



Live To Serve, Serve To Live

Encanto (2021) · Not Rated · 7221 words

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Bruno has a vision that the villagers' dislike of him (and his family's newly protective responses to such) will eventually lead to them turning on the Madrigals, and the Madrigals becoming the worst versions of themselves to survive.

To prevent this terrible future, he decides to try to make the villagers like him by finding a way to help out around the Encanto that doesn't require his magic. He finds more than he bargained for in the form of a merchant named Ayla.

The first two chapters are finished and in chronological order. The third chapter is still in chronological order but isn't finished. The chapters after that are random scenes. This work is unfinished and I doubt I'll ever fill in the gaps, but I love what I've written so much and hope that by posting it, I'll inspire someone else.

I hope you enjoy!

Prologue

The Madrigals were, in a word, magical.

They were, in another word (or two), incredibly destructive.

Oh, sure, not all of them. But enough of them to prove an issue.

As far as the villagers were concerned, Bruno Madrigal threw out curses left and right. That alone was enough to make social pariahs out of a family.

But there were real problems, too.

No-one has perfect control over their emotions 24/7. Pepa's powers weren't even a 1:1 good emotion = good weather, bad emotion = bad weather. It was more complicated than that. She could bring sunshine in the coldest months, but she could also bring hailstorms in summer. The times of her pregnancies are still talked about in hushed, frightened whispers.

Luisa, in her younger years, was a *menace*. She didn't mean to be, she was far too gentle for that, but a toddler with super-strength running around wasn't exactly the safest scenario.

Privacy was not a thing in Encanto. Had a fight? Had sex? Threatened someone? Still talk to your favorite doll? Cried over a trashy romance book? Dolores heard it. Dolores knows it. Dolores will drop overly-mysterious hints about it, as Mirabel and Bruno learned the hard way.

Camilo is, well... Camilo. He is as helpful as he is mischievous, and likes to scare people as much as he likes to make them laugh. As much of a whirlwind of emotions as his mother, but with a body that changes with his moods. No-one in Encanto has lived a prank-free existence in years.

Isabela was a perfect, golden child. Powerful, yes, but she never did anything more than craft beautiful statues of flowers or swing elegantly on vines. Until she tore up part of the town and broke her would-be fiance's nose. People were a tad bit more weary of her after that.

Antonio was a five year old with an army of jaguars. You do the math.

And yet, their praises were sung in the streets. Alma was the leader of their community, her word was law. When a Madrigal shopped, they didn't bring money — they simply asked and were provided for. Why, you might ask?

Because who would deny the woman who spent her days toiling in the kitchen so she could heal their wounds? The girl who kept their crops prosperous year-round? The boy who whispered to their pets and made them behave themselves? The girl who kept their secrets, yes, but also kept an ear out for unseen dangers? The girl who retrieved their donkeys, moved their crates, lifted what they could not? The boy who rocked their babies with their own arms and entertained their kids with his silly acts?

Who could hate or argue against those that served so selflessly despite their power? The chaos and laws of the Madrigals were a small price to pay for large crops, free healthcare, free childcare, free assistance in just about anything and everything they could possibly need.

The family Madrigal were gods among men. Gods evoke fear more often than worship, and men have a habit of turning against that which they fear, no matter how powerful. But who could fear a god who smiled at you and offered to take your burdens away for nothing or next to it?

So the family served the village even as they lead it, and they served well.

Except Bruno. But we don't talk about Bruno.

Chapter 1: Bruno's Vision (Bruno's Decision)

Bruno loved his family. When he had been unsure of everything else in his life, including their love for him, he had still been sure of that one fact. He loved his family.

And he was a danger to them.

The villagers did not like Bruno. Those that did not think he was cursed thought that he cursed others. Those that thought neither thought he was lazy. There were quite a few that thought all three.

Hate was perhaps a strong word, though. None of the villagers wished him pain or death. They were good people, mostly, and the worst among them just wished for him to *go away*.

He tried to ignore the ones that wished he would *go away* back to Hell or wherever else they thought he came from. Dolores was less forgiving than he was. As was Pepa.

Which was the problem. His family, their eyes open to each other's issues, were becoming much better about being there for each other. Which included protecting him. Even when he was locking himself in his tower and couldn't even hear the insults in the first place.

("You shouldn't have to hide yourself away, Tio!" Mirabel would say, which confused him. He wasn't hiding himself away. He came down for meals, played with his sobrinos y sobrinas, had long chats with his hermanas and Mama... He even spent time with Felix and Agustin! So what if he was avoiding every other living being on the planet, wasn't his family enough?)

