulders when the time was right. Renewed with short burst of energy, Branch got to his feet and quickly rolled up his mat, throwing it under his arm. The dark troll secretly stepped along the back end of the emptying studio to avoid an encounter with Poppy or any other troll that might look his way. He just had to grab his bag of mushrooms and then get the hell back to his bunker where it was safe.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

A little be a closure would be good for all of us. < 3
also, i love writing from Creek's POV sorry not sorry

“Hey, has anyone seen Branch?” Poppy asked loudly, looking around the emptying yoga studio frantically for a short stalk of dark hair. Most of the trolls were clogging up the exit, laughing and poking fun at one another while the others tried to push and shove their way through the single black door. There was only one way in and one way out, so Branch had to still be here but Poppy couldn’t spot him anywhere! She grumped to herself and jumped up and down, trying to look over her friends’ heads.

Guy Diamond tapped the pink princess on the shoulder and she whipped around to face him. “He’s at the back corner,” Guy said smiling, jabbing his thumb over his shoulder. “Probably waiting until everyone leaves so he can slink away undetected.”

“Oh, thanks!” Poppy lit up with excitement, rushing past Guy Diamond to get to the grey troll before he could sneak away, but Guy grabbed her arm before she could leave and he cleared his throat.

“One second, Poppy,” he said. “I was just wondering, do you really think that this whole charade was a good idea?”

Poppy tilted her head and stared at him, confused, “Of course it was a good idea! How else are we going to get Creek and Branch to spend time together?”

The glitter troll rubbed the back of his head and shrugged. “They didn’t really get to be alone, though. Branch has been upset this entire time, so we might have done more harm than good.”

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“Psh,” Poppy rolled her eyes and put her hands on her tiny hips, “Branch is always upset, you know that as much as I do. There’s only so many things we can do to get him to come out of that depressing hole in the ground. These guys aren’t going to come together on their own. Even if it’s only for a yoga class, we need to take our options where we can get them.”

“Yeah, you’re right I guess,” he replied with a small frown, still unconvinced.
After the scheming Poppy did with Cloud Guy about their exciting match-making game, the princess decided to invite the Snack Pack in on the deal. All of her close friends were quite excited to be able to help Branch in hopes that he would finally become happy like a normal troll. Biggie, Smidge, and Guy Diamond were her main conspirators and the best crew she could ask for, but after witnessing Branch’s panic attack for the first time, Guy was worried about the grey troll’s well being now more than ever before.

Guy Diamond was a joyful, caring troll and sometimes was the voice of reason to Princess Poppy. The silver troll could be the wildest party animal, but the most understanding friend, even more than Biggie with his heart on his sleeve. Poppy always tried to listen to Guy when he told her his worries because he was right, most of the time. This seemed to be one of those times and Poppy shuffled her feet while she watched the worry in Guy’s face.

Then, the pink troll sighed, biting her tongue. “Well...” Poppy said, rethinking her actions and looking past Guy Diamond to where Branch was hiding. She still couldn’t see where he was at, but maybe that was for the best. “We’ll give him some time to relax before the next attempt? I guess he was a little more upset today than normal...”

Guy Diamond nodded and gave her a tight side hug, guiding the princess away, “Not to worry, we’ll try again soon,” then they went to the exit door and tried to pry some of the clogged trolls out of the ridiculous chaos.

“Disperse, disperse!” Poppy yelled, wrapping her pink hair around a random arm that was sticking out of the pile to tug on it.

“Poppy said DISPERSE! Raaggh!” Smidge sprinted up from behind and blasted into the clog of bodies, using her superior strength to shove them forcibly out, into the hallway, and through the front door for the pod. There were a couple of shrieks and yells until the dozen trolls rolled and sprawled apart on the bark of the tree, laughing their thanks to the small yellow troll.

“Thanks Smidge, it was getting too rough for my liking,” a blue troll waved.

“If your butt wasn’t so big it wouldn’t have taken so long to leave,” another giggled.

“Ya’ll say one at a time but that flies right over your hair!”

Poppy shook her head and grinned, trotting down the wooden steps. “Glad that’s taken care of, see you guys later! I have a date with Cloud Guy!”
With the yoga class over and done, it was just three in the afternoon and already the sun was starting to dim, overcast with full clouds. It looked like it was going to rain again and the air was chilly. Traveled far past and down the carved path towards the market, Creek was following right behind King Peppy. His hands were clasped behind his back and his rounded ears were tilted, keeping his senses open to make sure no one was eavesdropping or following them. The two trolls had just left the bakery after a painfully long conversation with Biggie about his worm, Mr. Dinkles. Creek ushered them to hurry up and say farewell and now the they were on an empty path going in no direction particular. It took forever for King Peppy to pick out his sweet treat from the bakery shop before giving Creek the attention he desperately needed. The stumpy orange troll was wise beyond his years and was fully respected by every troll in the village… unfortunately, his age also made him one of the more eccentric trolls and it was difficult to keep him on point.

“You needed to talk, Creek?” King Peppy asked with a happy drool, unwrapping wax paper on a rather large cinnamon roll covered with cream cheese icing.

“Yes, I do,” the purple troll said slowly. “I have many questions that only you can answer. I would much prefer if we could go to your pod where it’s a little more private, if you don’t mind?”

“Private… Hmm.” The troll king took a huge bite of his roll and hummed to himself, using his free hand to scratch idly through his large beard. “What kind of questions are these, child,” he said with his mouth half full, “that we need to hide ourselves away from the rest of our family?”

“Please, King Peppy,” Creek begged quietly, looking back over his shoulder. “You know this is difficult for me.”

The king stopped abruptly, turning around and grasping Creek on the shoulder with strong shake of reassurance. “Yes, yes. I know quite well what you’re about,” he said. “Come, then! Let’s have a drink together and we can sort this all out by the evening.” Creek sighed in relief and King Peppy patted him on the back with a big smile as they walked together side-by-side now.

Traveling together to King Peppy’s pod, Creek’s stomach swirled as the orange troll barreled through his front door and held it open for the purple troll with his foot. The place smelled woodsy and dusty, but not bad. He’d been in the troll king’s quarters before and it had a cozy atmosphere that was comparable to laying by a fireplace. The main living area had a deep orange glow and was furnished with two worn, leather recliners. The back wall was lined with dark wood bookshelves, filled to the brim with novels older than the king himself. Creek breathed in deeply and admired the setting. King Peppy went to his locked cabinet in the corner of the room and produced a tall bottle of liquid and two small, short glasses.

“Sit down, sit down,” King Peppy said, bringing the items to the short table resting between the two chairs, sitting down in one of them and setting up the drinks.
Sinking in the plush arm chair across from the old orange troll, Creek leaned forward with his hands on his knees, fingers gripping tight while he wracked his brain for the right words. King Peppy was patient and quiet, working on their drinks without pushing the younger troll. He uncorked the dark vial and poured a small amount into both crystal glasses. The alcohol was clear and smelled strongly of diluted ethanol.

“This will definitely take the edge off and help you relax,” King Peppy smiled, offering a glass across the table. Creek took it and raised the glass in thanks before downing the contents in a single swallow, unfazed by the liquor’s severity. Peppy was rather impressed, bouncing his large eyebrows before following suit, throwing back his drink until it was empty.

After a few moments of rubbing away his nerves and letting his body warm up to the fiery drink, Creek let out a breath and smoothed his clammy hands along his pants. “I wanted to talk to you about mating,” he said, his lip twisting grimly while his cheeks reddened.

King Peppy barked a laugh and slammed his glass down on the table, forcing a solid jump scare out of Creek. “It’s about time, my boy!” he exclaimed. “I was beginning to worry you’d never figure it out, you know! So who’s the lucky troll?”

“There’s no lucky troll!” Creek said exasperated, steadying the wobbling table from the sudden assault.

“Of course there is,” King Peppy chuckled, taking up the vial and pouring himself another drink. “You most definitely have a lucky troll and we should drink more to celebrate it!”

“You’re not listening to me,” Creek groaned.

“And you still seem to be clouded in denial,” the king said. “Why else would you be curious about mating if you hadn’t come across your destined mate?”

With that sly statement, the purple troll stopped, watching the troll king’s proud and scheming facial expressions. Creek lifted a brow and sat back in his chair, “That’s not quite what I was going to ask about. More so how to stop mating urges rather than start them... What do you mean I’m in denial?”

The orange troll chuckled again and swigged his drink, grunting a quick approval. “There’s a troll soul out there for everyone, Creek. It may take a few years to find them, it may even take a few days.
Sometimes you know your soul mate from the first moment you lock eyes with them. Sometimes when you’re stubborn enough, the answer could be unseen, resting right under your nose for the rest of your life.”

Creek frowned and said nothing, letting the king ramble onward as he always does. First Poppy, now her father. He knew about soul mates and he didn’t need any more lessons. When it came to knowledge of the unseen, the village was almost segregated. Older trolls who had the information passed down to them by their parents knew about souls and their bonds, while younger trolls in this generation heard the talks of mystery but didn’t quite understand the full details. Creek lay somewhere along the faded line, knowing but missing important pieces of the puzzle. It was futile to talk about it because for all he cared about, it didn’t pertain to him. He just wanted to know more about what Branch was going through and why the dark troll was reacting so strongly to him all the time. There had to be something he could do to ease the dark troll’s pain and strengthen their friendship.

“You’re curious about mating but you don’t have anyone in mind,” King Peppy concluded, his smile fading then while his old eyes bore straight into Creek. “You’re a lot more stubborn than I thought. How long is it going to take for you to realize who they are?”

“I do not have a soul mate,” Creek said roughly, crossing his arms over his chest and glancing his eyes away, avoiding the contact. “They don’t exist, King Peppy. They’re dead. This talk of soul mates is completely pointless and off topic, with all due respect, sir.”

“Do you know that for sure?” Peppy quipped, raising his furry pink brow.

“Well, there isn’t any –“

“Do you know what happens to a troll when half of their soul is gone forever?” the king said, staring Creek down. The purple troll squirmed slightly and swallowed, shaking his head. It was frightening when King Peppy became serious. It was so out of the ordinary that it made his hair stand on end and goosebumps covered his arms. Creek was positive that his soul mate was long dead from the last Trollstice twenty years ago. He’d searched high and low in the village for many years and never found what he was looking for. He’d met every troll, every creature to ever walk past his way, and none of them gave him that feeling of connection.

“When half of your soul is dead, you become empty,” King Peppy gravely said. “It takes an extraordinary amount of willpower to live through losing your soul mate, Creek, even if you haven’t met them.” King Peppy eyes softened and filled with sadness. “When they leave, you just know they’re gone, deep down inside. You can feel the piece missing out of your heart. A troll with only half a soul doesn’t survive longer than a few days.”
Creek soaked in the words, his chest shot with a depressed, guilty feeling. He’d underestimated how deep of a bond it could be. Did King Peppy know the pain of losing a soul mate? Many trolls were curious but never asked the king about where his wife, Poppy’s mother, could be. She was gone with the rest of the victims, more than likely, but King Peppy was still here among them. His willpower alone, as the hero of the troll race from twenty years ago, could have pulled him through those harsh times. Then, Creek’s ears perked up while he tried to understand what the king was telling him. His eyes became wide, his stomach filling with a torrent of flapping butterflies. “Wait, you mean… you mean my soul mate is still alive somewhere?!”

“Of course, Creek,” King Peppy said, a grin spreading from ear to ear. “I can’t believe it’s taken you so long to figure this out! I thought you were a smarter troll than that.”

“I’m not very knowledgeable when it comes to these matters,” Creek smiled weakly. “That’s why I came to you in the first place. Mating and soul mates. Finding your true love, and the sort... These things I haven’t thought about or cared to think about for a long time because my mate has never shown their face to me. I’d given up...” But he was excited now, so very excited! His heart flipped in his chest and Creek’s hands were jittering with energy. Unable to keep still, Creek decided to reach to the table and fill his cup, taking up the offer on a celebratory drink.

“Let’s take a step back and talk about your initial concerns,” Peppy suggested. “If not about your own soul mate, then what questions of mating do you have now?”

The purple troll’s mind was still boggled with the new revelation about his mate. All he wanted to do was go out and search for them. He wouldn’t rest a single moment until they were locked safe in his arms. “I want to know if there’s something I can do about Branch,” he replied, tasting his liquor more slowly. His tongue was becoming loose and his head buzzed, but it was still difficult to relax into the burn of the alcohol.

“Branch... Branch? The sad little grey troll?” King Peppy asked, stroking his beard in his hand over and over while he recalled the young troll in his mind. The old king sat back in his big chair and hummed to himself, gazing off to the side while he sank into his thoughts.

“Yes, the only colorless troll in the village,” Creek confirmed. “I believe he’s... attracted to me unwillingly, for one reason or another. I wanted to ask if you had any knowledge about what could be causing it. Do you think that he’s become desperate?”

“Maybe not desperate,” the orange troll said thoughtfully, tapping the tips of his fingers together. “Poppy told me that you have been going out of your way for him, lately.”
Creek folded his hands in his lap and fidgeted. “I have only done a few simple things… in return for letting me stay in his bunker while my pod is being repaired from the fire damage. He got stuck with me because no one else wanted to take the challenge, I suppose. That’s all.”

“A few things like bringing him a rare and beautiful firefly? Cooking for him? Sharing our private drinks with him?” King Peppy questioned, smirking while he watched the purple troll become undone by his intimate knowledge.

“How do you all know this?!” Creek cried out, covering his mouth in horror. He hadn’t told anyone about those things, not even Poppy. How did Poppy know of all the sappy, heartfelt attempts he’s done in order to stand on equal ground with Branch? Why did she have the nerve to tell her father of all trolls about his ventures? Creek’s embarrassment was going to topple him and he could hardly stand it. He could understand finding out about Tilly because she was wild and flitted about as she pleased, but nothing else. Everything was behind a closed door, deep underground.

“I have eyes and ears everywhere. I am the king!” Peppy laughed loudly.

Creek rubbed his hands on his face and tried to calm down. Think logically, you fool, he thought to himself. The only way Poppy would know about what they’ve done is if Branch told her, but he couldn’t believe Branch would do such a thing. He was more reserved than any troll Creek knew. The only possibility would be that he and Branch were being watched. Their relationship was being observed in secrecy. Nothing was private anymore. Creek was beginning to question just how much information King Peppy was hiding under his belt.

“It looks to me like you’re courting him,” the troll king continued, ignoring how uncomfortable Creek had become. “Getting ready for the next mating season, are you? How can you not expect an honest child like that to not be attracted to you after all you’ve done? You’re a handsome troll, Creek!”

“C-Courting him? That’s absurd!”

“Courting, not courting, whatever you say,” King Peppy said with a dismissing wave of his hand. “Just remember that Branch is a special breed of troll. After the passing of our dear Rosiepuff, the boy has never been the same. Being grey for so long does things that are difficult to reverse. It could be possible that he’s attached to you out of sheer need for social interaction… but there is more likely a very real, astronomical reason behind his attraction.” The orange troll gave Creek a knowing wink that made him blush harder in return. “Would you like to tell me anything specific about how he’s been acting?”
Creek’s blush traveled down his neck as he remembered all of things that’d happened between him and Branch so far. The subtle looks, the unexpected touches, the intoxicating kiss that they shared during a stormy night… When he caressed the back of Branch’s neck at the yoga class today, there was a rippling energy that traveled up his arm, like a bolt of electricity. The sound that spilled from the grey troll’s lips was small, almost unnoticeable, but Creek had heard it. The innocent moan forced that shocking energy straight to his groin and his breath caught in a vice.

“N-No,” Creek gulped, turning his face away from King Peppy. “Nothing specific is needed.”

“Hmm… alright.” King Peppy nodded, hefting himself out of his chair and rubbing his hands over his lower back with a grunt. He shuffled over to the bookshelves along the wall and pondered, reading the titles to himself in soft muttering. “Ah, here we are,” he said, pulling a thick, tattered volume from the shelf. He dusted the cover with his arm then came back to Creek, holding the book out to him.

Creek accepted the book curiously and read the title. *Troll Cultures and Tales of Love*

“Take this with you,” King Peppy said. “There’s more details in here than I can remember off the top of my head. You’ll find your answers if you look.”

“Thank you,” Creek said slowly, gazing at the glittering letters and frayed black binding. “I’ll return it as soon as I can.”

Despite the awkward circumstances, there was hope in his heart again. The purple troll had hopes, goals, and this book had answers that he was seeking. His thoughts were tangled and twisted around worry, but for once in his life he was happier than any other of his plagues. He could feel positivism bursting through his aura, wrapping around his form like a hot blanket in winter. He wanted to jump to his feet and dance! He wanted to smile and sing while he twirled around outside in the grass, just like when he was a young trolling. The closure he sought was almost in his grasp.

Creek almost expected King Peppy to tell him that Branch was his destined mate. Poppy had already concluded that could be a possibility, but he was grateful that the troll king didn’t try to shove it down his throat as well.

He knew already. He knew that there was something with Branch that he couldn’t ignore for much longer. The only problem was, regardless of either of their weird, out-of-character actions, Creek still hadn’t taken in the scent of his soul. His soul mate would have a smell to them that would make them
stand out in a crowd and it would be the most perfect scent he’d ever know. Their two scents would
unify and the very wildflowers would spring up from the ground at their feet just to take part in the
beauty, or so the older trolls said. Until he found his soul’s scent, there was no mate. Poppy and King
Peppy were hinting and poking, trying to get him to put his hope in the colorless troll, but it was
impossible. Branch just wasn’t the one… or was he?
All the trolls in the village began retreating into their pods, another storm rolling from the skies in the East. It didn’t look to be a horrible storm, but no one wanted to be caught if the wind blew too hard. The oncoming cold front made the air chilly and the sprinkling of rain felt like soggy ice.

Branch and Creek somehow avoided one another when returning home to the depths of the bunker that night. Each troll locked themselves away in their respective bedrooms, keeping quiet and getting ready for sleep. Creek was nervous about seeing Branch and was quite thankful he had more time to gather his thoughts. Little time passed since he came to live here, but with each day he was scattered farther out of the norm. He had so many questions, so many feelings that didn’t have structure, and in the back of his mind he felt he was running out of time.

His life before Branch was solid, peaceful, and always the same. Creek had a simple routine and followed through with what everyone expected of him. He taught his yoga classes, per Poppy’s request, and he used most of his free time to meditate. He had deep, dark feelings that would only rise to the surface once in a blue moon… otherwise, things were fine. Ever since he spotted the dark troll, heard his beautiful voice, and spent some time observing him after so many years of ignoring him, something shifted and changed inside Creek. He’d become anxious, needy, and thought of Branch constantly. If he was totally honest with himself, he’d pull the blue moon down from the sky if that’s what Branch wished for. In the midst of all his wandering about and questioning, somehow his need to find his fated companion and his need to bring Branch happiness were merging into the same path.

The book that King Peppy gave to him, *Troll Cultures and Tales of Love*, seemed to be his only chance to fill in the missing gaps. Tonight, he was going to scour through the entire thing and make a decision before going to sleep, then tomorrow morning he would act that decision without looking back.

Feeling motivated, Creek slipped into some warm pajamas and crawled on top of his bed with the novel. He laid on his stomach, supporting his upper half with his elbows and opened the book against his pillow. Turning to the first page, Creek began to read.
For thousands of years, mating between Trolls has evolved and changed, as all things do, for better survival of the species, but one unique aspect has always remained the same: the conjunction of a split soul. Every Troll born is compromised with the task of seeking out and rejoining the pieces of their souls. Mysteries remain when wondering why souls are divided in the first place and how this phenomenon occurs, but the season of mating has become ritualistic in order to obtain the true feeling of happiness when a Troll couple is whole once more. Focusing on only this aspect, determined Trolls from around the world come together at the Sanctum of Eden during the early days of Spring in hopes of discovering their destined counter part.

Biting the inside of his cheek, Creek squinted at the introduction tidbit. He knew most of this already, but what surprised him was the mentioning of the Sanctum of Eden. He’d never heard of such a place before, but it would make sense if he imagined that there were other villages of Trolls out there besides his own. He’d never thought about other Troll races and where they might be. His heart and mind was always nestled safely in his own world and there wasn’t any need to venture out and explore.

It was no wonder why it was so difficult to find your soul mate. Chances of actually coming together with them down the road of destiny was slim to none if you factored in all the Trolls in existence! Creek had been only looking inside his own village. His mate could be out there, hundreds of miles away, completely unaware just as he was.

The impossibilities were beginning to weigh down on Creek’s enthusiasm while he flipped gently through the pages of the old book. He adjusted his position on the bed, laying his head on his upper arm while supporting the book in his other hand. His body was tired and sleep tugged but he wanted to know more, so with a tiny yawn, Creek skipped through, reading each chapter title… Lessons of Loving Unconditionally, The Troll Meaning of True Happiness, The Art of Mating Between Souls. He paused at the last chapter and a small blush touched his cheeks while he scrolled through the page.

… physical sex is necessary when procreating in Troll culture, except in the instances between soul mates. Life Energy Exchange is a studied concept that happens between two destined mates. Odds of success vary with every generation, but same-gendered mating will produce offspring in the instances when Life Energy is involved. The most recorded cases of this unique pregnancy are between two female soul mates, where penetrative intercourse is not possible. Secondly, two male soul mates are also affected, the dominant Troll passing his traits through sex and/or Life Energy. Male pregnancy is uncommon, but not impossible. Thirdly, male and female Trolls…

“That is a bit more information than I needed,” Creek said to himself, turning the pages quickly and passing over the entire chapter while he was red in the face. Ghostly images of Branch played across his mind and he chewed his lip. He tried to read the next chapter but couldn’t concentrate while the figment grey troll danced in his eyes, so he laid the book down and pressed his nose into the mattress to think about him.
He couldn’t doubt there was an attraction to him. Branch wasn’t an ugly troll, not by a long shot. When Creek looked past the dull hue of his skin, he found an intelligent, strong, dignified troll that could care for himself. He was attractive in so many ways that even his sharp tongue gave a little excitement. He was unhappy, yes, but that only drove Creek forward with stronger purpose. He needed to know if Branch was his mate or not. Creek couldn’t dismiss the notion any longer after so many instances. He felt awkward and embarrassed for being curious about whether they were a destined pair because if they weren’t, then where did that leave him? Pining after a troll that wanted nothing to do with him in order to fill the void in his chest? It seemed like such a selfish notion... but just when was Creek going to give in to the selfishness? He’s always doing things for others, ignoring his own wants and needs. That’s how he ended up with such a depressing life.

Taking the book into consideration, if they were, hypothetically of course, mated... that meant that either he or Branch could actually become pregnant from it. Creek blushed again as he imagined having a little trolling child of his own, running around his legs and enjoying life without a care in the world. He suspected his baby would be gorgeous, more so than any troll in the entire village. Their color would mimic either his or Branch’s, or they’d be a mixture of the two. Regardless of that, there was no doubt in Creek’s mind that their trolling would be beautiful. They’d be sweet, kind... smart and strong, just like their grumpy daddy.

It almost seemed insane the way he was already thinking about their potential life together. He rattled his head and tried to be reasonable with himself. All the talk about mating was making him pass boundaries that didn’t need to be crossed right now. Taking a breath, Creek raised his face and opened the book again towards the back. *Conflicts and Struggles.* This looked a little more promising...

… *There is no such thing as a perfect world, and it also applies to the struggles of life outside the normality of Troll living. Sickness, famine, poverty, and the like, all run the course in our existence. There are occurrences between soul mates that could prevent the achievement of merger, such as disability, adultery, and irreversible loss of color.*

“I-Irreversible...” Creek stuttered. His worries blossomed painfully at his core and he grazed down the words, refusing to believe it.

… *prolonged loss of color in a soul mate has many life-changing side effects. When a Troll loses their color, it is similar to being drained of their Life Energy, leaving an empty shell of who they once were. The causes of this are many, far and in between, and most cases stem from the root of losing something important. The matter is always different per individual, though loss of color is not a permanent illness. The Troll in question may have a change in personality and other contributing mental deficiencies. Effects may include changes such as uncontrolled aggression, introversion, depression, anxiety, and nervousness.*
Unfortunately, the effects of this ailment are not one sided. The other half of the afflicted soul is also damaged. Troll mates feel the same negativism as their counter part, even if they are divided.

Color loss can be amended, but there is no known medicine or cure to date. If the colorless Troll cannot help themselves, the ramifications could be severe for both mates and are not limited to death itself.

He couldn’t read it anymore.

Creek closed his book and set it aside on his wooden night stand, tears spilling over his cheeks because the emotion was just too much to handle. He knew already what Branch was like, but it seemed more unsettling when reading it from an old book written by a scholarly Troll who more than likely wasn’t alive today. Branch had lost his colors twenty years ago and has been suffering by himself ever since that day. Creek abandoned him. He abandoned his best friend who couldn’t do anything for themselves as a small trolling. No family, no friends, and Creek hammered the last nail in his coffin.

Creek sniffed and let out a tiny sob, leaning into his pillow and squeezing his eyes closed, swiftly shutting down the urges to cry.

He didn’t want Branch to live the rest of his life in this misery, for whatever years the troll had left. Soul mate or not, Creek had to do something. If Branch didn’t have any Life Energy, as the book says, then he would give him his own. He didn’t know how to do it, but if it was similar to his beliefs in emanation of auras then it was possible.

A crack of thunder echoed through the survival bunker and Creek’s ears perked up to the noise. The storm was in full effect above ground, rain splattering against the entrance hatch. Creek could hear the pitter-pattering of the droplets and the shaking of the forest trees. While he listened to the rain, an ominous shroud hung over his head.

Something wasn’t right, he could feel it in his bones. Getting out of bed, he straightened his pajamas and went to his bedroom door, opening it and moving down the hall to Branch’s bedroom. The floor was frosty and the sounds of rain were louder in this area, probably because it was closer to the elevator. Creek stopped outside Branch’s door and hesitated. Would Branch really appreciate him coming in again like before? It was highly doubtful but Creek couldn’t pull away from the tug that bound him. Raising his hand, he went to rap on the wood.
The door swung open unexpectedly before Creek could knock and it startled him a step back. Branch stood in the entry way, his darkened gaze cast away to the side. There were prominent circles under his eyes and they were slightly pink and puffy. The grey troll looked incredibly exhausted and panicked.

Creek faltered and rubbed the back of his neck nervously. “I just – wanted to check on you because it’s storming,” he said quickly. “Are you doing alright?”

Branch still didn’t meet his look and Creek noticed there was a fidget in his shoulders. “Hurry up inside, it’s cold,” he said faintly. Branch turned and retreated back to the black depths of his room, leaving the door open. Creek blinked a few times at the unanticipated reply then followed him inside quickly, shutting the door behind him with a tiny click. Taking a moment for his vision to adjust in the dim lighting, Creek caught the outline of Branch’s figure getting in bed on the left side. A rumbling thunder crawled through the storm above them and the dark troll curled into himself. Just last night they had shared a searing kiss in this same bed, which ended tragically for both trolls. Creek was afraid of repeating the scenario but he wasn’t about to leave his friend alone. Not this time, and not ever again.

Butterflies danced through Creek’s stomach while he walked to the right side, gingerly taking up the edge of the blanket in his hand. Branch didn’t say a word, so he took the cue and slipped under the cover as carefully as he could to not disturb the mattress. Adjusting his right arm under the pillow, Creek laid on his side facing Branch’s back. They were only a foot apart, separated by the dip of a thin sheet. A particularly loud thunder crack rattled the bunker, items from across all rooms shifting and clinking into one another.

“C-Creek,” Branch stammered, his pointed ears flattening as far as they could go.

Without delay, the purple troll took him about the waist and pulled him back to his chest. Creek wrapped the blanket around them both and held him close, his face resting near Branch’s ear. He’d be damned if he was going to ignore Branch crying out his name in such a way.

“I’m here,” he said softly. “I’m right here.”

Branch nodded vigorously and let out a shaking breath, bringing his hand to clasp Creek’s wrist. His palm was clammy, fingers digging into his skin.

“I need help,” Branch pleaded quietly, his voice beginning to break while he lost hold of his control. “I feel like you’re the only one that understands.” His words were forced out with all the strength he could muster. Branch was burying his pride, reaching out to Creek for support.
Creek’s heart twisted. He did understand and he wasn’t going to reprimand Branch for having these intense doubts and fearful thoughts. He understood more now than he ever did his entire life. Instead of responding to Branch’s comment, he started to hum softly. Just like last night, and every stormy night when they were young, he would sing their song. Their lullaby that they wrote together, Creek would sing for him alone.

“When the lights disappear, know that I won’t let go. When you’re cold, when you’re lost, and you fall from the light,” Creek sang to him under a low whisper. “I will stay by your side with the song for the night.”

Branch rolled in Creek’s arms, adjusting his position so that he was facing the troll. He planted his face into the crook of his neck, hands holding fast to his night shirt. Creek rested his chin into the stalk of black hair, tightening his hold in return.

“Tonight you’ll find, some peace of mind... knowing you’ll be safe, asleep tonight.”

As quickly as the rain fell, the Fall weather passed by without any more disturbances. Branch fell asleep in as little as an hour, nestled warm in protective arms. Creek yawned quietly, keeping himself awake until he knew that Branch was settled. He listened to the soft whispers of Branch’s breath, feeling puffs against the skin of his neck. He felt... contentment.

Listening to the beat of his own heart while he looked down at Branch’s serene, sleeping face, the corner of Creek’s mouth turned up and he closed his eyes to the weariness. I can hear you now, Creek thought to his heart. I love him.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a warmth that was bled into his body, brushing feathery touches around his foundation, but staying just far enough away from where he really needed it. His chills were melting and his body was comfortable. A gentle hand caressed slowly down his back, layering coats of heat into his skin with each stroke. It was so warm, so wonderful. An invisible string of broken chain links drifted as loose chaos, scattered and ignored. Amidst the damage, pulses of energy exuded from the pieces; a single ring repaired itself and connected to another.

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Rich aromas of fried potatoes roused Branch that morning, tickling their way to his nose and coaxing him awake. The grey troll lifted his head and sniffed groggily, his black hair messy and matted to one side. Then he flung his arm out and clawed the other side of his mattress, feeling around for the troll he let into his bed last night. Creek was gone but left a gift in his parting. Branch sat up in bed and pulled a thick, aqua and teal colored hair from the bed sheet. He stared at it dully, annoyed. “Hmph,” he huffed through his nose, tossing the hair over the side of the bed to the floor. “That’s real cute,” he grumbled, scratching his head and yawning deeply. Creek was starting to resemble a furry, domesticated critter, following him around day-to-day and shedding all over his possessions. Chuckling at the thought, Branch rubbed his eyes and rolled out of the bed.

That was the best sleep he’s had in days, surprisingly. He felt entirely refreshed, ready to tackle the day like normal. He liked his normality and missed it immensely so he was going to try his dammedest to get back on track and finish his preparations for winter. Lately, there was a digging hole in the center of his chest, haunting him and playing with his emotions. Anxiety was a close friend in Branch’s world, but it’d been more painful than he could ever recall. In this very moment, the hidden pit in his heart seemed calm, sleeping dormant and in control.

Following the orders from his stomach, Branch brushed his hair in the mirror and pursued the drifting trails enticing him to the kitchen. Peeking around the corner of the hall, he looked towards the fire stove and raised a brow at the spectacle.

Creek was bustling back and forth between the counter and stove, muttering to himself then randomly breaking out into a tuneful whistle. He was wearing soft yellow slacks that were similar to his old pair, and nothing else. It complimented his violet hue, making the troll seem brighter against the background of the deep brown bunker walls. Branch dragged his eyes over the dips and curves of Creek’s bare back, watching his muscles dance with his movements. His body was entrancing to look at, trim and fit from all the exercising that was worked into his life’s routine. The troll did a tiny
jig with his hips, the tail end of his long hair swinging to the side and flicking a spatula into his open hand. As impressive as that was, the movement forced Branch to cover his mouth and stifle a laugh.

Biting his bottom lip and stoning his expression, Branch tip-toed into the kitchen and walked up behind Creek’s side, peeking over his shoulder to get a look at the fry pan. “What are you making?” he asked loudly.

Creek jumped in alarm and made a loud squeak, whipping around to face him while his back slammed into the edge of the counter. The hanging utensils and spare potatoes shook, a couple of items rolling over the edge and falling on the floor. After a few seconds, the purple troll put his hand to his chest and breathed heavily. “Dear Mother, did you have to ambush me like that?”

Branch smirked and shrugged, bluffing his amusement. “Just giving you a little payback,” he said.

“Ah, yes,” Creek mused, “much deserved, isn’t it?” The purple troll scooped up the dropped pieces and turned back to the sizzling pan, shooing Branch away. “Breakfast is almost finished, sit down.”

Branch smiled slightly and did as he was told, stepping back and plopping himself into a chair at the dining table. Their places were set with plates and silverware already and he picked up a fork to inspect it, keeping himself occupied. His eyes kept training to the side, curious about Creek’s mood. Branch was feeling mischievous, even somewhat happy for once. It seemed the other troll was in the same spirits and it made him feel jittery. The atmosphere was gentle and warm. He didn’t get to appreciate moods like this because they were incredibly rare, so he hoped it would last a little bit longer between them.

Creek scooped his concoctions into serving dishes and brought his cooking to the table, laying it all in the center neatly. It smelled mouth-watering and Branch sat up straight, analyzing the food. “Breakfast potatoes gratin with peppers, onions, and fresh greens,” Creek explained, handing off a large spoon for Branch to take. “I thought eating something hardy would help stave the cold weather.”

Branch nodded and used the spoon to fill his plate while Creek settled into the chair across from him. The purple troll watched intently and Branch did his best to hold in his awkwardness, returning the spoon to the main dish after retrieving his share.

“... About last night. I’m sorry,” Branch started to apologize, but Creek cut him off by offering him a mug filled with fruit juice.
“It is alright, we don’t need to talk about it,” he said lightly. “I fresh pressed this earlier, enjoy it.”

The grey troll took the cup gingerly, his cheeks coloring now. “Thanks,” he said, clearing his throat and taking a sip of the drink. It was incredibly sweet and tart, tantalizing his tongue.

“I’m just glad you didn’t run away,” Creek continued, dressing his own plate. “You came to me, instead. I appreciate it,” he said, softer now. “If you need me again, know that I’ll be here.”

Branch fiddled with the handle of his cup, staring down into his finely chopped potatoes and counting the flecks of seasoning that he saw. He didn’t know how to respond to the fervor that flourished inside. He glanced up, watching the troll take a bite of his breakfast, laying the conversation to rest. Branch’s heart thumped in his chest and throbbed in his ears. He felt a tug towards Creek’s direction, something imperceptible and unknown pulling him forward. He mentally grounded himself to his chair, lips parting for air while he strained against the growing force. He wanted to be closer to him, perhaps just to sit next to him while they ate, or even talk more with him about nothing in particular.

A stream of blue light buzzed into the kitchen and surged around the table, catching their attention. Tilly landed on the table on Creek’s side and nuzzled the back of his hand, earning a gentle pet over the firefly’s shell. The happy feeling inside Branch bloomed while he observed the exchange, pulling his hands into his lap to clench them into fists. The guru offered a piece of tender greens to the fly and she took it enthusiastically, rotating and chewing down the edges.

Creek was utterly compassionate, attractive, and Branch couldn’t understand why he believed no one would look in his direction. Creek had told him his love life was barren and empty. As far as his knowledge stretched, the troll never had a mate, or even a temporary lover. He’d always assumed there was someone in the background of Creek’s life only because the guy was a total catch. He had to be mistaken; there had to be trolls that were crushing after him, wishing they could get a chance. But Creek was here, living in his bunker, making him breakfast and spending the night in his bed. It was all for him and Branch gave him nothing in return. He was monopolizing his kindness and it made him feel guilty. There had to be something he could do that Creek would enjoy. He admired so much about the purple troll, he deserved to be taken care of as well.

Pushing his thoughts aside in an attempt to keep his positive mood, they finished breakfast together in comfortable peace and then Branch stood first to gather all of the used dishes. Creek jumped up with him and helped take it all to the sink.

“I can wash dishes, you know,” Branch said with a frown, tossing the plates in a fresh vat of soapy water. “This is my home, I do everything on my own.”
“I don’t mind helping,” Creek replied, unmoved from his position at the side. “I would prefer if you let me do all of it, though.” He bumped his hip playfully into Branch’s, the grey troll stumbling a little and giving him a prominent eye roll.

“You made the food, I wash the dishes,” Branch said sternly, snatching a dish from Creek’s hand. “It’s balanced that way. Don’t make this difficult, alright?”

Creek smiled and gave an animated sigh of defeat, “Alright, love. As you wish.” He moved around Branch, touching his hand on the grey troll’s shoulder and giving it a gentle squeeze before leaving the kitchen. A hard shiver surged over Branch’s skin and he leaned over the sink with his eyes closed, willing it to pass quickly and hoping that Creek didn’t turn back. His heartbeat was untamed and threatened to break through his rib cage. Branch cursed his body’s sensitivity to the simple gesture and washed the soiled dishes furiously.

Writing a mental list of objectives for the day, the grey troll finished cleaning his kitchen and wandered to the main living area, digging through his desk by the far wall. He pulled sheets of prepared reports, flipping through them. A quick check of his stocks and then he’d do a bit of rotation, and then he’d clean some accumulating dust…

“Is there anything I can do?”

Branch looked up from his papers to the willing purple troll hovering around him and raised a brow at his enthusiasm. “This isn’t a game, I have to get ready for winter,” he said, tapping a page for Creek to see. “There’s only so much time until the entire bunker is snowed in so I’ve got to finish these tasks before then.”

“Whatsoever you have to do, I am capable of assisting,” Creek replied. “It’s the least I can do while I stay here.”

“Your persistence is kind of annoying,” Branch said, enjoying the flash of a disapproving look. “but if you really want to, you can help me clean.” Dropping the stack of papers on his desk, Branch beckoned the troll into a part of the bunker that Creek hadn’t visited before. The purple troll had lost count of the rooms and was still in awe from the complexity of the tunnels and how well the grid was laid out. The deeper they traveled, the more dingy and untouched it became.

Branch came to a solid oak door towards the back and opened it, the hinges squeaking loudly. The grey troll muttered to himself about remembering to oil the door, ushering Creek inside the room.
“My crafting room,” Branch explained, gesturing around. “Probably the most used room in this entire segment. I make a lot of my inventions here.” There were half finished pieces of wooden furniture and other contraptions stacked against the walls, and in the middle was a large dark wood desk with a weathered stool. Tools of all kinds littered the top, along with wood shavings, smears of oil, and layers of dirt and dust. The grey troll grimaced as he looked over the shambles that was his work area, then turned to Creek. “We can start cleaning this first. Don’t throw anything away, I just need things wiped off.”

“This is incredible, Branch,” Creek said in amazement, moving to the table and picking up the closest screwdriver. Its handle had endured countless hours of tasks, creating remarkable things that were strewn about the bunker and even outside in the village; gadgets and mechanisms that he toiled to provide for an ungrateful lot of trolls. He was in awe, appreciating every bit of grime that was sunk into the tool.

“It’s nothing,” Branch said quietly, shuffling on his feet while his things were inspected.

“No, I really mean it,” Creek said, placing the screwdriver back down and admiring the next one. “This is the most amazing room in your bunker... You can create something out of nothing. Everything you could possible need is born out of this room and each one is by your sheer brilliance.”

He was beginning to feel embarrassed while Creek touched his tools with delicate hands, as if each item were a treasure. His compliments were unnatural, but enjoyed nonetheless, and the restless grey troll rubbed his upper arm nervously before retrieving the tools out of his hands and putting them away. Creek looked a little disappointed about being shut down, obviously still curious, but they’d be wasting all their time if he let the troll gush over every bit and bob that was stored in his craft room.

“Let’s hurry this up,” Branch said, placing the rest of the spare tools inside their metal box. “I’ll show you more later,” he added, watching Creek’s ears tip upwards happily.

