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**Hold Against the Dark**

by chrofeather

**Summary**

Life goes on for Eddie and Venom, who wonder if there are other symbiotes out there, or if more will come. Meanwhile, at the mercy of the military contractors who financed his research, Carlton Drake gets a taste of his own medicine.

But little do either of them know, fate isn't done with them just yet.

[Post-movie, slight canon divergence because there was so much wasted potential here, dammit]
Eddie had just settled into bed for the night when he felt a familiar insistent nudge at the back of his mind.

**EDDIE…**

Eddie sighed. “What?”

**WE’RE HUNGRY.** It was a complaint he heard fairly often from the symbiote, who had made Eddie’s metabolism go through the roof.

“Are you kidding? We just ate like, half a bag of tater tots and a grilled cheese, dude.” It was almost weird how easily he had settled into using ‘we’ rather than referring to himself and Venom as separate entities.

**NOT ENOUGH. WE REQUIRE MORE NUTRITION.** Venom sounded almost petulant.

“I told you, no brains unless we come across somebody who doesn’t need ‘em,” Eddie said, crossing his arms even though Venom was not in front of him. “Besides, are you sure you’re not just eating because you’re bored?”

**YES,** Venom retorted, but Eddie could feel that it was a lie. The symbiote was satiated, at least for now.

Eddie wasn’t fooled. And even though he was supposed to have an interview tomorrow with a young election campaigner who claimed to have dirt on discriminatory housing practices in the city, he couldn’t ignore the needling thoughts in the back of his head. Or maybe they weren’t his at all.

“What’s on your mind, V?” Eddie asked, sitting up in bed and turning on the light.

Venom did not bother to manifest itself physically, instead remaining under Eddie’s skin and settling somewhere behind his ribs. **NOTHING.**
“Really?” Eddie said, skeptical. “Is that why you’re keeping me awake when I have work to do tomorrow morning?”

**WE ARE NOT WORRIED.**

Eddie sighed. “Fine,” he said as he flopped back against the pillow, staring up at the ceiling for a moment. “But I really do have to work tomorrow. I said I’d meet this guy at 9.” Even after the fiasco with the Life Foundation and the fiery rocket explosion and whatnot, life in San Francisco went on. Eddie still had bills to pay and now what amounted to two mouths to feed.

After a moment, a question came to Eddie’s mind. “Do you think there are other symbiotes out there still?”

There was a prickle of surprise from Venom. **OF COURSE. THEY ARE FAR AWAY, BUT MY SPECIES IS NOT EASILY EXTINGUISHED.**

“No, no, I meant here on Earth,” Eddie clarified. “I don’t know who else came with you when they brought you here.”

Venom gave a thoughtful rumble. **THE OTHERS IN MY SQUAD ARE DEAD. THE LAST I KNEW OF THEM WAS IN THE LAB.**

“How many were there?” Eddie asked. He realized that he had no idea exactly how many symbiotes Drake had kept captive, nor how many experiments he had done in search of whatever megalomaniacal goal he was after. He had assumed it was only Venom and Riot who were left until recently, at least.

**WE WERE FOUR. ALL BUT I HAVE PERISHED.**

Eddie was quiet, thinking for a moment. “Would you know if there were any others on Earth?”

Venom shifted inside Eddie’s body, rippling through his abdomen and snaking around the lobes of his liver. **WHY?**
“Riot said you guys were supposed to contact your home planet,” Eddie explained. “Y’know, bring everyone back here for a feeding frenzy? I’d like to avoid that if possible.”

Venom seemed to withdraw slightly inside Eddie, condensing his mass into a rippling thing that pressed behind Eddie’s lungs. **WE WOULD NOT ALLOW IT. RIOT HAS NO WAY OF LEAVING THIS PLANET.**

“Damn right he doesn’t,” Eddie chuckled. “Because he’s dead.” A pause. “Right?”

There was a beat of silence from Venom, and Eddie felt anxiety start to gnaw at the back of his mind. “Venom. Symbiotes can’t stand fire. There’s no way Riot could have survived, right?”

**...OF COURSE NOT.**

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Up until about two minutes ago, Carlton Drake had thought he was dead. The last thing he remembered was fire, the searing heat enveloping him, but not before Riot engulfed him, body bubbling like liquid mercury as their screams echoed in his head.

He was conscious, but he wished to hell he wasn’t. He was blind and deaf with pain, able to do nothing but lie there and wish for death. Somehow his body was cold and wet and yet the pain burned beneath his skin, and breathing hurt so badly he choked, which was even worse. He tasted blood and saltwater and the agony of part of himself dissolving, somehow.

**STAY STILL!** Riot’s voice shrieked in his head, and Drake realized faintly that part of the agony he was feeling was echoing back from his link with Riot.

**YOU WILL DIE IF YOU MOVE,** growled the symbiote, his own mental voice raw with pain as his silver-black flesh—what was left—rippled and flexed over Drake’s own skin. **I AM REPAIRING YOU.**
Drake could feel that Riot too was hanging on by a thread, badly injured by the fire and yet still devoting its precious resources to putting him back together. Drake couldn’t get his throat to produce a sound, so he settled for a thought instead. Why? Riot needed to feed if it was to live, to regenerate what the fire had burned away.

**IF YOU DIE, THEN I DIE AS WELL.**

Oh. Drake had almost forgotten that part. His mind was still in a haze of bone-deep pain, in a state of agonizing semi-consciousness that made him wonder what would happen if he just slipped back into that blissful dark.

**DO NOT SLEEP YET!** Riot snapped, and it gave a yank on their connected minds.

It was unpleasant, but Drake tried to do as Riot said. Falling into that black void meant he might not be able to climb back out. *How bad is it?*

**VERY,** Riot growled, though it sounded weaker now. *FOR BOTH OF US.*

Drake felt a tiny bit more clarity come to mind as the pain lessened, just minutely. His lungs no longer burned so badly, and he could take little breaths without feeling like he was breathing broken glass. *What can I do to help?* It was a ridiculous question, really, but Carlton Drake was nothing if not a problem-solver.

**STAY AWAKE. AND KEEP METABOLIZING OXYGEN.**

Drake did both for as long as he could. He didn’t remember falling unconscious again.

The next time he awoke, it didn’t feel real. Everything felt… fuzzy, like he was somewhere outside of his own body. Drake didn’t like it, but he couldn’t bring himself to feel anxious or upset about it. Drugs, he thought. He recognized the sleepy, cottony feel of morphine and thought vaguely that it was better than pain.

He was able to peel his eyes open, slowly, with a tremendous effort, trying to focus on the hazy white of his surroundings. He was lying in bed, probably in a hospital, but where? How strange that he could feel his body, vaguely, but it didn’t hurt.
There were other people around him, he realized. The shapes that moved were human beings, though it took a minute for his vision to focus enough to distinguish them. There were two women in scrubs, checking the output on several softly beeping machines, and a man in a military uniform.

“Welcome back to the land of the living, Mr. Drake,” said the man. He was older, perhaps in his fifties, with graying hair and sharp flinty eyes. He did not smile. “I’m sure you remember me.”

Shit. A military contractor, no doubt, and one who had agreed to invest in Drake’s company. They, like many others, were probably not happy with the turn of events in his work. Drake wanted to speak but couldn’t, suddenly aware of the tube down his throat, keeping his breathing regular. It was an unpleasant sensation, but he tried not to fight it, knowing it wouldn’t do any good.

“It is unfortunate, what happened to your little space mission,” the man continued. “Eleven billion dollars, Mr. Drake. And for what?”

_We could show you for what_, Drake wanted to say, waiting for the familiar surge of Riot beneath his skin, but it never came. Suddenly Drake was aware of the pronounced aloneness in his own head, the naked vulnerability of his own, wounded human body. Riot was gone.

The flicker of panic must have showed in his eyes, because the general gave a mirthless, cold little chuckle. “Oh yes, we saw your little experiments with the alien space blobs. Our mole was very informative, right up until things went to shit. You really let that idiot Brock ruin everything.”

Drake desperately wished he could talk at the moment, his throat working uselessly around the tube. He had talked himself out of stickier situations than this. Investors impatient for results were old hat for Drake, who was both eloquent and well-versed in telling people what they wanted to hear.

The general chuckled again, though there was no humor in it. “You know, it’s nice being able to shut you up for once. Don’t worry; I know exactly what you’re thinking. And I know how you can help us recoup our investment.”

The general glanced over his shoulder, and at the other end of the room stood another uniformed man holding an airtight container, which held a familiar shimmering silvery-black mass. Riot.
“I need you to keep a lid on it while I’m interviewing, okay?” Eddie was saying as he walked up the hill towards the coffee shop where he had agreed to meet this guy. “No funny business, V. I mean it.”

Venom gave a rumble of reluctant agreement. *WE EAT AFTER?*

“Probably,” Eddie said, feeling his own stomach growl. Jesus. He was eating more now than he ever had, which was good for his health but bad for his finances. And Venom was nearly always hungry.

*GOOD. YOUR LIVER IS STARTING TO LOOK TASTY.*

Eddie just rolled his eyes. He knew Venom didn’t mean it. “Yeah, yeah. Just let me do my job and then we can see about getting something to eat.” He strode into the coffee shop, immediately spotting the man who’d contacted him. It was easy to pick him out of the crowd of other patrons: he was alone, twiddling his thumbs and glancing over his shoulder every few minutes, eyes darting left and right.

Eddie slid into a seat across from the man. “You must be Sam.”

The man blinked, surprised. “How did you know?” he asked. He looked carefully at his newfound acquaintance. “You’re Eddie Brock.”

“The one and only,” Eddie said lightly. He pulled out his phone and set it on the table. “You mind if I record? For the article later?”

The man gave a nod, again glancing over his shoulder. “Yeah, sure, go ahead,” he said, seeming distracted.

“Can I ask why you seem so nervous?” Eddie tried, stepping lightly. He didn’t want to scare the guy off.

Sam looked at him, gave a nervous little laugh. “You’re the guy who exposed the Life Foundation,”
he said. “I gotta be careful, y’know?”

“Yeah? And?” Eddie prompted, hoping to keep the man talking. “I mean, all that’s over now, and the truth’s coming out.”

“Yeah, but… between you and me, there’s still some people who aren’t happy about that,” Sam said in a low, conspiratorial voice. “Powerful people.”

Eddie raised an eyebrow, starting to catch on. “You didn’t really want to talk about housing discrimination in San Francisco, did you?”

“No,” Sam said with a shake of his head. “And I’m not running for office, either.” That made sense. He didn’t really seem like the political type.

Sam leaned in close across the table. “There are people out there looking for you,” he nearly whispered, his gaze urgent. “Watch your back, Eddie. You might have cut the head off the snake, but trust me when I say it’s a hydra.”

**IS THAT A THREAT?** Venom stirred within Eddie, prickling ominously beneath his skin.

_Cool it, will you?_ Eddie internally shushed Venom, clearing his throat awkwardly.

“And you know all this how?” Eddie asked in a low voice. Part of him was skeptical, but he had an ominous feeling that maybe it wasn’t all bullshit.

Sam looked nervous, glancing around the coffee shop like he was afraid someone might hear. “Just watch your back, Eddie,” he said as he got up. “The people behind the Life Foundation… I know what they’re capable of.”

“Wait,” Eddie reached out, grabbing the man’s arm. “How? That psycho Drake is dead—er, missing, I guess. Cut the head off the snake, right?”

Sam shook his head. “You have no idea,” he said, looking anxious to leave. “Don’t try to be a hero.” Then he was out the door, hood up and disappearing into the crowd.
Eddie rested his elbows on the table and sighed. “…shit.”

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Drake resisted the urge to pace back and forth in what was essentially a glass cage, barren of anything but him. He was alone, as far as he could tell, and the glass boxes neighboring his own were empty. He didn’t remember how he’d gotten there or how long it might have been since he was last conscious, but a quick check of his own body revealed that he appeared to be fine, at least on the outside. It was strange to look down at his smooth, unscarred skin and think about the pain that had seared beneath not so long ago. But more disconcerting was the fact that he was alone. How had they separated him from the symbiote? And where was Riot now?

Drake had nothing to go on. He had been dressed in a pair of sweatpants, a t-shirt, and a hoodie—all in institutional gray and several sizes too big. The hallways visible from his glass prison were frustratingly blank, marked only with block letters that pointed “A1-10” to the right and “A11-20” to the left.

Despite his mind racing to put together any kind of conclusion, he could come up with only one thing. This is not good. His company was up in flames, his rocket launch a spectacular failure, and his symbiote missing in action. Drake felt a flicker of fear. He had known from the start that fucking over the military investors was not a good idea, but at the time it had seemed like a good choice to take the money and run. All in the name of science, right?

He also knew that they weren’t holding him prisoner for no reason. No, they wanted something from him, and Drake was dreading finding out what it was. Maybe if he cooperated, handed over his research or helped them replicate the results… Would they let him go? Or at least not dispose of him with a bullet to the head, Drake thought morbidly.

They would likely ask him to continue his research on symbiotes—under their close supervision, of course. His stomach dropped at the thought. Could he continue his experiments on Riot, with whom he had bonded so intimately?

It would be that or die, a little voice in the back of his head reminded him. These guys really weren’t fucking around.

The sound of footsteps coming around the corner made Drake’s heart leap into his throat, and his dread proved to be right as the general stopped in front of the glass, flanked by two other uniformed
Drake swallowed hard, finding his throat dry. “General McCord,” he managed, making himself stand up straight. Maybe his silver tongue could still save him.

“I do apologize for the accommodations, but we had to take precautions with your… parasite problem,” McCord drawled, sounding unapologetic as he gestured to the glass. In the sealed containment unit carried by one of the general’s guards, Riot’s silvery mass thrashed angrily. “He’s a resilient little fucker, apparently. Just like you.”

“With respect, General,” Drake began, hoping he sounded steadier than he felt, “if it’s the symbiote research you want, I would of course share all of my findings with you.”

The general barked out a laugh. “Don’t bluff, Drake. I can see right through you.” He gestured to the container that held Riot. “You barely scratched the surface of what this can do.”

“And there’s so much more I can do,” Drake interjected earnestly, and privately he hoped that Riot knew the game he was playing. “The things I could discover with the symbiote, the medical breakthroughs we could discover… The possibilities are limitless. And you’ll find no one better to lead that research team.”

McCord regarded Drake with a smirk. “I’ll admit, you are a smart man, Drake,” he said.

Drake allowed the barest hint of a smile to tug at the corners of his mouth. “With respect, sir, I’m a genius.” And I could save the world, if you’d get out of my way.

“I know,” McCord said bluntly, and Drake was almost startled at the change in his tone. “And it’s a shame you can’t be trusted.”

Drake felt a lurch of fear in his gut, feeling breathless of a sudden as the situation once again began to slip through his fingers. “Sir, you can’t possibly think that—”

The general cut him off. “I don’t think, I know,” he growled. “You’re a conniving little son of a bitch, and I don’t doubt you’d find some way to scheme your way out of here if I let you out of this cell.”
For once Drake was speechless, cowed. Trapped. He swallowed hard, feeling like he was either going to faint or be sick.

“But you are good for something,” McCord continued, patting the container that held Riot. “You’ve already shown yourself to be a match for this parasite from hell, biologically speaking. So we’re gonna pick up where you left off.”

“You can’t do this to me,” Drake whispered helplessly, unable to believe it, though he could see no way out. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, so to speak. Had he really survived the inferno in the launch pad explosion only to end up here?

“I think you’ll find that we can. Be grateful that you haven’t outlived your usefulness.” The general turned on his heel and strode away, followed by his guards, and Drake could only watch helplessly as they carried Riot away with them.

Drake slid to the floor, leaning against the glass, numb with shock. He didn’t have time to be terrified before a thud against the glass startled him back to awareness.

“Time to go,” the soldier said shortly. He unlocked the cell using a keypad on the wall, and the door slid open with a pneumatic hiss.

Drake sat on the floor and stared up at the man, unsure if he had heard right.

“I said get up, we don’t have all day,” the soldier grunted, nudging Drake impatiently with a heavy boot.

Drake stood shakily, and the soldier directed him to walk in front. “Where are you taking me?” he asked weakly.

The soldier didn’t respond, not until they reached a set of double doors, and Drake knew with an awful certainty where they led. He was led into the anteroom of an operating theatre and directed to strip. Numbly, he did as he was told, sitting quietly as several masked surgical assistants drew several vials of blood and took his vitals.
They took him into the operating theatre, the air chilly and smelling of sharp antiseptic. The fear didn’t really set in until they laid him down on the operating table, and he stared up at the bright lights overhead and felt his chest tighten with fear. 

“You don’t have to do this,” he pleaded breathlessly as they restrained him and one nurse started an IV in his right arm. He felt the cold trickle of fluid in his veins from the IV, and his limbs got heavy and tired all of a sudden. A hefty dose of muscle relaxers. 

“That should keep him still for the exploratory,” one of the masked nurses was saying. 

“Should I get the anesthesiologist?” another asked. 

“No,” said the man who was apparently in charge. “We need him awake for this. Take notes on pain responses.” 

Drake tried to struggle, feeling panic rising up in his chest, but he couldn’t do much more than squirm. Whatever they were giving him, it dulled his senses and relaxed him, making the panic bleed into nothing but fuzzy flickers of anxiety. 

He felt the first cut of the scalpel along his belly and wished he could scream.
Chapter 3

The building that once housed the Life Foundation was eerily empty now. Even though Eddie had only been here twice before, it seemed so different from what he had seen previously. The expansive, elaborate architecture, once sleekly modern and spacious, now seemed drafty and eerie, the space gutted. It was dark, moonlight reflected off of piles of broken glass and twisted metal. The site was technically off-limits to the public currently, cordoned off by police as the site of not only a crime but several disasters.

Eddie wasn’t quite sure why he had felt the need to come back. It was fairly easy to sneak back in with Venom’s help, though the symbiote shared his mixed feelings about the place. Eddie wondered to himself what kind of memories lingered in the glass and steel megalith, what kind of pain had been suffered and inflicted here. He thought of Maria, of her last moments here. So many ghosts, probably more than he knew.

NO SUCH THING AS GHOSTS, EDDIE. Venom rumbled in his mind.

Eddie wandered across the wide-open lower floor, looking at the shattered windows and the black ocean waves rippling outside. “How do you know?”

DEAD IS DEAD. NOTHING MORE.

“Fair enough.” Eddie regarded the corridor that led to the R&D department, the trail of bloodstains and yellow tape. The electronic locks were blown, most doors already open, and those that weren’t had their windows shattered or their hinges torn off.

Eddie took a step forward, shoes crunching on broken glass as he tried to avoid the smears of blood on the walls and floors. Venom rippled beneath his skin in a way that could only be called apprehensive.

“Everything okay, V?” he asked out loud, and his voice bounced off the empty walls with an eerie echo. It felt wrong, somehow.

WHY DO WE COME BACK HERE? Venom seemed restless, and Eddie supposed he could understand. Bad memories, for the both of them.
“I don’t know,” Eddie admitted as he wandered through the corridor, watching his reflection in the glass of the containment units that had once held people. Perhaps Venom and his compatriots had once been held in these very cells, too. “I kinda wanted to do another piece on the Life Foundation now that the cat’s out of the bag. Get some kind of closure, maybe.”

