Brutus Loves You - Sparrow1M - Bliss SMP [SquidgeWorld Archive]
Posted originally on the fanfiction.lol at https://fanfiction.lol/works/699.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Ableism
Category:	General (non relationship-focused)
Fandom:	Bliss SMP
Relationship:	ECorridor & MugM (Bliss SMP)
Characters:	ECorridor (Bliss SMP), MugM (Bliss SMP)
Additional Tags:	Horror, Religion & Mythology & Folklore, Mythical Beings & Creatures, Fire, BAMF ECorridor (Bliss SMP), Romãozinho, Brazilian Folklore
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-11-05 Words: 7,978 Chapters: 1/1

Brutus Loves You - Sparrow1M - Bliss SMP [SquidgeWorld Archive]

by Sparrow1M

Summary

Little Roma, Little Roma, oh how Brutus loved you. His love could have saved you, if you'd let it, if you'd seen it.

ECorridor sets out to prove his friend Mugm isn't a monster. But... what if he is?

Notes

based on the myth of Romaozinho, a boy who lied to his father, who then killed his mother, who cursed Romaozinho with her dying breath. Romaozinho means "little rome" hence the title (which also works perfectly with ecorridor's comparison between mugm and julius caesar)

Word around town is that ECorridor's closest friend is a monster.

In their small town far outside any city, there's been a tragic death. Everything's dreadfully cut-and-dry, no doubt who killed who. Wailable, one of the farmers most prone to dramatic outbursts, had returned early from the field one day to kill Wyll, who was at home in his forge. The blood had spilled onto a red-hot sword, iron sizzling on sparking iron as the hammer dropped from Wyll's hand. The questions that remained after the two had been found locked in stiff embrace were thus: Why had Wailable suddenly returned? What angered him, drove him to uncharacteristic murder with his peaceful rusty hoe? Why had he driven the blade straight into the soft spot behind Wyll's ear, then cradled him so gently once blood had congealed and pulse had stopped?

As he was dragged, blood spattered across his face, to the prison, he wailed about Mugm. A cursed instigator, he yelled, warbling between sobs as he tried in vain to wipe Wyll's hair from the tips of his fingers with which he'd pulled the hoe out to strike again and again.

Mugm. The mystery man, the one who'd showed up and moved in next to ECorridor and a few others. The one who'd lent ECorridor his lawnmower and scythe and wrench on far too many occasions to count. And yet, despite all this, no one trusted him.

Especially not while Wailable was screaming his name from the depths of the prison.

The town is peaceful: humidity condensing on the rich green leaves of the cassava fields in the valley, wind rustling through the dry leaves of the maize fields on the hills, and perfect weather in the small town between the two. Around the basin, Paraná pines grow tall and thin, their shade kind to the stray farmer or townsperson out for a stroll; the same forest has marooned a small patch within the basin, only a corner of which remains while the rest has been taken over by luscious farmland. ECorridor doesn't regret moving here, not for a second; this is bliss. Literally—Paraíso, the town's name, means paradise.

Despite the recent suspicion permeating the town, it really is a beautiful place to live. Difficult to find, yes, and hard to leave, but well worth the stay.

In the peace of the sun, ECorridor sits on the hillside overlooking the village and carefully highlights a line in his book. Below, he can watch the others go about their business—though much of their business is done inside, with little travelling, or in the fields where they appear as ants wandering through wild grass. But there are a few taking the day off, or whose fields have already been tended, or who herd the chickens and sheep that wander within the town itself. The homes here are flat and sprawling, with covered wraparound porches where people sit in creaky rocking chairs to wear lines in the porch and watch the chickens pick their meandering way past. There's little risk of them wandering off, and everyone knows whose livestock are whose (save the odd creature won or lost in a bet or competition). What's the risk penning them in? The basin itself is a perfectly natural barrier: hard to ascend, though it is travelled every day by farmers like Wailable with fields at the top.

Sure, some folks have a car rusting and leaking oil in their garage, but really, what's the point of it? If you've made it all the way out to Paraíso, you're sticking around. Traversing the road in and out is dangerous. And that's the thing about the town: it's dangerous. The people here know how to survive, how to keep on living. The land knows how to keep on living, and will create whatever it needs to survive.Even Wyll knew how to keep on living, which makes his sudden death all the more shocking to the community.

It's the perfect breeding ground for a rumour, an ugly rumour to target the man literally shrouded in mystery. With a warped question mark scarred on his chest, notably visible through his unbuttoned shirts, he has yet to live down the reputation of mystery. He has the air of a dangerous man, only strengthened by his alleged connection to the murder; he doesn't back down from an argument, never lets anyone take advantage of him. And it has been these traits that ECorridor has admired most when living next to Mugm.

