



*Rut*

REESE MORRISON

Reese Morrison

Rut

*The Change*

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*Thank you!*

# *Rut*

The Change

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# Chapter 1. Elias

Elias released a contented sigh as the last rays of sun slipped behind the curve of the earth. Touches of stunning pink and delicate blue gave way to a canopy of shining stars. Frogs and crickets chirped their own rhythms into the humid evening air.

“That was beautiful.” Jordie’s voice was rich and warm, wrapping around Elias like it was part of the night.

“It’s beautiful every night,” Elias agreed. “And yet I never get tired of watching it.” He lay back on the wooden platform that served as an open porch for his little cabin. Most of the others stayed in the dormitory, but he’d commandeered the tin-roofed hut for his own.

He heard Jordie’s grunt of contentment as he arranged himself on the sun-warmed boards a few feet away.

That small sound filled Elias with a warmth completely separate from the thick, tropical air around him. These evenings on the deck were their little ritual. Elias had never felt closer to another person. Never felt as connected and whole as he did in this time they spent together each day, watching the depth of stars in the endlessness of space.

“I got a letter today,” Jordie’s voice wove through the calm rather than interrupting it. Sometimes the two of them spoke for hours, but sometimes they didn’t need words.

“From the boat?” A motorboat came out from the mainland twice a month to deliver supplies. Jordie wrote back and forth with his eight-year-old niece on paper, even though their correspondence could take weeks to reach its destination.

“No. An email. From Princeton.” There was something strange in Jordie’s voice. A hesitation that wasn’t usually there.

“About the grant?” Elias would be disappointed if they didn’t get the funding that they’d applied for through one of their partner universities, but not heartbroken. They always had a few grant applications out, and plenty to work on already.

“Uh, no. They want me to lead their research lab. In New Jersey. I mean, I still have to formally apply, but the implication was that the position was mine.”

Elias sucked in a sharp breath. This was the best possible news. Amazing news. Jordie deserved that position like no one else—a chance to grow in new directions and show everyone the leadership he was capable of.

That didn’t stop a chasm of pain from opening up in Elias’s chest.

Jordie was going to leave.



All of their cozy evenings under the stars were over. Their energizing morning swims, where they collected water samples together and greeted the sun, would be gone.

*Jordie* would be gone.

And Elias could never admit to anyone how much that was going to hurt him.

He forced a smile to his lips, letting all of the pride and happiness he felt for his mentee overtake his inappropriate feelings. “That’s amazing. You’ll be able to do fantastic work there. Are you going to take it?”

He shouldn’t have even asked, because of course *Jordie* should take it. It was the career opportunity of a lifetime.

“I think I’m still too stunned to even know what to think. I didn’t even know the position was open—Dr. Matsu just reached out to me.” He was the current head of the lab, who both of them worked with closely.

“Well, it’s a good position,” Elias said gruffly. “You should take it.” He couldn’t bring himself to look over at *Jordie*. He already knew the shape of his silhouette, the thick muscles of his chest and each plane of his face outlined against the stars.

“It’s cold there.”

Elias let himself chuckle, though the rest of his body felt numb. All except the ache in his heart. “You hate the cold.” He’d never known anyone who appreciated their muggy, tropical weather so much.

“Yeah.”

Silence hung between them, and for a moment, Elias almost let himself hope. Maybe there was still the tiniest chance... He had to go for it. "I know it's not as prestigious, but if you stayed... I mean, we've been working on all those other grants. Your postdoc will be over, but you'd have the funding to supervise your own team here, too."

"Yeah? That's tempting. Or I could return each summer. Maybe summer and winter? Keep my research based here and teach a few classes."

"Yeah." The pain lifted, but it didn't leave, just spread through the rest of Elias's torso. Seeing Jordie twice a year would still be better than nothing.

But he knew what would happen, sooner or later. Jordie would meet someone. Someone socially acceptable. Someone who could walk proudly beside him.

And some year, he would come back with a partner at his side. Or wouldn't come back at all.

"When would you go?"

"They want me back in June."

Plenty of time then. More than half a year.

"But I need to give them an answer in three weeks."

"I'm proud of you, whatever you decide." It was true. Even if it was breaking his heart.

Elias looked up at the stars, but this time the dark tapestry only made him feel alone.

\* \* \*

“Dr. Greton, is this the fern you were looking for?” Saanvi’s voice called from just ahead, though she was momentarily hidden by several large tree trunks. Dappled light filtered through the canopy to reveal a tangle of vines and ferns, small reptiles skittering away at the sound of voices.

“Call me Elias,” he reminded her as he caught up. Saanvi had only arrived at the research station a couple weeks ago to join her wife, and she was still getting used to the informality of the place.

“Sorry,” she replied, not seeming overly worried, or more likely to remember the next time. Her attention was firmly on the plant.

Jordie reached her first. “*Osmunda claytoniana*. Nice work.” He squatted down beside Saanvi, the thick muscles in his thighs bunching while his cargo shorts molded around his ass.

Elias looked away.

He had lots of practice at looking away from Jordie.

Even if Jordie wasn’t his research assistant, Elias’s abnormal desires weren’t something he would consider acting on with anyone.

Especially not the man who would certainly decide to leave for Princeton next summer. The man he privately considered to be his best friend.

He wasn't sure if Jordie even thought of them as friends or merely colleagues. With only a couple dozen people at the research station, it was likely that their long evening talks, watching the stars, or sitting around a campfire meant nothing more to Jordie than a way to pass the time.

It was only by chance that both of them loved long swims out into the ocean, which had started their morning ritual of greeting the sun over the water.

They gave Elias plenty of time to practice looking away, though, when Jordie rose from the waves, droplets glistening on his thick chest...

Elias listened with half an ear as Jordie competently reviewed the arrangement of the *O. claytoniana* fronds, pointing out the differences from the nearby *O. praecantata*.

That was their work—not ferns, but researching the differences between organisms that had been impacted by the Change, and those very few that hadn't. *O. claytoniana* was a living fossil—nuclei and chromosomes virtually identical for nearly two hundred million years, trapped in evolutionary stasis like a window to the past.

*O. praecantata*, like nearly everything else on the planet, had been impacted by the asteroid that hit two hundred short years ago. A violent period when alien bacteria spread through

the air, adding new organelles to every living cell, each with their own external DNA.

That had firmly ended the debate about the panspermia theory, since clearly life originating on other planets was compatible with life on Earth, but by then they had bigger fish to fry.

Ninety percent of the human population—and the biodiversity of the planet—had been wiped out within a year. Those that survived were unstable, ill. And then the first babies had been born.

Elias couldn't even imagine what those first generations of parents went through, seeing their babies born with unexpected tentacles or feelers, and skin colors never seen before on a human.

Worse was imagining the fate of those first unlucky children, who were truly a different species. To have their delicate sense organs amputated from the space just below the armpits before the doctors or parents realized just how valuable they were—how integral to their understanding of the world.

His two long tentacles contracted inward at the thought, his sides tingling where they connected to his torso.

He couldn't imagine being limited to only his relatively weak nose and mouth, when his tentacles brought him a dozen times the input simply by unfurling into the air. How had people even navigated without that innate sense of the Earth's

magnetic core beneath them, exerting that subtle pull that always told him exactly which way he was facing?

How could he even do his work as a scientist if he couldn't pick up the chemical signatures of each organism and inorganic object that he touched, cataloging each of their unique flavors?

How had pre-Change humans survived difficult conditions, or even long excursions, without the extra boost of energy that their skin—red, green, blue, or some combination of the three—allowed them to photosynthesize from the sun?

Not to mention how much the Change had modified gender from a binary to a quaternary system, duplicating male and female sexual dimorphism with a second reproductive path between viratrixes and progenetrixes.

At the thought of viratrixes, Elias found himself looking at Jordie again. His mottled green tentacles bulged and undulated around him, thick and strong in just the right way to wrap around...

Elias turned away. What the hell was wrong with him today?

He'd been working beside Jordie for two years without letting his eyes wander like this.

At least not much.

Or at least not while they were working.

Any glimpses he caught of Jordie's body were something to be savored, late at night, in the privacy of his own cabin. He

didn't need any reminders to visualize the way the sun danced over Jordie's bronzed green skin, or the way that his lush lips would quirk up into a smile. Elias could all too easily envision Jordie's muscular back glistening with sea water, or the way his strong viratrix tentacles would casually curl up around a tree branch or reach toward...

Elias pulled in a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. He was the principal investigator on the research team, managing almost a dozen grants and even more ongoing papers. He could keep it together.

He noted a flash of dark green amongst the purple and orange foliage lining the path and welcomed the distraction. "Saanvi, have you seen a *Pinus devoniana* yet? I think that's one just up ahead. They used to cover this entire area."

Saanvi looked up, wiping her brow and stretching the two short rows of crimson feelers that ran down her sides and marked her as a progenetrix. Her coppery-red skin looked a little pale, but her focus was entirely on the tree further up the ridge. "Maybe?"

Elias strode toward it, trusting Jordie and Saanvi to follow. When he got there, he pulled down a branch. "You'll notice the distinctive pattern—the long needles that curve downward along the branch, then the short needles pointing upward at the curved tip. No cones this time of year but..." He looked down and found one to pick up. "Here's one. You can see how the scales are wide open when they fall."

He looked at Saanvi, whose breaths were coming out in little puffs. This was only the second time she'd climbed to this elevation with them, and it was probably rough going for her. "Let's take a break," he suggested. He sat on a rock and pulled out his own water bottle and protein bar by example.

The water sure did feel good, sliding down his throat. He hadn't realized how hot and thirsty he was, either.

Saanvi sat across from him, fanning her patterned shirt so that air could rush in the two long slits down the sides, cooling her torso and feelers. "Thanks. I guess I still need to get used to the altitude." She looked sheepish.

"No worries. Happens to the best of us." It was important to Elias that no one on his research team was ever made to feel less capable because of their biology. As a woman and a progenetrix, there would be enough people out there who'd probably doubted her scientific abilities.

It was all bullshit as far as he was concerned—her body might be equipped to carry babies by both the ancestral human method and with her newer Changed organs, but it did nothing to detract from her keen mind.

But those attitudes were why Elias was happiest in the remote tropical mountains, far away from society. Viratrix men, like Elias, didn't mate with other viratrix men.

Jordie sat down a moment later, a few feet further down the same log Saanvi had chosen. His tentacles writhed aimlessly, and for a moment Elias was mesmerized. They were so glossy and smooth, catching the light as the muscles



bunched and curled beneath his pine green skin. Elias could only imagine how tightly they could squeeze...

Saanvi broke him from his trance. "I recognize that one." She pointed. "*Pinus esuries*."

Elias turned to follow her gaze. The tree was a brilliant blue, its needles curling in on themselves like vines, the ones at the tips coated in sap and ready to trap an unsuspecting fly that buzzed too close. After the Change, when so many species gained organelles allowing them to photosynthesize at three different wavelengths, green was just one possible color among many.

"Good eye," he complimented. He could have gone over more details, but he was feeling overheated and more than a little distracted.

"God, it's hot today," Jordie commented, fanning his own shirt. He stretched his tentacles eight feet upward to the tree branch above, probably seeking a cool breeze.

Elias tried not to follow the motion and focused on Jordie's face. Only Jordie's thick jaw was tilted up toward the sky, exposing the corded musculature of his neck and the perfect point of his nose. His eyes were closed, his lashes delicate against the rugged masculinity of his high cheekbones. The sun glinting off his skin brought out the deep emerald color under the golden overtones.

What would it be like to kiss along his corded neck? To feel those viratrix tentacles wrap around him and...

No. That wasn't something he could ever consider. Jordie could never know.

Elias forced his gaze lower, but that only allowed him to catch a glimpse of the smooth, raised swelling at the base of Jordie's tentacle where his sperm pouch lay hidden. It would only need the gentlest caresses and coaxing to slip open so that Jordie could...

Elias looked sharply away. At the sky. At the ferns on the forest floor. He cataloged them. The tall, shady *Cyathea weatherbyana*. The frilly *Asparagus densiflorus*. *Nephrolepis undulata* with its distinctive scales.

His eyes kept drifting toward muscular green legs, then upward. Oh, God.

Elias could see a bulge in Jordie's loose, tan shorts. A rather *sizable* bulge. A bulge so thick that he could almost make out the ridge of the mushroom head.

He watched, captivated, as Jordie's tentacles came down, but didn't drift at all in the direction he wanted them to go.

They were sneaking toward Saanvi.

And they were glowing a lustful neon green.

Ah, fuck.

Elias couldn't believe it had taken him so long to realize what was going on. "Saanvi," he asked quietly. "Where are you in your cycle?"

Her glowing red feelers snapped closed around her chest in protection, even if it was just from embarrassment. When she spoke, though, her voice was confident and even. “I’m two months out from my next heat.”

Elias grimaced. “You might have been, but you were away from Meena for three months before you moved here, and you started going on eight-hour hikes as soon as you arrived...” While Saanvi was a burgeoning botanist, her viratrix wife was a marine biologist, so every day took them in different directions.

He watched the awareness dawn in her eyes. “Ah, fuck.”

He hid a smirk at how closely her reaction had matched his own.

He dug his radio out of his pocket—cell reception was non-existent out here—and called down to camp, updating everyone on the situation. Hopefully by the time they arrived, Meena would be ready.

“How long will it take us to hike back down?” Jordie asked, tentacles still waving distractedly toward the progenetrix. “Sorry. I’m not even thinking. I know where we are. Think you can hold out for three more hours?” he asked Saanvi.

It sounded like they were all feeling muddled.

“I’ll make it.” She hid her feelers under her shirt, though they didn’t seem inclined to stay there for long.

“Let me check the first aid kit for blockers.” Elias reached into his backpack. It was a long shot, but he didn’t remember what was in it.

Bandages. Painkillers. Antihistamines. Scissors. Nothing useful.

“Alright,” He stood. “Let’s go. The sooner you get down, the sooner we reach Meena. And, ah, as the wind’s coming up the mountain right now, maybe you should walk a little behind us?”

The danger to all three of them didn’t need to be explained. If Saanvi was going into heat, she could drive both of them into rut. And while they would *probably* be able to withhold themselves from their instinctive desires, it would grow increasingly difficult.

“Makes sense. I’ll stay... twenty or thirty feet back.”

“Good. Good.” He was almost talking to himself, willing words to the surface. “Remember to avoid snapfruit and chokevine. You know what those look like?”

Saanvi nodded.

Heat pheromones acted like a mild intoxicant, delaying reaction time and leading to poor decision making. If there was any danger in the forest—which was almost inevitable, as they were surrounded by Changed plants and animals—their situation would get much worse.

Once a heat or rut cycle had been triggered, it was unstoppable, but the speed at which it came on would depend

entirely on how close they got to their counterpart pheromones.

“Good. Our goal is just to get back to camp as quickly as possible. Ready?”

By the time he asked, the other two were already standing.

It was already a little easier to breathe with Saanvi further away, but... God, Jordie was still so close.

Distractingly close.

Elias's tentacles reached out...

He pulled them back into his body. Jordie could never know what he was thinking.

All three of them were crashing recklessly through the underbrush, making their own paths with arms, tentacles, and thick-soled boots. Jordie walked beside him and Saanvi a good distance back. So far so good.

Then Elias was ducking under a vine, and his outstretched tentacle touched Jordie's. It was like lightning going through him. Even after they parted, the salty-sweet taste of Jordie's light coating of slime lingered on his skin, the flavors made stronger by his arousal.

It was rude to touch tentacles or feelers, something you were supposed to ignore when it happened unexpectedly.

But Elias wanted to moan.

He wanted more of that flavor, more of those strong, corded tentacles shiny with fluid that would ease their way

into his...

When he chose his next steps, he moved a few more feet away.

Hell, the worst thing that could happen now was for Jordie to realize what he was thinking. That Elias had barely given a thought to the young progenetrix female behind them, because the object of his lust was much closer.

If Jordie ever found out, he'd be horrified.

Better to just get back to camp as quickly as possible.

## Chapter 2. Jordie

Jordie pushed a handful of vines to the side and stepped over a moss-covered branch. His heartbeat thudded in his ears, echoed in the pulsing of his cock.

They were making good time, but even if they could make it down in another hour instead of two, he felt like he would lose his mind.

He'd never been around a progenetrix in heat before. Sure, he'd walked past closed doors and windows on the sidewalk, getting that second-hand whiff of pheromones. But he'd never been so close for such a long time.

He was instinctively aware of Saanvi behind him—fertile and available. He couldn't smell so much as sense her at some unconscious level that had his libido climbing through the stratosphere.

Every sense seemed alert. Every texture—deliciously rough or seductively smooth—on his tentacles made him think about sex.

And fuck, when he'd touched Dr. Greton for just that moment...

It had sent every thought flying from his head. Elias was his competition. Elias, who tasted like man and musk and charging against each other in battle. They would rut against each other, chests bared, tentacles writhing, legs tangled together on the forest floor...

He stumbled a few feet farther away, watching Elias the whole time.

It was just hormones, he reminded himself. Just Change pheromones that were hijacking his own endocrine system. Serotonin that made him feel happy and light. Endorphins making him excited and hyperaware. Vasopressin making him aggressive and impairing his concentration. Testosterone making his cock throb and his muscles swell as he prepared for combat.

Naming them all didn't help, though it distracted him for a moment.

He watched Elias striding through the undergrowth. The viratrix was truly a paragon of self-control, because he hardly seemed affected. How the hell did he do that?

Yes, his shorts were tented. It was impossible to miss the fleshy outline of his cock straining against the fabric that wrapped around his muscular thighs. God, how big was that thing? It looked as thick and plump as Jordie's arm.

Elias's tentacles glowed a brilliant aquamarine of arousal, but they were calm, one holding aside a curtain of vines and the other quietly tasting the air ahead.



He was like some swaggering hero from a comic book, sweat dripping seductively down his slate blue torso while he handled the toughest challenges without a second thought.

Or maybe that was Jordie's own hero worship getting mixed up with all of the pheromones.

Oxytocin, the hormone responsible for affection and adoration.

Jordie had to admit he had the tiniest bit of an academic crush on the man. Even after two years working together, Jordie was still a little awed that such a renowned scientist would spend so much time sitting on the beach with him and listening to his passing thoughts. They talked about everything and nothing, but sometimes Elias put things together in such brilliant ways that it was breathtaking to watch.

Elias was his best friend, father figure, mentor, and role model all wrapped up into one—kind to everyone, passionate about his work, and so confident about himself that he never needed to assert his title like so many blustering viratrix men were inclined to do.

Not that Jordie would ever let Elias know how he felt. His idolization was embarrassing.

It was just that he'd never gotten along with someone so completely. He'd shared things with Elias that he'd never mentioned to anyone else—his doubts and fears, his hopes and dreams. Everything with Elias was just so easy.

And the way the man smelled, making his tentacles tingle...

Fuck. These hormones were pulling him in all sorts of crazy directions.

Elias marched ahead of him, broad shoulders and luminescent tentacles not betraying any discomfort at the situation.

Jordie felt almost like a child in comparison, tentacles flailing around and shuddering with every touch. Fighting his distinguished mentor over a progenetrix—a married progenetrix colleague—would be embarrassing in the extreme.

Jordie chose a path that took him a few steps further away from both of them.

Only that was when Saanvi cried out.

Jordie turned to find her crouched on the ground, and his instincts went into overdrive.

A progenetrix was hurt.

He could save her.

“Are you alright?” he and Elias both asked together. No matter what he’d just told himself, the other viratrix’s voice made him want to growl.

“Chokevine. But I already killed it.” She held up her machete, dripping with neon orange goo. Her voice was confident, but her body was shaking.

The spiked chokevine slithered off through the leafy purples and greens behind her. But she was still in danger. It could sense movement and attack unpredictably.

Every instinct told Jordie that she needed to be rescued.

Jordie surged forward. He could rescue the helpless progenetrix. He would wrap her up and keep her safe.

“Well done,” Elias complimented. How could he be so calm when a progenetrix was in danger?

Then Elias’s voice rose in warning. “Jordie! Stay back!”

Jordie hadn’t even realized he was moving. He took another step, unwilling to take commands from another viratrix... Until some part of that panicked tone cut through the fog.

An orange vine swung toward him, barely missing his head when he jumped away. Its glossy green leaves rippled with violent intent.

He stumbled back a few more paces, heart racing.

He’d nearly gotten himself killed.

“Jordie!” Elias called again, voice strangled by fear and now much closer.

Jordie snarled at Elias, willing the haze to clear from his mind. He’d nearly walked right into another trailing chokevine. Or maybe the same one—the things could be huge.

“Jordie, I need you to turn around and walk toward that queñua tree.”

It took him a moment to find the peeling red bark, twisted branches, and tiny green leaves. Another pre-Change specimen, though it looked as strange as some of the Changed plants.

He set off toward it, willing his focus to narrow.

He ached to move. To do something. To battle the chokevine. To swoop in to the rescue. To walk up to Elias and show him who was the superior viratrix. To fight and fuck and claim what was his.

Instead, he walked toward the queñua tree, keeping his movements slow.

“There we go,” Elias’s voice came again. It was low and almost hypnotic. “Very good, Jordie.”

Jordie’s chest shouldn’t have felt so light with that praise from his mentor.

“Saanvi, I want you to take three steps to the left. No, that way. Good job. I know it stings. Now walk forward. *Good* job. Look down at the root. You’re going to take a *big* step over it. There. And now move toward Jordie...”

When Saanvi got close, Jordie couldn’t help it. He grabbed her with arms and tentacles, as if he could keep her safe from everything that moved. As if she were *his*.

She clung to him with the same urgency, ruby red feelers locked around his tentacles in little rings, an interlocking puzzle of safety.

He would take her somewhere. Somewhere quiet and alone where he could...

She kicked his shin. “Put me *down*.”

Dammit.

He opened his arms, dropping her to the ground, but his tentacles wanted to linger. Her feelers were still dancing toward him.

She took a step away from him. Then another.

They were both panting, Saanvi’s shirt lifting as her feelers tangled over each other.

They stared at each other for a long time.

And, oddly enough, looking at her helped him remember.

She was his colleague. He liked and respected Saanvi and her wife.

Until a couple of hours ago, he’d had absolutely zero attraction to her.

He still didn’t actually want Saanvi.

As a viratrix man, he could impregnate any female or a progenetrix male, but his preference had always been for men. Progenetrix men.

As attractive as Saanvi was—objectively—her curved hips and smooth heart-shaped face did nothing for him, even in rut.

He just wanted to fuck. Desperately and brutally and possessively.

But he wasn't an animal. He could control his urges.

That was something that was drilled home in every lesson he'd been taught. He was still a thinking, rational being.

He might spend the next twenty-four hours rubbing his dick raw, but he wasn't going to rape someone, or even have sex with someone he wasn't innately attracted to.

But God, the strength of his rut was staggering.

He'd had no idea.

His eyes swung to Elias. The blue-skinned man was equally thick everywhere—rippled belly, strong arms, muscular tentacles, heavy jaw... just the picture of viratrix masculinity.

Jordie had never wanted to touch anyone so badly in his life.

He could already imagine the scene. How their bodies would crash together, tentacles squeezing, shirts ripped from chests. They would tumble over the ground, cocks pulsing as they scratched and roared for dominance.

And when Jordie won, he would...

He shook away the half-formed thoughts.

He was attracted to progenetrixes, obviously. He wanted a mate who was male, but more soft and yielding. Someone with gentle feelers along their sides who'd look up at him with begging eyes.

He reached down to adjust his cock, which was already threatening to burst from the confines of his cargo shorts.

But that was a mistake. The mere touch had him ready to blow.

Maybe he could just duck behind a tree and rub one out?

No. He could control himself.

“Sorry,” he grunted out, for all that he truly meant it. He’d never intended to touch Saanvi and hoped that she would forgive him.

He forced himself to—carefully—walk another dozen feet away. And then a dozen feet further.

That helped a lot.

Elias was heroically *still* unfazed, sitting close to Saanvi and digging through the first aid kit. “How’s your ankle?”

“Swelling up fast.”

He tossed her a tube of antihistamine ointment, the motion of his arm pulling all of Jordie’s attention. The way his muscles rippled. The massive length of his glowing tentacles.

If they fought, rolling around on the forest floor, who would win?

Jordie stared off into the treetops. He needed a distraction.

The big question that had been circling his head for the past few days rushed in. Should he take the job at Princeton?

He had a list of pros and cons neatly laid out in his notebook, though some of the details were escaping him right

now.

Princeton was prestigious. An honor and a challenge. Everything he'd been working toward.

The island was... well, mostly he'd be able to continue his current research with Dr. Greton, but with his name as first author. And he liked the beach.

It should have been an easy decision.

And yet he didn't want to go.

There wasn't anything that he'd been able to list as a reason to stay except for... what? That he liked watching the sunset? That he wanted to swim in the ocean every morning with his friend?

He heard a moan and realized it had come from his own mouth.

While he wasn't paying attention, his tentacles had slithered to his shorts, massaging his rock-hard cock and leaving a wet trail down his zipper.

That wasn't embarrassing at all.

He looked back at his companions.

Elias was giving more instructions to Saanvi. "Put this on everywhere. Much higher than where you see the marks. Then keep it in your pocket." It was like Elias was in a different universe, completely unruffled. "Do you think you can walk?"

"Maybe with a walking stick." Saanvi's ankle was slathered in ointment now, the crisp medicinal smell covering



some of her natural scent.

That helped, but Jordie still felt like he was flying high. He tried to focus on Elias's words.

“I think that's our best bet right now. But let us know if the pain gets worse. We could wait and have Meena meet us up here.” Elias didn't mention the obvious—that it would likely double the time for the couple to be reunited, and when it happened, they would still be in an unprotected location. “Or one of us could carry you down as quickly as possible.”

Saanvi whimpered and closed her eyes. Her feelers brushed comfortingly over her own chest, burrowing under her shirt. “If you guys can handle carrying me... I don't want to stay up here any longer than necessary.”

“Who would you like to carry you?”

“I can handle it,” Jordie found himself saying before he even realized it. Helpless progenetrix, competing viratrix... His instincts were telling him to do what he had to do.

Elias's tentacles surged threateningly toward Jordie for just a moment before he got them under control. Elias bowed his head, just a subtle movement, and took a few steps back. “Is that alright, Saanvi?”

She drew in a shuddering breath. “Yeah.”

“Go ahead.”

That felt better than it should have, to have the other viratrix—the man in charge—yield to him so easily. *Trust* him to carry this precious cargo.

He felt like he was on top of the world.

Proud and strong.

Admired by the man he most looked up to.

Damn, these hormones were insane.

“Let’s try piggy-back,” he suggested. The last thing he needed was Saanvi anywhere near his cock.

She climbed carefully onto his back, and he tucked his arms underneath her legs, *very* careful to keep his tentacles out in front of him.

Saanvi didn’t appear to have such good control, her feelers brushing rhythmically against his side, questing toward the openings of his shirt.

He wished it didn’t feel so good.

“Sorry,” Saanvi whispered, head tilted as far away from him as she could get.

“No worries,” he grunted.

He could do this. He could still focus.

He could keep putting one foot in front of the next.

Watch his footing.

Think about... snow. In New Jersey. The gritty, gray slush oozing uncomfortably around his shoes.

He would just ignore the way his cock was about to burst in his shorts. His tentacles were positively throbbing, the thick layer of slick fluid starting to drip from the tips.

He wrapped them around each other, because that was better than touching Saanvi. But then it practically felt like masturbation with how aroused he was.

How had he never noticed how erotic that smooth-hard feeling of his own tentacles could be? They were glowing in arousal, a vivid green that lit up the shadowed forest floor.

He walked.

And he walked.

He had no idea how far he'd managed to travel. At this point, the only thing guiding him forward was the bright allure of Elias's azure tentacles through the leaves twenty paces ahead of him.

He felt like he was walking in a dream.

A very good dream that would end with his cock sliding home, and his tentacles twining around...

"Saanvi?" His voice was broken as he let her legs slide down. "I don't think I can go any further."

"Thanks." Her breath was ragged. She stumbled a bit, but her ankle wasn't as swollen as it could have been. They'd gotten the antihistamine to her in time. "I think we're most of the way back," she added, through gritted teeth.

He looked up. He hadn't even realized. Through the trees, he could see the mountain peak high above, and the glistening water below. They really were pretty close.

But they had at least another half hour to go.

“I can take her.”

Jordie wanted to growl, tentacles raised, at the other man’s voice.

It made no sense, turning on the viratrix he’d been idolizing a moment ago.

But right now, he was a threat.

Elias approached slowly. Head bowed. Tentacles curled inward around himself.

As deferential as he could possibly be.

It made Jordie want to rub his own tentacles all over him, stroking and grooming him until his scent was everywhere and everyone would know who Elias belonged to.