This protection was beginning to make the town weary. Accidental destruction was one thing, bad as it was, but flat-out threats? No, this was not going to end well.

Bruno had stopped taking requests for visions, but that did not mean he had rejected his Gift entirely. After ten years not purposely using it, his magic was itching under his skin, begging to be used.

So he used it, trying to figure out what would become of his family should the villagers continue to dislike him, and should the others continue to protect him. It took him a few visions to piece it together, but he eventually figured out the grim truth.

He had been prepared to see the forms of his family, cold and dead or even dying, bloody or even downright gory. He had spent hours talking with his rats, trying to psych himself up enough to do the ritual anyways, and then hours more calming down Dolores after she overheard him.

Finally, he managed to start his visions.

He saw death. So much death. But not of the Madrigals.

People with vines growing *through* them, broken in half like twigs, burnt to a crisp by lightning, torn apart by animals... He saw the village turn on those he loved, and the high cost the Madrigals would pay for their survival. The best he saw, everyone else was run out or his family ruled with a much more iron fist than before. They wouldn't have a choice.

Bruno seriously considered running away again. It wouldn't have to be far, he could even live in the walls again! But, well, they knew about that now and would look there...

He could always change his clothes and hair, use a little makeup, and pretend to be someone else. He likes acting, after all. No, he decided, he'd be caught the first time he gave in to one of his, er, tics.

He could leave the town. He'd lived in a wall amongst rats for a decade, he could survive on his own. Probably. Maybe. Whatever, it was to protect his family, so it was worth the risk.

His family... They'd come after him this time. His hermanas had missed him too badly the first time around to lose him again, and his amazing sobrinos y sobrinas weren't going to let him go without a fight. The moment he started walking towards the exit, Dolores would sic Isabela on him.

He could fake his death? Maybe if he had his rats make a loud enough noise somewhere else, Dolores wouldn't hear?

Oh, but then his family would mourn. That would hurt them. All these plans would hurt them, in fact. He hurt them so badly when he first disappeared, a fact that he still hadn't forgiven himself for and was quite shocked they had forgiven him for. He couldn't do that to them again. He couldn't hurt his family.

He loved his family.

That and the rats were his only two constants in life.

Which left him with one other choice; make the villagers like him.

It sounded like a monumental task, but he already knew how to do it. He was a Madrigal, after all, and Madrigals had a surefire method for getting people to like you when they would otherwise hate or even fear you; selfless, dedicated, happy service.

He just needed a way to serve without his Gift.

Easy, right? Surely he had *some* skills outside of visions. He had to have.

Right?

Chapter 2: Job Hunt

The woman is named Ayla. She's a merchant who needs an assistant to help her on a trip outside the Encanto, and she hires Bruno.

Bruno agrees to go with her mostly because he wants a break, finds the idea of leaving the Encanto (and getting to know her better) interesting, and figures that it'll be easier to run if he's outside of Dolores' earshot.

Things of course eventually go out of control and what was supposed to be calm trip lasting only a few days turns into weeks/months of adventure and bonding. Eventually, though, they make it back to the Encanto — but their adventures aren't over yet. Slowburn genuine friendship to romance.

"Why me?"

"How often do you get the chance to spend time with a magic man?" She chuckled, winking at him. "Even one who won't use his magic."

"Love triangles and amnesiac sex aren't age-appropriate topics, Tio," Camilo said through gritted teeth, which was as calm as he could manage, having spent the last hour talking down parents whose kids were either crying or repeating things they shouldn't know after witnessing a rat telenovela.

"Maybe animals aren't your thing," Luisa chuckled nervously, helping Bruno reach the kitchen for some of his hermana's arepas to heal the broken bones. How was he supposed to know donkeys kicked when startled?

"Stay out of my kitchen," Julieta ordered flatly. She covered her mouth to cough out more smoke, then slammed the door in his face. Honestly, Bruno thought, *fair*.

"Animals definitely aren't your thing," Antonio told him matter-of-factly as they rounded up the last of the frogs.

On and on and on it went. Everything he tried, he messed up somehow. Well, no, that wasn't true. He actually was pretty good at a few things. Usually menial tasks that still let him take a second to knock or throw salt when he needed to. But even in those things, he kept running into the same problem.

People wanted visions. They would hint at it, beg for one, demand, ask, bribe, threaten (Dolores had sicced Isabela and Pepa on that one), and otherwise attempt to coerce him into giving them a vision.