ECorridor is not particularly good at standing up for himself. As a matter of fact, he kind of really sucks at it. He considers himself pretty chill, never truly minding whatever anyone around him is doing or not doing, saying or not saying. Like a rock in a stream, ECorridor allows the concerns of others to pass around him like flowing water. He likes to think someday he'll be a great philosopher and teacher. He won't, obviously, but it's a nice thought.

But no matter how much he avoids the opinions and happenings of others, he can't avoid this rumour. It is delivered, one day, straight to his front door: taped up in an envelope he couldn't miss if he wanted to. He tears it down immediately to skim the words.

That's what brings him here, to sit on the steep hillside surrounded by odd books and a thoroughly abused wi-fi connection. People say Mugm is a monster, everyone telling a slightly different story of it. ECorridor doesn't believe any of them. He knows his neighbour, his *friend*, is as human as the rest of them. For Mugm's sake, ECorridor needs to convince the entire town of this simple, basic fact. Is there such a thing as monsters? Just because *he* doesn't believe in them doesn't mean it's as simple as telling the other residents that monsters aren't real. They've all seen things down here, unexplainable things. Could be exaggerations and lies wrapped up in guilt, could be supernatural. It's obvious which one people would choose to believe.

Then, of course, there are the abilities. Astral projection; extra energy throughout the day; inhuman strength or speed. Shepherds finding their sheep giving birth to twins, even triplets. Blacksmiths seemingly able to heat their forges with a thought.

Insignificant, but together they must mean something, they must tell a story of this place. Blessed, maybe, or cursed. ECorridor tends to think the latter. Everyone who develops a power, they withdraw into themselves and their worst traits are called out. But maybe that's just them. Maybe that's the natural response to great power. Maybe it's human to hoard it for oneself and use it for one's own betterment; maybe it's the fate of humans to act selfishly when given power greater than themselves.

ECorridor turns the traitorous stone over in his palm. Shining purple as if it were chipped by the gods from his own skin, it glares into his eyes, power almost too radiant to look at. He wonders if the others have figured it out and catalogued it in as much detail as he has. Notes spill from his journal, written on scraps and napkins until he could bring them home and slot

them into place in his theories. Different stones, different powers. He suspects they live in a crater rather than a natural basin, and the stones are something out of this world. Were they ever intended to have this power? Is it a curse of the gods, or simply an accident? It's all inutile speculation.

Not... *entirely* inutile. ECorridor has a secret of his own, in a way; he's not some sort of mystery man linked to a murder, nor is he capable of making plants grow. No, quite the opposite: he can take life, steal it, morph it to his own will or devour it if he chooses. It began as a simple attempt to grow herbs in a windowbox, and ended with disastrously, disappointingly dead stalks and withered leaves, and a rather refreshingly herbaceous taste in his mouth as a burst of energy rushed through him. Then it had, quite accidentally, expanded to include a stray chicken, a wild lizard, and a very unfortunate cat. After the death of the beloved cat had been honored around town, he walked himself out into the forest and stayed until he figured out how to turn off the vacuum that was his power. Like someone left a faucet on, only instead of flooding the kitchen sink, it can kill everything around him until he's standing in the forest surrounded by plants sagging beneath their own lifeless weight and blackened trees dropping their leaves in a thick blanket to cover his lack of restraint.

Once he got over his fear... he has to admit, it's pretty cool. It's pretty dangerous. Dangerous enough that he feels more than comfortable spending time with Mugm, despite the distaste of everyone else. Mugm is funny, he's strong, and above all else he's determined. He can always come up with a different way to cut corners and make his work easier—innovation at its finest. ECorridor loves that about him. Mugm rarely talks about himself, choosing more often to comment on whatever he's doing, or how the weather's been, or who's up to what.

As the town architect and repairman, ECorridor knows much of the gossip. He pretends not to, of course, but sometimes the facts stick in his mind entirely against his will. While he's already spending so much energy focusing on controlling his power, his control over his ignorance often slips. On the other hand, Mugm just... knows. Almost everything ECorridor could possibly tell him, he already knows. The man of mystery grows more mysterious by the week.

Still, ECorridor trusts him. Maybe it's a mistake, maybe not; only time can tell.

He trusts Mugm enough to prove his humanity to the rest of the town. He's a good person deep down, ECorridor can see. He's good at reading people like that. But there's an air about him that clouds him in untrustworthiness, like even he believes he's not worthy of trust or friendship. ECorridor will prove him wrong, too.

He's compiled a list of tests he can perform to rule out most monsters. Werewolves, vampires, local myths, general evil. The basics are covered.

First he lines his threshold with salt and crushed crystals, digging a small ditch all around his house in the dead of night and lining it with the powder. Anything evil should, according to the occultism books he's read, be stymied at the border where the salt lies, prevented from entering to do harm—which is to say, since they're all written about monsters, they're prevented from crossing the line at all. ECorridor doesn't appreciate the lack of nuance in these resources. Surely if monsters are real, some of them have to be good. But they're not

real, probably, and it's all just the gems and this place, probably, and he's going to prove Mugm's just a perfectly normal guy. Right?