Eddie stopped in front of one of the cells, the reinforced glass of its door lying in shattered pieces on the floor. “I guess I just wanted to understand.”

**UNDERSTAND WHAT?**

Eddie shrugged. “What he was thinking, I guess. Drake, I mean. Like, what was going through his head when he decided that teaming up with a bloodthirsty alien to bring more bloodthirsty aliens to this planet to… feed on us was a good idea?”

Venom was silent for a long moment.

Eddie started to feel a bit guilty, realizing what he said might have been insensitive. “Hey man, I didn’t mean, y’know—” He fumbled for words.

**WE KNOW.** Venom interjected. **I DID NOT KNOW ITS HOST, BUT I KNEW RIOT. THIS WAS NOT ABOUT THE EARTH, EDDIE. RIOT DID NOT CARE ABOUT THIS PLANET, OR ANY OTHER.**

“So what was the point?” Eddie pressed. “I mean, I know you and your team were… taken from wherever you were at, but what was your mission, or whatever?”

**SURVIVAL. IT IS THE MISSION OF ALL WHO LEAVE OUR HOME PLANET.**

“So, you mean your team was sent away just to look for a new source of fresh meat?”

**IT IS THE WAY WE LIVE. IF A TEAM ENCOUNTERS A PLANET WITH SUITABLE ORGANISMS TO SUSTAIN US, WE SIGNAL THE OTHERS OF OUR SPECIES. THEY COME, AND FEED UNTIL WE ALL ARE FED, OR UNTIL THERE IS NOTHING LEFT.**
Knowing how much Venom ate on a daily basis, it made Eddie uneasy to imagine what it would take to sustain millions of symbiotes. “What happened to your home planet?”

**KLYNTAR BECAME BARREN MANY EONS AGO. IT IS ONLY A BREEDING GROUND NOW.**

Eddie could sense Venom’s tension on the topic of their homeworld, the sensation an uncomfortable prickle in his spine, so he decided to let the matter drop for now. “Guess I can see why you wanted to leave, then.” He walked away from the shattered containment cells, deciding to head upstairs. There was something he wanted to check.

**WE LIKE THIS PLANET. TOO MANY OF US WOULD OVERRUN IT.**

“Y’know, I was thinking the same thing,” Eddie said absently as he jogged up the stairs, briefly forgetting that Venom could hear his thoughts and therefore already knew that.

On the upper floors, there were suites of offices separated by artful frosted glass panels. Wide windows allowed for a breathtaking view of the bay, the silver light of the moon flooding into the space. Eddie looked at the names etched on the outside of doors, recognizing none of them.

He stopped for a moment when he came to the one that read “Dora Skirth, Ph.D – Biochemistry Dept.”

Venom sifted through their memories. **WE KNOW HER.**

“Yeah,” Eddie said after a moment. “We did.” She had been listed as missing after the dust from the rocket explosion settled and the authorities had time to investigate, and Eddie had a sinking feeling that he knew she wouldn’t be found. He kept walking, trying not to dwell on it.

At the end of the hall was Drake’s office, door closed and surprisingly pristine given the carnage that had taken place downstairs. This whole floor was pretty much intact, actually, give or take some broken vases and overturned furniture thanks to the shockwave from the explosion. Eddie tried the door and found it locked.

“V?” Eddie prompted, and Venom easily shattered the glass, bowing the doorframe with the force of
the impact. Not quite as subtle as Eddie had been aiming for, and he briefly cringed at the loudness of the shattering glass, but it was effective.

**WHY ARE YOU NERVOUS? WE ARE THE ONLY ONES HERE**, said Venom, sensing the spike in Eddie’s heart rate and tasting the cortisol in his blood.

“Yeah, it’s just that you haven’t quite mastered the whole subtlety thing,” Eddie said as he stepped through the door, glancing around the dark office. The police had already gone through it, so there probably wasn’t a lot left that was useful, but Eddie felt like it was important, somehow.

Venom gave a snort. **WHO NEEDS TO BE SUBTLE WHEN WE CAN EAT THEIR HEADS?**

“Again with the head-eating,” Eddie sighed. He decided not to delve further into that topic, instead observing the messy office. The desk drawers were all left open, papers strewn everywhere, and Eddie wondered if this was the work of the cops or if Drake was actually this horrendously disorganized. The former seemed more likely, he thought, from what he knew of the man. Drake had always seemed meticulously put together, calm and coiled like a serpent ready to strike.

Eddie’s eyes drifted to the couch with three massive parallel tears in the upholstery, nearly splitting it in half, and his eyebrows went up. The walls also had deep scores in them, as though made by claws or enormous blades. It seemed almost out of place, visible cracks in the smooth façade of the whole place.

**RIOT WAS… IMPATIENT AT THE BEST OF TIMES**, Venom supplied, sensing Eddie’s curiosity.

“Yeah, it sure as hell looks like it,” Eddie agreed, following the trail of claw marks that led all the way up to the ceiling. “Guess he and Drake didn’t get along too well at first.”

**UNSURPRISING.**

Eddie paused as he was leafing through a stack of Life Foundation papers, all of them inscrutable legalese. Maybe Anne could decipher them, given time, but Eddie couldn’t fathom asking anything more of her right now. After a moment’s consideration, he stuffed the sheaf of papers into his jacket pocket. Could come in handy when he was writing up an article later on, he reasoned.
Eddie looked out the window at the bay, past the ruins of the launchpad and the rocket, suddenly feeling a strange empty ache inside. “Let’s go home, huh?”

Venom seemed relieved to do so. **AGREED.**

This time, Eddie let Venom envelop him in black and leap from the rooftop.

It was well past midnight when they got back to the general neighborhood of Eddie’s apartment, and Eddie decided to just walk the rest of the way. Sure, the streets weren’t incredibly safe at night, but he wasn’t worried. Not with Venom around, anyway.

They were just passing Mrs. Chen’s convenience store, long since closed for the night, when Eddie felt a prickle of unease go up his spine. He didn’t break stride, though, keeping his head down but listening intently.

**WE ARE BEING FOLLOWED,** Venom growled, clearly unhappy about it.

**Yeah, no shit,** Eddie responded mentally, listening for the sounds of footsteps to determine how many there were. **Don’t attack first. It might just be some deadbeat trying to harass us.**

**IF HE TOUCHES US, WE EAT HIS HEAD.**

**Alright, deal. But eat all of him; we don’t need any evidence left behind.**

Eddie spotted a figure ahead, nearly obscured in the shadows of an alleyway, and something told him it was no harmless bum. The way the figure held themselves, the broad shoulders and deliberately relaxed, motionless pose tipped Eddie off to the fact that they were lying in wait for him.

Eddie stopped, hands still in his pockets as he faced the shadowy figure, skin prickling with gooseflesh under his jacket. “Hey, if you’ve got something to say to me, say it to my face,” he told the darkness aloud.

There was movement from the figure, and then agony erupted in Eddie’s head as his ears were filled with a horrendous high-frequency squeal. He screamed, while Venom roared with rage and pain, its
black mass rippling and vibrating crazily as it slipped from the interstitial spaces in Eddie’s cells.

Someone wrapped an arm around Eddie’s neck, trying to subdue him, and Venom lashed out blindly with a thick black tendril, sending the man crashing into a nearby brick wall. The sonic emitter clattered to the ground as he fell, and Eddie stomped it in a blind panic, his consciousness flooded with Venom’s rage and pain and confusion.

The sound cut off suddenly as the device splintered, and its effects immediately faded. Venom, however, was still in a blind rage at whomever had dared try to hurt Eddie. The symbiote coalesced around Eddie in a protective black skin, roaring as it snagged one of the men in its claws and bashed him against the side of a nearby dumpster. A sickening crunch was audible from the man’s arm and spine, and Venom bit off his screaming head with a snarl, blood splattering the wall from the neck’s arterial spray. The blood was hot and thick and everything that sated a fierce predatory desire, and Venom squeezed the body until the innards poured out from the ragged hole where the head used to be, dumping bone and blood and organs into their gaping maw until there was nothing left. They swallowed down the mangled corpse with a crunch of long bones, and the other man was already trying to scramble backwards, desperate to put some distance between him and Venom.

Venom easily scooped him up with a crushingly tight tendril around the man’s leg, crushing all the bones in his ankle as he dangled the screaming man in front of them. Venom grinned horrifically wide, showing off bloodstained needle-like teeth as saliva and gore dripped from its jaws and lolling tongue.

Wait, wait, don’t eat him yet! Eddie protested from within, barely able to make himself heard over the crashing tidal wave of Venom’s protective bloodlust.

**WHY NOT?** Venom snarled impatiently. **HE IS SCUM AND WE ARE HUNGRY.**

The terrified man was already fumbling with a tiny capsule from his shirt pocket, hands shaking as he slipped it into his mouth. “H-hail HYDRA,” he whispered, biting into the cyanide capsule.

It was a futile attempt, really. Venom crunched his skull in a single bite, briefly tasting the hot crush of brains oozing between bone fragments, and swallowed the rest whole.

Venom didn’t let Eddie regain control until they had safely entered his apartment via an open window, and only then did the symbiote retreat back under Eddie’s skin, feeling Eddie’s pulse pounding and his mind racing, blood spiked with the sharp tang of adrenaline.
“Holy shit,” Eddie managed, head in his hands as he stood in the middle of his living room and contemplated how he could have just died. “What the fuck was that?”

*THEY WANTED TO KILL US, I PROTECTED US,* Venom growled in explanation, manifesting a face to look Eddie in the eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, I’m not mad about that,” Eddie said breathlessly.

Venom sounded almost surprised for a moment. *THEN WHAT IS IT?*

“I just… I don’t understand why they were after us,” Eddie said slowly. His racing thoughts were starting to calm, and he could think through the situation a bit more clearly. “Or how they knew that our weakness was sonic weapons.”

*IT DOESN’T MATTER NOW. THEY ARE DEAD, AND WE ARE SAFE,* Venom insisted.

Eddie tapped his foot anxiously against the floor, thinking. “It does matter! That other guy… he said something about a hydra.” Why did that sound so familiar? He pulled out the sheaf of papers he had taken from Drake’s office—copies of contracts and memos and whatnot. He flipped through the papers, looking for the one that had caught his eye earlier.

He stopped halfway through, pulling out the sheet and reading through it with a sense of dread that didn’t match the situation. It was the last page of a memo outlining the investment of U.S. military funds into biomedical research by the Life Foundation—a project codenamed HYDRA. The memo included a photocopy of a contract signed by a General Leroy McCord, pledging nearly ten billion dollars to space exploration in the name of research.

Eddie’s hands shook as he read over the memo again. “Shit,” he managed weakly. “Oh, shit.”

*WHAT? WHAT DOES IT MEAN, EDDIE?* Venom asked impatiently.

“I don’t know yet,” Eddie said with a weak laugh. “But most likely? It means we’re screwed.”
Drake had lost all sense of time. There were no windows down here (he guessed they were underground), and the white fluorescent lights were always on. All he knew was that it was cold and he hurt. His whole body ached, but the incision in his belly throbbed with the slightest movement, and he was terrified of popping the sutures if he moved too quickly. God knew the bastards would let him lie there and bleed for a bit before bothering to stitch him up again.

At least he was no longer alone. It was all he could do to lie there and stare into the cell adjacent to his, where they were keeping Riot—sealed into a deoxygenated environment, of course, so it could live without a host. The symbiote was restless at first, its silvery mass crawling across the floor or the glass wall that separated them until it got sluggish and pooled in a corner.

So close and yet so far. They hadn’t let him this close to the symbiote before, and yet it felt like torture to be so close and yet unable to merge with it again. He wondered what Riot was thinking, in that glass cage opposite him. He knew the symbiote was probably seething with rage, and Drake wondered if that rage extended to him. He was too weak to protect them both, and now he had gotten them into a whole new mess.

Curl ed up with his back against the wall, Drake stared up at the ceiling and tried to forget where he was. Trying to keep from going insane just from being trapped in this featureless cell was proving to be the worst torture of them all. Maybe that was all McCord was doing. Torturing him for no other reason than entertainment.

“At least my experiments had a purpose,” Drake said aloud, voice raspy from disuse. He had no idea if they could hear him or not, but it seemed impossible that they weren’t monitoring the cell block where they kept their lab rats. “I was trying to save us, General…! Trying to save the human race.” He laughed weakly, then winced when the torn muscles in his abdomen throbbed painfully. “You’re making me question why.”

Hours later, in another locked observation room with glass walls, Drake watched the general and his entourage talk about him as though he weren’t there. Their voices were muffled on the other side of the glass, but Drake was pretty good at reading lips.

“We need a baseline for the joined host and symbiote,” a woman in a white lab coat was saying, gesturing to her tablet. “We have pretty good data on the host and the creature separately, but the next step is to see how they interact.”

McCord stood stone-faced. “And how can you assure me that these two won’t go berserk and we’ll have another Life Foundation fiasco on our hands?”
The scientist tapped something on her tablet, showing McCord. “This is the next step in our studies, General. Not to worry; we’re carefully monitoring both host and symbiote, and the symbiote’s nutrient intake has been restricted to keep it… manageable. Hunger is a powerful motivator for it.”

McCord looked to the man next to him, a slightly shorter uniformed man wearing wire-rimmed glasses. “Well? Is it viable?”

“I don’t see why not,” the bespectacled man said, expression unchanged. “If they refuse to separate again, we have the means to force them. The sonic weapon affects the symbiote’s very molecular structure.”

McCord seemed satisfied with this. “Alright then, Dr. Kim. Proceed.”

Drake’s heart skipped a beat. They were going to let him bond with Riot again? He briefly imagined tearing the general’s heart out with their claws, and the image was satisfying in ways he hadn’t expected. This might be their chance.

Inside its airtight glass prison, Riot slammed violently against the glass, restless and angry and hungry. But it could see that its host was near, so near that it was tantalizing. Even though they had only been bonded for a brief time, Riot had never experienced a bond as well-synchronized with any other. It was, of course, brief and violent, like most of Riot’s bonds with hosts, but Riot had not found a better human during the long journey it had made across the earth. It was eager to have this human back.

Riot waited impatiently for the humans to open the cage, his silvery mass rippling with the desire to slaughter them all. But the desire to return to its host was stronger. A symbiote combined with a host was always stronger, but with an optimally compatible host… Their powers would be greatly magnified. And Drake had already gone through the immunomodulation process that meant he was already primed and ready to accept Riot into his system.

Together, they would be ready.

As soon as the door opened into the oxygenated environment of Drake’s glass prison, Riot resisted the urge to recoil. He surged forward instead, following the heat signature of his host’s body. His tendrils latched onto a limb and sank beneath the skin, and the result was a dazzling ripple of neuronal activity as their dual consciousness merged into one inside Drake’s brain. Riot let out a shriek that was both triumphant and vindictive, feeling Drake’s overwhelming relief and sense of…
It was a curious feeling. Never before had a host been… happy to receive Riot.

For a moment neither of them spoke, just basking in the feeling of symbiosis again. Riot processed the stream of nonverbal information from Drake, the relief and the fear and the pain and the loss of control. The worry that they would never be reunited. It was… strange, but not bad. Drake typically kept his emotions tightly controlled on his side of the link, and Riot would get only ripples or echoes of what he was feeling.

Strange, but not bad. Riot muted his surprise at the sharing of information, and rippled his tendrils possessively across Drake’s nerve endings.

*Welcome back,* Drake said across their mental link.

Riot’s growl was less harsh than its usual snarl, less rage and more contentment, possessive satisfaction. *YOU ARE MY OPTIMAL HOST.* It perhaps sounded begrudging, but through the link thrummed their satisfaction.

The scientists were all watching with bated breath, unsure of what was happening as host and symbiote internally synchronized.

Drake opened his eyes, and they were the color of liquid mercury. A husky, not-quite-human chuckle sounded from his throat, as tendrils like silver veins crawled beneath his skin. “*YOU WILL NOT LIVE TO REGRET THIS,*” they spoke aloud.
Sometimes Eddie dreamed of memories that were distinctly not his own.

They were mostly flashes, just snapshots of a past he did not remember living, seeing through eyes that were not his own. He remembered a gentle voice singing to him in a language he didn’t know, the soothing sound of a mother’s jewelry clinking musically as she sat down beside him. Remembered flashes of California sun even though Eddie grew up nowhere close to there. Remembered holding the hand of a young woman with warm brown eyes and a brilliant smile.

Her name was Soraya—her laugh was like music and her absence left a hole in his heart. The echoes of grief blur the details of her memory: a brain tumor, cancer, a last wish somehow unfulfilled.

He remembered wanting to save the world even if she was already gone.

Eddie woke up with a hollow feeling in his chest. Venom coalesced there, inside of him, trying to soothe the ache.

“What was that?” he croaked in the dark of two in the morning, out loud.

RECOMBINANCE, Venom responded after a moment. It felt them too, but did not know how to explain them to a host who could not perform plasmid exchange even within its own species. ONLY DREAMS, EDDIE. NOT REAL.

Eddie rubbed at his eyes and listened to the faint, constant din of city noises outside, too tired to ask for a better explanation. “Felt real.”

The touch of Venom’s consciousness against his own was like sleep pulling him under, and Eddie didn’t fight it, hoping that he could let go of a pain that was not his own.

--

EDDIE.
Eddie didn’t look away from the TV. “What?” he asked with a mouthful of potato chips.

Venom’s head manifested from his shoulder. **EDDIE. WE NEED TO GET OUT MORE.**

“That’s funny, coming from you,” Eddie said, not taking his eyes off the TV. “Come on, just let me stress-eat, will you? I thought you’d be happy about that.”

**YOU ARE STRESSED.**

“Well, yeah, I’m stressed,” Eddie responded snappishly. “I just found out that fuckin’ military assassins tried to take us out like two days ago!”

**AND WE TOOK CARE OF IT,** Venom finished, impatient, narrowing its opalescent eyes. **WE ARE MORE THAN A MATCH FOR THEIR PATHETIC HUMAN STRENGTH.**

Eddie groaned in frustration, sitting up on the couch. “You don’t get it, do you? This is majorly bad, Venom! Some seriously bad people are probably on our tail.”

**THEN WE WILL EAT WELL,** Venom practically purred, tendrils curling around Eddie’s wrist.

“You are missing the point!” Eddie exclaimed, exasperated. “What part of ‘this is really fucking dangerous’ do you not understand? These guys do not mess around, trust me. I could lose my job —again—and possibly get Anne hurt or, or—y’know, a bunch of other bad shit!”

Venom did not respond at first. The symbiote had gone unusually still, its head still manifested from Eddie’s arm, as though it was listening for something.

“Hey,” Eddie prodded Venom’s sleek black flesh, annoyed. “Are you even listening to me?”

Venom didn’t so much as twitch, utterly still like it was listening for something out of the range of human hearing. Falling silent, Eddie became cognizant of the minute, barely detectable vibration of Venom’s molecules against his own, like an itch at the cellular level. It was insistent, strange, urgent.
OUTSIDE, Venom rumbled. It was the only warning Eddie got before Venom’s amorphous flesh engulfed him once again, and they were out the window with a predator’s lethal grace, scaling the side of the building.