The two trolls worked together, organizing Branch’s woodworking and putting away the stray half-finished inventions in the cabinets. Branch began wiping over the desk with a wet cloth when he spotted a deep orange envelope resting on the edge. It was Poppy’s forgotten invitation to her new Fall Festival. He set aside his wash rag and picked up the envelope, opening it again to look at the two glittering tickets inside, his mouth grimacing. Sitting down on his tool, he turned the tickets over in his hands and sighed.

Branch told her he wasn’t going... He said he wouldn’t, even if she forced him. It was the same song and dance when it came to Poppy’s parties. Looking over to Creek, who was hard at work on the other side of the room dusting some empty shelves, there was the faintest idea poking him in the
back of his mind. He grasped the two red tickets in his hand and swallowed, a fearful pressure weighing down on his shoulders. He had to be out of his mind to even feel the desire of leaving his bunker to attend the obnoxious get-together, but with Creek at his side it might not be that horrible. He could kill two birds with one stone, making both Creek and Poppy happy at the same time. Would Creek enjoy her festival like the other trolls? The worst he could do was refuse. The urge to be around Creek was overcoming, aggressively pushing him onward.

Staring down at the tickets, Branch swallowed the lump in his throat breathed slowly, then glanced back to Creek. “Hey, Creek,” he called out.

“Yeah,” the purple troll responded, continuing his dusting without looking back.

“Do you know about… Poppy’s Fall Festival that she’s throwing?”

“It’s hard not to know about it,” he chuckled, tapping his feather duster free of debris. “That’s all Poppy ever talks about these days. I believe she’s having it tomorrow.” Creek adjusted the feathers back into place and looked over his shoulder, confused. “Why do you ask?”

Branch averted his eyes and tapped the tickets in his free hand nervously, “Are you… going with anyone,” he asked, trying not to gag on his words.

Creek stared at Branch, having a difficult time processing his intentions. “No,” he answered slowly. “I’m not.”

“Do you want to go with someone…?” Branch’s tongue was heavy in his mouth, chest thrumming with anticipating.

Creek grinned slightly, “Yes. I would.” The troll set down his duster quietly on the shelf, watching Branch intensely.

“Would you, er.. go – with me,” the grey troll managed to ask, his cheeks instantly burning up to a powerful blush. He refused to look at Creek; he just couldn’t do it. He could feel those beautiful eyes bearing like hot knives, tearing into him and reaching effortlessly through his barriers. He could hardly breathe. His hands were starting to shake, the overwhelming feeling of dread smothering all the happy feelings he’d been desperately holding on to the entire day. He wanted Creek to say yes. He wanted Creek to choose him over anyone else. His ludicrous wants were just that, absolutely deranged and senseless, and he was filled with instant regret for even mentioning anything. Then, the
tickets he was holding in his hand disappeared. Creek had walked over and taken them, looking over
the slips. Branch stared at the floor, tying his fingers together with an effort to inhale.

“Of course I will,” Creek said with a pleasant smile, leaning down to try and get Branch to look him
in the face. “If you’ll have someone like me?”

Branch looked up and his blush deepened. “I – uh...” Their eyes met and he was frozen in place. Did
Creek just become more attractive somehow? The irises of his eyes seemed bright, shining a deep
mauve that was reflective in the room’s light. Branch stared into his eyes and Creek smirked,
bouncing his eyebrows. The grey troll’s speech stalled again, “Uh – I..”

“Yes?” Creek offered quietly, gazing over Branch’s flushed features with knowing attention.

“Yes,” Branch repeated, his hands fidgeting in his lap while they stared at each other. Creek was
leaning in so close to him now, he could savor the scents that made the purple troll practically
irresistible. God, if only Creek knew how alluring he actually was. He would be a force to be
reckoned with.

“You’re being adorable Branch, calm yourself,” he said teasingly. “We still have a lot of work to do,
right?” Creek touched the pad of his finger to his dark nose lightly, “Boop.”

Branch flew his hand up to cover his face, eyes wide and cheeks blazing. His voice was caught in a
web made of embarrassment and cement. His blush was traveling up into his ears, the tips of his
points coloring red. He was incredibly happy at the response but also extremely nauseous. Creek
split the tickets and took Branch’s wrist, patting a single one back into his sweaty palm and storing
the other one in his pocket. He looked down at him a moment more then went back to dusting the
shelf, whistling himself a cheerful tune. Branch’s ears sagged and he released his mouth, panting
heavily. For the umpteenth time, his heart beat loud and strong, drowning out any thoughts that
weren’t Creek.

Chapter End Notes

Ohhh things are a little more fluffy aint they!!! winky face~
“How do I look?” Creek asked, giving Branch a small whip of a turn to make his deep, royal purple cloak float gracefully around his legs. It was the first time he was going to wear it out in public and it was a little gaudy, to be fair. Satin and Chenille had worked hard on making him clothes that fit him perfectly and this event would be a good showcase for their more creative work.

Branch was sitting in his living room chair, arms folded over his bare chest, inspecting Creek with a raised brow. “A little flamboyant,” he replied.

“That is the point, my dear.” Creek twisted the long sleeves and straightened the fluffy collar hanging around his neck, humming in thought. He peeked over at the grey troll in his adjustments, taking in the rugged body Branch had on display. It was taunting and provoking him no matter how much he tried to ignore it.

He wasn’t wearing a shirt for the first time, in front of Creek. Usually, Branch had a simple long sleeve garment or he donned his tattered vest whenever he ventured outside. Creek didn’t know how many different kinds of clothes the troll owned but he was starting to prefer nothing at all. He’d never been so interested in Branch’s body until now. Creek blamed the revelation of his secret feelings, the emotion bleeding into his physical cravings. Branch’s arms looked surprisingly athletic and they bulked up around his pectorals while his arms were crossed. Scars and blemishes littered over his shoulders and down his torso. There was even a more prominent scar slashed over his stomach, which was also lean and muscled. The marks had stories and curiosity was murdering him. He wanted to know about them and how he got them. He wanted to touch them delicately, individually, for hours on end...

Creek shook the fog away cleared his throat and turned his back to Branch, pretending to fiddle with wrist of his cloak. His attractiveness wasn’t just in his face, the grey troll had an entire package to unwrap and Creek’s chest fluttered at the prospect.

“I don’t know what to wear to these damn things,” Branch said with a sigh, unfolding his arms and getting up from the chair. “Is there some kind of weird etiquette? Can I just wear what I normally wear? I’m going to look like a freak show next to you.”
“No you won’t,” Creek chuckled. “I’ll lend you something of mine.”

Branch groaned while the troll went to his room to rummage through his drawers of clothes. He could only imagine what kind of apocalypse he was about to offer up. His sense of style was gaudy and bright, the complete opposite of what Branch would own. He wore clothes that would make him stand out in a crowd, as if his bright purple skin wasn’t enough already. Soon enough, Creek returned holding up a thin, black cotton shirt with long sleeves and a gentle ruffle down the center of the chest.

“I think you’ll make this look great,” Creek said, handing him the shirt. Branch felt the material between his fingers then slipped his arms through the sleeves and pulled it over his head with a huff, shaking his black hair free and observing the look.

“I like that it’s plain,” Branch commented, picking at the neck ruffle. “Almost plain.”

“You’re far from plain,” Creek said in admiration, watching the grey troll twist around in his shirt to test the flexibility.

It was the morning of Poppy’s festival and vibrations of excited trolls rumbled through the bunker while they were making their way to a nearby meadow that was chosen to be the fairgrounds for the occasion. Every single troll in the village was going to be there, including Branch and Creek. From the way Poppy gushed about her plans to Creek the other day, it was her biggest design of the year and would become a regular tradition every year henceforth. The princess was incredibly excited knowing that Branch was going to attend and she had some secret gifts lined up for him. Creek felt awkward holding these secrets from him, but Poppy’s wrath would be more painful if he ruined her surprise. He had no idea what she had in store and it concerned him. He hoped it wouldn’t drive the grey troll back into his bunker halfway through festival.

“I have something for you too,” Branch said quietly, sounding almost unsure of himself. The troll knit his brows together, reaching into his stalk of hair.

Creek tilted his head curiously, then paled out when he watched Branch reveal a sheathed dagger. The leather covering was black with small golden bolts lining the side, its handle equally beautiful with a hard grip. Branch inspected it momentarily, his frown deepening, then offered the blade to Creek with its handle outward.

“A weapon?” Creek asked worried, pulling back an inch from the unexpected gift. “But why, Branch?”
“In case of Bergens,” he said tightly. “We always have to be ready. Keep it in your hair so that you’ll have some protection.”

Creek pained slightly and took the dagger, the weight of it heavier than he expected. He should have known something like this was going to come up. “Bergens,” he said quietly, tracing the golden bullets with his finger. “We’re supposed to be friends with them now.”

“I don’t care, Creek,” Branch said heatedly. “Better safe than sorry and I want you to be safe. Just, please hold on to it. For my sanity, too.”

Creek didn’t want to fight him about this. When it came to the Bergens, there was no winning against the hard stance that Branch stood in. He wished for peace between the races as much as anyone else did in this world. Although he didn’t agree with, or even wanted to have, a weapon like this in his possession, Creek understood that all Branch wanted was a little security. Swallowing down his disagreeing words, Creek nodded and slipped the weapon into his teal hair, storing it out of sight and out of mind. “I understand, love.”

Branch bristled up at the pet name and huffed, having expected Creek to refuse his offering, “Good, then.” He turned away from the purple troll and headed towards the elevator lift that traveled to the floor above. “Come on, the day won’t end any faster if we don’t get on with it.”

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“Come one, come all, to the greatest show on Earth!”

“Psst, Suki, it’s a festival, not one of your shows.”

“Oh, right. Right! Come one and all to the greatest festival on Earth!”

The booming voice of DJ Suki and Guy Diamond echoed through giant megaphones attached to wired poles surrounding the insanely large, dome-like structure that was Poppy’s Fall themed festival. Trolls from all over the village were filing out of the nooks and crannies of the great Troll Tree, swinging down from their pods and making their way to the entrance of the stadium that was comparable to a high-end sports amphitheater with an open roof. The building was only half a mile
from the village, nestled in its own area near the Cliffs of Laurel. The wide space was covered with sloping grasslands, cleared of forest trees and other shrubs that would block the incredible view of the plateau, hanging over a seven hundred foot drop that led straight down into the icy blue waters of the Serenity lake. The touristy location was a fan-favorite for watching the sunset with your loved one, and it also made the best post card photos.

The arena was already jam packed with celebration; glitter bombs shoot through the sky in bursts of yellow and silver alongside the cracking of fireworks. The horseshoe entrance was decorated in Fall emblems, streaming with ribbons, banners and glitter spotted flowers with leafy accents. Everything was color coordinated and perfectly blending with auburn hues.

Creek and Branch stood together towards the middle of the line to get in, both of them frowning for different reasons.

“This is not what I signed up for,” Branch said gravely, the corner of his mouth twitching.

“How did Poppy make something so huge in such a short amount of time?!?” Creek exclaimed, holding his forehead while his mouth was agape. “This is utterly insane.”

Branch grimaced and his pointed ears drooped. “You don’t suppose it’s too late to head back to the bunker?”

Creek sighed and rested his hands on his hips, shaking his head. “We’re already here, we might as well do the best we can, for Poppy’s sake.”

From that statement, Branch gathered that Creek was just as apprehensive about this event as he was. Damn it all, he knew it! This was a horrible idea and he should have trusted his gut instinct. Instead of trying to do something fun with Creek, he ended up driving them both into a mess neither one of them wanted to be a part of. Branch fumed at his blundering and rubbed the back of his neck, shifting his weight from foot to foot in annoyance while they stood there among a hundred chaotic, chattering trolls. He was already feeling like an outcast because trolls around who saw Branch in the crowd were slowly stepping away like they wanted to avoid catching his grey. Creek didn’t seem to have noticed that they were in a pocket of free space, comparable to the rest of the line.

“The line is moving fairly quickly, at least,” Creek said.

“Wonderful,” Branch grumped sarcastically, shooting a hot glare to a random green troll that was
staring in his direction. The troll jumped in surprise and scooted farther away from him.

“You’ll never make friends that way,” the purple troll said, keeping his watch on the line in front of them. Creek’s sense of awareness was sometimes irritating for Branch. He knew what was happening even if no one else did.

“I don’t want to make friends,” he spat angrily.

“Life is more fulfilling when you have someone to share it with,” Creek said lightly.

“You’re enough.” Branch said, shoving his hands into his pockets to keep himself from getting any violent ideas. “And don’t get cocky about it,” he added.

Creek smiled a bit, his ego elevating to dangerous levels. “Too late for that,” he said. “I will remember what you said.”

Branch rolled his eyes and huffed, wishing that he hadn’t opened his big mouth, “I don’t doubt it.”

Between the casual bickering and off topic conversations, the line into the festival moved at a lightning quick pace. They came to the entry way, manned by a handful of trolls who were passing out cupcakes, balloons, party hats, and more. Cooper was the closest to them and gave them a wave with his front leg. Branch inwardly groaned, a permanent scowl plastered to his face. If he was going to have to meet with every single one of Poppy’s friends he might actually lose his mind today. It was going to be impossible to avoid anyone inside that mayhem.

“Branch and Creek. Branch and Creek!” the giraffe-like troll laughed enthusiastically and galloped in their direction. Branch darted quickly out of his reach, but Creek was caught full force and Cooper crushed him in the mightiest of hugs.

“Yes! Very good, Cooper!” Creek gasped, tapping him on the neck.

“Oh, sorry,” Cooper grinned, letting the purple troll go. “Poppy gave me very specific instructions for when ya’ll came to the party.”
“And what are those?” Branch said grumpily.

“What are those, what,” Cooper asked, confused.

“What. Are. The. Instructions.” the grey troll seethed, becoming more aggravated with every passing second. He couldn’t stand this airhead of a troll, despite him being one of Poppy’s Snack Pack friends. Creek was alright, obviously. Biggie was tolerable, if you could look past his obsession with the yellow worm. Guy Diamond was growing on him. Everyone else he had no intention of getting to know any time soon, the pink dimwit included. Was he even a troll, really?

“Not that it really matters,” Creek said quickly, interjecting between the two. “Here are our tickets! We must be on our way.” He presented the deep red slips for Cooper to take, and the troll’s eyes lit up when he saw them.

“Oh yeah! Poppy said, ‘take their tickets and let them in’,” he repeated her words matter-of-factually.

“Perfect!” Creek said weakly, “So we’re going in now. Thank you, Cooper.”

“You’re welcome, Creek! Have fun,” Cooper laughed, stepping to the side and out of their path.

Creek took Branch’s hand and they hurried through the entryway before anything else could be said, escaping what looked like a possible meltdown on Branch’s part. The purple troll could feel the trembles coming from the other’s hand and he squeezed it reassuringly.

The interior was breathtaking. The stadium was filled to the brim with roller coasters, carousel rides, stage entertainers, street performers, and anything else you can think of that a rowdy troll would want to do in a place like this. There were shouts and screaming, laughter, and singing all clumped together in a single, constant sound. With excited trolls pushing at their backs, Creek and Branch were jostled into moving further into the pandemonium. Fresh fireworks were shot nearby, exploding in the air and making Branch flinch bodily. Creek pulled him off to the side, away from the fireworks stand, while looking for a safe place to gather their bearings.

“Can you see just a stitch of light, come in through a crack in the blinds?”

Branch’s ears picked up on the melody that pitched higher than the rest of the noise. The music was sweet and harmonic, coming from a nearby stage with a very familiar, pink troll standing at its center.
She held her microphone with her elbow up, wearing a velvety red dress and matching tiara accented with golden glitter.

"'Cause we're only getting so much time... oh. So let's live like we'll never die, oh!"

Poppy looked stunning as a princess should and she smiled at all of her friends who were jumping up and down at the pit of the stage, waving their hands in the air.

"Let it all go, slowly we fade, reality falls away!" she sang passionately, dancing across the stage and twirling in her dress. "We're losing our minds, we can't stop. Oh, if we don't breathe, we'll never see, life is a masterpiece. We're losing our minds, we can't stop!"

Creek stopped and looked over at the stage as well, beaming at the troll princess. “She’s an amazing singer,” he said lovingly.

"Yeah, she really is.” Branch agreed. Poppy was one of the best singers in the village, and despite all of the times he’d refuse to stick around long enough to listen to her, his heart was weak to her voice in the right moments. He fought her, avoided her, and berated her on a daily basis, but she never gave up on him. She never left him alone in all of the years of his attempted solitude and he was grateful. She was stronger than he was emotionally, mentally, and probably even physically, but he would always lend his support if she really needed it. Poppy was the future queen for a reason.

"Walking streets in the neon light, all the colors will be our guide. 'Cause we're only given so much time, oh... So let's live like we'll never die, oh!"

As the two trolls watched her performance, Poppy noticed Branch in the background of her fans and gave him an energetic wave from the stage. Now it seemed like she was singing for him alone and it made Branch blush horribly. She always had to take it too far, didn’t she? Branch bit his lower lip and looked over at Creek who was still completely enthralled with the song. The other trolls cheered and danced with her, singing along to lyrics.

"Let it all go, slowly we fade, reality falls away! We're losing our minds, we can't stop. If we don't breathe, we'll never see life is a masterpiece... We're losing our minds, we can't stop!"

Branch snagged Creek’s long sleeve and tugged on it, turning away from the stage. “Can we move on?” he said, his cheeks hot.
“Of course,” he said, giving a big farewell wave to Poppy then leaving with Branch to go exploring. They moved slowly through the festival, spending some time looking at each fast-paced ride before moving on to the next one. Branch refused every single option that Creek offered, cutting the purple troll off and leaving him whenever he suggested they get on a ride that looked too much to handle. To be honest, Branch was scared of this whole place. The loud screaming and grinding of the roller coasters with arms and legs flailing about, all while trolls were rocketed through the air at dangerous levels; it was just too much.

“No, not this one either,” Branch said, feeling a little queasy. He retreated again, but Creek grabbed his arm to stop him from running away.

“Come on, Branch. Wait a moment,” he pleaded. “One more try, okay? Give me a chance to find something suitable for us.”

“One more,” he agreed quietly. He had to try, if Creek really wanted it. He wished there was something easier to do that wasn’t going to turn his body inside out. Normal troll ‘fun’ wasn’t normal, in his mind. People could really get hurt if they weren’t careful, which they never were. He couldn’t do anything about it right now and it put him on edge. If he made any kind of commotion that caused the shutdown of Poppy’s festival, he would never hear the end of it from her or any one of her friends. His life as an outcast wasn’t good, but it could definitely be more miserable if he tried to oppress the village with his safety standards.

Branch followed with his eyes downcast, trying to quell the swirl in his stomach. A rogue troll ran past and bumped into his shoulder and he ruffled up, trotting closer to the purple troll’s back so he could use Creek as a body shield.

“YOU THERE, WITH THE STYLISH BLACK SHIRT! COME OVER HERE!”

Branch grimaced at the deep, baritone voice shouting at him randomly. They spotted Smidge across the way, who was dressed up like a tiny conductor, bouncing up and down to get his attention. She had a flat top hat and a button up vest, waving a neckerchief in their direction while standing on top of a wooden terminal. It was sitting along side a lengthy paneled walkway parallel to an impressive stretch of water, leading outside through an opening in the arena wall.

“Always a pleasure, my dear,” Creek greeted her as they walked up to the platform, then he looked over the side of the walkway at the flowing water. It resembled a thin river with air blown barriers on each side to keep the water in. Anchored at the starting line were multiple, two-troll pedal boats, each painted a different color of the rainbow.
“You guys are in for a treat,” Smidge said proudly, jumping off her podium and pointing at the first pedal boat. “Be the first to try our most impressive, most enjoyable, mysterious and awesome river ride!”

“Is it easy going?” Creek questioned, smiling at her enthusiasm.

“It’s the easiest of goings,” she nodded. “Built for two.” Smidge looked over at Branch and winked at him, making him frown in suspicion.

Creek jumped into the first boat, the water sloshing and rocking the craft. Branch flinched and looked over the edge, biting his lip and twisting his hands together. “No, no. This doesn’t look safe,” he said nervously. “We should skip it. Get out Creek.”

Creek shook his head and put his foot up on the seat, reaching up towards the grey troll. “Nonsense, Branch. It is perfectly fine, I promise. You said you’d give me a chance.”

He made an averse face and eyeballed the contraption, unconvinced. “How can you trust it?”

“I trust that I can protect you no matter where we are,” Creek replied gently, urging him to take his hand. “Just like how you will protect me, right?” He knew what he was implying, given their earlier conversation in the bunker. He appreciated, yet hated Creek for using it to his own gain.

Branch decided to take the risk and took a breath in, “Alright, damn it!” he said with grit teeth, grabbing the purple troll’s hand and leaping into the boat with him. It bounced heavily in the water from the added weight and Branch clung to Creek’s forearms to regain his balance. They settled down into the plush seat cushion and Creek signaled the go-ahead to Smidge at the control station.

“Please stay seated through the entire adventure and keep all hair, hands, legs, and any other appendages inside the boat at all times! But we can’t really stop you if you don’t want to,” Smidge giggled, yanking down the large wooden lever that lurched the paddle boat forward, releasing it freely into the troll-made river. “Bon voyage!” she waved to them.

Branch gripped the side of the boat with his right hand and his knee with his left, absolutely terrified that they would both come out of this joy ride irreversibly injured. Creek placed his feet on the pedals of the boat underneath the dash and gave them a gentle turn, moving the vehicle forward down the lane of water.
The river took the boat in a gentle slope, passing outside the walls of the festival arena and traveling against the outskirts of the grassland. It was just the two of them in the boat, the sounds of music and laughter drowned out by the thick walls of the stadium and carried away by the breeze. They could see an admiral view of the cliffs, the sun blazing midway in the sky. Branch looked out to the lake water that seemed so far away, but glittering against the sunlight. The incredible view and the quiet ambiance eased his anxiety and his grip loosened on the paddle boat while they floated slowly down the lane; until he saw that the river was leading into a dark, hillside tunnel with no meaningful alterations or context. It was layered in gold and red crafted leaves, arranged in a large arch around the mouth of the tunnel. The two trolls had no clue what lay beyond the passage.

“What in the world...” Branch grumbled, his pointed ears flattening.

Creek made a questionable hum, evaluating. “It can’t be that horrible” he said. “Only one way to find out, though.”

“You’re not giving me much confidence.” Branch groaned in discomfort while Creek paddled them forward, drifting closer and closer to the tunnel and then passing through blackened entrance. The darkness eerily loomed as the only source of light started to fade out behind them. They couldn’t see more than a couple feet ahead and Branch started to shiver, looking around himself.

“I’ve changed my mind,” he said frantically. “Let’s not do this!”

Creek gripped Branch’s shoulder was about to try and calm him down, when suddenly the ceiling of the tunnel began to speckle with orange and yellow lights. Both of them looked upwards with a gasp, the lights multiplying at an alarming rate and cascading down the walls of the tunnel like waterfalls of glitter. Glowing butterflies, ranging from fiery reds to sweetened yellows, were clinging to the ceiling and fluttering around them, their luminescent wings flickering like tiny, beautiful flames. A few critters floated down to meet the trolls, landing in their hair and on the tip of the boat. Branch held a butterfly in his hand, eyes wide with wonder, then he smiled, letting the bug drift away with the rest of the swarm that danced over their heads.

“Wow. They’re so beautiful.” Branch said, fascinated while they drifted through the glittering flames. “I have a love for bugs like this.”

Creek was watching Branch, not the butterflies. “Yeah,” he said fondly, gazing over the glow in Branch’s happy face. “Beautiful.” He was beautiful, more so than the rare creatures that floated through the mysterious tunnel. The word couldn’t do him justice. The critters surrounded Branch, nestling into his black hair and landing on his nose, resting on his shoulders and arms. They could tell that he was a good, gentle troll at heart. Critters were known to be able to sense the inner aura of other creatures. It was so they could determine if they were safe to be around, and in situations like this… being covered and loved by such small, delicate creatures, it was like a recognition of your
Branch glanced back to the purple troll and Creek startled himself out of his staring, resuming his slow paddling. He pursed his lips and averted his eyes, feeling a heat creep up his neck. Creek pointed ahead of them, “We are almost through now.”

The butterflies drifted back up, landing on the ceiling and folding their wings together. The last one touched Branch’s cheek briefly, as if giving him a kiss, then rejoined the others for the next duo of trolls to enter their domain. The pedal boat sailed through to the end of the enclosure and they shielded their eyes to the brightness, emerging at the opposite side gate of the festival. They were greeted with the full blast of music and merriment, a regrettable change to what they just experienced.

Smidge was there, as she somehow beat them to the end of the path, to greet them while the boat came to a halt. “Thank you for choosing our all new, patent-pending, Butterfly Wonderland ride! Please come again next year,” she said happily.

Branch clambered onto the water walk first, sighing deeply with contentment. “That’s probably the best thing they’ve got in place.” He grabbed Creek’s hand and helped pull him out of the boat. “Do you think Poppy set that up specifically with us in mind?”

“One can only wonder,” Creek replied. The purple troll dusted down his purple cloak and patted down a stray stand of hair, then hooked his hand around Branch’s upper arm and tugged him along. “Let’s look for something equally delightful!” he exclaimed.

Branch let himself be carted around by Creek’s enthusiasm, diving into the crowd of trolls once again. They were dancing, singing, pairs were holding hands and sharing sweet desserts and other street foods. The sea of colored hair was like a ripping rainbow on the stadium floor. The grey troll dipped and dodged around while clinging to the sleeve of Creek’s robe as he rushed ahead, hoping that they didn’t get separated in this mess. The last thing he wanted to do was lose his purpose for even coming here. They made their way out of the dancing pocket and into the food vendors, each side of the cobblestone path stuffed with booths serving pastries, snacks, cotton candy, and the like. The canopy above was a web of yellow and orange lanterns hanging from building to building. The whole area was vividly bright and the air was rich with all the savory smells of cooking festival fare. There were just as many trolls here, wandering back and forth by each booth, but the mood felt a little more low key.

“Would you like to eat something?” Creek asked, turning back to Branch.
He was still gripping Creek’s sleeve tightly, ears and eyes flicking around in high alert while he tried to watch everything that was going on around them. “Uh.. food. Yes,” he said, moving a step closer to Creek’s back in an attempt to avoid being crashed into by a havoc couple. “Something simple.”

Creek guided him to the side of the road, setting him down on an empty bench nestled between the corn dogs and the funnel cakes. “Wait right here,” he said with a smile.

Branch was about to protest but Creek slipped back into the crowd and was lost before any words were said. Uneasiness filled his stomach and he cast his eyes downward, hands fidgeting in his lap. Minutes felt like hours and the scenery around him was a colorful blur while trolls big and small walked past him every which-way. The music wasn’t discernible either, just loud and overbearing and he felt an oncoming ache in his head.

“Well, hello there Branch! What a surprise!” The troll looked up from his despair to find Biggie and Mr. Dinkles standing in front of him, holding multiple sticks and colors of cotton candy balls. The yellow worm meeped in approval and Biggie laughed, “I know, I was just thinking the same thing. I haven’t seen him attend any parties like this in years.”

“Er, yeah…” Branch said.

“Here, have one of our cotton candies! They’re super delicious,” Biggie said, picking out a stick from his arms and offering a bright orange cotton candy to the smaller troll. Branch accepted it out of politeness and realized it was almost larger than his entire head. It smelled like straight sugar and artificial orange flavor.

He looked around the cotton ball and smiled weakly, “Thanks, I’m sure Creek will enjoy it.”

“Oh, Creek is here with you! That’s excellent! That lovable little yoga master,” Biggie laughed. “Here – have another one for him,” the large, blue troll pressed another yellow cotton candy stick into Branch’s other hand.

“Wait, Biggie, this isn’t really –“

“You two have fun, the games will be starting soon. Don’t be late!” Biggie gave Branch a wink and left him there, chattering to his worm then exclaiming at the next group of trolls he came across.
That was the second time a troll had winked at him and the stink of skepticism was strong. Branch stared at the giant cotton in his hands then set them aside on the free end of the bench. He was probably just imagining things… Branch rubbed his temple and sighed, already feeling tired and worn out. Creek returned not much later with baked zucchini chips and a few drinks of lemonade.

“Something edible? That’s rare,” he said sarcastically, scooting over in the seat so Creek could sit next to him.

“Neither one of us is a fan of the typical troll diet,” the purple troll explained, passing him a paper bowl filled with the green chips. “Milton was at one of the booths and was very accommodating. I’ve been told he’s a vegetarian.”

“Makes sense,” Branch said. “It’s probably because of all those critters he owns.”

Creek agreed with a hum and munched on his food, then glanced over at the cotton candy resting by Branch’s side.

“Biggie,” the grey troll said dimly, taking a sip of his drink. The icy lemon drink was refreshing and it washed down a lot of his irritable feelings.

“Say no more,” Creek chuckled. He popped another zucchini slice in his mouth, looking absolutely charmed. “These are great! The seasoning is spot on.”

Branch watched his friend from the corner of his eye while they talked. Their topics were pointless and random, but the flicker in his stomach made itself known. He enjoyed this simplicity with Creek. Hanging out with him and sharing their day together gave him so much more than he thought he wanted.

Every word that Creek said opened up the purple troll’s world, letting Branch see more and more of what he was really like. His personality, his likes and dislikes, and the way that he smiled at simple things, filled in the gaps of Branch’s memories. He knew Creek from when they were just trollings, growing up together until they were six years old, but now he was beginning to know him as an adult. The two versions were one in the same and he could see the deep similarities, but the troll in front of him now was constrained. It was almost like he was hiding a secret truth underneath the blanket of his outward self. Branch remembered him being outgoing and loud, approachable, and easily anyone’s friend. Now… he realized that Creek was quiet, distant and withdrawn from the troll society, almost in the same sense that Branch was. He expressed his displeasure in front of Branch, but pretended to be joyful for others. He was confused on whether or not he should feel privileged for seeing this side of the purple troll.
“Are you doing alright?” Creek asked him softly, watching the lanterns sway together in a brisk gust of wind.

Branch realized he’d stopped talking, only watching him with his hand halfway to his mouth. He dropped his chip quickly and broke his eyes away, “I’m okay,” he said. “You?”

Creek smiled and leaned on the bench, draping his arm over the back of the seat behind Branch. He scooted closer to the grey troll and smirked wider as Branch became squirmy, “I’m doing great,” he replied coolly.

“That’s good,” Branch breathed, his body stiffening up like a plank of wood while Creek closed in on his meager amount of space. He was incredibly close, their thighs barely brushing together.

“You know,” the purple troll said thoughtfully, “coming here together; this is almost like a date.”

“You wish I would date you,” Branch said jokingly, his nerves paralyzing while the word repeated over and over, deafening in his ears. Date. Date. Date. His heart rate increased and he swallowed some of his tension.

“I do wish.”

“W-Whuh —... what?” Branch mumbled. Did he hear that correctly?

Creek brought his hand up and touched Branch’s cheek, his thumb caressing just under his widened eye. “I have been… thinking a lot,” Creek said, his voice lowered but just loud enough to be heard over the festival around them.

Branch didn’t pull away. He let the purple troll touch his face, petting his grey skin ever so softly while he felt himself be infiltrated by those eyes. Those eyes. Branch was being sucked into those lilac dreams again, the fields of tulips and lavender alluring him to the point of no return. Tell me everything you’re thinking about, his mind craved. Goosebumps coated his arms and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, Creek’s touch electrifying him.

“Being with you,” Creek continued, his light expression starting to cast shadow while he
contemplated his choice of words. “Branch, I…” He held his breath, searching Creek’s face for an answer. Then the troll lowered his hand from Branch’s cheek, hesitating in the end. “I really enjoy doing these things with you. We should come again next time.”

Disappointment flooded Branch’s heart, drowning out the erratic beats in a sea of rejection, but he cracked a forced smile and turned his face away. “Yeah, sounds good.” He brought his hand to the painful burn in his chest, trying to rub it away. He didn’t know what he expected out of Creek. He didn’t understand why he was so upset now.

A loud trumpeting resounded across the festival and all the trolls squealed in delight at the sound of DJ Suki’s voice booming in the arena.

“It’s time for a little game play, ya’ll!” she yelled through the speakers. “Head on over to the south lot and let’s have some fun! T-MINUS TEN MINUTES!”

“Let’s go with them,” Creek said hurriedly, getting up from the bench.

“I’m really not interested in troll games,” Branch said, grimacing when Creek took his hand and forced him to his feet. He tore his hand away quickly, causing the purple troll to question the movement with a raised brow.

“Poppy’s told me she has a surprise for you during the festival games, so we have to go meet her,” he said.

“Whatever,” Branch grunted. “Just what I need right now. Lead the way,” he gestured for Creek to hurry along. The purple troll looked at him worriedly but decided it would be best not to question his mood. So much for Creek being aware of his surroundings, Branch thought bitterly.

Chapter End Notes

Poppy's song - Taska Black - Losing our minds
https://youtu.be/z068utooQUM
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

There's a little NSFW!! Just a heads up if you're not into that!
but who are we kidding, if you're reading this story that's all you're looking for, isn't it XD
-thumbs up-

thank you so much for all of your wonderful comments ;u; it is literally the fuel to all of my writing and I love posting chapters for people who love the troll boys as much as I do. again, thank you thank you thank you < 3 much love.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It's about to go down, in a minute! Let me touchdown, I'mma get it. ‘Cause I, I, I’ve been waiting all night!” Guy Diamond sang cheerfully, taking Poppy’s hand and dancing with her while they skipped through the cheering trolls to the game zone, a cluster of buildings marked with high beam signal lights and flashing neon colors. “To make it go from the friend zone, to the end zone, tryna take it to the house, baby, let's go! ‘Cause I, I, I’ve been waiting all night. It's game time!”

“Do you think this will work?” Poppy giggled, bumping her hip into the glitter troll.

Guy spun the princess in a flashy dance move, catching her by the waist. “It most definitely will!” he exclaimed.

“I’m so excited I could scream!” Poppy said, breaking away and cartwheeling down the path.

Guy Diamond waved and chased after her, “Hey, wait up!” he laughed.

The Game Zone was everything you could desire. There was an expansive arcade, carnival games, giant critter rides, bumper car racing, and even competitive pie eating. The trolls were crammed at the gate, waiting impatiently for the go ahead to enter. In a flash of white smoke, the critically acclaimed Nova Swift presented herself to the crowd, balancing on top of the metal gate that separated them from their fun, her fans screaming and going wild at the unexpected entrance.

She was the village’s most influential trend setter, and the fashionable troll with striking yellow hair blew kisses and waved, “The honor is mine, my little nuggets!” she said happily. “I’m here to get us started in our festival games at the request of Princess Poppy! Play to your hearts content, make
memories and dreams come true, and party on until the night gives out!” The troll pulled a confetti popper out of her pocket and pulled the string, the tiny celebratory pop releasing the stampede of excited trolls into the district where they spread out to their favorite choices.

Nova jumped down from the gate and was instantly surrounded by her admirers. She smiled pleasantly and chatted with them for half a second, then brushed past the trolls and pointed earnestly in another two trolls’ direction. “You there, little grey troll!”

Branch tried to ignore her, but Creek took him by waist to keep him stationed. The purple troll was getting a little too bold for his liking, placing his hands wherever he pleased every time he wanted to avoid an approaching headache. He understood why he had to stay, but he was going to fight it to the teeth because that was the only thing that proved he wouldn’t be easily manipulated. Branch was bombarded by the many eyes of Nova Swift’s fans while the group turned to look at him. Passing through the gate undetected would have been a joy, but now he was being summoned by, yet another, one of Poppy’s friends.

“What is it?” Branch asked, quirking his brow and straightening his back to meet Nova Swift as she sauntered over to him with her followers trailing in her wake.

“It’s time for your surprise,” Nova said pleasantly, “We have picked out an especially trendy game for you and Creek to share.”

Knowing that this was what Poppy wanted, Branch’s mouth twitched but he didn’t refuse, following the fashion troll through the gate and into something that resembled a small town in itself. Creek was unusually quiet, skeptical of what was in store for them. It seemed he didn’t know that the ‘surprise’ was for both of the trolls. Branch watched the purple troll from his peripherals, noticing that his lip was tight and his hands were twitching at his sides. Either he didn’t know what lie ahead, or he did know and he didn’t like it.

Trying not to become too vexed, Branch looked to his right and left, drawing his curiosity to the different things the trolls were doing. Some were hurrying splat balls at each other and some were popping balloons with squirt guns. Prizes of all shapes and sizes were being offered at the carnival games, the stuffed animals noticeably larger than even Biggie.

“No, it’s fine,” Branch said quickly. He wasn’t about to let Creek fetch him a prize, his pride wouldn’t allow for it. That sort of thing was meant for couples, not displaced friends.
“This first game screams sizzle!” Nova said suddenly, throwing her arms out, “and it’s something you all know and love from your adorable teenage years.” The female troll smiled slyly as she turned to face them, gesturing to a tall, freestanding door that was placed in the middle of a circular plaza. “*Seven minutes of hug heaven.*”

The door was illuminated by a bright spotlight, encompassed by dozens of couples who were waiting in line for their turn. Then, the door opened and the current pair came out of the closet with flushed faces, giggling like children. The two trolls hugged each other then skipped out of the way for the next set. Branch gripped Creek’s sleeve and took a step back, ready to bolt. No way, they wouldn’t actually try to make Branch do something like that?

“Yes, these two are next, by the order of Princess Poppy!” Nova Swift shouted out, jumping behind their backs and pushing Branch and Creek towards the group.

“You’ll have to kill me first!” Branch yelled, dodging around Nova quickly and making a break for it. He was going to get the hell out of here and go back to his bunker. He was done with this entire fiasco of a party! Absolutely finished!

“Now, now, don’t run away! Grab him!” Nova commanded, and her fan group grabbed Branch at the shoulders and dragged him to the open door while he was flailing madly. “Poppy said you might try to fight but this is more than I could have imagined,” Nova pondered. Creek was in no better position. He was frantically trying to talk to Nova and change her mind while she blatantly ignored him, but they seized the purple troll as well and they were both thrust unceremoniously into the closet, the door snapping shut.

“Timer, timer,” the trolls chanted. “Ready, set, go, seven minutes of hug heaven!”

Branch twisted in the closet and felt around himself, trying to gather his bearings. “Damn it all, damn it!” he cursed.

It was hot and cramped inside the costume closet. Branch pressed his back against the thick layers of hanging clothing, trying to inch away from the troll on the other side of the darkness. His heart was hammering out of his chest. They couldn’t have even cleaned out the place if they were going to use it for their stupid games?

Creek said nothing and made no direct movements, which confused him considerably the more seconds that ticked by. He’d expected to be tackled with a hug immediately, but instead Creek was
playing a silent, evil game within the game. He definitely didn’t appreciate it, wishing the purple troll would show a little more crazed demeanor to fit the situation. Branch’s skin crawled, all of his senses straining. They were so close together he could feel the caress of air coming from his breathing.

The laughter and chatter continued to blare from the other side, muffled but still loud enough to vibrate their enclosure. Branch kept one hand clinging to a random crumple of fabric hanging at his left side, feeling around with his right towards the door to test the handle. He jimmied it roughly but it didn’t budge. They were definitely locked inside.

“I can’t freakin’ believe it,” Branch growled, slapping the handle in frustration. His ears twitched and turned at the slightest sound of shuffling. There was no way that Creek didn’t feel as awkward as him right now. “You don’t have to hug me,” he said. “We can just wait this out and go back to the survival bunker. I’m sick of this festival, anyway. Stupid game, right?” Branch snorted, his nerves shaking into his voice, “and honestly, we both know you don’t want to be cramped up in here with me, so don’t worry about it.” He wanted to make his stance clear about their position but the more he spoke, the more he regret his words. Stinging pain worked its way through his feelings and Branch felt pressure at the back of his eyes. This whole ordeal was pushing the limit and he felt like he might cry because of it. He was stressed out, sick of the bullying that he had to endure.