There's something terrifying about inviting him over for lunch the next day. What if he can't cross the line? If ECorridor's wrong about this somehow, if he's wrong about everything, his entire world could fall apart. Are monsters real?

No, it's fine, of course monsters aren't real. Mugm steps over the threshold without pause, setting the basket of food on the patterned table with a sheepish grin. "Sorry, I got hungry on the way over. Already ate one of the drumsticks."

"Dude!" ECorridor laughs. "Rude! And it takes, like, two seconds to get from your house to mine. But it's fine, really," he tacks on, seeing the look on Mugm's face—like he's watching a zombie curse his mother or something. "Plenty of food to go around."

They unpack the basket, including a beautifully golden, crispy roasted chicken still dripping with grease and, as advertised, missing the flesh off one drummie. One last thing, before they dig in: ECorridor flips his Kodak around and takes a picture of the two of them, smiling over the table of food. Something to remember the day by, he says. Something to prove Mugm is human.

They eat, and it's probably the best meal ECorridor has ever tasted. Everything is rich and life is beautiful here with Mugm in his kitchen, eating off the best table he's ever made, sharing the stupidest jokes and making fun of the way they each eat. The sun shines through the dust, a light from heaven illuminating the moment. Everything's sure to turn out fine with an omen like that smiling down on his mission.

Domonoko's house is ripped apart by a storm, and naturally he calls ECorridor to patch it up. There are holes in the roof, dents in the doors, shattered windows, and siding peeling off. A big project, one that may take him a couple weeks. He takes pride in his work, but he's also very quick; he makes a checklist of materials and tasks and sets to it.

He rips off the damaged siding, tossing it into his truckbed to be hauled to the scrap heap outside town, and tacks on new siding fresh from the big city. He matched the color, of course, and it fits perfectly. He replaces the windows, next, after sweeping up the broken glass and tossing it in a bucket where no one might accidentally hurt themselves. The windows slot into place with a bit of glue. Then the shingles, one by one pulled up and a new one hammered into each empty slot. Roofing is probably his least favourite task. He wakes up early, before sunrise, and clambers up at dawn to work before the heat of the day kicks in. Humidity, of course, is a different matter; it's always thick around here no matter the time of day, there's just no avoiding it. But shingles heat up real quick in the sunlight. After a couple hours he slithers into the clumsy gloves that will protect his palms from the scalding tiles as he wiggles them out of place. His nail gun empties around noon, the perfect time for him to move on to something else until he can finish the roof tomorrow.

Double checking the siding, he finds no faults in his past work and instead sits down for lunch. Mugm had, ever so kindly, packed a bag with a sandwich and an apple. It wouldn't be

too much work to walk home and have lunch there, but ECorridor does appreciate the thought as he sits in the cool shade and sighs contently. This is the life. A friend to pack his lunches so he doesn't have to walk home in the sun, a beautiful view of the basin and the farmers weeding the cassava fields, and a chicken flapping its wings in his face. Okay, maybe that's more annoying than enjoyable, but it's all part of the lifestyle here. He's okay with it; hell, he's more than okay with it, he loves this town and everything in it.

After lunch he fixes up the back door first, then tosses the more damaged front door in the truck bed with the siding and sets about fashioning a new one. It's not done until the next afternoon, at which point the roof is also complete, waterproof and sealed up tight. He asks Mugm over to proudly show off his work. "Follow me," he smiles, and loops around the house, pointing out where damage had been and what he's fixed. Then, without saying anything, he walks inside, and Mugm follows without invitation. Not a vampire, then. And he's perfectly polite in Domonoko's home, careful not to track in dirt or touch anything; he smiles and nods and comments on ECorridor's work approvingly. How could anyone think he's a monster?

That night, he details the interaction in his journal and tries to work up the courage for his next test. Monsters often can't touch certain materials, such as iron or silver. He's seen Mugm hold iron, of course, as have half the other townsfolk; it's silver that remains to be checked. And, as far as ECorridor is aware, the only person around here with silver is Puki: the so-called mayor of the town whose only real job is to live in a fancy house with fancy trim and eat off silver spoons. Not that he's eating better than anyone else, or really living better, either—he owns and cares for much of the livestock in town, which is no easy job. His station is inherited, as are all his fineries. He also hosts the town library: a thick brick building next to his house at the end of the street. As separated as they are from the outside world, the newest book ECorridor has found is from 1992: a car manual left by Alrey, presumably from his car that hardly runs anymore. He must have left it when he arrived, but ECorridor has no business knowing when people settled down in this town. All he knows is that the resources in the library on mythology and supernatural creatures are outdated and offer little information he hadn't already known.