What the ever-loving fuck?

Jordie forced himself to take a step back.

He’d expected the arousal that a progenetrix would bring out, but nothing had prepared him for the reaction to another viratrix man submitting to him.

“Go ahead,” he grunted. Elias could carry Saanvi down the rest of the slope because *he* allowed it.

Then he forced himself to take another dozen steps back because his brain was going haywire.

His thoughts about Elias were just as inappropriate as his thoughts about Saanvi.

“I’m going to...” His tentacles rippled in frustration and pure, blind need. He vaguely remembered that he was

supposed to be downwind, but he knew he wouldn't be able to circle around Saanvi and Elias without giving in to his urges. "I'm going to walk a little further behind."

"Good idea." Elias's voice sounded strained now, too. For a moment his tentacles reached toward Jordie, like he was almost ready to fight.

Jordie met his eyes, nostrils flaring.

There were whole worlds of arousal in Elias's dark, smoldering eyes.

Jordie could get lost in them.

But then those undulating blue tentacles settled down obediently at his mentor's sides.

Jordie turned away, scrabbling back up the path to add some distance.

Elias hitched Saanvi onto his back, and they were off again.

Walking behind the pair of them was its own unique kind of torture, but somehow they all made it those last staggering miles.

Jordie concentrated on the trees, naming each one that he passed. Drawing evolutionary relationships in his head or making them up when facts and words slipped away.

Fuck. He just had to make it a little farther without giving in to his rut.

Meena ran out to meet them on the path, plum-colored tentacles flinging themselves around Saanvi before the rest of her slender purple body caught up.

“Go,” Elias told her, voice thick. “The honeymoon hut should be ready. Use the radio if you need anything.”

The “honeymoon hut” was what they euphemistically called the housing unit placed a mile away from the camp for exactly this purpose.

“I’ve got her,” Meena agreed. Her eyes were still clear, though they wouldn’t stay that way for long with the way that Saanvi was clinging to her body and kissing hungrily up her neck.

The two of them were already entangled, limbs writhing on top of each other, so that it was a wonder Meena could walk at all.

Elias turned around. “And you’re coming with me. The last thing we need is our pheromones setting off the rest of the camp.”

Jordie nodded, the words sparking a distant level of recognition. Progenetrix heats happened on a cycle, but once they sparked a viratrix to rut, they could set off other progenetrix heats in an ever-intensifying spiral.

Change DNA was programmed for orgies—only the stupidest anti-scientific traditionalists denied it, with evidence from every species around—but humans had, for the most

part, clung to monogamy and privacy for their Change-influenced matings.

Which meant... Jordie couldn't go back to his room in the dorms. He needed to get away from the camp.

To Elias's cabin, which was further away from the rest of them, and in the opposite direction.

Jordie gave up on identifying botanical specimens and just followed Elias's undulating tentacles. They were mesmerizing. Dangerous. Dripping.

The next moments were a blur of familiar voices and tree-lined paths made strange by the fog of rut. Every viratrix was an enemy. Every progenetrix was a potential mate.

Jordie scooped up supplies that his colleagues had placed on the path in front of him before racing away. His tentacles reaching out blindly as he caught the taste of different pheromones.

His balls felt so tight, he might come from just the friction of his boxers against his cock. His cock that was sticking straight up, heavy and full against his belly.

Only Elias's voice kept him moving. "Jordie. Keep walking. Follow me."

How could he be so calm? Elias's turquoise tentacles were glowing as vividly as Jordie's, shimmering with satiny liquid as they danced in the air.

"You go in," Elias told him, holding open the door. Somehow, they were already at Elias's cabin.

Elias's azure face was dripping sweat. His shirt was plastered to his body with it, outlining every muscle. His tentacles writhed, reaching toward Jordie, until he thrust them behind his back.

Jordie growled.

Elias with his tentacles outstretched was competition.

Elias with his tentacles locked behind him was entrancing.

Subservient.

Thick and muscular and so biddable.

Confusing.

"I'll keep going," Elias added, tilting his head in the other direction.

Jordie peered into the welcoming gloom before him. He didn't see the familiar walls of wood and reed, the manufactured roof, or carefully stored scientific equipment and specimens.

All he saw was a cave.

Somewhere private. Somewhere where he could drag a mate and fend off attackers.

Somewhere he could take out his throbbing cock and drive it home.

No... wait.

A place where he could wait out his rut by himself without endangering or triggering anyone else.



That was why he was here.

He darted through the doorway, tentacles brushing over Elias's as he passed. They were salty-sweet and oozing, skin impossibly soft over corded muscle.

Almost like a cock.

There was a viratrix in Jordie's lair.

A virile man, who tasted like rut and sex and rivalry.

His scent was everywhere, covering the mattress on the simple rope bed, infused in the clothes that hung over the chair.

And he was going to leave?

Jordie set down his burdens. Food to provide for his mate. No, to feast after beating his competition. No...

He couldn't remember what his objectives were any more, just this overwhelming urge to fight and fuck, fuck and fight.

His tentacles snaked around Elias's wrists to bind his arms before his consciousness caught up.

Boxes crashed to the ground.

Elias shouted, a bellow of challenge and need.

Jordie dragged him closer, pulling him inside the cave, one resisting step at a time.

Jordie was going to win. He could feel it pulsing through his body. He would fight and dominate, hold all of that dangerous bulk to the ground so he could conquer. So that everyone could see that he was the stronger viratrix.

That Elias was his to command.

Elias was panting now, eyes wild, tentacles looping around his own in tight coils that almost felt like rows of progenetrix feelers. He wasn't fighting back. He was *clinging*.

This was the man that Jordie had always admired. The viratrix he always wished he could get a little bit closer to.

Giving him a look of such longing and hope. It sent all of his protective instincts into overdrive.

Jordie threw him face-down onto the bed.

## Chapter 3. Elias

**E**lias walked, head down, trying to ignore the grunts on the path behind him. It was bad enough that Jordie was so brawny, his sweat and musk filling the air.

But did he have to *grunt* every few steps so that Elias couldn't forget it for a single moment?

Every deep exhale sounded like sex. Like the sounds Jordie might make with each thrust of his cock into a willing hole. Like the sounds he would make while his sensitive tentacles writhed, dominating and slithering their way into...

Into a progenetrix, obviously. Or a woman of any Change gender. He didn't know Jordie's preferences, but they wouldn't be for a viratrix male. Not for Elias.

Elias wiped the sweat from his brow.

He had a plan.

He would get Jordie into his own cabin, and somehow manage not to think about how Jordie's rich scent was going to soak into all of his belongings. Sweat and slime and semen dripping onto his sheets.

The way that he could roll around later in that heady aroma and...

No, he wasn't going to think about it.

He would deposit Jordie in his cabin, and then continue on to the observation deck on the promontory over the beach. It didn't have walls on two sides, but it would give him a sense of privacy to weather out his rut.

He reached the familiar door of his home and held it open for Jordie.

The man looked dazed, arms full of the water bottles and boxes of food their colleagues had left for them on the path. His shirt was riding up, revealing his bronzed green torso, and...

Oh, fuck. That was a sight that Elias could never unsee.

The dark tip of Jordie's cock was poking out above the band of his cargo shorts. It was conical and domed, the flesh plump and slit weeping with pearly drops that Elias ached to taste.

Fuck. He had to get away.

"You go in," he panted. Elias wrapped his tentacles behind him so he wouldn't accidentally touch Jordie. He looked away, knowing that any challenge would be met with a fight. "I'll keep going."

Jordie raced by him, one long tentacle dragging across Elias's shirt and lingering on the edge of his tentacles.

Elias could taste everything. Jordie's arousal and dominance. His unique musky flavor, made liquid and potent to ease his way inside a willing body.

Elias shuddered, hoping that he succeeded in muffling the whimper that wanted to escape.

Jordie set down his box of food and the pack of water bottles on top.

Good. Elias could go now.

He would really leave.

After just one more moment of watching that glorious ass, the way those tentacles were questing toward him...

Elias cried out when they made contact with one wrist, and then the other. His supplies crashed to the ground, forgotten.

God, it felt so good. Like every teenage fantasy. And most of his adult ones, too.

Jordie dragged him closer. Damn, he was strong.

Or maybe Elias wasn't really resisting.

He didn't want to resist.

When those burly green tentacles drew his hands to his sides and then continued wrapping around his back, it was all he could do to dig his heels in and hold on.

He could feel his own blue tentacles wrapping around Jordie's against his will.

Not wrapping around Jordie's whole body or coming between them like a proper fighter, trying to crush him or turn

him or thrust him away.

But spiraling around those undulating limbs in tight coils like a progenetrix. Tasting that sweet flavor of desire and man, clinging and wanting...

Jordie kept drawing him closer.

Their eyes met.

For a moment, Elias thought he almost saw a matching desire.

Then Jordie looked down at Elias's tentacles, inappropriately wrapped around him and showing wordlessly everything that was wrong with Elias's existence.

Jordie's tentacles slithered away from his grasping coils, and in one lunge pushed him face down onto the bed.

Elias whimpered. What had he done?

He pressed his face into the pillow, like he could make everything go away.

Hopefully Jordie wouldn't remember this tomorrow.

Maybe Elias could just slip out the door, walk quickly away, and spend the next twenty-four hours getting himself off to the memory of that one touch.

He inched toward the bottom of his mattress. He could feel the wooden frame with one foot. Now the other.

Soon he could straighten. Just a little further...

Jordie landed on top of him in a flurry of arms and tentacles. Large hands pinned him to the mattress. One

tentacle slithered down his leg, holding him in place, while the other wrapped around his chest and came to rest in a loose curl around his neck.

God, it was exquisite. To be so painfully, perfectly trapped.

Jordie's knee came up between his thighs, so that his enormous cock rested between Elias's buttocks, grinding him down into the bed and working his cock in small thrusts.

"Jordie!" he called out helplessly. "What are you...?"

Jordie's breath was hot against his ear. "Do you yield?"

Right. He was supposed to be fighting. Because what he wanted was all wrong.

He lifted his tentacles and wedged them under Jordie's hips, trying to push him away.

If only he could get a few inches between them, he could start to think again. He could make some plan that didn't involve wanton moaning and begging his research assistant to fuck him.

Jordie tightened his hold, seeming to enjoy the struggle.

This time, Elias really did moan. To feel so delightfully helpless. Pinned. The corded loop was so strong and silky around his throat, applying the perfect amount of pressure to let him breathe but remind him that he was completely at the other viratrix's mercy.

"Is that all you've got, Elias?" Jordie was panting, but there was a gentle teasing behind it.

“No!” Elias put in one final effort. He had to resist. For his own reputation. For the future of their friendship. He thrust with both tentacles, lifting Jordie’s hips away...

Only to have them come pounding back against his ass when Jordie’s tentacles tangled with his, forcing them out of the way. He was overpowered. Helpless.

Mountains of ecstasy rumbled over him, holding him trapped beneath. He thrust his ass back subconsciously, seeking more friction. His tentacles writhed, unsure whether to push or pull, but certain that each wriggle just tightened Jordie’s delicious hold.

“Do you yield?” Jordie asked again, sending dangerous tingles of desire through him when his breath caressed Elias’s neck.

“I yield,” he admitted, half thinking it would allow him to get away... and half hoping it would be the gateway to his darkest desires.

Jordie’s cock rubbed against him again. God, that thing had to be monstrous. A fantasy made real. And he was so deliciously immobilized that all he could do was endure it.

He whimpered.

Jordie shifted again, spreading Elias’s legs further so he could nestle between them. “Do you submit?” he asked, voice husky.

It would be so easy to say yes. To play out this dream for a single day, even if it was humiliating tomorrow. Even if he



could never look his colleagues in the eye again. Even if he lost his best friend.

That shook him out of it. “Jordie?” he asked. “Do you know who I am?”

“Elias Greton,” that low voice rumbled. “Brilliant research scientist and the best mentor I’ve ever worked with.” The coils loosened a little, the glide sensuous over his skin.

“Good.” Elias’s voice was shaking, even as the praise made his chest feel light. “So you should... probably let go.”

The coils tightened. Deliciously.

Elias moaned, loud and long, from somewhere deep in his chest.

“Probably?” Jordie asked. It sounded like reason had returned to his voice. But only for a moment. “But you yielded to me,” he growled back. “You’re mine now.”

God help him, he wished that were true.

He didn’t have an answer. Only a gasp as Jordie’s tentacles wound around his. It was like kissing, but across a thousand nerves, all singing in bliss.

He knew he should probably fight back. They could acceptably touch each other if they were in battle. But he left all of his limbs how Jordie arranged them, rapturous at the contact.

“Jordie...” Elias protested again. “This isn’t...”

Jordie interrupted, even as his hips rocked against Elias's ass. "I know. We're in rut. But God, I never thought it would hit me like this. You're... irresistible. My inner viratrix doesn't want to let you go. So just... Maybe we can help each other out. Just fulfilling a biological urge until it's over." His voice sounded strained, like he was barely holding himself back.

It was everything Elias had ever wanted.

*You're irresistible. My inner viratrix doesn't want to let you go.*

"This won't change anything?" he asked. *You won't disdain me later? You won't tell everyone?*

"Won't change anything." Jordie punctuated his words with another thrust. His tentacle was sneaking up Elias's shorts. "Just yield to me."

Elias whimpered.

He'd wanted Jordie from the moment he landed on the island.

But he'd grown to trust him over the past two years. They'd shared so much together.

He could feel his resistance slipping away.

Especially since this might be his only chance.

"Okay," he mumbled, face half smashed into the pillow. "I yield." The most dangerous and exciting words he'd ever said. "We can help each other out," he added in a rush, but he wasn't sure if Jordie heard.

Elias's body was already moving, being exquisitely manhandled by a flurry of arms and tentacles. He landed on his back with Jordie arched over him.

He felt small and helpless and weak, exactly like he'd dreamed. Not like a viratrix at all.

From this angle, Jordie looked huge. A tower of hairy muscles, sparkling with sweat over forest green skin, arms and tentacles forming a cage around him.

Elias looked away. He couldn't meet Jordie's eyes.

The tip of one glowing tentacle stroked down his face. "Don't worry. I'll take care of you." Jordie's voice was tender and low.

Elias swallowed. It sounded like a promise. Like everything he'd ever wanted. Tears pricked at his eyes. "Only because we're in rut," he whispered. "Just fulfilling a biological urge until it's over."

"Of course." That smooth tentacle tip traced over his lips, as gentle as a kiss, then played at the seam.

Elias felt helpless as he opened his mouth and started sucking, the flavor a burst of musk and sweetness. The flexible muscle glided over his tongue, stroking it and then brushing the roof of his mouth until he was shivering.

He knew how he must look. This was something progenetrixes did. And here he was, just as eager to suckle and kiss, to have any part of Jordie inside of him.

He had no secrets from Jordie now. If he ever had. He'd had a dozen chances to turn this into a fight for dominance, and he'd barely taken one.

But Jordie, sweet, clever Jordie, who watched the stars with him and went swimming in the mornings, had promised to take care of him.

Elias sucked for all he was worth, dragging more of that undulating muscle inside to bathe it with his tongue. When Jordie groaned in return, he felt like he'd won a prize.

“Damn,” Jordie panted. “We’re wearing too many clothes.”

Elias nodded, mouth full.

That was all the warning he got before Jordie yanked up the front panel of Elias's shirt, the rows of snaps on both sides popping open with the force. Jordie withdrew from his mouth for just long enough to pull the offending garment over Elias's head, then slithered back in with his other tentacle, bringing on a new burst of flavor.

Jordie repeated the move with his own shirt, which was cut in the same viratrix style. And then all of that sweat-slicked bronzed green muscle was on display, matted with dark curly hair.

For once, Elias didn't look away.

Jordie had a barrel chest, with two strong tentacles sprouting beneath his arms. Undeniably viratrix. Undeniably the only body type Elias had ever been attracted to.

Jordie ran a tentacle down Elias's matching chest, and for a moment Elias wished that he was smaller. Softer. That he had those gentle rows of feelers along each side to curl around Jordie's dominant tentacles.

It was a fantasy buried even deeper than the one of being claimed by another viratrix.

But he found himself coiling his tentacles around Jordie's, making tight little rings that were almost the same.

He felt completely exposed like this. With anyone other than Jordie, he wasn't sure he would have dared.

He looked up, expecting to see derision. Or perhaps gloating, from the superior viratrix to the inferior.

Instead, all he saw was raw lust. A possessive, wild lust.

"You're mine," Jordie growled. His eyes were wide, watching Elias swallow the tip of his tentacle like he couldn't look away.

Elias knew he was just stating his claim as the dominant viratrix, another effect of the rut.

But how he wished it were true.

All Elias wanted was to touch and lick and fuck. To worship that muscular body and follow Jordie's commands.

And right now, to be the hole that Jordie sunk into as he fulfilled the biological imperative to breed.

Elias was on the edge of begging.

It was a good thing there was a tentacle plundering his mouth, or he might have. And he wasn't sure he could live that down.

As long as Jordie was in charge... as long as the other viratrix was initiating everything... it wouldn't be Elias's fault, would it?

Jordie snarled as he opened Elias's shorts and pulled them off, yanking them down his hips. He removed his own with the same haste. They hit the cement floor with a loud thunk and a faint tinkle of glass. A specimen jar in his pocket must have broken and he didn't seem to care.

Once Elias swept his eyes downward, he couldn't bring himself to care either.

Jordie's cock was a work of art, so heavy and full that gravity pulled it down. The brown and green hues of his skin darkened to almost black along the thick length. Veins wrapped around it like roots on a tree. The head was a deep forest color, so plump and wide that Elias knew he would struggle to take it in his mouth.

Could it even fit inside him?

His hole clenched at the thought, hungry to find out.

But when Jordie surged forward, he had something else in mind.

He laid heavy over Elias's chest, pinning him with his weight, while their cocks lined up together. A tentacle

wrapped around them, the slime making everything slippery, and Elias wanted to cry from the pleasure.

He touched himself this way sometimes, imagining it was another viratrix. But never had he thought it would be so good. Even side-by-side, it felt like Jordie's cock was dominating his, thrusting against it while he laid there to be pleased. Coils of tentacle jerked up and down, squeezing at the same time, in an unending wave of sensation.

“Damn, Ellie.” Jordie's voice came in short, strained bursts. “Never felt like this before. Just want to... come all over you. That okay?”

Elias nodded around the tentacle filling his mouth, trying to express in every way that he could that it would be perfect. That it was just what he wanted.

He had a nickname. A real, true nickname that made him sound soft and small. And, he secretly pretended, adored.

“Fuck,” Jordie grunted. “Just need to... Oh, God. Gonna paint you with my cum. Just...”

Elias was lost in a world of pleasure. The exquisite glide of cocks and tentacles. Breath coming in short gasps around the fullness in his mouth. Jordie's weight immobilized him.

He was ready to beg. He was ready to come. He just needed...

Jordie's eyes went wide as he roared out his orgasm, burning spurts of fluid filling the space between them.

Elias's tentacles slithered in automatically, eager to taste it.

God, it was so good. So musky and thick, bitter and salty in just the right way.

“Spread it around,” Jordie commanded.

Elias found some way to whimper, even while his tongue kept dancing over the tentacle invading him.

His cock was diamond hard, near to bursting. He thrust mindlessly into Jordie’s coiled tentacles, seeking more. Seeking completion. Seeking...

“Come, Ellie.”

His orgasm burst over him like fireworks. All it took was those two growled words, a command and his nickname uttered so sweetly, and he was swept away. Lost in ecstasy as another viratrix gave him everything he’d ever wanted.

No, not just another viratrix.

Jordie.



## Chapter 4. Jordie

Jordie looked down at the man panting beneath him.

The tips of Elias's glowing blue tentacles were slipping lazily through their shared cum, sweet, delicate touches that matched the soft look in his eyes.

Jordie was a caveman for how much he enjoyed marking his claim that way... but that must all be part of the rut.

In the wake of his orgasm, a little clarity was returning. Some part of him knew he should be freaking out.

He'd just had sex with his *supervisor*.

He'd demanded his submission and taken control of their coupling.

He could lose his job for this.

He could lose everything he'd ever worked for.

At best, he could hopefully slip away to his new job in June without breathing a word to anyone.

At worst, he could be packing his bags in shame and leaving on the next boat.

His inner viratrix didn't care.

Because Elias was so gorgeous like this, blissed out and smiling up at him like he'd invented the sun.

How had he never noticed how handsome the man was? His eyes were dark pools that Jordie felt like he could fall into, pupils wide with lust and adoration. The wrinkles at the corners just made him sexier. This was a man with wisdom, experience, and kindness—which Jordie already knew from all of their peaceful evenings on the beach.

He'd thought he felt close to Elias in those moments, as they shared quiet thoughts and dreams. But it was nothing like the closeness he felt now.

And those lips...so thick and full, pink with an undertone of the slate blue from his skin. They were manly lips, but the way the other viratrix had practically swallowed Jordie's tentacle...

He hadn't known anything could feel so good.

Jordie found himself getting hard again, though he'd come only minutes ago.

He was mesmerized by that mouth. What would it be like to kiss him?

To kiss another viratrix? But not just another viratrix... To kiss the one man he looked up to above all. The one who had, for some bizarre reason, yielded to him during their ruts.

The very idea of it sent a rush of pride through Jordie's chest. He was the triumphant viratrix. The winner.

But there was something that went beyond that. This desire to shelter and care for the man. To win him over and keep him safe from every harm.

Why had he never heard about this before?

Part of him wanted to get lost in the haze of hormones and sensations. God, the way Elias was playing with their mingled cum, tickling along his chest in those sensuous movements, was still driving him to distraction.

But the biologist inside was fascinated.

Rut brought on a battle lust, but if the weaker viratrix was going to lose, he could fight or run away. Yet Elias had chosen to stay and submit.

Was that what had happened?

Jordie's area of focus wasn't human biology or behavior, but surely, he would have heard about it if such a thing were possible.

Well, obviously it was possible because it had just happened. But was this typical behavior? Why hadn't anyone mentioned it before? Why wasn't it in the textbooks?

A shadow of worry crossed Elias's face, and suddenly none of that mattered.

The biology behind it was immaterial if Elias was upset.

"Was that okay?" Jordie asked. He couldn't seem to keep his tentacles away, stroking the sides of Elias's face and wrapping around his limbs.

“Yeah.” Elias looked away.

God, had Jordie fucked this all up? “Elias, did I... did I scare you? Were you... did your viratrix hormones tell you to yield to me because you were afraid of a fight?” Jordie’s stomach churned at the possibility. It would still be rape, even if Elias had seemed to acquiesce.

Elias glanced up for a second, then just as quickly looked away again. “I’m sure there’s some biological imperative there, but, uh... no. I wasn’t scared. Just, um, horny. Needed to get off.” Elias went from clinically thoughtful to shy, almost evasive, within the space of a few words.

Relief flooded through Jordie, but it sounded like he was still missing something.

Jordie was pretty sure that he wouldn’t have submitted if their roles were reversed. He would have fought to the point of exhaustion, then run away to lick his wounds and, most likely, jerk himself raw.

Jordie imagined that it had to be equally hard for Elias to submit, no matter what biology was telling him to do in the presence of someone he perceived as stronger.

Yet Elias hadn’t seemed upset, shifting his focus from aggression to mutual arousal. Probably much safer for both of them.

And a thousand times more enjoyable.

The haze of hormones still had Jordie in its grip, some mingled desire to fuck Elias hard and to take care of his every

little need.

Even if that need was keeping things as formal and detached as possible.

“We’re still in rut,” Jordie commented. “Do you want to keep going?” He instinctively thrust his stiffening cock against Elias’s, which seemed to be in the same state. He couldn’t get enough of it.

He was rewarded by a moan and the sweet fluttering of Elias’s eyelids. “Sure.” The single, flat word was at odds with the way Elias’s tentacles started wrapping around his own in tight little coils.

Fuck. It was so much like the curl of progenetrix feelers that Jordie almost forgot for a moment what they were. It woke up some primal urge in him.

Jordie wrapped his own tentacle around their cocks, pleasure coursing through him as he tasted the other man’s silky flesh and the lingering flavor of his cum.

His libido was through the roof again. He wanted to come. He wanted to watch Elias come, falling apart in his arms.

Elias moaned, thrusting up against him. Elias’s hands gripped his hips, not guiding but eagerly following the motion.

Fuck. Jordie wanted so much more. Wanted to thrust and breed and claim. Wanted to be *inside* Elias in every way possible.

But not if the other viratrix objected. He was still looking away.

“We can do this again.” Jordie wanted to make his plan clear, so Elias would stop being uncomfortable. “I’ll get us off.”

If he hadn’t been watching Elias closely, he wouldn’t have noticed it. The downward curve of his lips. A tightening at his eyes.

Elias was disappointed.

Was that *not* what he wanted?

“If you like, we could switch off,” Jordie volunteered. “You could be on top.” His *viratrix* *hated* the suggestion. He wasn’t even sure if he could do it. But he would try anything for Elias right now.

Elias stiffened and his hips stopped rocking. For just a moment, something else flashed across his face. Fear? Disappointment? Whatever it was, it wasn’t good.

God, Jordie wished Elias would just *look* at him. He needed to see what those entrancing eyes were saying.

“If you want me to,” Elias answered, voice still flat.

No, that wasn’t right at all. Elias was supposed to look joyful, like he had ever since Jordie had taken control. He was supposed to look up at Jordie with wonder and submission and adulation.

Was that it? Was it possible that Elias... truly enjoyed the submission? Looking back, how much of his resistance at the beginning had been real?

That was an easy answer. None of it. Elias was slightly bigger than Jordie and easily as strong. If they'd fought, they would have been well-matched, destroying the cabin as they roared and struggled in a cloud of sexual frenzy and aggression.

Instead, Elias had moaned and whimpered when Jordie covered his body. He'd sucked Jordie's tentacle like it was his natural inclination. And when Jordie promised to take care of him, Elias looked like he'd won a prize.

The thought made Jordie's chest warm. His sweet Elias wanted exactly what every instinct was driving him to give. Adoration and a fierce possessiveness surged through him.

The brawny older viratrix was *his*.

Jordie let his voice go throaty with his need. "I don't want you to top, baby. Believe me, that's the last thing I want. Not when you're so perfect."

Elias's eyes flickered upward for just a moment, giving him a glimpse of hope and longing.

This was it. This was the ticket.

"I'm going to give you everything you need. Look at me, Ellie."

Jordie didn't know where the nickname had come from, just that it felt right. Something to connect them, to make the moment special. Elias certainly didn't seem to mind.

His eyes finally turned upward with the command, looking shy but still so full of lust and yearning.

“You’re mine to take care of,” Jordie promised.

Then, heart in his throat, he took another gamble. He knew what he wanted—what every instinct was screaming for—even if it was wrong. But if it would make Elias happy, too... “Mine to breed,” he growled.

Elias’s eyes widened, mouth dropping open in an audible gasp even while his cock surged in Jordie’s hold. The coils of tentacles tightened, pulling Jordie closer, as if the full-length press of their bodies wasn’t close enough.

“Is that what you want, sweetheart?”

Elias whimpered his arousal, even as he looked away.

So he wanted it, but he was embarrassed to admit it. Or afraid to ask for it.

Jordie could feel the conflict inside of Elias—the longing to submit, competing with the knowledge that society would condemn him for it.

Social roles were bullshit. That’s what Elias had always said. It was why so many on his research team were progenetrixes, women, or both—brilliant minds who would have otherwise been held back.

It made Jordie’s heart clench that Elias couldn’t give the same respect to his own desires, however unconventional they might be.

Well, Elias didn’t have to answer in words. Every heady moan and coil of his tentacles made his desires clear.



“You were made for this, weren’t you?” Jordie cooed. “Made to take me. I’m gonna fuck you so hard,” he promised, punctuating his words with the grinding of his cock. “Give you everything you need.”

Elias moaned again, hips working in a subtle rhythm.

God, he was beautiful. So perfect, with his pleading eyes and that manly, rough-hewn face. He clung to Jordie like a progenetrix, and really, that right there should have told Jordie everything he needed to know from the beginning.

“I’m gonna fill you up so good. Make you forget everything but me.”

He pushed Elias’s thighs farther apart with his own, then started slithering back with one tentacle. Elias’s body was so muscular and heavy, just dripping with sweat and lust. He eased across his hip bone. Down his inner thigh.

“That’s right, sweetheart. You just tell me if you don’t like anything. Okay?”

Elias groaned and drew up his knees. That hungry, adoring look was back in his eyes. Consent and more, even if it wasn’t with words.

Jordie’s tentacle moved inward, just a bit further, seeking out that tiny hole.

At the first touch, they both moaned together.