Parties, making friends, and just participating in the happiness that was the Troll village; all of these things Branch avoided like the plague and it really got him thinking, what was the point? He fought tooth and claw, but in the end he always ended up doing what the village wanted. Unfortunately, he could feel part of himself aching to be included… the small yearning inside budding up whenever a troll looked in his direction, and a desperate longing to get a hug inside of a dusty closet from a handsome, purple troll. He really did want it and he was disgusted with himself for always pushing those wants away. He pushed away while they pulled. The two halves of his personality were doing a tug-o-war in his heart and he was sick of it all. Afflicted and tired, Branch closed his eyes in the darkness to relax away his grief.

He heard the other troll take in a sharp breath suddenly. Branch quirked an eyebrow, pondering what it meant. Branch’s mind reeled at the possibilities, each one worse than the last. Did Creek actually hate being this close to him? Creek still wasn’t saying anything and he seemed guarded. They stood, facing one another, without a single word exchanged and it was incredibly uncomfortable. Branch clenched his teeth as he fought back the wetness growing in his eyes. He’d always expected to be pushed away by everyone because he was the unhappy, grey troll of the village. Even so, he wanted to believe that Creek was different now.

Irritation settled over his depression while he still couldn’t see an inch in front of his face. The closet was pitch black, stuffy, and smelled strongly of cosmetics, plastic, and used fabrics. Sweat bead on his forehead and he swiped it away, wishing the seven minute game would end already. The stagnant silence reached lethal levels and his heart beat wildly in his chest with every passing second.
Creek cleared his throat then, startling him back into the clothes rack. Branch squinted his eyes in the darkness, barely making out the faint outline of his figure. He was shaking his head back and forth, quiet but refusing. ‘No?’ Branch questioned sourly in his head. No, what?

“I don’t understand you,” Branch scoffed, losing his patience. “Do you actually want a hug, or don’t you? Why don’t you say something? Is it really so bad, being locked in here with me, that you can’t even talk to me?” When he was met with more silence, Branch did his best to hide a hiccup, the emotional chunk in his throat threatening to make things worse. “Fine, that’s great. I don’t even like hugs.”

The purple troll huffed in frustration and raised his arms quickly, capturing Branch and pulling him in for a tight squeeze. It didn’t take much effort since they were already so close together.

“Hey, hey! Did you not just hear what I said? I don’t like hugs.” Branch’s face contorted in a blush and he grabbed Creek’s shoulders to try and push him off. He smashed his palm into his nose, but Creek pushed it aside and moved his head next to Branch’s hot cheek, out of reach. Stubborn mule, Branch thought briefly while he struggled in the vice grip. Being stubborn was something they had in common, so he couldn’t hate Creek one hundred percent because of it.

The guru wrapped his arms tighter around, splaying his hands on Branch’s back and just held him in silence. Branch shifted slightly against his solid torso before he gave up the struggle with a soft sigh, his palms resting on Creek’s chest… Creek seemed to have a knack for giving Branch all of his unspoken wishes, even in the fits of his anger. His body was incredibly warm and comfortable to lean against. Branch’s heart felt loud and reckless and he knew that Creek could feel it pounding into him like a drum while they were pressed together.

“I wish I knew what you were thinking sometimes,” Branch grumbled quietly, laying his flushed face on Creek’s shoulder, eyes wet but not overflowing. “Being around me gets you nothing… I have nothing to offer, nothing to give you... and you’re going all in, for what?”

Laughter and music echoed through the closet while the dark troll wallowed in his conflict. Any moment now and Poppy would let them out of this hellish place. He was getting hotter and it was difficult to breathe while being constricted in the small area. Creek’s hair was stronger than ever before, emanating that minty smell that was all too familiar now. The scent was filling the closet to the ceiling and masking over the other uncomfortable mixtures. Branch breathed in slowly, letting the wonderful aroma permeate. It was the first time he didn’t try to reflexively recoil away from it.

“You smell so good, Branch...”
Branch almost missed the whisper in the background noise. Creek’s hands moved on his back now, caressing in small, slow motions while he felt up and down his silken black shirt. Branch breathed sharply and was about to refuse being handled so intimately, but a gentle tremor of pleasure seeped between his nerves and his brain stopped his tongue. The massaging ministrations broke through his thick hide like it were made of wet paper, entangling his thoughts.

No one was ever allowed to touch him like this. He never willingly accepted any kind of contact. Trolls couldn’t even get close enough to do it, except Creek. Was he really about to let Creek do what he wanted? His swallowed heavily while his thoughts blanked, dialing in on the movements. He didn’t hate it, not at all. There was something different about Creek right in this moment that Branch couldn’t place. It was like the purple troll was purring against his shoulder, hands exploring without containment. It interested him and frightened him at the same time. It’s not like Creek didn’t know who Branch was. He knew exactly what kind of unforgiving, grumpy troll he’d grown to be, and yet he took brave steps without looking back, totally oblivious to any possible repercussions. He was either very confident or extremely dumb. The closet was dark but Branch bet his bunker that he could absolutely punch the troll square in the face right now, if he really wanted to, but he didn’t.

Branch’s heart beat impossibly faster, feeling a particularly deep caress down his spine. The bodily venture continued, becoming even more daring. Both hands moved along his tensing muscles and around the back of his hips and just barely above his ass, repeating the path several times. The strong fingers traveled farther and pressed into the junction of his shoulder blades, massaging upwards, rougher than before. Creek released a heated breath through his nose, like a geyser of steam, against Branch’s shoulder. “What is this? Your scent… is intoxicating,” the purple troll whispered.

Wave after wave of delight showered over Branch and his breathing came in little pants, eyelids fluttering. His scent…? Did he have a scent in the same way that Creek had one for him? The sensations of Creek’s hands combined with his soothing mint leaves engulfed the grey troll in a blissful cocoon. His body was melting easily into those amazing hands. Creek unraveled the years of strain and tension built into his muscles, teasing away aches with fine expertise.

Branch gripped handfuls of Creek’s purple cloak, needing support while his legs weakened. The pressure in the closet was changing, the air becoming thick and sweltering. Mischievous, lithe finger tips snaked under the edge of his shirt and hooked the material up up the middle of his back, touching the naked skin with his other hand. Branch’s gasp hiked up and caught, sparks igniting like raging fireworks, and he made the smallest, uncontrolled noise. Creek moved his mouth onto his neck, letting the grey troll feel that his breaths were also short and quick. Branch’s panting elevated and he angled his head backwards, a bodily shiver traveling through him. The purple troll sucked deeply through his nose and opened his mouth along a tight neck tendon, lips dragging upwards to where Branch’s sharp jawline and earlobe met. Blood coursed hot and fast in Branch’s veins, goosebumps raising while he felt his ears about to be assaulted.

“W-W.. Wait,” he breathed hastily, fingers clawing hard into Creek’s shoulders. How did it get to this point? Creek was going to eat him alive and Branch needed it with every fiber he possessed. His consciousness was beginning to peek through the haze, but all he could think was please don’t stop.
“Too much,” Branch whined in urgency. He had to try and stop this before they couldn’t turn back.

The troll ignored his protest with a disgruntled groan. Creek’s tongue slipped out and gave a full bodied lick over the shell of the pointed ear then bit into Branch’s lobe.

“Fuck!” Branch cursed with a broken cry, sagging heavily into Creek’s chest and holding on to him for dear life. His ears were so unbearably sensitive and desire danced playfully between his chest and his groin. He couldn’t help his body from arching forward while Creek dug his teeth endlessly into his pathetic earlobe and massaged the tender flesh with his tongue. Then, the purple troll made an intimidating primal growl, clamping both hands tight into his bottom cheeks to keep them pinned together. Branch shuddered, the pleasure jerking him inward and their hips ground erotically. Creek was hard.

“I want... I want you, Branch. I always have,” Creek whispered passionately in his ear, his voice dry and trembling. The troll went to planting kisses following down his exposed throat.

“C-Creek,” Branch pitifully responded.

He groaned, “you were my everything,” and sucked on Branch’s neck, scraping his teeth into his skin and licking the bite with lacking coordination.

A strong thigh slipped between Branch’s crippling legs and pressed into his crotch, pulling another sharp moan from the dark troll. He scrambled against Creek’s body, the last thread of coherent thought lost to the void. The painful coil of his arousal was winding inside, tormenting him and loving him at the same time. Let him touch you. Touch him back! There was nothing else he wanted to do. He was craving what he didn’t know anything about; craving so much that it made him insane. Branch’s hands rose fast and delved into the back of Creek’s hair, grabbing handfuls of the delicious sapphire locks. They pressed their sweaty foreheads together while his hips moved as they pleased, stroking against the bulge inside Creek’s pants with his own.

“Mother of God, yes,” Creek panted fiercely.

Branch was crazed with lust, every sound and movement that Creek made only drove him harder into oblivion. He didn’t care anymore, he needed more than this. He wanted to strip off the troll’s clothes and pull every pitch from his pleasured voice while he writhed underneath him. Then, a soft laugh resounded from his aggressor, arms holding him up while his legs were unsteady.
He laughed. Why did he laugh?

Creek grabbed Branch’s chin abruptly and held him steady through the flames of their passion while he dipped his head to kiss him on the mouth. Just before their lips came together, suddenly from outside Nova Swift yelled “Alright, TIME’S UP!”

The door to the closet burst open and a multi-colored arms reached inside. Branch was dragged back out into the plaza, blinded by the harsh change in lighting. He flew his hands to his eyes and rubbed them painfully while the crazy trolls jumped, shouted, and cat called at him over the blaring music. He blinked several times then looked around quickly to the closet door, staring at the one that had made his entire body set fire. Creek was ushered out behind him, already being replaced with another pair of trolls who giggled and slammed the door shut. “Timer, timer! Ready, set, go!” the crowd yelled for the next couple in the closet game.

The purple troll looked as disheveled as Branch felt, cheek’s flushed and mouth open agape while they both panted, out of breath. His perfect, two-toned hair was sticking up in small places, especially the back. Creek stared back at him, eyes overcast and dilated with sexual hunger. Then, he put his hand to his temple and tore their eyes apart, briskly walking away in the opposite direction. A cold splash of reality smacked Branch without mercy.

Running out of the woodwork, Poppy jumped and waved at Branch while she trotted up to his side. “How was it?!” she asked Branch enthusiastically, startling him with a shoulder shake. “Did you get a really nice hug from Creek?? Eh?? I bet you did, from that look!” She elbowed him the side with a smirk. “Tell me what happened!”

Branch swiveled around to the pink troll who bounced up and down on the balls of her feet. A sudden anger boiled up inside him, his eyes livid. “Why did you do that?” he demanded.

“Do what?” she asked cheerfully, tilting her head. “What’s wrong?”

“Why did you put us in there?!” he cried out, looking back towards Creek and watching him drift farther out of view. He was headed back towards the entrance to leave the festival arena, pushing through dancing trolls and dodging around rolling snack carts.

Poppy frowned and crossed her arms, “I know you guys did more than hugging in there, it’s written plain as day all over your faces! Don’t get mad ‘cause I helped you along, someone had to!”
Branch scowled at her, but then his expression shattered into deep despair. “How are we supposed to be friends like this, Poppy,” he asked, tears filling his eyes. “Just when I thought we could go back to how we used to be. I can’t stop myself from wanting him,” he sniffed, covering his eyes with his arm. “How can we be friends now, after that? How can we, when.. we...”

Poppy took Branch’s hands in her own and squeezed them reassuringly, giving him a small smile. “That’s easy, Branch. I know it’s hard to think about but you can be more than just friends. You guys were meant to be together, don’t fight it anymore! You both have incredible chemistry, in more ways than one!”

“That’s impossible!” he yelled at her, yanking his hands out of her grasp. Branch turned his back on Poppy and covered his mouth, all of the different emotions swirling inside his stomach. He felt like he was going to puke. “Just tell me one thing,” he managed to say. “Did you force Creek into your plotting? It seemed like he knew what was going to happen, as did all of your other friends. I feel like I was on a pre-made path to this horror.”

Poppy bit her lower lip and tapped her fingers together, “Er... No. It’s not like that, it’s kind of complicated. I mean, I guess I did ask my friends for help. We were trying to match you guys together. But it was only for your own good! This entire event was made just for you, Branch” she said quickly, waving her hands defensively. “And Creek only knew a little bit, I only talked to him about my surprise!”

Of course.

Pieces fell into place inside Branch’s mind and the more it made sense, the more it hurt. This night, Poppy had harassed him for the last time. Her actions were unbearable, never listening to his concerns, always trying to include him in things that he didn’t want. Festivals, yoga lessons, even placing Creek in his bunker to begin with. This time, she had forced Creek into playing with his heart. Just when he had started to open up to the purple troll, his defenses were broken and his feelings were toyed with. Was Branch some kind of sport to them? The utter betrayal from both trolls was almost intolerable, but Branch was strong. He could handle this, just like any other thing pushed his way. He couldn’t believe how stupid he was, thinking that Creek could be more than anything but a rival.

“I get it,” Branch said quietly, turning back to Poppy. He fought back the turmoil, but he was losing the battle. He didn’t want to cry anymore, not for them. Their business weren’t worth his feelings anymore.

“You do?” Poppy asked worriedly and inspected the grim lines in Branch’s face, trying to read what he was thinking.
“Stay away from me,” he choked on the threatening emotional lump lodged in his throat. His eyes were going to deceive him if he didn’t get away from Poppy quickly. “Just leave me alone.”

“What, what, what?!” Poppy gasped. “Branch, you can’t be serious? I’m just trying to help you! Please calm down,” she begged, reaching out to him. “Let me explain everything to you, I swear it’s going to be okay. I won’t leave out any details, then you’ll understand!”

“Don’t touch me!” Branch stepped back from her a few paces. The trolls around the two of them noticed the conflict and they started to hush, watching the strife unfold. “You and Creek. Both of you, just don’t touch me. No more, I don’t want it anymore.” He turned away from the princess quickly and followed the path that Creek had taken, gritting his teeth while pushing through the onlooking trolls. The scampered out of his way with a fearful squeak. He left Poppy there while she looked baffled that her plan hadn’t worked at all. Don’t cry, he thought to himself. Don’t look back. His tongue tasted bile and his palms sweat while he tried to replace his grieving with anything else he could muster.

“I’ll fix this, Branch!” Poppy yelled to his back. “I promise I’ll fix it, okay? Don’t give up!”

That’s precisely all he wanted to do. He wanted to give up, escape, but not after he gave Creek a piece of his mind. Branch never wanted to strike the troll so badly in his life. His body burned where Creek had touched him and it only fueled his increasing anger while he trudged through loud, obnoxious trolls in search of the fleeing culprit. He couldn’t bring himself to fully take it out on Poppy, even though it was mostly her fault. She was the princess and he had to force himself to respect her, but he could avoid her all he wanted until he settled down. Creek, on the other hand, was no longer safe.

Branch was heartbroken and upset. The angrier he became, the faster he walked, until he was full blown sprinting through the festival to the outskirts of the stadium, following the trail out of the gate. He wiped his flowing tears quickly with the back of his hand and scanned the empty grassland. The sun was beginning to set over the horizon of Serenity Lake, the shade of dusk casting itself over the plains. It was hard to discern anything in the fading light, but then he spotted Creek slipping away between a thicket of trees standing tall at the West side of the stadium, over a hundred yards out.

“YOU’RE SUCH A HYPOCRITE!” he yelled at the top of his lungs.

Chapter End Notes

Guy Diamond's short little song: Flo Rida - Game Time
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

sorry for the long wait. ive been working a lot and im sick as a dawg so if this chapter is a little weird in some areas i am so sorry. i tried editing it multiple times to make it work. i'll go back and fix it when im feeling better. theres a ton of dialogue and im not really comfortable with that haha my bad. anyway thanks a lot for all your support < 3 things are gonna get a little heavy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[One day before]

Poppy and Creek were spending some quality time together in her pod, scrap booking the day’s events and sipping tea while sitting on the plush carpeting. Her bedroom was lacy and dyed in soft pinks; stuffed toy critters littered the bedspread and the walls were adorned with fresh flowers and pinned photographs of all her friends. The princess hummed to herself happily, laying on her stomach at the foot of the bed and cutting felt pieces into perfect shapes for her book. Among the mess of clippings, Creek sat next to her crossed legged, cup in hand, observing the artwork peacefully.

“You haven’t used much green, today,” the purple troll commented.

Poppy tilted her head to inspected the page then buried her arm into a nearby box to withdraw a fist full of green construction paper. Creek chuckled and took slow drink from his tea cup.

“By the way,” she said, pursing her lips and squinting at her project. “Fuzzbert said your pod is finished. It’s hanging in the same spot as your last one, ready to go. You can move in whenever you want.”

Creek froze, a sour seed of grief planting into the lining of his stomach. Then he tapped his fidgeting finger on the side of the cup. “Poppy, my dear… I thought you said you’d tell the construction to wait.”

“Yeah, but come on Creek,” she looked over at him with a quirk in her brow. “We both know you’re just buying time. You shouldn’t make the fuzzlings wait when they’ve got so many other things to do.”
His mouth twitched and he avoided her gaze, staring down into the dark liquid of his drink. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Poppy smiled and put her hand on his knee, giving it a pat. “You’re being evasive,” she teased knowingly. “Is there something wrong?”

“Not at all...”

“That’s not what my dad told me,” Poppy whistled, resuming her snipping of the green paper.

“Urgh, your father – !” Creek groaned, covering his face with one hand. He should’ve known the daffy old troll would spill to his daughter. They shared everything to one another, even if it was a secret. Creek would never win a war against the dynamic duo. “And what exactly did King Peppy have to say,” Creek said through his fingers, praying that Peppy was spared from most information.

“You like living with Branch, don’t you?” Poppy asked, bypassing his question and keeping her attention on her snipping scissors. “Is that why you don’t want your pod back?”

Creek pressed his lips together tightly and his cheeks tinged with color. “I don’t mind it, but that’s not the problem,” he said, being wary of every word he said. Poppy was smart and would pick him apart if he wasn’t careful.

Poppy tossed down her supplies and scurried up into sitting position, a huge grin on her face. “That’s it, isn’t it? Tell me more about you and Branch,” she blurted out happily.

Creek felt the urge to retreat, his oncoming blush reaching unbearable levels. That didn’t take very long, did it? “There’s nothing!” he said quickly. “There is no Branch and I.”

The pink troll wasn’t deterred, “But there is something, isn’t there?” Poppy pushed, scooting closer to Creek and staring him down with giant, bright eyes. They shimmered with excitement and Creek’s heart throbbed in his chest, stricken with guilt and longing.

“N-No,” he denied again. “Nothing with us.” It was true, there was nothing between the two trolls, but he couldn’t hide his erratic emotions from his best friend when the dark troll’s name was
mentioned. “Just… just me. It’s just me, Poppy,” Creek admitted faintly, averting his eyes.

Poppy squealed loudly and tackled Creek into the floor, hugging him tightly. “Oh my gosh, I can’t believe it! You love him – you love him! You love Branch, don’t you?!” The purple troll gasped and wriggled under her, but she wouldn’t let up just yet.

“Can’t breathe!” he cried out, tapping her on the back. The princess leaped off quickly and helped him back up, raving her apologies while grinning from ear to ear.

“I’m just SO. FREAKING. HAPPY,” Poppy giggled, hugging herself around the middle and twisting around from all the pent up energy. “This is the most amazing thing in the world!”

“Alright, alright!” Creek said with a grimace, rubbing the back of his bumped head. “I admit it, I do like him but you need to calm– “

“Love,” Poppy corrected him, sticking out the tip of her tongue.

“L-Love… him…” he sighed, touching his cold palms over his fiery cheeks. “But Branch, he… I’m not a match for a guy like him. He’s so creative and intelligent, and I am nothing in the face of that.”

“What the heck are you talking about?!” she squealed, grabbing his shoulders roughly and rattling him. “You’re PERFECT for Branch! You guys are like two peas in a pod, a pair of matching socks – You complete one another and I’ve never seen a more perfect troll couple!”

“But we’re not a couple,” Creek frowned. “Even if I have feelings for him, it’s impossible, Poppy. Branch is barely my friend… I can’t jeopardize that again. I’d rather us stay like this for the rest of our days if it meant being able to stay in his life.”

“Well, I for one, don’t want either of you to be this miserable anymore,” Poppy said, taking up Creek’s hand and squeezing it lovingly. “Don’t worry about a thing, I have a surprise for Branch at the festival games and it’ll help him see just how amazing you are.”

“A surprise?” Creek questioned worriedly. Poppy surprises were always well thought and considerate, if it were for a normal troll. He wasn’t so sure if what she had planned would be a great gift for the irritable grey troll. He seemed to dislike everything that Poppy threw at him, but Creek was in no position to tell her to stop.
“Nothing too crazy,” she assured and opened her arms to him. “Just make sure to take him the game zone when the festival starts, that’s all you have to do.”

The princess smiled sweetly at the purple troll and then he slumped his shoulders in defeat, going in for another hug. Creek sighed slowly and she rubbed his back with a hush. The weight of his worry lessened now that Poppy knew the secret that was locked in his heart. He felt significantly better, but there was an ominous cloud of apprehension cast over his head.

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[Present time]

Creek heaved from running, leaning one shoulder against a tree to catch his breath. His entire body was damp with a thin layer of sweat, the icy breeze chilling straight to the bone. He was so scared and embarrassed. He had to calm down, before anything else happened. He had to get out, get into nature, away from the village, the festival, and all the trolls. Inside his pants, a trickle of fluid traveled down his leg.

“YOU’RE SUCH A HYPOCRITE!”

Creek flinched at the angry shout that drifted over the wind towards his direction. Without looking back, he slipped into the forest to find a spot to rest. “I’m so sorry, Branch,” he said shamefully, pushing past a thicket of prickly brushes, “I didn’t plan any of this!” Guilt ripped into his conscience with zero clemency. He was running away from Branch, leaving no word or explanation as to the reason why; he was running away from his soul mate and they were going to hate him til the end of time, but Creek’s fear of his own changing body overcame everything else.

In that tiny closet, riding up against the dark troll in a frenzy of intense emotions and desire, he’d sensed Branch’s soul. The scent peeked out and caressed Creek with the smallest of touches but he caught it and held it to his heart for dear life. The essence of Branch was smokey and dark like his skin, but invigorating to suck in like white cedar trees after a dousing of rainfall. The strong and demanding musk was sweetly edged with sugar, inviting him in with a curling finger. It teased him with dirty vows and Creek could compare it to digging through a wild, thorn-filled berry patch just to get a taste. He fought so hard, clawing his way in Branch’s life in search of the sweet taste he longed for and he’d finally achieved it, finding it was everything he’d wanted and more.

Creek stumbled over a thick protruding root and fell to his knees. He sat there on his calves and teared, hastily swiping his eyes in an attempt to harden up. He was so uncomfortable and confused, inwardly tightening against the sticky, hot mess coating his inner thighs. He wanted to mate so badly.
Feverish thoughts and urges pulled at him from different directions, telling him to go back and throw himself at Branch like a wanton, loose troll. Creek trembled at another influx and groaned in desperation. He’d never heard of male trolls becoming so needy; he didn’t even know he had the parts, it was like he was going into heat! His aura burning while running through a maelstrom of fiery torture that screamed to bed the grey troll without any remorse for the consequences. Every Spring, Creek managed to keep the slim hinting of arousal buried out of sight, even when he was surrounded by dozens of couples, kissing and fondling each other in public. He’d become numb to the entire season. This erotic feeling was advanced and new. What he really wanted was to clean himself out and cool down or he was going to lose his head in Branch’s presence; Doubtful that the grey troll would have the patience through his red fog to deal with any of Creek’s pleas.

Sitting there in the coming darkness of evening, the purple troll missed how much time had passed. He felt alone and secluded, surrounded by thick bushes and long, swaying grass. Gusts of wind threaded through the forest and a few more dead leaves broke free from the overhanging branches, littering the earth in brown and yellow. Everything was eerily quiet, like the forest was vacant of life. Creek sniffed and wept in small intervals, feeling victimized by nature and a convicted felon for hurting Branch’s feelings, then he decided to hobble back to his feet. He used a nearby tree to balance his weak knees and slumped into the trunk, wondering if he should head to his new pod and lock himself away, never to be seen again.

“Found you,” came a profane growl from behind him.

Creek whipped around and was faced with a fuming monster. Branch looked livid with fists clenching at his sides, eyes dilated and glowing in outrage. He’d never seen him so angry before and a new fear speared through his chest.

“STOP! Stop running!” Branch seethed, halting Creek in his tracks when the purple troll had tried to move. He stomped over to him and snatched him around the neck with a whip of his black hair, smacking his back into the tree with an acute force that didn’t seem possible. Creek choked and became dizzy, the air knocked out of his lungs. “That’s for running away from me,” the dark troll explained, then he reared back and threw a heavy blow into Creek’s abdomen, his fist backed by all the fury he had. “And THAT’S for fucking with me and my feelings!”

Creek heaved and clutched his stomach, white spots dazzling over his vision. He spluttered over the incredible pain and paled out. Branch released him and Creek dropped heavily to the ground on his knees, face planting into the grass.

Branch glared down at the troll with daggers in his eyes, the urge to kick him while he was down prodding into his mind. “You think you’re smooth, don’t you,” he hissed, his lip curling.

“N-No,” Creek managed to say, shaking his head and coughing.
“It was only a matter of time before I found out. My miserable life must be incredibly entertaining to play with,” Branch said with a venomous cruelty. “The unhappy troll. The colorless, grumpy troll,” he continued, squatting down and grabbing Creek by his ear’s edge to force his face up to look at him.

The purple troll winced and grit his teeth, peering up at Branch, “Hold on, what are you –,” but then his face was dropped mercilessly with a fresh scowl.

“I guess I’m an easy target,” Branch scoffed, “because I’m sure you all know that deep down, I really wish I could be just like you guys. You and Poppy were really conniving this time around, I’ll give you that much!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about!” Creek shouted. He used all his energy and clambered back to his feet, face twisted while holding his aching stomach. Branch stepped a few feet back and his anger reboiled.

“Don’t pretend to be stupid, I’m not fucking with this anymore, Creek! I’m out of this game!”

“Here’s no game,” Creek said, “I would never play with your feelings...” He knew that running away would leave him angry, but he didn’t expect this. There had to be some sort of misunderstanding between them. He felt lightheaded and nauseous, but there would be a worse pain if he couldn’t talk Branch out of his hysteria.

Branch ignored him, fidgeting and beginning to pace back and forth across Creek’s path. He muttered to himself and ran his hand through his hair, then he laughed flung his arm out, pointing at the purple troll and making him flinch. “You know, it’s alright,” he said, his face smiling but hard emotional pain was etched into his features. “I’ve been a fool my entire life, it’s not only your fault. It’s not like this hasn’t happened before. Twenty years ago, I looked to you and I loved you more than anyone, and then Rosie was taken. I couldn’t handle it like everyone else did and then you ran when things got rough. Life is cruel, isn’t it? It’s coming full circle again and I didn’t learn my lesson the first time.”

Creek’s mental strength failed while he watched Branch unravel before him, tears breaking and rolling down his cheeks. He recalled the normal start, sunny day of his childhood and the emotions he felt when he lost his best friend to the darkness of having no color. “You pushed me away,” he said, grieving at the memories that haunted them both. “That day, when I – I wanted to give you my book, to make you happy. You pushed – “
“Is that all it takes?” Branch snapped. “One slap away and you become the shallowest of friends? I wasn’t worth the trouble in the end. Not then, and not now. You’re in it for your own gain; You don’t actually give a damn about me at all!”

“That’s not true!” Creek cried, stepping forward and reaching out to the grey troll. “Everything I do now is for you, only you. I think of nothing else!”

“And now, what is this?” Branch’s voice wavered and he retreated out of Creek’s reach. He clutched his upper arm with one hand and his eyes filled with oncoming tears, face dipping past his shoulders. Creek’s heart twisted painfully, gaping wide to the agonizing emotions bubbling up over Branch’s fortitude. “You just keep going on and on, you just keep playing,” he stifled a whimper, gnashing into his lip. “Why are you doing this to me? I’ve left you alone, haven’t I? I never tried to bother you. I’ve kept alone my whole life and you’ve been screwing with me, making me feel things for you all over again, wrapping me up and leading me on because what – you’re bored?! WHY?!”

“We’re soul mates!” Creek yelled, snatching Branch’s wrist and pulling him in to get his full attention. “We are destined. I don’t know where you’ve been getting these conclusions about my intentions but the only thing I’ve been trying to do is get closer to you because I love you!”

The troll’s cloudy pupils blew momentarily and then he squinted his eyes shut, ripping his arm out of the hold easily. “BULLSHIT!” he yelled back, “What about all the badgering around with Poppy? How many times a day did you frolic with the princess behind my back, planning some new hair-brained scheme to make me miserable?! How many laughs did you guys get at my expense?”

“Poppy does what she wants, it has nothing to do with me,” Creek pleaded. “I can’t do anything to stop her, you know that more than anyone. But I want you, Branch. We’re soul mates. I’ll say it over and over again, I’ll do whatever it takes. We have all the signs, don’t you feel it too? Don’t you feel the pull in your soul?”

Branch crossed his arms tightly over his chest and stared into the purple troll with a menacing look, his cheeks wet and shining from his crying. “We’re not mates,” he said icily. “You don’t really want me, and I don’t want you either!”

It was just like when they were small. The young, distraught voice echoed in his ears.

*I don’t want you either!*
We can support each other. I can help you get your color back...

I don’t WANT my color back!

I don’t want you either!

Creek’s heart shattered like a pane of thin glass. He hiccuped a sob and covered his mouth tightly, an endless streaming of tears casting lines through his flushed cheeks. Branch didn’t move, his gaze baring into Creek’s form and watching him cry. He grit his teeth and said nothing more, the lines in his face lessening while he finally achieved making Creek feel just as badly as he did, but it didn’t seem like that’s what he really wanted.

This would be the end, if Creek gave up. In the fury of Branch’s misunderstandings, there was still a misting of truth. He was right, he didn’t try hard enough. He was a hypocrite. He ran away when it got too rough and he waited twenty years too long to try and support what he really cared about.

“I loved you too, when we were trollings,” Creek whispered. The troll wiped his eyes slowly and continued, even if the backlash were to hurt him more. “You were my entire world and I’ve hated myself to this very day for not going back to you when you lost your color. What could I have done, not knowing an ounce of what you were going through? What could a small child do then, to fix something as serious as this?”

“I don’t know,” Branch said under his breath, averting his eyes. “It’s not my problem anymore.”

Silence daunted over them and Creek moved forward again, merely a yard away. His arms ached to capture the troll and hold him, if not for Branch’s sake then for his own.

“I love you,” Creek proclaimed softly.

“Stop,” the dark troll replied sharply, but he pressed onward to counter his standoff.

“Soul mates or not, color or no color, I don’t care. Cast aside the memories and the troll tales and all we’re left with is each other, right here, face to face, and I’m telling you I love you. Hit me again if it’ll make you feel better, but it will all the be the same.”
Branch swallowed slightly and unfolded his arms. “Well, I don’t really want to love you,” he grunted stubbornly. “Nothing you say is going to change that.”

“I love you,” Creek repeated vehemently, closing the distance and slipping his hand into his. He’d say it a thousand times over if it meant getting through the tough exterior of his adamancy.

Branch snatched his hand away hastily, “I don’t really want to love you,” he frowned, his voice pitching up with his stirred emotions. Creek’s eyes widened in surprise. It had finally been too much for the grey troll to handle, the deluge of his feelings breaking out in the form of song. The intense energy flowed from the root of his foundation and out of his chords.

Branch’s lip curled into a sneer and he shoved Creek back roughly, making him stumble, “Over and over, I try staying sober, but I can't seem to get myself straight,” he sang to him. “Still trying to erase all the feelings that stayed, the minute that you walked away... Is this love, or obsession?”

“Aren't the two exactly the same?” Creek replied in verse, smiling slightly when Branch became flustered.

“But you still keep me guessing and that's the reason I ain't sane,” the grey troll bit out, a touch of color forming in his dim cheeks. “I don't really wanna love you, I don't even care that much! I just wanna see the day when I don't think of you.

I don't wanna get with you baby, I just wanna give you up! I just wanna see the day when I don't think of you.”

His voice was incredible, the rhythmic octaves chilling colder than ice but effortlessly birthing flames. Branch jabbed his index finger into Creek’s chest and stepped closer.

“Week after week I see you in my dreams, but I don't even want you there,” he serenaded, his tone softening. The clear, sweet notes punctured the purple troll and his own blush became more prominent, lips parting slightly for air while the alluring melodist moved in on his face. “I swear that I'm good, boy, I just wish I could fix what only time can repair... Is this love, or obsession? Are the two exactly the same? But you still keep me guessing, and that's the reason I ain't sane.”

A wave of heat washed through Creek and he shivered, sucking in a slow breath while his pulse thundered radically. Their noses were only a few inches a part. Branch stared him down with shadowy eyes, momentarily flickering down to his lips. Then, he backed up with a soft huff, turning
away and rubbing the back of his neck.

“You stink,” he muttered tiredly.

Creek swallowed and licked his dry lips, “It’s my soul,” he said quietly, “because you’re my mate.”

“How long are you going to keep up this charade,” Branch growled. “Don’t you have any shame? I don’t know anything more about this soul mate crap than the next troll. How can you claim that I’m yours?”

“Give it a chance, Branch,” he asked him desperately, wringing his hands together. “I have looked for all of the answers to the plaguing questions. I’ve read books and researched auras. I’ve practiced meditation and touched the other world, all in an attempt to find this missing part of me.”

“I wish I had that much free time,” Branch huffed sarcastically.

Creek grimaced but continued to try, “I’ve even talking with King Peppy because he’s one of the few elders that still know the fine details. Our village has lost everything when it comes to soul mates... but I have no doubt in my mind that we are two halves of a whole.”

“Just give up,” the grey troll said, throwing him a look of disdain. “You’re good at that.”

Another hot sting of heartache buried in his chest. He deserved that, but Branch would not win this fight, not while he could still breathe. “I will not give up,” Creek replied defiantly.

Chapter End Notes

Branch’s song: The Royal - Not thinking of you
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sUFhHGrhwCsE
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Rating going up. -thumbs up-
NSFW.

DO NOT read this chapter if you don't want it! I've warned you. If you skip this chapter you won't miss out on any story. Probably.
Idk really it's a work in progress, but I separated it from the last chapter just in case there's a reader that isn't comfortable.
much love~

The two trolls looked each other down, equally stubborn and enduring. Branch’s mouth twitched while he gazed the purple troll over, silently thinking. “If you aren’t lying,” he said slowly, pausing while he contemplated his words. “Then… I want you to strip.”

Creek cringed with a sudden tremble of fear. “What do you mean, strip?” he asked, the hairs on his body rising on end. He could feel a radiating pulse of energy from Branch, his aura shifting in an unexpected direction.

“Take off your clothes,” he said boldly now, stalking towards Creek with heavy intent in his eyes. The purple troll walked backwards quickly and was met with a tree blocking his escape. He pushed his back up against the tree and held his breath while Branch placed his palm on the trunk next to Creek’s head, efficiently trapping him, and leaned in. The troll stared him down just inches from his face, not frowning, but not smiling either. “If you want me, Creek,” he whispered to him tauntingly, “then you’ll take your clothes off, right here and now, and mate with me. That’s what you want, right? You want to be my mate…? I won’t believe you, otherwise. I don’t think you can do it, so prove me right. Show me that you’re faking.”

Creek’s heart throbbed in his chest and he couldn’t help the shaking wheeze that escaped him. “At this very moment?” he asked weakly. “Here in the forest, out in the open?”

“Is that disgust that I hear?” Branch said, scowling at him. “Yeah, it must be disgusting to think about actually having sex with a troll like me. So it’s true, you’ve been stringing me along this entire time!”

“No, I haven’t!” Creek cried out.
“Then do it!” Branch yelled, startling the purple troll.

Creek bit hard into his lower lip and looked away, unable to accept the intimidating glare. Branch was asking for something horribly cruel but he still couldn’t blame him for being doubtful and guarded. He swallowed heavily, trying to think of a way out. In all honesty, he did want Branch. He wanted him so badly his body was screaming to have him, especially after hearing him sing, but he wasn’t sure if he was mentally ready to give it all up in these circumstances. If he had to make that kind of sacrifice to keep Branch at his side; if this is what it would take... then he’d show him just how serious he was. He’d prove that his feelings were real and that he wasn’t a liar like Branch believed.

Taking in a shallow breath, Creek reached his shaking hands up and opened his dark royal cloak, shimmying the material over his shoulders. The clothing slipped to the ground in a puddle around their feet. Branch didn’t say a word, watching Creek, digging his eyes into his presented chest and dragging them down his trim stomach. Flushing hot at the attention and steeling his resolve, the purple troll unfastened the front of his pants and met Branch’s challenging gaze again.

“Creek,” Branch breathed, their lips just inches apart. The grey troll gripped the tree tightly with his fingers, the bark crumbling easily. “Are you serious,” he whispered, “You can’t be. Don’t lie to me. Please, don’t break me like this.”

His demeanor shifted rapidly, going from doubtful to worried. Branch’s aura flickered while his eyes looked down on Creek through the shifting shadows of the forest around them. The sun was completely set, night time looming in the quiet rustling of the canopy over their heads. It was just the two of them in the moonlight, no one else would be coming here and no one would spot them from the festival. Creek could see the flames dancing in Branch’s pupils and his heart hammered up into his throat. Yes, he did want this.

Creek grasped the hem of his pants and inner briefs, pushing the fabrics down his hips and he wiggled them over his thighs, showing himself in full nudity. He shivered heavily against the chilly air, stepping out of the pants and kicking it to the side. “I am serious,” Creek said, holding his forearms around his middle. His cheeks flared in a never ending blush, letting Branch judge his physic. He chanted to himself mentally to not be nervous, to not hide himself away, because he knew he wasn’t an ugly troll. There shouldn’t be a reason for him to be afraid of being naked in front of his soul mate. No matter how many positives he went through, the fear still constricted.

Branch came one step closer. He pressed their bodies together and helped block the harsh, windy element. The grey troll moved both of his hands in, resting them at the edge of Creek’s jawline and touching his thumb over his lower lip. His eyes were hooded while he focused on Creek’s face, their expressions mirrored raw desire for one another. Creek saw how conflicted he was through those
swirling dark pools. He was waltzing slowly aside confusion and longing, tested by what he believed and what he was seeing. There it was; the chance, the opening, to make him realize his feelings and end the whole charade between them.

“I will do anything,” Creek said quietly, moving his arms around Branch’s neck and touching the soft strands at the base of his hair line. “Believe in me. Believe that we’re mates that have been estranged for half a lifetime. There’s an explanation for all of this... You have nothing to lose but everything to gain, being here with me.”

“Mates...” Branch repeated the word under his breath, staring into watery, lilac eyes. He touched his hands along the sides of Creek’s face slowly and let his fingers thread through his silken hair, mimicking Creek’s gentle touch. The dark troll was coming undone, his pulse echoing loud enough to feel inside Creek’s own chest.

Creek closed his eyes to the sensation and sighed, then he felt a sudden pressure on his lips. Branch kissed him deeply, angling his mouth for the perfect fit. Creek melted instantly at the invasion and clung to his shoulders, their soft, shy tongues curling around each other. Branch tasted sugary like ripened fruits, something he could easily become addicted to, and his excitement sparked anew. The grey troll delved deep, his kiss coaxing with slow caresses and swallowing his mouth until there was no end and no beginning. All the worries in the world were wiped clean, Branch’s musky scents of cedar and savory berries surrounding him with comfortable, fluffy pillows. Their first kiss had been fiery and difficult in the end, but their second spun 180 degrees, blooming sober and beautiful with a sprinkling of euphoria.