Bruno would actually love to give them a vision. His Gift was, well, a gift. He had liked using it, once upon a time, and he remembered the feeling well. But he knew bet-

ter. His powers rarely told him things that could be changed very easily, more often things that would just *happen*. He would not be the cause of the good so he would get no praise, and though he wouldn't be the cause of the bad either he would still be blamed for causing it through a curse or something.

Your fate is sealed when your prophecy is read.

But what use was a Madrigal who wouldn't use their Gift?

Alma lead them all wisely and mostly justly (especially nowadays). Felix kept Pepa as stable as possible, which was a boon to everyone. Mirabel worked hard and kept the family together while also helping in the village, and *always* with a smile. And Agustin was apparently just impossible to hate.

They were different. They had no Gifts, for one reason or another, but they still did their best.

Bruno had a Gift he wouldn't use, so he was lazy.

Bruno's Gift 'cursed' people, so he was dangerous.

Bruno didn't have many helpful skills, so he was useless.

Bruno was weird and had a hard time socializing and *(was traumatized from being treated as a monster since he was a child and spending a decade living off scraps in the walls while watching his household literally break apart — but let's just forget about that, right?)* his best friends were rats, so he was hard to interact with.

He was everything a Madrigal should not be.

He leaned against a stall in the market, sighing after another long day in a string of long days looking for a way to serve. He was fairly certain he'd just made the villagers' feelings towards him worse, but he was too scared to double check with his visions.

"Well, Ratito," he muttered to his favorite rat, who he held close to his chest as he gently petted his head, "looks like we'll have to buy cabbage after all."

Buy cabbage, he'd decided, was his secret code for 'leave Encanto'. Over the years, he'd occasionally write different codes out on his floor in sand, then show it to his rats so he could talk to them without Dolores understanding. He loved his sobrina, very much so, but a guy needed some privacy in his life. He doubted he was the only one in

Encanto that did things like this. Dolores would forgive him if she found out. He hoped.

If she didn't, well... He supposed she had a right not to. He was using this as a way of leaving forever, after all, which would hurt her and the rest of his family. He didn't want to do that, but it was beginning to look more and more like the lesser of two evils.

He was running out of ways to make the villagers like him short of personally waiting on them hand and foot. Which he couldn't do, for a variety of reasons.

The first was one of his main issues with quite a lot of his plans; Dolores would hear and most likely disapprove.

The second was that it might make the villagers expect more from the rest of the family, and they already worked so *hard*.

The third was that, energetic as he was, he wasn't a young man anymore. There was only so much he could do before his joints started acting up and he got tired or even downright confused.

There was a fourth reason, one that wouldn't have stopped him in the slightest if the other three weren't there, but he was still pleasantly surprised to find it existed; he had some sense of dignity and self respect.

Yes, he lived in a wall with rats for ten years, and sometimes he put a bucket on his head and called himself Jorge. But he was still a human being and a Madrigal (a proud family no matter how gleefully they served) and there was only so low he could accept being brought. Unless it was to protect his family, then he'd go as low as he had to.

But it wasn't an option anyways for the very good reasons he listed, so... Yeah.

"We're doomed, Ratito," he lamented, eyes tearing up. He wouldn't cry, though, not in front of the villagers. He'd learnt that lesson ages ago. Besides, Dolores would hear and then she'd tell Pepa that something had made him cry and then Pepa would literally storm the town and then... He shuddered at the memory of his visions. With the hand not holding Ratito, he rapid-fire hit the wood of the stall behind him, then his own head. "Knock, knock, knock-knock-knock, knock on wood."

Ratito, who was too used to the knocking to be startled, and did not understand most words but did understand that the human he liked best was upset, chittered in sympathy and rubbed his head against Bruno's chest. Bruno patted him, smiling. The expression was shaky but real.

"You always know just how to cheer me up, Ratito. You're such a good friend," Bruno praised, petting the furry creature. Bruno considered praise very important, and gave it to his rats often. He gave it to his family too, but that usually came off a bit more awkward.

"So it's true, you do talk to rats," a voice chuckled. Bruno startled, gently but quickly shoving Ratito inside the safety of his ruana, before taking in the speaker. She had light hair like straw, pulled into a ponytail on the side of her head, and wore the clothes of a merchant. She grinned at him, one hand resting on her hip. "And here I thought it was just one of those nasty rumors. I wonder what else they say about you is true?"

"N-not much," Bruno muttered quietly. He was surprised to not recognize the woman, though he supposed some people could've moved in and out in the last decade, but was unsurprised that she knew of him. Everyone did. He straightened, trying and failing to put on a friendly grin, and cleared his throat. Trying to sound eager and helpful, he asked, "Is there anything I can do for you?"