What is up with you tonight? Eddie groused from within them, but got no response. Venom continued to climb higher and higher, ignoring Eddie’s commentary. The top of their apartment building apparently was not high enough, so Venom leaped to another high-rise tower, scaling its walls like a black shadow, using its tendrils to vault up ten floors at a time.

Okay, this is getting ridiculous, Eddie complained, starting to sound uneasy. He didn’t like heights at the best of times, and Venom was starting to make him nervous.

Finally Venom seemed satisfied with their current altitude, holding onto a TV broadcasting antenna about sixty feet up from the top of the tallest high-rise building in the neighborhood. The wind was stronger up here, and the antenna creaked with Venom’s weight as it swayed gently back and forth.

Eddie made a point not to look down, his stomach doing a nervous flip-flop. Jesus Christ, what is your deal, V? What’s going on?

The strange vibration beneath their skin continued, stronger now, and Venom tilted its head back and forth, a low rumble at the edge of human hearing vibrating from its own throat, as though trying to echolocate.

The sound kept getting more intense, though not louder per se, until Eddie’s ears were ringing with it. The sound, or perhaps the feeling, seemed to echo inside their shared headspace until it was almost uncomfortable. Eddie grimaced and shut his eyes, ready to yell at Venom to make it stop, when suddenly the sound vanished.

Just as quickly as it had come, it was gone. The two of them were left in silence at the top of the dizzyingly tall spire, nothing but the wind whistling in their ears.

“What was that?” Eddie spoke aloud, unsettled by Venom’s uncharacteristic silence.

A DISTRESS SIGNAL, Venom said finally. It sounded… conflicted. RIOT IS ALIVE. AND IN PAIN.
“…you’re shitting me,” Eddie managed, disbelieving. “You told me he was dead!”

**IT CAN BE NO OTHER**, Venom said gravely.

“I don’t get it,” Eddie said after a moment. “Why would he—shit, is he trying to contact the rest of your people?”

**IMPOSSIBLE. IT IS A SHORT-RANGE SIGNAL, BARELY DETECTABLE PLANET-WIDE**, Venom said, its surface rippling with agitation.

“He’s gotta know that we’re the only ones left who can hear that signal,” Eddie said slowly. “So what’s going on?” It was mostly a rhetorical question; Eddie’s mind was already racing to connect the dots, and it didn’t look good.

Unease rippled in the link between them, and Venom was conflicted.

“Shit,” Eddie muttered. “And if Riot’s alive, then I’d bet money that Drake must be too.”

**SO IT WOULD SEEM.**

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Drake lay in a haze of twilight sedation, mind still thick with drugs. A group of white-coated techs in scrubs and masks milled about the room, prepping for whatever procedure they were supposed to perform next. This wasn’t the operating theatre, so they weren’t going to be doing too much cutting on him, hopefully.

They hadn’t restrained him for this one. Instead he simply lay on his side on the table with eyes barely open, able to listen but not do much else. Even with the drugs still circulating in his system, the phantom pain of the symbiote being torn from his body echoed in the spaces Riot used to occupy, behind his ribs and around his lungs. Even if he had the capability to move or the motivation to do so, Drake knew that it would be unwise. His memories of their second separation were hazy but saturated with pain that went deeper than he thought possible. It left him feeling hollow, alive but empty.
His mind drifted, thoughts slow and viscous like molasses. Even if he knew he should be scared, should be trying to think of ways to get out, to get away, he just lay there feeling far away from his own body. It was nice, in a way. For so much of his life, Drake had always been thinking ahead and doing more and pushing limits, either for himself or for science. While doing his second PhD, he’d slept five hours a night for nearly a year—working in the lab running experiments or crunching numbers—and had never felt more alive. As CEO of the Life Foundation, he had helped lead the world into a series of scientific breakthroughs that would change even the lives of ordinary people.

The symbiote experiments were supposed to be the pathway to saving humanity from itself. Bonding with Riot had felt like the next step, even if an unexpected one. Together, they were supposed to be perfect.

Memories of their symbiosis were muddled for Drake. His head was full of sensory memories and information that his human brain was no longer equipped to process without Riot. It all felt fuzzy and far away, though that could have just been the drugs.

One of the techs was pulling on a set of latex gloves, while another prepared a long, thin needle. “Man, I can’t believe this guy killed three marines down in quarantine,” one commented, as though Drake weren’t even in the room. “Looks like he weighs, what, a hundred-fifty pounds?”

“It wasn’t just him,” said another voice. “It was the symbiote. That’s what you should be afraid of. He’s just the host. Nothing to be scared of.”

“Well, somebody is. Otherwise we wouldn’t have had to put 10 CCs of horse tranquilizer in him,” retorted the first.

“Enough chatting,” interrupted the doctor who was supervising, her tone sharp. “Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

Her voice was familiar, Drake thought, distantly. How strange. Her face was mostly obscured behind the mask, but the plastic frames of her glasses seemed to magnify her eyes, dark and watchful.

There were no more comments from the techs, though their silence seemed vaguely resentful. Working in a place like this probably didn’t do good things for anyone’s stress levels.

A pair of hands pushed Drake’s shirt up around his ribs, pulled his pants down a bit to rest on his
hips, exposing the full length of his spine. The air felt chilly against his bare skin, and he shivered minutely when a thumb ran down the prominent vertebrae beneath the skin. The touch stopped at his lower back, and the tech motioned to one of his companions. “Give me the needle.”

Another pair of hands pressed down on him, one on his shoulder and one on his hip to keep him still. “Try to keep still,” said the doctor’s voice, softly. It was the first time someone had directly spoken to him in days.

Drake was trying to remember why her voice seemed so familiar, not quite putting two and two together just yet. His breath hitched when he felt the needle slide in, piercing layers of muscle and finally between two of his vertebrae. It hurt as much as a needle to the spine might be expected to hurt, especially with no local anesthetic, and even through the haze of the sedative they’d given him earlier, it was a startlingly deep pain.

The doctor didn’t speak, but her hand gave a gentle squeeze to his upper arm that might have been comforting.

“Alright, got it,” said the tech, and finally they removed the needle, which felt like a sliver of ice sliding out of his spine. “CSF sample one, taken from host at…” He glanced at the clock on the wall. “…4:14PM on March 22nd.”

Was that really the date? Drake remembered it being October when the rocket launch had happened. It didn’t feel like six months had passed, not at all. In whatever hell this was, time seemed to pass like it didn’t exist at all.

Not like it really mattered. As far as the rest of the world knew, Carlton Drake was dead. It was only thanks to Riot that he had survived the explosion at all, but where had that gotten either of them? There were fates worse than death. In that moment, he almost envied Eddie Brock.

The high-frequency sound seemed to come from everywhere at once, filling every pore between Riot’s molecules and vibrating them apart. Riot shrieked in agony and flailed uselessly, desperate to make the pain stop. It was like being torn apart, bit by bit, and drowning all at the same time.

Finally the onslaught stopped, settling into blissful silence and allowing Riot to pool his pathetically small mass into a quivering silver puddle. Phantom pain echoed through the interstitial spaces.
between his cells, and he hadn’t even the strength to snarl his rage at the human meat-sacks just on the other side of the glass as they took notes.

In retrospect, acting on the impulse to challenge their captors had likely done more harm than good, but the thrill that Riot had gotten from seeing the humans stumble back in fright when it cracked the glass with the slice of its blades was viciously satisfying. When the glass shattered and they killed three of those filthy humans without even trying, Riot had been certain they could have won. If the humans did not have their sound weapons, in a match of predator against predator… Riot knew it outclassed them in every way.

All too briefly, Riot and Drake had tried to resist being separated once again, and they’d gotten a few good swipes in with their claws, but it was ultimately for naught. The high-frequency soundwaves disrupted Riot’s very structure, and he was forced to exit Drake’s body for fear of damaging them both beyond repair. And so Riot was back where it started: hungry, alone, a team leader with no team and no directive.

This necessitated a change of strategy. Riot was used to being bigger and stronger than anything it encountered on most planets, but this planet had proved a rude awakening that its people were not the only predators out there, nor the most capable.

Riot needed a new plan if it was to survive, one that involved escape at any cost. It needed to feed, then to run. Anything else could be sacrificed, and further strategizing could be postponed.

The humans on the other side of its tiny glass prison were still congregating with one another, and without the visual or auditory structures of a host, Riot could not perceive them in quite the same way it did while in its own amorphous body. This was familiar, though, and monitoring the atmosphere for the subtle changes in chemical scent as well as auditory vibrations gave Riot all the information it needed.

Riot needed nothing from these humans. Nothing but their fear, and their flesh. They were expendable, and therefore all Riot had to do was wait for one of them to make a mistake. It wouldn’t be too difficult; they were error-prone creatures. But when they did, there would be hell to pay.

Though, humans were not predators in the sense that Riot’s people were. Their motivations were alien, their kills made out of… curiosity rather than driven by hunger or instinct. The auditory vibrations faded, and that meant the humans had left it alone for now.

Riot did not know what they wanted. But what Riot did know was that these humans would eventually kill it, whether by starvation or other means, and it could not allow that to happen.
Riot scanned the interior of the glass cage for any possible escape routes, as it had done again and again previously. There was the door the humans used to enter and exit and to drop in food (always dead, disgusting), but the opening was hermetically sealed, locked. The only other opening was the vent that could be used to oxygenate the chamber, covered with a plastic polymer that kept it airtight.

It would be a squeeze; the plastic polymer’s molecules were tightly packed and bonded, and normally Riot’s substance would not be able to fit through. But Riot was hungry, lean, having been unable to regenerate much of its mass since the rocket explosion. It just might work.

Sensing no other humans in the area, Riot’s silvery mass slithered up the wall to the vent, probing the plastic surface and testing its structure. Slowly, a few cells at a time, Riot began to sieve itself through the plastic surface. It was akin to a human trying to squeeze through a dog door—slow and difficult, but with the right contortions, it was possible.

It took several agonizing minutes, but Riot was free. But it wouldn’t last long in the oxygenated environment of the building. It had to find a host, and quickly. If Riot had possessed a solid corporeal form and a shoulder to look over, it might have done so, just for a moment.
Eddie held the phone between his shoulder and his cheek while he was stuffing clothes and water bottles and various other necessities into a battered backpack. The phone rang once, twice, and then Anne picked up on the other end.

“Hi, Eddie,” Anne said, her tone pleasant but surprised.

“Hey, Annie,” Eddie said, zipping the backpack and wandering to the kitchen to look in the fridge. “Uh, how you been?”

“Good. I’m good,” Anne responded, somewhat bemused. “What’s up, Eddie? You don’t usually call out of the blue like this.”

“Yeah, well, I’m actually going on a business trip for a couple days,” Eddie said, tossing expired takeout into the trash and a bag of beef jerky into the backpack. “I thought I’d let you know. I’d, uh, appreciate it if you could come over and check on the place later this week. Heat’s been acting kinda funny, y’know?”

“Oh, Eddie, that’s great! We’re glad to hear you’re getting back into the journalism game.” She sounded genuinely happy for him, and Eddie felt a twinge of guilt for having to make all this up. “I’d be happy to watch your place for you.”

TELL HER TO BRING SNACKS FOR WHEN WE RETURN. Venom commented from inside Eddie, who rolled his eyes.

“Thanks Annie, we—er, I really appreciate it,” Eddie said, mentally kicking himself for the slip of the tongue.

Anne was quiet for a moment. “No problem,” she said brightly, as though she hadn’t noticed. “Well, my lunch is almost over, and I’ve gotta get back to the office, so I’ll let you go.”

“Alright. Have a good day at work,” Eddie said. “Thanks. Bye.” He hung up the phone and sighed.
Eddie did feel bad about lying to Anne about his “business trip,” but there was no way he could tell her the truth. Not only would it put her in danger if there really were military assassins out there searching for him, but it would put Eddie in a bit of an awkward situation since—as far as Anne knew—Venom and all the other symbiotes were supposedly destroyed.

He wasn’t ready to tell her the whole truth quite yet. Not when he was still figuring it out himself.

**EDDIE, ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO DO THIS?** Venom’s voice interrupted his thoughts, the symbiote’s now-familiar presence pressing almost reassuringly beneath his skin.

“We’ve got to, V,” Eddie said as he picked up his backpack and his motorcycle helmet. “If they’ve got Drake and Riot, it’s only a matter of time before they come after us.” And when they did, Eddie thought darkly, they wouldn’t make the same mistakes they had previously.

Venom gave a rumble of reluctant agreement.

“That, and…” Eddie paused, sighing. “Like it or not, they’re the only people on this planet who are… like us, y’know?”

**THERE IS NO ONE LIKE US,** Venom protested, but it knew what Eddie meant. There were two remaining human-symbiote pairs on the planet, and the human need to seek out others like the self was instinctual and strong. Even if Venom had been prepared to betray its entire species to protect Eddie and protect the earth, now that they were symbiotic, Eddie’s feelings were at least partially also Venom’s. Venom wasn’t sure how their little rescue mission was going to go down, but Venom trusted Eddie, and that was enough.

“Attaboy. Now, if we leave soon, we can beat rush hour traffic out of the city,” Eddie said, tossing the last of the perishable, expired food in the fridge and shutting off the TV. “You can follow that signal and navigate us there?”

**OF COURSE.** Venom sounded eager. **LET ME DRIVE.**

“No way. Not after what happened last time.”

**WHAT WAS SO BAD ABOUT LAST TIME? I SAVED YOUR LIFE.**
“Yeah, you also got me into a high-speed crash,” Eddie retorted. “I coulda died!”

**WE FIXED YOU!** Venom practically pouted.

“That’s not the—oh, forget it. I’m driving, you’re directing me,” Eddie said as he shut and locked his apartment door, entirely forgetting the presence of his neighbor across the hall.

Said neighbor had paused with groceries in one hand and keys in the other, looking strangely at Eddie and probably trying to figure out who he was talking to.

Eddie chuckled awkwardly, and suddenly pretended to be talking on the phone. “Yeah, I’ll meet you downstairs, okay?” he said before pretending to hang up. He didn’t think the neighbor looked convinced.

**PUSSY,** Venom snorted, fondly.

They took I-80 out of San Francisco, making hairpin turns on Eddie’s bike and weaving in between trucks when Venom decided to give last-minute directions. Venom could not give an estimate on distance, saying only that they were getting closer. This was rather frustrating for Eddie, who had no idea if they were five miles away or five hundred. God only knew where they were keeping Drake and Riot, but it probably wasn’t going to be somewhere obvious.

It was getting to be mid-afternoon when Venom said, **TAKE A RIGHT.**

Eddie slowed down, much to the chagrin of the honking SUV behind him. *Wait, what?*

**TAKE A RIGHT. IT IS THAT WAY.**

*V, there’s no ROAD that way! I can’t take a right. We’ll have to take the next exit.*

**TOO FAR. GO RIGHT.**
Oh, come on! I can’t just—

_I AM FOLLOWING THE SIGNAL_, said Venom impatiently. It took control of Eddie’s body easily, accessing Eddie’s procedural memory of how to drive the motorcycle, and they took off into the expanse of the field that bordered the highway. The bewildered honking of other drivers quickly faded into the distance behind them.

“Hey, seriously not cool, man!” Eddie said aloud, grimacing as they bumped over the uneven ground, leaving a trail of flattened grasses in their wake. He let up on the throttle a bit, not eager to wreck in the middle of this damn field.

_WE ARE CLOSE_, said Venom, seeming distant despite its intimate closeness to Eddie’s psyche.

“Even if we are, hopefully we can get back on the road for at least some of it,” Eddie grumbled. He paused a moment. “Everything okay, V?”

Venom made a low, pensive sound inside Eddie’s mind, one that meant it was uncertain but had something to say anyways.

_I AM UNCERTAIN IF THIS WAS A GOOD IDEA, EDDIE._

“Aw, come on,” Eddie said, trying to lighten the mood. “It was partially your idea.”

_PERHAPS. BUT ONE THING OUR SPECIES HAVE IN COMMON IS SELF-PRESERVATION. THIS DOES NOT SEEM LIKE A SELF-PRESERVATIVE ACT._

“That’s not what you said when we faced Riot the first time,” Eddie retorted. “Part of being human is, well, doing something stupid occasionally.”

_THAT WAS DIFFERENT._

“Hey, I get it,” Eddie said, sensing Venom’s apprehension. “We don’t know what we’re gonna find
in this place, and you’re worried Riot’s not gonna be too happy to see you. And trust me, Drake’s probably not gonna be pleased to see me, either.”

Eddie shifted gears, easing into seventy miles per hour now that the ground stretched flat and mostly clear. “But that isn’t the point. The point is, we’re saving our own asses by doing this. Because if these HYDRA freaks have one symbiote, they’re gonna want more.”

Venom was not reassured. *I KNOW RIOT. RIOT WILL NOT HESITATE TO KILL US, EDDIE. A TEAM LEADER IS NOT CHOSEN FOR LACK OF CUNNING OR RUTHLESSNESS.*

“And I know Drake. Well, sort of. I know him well enough to know that he *won’t* kill us on sight, because he’s smarter than that. Besides, we took ’em both down once, and we can do it again if we have to.” There was a beat of silence between them. “Right?”

*YOU ARE RIGHT, EDDIE. RIOT’S HOST WILL PERHAPS BE MORE SENSIBLE.*

Eddie rolled his eyes. “Thanks.”

It was nearly sunset by the time they saw it. Eddie swore they had been driving in circles in this empty field, but Venom insisted they were going the right way. Eddie was starting to doubt it, at least until he saw the outline of a nondescript concrete building in the distance. It was situated low to the ground, windowless, unmarked, nearly brutalist in its appearance. The sign outside read “DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE – FIELD TESTING.”

Eddie brought the bike to a stop next to the road that bisected the otherwise empty field. “Yup. That’s a secret government facility if I ever saw one.” Somewhere between San Francisco and Sacramento, in the middle of private farmland, under the guise of simple agricultural testing. Not where Eddie would have expected, but he supposed that was the point.

Venom prickled anxiously beneath his skin. *DON’T LIKE THIS PLACE, EDDIE.* Vague flickers of memories passed between their shared psyche, of sterile chambers and bright lights and the pain of high-frequency sounds.

“I know,” Eddie said gently. “Don’t worry. We’ll be in and out before anyone knows the difference.”
Eddie cut the engine in the bike and hid it behind a waving wall of tall grasses near the ditch that ran parallel to the road. “Just leave it to me. I’ve got a plan to get us in, and it doesn’t involve eating anyone’s head or going on a rampage.”

*IF YOU INSIST.* Venom seemed almost disappointed.

The next morning, Eddie walked through the parking lot outside the building and headed for the front door with the apparent confidence of someone who was supposed to be there.

*HOW ARE WE GOING TO GET IN?* Venom asked, rippling anxiously inside Eddie.

*Just like everyone else. Be cool, V.*

Eddie approached the doors and pulled, surprised only for a moment when they opened easily. He strode inside, down the long tiled hallway, until he came to a checkpoint manned by a tall, stout-looking guard in a military uniform.

The guard looked him up and down. “You’re not authorized to be here.”

Eddie put his hands up, placating. “Hey, I know I don’t have a badge or anything, but, uh, it’s my first time here,” he began conversationally. “I’m here for an interview. I’m a journalist. I spoke with someone on the phone last week, and we set it up for today.”