Fuck, his Ellie tasted so good. Musky and rich. Not at all like a progenetrix, who’d be drenched with a tangy natural lubricant. Elias was completely dry, but Jordie could fix that

on his own. His tentacles were dripping and had been for hours.

He prodded inward, just with the tip, and was rewarded with another burst of flavor and a soft moan.

Fuck. Elias was so tight. Impossibly tight.

“Relax, baby. Let me in.”

Elias whimpered, giving Jordie a helpless look like he was supposed to fix it.

Jordie stroked their paired cocks again. He'd somehow almost forgotten between his concerns for Elias and his desire to be inside him.

He wriggled in farther, keeping his tentacle narrow and soft. Fuck, Elias was so tight, those viratrix muscles automatically resisting even while his hips rocked forward for more. And God, his taste. It was dizzying.

He surged in deeper, thickening his tentacle when Elias moaned.

“Jordie...” Another look of worry crossed Elias's gorgeous face.

“Don't hide,” Jordie commanded. “Is this what you want?” Cock or tentacle, it didn't matter to him. He'd use them both, over and over.

Elias looked away again.

The sweet, sexy man. He wanted this, but he still couldn't admit to it. Even with Jordie already filling his ass. Even when

Elias's spiraled tentacles were already clinging to him like a needy little progenetrix.

Jordie had just come, but he felt like he was ready to do it again. His tentacle pulsed deeper into Elias's ass, tingling everywhere at the tight heat wrapped around him.

They could worry about words later.

"I've got you, Ellie. Do you feel how hard I am for you?"

Elias thrust up against him.

"I'm going to fuck you." Jordie kept it simple, delighting in the sounds Elias made. "Tell me yes."

Elias hesitated. Then he bent his head. Barely a nod.

"Words," he demanded again. "Words or I stop."

Elias's eyes flashed open, needy and begging. He gave the tiniest whisper, just a bare parting of his lips. "Yes."

His gorgeous, sweet man. That was enough.

Jordie withdrew his flexible limb, using the same movement to wrap it around Elias's legs and push them back.

His cock was already slick and dripping. With their shared cum. With the slime from both of their tentacles.

He lined up, then surged inside with a roar.

Damn. *Damn*. Elias was just so tight. Writhing beneath him even as he pulled Jordie closer.

Jordie held him down, lacing his fingers through Elias's and pinning them to the bed. He let his weight drop, forcing

Elias's legs open as their bodies pressed together. He wrapped one tentacle around Elias's neck.

“Mine,” he growled. He needed Elias to feel it.

Elias was *his*.

## Chapter 5. Elias

Jordie was inside him. His research assistant. His best friend.

The man he'd been pining over for two years, though he'd never admitted it.

It didn't even seem possible.

The stretch stung as his tight hole resisted, though he'd never wanted anything more in his life.

He whimpered in mingled pleasure and rough, burning pain, but Jordie exquisitely didn't stop, voice raised in a shout of ecstasy that must have shaken the treetops.

Jordie was filling him. Practically splitting him in half. Growling over his conquest as his thick cock took possession of Elias's body.

Treating him like a progenetrix.

Like he was going to pump him full of cum and babies.

Elias let out his own roar, which turned into a cacophony of sounds he didn't even know he could make.

It was exquisite.

Every part of him was bound. Fingers tangled and pressed into the mattress. Legs spread wide. Chest compressed under Jordie's heavy weight.

And damn, that tentacle around his neck. Not restricting his breathing, but reminding him with every pulse of his heart and inhalation in his lungs that Jordie owned him.

At least that was what he'd said.

And Elias was too far gone to worry about what that meant. If he had this one chance, the most glorious moment in his life, he was going to take it. Just lose himself in the swirl of hormones and rut.

Lose himself in Jordie, who was slowly pulling out, that enormous dick dragging over each sensitive inch inside him... only to thrust back in.

Elias keened. There was no other word for it. Voice high and clear like a progenetrix.

"Fuck," Jordie swore. "Can't get enough of you."

The words wrapped around all the sensations. Jordie *wanted* him.

Elias couldn't get enough either.

He wrapped his legs around the other viratrix, curled his tentacles tighter. Jordie was holding him down, but Elias wasn't letting him go.

And with this new angle, with his ass tilted up and accessible... Oh, God. He'd never imagined it could be like

that.

Jordie was railing his prostate, the pounding rhythm sending waves of ecstasy through him.

“Are you ready, Ellie? Ready for me to fill you up?”

Elias could never admit it in words, but the sounds he was making had to be answer enough. He wanted to drip with Jordie’s cum. Wanted it spilling out of him.

Jordie laughed suddenly, a beautiful deep sound like a ray of sunshine. “I thought I could last longer, but I just don’t think I can. God, you’re so tight. So gorgeous, baby. I’ll go slower next time, I promise.”

Elias shook his head. It didn’t even matter. They’d be fucking all night, and knowing that it was *him* Jordie couldn’t get enough of... Joy welled up in his chest until he thought he would explode.

His climax was approaching. Every time he moved it brought him closer to the edge. Straining against those strong limbs. Arching up for Jordie’s cock. God, the way that Jordie pounded into him, hitting places inside that he hadn’t even known existed...

With another roar, Jordie tightened the tentacle around his neck, stopping his breath. Elias flew apart into ribbons of ecstasy. He could feel Jordie pumping inside him, his seed thick and hot, even as his own burst of liquid surged between their chests.

Stars danced in front of his vision, the edges going dark, but they had nothing on the euphoria shimmering through his body.

“God, Ellie...” Jordie’s voice was hushed in wonder.

The tentacle slowly loosened, and Elias sucked in a gasping breath.

He felt limp. Sated. He never wanted to move again.

But when Jordie started to pull back, he reacted instinctively. He *couldn't* let him go. Couldn't have that thick cock pulling out of his ass when it should still be filling him. He tightened his tentacles, which were still coiled in little ringlets around Jordie's.

“I'm not going anywhere.” Jordie chuckled, in that sweet way he had. He nestled back into the crook of Elias's thighs, heavy on his chest and the place where their bodies joined.

That could, so easily, have been mocking laughter. Elias had keened like a progenetrix. When Jordie talked about breeding him, he'd spread his legs. Everything he was doing was wrong...

But Elias had only felt adored.

And somehow, still so goddamn horny.

He rocked upward, hopefully. Maybe Jordie would be feeling the same way, and he wouldn't have to ask.

There was no way he could actually ask, not when Jordie had already made him come twice. When Jordie was already



whispering every dirty, wrong thing he'd ever imagined.

Jordie grunted and met his thrusts. "You're insatiable, aren't you?" He laughed again, but somehow Elias could only hear delight. "This rut thing is..." He thrust again, cock already hardening again. "Need to take you again. Is that what you want?"

His voice was so seductive. So hungry.

But Elias still couldn't bring himself to answer. He'd given consent earlier. Why did Jordie have to keep asking?

He gave a little nod.

"You do," Jordie told him. "You want it, baby. You were meant for this. Tell me how much you want it. Beg."

Elias froze. Was Jordie mocking him? Driving home his superiority?

He wanted this, but not at the cost of Jordie's disdain.

Elias looked down at the luminescent blue tentacles he'd wrapped around Jordie's. "Why are you doing this?"

Jordie stroked over Elias's tentacles with his hands. The sensation was enough to send shivers racing through him.

"I want you to know how beautiful you are. You're so sexy when you show what you want. You always say that gender shouldn't hold anyone back. I want that for you, too."

Tears pricked at Elias's eyes. Logically, he believed that. For everyone on his team, definitely.

But that was different from opening himself to the potential of scorn and shame.

Jordie rocked against him, smooth in the sea of cum that he'd deposited inside. And oh, how Elias wanted to beg. The words were stuck just behind his teeth.

He couldn't make himself do it, though.

Maybe Jordie meant it now, but if this moment of understanding vanished with the fog of rut—it felt like this would be the final step. The moment when everything went wrong.

He trusted Jordie. He wanted him. More than anyone he'd ever met.

But if Elias dared to say it out loud, his humiliation would be complete. With Jordie restraining him, he could at least pretend he was giving in to the rut and doing what Jordie wanted, not living out his wildest fantasies.

Jordie rocked inside him again, moaning at the contact. "Ellie, don't hide from me."

Elias shook his head. He couldn't.

He didn't feel like the lead researcher of a major team and Jordie's supervisor right now. He was just a progen... Just a viratrix with very confusing desires.

Twisted desires. Wrong and shameful.

Jordie pulled out, almost all the way, then thrust in all at once. For a moment, the sheer pleasure stole Elias's breath.

Jordie whispered against his ear. “Don’t hide from yourself.”

He shook his head again. The beauty of being seen so clearly actually hurt.

Jordie thrust a little faster. “You like that, baby?” His voice was rough and desperate.

*Yes!* Elias thought. *God, yes!* But the words caught in his throat.

Jordie nuzzled at his ear. “Say the words. Tell me you need this. Beg for everything you deserve.”

It would be so easy to give in. So easy to just turn into a shameless, wanton slut for Jordie. If he hadn’t already.

But saying it was somehow going one step too far.

He felt his face flush, knowing it would turn a vivid purple under the blue tint of his skin.

“Do you want my pouch?” Jordie growled.

Elias sucked in a breath, thoughts scattering. He was already dripping with Jordie’s cum, smeared across his belly and sloshing in his hole. He was already filled with Jordie’s stiffening cock, so that should have been enough.

Enough to last a lifetime.

But to have Jordie’s pouch...

A sperm pouch was special.

In comparison, semen was almost accidental. A byproduct of having a good time. Whack off, and your hands got sticky.

Even in the height of rut, you didn't pop a sperm pouch out of the sensitive opening beneath your tentacle, thrust it inside someone else, and then prick it open by accident.

Even driven by lust, a sperm pouch had intentions. Commitment. Romance. A future.

Elias nodded his head, just the tiniest bit.

"I'm gonna need words, baby."

Not yet. He couldn't.

Elias scrunched his eyes shut.

Jordie withdrew, leaving Elias's hole desolate and gaping.

He whimpered despite himself.

The fat, long shaft was replaced by just the teasing tip of one tentacle. It fluttered just along the rim. "You just let me know when you're ready, sweetheart."

Elias rocked upward. This was torture.

He could sense Jordie's arousal all around him. He could smell it. Taste it. Why didn't Jordie just shove back inside?

Instead, Jordie rocked back on his hands and knees. Then he sat up, forcing Elias's tentacles to reluctantly leave their place around his arms.

Elias peeked up. Jordie was kneeling above him now, glowing tentacles lighting up his magnificent green chest. He was a work of art, eyes heavy-lidded with lust and plump cock jutting up against his thick belly.

He looked like he could come at any minute, his fat green cock dark and full again.

Yet he kept teasing at Elias's entrance, and it was driving him mad. It was deliciously arousing, but he was hungry to be filled. Ravenous.

Jordie's other tentacle meandered up his thigh and slithered up Elias's cock. Each touch brought on a new wave of bliss, but it was nowhere near enough.

Elias needed to be pounded and squeezed and taken, with rough thrusts and rougher hands.

"Look at yourself," Jordie commanded.

He'd been too focused on the sensations to look down, but when he did, it knocked another breath from him.

The only light in the small cabin came from the glow of their tentacles, Elias's a warm, watery blue and Jordie's the neon green of a swarm of fireflies in delicate coils. It made everything close and intimate.

But it was the sight of his own cock that made Elias's breath catch. His dick was substantial, broad and heavy like most viratrix men's. But beside the bunched thickness of Jordie's tentacle, it looked almost small. Exposed. So easily swallowed up by those beefy glowing rings.

Jordie took just the luminescent tip and slid it under Elias's foreskin. The sensation and the glowing bulge under that thin, sensitive layer made Elias moan.

It was like Jordie was inside him and all around.

“God, you taste so good, baby. Look at you.” Jordie slithered in a tight circle around Elias’s tender head. “Maybe I’ll be begging instead of you.”

That joy filled Elias’s chest again. Even if it was just rut, just temporary, Jordie couldn’t be faking his desire. His voice sounded wrecked.

Jordie’s tentacle slithered out, only to loop around his cock and return to its place. There were no words for how good that slick glide felt along his length. How much he’d longed for another viratrix man to claim him like this.

“How many more times do you think you can come tonight?” Jordie asked, the glowing tip of his tentacle brushing along Elias’s slit. “Just say the word and it can be as many times as you want.”

Elias whimpered.

“Fuck. Or as many times as I want,” Jordie panted. “How do you taste so good?” His neon tip dipped inside the narrow slit, and Elias watched Jordie’s eyes roll back at the taste.

When that slender tentacle wriggled in a little further, it was Elias who couldn’t keep his eyes open.

He keened. The sound was deep and primal. All progenetrix.

Jordie was... He was *inside* him. Inside his *cock*.

He moaned. It was like being fucked, but a thousand times more intimate.

He had to see. The dark blue head glowed green, and then even that dimmed as the tendril slithered an inch down his long shaft.

“Fuck, baby.” Jordie was watching him with wide eyes, mouth hanging open. “You like that?” This time it wasn’t a coaxing command. It was pure awe.

They both watched as Jordie lengthened the slender tentacle, drilling deeper inside him.

Elias was being penetrated. So smoothly and intimately. Not even like a progenetrix but like... like his cock wasn’t even meant to fuck someone, but was instead another hole for Jordie to fill.

Oh, God. How was that even possible?

Elias whimpered. He moaned. And Jordie kept going. Burrowing inside, only to withdraw and then slowly wriggle back in again.

Suddenly it was too much. Too exquisite. Elias was going to come. He wrapped his tentacles back along the other viratrix’s arms, clinging to him before he burst into a thousand pieces. “Jordie...” he whimpered. Not quite begging but close.

“Ellie.” Jordie sounded awed, still thrusting gently inside him with that glowing tendril. “You were meant for this.”

Bright tears stung his eyes. He *was* meant for this. He’d never been happier. Never felt more complete.

What were words when Jordie had already stripped everything else away, and still looked at him with so much

wonder on his face?

“Please, Jordie.”

“What do you want, Ellie?”

“Want you.” It was terrifying to say it, but he couldn’t deny it any longer. “Want you to fill me up.”

“Yes, baby. Like this?” Another slow flick of that tentacle inside his cock.

He hadn’t even *known* his body was capable of such pleasure. His toes tingled with it. His tentacles, coiled around Jordie’s, shivered in rapture. “Yeah,” he panted. “Please. Please, Jordie!”

“So good, baby. Gonna make you come for me.”

The tentacle that had been swirling around the rim of his ass pushed inside, so that he was filled in both places at once.

“Look at you,” Jordie breathed. “You’re gorgeous.”

Maybe it was true. He could almost believe it.

The flesh inside his ass thickened, gliding over his prostate with purpose, until the small orb was being massaged from the inside and out, caught between both tentacles.

“I’m gonna come,” he panted.

“Yeah, baby. Come for me.” In one fluid motion, Jordie slithered out of his cock, the delicate movements seeming to pull the orgasm right out of him. Ecstasy shot through his limbs as fountains of cum spurted from his dick.



At the same time, the other tentacle surged inside his ass, thicker and fuller, pounding him hard. Pleasure quaked in his bones, spiraling into the deepest parts of who he was.

“Jordie!” His voice didn’t sound like his own. “Hold me.”

He was shattering into a thousand points of light, and his viratrix was too far away.

Jordie covered his body, hard cock pressed to Elias’s softening one while his tentacle continued thrusting inside, milking the last drops of delight from his quivering body.

Then he floated, lost in a sea of happiness, surrounded by everything that was Jordie. His scent. His taste. His heavy weight.

All of those adoring words that Elias was starting to believe might actually be true.

“Was that good?” Jordie asked against his neck.

“Yeah,” he admitted. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt this shy. “Was it good for you?”

“Perfection.” Jordie rocked against him, making Elias’s limp cock give a hopeful surge. “But we need to eat something first. And maybe try to nap if we can.”

“What about...” Elias shifted, nudging the very hard cock that lay against his abdomen.

Jordie laughed. “You’re insatiable.” He kissed Elias’s neck. “Believe me, I want to take you again. But I’ve already

come twice. And we've got all night. You need to keep your strength up."

It was maybe a little disappointing, but if his viratrix wanted him to eat... "Okay."

Jordie's grin was its own reward.

## Chapter 6. Jordie

Jordie extended a dripping tentacle toward the case of water bottles a few feet away, which at any other time would be... just yuck. Completely unsanitary.

But right now, *everything* was covered with the fluids of their mating. They'd tasted and touched each other everywhere, so what was a bit of slime... and some of Elias's delicious cum... on the outside of a water bottle?

He dragged the case close enough that he could use his more nimble fingers to open the box and extract two of them.

Then he realized that he'd have to move back if Elias was going to be able to sit up and drink.

He *really* didn't want to.

So he went with his instincts.

He set the water bottles on the bed. Then, in a flurry of limbs, he sat up against the wall and pulled Elias between his legs, back to chest.

Cock to ass.

Elias was *his*.

Elias didn't protest the rough manhandling in the least. God, Jordie couldn't get enough of him.

Jordie opened one of the caps. "Drink."

Only when Elias was taking long, smooth swallows did he open his own. Damn, he was parched.

He stretched out a tentacle, and after a bit of questing, found his way into the case and pulled out two more bottles.

His chest felt like it was glowing as much as his tentacles when Elias took one with a grateful smile.

Jordie was providing for his mate. Taking care of him. Meeting his needs.

He stretched a little further and pulled over a box of granola bars.

Usually the entire research camp cooked communally—mostly beans, grains, and some fruits and veggies imported from the mainland, supplemented with a few things grown or foraged on the island. The granola bars and disposable water bottles were a huge waste, saved mostly for emergency heats and ruts when no one else dared approach.

So he wasn't exactly hunting down a big kill or preparing dinner with his own hands.

He opened one of the granola bars, wishing it were something a little more... impressive. Something he could use to show the illustrious Dr. Elias Greton how honored he was. To prove that he was worthy of claiming him. To let him know

that, even as another viratrix, there was no one Jordie had ever wanted with such all-consuming desire and respect.

So far, his instincts had been serving him well, though. And in the musk-scented air of the cabin, it was hard to think of anything else.

He broke off a piece of the bar and held it up to Ellie's luscious, blue-tinged lips.

Elias's eyes widened, every muscle freezing for a moment.

Was Jordie pushing him too hard? Demanding too much of the other viratrix man, who was nearly a decade older and his supervisor to boot?

But a moment later his lips parted, accepting the offering. Elias's head flopped back against Jordie's shoulder, pliant and snugly.

Jordie knew he'd been pushing him, but he had to hope that it was in the right direction. If only Elias could truly see how sexy he was. How delightful he was in his submission.

Jordie wrapped his arms and tentacles around the older man. When that wasn't enough, he added one leg, hooking his heel over Elias's ankle. He needed his... well, his other viratrix, as close as possible.

Elias should know that he couldn't get away. That Jordie would take care of his every need.

Jordie broke off a second piece of the bar and shoved it into his own mouth, hardly tasting it with either tongue or

tentacle. Watching Ellie accept the last chunk from his hand was entrancing.

How could he ever grow tired of watching those generous blue lips? The way Ellie's throat bobbed when he swallowed?

That was when Jordie decided.

He was staying.

He hadn't been able to put words to it before, this longing to live on a remote island, when he could be catapulted to the top of his academic career. The job at Princeton was everything he'd been working toward.

What he hadn't been able to figure into his list of pros and cons was the way that Elias had become much more to him than a mentor. Much more than a friend.

Or at least, that's what all of his instincts were screaming at him right now. He needed to stay. Make Elias his mate. Become his everything.

But did Elias want that? So far, Elias had only accepted rut-infused sex from him, and that acceptance was more the reaction of his body than his words.

Hell, Jordie knew that he couldn't even trust his own emotions right now. An avalanche of oxytocin wasn't the same as love.

What if all of this protectiveness and need evaporated with the end of his rut?

It didn't seem possible. He'd never felt so proud or so honored.

He'd definitely never felt so horny. Already, he wanted to slide his cock back in. Hear more of those precious moans. Watch Elias choking on his cock. Or maybe his tentacle again...

And that was the problem. Even in the haze of lust, he knew he shouldn't be making decisions now. His list of pros couldn't just say ELIAS in giant blue letters.

He tugged over the third box of food and extracted a few envelopes of what turned out to be little protein disks with a meaty, mushroom flavor.

He pressed a bite to Elias's lips, still entranced by their motion. Honored that his mate was allowing him to feed him.

Could this last past the next day?

He was suddenly glad he hadn't shared his sperm pouch with Elias. That was something that should be special. More than just a rut. It should be a promise.

His doubts didn't stop Jordie from hoping that those little bites could symbolize something more.

They'd need to talk about all of this when the hormones had cleared their systems. Maybe after a couple of days to think and settle down.

If he could keep his hands off his Ellie for that long.

Jordie snagged another granola bar, dividing it like the first.

It didn't help how Ellie moaned as Jordie's fingers brushed his lips. Or the way that Ellie poked out his tongue this time, lapping at Jordie's thumb.

Oh, fuck.

Jordie knew he should get some more food into their bellies, but instead he thrust his thumb in further.

Ellie moaned, rocking against him, with those thick, round cheeks nestled against his cock.

Jordie couldn't help rutting against his slick hole.

“Jordie...” Elias was already breathless. “Please.”

He couldn't get enough of hearing him beg.

Maybe, Jordie thought, as he pressed his Ellie back down onto the mattress, they could worry about food and logic later.



## Chapter 7. Elias

**E**lias went from sleep to instant alertness. Jordie was wrapped around him, the hard planes of his chest curving around Elias's back and one heavy leg thrown over his hip. Tentacles vined around him, restraining him exquisitely from head to toe. Jordie's breath was slow and even against Elias's neck, seducing him even through sleep.

It was heaven.

If Elias could have this every day...

He couldn't, though.

It was one thing, maybe, to have sex during their shared rut. Glorious, submissive, progenetrix-like sex.

But to still be there the next day?

He could feel that his rut was truly over. His body ached in unexpected places. His mind was clear, noticing small details like the granola bar wrapper tucked under the pillow, and the stuffiness of the pheromone-drenched air because they hadn't thought to open the windows.

He had to move.

Slowly, he withdrew his own tentacles, muffling a moan as they dragged along Jordie's solid chest and slick tentacles. The man still tasted of sweat and sex and everything Elias wanted.

Elias's rut was over, but he could secretly savor the last feel of the gorgeous, kind viratrix's body one last time.

He gently eased Jordie's arm off his chest. Halfway through, Jordie gave a sleepy grunt, tentacles tightening, and rolled forward. Now Elias was restrained beneath his hips and... God, he never wanted to move.

He felt trapped. Owned.

He almost wanted to cry with how good it felt.

Jordie rocked sleepily against him, his heavy cock thickening against Elias's hole.

Was Jordie still in rut? It was possible, and it would explain why he was still holding him so tightly. Possessiveness was an automatic response. It would explain why Jordie had insisted so many times yesterday that Elias was *his*. It didn't mean anything outside of the fog of hormones.

They hadn't even kissed, he now noticed with disappointment.

And Jordie had asked if he wanted his pouch. Tempted with it. Nearly coaxed him into begging.

Elias's cheeks felt hot.

He'd begged and then some. Held his butt cheeks open for Jordie to pound. Sucked that massive cock until he choked,

and then begged for more. Curled up in the man's lap and eaten food from his fingers like a baby bird.

It felt almost like a dream now. A wonderful, impossible dream.

What did it matter if he'd gotten Jordie's pouch or not? Wanting it was ridiculous.

Only he couldn't help but imagine it, when Jordie was still on top of him, rocking faintly in his sleep. If Jordie wanted to go another round...

Elias's hole was sore. A painfully beautiful reminder of all they shared. But he would take that cock again any day. He'd spend the rest of his life imagining those tentacles slithering inside him.

A little snore ruffled the hairs at the back of his neck.

It was so cute. So intimate.

And it also meant that Jordie had no idea what he was doing and was probably still coming out of rut. He'd just fallen asleep this way.

Elias tried to ease one of his legs out, using his own tentacles to push Jordie's down. One loop eased over his foot. Then a second.

"What time is it?" Jordie asked, voice slurred with sleep.

Elias froze, heart rabbiting. "Afternoon, I think." Maybe if he didn't talk about it, they could just disentangle themselves and never talk about it again.

Jordie would accept the new job in a few days, and next summer he'd be gone. All that Elias could hope was that he wasn't too cruel in the intervening time.

Jordie's arm fell over his chest again, tugging him back. "I can't tell if I'm still tired or not." Jordie cracked a wide yawn. "That was wild, right?"

"Yeah," Elias agreed, misery sinking into his bones. He thought he hadn't allowed himself to hope for anything, but apparently he had, because Jordie's comment crushed him.

"I guess it's too late today to get any work done." Jordie's husky voice held a hint of suggestion, but Elias couldn't imagine what for.

Talking about work was good. Maybe at least everything could go back to normal.

Maybe he hadn't lost his best friend yet.

"Yeah."

Jordie nuzzled against his neck. "I suppose we should clean up the cabin."

Huh. He certainly sounded more alert.

"Or maybe go for a swim? We could wash off together."

Elias made himself nod. "Sounds good." It was both exactly what he wanted, and the beginning of a deep sorrow settling into his chest, aching beneath his ribs.

They were going back to normal. They would go for a swim, just like always.

In just a few minutes, Jordie's scent would be washed from Elias's body, leaving him with nothing but memories and regrets.

Jordie rose behind him, one long tentacle slithering across his back like a final goodbye. The bed creaked when he stood.

Elias made himself sit up, which was when he suddenly realized something he should have figured out earlier.

Jordie was still naked.

Jordie stretched, without an ounce of shame, arms overhead and tentacles flung gloriously out to each side. His half-hard cock hung heavy, just at the level of Elias's face.

Jordie handed him a water bottle. "Here. Drink this. We're both dehydrated."

Well, at least Jordie wasn't making it too awkward. Elias took the bottle automatically and drained it.

So what if he'd secretly been hoping that the tender way Jordie had held him and fed him would happen again?

Jordie had fed him three times during their rut. That was more than he'd ever expected.

Elias stood, trying not to look ridiculous as he crossed the room to the wooden crate that held his clothing in three neat stacks. His swim trunks were at the end. He tugged them on, both afraid to show Jordie his face and hyper aware that he was sticking out his ass.

"Ready?" he asked, determined to keep things normal.

He turned to find Jordie staring at him, an indecipherable look on his face.

Was that good? Bad?

Elias wrapped his tentacles around himself. He knew it was giving too much away, but he was feeling vulnerable.

“I don’t have a swimsuit,” Jordie commented.

Every word they were saying sounded inane. Like they hadn’t just spent the past twenty-four hours fucking in every way Elias had ever imagined and some that he didn’t even know existed.

“Here.” Elias held up his spare swim trunks. When their fingers touched, it was like lightning sparking between them.

Or at least that was how it felt to Elias.

Jordie stepped into the shorts. They were both larger guys, so the fit was good.

He wasn’t going to think about how the fabric was cradling Jordie’s cock. Or how it wrapped around his ass.

“Let’s go.”

The walk to the beach was silent.

The air was hot and muggy, like always, but Elias was almost shivering. His arms hung limply at his sides, but he couldn’t get his tentacles to behave and follow suit. They were twined around his own torso, providing the comfort that he didn’t want to admit to needing.

At least Jordie was walking in front of him, so he couldn't see.

They emerged from the last cluster of trees, and the sparkling ocean stretched on forever. It was later than he'd realized, the orange sun hovering over the horizon and promising another gorgeous sunset.

What was going to happen to their evening chats together? Their morning swims?

Jordie looked back at him, a frown wrinkling his brow.

So Elias had already disappointed him.

Maybe now it was truly sinking in what had happened during their shared rut. It was conventional to... conveniently ignore unexpected sex during a heat or rut if the two people involved didn't want to acknowledge it. These things *did* happen.

Elias only wished now that it hadn't happened to *him*.

He held himself tighter. "Actually," he said, making his voice work. "I think I'm hungry. I might not be up for a swim."

Jordie looked at him again, eyes flashing with something Elias couldn't work out, before settling back into that frown. "I guess I'll still swim."

Jordie was usually a pretty low-key guy. He smiled often. Joked easily. It was one of the things that Elias loved—appreciated about him.

He could probably count on one hand the number of times Jordie had frowned before.

Elias turned back along the jungle path. He'd done that, with his deviant desires and his irresponsible crush.

He wasn't hungry, of course. The last thing he wanted right now was food. Especially not the same granola bars and protein disks that Jordie had so carefully fed him last night. And he couldn't bear the thought of seeing anyone else.

He washed off carefully in his outdoor shower, a simple pull-string that sprinkled water from the rain barrel on his roof. He wanted every hint of Jordie's scent off his body now.