The mayor's house is the only two-story house in town, if you exclude basements. Its thick white paint is peeling at the corners, and ivy has begun the long and winding trek up the house's foundation, reaching for the flat roof which hosts a short railing and what is likely an underwhelming view of town as it stretches into the vast and empty road that leads up the side of the hill to the rest of the world. In fact, this house is remarkably easy to forget about considering its standout location and height. No one looks down here unless they've got business, and no one here has any kind of business except their jobs.

ECorridor knocks sharply, but the door swings open under his knuckles, so he sticks his head in. "Hey, Puki? You in here?"

"Sure!" Puki barks from somewhere. "C'mon, down the hall, door's open."

Indoors is, as always, blissfully cool compared to the oppressive heat outside; though the foyer is a bit warm from the unlatched door, the rest of the hall is wonderful and the cracked

tiles are cold beneath his feet. Puki is in the last room on the right, feet kicked up on the desk as he reads through a packet of documents.

“Well hello, ECorridor, what brings you to me today?” he grunts, dropping his feet and facing ECorridor.

“Can I borrow a fork?”

Puki raises an eyebrow. “A fork?”

“Or a spoon. Any utensil, really. I only need it for today, I’ll wash it and bring it right back tomorrow.” ECorridor gives his best, most winning smile.

The mayor’s expression stales slightly, before he stands and gestures for ECorridor to follow him. “Sure? I can’t imagine why you need it, but... sure. Sure.” They pass through a dining room, the walls a bubbling sage green that weeps in the heat, into the kitchen, where Puki materializes a fork from some drawer or another beneath a rack of hanging pans.

It feels different from ECorridor’s forks: more sturdy, more decorative. Exactly the silver kind of utensil he needs in order to prove Mugm isn’t a monster. He thanks the mayor and rolls the fork over his knuckles as he wanders home. He’s invited Mugm over for dinner again, this time cooking a slab of mutton cut from a sheep only yesterday, glazed with brown sugar and butter, then tossed with caramelized onions for a wonderfully sweet-smelling meal. Mugm is bringing some strange mead, apparently fermented honey. ECorridor’s never had such a thing, but if it’s honey he assumes it will pair well with their food. He sets the table meticulously, lines everything up. He’s never sure why he gets so damn nervous to invite Mugm over; he trusts him, of course he does. He’s going to all these lengths to prove that Mugm is just as human as the rest of them, of course he trusts the man. But there’s always a nagging, just a tiny voice in the back of his mind wondering if the others are right.

What if, one of these times, Mugm comes over expecting a peaceful dinner and ECorridor ambushes him with something that hurts? What if he picks up the silver fork and his hand burns? That would be incredibly rude, as host. Does his faith in Mugm’s humanity outweigh his desire to be kind?

Besides, another part of him almost doesn’t want to know. He could stop with the tests right now; no one would ever know, they’d just keep on being suspicious of Mugm and ECorridor would never need to find out if Mugm is in fact inhuman. Does it matter? Does it really matter if he’s not human? ECorridor knows his heart is in the right place, whether or not creatures of the night are real.

Mugm enters, rapping twice on the doorframe as he does, and ECorridor wipes the worry from his face. This is his friend, after all, and they have a mouth-watering meal laid out before them and a night of enjoyment ahead.

When he picks up the silver fork there is no sizzling of flesh nor cry of pain. But after a moment, Mugm frowns and looks at it more closely. “This is a new fork,” he comments.

ECorridor laughs nervously, glancing askance. “Yeah, uh, I lost the—uh, the rest of mine, or the only other clean one and the rest are dirty so I had to borrow one. I didn’t think you’d notice.” Why didn’t he think Mugm would notice? They’ve been eating off each other’s utensils for months now, they know the shapes and weights and everything. That was a terrible excuse, he’s going to call ECorridor a liar and storm out and be... very upset.

“Hm, okay. Cool.” Then he takes a bite of the mutton and hums loudly, appreciatively.

Taking that as his escape, ECorridor digs into his own meal with fervor.

Tonight he kills two birds with one stone. As the harvest season approaches, the sun sets earlier each night and the lamps are lit sooner and sooner. Temporary lamps are brought out of retirement and posted in the fields, allowing farmers to work as late as they may need. And under the light of the lamps, ECorridor follows Mugm out to his field in secrecy. He disconnects the electricity and quickly, in the darkness and moonlight, snaps a picture of a perfectly human Mugm beneath the full moon. No werewolf, no creature of the night, no transformation or appearance of odd features. Just a very human farmer blinking into sudden darkness, wondering how the lights must have been unplugged and likely wary of the real dangers of night.