Creek reluctantly pulled away to gasp for air, but Branch brought him in again and kissed over his lips and chin, completely insatiable. “I believe you, Creek,” he whispered between pecks. “I believe you, okay? Just kill me if you’re lying. I can’t do this anymore. I don’t want to fight it anymore.” He kissed Creek once more, pinning him to the tree trunk and working their mouths passionately before he succumbed to let the troll breathe again.

“B-Branch,” Creek stammered through the assault, legs cinching together. His body throbbed mercilessly, another unfamiliar trickle flowing down the inside of his thigh. Fast arousal caged him behind steel bars; it was blatant, suffocating, and he was embarrassed to beg for more. The tightening in his groin and loosening of his backside were going to push him to his knees before too long.

Branch felt him squirm and pulled back a bit, becoming worried by his distressed expression, “What’s the matter? Are you in pain?” he asked.

Creek didn’t immediately respond, tasting his lip for some sweet residue his love left behind. He probably thought Creek was sore from the clocking he took earlier, which was true, but it was nothing he couldn’t handle; nothing in comparison to the new pain accumulating between his legs.
Sweat bead on his forehead and his mouth twisted, “You could say that,” Creek groaned, another hot spell rolling through his nerves.

“Ugh – I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have hit you, I’m such a jerk,” he apologized and hugged Creek tightly. “Here, sit down with me...” Branch held the other troll and helped lower them to the ground. He twisted their positions and put his back to the tree to heft Creek into his lap, letting the purple troll rest his full weight on his thighs. “Is this better,” he asked, resuming his sweet kisses along the side of his throat. The dark troll was breathless and needy and he could feel his hands twitching while they rested on his legs. “What can I do?” he asked.

The positioning made Creek blaze, his elation stoking the embers in his belly. He tangled his fists into Branch’s ruffled shirt and panted, mind going up in smoke. Here he was, completely naked and aching to be mated senseless and Branch was trying to be sincere. He loved it so much he could hardly contain himself.

The grey troll swallowed nervously and caressed around his hips, forcing his body to arch sharply in his hands. “Branch,” he called out his name again, releasing the shirt so he could pet his palms up and down his chest. Solid and strong, broad and muscular; Creek couldn’t take it anymore. He scooted closer in, ignoring the awkward feel of his erection pressing into Branch’s stomach. He tried to entice farther, slipping his hands under the black material to seductively graze the troll’s nipple. “Will you touch me,” he asked desperately. “Please, Branch. Do something to me. Tell me you want me, too.”

Branch’s pointed ears flicked and he groaned in obedience, taking no time in reaching his hands around to grasp Creek’s rounded ass. He pulled roughly at the flesh and the purple troll hissed in pleasure, hiding his face in Branch’s neck while he was brazenly groped. He was so thankful that that it was dark outside, despite being alone together. He couldn’t imagine what his face looked like.

“I do want you,” the grey troll hummed coarsely against his ear. “Are you sure you want me, though?” Branch asked him, massaging into his cheeks with his fingers. “How badly do you want to be a mated troll? How badly… do you want me inside you?”

The tease! He was being a bloody tease and it was stupidly erotic, his attempted foul talk throwing him in disarray. Creek could only nod vigorously and opened his thighs, dipping his spine to give Branch full access. He was leaning against his chest and supporting himself on his knees, spread over his lap with everything exposed. Branch accepted the silent submission and put his mouth to Creek’s shoulder while he slipped his hand farther down the crevice of his backside, his finger tips breaching the incredible wet and unexplored depths. Creek gasped, shivering while Branch’s curious fingers probed the entrance to his body. His virgin touch was gentle and careful but that burned him up even more. Creek rubbed his hot face on Branch’s throat and made an urgent, whimpering sound, his legs shaking from the excitement. The grey troll went to laying more kisses into Creek’s collar bone and pushed a single finger deep inside, causing Creek to jolt.
“You’re so fucking beautiful,” Branch said, his voice straining. His words were laced with a demanding arousal despite taking the slow actions he forced on himself. He also seemed hesitant, unsure of which direction to go.

Taking control, Creek darted his hands down and hastily tugged on Branch’s trousers, momentarily fumbling with the button as a second finger pressed inside along with the first. The burn inside pushed to dangerous levels and he flinched at the painful intrusion, but it wasn’t going to deter him from the goal. He’d rather die a horrible death than quit over a little soreness.

“Not as beautiful as you,” Creek countered, reaching into his pants and daringly wrapping his fingers around the already hardened member. The grey troll grunted and his hips bucked slightly, flushes of pink lighting up his cheeks. His fingers paused their ministrations, giving Creek a chance to regain his sanity. A few solid strokes and Branch was reduced to a panting mess underneath him, shifting and lifting to every loving stroke Creek gave.

Suddenly, Branch pulled his fingers free and grabbed Creek’s wrist tightly, “Wait, stop! That’s too much… I’ve never – I’ve never done this before,” he huffed, chest heaving while he tried to catch his breath. Creek obliged and carefully removed his hand, looking Branch dead in the eye while he brought his slick fingertips to his lips.

“However you want it, in any way,” Creek murmured. He licked the leaked fluid from his sex, tasting the essence, and bounced his eyebrows at the troll knowing full well the wickedness he dealt.

Branch stared at him and his eyes narrowed. A primal noise pelt from deep in the grey troll’s throat and he seized Creek at the shoulders, thrusting him backwards to slam him into the cold, damp grass. The purple troll had the wind knocked out of him and he coughed, staring wide-eyed at the beast born above him. Branch pulled his shirt over his head quickly and threw it aside. There were only moments to appreciate the dips and curves of his muscles before the troll gripped his soaked thighs and forcibly dragged him inward, spreading them wide open.

Creek shifted eagerly and gripped what he could of the grass around him, watching the impatient troll push down his pants. His pulse was irregular, finally seeing every bit of skin that Branch had to offer. The tapering of black pubic hair led to a shaft that was engorged and darkened, upright and willing with a sheen that made Creek’s mouth water. Leaning over the purple troll, Branch hooked his hand under his knee and lifted his leg, fitting his hips in the creamy apex of his body.

“Oh, Holy Mother,” Creek panted.
“She can’t save you now,” Branch whispered huskily, shifting his position with his free hand ducked between them. “Last chance to say something,” he warned. “Because I won’t stop half way.”

The purple troll reached for his neck and pulled Branch’s face close to his. “Mate me,” he begged. “Make love to me. For God’s sake, fuck me!” Creek cursed, for the first time in his life.

Branch groaned heatedly and caught his mouth in another quick, searing kiss, lining up and forcefully pressing the head of his length past the slippery tight ring of muscle. Creek gripped his arms around and dug his fingers into Branch’s back as his hips lifted off the grass. The pain was sharp and intense, his entire being feeling like it was being severed through the middle. He couldn’t breath while Branch penetrated, pushing deeper and deeper without remorse, stretching him endlessly until they were stuck snugly together.

Creek grit his teeth, swallowing all the sounds that wanted to escape. New tears threatened to break while his body agonized, overwhelmed by the discomfort. He felt the panicking recoil inside but fought it down, instead clinging tighter to Branch’s form with all of his limbs.

“Relax a little,” Branch groaned, rolling his hips, “You’re squeezing too tightly.”

“I’m not squeezing,” Creek managed to gasp. “I am this tight… I-I’m… I’m a virgin, too” he stammered, “but… not anymore.”

“No way,” the troll shivered and he jerked forward.

Creek cried out obscenely and bit hard into his lower lip, drawing out a pebble of blood. With his eyes screwed shut, he wiggled and tried to relax but it was near impossible. Branch kissed his bruised lip and sucked it into his mouth, licking the tiny cut with an apologetic murmur. The dark troll then made a low, drawn out sound of pleasure, grinding slowly with as much patience he could give. Goosebumps covered Creeks skin and he squirmed, each movement sending bolts of electricity to his core. He couldn’t speak anymore, he couldn’t breathe, every filled inch muddled his thoughts.

The air around them was cold and their breaths were visible, steamy clouds puffing from their lips. Despite that, he was sweltering, the molten storm inside him concentrating at their connection. The sound of Branch’s heavy panting was a song to his ears. The tightness was beginning to recede by the working of his lover’s care, more of Creek’s natural slick helping them along.

He felt a slow pull from inside and keened, only to have Branch give a particularly solid thrust.
Creek levitated off the ground with a wince but it turned into a choked moan, the pain momentarily overcome by such an amazing feeling he couldn’t discern if it was real or not.

“Right there?” Branch muttered, gripping Creek’s shoulder with one hand and his thigh with the other. He repeated the action, diving into the wet depths and scraping into Creek’s prostate.

“A-Ah! Branch!” Creek clumsily grabbed at him, searching for more leverage.

“Yes, baby?” he cooed under his breath. “Like this?”

He didn’t think he could become more stirred. Creek shivered at the pet name, a string of unstoppable moans and mewls coming from his throat with every strong thrust Branch gave him. The dark troll quickened his pace, abusing the bundle of nerves with every deep advancement. It was rough and hard, and Creek never wanted it to stop. He needed; he so desperately needed everything and more, the daunting coil inside him winding so tightly he wanted to be scattered across the forest.

Branch was the same, his thrusting hips becoming erratic. His fingers were gripping into Creek enough to bruise, breath ragged while his body sweat from the pleasurable toil. There was nothing more perfect than having Branch on top of him, layering messy kisses over his dried lips. Creek was climbing up, the winding thrill twisting and burning in his lower gut until it threatened to break lose. The purple troll clung his arms tightly around Branch’s neck while his body rocked. He was so close, reaching out mentally for whatever demon called his name.

Then, a black wave wrapped around Creek’s disheveled hair. Branch screwed their contrasting strands together tightly, arresting the purple troll with everything he had. His senses were slammed with Branch’s soul scent, pushing him over the edge. Creek gasped in fast, short breaths while he felt his body contract, staring into the shadowed depths of Branch’s crystal blue eyes.

“C-Creek, I can’t – I don’t know,” Branch pressed his face to Creek’s shoulder, his breath catching harshly and his hips stuttering.

“Don’t stop!” Creek pleaded quickly, “Please! Ah – ah!” His climax flipped his world upside down and he spasmed violently. Tears sprung from his eyes as he cried out, legs tightening ruthlessly around the dark troll’s waist. Branch groaned loudly and slammed into him, brows furrowed. He trembled hard and held fast to Creek’s hips, locking himself deep inside while he came. His moans were pitched high while he rode out his orgasm and Creek’s merciless clenching milking him out until he collapsed heavily on top of the purple troll.
They both panted, completely spent, sweaty, and feverish. Branch didn’t pull out of their messy bond just yet, touching his lips to Creek’s throat. He pressed his hips forward slowly to stay connected and Creek moaned weakly from the sensitivity. The purple troll caressed his fingertips across Branch’s broad back, receiving a pleasurable purr in response. His eyes cracked open and glanced up at their twisted hair, still wrapped together in a beautiful spiral of black and teal. Blurred by contentment, he spied a barely noticeable shimmer of blue and purple hue highlighting Branch’s strands. He blinked through the haze, wondering if he was just imagining things.
One soft kiss, then another, followed by a third. Creek touched his lips over and over, tender and slow, to Branch’s mouth during the bask of their afterglow. They sat facing one another, exchanging kisses after cleaning up the best they could and putting their clothes back on. A prominent ache throbbing in Creek’s lower back and stomach kept him grounded, unable to walk steadily enough without more rest. Branch wasn’t too excited about having to travel in the dark but he wanted to get back home as soon as possible. They’d already been out here in the wilderness for over two hours, midnight fast approaching. Camping wasn’t an easy alternative without proper equipment and the prospect of continuing the exploration of his new mate in his own, warm bed was absolutely more inviting. Branch would let him rest a little bit longer, though, while the two were led through the motions of their instincts.

Earlier passions rekindled each time he tasted Creek’s lower lip. Branch placed his palm on Creek’s thigh and rubbed the thick muscle, a shuddering sigh coming from the purple troll’s mouth.

“You are a tease,” he whispered. “Calm yourself, so that I can as well.”

“Sorry,” Branch apologized, but he wasn’t sorry at all, nipping Creek’s lip with his teeth to pull another needy sound. “I’m in a dream... I don’t want it to end just yet.” Feeling evermore confident, both of his hands slipped around the troll’s waist through his opened coat. He splayed his fingers over Creek’s lower back and massaged down his tail bone, using the most careful pressure to help ease some of the ache.

The purple troll’s eyelashes fluttered and he leaned in, the tips of their noses brushing. “No need to feel rushed,” Creek said quietly, bringing his hand up to pet Branch’s cheek. “Just a few more minutes will be fine, then we can leave.” His lilac eyes broke their gaze and trained upwards momentarily.

The dark troll pulled his kisses away, noticing Creek’s weird glances up at his stalk of hair like he was looking for something in particular. “What is it,” he asked worriedly.

“Nothing, really.” Creek forced his attention back down to his face. The purple troll tried to kiss him again but he moved back to avoid it.

“There’s something,” Branch said, frowning in suspicion.
“Well… I’m a bit curious, that’s all,” Creek said truthfully, looking back to the black strands. “There might’ve been some color in your hair earlier… I thought maybe it was finally coming back. How are you feeling, Branch? Do you feel any happier?”

The grey troll frowned more deeply, his good mood gone sour at the mention of his color, or lack thereof. “I guess I was a little happy, but not for long if you keep believing the impossible.”

Creek held up his palms, “Alright, my love. Don’t get upset. You asked, so I told you.”

Branch huffed in annoyance, crossing his arms defensively, “I just wish you’d let it go… I’m sorry.” He apologized again, trying to get his erratic thoughts in order.

There was a nagging in the back of his mind, prodding with the intention to ruin all of the positive feelings he desperately tried to keep inside. Of course he felt happier; who wouldn’t after everything they just did together? He was scared though, and Branch couldn’t bring himself to tell Creek that he was afraid of their future. It all seemed too good to be true; so many years of forcing himself through torturous solitude, only to have the most beautiful soul mate drop into his lap without any provoking whatsoever. He fought it tooth and nail, being a real jackass in the process, but Creek prevailed in the end and he didn’t deserve such a gift.

The fact of the matter was, Creek needed a better mate than what Branch could give him. He couldn’t provide the normal, emotional necessities that were expected. He just couldn’t be a normal troll. The future was empty in his eyes, void of everything that Creek was going to expect – laughter, singing, dancing… even bringing up a family and living happily ever after until they were old, surrounded by loved ones without a single care in the world.

A gentle poke in the middle of his forehead brought Branch to the present and he blinked.

“If those lines get any deeper, your great looks will be compromised,” Creek cooed.

Branch rubbed his forehead and a smirk played across his lips. The compliment was snarky, but well received. He supposed it wouldn’t be so bad to just relish in what he could, before everything went south and he’d be left alone again. It was painful to think about Creek leaving him now that he’d already decided he was in love with the stupid yoga guru. Eventually, though, he’d have to let him go. Staying strong until then was going to be tricky. Life never seemed to fail him… in everything that he enjoyed, there was a buried seed of misery that never went away.
Creek noticed the small smile and beamed brightly with his own, catching him in his arms and tackling him into the grass.

“What the hell?” Branch chuckled. “Where are you getting this energy, all of a sudden?” Despite his dark thoughts, it was difficult to be upset when his mate was halfway on top of him, one leg curling around his knee enough to make his heart pitter-patter against his rib cage.

“Your smile,” he said simply.

A hard blush cast across Branch’s face and he cleared his throat, “Do you have to be so bold,” he muttered through his embarrassment, pushing off the clingy troll to sit back up. Creek’s face told him that he regretted nothing, the happiness practically glowing through his skin. It was utterly contagious, the feeling bouncing between the two trolls and multiplying.

“Of course, one of us has to,” Creek said and started to stand up from the ground, one hand on his knee and the other on his back. “It’s too cold to stay out here anymore, though. Shall we get going?” He winced slightly when he straightened and Branch scurried to help, but the troll waved him off. “It’s fine, it’s fine,” he breathed.

Branch judged his awkward positioning and rolled his eyes. “Get on my back,” Branch commanded, kneeling down in front of him with his arms behind to help him up. “I’ll carry you home."

“That’s not necessary,” Creek mumbled stubbornly. “I am completely fine to walk.”

“Would you just do it?” Branch shot him a glare of his shoulder. “It’s the least I can do for hurting you.”

Creek bit his tongue said nothing more, crawling onto Branch’s back and holding loosely around his neck. Branch felt the vibes of insecurity coming off the purple troll. It almost like he could hear his emotions as they were speaking. The regret was overwhelming when he realized his rough tone was yet another jerkish act on his part. Branch hefted the troll up and bounced gently, hooking his arms under Creek’s legs for a solid hold. His weight was surprisingly lighter than expected, it would be easy to piggy-back him the whole way.

Beginning the trek back to Troll village, the pair drifted through the darkness in silence. Branch wanted to apologize again, knowing full well the pain was entirely his fault. He’d hit him in a fit of
rage and then was animalistic with his body, showing no prior knowledge on how to properly prepare someone’s first time. He’d educated himself, as with any subject, but when the moment came all thought process was jumbled in lust, most coherent action completely unattainable. He also regret so many things when it came to the harsh words he said, remembering the way Creek cried because of him and begged for him to listen. At the time, Branch was completely ready to kick the troll out of his life and have everything go back to normal. He didn’t want him as a friend and especially not as a mate. There were still things that were cause for wary, loose ends that needed to be tied before he could completely trust someone other than himself.

“Talk to me,” came a soft spoken murmur to Branch’s ear. “Tell me what’s on your mind.”

He breathed out slowly, adjusting the hold on Creek’s legs after stepping through a rather tangled area of shrubs. “It’s nothing you need to be concerned about,” he responded shortly. “I’m just thinking.”

“You can tell me anything,” the troll assured him, the breathy whisper tickling his ear and making him shiver. Creek tightened his arms, seemingly knowing how torn Branch was feeling. It was difficult to shake off the advances when his energy was an open book. Maybe Creek could sense his emotions like he could feel his. Being soul mates was something weird to experience, each nook and cranny exposing new mysteries.

After a few quiet moments, Branch swallowed nervously and decided there was no point in keep Creek in the dark. “There’s a few things bothering me, I guess...” he started out slowly.

Creek’s ears perked up to listen, but he didn’t say anything, giving Branch the opportunity to continue.

“Back at the festival,” he said, “Did you really not know about Poppy’s ‘surprise’?”

Creek shook his head, “She told me to bring you, but didn’t advise me on the specifics. Of course I didn’t know she was going to lock us in a closet like a glittering spectacle in front of dozens of trolls... I would have never brought you there, if that was the case.”

“I only went because of you,” Branch mumbled. “I hoped that it would be alright, since you were there. We could’ve avoided everything.”

“Possibly… but then we wouldn’t be together right now.” Creek pet a finger gently down his throat
and Branch’s breath hitched, stumbling in his walk.

“Creek,” he said desperately. “Don’t make me drop you!”

The purple troll laughed lightly and clasped his hands to Branch’s shoulders, keeping them at bay.

Flustered by the flirting, Branch grit his teeth and scrunched his nose. “And another thing about that,” he added hotly. “When we were shacked up in that disgusting hole of a closet, were you mocking me? I heard you laugh, right before we got out.”

Creek thought for a moment, trying to recall what he was talking about. “Oh, that,” he said, chuckling again with a slow sigh. “I was actually laughing at myself and my own foolishness… All this time I’ve been trying to convince myself against the inevitable. When I sensed your soul, the sheer calamity of it all was simply amusing. Mother Destiny has always pointed me in the right direction and I didn’t listen to her this time around. It’s my own fault.”

Branch grunted in response, forcing himself to try and believe Creek’s words. The troll had no reason to lie to him. He kept wanting to deny him, push him away, and ignore his explanations. Branch hated that side of himself, taunting and tearing apart anything that made sense. He wanted to take control of these doubts and bury them in the dirt, never to see the light of day.

“I wasn’t mocking you at all,” Creek reaffirmed, touching his lips to the back of Branch’s neck. The dark troll trembled again but didn’t stop him, a small blossom of happiness forming at the contact.

“I… believe you,” he said quietly. The purple troll hummed, warm vibrations flowing through his back. It was going to take some time, but Branch was hopeful for once. Invisible hands pulled him in Creek’s direction, capable and unyielding. It was stronger than his doubts, stronger than his depression, and he leaned into the entity praying that it never gave up on him.

- - - -

Tonight was the night Chef the Bergen had been waiting for. All of the painful days of exile would be returned tenfold after she got her hands on a couple of unfortunate trolls. With Kevin at her side, the plans they created to overthrow King Gristle Jr’s kingdom would bear the fruit of sweet revenge and she could hardly contain her excitement! The procedure was simple enough; backed up by a second version in case the first one fell through. They only needed to capture two trolls. If they happened to get more, Chef would be over the moon, but two were enough. She’d use the creatures
to take control of neighboring Bergen villages with promises of a happier life. They’d make their own magical troll tree and breed their captives, having complete ownership over the entire population. Chef’s power over the Bergens and the Trolls would skyrocket her position to the top, and then she’d make her kingdom greater than Gristle’s Bergen Town, overthrowing it in a mere fortnight. The old king would grovel at her feet and lick her shoes just to get a taste of her holy boot.

Chef deserved the posh life and she was going to get it, no matter who she had to trample down. But first, the most important aspect of their plan needed to be complete. The two sneaking Bergens slipped soundlessly into Troll village with one thing on their mind; Capture some trolls and then get out before anyone noticed. The last thing Chef needed was alarms notifying the castle guard that their precious troll friends were being kidnapped. They wouldn’t ask questions when they saw Chef; They’d toss her in the dungeon without a single thought on the matter. Still, once they got away, it would be an easy slide down hill into fame and fortune. Unfortunately, the first phase looked to be problematic because there wasn’t a single troll in sight. The entire village was silent and dark.

Kevin observed the hanging, empty pods from the great tree and twisted a colorful one in his hand, musing over his thoughts.

“Where in the hell are they?” Chef griped, lifting up a couple of stones and mushrooms to look underneath them.

Kevin glanced over at her and rolled his eyes, releasing the pod and shoving his hands in his coat pockets. “Not here, obviously. I doubt they’ve abandoned their Troll Tree, I’m guessing the trolls are out having a party somewhere else, knowing their kind of culture.”

“Then we’re just going to have to go find them.” Chef tossed a mushroom cap angrily and stomped past the male Bergen to leave the small village, then she stopped suddenly and strained her ears. “Wait, do you hear that?” She beckoned him over quickly, craning her neck towards the forest. He obliged, keeping quiet and opening his ears. “I think I hear a tiny voice,” she whispered happily, then stepped quietly through the foliage with Kevin at her tail.

“We’re almost there,” Branch huffed, following a familiar, skinny dirt trail winding through the trees. They’d made it from the festival area to the outskirts of the troll village and Branch hopped on his carefully camouflaged path that led to the entrance hatch of his survival bunker. The path was ragged and clustered, difficult to see with all of the dead leaves covering the ground. It was even more difficult since it was nighttime, but Branch had followed this same path a hundred times over and was confident of his whereabouts.
Quickly and carefully, he carried Creek through the thicket and dense brush, trying not to make any unnecessary sounds. His ears listened, twisting around to catch anything out of the ordinary breeze. His fears were starting to twist out of normality, wondering if they were being watched. They could possibly be followed back to the village by something unwelcome, so Branch darted haphazardly to try and shake off the trail. His gut instinct was alarming, telling him to hide. He shook his head roughly but couldn’t get rid of the feeling, becoming more concerned by the second.

“Branch?” Creek asked, worried about his change in behavior. “What’s going on?”

“Something’s not right,” he muttered. “Shh, be quiet.” He started to run faster, leaping over rocks and roots and shooting through shrubs like a dark blur, then he suddenly skidded to a halt when a particularly loud crack of wood startled him, his heart jumping into his throat.

“Let me down,” Creek said quickly, struggling his legs to dislodge himself from the troll’s grip. Branch regretfully dropped him onto his feet and the purple troll grunted from the sharp pain, rubbing his back but then straightening his clothes into place with attempted dignity.

Another crackle of breaking twigs and shuffled dirt came closer to their position and they both flinched, staring into the black depths. Branch’s palms became sweaty, mind rolling through the possibilities. A deep, rumbling voice sifted through the trees, loud and echoing.

“If you stomp any louder, we will be found out.”

_A Bergen._

Branch’s entire body froze in ice. He couldn’t move, his fear of Bergens rooting him to the ground and squeezing his throat in a vice. Maybe they’d turn away and not find them. Maybe they were friendly. Bergens were friends, right? That’s what Poppy said. Bergens were friends. They had to be, right?! His mind reeled dizzily while he choked on his dread.

As if on queue, from the shadows emerged the giant brutes, pushing past the low hanging tree leaves. Branch stared up at the hideous, bluish monster, his terror uncontrollable to the point where he couldn’t even shiver. It wasn’t just _any_ Bergen, it was Chef; The catastrophic creature that almost ended all of trolls civilization by creating Trollstice. The one Bergen he never wanted to see, ever again, because she single handedly killed off his entire family and made him the grey troll he was today. The rugged demon stared back at Branch with her beady yellow eyes, rimmed in red. Then, she smiled, pointed and jagged teeth gleaming menacingly in the moonlight.
“Oh my, what do we have here,” Chef said.

Another Bergen showed up from behind her, scrawnier and equally tall with a foreboding presence. He looked down at the two trolls, his expression barren.

*Oh my God, another one?* Branch didn’t recognize this Bergen, but he looked even scarier than Chef, which was a feat in itself.

“A two-for-one deal, looks like,” he said in a drawling voice.

“Get them, Kevin, before they get away,” Chef hissed quickly.

“BRANCH, RUN!”

Creek yelled at him, shoving him forcefully out of his paralysis and grabbing his hand tightly. He was dragged into a sprint, Creek leading the way while they ran for cover. The younger, male Bergen stepped forward quickly and swiped down to grab the trolls, but missed by merely an inch. The purple troll yelped and looked around frantically, trying to find a suitable place for their escape. Then he swung out his long, teal hair, grappling to a nearby overhang and was about to drive them into the leaves, but Kevin was much faster and reached for them again.

Branch looked behind himself, eyes wide and mortified when he realized he was about to be caught in the green, mottled fist. Changing direction at the last second, Creek used all his strength to fling Branch out of the Bergen’s outstretched hand and propel him away. The grey troll curled up and rolled roughly through the grass and bushes, out of sight and into a nasty patch of bramble.

Creek was seized instead.

Kevin shook the troll in annoyance, dislodging his teal hair from gripping the tree and then brought him in close to inspect. Creek struggled in the giant hand, arms and legs pinned ruthlessly without breathing room.

“The other one’s getting away,” he commented, scanning the dark greenery. “Shall I go search for it?”
“Leave him,” Chef said sharply, “It’s that sour troll, no flavor. I hear he’s the town’s crazy man as well, no one will believe him if he cries about Bergens. This one, on the other hand,” she said, leaning in close to Creek to look at him. “I remember you specifically,” she sneered. “You’re one of Princess Poppy’s friends.”

“And I remember you,” Creek shot back. “You’re breaking the treaty, capturing me like this. King Gristle will have your head. Banishment won’t be enough!”

Chef barked a laugh and poked Creek in his cheek with her large, dingy finger. His tough exterior crumbled instantly and he cowered in fear, squinting his eyes shut. “Such a pretty color,” she grinned. “The brightest of trolls are always the sweetest. Don’t worry, little one. Before too long, with your help, Gristle will be locked away in a dungeon, begging me for scraps.”

Across the way in a dark cover, Branch held his dizzy head and looked around in confusion. Creek was missing and his realization made him want to puke. Scrambling to his feet, Branch starting clawing his way through the dead patch of spiny bushes and thorns, cursing every time his clothes were caught. He ignored the cuts and scrapes that the sharp edges created, each wasted second something he just didn’t have.

He could hear the Bergens leaving, their voices drifting farther away with each giant step. Creek’s voice cried out over the wind, but then all of their sounds disappeared as quickly as they came. Branch panicked, ripped at the shrub to free himself from the thorny prison. When he burst free from the brush, he grabbed chunks of his hair in his fists, panic fully setting in. Branch looked around, panting heavily. They were gone; the Bergens took Creek and they were gone.

Chapter End Notes

T_T and so it begins.
Running wildly with flailing blue arms, Cloud Guy made a bee line through the Fall Festival shrieking at the top of his lungs. The surrounding trolls stopped what they were doing, staring at the mad cloud while he bolted around the clumpy crowds at a breakneck pace, unapologetically smashing and bumping into anyone that was in his path. The trolls jumped out of his way and looked at one another, utterly confused on what all the fuss was about.

“POPPY! Where’s Poppy!?” Cloud Guy snatched the nearest troll and shook him roughly, trying to spill the answer from his very being.

The bright orange troll blubbered and looked around himself, then quickly pointed over at the funnel cake cart, “Over there!”

Cloud Guy unceremoniously tossed the troll aside and jogged over to the princess. She was stuffing her face with the glazed pastries, looking somewhat distraught. Her wounds on her feelings were still fresh after the bout with Branch. When she glanced up at Cloud Guy, her mood lit up exponentially and the princess swallowed the rest of the cake down, waving him over.

“Hey!” she exclaimed. “Just the cloud I’ve been wanting to see. How goes the mission?”

Guy panted and put his skinny hands on his knees, then held up one finger to pause, catching his breath. “I need to work out more,” he wheezed. After a moment, he resumed his frantic deposition and pulled on the fluffy bits that would be his cheeks. “I have good news, and bad news,” he started. “What do ya want first?”

“Let’s go with the good news?” Poppy asked, watching him with more concern now.
“Creek and Branch. In the forest. Together.” His eyes bulged, portraying all the seriousness he could muster.

“Yeah?!” Poppy urged him on. She was scared and hopeful, knowing that Branch had escaped her as an unstoppable tornado of fury and she honestly feared for Creek’s safety, but if Guy had good news, the two of them could have made up on their own.

“Well, honestly. You know that bit where I was supposed to keep watch over our lover boys then report back to you with all the dirty details on their progress?”

“What do you have to report?! Tell me!” Poppy cried out. “I can’t take the suspense.”

The cloud’s demeanor changed rapidly, his face going from frantic to blushing. His entire body shaded a soft hue of pink and he inched closer to the princess, holding his hand up to shield his mouth. “There are some dirty details,” Cloud Guy whispered to her secretly, his lips puckering. She tilted her head in confusion and he cleared his throat. With an idle whistle, Cloud Guy made an erotic gesture with his fingers to signify such dirty details, making Poppy blush harder than she ever had in her entire life. She slapped his hands down, being sure no other innocent troll saw what she just did.

“Are you flippin’ serious?! You saw this?”

“If seeing it through closed eyelids is a thing. I have some decency to give Branchy-poo a little privacy for his first romp in the leaves. I would’ve picked a better location, honestly. I can’t imagine how uncomfortable that was. It was drab and dark, literally in the middle of nowhere and –”

Poppy quickly fanned the heat from her face with both hands while Cloud Guy rambled on about the bits and pieces of what he saw. She bounced in place, a grin splitting from ear to ear. “I can’t believe it, this is incredible,” she said, “and here I thought that everything was going to fall through after I made Branch so angry! I can’t wait to ask Creek about what he did to change everything around.”

Cloud Guy was bouncing happily with her, and then stopped abruptly at the mention of Creek’s name. “Oh.”

The pink troll stopped as well and quirked her brow. “Oh? Is there something else?”

“The bad news,” he affirmed, crossing his arms. “Creek’s been trollnapped by a couple of nasty
looking Bergens. Branch should be on their trail by now but I don’t know what one gloomy guy can do against those kinda odds. He’s not exactly the heroic type.”

Poppy’s jaw dropped and she stared at the puff of cumulus, all of her excited feelings vanishing in an instant. “You should have started with that!”

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Trudging through the woods at a slow walk, Chef and Kevin made their way back towards the edging of the enclosure, away from troll village, for the next part of their plan. With her new prize in hand, it was only a matter of time before Chef could taste the sweet riches that would come with her kingship over the Bergen race. They had one troll, but they needed one more to make them reproduce. Instead of finding and ransacking the trolls’ party this night, Chef was opting to return to their hideout and await another day to steal their second troll. Staying incognito was the only bet to her success. Although, another problem began to rise while the two Bergens traveled together, specifically coming from her quiet, musing counterpart.

Kevin said few words but it was obvious the cogs in his mind were ticking and reeling with something of his own. Creek’s entire body was beginning to feel numb from being crushed in his grip. He squirmed uselessly, utterly defeated, and his head hung low and bobbed like a lifeless doll to the tempo of the Bergen’s pace. The troll racked his brain for a solution, literally anything that might help him get free, but he couldn’t think of a bloody thing. Every so often, the Bergens bantered back and forth in hushed voices and Creek’s ears perked to eavesdrop. From the bits of conversation he could safely assume they weren’t going to eat him, at least not immediately. Unfortunately, there are worse things in the world than sudden death and Creek was drenched in a cold sweat, uncertain of the Bergens’ true intentions.

Kevin kept looking down at his captive, glancing at him then darting his eyes around the area before settling on Chef’s back while following her through the dark forest. He seemed to be nervous as well but for an entirely different reason than just being caught red-handed.

“Are you sure this is the right way back?” Chef questioned irritably, smacking a loose draping of vegetation and hung in the way of her face.

“Just keep going,” Kevin replied tensely, his yellow eyes dilating icily while he stared into the Bergen’s dingy white uniform.

Chef whipped around and jabbed a finger at him, “Don’t get smart with me,” she said with her teeth bared, “You’re due to remember who controls this operation.”
A shiver pelt through Creek’s spine and he ducked his face down instinctively, ears flattening in defense to the surging aura that emanated off the male Bergen. He glanced up carefully between the two giants, judging the darkening appearance of Kevin’s features. They matched perfectly with his cruel energy and Creek swallowed nervously. The scales tipped in Kevin’s favor, making Creek more afraid of him than of Chef.

It seemed ages since Branch and Creek were separated and the troll quietly cried to himself for the dozenth time, wondering if Branch was doing alright despite his own circumstances. He could feel the faint connection between them. The other end of the invisible line was sporadic, emotions flickering like a dying flame. Branch must be losing his mind and Creek wanted nothing more than to be free of these monsters and go back to the grey troll. Creek’s fear for his own safety was overbearing but not so much that he didn’t want to save Branch from the taunting demons that were, without a doubt, sinking their claws into straight into his heart. He could only imagine what kind of turmoil Branch was experiencing right now, considering his past.

Chef looked back at her prized troll, then stopped walking to turn and give him a good once over. Creek sniffled his tears away and turned his cheek to the other side, closing his weary eyes and tightening his lip. He couldn’t stand being gawked at by the likes of her.

“He looks pale,” she commented, and Kevin raised a questioning brow. “Don’t squeeze the troll so hard, you’ll kill it before we get back to Bergen Town.”

The male Bergen scoffed and rattled the troll in his fist, making Creek dizzy and nauseous in the process. “Are you joking; do you want him to have a chance at getting away? We might as well be dead if he managed to alert Gristle of our attempt. He’s probably just wishing we eat him now rather than later.”

Newfound rage blared from Chef and she held out her hand, “Give it to me. I’m taking the troll the rest of the way.”

Kevin stared at the outstretched palm, eyeing her overgrown claws and the warts that littered her knuckles. After a contemplative moment, his features slackened and Kevin looked up at her coolly. “I think not,” he replied. The Bergen had been walking a thin line between obedience and selfishness, but now he’d finally made a decision.
Chef blinked, completely taken aback by his refusal. "Excuse me, what did you say?" she growled, stepping closer with deathly glare. "You’ll give me my troll. NOW."

“I do apologize,” Kevin said, reaching into the side of his coat with his free hand, “but the troll is mine.”

Chef roared angrily and moved forward to both snatch Creek and clobber Kevin upside the head, but the male Bergen withdrew a long-nosed baretta pistol and pointed it between Chef’s eyes. She froze in her tracks and gawked cross-eyed at the silver gun.

“W-Wha – Wait!” she exclaimed, holding up her hands and backing up from the tip of the muzzle. “I’m sorry,” she said quickly with a nervous laugh. “Don’t be so hasty, Kyle, I was just kidding!”

Kevin looked bored, his face devoid of emotions. His arm outstretched towards the female Bergen, he clocked the hammer with a harsh click that seemed to echo through the night. “I really did like you,” he explained, “if only a little bit. But honestly, Chef, your stupidity outweighs your charm. I can’t have that holding me down.”

"Is your cut on our kingdom not enough,” she tried to reason with him. Her eyes bulged with fear, the Bergen shivering and cowering beneath the weapon. “I'll give you anything you want! Anything! I swear it! How can you betray me like this?”

A maniacal grin split across his face and he chuckled, “You look beautiful when you’re begging,” he commented. “But really, Chef, I betrayed my own king after an entire life’s service. What ever made you think you were a cut above that?”

The sound of the gunshot was deafening, rushing like a violent breeze through the forest. A flock of birds scattered out of the canopy above them, spooked by the sound. Gun in one hand and Creek in the other, Kevin left her there, continuing his path out of the thicket of trees with zero qualms. He reached the open expanse of fields, grass brightened by the night’s moon. Towards the Cliffs of Laurel, he’d follow the path back to his self-made sanctuary that was stationed on the East side of the plateau. Kevin had already abandoned his post so there was no point in going back to Bergen Town, that’s why he’d previously prepared a hideaway that no one but him knew about.

Kevin just made it on the dirt path winding through the fields when he heard a rumbling, pattering sound coming from behind him. He turned and looked over his shoulder, spotting a tiny wave of bright colors headed fast in his direction. Their dozens of feet smashed through the grassland, disrupting the quiet fortitude of the darkness.
“I’ve been found out,” he sighed. “That’s sooner than expected.”

Poppy had gathered her friends and other brave trolls from their festival. As soon as word got out that Creek was in trouble, many rushed to the pink princess and insisted that they go after the Bergen. Their determination was a breath of fresh air. Normally the trolls were meek and mindful on keeping themselves out of trouble, but not right now. Each one of them knew of Creek and loved him unconditionally, giving them all the more reason to jump into action. The group chanted King Peppy’s historic vow, ‘No troll left behind!’.

Each second was critical, so Poppy didn’t have time to alert Bridget or Gristle and get the Bergen’s help to deal with such a large threat. She brainstormed how they were going to deal with a giant who had nothing to lose, but each option seemed worse than the last. Despite the odds, she had to try. Using Cloud Guy’s navigation in the sky, the trolls caught up to Kevin’s location, tenacious to stop his track and retrieve Creek before more harm could come to the purple troll.

Branch had emerged into the fields as well, having followed the Bergen’s footprints laid in the ground with his own agenda to complete. The sight of Chef’s body had unnerved him, but he was fast to ignore it. One Bergen down, one to go, he told himself.

Kevin’s jaw tightened and he backed up from group closing in on his position. There were too many creatures for him to handle and it wouldn’t be smart to try and take them all at once. He could be overrun by just their numbers, so the Bergen turned and rushed to the brink of the cliff behind him. He jumped over the wooden safety fence that surrounded the entire area and stopped a few feet from the edge. Kevin breathed heavily and searched around himself, looking for a safe way down. It would be faster this route than using a wide-opened path. There had to be a way to slip out of sight. He needed to hide, lose their trail, and get back to his base.

The side rock was steep with very few platforms. There was nothing that could even pass off as a pathway throughout the entire seven hundred drop. Kevin grunted in irritation, turning around to face the horde of tiny colorful creatures that had backed him up with no escape. The wave of colors surrounded him and encroached on his space. Kevin took a careful step backwards, the heel of his boot touching the border between land and sky.

Poppy was at the front of the crowds, her pink hair bristled and ready. She chewed her lip slightly and looked to Creek, who was still clamped tight in the Bergen’s fist. He was slouched in pain, trying to breathe steadily while his meager room was stolen by the nervous squeezing from Kevin’s hand.

“This is the end of the line. Let him go!” Poppy yelled, her brows furrowed. “You’re outnumbered
with nowhere to run.”