Then it was time to work on the cabin. He opened all the windows. Pulled the sheets off his mattress. Even when he bundled them at the edge of the wooden platform outside, he could still capture Jordie's rich, musky scent.

He lined up the cases of water bottles outside. The food would be safe from animals in a plastic case with a clasp.

He only had one other set of sheets, and he arranged them on the bed. They smelled like the muggy air around him, since everything was line dried. His clothing, a loose set of shorts that he'd pulled over his sensitive parts, didn't smell like anything either.

It was like the rut had never happened.

Elias laid down on his too-wide bed and told himself that forty-six-year-old research directors didn't cry.



## Chapter 8. Jordie

**J**ordie swam until his arms were tired. Then he swam some more.

The island was a green blob in the distance, and he knew he was being irresponsible.

If some Changed beast surged up from the depths—or even a pre-Change shark with an appetite—no one would ever know what happened to him.

He turned toward the shore, letting the waves carry him back, his strokes automatic even as his arms ached and his tentacles grew limp.

Maybe if he tired out his body enough, he could calm his mind.

What had he done?

Every time he closed his eyes, the colorful trees of the island were replaced by memories of Elias spread out beneath him. That cerulean skin. Those glowing blue tentacles that clung to his own like rows of progenetrix feelers. Those gorgeous eyes looking up at him like he hung the moon.

Jordie's dick made a valiant effort to get hard again, despite the cold water and the overuse of the past day.

It had been... amazing. Breathtaking. Beautiful.

Never in Jordie's life had he felt so connected to another person.

But what did it mean now?

In that little cabin, Elias—his mentor and supervisor—had felt like his... his...

His lover. His progenetrix. His mate.

His everything.

But was that just the hormones talking?

Rut hormones were wild. His tentacles had been drawn to Saanvi yesterday morning. He'd even been ready to fight for her.

But a day later, his only thoughts of her were a mild concern for her safety after the ordeal and friendly hope that she'd had a good heat with her wife and would be ready to return to work soon.

Jordie's thoughts of his mentor however...

Even with his eyes open, it was like a video replaying in his mind. The sweet noises that Elias made at every touch. His eyes, as stormy and blue as the ocean, looking up at Jordie with such awe. His soft voice, so filled with shame and hope.

Jordie finally dragged himself up onto the sand. His instincts all screamed for him to return to Elias's cabin. To

make sure that his mate had everything he needed. To bring him the tastiest foods. To nurture the life that would be growing inside him... even though there was no way for Elias to get pregnant and Jordie had never really thought about children.

God, this rut thing was intense.

That had to be it, right? Maybe he was just feeling the aftereffects. He'd heard of that before—near strangers who proposed marriage in the middle of a rut and then tried to go through with it afterward. It often failed dismally. More commonly, strangers wandered out of their hormonal fogs, met the other person again, and wondered what the hell they'd been thinking.

All Jordie could think of was Elias's warm voice beside him as they watched the sun go down. Elias's tentacles twining with his as they walked down to the beach. Pressing Elias up against a tree and kissing him in the middle of the day, just because he was so sexy and kind and smart.

Was that what the end of a rut looked like?

Jordie walked by Elias's home, both disappointed and excited to see that all the lights were off.

"Elias?" he called, knocking on the door. There was no answer, and the intoxicating scent of their rut was so strong through the windows that he couldn't detect any fresh taste of his presence.

He grabbed his towel and swung it over his shoulder.

Ah, well. He couldn't sneak back into their cozy nest, but at least Elias would be at dinner with everyone else.

This would be the test, really. Not fantasy and sex hormones, but reality.

Though every thought Jordie had was of Elias's warm smile. The crinkles around his eyes. The way he took every question seriously, whether it was from a senior colleague or a green undergrad.

Perhaps seeing the man in person would be the wake-up call he needed.

Jordie traveled the familiar path to the main camp, weaving between the trees.

Jordie broke through the cover of underbrush, eyes already scanning the handful of tables under the dining hall tarp for deep blue skin and shoulder-length hair. No luck.

"Hey, Jordie!" One of the other postdocs, Camilo, greeted him with a shout. "How's it hanging?"

Everyone else looked up, laughing good-naturedly at the innuendo.

"A little chafed, maybe?" Langston added. He, like Camilo, was another viratrix male.

As a rule, the group tended to be professional, but it was only natural to expect a bit of teasing after a rut.

Jordie froze.

He would normally have played it off, joked back a bit. Though he wasn't chafed at all. There weren't words to express how good it had felt sinking into Elias's tight hole. The way he'd taken Jordie's tentacle deep down his throat, eyes begging for more.

Instinctively, it felt wrong to say anything. It would be... outing Elias. Sharing secrets that the man was already ashamed of, and hadn't given permission to be shared.

Did Elias think of himself as a progenetrix all the time? Was it just a bedroom thing? A bigger part of his identity? He'd barely managed to voice his desires, and outside of a rut, he might never have acted on them.

Would he ever be comfortable sharing that, or even acting on it again?

The way might not be easy, even in their small enclave of people who seemed supportive.

So if they were together, would it always be a secret?

Or would everyone know that they were two viratrix males, together? Jordie knew what everyone would think. He was younger and lower in the social hierarchy... everyone would assume that he was the submissive one.

He tried not to put any judgment on that. He really did. But the idea of it rested uncomfortably on his shoulders. It wasn't who he was. He was typically attracted to male progenetrixes, and that was a lot of what he'd enjoyed about Elias. Jordie was, unmistakably, the dominant one in their relationship.

And there he was again, thinking about this like it was some kind of relationship.

A good two hours had passed since he'd left the cabin. Shouldn't that have worn off by now?

Jordie realized that Langston was still waiting for a response and made himself roll his eyes. It was pretty weak—far from the snappy comeback he would have preferred.

Imani called out to him, half joking and half concerned. “You sure you're ready to be back? You look a little dazed.” She was a progenetrix woman with a medical degree, and while she mostly studied the animal population of the island, she functioned secondarily as the camp doctor.

“I'm fine.” Just reliving the best, and most confusing, moment of his life.

That brought him, somehow, to the Princeton job. He needed to give them a decision in three weeks. Not that he'd be leaving immediately. No, he'd have months.

He circled around the group to reach the dorm. He needed to wash up and change clothes in his room before dinner. The motions were habitual, which was good because his mind was spinning.

What if he stayed?

He loved it here. The landscape was beautiful. His colleagues were supportive and thoughtful.

It wouldn't be as prestigious, but he could do important work. He published often. Elias had already offered him a job

of sorts, or at least the opportunity to seek out his own grants and continue his own lines of inquiry as a principal investigator. He could see himself taking on a few more graduate students, maybe hiring a few long-term research assistants.

He could wake up each morning and swim with Elias. Work beside him during the day or do his own projects and bump into him at lunch. Watch the sunset together in the evenings.

And then follow him into his cabin to do delicious, decadent things to his body before falling asleep with Elias's head sweetly resting on his shoulder, blue tentacles coiled delicately around his long green ones.

How much of Jordie's desire to stay had always been Elias? Even from the beginning?

Jordie shook off the thought. Elias had probably forgotten about him already. They'd meet back up and laugh about it, then never discuss it again.

Dressed again, Jordie went outside and scanned the group for Elias. He still wasn't there, but Jordie made himself walk through the maze of tables to grab some dinner. Lentils, rice, greens. A column of small, starchy bananas picked from one of the local trees. A bowl of round guanabanas, some pre-Change varieties that looked monstrous enough on their own with their irregular bumpy exterior, and some Changed fruits that glowed orange and purple.

Jordie didn't care much for the custard-y soft banana-apple flavor, or the mess of extracting the large black seeds. But Elias loved them.

Without letting himself think too much about it, Jordie picked up an extra plate and picked through the bumpy fruits to find the plumpest, roundest one. Not that Elias couldn't get his own but, well, when he came to dinner later, Jordie would have saved it for him.

Even distracted, he enjoyed chatting with his colleagues. It was only as the meal drew to a close, with the uncarved guanabana still looking back at him, that he started to worry.

"Hey, has anyone seen Elias?" he asked, though he wouldn't be surprised if he was hiding out back in his cabin. Maybe he could take dinner to him.

"He took the motorboat. He was going to get some samples tonight, then head for the mainland tomorrow. Said he wanted the new gene sequencing machine before the next delivery."

Jordie's heart skipped a beat, and he had to force himself to calm down.

The mainland wasn't far. He knew exactly where Elias was. He could probably still radio him now.

But he knew this was Elias putting space between them, and it hurt.

He tried to tell himself that Elias just needed time to think. That was what he'd needed, too.



Hopefully that was all it was, and they could figure everything out together soon.

## Chapter 9. Elias

**E**lias knew it was cowardly, but he couldn't face Jordie right now. He'd slept through yesterday afternoon, fatigued by the crash after his rut. When Jordie had woken him up with a knock at the door, his heart had leapt into his throat.

He just couldn't look at him right now. He was too raw. Too exposed.

Eventually he'd showered off and radioed basecamp that he was taking the motorboat. The two-day trip was completely superfluous—the new gene sequencing machine could have easily waited until the next delivery—but he couldn't think of what else to do. There wasn't any viable way to avoid Jordie on the island.

He'd escaped around the other side of the island, taken enough samples to justify his ploy, and slept on the boat, then taken off so early the next morning that the sun had barely broken the horizon.

The boat's engine was slow but constant, so he just sat behind the wheel, steering and occasionally checking the compass as he stared at the water. After two days in the sun, his skin was taking on a heated rosy purple. He should

probably put on a shirt, but he just splashed some water over his back. Even with his chloroplasts working overtime to process the sun's energy, he would eventually still burn. He found he didn't care.

He tried to think. He tried not to think.

He watched the time pass. Sunrise. Sunset. And sunrise again. Would Jordie avoid him now? Or could they at least swim together? Jordie had swum alone just after their ruts. He was probably still doing it, his powerful arms cutting through the water. Surely that would still be safe, wouldn't it?

The high dose of sunshine meant he barely felt hungry, but he ate anyway. Lunchtime was a protein bar on the boat, fortunately a different one than Jordie had fed him. Was Jordie chatting with their colleagues? Was he telling them what he'd done? Telling them what *Elias* had done?

Another hot, steamy afternoon. Was Jordie in the jungle? In the lab? Writing an email where he accepted the job at Princeton? Coaching Saanvi on her new role?

Elias could barely think about his young progenetrix mentee, stupidly jealous of how she had her partner right there on the island for all to see. If she got pregnant, Meena would take care of her and dote on her. They'd debate when to return to the mainland for some other academic posting, and whether Saanvi should stay home with the baby or continue to work. He hoped Saanvi would keep working. He assumed Meena would let her.

Elias could never have that, with Jordie or anyone else.

Most of the time he didn't think about that. He loved his work. It was easy to get caught up in his projects. On this remote island, he wasn't the only one going years at a time without sex or relationships, or at least he assumed that was the case.

But Jordie, oh, Jordie...

He ached for the viratrix, but was terrified at the same time. These feelings were so inappropriate.

It was just so much worse knowing the taste of Jordie's skin. How he could hold Elias so tenderly and fuck him so hard.

How he'd even, in the heat of rut, called Elias beautiful. Offered his sperm pouch.

A glorious but ultimately empty offer.

*What if I'd said yes?* Elias kept asking himself. He'd had twenty-four golden, unrepeatable hours, where every other wish had been fulfilled. *What if I'd just said yes?*

There was no use dwelling on it now.

He could see the island in the distance, and he turned the wheel to aim for the dock.

Right now, he needed to figure out how he was going to walk back onto the dock, and then up the steps to the outpost, and manage to live alongside the man who'd done unspeakably delicious things to his body during a rut without letting anybody know.

The shore approached all too quickly. Elias tied up the boat and picked up a load of supplies. They couldn't shield him for long, but if everyone was talking about him, at least he'd have something to hide behind for a few minutes.

He might have picked up a *few* too many boxes, but he steadied them with one tentacle and used the other to stabilize himself with the old wooden banister, and then some of the trees along the uneven path.

When he reached the camp, he peeked around.

Kennedy was at one of the tables, tapping on her laptop.

Simon was stirring something in the communal cooking pot—dinner would likely be good today, with him on the rotation. He looked up as Elias passed. “Hey! You got the new PCR system?” He went on without waiting for an answer. “Did they happen to have the spice order, too?”

Elias nodded to both as he set down his load on a table. “Spices are still in the boat.”

“Awesome. I'll go back down with you.”

Kennedy glanced over and gave him a nod. “Hey, Elias.” She went back to her computer.

Sooo... it looked like Jordie hadn't told anyone. That was good.

Or at least it should have been good, so why was Elias's chest still trapped in a vice?

He walked back with Simon to the boat. They chatted about Simon's recent work in animal-to-plant chemical signaling and a new band he was listening to. Elias thought he kept up with his end of the conversation, but all he wanted to ask about was where Jordie was.

He didn't.

And ultimately, he didn't need to. Just as they got back to camp, a deep voice came from behind Elias's pile of boxes. "Hey, let me take some of that from you."

Elias froze. It was Jordie, who looked more attractive than ever with his midnight-black hair curling gently around his face and his bronzed green skin shimmering with just a bit of sweat in the mid-afternoon sun. Had his arms always been so big, or was it that brick-red shirt that made them seem to bulge with each movement today?

It was really his smile, though, that left Elias shell-shocked. It was warm. Pleased.

Elias felt a flutter in his chest, charmed by the mere sight, until he reminded himself that Jordie smiled at everyone.

And those thick, pulsing green tentacles that were reaching toward him weren't really for *him*. Jordie was just going to help with the boxes.

Jordie's tentacle slid across Elias's chest, warm through his shirt, and another one brushed against his own glowing cobalt tentacle where it encircled the boxes. Elias was hit by a burst

of flavor, his knees growing weak at just a taste of the musky, clean, masculine chemistry that was all Jordie.

The weight in his arms suddenly decreased, and he rocked back to balance himself.

“You okay there?” Jordie asked. So kind. So supportive.

Just like he would have been with any other team member.

Elias nodded mutely.

Fuck. He was struck stupid by a smile from a guy a decade younger. A guy he *supervised*.

Another viratrix.

He swallowed heavily, then put his packages down.

“How was the trip?” Jordie asked, already popping the clasps on the boxes and starting to sort the contents.

Alright, that was how it was going to be.

Just totally normal.

“Fine. The ocean was calm.”

Not that he’d checked first. It had been an irresponsible choice, but he’d needed time to get away. He’d gotten very lucky that there hadn’t been a storm.

“Saanvi found an interesting croton variety. It looks pre-Change, but there are Changed ants and a few beetles swarming it, so I suggested she sample the sap.”

“Good thinking,” Elias said automatically.

Normally he would have been excited at the discovery, eager to cheer on his newest mentee and more quietly thank his competent postdoc for the guidance. But when that postdoc was Jordie, he had no idea how.

The rest of the day went on like that. Elias met with a colleague on a video call and worked a bit on a paper. He found Saanvi and looked over her work, reminding her again that she could call him by his first name. A few people stopped by with questions or ideas, and he answered them and sent them on their way. Jordie was around, just like any other day. Chatting with someone across the camp, whistling as he ran some labs. They didn't bump into each other.

Dinner came, and Elias debated going back to his cabin.

But he couldn't hide forever.

He took a bowl of lentil stew over rice and sat down at one of the tables. The conversation was about football, which he still privately thought of as soccer, and knew no one would expect him to talk about.

Someone sat down beside him. So close that it was impossible not to brush against his arm. To have their tentacles touch where they rested on the bench.

Elias tried to keep his breathing even. Tried not to look up.

It was Jordie. Sitting unbelievably close to him, when the whole bench was available.

Of course, Jordie was already deep into the conversation, joyfully arguing with Meena and Kennedy about some player



Elias had never heard of.

It was only Elias whose heart was racing and fingers were shaking, even as his dick started to grow.

Not now, oh *please*, not now.

Jordie nudged his side, their tentacles rubbing deliciously against one another. He dropped two ripe soursop fruits beside Elias's plate, one a dull raspberry red and one a vibrant blue.

“You missed these on Thursday night. Thought you might like some.”

Elias looked at the two fruits, stunned.

They barely lasted a day or two without refrigeration, and most of their refrigerator space was reserved for experiments or a few leftovers for people who wanted a snack. Jordie had gone out and picked these from two different trees that weren't particularly near each other.

What was that supposed to *mean*?

Was it an apology? A thank you?

A courting gift?

Elias could feel the heat rising in his face, staining his cobalt skin a flushed purple.

Jordie couldn't possibly mean that.

“You like these two guanabanas best, right?” Jordie pressed.

Elias found his voice. “Yes. Thank you.” He mentally committed the Spanish word to memory, but mostly he was

thinking that Jordie had noticed what his favorite fruit was.

He was almost afraid to touch the prickly delicacies, as if eating them would condemn him, like Persephone, to spend half of his life infatuated with a man he couldn't be with.

Only it was far too late for the infatuation, and he wouldn't even get this viratrix half the time.

Comparatively, Persephone had it pretty good.

Jordie whipped out a knife from somewhere, then slipped another plate out from beneath his for the soursops to rest on.

He'd thought of everything.

Would he cut them, too? Pull out the wide seeds so that Elias could eat the soft, white flesh?

Elias grabbed the first fruit and took the knife. Whether he didn't want to be disappointed if it didn't happen or didn't want anyone to see something so intimate if it did, he wasn't sure.

Jordie just gave him another little side-bump that left all of his senses soaring, then went back to the football conversation.

Elias cut the soursop in half, giving it his full attention so he wouldn't have to look up. The inside was creamy and fleshy, just as it should be, with a flavor that he still couldn't quite characterize. A little like dried fruit, a little banana. He thought pineapple, sometimes. If he'd grown up here, he'd probably just think of it as soursop—or guanabana? Maybe it was supposed to taste like guava and banana?—but his taste buds kept reminding him that he was a foreigner.

He thought he caught Jordie watching him, but he couldn't make himself look up to find out.

Elias moved his tentacle away from Jordie and onto his lap. The last thing he needed was for Jordie, who looked completely at peace, to accidentally touch him and taste his anxiety.

Fortunately, dinner broke up before too long. Elias stood when the first people started to disperse, taking his bowl and plate to the bins to wash up.

Jordie appeared by his side again, swishing his plate in the soapy water while Elias rinsed. "Swimming tonight?"

Elias gave a jerky nod. Was that a code for something, too? Or just getting back to normal?

Elias knew he could probably just ask, but to even acknowledge all the things he'd revealed during his rut was terrifying.

"Good." Jordie's smile was blinding, his teeth so white against his darker skin. "And we can talk too, yeah?"

Elias nodded again. At least now it was all in Jordie's hands.

Then he turned and fled.

## Chapter 10. Jordie

Jordie watched Elias's form as he hurried away.

God, that plump, squeezable ass. And those muscular thighs. That fucking soft hair at the nape of his neck. And those mesmerizing blue tentacles that could coil so sweetly around Jordie's. Elias was a walking feast for the senses.

Jordie had spent two days debating whether he was still having some rare rut hangover, or truly obsessed with his older mentor, but there wasn't any doubt now.

His heart had tried to beat its way through his chest when he got just one little look at a cerulean tentacle wrapped around a too-tall stack of boxes. He'd melted when he met Elias's gorgeous, anxious eyes. He'd noticed nothing at dinner except Elias's proximity to his body.

And he'd practically fallen all over himself to fetch the guanabanas, which Elias called soursops, when he'd heard about Elias's return time.

Only Elias hadn't loosened up over dinner, or even looked like he truly wanted to see him. For all his bulk, he'd run away like a timid mouse. Was he that embarrassed?

Or was he just uninterested in more? The thought was crushing. Jordie had to face the chance that outside of rut, maybe Elias had realized that the last thing he wanted was a relationship with his underling, and especially another viratrix.

Maybe Elias's attraction had dried up the moment his hormones had faded away. Perhaps Jordie had just been a convenient body. A pheromone-filled opportunity to get off with someone he already knew and trusted, but nothing more.

Jordie had to consider the possibility, no matter how wrong it seemed. He couldn't exactly force Elias to like him.

He figured he'd give Elias some time to relax, chat with anyone who wanted to hang around so he didn't draw suspicion, and then head down to the beach.

Whatever was going to happen, he might as well know.

He glanced toward the path, though Elias had long-since disappeared into the woods.

When he turned back, Meena was eyeing him, speculation in her face.

Oops.

Had he been too obvious?

He gave a curt nod to the other viratrix and decided that perhaps he'd be better off in his room. He wasn't sure he could actually keep calm out here.

Inside, he just had to wait.

He pointlessly rearranged his desk, making sure that his pencils were parallel and all the same distance from the edge. He tidied his already neat room, telling himself that it wasn't just on the off chance that Elias followed him back here sometime.

Was their thing supposed to be a secret?

Was there even a thing at all?

He'd planned to wait an hour, because that seemed normal. Jordie would typically eat dinner, then do a bit of writing or look over his field notes, maybe check in on an experiment if he needed to, or just hang out with colleagues, maybe play some cards. Eventually, night would fall, and he'd wander down the path, picking up Elias and heading to the beach.

If Elias wanted to be covert, Jordie should stick to their usual schedule.

Or was Elias just ignoring him?

Afraid?

Jordie was jittery himself.

He'd dated before. Nice progenetrix boys he could bring home to his parents. Easy relationships, where they would casually hold hands walking down the street. Where wrapping a tentacle around his date's trim waist in public would, at most, get an indulgent eye roll. Where people would walk right on by without noticing if he gave his boyfriend a peck on the lips before class.

Would Elias want that? Would Jordie?

It had all seemed so much easier just after the rut, when his tentacles were still soaked in Elias's flavor, and his ears still rang with Elias's moans and whimpers.

He'd had a plan.

Until Elias had disappeared for two days, and then come back looking skittish and almost ill.

Jordie had had so many chances to think and re-think. To play out every possibility.

Just after the rut, he'd been convinced it was mutual. That this was a merging of bodies and souls, no matter how unconventional.

Elias had to feel the all-consuming desire that had been with Jordie every moment since that day of hormone-infused passion, when his eyes had been opened to what was right in front of him all along. Elias couldn't possibly ignore everything that had happened between them. Everything that now felt like it had been building up over the past two years of morning swims and evening talks under the stars.

But now he was going back to the other side. What would his parents think? His brother, Reggie, who was in college with a football scholarship? His sister, Sofia, or her daughter, Cami, who was still years away from dating, but already knew which of the quaternary genders were supposed to be paired with which?

Jordie fluffed his pillows again and surveyed his wall. A large, colorful blanket with a traditional Mexican design that

was pinned up because it was too hot to sleep with. From dozens of photos, his family smiled back at him. Buddies from college and grad school looped their arms around his as they grinned at the camera.

Would they smile just as widely if they knew?

Jordie touched the frame that held one of Cami's drawings. This one had two green people, one tall and one short, holding hands with tentacles waving. They both wore giant smiles like upside down rainbows and had little dots for eyes. Himself and Cami, obviously. The sun was a yellow circle in the top corner, yellow lines darting out from it in uneven rays.

Would Sofia be aghast, worried about the influence Jordie would have on her daughter? Or would she take it in stride and welcome Elias into the fold?

His family was everything.

He was sure they would love Elias.

Except.

He couldn't be sure. What would they think of Jordie with another viratrix? Or a progenetrix who looked like a viratrix?

Jordie straightened his colorful sheets one more time, though the single bed was already neatly made.

Would Elias like his room? Would they even fit together on his narrow bed? Or maybe he'd never see it, the hallways of the dormitory too public to be shared.

Jordie shook his head. He was getting ahead of himself.



Better to get this over with, so he'd at least know where he stood.

He quickly changed into his blue swimming trunks, then switched to his red ones. Which ones did Elias like better?

No, that was stupid. He was going to the damned beach to swim and talk. The color of his shorts wouldn't change Elias's opinions.

Even walking through the camp felt weird, as he waved to various friends and smiled as he avoided getting sucked into their conversations or games. Did anyone notice that something was different?

It was a relief to reach the shaded path, and he walked a little faster. When he reached Elias's cabin, he called out his usual greeting. "Hey! Ready for a swim?"

There was a long pause, then a soft, "Sure."

Jordie found his tentacles wrapping around his torso as his fingers clenched. He forced himself to relax.

The second Elias appeared, Jordie's tentacles reached unconsciously forward. He looked delectable standing there, his muscular physique and soft belly revealed in all his cerulean glory, just a towel and a pair of swim trunks hiding him from Jordie's eyes.

He was nervous, though. Jordie could tell. It was a subtle thing. His shimmering cerulean tentacles were held just a little stiffly at his sides and his eyes didn't quite meet Jordie's.

Was he trying to get their friendship back to normal? To let Jordie down easily?

Or was he hoping for more and afraid to ask?

Elias set off for the water before Jordie could even make a move, surging forward with powerful strides, and then wading right into the surf while Jordie was still watching his thick, round ass.

Damn.

Jordie eventually jogged after him, catching up to pull into an easy freestyle a few paces behind. His tentacles naturally aided his movements, undulating to propel him through the water without ever needing to be taught.

Soon they were beyond the choppy waves near the shore, far enough out that the ocean was smooth and they could easily talk, but Elias was keeping his head down, turning his head up only to breathe.

Jordie fell in beside him. They'd have time to talk after.

Elias pushed them both hard, but even he must have realized that he couldn't just swim forever.

Jordie followed him up onto the shore, his limbs fatigued. But Elias just kept going, booking it back toward his cabin.

Elias could run, but he'd have to face things sometime.

Jordie trailed behind him, gathering up his courage. Elias had already laid his towel down all the way at the far edge of the platform instead of vaguely in the middle. He was laying

on his belly, face buried in his arms, and his tentacles lined up tight against his sides.

It was clearly a message, but what did it mean?

It was tempting to just reach out and touch... but they needed to have a conversation first. A real one, where Jordie could finally know whether he was going to have his heart ripped out before their relationship had even started.

Jordie still took his time laying out his towel. Elias had to hear him rustling around with just a foot between them. He lay back, hands behind his head. “The sunset’s gorgeous tonight.”

Elias looked up at him quickly, then away. He finally turned over. “It is.”

The last pinks and purples painted the sky against inky black, the tapestry framed by leafy palms. Jordie tried to look at it, but all his awareness was on the man beside him.

It still surprised Jordie to see Elias uncomfortable. Usually he took everything in stride. Seeing him like this, though, just made Jordie feel more protective. And possessive. Elias should never have to feel uncomfortable, especially if this was actually something they both wanted. Clearly, he would have to be the one to make the first move.

“You went to the mainland,” Jordie commented.

“Yeah.”

Alright, it had been a stupid thing to say. He was just trying to work his way around to what he wanted to say.

Maybe he just needed to be more direct. “You were avoiding me.” He kept it gentle. Not an accusation.

Elias peeked over quickly, then turned his face toward the sky. “Sorry. I just... It was just a rut, you know.”

“Was it?” Jordie let one of his tentacles drift over, barely touching Elias’s. He still caught Elias’s sucked in breath. The glorious flavor of his skin.

“Yeah, of course. I’m a... You’re a viratrix.”

“I’ve noticed.” Jordie grinned, confidence growing. That wasn’t really a disagreement. It sounded more like Elias trying to convince himself that what he wanted was wrong, or that he was unworthy.

“So...” Elias asked uneasily.

“So does that mean I can’t do this?” Jordie stroked down Elias’s chest with one tentacle, savoring Elias’s breathy reaction and tasting the salt on his skin.

“But why would you...?”

Jordie rolled onto his side. “Because I want to see where this is going.” There couldn’t be any possible way to misinterpret that.

Elias jerked his head over to look at Jordie, and then away. He was trembling. “Where could it go?”

Mmmmm. Elias *did* want him. He’d just been too scared to ask. Jordie should have known from the beginning. “Wherever you want, baby. You tell me.”

Elias's hands were clenched hard at his sides, but his tentacles were slowly creeping up to brush along Jordie's. "I don't know."

Jordie doubted that. Elias had to have dreams. Fantasies. Things he wanted deep in his soul but wasn't ready to admit yet.

"You keep thinking about it then. We can take things at any pace you want." Even as he promised, Jordie couldn't resist touching Elias any longer. He reached out his other tentacle to tangle with Elias's legs and swept a hand over his soft belly to hold over his heart. He could feel Elias's tension, but also the way his tentacles were starting to coil. His cock tented his shorts, matching Jordie's arousal. It was intoxicating just touching him, all trapped and submissive. The prelude to everything Jordie wanted.

Elias was breathing shallowly, eyes focused on the dark sky. He wasn't moving, every muscle rigid.

"My beautiful, beautiful darling." He stroked through soft strands of hair, curling it around his fingers. "Is this alright, Ellie?"

He knew that it was. All he needed was for Elias to say yes.