The woman hummed. "Well, maybe. They say you're looking for work that doesn't involve your magic. That true?"

"Uh, yes, though people seem to have a hard time accepting that. I've been asked for like twenty visions today!" He chuckled nervously, mentally slapping himself. Complaining about villagers did not help his reputation.

Chapter 3: Random Scene 1: The Tunnel

Fun fact: another fic of mine, *Compulsion*, sprang from a flashback in this. So, if you've read both and see some similarities — that's why!

"T-there's a tunnel?" Bruno asked, eyes wide as he stared at the circular entrance.

"Two, actually," she replied, not commenting on his lack of knowledge. Most people in Encanto didn't actually know how to leave. They didn't care enough to know. She twisted slightly on her horse, smirking at him. "You aren't scared of the dark, are you?" she teased.

He wasn't, actually. Dark was... Dark was his rats. His room. His hideout in the walls. Hernando and Jorge, because their eyes were always covered. When he and his hermanas were young and would hide under the bed together because one of them was having a bad day.

Dark was safety.

Tunnels, however, were not.

He eyed the trees next to the tunnel, gently steering his horse a little closer to them. He needed... Needed to...

He eyed Ayla. For all he was well-known, few actually knew about *this*. She would think he was weird. More than she already did, anyways. And while he normally wouldn't care, he knew it would not help his reputation.

He should just go through the tunnel like a regular human being.

But he just... He just... Surely he could just...

He whimpered, eyes flicking between Ayla, the trees, and the tunnel.

His hermanas, his darling hermanas, liked to insist it was perfectly normal. He just believed a bit more strongly in superstition than most, that was all, according to them.

God, he loved them.

But he knew it wasn't normal. He knew that superstitions were only supposed to go so far. They were supposed to be a conscious, purposeful decision.

Not a... *Compulsion*.

He knew because he remembered how it was before he had them. Not well, but he remembered. And he remembered when they started.

The day the first Gifts were bestowed was a good one. The bad stuff mostly came later. There was a little bad in it, however. He remembered that clear as day.

He remembered his Mama being entirely distracted with the task of calming Pepa, who had already been grumpy because she'd managed to skip her nap and whose mood had not been helped by the little storm above her head. Julieta had wandered off to the kitchen while Mama was distracted, wanting to find out what the food on her special door meant.

Bruno wanted to follow Julieta.

Bruno wanted to help Mama.

Bruno wanted to cheer up Pepa.

Bruno did not get what he wanted.

Instead, fear had washed over him. He *had* to open the new door, or else something bad would happen. He wasn't sure what, but he had to all the same.

Then he had to enter the room. It had been slightly different back then, smaller, more suited to a toddler. He actually loved his room, and kept loving it for the most part.

But he didn't get much opportunity to admire it then. He had to make the sand just right. He didn't know why, just that something bad would happen if it wasn't exactly right.

It was hard work for a five year old, but he had help. Ratito scurried alongside him, just a pinkie back then, and did his best to help push the sand. It wasn't actually all that much help, he messed up the piles more than once, but Bruno appreciated it none the less. He didn't know what he would do without his favorite furry little friend.

And then came the fire. Bruno was not allowed to play with fire. He didn't want to disobey his Mama's rules. He didn't want to risk getting burned or burning Casita. But

more than anything, he didn't want something bad to happen to his family. He loved his family. So he *had* to.

That first vision took him by surprise. Ratito had been so startled, he'd hidden in Bruno's shirt.

It was confusing.

Scary.

Different.

Exhilarating.

He still remembered the way his Mama rushed in, summoned not by the sound of swirling sands but by her son's cackling.

Bruno was not a boy to cackle.

But what else was one supposed to do when all of time and space had just opened up to them? When time was no longer just *there*, but a physical force moving along his skin? When possibility and paradox were things he could see all around him?

It was too much, honestly. Luckily, the same instinct that had instructed his ritual told him what to do here. And he wasn't scared, because he was happy to follow it, so nothing bad was going to happen.

He focused on one thing. He could see his Mama standing in shock, Pepa hiding behind her (he didn't mean to scare her...). He wanted to know where Julieta was, so he made that his thing to focus on.

Julieta was... Lifting something? No, eating! No, that wasn't...

Baking! Julieta was baking!

Without Mama there to help her.

Oh, she was so grounded.

The sands swirled together and his first tablet formed. He still had it, in a drawer somewhere. Him and Pepa on either side of their hermana, all laughing with bits of frosting on their faces.