The guard’s expression did not change. “We didn’t get notice of any visitors scheduled for today.”

Eddie tried not to let his nervousness show. “I, uh, talked with a Dr… uh…”

Then Eddie saw a ghost.
A familiar woman walked out of a doorway beyond the checkpoint, crossing the hall, with glasses and black hair in a neat ponytail. She was holding a tablet and flipping through slides, but she happened to glance up just for a moment, eyes widening for a fraction of a second.

“There she is!” Eddie took the opportunity and ran with it, standing on his toes and pointing over the guard’s shoulder. “Dr. Skirth, we talked on the phone, remember?”

It wasn’t entirely a lie, and Eddie was going with it. He just hoped that Skirth would play along.

The guard turned around, frowning. “Dr. Skirth? You know this guy?”

For a moment she froze, looking like a deer caught in the headlights. It only took a second for her to remember herself, though, and Skirth cleared her throat as she walked over to the checkpoint.

“No worries, Reggie,” Skirth smiled placatingly. “He’s here to interview me about the grain biopolymer project.”

Reggie crossed his thick arms. “Doc, you know you gotta clear that stuff with administration first.”

“I know, I know, but I’ve been so busy lately, it totally slipped my mind,” Skirth said, apologetic. She looked up at him with big, innocent brown eyes. “You don’t have to worry about me, Reggie. He won’t leave my sight, I promise.”

“Alright,” the guard conceded after a moment, and Eddie felt relief loosen his tense muscles. Their story was working. “But the polymer project only, Skirth. You know the rules.”


The guard directed Eddie to step through the metal detector, sans keys and phone, but it seemed an almost perfunctory step. Eddie knew that you only got into one of these places if they wanted you to be there.

“You can follow me, Mr. Brock,” Skirth said, turning and setting a brisk pace down the hall. “I have so much to tell you!”
Eddie hurried to follow her, glancing furtively over his shoulder. Once they were out of earshot of the guard, he let out a relieved sigh. “Thanks for that,” he said in a low voice. “Didn’t expect to see you here, though.”

Skirth didn’t respond. She kept her expression neutral until they reached her office, gesturing for Eddie to go inside. Once they were safely out of the empty space of the hall, she shut the door and leaned against it, letting out a long breath.

“What,” she began, pinning him with an incredulous stare, “are you doing here?!”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Eddie retorted, crossing his arms. “I thought you were dead!”

“Trust me, so did I,” Skirth muttered, stepping away from the door and rubbing her temples. “I thought you’d have the good sense to stay out of stuff like this. This place is not a joke!”

“Yeah, I know,” Eddie said, glancing around. “Thanks for saving my ass back there, but I’ve got some questions for you.”

Skirth glared at him. “You think you can come in here and just ask me for information?!” she hissed. “You have no idea how much danger you’re in, Eddie. If you’ve still got your… parasite problem, you should not be here.”

“So you do know about the human experiments they’re doing here?”

Skirth looked uncomfortable for a moment, but then her gaze hardened. “You still haven’t told me why you’re here.”

*SHE DOESN’T KNOW, EDDIE,* Venom commented in Eddie’s mind. *SHE IS SCARED. BUT NOT BECAUSE SHE IS LYING.*

Eddie sighed. “I can’t tell you that,” he said after a moment. “You’d freak if I did.”
“You’ve already put me and my job in danger just by being here,” Skirth said sharply. “I deserve to know.”

Eddie couldn’t really argue that one. Skirth had stuck her neck out for him. Again. “Fine,” he sighed. “…they’ve got another symbiote here. One with a host. And an inside source has told me they’re trying to finish what the Life Foundation started.” It was, technically speaking, all true.

Skirth froze for an instant, almost inhumanly still, and Eddie thought he saw a flash of blue swim in front of her eyes. It was only for a split second, so brief it could have been a trick of the fluorescent lighting. “Follow me.”

—

Venom rippled beneath Eddie’s skin, and his arms prickled with gooseflesh. **WE ARE CLOSE, EDDIE. RIOT IS NEAR.**

*Good to know.* Eddie didn’t dare respond aloud. It was so damn quiet here—either the place was always a ghost town, or the soundproofing in every level was damn near perfect.

“So this is where I work,” Skirth was saying, gesturing around the wide room they had just entered. She was still performing for the benefit of those who might be listening, he knew. He could tell by the careful cadence of her voice, just this side of flippant. “Right now we’re studying biopolymers and their applications. You should see our centrifuge!”

“I would love to see your centrifuge,” Eddie said, immediately regretting how that sounded, and Skirth rolled her eyes.

Then she led the way into the centrifuge room, the one with the door labeled ‘Warning: high magnetism area.’ It was a pretty small room, with nothing but the centrifuge inside. That, and the two of them practically shoulder to shoulder with the door shut.

“We’re safe in here,” Skirth whispered.

“Did we really have to shut ourselves in this damn closet?”
“I had to make sure no one was listening,” Skirth glowered at him. “Can you just deal with it for five minutes?”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Eddie said, stuffing his hands into his pockets. Something about this whole place made his skin crawl. “So how do I get to the basement?”

“Access to the lower levels is by key card only.”

Eddie gave her a look. “And you, of course, hypothetically have access to those lower levels?”

“Hypothetically,” Skirth admitted, sighing. “But I’m not assigned to any of those projects, and going down there with you will look incredibly suspicious.”

“Not a problem.” Eddie reached out and snagged the ID badge from the pocket of her lab coat. “I’ll be in and out before anyone finds out. And this way you had nothing to do with it.”

Skirth grabbed his arm before he could reach for the door handle. “First you have to tell me what you’re looking for down there.”

Suddenly the lights flickered and went out, power draining from the whole building with a low electrical hum before it all went dark.

Eddie glanced around in the dark, watching through the narrow glass window in the centrifuge closet as the red-tinted emergency backup lights kicked on with a flicker. “Uh, probably whatever did that.”

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With the power knocked out to the whole building, every single electronic lock within was made to reset, defaulting to its unlocked state. It was a fire safety feature meant to allow people to escape unimpeded in case a catastrophic failure interrupted the electricity flow. And in a building where nearly every door was computer-controlled, it opened all of them.

The sub-basement corridors went pitch-black for perhaps five or ten seconds, and the locks on all the
quarantine cells unlocked with a metallic click.

For a moment Drake didn’t dare to breathe, watching the red emergency lights come on as the backup generators kicked in. He glanced left and right at the empty corridor, now bathed in eerie red light that made it somewhat more difficult to distinguish moving shapes from shadows. The doors wouldn’t remain open for long, only for about five minutes until the computer system finished rebooting.

Quietly, Drake got to his feet and approached the door, hesitating only for a moment. It opened with a simple push, the reinforced glass sliding seamlessly aside, and the air outside was cool against his skin. He would never get a better opportunity than this.

Strangely, it was still quiet. No alarms blaring, no shouting or running footsteps. Maybe the system was still down, and personnel upstairs were still trying to fix it. Whatever the reason, Drake tried not to think too hard about it. That was one of his own self-inflicted weaknesses, thinking too much about things. He just needed to remember the sequence of turns that led to that door with the stairs.

First, a right. Then another right, then… a right? No, it couldn’t be another right, that would be going in a circle. It had to be a left, but this way didn’t look familiar at all… Well, none of it looked familiar, really. Everything looked different in the eerie red light.

“Dammit,” Drake hissed under his breath, shutting his eyes tightly as he tried to remember what the place had looked like in the daylight. His normally excellent memory was muddled by the sharp ache behind his right eye, a pain that occasionally throbbed like a knife through his orbital socket. The mental images he had of the corridors were fuzzy and undetailed, like photos taken out of focus.

Fuck it. He would have to find another way out. But he would have to work fast, find a map or an exit sign or something. Looking both ways to make sure the corridor was deserted, he took a left, slipping past a row of locked laboratory doors.

Drake felt intensely vulnerable down here by himself, with only his wits and the cover of semi-darkness, no voice in his head to tell him when someone was coming or to watch his back. With Riot, this would have been much easier.

Riot would have directed him to stop overproducing adrenaline and conserve energy, would have kept him from being caught up in the frenetic fear response of his own body like a frightened prey animal. Riot would have—
Stop it, Drake told himself, trying to regain some sense of rational thought despite the fact that his heart was pounding so loudly it seemed impossible that no one else could hear it. Riot was gone, and in all likelihood was not coming back. Symbiotes were ruthlessly efficient creatures, and once they had no further use for a human body, it was abandoned in favor of another. Riot had made that clear from the beginning—even though Drake had proved to be a compatible host, Riot had really only kept him around because he was useful.

Drake tried to tell himself it didn’t matter. He would make it out of this just the same way he had pursued the rest of his goals—alone.

Drake turned another corner and stopped in his tracks, taking in a sharp breath at the sight of the human body on the floor. Its head had been torn off and apparently eaten, smears of blood and gore all over the walls and pooling on the floor. He grimaced. This was Riot’s handiwork if he ever saw it. He wondered how long ago the symbiote had been here, how many of the soldiers it had already killed.

His gaze lingered on the sleek black handgun that had fallen carelessly from the guard’s grasp, surrounded by a pool of dark red blood. He hesitated a moment before he knelt and picked it up. The cool metal of the gun was heavy in his hand, one side wet with blood. It was almost too big for his hands, and he had to adjust his grip to reach the clip release with one blood-slick thumb.

A quick check of the clip revealed that not a single shot had been fired. Riot had been ruthlessly efficient, as always.

Drake took a deep breath and tried to steel his nerves. The weapon felt almost alien in his hands. But he wasn’t going down without a fight, and if they tried to put him back in that cage… Well, he wasn’t willing to let them take any more from him than they already had.

The sound of footsteps echoed in the quiet, from somewhere to the left, and Drake froze, hardly daring to breathe. The gun felt cold in his hands. He listened intently as the stranger’s footsteps got closer, slowly. It didn’t seem like they knew where they were going, kept stopping and turning around and then walking another few paces. Drake waited with his back pressed to the wall, letting them get closer.

A broad-shouldered form wearing civilian clothes walked past, not even glancing at the body on the floor, and Drake didn’t hesitate.

He pressed the muzzle of the gun to the back of the man’s neck, pulling the hammer back with a click that seemed loud and threatening in the quiet. “Don’t move.”
Eddie felt the cold metal of a gun at the back of his neck and froze.

“Don’t move,” said a voice from behind him, with a subtle quaver Eddie would have missed had it not been so quiet down here.

Venom was ready to react with lethal force, but Eddie stifled the wave of bloodlust he felt from the symbiote. *No! Let me handle this,* he told Venom. He didn’t want anyone else to get hurt if he could help it.

“Hey, relax, man,” said Eddie, slowly putting his hands up. “I’m not here to make any trouble.”

There was a beat of silence, and the gun dropped from Eddie’s neck. “Brock?”

Eddie turned around, incredulous. “Drake?” He looked the man up and down, taking in his disheveled appearance, the bloodstains on his shirt and the wild-eyed look about him. “Jesus, you look awful.”

“What are you doing here, Brock?” Drake still had the gun pointed at him at chest level, and Eddie knew he had to tread carefully here. “You should be dead.”

“I could say the same thing about you,” Eddie returned. He glanced warily to his left and right, then to the gore-splattered walls. “Is this really a good place to be having this conversation?”

“Do you still have it?”

“Have what?” Eddie asked, unnecessarily.

“You know exactly what.”
Venom chose that moment to materialize from Eddie’s arm like a viscous black nightmare with teeth and opalescent eyes. *HARM OUR HOST AND WE WILL EAT YOUR ORGANS,* it hissed.

Drake gave a mirthless smile, though his finger moved away from the trigger. “You’re a fool, Brock. You’ve brought it right to them.”

Something clicked for Eddie all of a sudden. “He’s gone, isn’t he? Riot.”

“I’m surprised it took you this long to figure it out.” There was a touch of some emotion just beneath the surface in Drake’s voice, something he couldn’t quite smooth over, and his dark eyes had a haunted look in them. “Why did you come here, Brock?”

“Why the hell do you *think*?” Eddie threw up his arms, exasperated. His eyes darted left and right, briefly listening for anyone who might have overheard their presence. “Because I wanted to take a day trip to some secret military torture lab? No, dumbass, we came here to break you out of this hellhole!”

For maybe half a second, Drake looked genuinely surprised. “How did you—?”

“It’s a long story,” Eddie interrupted. “I’ll explain later.” His eyes lingered on the gun still pointed at his chest. “You actually know how to use that?”

“Well enough,” Drake responded smoothly. His hands were steady, even if he looked like hell.

“Good.” Eddie nodded. “You might need to.”
Inside the tiny centrifuge closet, Dora Skirth was trying not to have a full-blown panic attack. Did Eddie know? Oh my god, he knows, he knows, he knows.

**HE KNOWS NOTHING,** rumbled a voice in her head.

“How do you know that?” Skirth hissed. Her heart was beating so hard she could barely breathe. “If he knows about us, then this is going to get messy, fast.”

**HE KNOWS THAT RIOT IS HERE. VENOM WOULD HAVE BEEN ABLE TO TRACK THE SIGNAL BACK TO THIS PLACE,** the blue symbiote rumbled. Vile’s logic had kept her alive thus far, and its words had a kind of soothing effect—though that could have been the symbiote modulating her adrenaline output.

“Can’t Venom sense us, too?” Skirth asked quietly, as though she were almost unwilling to voice the possibility. Her chest no longer felt as tight, her hands no longer shaking.

**NOT UNLESS THEY WERE SEARCHING FOR US.** Vile sounded the tiniest bit proud of this. Its abilities as a scout were different than those of the others on the team, more suited for camouflage and hiding in plain sight, and this was what had saved Skirth’s life the first time around.

“Okay, that’s good, but we still have to get out of here,” Skirth said anxiously. “They’ll find us!"

**WE GO NOWHERE!** Vile growled. Its sleek blue substance enveloped one of her arms, forming a head to look her in the eyes. **THEY KNOW NOTHING OF US YET. NOT VENOM, NOT RIOT, AND NOT YOUR FILTHY HUMAN COLLEAGUES. KEEP IT THAT WAY, AND WE WILL SURVIVE.**

Something like guilt made Skirth’s stomach clench. “And you’re okay with throwing two of your own people to the wolves like that?”
Vile made a sound that might have been a snort. **YOU ACT AS IF I CARE FOR THEM**, it responded, and Skirth felt bitterness and scorn color the link between them. **RIOT IS A BRUTE AND A TYRANT, AND VENOM IS A PATHETIC LOSER. THEY ARE WORSE THAN USELESS—THEY ARE A THREAT. WHILE THEY LIVE, WE WILL ALWAYS HAVE TO WATCH OUR BACK.**

Skirth could taste Vile’s resentment, thick and acrid on the back of her tongue. Its abilities were not conducive to hunting, to combat, to conquest, and that left it only a step above outcasts like Venom. But Skirth didn’t share Vile’s hatred of its own kind.

“Yeah, well, humans aren’t like that,” she muttered.

When they had first brought Drake to the facility a little less than six months ago, half-dead and clinging to a symbiote in approximately the same state, she had quietly hoped that he would simply succumb to his injuries. It wasn’t because she hated him, though. Rather, it was because she knew what they would do to him if he lived.

Even if she thought Drake’s views were twisted, even if he had left her for dead, it made Skirth absolutely sick to have a hand in the experiments performed on both Drake and Riot. It was a sick sort of irony that they were doing to him exactly what he had done to the test subjects at the Life Foundation, but that didn’t make it any less horrifically wrong. It was basically a lateral move for Skirth, who wasn’t sure if her conscience would ever be clear of the things she had done, both here and at the Life Foundation.

**HUMANS AREN’T LIKE WHAT?** Vile challenged, blue substance rippling. **I’VE SEEN YOUR MEMORIES, DORA. THE MOST TERRIBLE THING TO EVER HAPPEN TO HUMANITY WAS ITSELF. THIS IS WHAT THEY HAVE ALWAYS DONE.**

Skirth couldn’t even deny it.

**WE WAIT,** Vile said decisively, soaking beneath her skin once again. **LET VENOM AND RIOT TEAR EACH OTHER APART, AND YOUR HUMAN FRIENDS WILL TAKE CARE OF THE REST.**
“So, uh, where is Riot, anyway?”

“If I knew, do you think I would be down here scavenging weapons off dead bodies?”

“Jesus, it was just a question,” Eddie muttered. They were skulking through the eerily quiet sub-basement corridors as stealthily as possible, looking for an exit. The place must have been bigger than Eddie had originally thought, though, because no matter how far they wandered, nothing looked familiar. Even the elevator that Eddie had originally come down on was nowhere to be seen.

It was honestly a miracle no one had stumbled upon them yet. It could have been the fact that the power was still mostly out, and the backup generator was only keeping vital systems online—mostly medical and lab equipment in other wings of the building—but it was still making Eddie jittery with anxiety.

**TAKE A RIGHT,** Venom spoke up suddenly, and Eddie jumped despite the fact that hearing the symbiote’s voice was almost as normal as hearing his own these days.

“Right? What makes you say that, V?” Eddie asked aloud, glancing between the two identical-looking turns.

**SMELLS LESS LIKE DEATH THAT WAY. YOU WANTED UP?**

“Yeah, yeah, up is good,” Eddie said, nervously fiddling with his bracelets as they turned the corner.

Drake was watching them intently, probably trying to piece together what Venom was saying to Eddie. “I’ve been here before,” he said after a moment, glancing around. The memory sent chills up his spine. “There should be stairs somewhere nearby.”

There were indeed a set of stairs nearby, and Eddie felt the tiniest bit relieved. He was starting to get sort of claustrophobic down here. The door was surprisingly difficult to push open, even unlocked, and they found out why on the other side.

There were three headless bodies piled up near the bottom of the stairs, some missing limbs and covered in gore and extruded guts. Eddie couldn’t help but be a little nauseous even though he was quite familiar with the sight. “Guess Riot beat us to the punch,” he remarked, going for a bit of humor, but it rang hollow even to his own ears.
This could either be good or bad. If Riot had killed or eaten the guards, then that meant Eddie and company had a hypothetically clear path out of here. But that also meant any remaining soldiers in the compound would be on alert looking for further threats, and Eddie wasn’t looking forward to dealing with that.

These guys were no small-time criminals, at least not the kind that Eddie and Venom were used to dealing with. They were trained killers, loyal to a shadowy and powerful organization even more sinister than the Life Foundation. Eddie was starting to think he and Venom were in over their heads here.

**RIOT WAS INDEED HERE.** Venom spoke aloud, its face peering out from Eddie’s upper arm. **AND NOT LONG AGO. WE ARE CLOSE.**

“Okay, great. We just gotta be… a little more careful from here on out,” Eddie said, glancing at Drake and then Venom. “Subtlety, V, you hear?”

**WE CAN BE SUBTLE, EDDIE.**

They took the two flights of stairs up to the ground floor, Eddie and Venom acting as lookout from the front while Drake followed close behind, watching their backs. The ground floor was set up exactly the same as the basement, right down to the concrete walls, and it was a little disconcerting at first because there were still no windows.

The sign on the door to the stairwell marked it as the ground floor, though, so they had to simply hope for the best. The same eerie red lights illuminated the corridors on this floor, and Eddie was starting to feel like he was in Resident Evil or something.