## Chapter 11. Elias

**E**lias turned the words over in his head. *My beautiful, beautiful darling.*

He wanted them like a desert wanted water. Like plants wanted the sun.

The dark velvet of the night was settling over them, but Elias could still see Jordie's face, etched with concern and a little uncertainty. Then he realized why he could see so clearly—Jordie's tentacles were glowing the firefly green of arousal.

All the signs pointed to Jordie really wanting him. Just as he was. Like this. Whether it was just for a bit of fun or, dare he think it, something more.

He knew what Jordie had said. All the evidence was right before him.

Jordie wanted to *see where things went.*

He just couldn't make himself believe. He was heading toward fifty without any relationship experience. His hair was starting to gray and his belly was rounder than it ought to be. Not to mention his very obvious viratrix tentacles.

He knew that they must be glowing blue with arousal from the way they tingled, especially when Jordie was leaning so close, the scent of musk and saltwater coming off him in waves.

Elias felt like he needed to hide them. He laid them along his sides, where he wouldn't be tempted to touch. Where perhaps they could be overlooked.

“Well?” Jordie prompted. His broad hand slid over Elias's nipple. One tentacle slithered down to his foot, wrapping around it until Elias had to suppress a whimper.

“I'm your supervisor,” Elias argued. As if that were his biggest concern. In the academic community, hierarchy was a little blurry with people working on multiple grants from different institutions.

“Yes, and we work on an island with twenty people. We can keep it a secret, or we can tell them.”

Really? Jordie would do that? “I'm a viratrix.”

Jordie raised Elias's hand to his lips and dropped a kiss his knuckles. “You can be whatever you want.”

Elias's heart was about to beat through his chest. No one had suggested such a thing before. “But I don't... I mean... You're sure?”

“Very sure,” Jordie agreed seductively, his breath warm on Elias's palm.

“And you're just... okay with that?”

“Am I okay that you cling to me like the sweetest progenetrix? That you’re hungry to submit? That you suck my tentacles and take my cock like you were made for it? Or maybe the way that you let me hold you and feed you? Ellie, I wish I could make you see how beautiful you are.”

Elias sucked in a breath, but he couldn’t let it go. How was it... There was no way that Jordie could actually mean that. At least not now that the fog of rut had cleared.

Jordie’s tentacle slithered higher around Elias’s neck. Claiming him. Elias just wanted to give in to that sensation. To imagine that all of this could be true.

There had to be a catch somewhere. “So you mean that... you like having another viratrix submit to you?” That had to be a power rush. At least for a normal viratrix who was built that way.

Jordie gave him a teasing grin. “Are you just making up excuses right now?”

“I... no! I don’t...” He didn’t even know what he was saying. But he wasn’t making up excuses. He was terrified.

“You, Elias Theodore Greton. I want you.”

Some frantic hamster wheel part of his brain wondered how Jordie knew his middle name. What came out of his mouth was, “But you didn’t even kiss me.”

Elias should have expected what happened next, but he was still stunned. With one quick pull, Jordie was on top of him. Not heavy, but caging him in. Hovering on hands and



knees, tentacles sweeping passionately over his body, so that the slight distance between them was all Elias could think about.

Jordie's lips descended, warm and soft. Not rushing. Tasting. Sipping. Inviting him to a dance of tongues and gentle nips that left him floating.

No one had ever kissed him like that.

Like he was precious.

Like he was something to be savored.

"Ellie," Jordie breathed, before kissing him again. The corners of his mouth. The arch of his cheeks. His eyelids. "Is that what you needed? Will you say yes?"

"I'm not even sure what I'm saying yes to." He was still feeling dazed.

"You're saying yes to me. Everything else we can figure out."

Elias filled his lungs. The air was full of the musk of Jordie's arousal. This whole thing sounded insane. And Elias felt like he could just float away in happiness.

He pulled in his breath, opened his mouth and said... "Yes."

"Oh, thank God." Jordie's tentacles tightened around Elias until he could scarcely breathe. "I was worried you would say no."

“You were worried?” There was no way. Jordie was always confident and easy-going. He could have anyone.

“Terrified. I think I’ve been attracted to you for two years. Maybe since the first time you stepped out of the ocean, all of those drops of water running down your chest, and invited me to swim.” That had been Jordie’s second week. “I just didn’t know what it was.”

“So, you’re actually...?” It didn’t seem possible. Joy filled him down to his toes, like bubbles of champagne.

Jordie kissed him again. “Very interested. *Very*. Just give me a chance. We fit so well together.”

“I, um... I might have thought about you. A few times. Over the past couple years.”

“While you were alone in your bed at night?” Jordie’s voice dripped with insinuation.

“Yes.” Elias was blushing. “And when we watched the stars together. And, um, swimming.” Though he’d fought it hard. A single glowing tentacle would have given him away.

“Any other times?” Jordie teased.

“God. Don’t ask me that.” He buried his head in Jordie’s neck. Jordie *wanted* him.

He wasn’t sure how he felt in return.

No, that was a lie.

He knew how he felt but putting words to it just felt too big. Too daunting when this was all new, and he still thought it

might fall apart.

“I won’t push you for more than you want,” Jordie promised. “You set the pace.” Then he kissed Elias again. Hungrily. Like he couldn’t get enough.

They broke away, panting.

“Is that you letting me set the pace?” Elias somehow had the confidence to tease.

“Let me touch you,” Jordie begged.

Elias giggled—actually giggled—because Jordie was *already* touching him, their chests pressed together and his hands groping Elias’s chest. A tentacle still encircled Elias’s neck, staking Jordie’s claim and leaving Elias floating on a cloud of euphoria. Their breath mingled as Jordie waited for his answer. “You *are* touching me.”

Jordie let his weight drop, aligning their hard cocks. “You know what I mean. I want you now. When we’re not in rut.”

“Oh, um, okay.”

Jordie grinned, his emerald skin lit by his aroused tentacles. “Okay? Is that all you have to say, Dr. Greton?”

Elias just managed to tease back. He wasn’t as funny by nature, but he thought he had this one. “Yeah,” he countered with sass. “That’s all.”

Jordie rutted against him, then sat up just enough to shove down Elias’s loose shorts. “God, you’re gorgeous. I can’t

believe I wasted two years when I should have been worshipping your body.”

“That’s ridiculous.” It was a weak protest. Elias’s tentacles were already snaking around Jordie’s in little loops, as if they belonged there.

“Not ridiculous. I can’t get enough of you.” Jordie was struggling with his own damp swim trunks, and Elias helped to push them down.

Their hard cocks came together, silk over steel. “Are you sure you’re not still in rut?”

Jordie kissed along his neck in deep, greedy bites. “Is that a joke? It’s been days. I went crazy when you left.”

Somehow, this was actually what Jordie wanted. Elias was finally starting to believe it.

“Kiss me,” Jordie demanded, as if he ever needed to do more than look in Elias’s direction to have him falling at his feet. But the rough command made Elias’s blood heat.

He returned the kiss as Jordie encircled their cocks with his thick, pulsing tentacle.

“I’m not gonna last, babe,” Jordie told him.

Elias wasn’t going to last either. But it didn’t matter. Jordie was in control.

Jordie moved faster, squeezing and stroking along their lengths. God, his cock was fucking huge, so hot when they pressed together.

Elias knew that his own wasn't much smaller, but it felt that way when Jordie was pinning him down. Making him feel small and safe and desired.

Elias was whimpering and writhing, but he couldn't stop. He needed to come. He needed Jordie to come.

With a few hard fast strokes, Elias felt his balls tighten. His orgasm ripped through him, coming in heavy waves as he clung to his viratrix. His man.

Jordie was still going, drawing Elias's climax out as long as possible, rocking against him, his hard cock rubbing against Elias's.

Elias was lost in ecstasy, but he pulled his eyes open. He looked up to find Jordie staring right back at him. His bronzed green cheeks were dark with exertion, his mouth hanging open.

"Ellie," Jordie panted between breaths, his moans of pleasure filling the air around them. "Ellie..." He squeezed his eyes shut as hot splashes of cum spurted over Elias's chest.

Elias had never seen anything more beautiful in his life.

Jordie rocked a few more times, then collapsed against Elias's chest. His skin was soft and warm, slick with sweat and cum. Elias dared to touch him even now, running his hands over Jordie's back while his tentacles coiled around Jordie's arms.

He tasted of salt water and sex, his own unique flavor blending with Elias's.

Jordie rested his forehead on Elias's shoulder and breathed.

Elias matched his breaths as the thick tapestry of stars danced above them. This was more than he'd ever dreamed. More than he deserved.

Jordie nuzzled against Elias's neck, dropping little kisses. Elias turned toward him, silently asking for more.

Jordie took the invitation, licking his way into his mouth and making Elias moan again, though he knew he couldn't possibly perform again for hours. He just couldn't get enough of Jordie. His mouth was warm and sweet, the rub of his stubble against Elias's skin pleasantly rough.

"Let's get cleaned up," Jordie whispered.

"I, uh..." Elias wasn't sure what he wanted to say. Jordie already knew where the small, gravity-operated shower was behind the cabin. What he wanted to know was whether Jordie was going to stay the night or not.

If this was just a sex thing or, well, a boyfriend thing or something. And now he sounded like a pathetic teenager in his own head.

Jordie had admitted to wanting him. To being attracted to him. To wanting "to see where this is going."

But what if it was just...

"Shhhhh... You're thinking too loud. Let me get you cleaned up."

Elias let Jordie manhandle him into standing, enjoying every minute of the rough tugs and tender care. It was a wonder they could even walk the short distance to the shower with the way Jordie had Elias wrapped up in his tentacles, with barely a breath between them.

Jordie's soft cock nestled against Elias's ass, still arousing, but mostly soothing and intimate.

Special.

Jordie didn't let go of Elias as he pulled the chain, dropping lovely cool water over their heads. Somehow, he found soap in the darkness and managed to rub it over both of their bodies, all without ever letting go.

He pulled back only a little more to rub the towel gently over Elias's skin, then give his own a perfunctory sweep.

"Toothbrush?" Jordie asked.

"That's back here, too." Elias groped around until he found what he needed without a lantern and quickly cleaned up.

"I'll do mine in the morning." Jordie dropped gentle kisses on the back of Elias's neck.

Somehow, that was the sweetest part of the whole evening. Jordie was here with him, for something as mundane and homey as brushing teeth.

And he was going to stay.

Jordie kissed his neck again. "Baby, do you think of yourself as a progenetrix most of the time?"

Elias froze, his eyes darting around in the darkness for an escape route. But Jordie was holding him tightly, running hands and tentacles gently over his exposed skin, and Elias still had a mouthful of toothpaste.

Elias kept brushing, but eventually he had to spit it out and rinse his mouth. “Maybe?” he whispered. He’d never said it out loud before.

Jordie nuzzled into his cheek. “Will you tell me more about it?”

“I guess most of the time I just don’t think about it. When I’m working, I’m just a researcher, you know? My tentacles are useful. They collect data. I don’t think much about... things. I’m just my mind, I guess.”

“So you don’t connect with your body or your gender?” Jordie was still caressing him with soothing strokes. “You just exist separately from it? You’re just you?”

“Yeah.” He relaxed enough to tilt his head back onto Jordie’s shoulder. He hadn’t expected him to get it so well.

“And when we’re together?” Jordie kissed along his neck, making him tingle.

He could feel his muscles tightening again, but he spoke through it. He knew Jordie wouldn’t judge him, but part of him still feared the response. “I feel like a progenetrix.”

Jordie nibbled along the rim of his ear. “The loveliest progenetrix I’ve ever met.”



Elias had already done so much crying, and he wasn't going to do it again, dammit. "You're sure? I mean, that you're okay with that?"

"Mmmmm..." Jordie squeezed him tighter. "I'm not attracted to other viratrixes. Never have been. This makes so much more sense."

"But, but, you could be with any other progenetrix!" That was his deepest fear, after being found out and shamed.

Jordie turned Elias around in his arms. "I'm not looking, babe. I've got everything I need right here."

Did he really mean that? How long was that going to last for? Because it sounded much bigger than just fooling around. Was he going to stay?

Elias tried not to get too excited. He should be happy enough just to have Jordie for another eight months. That alone would be a fantasy to last a lifetime, even if it left his heart cracked open.

"Now put your feelers around me," Jordie commanded, and Elias's breath caught in his throat.

He buried his head in Jordie's shoulder, inhaling his unique, clean scent mixed with Elias's soap. Did Jordie understand how hard this was for him, and how beautiful it made him feel at the same time?

Slowly, Elias raised his tentacles—his feelers—and coiled them around Jordie's arms and tentacles in that little space by

his own ribs. It wasn't perfect, but at the same time, it felt so gloriously right.

“That’s right. Let me feel them. I love how you cling to me.” Then Jordie was tilting Elias’s head up and kissing him so thoroughly and gently that the stars seemed to spin above them.

“Do you know how much it turns me on to think of providing for you?” Jordie spoke in soft puffs of air against Elias’s mouth. “I know you’ve got the bigger grants, but maybe you’ll let me feed you sometimes?”

How could this be his life?

“Alright.” He could hardly breathe with how fast his heart was beating.

“Mmmm... Good boy. But now what I want is to fall asleep next to you. Outhouse first?”

“Yeah,” Elias reluctantly admitted.

They each took a turn walking to the little building, but the moment Elias came back Jordie was on him again like an octopus, arms and torso captured so tightly he didn’t even know how he was going to move. Elias was glad the night covered his grin as Jordie somehow hustled them both back into the cabin and drew back the covers.

Jordie laid down, as if this was something they did every night, and pulled Elias into his arms. Elias was still for a few moments, barely daring to breathe in case he’d gotten any of it wrong.

Jordie's breaths were already starting to slow when Elias finally rolled over onto his side. Jordie tentacles followed him, and then his whole body, holding him close.

The little spoon.

Jordie dropped a kiss on the back of his neck.

It was heaven.

## Chapter 12. Jordie

Jordie swung Elias's wide hand in his as they walked down the trail. His tentacle didn't need any prompting to curl around Elias's soft waist, and he was forever charmed by the way Elias's tentacles wrapped around his in tight little coils.

It wasn't exactly how a progenetrix's tendrils would feel, but it gave him the same caveman sense of protectiveness and giddy delight.

He'd woken Elias this morning with hungry kisses that had ended with them covered in sticky, drying cum as they made their way down to the beach. From there, they'd hardly managed a real swim because Jordie's tentacles kept tracing over Elias's body, until he had to pull them together for another kiss, treading water in the middle of the ocean.

When they'd made it back, Jordie put Elias on his knees on the smooth wooden deck under the shower, demanding a rough blowjob while Elias looked up at him with hungry eyes that glistened with tears. Then, he'd returned the favor, suckling and teasing at Elias's thick cock until he'd come, spurting down Jordie's throat.

Elias had looked awed, like he hadn't even conceived of such a thing happening.

Now they were heading back toward the rest of the community for a day of work, and Jordie was on cloud nine.

He squeezed Elias's hand. "How do you want to play this, babe?"

Elias turned to him, anxiety scrunching up his face. Jordie wished he could wipe it all away, but that would take time.

"Can we, uh, not..." Elias pulled his hand away.

Alright, that was answer enough for right now.

"We should be professional," Elias finally managed, sounding more like himself now that he had a rationale.

Jordie still swooped in for a kiss. "Whatever you want, baby."

There were three married couples at the research outpost, and he knew for sure that some of the single folks hooked up from time to time. Professional wasn't the same as hiding, even if Elias was technically his supervisor for another handful of months.

But it was new and scary. Elias was probably worried about a thousand things.

And, to be honest, Jordie wanted a little bit of time to feel things out, too.

Nobody would think it odd for them to arrive at breakfast together—it would be stranger if he missed a morning swim—

but Jordie was responsible and managed to sit at a different table from Elias for breakfast without looking at him too much. He only checked in with Elias for a slightly awkward moment before he took Saanvi out to collect samples, as if his world hadn't changed overnight.

Elias wasn't around when he took lunch at the communal picnic tables, and Jordie didn't want to seek him out, because he wasn't sure if he could keep his tentacles off him.

By the time evening came, he couldn't help but swing by the guanabana tree since it was only a little out of the way. Alright, it was a lot out of the way, but he picked a whole bag of the large, spiky fruits so at least he could say that he'd gathered them for everyone.

He couldn't resist sitting beside Elias at dinner. And after all, Elias was his mentor, right? They were still friends. They'd sat together hundreds of times.

It was just that now his tentacles kept creeping over to Elias's lap beneath the table. Tangling around his ankle.

Elias had given him a sharp look, but he'd shrugged it off and started cutting open a few soursop fruits for the whole table. If he happened to put the plate just in front of Elias, who could say anything?

He even took a few bites for himself. It was a pretty good one, on the sweeter side, kind of a combination of pineapple and raisin. The true joy, though, was watching Elias enjoy it.

Jordie kept up with the conversation around them, laughing and putting in a few comments, but only with half his attention. Elias was simply too appealing, carefully lifting each spoonful of soursop to his lips with a slight furrow to his brow, and then humming when it reached his tongue.

It was adorable.

When Elias took off for his cabin, Jordie made himself stay for a few hands of cards, but he barely made it half an hour.

Then he raced back to his room for his swim trunks—this time, thinking far enough ahead to grab a toothbrush and wrap a change of clothes for tomorrow into his towel.

He tried to keep it cool as he strode back through the loose gathering of folks relaxing after dinner, but he couldn't help a hitch of annoyance as his phone rang.

He thought about letting it go, but he didn't get many phone calls down here. The reception was bad on much of the island, and most of his community was here anyway.

He reluctantly fished it out of his pocket, but smiled when he saw it was his brother. "Reggie!"

"Jordie!"

"It's been a while. *Te extrañé.*" Jordie returned affectionately. *I missed you.* "How's college?"

"Finals are kicking my butt."

Jordie turned onto a side path that was likely to be empty this time of night. “Don’t you know you’re supposed to slack off senior year?”

“Ha. Like you ever did.”

Jordie hadn’t, but he’d also known exactly what he wanted to study and what he was going to do with it. Reggie was still floating around, trying to find his place. He’d finally committed to a major sometime last year, and he was plenty smart, but about half their calls were Reggie asking for advice and trying to find his place in the world.

Not that their parents weren’t around, but their progenetrix mom was a little high strung, and their viratrix mom was lost in her own world of academia. She’d wanted Reggie to get at least a master’s degree, if not a doctorate, but to do that Reggie would need to first find something he wanted to study. With a decade between their ages, Jordie often found himself stepping in as a bit of a parent.

“Are you enjoying your classes?” Jordie asked. “At least when they’re not kicking your butt?”

“Yeah.” He could almost hear the shrug in Reggie’s voice. “How’s your research going?”

“Research is good. Our new research assistant knows her stuff and she’s starting to come out of her shell, so I think she’ll be a good fit. I had a paper accepted last week.”

“Congrats. What was it on?”

“Do you really want to know?”



“Lay it on me.”

“Chemical evolution of autonomous DNazymes and horizontal gene transfer in ophioglossoid ferns that have decreased responses to Change RNA.”

“Oh, yeah,” Reggie joked. “I was just thinking about that this morning. Wanna tell me what that means?”

Jordie knew Reggie didn’t really care, but Jordie could go on about how cool ferns were, with some of the biggest and most disorganized genomes around, tracing their kleptomaniac genetic ancestry all over the map. It was a good thing that Reggie didn’t mind.

Today, though, he gave a brief explanation, because he had something much bigger filling up his thoughts.

“Hey, uh, I wanted to ask you something.” Suddenly, it was vital that he get Reggie’s approval, but he had no way to ask. He didn’t want to reveal anything that Elias wanted to hide.

“Shoot.”

Jordie checked the area, though he was so far from the group he couldn’t even hear the music that was playing. There was just the evening chorus of crickets and frogs. His tentacles told him that there were no humans nearby.

Still, he found himself squeezing the towel folded in his grasp. How could he put this? “So, there’s this guy. In our research group. He looks like a viratrix. But he’s, uh, attracted to other viratrix men.”

There was a pause. Was Reggie disgusted? Indifferent?

“Dude, was that a question?”

Oh. He supposed it wasn't. “I just wanted your opinion. On things like that.”

“Well, actually, I guess I have a similar situation. There's this guy. Uh, Dante. In our house this year. He's... I don't know what he is. He's a progenetrix, I guess. But he does this thing where he stretches one feeler out long, so it's like a tentacle. And he has this... like this viratrix energy. It doesn't matter if someone's twice his size, because he's not afraid of anything. And, like, he wears women's clothes at the same time. Like makeup and skirts and things.”

Jordie pressed the phone tighter to his ear. That sounded almost like Elias. Well, not quite the same. But about Elias's tentacles; how he used them like sweet little rings of feelers. Would he want to wear women's clothes, too? He couldn't quite imagine Elias in a dress. But a pair of lacy underwear?

Fuck.

“And, uh, how do people treat him?”

Reggie laughed, a little self-consciously, Jodie thought. “Oh, uh, they're all scared of him, I think. He's just so... Dante's powerful, you know? So smart, and he'll say things that just tear you to shreds. His clothes are like, fashion-model sexy, but in this dangerous way, if that makes any sense. And he wears these heels that click on the floor so you can hear him coming.”

Jordie had thought Reggie was uncomfortable with the idea of Dante, but now he was starting to think something else. Something much more interesting. “You like him, don’t you?”

“Oh, no,” Reggie protested, his voice getting higher with every sentence. “He’s, like, three years older than me. He’s a grad student. In journalism. He’s written all these famous pieces. I mean, he’s just living with us because he needed to find housing after the semester started, and he’ll be moving out in June. He would never even look at me.”

Jordie chuckled. “You think he’s hot.”

“No. No! I’m just...”

“Oh, Dante,” Jordie fake panted. “Your clothes are so dangerous and sexy...”

“I’m not talking to you.”

“Tell me about his heels again. What do they sound like?”

Reggie huffed. “Are you done yet?”

“I am, chico. I won’t tease any more. Seriously, you should ask him out.”

Reggie made a choking sound. “I could never do that!”

“Why not? Put on a nice shirt. Maybe buy some flowers. What food does he like?”

“Thai food,” Reggie murmured, like he was pretending he didn’t know. “That’s always what he gets when he’s staying in for a night in his pajamas.”

“I bet you like those PJs. What does he wear?”

“Shut up. You said you wouldn’t tease.”

“Still, I think you should ask him out.”

“You wouldn’t think that was weird?”

Jordie did laugh this time. “So, remember how this whole conversation started?”

“Ah, the viratrix. You said he *looked* like a viratrix. Does that mean he’s actually more like a progenetrix?”

“Maybe. Or not all the way in one direction or another,” Jordie mused. “I think he’s still figuring it out.”

“So, what do you think of him?” Reggie pushed.

*That I’m head over heels for him. That I can’t keep my hands off of him.* Jordie drew in a breath and squared his shoulders. “We’re dating.” Or at least something close to that.

“¡Jordán! Oh my god!”

Jordie held the phone away from his ear so he didn’t burst an eardrum. By the time he put it back, Reggie was talking a mile a minute.

“What’s his name? Does he live on the island? Do you go on dates? What are people saying? ¡Vaya! You have to let me meet him!”

Jordie chuckled. “I can’t answer your questions if you’re still talking.” But what a relief it was to know that even one person close to him supported his relationship. Reggie was so excited that it soothed something inside. Without that pressure,

he realized that he'd been more worried than he let on, even to himself. And now he didn't have to be.

“Ok, go.”

“Well, I'm not going to tell you his name yet.” They'd just started this thing yesterday and it was too new. “But he lives on the island. We haven't told anyone else.”

“Are you going to?”

Jordie looked at the leafy canopy above him. “I don't know. I don't think he wants to.”

“Oh, Jordie. That sucks.”

“I mean, it's okay. I want him to feel safe. He needs to be able to figure himself out in his own way.”

“So you're going to hide everything then? Aren't there, like, fifteen people on the island?”

“Twenty-one right now.”

“You think you can keep it a secret?”

“I dunno.”

A parrot ruffled its feathers and squawked above him. Life must be so easy, being a parrot.

“I'm sorry, man. Would you be embarrassed if someone found out?”

Jordie thought about it. There was a layer of fear. Of wondering what people would think of him. But also this sense of joy. What would it be like to sit beside Elias at meals and casually reach over and touch him? To have Elias sit on his lap

or rest his head on his shoulder at a bonfire party on the beach?

He wanted it fiercely.

More than that, he wanted Elias to have it. He wanted Elias to feel like he deserved it.

“I would never be embarrassed. He’s an amazing man.”

“Tell me about him.”

Jordie could feel himself smiling already. “I guess, well, he’s cute. A little older. And he genuinely cares about people. You can see it in everything he does. Status, background, gender—none of it matters to him. He just respects people. I learn things from him all the time. He’s just... he’s just such a good person. He’s kind. Sweet. I’ve never talked to someone so easily.”

Reggie gasped. “Is it Elias? It is, isn’t it?”

Shit. “Uh, yes? How did you know?”

“Maybe because you talk about your mentor every time you call? I thought you put him on a pedestal, but now I know you just wanted in his pants.”

Jordie laughed. He truly hadn’t meant to share any of Elias’s secrets, but he probably did gush over him. And it was nice to be teased about Elias like he was just any other guy. “It’s more than just getting in his pants.”

“Uh huh,” Reggie said, clearly not believing him. “Tell me about those moonlit swims...”

“They’re very nice,” Jordie said primly.

“And I bet you do lots of *talking* on his deck under the stars.”

“We do.” And a few other things that got him hot and bothered just thinking about them.

“What color are his eyes? Are they the blue of the endless ocean?”

“Shut up, Reg.” They were even bluer.

“Seriously, though. You said he *looks* like a viratrix. Is he... not that?”

“I dunno.” There were some things that he sure as hell wasn’t going to say to his little brother, and some things that he only felt comfortable saying now because of Reggie’s crush on Dante. “He uses his tentacles like feelers sometimes.”

“How does that work?”

“He’ll coil them in a row around one of my tentacles or arms.” It felt like a very intimate thing to share. Just thinking about it made him shiver.

“Oh, yeah. I can see that. Well, that’s cool. I’m happy for you. Good luck with everything.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

They chatted for a little longer, just hanging out, until Reggie said he had to get back to studying. It was just as well, because Jordie was itching to get back to a certain man who he hadn’t kissed for far too many hours.

“Night, Reg. Good luck on your finals.”

“Bye. Thanks for the chat.”

“Any time. And let me know how things go with your Dante.”

“He’s not mine.”

“Bye, Reggie.”

“Bye.”

Jordie whistled as he walked down the path. He had Reggie on his side, and he felt like he could conquer anything.

Even better, it was finally nightfall, so he could be alone with his mate. He had big plans. Like kissing Elias to within an inch of his life. Then going swimming and making out under the stars.

Fuck. He couldn’t wait.



## Chapter 13. Elias

**E**lias was floating in warm salt water. The ocean was caressing him, surging around him. The waves came to him like the hum of Jordie's voice, deep and low, resounding in his chest.

He arched forward with his pelvis, and the ocean surged back toward him. Somehow, his swimsuit had disappeared, but the land was close, and there was Jordie on the shore, watching him, eyes bright with arousal.

“So pretty,” Jordie was telling him. “Let me see more.”

Elias rolled onto his back, floating easily with his cock stretching toward the sun and rows of feelers swirling at his sides in a soft, rhythmic beat.

He shuddered again as a wave washed over him. He was so close to coming. His arms were trapped somehow, his feelers not long enough to reach, but the ocean was doing the work for him. Pulling him toward climax. It was...

Elias woke with a start. What a strange, intense dream. It hadn't made any sense, but now he was horny. So damn horny.

Wet heat surrounded his cock, and this time it wasn't a dream.

"F-Fuck," he managed. His wrists were trapped above his head by one strong tentacle. It was the third time he'd woken up like that in the two weeks they'd been together, so he knew exactly where he was. "Jordieeee..."

"Mmmmm..." Jordie hummed, his lips tight around Elias's shaft, before he went back to licking around the head like an ice cream cone. "So beautiful, baby."

One slick tentacle teased at his sensitive hole, then pressed inside. Not deep or thick, just enough to have him craving more.

He was still half asleep, and Jordie was surrounding him like the ocean. Powerful and unfathomable. "Jor... Need... Please..."

"Mmm... Such a needy little slut, aren't you? Want me to fill you up?"

"Please!" He was writhing now, knees wide around Jordie's hips and arching up to meet each thrust. "Please, more!"

Jordie hummed in approval, licking and fucking his tentacle inside in a rhythm that had Elias veering toward the edge. He'd barely been awake for three minutes and he wasn't sure he could hold back.

It wasn't just the way Jordie was touching him, though his mouth was wickedly talented and his tentacle was hitting

every spot perfectly, surging inside him.