“Outnumbered?” Kevin barked a short laugh that startled many of the trolls, including the princess. “You’re just trolls; You’re nothing. I’ll capture all of you if that’s your wish.”

“Then why are you running?” Poppy countered, seeing through the nervous bluff.

Kevin held his ground and glared at her, then ejected the empty magazine from his pistol and tossed the parts to the side like a broken toy. He’d only managed to steal one bullet from the castle armory, but he didn’t regret using it on Chef. He only wished there was a better way to deal with unexpected defiance from the troll village, trying to act brave just for the sake of one.

Behind the mass of murmuring trolls, Branch shoved his way past individuals in an attempt to get closer. Half the village was here! He didn’t know how Poppy had found out about their situation but he was grateful that she acted fast. Then, Branch’s eyes locked on Creek’s form. His chest felt tight and his legs were wobbly like fresh jello, but he had to reach him. He needed to save Creek. He couldn’t handle seeing him wrapped up in the Bergen’s fingers, the digits squeezing the very life out of his small body. He was so utterly afraid for Creek that he couldn’t think of anything else. He’d already lost his mother, father, and his grandmother, to the monsters’ clutches. He wasn’t about to let them take Creek, too!

Moving around a familiar silver troll, suddenly his shoulder was grabbed and Branch cried out and whipped around to instinctively punch the troll in the face, but his fist smacked the palm of Guy Diamond’s hand. The glitter troll’s reflex was fast, his concerning frown rattling Branch back into his present mind.

“Branch,” he said in a hushed voice. “Get a hold of yourself. You can’t run out there yet.”

“C-Creek,” he stuttered slightly, then growled in frustration over the trip in his tongue. “Creek needs me! Don’t get in my fucking way!” Sparks of anger scattered over his emotions and he broke away from the glitter troll.

Guy Diamond quickly latched onto Branch’s upper arm to keep him still, “Creek will get even more hurt if we rush in without a plan! Poppy will handle this, trust in the princess,” he whispered frantically. “We don’t know what this Bergen is like. He’s dangerous.”

As much as he knew Guy Diamond was right, he didn’t want to listen. Branch looked back to his
helpless mate, ripped between logic and instinct. Creek’s eyes were squinted shut and his head lolled, a flash of pain striking across his face. Branch sucked in a sharp breath and ripped out of Guy’s clutch, ignoring the glitter troll’s protests, and he dashed through to the front of the pack. He ended up at Poppy’s side and she side glanced at him in alarm but said nothing. Kevin’s yellow gaze moved to the grey troll and his eyes dug into him like sharp hooks. Branch felt frozen then, his fear of Bergens getting the better of his motions for a second time that night. Those yellow eyes clawed straight into his resolve and tore it to tiny pieces. The Bergen smirked at him, almost mockingly, like he knew. The glimmering of his sharp teeth threw sheets of ice into Branch’s blood.

“It seems Chef was wrong, they did listen to you,” Kevin said lightly. “I knew that I shouldn’t have let you get away, another mistake on my part.”

Branch grit his teeth and ground them together, clenching his sweaty palms. This guy wasn’t even phased. The way he held his posture, the words that he spoke; it’s like he was taunting them. The Bergen was daring them to do something. It was Branch’s own fault that Creek was in this mess because he couldn’t overcome his shackles. They could have easily gotten away if Branch hadn’t been a useless sack. It was killing him inside and he wanted to take on the Bergen’s challenge.

Poppy placed her hand on Branch’s shoulder and it made him flinch, but his lungs opened so he could breathe again.

“There’s no reason for you to want to eat a troll,” Poppy said to Kevin, her stance strong and resolute. “There is happiness inside everyone… Eating Creek won’t help you attain true happiness. We’ve already proven it, just look at Bergen Town! We made a peace and friendship treaty with all Bergens, including you.” The pink troll clasped her hands together hopefully, “Please let him go,” she pleaded. “There has to be something else we can do for you. It doesn’t have to be like this.”

“There are bigger and better things out there,” Kevin explained. “I’m not the only Bergen that craves the taste of a sweet troll. I am not the first, and I won’t be the last. This one little troll...” Kevin gestured to Creek with a gentle smile that sent an unnerving chill through the crowd, “will guarantee a high ranking status that only breeding trolls can achieve. I seek more... If you come with me, I guarantee your safety, so long as you produce results.”

The group of trolls gasped in unison and covered their mouths. Poppy looked unbelievably stricken at the offer.

“Breeding?!” Branch yelled suddenly.

“No, stop!” Poppy tried to grab Branch’s hand but he was already out of her reach, stalking towards
the enemy with his anger flaming violently in his eyes.

“I’ll be damned if I let you get away with that bullshit!” The grey troll drove forward, extending his hair up and grappling around Kevin’s wrist.

He was going to fight, even if it killed him. All his life he’d been preparing to save his own skin from a Bergen attack, mentally steeling himself to be alone for the ten or eleven years that his bunker would keep him safe. Over a decade of his life was spent dedicated and paranoid, and now he was throwing it all away if it meant Creek could be free of this demented monster.

Branch launched himself up onto the Bergen’s arm and ran up his shoulder. Kevin looked repulsed and went to slap his palm on the pest, but the troll managed to dodge quickly enough. Using his black hair like a smart whip, he slashed across the giant’s vision.

“Argh! You shitty nuisance!” Kevin growled and hunched over, rubbing his free hand over his injured right eye.

Using the temporary blindness, Branch leapt to the Bergen’s fist that was clutching his mate. Creek teared up at the sight of his rescue and began the struggle again, using everything he could to try and worm his way free.

“I’ve got you, Creek!” Branch yelled, digging his hands around Kevin’s index finger and pulling hard with a grunt. The purple troll managed to get one arm free and used it to help push, gasping and twisting as much as he could.

On the ground below, Poppy was just about to join in on the fray. It was too dangerous to let the rest of the village try and help, but many of the trolls were clenching their teeth, taking steps forward with their hands raising. Branch was acting in reckless abandon but what else could they do? Then, she saw Kevin’s left eye snap open in rage.

“Branch, watch out!” she screamed.

The Bergen’s clawed hand came fast and sharp, smacking the grey troll off his arm. Branch was hurled to the ground and was about to hit the grass, but he recovered and wrapped his hair around Kevin’s other wrist as an anchor, swinging himself back up.
“You’re dead,” Kevin said furiously, trying to shake him off. “I’m going to kill you like an annoying roach!”

In the flurry of movements, Branch attempted to lash his other eye but Kevin managed to move his head backwards out of reach. With that, though, he lost his footing and the back of his boot slipped. His eyes went wide and the Bergen struck his arms out, trying to regain balance but it wasn’t enough. Kevin wobbled at the edge and silently dropped over it.

“HELP THEM!” Poppy yelled, and the horde of trolls rushed to the cliff, jumping one by one in a line into the canyon. They grabbed each other by their feet and their hair, creating a troll-made rope with Smidge and Biggie using their superior strength to anchor the line at the top with the help of a nearby boulder. The troll princess was at the end, reaching out quickly and wrapping her hair around Branch’s legs. Kevin was dangling helplessly just a few feet down, one arm tangled in a side-growing plant and his fist pressed into the rock wall. He scuffled his boots into the side, searching for a foothold.

Branch stretched his hair down as far as he could and captured Creek’s teal strands. A surge of energy flowed between the two trolls and Branch panted in relief at the feeling. He pulled up hard to try and dislodge the purple troll from Kevin’s fist.

“Branch,” Creek cried out to him, looking down to the restless waves of the lake hundreds of meters below them.

“Don’t look down!” Poppy yelled from behind them. “We’ll get you out!”

“LET HIM GO!” Branch growled at Kevin, pulling harder. He wrapped his fist in his black hair for more leverage and power.

“I’d rather die,” Kevin hissed stubbornly, his muscles straining from trying to keep himself from falling down the canyon. Suddenly, a root pulled itself from the dirt and everyone screamed when the entire troll line jerked downward from the force.

Creek stared up at the dark troll trying so hard to yank him free. His hair follicles burned painfully, threatening to tear away themselves. Rubble cascaded from the cliff side, the Bergen’s anchor slowly but surely ripping lose of the dirt. Time seemed to stand still as he watched the rocks tumble and the roots pull, fragments loosening and releasing one by one.
“Branch, let go,” Creek said hurriedly, his stomach twisting upon itself.

“No.” He responded fast, refusing such stupid request. “We’re going home,” Branch said tightly. “I’m taking you home!”

“Let go!” Creek repeated and squinted his eyes shut momentarily when the plant jerked again, more dirt showering around him.

“Shut up, SHUT UP! SHUT UP!” Branch was hysterical, clenched teeth bared while the veins in his forearms bulged out from the effort. He twisted his fists a second and third time through his black hair, refusing to give in to the incredible weight. Poppy and the trolls behind her had the same look, everyone desperate and clinging to each other’s feet with all their strength, but it wasn’t going to be enough.

“Branch,” he said softly then, a bittersweet smile touching his lips. Creek’s gaze was full of longing, regret, and Branch couldn’t look away while the moonlight reflected beautifully from the depths of his eyes. “I love you,” he called up to him.

Heavy tears sprouted from Branch’s eyes, a couple of droplets making their way down. They splashed lightly on his pale cheeks. He couldn’t respond, a knowing dread burying the words he so desperately wanted to return.

Reaching into his outstretched hair with his only free arm, Creek quickly pulled a bejeweled dagger from its depths, the same one that Branch had given him in case he ever needed protection from a Bergen. He’d use it, but to protect Branch instead. In one fluid movement, he shucked the casing and slashed a cut across his own teal strands, severing the bond and practically catapulting the string of trolls holding Branch’s feet upwards like a slingshot, all the way back to the cliff top. Just as that happened, the weakened plant pulled completely by the Bergen’s weight, both Kevin and Creek plummeting to the bottom of the canyon and into the mass of water below.

“CREEK!” Branch screamed and rushed back to the edge of the plateau on his knees, almost diving over it again if not for King Peppy grabbing him around the middle. The dark troll struggled against Peppy, searching over the crashing waves in a frenzy. There was nothing that could be seen in the black water. It was almost like nothing had happened.

Poppy helped her father pull Branch away from the cliff, the grey troll becoming wild and unruly while he tried to fight them off. “I have to – Don’t, please – He’s right there!” Branch sobbed, trying to reach back to where Creek fell. The troll king grasped his hand tightly and pulled it back it, his face darkened and quiet.
“Get him back to his bunker,” Poppy commanded quickly, her own tears filling her eyes. “He can’t help like this. We’ll set up parties and search the lakeside.”

Chapter End Notes

To my Bergen OC, Kevin - you were only around for 3 chapters. You did a great job, serving your purpose, but I’m glad you’re gone now. -salutes- Please never come back.
Four weeks later…

The first snowfall came during the afternoon. Icy white flakes drifted around the great Troll Tree, swirling around its roots and settling into small clumps. The imagery was beautiful and surreal and many trolls stopped to watch the weather in a curious wonder. It almost seemed fitting that today would be the turning point in seasons, overbearing browns and oranges finally resting under the blanket of winter. Today was also a day of mourning, a day to celebrate life, and remembrance of those lost.

By the outskirts of the village, the entrance to Branch’s survival bunker was dug out from the growing snow pile. Many trolls came and left wrapped boxes and woven baskets of food at his doorstep, offering their condolences to the grey troll. Each gift was left untouched and frozen in the ice, hatefully ignored. Branch hadn’t ventured outside of his bunker since four weeks ago when Poppy decreed that he was unfit to handle himself out in the open. Since then, he’d locked himself away permanently on his own accord, rejecting everything from the outside world. If they wouldn’t let him leave the village, then he wouldn’t leave at all.

A soft banging sounded on the bunker hatch, the noise reverberating the walls and making its presence known. Branch was curled up in his bed, sheets tangled around his arms and legs with multiple pillows scattered over the mattress. He opened his eyes slowly and stared blankly at the dark wall of his bedroom, unwilling to move from the nest he’d made. He knew who was at the door because they came every day at the same time, no matter how much he expressed his resentment.

On queue, the creaking hatch opened without the need for an answer and Branch listened to the elevator lurch into motion. The dark troll closed his eyes again and sunk deeper into the mattress, willing it to consume him. He didn’t want to think. He didn’t want to breathe. He especially didn’t want to deal with the tasks on the way.
Another knock came from his bedroom door, two quick raps signaling that King Peppy was coming in. The orange troll twisted the carved handle and shuffled inside, humming and tutting gently while he went over to the side table to turn the lamp on, effectively drowning out the darkness. Branch didn’t move, knitting his brows at the harsh light that glowed through the back of his eyelids.

King Peppy pulled his three-legged stool from the wall and settled down next to Branch’s bedside, situating himself and clearing his throat. He didn’t say anything at first, taking some time to observe his twisted form in the sheets, then after a minute came a deep sigh, “You’re not eating again,” he commented. “You become thinner every time I see you. Do I need to visit three times a day and put food in your mouth, child? One meal isn’t enough; you need to eat even when I’m gone.”

Branch turned his face into the mattress, refusing to look at the elderly troll. There was no answer he wanted to say.

King Peppy sighed again and decided to let it go. He touched his shoulder and gave it a squeeze, “Well, then… Up you go,” he said, “You know the drill.”

Branch obeyed, dragging himself out of the covers. He was incredibly slow while the meager amount energy he stored escaped the reserves. Sitting up made him even more tired, if that was even possible. He immediately wanted to lay back down again but Peppy had already shown how serious his demands were over the weeks they went through this routine checkup. The king was warmhearted, patient, and wouldn’t put up with any of Branch’s stubbornness. So with that, Branch reluctantly slipped his legs over the side of the bed, hunched over. His head swam dizzily and he let Peppy help steady the sway with a strong hand on his upper arm.

“Eyes forward,” Peppy said, taking Branch’s chin in his other hand and holding it up while peering into his eyes. Branch looked upon King Peppy, all of his emotions lost to the void inside. His pupils were black and lifeless, dark circles hanging heavy under each eye and flowing through to the hollows of his cheeks. His grey skin once had a blueish hue but now, after lifting away over time, it bore a much more pale, ashy tone. Peppy inspected his bared torso, noting his skin color and how his ribs were showing more prominently than normal. Branch’s cream pajama slacks hung loosely around his hips, one leg pulled up and bunched around his calve from rolling around for so many hours. After seriously judging his current condition, King Peppy then gently released the troll’s chin, letting his head bow back down.

These motions were like clockwork. Every day, Peppy came into his bunker and asked him the same questions about how he was feeling. Every day, Branch dragged himself out of his room and was forced to eat with him, forced to shower, and then King Peppy dressed him in fresh night clothes and laid him back into bed before the sun set. It was like he was being reverted back to his trolling days. The older troll wouldn’t let him be and he no longer had the energy to refuse. He was being analyzed.
and watched, ‘just in case’. Branch wasn’t an ignorant troll, he knew exactly what Peppy was afraid of. Thinking about how no one could trust him with his own well being made him sick to his stomach.

“Branch,” Peppy said to him. “The memorial is being held in a few hours. Do you want me to help you get ready?”

They were in the kitchen now, sitting together at the dining table while the dark troll slowly stirred his spoon in a bowl of oatmeal and fruit, playing with the unappetizing mush. Branch visibly stiffened but didn’t respond, ignoring the question. The last thing that Peppy wanted to do was push something emotionally uncomfortable, but he didn’t want Branch to regret this choice later on in life. Talking about his mate was a necessary evil he couldn’t avoid. “Creek’s funeral,” he explained again, “I’ll help you pick out some clothes and take you there when it’s time.”

Branch’s pointed ears flicked then and his eyes went impossibly darker, a deep scowl setting into his once stoic features. He didn’t look up, glaring into the bowl. “I’m not going,” he said quietly. His voice was cracked and dry, having barely spoken a handful of words since the tragic accident on the Cliffs of Laurel.

Creek was deemed a victim of manslaughter, his body still missing after some endless days of searching watery banks and digging through rocks at the bottom of the canyon. Instead of being able to help search for him, Branch was under house arrest with the supervision of King Peppy. The first twenty four hours were true insanity. His mind was completely consumed by hysteria, disbelief, and nothing was safe inside his bunker. He tore up books, ripped apart half-finished inventions, overturned furniture, and completely shattered a few of his storage units. He felt a blind fury over many indistinguishable things, his vision consistently blurred by madness and tears. King Peppy did his best to calm him down but it was only after a week of destroying his home that things took a drastic turn for the worse. Branch shut down completely, both physically and emotionally. It was at this point that the troll king truly worried for his health, taking personal initiative in making sure he stayed grounded to reality. If anyone understood Branch’s pain, it was him.

Once upon a time, right after Poppy was born, the king lost his wife outside of the Trollstice holiday. She was randomly picked out of the leaves and it left a shocking blow to the entire village, but more so to Peppy because she was his soul mate. The anguish he felt wasn’t comparable to anything in the world and he could feel his half-soul slipping away, the promise of death looming over his head. The only thing that pulled him through those dark times was the need to stay for his daughter and his kingdom. He never turned grey, never expressed his negativity or confided in other trolls, and with his own sheer force of will he managed to regain the power to stay alive. He used that strength to save his beloved family, protecting them from another Trollstice for the last twenty years.

Branch was going through the same turmoil he once experienced, though it seemed impossibly worse because he was already grey to begin with, due to his grandmother Rosie’s death. No matter
what happened, Peppy wasn’t going to leave him to deal with these losses alone. He wanted to believe that Branch had the will to pull through but with each day gone, he sadly wondered if they should prepare another casket.

“You should reconsider,” King Peppy pressed slowly, watching every shaking breath that exhaled from the troll across the table.

Branch suddenly slammed his utensil down with a snarl, the dishes rattling loudly, “I’m not going,” he repeated with his voice raised.

The orange troll didn’t even flinch, his gaze still very much soft and understanding. Branch panted from the burst of exertion and released his spoon, moving both palms to his face while a fresh wave of grief rushed through him. They remained quiet, Peppy giving him the time to regain some composure while he stroked his beard idly.

Thinking over the matter, Peppy resigned to himself and gave in, his heart aching for the young boy. “Okay, you win,” he said. “You don’t have to go. I won’t make you.”

Branch dropped his hands back down on the table, hot streaks marking his paled cheeks. His eyes were reddened now, looking everywhere but King Peppy’s face, and he nodded weakly. The older troll reached over and warmly patted the back of Branch’s hand.

“I won’t make you, on a few conditions, however,” he continued, picking up the spoon and putting it back into Branch’s palm. “You’re going to eat this and take a nice, hot shower, and then I want you to spend some time out of bed.”

“To do what,” Branch questioned bitterly, his lips still frowning while he went back to digging at the oatmeal with a little more gusto than before.

“Anything your heart desires. Read a book, draw something, or maybe write some poetry. You haven’t done that in awhile.”

“I wanna go outside,” he said quickly, making Peppy raise his eyebrows.

“Within reason,” the orange troll responded lightly, “We can gather your gifts on the upper floor and –,” but Branch cut him off.
“Outside the village.”

The two were quiet, Peppy matching his stare without budging. Then he shook his head, clasping his hands together on the table top. “Not yet.” he said sadly. “I can’t let you go out.” The troll king knew exactly what Branch wanted – to go out and continue searching for Creek’s body. Every able body in the village has already scoured the entire lakeside and even dived to the bottom of the cold waters in an attempt to retrieve him. The grey troll would only hurt himself in his current condition and that was something he couldn’t allow.

A blossoming of hatred bloomed in Branch’s chest but they spoke nothing more of the matter. Only a quarter of his food could be eaten after that, but Peppy accepted it for what it was and washed the dishes while the dark troll stood in the stream of his shower for what seemed like an eternity. His showers were getting longer each time, reaching forty minutes or more now. It was probably the only time in Branch’s day that he felt physically relaxed, the pounding current of hot water attempting to wash away all the ache that he harbored inside.

After King Peppy left him alone again for the rest of the day, Branch stood in the middle of his living area, thinking of what he really wanted to do.

Nothing. He wanted absolutely nothing.

Knowing how determined the older troll was at making sure Branch did as he requested, he decided it wasn’t worth the risk to try and crawl back into the covers just yet. King Peppy always, somehow, knew exactly what he was doing and when he was doing it. He rubbed the back of his neck tiredly and went to his bedroom anyway, walking past the clutter and broken objects that littered the floor and hallways. He didn’t care that his home was dirty and he felt no remorse for breaking anything. Nothing mattered anymore. He didn’t feel the urge to pick anything up, kicking aside strewn clothes and crumple of torn paper out of his path.

Reaching the bedroom, Branch made it to his longstanding mirror next to the closet and dropped heavily to his knees. He breathed and rubbed his eyes, pulling his legs up and sitting with them crossed. As much as he wanted to lay in bed, it really wasn’t going to do him any good anyway. Insomnia had taken him in its ugly jaws and the troll was lucky to get a few hours of actual rest a day.

Branch glanced up at himself in the mirror, looking at how saggy his eyes were and how ragged he’d become. His stalk of black hair was tangled in places and frizzy from the shower. He couldn’t remember the last time he actually brushed it... Laughing inwardly at his own image, he briefly thought about how ugly he was and if it could get any worse.
Then, his breath caught when his eyes flickered over to a familiar purple troll that flashed in the reflection, just a step behind his shoulder. Branch whipped around and looked behind him with his pulse racing but there was nothing there. His eyes darted around the room briefly, then he put his hand to his chest, slowly turning back around. The extreme excitement put a sharp pain right through the middle of his heart and caught him off guard. His eyes were playing tricks on him... He was really starting to lose his grip on the world, but honestly... he wasn’t so sure if it would be such an awful thing.

When he brought his gaze back to the reflection, Creek was there again. Branch stared at his image in the mirror, unable to breathe. The troll was sitting right behind him, close enough that his chest could be pressed against his back. Creek brought his arms around Branch’s waist and held him, fingertips splaying upwards over his stomach. The expression on his face was of sadness and regret, like he was trying to apologize without words.

He looked so real. Branch didn’t want to look away no matter how much it nagged to turn and check again. There was no way that Creek was actually there, he couldn’t feel his touch, but there was a faint pulse coming from where the contact of his hands would be. The very skin of his body was desperately reaching out for the connection. Logically, Branch could conclude that he was only hallucinating. It didn’t deter him from wanting to keep the image fresh in his eyes. He touched his fingers to the glass slowly, a jumble of equally happy and angry emotions toiling inside him, rolling over what used to be a mentally barren wasteland until now. He could feel the tears coming again, fighting them away because he didn’t want to jeopardize his mind’s gift.

“I... miss you,” he mumbled to Creek in the mirror. All of a sudden, he regret everything in his life. The heartbreak was coming full force and his lower lip trembled. “We didn’t even... get a chance.” There were so many things he wanted to say. Branch’s mind reeled through all the possible dialogue he never got to express, each string of words battering more painfully than the last.

Creek said nothing, his own lilac eyes shining beautifully. The color was deep and bright, just like how he remembered it. The purple troll raised his hand and placed it to Branch’s palm, just a thin sheet of glass separating their touch. The mirage was beautiful, but the real thing was even more so. His chest swelled in affection anyway, the aches and pains of grieving revisiting for the thousandth time.

“I fought you,” Branch continued, whispering to the wavering image in the mirror. He leaned closer to the glass and tried to swallow the dryness in this throat. “I said things I didn’t mean,” he confessed. “I was an asshole. I should’ve told you how wonderfully amazing you are, or how much I appreciate everything you’ve done for me... I never got to t-tell you... t-that I love you.” Branch clenched his jaw and blinked away the heavy tears. “I never said it. I wanted to say it so badly. Damn it, Creek,” he choked slightly over an oncoming sob.
Creek’s image faded from his vision and the grey troll felt a moment of panic, gripping the sides of the mirror with both hands tightly. He searched his reflection but it was only himself, staring stupidly for something that was dead and gone.

Branch had nothing left and the realization was a tough pill to swallow. He was the one that screwed up and it cost him another life. He’d blamed Bergens for everything wrong in the universe, but in actuality it was all his own doing. Branch ran from the truths of his actions but they were catching up to him now. He killed his grandmother with his singing, and killed Creek with his uncontrollable anger and stubbornness.

He should’ve let Poppy handle that Bergen. He should’ve listened to Guy Diamond and stayed back. He should’ve listened to his gut instinct instead of running a muck with his emotions. He practically pushed Creek off that cliff with his own hands. He was a menace to the entire troll race.

All of these things bombarded Branch’s mind and he slid his palms down the framing in defeat. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. It was happening again, all of the erratic negativity pushing him and taunting him to make actions based on his turmoil. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and stumbled up from the floor, wandering out of the bedroom again to try and get his mind somewhere else.

He was so utterly tired. It felt like these feelings were sucking the very life out of him. It was what he deserved, however. He didn’t deserve to be alive like this, but here he was.

Branch rubbed the winter chill from his arms and somehow ended up at the back end of his bunker in his roaming. He shoved open a thick oak door, the screech from the hinges echoing down the drafty halls. In the middle of the tiny room was a simple stand, illuminated by a single hanging bulb that was dingy and yellow from age. Atop the stand sat an unmarked square case with a combination lock. Branch lifted the lock gingerly and stared at the numbered cogs, rolling through the password with the pad of his thumb without any kind of serious thought. He’d done it a million times before in the past so he never quite lost the muscle memory. The lock came undone easily and he dropped it onto the floor with a solid clunk.

Opening the dusty box, Branch reached in and pulled out his trusty remote that controlled all of the Bergen-proof mechanisms scattered inside his bunker and around the troll village. He stared at the controller with half-lidded eyes, giving it a light blow to free some of the accumulated debris from sitting so long untouched.

Ever since Poppy made her peace treaty with her Bergen friends, his inventions were basically outlawed and unusable. There was no need for such traps and protective measures, she told him. Gary had been locked away, untouched for months, and Branch was unsure of why he ended up here to look at it. He pondered to himself, bringing the remote with him while he continued his
mindless walking through the shambles of his survival bunker. Would things have turned out differently if he had Gary with him? No, no... Probably not, there weren’t any traps or safety nets placed so far outside of the village. He kept wanting to look for an excuse, anything to believe that it wasn’t entirely his fault.

The grey troll settled back at the living room, collapsing in his lounge chair and holding Gary to his chest like a sorely missed keepsake. He toyed with the large, red central button above the keypad, chewing his lower lip harshly.

“Maybe it’s time, Gary,” he said. Branch stopped, listening to the silence and nodded his head in agreement. “Yeah, you’re right. Sooner rather than later.”

- - - -

King Peppy was on his way back to his pod when he was met halfway by his beloved daughter, her tiny form wrapped up in a large pink sweater and matching snow boots. He put his hands in his coat and smiled at her as she walked up, but the princess didn’t return the warm greeting so easily. There was worry in her eyes, lips pursed tightly and cheeks tinged from the cold.

“Couldn’t wait until I was home?” he said teasingly.

“I couldn’t,” she admitted, shuffling her foot in the snow. “I already finished feeding Tilly at the pod, she’s just as anxious as I am. I’m sure she knows what’s going on though, that firefly is a smart cupcake… I just needed to know if Branch is still doing okay.”

“Hmm,” the orange troll tilted his head back and contemplated his word choice, casting his thoughts to the sky. Most of the leaves were fallen and buried now, the grey clouds clearly seen through the bones of the trees. Poppy waited for him, wringing her hands together impatiently while her mind concluded the worst. He looked back down and they locked eyes, his voice becoming solemn. “It’ll be any day now,” he said seriously. “We don’t have a lot of time left and there’s nothing more we can do to help.”

Poppy put her palm to her mouth and closed her eyes. King Peppy pulled his hands out of his pockets and beckoned her in, giving the mightiest of hugs. She sniffled a little and leaned in, squeezing him back tightly. “We shouldn’t leave him alone then, let’s go back before the ceremony starts.”
“Also, about that,” Peppy remarked with a weak smile. “He was very adamant about not going, so I said it was alright.

Poppy bounced out of his arms and looked at him credulously. “DAD! How could you?! He has to go. Maybe it’ll make him feel better!”

“Everyone heals in their own way, Poppy. Forcing the boy to deal with pain like this could worsen his condition. I was just afraid of aggravating the wound.”

“I’m going to talk to him,” Poppy said, moving quickly past her father and heading down the frozen path back to the survival bunker. “Maybe he’ll change his mind. He can’t just not go to Creek’s funeral. I swear it’ll be good for him.”

King Peppy followed the little pink troll, hands clasped behind his back, “I don’t think he’s going to change his mind, dearest. It might be best to just accept his wishes.”

She turned around, looking absolutely befuddled. “How do you think Creek’s spirit would feel if the troll he was in love with didn’t even show up to say goodbye? Sick or not, Branch’s stubbornness is endless! This is something he has to do, I’m positive of it.”

“Both of your stubbornness is endless,” King Peppy chuckled to himself.

The two trolls squabbled back and forth in an appreciative normality while they discussed details on what they could do to change Branch’s depressed state. Each possibility was more unrealistic than the last and it didn’t take long for them to hit the wall of uncertainty while coming upon Branch’s bunker hatch. King Peppy did his usual loud knocking like before, then grasped the metal handle to pull the door open.

Down below, Branch held his remote tightly and stared at the red button, mouth parted slightly in his mental daze. “What I desire… is…” he told himself. “To ’see you in ten years’, if you’re still around.” Without hesitation, he smashed his index finger into the button.

Suddenly, there were blaring sirens and cranking mechanisms all around the two trolls above ground. Poppy shrieked in surprise and King Peppy jumped away from the hatch just before his fingers got caught, a thick shield of silver metal shooting out from underneath the soggy dirt and snow and covering the bunker door protectively.
“Locking down,” came a loud, mechanical recording of the younger version of Branch’s voice. It sounded incredibly old, the electrical static crackling through sets of speakers hidden throughout surrounding bushes and trees. Poppy spun around on her feet and tried to figure out what was going on, but the recording helpfully blared its intentions.

“Bergen-proof survival mode initiated! Take that, you nasty Bergens! A-Ahem… In the event that there’s still a surviving troll out there – Sorry, see you in ten years! Branch, OUT.”

Then, all of the noises stopped and faded into the air. The father-daughter duo stood dumbstruck at what just transpired. Branch had completely locked himself inside, with no way in and no way out.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

chapter is a little short but needed to be for other things to happen. quick updates for my loves, enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The silent, peaceful days that followed after the total bunker lock down was everything Branch ever dreamed of. His walls were now fortified to the teeth and he was in a safe, cozy environment that not even dynamite could penetrate. Honestly, he should have done this sooner. He was all alone, yes, but his appetite rose and he slept better; it was almost like Branch could be normal again, though his skin was becoming more dim and grey than a foggy night in December.

“Pickled plums, pickled plums,” Branch sang to himself, lounging in his recliner in the living area with a giant jar placed in his lap. It was huge, bigger than three combined squish balls, and filled to the brim with sweet and sour fruits that have been marinating on the shelf for years. The grey troll pulled out another piece from the sticky liquid and popped it into his mouth, making a comical face before swallowing it down. He lolled his head back and looked over his shoulder over at his remote on the side table, lifting a brow animatedly. “You can’t eat it, Gary, you’ll break. What a silly notion,” he chuckled, reaching in and snagging another treat.

This happiness he felt… Was it really happiness? It was refreshing, awkward, and most definitely a fake feeling, but the grey troll didn’t care. The trick was just ignoring everything, even his own thoughts. Real, fake, real; it was all the same now. It was just him, himself, Gary, and his bunker for the next ten years. Branch aggressively pushed all his deep thinking away, refusing to acknowledge anything of the past. Nothing mattered, not even the future. The new goal was simple enough; all he had to do was make his provisions last as long as they could before he was forced to return to the surface. His own company could be the best in the world and he finally wanted to relish in it after all of the fighting and self hatred... or so he thought.

Branch spent a lot of his endless free time laying around, moving from his chair, to his bed, to his library, and then back again. After so much lazying his back became sore, so the troll decided it was time to clean up the chaotic mess strewn all over the floors. He was only a few days into solitude; he couldn’t possibly become bored now. Branch took his sweet time, humming soft melodies and tossing the broken items and garbage into bags and throwing them into the incinerator pit. Ghosted pangs of regret taunted him each time he picked up an item that used to mean a lot to him but he ignored it vehemently, telling himself that things could be replaced. Everything was replaceable. Absolutely everything and everyone.

Day number three of being alone. It was fine, everything was fine. He’d do a bit of sweeping, that
would make time go by faster. Picking out a broom from the closet, Branch swept along the hallways and drug the bristles along the ceiling, loosening the dust and collecting everything into tiny piles. This is what he lived for; caring for his bunker and nothing else. Cleaning was one of his favorite pastimes and he could do this all day.

He stalled when he walked past Creek’s bedroom door. Branch stopped outside of it and looked over the dark oak wood then down to the handle, a lump forming inside his throat. Every single droplet of fake happiness flushed out of his body right then and there and he gripped his broom in a tight fist. He recalled carving the door and hammering the metal, sweating over his workbench to make sure it looked absolutely symmetrical and made from the finest materials he could get his grubby hands on. He did it for Creek, wanting to show as much hospitality as he could despite their circumstances when the purple troll first moved in. It was like he was trying to prove himself worthy of being a host to someone as sophisticated as him. Those moments felt so long ago already… so much had happened since then.

He deserved better than you.

“No, stop,” Branch hissed at himself, ripping his eyes away from the door and briskly walking away from it. He wasn’t going to keep overthinking. Nothing good would come from it. He couldn’t keep doing this!

Branch hurled his broom on the ground in frustration and headed back to his bedroom, throwing himself on the bedspread.

He couldn’t… he didn’t want it.

It’s your fault he’s gone.

He groaned, curling up into a ball. The voice in his head was right, of course. Branch clutched his pillow and hugged it, burying his face into the casing. His heart throbbed painfully. He tried desperately tried to fight it, but to no avail. He cried again, covering his mouth so tightly that no sound escaped. He would cry but he didn’t want to hear it. He didn’t want to acknowledge that he was a broken troll. Ignore it. Ignore everything.

Episodes like these weren’t rare or far between. It seemed to happen every day now, whenever Branch came across something that reminded him of Creek. Almost everything reminded him – every room had the essence of that troll, either in memory or random possessions that seemed to pop up out of thin air. Branch’s emotional roller coaster was unpredictable while he teetered on the balance beams between the first three stages of grief, denying every truth he didn’t want to see but
being overturned by guilt, only to become incredibly angry with himself because of his weakness.

Five days through forced solitude and he was back into having fits of rage. Branch left nothing untouched in his path, hating his bunker and hating himself for being alive. What once was clean was now tattered and destroyed, more so than before. He ended up back at his long bedroom mirror, slumped on the floor and begging for an image of Creek to present itself. He was so incredibly tired, worn out emotionally and hopeful for just a little relief; he’d give anything to just get one more look at the troll that he loved. He dug his eyes into the reflection for hours, pitifully wishing and trying to forcefully conjure something even remotely perceptible as his best friend.

*Not even Creek’s ghost cares to see you.*

Branch clenched his jaw, another flash of fury blinding his eyes. The grey troll smashed his fist into the glass with a surprising force, a violent spiderweb crawling over the entire surface. He hit it again, causing the pieces to shatter and bounce out of the framework and fall all over the floor in sharp chunks. Branch panted and unclenched his fist slowly, looking down at his injured hand. The outside of his palm and along his pinky finger was cut and bleeding, tiny streams of blood falling down his forearm. He stared at it injury, completely lost. It didn’t even hurt.

*You deserved to be hurt, not Creek.*

Branch’s gaze darkened and he glanced over the broken glass laying over the floor in front of him. He spotted a larger, jagged piece and picked it up carefully, crawling back up to his feet. He walked slowly back down the hall to Creek’s bedroom and entered the forbidden domain while feeling numb and blank, flicking on the light switch and looking over everything that hadn’t been touched or moved since Creek was last in here. The room was disgustingly tidy and well kept, just like how he’d appreciate it.

A gentle lingering of a minty scent was stuck to the air and Branch’s eyelids fluttered heavily, taking in a deep breath to pull in what he could.

The more he wanted, the more destroyed he became.

Branch moved to Creek’s bed and sat down, sinking into the plush covers. He felt absolutely dead inside. What was the point of any of this...?

*So, what are you waiting for?*
His lips parted slightly for air, staring down into his hand that held the broken glass. A droplet of his blood fell onto the clean floor.

It should’ve been you, not him

“I know…”

If he would’ve been stronger… if he weren’t so stupid;

Branch closed his eyes and brought the point of the glass to side his throat, his breath shallow while he touched it lightly to his grey skin.

This is how you atone. This what will satisfy Creek.

His heartbeat felt wild in his rib cage. Suddenly, he felt a jolt of energy strike through his nerves like a whip, stunning him and making his eyes snap open. He let the sharp piece slip from his fingers, allowing it to bounce on the floor, and put his hands to his face. Branch’s shoulders trembling hard while he reeled in his cast on reality. No, this isn’t what would satisfy someone who did nothing but care for him at every damned turn; someone who sacrificed himself just to keep him alive. Branch never felt so foolish. He leaned over and stretched out on the bed to press his face into sweet scent that clung on the sheets. The faint smell permeated him and caressed his soul, warily prodding at the darkness enveloping his psyche. The grey troll finally relaxed with a heavy exhale, sending out a silent plea for a dreamless sleep.

- - - -

The sun had already set over the horizon of the forest, bringing the temperature down at least twenty degrees but still within bearable levels. The wind was quiet, snowy breezes resting for the night after layering down their daily douse of winter, and the moon reflected against the white wonderland with a supernatural glow. Miles away, across the thicket of trees and massive expanse of dark water, there was a tiny campsite hidden away inside the rocky ravine. The clearing was nestled next to the lakeside, concealed by giant, stacked boulders with a cave that served as a makeshift home. The camp was owned by an unlikely character, separated and lost from his homeland, but not really missing it much to be quite fair. He’d built his shelter all by himself and was making due with nature for the last six months.
A twice-removed Bergen cousin, but much smaller in stature, Diego was a lizard-like creature with deep, green skin, a pointed face, and teeth as sharp as nails. Once a party crasher, always a party crasher, but he wouldn’t be participating in crashing any time soon until he could figure out where the heck he was and how to get back to his town! He’d been stuck stranded in the wilderness all by himself, enjoying what it offered and learning along the way just how difficult it was to survive against ravaging critters and harsh weather elements. The colder it became, however, the more he wanted to get back home. That’s what he gets for taking a leak while the rest of his party crasher crew packed up the bugbus and carried on to the next bash. Left behind in a desolate forest with no map or navigation skills, Diego would do what he could until someone – if they even cared – came to retrieve him.

The camp site outside his cave was dug out of the snow and covered with a sturdy canopy of cross-hatching branches and leaves sewn together in raw materials. It was a cozy little area and Diego was very fond of his handy work. He couldn’t wait to share his newfound knowledge with the rest of his buddies. Sitting atop his favorite stone in front of the fire, he twirled the catch of the day on a stick through the flames. He sniffed the fish and nodded in approval, letting it roast for a few minutes more.

From the other side of the fire, a purple troll with two-toned hair bolted upright from his sleeping mat with a hand latched to his neck, startling Diego and making him drop their dinner.

“Whoa, easy there mate!” he said, fumbling with the stick and blowing out the tiny bits of flame that caught to the wood.

“My apologies,” Creek muttered, rubbing his throat slowly and yawning.

Diego watched him carefully with a quirked brow then smoothed a hand over his webbed mohawk before jumping up from his seat and walking around the fire. He thrust the fish out to the troll and Creek looked up at him. His forehead was sweaty from his nightmare and his skin was paled, a small cause for concern.

“Another vision, I take it?” the reptile mused, shaking his offering impatiently before Creek took the fish with a mumble of thanks.

“A feeling rather than an image,” he said quietly. “I’m worried about my… about Branch. He’s not doing well. I have to get back soon.”