Guiltily, ECorridor slips back down the hill into his home. He wants to try one more test, something that will prove, indisputably, to the townsfolk that Mugm can be trusted. But this test requires ECorridor to trust him as well, and that’s... that’s a lot to ask. ECorridor is a lot of things: determined, thorough, inquisitive. Trusting? He wouldn’t put that too high on the list. He trusts Mugm, yes, but in the way one trusts the sun to burn and the moon to reflect. He trusts Mugm to be kind. He’s not sure he trusts him with *this.*

He spends a total of three days gathering his courage, preparing himself and reciting the motions he’ll have to make if something goes awry. On the fourth day he takes a deep breath and goes for a walk.

His route brings him up near Mugm’s fields at the top of the basin, where looking down is enough to make anyone’s head spin. But no one in their right mind would look down. They all know the basin is deep and its walls steep; they all know to take the road. But recently, near one of the turnpikes, a bit of the hill had been loosened by rainflow and a minor mudslide had poured rocks down the basin wall. It’s near this mudslide that ECorridor wanders, taking deep breaths and looking everywhere but down. He’s certain to catch Mugm’s eye while he’s up here, waving excitedly and gesturing to the well-worn path that many have taken for a breath of fresh air outside the basin and its insidious magic.

He’s out of sight when he finds the mudslide’s track, where it’s eaten away half the path. It’s now or never. He trusts Mugm. He trusts Mugm. He trusts Mugm.

Pretending he’s seen a snake, he jumps—although he’s almost certain no one can see him here, he must keep up the ruse—and steps into the cavity where the mudslide began. From there it’s as simple as falling. He’s seen the stretch of land before, watched it from below until he knew with unshakeable certainty that he would grab the root by instinct; he does. It’s his one lifeline, the single string between him and a very long drop. He screams and shouts for Mugm, hoping that he can hear. He must be able to hear. But he’s also busy in the field.

How long will ECorridor have to hang here? His hands are not soft—he works with them day after day on projects of wood and construction—but he can't hold on forever. He can only remember the feeling of turning on the tap, can practice the mental motion to pull life from the plants if he falls. He will have to drain quite the radius, will leave a large circle withered and dry, but he will probably survive. Maybe.

It seems like forever. Mugm must not hear, and ECorridor's voice is going hoarse by the time someone below sees him hanging from the hillside. Everyone gathers for a moment at the emptiness where the houses stop and the road keeps running; they spill from their houses until someone drives their truck up the mountain. He can faintly hear the horn honking, and shortly thereafter Mugm appears at the top to peer over, eyes wide.

"ECorridor!" he shouts, though there's really no need for that. He's only fifteen, twenty feet down. "What the hell? Okay, hold on, let's get you back up here on solid ground. You gotta watch where you're goin', man!" He disappears over the top again, then reappears to toss a rope down. "Okay, grab that."

Steeling his nerves, ECorridor shakes his head. "I can't let go."

Mugm frowns and tightens his grip on the rope. "You have to, you need to let go. Just one hand, grab the rope, then the other. Okay?"

"I can't, Mugm. I'll fall, that's—it's so far down, I need to keep holding on. That's so far, dude, I don't wanna fall, I don't wanna fall!" Of course, he has a backup plan in case he does, but this test hinges on Mugm doing something risky. Something that no one could misinterpret. Going out of his way to help ECorridor.

Something wars on Mugm's face. He stares at ECorridor like a wolf sizing up a moose, then disappears again. He takes longer this time, and the root is loosening in the earth even while ECorridor stays as still as he possibly can. Time is running out. He reminds himself how to turn on the tap.

Mugm returns suddenly, jumping down beside the track of the mudslide with the rope tied around his waist. He rappels until he's level with Mugm, then shuffles sideways as the root slips more.

"Hurry, hurry," ECorridor mutters, staring at the crumbling dirt where the root meets the hillside. His feet scramble involuntarily at the dirt and rocks, sending more tumbling down the hill. "It's slipping, c'mon—"

Then Mugm's arm wraps firmly around him. "Got you," he says, "got you. Grab onto me."

With a deep breath, ECorridor releases the root and heaves his body up toward Mugm, wrapping his arms around his neck. "Okay," he breathes.

"Bring us up!" Mugm calls, and the rope begins to retract up the cliff face. They both glance at the ground far below and shudder.

When they surface, they don’t even move to detach themselves or the rope as the other townsfolk give a hesitant round of applause. They just lie, for a minute, motionless save for their heaving chests. If that doesn’t prove it, what does? Mugm is a good man, indisputably, and ECorridor has proven it to everyone. Now to dispel their rumours of his inhumanity. But first, naturally, he needs to untangle himself from Mugm and find his land legs after that horrifying fall. Stepping over the edge yourself doesn’t make it any less horrifying, it doesn’t nullify the pit in your stomach or the way your throat closes up with fear. It just means you did this to yourself.

ECorridor has done this all for a very good reason. And speaking of—“Thank you,” he huffs between choppy breaths, and Mugm nods.

“No problem,” he responds, though he’s clearly shaken too. They stand and leave it at that, ECorridor hitching a ride back down in the back of the truck as Mugm trembles his way back into his field like a fallen leaf tossed across the ground by a malicious gust of wind.