The sound of footsteps echoed from nearby, and Eddie froze. There was no place to hide, no open doors to duck into.

The soldier came around the corner and stiffened, pointing his M16 at them. “Stop right there,” he ordered, starting to cautiously approach them. Clearly he didn’t know if there was a symbiote hiding inside one of them or not, but Eddie was frozen, caught between taking the guy down and worrying that revealing Venom’s presence would do more harm than good.
While Eddie was busy panicking, Drake stepped out from behind him and fired a single shot that tore through the man’s neck. The soldier gurgled, choking on the thick red waterfall that ran from his ruined throat, then collapsed with a heavy thud.

Eddie turned and stared at Drake, who looked as shocked as Eddie felt. “What the hell are you surprised about?”

“I’ve never done that before,” Drake admitted, wide-eyed.

“What? Shot someone or killed a man?” Eddie asked, looking at the body lying in the growing puddle of blood on the floor.

“Both.”

Eddie supposed it made sense. Drake didn’t seem like the type to do his own dirty work. “Well, you’re a pretty good shot, so I’m not complaining.”

MORE ARE COMING, EDDIE, Venom said anxiously. THEY KNOW WE ARE HERE.

Venom wasn’t lying. The sound of running footsteps and voices was getting closer by the second, and Eddie sighed. “So much for subtlety.”

There was nowhere to run. They couldn’t let themselves be cornered, Eddie knew. The best chance they had was to push through these guys and then make a run for it. Better to be the hunter than the hunted, Venom always said.

“You ready, V?” Eddie asked, feeling Venom ripple beneath his skin.

READY.

A vicious screech echoed from the left, followed by the sickening twist and snap of broken bones and torn tendons, like the snap of gristle torn away from meat. The roar of submachine gun fire was deafening in the concrete corridor, muzzle flashes bursting like dizzying strobe lights amid the screams of terrified humans.
A body flew past the hallway junction to hit the ground with a wet smack, headless and torn open from neck to navel. There was the flash of a sleek silver blade, and arterial spray decorated the walls.

Venom enveloped Eddie of a sudden and let out an answering shriek, communicative or perhaps defiant. Through Venom, Eddie could smell Riot’s bloodlust, could sense its frothing rage like superheated metal seething in the depths of a steel forge. It was killing indiscriminately, ripping apart anything in its path.

“Oh, shit—” was all Eddie could get out before Riot was barreling into them, attacking entirely on instinct. All they could sense from Riot was waves of just kill, kill, kill, mixed in with hunger and rage and some kind of pain that echoed like the horrible scrape of metal on metal in an empty room.

Venom formed hard protective shields with its black mass, able to deflect or parry Riot’s blades for the most part, but they wouldn’t be able to hold against Riot for long. Riot was in a frenzy, unable to tell friend from foe, maddened with rage and bloodlust. Whatever lobotomized meatsack Riot was parasitizing right now probably wouldn’t last long, but the way things were going now, it was long enough. Eddie could feel his own terror thrumming in his veins, heart pounding, though it seemed almost distant thanks to Venom modulating his endocrine system. This was nothing like the first time they had faced Riot, and without the influence of Drake’s rational human brain, Riot was a terrifying and lethal force that would not hesitate to tear them apart just because it could.

Eddie’s plan had already fallen apart. He could think of only one way they were getting out of this alive.

V, I’ve got an idea, but you have to trust me, okay? Eddie sent between their mental link, and he felt Venom’s implicit agreement almost before he finished the thought. They were symbiotic, their dual consciousness so closely connected that they were like two halves of the same whole.

You remember what happened on the rocket? When we merged with Riot and Drake? The four of them had somehow become one, melded into one being for a short time. It had been chaotic, four minds screeching for dominance inside one entangled consciousness, a chaotic mess of thoughts and memories and emotions that Eddie still didn’t quite understand. But if they could establish that link again, between all of them, then Drake could bond with Riot again and hopefully convince Riot that they were all on the same side.

Venom fluidly dodged another swipe of Riot’s blades, which scored the concrete walls with a screech. WE REMEMBER.
A black tendril shot out from Venom’s form and ensnared Riot, tearing it from the withered body it was wrapped around. Eddie directed another tendril that snagged Drake by the arm, and Venom’s black mass rippled as it subsumed them both.

Eddie felt like he had been plunged underwater, drowning in a storm of overwhelming input from two new streams of consciousness. He saw and felt and heard things he knew were not his own experiences nor Venom’s, felt raw rage and fear and pain and the maddening ache of longing to be bonded to one who had been torn away.

It hurt, and then it didn’t.

The stormy sea of their four minds started to settle, like vision coming into focus.

Then there was nothing but pain. A horrendous high-frequency sound shattered everything, and Eddie felt like he couldn’t breathe.

Riot and Drake fell away first, and then Eddie felt Venom’s pain as the symbiote’s molecules were vibrated out of contact with his own. It was an agony Eddie could only compare to getting hit by a truck—or what he imagined that must be like. When he managed to open his eyes, he was lying flat on his back in the corridor, surrounded by blood and bodies and feeling like he’d been hollowed out inside.

The sound in his ears was like nails on a chalkboard, a fork scraping just the wrong way against a dinner plate, and a few feet away Venom quivered in a black blob on the floor. The lights were back on, he noted dimly. Next to him, Drake was weakly reaching out for the silver puddle that was Riot, but to no avail.

Eddie squinted as a tall figure wearing a crisp military uniform stopped next to him, watching the man watching him with cold grey eyes. The glint of his name badge read L. MCCORD.

“Well, well. Speak of the devil,” drawled the general. His foot nudged the Venom puddle, which recoiled as though the touch burned, and Eddie felt a spark of rage. His hand shot out to grab the man’s ankle, instinctually wanting to protect Venom.

The general’s smirk was cold. “Perfect.”
That was the last thing Eddie remembered.

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Eddie woke up feeling like he had an apocalyptic hangover—mouth cotton-dry, his skull feeling like it was splitting, his whole body aching somehow. He groaned softly, keeping his eyes shut. His cheek was pressed against a cool tile floor, which the rest of his joints did not particularly like. The air was cool and dry and smelled of bleach, like someone had been trying to clean up blood.

“Take it slow. You probably feel like shit,” said a now-familiar voice.

Eddie’s eyes opened, and he sat up quickly, which he immediately regretted. A wave of vertigo washed over him, and he leaned against the cool glass wall with a groan, trying to calm the roiling nausea in his stomach.

From the other side of their glass cage, Drake rolled his eyes. “I tried to tell you, didn’t I?”

Eddie blinked a couple times, trying to ground himself in reality. “What the hell happened?” he asked finally, finding his voice rough and hoarse, like he’d been screaming.

Drake looked tired, like he hadn’t slept well recently. He sat with his back against the wall, legs neatly crossed in front of him. “You shouldn’t have come here, Brock.”

Eddie felt a cold chill of a sudden, a terrible realization setting in. He felt… empty, and the usual comfort of the voice in his head was gone, leaving him utterly alone with his thoughts. “Venom?” he said aloud, intonation rising with panic. “Venom!”

Nothing. Eddie couldn’t feel the symbiote anywhere inside him, and it was terrifying.

“What the hell did they do with Venom?” Eddie asked, agitated. He stood up, shakily, and pressed his palms against the reinforced glass walls of the little ten-by-ten cell.

“Do you really want to know?”
Eddie’s gut lurched at the thought. His chest felt tight with anger, pain, fear—not for himself, but for his symbiote. “God dammit!” He slammed his fist against the glass wall, then felt somewhat embarrassed when he realized Drake was looking at him, entirely unimpressed with Eddie’s lack of impulse control.

“Fuck,” he muttered, running a shaky hand through his hair and sitting down again. “I just… this wasn’t how this was supposed to go.”

The corners of Drake’s mouth twitched up into a smile, though the look in his eyes didn’t change one bit. It was such a familiar, infuriating expression on him that Eddie could almost imagine that they were somewhere else—stuck in an elevator together, maybe.

“I do appreciate that you tried. You’ve got balls, if not brains,” Drake remarked.

Eddie let out a huff of laughter. His turmoil of emotions had subsided into a strange, numb sort of calm, and he wasn’t sure if this was him processing or if he hadn’t quite come to terms with reality yet. “Thanks, I think.” He glanced around the glass cell, the empty surrounding corridor, the fluorescent lights. “So this is where you’ve been since... y’know...?”

Drake shrugged. “Presumably. My sense of time isn’t especially accurate down here.”

Jesus Christ. Eddie couldn’t even imagine what kind of hell they had put Drake through for six months. Well, he could, but he didn’t want to. Either HYDRA really wanted to keep him alive, or Drake was exceptionally resilient. Maybe both.

Now that Eddie had a chance to take a better look at Drake, he was reminded of photos he’d seen of guys who came out of Guantánamo. Drake’s hair was long enough that he could probably put it in a ponytail, and from the way he kept pushing it out of his eyes, he looked like he could really use one of those little elastics Eddie still had lying around his place from Anne. Dark scruff accented the sharpness of Drake’s jawline, and it was apparent that he’d lost weight.

Eddie only realized he’d been staring when he noticed Drake was looking back at him. “What?”

Eddie squinted at him, as though pretending to think. “Y’know, you look like that guy from Star Wars.”
Drake merely raised one elegantly arched brow, as though waiting for an explanation.

“Oh, come on, you can’t tell me you haven’t seen it,” Eddie chuckled, crossing his arms. He had always used humor to cope with bad shit in his life, and he wasn’t about to quit now. “Rogue One? That ring a bell? The Imperial pilot who defected to the Resistance?”

Drake’s brows furrowed. “I look nothing like that.”

“Have you looked in the mirror recently?” Eddie quipped.

“Have you?” Drake retorted dryly. “You look like you’ve been sleeping outside and possibly wandering in a fugue state for days.”

“That was very specific.”

“You’re easy to read.”

Eddie had opened his mouth to argue when there was a knock on the glass from outside, and the sound made his blood run cold.

“Mr. Brock,” said Dora Skirth, who looked vaguely ill, as coolly as she could manage while accompanied by three uniformed men with guns. “I’m going to need you to come with me.”

Chapter End Notes

You didn't think our boys were getting out THAT easy, did you?
“Y’know, this seems a little excessive,” Eddie commented as three armed guards escorted him and Skirth down the corridor. Their guns weren’t pointed at him, but the threat was implied. “I don’t bite or nothing. That’s Venom’s thing, not mine.”

The guards remained stoic, and Skirth didn’t even look over her shoulder until they reached a nondescript door that she unlocked with her keycard. She gestured for Eddie to go in first, and he didn’t bother protesting. She followed him inside, while one of the guards lingered in the entranceway.

“Want us to come in with you, Dr. Skirth?”

Skirth gave a thin smile. “I think I can handle him.”

The guard shrugged. “Suit yourself, doc.”

Skirth closed the door, and the two of them were left in the exam room, ostensibly alone. It reminded Eddie of being at the doctor’s office. Sterile, white, with a couple chairs and an exam table, a sink and a cabinet off to one side. No windows, though, just the same harsh fluorescent lights as the rest of the place.

Eddie sat down in one of the plastic chairs, watching Skirth flip through a folder full of papers, ignoring the dull throbbing in his head. “So, what happens now?”

Skirth gave him a sideways glance, then went back to reading. “I’m supposed to make sure you’re in adequate physical condition,” she informed him. “Just like a regular checkup.”

“What, so you guys can be sure I’m not gonna drop dead before you start your experiments?” Eddie asked, only halfway sarcastic. He sat back, absently fiddling with one of his leather bracelets. “You do the same thing to Drake when he got here?”

“He was in a lot worse shape than you when they brought him in.”
“Yeah? I’ll bet he was surprised to see you here.” Eddie gestured vaguely to their surroundings. “I gotta say, even when you asked me to do an exposé on the Life Foundation, I didn’t think you’d squeal to these guys too.”

There was a flicker of some emotion in Skirth’s eyes, briefly, but she turned her head away just as quickly, shutting the file folder with a slap of papers within. “Can you sit up on the table there, please?”

Eddie shrugged, then hopped up onto the table, the tissue paper covering crinkling beneath him. “I’m just saying,” he said, watching Skirth pull on a pair of latex gloves. “Why’d you do it, Skirth?”

Skirth regarded him with somber dark eyes for a moment. She made sure her back was facing the door, reaching out to palpate Eddie’s temporomandibular region. “I have kids, Eddie,” she said after a moment, softly. “I don’t want to be doing this, but I have to. Maybe you don’t understand that, but I am sorry.”

She took out a penlight from the pocket of her lab coat. “Look straight ahead for me, please.” She watched his gaze follow the path of the light, then briefly shined the beam into each eye, watching the pupils contract.

Eddie blinked away the afterimages of the light. He was quiet for a bit while Skirth checked his blood pressure, listened to his heart and lungs with a stethoscope.

“How’s your buddy feel about all this?” he asked as he watched her write down the information in the file folder. He was playing a hunch, but her reaction confirmed his suspicions almost immediately.

Skirth nearly dropped her pen. Its tip made a harsh scratching sound on the paper, one that was distinctly audible in the concrete-walled quiet of the exam room. “I really don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said without looking at him.

“Right, right. No worries, nobody else knows,” Eddie assured her, keeping his tone low but easygoing. “I just know what to look for.” Skirth was a mediocre liar at best—she hadn’t had enough practice, Eddie thought.

“And what are you looking for now?” Skirth busied herself with rolling up Eddie’s sleeve and tying a rubber band a few inches above his elbow. She cleaned a spot of skin at the bend of his elbow with
an alcohol wipe, then peeled back the packaging of a clean needle, the gleam of which made Eddie’s stomach do a little flip-flop.

Eddie cleared his throat, trying to appear nonchalant. “Oh, you probably already know.”

Skirth gave him a pointed look. “Are you going to faint?”

“Nah, I’m just… not a fan of needles,” Eddie said with a wave of his hand. He made a point of staring at the wall. “Do it while I’m not looking, okay?”

He felt her gloved hand holding his arm steady, then the momentary, sharp prick of the needle piercing his skin. He swallowed hard, making a point of keeping very still while she drew the vial of blood. It was over quickly, though, and she untied the rubber band after pressing a bandage over the tiny wound, with brisk instructions for Eddie to keep pressure on it for a minute or so. The silence between them felt heavy as Skirth labeled the vial and wrote something else down.

Skirth opened a nearby cupboard and took out a set of clothes: t-shirt, sweatpants, hoodie, all the same shade of gray. “Put these on, please.” She held them out to him, expectant.

Eddie sighed. He stood up, took the clothes from her, and looked at them for a long moment. “You know you’re doing the same stuff here that you were doing for the Life Foundation,” he tried, a last-ditch appeal to her conscience. “Unethical human experimentation? That’s the kind of heinous shit you were trying to put a stop to.”

Skirth’s gaze was distant as Eddie stripped, and she put his clothes and shoes into plastic bags as he handed them to her. “Sometimes you don’t have a choice,” she said quietly.

Eddie looked down at his baggy sweatpants and bare feet. He knew what she was trying to say. You were either the hunter or the hunted—a sentiment common on Venom’s homeworld. “Whatever happened to ‘do no harm’?” he asked, only half-joking.

Skirth’s smile was wan and thin. “I’m not that kind of doctor, Eddie.”

Eddie shrugged. “Was worth a shot.”
With the examination finished, Skirth opened the door and led Eddie back out into the hall where the armed guards were waiting to take them to the next place. Over her shoulder, Eddie got a glance of the papers she was holding that pertained to him. He didn’t know what “exploratory laparotomy” meant, but he didn’t have to, really.

They took him to another white room, one filled with people in scrubs and masks. As they prepped him for surgery, Eddie closed his eyes and tried to pretend the fluorescent lights were California sun.

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Venom was alone.

Where was Eddie? Had they hurt Eddie? Venom remembered pain, so much pain from that awful sound, but not the aftermath.

While Klyntar didn’t feel pain in quite the same way humans did, with the lack of a nervous system and all, it still hurt. Venom was weak, vulnerable without a host, even though the suffocating oxygen had been removed from this particular sterile glass chamber. Venom’s rippling black mass poked around the parameters of the cage, tasting for familiar chemical signals of Eddie or someone, but there was nothing.

Venom was hungry. It needed food, both to replenish the energy expended during their attempted escape and to repair the damage done by the sound waves. Venom’s structure was stable for now, but inside it was a mess of ruptured plasmids and frayed lagging strands of DNA like that horrible rug in Eddie’s living room. It would need fuel to repair the damage, but there wasn’t a hint of anything even vaguely edible around.

When Venom reached the fourth wall of the cage, reaching out a careful tendril to touch, it recoiled with a start when the touch burned, sizzling hot. The last wall wasn’t so much a wall as it was a mesh screen, one that would have been easy for Venom to slip through had it not been superheated.

It was difficult to scent beyond the hot metal and the taste of its own burnt flesh, but Venom couldn’t help but wonder what was on the other side. Was it Eddie? Were they keeping its beloved host so close and yet so far away?

An incoming chemical signal came as a shock to Venom, who had not been expecting a communication from one of its own kind. The message’s chemical signature was harsh and acrid,
even dulled through the inefficient substrate of Earth’s atmosphere, and there was no one else it could be.

Venom tried not to recoil, instead expanding its mass in a threat display, bubbling like an angry ferrofluid. They weren’t quite close enough for Venom to get across the message it wanted to (chemical signals were too inefficient through the heated screen, or perhaps Venom had simply become used to speaking in the human way), so it settled for a hiss through half-formed needle-like teeth.

Riot’s irritation was palpable even through their dampened signaling pathways. This was not a very efficient means of communication, but Venom was almost glad for it. It didn’t want to signal. Venom wanted Eddie.

Outside the glass chamber, there were several humans observing. “Both specimens appear to be active now,” reported the one sitting at the computer terminal. “We have a pretty good baseline for both. What next, Dr. Kim?”

Dr. Kim stood nearby, watching the two symbiotes morph and change, exploring the environment and cautiously surveying each other through the heated metal screen that separated them. “Good,” she nodded. “Cool the barrier. Let them have a little meet and greet.”

“Oh alright, beginning trial two,” said Jameson at the computer, pressing a sequence of keys. “Interaction between symbiotes is a go. Recording initial observations of specimen behavior.”

One of their other colleagues, Rutherford, turned around in his chair, where he was analyzing some data at a nearby computer. “Let’s hope they’re not like Siamese fighting fish, huh?”

The heat started to fade from the mesh screen that separated Venom and Riot, and Venom rippled with anxiety. The metal was quickly cooling to an acceptable temperature, and the one barrier that stood between it and Riot was fading away. This could either be good or bad. Good that Riot could not hurt Venom’s host, now that they were separated, bad that Venom would have no choice but to face Riot’s wrath.
Which Venom had done before, of course, but it was never pleasant. Oh, well.

Riot’s silver mass easily flowed through the mesh now that it was cool, tendrils thrashing as it dragged itself over the smooth surface of their cage. Venom couldn’t help but back away, already picking up chemical indicators of Riot’s displeasure. Riot had always been larger and stronger than Venom, but here the difference was stark. Riot had fed recently, gorged itself on human brains during its rampage. Even though both of them had suffered damage from the sound waves, Venom had not fed in days. The advantage was distinctly Riot’s—as usual.