It came true minutes later, when Julieta had shown off a truly horrible-tasting cupcake and they'd eaten it anyways. A scrape Bruno had gotten from falling while moving the sand sealed itself, and they knew Julieta's Gift.

Yes, that was a good day.

It was also when the compulsions started.

He wasn't ashamed of his compulsions, though. Not really.

He could literally see the future. If *anyone* should listen to their brain telling them to do random, nonsensical stuff or else, it was him.

With that in mind, he went right over to the tree, hitting it five times and his own head once. "Knock, knock, knock-knock-knock, knock on wood!"

He held his breath, crossed his fingers (woah, it was hard to ride a horse without hands), and nodded at Ayla to lead the way. Staring at him, she did.

The tunnel wasn't too long, but Ayla moved a bit slowly. He gasped out the breath he'd been holding once they were on the other side, forcing himself to breathe normally rather than gulp in air.

"One down," Bruno joked, "one to go."

Ayla blinked. "What was that?"

Bruno shrugged.

Ayla sighed. "Right... Well, the other tunnel is a lot longer, so maybe don't hold your breath for that one?"

"Oh, don't worry," Bruno assured her, "I can go a while without breathing."

"Is that part of your magic?"

"No."

"Oh."

"Though my entire family is somewhat immune to lightning strikes."

"That's... interesting."

"Hmm."

They stared at each other for a moment.

"Well, let's go, then," Ayla said, sending her horse forward again.

"You got it, boss," Bruno saluted, his horse following hers.

Chapter 4: Random Scene 2: We Don't Talk About Bruno

Context: Ayla has just told a story about an incident in her past. It involves something about her getting back at someone who had wronged her, and was a mostly humorous tale with some of her backstory in it. Or at least it will be once I eventually write it.

Oh! And this scene takes place in a forest clearing where they've set up camp for the night.

"You're a bully!" Bruno told her, but he was smiling. In truth, he was impressed.

"Only to those that deserve it," Ayla assured him, winking. She winked at him a lot, he'd noticed.

"You've never been that mean to me," he muttered.

"You haven't deserved it," she said, as if it was the simplest thing in the world.

As if anyone outside his family had ever said anything of the sort to him before.

"Well, don't hold back on my account," he chuckled nervously. "I'm the 'Curse Of Encanto', I'm, uh, used to it."

"'The Curse Of Encanto'?" she repeated, snorting. "Oh, yes, I heard some call you that. They like to say all sorts of things about you in that town."

"What have you heard?" he asked, cringing a little even as he did. He already knew what they said about him, he didn't need to hear it from someone who had been so kind to him.

"That you talk to rats, for one," Ayla answered, nodding her head to Ratito. That got a small laugh out of Bruno, who remembered her first words to him. "But mostly that you're a beastly, mischievous man who hands out curses like candy. So, a little truth and a lot of slander."

"Oh? Is that it?" Bruno asked, relieved. That was all she'd heard? Made it rather interesting that she'd chosen him of all people to travel with her, but at least it wasn't too bad.

"Mostly, yeah." She scrunched up her nose. "Why? What else do they say?"

Bruno hesitated. She was so nice to him, he didn't want to ruin that. But... She'd already called what she heard slander. So maybe...

Bruno shrugged. "Oh you know; I kill goldfish, make men fat and bald," he was, perhaps, just a tad bitter as he added, "ruin weddings."

Ayla laughed. "What? Seriously?"

"Yep." Bruno chuckled, glad she didn't seem to be scared off.

"That's ridiculous!"

Ridiculous. Bruno grinned, eyes wide in delight. She thought it was *ridiculous*.

"I, I guess it is a little silly, huh?" He laughed with her. "I mean, I don't always have very good reasons for things, but I hope you can see my very good reasons to not use my Gift lightly anymore, hmm?" He sobered a little. "It's hard being blamed for things I can't control all the time, you know?"

Ayla's laughter petered out as well, her smile growing gentle. No one outside his family ever looked at him like that. "Well, I promise that if you ever give me a vision — not that I'm asking — but if you ever do and something horrible happens, I won't blame you in the slightest."

"Really?" he asked, surprised and wary, hopeful but not quite daring to believe it.

"I swear on my honor as a merchant," she said, very seriously. "That's an incredibly important swear, if you didn't know."

"I didn't."

"Well, it is."

Bruno doubted that. But he understood the sentiment. "Thank you, then. That... means a lot."

"You're welcome." A few moments passed in a silence that wasn't exactly awkward but wasn't exactly not. "Sooo..." She smirked, breaking the quiet. "What else do they say about you, oh Curse Of Encanto?"