It was the way that Jordie looked *hungry* for him. The way that Jordie had, apparently, been so aroused by Elias's sleeping form that he hadn't been able to wait for Elias to wake up. The way that Jordie so visibly desired Elias's body, thick blue viratrix tentacles and all, and couldn't get enough of touching him.

Elias had never imagined being so wanted.

Jordie's tentacle was growing thicker. Stretching him. Making him take it.

Elias keened, loving how impossibly bound he was. How Jordie so easily took control.

Jordie looked up at him, face glistening with his own saliva and Elias's precum. He was a forest green god, slick with sweat in the dappled morning light and tentacles glowing neon green in his arousal. "You gonna come for me? Be my pretty progenetrix?"

That was all it took.

Elias shouted as Jordie took him apart with tentacle and tongue. His cock erupted, his seed spilling across his own chest as Jordie milked him to a shuddering completion.

When his convulsions gently subsided, Jordie licked the remaining cum from Elias's cock and kissed down to the inside of Elias's thigh. "Mmm... delicious. I could eat you all day." He gave a little bite, just enough to sting, then set about

lapping the cum from Elias's belly as he slowly eased his tentacle out.

Elias could feel himself blushing. He loved all the dirty and sweet things Jordie called him, but he still wasn't sure he deserved them. Now that he was past the throes of ecstasy, being so admired was a little overwhelming. It seemed like somewhere Jordie must have made a mistake. Like he'd intended all this for some progenetrix with dainty feelers and a trim waist.

Yet out of all the progenetrixes Jordie could choose, for some crazy reason, he'd chosen Elias. Not just chosen him but didn't seem to be able to stop touching him or saying ridiculous things like that.

Seeing Elias *as* a progenetrix.

Maybe letting Elias even see himself that way.

He felt more every time they were together, like he was finally right in his body, when he was clinging to Jordie, while Jordie cooed over him and praised him.

Elias adored it even as he worried every day about when it would end.

Jordie kissed up Elias's chest, chasing every speck of cum, until he was nibbling on Elias's lips and pressing into his mouth. "Mmmm... delicious."

Elias agreed. He could taste himself on Jordie's tongue, along with the slick of Jordie's tentacles. It was a heady combination.

“Ready for a swim?” Jordie quipped when he pulled back.

“No.” Elias pouted, feeling indulgent and maybe even a little... cute? He was completely drained, his head still fuzzy from sleep and his body wrecked by his orgasm. He never wanted to move again.

For just a moment, he wasn't Dr. Elias Greton, principal investigator. He was Jordie's Ellie, with no more responsibility than pleasing his viratrix. It was freeing in a way he'd never expected. He could act a little bratty and silly, and Jordie would just grin at him.

“But you love swimming,” Jordie argued playfully, before biting Elias's pouty lip and drawing him into a long, languorous kiss. “And don't you need to get some water samples? You've been skipping some days.”

Elias nuzzled into Jordie's shoulder. He was getting behind because Jordie kept distracting him. And he knew it.

But fine. Elias pushed at Jordie's chest, a playful nudge without even half of his strength. Because he was small and cute. A progenetrix.

Jordie took the hint and stood beside the bed, eyes sparkling.

Elias moved to get up, but the view was too much. He was Jordie's mentor, his boss, but sometimes he was still tongue-tied that this unbearably attractive younger man wanted to be with him.

Jordie was everything. That broad chest. The thick belly. A dark green erection so hard it had to be painful. And those plump balls beneath, so full and ready to explode.

He deserved to be worshiped.

And Elias wanted that cock in his mouth.

“Ask for what you want,” Jordie cooed.

Every time Jordie did this to him, Elias was struck by a little pulse of anxiety. That *this* time, Jordie would change his mind. Shame him for his desires. Reject this strange thing that they seemed to be building together.

He knew it wasn't true. It was the opposite of true. Jordie had proved that over and over again. Even if Jordie was leaving in the summer, he wanted Elias now.

His mind knew it, but his heart was still struggling.

He was getting a little better, though.

“Say it,” Jordie ordered. “Ask for what you want.”

That commanding voice did it to him every time.

Elias gathered up his courage, focused on that thick monster he wanted inside him, and spoke. “I want to suck you.”

It came out just above a whisper, but Jordie still groaned, precum beading at his tip.

*Elias* had done that. *He* had made Jordie so hard and aroused.

“Get a pillow and get on your knees.” Jordie’s voice was husky, sending shivers down Elias’s spine.

He grabbed a pillow, feeling so beautifully submissive—but but powerful at the same time.

He’d dreamed of this, but he hadn’t realized how right it would feel. How he could fit together with someone like two halves of a whole.

He sank to his knees on the floor. Letting Jordie see him. Showing Jordie who he was, and who he was meant to be. Claiming himself.

“Oh, fuck, baby.” Jordie gave him a look of adoration and awe. “I’m so proud of you. God, I’m a lucky man.” He stepped closer, thick cock bobbing in front of Elias’s face. “Gonna fuck your mouth, sweetheart.” His fingers tangled in Elias’s hair, yanking him into position. “Open.”

Elias dropped his jaw.

Jordie didn’t wait, thrusting into his mouth and pressing down his throat.

Elias wasn’t sure if he wanted to moan or gag. The intrusion was rough, but Jordie still held him in a painful grip, and he couldn’t do either. He had to swallow, and swallow again, his throat straining as he took Jordie’s length.

Jordie didn’t let up. “So good,” he said thickly, wiping a tear from Elias’s eye. He held still for a moment, letting Elias get used to the invasion. “Oh, fuck, you’re so beautiful.”

That surge of rightness came back. The power of knowing that this was exactly where he was meant to be. Serving his viratrix.

Jordie's cock was thick and hot, and Elias's whole body was shaking with the effort of taking it. He tried to open further, even though it hurt. To relax and let Jordie take what he wanted. To let Jordie use him.

Jordie didn't need an invitation. He pulled out long enough to let Elias gasp for breath, then fucked Elias's mouth with deep, smooth strokes. Elias moaned, gathering sharp breaths when he could.

His feelers wrapped automatically around Jordie's tentacles, clinging and pulling him closer.

His head spun with how good it felt. The pain. The submission. The musky scent of Jordie's pubes and the salty, bitter taste of his precum. The sharp sting with each tug at his hair.

Jordie was his god, and he would happily worship at his feet.

Jordie thrust in again, then held himself there, as one tentacle tightened around Elias's neck.

Elias felt his head growing light. His lungs burned. His fingers tightened convulsively around Jordie's thighs, but he didn't fight it.

If Jordie didn't want him to breathe, he wouldn't breathe. His dick was already trying feebly to get hard again.



With a roar, Jordie fisted Elias's hair, pulling him even closer. His huge cock jerked in Elias's throat, and he came with a strangled cry. Jordie was so deep that Elias couldn't even taste it.

When he pulled out, Elias collapsed against his thigh, panting.

"So gorgeous, darling." Jordie's fingers were gentle in his hair, stroking him as they both came down. Connecting with him.

Then he pulled Elias up, covering his face with soft kisses and punctuating each one with sweet words. "So beautiful." He raised one tentacle, pulling Elias's neat row of coils to his mouth. "So perfect, these cute little feelers. Do you know how happy you make me?"

Elias could feel himself grinning and he didn't even fight it.

Jordie liked his feelers, and it was everything. Jordie *saw* him.

He was still loopy and relaxed as Jordie manhandled him into a pair of swim trunks, and tugged him down to the beach, arms and tentacles twining around his back.

The ocean greeted him each day with its dazzling blue, and he plunged his sweaty body into the water, giggling when Jordie ran a tentacle along his leg beneath the waves.

They swam, matching strokes as their tentacles helped them cut through the water. Elias didn't mind having tentacles

now, when it meant he could plunge through the waves like a dolphin. He loved the speed. The freedom.

In the water, his tentacles were just another part of nature. The ocean. He got to enjoy the most beautiful place in the world with the most handsome viratrix at his side.

Jordie pulled him into a playful kiss when they reached some unmarked distance that felt like it was about as far as they usually swam. Elias kissed him back hungrily, his feelers creeping up again to circle Jordie's arms. There was no one around to watch them, just the sun and the water.

It was so easy out here. Sheer paradise.

They didn't play around much longer though, in an effort to be on time at least once this week.

It was harder going back. It always was.

With each stroke, Elias felt like he was strapping on his armor.

He had to prepare himself to go back into the world. To hide his feelers away and be a strong, confident viratrix. To pretend that Jordie was just another postdoc.

To pretend that he wasn't deathly afraid of what Jordie was going to tell Princeton. It was a really good job offer. A huge step forward in his career.

What did Elias have to offer all the way out here? For most people, this was a sabbatical year. A semester abroad. A postdoc as a stepping-stone toward a tenured position. Elias was one of the few who stayed.

Would Jordie want that kind of life?

And if he didn't, how long until visits over summer break turned into apologies, and then forgetfulness, and then a wedding invitation in the mail when Jordie went off to marry someone else?

Elias was afraid to even ask.

Jordie always wanted to shower with him after their morning swims, but Elias pushed him to go back to the dormitory. Elias's excuse was that he didn't want to change their patterns, but really, he needed that time to prepare himself. To be a whole different person in the real world than he was in their little bubble out here on the beach.

Jordie always gave him a lingering kiss before walking away, but after that Elias had the time he needed. His tentacles felt heavy as he started using them to wash his hair. He let them dangle at his side as he switched to his fingers.

He and Jordie had decided, by some unspoken code, that they would only sit together at one meal each day. Elias always approached the clearing slowly, scouting out where Jordie was, or if he'd arrived for breakfast yet, before getting his food and choosing a seat.

Today, Jordie hadn't arrived yet, but Elias still felt jumpy. How was he supposed to focus on mundane conversation when his hole was still tender from Jordie pounding him with that tentacle this morning? How could he talk about the weather, or the next delivery boat coming in, when he could still feel Jordie's kisses bruising his lips?

And what would it be like to live the rest of his life like this?

Every night with Jordie was a fantasy come true, but his fear of exposure had never been closer to the surface.

It was easier when he could get lost in his work. When he was in the lab or mentoring another one of his grad students or postdocs. Out here in the gathering area, it felt like he was on display every moment.

He stood in line while others chatted and served himself a bowl of porridge and fruit on autopilot.

“Hey, Elias,” came Jordie’s deep, lilting voice from just beside him. “You look a little dazed. Get enough sleep last night?”

Elias startled and froze up, clutching his bowl so hard that he brought a tentacle up automatically to support it. Jordie knew exactly how well he’d slept last night, that is to say, beautifully after an evening of swimming, stargazing, and then getting each other enthusiastically covered with sweat and cum before falling asleep in each other’s arms. He’d woken up with Jordie’s mouth on his cock after a peaceful night.

“Yeah,” he said gruffly, before turning and stalking over to an empty table.

He could feel eyes following him, the warmth of Jordie’s concern and the confusion from colleagues.

Fuck. He was screwing this all up.

Jordie seemed to have no problem going about his days as if nothing had changed. He'd already found another table, and was chatting with Luhan about downloading some music so they could play duets.

Fucking fuck.

He was a grown man. Old enough to be married with kids. Far too old to be hiding like a teenager who didn't want to tell his parents that his boyfriend was coming over.

Some wild and rebellious part of him wanted to grab Jordie's hand in front of everyone. To tell them that they were a couple now. He didn't want to explain that he was, well, whatever type of weirdo he was, confused about being a progenetrix or a viratrix. The very idea of it had his throat closing up in fear.

But he wanted to at least claim Jordie publicly. To walk back to the cabin holding hands while their colleagues wished them a warm goodnight. To feel Jordie's thick tentacle around his waist at breakfast. To smile when Jordie slipped soursop pieces onto his plate at dinner—a practice that he'd put a stop to after the third night because it was just too public.

Jordie said he was open to it. What would happen, though? Who would look at them differently? How long would it take for word to get back to their sponsoring institutions? Would they lose funding? Would Jordie's career be over before it had really started?

Or would it all be fine? A weird quirk that people whispered about but mostly ignored as they went about their

lives?

It was tempting to find out, but not nearly enough for Elias to risk it.

Especially if Jordie might be leaving this summer.

Elias was certain he'd never find anyone like him again. Someone who was his perfect intellectual companion, enjoyed his confusing body and role in bed, and also loved his little island home and shared his projects?

The chances had to be one in billions—and only eight or ten new people came to the research station each year.

If Jordie left, that would be it for Elias. Forever.

He'd live in heartbreak and go about his work, silently mourning the eight-month relationship he'd had for the rest of his life.

No, it wasn't worth the risk of telling even a single soul.

Elias thought that he could maybe bear the shame himself, but Jordie couldn't possibly know what he was in for. He was so young. Just at the beginning of his career.

So Elias should do the noble thing and keep quiet. When summer came, he would quietly let Jordie go. That was all there could ever be.

Who cared if they never got to hold hands while sitting around the campfire after dinner? Who cared if they had to hide within the walls of his tiny cabin?

Someone bumped his arm. “You okay?” It was Meena, her wife Saanvi sitting happily beside her. He hadn’t even noticed them sit down.

“Yeah,” he answered, trying to smile. “Just thinking about something.”

She raised one eyebrow, but he didn’t have anything else to say. It was barely the beginning of the morning, but he was already exhausted by his own anxiety.

Jordie was the best thing that had ever happened to him, but he’d be a wreck by the time summer came.

## Chapter 14. Jordie

Jordie toyed with the guava in his porridge. He usually took at least two helpings—he was a big guy—but he wasn't feeling as hungry this morning.

“Yeah, that piece has a nice guitar part,” he agreed with Luhan. “Let's see if we can grab it.”

“I can download the sheet music today.” She grinned before going in for another bite. “And I'll grab anything I think you might like.”

Jordie smiled back. She was an undergrad, and she'd come here for her semester of practical experience, awed by all the prestigious names and degrees. She'd gone from almost too shy to speak to hanging out with the gang. She was technically Dr. White's student, but they were a small group where everyone supported each other. He enjoyed mentoring her in both scientific techniques and social activities. With her classical violin training, they'd been practicing and performing some duets for their assembled colleagues.

Jordie finally scooped up the bite that he'd been playing with. Could he see himself here for the next forty years? All too easily. It would be a lovely existence—doing the research



that inspired him, mentoring students, swimming every day, and spending his nights with a man he admired and adored.

If that man would speak to him.

He'd thought he'd be okay with keeping their relationship a secret. Intellectually, he was. He wanted to support Elias in figuring himself out on his own time, without any pressure.

But the way that Elias was so icy to him in public, snubbing him or turning brusquely away, hurt every time.

He knew it came from Elias's insecurities, not a desire to wound him.

It just made everything that much harder.

Could he spend the foreseeable future pretending his life away? Always in hiding? He knew that other people might look down on their relationship, but he was pretty sure that he was willing to shoulder that burden if they could present a unified front.

He didn't like being dishonest, and he hadn't realized how much it would wear on him.

If they lived somewhere else, each going off to different labs every day and coming home to eat dinner together, it would be one thing. But in this small community, where the same twenty people were your colleagues and neighbors and friends, where all the meals were communal, and the only entertainment was what you produced together... It was hard to keep a secret.

Which made him wonder how committed Elias really was.

Jordie wanted Elias more than anything, but what if Elias didn't want him as much? What if, for Elias, this was just a phase? For him, it might just be an opportunity to explore sex in a way that he hadn't thought was possible before.

They'd been together for two weeks now, which wasn't nearly long enough to know where things were going. But he had to give Princeton an answer soon. His heart was pulling him in two different directions.

"Hey, Jordie." Saanvi was at his elbow, closer than he'd expected her to be. "Are we taking the lower trail again today?"

That had been the plan, but Jordie needed some time to think. "I actually wanted to get some samples from a new fern variety that I saw a couple months ago. It'll be a rough climb, though." He looked pointedly down at her bandaged foot. She'd had a delayed reaction to the chokevine, when a tiny spike had become embedded in her skin without her noticing during her heat. She was recovering but avoiding anything strenuous.

She nodded, accepting his excuse readily. "To be honest, it'll be nice to take a day off my feet."

"Do you want to take a stab at writing up some of our findings? Elias or I can look them over tomorrow and talk about formatting for submission to a journal."

"Yes! I'd love to learn. I can't promise anything useful right now, but I'll give it a try."

“Everyone starts somewhere. You have all the makings of a great geneticist.”

Saanvi beamed. “Thank you! Any tips?”

They talked for another half hour, while Jordie watched Elias walk off stiffly toward the lab building.

Once Saanvi was settled, Jordie took off in the other direction.

He wasn't lying about the ferns, but that hadn't been his motivation either. He needed somewhere to think. Alone.

It was true, too, that the area would be dangerous for Saanvi, with her limited mobility. The area was full of dangerous snapfruits, and he'd seen some of the more deadly species of Changed frogs around.

But he would be careful.

It would give him something to concentrate on while he worked out everything with Elias in his mind.

## Chapter 15. Elias

**E**lias had nearly forgotten that it was his turn to make dinner, but his calendar had rescued him with enough time to get a hearty meal of rice, lentils, and a few varieties of Changed gourds and greens that grew well on the island. It was nice to have something to do with his hands and say hello to everyone as they wandered in for dinner.

A few of them looked at him askance—probably from his days of hiding from Jordie so hard that he seemed grumpy—but everyone had been ready to smile or chat when he showed he was open to the company.

Jordie didn't show up at the beginning of dinner, so Elias felt like he had a little room to just breathe, without having to worry about how he was treating Jordie and how people would perceive it.

It was nice, honestly, to reconnect with people. To remember that they weren't the enemy. That he didn't have to impress them. He even played some cards after dinner, which he hadn't done in ages.

As the sun started to creep toward the horizon, his concerns over Jordie started to grow. It wasn't unheard of for

someone to get lost in their work and come to dinner late. They kept a refrigerator running with a few leftovers and snacks for people who missed mealtimes.

But Jordie didn't seem to be anywhere around. Saanvi had casually remarked that he'd left this morning to get a sample from somewhere that she couldn't climb, and Luhan said she'd knocked on his door before dinner.

The vivid blue sky started taking on pinks and oranges. This was normally when they would be swimming, and Jordie had never missed it before.

Elias first worried that Jordie was avoiding him, but that quickly gave way to a more urgent fear. Being anywhere but a well-known, well-lit area after dark could end in tragedy. Chokeyine and snapfruit grew quickly, taking over spaces that had once been safe.

Snakes and poison dart frogs came out to hunt and mate, and they'd been venomous enough before the Change. There were doubtless Changed animals on this island that hadn't been discovered yet, and a cute, cuddly little species could be just as dangerous as a hulking, fanged one. Sometimes even more so.

Elias looked around one more time for that bronzed green skin, and finally had to speak up. "Has anyone seen Jordie in the past few hours?"

People had been talking, but his voice must have been loud enough to cut through the chatter.

Various *no*'s came from different directions, with everyone agreeing that Saanvi was the last person to see him after breakfast. She repeated his words, that he wanted samples of a new fern variety and that she wouldn't be able to make the climb, but given her bandaged foot, he could be almost anywhere.

A few volunteers decided to sweep the area, checking the labs and his room in case he'd gotten lost in work or slept through dinner. Elias could hear someone checking on the radio. His final desperate hope was that Jordie was waiting for him at his cabin or had gone down to the beach.

Some others came with him, and while he would have been embarrassed to have them discover Jordie naked in his cabin, anything would be worth it just to know that he was safe.

But he wasn't anywhere.

Elias was terrified, every beat of his heart echoing his fears. Poisonous frogs with tentacles longer than their tongues. Wild boars with thick tusks. Chokevine, holding him captive and infecting him with their venom.

Elias told himself that Jordie had to be safe somewhere. He just *had* to be.

But he didn't believe it.

He kept calling Jordie's name into the increasingly dark forest around his cabin until someone handed him a lantern, a flashlight, and a sheathed machete to strap to his waist.

Right. There were protocols for this.

“Do you know where a new fern variety might be? Did Jordie mention anything to you?” Meena was looking into his eyes, watching him avidly.

Elias forced himself to take a deep breath and think.

Changed species developed rapidly, and ferns covered much of the shaded areas between trees on the island. But there were two locations that *he* had wanted to check up on for gathering samples, and he remembered Jordie describing a third, though he didn't know the exact location.

He relayed all of this to Saanvi, who was fortunately able to take charge while Elias was just standing there. His mind was spinning between every beautiful moment he'd shared with Jordie and increasingly graphic concerns about what might have happened to him.

Teams were formed to search the trails and possible locations. Elias thought someone was calling Search and Rescue on the mainland, but all he could think about was Jordie. Jordie. Jordie. Maybe hurt and alone. In pain or frightened.

He wouldn't let himself imagine anything worse.

It was a relief when Charlotte put him on her team. After him, she was the principal investigator who'd been here the longest, and despite her curly piles of gray hair and slender build, she had the best survival and defensive skills. Elias's job

was just to help recognize areas where Jordie might have been looking for a new fern variety.

Good. At least he had a purpose. At least he could *do* something.

He marched behind the others, carrying the heavy backpack he'd been handed and calling Jordie's name with increasing desperation. He hardly noticed when Simon led them around a tangle of snapfruit trees, or when Charlotte threatened a Changed coati, a small racoon-like rodent with a ringed tail that hissed when it saw them, its hackles up and tentacles forward in an attack formation.

Charlotte marched up to it, machete drawn, until it scampered away.

At another turn, she cut through a chokevine that he hadn't even seen.

All he could imagine was Jordie being in the same position, armed with only a machete and possibly not even a light.

Elias watched the ferns, half out of habit, and half in fear. It was difficult to see distinguishing characteristics at night, and the fronds hid all sorts of bumps and holes, making their footing treacherous. But he knew the right altitude and shade to find them in, and each time he located a new patch, he offered up another little prayer that *this* time they would find Jordie.



It seemed like they'd been traveling forever when a faint shout returned their calls.

Elias raced forward, heedless of the danger, only to be caught tight by Charlotte's tentacles. He struggled against them, until she shook him by the shoulders. "Get ahold of yourself. You can't help Jordie if you get taken out by a snapfruit."

Only then did he look up to realize they were surrounded by them. Not immediately above them, but disturbingly close, the fat yellow fruits with their quivering tentacles looking deceptively luscious and plump. He'd been so focused on the underbrush that he hadn't even noticed.

"Sorry," he said meekly. But his heart was still pounding, telling him to run toward the faint calls, holding back for nothing.

"You good now?" Charlotte stared him down.

"Yeah."

She let him go and bent to set off a white flare. At least the others could stop searching now.

"Please only walk where I walk," Charlotte reminded them, though she was probably mostly talking to Elias.

He complied, if only because it was the fastest way to get to Jordie. Kennedy eyed him as he fell in behind her, but didn't comment.

If the path so far had seemed long, the last distance seemed endless. He could hear Jordie now. Was there a wobble in his

voice? It seemed a little strained. Was he pinned down? Hurt?

The closer they got, the slower they went. Charlotte had them double back twice when the snapfruit groves got too thick. Four arm lengths away was ideal. Two and a half was the minimum safe distance. Sometimes they couldn't even find a safe path, and Elias cursed each time they had to plan another route while Jordie was still calling out to them.

How had Jordie even gotten there? Had he come up from the beach? From higher along the mountain? They all scrambled down a ravine, then followed it upward, trying not to twist an ankle or splash into the muddy water that pooled between the sharp, shifting rocks.

Elias kept calling Jordie's name, then waiting for replies. Did Jordie know it was him, rather than any of the other handful of men at the outpost? Could Jordie hear the fear and care in his voice?

At last they clambered out of the ravine, pulling at roots and vines to heave themselves up. Jordie's voice was louder now. So close it seemed like his gorgeous, green shape should come into view at any moment.

Charlotte walked even slower now, pausing for long moments to plot a course.

"We're here," Elias shouted. "Jordie, we're here."

"Thank God." Jordie wasn't even yelling now, his hoarse voice carrying the short distance between them.

Elias shone his flashlight through the dense forest, and there he was. Pale, muddy, propped at an uncomfortable angle with one fat, wicked snapfruit attached to his left shoulder and another on his right ankle. They'd both taken on a concerning orange from the blood they'd absorbed, and stiffened into place so Jordie couldn't escape. A third orange fruit clung to his right tentacle, its ring of teeth-like spines and stinging tentacles still sunk in deep despite a clean slice through its connecting stem.

He was stuck in a grove of four snapfruit trees, maybe more. The ground was littered with more fruits, smashed or sliced and giving off a deceptively sweet scent. More still clung to their vines, scored with slashes from the machete that was stuck in another yellow fruit, uselessly waiting just a meter from Jordie's feet.

"You came," Jordie said, looking right at Elias.

"Of course, I came." He was near tears. How could Jordie even imagine that he would do anything less?

Jordie's smile was shot through with pain. He had to be in agony. He was trembling, but he wasn't moving, well aware that trying to free himself would only draw more attacks.

Elias stepped forward only to find that Charlotte already had a hand on his arm and a tentacle hovering just inches from his waist, ready to grab him. "We're going to help you," she said to Jordie, though it was clearly meant for Elias's ears, too. "We're going to contain the trees first, then come in to get you."

Elias knew this was the protocol. He'd performed similar extractions himself. But he couldn't tear his eyes from Jordie's body, cataloging each of his wounds.

Behind him, he heard Charlotte giving Kennedy instructions to set off another flare. She demanded his backpack, and he let it slip from his shoulders.

A few moments later, there was a sharp crack as Charlotte aimed an air cannon at the tree and fired. Elias watched, heart in his throat, as the weighted net inside it drifted down to cover almost the entire area around Jordie and stuck there.

Thank God. She'd made it on the first attempt.

Charlotte fired four more cannons in quick succession, containing the snapfruit on the closest trees and clearing a path for them. The nets wouldn't get all of them, but they'd greatly decrease the risks.

"Elias," she snapped.

He turned to her, meeting violet eyes that stood out against her lavender skin.

"We're going to enter over there, and we stick together. You'll carry your machete on the way in, and Jordie on the way out."

He nodded to show understanding. Time moved too fast and too slow, coming to him in bright flashes.

"You know what to do with these?"

He looked down at the bottles she was handing him. A canister of salts to shrivel the fleshy fruit. A high-dose pain reliever for Jordie to take as soon as they reached him. A small bottle of water to wash down the meds.

“Yeah.” Elias put everything in his pockets, memorizing where each one was.

“Good. On three. We walk together. You ready, Kennedy?”

“Ready.” She nodded, her dark eyes serious and her deep plum skin almost black in the night.

Elias drew his machete, and they stepped forward together. They all ducked as an errant snapfruit vine swung heavily toward them, but stopped a foot from their heads, continuing its arc to hit its own trunk with a wet splat.

A few more steps and the snapfruit were popping out from their coiled trebuchet-like bases, hitting the nets only to tangle in them or fall back.

One shot out from the side and Kennedy sliced clean through the stalk.

Another few steps, and Charlotte took down one fruit, while Elias barely got his machete up in time to ward off another one.

He had to do better than this. He had to focus.

Three more steps and an explosion of snapfruits all struck at once. He was ready now, chopping through two while Kennedy and Charlotte took down the others.

Two more steps, and there was another barrage.

Each snapfruit was a menace on its own, but the true danger was their numbers. He got three of them, but this time there were too many.

One reached Charlotte, its ringed teeth biting through her shirt and into her arm.

Elias had the salts ready in his hand and shook them over the fruit, which detached a few seconds later as the flesh around its mouth-shaped opening started to shrivel.

Tiny red dots of blood seeped through Charlotte's shirt, but she nodded that she was ready to go on. It looked like the stinging tentacles hadn't had time to do their work.

The next few steps were harrowing, but no more fruits attacked. Elias gripped the salts in one hand and his machete in the other, every nerve on a hair trigger.

Closer. Closer. He could see the pain and relief in Jordie's eyes. He could almost feel his warmth.

Another cluster shot down, one heading for Jordie's exposed tentacle. Elias slashed out to stop it and watched it go down with a satisfying thunk. That's when another one smashed into his shoulder, the flavedo popping open to expose the mesocarp with its viscous spikes.

He could feel each individual spine digging into his flesh. The heavy weight of the fruit as it pulled against his muscles. Six tiny tentacles waved over his shirt, seeking entrance.

His companions slashed and cut through the vines as they could, and then Kennedy sent a rain of salts over his shoulder.

He counted silently to five as the teeth tightened, tearing at muscle, before releasing. The fruit plopped to the ground with a dull splat.

It stung, but he knew the feeling had nothing on what Jordie was going through.

The second Elias was freed, he raced the last two steps to Jordie, heedless of any further danger. It had already been too long.