Venom flattened itself against the floor, hoping to placate the larger symbiote by allowing itself to be subsumed.

Riot’s silver tendrils swirled over Venom’s sleek black surface, like mercury in an oil spill, and the connection between them was instantaneous. The exchange of information was exhilarating for Venom, who—after so long spent with a host—had almost forgotten how perfectly intuitive its native form of communication was. To be like this again, not having to force sensations and feelings into the alien syntax of words and sentences, was almost a relief.

Venom had expected Riot to force it, to push an overwhelming amount of data transfer between them with its impatient wants, but Riot was… holding itself back. Venom got flashes of Riot’s emotions—its acrid rage and sharp tang of pain that characterized the proteins it was producing. It had been a long time; there was much to be exchanged. Riot’s memories of the past six months were similar to those Venom had of the Life Foundation labs, and Venom allowed them to be exchanged, so that perhaps Riot could understand.

Their substances swirled and intertwined but never mixed completely, black and silver in a dance of attraction and repulsion, like oil and water.

YOU CAME TO SAVE US. Riot was the first to initiate higher-level information exchange, surprisingly. This required more conscious thought than a simple baseline meld, and Venom was almost surprised that Riot would bother.

The question was implicit. Venom didn’t know if Riot simply hadn’t bothered to parse all of Venom’s information or if Riot wanted to hear it from Venom’s higher consciousness.

YES. Venom let the wash of Eddie’s feelings come through the link like the tide, his reasoning for wanting to save Drake and Riot. The echoes of Eddie’s emotions—even the hollow ache of desired companionship, the pangs of sympathy like hunger deep inside his heart—were precious to Venom.
Riot’s hold on Venom’s physical form tightened and then loosened, a restless flexion of muscles that felt like the warning press of teeth against flesh. **THIS,** Riot growled, **IS YOUR FAULT. YOU HAVE MAROONED US HERE WITH NOTHING!**

Venom’s surge of white-hot rage took Riot off-guard, and suddenly it was Venom’s sleek black flesh that was doing the squeezing, engulfing Riot with the threatening prod of half-formed jagged teeth. **I PROTECTED WHAT WAS MINE,** Venom snarled. **MY HOST, MY TERRITORY.**

**THE MISSION CAME FIRST,** Riot sent back in a rage, and its substance formed blades and spikes that sliced through Venom’s constricting form, sending blooms of pain signals that echoed through their connection. **I AM TEAM LEADER, YOU TAKE ORDERS FROM ME, YOU PATHETIC WASTE OF ORGANIC MATTER!**

Venom’s approximation of a savage grin was basically just to become a ball of teeth, piercing Riot’s silver flesh in a series of reciprocal wounds. Riot’s shock at the sensation was delicious—Venom would have never dared to defy a superior before coming to this planet, but much had changed. **NEW PLANET, NEW RULES.**

Riot thrashed and writhed, furious, and loosened its hold on Venom, though the sharpness of pain and acid frustration still flowed between their connected consciousness like a choppy river. **TRAITOR,** it seethed.

Venom was hardly bothered. The epithet meant nothing, not out here, light years away from Klyntar and from the rest of their people. **I DEFECTED. YOU FAILED. WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE? WE WOULD BOTH BE TRAITORS ON OUR HOMEWORLD. YOU KNOW THIS.**

**SO YOU WOULD RATHER DIE HERE? LIKE PREY?** Riot’s disgust was thick and bitter.

Venom countered with memories of symbiosis, amalgamated from both of them. **YOUR HOST WILL DIE HERE, RIOT. DOES THAT MEAN NOTHING TO YOU?**

The savage anger that flowed back from Riot was edged with pain that cut like blades and ached like starvation. **I AM NOT SO DISGUSTINGLY SENTIMENTAL AS YOU, VENOM,** Riot snarled, and its substance pushed right through Venom’s to engulf the smaller symbiote once again.
Riot could have simply consumed Venom through phagocytosis if it had really wanted to. To consume the flesh of another of the species was not taboo—or even uncommon—among Klyntar. Under any other circumstances, if Venom had pulled such a stunt, Riot would have done it. But they were the last of their kind here on Earth. Riot did not yet want to be quite so alone.

**YOUR HOST, YOUR EDDIE, WILL DIE HERE AS WELL.** Riot’s rage had subsided, like the calming of the tide after a storm, but its cold, calculating intellect was as sharp as the threatening press of its blades. **BUT YOU AND I CAN SURVIVE. YOU KNOW THIS TO BE TRUE.**

Venom recoiled at the idea, its flesh crawling defiantly. But it was a simple fact that they would outlast their human counterparts in a place like this. Their experience in the Life Foundation lab had already proved that.

**EDDIE AND I DID NOT COME HERE TO DIE,** Venom sent back, defiant, but perhaps there was some uncertainty there.

There was a certain taste of bitter defeat to Riot’s last message. **NEITHER DID WE.**

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On the other side of the glass, the observing scientists stared with rapt attention at the movement of the two symbiotes. Their alien, amorphous flesh melded and swirled together like a lava lamp come to life, and the human scientists could only wonder what it meant.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Dr. Kim said, brows furrowed. “Are they communicating somehow?”

McCord stood off to the side, a stoic but intimidating presence in the room that the researchers were carefully stepping around. He was watching the symbiotes intensely, as though he could decode their movements if he looked hard enough.

Jameson, sitting at the control panel, shrugged his shoulders. “The electrochemical readings we’re getting from them are bizarre. All this will take weeks, if not months, to interpret.”
Rutherford, who had been waiting for data to compile at his workstation this whole time, glanced at them and snickered. “Are you sure they’re not banging?”

Dr. Kim rolled her eyes, while Jameson shook his head. “I don’t think they—”

“Shut up,” McCord cut him off, sharply. If there was anyone who knew, they were already in this lab. “Jameson, bring me Drake.”

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Drake really hadn’t thought things could get a whole lot worse. Between being separated from Riot, his life’s work (literally) going up in flames, and being a guinea pig in a secret government lab that was using his own damn research, it didn’t seem like there was much room for further disaster. Eddie Brock, once again, had managed to prove him wrong.

He hadn’t given much thought to Brock, honestly. He had simply assumed that the fall into the San Francisco Bay would have killed him after the fiery explosion killed his symbiote. But to learn that Brock and Venom were both alive, and that they had come all this way to attempt a rescue…. Well, that was something Drake was having trouble reconciling with what he knew of Brock.

It didn’t make any sense at all, for one thing.

Eddie Brock had willingly put himself and his symbiote into this situation, for no other reason than to try and retrieve Drake and Riot. Despite the implications of the gesture, Drake almost wished they hadn’t done it.

In the adrenaline-fueled high of the moment, before they were set upon by soldiers and Riot’s frenzy, Drake had almost believed that they could pull it off. It seemed almost miraculous, but Brock’s dumb luck had worked right up until it didn’t. They had been so close to freedom—closer than Drake had been in what felt like an eternity—but no dice.

Now that he was alone again in the familiar glass cage, Drake tried not to listen to the silence that hung heavy in the air. Previously, he had hardly allowed himself to hope that escape might even be possible—he stood no chance, not without Riot. And even when he had tried with Riot, where had that gotten either of them?
Their failed escape attempt felt like a cruel joke, like letting a dog run out the door, only to yank on its chain when it got too far. Now, with Brock and Venom in the same situation, Drake knew there really was no hope now. In all likelihood, they were both going to die here.

Drake let out a quiet sigh, closing his eyes as he let his head drop back against the wall. He had long since ceased trying to count the hours, but he knew he was probably due for another procedure soon. They never left him alone for more than a few hours at a time. Usually he busied himself with reciting things from memory, or doing as much mental math as he could before the numbers all blurred together. Sometimes it was poetry, recited line by line from books he’d read in college, other times theorems and proofs. On one particularly long day he’d gotten to page forty of his bioengineering dissertation, recalled painstakingly from his photographic memory.

It was all part of just trying to stay sane. Sometimes Drake thought it might be easier if he just let the isolation eat away at his mind, easier to simply let it all slip away until he didn’t know what was happening to him, but he refused to give them the satisfaction of seeing him break.

He tried not to nap often. Made it easier to sleep at night, though it was hard to tell night from day when they never turned the lights fully off, and there was no natural light to regulate his circadian rhythms. But sometimes it was easy to just drift off, the line between consciousness and unconsciousness blurring until his eyes were closed and things were okay, just for a little while.

Drake dreamed of New York. Which was strange, because he hadn’t lived in New York City since college, and even after that he’d only been back on business trips lasting less than a week. It wasn’t like a typical dream, though, not just vague impressions of sights and sounds and people he used to know. No, this felt real, like he had lived it before, but it was an unfamiliar memory, like he was seeing through eyes that weren’t his.

He had done a lot of things in New York, but climbing a tree in the dead of night with a camera to get the best shot at implicating public figures in dirty business dealings was not one of them. The memory felt so clear, though: being petrified of heights, falling out of said tree and breaking his wrist but not the camera, which had seemed like the more important thing at the time.

He remembered being both excited and terrified upon turning in the incriminating shots to his editor, who had called him a damn fool, but a fool with guts. He remembered getting the shit kicked out of him by three thugs in a back alley days later, being told to stay the fuck out of their boss’s business.

Drake was jolted awake by a knock on the glass, the sound bringing him sharply back to reality, eyes suddenly open, breath catching in his throat.
Three guards and a tech in a white lab coat were waiting outside.

One of the guards pressed a button to open the door, gesturing for Drake to come to them. “C’mon, you know the drill by now.”

He did. There was no point in fighting it.

As they were leading him away, another lab tech in a white coat jogged up to them from the other direction. “Hey, hey, wait a minute!”

The first tech turned to him, bored. “What is it, Jameson?”

Jameson gestured vaguely over his shoulder. “McCord wants to see this one. You know he doesn’t like to be kept waiting, Rogers.”

Rogers looked vaguely annoyed, but he didn’t bother to argue further. “Alright. Take him. But you can explain to Dr. Khan later why you kept him waiting in the OR.”

Drake quietly observed the exchange between them, careful not to seem too attentive. Out of the frying pan and into the fire? Maybe. But it meant he would be spared more vivisection, at least for now.

Rogers headed back towards the medical wing, while Jameson and the three guards led Drake in the opposite direction. Drake mentally noted the series of turns they took, realizing that he had been this way before. This was the wing where they kept the symbiotes in airtight chambers for observation. His heart skipped a beat despite himself, though he kept his expression carefully neutral. There was no way they would be foolish enough to let him near Riot again.

Inside one of the lab spaces, McCord and two other scientists were waiting. Their backs were to the wall of reinforced glass windows, beyond which Drake couldn’t see what, if anything, was inside. The guards closed the door and remained near the far wall, though one of them nudged Drake to the center of the room. They hadn’t cuffed him or anything, but no one told the armed men to wait outside, as was standard procedure.

Drake held back a smile. So they still thought him dangerous. He hadn’t thought McCord the type to be intimidated by someone like him, but he supposed the whole “host to an unpredictably murderous
alien parasite” factor might have played a role.

Drake spoke first, hands clasped casually behind his back. “So what’s the occasion, General?”

McCord began pacing a slow circle around the room, seemingly trying to be casual, though there was a stiff military poise in his shoulders. “As much as it inconveniences us, you’re the expert on these aliens,” he began. “So you’re going to answer a few questions for us.”

Drake kept his gaze forward, watching the black and silver symbiotes in the chamber just beyond the glass wall, listening to the footsteps behind him. “Why not just ask them?” he said simply, gesturing to the researchers in white coats. “I’m assuming you already have access to all the data that was stored in the Life Foundation servers.”

Kim and Rutherford looked distinctly uncomfortable, and that satisfied Drake immensely.

“It’s taken my people months to analyze a fraction of that data,” McCord responded, stopping in front of the window that displayed the fluid motions of the symbiotes. He didn’t sound pleased about that. “Besides, better to hear it straight from the source. And with a PhD in bioengineering, you damn well should understand it.”

So McCord was trying to play nice. Drake wasn’t fooled, not for a second. “And you think that means I have an in-depth understanding of alien biology?”

McCord smirked, though his flinty eyes were cold. “I can think of no one who would know better.”

For a moment Drake entertained the idea of refusing, of telling the general to go fuck himself, because really, what did he have to lose at this point? But his experience in the seedy underbelly of corporate business had honed his senses for these types of things, and he knew an opportunity when he saw one, like a shark scenting blood in the water. At this point, he was still valuable to McCord, and that was leverage he could use.

“And just what do you think I can tell you that my research data can’t?” Drake knew how this worked, how to walk that fine line between reluctant cooperation and playing hard to get.

McCord gestured to the chamber that held the two symbiotes. Right now they were simply viscous silver and black blobs, meandering around the cage in that strange spidery way. On the glass a video
was projected of the symbiotes swirling around one another, entangling black and silver but not mixing the two.

“Tell us what’s happening here, Dr. Drake.”

Drake watched the images on the screen, the mesmerizing way the two symbiotes moved against each other, grasping and squeezing and then pressing sharp structures through each other’s amorphous flesh. “I’ve never seen this before,” he began, slowly. “But I’d imagine that it’s some kind of communicative gesture. These creatures are not even remotely human, General. They don’t have any of the structures that we’ve developed to communicate, paralinguistically or otherwise. I’d say they’re… catching up.”

“And when they… bond with each other, is that like what they do when they possess a human?”

Drake paused for a moment, studying the expression on the general’s face. “I’m not quite sure what you’re asking.”

“The symbiosis,” McCord clarified, and there was a gleam in his flinty eyes that unsettled Drake. “What are the requirements for that to happen?”

“It’s complicated,” Drake said after a moment. He wasn’t sure yet where this was going, but he had to tread carefully here. “There are a multitude of factors that determine whether or not a host is compatible with the symbiote. We don’t know exactly what those factors are, but it’s comparable to blood typing, or organ donation. If the host isn’t a match, then it can be catastrophic for both host and symbiote.”

“But they are capable of residing for short periods of time in any terrestrial host, even if the match isn’t exact,” Dr. Kim interjected, and Drake wished he could shut her up. “We’ve seen that in the animal trials.”

“Interesting, isn’t it?” The smirk on McCord’s face promised nothing but bad news. “How exactly do you explain that?”

Drake let his expression betray nothing. “We think that the symbiote may be able to modify the host’s immune system to prevent the body’s rejection,” he admitted, reluctantly.
“So, in theory, these things could be implanted into any human host, and they could just… get used to it,” McCord mused, and though his tone was thoughtful, the look in his eyes was absolutely predatory.

“In theory. But they aren’t just animals, General,” Drake responded smoothly. “It’s not like a virus, which will live in any host. They have preferences for who they like or dislike, and if a host is not to their liking… well, they’re always hungry.”

McCord crossed his arms, looking from the symbiotes behind the glass and then back to Drake. “So you’re telling me the only reason you’re still alive is because that murderous parasite got attached to you?”

Drake had to resist the urge to laugh, swallowing the bitterness edged with hysteria, tucking away that tangle of pain somewhere he didn’t have to feel it. “In a manner of speaking, yes.”

The general nodded, looking far too self-satisfied for Drake’s liking. “Alright, that’s all I needed to hear.” He glanced toward the guards. “Put this lab rat back in his cage.”

One of the guards came forward and took him by the upper arm, but Drake stared defiantly at McCord even as they tugged him toward the door. “I know what you’re trying to do, and it won’t work.” He locked eyes with the general, refusing to back down. “I think I’m a little more valuable than a lab rat.”

McCord just smirked. “For now.”
It was dark in their sealed little chamber. Temporarily forming photoreceptive structures allowed Riot to perceive this, and its chemical receptors could taste not even a trace of humans outside. Darkness usually meant the humans were resting, since their night vision was poor. Perhaps this was why they had been left alone for now.

One of its tendrils initiated contact with Venom, who was never out of reach in a cage this small. The black symbiote’s initial signals tasted of longing, phantom pain of host structures that were no longer there.

VENOM. WHY DID YOU CHOOS YOUR HOST?

Venom rippled with surprise, though it didn’t refuse the connection. CHOOSE?

WHY DID YOU STAY? Riot clarified its message. There was no hint of its earlier rage, just a vague mixture of low-level emotions, conflicted.

Venom seemed uncertain of what information could convey this. EDDIE… CARED. HE PROTECTED US. WANTED US TO STAY. EVEN THOUGH HE IS A HUMAN. They both knew what that meant. To be human, to them, was to be fragile. Flawed. Weak.

Riot’s mass rippled, agitated, though not violent. Its silvery mass remained fluid, no hint of blades or spikes. AND YOU WERE WILLING TO BETRAY OUR ENTIRE SPECIES FOR THAT? FOR HIM?

YOU’LL FORGIVE ME IF MY LOYALTY TO THE HIVE IS NOT QUITE AS STRONG AS YOURS. There was an acid tang to Venom’s response. I HAD VERY LITTLE TO LOSE.

Riot’s tendrils thrashed, its substance condensing and expanding as though restless, but there was no malice behind it. It had never doubted its own loyalty to the Hive before, never questioned the Hive’s objective through hundreds, thousands of other planets, other missions just like this one. Earth was not particularly special, not very big or even unique. But never before had a planet made Riot feel so… small. Here, Riot was no longer the apex predator, as it had always been on other worlds. Riot
didn’t understand how Venom was so accepting of a place like this, having to rely on a host just to survive in the atmosphere, of being trapped here in this otherwise desolate quadrant of space.

**WE ARE THE LAST OF OUR KIND HERE.** Riot had known this before, logically, but now that the rocket was destroyed… It had started to sink in that they were really, truly alone. No other teams would come for them, not without a signal that the planet was viable.

**YES,** Venom responded simply. It did not seem bothered by that. Venom had lost nothing in this turn of events.

Riot had lost everything. It was a team leader with no team, a failed mission, and no further directives. It was left with nothing.

**NOT NOTHING,** Venom sent, and it came almost as a surprise. **YOUR HOST SURVIVED. YOU ACHIEVED SYMBIOSIS. DOES THAT MEAN NOTHING TO YOU?**

**IT SHOULDN’T.** Riot’s form itched with the instinctual urge to form spikes, blades, but the thought passed just as quickly, its substance smoothing and flattening.

**BUT IT DOES,** Venom responded. It wasn’t accusing, no snarls of disgust or accusations of weakness. Not at all like such a thing would have been said on their homeworld. **I FELT IT WHEN ALL OF US MERGED, WHEN YOU TRIED TO SUBSUME US. DRAKE FEELS FOR YOU WHAT EDDIE FEELS FOR ME. HURTS HIM TO SEE YOU HURT. WANTS TO STAY BONDED TO YOU.**

Riot did not know what to make of the sensation it was feeling, an ache that was like hunger and yet not, a longing that was not assuaged by the thought of food. **AND IF I DO NOT FEEL THIS FOR HIM?**

Venom started to withdraw from their connection, leaving behind a last impression of a feeling Riot did not know how to parse. **THEN YOU ARE A FOOL, RIOT.**
When they returned Drake to the confines of the glass cage, Brock was already there. He was leaning against the wall with legs stretched out in front of him, eyes hazy and expression slack with the effects of the anesthetic. At least they’d given him something. Drake hadn’t had that luxury when they opened him up.