Bruno grinned. And if it was just a bit mischievous? Well, there was no-one around to write a song about it.

"Oh, you know..." Bruno started, walking around her. "Seven foot frame, rats along his back." He held up Ratito in demonstration, standing on tip-toe with his arms spread out menacingly.

"No," she protested with a chuckle, shaking her head, "they don't."

"They do!" he confirmed, nodding.

"But you're so tiny!" she argued.

"Hey." He pouted at and crossed his arms, looking away in offense. "I'll have you know, I'm very tall." He waited just a moment before grinning. "All my rats say so."

She burst into more laughter. He liked her laugh, he decided. He was lucky to get to hear it so often. "What else, what else?" she asked, bouncing on the balls of her feet like an overexcited child.

"When he says your name, Ayla," he leaned in a bit too close to whisper the name in her ear, having too much fun to notice just how far into her personal space he'd gotten, "it all fades to black."

He twirled behind her, covering her eyes with his hands. She pulled his hands away and twisted to face him, making him briefly worried that he'd crossed a line, but she was still grinning so he decided it was probably okay.

"He sees your dreams," he made his eyes glow just for a brief moment, startling a gasp out of her, "and feasts on your screams!"

"Bruno!" she yelled, startled, as he suddenly pulled her down to their bedrolls. She shoved him, and he shoved her back, both of them cackling. "Bruno, you're ridiculous."

"Careful, Ayla, don't you know the rule?" he asked, batting his eyelids innocently.

"What rule?" Ayla asked curiously.

"We don't talk about Bruno. No, no, no, we don't talk about Bruno," he informed her, smiling wistfully. He loved singing that.

Camilo had been so mortified when he learned Bruno knew about his song, so Bruno had made it a point to memorize it and sing it whenever he could. His sobrino wrote such catchy lyrics, he wanted him to know he was proud of him, despite the subject matter.

"Is that a rule?" Ayla asked, joking. "Because they seem to talk about you a lot..."

"It used to be," Bruno explained casually. "Back when I was living in the walls."

"You... What?" Ayla blinked.

"I ran away and secretly lived in Casita's walls for ten years." Bruno wasn't surprised she didn't know. Not many people knew where he'd been the decade he was gone, and he wasn't keen on telling them lest they use it as fuel for more hurtful rumors. But Ayla wouldn't do that, so he felt okay telling her. "People didn't listen much to the rule back then, either, though. Not if they had something insulting to say, anyways, though they considered it an exception to 'warn' people."

"I... That..." Ayla blinked rapidly. "Isn't your mother in charge of the town?"

"It's technically unofficial, but yeah." Bruno laid back, looking at the stars. They were pretty. His eyes began to glow softly as he watched time slipping between them, saw them twinkling into existence and bursting out of it, over and over again. That was pretty too.

"So you *ran away* and your *mother* made a rule that no-one could talk about you unless they were 'warning' someone about you."

"Well, the villagers were actually the ones who came up with the warning exception, but more-or-less, yeah," Bruno confirmed, still staring up at the stars. He felt peaceful. He was out in the open, so far from home, yet he was happy. Because Ayla was here and she was nice to him and he felt *safe* despite all the unknowns.

Looking away from her as he was, he missed the look of horror that crossed her face. Schooling her features into a soft, somewhat sad smile, she touched his arm. "Bruno?"

"Hmm?" he hummed, turning towards her. She was mesmerized for a moment by the glow of his eyes.

"I want to make another promise," she told him, making him raise an eyebrow in curiosity. "I promise that if there's ever another rule like that, I'm going to keep talking about you. And I'm not going to be *warning* people."

"Oh?" He smiled, still looking at her even as he gave into Ratito's nudging his hand for pettings. He knew he should probably turn his powers back off, but it felt so nice to

let it out and she didn't seem scared, and it was interesting seeing the wrinkles form on and retreat from her face. "What would you say about me, then?"

"That you're a sweet, funny little man who loves his family and takes very good care of his rats," she answered, making his smile grow. With a wink, she added, "And who passes out in large tunnels because he holds his breath too long."

"Hey!" he laughed, eyes finally flickering back to normal, "I had a very good reason for that!"

"Yeah? What?" she challenged.

"...okay, so not a very good reason," he grumbled. "But what was I supposed to do, just let bad luck fall down on us?"

"Aw, you could never bring bad luck to me." She grinned, squeezing his arm. He hadn't realized her hand was still there. It was... Nice. "You're my good luck charm."

Bruno froze, blinking rapidly. He only started moving again when Ratito began squeaking in protest at the halted pettings.