He shook the canister of salts over each of the three fruits, trying to attack them from all angles. They would be much harder to dislodge now that the tentacles had burrowed in, and the fruits were rich with blood. It was tempting to slash through them, to attack them as they'd attacked his beloved, but that would only make the spines tighten and lock, sometimes requiring surgery to extract.

Instead, he drew out the bottle of water and the painkillers, his hands trembling as he fished out two pills and unscrewed the cap. His tentacles wrapped around Jordie's body without a second thought, automatically tasting his sweat and his skin.

He tasted sick. Weak. He needed the water, and Elias cradled Jordie's head as he pressed the pills to his soft lips then the bottle for him to drink. "I've got you," he soothed. "Just take these and it'll be better soon. Drink as much as you need."

Jordie drained the bottle in heavy gulps, while his one free tentacle came up behind Elias to rest heavily on his own tentacles.

“I’ve got you,” Elias said again, pressing closer to Jordie’s body. Pulling them as close as he dared and taking on some of Jordie’s weight. “Just a moment and you’ll be free.”

Jordie nodded, resting his head on Elias’s shoulder. “Ellie,” he whispered.

“I’ve got you. I’ve got you, love.” He could feel Jordie start to relax as the meds kicked in. His tentacle wormed around Elias’s, nestling in to cling when it didn’t have the energy to support itself.

The disconnected fruit fell from Jordie’s other tentacle with a wet thunk, and Elias gathered the limb close. It was a dull green, lax and disturbingly soft with fluid loss. He felt Jordie tense when Kennedy sprayed the open wound with antiseptic, but after the first sting, it would numb the area and give him more relief.

Kennedy asked Jordie a few questions about his health, knowing that Jordie had to be lying about his level of pain. He’d been caught by the tree for *five hours*. If they’d found him much later, it would have been too late.

Their radios crackled, and Charlotte took over communications, telling a boat where to pull up to shore and ordering IVs.



It was another ten long minutes before the two live fruits finally fell off, their vines withering, as Elias rocked Jordie in his arms.

“He might pass out on the way back,” Charlotte warned him.

“That’s alright,” Elias said, turning so that he could help Jordie onto his back. He hooked his arms under Jordie’s thick legs, using his tentacles to support him and hold him tight.

Jordie’s arms and tentacles draped over his shoulders, barely holding on.

The walk back down the mountain was flashes of fear and exhaustion. Jordie was heavy, but Elias wasn’t willing to set him down. Charlotte led them around a wide grove of snapfruits and cut through several chokevines before they met the other rescue party coming up.

They stopped in a clearing. Elias held Jordie, cradled in his arms, as someone gave him an IV for fluids, and checked his eyes. His voice was slurred now. He kept trying to answer questions, but his words came out mumbled and incomplete.

He turned in Elias’s arms, nuzzling against his chest. “Ellie.”

Elias kissed his forehead. Then his soft, wan lips. “I’ve got you.”

Jordie smiled and snuggled in closer, his eyes falling shut.

There was no way anyone missed that, but Elias couldn’t bring himself to care. Not when Jordie was so vulnerable and

in pain.

After the break, several colleagues volunteered to carry Jordie, but Elias only assented when someone pointed out that he needed to have the energy to help Jordie through the rest of his ordeal. So he walked behind Yuto, balancing Jordie with his tentacles and carrying the bag of fluids, held high.

It was a harrowing trip, but at last they reached the boat and Yuto set Jordie down on a waiting bench. Elias knelt by his side, letting the others handle the trip back around the island to basecamp while he held Jordie's hand and wove their tentacles together.

Perhaps Jordie would still leave him after this, and they both might be shunned, but if Jordie was taking even a little comfort from his presence, he wasn't going to let go.

The trek up to the small infirmary was solemn and quiet, Elias taking one corner of the stretcher as they made their way up the rough-hewn steps.

Imani took command, arranging Jordie comfortably on the raised pallet as her feelers swept over his face and neck. Elias wanted to growl at her, to keep her away from his viratrix, but he pushed the urge down. She was a medical doctor and the best equipped to keep Jordie safe.

She pricked his finger for a blood sample and switched out his bag of fluids for two smaller ones and a larger one.

If anybody thought it was odd that he was hovering at Jordie's side, no one mentioned anything. Simon, who

sometimes functioned as the doctor's assistant, even brought him a chair.

“What's your blood type?” Imani asked him.

“O-negative, Change-factor three.”

“You're practically a universal donor.” Imani was tapping on her tablet. “He's AB-negative, Change-factors one and three. Will you donate blood?”

“Anything.”

“Good. Simon, get out the kit. And then go ask... Let's see.” She tabbed through a few more screens. “Ask Luhan and Kwame if they would be willing to donate if we need it later.”

“No problem.”

It was almost a relief when Elias watched his thick red blood start to fill the flat bag. One more little thing that he could do to help. He ate and drank by rote when Simon pushed cookies and juice into his hands. Imani did something for Elias's scratches and he knew she was patching up Charlotte's arm, but all he could see was Jordie.

“Will he wake up soon?” he asked Imani.

“Could be ten minutes after he gets the transfusion or after a full night and day of sleep. The medicine is going to make him woozy for a while, and he's lost a lot of blood, plus the dehydration and exhaustion from standing in the forest for five hours. Do you want to stay with him?”

She asked the question with clinical efficiency. Like any other doctor planning someone's care with the family member who'd come in to support them.

"Yes," he found himself saying. "Thank you."

She nodded. "We'll set you up a cot. If he wakes up and feels well enough to eat or go to the bathroom, that's good. Call me or Simon if you need help. Otherwise, I'll leave the monitor on him. If his blood pressure drops too low, I'll get an alert and this will beep."

"Got it."

He watched his own blood flow into Jordie's veins, hoping that Jordie could feel some of his energy and care wrapped up in it. His need for Jordie to be alive and well.

Finally, the doctor cut off the lights, leaving the two of them alone in the darkness, watched over only by the neon lights of the monitor.

Elias tangled his tentacles around Jordie and nestled their hands together. He was completely exhausted, but it was a long time before he dropped off to sleep.

\* \* \*

Morning came too early, with bright lights and a flurry of activity. Imani and Simon were both at work, checking for

infection, running tests, and bringing Luhan in to donate a second pint of blood.

Imani checked in with the hospital on the mainland, and much to Elias's relief, decided that Jordie didn't need a helicopter to transport him in. He was basically healing like he was supposed to, and his color was coming back, though Elias hated to see him hooked up to all those tubes and machines with his tentacles so limp beside him.

Imani gave Elias sharp instructions to eat, take a shower, and change clothes before coming back, with a strong hint that he should go for a swim or catch up on some work as well.

He couldn't imagine concentrating on work while Jordie was still unresponsive, and swimming without Jordie would hurt too much.

He still showered and changed, before placing himself in the breakfast line behind Charlotte and Yuto.

People greeted him with soft voices, but everything still seemed awkward. Tense.

There couldn't be anyone on the island at this point who didn't know that he was sleeping with his postdoc. Those few who hadn't seen their intimacy firsthand would certainly have heard about it by now.

Everyone knew that he was attracted to other viratrix males. It wouldn't be a difficult jump to assume that not only had they shared their rut together, a jumble of hormones and

arousal, but something more, with pet names and his clingy behavior.

He found that he couldn't meet anyone's eyes.

A few people sat down at his table, shooting him concerned glances. He could hear whispers at other tables. Eventually, he dumped the rest of his porridge in the compost.

He ached to go back to Jordie's side, but the actions that had seemed so natural last night when Jordie was trapped and in pain seemed too revealing in the light of day.

If someone was going to say something about him and Jordie, he wanted to put it off as long as possible. Some things, he figured, could be excused in the heat of the moment, but he didn't want to put them under any further scrutiny or make the rumors worse.

He knew Jordie had said he would be okay with telling people, but suggesting it as a hypothetical was very different from experiencing the reality.

With a final longing look toward the infirmary, he turned back toward his cabin. Fortunately, his laptop was still there and charged. He could take Imani's advice and make himself scarce. Perhaps it might be better for everyone if he buried himself in work.

## Chapter 16. Elias

**W**hen Elias awoke, bright afternoon sunshine streamed through the cracks in his shutters, and at first he wasn't sure what had roused him. Some small sound, his brain said, that didn't belong.

He rolled over and closed his laptop. He didn't even remember falling asleep, but he had a crick in his neck and one tentacle tingled where he'd been laying on it.

He listened, as he blinked his crusted eyes. Had he really heard something?

The toucans and chimps were squawking and hooting their distant calls. Wind rustled in the trees. He was too far away to hear the roar of waves against the shore unless he listened closely.

He thought he scented Jordie, but all of his bedding was saturated with Jordie's scent.

He turned around, gasping when he saw Jordie's wide outline against his door frame, his face unseeable with the bright light behind him. Even in the gloom of his cabin, Elias would know that shape anywhere.

He stepped inside, wearing a loose shirt with the edge of a bandage peeking out of the collar, and a pair of athletic shorts. His scent was fresh and clean without the lingering smell of antiseptic, blood, and sickness.

“You’re alright,” Elias said.

“I am. Thanks to you.” Somehow Jordie’s voice was deeper than Elias had remembered, sending shivers through him.

“How are you feeling?” he asked awkwardly.

“Pretty good. No infections. Once I woke up, I switched to ibuprofen and ate something, so my head’s not fuzzy anymore. You missed lunch.”

“Sorry. I took a nap.” He wasn’t sure why he was apologizing. What he wanted to know was why Jordie was in his cabin. If he was worried about what people would say. If he’d changed his mind after Elias had exposed him to all the gossip that must be floating around.

“I’m glad you got some sleep. You needed rest.” Jordie’s voice was soft. It sounded deceptively like nothing had changed. He took a step closer. Then another.

“I’m sorry I kissed you,” Elias blurted out. “I’m sorry. Everyone knows now.” Elias hugged the thin sheet to his chest, covering the tentacles that he’d wrapped around himself like steel bands.

“I’m glad.”



Elias looked up sharply. Jordie's face was still shadowed.  
“What?”

“I'm glad. I'm glad they know.” He sighed, sinking to the bed with a few feet between them. He hissed as he folded downward, stretching out his right leg, which was wrapped in a crisp, white bandage.

“Oh, God. Should you be out of bed?”

Jordie grinned. “I'm in bed.”

“I mean...”

Jordie waved his concerns away. “I'm fine.” Then he grew more serious. “It's the last few weeks that have been hard.”

Because Elias had made them hard. “I know. I know. I'm sorry.” Maybe he could just apologize enough.

“No apologies.” Jordie fixed him with a glare. “I just... I want you to know that it's difficult when you ignore me. It hurts when I can't sit next to you without you turning away. I wanted to give you as much time as you needed to figure things out, but it turns out that this is a really small community. I wasn't sure how much longer I could handle it.”

So that was it. Elias couldn't keep things under wraps. He couldn't act like a decent human being in public when he was so infatuated, and now Jordie was going to leave.

“Alright,” he nodded, drawing up all his strength. “I understand.” He wasn't going to cry.

Jordie slipped a soft tentacle along his cheek. “I don’t think you do. Or at least I don’t think we’re talking about the same thing.”

Elias could see Jordie’s face now, etched with concern and a little uncertainty.

Then he realized why he could see so well—Jordie’s tentacles were glowing a firefly green. Was he aroused right now? And if so, was this goodbye? A final fling?

Elias pulled the sheet higher. If his own tentacles lit up in return, he didn’t want Jordie to know. Especially when he was leaning so close, the scent of musk and man coming off him in waves.

“I’m not taking the job,” Jordie stated.

“What?” It came out as a squawk. “Why?”

“I don’t want it.”

Elias scowled. “Of course you do.” A fresh start. A new place where he could make his name, far away from Elias and the judgment their relationship would bring.

Jordie leaned closer. His tentacle looped around Elias’s neck. “Not as much as I want to stay here.”

Elias wanted that to be true. More than anything else. But there was no way Jordie could mean what Elias wanted him to mean. Not now that they’d been exposed. He tried to steady his voice. “Oh, well... If you want to work on grants, I’m sure that the orchid one would do well, plus the three you already sent out. And we still have funding from the...”

“Elias.”

Elias’s heart fell and swooped all at once.

“We can figure out the grants. What I want to know is, do you want me to stay?”

Stay and do what? Co-lead a research team and publish papers? Hold him every night and call him *Ellie* with that husky voice? Fuck him with those glowing tentacles every morning, and then cut little pieces of fruit for him at breakfast?

It was a fantasy, but a private one.

“Of course, you can stay,” Elias dodged.

“Ellie.” Jordie pulled one of Elias’s hands from its death grip on the sheet, clasping it between his own. Their hands were the same size, both broad and a little rough. Every nerve in Elias’s body danced at the contact. “You know that’s not what I’m asking. If I stay, will you be mine?”

*Yes*, he wanted to scream. He wanted to jump into Jordie’s arms. Pull him down onto the bed. Feel his heavy weight pinning him down. “Your what?”

“My everything.” Jordie said it so simply. “My mate. My husband. My progenetrix? Or my viratrix, I suppose, or something both or in between. Whatever you want to be.”

“But what about...” The looks. The whispers. The friends who’d trusted and respected him.

Jordie stole his words with a kiss. “We’ll face everything together.”

“Are you sure? It’s only been a few weeks.”

“Or you could say it’s been two years. I think you’ve been more than just a friend since I got here. What were all of those romantic sunset evenings, hmmm? I know you’ve been stressed the last couple weeks and closed yourself off, but that’s not you. You’re open and honest. You’re a good mentor and an inspiration to everyone here. They care about you and that’s not going to change. And if it does, *I* won’t change. I’m proud to walk beside you. I’m proud to call you mine. I want the whole world to know.”

“Are you sur...?”

Jordie’s tentacle, already coiled around Elias’s neck, pressed against his lips. “Don’t say it. *You* are the one that I want. Even before this, I was seriously thinking of staying just to keep working with you. I’ve told you this before, Elias Theodore Greton, and I’ll tell you as many times as you need to hear it.”

“How do you know my middle name?” It was a silly question, but he’d been wondering and everything else was too much. Too good and real to be true.

Jordie chuckled. “I know a lot of things about you, Ellie. But your middle name happens to be on your dissertation. I read the whole thing, you know, as well as your articles before I applied here. I can still see the font your name was written in. I couldn’t believe that I got to work with the illustrious Dr. Greton in this tropical paradise. And then I met you, and it only got better.”

Elias could feel his cheeks warming.

“So what do you say, my love?”

Elias could feel his eyes going wide.

“Mmmm... You liked that, did you?” Jordie pushed him back onto the bed, straddling his hips and touching him everywhere. “I love you, Elias Theodore Greton. And everybody’s going to know it.”

Elias was grinning so hard his face hurt. How could it be that this amazing man, this sexy younger amazing man, just at the start of his career and his life, wanted *him*?

And Jordie loved him?

Jordie caught Elias’s hands and drew them over his head, pinning them to the mattress while he kissed along his neck. “You’re my sweet submissive progenetrix. You’re everything I’ve been looking for.” He rubbed against Elias’s torso, pressing their cocks together. “Now, tell me you want this, baby. Say yes.”

Elias wanted it more than his next breath. He wanted all of it. With Jordie at his side, maybe he wouldn’t care what anyone said. “Yes?”

A glowing green tentacle snuck under his clothes, pulling and pushing them off until his body was bared. “Was that a question, love?”

Elias shook his head.

“No?” Jordie teased.

How could he feel so foolish and so happy at the same time? Even as a teenager, he'd never been this shy. "It wasn't a question," he mumbled. "So, uh, yes."

He wasn't even sure what he was agreeing to. They couldn't get married, could they? But to live together? To have Jordie here with him, working and sleeping side by side for the rest of their lives? He'd never thought that was possible for himself.

Jordie looked like he'd won the lottery. "That was the right answer," he teased. "I wasn't going to let you go until you said yes."

How could one man want him so much?

But it was apparent that he did, covering Jordie's neck with open-mouthed adoration, then dipping down to bite his nipples before skating up along his chin and diving in for another passionate kiss.

Elias gave himself up to it, kissing Jordie back whenever he could reach any part of him, but mostly loving being adored. Looping his tentacles around the base of Jordie's tentacles or chest so they just barely crept up like little feelers. It felt so right. So good and natural. And, miraculously, Jordie just seemed to want more of it.

Jordie sat up to pull off his shirt, then paused, holding his head. "Oooohh... Dizzy."

"Oh no! Let's stop." Elias's hands flew to Jordie's chest, trying to support him rather than continue the pleasurable

caresses. A large bandage covered his shoulder. “I’ll move and you can lie down. We can do this later.”

Jordie smirked. “I’ve got a better idea. You move so I can lie down.” They quickly switched places. “But we’re not going to stop. It’s your turn to be on top.”

Elias was sitting at the edge of the bed, but he wasn’t sure how this would work. “I, uh…”

In fact, the more he thought of it, the worse he felt. Didn’t Jordie understand that this was exactly what he didn’t want? Was this what he’d need to do for them to stay together?

Jordie’s tentacle traced along his cheek. “Hey, darling. What’s going on in that beautiful head of yours?”

“Just, um, I like it better when you’re on top.” When it was easier to think of himself as a progenetrix. When Jordie was in charge.

“Come here, babe. Let’s talk through it.” Jordie opened his arms and Elias dove into them. Jordie pulled and nudged him until he had him exactly where he wanted him, their chests pressed together and Elias straddling Jordie’s hips.

He tried not to put too much weight on Jordie’s healing body, but oh… that was delicious. The way that Jordie pulled his knees apart. The way that one tentacle tightened around his ankle, while the other slid up his inner thigh, right to the place where their cocks were pressed together again, and then up over his ass to squeeze and tease.

He couldn’t keep his whimper inside.

“See, love?” Jordie whispered. “Just because you’re on top doesn’t mean anything has to change.”

The questing tentacle started to slip into the cleft of his ass, dripping slick lubricant as it got closer, closer...

Elias arched his back, thrusting back toward it and inadvertently rubbing their heavy dicks together again.

“There we go,” Jordie purred. “So good for me. So good for your viratrix.”

Elias trembled as Jordie’s tentacle circled his entrance once more and then slipped inside. “Jordie...”

“I’ve got you, babe. See?” Jordie pulled out and thrust a little deeper. Made his tentacle a little thicker.

Elias saw. Oh, did he see. Being on the top or the bottom had nothing to do with their roles. He was still trapped and adored. Still bringing Jordie pleasure, while Jordie pleased him.

He needed more inside him, though. Thicker. Harder. “Please...”

“I want you to ride me,” Jordie whispered against his ear. “I want to see my sexy, slutty progenetrix bouncing on my cock.”

Everything that Jordie said was just so *dirty*. And perfect.

“Okay,” he allowed, face still pressed to Jordie’s pecs. “I might not know how to do it.”



“Mmmm... it’s a good thing you don’t have to know then, isn’t it? You just let me put you where I want you.”

That sounded amazing.

Elias sat up when Jordie prompted him, rising high on his knees, only to have Jordie guide his cock to his slick hole.

“Let me see you take it,” Jordie commanded.

Elias pushed back, momentarily overwhelmed when the fat head finally made it through his tight ring of muscles. He was breathing hard, but there was something so, so... so empowering about it.

Maybe it was the way Jordie was looking at him, like he was the most glorious thing he’d ever seen.

Maybe it was the way Elias could control the speed, inching downward as Jordie’s mouth fell open, begging wordlessly for more.

Or maybe it was the sting of taking Jordie’s hard length into himself, the wave of pleasure when he got the angle just right, claiming that *this* was what he was meant for.

He dropped, filling himself, until his thighs were flat against Jordie’s hips, his channel impossibly full. They both moaned together.

Jordie was panting beneath him, hands flexing around Elias’s thighs, his tentacles twitching. Letting Elias take control, just for a moment.

Elias rose, still not quite sure of his balance, but aware of every inch of Jordie's cock and the way that Jordie grunted when he fell again.

"That's it, baby. Put your hands behind you on my knees. That's it. Oh, fuck, yes."

That was what Elias needed. He rose faster this time, taking what he needed.

Jordie's hands and tentacles were all over him, rubbing and pinching. "God, you're so beautiful like this. Little slut, taking all that you need. So fucking gorgeous."

It still seemed implausible. Elias was thick and heavy, heading rapidly toward fifty, with graying hair and glowing blue tentacles that were impossible to miss. Yet Jordie thought he was beautiful. Beautiful and slutty and gorgeous.

He was starting to believe it.

"Yes, yes... more, Ellie."

It turned out, Elias loved hearing Jordie beg. He loved knowing that *he* could make this young, handsome viratrix practically lose his mind with need.

Elias was sweating now, his cock bobbing until Jordie caught it with one silken tentacle and began stroking it, teasing around the tip.

The other tentacle was circling his rim, until the moment when it thinned out and just... slipped into him beside Jordie's shaft.

He keened. He was so full, and yet so needy. He pushed down harder, urging Jordie to give him more.

Jordie kept looking up at him, panting, and then closing his eyes as pleasure overtook him.

*Elias* was doing that to him.

Then he suddenly had a wicked thought. On the next rise, he held his place at the top and then moved down sloooooowly.

Jordie's eyes opened to lust-drunk slits. "Baby..."

Elias grinned. He rose at an even slower pace, watching the pleasurable agony on Jordie's face.

"Please, babe. I..." Jordie was panting, looking frantic.

Elias dropped at the same pace, enjoying every whimper and plea he evoked.

"Baby, I..." Jordie grabbed Elias's hips, pressing them together hard and fast.

Elias laughed, loud and carefree. Jordie hadn't even lasted a minute letting Elias truly be in control, and that was perfect for both of them.

But now things were getting intense. Jordie's tentacle was growing thicker, truly stretching him to his limits and nailing his prostate in every surge.

Jordie's eyes were wild, his hands so tight on Elias's hips that he hoped he'd have bruises. Elias's cock was wrapped in

the perfect suction of Jordie's slippery tentacle, pushing through it with the strength of their motions.

"Elias, need you. Need you to come."

Elias didn't know how Jordie could even talk, because it was all he could do to hang on, overwhelmed with desire.

"Come, baby. Mark me," Jordie commanded.

Jordie thrust upward two more times, and then Elias was shooting all over him. Marking *his* viratrix with thick, white semen as pleasure raced like electricity through his body. Shaking as Jordie kept the rhythm going, filling him with seed.

Jordie fucked them both through the last tremors of their shared climax, then pulled Elias down on his chest. They kissed, sweaty and sloppy, still panting.

"That was amazing," Jordie said, all his limbs flopping heavily on Elias's back. "And look at you taking charge, my slutty little brat."

Elias smiled against his shoulder. "It was only for a minute."

"And what an amazing moment that was." He played with the hair at Elias's nape, his limbs slowly flopping toward stillness. "Oh god, I'm tired."

"Jordie! You shouldn't have done that." Now Elias was annoyed. Well, all loved up and happier than he could imagine, but still a little annoyed that his favorite person had exhausted himself.

Jordie chuckled. "It's alright, love. I really am fine. My tentacle stings a bit." He held it up, showing the rough ring of marks where the snapfruit had bitten. It looked a little swollen. "You'll have to take good care of me," he added.

"Anything," Elias promised. If Jordie wanted something, he'd march back to camp right now and get it. He'd wait on Jordie hand and foot.

"Well, right now I could use some cuddles and a nap."

Elias rolled his eyes, but he settled back onto Jordie's chest.

Jordie gave a pleased hum, one arm tracing up Elias's back. "You know, you remind me of my brother."

"Hmmm?" Elias wasn't tired after sleeping all afternoon, but just being close to Jordie was divine.

"He's a lot like you. Relaxed and low key, but if someone close to him needs something, god help anyone who stands in his way."

Elias snorted. He was no saint. He was still scared now of what tomorrow would bring. "Your brother sounds like a great guy." He was in college, Elias knew, and the two viratrixes were close.

"I can't wait for you to meet him. Maybe this summer? Or we could do a video call."

Elias's head rose, or at least it tried to before he found that Jordie had him trapped, likely anticipating his movements. "What?" That sounded terrifying.

“And my sister and parents, eventually. But first, Reggie.”

“Yeah? You’re sure he won’t...”

“He’s gonna love you. He’s such a great kid. Well, I guess he’s an adult now. But he has a friend who’s kind of like you. I thought you might want to meet him, too.”

Elias squirmed, which only made him more aware of Jordie’s cock slowly softening inside of him, and the tentacle that didn’t seem to be in any hurry to leave. They both moaned.

“I guess I could meet them.”

Jordie kissed his cheek, which turned into trailing his lips up to his ear. “Excellent. I want to show you off.”

He still didn’t see how that was possible, but Jordie’s confidence and enthusiasm was starting to encourage him. Maybe it wouldn’t be all bad.

“So, maybe a little rest and then dinner? You missed lunch, and don’t think I’m going to let you get away with it again.”

Elias was still filled with trepidation, but he’d already conquered so many of his other worries with Jordie. Maybe everything would turn out fine.

He comforted himself with the knowledge that if they had to flee, Jordie would probably come with him.

## Chapter 17. Jordie

Jordie watched Elias fussing with his polo shirt for the third time. He didn't even have a mirror in his cabin—just the one outside by the shower for shaving—so it was hard to imagine what he thought he was fixing.

“Dinner,” Jordie announced.

Elias had already procrastinated quite effectively by dropping to his knees in the shower, but as delighted as Jordie was with Elias's newfound sexual courage, there was something else they needed to conquer today.

Jordie wasn't entirely sure how everything would go. He'd gotten nods from people this morning. Lots of questions about his health. A conspicuous lack of questions about why Elias had stayed with him overnight in the infirmary or any woozy pet names that might have slipped out during the rescue. Yet he knew the secret was out.

Well, if anyone had been avoiding him this morning only to barrage him with vitriol or inappropriate questions now, he'd just face them head on. As long as Elias was alright, which was all he cared about.

Jordie kept both tentacles wrapped around Elias as they walked down the shaded path to the main camp, infusing as much love as he could into the touch. He just wanted Elias close all the time.

What he changed was keeping one tentacle lightly resting on Elias's waist as they waited in line for their food.

Elias's hands were literally shaking as he picked up a spoon and Jordie squeezed him a little tighter. They'd get through this together.

"Hey," Jordie greeted the nearest table. Charlotte gave him a casual wave between bites. Imani told him he was looking healthier and asked how he was feeling. After that, it was easy to get sucked into the usual football chat. He'd missed last night's game, so Kennedy and Yuto filled him in.

Elias was barely moving, head down, clutching his plate.

Jordie scooped up a few slices of avocado for himself, and then dropped a few onto Elias's plate.

Elias looked up at him with gigantic, anxious eyes and Jordie pulled him a little closer.

Jordie hadn't realized until recently how much of Elias's expressions were a mask. Not when he was chatting about his work or mentoring young scientists, of course, which brought out genuine interest and warmth.

But there were so many more sides to him, an inner fragility that Jordie was honored to be able to see. It was a



huge act of trust, the way that Elias opened up to him right now, asking without words for Jordie to be his strength.

God, Jordie just wanted to kiss him. He longed to wrap his Ellie up in his tentacles and tell him how beautiful and special he was. And he was sure as fuck going to do that the moment they were alone.

To truly allay Elias's fears, though, they needed to get through breakfast first. He glanced around and saw warm smiles for a few colleagues. A nod or two gave him increasing confidence.

He led an unresisting Elias to a table that was already populated with a few folks. Saanvi and Meena were across from them, sitting the same way with Meena's tentacle wrapped casually around Saanvi's waist.

Could Elias see that? They were just like any other couple, casually and appropriately sitting next to each other in their off-duty time.

Jordie pulled out a sharp knife and cut open a nice, plump guanabana, gently easing the fat, black seeds from their pulpy bed before sliding it in front of Elias. It was a viratrix move, an I-can-provide-for-my-mate message, for all that he'd taken it from the communal bowl and Elias could have gotten his own. Elias gave him a nervous glance, but Jordie wasn't going to hide anything. He was going to take care of his gorgeous progenetrix, and anyone who had an issue with it could take it up with him somewhere else.

No one said a word, and smiles were a little awkward, but still there.

The football conversation wound down, and Charlotte raised her voice for every table to hear. “I just got another paper rejected.”

Murmurs of heartfelt sympathy went around, along with questions about which journal she’d tried and suggestions on which one she should pitch it to next. Academia was ridiculous like that—send in the article you’d spent two years preparing, wait three months without a word, then get a kind letter suggesting that your article didn’t quite meet the current focus.

“What was the topic?” Jordie asked.

“Mating habits of the coronated tree frog.” Charlotte spoke louder, drawing everybody in. “It’s an invasive species to the island that’s been especially effective with Change DNA, but it’s how they’re managing it that’s fascinating. The progenetrix females will all get together—they have adaptive calls for this that change every time—and find a nice little freshwater pool to basically get their orgy on. I’ve found it a dozen times now. All females, all progenetrixes, piled up on top of each other in a classic mating position, but with up to ten of the lucky girls in a stack. There’s no competition because everybody wins.” She winked as she delivered the last line.