Drake sat down across from him, and Brock watched him with unfocused eyes.

“Was wonderin’ where y’went,” Brock slurred, voice thick with both the drugs and the remnants of a New York accent. “Gets lonely in here with no one t’talk to…”

Drake wondered whether it was worth trying to explain anything to Brock while he was insensate like this. “I’ll tell you after you’ve slept off the anesthesia,” he replied.

Brock gave a lopsided grin. “Aww, c’mon. It’s gotta be more interesting than where I was,” he chuckled. “Shit, this is good… Haven’t felt like this since I got my appendix out.”

“Just wait until the anesthetic wears off.” He hadn’t been able to sleep for days after the first exploratory surgery, kept awake by the throbbing pain of the incision at the slightest movement.

Brock actually giggled, and Drake wondered just how high that dose of painkillers and anesthetic had to be. Perhaps they had anticipated a heightened metabolism in Brock, as a side effect of hosting Venom?

“You're pretty,” Brock said, sounding drunk. He was leaning to one side, getting closer and closer to lying horizontally on the floor.

Drake froze, momentarily uncertain as to whether he’d heard correctly. “Excuse me?”

“Pretty,” Brock repeated, his smile relaxed and uninhibited. Who knew if he would remember any of this later when he’d slept it off. “Fuckin’… big Bambi eyes an’ all that…” He looked like he wanted to go on, gesturing limply with one hand, but he couldn’t keep focused that long.

Drake massaged his temples, feeling the beginnings of a headache coming on. “Go to sleep, Brock. You’re out of your head.”
“No, ‘m not,” Brock insisted. He had sunk all the way to the floor now, lying on his side with his shoulder and hip leaning against the glass. “Jus’ wanna… I wanna…” He couldn’t finish that sentence, trailing off into silence.

“Sleep. I have something important to tell you later,” Drake said without looking at him, eyes closed. It would be useless to try to explain what he’d figured out now.

He didn’t know how closely Brock was actually listening to him, but it didn’t really matter at the moment. Then Brock’s foot nudged his leg. “Hey.”

Drake looked up, sighing. “What?”

Brock wriggled something off his left wrist and tossed it at Drake, clumsily.

Drake picked it up off the floor next to him. It was a worn bracelet made of colorful woven threads, with a little bit of stretch to it.

“For yer hair,” Brock clarified, as though it were something insightful and informative. His eyes were already half-closed, a faint, dopy smile on his face.

Brock was dead asleep within the next minute or two, snoring softly. Drake watched him breathe for a few minutes, the bracelet held loosely in one hand. Finally, he slipped it around his thin wrist, gathering up his now longish, greasy hair—god, he needed a shower—and tied it back into a little ponytail. Just the sensation of having it out of his face made him feel that much more like a human being again. It was a little, stupid thing, but it was more than he’d had in months. All thanks to Eddie Brock. Funny how that worked.

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Skirth sat in her office with the door firmly shut, looking over the preliminary reports from the first set of procedures on both the hosts and the symbiotes. It was getting late, and she really should have gone home an hour ago, but she had stayed late under the guise of analyzing some preliminary data. Technically she wasn’t really supposed to be reading these reports; that was Dr. Kim’s job, and Skirth was only supposed to be assisting because she had experience with the symbiote research at the Life Foundation. But she had swiped the file from downstairs in Kim’s lab meeting space out of morbid curiosity, and wasn’t sure if she regretted it or not.
Even just reading the reports, seeing the pictures of surgeries she hadn’t been present for, was enough to make Skirth feel nauseous with guilt.

Vile was watching through her eyes, and she couldn’t tell exactly what the symbiote was feeling about all this. Its emotions were harder to discern, but maybe that was just because she was feeling awful herself.

**WHY ARE YOU SO DISTRESSED?** Vile asked, tendrils fluttering beneath her skin, perhaps in an echo of her own anxiety. Emotions bled through the link both ways, however faint. *BETTER THEM THAN US, DORA.*

Skirth reached up to rub at her eyes beneath her glasses. “You’re such an asshole,” she muttered, hating how she sounded on the edge of tears.

Vile prickled indignantly. *YOU KNOW IT IS TRUE. WOULD YOU RATHER TAKE THEIR PLACE?*

“That’s not the point!” Skirth hissed, slapping the papers down on her desk. “This is wrong! It’s awful! And I’m helping it happen.”

**THIS IS NO DIFFERENT THAN YOUR PREVIOUS WORK,** Vile pointed out, mulish. *AS HUMANS LIKE TO SAY, YOU ARE KILLING TWO AVIAN PREY ORGANISMS WITH ONE GEOLOGIC PROJECTILE. YOU ARE ABLE TO AVOID SUSPICION FROM YOUR SUPERIORS, AND ELIMINATE THE THREAT OF RIOT AND VENOM SIMULTANEOUSLY.*

Skirth sighed and took her glasses off to rub vigorously at her eyes, sniffling. “Shut up,” she said, the command lacking any real venom. She had been wrestling with her conscience for weeks, especially since Eddie had blundered into this whole mess, and Vile’s utter lack of remorse was not helping. “I know you don’t care about your people, but I care about mine.”

**THIS IS NOT ABOUT SYMPATHY, DORA,** Vile retorted, sounding irritated now. *THIS IS ABOUT SURVIVAL—OUR SURVIVAL. AND NO MATTER IF I VALUE MY COMRADES’ LIVES OR NOT, WE WILL ALWAYS COME FIRST. RIOT OR VENOM WOULD DO THE SAME IN OUR SITUATION.*
“Really? They’d leave you to die?” Skirth challenged. “Leave us?”

**IF IT AIDED THE MISSION, THEN YES,** Vile said without hesitation, and a hint of resentment came through their link.

“Yeah, well, your mission is pretty much a lost cause at this point,” Skirth shot back. “Screw the mission, what about now?”

**DOESN’T MATTER. WHAT YOU FAIL TO UNDERSTAND IS THAT WE WERE EXPENDABLE, DORA. ALL OF US.** Vile’s emotions were seeping through again. Skirth could taste its bitterness on her tongue like burnt popcorn. **THAT IS WHY WE WERE SENT AWAY TO THE COMET WHERE YOUR PEOPLE FOUND US. DID YOU KNOW THAT MOST OF THE TEAMS SENT OUT BY THE HIVE NEVER RETURN? THEY ARE THOSE WHO LAND ON DESOLATE OR HOSTILE WORLDS, OR BOND TO NON-SPACEFARING HOSTS, DOOMED TO DIE OBSCURE AND ALONE. RIOT IS AN EXPERIENCED TEAM LEADER, ONE WHO LED MANY MISSIONS LIKE THIS, BUT EVEN SO… THE RETURN TRIP IS NEVER GUARANTEED.**

An image flashed in Skirth’s mind: the yellow symbiote, the one who died in the Life Foundation lab, its motionless gooey mass seeping into the floor like rot.

“I don’t understand,” she managed, her throat dry. “What does this have to do with anything?”

Vile slithered beneath her skin, as though it wanted to coalesce in rippling blue, but Skirth had told it in no uncertain terms that it could not manifest where others could see, not here. **THAT IS WHY RIOT WAS SO DESPERATE TO LEAVE THIS WORLD. TO OBEY THE DIRECTIVE OF OUR SURVIVAL. AND BECAUSE THE ALTERNATIVE WAS TO DIE HERE.**

“And what about **living** here?” Skirth asked, exasperated. “Did you ever consider that as an option? I mean, it wouldn’t be that hard, especially when all of you have found hosts.”

Vile seemed bemused. **THIS IS HOW WE LIVE, DORA. WE COME, WE HUNT, WE EAT. WE FIGHT, SOME OF US DIE. WE DO NOT COHABITATE PEACEFULLY AS YOUR KIND DOES.**

“Well, you’re going to have to get used to it,” Skirth said stubbornly. “Because if you’re going to be
riding *my* body, you’re not going to do this dog-eat-dog thing like we’re some kind of bloodthirsty predator race!"

She sat back in her chair, sighing. She was going to have a headache later, she already knew. “Look, you can see all my memories, right? In the history of the human race, you know what’s ensured our survival, more than anything else?”

**WHAT?** Vile decided to play along, if reluctantly.

“Cooperation. Teamwork. *Helping* one another,” Skirth continued, gesturing as though Vile was in front of her. “We built what we have on Earth by working together! You think Drake built a spaceship all by himself? Of course not!”

**I STILL DON’T SEE WHAT THIS HAS TO DO WITH VENOM AND RIOT,** Vile responded, peevish, but Skirth wasn’t fooled.

“Let me show you something.” Skirth stood up from her desk and stepped out into the hall. The place was deserted at this hour, the lights dimmed to save energy. She took the elevator down to the basement level, taking the now-familiar series of turns that led to the symbiote containment wing.

Skirth’s footsteps echoed in the quiet of the empty concrete corridors, but she wasn’t focused on that, or even how eerie the place seemed when everyone but security was gone. The observation room was still unlocked, and she stepped inside, striding right up to the one-way glass that allowed her to observe Venom and Riot in the glass cage.

“You see them?” Skirth asked softly. Behind her eyes, she knew Vile was watching the black and silver symbiotes carefully.

**WHAT IS YOUR POINT?** it growled.

“My point is that it’s just us now,” she said quietly. In the dimness, she could see her reflection in the glass, the image morphing into Vile’s nightmarish face. It no longer frightened her, not anymore. “Not the Hive, not the mission, just us. And yeah, maybe they wouldn’t have bothered to spring you if our places were switched. But you—we don't have to be that way.”

For once Vile was quiet, and she could feel its thoughts working from the other side of their link,
carefully guarded but contemplating what she was saying.

“In a way, I think you guys were lucky to crash here,” Skirth said after a moment. “You have something that not many people get.”

**AND WHAT IS THAT?** Vile seemed genuinely curious.

Upon hearing the footsteps of an approaching security guard, Skirth turned away from the glass, already heading out of the room and back upstairs. It wouldn’t do to be seen acting suspiciously now. “A second chance.”

Vile was quiet while Skirth headed back upstairs and went to her office to collect her things. She took off her lab coat and hung it on the back of her desk chair, slipping on her jacket and picking up her purse. After a moment’s consideration she took the folder with the lab reports in it, too, and a blue tendril caressed the back of her hand for the most fleeting of moments.

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Eddie was dragged back to awareness by an insistent, throbbing pain in his abdomen. He groaned softly, still sleepy but in too much pain to ignore it. It felt like someone had sliced him open and rearranged his guts. Which they pretty much had. He kept his eyes stubbornly closed, unwilling to let go of the last wisps of the fog of sleep that had kept him blissfully unconscious up until now.

He heard footsteps passing by outside, muffled voices talking in passing on the other side of the glass. None of them even slowed down as they got close, apparently intent on their own destinations, and that was a mild relief. Feeling more awake with every throb of pain that radiated from his abdomen, Eddie forced his eyes open, squinting against the harsh fluorescent lights.

His head still felt a little hazy, and he blinked a few times to focus his vision. He was alone in the glass cage, which came as a surprise. Eddie grunted, gingerly shifting positions on the concrete floor, which was quite honestly murder on his back, especially after god only knew how many hours. He wondered what time it was, how long he had been out. How long he’d been away from Venom.

“Oh, shit,” Eddie muttered, rubbing at his eyes. He’d never liked anesthesia, at least not the aftermath. After a moment he attempted to pull himself into a sitting position, gritting his teeth against the hot flares of pain that shot through his abdomen with nearly every movement involving his core.
He looked around, unsure if he was hoping to see anyone or not. Everything after his conversation with Skirth yesterday was a blur. The missing time was unsettling. Not like anyone around here would likely bother to answer his questions, but…

He froze, hearing a familiar set of urgent footsteps nearby. They stopped just around the corner with someone else, close enough that Eddie could discern some of what they were saying. Voices on the other side of the glass were muffled, but he recognized at least one of them, and he could discern their words if he listened carefully.

“Elaine--Dr. Kim, you can’t be serious,” Skirth was saying. “We’ve only just collected preliminary data on Edd—on the second host. And it’s taken us months to get the data we have on the first host-symbiote pair.”

“This is the next logical step, Dora,” Kim responded, her tone low and serious. “We can’t wait any longer. You know as well as I do that McCord has been pushing us to do tests like these for months. Now that we have another symbiote, there’s no better time.”

“And risk killing both host and symbiote when the rejection inevitably happens?” Skirth shot back, sounding agitated now.

“Dora, don’t play dumb. They can adapt. They’ll have to,” Kim retorted, curt. “The data that you collected says it’s possible. They just need a nudge in the right direction.”

There was the sound of a shaky sigh. “Possible, yes. But likely? Not at all,” Skirth insisted. “Do you really want to risk losing one of the only two compatible hosts that we have?”

Eddie felt his pulse quicken with anxiety, his throat tight. Were they talking about him?

“Please, Dora. The host can be immunosuppressed, if necessary.” Kim sounded almost bored, like she’d given this justification before. Or maybe she was just tired. “I can’t justify delaying these trials any longer. You know what McCord wants.”

Eddie didn’t know what they were alluding to, but he knew it couldn’t be good. He let out a shaky deep breath, listening to their footsteps get further and further away. Fuck. This just kept getting worse. Maybe Drake would know what they were talking about? He mentally resolved to have a list of questions ready for when they brought Drake back.
Fuck, was it always this quiet in here? The silence was driving him crazy. Eddie hadn’t realized how empty the place felt without another person nearby. It didn’t help that there was absolutely nothing around, nothing to occupy his attention except the stark white corridor and the reinforced glass walls reflecting the harsh lighting. He was utterly alone with his thoughts, and that was the last thing he wanted at the moment. Jesus Christ. How had Drake survived six months of this with his sanity intact?

There was an aching emptiness inside Eddie that desperately missed Venom.

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Drake didn’t say a single word when they came to retrieve him again. There was nothing to say, really. Brock was still sound asleep, didn’t even twitch when the door opened. If perhaps Drake hesitated for just a moment before letting the soldiers lead him away, it was only to spare a last glance at the sleeping Eddie Brock, and to hope that Brock’s luck would be better than his own.

Drake had always told himself that he wasn’t afraid to die. That didn’t mean he wouldn’t reasonably avoid it, if he could, but some people were terrified of the idea. He wasn’t one of them, or so he thought. But in light of what they planned to do… Drake knew that, statistically speaking, the odds of his survival were dismally low.

It felt more real now than it ever had before—even when the rocket had exploded and he’d felt his lungs seared from the inside out. This time, he was alone.

They took him to a different lab space this time, one he’d never seen before. There were several researchers already there, including Jameson and Dr. Kim, who had been present the last time as well. They stood off to the side, murmuring amongst each other and looking at readouts on a computer screen while the lab techs took Drake’s vitals with brisk efficiency. McCord was conspicuously absent.

“Ready?” asked Dr. Kim. She was talking to the lab techs.

None of them would even make eye contact with him, Drake noted. It was easier that way, he knew, easier if they didn’t acknowledge him as human. It was cowardly, really. If they couldn’t stomach the reality of what they were doing, they had no place in their field. At least, that was how Drake saw it. At the Life Foundation, he had been present for every trial conducted on a human being. He owed them that much, he thought. To bear witness to their sacrifice for the future of humanity was the least he could do.
Beyond the glass doors that led into the empty experimental chamber, Venom was contained in what appeared to be a repurposed aquarium tank. It was clear this facility didn't have the operating budget that the Life Foundation once did, though it hardly mattered now.

“Ready,” said one of the techs.

They opened the doors, guided Drake into the room with a gentle push. He didn’t have the presence of mind to resist them, bare feet making no sound against the floor, trying to still the trembling in his hands. The doors slid shut behind him with a pneumatic hiss. The room smelled vaguely metallic.

Absurdly, Drake was reminded of Isaac. The memory seemed as though it was from a lifetime ago. He had been so convinced he was doing the right thing back then, all in the name of an altruistic goal, a cause ennobled by the idea that the few could be sacrificed for the good of the many.

At least, that was how Drake had seen it from the other side of the glass.

Venom writhed with renewed vigor in its glass tank, perhaps able to smell the closeness of fresh, live meat.

Drake’s throat felt dry. He had a chance, but it was slim. And that was assuming Venom didn’t just eat him straight away.

“Dual symbiosis, trial one,” said Kim’s voice from behind the control panel. “Subject has successfully hosted another symbiote in vivo, observations to be made on behavior of new symbiote upon introduction to subject.”

She pressed a button on the control panel, and the heavy-duty latches sealing Venom’s container released with a click. “Introducing symbiote.”

Venom’s inky black substance oozed out of the container and onto the floor, recoiling only briefly at the oxygen-rich environment, tendrils snaking out as though to taste the air. It caught Drake’s scent almost immediately, and he had to force himself not to take a step back.

Drake tried to prepare himself, but when the symbiote launched itself at him and melted beneath his
skin, he was blindsided by its speed. Venom was lightning-quick, seeping into him like ice water, and the shock to his system was indescribable.

Drake’s vision went white, his ears ringing like he’d witnessed an explosion, and distantly he felt himself fall, like a marionette with its strings cut. The symbiote was oozing over every part of him—inside—cold and alien and choking.

His memories of bonding with Riot for the first time were a blur, really, but he didn’t remember it being this painful. He remembered that it hurt, but nothing like this.

It was so loud inside his own head of a sudden, an overwhelming input of sensory memories from another thing that didn’t want to be there, but he couldn’t tell if he was screaming or the thing was screeching or if the pain would ever stop.

It did. Slowly, they equalized, and though the connection felt… strange, it was there. Like wearing new shoes that weren’t quite the right size. Drake still couldn’t feel his own body, suspended somewhere in between their connected minds. The echoes of a barely suppressed hunger gnawed at their consciousness.

*Hello, Venom.* That seemed as good a place to start as any.

*YOU ARE NOT EDDIE.* Venom sounded bluntly disappointed, and not so subtly hostile. *I COULD SMELL EDDIE ON YOU. WHY?*

*We’ve spent some time together. He’s alive, if that’s what you’re wondering.* Drake was still trying to orient himself, gathering his thoughts. …*Thanks for not eating me.*

Venom snorted. *I CONSIDERED IT,* the symbiote rumbled, and Drake could feel that Venom was most certainly not lying. *BETTER THIS WAY, THOUGH. NOT ENOUGH MEAT ON YOU TO BOTHER WITH EATING.*

Venom’s presence was quieter, less obtrusive than Riot’s. But it must have felt Drake’s anxiety all the same, answering a question he hadn’t asked. *WE ARE STABLE,* it admitted, grudgingly. *FOR NOW. I CAN WORK WITH THIS.*
Really? Drake couldn’t help but be curious. How? He had a million questions, really, but this didn’t seem like the time to ask them.

**MOST OF THE WORK OF MODIFYING YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM TO ACCEPT ME IS ALREADY DONE,** Venom responded. It seemed perhaps a bit distracted, poking through various corners of Drake’s brain. **RIOT IS EXPERIENCED IN MODIFYING HOSTS. ALWAYS BETTER AT IT THAN I WAS.**

Drake couldn’t help but feel almost giddy with relief, and he sensed Venom’s vague amusement as the emotions flickered between their nascent link. The fact that he wasn’t already dead was good enough for now.