“Don’t we all,” Diego laughed. “That’s the grey one you told me about, right?” He shuffled back over to his seat and skewered another raw fish, propping it into the campfire with a hum. “Can’t tell
ya that I understand how you know but your leg ain’t up to par yet. I wouldn’t trek the cliffs for another three weeks, minimum.”

Creek stared down at the roasted fish, feeling queasy just looking at it. He shifted uncomfortably, throwing the borrowed coat off his legs as it was suddenly too hot even in this weather.

Because of this guy he was lucky to be alive, but it didn’t deter him from wanting to risk his life again in order to climb back up to where he belonged – to where he knew he was needed. When Creek fell, his life flashed before his eyes on the way down to the lake. He made quick promises to the moon, offering up everything he could give to make it out alive. There was so much more he wanted to accomplish in life, he couldn’t fathom the ending this way and begged for another chance right before being consumed by the black, watery depths of the lake. His Mother from the other realm wasted no time in taking up his promises. Blacked out and injured, Creek washed up on the other side of the rocky banks, rolled over on his back by a curious stranger who happened to be strolling by while collecting supplies. He was ragged and torn from almost drowning, the currents dragging him along the rocky bottom of the water and then thrusting him out like he tasted something awful. Creek got away with everything mostly intact, spare just a few cuts and scrapes, a ding on his head, and a nasty fracture in his left leg. It was nothing short of a miracle.

Miracle, indeed. Creek could have been horribly mangled beyond repair or would be visiting the pearly gates in the sky. Diego patched the troll up with a makeshift splint and offered him a place to sleep in return for someone to talk to. It was a weird trade, Creek wasn’t complaining about it. He was going to be forever grateful to this odd-ball of a creature and took advantage of his hospitality while he willed his body to heal faster, but three more weeks in the wilderness wasn’t going to work for him.

“I will find my way back alone, starting tomorrow,” Creek said, making a sour face before taking a hearty bite out of the crispy fish. He swallowed the meat with difficulty and then set it aside, pulling Diego’s dark coat up and over his shoulders to keep out the night’s chill. If it weren’t for his indescribable kindness, even if Creek didn’t drown he would have froze to death by now. His own cloak and shirt were too torn to wear so he opted going shirtless and offered the scraps to make something more useful.

“I wouldn’t,” Diego said with pursed his lips and he looked at the troll through the flickering fire. “Yer gonna risk getting eaten alive by some giant critter, or messin’ up your leg some more, just because you can’t wait to see this fella back home? Sounds really, really stupid if you ask me. I’m sure he can wait.”

“Unfortunately, I’m not asking for your opinion.”

Diego shrugged indifferently, rotating his fish. “I’m just sayin’. I didn’t drag ya out of the water for
you to go an’ die again. You sure you don’t have some kinda death wish?”

Creek covered his mouth then, furrowing his brows. “Mm,” he responded shortly, then quickly took up the thick, wooden crutch that Diego had pulled from a brittle tree trunk. The purple troll staggered to his feet and used it to hobble to the side of camp, away from the light of the fire. He leaned against the nearest boulder and puked the entire contents of his stomach.

“Doin’ alright?” Diego asked worriedly.

Creek kept his back turned and waved his concern off, trying to settle the battle with his nausea, “M’good,” he managed to say.

“And what’s with that?” Diego asked gruffly, rattling his fish around before sinking his sharp teeth into the head, “Mmfh… You were perfectly fine the other day. Now all of a sudden you’ve caught some bug, or somethin’. Bad luck, man!”

Creek sighed and wiped his mouth, coming back to lay on his mat with less grace than a newborn fawn. His pride was tortured every time he forced himself to move around on his bad leg, but his companion made no comment about it. “Your guess is as good as mine,” he said wearily, taking a deep breath and closing his eyes with his palm resting on his belly. It didn’t feel like a normal sickness and a few scary doubts trickled through the back of his mind. It was just another item chocked to the list of reasons on why he shouldn’t stay here any longer. Blast his leg and blast his health; there were much more pressing matters that begged Creek’s attention.

Diego eyed his form and continued his fish feast, falling silent while Creek rested and tried to drift back to sleep. It was funny how much they’ve gotten to know one another in a month’s time. Each night went through the same routine, a little bit of talk about their homeland here or there, checking on Creek’s wounds and discussing all of the other worldly habits that Diego had no idea existed. He meditated and practiced yoga during the day, explaining different stretches and shared his knowledge of energy in its purest form. The purple troll was an odd-ball for sure, but he could get down for the refreshing ways he lived. It was going to be a bummer being stuck out here alone again.

Chapter End Notes

Branch’s depression is progressive and steadily becomes worse. trying to write about how someone’s mentality deteriorates to sicknesses like this is really difficult; people experience depression in different ways. its not always violent and not always seen with the naked eye. just some food for thought - suicide is never the answer. there is always someone out there that loves and appreciates you. reach out. take their hand. life is
worth living, even if you feel alone and there's nothing else left to gain. take care of yourselves, friends.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

ow
so I'm really sorry it took me like a month and a half to get this out. I can't tell you how
def ink busy I've been. So much has happened IRL and it's just so hard to get a moment
to myself where my brain is in a capable position of actually putting out, ya know what
I'm saying? I wanna show you a bunch of things though! Check this stuff out if you
have time!

Artwork of Branch I commissioned for myself!
https://www.deviantart.com/velvetdelusion/art/Branch-tat-design-colors-Commission-
792785546

Artwork of Creek! also bought for me
https://www.deviantart.com/velvetdelusion/art/Creek-colors-Commission-790900378

ANNDDD My new tattoo!
https://imgur.com/a/vdn1wv2

I've also taken to DRAWING trolls because it doesn't take very long. I mostly do
sketches at work and then make them digital at home
Here is my gallery. I will have to make fan art of creek and branch, won't I?
https://www.deviantart.com/liet-avery/gallery/

Let me know what you guys think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Blankets of snow laid over the valley during the night. It was clean and soft, the landscape glowing
with a sparkling winter beauty come morning. The sun rose as it always did and shined through a
cloudless sky, bringing out the small flocks of birds and critters who began their routinely scavenge.
At the edge of the massive lake that seemed to stretch for eons, Creek had managed to climb up a
particularly large stone overlooking the dark water, dusting off the snow and adjusting his bottom to
the chill. He shivered and puffed hot air into his hands, rubbing them together then digging his fists
into Diego’s jacket pockets. He observed the breathtaking view, the lake having succumbed to a thin
sheet that crumbled easily under the warming sun. It created slushy pockets and shifting tiles that
were nitpicked by swimming fish below the ripples.

It was still incredibly early in the morning and Diego was contently snoring like a beast in their
makeshift shelter. Creek took the liberty of renewing the fire and sweeping their tools out the recent
snowfall, then came to what he’d dubbed his private meditation spot in order to gather his thoughts
and ponder up with a plan.
He tucked his chin to his chest and closed his eyes, shoulders stiffening against a fresh gust of
breeze. He let the sun’s rays sink into his skin and soaked in the energy, sighing out the accumulated
negative vibes. The center of his chest had a constant throb of pain and Creek mentally tried to
soothe himself, clearing his thoughts of everything about what he was going to do that day and
focused in on one image. Black depths behind closed eyes… blank minded, slow breathing. Creek
listening to the songs of nature and felt the prickling of the weather along the skin of his cheeks. He
sat unmoved, relaxing into his meditation while piecing together an image of his mate. The edges of
his mind expanded slowly, reaching through the empty space between him and Branch. He let his
energy run free, grasping at the void that would connect him to the grey troll that was so incredibly
far away.

Over the weeks, each of Creek’s attempts came up empty handed but he couldn’t bring himself to
stop trying. Soul mates were supposed to have an other-worldly connection, something they could
both feel when they needed each other the most, and Creek wanted Branch to feel him; even just to
let him know that he was coming soon and to hold on tight. He put all of his knowledge to use in
every session, Creek’s determination to get back to troll village stronger than anything else. It didn’t
matter if his leg became irreparable. It didn’t matter if the trek would be dangerous, or if he got even
more lost. Creek couldn’t sit around any longer waiting for something to happen.

The black mob buried in his chest drove through his heart with an aggressive blade, twisting through
his resolves without mercy in an attempt to cripple Creek’s aura. Drawing in a deliberate breath,
Creek calmly settled the invisible attack with his jaw tightening a minute degree. He wasn’t going to
let it win, not while he could still breathe.

It wasn’t normal… it wasn’t natural. A serious plague that wandered unchecked could only be
coming from Branch himself. Between confusing nightmares, intense feelings and chaotic visions
whenever Creek had a moment to himself, he could safely assuming that Branch was going through
an emotional torment that would ultimately end up killing him. The effects of his mental state were
demons in flight, circling Creek like starved birds after they’ve done their fair share of scouring on
his other half. They were waiting for the guru to let his guard down, gunning for a chance to steal
what little strength he had left to fight off the advances. If Creek could feel how Branch was feeling,
then there had to be a way to return to call and let Branch know he was alive. It was a pity that these
moments were becoming do or die, it was such a beautiful day.

Sinking effortlessly deeper into his self awareness, the noises and feelings around Creek began to
fade out into the distance. His skin tingled until it was numb and his ears closed to the random
rustlings of nature. Creek’s chest rose and fell slowly with his natural breathing and his muscles
relaxed farther, silence enveloping his psyche. Dear Mother, I’ve relied many times on you, Creek
wistfully thought. I need you to guide me once more, for the sake of someone other than myself. An
eternity of time passed and Creek let go of the hold on the material world. The comfort of nothing
wrapped the troll in a unique territory that wasn’t visited often enough. Each flicker of thought and
twitch of a nerve sent him deeper down a path unbeknownst to anyone but himself.

Then, he felt it.
Branch was sitting cross legged on the upper level of his bunker. The floor was dusty, the entire room dark and freezing cold from the outside weather. The sun had barely come up over the horizon but he had stayed completely awake through the night, so it didn’t really matter when the sun rose. It’s not like he could see it.

Branch stared dead-eyed at the glimmering metal plating bolted over the ceiling hatch. He’d been looking at the plate for hours now, unmoved from the position with a half-empty glass bottle hanging loosely in his palm. Wandering through his bunker without a coherent goal, Branch ended up rummaging through Creek’s possessions and fell upon multiple bottles of alcohol made with King Peppy. They were branded with different strengths and flavors, truly showing that Creek had a passion for the craft. Branch knew it was wrong for him to be messing with things like this but he was saying screw it to rules, barriers, and screw it to whatever Creek’s spirit would say about him drowning himself in liquor. He was a full grown troll and of course he couldn’t handle it well enough but honestly speaking, the buzzed sensations were a sweet relief.

Two entire bottles drained with a third on the way and there was nothing else Branch wanted to do or think about, so he planned on double checking his Bergen-proof lock down mechanisms to make sure everything was secure. He dragged his tired and burning body up the elevator shaft, clinging to his drink and using the lever for anchorage. After opening the electrical panel in the wall and poking his tools aimlessly through the mess of mediocre, home-made engineering, Branch went to plopping himself on the floor and crawling back into his head space. There was no doubt about his contraptions, they were working perfectly as intended and a trickle of disappointment made itself known. He was really going to be in the bunker, alone with himself and his own untrustworthy brain, for the next decade.

Leaning heavily to the side, Branch let his body lay down to rest on the dirty floor. He kept his fuzzy gaze trained on the bunker hatch, contemplating his swirling feelings. Disappointment. Regret. Loneliness. It was pointless to second guess his choices now, however. He’d already sealed the deal and thrown away the key.

Branch’s eyelids fluttered and he let loose a deep, shivering wheeze. The cold air was numbing him in a pleasant sort of way. He could smell wafts of his own putrid breath and let the bottle roll out of his grip.

*You know what makes you so special?*

“No... what?” Branch responded to the silence.
The small, adorable voice of a younger Creek poked at his flushed ear tips. The purple trolling from his memories frolicked through his mind’s eye like it was his personal playground and Branch let him, smiling slightly at the remembrance of the little happiness he once felt so long ago.


The two friends were crouched on their heels at the base of the old troll tree in a patch of wild flowers. The colors of the small sprouts were like a twisting rainbow carved through the grass and up the giant roots, dancing lightly with the wind and tickling their ankles. Branch was using a tuft of royal purple hair to grasp a bundle of flowers that he’d been picking one by one. He picked another that had a vibrant pink hue and inspected it with a satisfied nod before slipping the stalk with the rest of his collection.

“I mean it, though,” Creek continued, idly dusting his finger tips through the flower heads between them while Branch continued his task. “You’re a really special troll. I think Mrs. Rosiepuff will cry when you give her this present.”

“I don’t want to make Grandma cry,” Branch commented with a tiny furrow in his brow, “Just smile.”

“Cry in a good way,” Creek amended. “Because she would be so happy. You make me feel like that too.” The brighter trolling looked up from the patch and watched the way Branch was so adamant about choosing the right colors for his bouquet. Branch looked up as well as saw the softness in his eyes, a dark blush coming to his cerulean cheeks.

“I make you want to cry?” Branch asked worriedly, still a bit confused. His way of thinking was blunt and innocent but it didn’t bother Creek at all. He smiled at Branch and nodded, plucking a daisy with purple petals and tucking it next to Branch’s ear as a gift.

“In a good way,” he repeated fondly.

Branch blushed more and searched the ground for a blue flower, taking it up and mirroring the same action Creek just did. He stuck the stem of it into Creek’s longer hair, though a little more awkwardly, and the trolling blinked and glanced up at it with a giant grin. His happiness was
Branch could remember the way he felt back then, so simple and carefree. He remembered how the feelings blossomed inside his stomach like roses in their prime and how much he loved it when Creek smiled at him over the smallest instances. He was taken care of like a precious gem stone. The more he thought about their past, the more apparent Creek’s love for him came through. They were so young, barely understanding what the word love even was, yet it was there. He never thought too hard about all the things that made his heart flutter. It was just pure happiness and he took it for granted. He missed it… He missed those feelings. He missed Creek. If he could just see him again Branch swore he’d change his lifestyle for the better. He’d do anything to get him back. He would try to smile more, just for him, and make friends with other trolls if that’s what Creek really wanted. He would even sing if his heart desired to hear it. So many things Branch would give up completely to get a second chance at learning what it would be like to be in love.

Consciousness starting to slip away, the bunker hatch became fuzzier and fuzzier. Branch let the weight of his head fall to the side. On the verge of falling asleep, his body felt warmer than what the drink gave. The grey troll swallowed slightly and shifted on the ground, curling into himself. Heat flowed into all of his limbs and spread like water, touching every crevice and curve that he owned. It even smoothed over the pain in his heart, magically relieving some of the pressure. Branch breathed heavily but didn’t move, letting this unexpected caress work its way in. The lift gave way to a fresh emotional flow and his eyes watered. He squint hard at the tears then opened his eyes back up to a surprising vision that caused his lower lip to tremble.

Flickering faintly like a ghost in shadows, Creek’s image laid on the floor facing him, their bodies just a breath apart. Branch stared into the depths of the lilac gaze, his tears rolling freely now and making a mess of his cheeks and nose. It definitely wasn’t real but he couldn’t help but feel so incredibly happy and relieved to see him.

“Creek,” Branch whispered, watching the other troll reach out their hand in an attempt to caress over his wet cheek and around his ear. His skin tingled where the contact would be and it only made his heart more unstable. Creek looked as sad as Branch felt so he tried to return the loving touch, his hand slipping under Creek’s chin to raise his face closer. The movement went through the faded air with zero resistance and caused the entirety of the visage to wither out of his sight. The last look he gave before he disappeared was pained, his eyebrows cinched and eyes darkened.

Met with a clearly empty bunker once more, feeling more alone than ever before, Branch covered his face with his palms to muffle a loud, frustrated noise. It lasted only seconds, but seeing Creek was enough to break him up all over again.
Hey, hey!

Hey! Over here!

Creek’s mouth twitched and he scrunched his face in anger, trying with losing patience to hold on to the relaxing realm formed in his mind. He’d just had a dying vision of Branch and was desperately piecing together the image in a hurry as the parts escaped his hands. All he could make out was the grey troll laying somewhere dark and cold. He wanted to reach out to him, to touch him so badly and tell him he was on the way. If only he could have some peace and quiet.

“Wait, here! Yes, YES!”

Finally, Creek snapped his eyes open and turned aggressively behind himself to glare at Diego who’d been yelling randomly and running around with his arms waving.

“Do you bloody mind?!!” Creek barked at him. “I am trying to meditate! I thought you were asleep.”

The green party crasher didn’t seem the least bit offended while he grinned wide at the sky with his eyes shining. “I’ve been awake. You’ve been out here for hours, ya know? But you can keep on sittin’ there doing nothing.” he said happily, “while I get out of this dump! My crew – my friends are here, Creek! Look, they’re comin’!”

Disbelieving, Creek craned to look in the pointed direction and had to keep his jaw from dropping out of his face. Sure enough, as Diego exclaimed, there was a speckling of dark objects flying over the lake in their direction. Beetlebike critters of different sizes and colors, with equally daunting party crashers riding on their shells, flew fast and furious over the wind towards their camp. At the lead of the pack was a smaller male, jumping up to stand on the back of his ride and he waved his arms sporadically in the same manner that Diego had done. Creek scrambled off his boulder when the critters swooped in over his head with the loudest wing beats he’d ever heard in his life. The noise echoed through the canyon and no one seemed rattled by it but himself. He covered his ears and stared while a total of five party crashers touched down at the edge of the lake, dustings of snow and lighter pebbles whipping up and swirling around them. The smaller one jumped from his beetle and ran into Diego, grabbing him in a hug.

“Oh my God, I found you!” he cried out happily with a sharp grin. They shared the same number of
pointed teeth and a greenish complexion. All of the crashers did, actually. Each one of them wasn’t far off from the other, complete with the same violet webbed mohawk, bald heads, and leather apparel that was more rebellious than a trolling on a sugar high.

Diego took his friend by the shoulders and shook him excitedly, “I can’t believe it, you’re actually here,” he laughed. “It took ya long enough, man! I thought you’ve forgotten ‘bout me by now. What happened?”

“We realized you were missing when we stopped a month later at an all-you-can-eat buffet, I turned to talk to you about this amazing cheesecake platter but you weren’t there! Do you know how many parties we had to back track to get to this point??”

“I have an idea, since it took ya the better half of a year to find me!”

While Creek was still sitting on the ground completely awestruck, a large, scary-looking female approached the troll and he shrank back defensively when she offered her scaly hand to help him up. “Hey, you okay?” she said, her voice at least ten octaves lower than Creek expected. He nodded faintly and took her hand, still undecided if he should trust the group of ruffians that just showed up to snatch up their friend out of the wilderness. The butch party crasher lifted him by the hand as if he were a sack of feathers and set Creek on his feet, slapping a rough pat on his shoulder.

Diego’s ecstatic friend looked over in Creek’s direction while they were discussing their similar events that led up to this travesty, then he abruptly stopped talking and pointed at the troll with a gasp. “What are you doing here, Creek??”

Creek blinked at him, only realizing now exactly who this party crasher was while the creature ran up to him with Diego on his tail.

“Archer? Er, Ka-blooey, was it?” he questioned, trying to jog his memory.

“Ka-boom,” he replied with an annoyed look. “Calling me Archer is just fine, you know.”

“Right, right, of course,” Creek said with an awkward smile. Archer and the village had gone through a tornado of drama ages ago, but Poppy deemed him to be one of the trolls in the end. Him and the village were on the friendliest of terms, but Creek was still unsure about all of his buddies. It didn’t look to be a problem though, they were acting friendly enough and Archer strut around as the leader of his pack. He’d never really talked to this guy before but Poppy only mentioned good
Diego came up to Creek’s side and laid his arm around the troll’s shoulders in an awkward side hug. “This fella here,” he said with a chuckle, “has been just as lost as me for the last four weeks. It was quite the luck, us meeting together. You two know each other?”

“Lost?” Archer said with a frown, jutting a thumb in Diego’s direction. “How did you get lost like this loser over here?”

“What the blazin’ did you say?” Diego commented, lower lip pouting out.

Archer ignored him with a prominent eye roll then pulled Creek aside, away from the other party crashers. The purple troll glanced back at the group when they were out of ear shot and Archer looked from the fading wounds on his face to the splint on his leg. He put his hand in his pants pocket to pull out a very tiny, clear jar filled with the smallest white berries. “Princess Poppy would be very upset if I didn’t help you get back to your village,” he started, twisting open the jar. “We’re friends now, I have to do my part!”

“So I’ve heard.” Creek said with a raise in his brow, feeling very wary about the unfamiliar berries that Archer was now offering to him.

“First, eat a few of these and it’ll help your leg feel better. A sort of pain killer, so to speak. These wild winters can provide very magical things,” he said with a wink, placing a good amount into the troll’s palm. “You probably won’t get any side affects. Maybe. I’ve never seen a troll eat them before, though.”

“Side affects?” Creek grimaced at the offering but decided that he could afford a risk or two, he was Poppy’s friend after all. He threw the fruit into his mouth quickly and swallowed most of it without chewing. They were tasteless.

“Anyway, I don’t know how you got out here, but you’re not far off from Troll village. Take my beetlebike,” Archer said, gesturing over to his large red and black critter was that currently grooming itself with its segmented forelegs. “It’s the fastest one alive and it’ll get you home in no time. Just head Eastward, up and over the cliff side, and you’ll see your troll tree from the sky!”

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He couldn’t take it anymore.

“I’m done. I’m done with this!”

Branch got up from the floor in a haste and pulled the level on his elevator to take him down. His eyes were puffy and his breath ragged, but everything in his heart and mind was beginning to blaze red. He was angry now. Angry at his own self; angry at the world. He contemplated everything that’d happened, went on the roller coaster of doubt while doing what he could do, and now he’s decided that Creek *couldn’t* be dead. Deep in his gut, Branch *knew*. Poppy wouldn’t let him search but now Branch’s life was his own and, by God, he was going to do whatever the hell he wanted. He wanted to spend the rest of the time he had alive searching for his mate, and that was that! Every time Branch told himself that Creek was dead, it felt like a lie. He was tired of lying to himself and being held up in this dark hole when the true answers he sought were sitting right outside the bunker. As much as he loved his home, it had turned into a prison and he wanted out!

Throwing the lever into the stop position halfway down, Branch practically kicked open the door to one of the many rooms that stored his rations and supplies. The area was filled to the brim with his excavation material. Shovels, lanterns, helmets, pickaxes, and the like. Branch moved to a wooden crate at the side and ripped off the top, nails popping out and pouncing to the floor. His eyes were flaming when he dug a piece of dynamite from the crate. The full stick was encased in a red sleeve with a black cap, the fuse twisted slightly from storage. Branch used these homemade explosives when he was expanding the lower levels of his survival bunker. After meeting a comfortable amount of space, this room went entirely unused for many years. Today, however, he was going to burst out of his own confinement.

Leaving everything behind except for a pack of matches, Branch went back to the upper level and rudely stuffed the stick between the paneled entrance and the rocky, carved ceiling. Packing the metal crevice tight so the dynamite wouldn’t fall out, his hands held the match box shakily. Branch gripped his own wrist momentarily to try and calm down, but there were erratic butterflies doing acrobats inside his stomach. He didn’t know if he was frightened or excited, or both, but the troll was bound determined to get out, even if it meant destroying his beloved bunker. There was something he loved more now.

Without anymore second guessing, he struck the match and lit the fuse. The sparks were white and wild and Branch’s eyes grew wide.

“Oh my God, I actually lit the damn thing!?” he cried out, backing up quickly and running far to the other side of the room, dodging and jumping over his Bergen claw traps strewn on the floor. Wanting to do something this crazy and going through with it were two completely and utterly different things. A mere handful of seconds later, the blast from the dynamite blew vertically, filling the bunker with a cloud of thick smoke and dust. The entrance above was no longer a hatch but a gaping hole that cried freedom. Branch coughed from the smoke and feebly waved at the air, taking
ginger steps around the sharp metal pieces.

Branch peeked up through the hole, the bright blue sky greeting him with open arms. He smiled and stretched out his black hair to fling himself out into the daytime. A little overzealous in his escape, the troll gasped when he dropped into a pile of snow large enough to consume him. The flames of determination flickered deep within Branch’s core, pushing him forward with a strength he hadn’t felt in years. An invisible hand shoved aggressively at his back while he reached and grabbed onto the nearest gnarled pile of roots to drag himself out of the snow pile.

“Facing forward... lights out, I won’t stop running,” Branch sang to himself, his motivation growing exponentially when he stood up and smacked the clumps of snow from his pants. His throat felt dry from breathing the frozen air, but he couldn’t help himself from continuing the lyrics. “Falling backwards, hands tied, I won’t stop running...” The corner of Branch’s mouth upturned slightly when he spotted a clear path through the trees, though now only skeletons of their former glory. The area felt fresh and free, a light breeze threading through his hair and making him shiver in pleasure. He wouldn’t stop. He couldn’t, not when he knew deep down in his gut that Creek was out there somewhere waiting for him. “I’ll take another sunrise; another hand to hold tight. This isn’t over. I am way too young and I won’t stop running.”

Branch started to jog, his breath coming in short pants while he crushed through the snow at an increasingly faster pace. This was it, this is what he’s wanted to do ever since Creek disappeared over the cliff. He didn’t know where he would be or if Branch would ever go back to Troll Village, but the unknown before him was all Branch wanted to see. His limbs felt frozen, the ice seeping deep to his bones until it was painful, but the ache in his chest could never be compared.

“I don’t know how much longer I can fake it – That it's all alright, that I can do this alone and I know that life is what you make it, but it's hard to see stars when you're always caught in the folds – Every night in my mind it's a fight... but I won't stop dreaming, 'cause this isn't over. It's never over.”

With the alcohol burning out of his system, his needs became clearer. They fueled him to go harder in order to achieve them. Fighting off King Peppy and Poppy, he’d hoped to start this search long before now. They should have let him go because there was no telling what kind of dangers or hardships Creek could be facing. Branch had convinced himself that his mate was dead at the bottom of his despair, even when the knowing feeling had never really left him. He was tired of letting his emotions run his life. He wanted to follow his instincts, and they were pulling him in a direction that could only be towards his soul mate.

Taking a sudden slide down a steep slope, Branch gasped slightly and skidded until he was on level ground, ducking around low hanging boughs and flinching at a flock of birds that rustled and broke free from their roost above his head. He ignored the pounding of his heart and almost laughed at his trembling fears, using his hair to swing himself back into the momentum, turning the jog into a full blown sprint through the forest. The dark trunks and branches of trees were nothing but a blur in his
peripherals. His true, blood-born instincts were raw and straight forward, and they were merciless in their inclusion for the need to sing his heart out. “I’d rather be the one that starts the fire than to shut my mouth and be the one who gets burned! Yeah, it is what it is, but I wanna go higher... ’cause I felt it once before. I believe the tables will turn. I wanna love and be the one who is loved! No, I won’t stop dreaming, ’cause this isn’t over. It’s never over... ”

He ran forever until his lungs were seizing. Branch shoved his hands into his arm pits and forced his legs to keep moving. He knew he was slowing down but there was only so much he could do against the freezing element. Branch rattled his head roughly while running to shake off some snow that’d fallen into his hair.

He felt so tired now. The physical pain was becoming too much. His entire body was heavy, unmovable lead. Branch finally collapsed on his knees, his breath ragged and harsh from over exertion. He gripped his fingers into his chest and heaved for oxygen, bowing his face forward with his eyes closed. Sweat dripped off his nose and his vest felt twisted and damp. A hard chill shook him roughly and he groaned in his panting, rubbing his hands on his upper arms to try and get rid of it. Could he really keep going like this? He had no equipment, no protection, and he was traveling blindly without any logical plans. Motivation ran dry the longer he thought about what the hell he was doing. Cracking his eyes open, Branch took a look at his surroundings briefly then his eyes widened at the sight.

His waterfall…?

Somehow, without evening realizing it, Branch had ran all the way to his secluded sanctuary, his favorite spot to relax and get away from the harsh irrationality of his village. His sanctuary that he had shared with Creek for a few awkward nights. It was the first time Creek had tried to be kind to him in all of their squabbling and ignoring each other. Branch had taken it for granted when it was so obvious now that Creek was genuine.

Opalescent river stones outlined the trickling river in a sparkling weave that flowed from the downpour of the waterfall and through the rest of the forest. Every boulder and ledge carried a pocket of snow like a soft white cap. The edges of the running water were beginning to crystallize but it wasn’t enough to slow it down quite yet. Branch stood up from his knees and wobbled slightly, carefully walking to the river and dipping his cupped hands into the clear liquid to take a drink.

It was just like before. He’d done this exact same action before meeting with Creek again. Branch drank the icy water and shivered heavily, either from the deja vu or from the breeze freezing his sweat, then returned his arms around to hold himself. Tired and run down, he sat in the snowy pebbles and watched the cascading falls with a bittersweet expression. His breath puffed large white clouds and he swore he couldn’t hardly feel his feet anymore. The weather was just too much to handle without a coat, a scarf, or even boots. He was a real idiot for leaving the bunker without taking those items with him, but at the moment he just felt too weary to care. So what if he was cold?
So what if he was alone? Watching the falls sparkle and dance was easily the most relaxing thing he’d ever seen.

Branch stared at the waterfall for so long he could watch the shadows shift as the sun made it’s way across the sky. “I won’t stop dreaming… ’cause this isn’t over,” he sang quietly. A deeper chill crawled across his skin and Branch trembled, closing his tired eyes. “It can’t be over, can it?” he asked himself in a mere whisper. He hunkered in and put his forehead on the top of his knees. Familiar shackles threw themselves over his shoulders and tied him down, body becoming heavier and harder to move. He couldn’t stay here… He had to keep moving, but...

Balled up against the cold, Branch extended his hair and wrapped it around himself like a makeshift cocoon. It would hold him for awhile, if he could stay conscious. He would just sit and rest… Just for a little while. Not a minute longer.

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Back at Troll Village, Poppy and Guy Diamond were shuffling around outside of Branch’s survival bunker, arguing with each other about their recent discovery.

The two trolls had met up for lunch that day and Guy Diamond was testing a new invention he’d made specifically for glitter trolls and their hatred of winter. Oddly, yet not oddly enough, the cold weather forced all trolls to bundle up in their scarfs and jackets but glitter trolls had a strong disdain towards clothing of every kind. Guy Diamond was no different and could only wear garments for a short time – specifically five minutes tops. Guy sprayed himself down with a patent pending aerosol can of ‘Cold-b-Gone’, the thin, clear coat acting as a shield against the ice.

Now here they were, inspecting the metal remains from the destroyed door that littered the ground. The plot of snow around the bunker hatch was shifted and ashy and there were fresh footprints trailing from the bunker to the forest, or the forest to the bunker? They weren’t quite sure which way.

“Branch!? Branch, are you in there?” Poppy called worriedly into the gaping hole of the entrance. She could see the shambles of the door inside the upper room as well. Her voice echoed to the depths with no answer in return.

“With all due respect, Poppy,” Guy started, “You’ve been coming here every day hoping that Branch opens his bunker back up to us. I think we should leave him alone!” Guy Diamond crossed his arms tightly, then immediately tried to peel them back apart. His invention was going through a few bugs that still needed to be worked out. He unstuck his arms and grunted, “If Branch wanted our help, he would have asked.”
Poppy shot the glitter troll a hot glare and tossed down the metal chunk she’d been inspecting. “Branch doesn’t ever ask for help, even if he really needs it. If someone didn’t break in, then that means he broke out. We have to go find him.”

“We should wait for him to come back,” Guy refused. “You’re always pushing your way around without listening to his feelings. Don’t you remember how he acted when you forced that yoga class down his throat?”

“He’s sick right now!” Poppy cried out. “What else can I do? And don’t be sticking the blame for that on my shoulders, you helped out with that one too.”

“Alright, alright,” Guy Diamond said, then gestured to the destroyed remains and cocked his brow, “But how can a sick troll manage something like this?” he asked. “He obviously has an agenda that he needs to work out himself. It looks to me like he finally realized holing himself up in that… that ‘hole’, was a mistake.”

Back and forth with two different views, they weren’t getting anywhere useful. Poppy was just about to give in to Guy Diamond’s way when their ears perked up to a strong wing beat. The sound became louder and louder, headed in their direction and they looked up to the sky in unison. A giant, red beetlebike was swooping down towards them at a breakneck speed with no intention of slowing down. Poppy and Guy cried out and took a dive into the snow in opposite directions just as the critter tumbled into the ground with a less than graceful crash landing. It slid roughly and bumped sideways into the nearest tree. The bug shook its head dizzily then ran its forelegs over its long black antennae with a low hum.

“I know I said to hurry, but that was ridiculous,” Creek said with a sickening groan, slipping off the back of the ride and trying to stand up straight on the ground. His world was spinning after the land and his stomach wanted to turn inside out.

Poppy stared at Creek and covered her mouth with both hands, her eyes wide. He turned slightly and spotted her, then gave the warmest smile that could melt winter itself. She ran full force towards the purple troll and they hugged tightly, Poppy whining into his chest.

“Creek – Creek! You’re alive!” she cried out, her voice turning into a soft squeak from all the emotions.

“This is the happiest day of my life,” Guy whimpered and wiped his face of the tears that were
leaking from his own eyes, then joined them in the tight hug. Their reunion was short lived when both Creek and Poppy inched back from the glitter troll with a twisted face of disgust, their clothes sticking to his silvery skin like it was covered in candy tack. “My bad,” Guy grinned and pulled himself away to unstick them.

“We can hug much more later,” Creek affirmed, taking Poppy’s hands then and squeezing them. “I will tell you everything that’s happened, but right now I need to know. Is Branch here? Where is he, tell me where he is.” His voice was urgent, eyes searching Poppy’s face for any negative signs that would give away a secret he wasn’t quite ready to hear.

“O-Oh, uh… I don’t know,” she admitted, sniffing again and wiping her face dry with her coat sleeve. “We just got here and his bunker is blown out… He’s out there somewhere, in the forest. He locked himself in and then broke out! I don’t understand what Branch is thinking right now.”

“Then I have to go,” Creek said, turning back to the beetlebike and beckoning it to help him back up its shell.

Poppy wanted to say something but her throat was tight and she raised her hand slowly as if to stop him, but she didn’t know how to say it. Creek hopped up on the critter and winced, then Poppy noticed the limp and splint on his leg and she grabbed his arm fast, “Wait, you’re hurt!” she said quickly. “Is it broken? You can’t, Creek. We should get you to a doctor first!”

From the top of the critter, Creek pried her hand off gently and gave it a kiss at the back, “I missed you too, Poppy. I know you are worried about me disappearing again,” he said knowingly, “but I will be back. And I’ll have Branch with me.” It killed him to leave one of his best friends like this, but the grey troll could be anywhere at this point and Creek wracked his brain for a clue, kicking the bug into gear. Time was of the essence and he had already run out of time weeks ago, so he was going to use Archer’s critter to the utmost advantage while he had it. Its wings split out and thrummed in a blur then it jumped off the ground with a deafening force, heading back into the sky.

Chapter End Notes

Branch’s song: A great big world - Won't stop running
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRWZgsTzipA
Falling water roared endlessly. It was a white noise in a white setting. Grey clouds moved in over the forest and shielded the sun while it set on the other side of the world. Branch blinked slowly, his breath light and transparent as he continued to watch the water travel down and splash into its basin. Snowflakes falling from a gentle coming storm landed into Branch’ stocky strands of hair, which had receded into its natural, upward position. The floating snow crystals faded into the backdrop of his surroundings and he admired it. However, there was no more strength to find within himself. His heart and soul were freezing over, just like the water in winter.

Still in awe of everything, the troll sat unmoved by the river. His fingers and ears twitched every so often, but he couldn’t feel them anymore. Branch had sat for so long in the snow that it was started to pile around his legs and up his back. His eyelids hooded heavily but he clung to consciousness. Sleep beckoned like an ocean siren, coaxing and singing everything he wanted to hear until it could lock him in its jaws with no return.

“C-Cr –...” Branch try to say aloud, though no sound of his voice could be heard over his chattering teeth. Creek, I thought I could do it, he thought to himself, his blurred vision giving way to a black halo closing over his sights. I wanted to save you, but now I wish that you would save me instead. Why did I end up like this?

The day’s light shifted and twisted the sky, drawing sunset colors through the clouds that stretched as far as you could see. It moved over Branch’s clearing and reflected into the waterfall. His eyes flickered when the water color changed. What once was grey and colorless, much like himself, now revealed a shade that could only be described as a stone of amethyst more valuable than anything that could be held. The water dazzled before Branch’s eyes as liquid quartz, all different values and shades of purple waltzing through every droplet. The dark troll managed to open his eyes a little wider to take in the spectacle, enthralled by a wondrous feeling that crept under his numbed skin. Its beauty reminded him so much of Creek.

Everything was purple. The color bled from the waterfall to the snow, to the bark of the trees and into the sky. He was surrounded by nothing but purple and it was like the essence of Creek had been born into nature itself. He didn’t know what it meant, if it was good or bad for Creek, or for himself, but he let the violet hues crawl over him. He welcomed the soothing color and sighed inwardly. Maybe this is what death looked like when you knocked on its door. People always feared leaving the material world, but if this is what Branch could see for the rest of his eternity then it wouldn’t be so bad.

The ground crunched around him and something large stepped in front of his view, taking his shoulders tightly. Branch slowly blinked again and tried to adjust his eyes on the new object but it was still just the same, deep expanse of purple color.
“Branch,” his name was called urgently and his shoulders were shaken gently. “Branch? Can you hear me? Darling, look at me. Look!”

He raised his head slightly and tried to look, his thoughts slow and confused. His blurred vision adjusted to reveal Creek looking down on him with tears in his eyes. They were searching his face and the handsome, purple troll swallowed slightly, a white puff of breath clouding his parted lips. Branch’s heart clenched and he dragged his consciousness back to the surface, unwillingly to fall asleep when his mirage had returned. The nerves in his hand twitched, wanting to raise it to grab on to the purple troll so he wouldn’t fade away again. Wait, he thought desperately. “W – Wh –” his teeth chattered again uncontrollably.

“Shh, I’ve got you. You don’t have to speak.” Creek shrugged off his dark jacket quickly and tossed it around Branch, pulling it tight over his shoulders and arms. He moved in close and touched the grey troll’s frozen cheek, caressing it. “I’m here now,” he said, trying to keep his jumbled, fearful emotions at bay. “I knew you’d be here… I don’t know how I knew, but I did. I felt it. I’m sorry it took so long, my love.”

Branch didn’t react at first, but when he felt the warmth from Creek’s hand his eyes widened and his arms shot up in a quick burst of energy. He grabbed at his forearms and squeezed them, the solid mass making his pulse race. Clumps of snow fell from his hair and off his nose and Branch panted like he hadn’t taken a full breath in a millennia. His mirage wasn’t a mirage. He could feel him. He was solid, knelt in front of him and blocking his view of the falls.

“Are you real,” he croaked, fingers digging into Creek’s hot skin in an effort to keep the dream alive. Don’t fade away. Don’t leave. His thoughts were tumbling sporadically in different directions. He honestly didn’t know what to think.

“I am real, I swear to you. Come with me, let’s get out of here before you freeze solid.” Creek quickly rose from the ground, pulling Branch up with him. The grey troll groaned while he was hoisted against Creek’s chest and dragged out of his sitting position. Branch’s legs were numb and he couldn’t stand. He clung to Creek however he could and squinted his eyes shut, feeling the other troll’s heart beat, feeling his sweet heat radiate into his own body.

Impossible. It was absolutely impossible that this was happening. “I’m... I’m dead,” Branch wheezed a bittersweet chuckle, unconvinced. Creek lifted him completely off the ground like a precious package and carried him away from the river. “Am I dead?” he asked again.

“You are not dead, I won’t allow it,” Creek responded roughly. He cradled Branch’s head back to his chest while walking to the beetlebike that was waiting on the other side of the sanctuary, putting
most of the weight into his good leg so not to drop or stumble on accident. He was lucky enough that Branch had lost considerable weight since the last time he saw him, but it also worried him to no end.