Jordie grinned back. He had a suspicion of where she was going with this. He’d actually heard about the frogs before, but he hadn’t thought about it in the context of his relationship

with Elias. He didn't know if Elias knew about the study and it would certainly be news to some, so he was grateful for Charlotte bringing it up.

“How do they reproduce then?” Luhan asked.

“Well, eventually the viratrixes and the progenetrix males figure it out and crash the party. They hop around a few times, drop some semen, and the female progenetrixes sneak out, leaving behind a pheromone cloud to keep everyone else there. I think they're out-competing the female viratrixes and the male progenetrixes just by getting there first and laying more eggs, even when those couplings match up later.”

“And you couldn't publish this?” Jordie asked, feeding her the line.

She rolled her eyes. “I've tried six times. I've been told that I might have been mistaken, that the frogs were just confused, that these are abnormal edge cases that aren't worth reporting, and that I'm trying to get attention without doing real science. You'd think that photographic evidence from seven distinct events would count for something, but apparently not. Oh, and I've been told more than once that I'm just pushing an 'agenda.'” She made quotes in the air.

“But... wouldn't that be relevant to better understanding the impact of Change genetics on behavior and evolution?” Luhan asked innocently.

“Obviously. I've observed similar things with other quaternary pairings. Animals take viratrix-viratrix and progenetrix-progenetrix mates all the time that are *also* male-

male or female-female. Homosexual is an old word for it that I think still fits. I've seen it now in three different parrot and toucan species, two monkey species, and another frog species. But if only reproduction-oriented sex and relationships are recognized by our society, it's not real science, is it? Everything would fit much better into its approved box if 'edge cases' like this just disappeared."

Luhan's mouth rounded in an O. Ah, the innocence of undergrads.

Charlotte continued her tirade. "The thing is, evolution doesn't care what society thinks. Genetics has been doing this since the beginning of time, in every animal species. Pre-Change, when we mostly had binary genders instead of quaternary, there were endless examples of male-male and female-female pairings. Something like ten percent of male sheep preferred to mount males over females. A quarter of black swan pairings were male-male, and they would chase female swans off their eggs and raise them, notably with a substantially higher rate of survival to adulthood. Meanwhile, a third of albatross females would find a nice male to fertilize their eggs, then raise the chicks in female-female partnerships. Reptiles. Amphibians. Fish. Insects. They all do this a little too often to say they're just 'confused.' It's only human society that tries to claim which pairings are 'correct' and which ones are 'unnatural.' Clearly, if it was unnatural, it wouldn't happen in nature!"

That got a good chuckle from everyone. Elias had completely stopped pretending to eat, hanging on Charlotte's

every word.

“I should mention,” Charlotte added, “that this was the same censorship that scientists faced for hundreds of years with binary genders, and it was just starting to be published before the Change. These are not mistakes. They’re a subset of populations, and my sense is that they have some evolutionary advantages. Maybe in robust animal populations, it’s healthy to have some adults who aren’t taking care of babies all the time. Maybe it supports prosocial behavior. Maybe gender is far more complex than the quaternary system.”

“They don’t teach that in school,” Luhan said.

“They don’t usually teach that when you’re getting your doctorate in biology,” Charlotte quipped back. “Anyone hear that from their coursework?”

Kwame, Mike, and Tia raised their hands, to everyone’s amusement. They were Charlotte’s students, and would have heard it in her classes, if they hadn’t been gathering the data themselves.

How different would Elias’s life—and even Jordie’s—have been if this was taught as a normal part of high school biology?

Kwame turned around from the other table. “I was looking up these cool lion videos. Everybody ignores pre-Change research, but there were all these female lions who grew manes like males. They’d stay with their prides and be mounted by males when the males came around, but the rest of the time they’d do all these male-like behaviors, scent-

marking, roaring, all that stuff, and they'd mount the other females. One pride had five of them."

Jordie gave Elias another squeeze, wrapping his other tentacle discreetly around Elias's knee under the table. This was much closer to what he was experiencing, and exactly what he needed to hear.

"So, you don't think that's wrong?" Elias finally asked. His cheeks were glowing purple as a flush lit his blue skin, but he managed to get the sentence out. "Any of that?"

"I think it's awesome," Kwame said. "I have a friend who's like that back home. He says that he's a man, and that's just what he is."

"I dated another viratrix girl in college," Meena put in coolly.

Saanvi turned to her, squealing. "What? You didn't tell me! When was this? Wait... Wait, wait. Was it Navya?"

Meena nodded smugly.

"I can't believe you slept with Navya!" Saanvi slapped her shoulder, looking far more amused than concerned.

"It lasted, like, two weeks. Maaaybe three."

"I've slept with progenetrix guys," Simon put in brightly.

That was met with the usual eye rolls and snorts. "You've slept with *everyone*," Mike put in for all of them. "It doesn't count."

“Does so!” Simon pouted. “Progenetrixes are so tiny and squishy and cute!”

That devolved into everyone ragging on Simon, and Simon giving it all back to them with his usual sass, before people returned to their own little conversations.

Jordie leaned over to whisper against Elias’s ear. “How you doin’, babe?”

He gave a little shrug, but there was a hint of a smile behind it. He picked up his fork and took a few bites. Jordie linked their free hands under the table, even though their tentacles were already intertwined.

Jordie watched protectively as Elias relaxed by increments. He had little tells that suggested he was still anxious, but he was slipping back into the calm, dependable advisor and colleague that Jordie knew him as. He didn’t speak much as he ate, but the silence seemed to be more contemplation—allowing himself, for the first time, to just be who he was with the people who respected and cared for him.

It was when Elias started giving Meena and Saanvi advice about their December holiday plans on the mainland, that Jordie knew they had made it. Elias might break down later, but he knew that he had a community that would give them a safe place for their relationship to develop.

And Jordie wouldn’t mind taking a winter holiday with a certain special someone of his own. He made a mental note to bring it up soon, but today had already been a lot. Having

Elias curled against his side was already enough to make him proud.

He intended to whisk Elias off right after the meal to show him just *how* proud he was, but Saanvi came up to them as they were washing their plates.

“Dr. Greton?”

Elias turned, probably still a little wary but hiding it well. “I told you to call me Elias.”

“Sorry, I’ll remember. But I just wanted to say... Meena and I considered a lot of other academic and research postings, but this was the only one we wanted. Everywhere else, they wanted Meena, but they made hiring me sound like a favor to her. They didn’t want to give me any important projects, or even a full course load, because they assumed I’d quit as soon as I got pregnant. As a progenetrix woman, I could get a doctorate, but they didn’t want me to use it. At best, they offered me a stipend for working in Meena’s lab, even though we’re in completely different fields. *You* actually read my papers, and you interviewed *me* instead of just Meena. We chose your lab over some more prestigious offers because you had a reputation for treating all team members equally, which you’ve more than lived up to. So... yeah. I just wanted to say that.”

Elias looked kind of stunned.

Jordie snaked a tentacle around his waist and smacked a kiss on his cheek. “See, babe? You’ve made a difference for a lot of people.”



“If there’s ever anything we can do to support you,” Meena added, coming up behind her partner, “just let us know. We’re here for you.”

“I... thank you. I...” Elias wiped a tentacle across his eyes.

“Thank you,” Jordie told the two of them, just as sincerely. “That means a lot to us.”

He led Elias down the trail to the cabin, then wrapped him tight in his arms, every part of their bodies close.

“You doing alright, love?” Jordie asked.

Elias smiled through shimmering eyes. “Yeah. I just... I don’t know why I’m crying. They were... everyone was fine with us.”

Jordie kissed his fingertips where their hands were twined together. “That’s because you’re a special man who leads a special team, and you’ve let them all shine. Now it’s your turn.”

Elias looped his tentacles around Jordie’s arms, grinning even as his cheeks turned wet. “I guess so. I hope it stays like this.”

Jordie supposed that there was a chance that some new scientist could join the team and make their lives hell. But they could screen for that, too.

“I’ll make it happen,” Jordie swore. “I’m the luckiest viratrix in the world. I get to live in a tropical paradise, doing the work I love, with the man I love. Nothing can take you away from me.”

That seemed to create another wave of crystalline tears in Elias's sapphire eyes.

Jordie kissed each one away. "I know, love. I know. And I love you so, so much."

## Chapter 18. Elias

Things were surprisingly, blessedly uneventful in the weeks that followed. Elias sent two papers out. He arranged a party for Luhan, who would be leaving at the end of the semester, and he accepted two more undergrads for the spring semester, though words like *spring* and *fall* meant nothing in the tropics.

He swam every day with Jordie, watched the stars with their tentacles curled together, and stayed up too late having glorious, dirty sex.

What was different were the little things. The way that Jordie made a quiet production of peeling fruit for him each night at dinner. The way that Jordie's younger brother, Reggie, always wanted to say hello to Elias when he called. The way that Saanvi and Imani, the two married progenetrixes on the island, pulled Elias into their conversations sometimes to laughingly complain about their viratrix scientist mates. He'd never told them outright, but somehow, they sensed that he was the one to invite into their little club of three, and that meant more than he could say.

Some things were so damned normal that they moved him right to tears, like when Jordie surprised him with a booking for the fanciest hotel in the mainland port for four days over December break. Elias was going on vacation... with his partner.

He'd never thought he would see the day.

Elias didn't mention it, but he'd already ordered himself a few new outfits to pick up once they reached the shore. One nice suit for an evening out, some new, colorful versions of his daily outfits, and daringly, a shirt cut in such a way that it could have been worn by either a viratrix or a progenetrix, with longer gaps at the sides and soft, loose folds that would wrap around his waist. He wasn't sure if he would wear it out, but by now, he had no doubts about what Jordie would think about seeing him in it.

He felt a little shy about it, a man at his age, but he wanted to look good for his viratrix.

Two days before the trip, he was already packed, just debating which shoes to bring and whether he should take his laptop or only a tablet.

Jordie came into the cabin without knocking, and took the tablet from Elias's hands, setting it on the shelf without even looking.

God, he was sexy like this, so casually dominant and clearly looking for his mate. He smelled divine, like clean sweat and musk and Jordie. There was another strange scent on him, but Elias couldn't place it.

“I was just thinking...” Elias started, still hoping to get the tablet/laptop question resolved while he was thinking about it.

Jordie never gave him a chance, pushing him down onto the bed with one aggressive move, his glowing green tentacles already swarming under Elias’s shirt while his hands opened the snaps. His mouth was hungry, devouring Elias’s until they were both moaning.

“What’s...” Elias asked, when they came up for air. Not that he was complaining. Jordie could throw him on the bed any time, but this growly determination was new.

“Simon is in heat,” Jordie grunted. “He was being ridiculous, so I carried him to the honeymoon hut.”

For a moment, Elias froze, his heart cracking. Had Jordie...? He couldn’t bear to think of it. But if he *had*, it wouldn’t be Jordie’s fault, really. Though, of course, it would make sense if Jordie wanted a progenetrix who was...

“Ellie,” Jordie said roughly, tentacles tightening on Elias’s limbs and hands cupping his face. “Look at me.”

Elias looked up. He was too well conditioned not to follow Jordie’s commands.

“I didn’t do anything with him.” He stroked Elias’s cheeks with his thumbs, staring into his eyes. “I would never want to. He didn’t get any closer to me than my shirt.”

Elias relaxed. He should have trusted him. Jordie had never done anything to make him doubt, but for his mate to

have turned down a doubtlessly very willing progenetrix in heat just for *him* left him in awe.

Jordie sat up, kneeling over Elias, to whip his shirt over his head. He tossed it down across Elias's face. "Smell that."

Ohhhh. The strange smell was the slick from Simon's feelers. Sweet and provocative, leaking heat hormones, it both turned Elias on and felt elusively wrong. He pushed the fabric off of his face.

"Unh-uh," Jordie told him, bringing it back to his nose. "Inhale. I'm going into rut with my mate."

Elias stared up at Jordie, still confused and increasingly horny and then, in a lightning flash, he understood. He pulled in a deep breath. Then another. He could already feel his mind going a little hazy. His cock, which never seemed to go fully dormant when Jordie got him back to the cabin, was suddenly pounding. His tentacles went from slate blue to glowing in the space of seconds.

Jordie ground down against him. "Look at my sexy mate." He pulled the shirt off Elias's face and left it resting on the pillow by his head. His tentacles were searching again, slithering over his nipples, brushing against his neck before circling around it.

He picked up the tip of one of Elias's tentacles and brought it to his lips. "You should have told me you were going into heat, baby," he cooed. "I barely made it back here in time."

Every nerve in Elias's body lit up, yet he felt like he was melting into the bed. He knew the words weren't factually true, but to believe they were, to share this with Jordie, was more than he'd dreamed.

"You're going to be such an insatiable little slut, aren't you?" Jordie's thick tentacle circled around Elias's neck. Not tight enough to harm him, but enough for him to feel thoroughly claimed. He couldn't escape, and it was magnificent.

"Yeah, Jordie." His own voice was rough. "I'm gonna be your slut." He didn't know how these words were coming out of his mouth. He truly had become a slut in the last couple months.

"Fuck, Ellie." Jordie's eyes grew large. "You just keep getting better and better." He thrust his other tentacle between Elias's lips. "Suck me, baby."

Elias was all too happy to oblige. He pulled it into his mouth, tonguing it and letting the musky tang of Jordie's slick secretions fill his senses.

"That's right. Take it." Jordie thrust into his mouth, in and out, so that all Elias could do was relax his jaw and accept everything that Jordie wanted to give him.

The high of taking his mate, of giving him pleasure, soared through him. Even if Jordie wasn't touching him anywhere else, this alone had him moaning, already craving more.

Jordie pulled back for a moment, taking his own shorts down and then Elias's. Elias used Jordie's lost focus to circle his tentacle with his tongue and draw barely-there teeth along it.

Jordie hissed. "Fuck, so damn sexy, baby. I'm gonna fuck you so good."

Elias nodded agreement as Jordie's other tentacle slithered down his belly, stroked up his cock just long enough to make him moan, and then slipped down between his thighs.

It was tantalizing, but not close enough to what he wanted. He tightened his feelers around Jordie's arms. He felt empty. Needy.

Jordie must have seen it in his eyes. "Don't worry, pretty baby. I've got you." The thin, silky tip slipped inside him and Elias keened.

"God, you're so tight." Jordie pressed in harder. "Damn. Just..." He set up a punishing rhythm, thick tentacles plunging in synchrony, while he stroked his own cock. "Fuck."

Jordie's face scrunched up in pleasure, forest green turning dark with lust. With a cry, he spilled over Elias's chest, hot splashes of cum dripping down his coiled feelers and ribs.

Elias was so full of Jordie's essence, those thick tentacles filling him at both ends, that he couldn't hold off any longer. That taste of Jordie's salty sweat, bitter cum, and intoxicating slime on his feelers set off Elias's own orgasm, shooting through him like a rocket. Jordie was so deep inside him,



filling his throat as his head spun from oxygen deprivation, that he couldn't even moan.

All he could do was shudder as pleasure rocked his body and cling to Jordie's back.

After fucking him through the last waves, Jordie gently withdrew, dropping his body heavy on Elias's and kissing him sweetly.

Elias should have been snuggly and sleepy, but his cock was already waking up for another round. Within moments, their kisses turned hungrier, and Elias found himself grinding up against Jordie's hard cock.

"Can't get enough of you," Jordie said, biting and sucking at Elias's neck. Leaving marks and bruises. "I'm gonna breed you. Fill you up with my babies." He rubbed Elias's soft belly, like he was imagining a child there.

Elias wasn't sure if he actually wanted children. There were so many complexities, and he didn't know how good a father he would be. But this was a fantasy and everything about it made him quiver. Deep into... heat now, he had no filter on his words. "Fill me up, Jordie. Make me yours."

Jordie's teeth bit deep into his shoulder. "You're already mine. You have been since the first week. But tonight I'm going to give you my sperm pouch. Fill you up."

Elias choked on nothing. Did Jordie know how much this meant to him? To be treated like a progenetrix in every way? To be pumped full of seed by his mate? He should have known

this was coming, since they'd even talked about it the first time, but it still shook him to his core. He found himself sniffing.

“Baby, baby. What’s wrong?” Jordie was at once concerned, dropping soft little kisses across his face. “We don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

Elias shook his head, then seeing Jordie’s misunderstanding, he started nodding just as frantically.

Jordie gave him a tender smile. “Can you try that again for me, love?”

“I want it,” Elias blubbered.

“Good.” Jordie snuggled down on top of him.

“It won’t do anything,” Elias found himself saying, some tiny part of his brain still not sure that he deserved this. That Jordie would change his mind.

Jordie chuckled, seeing right through him. “Yes, it will. My seed will be swimming inside you. It will mean that you’re mine. My mate. My sweet progenetrix.”

That was all he’d ever wanted.

Jordie eased back until he was kneeling between Elias’s thighs. Slowly, so slowly, he unwound a tentacle from Elias’s body and moved it up his own ribs. Elias watched as the glowing tip reached to the small mound along the side of his chest where the slick, luminescent skin of his tentacle met the more muted, matte green of his torso.

Right underneath was the soft, fleshy opening that would reveal a sperm pouch.

Jordie kept his eyes on Elias's as he stroked the seal a few times and then drew it out.

Elias had pulled out one of his own sperm pouches before, as a curious teenager. They stayed connected to their blood supplies until a rut came, when they could be plucked out with just a spot of blood. Once removed, they would regenerate in a few months, ready for the next heat-rut cycle. Or someone could ignore them for decades, like Elias had.

But this was the first time Elias had been close to the real, pulsing pouch of another viratrix.

The flexible sac was a warm, glowing green, like Jordie's tentacles but softer. Jordie handled it gently, the clear goo surrounding the pouch melding with the slick, viscous liquid of his tentacles.

Elias uncoiled the end of one blue tentacle. "May I..."

Jordie held it out to him. The outside was supple and silky, maybe three inches across. Through the translucent skin, life throbbed in the slowly swirling liquid.

Elias was awed.

It almost seemed a waste that Jordie was sharing this with someone who couldn't give him children.

Jordie met his eyes. "I've never done this before."

“Really?” Somehow, that hadn’t occurred to him. Birth control made it easy for viratrixes to use their sperm pouches in even casual ruts.

“I’ve never felt this close to anyone else.”

“Oh.” It was just one syllable, but it captured everything Elias was thinking. He was so lucky. So adored. Jordie knew everything about him and loved him just as he was.

“Keep this warm for me.” Jordie pressed Elias’s hands to his chest, the sperm pouch nestled beside his heart. Elias immediately wrapped his tentacles around the precious bundle as well, tasting it with his tentacles. Getting to know this wondrous gift.

“Open for me.” A tentacle quested down between Elias’s thighs.

Elias shivered when the slick tendril met his hole. He was a little sore, but that was immaterial when Jordie was touching him again.

Jordie circled a few times and then slithered in, stroking and filling him all at once. His hands clutched Elias’s hips. “You’re still loose for me,” Jordie murmured.

“Is that okay?” Jordie had never complained before, but weren’t tight holes supposed to be more pleasurable?

“Mmmm... It’s perfect. Means that you’re ready for me to take you. That you opened for my tentacle and you’re ready for my pouch.”

Elias tried to make some sound of agreement, but all that came out was a moan. His eyes flickered shut, overcome by Jordie's flexible digit rubbing over his prostate and the breathtaking stretch of his rim.

It took him a moment to realize when the second tentacle joined the first. One slid out, while the other slid in.

He whimpered at the burn, but Jordie didn't stop, stretching him wider and wider, thrilling his nerves even as it seemed like he would split in two.

"Jordie!" he called, not sure whether he was trying to get closer or farther away.

"So good, taking me. Letting me ruin you."

Elias sucked in a breath. Fuck, did it hurt, but there was something about knowing that Jordie was doing it on purpose, for his own pleasure, which turned it inside out until he could only clamor for more.

Jordie's hands slid over the tangle of limbs on Elias's chest, stroking and exploring until he reached the soft sperm pouch. He cupped it gently, giving Elias one last look, before one of his tentacles curled around it and drew it away.

Jordie's other tentacle slipped out of his hole, leaving him gaping and empty, just teasing him with the taste of more. "Need you, Jordie. Please."

Jordie punched inside his tentacle rounded with its precious cargo. It was so thick, so impossibly big, stretching

him so wide and dragging hard against his prostate until he was pulled into bliss.

Then Jordie was moving again, thrusting gently and slowly, just at his entrance.

Oh, God. The pouch was inside of him. He could feel it there, round and warm, nestled deep within.

He looked up to find Jordie looking reverently at their joined bodies. Then their eyes met.

Elias had been afraid for so long to look into the crystal-clear green of Jordie's eyes, and now he was drowning in them. So much care and adoration.

Such awe, that they were sharing this moment together.

"I've heard that you can open the pouch several ways." Jordie offered. "Do you want my cum, too?"

Elias nodded. Then he added words. He'd become brazen in his rut. A new self he almost didn't recognize. "I want your cock."

"Good. Because I want your tight, sexy ass." Jordie lifted Elias's knees as he surged forward, pressing their bodies together. It wasn't an easy position, but when one dripping tentacle guided Jordie's cock to his hole...

Elias saw stars. Jordie was so *deep* inside him, his heavy length extended by the press of the sperm pouch.

But it wasn't just the rut.

It was Jordie.

Fuck. How did he get so lucky?

Elias clung to his viratrix, feelers wrapped in tight coils, meeting every rough thrust with a wave of his own.

“My seed is inside you,” Jordie told him. “Going to fill you till it’s running down your legs.”

“Yes, please, Jordie.”

“I love it when you say my name.”

“I...” Elias almost said it. *I love you*. But he bit it back in time. He’d been feeling it for so long, but he hadn’t found the courage to make the words come out. “More. Please. Need you.”

Jordie pounded him harder. Faster. Sweat dripped from his chest. “You’re mine.”

“Yes.” He was. He’d never wanted anything else.

“Did it burst yet?”

Elias shook his head. “I think we’d know.”

Jordie started to pull out, probably to switch to a tentacle, but Elias couldn’t bear to be parted. “No, don’t stop.”

“But we need to...”

“It can fit. Along the side.”

Jordie blinked, then his eyes grew wide and hungry. “You dirty, dirty boy. I’m gonna fill you up so good.”

Stretched out thin, one sliver of a tentacle squiggled its way in alongside. Even with all of the natural lubricant, that

tiny extra width made Elias moan. It burned. He was just so *full*.

“You like that?” Jordie asked.

As if he didn’t already know. The noises spilling from Elias’s mouth had to be echoing through the treetops.

“Think you can take a little more for me?”

Oh, God. That wasn’t necessary for what they had planned. And Elias knew it would sting. But oh, how he wanted it. “Yes. Want it.”

The other slippery tentacle circled the place where their bodies joined, then, even more slowly, slithered past his rim.

It *burned*.

It was almost too much.

But then Jordie was punching in and out, all three silky lengths moving in their own rhythm so that Elias’s sensitive hole was massaged in every direction...

“Jordie, please!”

There was more delicious sliding, the already thick lengths in his hole tightening, pulling on his rim. “Jordie!”

And then he felt it. A tingling flood that quickly launched him into ecstasy, turning everything it touched into a golden wave of bliss.

“Ellie...” Jordie cried.

“Need you. Love you.”



Jordie covered his mouth, tongues tangling, even as he kept thrusting with those three thickening rods.

Elias keened. He wasn't sure if he was coming. Wasn't even sure if the word meant anything anymore. It was like an orgasm multiplied and expanded, filling his entire body.

There were no words left. Everything else was a wave of pleasure, a river flowing between their bodies and connecting them as it circled and spiraled, coming back renewed with each rock of their hips.

He didn't know how long he floated like that, cast adrift on an island of euphoria, every sense glorying in Jordie's touch.

It seemed like hours, and yet only seconds, when Jordie finally stirred. "Ellie," he whispered. "Ellie. I never knew it could be like that."

"Me neither." He kept his voice soft, protecting the sacred space around them.

"Did you mean it?" Jordie asked.

*Mean what?* he almost asked.

But after sharing so much, after seeing the wonder in Jordie's clear, green eyes, he was out of protests.

"I did. I love you, Jordán Ignacio Martínez-Guzmán. And I don't know why you're crazy enough to want me, but if you do, I won't say no."

Jordie laughed. "You know my middle name."

"I do."

## **The End**

### **Looking for Reggie and Dante's story?**

[\*Tentacle Wonderland\*](#) is the next book in The Change world series, and is also part of the [\*Tinsel and Tentacles\*](#) multi-author series coming Winter 2023.

### **Looking for more naughty tentacles from Reese Morrison?**

Check out:

[\*Hummingbird and Kraken\*](#)

[\*Garbage\*](#)

[\*Smart Ass\*](#)

# Books by Reese Morrison

If you liked this story, I hope you'll check out some more!

All my books have characters who play with gender, gender identity, and gender expression. Some identify as trans, some as genderfluid, genderflexible, or agender. It's also important to me to represent a range of cultural backgrounds and dis/abilities. But mostly, I love writing about people falling in love with a little bit of angst, a lot of care, and a guaranteed happily ever after.

## **The Change (Alpha/omega dynamic... with tentacles)**

[Rut](#) (coming out, alpha/omega dynamics, uncontrollable rut hormones, eager submissive, bondage and sounding—with tentacles)

[Tentacle Wonderland](#) (omega-like Dom, uncontrollable heat hormones, impact play; also part of the [Tinsel and Tentacles](#) multi-author holiday series)

## **The SPARK Files (A future where robots can fall in love.)**

[Garbage](#) (hurt/comfort, body dysphoria/euphoria, bondage, spanking, light enema play, robot kink, metal tentacles, new

Dom)

[Smart Ass](#) (bratty sub, body dysphoria/euphoria, primal play, CNC, role play, bondage, impact play, metal tentacles, robot kink)

[Rich Kid](#) (hurt/comfort, Daddy kink, spanking, robot kink)

### **Love Language (Deaf characters, ASL, and Daddy kink)**

[Love Language](#), also available as an [audiobook](#) (hurt/comfort, younger Dom/older sub, shibari, wax play, predicament bondage, CNC role play, public scenes)

[Love Lessons](#) (Daddy/middle, impact play, sensory deprivation, electrical play)

[Love Limits](#) (age play, puppy play)

[Love Unlimited](#) (two Daddies, two subs, age play, puppy play, impact play, and a whole lot more...)

[Love Language-The Complete Series](#) (all four books available in one volume)

### **Cuffed multi-author Daddy kink universe**

[Dear Daddy, Please Want Me](#) (orgasm control, impact play)

[All Tied Up](#) (one Daddy/two boys, hurt/comfort, older sub, physical dis/ability, exhibitionism, impact play, wax play)

[A Little Bit Naughty](#). (chronic illness, adorable age play)

[Pretty 'n Peak](#) (coming out, vision impairment, mental health, lingerie, impact play, CBT)

[A Daddy for Kinkmas](#) (new Dom/experienced sub, neurodivergence, bondage, impact play, primal play, T4T)

### **Hummingbird Tales (shifter, kinky)**

[Hummingbird and Kraken](#) (spankings, bondage, sounding, denial... and tentacles)

[The Hummingbird's Gift](#) (alpha/omega dynamics, impact play)

### **Stand-Alone Short Stories**

[Anything You Want](#) (age play, long-term disability)

[Whirlwind](#) (short story collection, too many kinks to list...)

[Jesse's Girl](#) (coming of age, not kinky)

### **Stand-Alone Holiday**

[His for Hanukkah](#) (anxiety disorder, food play, orgasm control, impact play)

# About the Author

Reese Morrison lives in Philadelphia with their partner, two precocious children, and intermittent housemates, guests, and homeless, queer teens. Their hobbies are volunteering on too many boards, planting gardens that they forget to water halfway through the summer, making up songs for their kids, and thinking about steamy romances when they're supposed to be working.

Reese and their partner both identify as genderqueer and are part of a vibrant community of queer and trans folks. They started writing because they were dissatisfied with the lack of trans and genderqueer characters in what they were reading and finally decided to do something about it. Many, but not all, of their books are kinky (for a whole range of kinks...) and they feel that it's important to represent a range of backgrounds, dis/abilities, gender presentations/identities, and body types in their writing.

**If you enjoyed this book, please leave a review!** Amazon and GoodReads reviews mean a lot to authors for sharing their work with even more readers. Even taking a couple of minutes to rank the book and write a few words makes a big difference. ;)

You can hang out with Reese on Facebook in [Reese Morrison's Rebels](#). Or sign up for their [newsletter](#) for updates about releases along with teasers and book recommendations.

# Thank you!

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