Everyone else in the truckbed is silent, watching ECorridor like he’s a family heirloom that’s been dropped and nearly shattered. He’s not fragile, by no means is he helpless. It was just a play to prove that Mugm could be trusted. And he passed the test. Still, everyone’s shaken at nearly losing someone. It creates quite a strong community to all live in a cursed basin with very few newcomers and even fewer visitors.

Shaken, he sits in bed the rest of the day, not venturing outside. He tries to write it down in his journal, as evidence, but his hands are shaking too much. He eats leftovers and drinks more water than he’s ever drunk in his life and falls asleep early.

And then he wakes up late and sick. A headache, a sore throat, aching all over. He’s not getting out of the house, nor is he assembling that pamphlet on Mugm’s human traits. No, he drapes himself atop the covers and tries to sleep it off.

Time passes. Then more. Then even more, and finally he feels well enough to start writing up pamphlets. He makes enough for everyone in town except himself. Waiting one more day to be sure, he finally stacks them up and steps outside.

On the one hand, he’s a little hurt that as far as he can recall, no one stopped in to check on him while he was ill. He doesn’t even know how many days it’s been since the incident. But on the other hand, it’s harvest season. And besides, why would they care enough to go out of their way? They’d already driven up the side of the basin and back to save him, isn’t that enough? He should stop expecting things of people, really; it’s silly. They’re busy, and he was sick. He just would’ve gotten them sick and it would pass around the whole village around harvest time, and that would just be a disaster. It’s for the best.

Everyone must be hard at work in the fields—there’s no one around, which means he’s luckily got the town to himself as he sticks the pamphlets in the crack of everyone’s front door just next to the handle, where they’re impossible to miss. The wind whistles sharp and quick between the houses, leaves rattling like bones and unlatched shutters clacking. Then he reaches the mayor’s house, and he’s greeted by the business end of a rifle. He freezes.

“Oh, ECorridor!” Puki exclaims with a wild look in his eyes. “Quick, quick, get inside. It’s dangerous out there!”

The door opens to admit him, and he’s tugged inside almost against his will. Circled around him are Wailable, Elemental, Puki, Decity, Shock, Ryan, Alreys, Ember, and Domonoko, all staring at him like a pack of starved wolves. They don’t seem to be doing too well, all filthy angles and smelling like they haven’t showered in days. Come to think of it, ECorridor probably isn’t much better. That hadn’t crossed his mind between the shock and the sickness and the determination to get those pamphlets out. Which reminds him: “Where’s Mugm?”

The others exchange a glance, like they’re deciding who’s going to break the bad news, or who’s going to take the first bite. Puki takes the mantle. “Mugm is... he’s a monster, ECorridor, he’s killed everyone else. Went on a rampage.”

ECorridor tamps down his first thought, which is *What did they do?* and his second thought, which is *What have I done?* and settles for his third, which is, for lack of anything clever, “What?”

“He freaked out, tried to kill Wailable,” explains Shock as the others nod along. “Then he started, like...”

“It was like he was on fire,” Ember passionately jumps in. “And his skin burnt and charred and now he looks freaky.”

But it can’t be true, ECorridor tested him and everything! With silver, with salt, brought him into a home uninvited and everything!

He stumbles back, fumbling for the doorknob to let himself out. Whatever’s happening, he needs to find Mugm. He’s not a monster, he’s just a human and it’s all a very big misunderstanding. A very *dangerous* misunderstanding. The wind is at his back, pushing him along down the deserted road as he calls for his neighbour, his friend. The pamphlets flap frantically, but, tucked securely as they are, they remain in place in the doors of the dead.

ECorridor’s sweat sears down his forehead and stings his eyes as he pounds on Mugm’s door hoping against hope he’ll answer and everything will be normal again. He knocks, slams his palm against the grain he carved not so long ago when Mugm had first arrived—all to no avail. Mugm does not answer and ECorridor doesn’t know what to do. Who is left if not Mugm? Where can he go if not to Mugm’s side?

Maybe he’s just working in his field. Yeah, maybe that’s it.

Starting up the long and winding climb, ECorridor begins to notice that it’s getting dark, and the change of the season is creeping beneath his t-shirt and clinging to the sweat coating his skin. Beneath his feet the road is firm, catching each step a moment before he expects it and leaving him constantly a little off balance. He’s not afraid of the dark. He’s not afraid of the road or the cold and he’s *certainly* not afraid of Mugm. But he *is* afraid.

He’s afraid he was wrong all along. All those tests, what if they were wrong somehow? What if Mugm really doesn’t care? What if ECorridor is seeking a man who will kill him without a

second thought?

He crests the basin at the perfect time to catch the sunset, basking Mugm's field in a warm orange glow that almost combats the chill in ECorridor's clothing, but not quite.

No Mugm.