The unexpected rescue became too much to handle emotionally. Secured tightly in Creek’s hold, Branch let a few tears of relief fall from the corners of his eyes and then allowed the gaping jaws of sleep snatch him up, dropping the troll into a black lagoon of nothing.

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His life was an awful, yet wonderful dream. Branch felt himself rousing awake, stretching his legs and toes while he laid in bed. The muscles in his calves and thighs were sore from all his running outside so he curled back into the hot cocoon of pillows and blankets crowding around his body. Eyes still closed, Branch noticed that the smell of the bed was different. It wasn’t what he was used to; it had a fresh, new scent and the textures themselves were unfamiliar.

Suddenly confused on his whereabouts, the grey troll lifted his head groggily and breathed a sleepy sigh while adjusting his eyes to the shadows. He looked around, trying to figure out exactly where he’d ended up. Slowly pulling himself into a sitting position in a strange bed that was too large, nothing looked familiar at all but the curves and colorful adornments along the walls could only belong to a troll pod. He definitely wasn’t back home in his bunker and a brief chill raged over his skin. The troll pulled the thick cover back up to his chin so not to let out his accumulated heat. He still felt incredibly cold but at least not so much as before. His limbs burned as they adjusted to the temperature change. He couldn’t have been in bed for longer than a couple of hours.

A light switched on in another room and it spilled through the doorway at the side, followed by a soft clinking of ceramic that made his pointed ears twitch and turn. He looked over in time to see Creek step over the landing with a tea cup and saucer in hand. They locked eyes and Branch’s breath caught, his heart skyrocketing into a flurry of beats that could have broken his rib cage. He was freshly showered, wearing a plain creamy, long sleeved shirt and matching pajama bottoms. The length of his hair was combed straight and the two-tone strands flowed in a gentle arch while twisting softly towards the tip, an angular jagged cut at the end making itself noticeable.

“You’re finally awake, I’m so glad,” Creek said, looking relieved with an incredibly bright smile. The purple troll went to Branch’s beside quickly and sat down on the edge of it, offering him the tea cup that had steam trailing from its contents.

Branch’s stare hadn’t left Creek’s face. His eyes darted over his flawless skin and landed on a fading blemish of a scar that marked his temple. Branch shakily took the cup and set it away on the bedside table, then he tossed the blanket off and grabbed the troll roughly, yanking him in for a fierce, crushing hug. Creek couldn’t contain himself then. He broke into a sudden sob and tried to sniff back his overflowing happiness while he hugged Branch just as tight. They sat there in silence, squeezing
each other as if the one of them would float away. The room stayed shadowed and quiet apart from
the soft shakes and whimpers coming from Creek. He desperately tried to regain composure but
managed to lose it every time he felt Branch’s arms squeeze him tighter.

“Are you sure I’m not dreaming,” Branch asked in a whisper against his ear. “How… How, even?
What happened to you?”

“It’s a very long, exhausting story,” Creek whispered in return.

“I want to hear it. I don’t care how long it takes.” Branch pressed his face into the junction of
Creek’s neck and shoulder and a squirming of happiness twisted a tight knot through his stomach
when he felt the other troll’s hands rub up his back.

Branch was glad he didn’t leave out any details. The two reunited trolls stayed sitting in bed while
Creek unraveled the miracle of his survival, filled with the things he saw and the people he met, all
the way up to the point of Creek carrying him into the new pod that the fuzzlings made to replace the
old one destroyed by fire damage. Everything in the home was brand new and almost exactly as
Creek had kept it, minus all of his personal belongings. The bed, the furniture, and all of the painted
colors were like walking through an old memory. Branch had never been inside of Creek’s home but
while the tale was being told, his cheeks flushed slightly and he looked around the bedroom
curiously, wanting to see the rest of the pod; An accurate replica of how Creek used to live his day to
day life before they had ever come together. There were suddenly so many things that Branch didn’t
know about him and he ached to find out.

“I tried to take you back to your bunker, first,” Creek continued, looking rather displeased about that
whole ordeal. “But since you decided to destroy the upper room, it wouldn’t have been easy to get
you in here so this was the only other place I could think of.”

Branch rubbed the back of his neck in guilt and sighed, giving him an uneasy smile. “Well, it’s not
just the top room,” he said. “My whole bunker is down for the count. It’ll take days to clean up the
mess in there.”

“I’d like to ask why, but I feel like I already know,” Creek returned the sigh. “You don’t have to
explain yourself.” He then reached over for the drink that he’d brought and took Branch’s hand to
get him to hold it, bringing his attention back. “Please,” he said, a small furrow in his brow. “You are
still very unwell. Drink this for me.”

Branch didn’t feel nearly as awful as before, in fact he felt better every moment that passed the
longer he sat here with Creek. Obliging finally, he had a careful sip of the warmed tea, then tilted his
head back and gulped it down until the entire cup was empty. “Phew,” he said with a chuckle. “That actually tasted better than expected... I needed that.” Creek smiled and was about to say something, but then blinked in surprise when Branch set the cup down and scooted towards him, brushing the thick covers out of his way so that he was almost on his knees, hovering incredibly close over Creek’s lap. The purple troll looked awkward now and his cheeks filled with a darker violet hue, leaning backwards only a single degree from Branch’s advance.

The tingling sensation that flowed through Branch’s blood was enough to give him daring hopes and thoughts. He gazed over Creek’s features while their faces were only inches apart. Creek’s silvery freckles were starting to glow and his lips parted. Branch felt so incredibly happy… He felt like all of his wonderful imaginations were coming true and nothing else bad could happen. His fears, anxieties, and the utter madness that he’d experienced the last month were lifting away, leaving only traces of a scar. Seeing Creek and being this close to him, knowing that he was alive and well and finally back home where he belonged; is this what true happiness really felt like?

“Can I kiss you?” Branch asked him hopefully.

The purple troll nodded fast and swallowed, the blush on his face growing exponentially. Branch chuckled again and the feeling of a hundred butterflies caressed over his heart. He was noticing how attractive and cute this troll could be in all of his nervous jittering... and the way his eyes were shining behind fluttering, long eyelashes. He moved his palm to the back of Creek’s hand and held it. He felt him tremble under the touch and glanced back to meet those brightened eyes. Creek lifted his other hand towards Branch’s cheek and thread his finger tips through soft black strands of hair near his ear, causing both of their smiles to drop away.

Caught fast in a whirlwind of desire, Branch closed in and captured his mate’s mouth with a kiss that ignited fireworks through his soul. Creek melted underneath him, grabbing hold of his upper arms and kissing him back with a passion so strong Branch swore he could taste it. Their mouths opened easily to deepen the sweet contact and a small, happy noise came up from Creek’s throat. Any amount of cold lingering within Branch’s body vanished. Creek’s sudden torrential scent of fresh mint and spiced herbs were penetrating him, farther than he ever imagined possible. He felt the essence slip through the air and effortlessly drift into his body from all directions, concentrating at his center. The refreshing feeling warmed him from the inside, out. Chains and shackles that held down his soul were exposed to that warmth, withering and driving away with only beams of sunshine left in their wake. Their kiss broke apart briefly so Branch could gasp for a breath. Their lips were still brushing gently and they shared air through their soft panting, Branch’s eyes remaining closed while the ethereal sensations rooted into every bit of nerve he owned.

“I love you, Branch,” Creek mumbled against his lips.
Branch took in another trembling breath, his hands going around and squeezing Creek’s waist. “I love you, too,” he said. “I love you so much, I love you more than anything. I’ve always loved you, since we were small,” Branch confessed wholeheartedly to him. He pecked Creek’s lips in multiple kisses then, eyes beginning to water from all of the incredible feelings enveloping him like a protective shield. They blocked out every bit of negative and unwanted thought that tried to poke and prod its way back in. He backed up and swiped his hands at his eyes quickly.

He was so happy. He’d never felt this happy before in his life. It couldn’t be compared to any memory he owned and he never wanted it to leave. He wouldn’t let it, he’d never let it go. Not again.

“Don’t cry, love,” Creek said gently, moving the pad of his thumb underneath Branch’s eye to brush away the escaping tears. “It’s going to be alright now. It’s all over.”

“I know,” Branch said with a hard sniff, smiling and letting out a short laugh, “I know, Creek. I really do.” He laughed again, putting his hand to his forehead because of so many epiphanies and realizations flooding through his brain. He couldn’t stop the string of happy giggles that followed.

Creek was concerned at first, wondering if the grey troll had finally lost his sanity, but then laughed in return when he found everything genuine. “Now, this here. This is what I love to see,” he exclaimed, “You have the most beautiful smile in the world, Branch!” The darker troll was about to refuse his compliment so Creek playfully tackled him before he could speak, both of them falling backwards on the mattress with a bounce.

“Ack! Alright! Seriously though; damn you to hell, Creek,” Branch grunted with a splitting grin. He dug his hand under Creek’s shirt and mercilessly groped his fingers into the side of his ribs, tickling the purple troll in a surprise assault. “I’ve been missing you forever, it took you long enough to come back home!”

“Oh my God – Agh, stop!” Creek cackled uncontrollably and tried to roll away from him, curling up on the other side of the bed but Branch didn’t let off so easily. He dragged him back and attacked the other side, fighting through the wave of arms and kicking knees to explore all of his tickle spots.

“I thought you were dead,” Branch continued to say, huffing and almost letting out some of his frustrations in his tickling. “I felt like I killed you with my own two hands. I wanted to die myself!” His fingers stopped and Creek panted for air, exhausted from laughing. Branch didn’t remove his hands just yet, letting them lay against Creek’s skin just to feel him and his breathing.

Creek took the moment to bolt upwards and grab the sides of Branch’s face, forcing him to look at him. “You,” he said between breaths. “You did not kill me, nor was anything your fault to begin
with. Nothing, Branch!” Creek almost yelled at him, his serious tone a startling change. “You’re innocent. Perfect. You did everything you could do, don’t regret anything… Because the only thing you are guilty of is stealing my heart.”

Branch blushed deeply and tried to avert his gaze, pulling his face out of Creek’s hands. “Really, Creek – do you have to be so bold?”

“Of course, one of us has to,” Creek said with a smirk.

The familiar dialogue had Branch’s blush traveling down his neck and up to the tips of his ears. “I can be bold when I want to be,” he replied.

“I know you can.” Creek took his hand and lifted it, watching his reactions intensely while he brought the fingers to his lips, kissing each of the tips ever so lovingly.

A pelt of fire drove through Branch’s system and he stumbled over his tongue, “Y-Yeah…?” His blush came three shades darker and he shivered, though not from cold this time. He suddenly didn’t know what to say or what to do, wrapped up and bound like a slave to his will.

Creek smiled seductively but gave him a bit of mercy, letting Branch go and guiding the troll to lay back down on the bed. “Let’s not get too caught up in anything else,” he said. “You should rest a little longer.” Branch was all too thankful for the diversion and weakly accepted the request, sinking back into the plush bedding.

Following after he settled down his back, Creek stretched out along the mattress and scooted in close at the side. He didn’t tease any more but slipped into the crevice of Branch’s arm and shoulder, laying his hand on Branch’s chest and his head on his bicep. The comfortable, yet intimate positioning gave Branch another influx of happy feelings. He relaxed with a sigh, drowsiness catching up again. Things just couldn’t get any better, he was in heaven.

“They will be here soon,” Creek said quietly, reaching over him for the discarded cover and pulling it over the both of them. “Sleep while you can.”

“They?” Branch asked with a small yawn.

“Poppy… and Peppy. They’re bringing a doctor. It’s just precautionary.”
“Mm.” Branch nodded in agreement, his breath becoming slow and heavy. He felt a natural nervousness at the mention of Poppy and her father, but he wasn’t the least bit upset about seeing them again. They just wanted the best for him and Branch had been incredibly stubborn to this point, pushing his friends away and making things worse for everyone. Right now, however, Branch felt there wasn’t a thing in the world that could kill his good mood. He got exactly what he wanted, latched onto his side. Branch moved his hand to Creek’s and they threaded their fingers loosely together atop his torso.

A couple of minutes went buy and Creek peeked up at the grey troll, noticing that he’d already fallen right back to sleep. He sighed contently, taking a deep breath of the scents that emanated from the stalk of black hair laying over the pillows. It reminded him of spring showers and his favorite wild berries. They were fresh and pure, just like Branch. He felt so lucky to share a part of the same soul with this troll and he wouldn’t trade it for anything.

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In a bright, white dream world, surrounded by a never ending expanse of open sky and sunlight, Branch and Creek stood facing one another, their hands clasped to their chests. In unison, they lifted their palms slowly, revealing the festering darkness that had delved into their hearts – into their single soul. Branch looked at the sporadic, black object that wriggled fast and unkempt in his grip. This evil… this shared pain that they possessed, had been born from Branch’s depression from the very beginning. It grew and spread as an indomitable disease, difficult to keep at bay; impossible to fight.

“Let it go,” Creek’s voice echoed gently through the dream. The shining, purple troll smiled at him, his own darkness clasped tight in his fist. Branch nodded and let out a slow, deliberate sigh. He opened his hand slowly, letting the light of the world enter the squirming void. Creek mirrored the movement and they looked up at one another, their eyes meeting.

Through a sudden, burning flash, the darkness they held withered and dissipated into the air. Creek took a step forward and took Branch’s empty hand, threading their fingers together tightly. He leaned close and kissed Branch’s forehead. Happiness flourished between them, the two trolls glowing brighter and brighter until nothing else could be seen.

The chain of their soul rumbled with energy, each segment and link coming together until every broken piece was mended and restored. It was tighter than the bond from their childhood, matured and strengthened to never break again.

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Feeling positively refreshed and content, Branch yawned wide and rubbed his eyes when he woke up to hushed voices coming from the other side of the pod. As much as the group of trolls wanted to be quiet, they weren’t really, and Poppy’s voice boomed over the others while she told her father to stop touching things and to keep quiet. Branch couldn’t help but smile at how comedic it was. Turning over in bed, he looked over Creek who’d also fallen asleep. The purple troll was clutching Branch’s borrowed pajama shirt in one hand and a pillow in the other. A soft snore vented past his lips and Branch grinned, biting his lower lip.

“Creek,” Branch called to him quietly. “It’s time to get up. Good morning sunshine, the Earth says hello.”

Creek’s eyebrows knit together and his snores stopped, “Mnh… I never cared much for that show,” he mumbled in his light doze. His rounded ears perked up to the rustlings in the pod and Creek sat up from the bed and casually flipped his side of the blanket onto Branch’s head.

“Hey, watch it,” Branch laughed. Between the darkness of the room and being blocked by the covers he couldn’t see anything at all now and he tumbled with the fabrics.

“Stay here,” Creek commanded him, stretching slightly then carefully padding across the bedroom to greet their guests.

Branch tugged the blanket off his head and felt around the dark bed to grip the edge of the mattress, swinging his legs over the side to adjust his shirt that had twisted from napping. He sighed and swung his feet idly, trying to listen in to the muttering voices across the house. Seeing a doctor seemed to be normal enough, he did almost freeze like a popsicle out there, but Branch hoped that they’d listen to him when he said he felt fine. He felt better than fine; he felt amazing. Branch smiled to himself and chewed on his lower lip nervously, rubbing his palms on his thighs.

Poppy’s voice became louder while they came closer to the bedroom, “and another thing, I’m not done scolding you for running out on me to go on this search and rescue mission!” She sounded upset and Branch inwardly winced as she nailed guilt into the purple troll. “You could have taken me with you, especially with your injured leg.”

“Yes I know, Poppy dear, I’m sorry,” Creek said solemnly when they came to the door. He reached at the wall and flicked on the light switch.

Branch squinted his eyes shut at the harsh change of lighting then peeked at the door, only to see
Poppy, Creek, King Peppy, and Dr. Moonbloom with the most shocked faces he’d ever seen them make. The four of them stared at him for a few seconds then came a flurry of different reactions that he had a hard time processing all at once. Creek covered his mouth with both hands as he was suddenly on the verge of crying. Poppy squealed and ran up to Branch, grabbing his hands with an excitement level that he’d never even seen from her before in his life.

“BRANCH,” she screamed happily. “HOW DID YOU – WHAT DID YOU – ?!” She tumbled over her words and King Peppy followed right behind her, clapping Branch on the back hard enough to make him jerk forward.

“Branch, my boy! I knew you had it in you!” he cried out, beaming at the troll with a giant smile. “I was worried you wouldn’t be able to pull through.”

Dr. Moonbloom adjusted her glasses with a cocked brow, filing into the room with the other two and observed Branch’s form from a closer perspective. “I’ve seen better,” she concluded. “But you’re not bad at all. Still, a little checkup won’t hurt just to make sure everything’s in working order.”

Eyes darting back and forth between the three trolls crowding around him, Branch’s confusion knew no bounds and he looked worringly over at Creek, who still stood by the doorway. The purple troll couldn’t stop staring at him until finally, he came to join the group hovering around the bed and picked up a hand mirror that laid on the nightstand.

“You’ve… changed,” Creek said, handing Branch the mirror.

“Changed?” Branch took the mirror and looked at his reflection.

*Cyan.*

He touched over his face, eyes wide. Branch’s hands trembled and he dropped the mirror on the bed, looking at his arms and chest and lifting up his leg quickly to inspect it, checking every bit of skin he could see. He grabbed his hair and pulled it down as well. The strands were a beautiful, deep royal purple that complimented the aquamarine tones of his newly found skin color. The texture had even changed, going from stringy and coarse to soft and silky.

“I’m… My color...” Branch let go of his hair and stared at his unfamiliar palms again, then looked up quickly to Creek. His mate had started to cry again and was rubbing at his eyes secretly behind Poppy’s ecstatic bouncing. The princess could hardly contain her happiness and she grabbed her
father’s arm as an anchor.

“Your color is amazing, Branch!” Poppy said to him. “I’ve never seen it before now and I’ve gotta say, I’m a little jealous.”

“It really is looking through a window to the past,” King Peppy confirmed with a solid nod. He stroked his frizzy beard and was now analyzing Branch a bit closer with squinted eyes. “You are not quite the same hue from when you were a trolling, but it’s there all the same. Trolls are known to having color changes when they mature, of course.”

Branch bolted up from the bed and pushed past Poppy and Peppy, going straight to Creek and taking him in a tight, unrelenting hug. The other troll ducked his head down to hide his face in Branch’s chest, twisting his fingers into his night shirt.

“You’re beautiful,” Creek whimpered at him. “I thought that… I thought I’d never see it again.”

His shoulders shook from a sudden sob and he rattled his head from the utter shock. Then suddenly Poppy grabbed the two of them and gave her own hug, followed by Peppy and even Dr. Moonbloom. The group hug with suffocating and Branch felt awkward and crushed, but instead of feeling disgusted he just grinned and laughed at the happiness of it all.
Chapter 26

“Your stethoscope is cold,” Branch grumbled. “I feel fine, you know. Is this necessary?”

“Of course it is!” Dr. Moonbloom grumped back. “I’m a doctor, everything I do is necessary.” The dark, plum colored troll scrunched her nose and continued to touch the chilly pad of her scope against Branch’s bared chest, listening to the rhythm inside. “Hmm...” she hummed, thinking. “Mmh-mhm! Interesting pitter-patter.”

Branch rolled his eyes and tilted his head to the side, looking over at Poppy who was shaking out a few articles of clothing she’d managed to dig out of his bunker. The princess shook her head and wagged her finger at him, folding up a cleaned pair of shorts and stacking them in the dresser with the rest of his retrieved wardrobe. “Don’t you look at me like that,” she warned. “Just sit there like a good troll.”

“I am,” Branch said, wincing from the next cold touch that was closer to his ribs. He had already been through numerous tests, pokes, and awkward feels with Dr. Moonbloom and he was beginning to tire of her antics. Creek and King Peppy were on the other side of the pod preparing dinner for the rest of them in the kitchen while he was stuck in the bedroom being groped like a lab rat by a troll who claimed to have a medical degree. The tests were long and tedious, and most of them didn’t make much sense, but it gave Poppy enough time to run down to his survival bunker and fetch a few things that he needed since they unanimously decided that Branch was going to be recuperating in Creek’s pod until the bunker was cleaned and repaired.

Dr. Moonbloom huffed and stood up straight from her crouched position, shoving all of her tools back into her travel bag. “That’s it! I’m finished with the exam. I recommend bed rest and a couple of cupcakes. You are too skinny, boy. Way too skinny.” Branch frowned and subconsciously gripped the bed cover he was sitting on, wanting to pull it up and cover his chest. He knew he hadn’t eaten well over the last month and couldn’t help but feel guilty for letting himself deteriorate. He didn’t need her to tell him that, he already knew. On queue, his stomach growled softly and the doctor heard it. She snickered, poking him in the gut.

“I get it,” he said, swatting her hand away and jumping off the bed. “You’re done? Thanks, I guess.”

Poppy came to him holding up two different sets of lounge ware and waved them around. “Which one suits your fancy tonight?” she asked him happily.

“Something comfortable,” Branch said shortly, grabbing the one on the left and pulling the grey, long sleeved shirt over his head. The brightness of his skin was making him feel strange and
awkward like he was wearing someone else’s body… He already missed his dark hue he’d grown so accustomed to, so the neutral grey in the shirt gave him a handful of comfort.

“You know, for being so colorful now, you’re still pretty grumpy,” Poppy commented, “Do you not like your new blue?”

Branch pulled his shirt straight then rolled up the sleeves to his elbows, shrugging. “No, that’s not it at all. I don’t really… feel grumpy? This is just my personality, Poppy,” he said, raising one brow. “Did you expect me to suddenly want to prance through the village like a naked glitter troll in celebration?”

Poppy shuffled her feet and shrugged at him, “Maybe, who knows? I’ve never known anyone else grey like you; no one knows what to expect. As long as you are alright, that’s all that matters to me.”

“I think I’m alright,” he said, though trying to convince himself rather than Poppy. His voice lowered softly, turning towards the pink troll and she looked at him questioningly. “It’s almost like this feeling isn’t mine,” he said.

“Not your feeling?” Poppy asked confused.

“This… brooding?” he asked himself then, taking the second part of his clothes from her hand and pulling the cotton sweat pants up his legs and over his shorts. “I’m not sure how to explain it. Forget about it, it’s probably nothing.”

He tried not to make a big deal out of it. He tried, in his mind, to brush it aside because he wasn’t ready to dig into something that could flip his world upside down. Deep inside, Branch was afraid that his newfound happiness was fragile enough to shatter in a moments notice. He felt a prickling along his skin, like there was a thin string tied around his pinky finger that looped through the room and connected him to Creek on the other side of the pod. The purple troll was acting normal enough, but the connection between the two was an open door and Creek couldn’t hide his feelings for long. Branch felt the other’s worry and it made him anxious because he didn’t know what it could be about.

A sharp rap on the door and King Peppy poked his beard into the room, waving at Dr. Moonbloom. "We’re about finished with supper," he told her. "Creek is ready for you while I plate up."

"Perfect timing," she said happily, throwing her bag under her arm and following Peppy out of the
bedroom. Branch watched them leave, feeling a little more uneasy but unable to make a comment.

The troll king wandered back into the kitchen while they set up in the living area, Creek being ushered to sit on the sofa so Moonbloom could prop his fractured leg up on the coffee table. She dragged up his pants and began to remove the makeshift splint. The purple troll stuttered a complaint, his cheeks warming, but she ignored him and peered closely at his injury, holding the leg by the ankle.

"Does this hurt," she asked, squeezing the lower part of his calve and Creek made a scrunched face.

"Well if you dig into me with those claws of yours, then -"

"I expected worse," Dr. Moonbloom concluded quickly, "your leg is healing nicely. Whoever made this splint did you a favor. Have you been experiencing any unusual symptoms? Fever? Chills? Vomiting? We can't be too sure if you've acquired a virus from living in the wilderness for so long.”

“No, nothing of the sort,” Creek said, then hesitated a moment before saying, “Except for one thing. Can I ask a favor from you?”

“Sure, that’s what I’m here for,” Dr. Moonbloom nodded while she flexed his knee in an out in her current test.

Creek folded his arms, drumming his fingers on his bicep while he thought over his words. “I’ve been feeling… odd,” he said, frowning over his own incompetence.

“Odd?” The doctor asked lightly, completely enthralled in her study of his weakened leg.

“I feel very emotional,” he started. “More so than usual.”

“Hmm, yes?” The plum colored troll nodded. “Of course, after such a life changing ordeal.”

“And sick to my stomach,” Creek said, hardening the squeeze on own arms from nervousness.
“You haven’t been eating well either,” the doctor explained, setting his leg back down on the table to rummage through her bag.

“Sometimes I get a headache… sometimes I’m dizzy,” Creek said quietly. He watched the doctor completely ignore him and frowned. “Doctor, you are not listening to me.”

Moonbloom blinked and gathered her attention back, “What? Yes, of course I am! You are fit as a fiddle, I’m sure. Your leg should be good enough to function normally in just a few weeks. There’s no need for a splint anymore. I just wanted to take a blood sample for some future tests.” She smiled brightly and revealed an empty syringe in her hand with an extra long needle.

Creek’s eyes widened, “No! That is definitely not needed,” he said quickly, grabbing her wrist before she could poke it anywhere near him. “I have another test for you to take. Can you just… tell me if I am expecting?”

It was Dr. Moonbloom’s eyes that widened this time and she leaned back with a questioning look, darting from Creek’s serious face then down to his lower stomach briefly. She dropped the syringe back in her travel back and snapped it shut. “Funny joke,” she said hotly, adjusting her glasses. “I wasn’t born yesterday, boy trolls can’t expect. Just who do you think I am?”

“Check anyway,” Creek said tightly. “Humor me.”

Dr. Moonbloom raised her brow in suspicion but then shrugged it off, “Fine, whatever, I’ve got a little time left.” She unzipped the side of her bag and produced a rather plain cotton swab on a stick, then suddenly shoved it directly into Creek’s mouth. He blinked in surprise and she adjusted it to his cheek, wiggling the stick roughly and then yanking it out just as fast.

“Why in the world did you - “ he said, but the doctor raised her finger to silence him, clicking the saliva ridden stick into a remote-like device.

“There are different ways to tell,” Moonbloom said, almost seeming bored, “but the easiest, fastest way is to analyze the chemical levels in your spit.” The plum troll hummed and bounced her head back and forth, staring at the screen of the device while she waited for the results to appear. Creek leaned forward from the couch and tried to look over it as well but she snatched it away, making a sly grin. “Hasty to see your negative result?”

Creek grit his teeth, holding back the swell of irritation, “Perhaps.” Doctor or not, he was about to
give Moonbloom a piece of his mind, until her test reader chimed in. She adjusted her glasses again, squinting at the digital screen.

“Oh my. Weird. Interesting!” she exclaimed. “How is this possible?! You’re pregnant. Oh, uh, congratulations as well. You’re a father. Mother? Hmm, I’ll have to go back and re-examine my biology studies…”

It was true. He was pregnant, and he already knew it. Creek’s nervous, churning stomach became that much worse and he put his hand to his forehead, trying to take in a breath but his lungs didn’t seem to be working. From the other side of the living room, a shriek blasted loud enough to startle them both and Creek jerked his head up in a sudden strike of fear. Poppy stood in the hallway and pointed at Dr. Moonbloom, her face in utter shock.

“What did you say?!” Poppy yelled at her. “DID YOU JUST SAY PREGNANT?”

“POPPY, no! SHHHH!”

Creek jumped up from the couch in a fiery haste and bounded into the pink troll, clapping his hands on her mouth tightly to keep her spastic voice from spreading to any other rooms. She struggled under him with her eyes blown and they wrestled briefly on the plush carpet. Dr. Moonbloom watched them in amusement then idly dusted off her pants, picking up her bag of instruments and walking to the front door of the pod.

“I’ve other things to attend,” she called out to them. “Let me know if anything changes with the boys, Princess Poppy. I’ll make another house call. Toodles.”

The front door snapped shut in the doctor’s wake and Creek looked over his shoulder, panting a curse. He couldn’t let Moonbloom get away either. There was too much, too soon, and he felt stricken with panic in all directions.

“HOLD IT RIGHT THERE, MISTER!” Poppy grabbed Creek around the waist as he tried to scramble back to catch Moonbloom from getting too far and they both collapsed again on the carpet. The pink troll straddled his middle and pinned Creek’s hands to the ground in a dominant fashion.

“Please, Poppy,” Creek begged her. “Don’t say anything. Please!” He struggled against her ungodly strength, his panic fully setting in.
“Creek, stop. Creek! It's okay!” Poppy tried, “I won’t say anything. I promise! Stop fighting me for two seconds!”

The purple troll breathed heavily and closed his eyes, trying to believe in her. The turbulences of all his fears and doubts were suffocating, or perhaps it was the fact that she was crushing his lungs. “Alright, get off,” Creek gasped. The princess let go of his wrists and bounced off his chest quickly. Despite their tussle, she was grinning from ear to ear and did her best to stand in one spot while Creek slowly pulled himself off the ground.

“So?” Poppy said, folding her excited hands behind her back. “Did I hear right?”

Creek looked at her grimly and ran his fingers through his long hair, straightening out the frayed ends in order to calm himself. “And if you did hear correctly?” he said, “Either way, I need you to swear on our friendship that you will not tell a single soul.”

“Can I tell Branch?” she squealed.

“ABSOLUTELY NOT!” Creek yelled, glaring at her credulously.

“Jeeze! Okay, you have my word. I won’t say anything to anyone.” The pink troll pouted in defeat, then shimmied up next to Creek and nudged him gently with her elbow, bouncing her eyebrows at him. “I know how trollings are made,” she said with a grin, “This means you and Branch are finally a pair, right? We’re going to have to throw another party! OH! And a baby shower! A wedding!? WHEN are you going to tell Branch?! Do you need help putting together a reveal party?”

Her excitement was unrestrained and the more Poppy teetered on her heels and threw her arms in the air, the sicker Creek became until he was wobbling on his own feet, nausea sweeping him up in a tidal wave. “I don’t know,” he groaned. Creek leaned his hip against the arm of the couch and held his stomach while his entire body drowned itself in a sheet of chilled sweat.

“Are you okay?” Poppy asked worriedly, taking his elbow to help steady his stand.

Creek nodded and then gestured towards the kitchen, allowing Poppy to help him to the small dining table lined with four elegant chairs and previously laid place settings. He slipped into the seat and sighed, curling his arms around his hair while he rested forehead on the table top. “Just leave me here until it's time to eat,” he said in a quiet, muffled voice.
King Peppy came out from around the corner of the kitchen, carrying a steaming casserole dish straight out of the oven. He smiled warmly at Poppy, gently placing it in the center of the table and taking off his oven mitts. “Poppy, my wonderful daughter, why don’t you go fetch Branch now?” he offered.

“Yes, dad,” she said, looking from her father to the sad state of her best friend, then bit her lower lip and left the dining room.

When Peppy was sure she was gone, he cleared his throat and patted his hand on Creek’s shoulder, earning him a weary glance. “We’ll figure it out,” he said simply. “I won’t say anything either. If you want to talk later, my old ears are open, child.”

Creek moaned again in grievance, realizing that there were now a total of three trolls that could possibly spill the beans before he even knew what to do with himself. Poppy was loud enough for her dad to overhear, what if Branch had heard already as well? His head was swimming with a hundred possibilities and even more so that he couldn’t fathom. Sitting there at his table, he tried to soak in everything that had happened that day. The sun had already set hours ago and soon after dinner, he’d be left alone with Branch; Left alone with his new mate in a large, quiet pod that felt familiar, yet unfamiliar. In a sense, Creek already knew that he was pregnant. He knew from the first moment of illness while camping with Diego in the rocky valley. He had tried to ignore it, even when his symptoms worsened. He ignored, but the growing spirit within him bubbled up and greeted his aura as a tiny orb of happiness that slipped out of his grip of control.

He couldn’t lie about being incredibly happy. Creek was so happy he felt his throbbing heart was going to choke him, but the prospect that Branch would reject their possible family scared him enough to douse the flame of his passions. It was just the beginning of their relationship. In reality, they didn’t even have a relationship. They’ve gotten as far as confirming they were soul mates, but Creek wanted more than that. He wanted the chance to properly court Branch and give the troll everything he deserved. They’ve missed out on so much, both of them guilty for wasting time until they were already halfway through life.

On top of his worries, now he had to keep Poppy from opening her big mouth. It was his mistake to ask for that test while they were still in his pod. He should have waited. He should have done many things differently, but now it was too late. Branch deserved to hear it from his mouth before anyone else. Creek hoped with every fiber of his being that he could trust Poppy and King Peppy to let him handle his own future.

Creek lifted his head from the table and straightened a stray strand of hair when he heard the soft footsteps come down the hall, trying to make it look like he wasn’t about to fall apart. King Peppy hummed to himself, cutting into the casserole and then giving Branch a big smile when he came to the table, taking the chair at Creek’s side.
“It smells good,” Branch said. “Your own recipe, King Peppy?”

The elderly orange troll chuckled, “A secret recipe! One that will warm everyone’s heart.” He scooped servings into Branch and Creek’s plates while Poppy plopped herself into the third chair across the table, tilting her head.

“It looks like plain lasagna,” she said.

“Oops, you caught me,” Peppy mused, nodding for Branch to start eating.

Creek kept his hands in his lap, twisting his fingers together while he reeled in his emotional distress. He looked from Poppy to Peppy, then side glanced at the gorgeous cerulean troll at his side that was carefully cutting a corner piece of his dinner. Branch happened to glance at him as well, but then he averted his gaze quickly, continuing the casual conversation about King Peppy’s cooking like there was nothing bothering him.

The room seemed to be underwater. Creek’s ears couldn’t pick up any bits of what they were talking about. His palms sweat and his heart was thundering in his chest. Branch subtly slipped his hand under the table and gripped Creek’s wrist, giving it a loving squeeze. The gesture was electrifying, the unexpected warmth of energy flowing from his mate’s touch and soothing many of his erratic feelings. He was able to take in a breath, looking back over again to see Branch giving him the smallest, most gentle smile. It was almost like he was saying, *It’s okay. I’ve got you.* Pressure built behind Creek’s eyes and he took in another shaky breath, pulling in as much positive energy he could find. It was going to be a horribly long night.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Thank you again for all your feedback, it really helps me keep writing! Work has been so hellish lately also, this chapter is NSFW -eyes- so beware. muwahahaha

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In Branch’s world, it took ages for dinner to be over. He drummed his fingers on the table then picked up his fork for the dozenth time to poke at the unfinished bits of food on his plate. He was feeling more unappetized the longer he listened to the royal family banter back and forth about their options on reinstating Creek into the troll village. The funeral had already long since completed and no one knew about his miraculous return besides themselves, except a few other trolls like Guy Diamond and Moonbloom. Among other things, Poppy gushed enthusiasm for a welcome home party. Her father listened intently and stroked his big fuzzy beard, nodding to her plans that were filled with immeasurable amounts of singing and dancing while Creek said nothing at all. The troll stared into his barely eaten dinner, allowing them discussion on his behalf. He hadn't spoken much the entire night and no one bat a concerning eye over his behavior, but Branch did.

The endless party plans made him feel sick to his stomach. Even though Branch finally felt a sense of emotional balance, he still didn't like the sound of parties, glitter, or hanging out with all of Poppy's weird friends. On top of that, listening to them talk so nonchalant about Creek's death, or lack of, thrust a sour taste of bile over his tongue. It seemed he still hadn't finished mourning, even while the purple troll was back by his side. Both of them had gone through their own share of trauma so it wasn't surprising that Branch still desperately clung to reality with everything he had. He hadn't forgotten all the promises made when bargaining with whatever higher entity that gave a damn to listen. To get over his life's pain, it was going to take more than just being happy and colorful. Branch needed to change his ways, keep an open mind, and stay true to the needs of his heart and needs of his soul mate. He wanted to spend the rest of his days flipping his world around for the better, Creek in hand. He trusted that he was awake and aware, but still afraid that this was all just a really amazing, well devised dream.

Floating over the happy talk between reunited troll friends, the ethereal connection between the soul mates vibrated in a subtle, shadowed energy. Branch’s left hand still rested on Creek's wrist under the table, out of sight. He pet his thumb into the troll's skin in an effort to calm down the insecure feeling. It was awkward yet pleasing because for once in his life, Branch was doing the consoling and he relished in it. Creek made no move to stop him and the hardened features on his face slackened minutely, relaxing into Branch’s subtle care. The more the blue troll secretly observed Creek, the more concerned he became about what was really going through the guy’s mind.

Finally, Peppy’s chair scraped backwards and he got up from the table, giving his large belly a satisfied pat down. “I think it’s time we head home, Poppy,” he said. “It's getting late and there are a
“No! I’ve got it,” Branch said quickly, jumping out of his seat and scooped up all the plates and utensils. He took them to the sink before Peppy could grab any, tossing the soiled dishes into fresh water and waving Peppy away. “It’s not a big deal, you guys go ahead and get out of here.”

To be completely honest, Branch wanted nothing more than to get a little more personal time with Creek. To spend time with him? Of course; to interrogate him on his abnormal mood? More than likely. Honestly, he appreciated everything that his friends were doing and wouldn't mind seeing them more. He’d have to apologize for everything he’s said and done to them recently but right now he wanted them to leave. Poppy and her father just couldn't get out of the pod fast enough.

Slow and steady like an aged turtle, King Peppy stretched some more with a long sigh. He smiled in Creek’s direction, who was still sitting silently at the table with downcast eyes. The young troll looked deflated and tired, a single strand of teal hair sticking out of place. “If you insist,” the troll king said. “I’m sure you two have more things to discuss... but don’t stay up too much longer. It's already past ten o’ clock.” He walked around the table to the purple troll and beckoned him in for a hug. Creek raised his gaze and nodded silently, letting the orange troll lean in and give him a hearty squeeze before Poppy trotted over to join them.

"I'm so happy you're home safe, Creek," Poppy gently cooed, laying a quick kiss on his temple. She took the liberty of gently smoothing out his stray hair. "I'll stop by tomorrow once everything is in order with the village. There are so many trolls who are going to cry with joy knowing that you're alive, prepare yourself for a bombardment of hugs and gifts."

The corner of Creek's lip twitched, trying hard to cover up an incoming twist of displeasure. Poppy didn't catch it, or pretended not to. She carried on her goodbyes by flipping around and grabbing Branch in a hug as well, though more forced and aggressive. The blue troll heaved while he felt like a balloon about to be popped. She giggled innocently, mercifully releasing him before pursuing her father through the living area, towards the front door. "Make sure you save me all the details," Poppy said with a knowing, chaotic grin while waving goodbye. She then winked at Branch, to which he returned a confused frown. Once again, there was something swirling around that every troll knew about except for him. These constant secrets weren’t going to sit well, but forcing himself to have an open mind would ultimately save a lot of headaches. He was sure he'd find out anyway, in due time.

“Don’t feel obligated to hurry over, we’ll be pretty busy,” Branch said, mirroring the most smug-ridden smirk he could muster up. "If you know what I mean." He winked back at the pink troll and Poppy turned ten shades of red, briskly snapping the front door shut behind her as she left without another word. Bold move on his part but Branch knew she’d make herself a little more scarce. Poppy tried so hard to bring them together, she wasn’t about to butt into any potential romanticism.
Branch slid the door's metal lock into place, sighing with heavy relief and sagging ears. The pod was finally at peace, leaving the two trolls alone together for the rest of the night. Unfortunately, their biggest challenge had yet to come. The atmosphere changed then and the fine hairs along the back of Branch's neck bristled. He could practically feel the thundering beat coming from Creek's chest in the kitchen.

Walking back to the dining table with slow, careful steps, Branch eyed Creek in his peripheral before turning his back to the table and stationing himself by the sink. He dunked his hands into the soapy water to wash the dishes, attempting to mentally quell the spinning tornado of anxiety inside himself. The other troll still said nothing and nerve wracking silence broke gently to clinking saucers and cups. Branch didn't know what to say so he swallowed feebly at the lump in his throat. There were so many unanswered questions and each one led to more uncertainties. What was going through Creek’s head right now? Maybe the troll had ultimately changed after being lost for so long. His current demeanor reminded Branch of himself, or at least all of the feelings he harbored most of his life. Cold, distant, unhappy...