"Bruno? Are you alright?" Ayla asked, worried.

"You are the nicest person I've ever met," Bruno told her, tearing up a little. "I'm glad I listened to Hernando and came with you."

"Hernando?" She scrunched her face in thought. "I could've sworn I knew all the names of your family already..?"

Grinning, he used his free hand to flip his hood up, pulling it over his eyes. "I am Hernando, and I fear nothing!"

"Um..."

"Don't worry, still just me," he told her, flipping his hood back down. His smile faltered when he saw the look on her face. "I, um, I do that when I want to be a bit braver. I'm... I'm not crazy. It's just acting."

"Acting, huh?" she asked, not commenting on the 'crazy' bit. He decided not to take that badly. "Do you like acting a lot?"

Bruno's grin came back. He could spend *hours* talking about acting. His different personas, the way he trained his rats to act out his telenovelas, he wouldn't shut up about it if he was allowed to go on as he pleased. He'd never really gotten the chance to really talk about it without interruption, though.

Until that night, anyways, when Ayla let him explain *everything*. She let him ramble on and on and on, as much as he wanted, until they both fell asleep.

Chapter 5: Random Scene 3: Won't You Let Me Cheer You Up?

Context: They're back in the Encanto at this point. Ayla has gotten a letter saying her brother is sick and it's uncertain if he'll survive or not. She won't be able to travel to see him for some time, and she's crying over the fact that she may never see him again.

As it's not written yet, I'll say it now: her brother lives and makes a full recovery, so don't be too sad. :)

"Uh... there, there." Bruno patted her back, trying to think of a way to help. "I'm sure he'll be alright, Ayla. H-he has to be, or he won't see your super cool painting. No one can die in good conscience without seeing your super cool painting, and you said your bro was a good one, so..." He paused. "Matter settled. Then. Yep."

"Thank you, mi amigo." Ayla gave him a shaky smile, one that was gone almost as soon as it was there. "I appreciate you trying to cheer me up. But until I know that my brother will be okay, I don't think I can be cheered up."

"I understand." Bruno nodded. He really did. If Julieta or Pepa were hurt and he had no way of knowing if they would be okay or not, he didn't think *anything* would calm him down, no matter how hard he knocked or how many of his rats cuddled with him.

Of course, he wouldn't have that problem. He would just check... their...

Oh.

Bruno's eyes widened. Maybe he did have a way to help, after all. He bit his lip, not entirely sure if he should do this or not.

Ayla sniffled, rubbing a hand over her tear-streaked face.

Screw it, Hernando wasn't the only one who could be brave.

Yes I am.

Shut up.

"Ayla?" Bruno waited for her to tilt her head towards him in acknowledgment. "Did you mean it?"

"Mean what, Bruno?" Ayla sighed. She was getting annoyed, he could tell. He was very good at telling when people were getting annoyed with him. He had a lot of practice with it.

But he could also tell she didn't want to be annoyed. She was just sad.

So he would make her less sad.

Hopefully.

"When you said you wouldn't blame me if anything bad happened in a vision," he clarified quietly. He didn't really doubt her word on that, he just... He needed to hear her say it, before he committed to this. "That you know I don't cause what happens, I only see it."

Ayla blinked. "Uh, yeah, of course I did. Why?"

He took a deep breath, asking a question that he hadn't spoken in over a decade: "Would you like a vision?"

"What?" Ayla sat up straighter, face turned fully towards him. But instead of looking eager or curious or even fearful, she looked distressed. "Bruno, no, I wasn't trying to hint or anything. I know you don't like doing visions—"

"I love doing visions," Bruno admitted, quietly, fist tapping rhythmically against the bench. It was the first time he'd said as such to anyone but his rats, and Dolores he supposed, since he was a child. He shook his head, a chuckle slipping out. "Dios mio, Ayla, do you even know what it feels like? To peer into the sands of time? I can literally see the future, Ayla! How many people can say that and mean it? It's my Gift, my purpose, I may have avoided it for ten years, but..."

He sighed, frowning. "I really only hate seeing bad stuff, and being blamed for it." He perked up. "But y-you wouldn't do that, right? And, and you weren't even trying to get me to do a vision! I've said how many times now that I would do anything for you? And yet you didn't even think about trying to use that promise to make me give you a vision."

He gripped her hand, staring into her eyes in a way he hoped was earnest and not creepy. "You didn't try to use me, Ayla, or my Gift. Despite really, really needing it. If it... If I can give you any peace of mind at all about your brother, will you let me? Will you let me give you a vision?"