But there! Just at the angle where the basin hill meets its bottom and becomes the patch of forest that's yet to be transformed into cassava fields, a light floats through the trees. It has to be him. ECorridor scrambles down the side of the hill, wildly grabbing at bushes and pulling life from the plants as he mostly falls to the bottom. Leaves and branches whip past his face, leaving cuts that will heal far too soon with his power active and drawing everything it can.

He doesn't need to be afraid. His stomach drops anyway, heart in his throat the whole way down. When he finds Mugm, what will he be? What will *they* be?

He races through the forest, following the faint glow and the memory of where he'd seen the light moving from the ridge.

"Mugm!" he calls, voice growing hoarse as the night falls thicker and heavier over the basin, pressing his voice down into the rich earth instead of carrying it like he wants it to. "Mugm, please! Can you hear me? Is that you?"

He bursts into the ring of light, cast by a flame held aloft in the darkness. The grip on the torch is dark, blending into the trees, and he thinks of what the others had said. A monster.

The darkness resolves into the form of a human, skin becoming visible. ECorridor's eyes must be adjusting. Then Mugm turns, and ECorridor sees his shadowed face, his bare chest branded with a question mark seared in freshly charred flesh.

What happened to him?

"Why did you come here?" Mugm asks shortly, as if it's unreasonable for ECorridor to want to find his friend.

Taking a deep breath, ECorridor tries to calm his racing heart. "Are you okay?" he asks, in lieu of anything else that could possibly be more important. The trees hiss suddenly, the spark in the torch popping.

"Fine. Didn't they tell you what happened?"

ECorridor doesn't care what they said, he doesn't believe them. They don't know Mugm like he does, Mugm wouldn't just kill people. But the night presses in, uncaring and urgent, and ECorridor's moment is lost. "I want to hear your side," he whispers.

"Wailable escaped." Mugm jolts, like he's in pain, but makes no noise beyond his words. "He attacked me, he blamed me for what he did to Wyll. So I defended myself, and they didn't like that. So I killed them, I slaughtered everyone who wasn't smart enough to keep their hands off me."

So they had been telling the truth. Mostly. “Why’d you do it?” he asks before he can even think about asking anything else. The question that will answer everything, that will prove ECorridor right or wrong. It all comes down to this, doesn’t it?

Mugm shrugs. “Well, everyone already said I was a monster.”

That gives ECorridor pause. *He* has certainly never called Mugm a monster. He’s always believed his friend to be kind at his core, no matter how gruff or shifting he seems on the outside. So he hesitates. “...Did *everyone* say that?”

“I mean, yeah, everyone.” Mugm looks away from the fire, but the shift casts his face in more light than had been.

“Oh.” It slips from ECorridor’s lips like water, or blood, sticking on his tongue as he realizes that Mugm doesn’t understand him at all. This whole time, he thought they were friends, but... Mugm lumps him in with everyone else and writes him off just like that.

ECorridor is used to being written off. Being overlooked is his specialty, making himself small and easily digestible to blend in with the background and stay out of trouble. Likable, but not enough to be lovable. Nice, but not enough to be kind. He really believed Mugm saw beyond that.

Apparently not.

“I guess in that case, I have something for you,” he mutters, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a pamphlet. He rips it in half and lets the halves float to the ground. “It was supposed to—“

With a loud bang, Mugm staggers back, staring at something behind ECorridor. A gunshot. Someone must have seen the light and come all the way out here to—

The bullet wound becomes visible as the torch sways, dropping sparks to the leaf litter. The bullet, golden and flattened, reemerges and drops to the ground as something veiny and dark pushes to the surface of Mugm’s skin. It spreads, spreads, covers his torso and blends with the charred mark on his chest until his entire body is stiff and flaking. In just a couple seconds, a single inhale, he transforms from human to something else and disappears into the dark forest, torch floating above him.

Stomping out the flames, ECorridor shouts vaguely for someone to come help him, but they’re likely chasing down Mugm. Who cares about that when the whole forest is poised to burn down? Fire is catching, licking up the dead leaves and drinking from the dry bark of the trees. Quickly it becomes a losing battle, and he’s no fool. He works with wood for a living, he knows how easily fire spreads out of hand. The only thing to do now is to run, abandon ship and hope Mugm makes it out, too. If there were more people left, and if fewer of them were obsessed with chasing a self-fulfilling prophecy, maybe they could make a moat or something to stop the fire from spreading to the cassava fields; instead, the best he can do is try to create a firewall. He grabs a stick as it dances with flame and runs from the larger fire as it roars up the trunks of the tall Paranás.

Near the edge of the forest, hoping this is the right place to start, he draws life from the plants and sets the newly made tinder ablaze. Hopefully this fire will burn inwards and meet the other fire until they both die out. He draws the line all around the edge of the forest, watching the flames burn higher and higher. From outside the basin it must be strange, a basin becoming a caldera in only a matter of minutes. Maybe, just this once, Paraíso is being noticed; maybe someone out there is watching the sky light up and realizing there's a town in this place. More likely, it's flying under the radar as it always has, and no one will notice. No one will come.