With the frightening aspect of Creek actually being unhappy and turning grey, the link between the two trolls thrummed stronger than ever. Branch felt weak to the wave of intense feelings flowing around him and it was followed Creek’s signature perfume. The smell gently clouded the kitchen, reaching out to Branch for desperate attention. He didn’t have to look back to know that their being alone was making Creek just as erratic. It’s like he could decipher the codes just by taking in his scent. Branch wracked his brain and bit into his tongue thinking of the true problem, or even some sort of solution to lessen the stress. If anything, they should be a lot closer now, definitely more personal together, or so Branch hoped. They kissed, didn’t they? Hell, they’d even mated out in the woods. Why was this so difficult? He was more than ready to drop all the old judgement. He wanted to leap in head first, just like he promised, and start fresh. The only differences between them were Branch’s newly found colors. It couldn't be because of his colors, right?

Suddenly feeling incredibly self conscious, Branch dried his hands with a nearby dish towel and looked down at his palms. His skin, bright and blue, was blemish free and easy on the eyes. His pride blossomed and he flexed his digits experimentally. The longer he adjusted to his new self, the more he felt as if he was finally saying hello to an old friend. The colorful suit was really becoming him each passing moment. Creek jabbed at him for years and put him down for being grey and colorless, though honestly wishing that Branch’s colors would just come back. That’s all Creek ever wanted out of him, his true colors. Here they were, prominent and beautiful. It would be a hard fact to swallow if Creek wasn’t happy with it.

A familiar pain ghosted over his heart and Branch sucked in a gasp, eyes bearing hard into his skin. He waited for it to fade with devastated breaths, each second agonizingly long. Every trickle of doubt scared him into believing that he would drop back down the hole he’d finally dug out of. Having a wide array of emotions was normal. He couldn’t be one hundred percent happy all the time. No troll was always happy, they dealt with the ups and downs of life like anyone else. It wasn't logical to be worried about having regular, upset emotions, but it was definitely going to take some time to adjust to this second chance. He'd sacrifice anything to stay out of the darkness...
Branch let out a slow, deliberate exhale to calm down, but the itching in his brain got the better of his tongue.

“Creek… Is my color making you unhappy?” he mumbled out. The blue troll snapped his mouth shut quickly after, gripping the edge of the kitchen counter with both hands. He inwardly cursed and festered with hard regret. Creek was upset about something and the best he could conclude was that he just wanted to be accepted by him? It was so selfish and pathetic that he was appalled by his own stupidity.

Chair legs scraped loudly against the wooden flooring and Creek was at his back in a moment, wrapping his arms around Branch’s middle. Burned white hot by the unexpected hug, Branch’s pulse quickened and his breath caught fast. Creek’s solid form pushed against the length of his back and the troll’s arms tightened possessively around him.

“I love your color,” Creek said gruffly, his moving lips brushing unbearably close to the skin of Branch’s throat. “Even so, color or not, you are a stunning troll. Don’t you dare think otherwise.” Branch shivered heavily and he raised his hand to touch Creek’s arm. He couldn’t believe how effortless it was for Creek to break him apart. “Then… why?” he asked quietly. “What’s wrong?”

The blue troll gasped as he was forcibly spun around on his heels. Creek pinned him to the counter top edge, taking Branch’s chin aggressively and kissing him on the lips without a reply. He was about to protest, still needing a legitimate answer for all his worries, but the sweetness of Creek’s mouth buried him in heaven’s clouds. They kissed deeply, a unanimous sigh coming from both trolls as contented feelings sprouted up and tangled around each fleeting thought. There was less and less room around him and Branch felt hot from the contact. He pet his palm up Creek’s chest, pushing slightly but fiercely wanting to drag him in closer. He couldn’t help but want to touch the troll now, he’d be insane for not doing so. It was too easy for him to fall; a simple kiss setting off a complex array of desires that lit sparklers inside his heart. Branch sighed again through his nose while they kissed and he rubbed his hand unconsciously over the thin nightshirt to feel up Creek’s thick pectoral muscle.

Creek made a breathy noise and broke their kiss all too soon. He panted, a dark glaze cast over his eyes that were blown with a wanton craving that sent chills of anticipation through Branch’s spine. “Believe me,” he said, dropping his hands to Branch’s hips to squeeze them in a vice grip. “Everything is fine… I’m fine. Are you fine, love?”

Pulse throbbing, Branch swallowed heavily and nodded. He sucked a deep breath, catching more waves of Creek’s scent that were now incredibly thick and overwhelming. It was nothing short of
intoxicating and his head became fuzzy. “I’m fine” he said, his original worries still holding on but feebly now. “We can go to bed, if you want.”

Alone with Creek, going to bed with him; Branch blushed hard by himself. The cogs in his brain whirled to a different set of images, none of which where actual sleeping was involved. Going back to Creek’s room and getting under the covers with him was increasingly erotic and undoubtedly within reach for every second they looked at one another. Branch tried not to assume anything was going to happen. He felt entirely too needy and hopeful that their relationship would deepen and now include carefree tumbles on sheets whenever they shared a kiss or touch. But he did hope, and he did need. His hopes gave Branch goosebumps when he spotted Creek's hard-bearing gaze dart down and give him a good once over, taking in all of Branch’s shape. Written plain as day across his features, it was difficult to be worried about anything at all. Creek was twisting him around his pinky finger, secretly promising pleasures with nothing but his gorgeous, lilac eyes; pleasures that were literally right around the corner of the pod. He’d felt Creek’s body once before and he wouldn’t mind exploring it again.

“Come with me,” Creek whispered, leaning in and kissing him again. The fresh kiss was enough to make Branch’s toes curl. He couldn't get enough of it.

Dazed and weak willed, Branch’s hands were taken and he was led away from the sink. Creek clasped him tight, flicking off the kitchen lights to cast the pod in darkness as they made their way down the hall and back to the bedroom. Branch tried to adjust his eyes to the lack of light, his beat racing ever faster.

“Are you afraid?” Creek whispered teasingly without looking back, squeezing his hand tighter. “I can hear your heart.”

Branch pursed his lips, then smirked as he replied boldly, “No, I’m excited.” The purple troll made a small noise that sounded like a needy whine, clearing his throat after to hide it, which only made Branch grin wider. He loved that he wasn’t the only one that was having a difficult time.

They turned into the bedroom and Creek abruptly yanked him in. Branch stumbled towards the bed and whipped around to witness the door slamming shut, the purple troll locking it fast then pulling his shirt up and over his head.

Branch's blood ran hot and shot between his weakened legs. He sat carefully at the edge of the mattress, soaking in the pleasant view of Creek's naked torso. It didn’t seem like he wanted to waste time and he was thankful for it. His skin was incredibly vibrant as always, but he looked leaner than what Branch could remember. Shoulder muscles danced and his stomach flexed in the shadows while Creek threw away his top to the corner of the room. He shook out his long hair and the two-toned locks waved gracefully into their natural shape, managing to arouse Branch more with a simple
flick that all trolls could do.

"Still fine?" the troll asked. His voice was seductive and hypnotic while he stepped in close, slipping between Branch's idly spread knees. Before he answered, Creek was suddenly climbing up his lap, latching back onto his mouth. They drifted backwards together on the bed and kissed again, passion striking hotter while their tongues curled and fought in the moment.

"Mmfh… 'm great," Branch rasped into their messy kissing, writhing underneath Creek's weight and pushing up to keep the fire kindled. They ground and stroked their hips together and Branch felt his eyes roll back into his head, hands flying out to anchor at Creek's shoulders. His shirt was being raked up, warm palms gripping his bared ribs and caressing around his chest. Branch could feel every crevice and hill of the other troll's body and he couldn’t possibly fathom having anyone else riding between his legs like this.

Through the shivering and panting, Branch sensed the negative pressure arise again. It was so tiny he barely noticed it in the accumulating hellfire. He needed Creek bad, more than ever before, but his better judgement was annoyingly getting in the way. Branch tried hard to ignore... until Creek's hands slowly caressed down his stomach, then stopped moving entirely. The two trolls lay there awkwardly, breathless and still.

“I can't," Creek said quietly. A deep, pained expression set into his flushed face.

“Huh?" Branch lifted his head dizzily, looking down in confusion. Creek avoided eye contact, just resting his hands on Branch’s belly with his lips parted while he caught his breath. They were both hot and bothered and Branch was aroused to the point of breaking through his pants. He couldn’t imagine that Creek wasn’t feeling the same urgency so it didn’t make sense for him to stop, unless his problem was actually that big. Branch's worries bubbled back up to the surface and he propped himself up on his forearms, waiting for Creek to explain.

“I’m… conflicted," Creek whispered to him. “I don’t know if I can mate right now. I’m sorry.” Creek slipped away from him and moved over the edge of the bed, sitting down with his elbows on his knees and hands buried in his frazzled teal hair. The inner frustration was achingly apparent and they were crudely tossed back to square one.

Branch sat up and stared at him with heavy breaths, wracking his brain for something, anything at all, that could help him understand what the hell was going on. “If you really don’t want me," he said, “then just say it to my face. I can handle it.” He didn’t mean for it to come off with so much anger but Creek wasn’t the only one frustrated.
The purple troll looked back to him quickly, “I do want you! That’s not it at all –“

“Alright, then just tell me what’s wrong,” Branch said, trying with a bit more sympathy. He didn’t want to fight, he just wanted answers. “Don’t say everything is fine, either,” he added, scooting over to him and taking Creek’s arm to help dislodge the grip on his long locks. He urged Creek to look him in the eyes. “What’s been bothering you this whole time?”

Creek looked at him and grit his teeth tightly, his eyes beginning to shine with oncoming tears. Branch felt distraught, having to watch the one he loved become upset enough to cry. Didn’t they share enough tears, already? He waited for him to say something. Each second felt sluggish and endless, until finally Creek dropped his gaze, putting his hand to his forehead.

“I am scared…”

Pangs of guilt wrought through Branch’s heart and he squeezed Creek’s arm tight. “Scared?” he asked worriedly. “What are you scared of? Did something happen? Are you hurt - did I do something to you? Is it Bergens?!” He ended up going a mile a minute and Creek’s eyes widened.

"Dear Lord, nothing like that!” he said quickly.

"Oh." Branch chuckled nervously, rubbing the back of his neck. “Habits die hard, I guess.”

Creek dragged his palm down his face, shoulders slumped in defeat, “It’s okay, it’s just... me," he began. "I'm scared you'll run out on me… You just found your colors, Branch. I don’t want to be the one that makes you lose them again. Your happiness is so important to me, though it feels somewhat ironic now because I just ruined our good mood."

“I’m not running from you – “

“You will,” Creek cut him off bitterly.

"I won't, trust me." Branch frowned when the purple troll turned his face away. "I don't think there's anything you could say that will make me grey again… the only thing I've wanted this whole time is you to be alive and come back to me."
"That was the easy part, Branch," Creek groaned. "I can’t explain what’s really wrong. I can’t, not yet."

"You can."

"Because it is not that simple of a problem."

"Because you're making it difficult, if you would just -"

"And what if you run?" Creek's voice was beginning to raise and he stood up from the bed, almost glaring down at him. "What am I supposed to do, then? I can’t work another miracle to fix… this."

"I'm not running, I'm right here," Branch said exasperated. "I promise I won’t! Tell me!" Is this what it was like every time someone tried to talk to him through one of his spells of irrationality? He was beginning to dread what was about to be unveiled.

"I'm…" Creek fell silent then, staring hard into him with a tight jaw.

Branch waited patiently but it was an increasingly difficult task. He bit into his tongue to keep quiet, trying to give the troll a chance to break through the barrier. He knew how hard it was, he fought down his own walls on a day to day basis, it was just a matter of -

"I'm pregnant, alright?!" Creek burst abruptly and the blue troll startled, blinking several times while they stared at one another. The silence after was stagnant and suddenly all of Branch’s previous assumptions were crumpled up and tossed away. He couldn't have heard that right.

“Uh… what?” Branch asked weakly.

“I'm pregnant; four weeks in,” Creek repeated, turning away and driving his hands back into his hair with a frustrated whine. Then he quickly forced himself to relax and dropped both arms with a soft laugh, walking around the bed towards the bedroom door. "It’s just one travesty after another, isn’t it? I will piece together a solution, however. You don’t have to worry about it, I just need some time to think.”
“Wait, wait, hold on!” Branch said hurriedly, jumping up to block Creek's escape from the room with lifted palms. “Did I hear that correctly? Let me get this straight. You’re… We’re... having a baby? Because of – when we…? That time before?” He was having a hard time forming a solid coherent sentence while he boggled on the realization of what Creek just told him.

“In the forest, when we couldn’t keep our hands off one another? Yes, my dear. It’s from that, of course. That was the first and only time I’ve ever mated my entire life.”

A heavy blush filled Branch’s cheeks. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing but did he really have a choice? They stood there awkwardly while Branch scraped together a response fitting enough for the news. Creek looked tired and agitated, ready to walk out of the room if he was given the chance. He couldn't let him leave, not like this. Branch was utterly surprised, to say the least, but strangely enough he didn’t feel the least bit scared or upset about the sudden unfolding of their future. This is what Creek had been worrying about so harshly.

"A little trolling," Branch said quietly, sinking into the image. The possibilities shuttled through his brain at a lightning pace, each one more precious than the last. There was no doubt that Creek would make a wonderful father. He could picture it now, watching his soul mate and their children in their day to day life. He felt a warmth blooming inside himself the more he thought about it. Once upon a time, he didn't believe that he could have kids, especially not with Creek, no matter how much he loved him. His life was too dark. He couldn't be passionate; couldn't possibly care for anyone in that condition. He just wasn't capable, but now…

The purple troll in waiting let out a constricted breath, wiping a stray tear off his own cheek. The huff caught Branch's attention and he rattled himself back to the present.

“Listen, Creek…” he started quietly. " The pressure in the room magnified as he felt ripples of insecurity. His nervous mate shuffled slightly on his feet and glanced towards the bedroom door, undoubtedly thinking of bolting out of the situation. Branch smiled inwardly, finding it humorous that Creek swore he'd run when he was the one searching for an exit.

Taking Creek's hands gently in his own, Branch cleared his throat and continued. "I never thought I’d be able to have a family again,” he said. “I believed I didn’t deserve it because I always felt at fault… I lost my parents before I could remember them; I lost Grandma Rosiepuff and spent my entire life in a depression I couldn’t get out of... I even lost you, Creek, my best friend in the entire world.” He pulled the purple troll closer to him so that he could slip his arms around his waist. "I know what it’s like to be insecure about everything and everyone. It took me this long to accept the truth of my feelings for you… don’t you think you should give me a little more credit?” With that, Branch moved one arm up and cupped Creek’s cheek gently. He could feel the rough pounding of his mate’s heart and it made him feel giddy and excited. “Look at me,” he grinned. "I'm still here, aren’t I? You being pregnant is the best news I’ve heard in a long time.”
Creek couldn’t help smiling back through deep, watering eyes. “Gosh, Branch. Were you always this openly poetic?”

“I’ve been told I have the soul of a poet.” Branch snatched the opportunity to dip forward for a kiss. The troll sighed against him, all of the pressure melting away as quickly as it came. When he pulled away, they were both blushing up to their ears.

"You surprise me," Creek sniffed gently, clearing up the rest of his fears.

"There's a lot more you can discover," Branch whispered, "are you prepared to deal with me for the rest of your life?"

"I won't let you go again." Creek pet his thumb over his flushed cheek, giving Branch another quick kiss. "Be mine, love."

Branch blushed harder and stuttered slightly, "I'm already yours, you know. Soul mates and whatnot."

Shaking his head slowly, Creek grasped his hands again, bringing them up to touch kisses on each of his knuckles. "Besides that, I meant officially. Let me court you, Branch. Date me; and then when our trolling comes, marry me."

He didn't know how red his face was in that moment. Branch couldn't breathe properly and his heart thundered in his ears. Now this; this is what true happiness must feel like. Everything else had been a lie until this point.

"Wow," Creek chuckled then. "Your freckles are glowing. Does that mean 'yes'?"

They were, sure enough. His freckles were few and far between but they were shimmering a bright silver along his warmed cerulean cheeks. Branch turned his face away, but they only glittered brighter and Creek couldn't stop smiling at him.

"Quit looking at me," Branch grunted, but his happiness was overwhelming. He couldn't even pretend to be irritated.
“Make me,” Creek challenged. "You're absolutely beautiful, I can't look away. Not just in color, but everything else as well."

"You're going to regret being so fond," Branch growled playfully, capturing the other's waist. He spread his fingers along the bare skin of Creek's spine, drawing from him a quick shiver. The purple troll didn't say anything then, his skin springing a fresh set of goosebumps while Branch touched him. It was all too easy to pull Creek back in. The uneasy vibe had vanished without a trace and he wanted nothing more than to make Creek as happy as he felt.

Feeling absolutely overjoyed and a little bit aroused, he caught Creek’s lower lip between his teeth. Branch nibbled softly and swiped his tongue over the flesh, his cheeks glowing in a mixture of bravery and embarrassment. The purple troll trembled harder and his long eyelashes fluttered. There it was again – the absolute power in a single caress. He wanted more, and Branch was certain he could get it.

“So, Creek… Have you thought of a name, then?” Branch murmured casually, sucking the tender lip while his hands wandered a gentle route around his hips.

“A n-name?” Creek responded, swallowing over his drying throat.

"For our child," Branch hummed, pecking his lips again with the slowest movements between each word. “I’m curious, would you prefer a girl... or a boy trolling?” His whispers became more daring while he took all the sensations of Creek’s shivering. Branch held his breath then and moved both hands around the purple troll's backside, traveling down to palm the delicious swells of his ass. He felt every jerk and twitch radiating from his mate's body while they melted together and Creek was hardly passive in his arms.

“Good God, Branch,” he grunted and squirmed.

The obvious frustrations threading his voice made Branch grin. “Tell me, Creek?” He tightened his hold on his prize and squeezed, digging his fingertips in and pinning Creek’s hips roughly into his own. Now painfully aroused, his coming groan was unrestrained and the sound bolted through Branch’s ears and ripped desire down his body, straight to his groin. He mentally doubled over from it and clung to the unruly troll, continuing the erotic massage into his bottom cheeks.

“Both,” Creek gasped and threw his face forward to hide it in Branch’s neck, his hands twisting hard into his nightshirt and jerking the material roughly, seemingly confused on what his hands should be
doing in the moment. “I want both – I don’t care. Give me both.” Creek arched his hips in an attempt to grind off the bulge in his pants, the threads of his sanity snapping and fraying away. The tight rutting almost crippled Branch’s knees, he didn’t know how much longer he could play the game.

"Y-You want more than one?"

“I want you .”

Creek grabbed him by the arms in a fast show of strength and steered him backwards to the bedspread, forcing him to lay across the mattress. Branch gasped and attempted to sit back up but the purple troll was already on top of him, straddling his waist and weighing him down to the plush bedding. Their roles were dramatically reversed and it only fueled the passion. Creek proceed to attack his neck in flurry of scraping teeth and heavy licks. He sucked the skin hard then dragged his tongue downward from the fresh bruise on a new trail of marking Branch would come to know for days. It felt so rough, possessive, and sent pleasurable electric shocks throughout his nerves. He slapped a hand over his face and muffled a moan when Creek ripped up his shirt and pulled it off his head, immediately locating his left nipple to tease the dark nub. Creek dug in with the tip of his tongue before sucking it into his mouth.

"What the hell," Branch breathed rapidly as his other nipple was given the same adoring attention. "Ngh! Creek, you're so...

"I am going to make such sweet love to you." Creek raised up and whispered hotly against his sensitive ear, dropping the clothing onto the floor, "you’ll not want to leave this bed for days." He licked up the pointed curve and Branch whimpered loudly, unable to control his own voice. He felt like prey to hungry lion, a starving animal hell bent on consuming him in every way possible, and by God, Branch was going to give himself up on a golden plate.

Chapter End Notes

Thats a killer of a cliffhanger, oops.
"Are you sure you're okay with this?"

Branch nodded, pressing his face into the mattress. "If you can do it, I can do it..."

Naked and feverish, the blue troll was propped up by his knees, chest flush to the bed. Even covered in darkness, the room couldn't keep their secrets hidden. Moonlit beams cast between a crack in the window curtains, illuminating the bedroom and Branch's skin. He glowed with incomprehensible beauty, displaying a scattered litter of dark hickies and crescent bites. Every mark paved to the deep reaches of his body, having been thoroughly explored and loved by Creek's mouth only moments before.

Sitting behind him, the urge to literally devour his soul mate took its savage hold on Creek again and he caressed his palms around the backside of Branch's muscled thighs. The other troll groaned in desperation, adjusting his knees on the bedspread to dip his spine, fully presented and trusting. It was a sight to behold and Creek wouldn't refuse Branch's invitation. He was achingly hard and not far off from the same state. Hunger growing, he gripped Branch's legs and leaned in to lick the tight hole nestled between his bottom cheeks.

"Ah-h!?" Branch jerked his head up fast and looked back over his shoulder with a ghastly expression.

Creek ignored him and hastily drove his tongue inside, playing deep with a satisfied rumble. He quickened his hold, forcing the jerking lower half of Branch's body to keep still so he could dig deep. Soft whimpers of his name soothed over his ears and Creek watched the blue troll's head drop back down in defeat, hands curling into the bed sheet tight. Branch's thighs were practically vibrating, making it difficult to have any semblance of control. Between all of the innocent noises and perfect reception, Creek could barely shackle himself down. He wanted to ravage this troll. He wanted to make him scream. There were delicious, musky trails of Branch’s soul scent tangling up their air and
aggressively suffocating him in unexplained ways. He would do anything for this troll. Anything at all; be a slave to his will without a touch of doubt. His resolve to start gently was crumbling but Creek had to be stronger, at least just for a little while. He had goals and he wanted to make this pleasure last.

Somehow finding a gentle, lapping rhythm, Creek slowly pried his gripping fingers away as Branch settled down. He apologetically massaged the reddened divots his thumbs made then went to spread his cheeks open, aching for more. His quivering lover's breath became labored while he begrudgingly accepted that Creek was going to do whatever he wanted, however he wanted, no matter how crazy.

"Oh God, Creek" Branch moaned for him. "I can't... wait anymore. I need..." he stopped again, his words replaced by another jumble of incoherent noises.

“Patience, love,” Creek murmured, trailing the tip of his tongue lower, down the soft sack then back up again before slipping a hand between his legs. He teasingly stroked over Branch's swollen sex and it responded immediately, a sharp whimper breaking over the noise of panting. It was solid and burning, twitching in his palm, and desire traveled through Creek as molten rapids while he played with him. His own naturally made slick was leaking to make a mess inside his thighs, the core of his body pulsing for the same attention. Branch didn't have this kind of arousal; he was most definitely the physically dominant troll between the two of them. Their bodies may have been born differently so that they could reproduce, but right now this beautifully crafted soul mate, dominant or not, was literally begging to be impaled; quite the opposite that nature intended. Creek's reservoir of control was running empty and he quickly wanted to make sure Branch wasn't going to end up hurt by this switch around, similar to the scenario when they'd first mated.

"Please," Branch begged, his calls becoming more desperate. His thighs trembled consistently and his knees started to slide down on the sheet while Creek thrust his tongue inside over and over again, making sure every inch of what he could reach was wet enough to compensate.

Creek loved how Branch was letting go, being recklessly loud and groaning away the world. It was just the two of them and they’ve left all judgement where it lay, forgetting about the outside and anything else on the other side of the door. Nothing else mattered but one another. The blue troll was so attractive with his pure reactions that each moment passing Creek became impossibly more aroused.

By Branch’s next sharp inhale, he removed his mouth fast and touched a loving kiss to the base of his spine, reaching to the right side by the night stand. It took only seconds to dip his fingers into a small jar of oils previously stashed in the drawer. Creek thanked his stars that he figured they were going to be a little more personal tonight and went ahead with proper preparation earlier. This would do very nicely for them both so he didn't feel like warning his next onslaught, replacing the twitching void with two wet fingers and delving them deep to the knuckle. He blushed himself, surprised at how
much softer his body felt inside and how loose it already was.

"Fuck," Branch cursed as he jerked forward and his face flushed a deeper hue of red.

Creek’s excitement soared. He panted, caressing his free hand over Branch’s ass while feeling inside of him. He curled his digits upward sharply, searching for a pleasure spot that was surely there. The movement had his mate’s breath catch and he lifted his head again, a violent shiver coursing through his entire being.

“Is that alright,” Creek asked in a mere whisper, stretching and brushing deep, becoming a little more brazen and rough. It would only be moments until he could feel the sweet agony of being buried inside this heaven. The slick, lavender scented oils were beading down his forearm. They weren't strong enough to cover up the heavy cloud of Branch's scent, and while the troll climbed to the peak it became thick and heavy in the room. The ghostly images of rainy forests and honey-ripe roots muddled Creek's psych.

“Yes,” the troll groaned loudly for him again and chanted, pushing back forcefully against Creek's hand. "Yes, yes, yes…” Branch's deep royal hair slithered out and started to wrap around the headboard of the bed, gripping it full force to combat the weakness in the rest of him.

Creek felt like he was going to burst at the seams, all of the nerves in the very center of his aura silently screaming to take Branch now as if he might run away. He moaned and gnashed his lower lip, releasing a steamy breath out his nose. He’d already gone far past limit and Branch just sealed his fate being openly erotic, so he pulled his fingers free and rose up on his knees to give the troll a bit of space.

“On your back.”

Branch gasped and mumbled something that sounded like 'finally'. He reined in his hair and hastily rolled over on the bed, stretching out on his back with his knees spread wide to invite Creek in. This troll couldn’t be any more beautiful. The way his curves and muscles glimmered in the moonlight, following up the v-shape to his belly button, and onward to his broad chest; his fine details were magically crafted specifically with Creek in mind. However, nothing was more attractive than the look on his face. It was reddened and shiny with sweat, tendrils of thick, dark hair sticking to his forehead and curling around his pointed ears. He already looked wrung out because of their foreplay but this would only be the beginning. Creek could see it; pure, raw need shining from his crystal irises while carefully crawling over the top of the blue troll. He hadn’t wanted to be a complete tease but it felt necessary to some degree. His constant touches had done this, created this maddening eroticism, and his sexy mate looked ready to orgasm before they’d even started. He shifted and twitched on the spread, chest heaving with short breaths. Teased, yes, but he was feeling more than good.
"You look like you want me," Branch said then, smirking at him even while breathless.

Creek’s heart clenched at the sight of his smile. He was so gorgeous; so wonderful and perfect. He never wanted that smile to leave his face. "I want you," the purple troll easily agreed, leaning down to kiss. He poured every ounce of adoration into it, making it the sweetest kiss they'd ever exchanged. Branch slackened in pleasure, shakily raising his arms and draping them around his neck. Creek's pulsing erection rested snug between his ass cheeks and in return, he felt the heat from Branch’s tucked along his stomach. The troll’s hips shifted up to graze on him but staying relatively unmoved, waiting to continue.

"I love you," Branch sighed dreamily while the other pressed into the junction of his neck and shoulder, lovingly kissing over the skin while grinding over his most intimate part. Each stroke became long and more languid, their bodies rocking softly into one another by an easy rhythm.

"I love you," Creek returned passionately, claiming the flushed blue skin with another softened hickie. "My beautiful mate." There was a sting behind his eyes, emotions tumbling forth and threatening to ruin him. "My best friend," he continued. That's right, this was his best friend. Creek’s heart traveled backwards in time, pulsing to a tune that was old and dusty. The feelings he held for Branch twenty years ago were swelling up and drowning everything he’d come to known. The sweet, wonderful troll he fell in love with as a kid was right here; wrapped up in his arms like nothing had ever separated them to begin with. They'd never been apart and Creek saw that troll coming forth to meet him in the present. He loved him so much, in so many different ways. Creek swallowed back the lump in his throat, piecing back together his composure.

"Creek…” Branch blushed and swallowed himself. He was becoming bashful, nerves finally showing as he started to emotionally crumble. There was something happening with him, too. He could sense it. They were on the same page. Creek could see it in his eyes and it only made him want more.

"My future husband," the purple troll went to whispering against his ear, brushing his lips over the sensitive lobe, "and the father to my trolling." He kissed it and sucked the bit of flesh into his mouth before rolling his hips seductively, refueling their passions below. Branch was made that much weaker and he whimpered, bringing his ankles up to hook around the other's thighs while his hips rose away from the mattress. The troll’s mumbling became incoherent, eyes clouded and mouth agape as Creek grinded the slicked entrance to his body.

Chanting Branch’s name in breathy whispers, Creek ducked his hand between them and lined up his aching sex. His breath held and his heart hammered, living the tight sensation while he began to pierce ever so slowly, as gently as he could manage. His mate stiffened minutely and sweaty palms clasped his back but no sounds of pain were heard. Pushing onward, it was easy enough to become
fully sheathed. Their slippery oils did the job and Creek finally exhaled. Everything was insanely hotter like someone had thrown a freshly tumbled blanket over them in the middle of summer. He worried glanced back to Branch’s face. “… Alright?”

Nodding fast, Branch dragged Creek closer and clung to any spot his hands could reach, calves scooting up around his hips. His eyes were shiny but he wasn’t crying, thankfully. Sweat shone over his forehead and his neck and chest bloomed a reddish hue from the pressure. He tried not to move too roughly, giving Branch a moment to adjust. The blue troll grunted slightly and panted, pushing back against the tightness.

The feeling of being completely encased in a trembling body was incredible. Creek groaned and flexed his hips into their connection. His entire center of focus was shifting out of alignment; his aura's energy spiraled as it reached, seeking Branch in order to connect farther on an ethereal level. His mind and body wanted to open up like a blooming rose bud. He loved him; he needed him. The physical touch just wasn't enough.

"M-More, not enough," Branch spoke as Creek was thinking. He slipped his fingers through the back of Creek's hair and threaded the teal strands. His loving caress was gentle and ticklish, setting up storm of goosebumps that crawled over Creek’s neck. So much more he wanted to give. Enraptured and hazy, he bucked forward, thrusting deep and hitting his hips into Branch's bottom.

The sound that came out his mate's throat was the most passionate thing Creek had ever heard in his life, his ears burned from the pleasure of hearing it. Taking Branch's leg in one hand, he guided his knee upwards and gripped the underside. Creek pushed deep in the easy position, pumping his hips to make Branch squirm underneath him. The blue troll's arms quickly grappled around the pillow under his head.

"Oh my God," he moaned heatedly.

Creek couldn't bring himself to reply. He gasped heavily and shivered, thrusting harder to bring his erotic lover into a bodily arch. Each time he touched the deepest part inside, their sounds became louder and more urgent. He could feel their separate energies twisting into one another, buzzing heavy over his mind and screwing with his senses. Creek’s thoughts scattered and he used all his will to just keep going. He dragged his free plan to Branch's hip and grabbed it possessively, pulling the troll down to meet him.

The hellfire between them was everlasting and real, building up intense levels in no time at all. He tried to give extra attention to Branch’s reactions, grinding along the sweet gland that would coax him closer to the edge. Suddenly Branch let go of his pillow and he curled towards Creek again, digging his fingers back into his shoulders and neck. The blue troll's breath hitched hard as he clung with all his limbs.
"Yes, my love," Creek whispered to him, quickly kissing his sweaty temple. "Don’t fight it.” He wouldn’t let up, increasing the vigorous pace and hitting rough to forcibly pull Branch's orgasm to the surface. He reached between them and gripped his mate’s dripping member, squeezing and stroking it by the tempo of his thrusts.

"Creek," he cried out. "Creek! I'm - I'm gonna - I feel," he stumbled over his words and arched again, hips and stomach flexing to the movements. Eyes screwed shut and body spasming, it was fast and messy. Another moan ripped from Branch's throat as he came over Creek's fist. He choked up on his cries and clenched his teeth, squeezing around Creek's length in a hard vice grip through his orgasm until he fell back to his pillow, spent and gasping.

Creek shivered, trying not to lose himself over what he just witnessed. His thrusts slowed considerably, turning long and deep while Branch relaxed into the mattress to catch his breath. They weren't finished yet, not by a long shot. He wanted to see it again; see his love reach that plateau of pleasure over and over again, for as long as he could manage. He'd waited and searched his whole life to find his soulmate sitting right under his nose. He'd always dreamed about their relationship and what their love making would be like; all he wanted was to make Branch satiated and happy for the rest of time.

Creek lowered Branch's leg gently, caressing his fingertips along the insides of both his thighs in admiration before kissing him. Another kiss sweeter than sugar, softer than silk, and he felt Branch smile into it.

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They made love to one another for hours, in every way possible, until exhaustion finally took its toll dousing the smolder and allowing a deep, restful sleep for the remainder of the night.

The day that followed after was fully bright and shining over fresh powdered snow by the time Branch roused himself awake. The pod hung quietly among the village inside the great Troll tree canopy. The thick branches and impermeable leaves blocked out most of the winter breeze, gently rocking village homes to a sleepy morning tempo.

The blue troll groaned and stretched long inside Creek's bed, warm feelings of pleasure still lingering in all the right places. Sunlight washed over him from the window and it felt amazing. He smiled sleepily and sat up in bed, rubbing away a yawn before searching for his mate that should've still been in bed with him, but wasn't.
"... Creek?"

Then he squeaked in surprise, realizing he'd been sleeping completely open and nude to the world without a cover. Branch scrambled to hide himself, blushing up to his ears. He bit his dried lip, looking around the empty bedroom. It was really nothing like he expected. This was Creek's room, somewhere he'd never been before… but to be fair, he usually wouldn't be caught dead venturing into other troll pods. Each brightly painted wall had colorful tapestries with patterns that looked like stained glass. There weren't many items, leaving the main area with a lot of empty flow around the large bed. A single wooden chair, a rug, and a nightstand with an elegant lamp and stacks of incense of different flavors. He actively ignored the piles of their clothing strewn across the wood flooring.

Branch was in awe of the set up before eyeing the other side of the bed. The sheet was messed, showing how Creek had rolled out and away, and the mattress was cold; the purple troll hadn't been next to him for awhile. Instead of becoming worried, like he probably would have in the past, Branch took a small breath in and relaxed. His hair tingled at the roots and shimmered over the top of his skin. His senses were telling him that the Creek was still somewhere in the pod. He wasn't alone; he wasn't dreaming. Everything was going to be alright. He was embarrassed but so stupidly happy that there wasn't a damn thing that could bring him down.

Branch slipped carefully out of the blankets and tried to stand, stumbling on his feet before catching his balance on the nightstand. With a touch of color in his cheeks, the troll deduced that last night was too good to be true but the aching pain in his backside told otherwise. Sticky and dried residue covered his thighs and privates; he smelled like stale sex with a hint of lavender. Great combination, he chuckled to himself.

Dragging the sheet back up to cover his nudity, Branch took it and his embarrassment to the bedroom door. He definitely wanted a shower before Creek could spot how much of a hot mess he was. The blue troll opened the door quietly and peeked around the framing. No one in the hallway. He heard a soft clink of a tea cup come from the living room. Darting out without a sound, Branch found the bathroom two doors down the hall and locked himself in to take a shower, leaving the bedsheets abandoned outside on the floor.

While lathering up and washing the ache and grime away, his face wouldn't stop burning as every conversation, every action done, was recalled in great detail. With so many revelations and a new beginning, it was crazy difficult to imagine what was going to happen next. He went from hitting rock bottom, almost dying, to having everything he could ever need dropped right into his lap; with a two for one deal!

He washed his face vigorously in the hot stream, trying to keep his splitting grin at bay. Not only did he have Creek, but now he was going to be a father. He was going to have a family again.
One thing Branch knew for sure; going outside to face the entire village was inevitable. He wanted to walk out in pride, with Creek in hand, and celebrate his return. That was easy enough to conclude... Everyone would cry with joy seeing him alive and well, just like how Branch had done. Creek was loved by all but when it came to himself, he was nervous for reasons he couldn't quite speak aloud.

A quick rap on the bathroom door startled the troll out of his deep thought and he dropped the soap bar.

"Would you like some tea?" Creek called loudly.

He scrambled to pick up the bar and slammed it back on its holding dish, heart hammering in both fear and excitement from hearing Creek's voice. "Uh, yeah. Yes! Tea, okay," he called back, inwardly cursing at himself. He was so dumb, feeling like a blushing bride on a honeymoon. His tongue felt heavy and tangled and the blood in his ears roared louder than the shower. Was it going to be incredibly awkward to talk to Creek after having so much mind blowing, life changing sex? Last night was nothing like the first time they mated. It was almost like their very souls had mingled together. Branch had mentally seen the inner depths of everything that Creek was. Nothing was a secret anymore. He felt like he knew everything about him and in return, he concluded that Creek knew everything about himself as well. It was scary and invigorating to think about.

After rinsing, drying, and rummaging the washroom cupboards to find a pair of sweatpants, Branch shook out his hair and brushed it quickly in the mirror. It was a beautiful hue, shimmering blue and purple in the light and it made his heart squeeze in admiration. Good to see you, he thought to himself. He eyed the dark blemishes, bites and hickeys that scattered over his neck and chest. He blushed again, wondering how he was going to go out in public like this. Not that he cared, really. It only would show that he was a mated troll and that Creek might be somewhat possessive. He liked that he was wanted. Branch smirked in the mirror; Creek, being possessive of him. That was quite the statement.

It didn't take long to become mostly presentable. Creek was waiting for him in the living area, parked on the floor at the center of the room in a familiar lotus position. The purple troll was quiet with his eyes closed, meditating in his signature yellow slacks with two tea cups set to the side on the carved wood coffee table. Branch didn't say anything at first, mesmerized by how attractive he was without doing anything at all. He grazed his eyes over the yoga pose, following up his smooth, two toned hair that curled gently against the sun. For a second time, Branch noticed a jagged cut that caused the tip of Creek's hair to be uneven. It thrust a sour feeling into his stomach but the blue troll shook it away quickly, stepping lightly around the meditating troll to sit down on the floor with him.

They faced one another, Branch folding his legs in and copying the position as best he could. He didn't feel any less stupid than the last time he tried yoga. This wasn't something he was good at, but he would try for Creek. He would do anything for Creek at this point, even look like a fool. He
knew that things were going to be awkward at first... it was unavoidable, let's be honest. He just wanted Creek to know that he was willing to try whatever it was so that they could live a happier life.

Branch closed his eyes and they sat together in complete silence. His brain still whirred, fingers twitching and nose scrunching. At least they were behind closed doors so the only troll to laugh at him was Creek. He sighed softly and tried to relax, letting go of some of his insecurities.

Quiet moments passed and Branch was almost sure that he was going to fall asleep again, until his pointed ears perked when heard a quiet whisper, "Good morning." He cracked open his eyes and saw Creek grinning, then the purple troll leaned in across the rug to kiss him smoothly on the lips. If it was possible for Branch to fall deeper in love, he would have done so again. His lips were perfect, sweet, and refreshing; energizing him in ways he couldn't explain. They lingered for a moment and Creek was the first to pull away, his eyelids heavy and freckles glowing a silver shimmer. He smiled and averted his eyes when he couldn't hold in a nervous laugh.

"Ahem, well. Did you sleep okay?" Creek tried to ask casually.

"Yeah, actually." Branch returned the smile and blushed for the umpteenth time, wringing his fidgeting hands together in his lap. "After last night, it was just so easy to…”

"I know what you mean," Creek said. He reached to the prepared platter and offer him a cup of tea that was red in color, still warm to the touch. "Here you are, my love."

Branch took the cup and sipped it eagerly, inwardly melting at how delicious it was. Good in bed and a great tea maker; he was going to start counting all of Creek’s qualities but he was sure he didn’t have enough fingers to do the job. He somewhat hated that it took him this long to find out Creek was perfect for him.

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