Ayla was breathing deeply. Bruno vaguely noticed that his knocking and her breathing had synced at some point, slowing both. She closed her eyes, steadying herself, be-

fore opening them again with a firm nod. "Okay, Bruno. Let's do this. Show me what you can do, my friend."

Bruno grinned, jumping up and pulling her after him. "Okay! Let's go to– actually, first I need some more incense, *then* we can go to my vision cave."

"Your vision cave?" Ayla repeated, letting herself be pulled through the market as Bruno looked for the incense he needed.

"Well, normally I just do my visions alone and then bring them to people," Bruno explained. "But for you, I figured I might as well let you have the full experience. That way, you can know about your brother the moment I do." He paused, looking back at her. "Unless you don't want to come to my vision cave. I, I mean it's perfectly understandable if you don't, it's a bit creepy after all and I–"

"Bruno." She huffed out a laugh, putting a hand on his cheek to silence him. "I said I wanted to see what you could do and I meant it. I'd love to see your vision cave."

"R-really?" Bruno asked hopefully. She nodded, making him grin and redouble his efforts to find the incense, gently pulling her with him. "Then I promise you, you are going to get the show of a lifetime!"

Just hopefully not your brother's lifetime, Bruno thought but did not say. Everything would be okay, he was sure of it.

And if it wasn't... Well, at least he'd be there to make sure Ayla didn't go through it alone.

If she'd let him, anyways.

Chapter 6: Random Scene 4: The Vision Cave

Bruno then has the sand carry them up. He also goes all-out for his vision, using the abundant amounts of sand in his room to truly put on a show for Ayla (I just imagine the sand flowing through his temple and the face-fountain things, looking really neat and magical now that he's in his own room instead of making do in Antonio's). He partially wants to impress her, having started falling in love by this point even if he doesn't realize it, but is mostly just trying to distract her/cheer her up.

And that's all she wrote. So far.

If you want to write anything based on this or finish the story yourself, please do so! I just find Bruno and Ayla really cute together, and I want to see more of them, but am unsure if I'll ever add to their story myself.

I hope you enjoyed! 😊

"You don't like people much, do you?" Ayla asked flatly, staring at the barrier of sand blocking his entryway.

"If you have to ask that by now, I have to question your observational skills." Bruno grinned, wiggling his eyebrows. "Don't worry, it gets worse."

"Can we go grab an umbrella or something?" Ayla asked, eyeing the sand dubiously. "Don't get me wrong, it's very neat that you have your own personal sand waterfall and everything, but I don't even want to think about how long it would take to fix my hair after going through that thing."

"No umbrellas required, my lady." Bruno pulled her away from the veil. Making sure she was watching, he calmly snapped his fingers, turning the veil off with a thought. The finger snap was just for effect. "It's my room, I can do whatever I want in here."

"Really? Whatever you want?"

"Well, almost." He rubbed his neck. "I guess not *whatever* I want, but a lot I can't do outside it, anyways. I missed it, when I was in the walls."

Bruno shook away his suddenly sad thoughts, offering his arm to Ayla. He'd seen Agustin do that and was pretty sure it was considered nice. He wanted to come off as nice to her. "Shall we?"

"Let's," Ayla agreed, linking their arms.

Most people outside his family were terrified of touching Bruno. He was cursed, he gave curses, after all. She was so *casual* about touching him, though. He liked it.

Bruno led her into his main room. Sometimes, he liked to just jump into the dunes. It was fun. Considering his guest, however, he willed the sand to form itself into a staircase for them.

He glanced over at Ayla, partly hoping she'd be impressed with this little trick of his, partly worried about what she would think of his room.

"You have a *desert*?!" Ayla asked in utter disbelief. "Your bedroom is a— where do you sleep?"

"Well, this is just the main room, I don't usually sleep in here," Bruno explained. He had occasionally slept out on the dunes, pretending he was camping or on an adventure, but it wasn't his normal. "I have a sleeping chamber, a study, and my vision cave."

His study was actually more of a storage room; it was where he kept his rat supplies, old visions he wanted to save, and the scripts for his telenovelas. But it did have a desk and 'study' sounded more refined, so...

Ayla shook her head and laughed, mouth opening to comment on his large *rooms*, but then her gaze caught on something. She turned in a slow circle, eyes wide as she followed the stairs along the wall. "Wow, you *really* don't like people."

"Hey, a guy needs his privacy, you know?" Besides, he did like people. He liked his family. And he liked Ayla. Wasn't that enough?

— end of "Live To Serve, Serve To Live" —