Shirt drawn over his mouth, shivering and hungry ECorridor staggers back into town, the main street always an inch lower than he expects, keeping him off balance. The lights are on in the mayor's house, and he can see figures shadowed through the windows.

If there's one place he doesn't want to be, it's with them. Any of them.

But he doesn't want to go home, where he's just passed who knows how many days sick. The air of illness tends to linger, and he can't handle that right now.

So he stumbles blindly into the only other place he can: Mugm's house.

It's dark inside, and filthy, but not with dust or dirt. Mugm's things, few as they are, are scattered everywhere. They're always everywhere. He leaves his things lying around like a child never taught to tidy up when he's done playing. ECorridor collapses at the table, eyes almost drifting closed. Outside, the fire roars away, two sides racing to the middle where they will both run out of fuel. And ECorridor feels like he's standing right in the dead zone between the two, burning up with no way out.

The night isn't over.

He can't sit forever in Mugm's empty house pretending things can continue as normal. At some point, he has to face the facts. He has to understand that Mugm is probably dead, and he's probably stuck here with these assholes who killed his friend.

Could he leave? Does he want to? Does it even matter?

ECorridor doesn't know who he is outside of this place and the odd stirrings herein. He'd been content here, even knowing that everyone has their own motives. They were, for the most part, polite. They've shown their true colours now. Unwilling to accept that anyone could be more than their first impression. Unable to see depth, nuance, humanity when it's staring them straight in the face.

It's sickening.

Mugm is not a monster. But ECorridor? ECorridor might just be something worse.

He rises, his feeble human legs strengthened by his power as it feeds off Mugm's lawn and the basil plant sitting next to the sink. His simple human eyes rove over the room, adjusted now to the dark. His finite human mind doesn't know what he's about to do, only that he's going to do it.

The town moves around him, the mayor's house growing until it's all he can see.

"ECorridor?" a voice rasps quietly over his shoulder. A prayer. "ECorridor, go home."

Mugm is, when he turns, a creature of ash and scorched flesh. The torch has long burned down until the flame reached his hand, burning now as the fat bubbles and the skin chars.

"They're wrong about you," ECorridor says. Futile. Small. Staring down fire on both sides. "You care. You're not a monster."

With a loud snarl, Mugm holds the flame close to his face until his cheek begins to melt. "I am, ECorridor, I'm everything they say I am and worse. You can't stop me. I'm going to kill them all. I was always going to kill them all, it's in my blood, I make people die. I make mistakes and people die; I lose control and people die. I forget what I am and people die."

ECorridor lifts his hand to Mugm's, reaching into the flame and crossing their palms. "You've been told you're evil, you've been told you're a monster. You, Mugm, are a self-fulfilling prophecy. But you don't have to be what they say you are. You have a heart, a human heart inside you, and I know that sometimes loving people means getting hurt."

Atop ECorridor's hand, the flame dims and Mugm becomes a little less solid. His expression wavers, glancing between ECorridor and the house beyond.

"Whatever made you this way, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't stick with you more. But I am on your side." He wishes he had a pamphlet to unfold, to point out that he's been on Mugm's side the whole time.

The fires in the forest nearby are meeting, fighting for dominance and for fuel. The basin holds its breath.

"Mugm, you're my friend, and you're just as human as me where it matters."

Then the door slams open, guns cocking, and ECorridor loses it. He very quickly closes the tap that springs open, but the rest...

In the middle of a rolling countryside filled with golden amber maize is a basin. The basin glows tonight, warm despite the changing of the seasons as two fires burn their way through the forest within. In the basin there is a town, and in the town there is a long, empty road. At the end of the road is a house lit up with the fires of hell, and the silhouette of two men. One cowers, afraid of the people who cannot fathom that something they find ugly and unappealing may in fact be human; the other stands up straight, haloed in blades that glow with righteous fury.

ECorridor is not any sort of creature or myth; he is perfectly human. He is also incredibly dangerous when he chooses to be.

With the power of a hundred knives poised around his head ready to strike the people standing in front of him, he chides them. "You should never side against the underestimated.

Don’t you know Mugm is my friend? And if you hurt him, I will kill you as slowly and painfully as possible. He is human; he has been hurt by your words in the past. He is not evil. He is not a monster. Allow him to live in peace, and we will help replant the forest and harvest the fields of the dead. Do we have a deal?”

The others stare at him like he’s sprouted a third arm. All things considered, this is probably weirder than any simile could be. Gradually they begin to nod.

Meanwhile, the two fires in the forest run out of oxygen, starving each other, and the basin is finally engulfed in the peaceful darkness of night.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!