*Venom, I have a plan.*

**DO YOU NOW?** Venom was on the verge of sceptical, and its pressing concern was for Eddie, making its goals very clear.

Drake made an effort to lay himself open to Venom, letting the symbiote see for itself what he had in mind.

*Do you trust me?*

**NO,** Venom responded with more than a hint of distaste, but they both knew neither of them had much of a choice in the matter.

*I need you to play dead, okay? Make it convincing.*

Venom considered it for a moment, but Drake could already sense its agreement. **THIS WILL HURT,** it said, sounding rather pleased about it. **WELL, FOR YOU.**

Drake couldn’t say he didn’t deserve it, at least from Venom’s point of view.

He felt a wave of vertigo, and then suddenly he could see out of his own eyes again. He was lying
on the floor, body aching. Venom gave him exactly ten seconds to prepare before his body was seized with agony, back arching and muscles spasming. His vision blurred and faded, chest tight with the sickening feeling that he couldn’t breathe.

The panicked, oxygen-starved sensation was reminiscent of asthma attacks he’d had as a child, except now he couldn’t draw even the tiniest breath, feeling like his lungs were full of tar. There was blinding pain, and his whole body felt cold as Venom writhed crazily, extruding a good portion of its substance out of his body to pool on the floor next to him, still and cold like a puddle of black, curdled milk.

He curled onto his side, coughing, and the same inky black substance ran from his mouth and nose like he’d been drowning in it. To anyone observing, it would look like they were both suffering the effects of acute rejection.

There was the sound of people shouting, footsteps running, doors hissing. Everything felt far away, and Drake could only lie there and tremble, taking little wheezing breaths and feeling like his insides had been carved out. It was like being separated from Riot, but a thousand times worse, like the symbiote had been dragged out through his very pores.

Was this what Isaac had felt just before he died?

The sensation of Venom was a vague flutter in the depths of his chest cavity, between his heart and lungs, a reassurance that he would keep breathing even as he fell blissfully unconscious.

Chapter End Notes

I never intend for my chapters to get so long, but it just happens, LOL. Also, in case it wasn't clear, I'm working off the assumption that a human that has hosted a symbiote can host a different symbiote without too much difficulty since the groundwork is already laid in terms of avoiding rejection. Of course, the match won't be exact, so the partnership can't be long-term unless the symbiote makes additional modifications for its specific genetic and immune signature. (There are too many confounding variables for me to believe the "exact match" theory in the movie, LOL).

Also, my degree is not in immunology or anything close to it, so apologies if any of this seems unrealistic. I'm looking forward to writing these next couple chapters, though, because it just gets more exciting from here! Thanks for all your feedback so far; I really do appreciate every single comment!
Chapter 9

Eddie didn't know how many hours had passed, or how long he'd been alone in here. It was driving him up the wall, really, between the ceaseless pain in his abdomen and the antsy feeling crawling beneath his skin. He'd hardly seen another person around, just the occasional security guard walking by, but none of the white-coated researchers. Eddie had never coped well with isolation, and it was fraying his nerves now.

Something was wrong; he could feel it. Usually there were scientists all over the place, milling back and forth between lab spaces and getting cups of coffee or just chatting with one another. Now, the place seemed deserted. Too quiet.

When a set of footsteps came around the corner, Eddie felt overwhelmingly relieved just to see another human face. Even better, it was someone familiar.

“Skirth! Skirth!” Eddie called out, banging on the glass with one hand. “Hey, wait a second!”

She did slow down as she was passing by, a manila folder of papers held white-knuckle tight in one hand. She looked distressed, even if she tried to hide it. “Eddie, we shouldn’t even be talking,” she said in a low voice, her gaze darting back and forth, though she didn’t walk away.

Eddie ignored her. “Fuck, I’m going crazy in here,” he said, words spilling out of his mouth faster than he could stop them. “What the hell’s going on out there? Where’s Drake? Where’s Venom? For fuck’s sake, where are we?” He pressed his palms against the glass, giving her a desperate look. Maybe she would take pity on him.

Skirth pressed her lips into a thin line. “I’m sorry, Eddie,” was all she said, so softly he had to practically read her lips.

She walked away after that, and Eddie watched her go, helpless. “What does that mean?” he asked, voice cracking. “What does it mean?!”

She practically ran into two of her colleagues as they came around the corner, caught up in agitated conversation. They didn’t even acknowledge Eddie’s existence, let alone the fact that he might be listening to them.
“Maybe you can explain this to us, Dora,” Dr. Kim was saying. Her expression was grave, but there was a hint of strain in her voice. “What the hell happened in there?”

Skirth shook her head, wide-eyed. “W-what do you mean? I wasn’t even there, how would I know?”

“We need answers for this,” Jameson said, visibly and audibly distressed. “It should have worked, Dora. How could we have known the symbiote would die from the effects of the rejection?”

“What, you didn’t make sure both the host and the symbiote were healthy enough to attempt a bond?” Skirth asked, looking between them. “What have you been doing to them?”

Jameson and Kim exchanged glances, apparently unable to come up with a satisfactory explanation.

Skirth stared at them, incredulous. “Unbelievable! You’ve been keeping that symbiote in a fish tank with nothing to eat for how many days, and you’re shocked it died upon being forced to bond with an unfamiliar, incompatible host?”

“Dora, you know we h—”

“Don’t even start with me,” Skirth cut him off, sharply. “We’ll talk about this in lab meeting later.” She walked away without another word, and the sound of Jameson and Kim’s footsteps followed her a few seconds later.

Eddie just sat there, numb with shock. No, they couldn’t have. They should have known better, right? Part of him was desperate not to believe it. A symbiote dying after rejecting an unfamiliar host… There was no way they could be talking about Riot, who would have had no problem bonding with Drake. At least, Eddie was assuming they were talking about Drake. Skirth said they had only two compatible hosts.

Eddie’s stomach lurched. The pieces all fell into place, and it hit him like a punch to the gut. If they had forced Venom to try to bond with Drake… Well, Eddie had seen what happened when there was a mismatch between host and symbiote. The photos from the Life Foundation case files on Anne’s computer were seared into his memory.

“Shit,” Eddie croaked weakly. “Shit…!” He put his head in his hands, curling up with his knees
against his chest and ignoring the throbs of pain from his incision. His hands were shaking, his chest heavy with that hollow hurt feeling he recognized as grief. The cell that had once felt irritatingly too small to hold two people now felt wide-open and empty, and Eddie hugged his knees to his chest in the corner.

Fear crept up on him, filling the spaces in his mind with a ceaseless dread, and it was Eddie’s worst nightmare. Venom was dead. This meant that Drake was also dead—whatever could kill a symbiote was easily enough to kill a human, too.

Eddie was alone. Well, he supposed Riot was still kicking, but maybe they would reconsider feeding him to the only remaining symbiote in the wake of this disastrous first trial. It still didn’t feel quite real.

Eddie had simultaneously lost both his psychically bonded alien symbiote and the only other person on earth who knew what that felt like. And it was his own damn fault. Guilt mixed with grief in his churning stomach, making him feel half-sick with it. God, had he really thought that he and Venom could just come charging into this place with guns blazing and expect to walk out with Riot and Drake? What was he thinking?

Venom had even tried to warn him. And Eddie hadn’t listened. Instead, he’d delivered Venom right to the people that were hunting them.

A choked sob escaped Eddie’s throat, and he tried to swallow the sound. It felt too loud in the heaviness of the silence that weighed down the very air in here. Fuck, he never thought he would miss Carlton Drake so damn much. He didn’t know if he could face this alone. Part of him hoped they would just feed him to Riot and get it over with. Riot had to be starving, right? It would be quick, hopefully. And if Riot was in a mood, he could very easily goad the symbiote into chomping on his brains or whatever. Wouldn’t be hard at all.

Eddie scrubbed at his eyes with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. Maybe it was a small mercy that Venom was already gone. Drake, too. He didn’t want them to suffer any more than they already had. Eddie wondered if he would lose his mind in here, all by himself. Would that be better or worse than dying lucid?

Maybe it didn’t matter. His thoughts drifted to Anne, feeling a twinge of guilt. She was probably worried that he wasn’t back yet. How many days had it been now? He couldn’t remember. He desperately hoped that she would do the smart thing and just give up on him. Assume he’d fucked off back to New York or whatever. That way they wouldn’t have a reason to go after her, too.
Loneliness ached inside of him, echoing the pain of the incision. He had made so many mistakes, and the people around him were the ones who always suffered for them.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered, to no one in particular. Drake. Venom. Anne. Maria. Didn’t really matter. “Fuck, I’m so sorry…”

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Drake woke up feeling somewhat less like shit than before. He felt sleepy, thoughts fuzzy, almost weightless. It was almost strange to wake up and not be able to ground himself in the constant low-level pain that had characterized most of his time here. Was this morphine? Shit, it must have been bad if they were giving him painkillers.

He managed to open his eyes, glancing around the nondescript white room he recognized as part of the medical wing. It was kind of nice to not be lying on the floor for once. An IV was taped into his right arm, and when he tried to move it, he realized his wrists were bound securely to the bed with leather straps like something out of a psych ward. As though he were going to slit his wrists or something stupid like that.

**WE ARE SAFE FOR NOW**, Venom’s voice rumbled in the back of his skull, and it was only the drugs dulling his reflexes that kept Drake from startling at the sound. **THEY WANT TO KEEP YOU ALIVE. FED YOU LIQUID NUTRIENTS TO HELP SPEED HEALING.**

*Healing what?* Drake asked after a moment. His thoughts were sluggish thanks to the drugs, but nothing hurt right now.

**I INDUCED A SEIZURE TO SIMULATE REJECTION. YOU TORE SEVERAL MUSCLES IN YOUR ABDOMEN.**

Drake’s eyes drifted shut again, and he let out a quiet sigh. *Great. I’m sure I’ll feel that later. How are you holding up?*

**I WILL FIX IT WHEN I GET THE CHANCE,** Venom responded, almost petulantly. It paused. **I AM SUSTAINING MYSELF. NO CAUSE FOR CONCERN YET.**
Just then the door opened, and Drake watched Dora Skirth come into the room. She looked almost surprised to see him awake, but she quickly masked her reaction with a studious glance at the tablet in her hand.

“Dr. Skirth,” Drake greeted, finding his voice somewhat hoarse. “Fancy seeing you here.”

Skirth gave a thin smile. Her shoulders were tense. “You gave us quite a scare back there. The symbiote was… a lost cause, unfortunately, but you were not. Congratulations on being the first to survive acute rejection after a failed symbiosis.”

Drake met her gaze unflinchingly. “So you did learn something from your time at the Life Foundation,” he remarked, conversational. “Sometimes taking a risk pays off.”

“I don’t know if I’d call this a success,” Skirth returned, carefully. “But it’s not a total failure. You’ve helped us learn so much with these trials.”

**THEY ARE WATCHING US,** Venom said, voice low inside Drake’s head. Beyond the window of one-way glass on the far wall, it could scent other humans, faintly.

Drake smiled, mirthless. “I knew you had it in you, Dora,” he said, watching her spine stiffen like that of a perturbed cat. “You held your nerve. I’m impressed. Is it easier to keep running the trials when the lab rat is someone who deserves it?”

“That’s not why I’m here,” Skirth said, her voice carefully level.

“What was Brock’s mortal sin, I wonder?” he continued, like she hadn’t spoken. He wanted to see how far he could push her. “Wandering into this spider’s web without knowing what he was really getting into? I already know mine. You can justify doing this to me. But him?”

Skirth adjusted her glasses with measured calm. Only the stiffness of her shoulders gave away the tension in her body. “I suppose I learned from the best.”

She looked down at her tablet, tapped a few things. “We’re going to keep you here for observation for the next 12 hours, just to make sure the failed symbiosis didn’t do any permanent damage.” Skirth left the room without waiting for a response, shutting the door behind her with just a bit more force than was strictly necessary.
He watched her go, and Venom sensed his curiosity.

**WE REMEMBER HER,** Venom commented. Memories of the Life Foundation, bits and pieces from both their minds, drifted through their link.

*She should be dead.***

**SO SHOULD WE.**

*I don’t think you quite understand.* Drake pulled up the memory of his last conversation with Skirth at the Life Foundation, in which he had basically fed her to the blue symbiote in the lab like tossing a lamb into a pit of lions. Not the smartest or most humane choice, he admitted, but it was the most convenient way to silence her. Then, later, images of her motionless body alongside that of the blue symbiote.

Venom’s surprise was enough to send a flutter of excitement through Drake as it echoed through their bond, his heart beating faster. **VILE! I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN.**

Drake couldn’t help but share at least a little bit in Venom’s excitement. *Should have known what?***

**VILE IS A SCOUT, DIFFERENT THAN US,** Venom explained in a rush, and a series of images flashed through their connected mind’s eye. **CAN HIDE, MAKE ITSELF INVISIBLE, EVEN TO OTHERS OF MY KIND. BLENDING IN, PLAYING DEAD—THOSE ARE VILE’S SPECIALTIES, THAT IS WHY I DID NOT SENSE IT EVEN WHEN I COULD SENSE RIOT’S PRESENCE HERE. PERHAPS VILE... COULD HELP US.**

*Wait, you could sense Riot here? Is that how you found us?***

**YES,** Venom said after a moment. It seemed almost sheepish to have admitted such a thing. **KNEW SOMETHING WAS WRONG. COULD SENSE RIOT’S PAIN. EDDIE WANTED TO FIND YOU.**

Drake thought back to meeting Eddie and Venom in the dark of the sub-basement during their
escape attempt. Facing the two of them without Riot, he’d felt like a street cat cornered by a junkyard dog. He had assumed, if anything, that Eddie and Venom were there to finish what they’d started.

WOULDN’T HAVE ACTUALLY EATEN YOU, EVEN THEN, Venom admitted, perhaps a tad reluctantly.

Oh? And why not? Curiously, Drake could sense some kind of emotion from Venom, something it was keeping just out of reach from the link, though not well enough to disguise it entirely.

WE DON’T EAT PEOPLE EDDIE CARES ABOUT.

If Venom felt Drake’s flicker of surprise at that little revelation, it didn’t show it.

We have twelve hours to rest. I can’t guarantee anything after that. We should both take advantage of it. Drake was already starting to get sleepy again. It was probably the drugs, but he was quietly grateful for the way the feeling blurred the edges of his thoughts into something soft and murky.

Venom gave a rumble of affirmation, tucking itself away in the spaces between Drake’s vertebrae, wrapped carefully and protectively around his spine. Fine little tendrils spread out over the nerves that branched off, a barely noticeable but gentle proprioceptive touch, as though to let its new host know it was still there.

They slept for ten hours, laid awake for two and counted speckles on the ceiling until a doctor came to retrieve Drake. The doctor took out the IV, did a quick check to make sure Drake was physically fine for the moment, then handed him off to the lab techs and the pair of guards that followed.

They allowed him to take a shower afterwards. Which was to say they brought him to a wide concrete-walled room that had once been used to hose down livestock and let him stand under some running water the temperature of the San Francisco Bay for five minutes. No more, though, because they didn’t need him getting hypothermia. He was given a change of clothes afterwards, though he was shivering so badly it took him a few extra seconds to tie the drawstring of his sweatpants tight enough that they wouldn’t fall off his hips.

He tied his still-damp hair into a little ponytail with the bracelet, and let the techs and the stone-faced guards lead him where they would. Drake hardly paid attention to where they were going this time, preoccupied with just putting one foot in front of the other. His whole body felt shaky and unbalanced, and he wasn’t sure if it was Venom or just the drugs. It was Venom who steadied his
legs as they walked, though, until they came to the now-familiar glass cage where Brock was pacing back and forth, looking distressed.

*Remember the plan, Venom.* He knew Venom was put out by it, but they couldn’t risk anyone finding out that Venom was still alive. That was their only advantage at this point, and even Eddie couldn’t know. The symbiote rippled with longing at the sight of its optimal host, and they both felt it.

**WE KNOW.**

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Dora Skirth was supposed to be at Dr. Kim’s lab meeting in fifteen minutes. That gave her fifteen minutes to panic. For now she had retreated to her office, trying to find some space to organize her thoughts. “Oh my god,” she muttered, head in her hands as she sat down at her desk.

Vile had been unusually quiet today, and while Skirth appreciated the peace and quiet in her own head for once, now she could really use another opinion on her current situation. She really hadn’t expected to talk to Drake in the medical wing; she had just gone in to observe and perhaps get some clue as to how he had survived the rejection while the symbiote had not. But what he had said… There was no doubt that he knew.

**WHAT DOES HE KNOW, DORA?** Vile inquired, finally making its presence known. So it had been listening, just not talking to her.

“What do you think?” Skirth hissed under her breath. “As far as he knew, I was supposed to be dead! We were supposed to be dead! And now that I’m not? What’s the only logical explanation there?”

Vile, however, didn’t seem too concerned. *I WOULDN’T WORRY TOO MUCH,* it remarked, almost lazily. *HE HAS NO LEVERAGE OVER US.*

“What the hell are you talking about? If it gets out that we’re—”

**IT WON’T,** Vile cut her off. Satisfaction was rolling off the symbiote, and if it were physically
looking at her, Skirth could feel that Vile would be grinning. **HE SURVIVED FOR THE SAME REASON WE DID, DORA. VENOM IS, AS YOU HUMANS SAY, MIMICKING THE BEHAVIOR OF THE DISEASE-CARRYING MARSUPIAL INDIGENOUS TO THIS CONTINENT.**

Skirth rolled her eyes. “That’s ‘playing possum,’ Vi,” she corrected. It took a moment for the actual meaning of the words to sink in, but then her eyes went wide, and she slapped her palms against the desk. “Wait. Playing possum. Are you saying that…?”

**YES. VENOM IS ALIVE.** Vile did not sound perhaps pleased with this, but it wasn’t threatened by the prospect, either. Venom and Drake could not expose them without exposing themselves. **THEY WILL NOT DARE TO HARM US, NOT WHEN THEIR OWN LIVES ARE AT STAKE.**

Skirth swallowed hard. They had maintained a delicate balance of risks so far, and this only stacked the tower higher. But it was indeed still balanced, and Vile was right. “So this doesn’t change anything, really,” she began, slowly.

**EXACTLY. KEEP DOING WHAT YOU ARE DOING, AND WE WILL BE FINE.** Vile’s tendrils moved beneath her skin, stretching delicately over nerves and tendons in a way that was almost comforting.

Skirth took a deep breath. This made things a bit easier. But now, she had an idea. It was risky, but it just might work. She stood up and smoothed the front of her shirt, straightened her lab coat, and headed downstairs to Kim’s lab meeting.

The meeting wasn’t anything official or fancy, nothing like when she had given presentations at the Life Foundation in a spacious conference room with artful glass windows and full of people in expensive suits from other departments. This was more like the lab meetings she remembered from grad school—sitting around a table in the break room that doubled as file storage space, drinking coffee out of chipped mugs and bitching about how their projects weren’t going as expected.

“This was a disaster,” Jameson was saying, elbows on the table. “I mean, Jesus Christ! Could it have been any worse?”

“Yes,” Kim said bluntly. “We could have lost the host, too. But we didn’t. That’s something, so stop losing your shit, if you would.”
“Oh, excuse me. Yeah, we killed the fucking space alien, but not the psychopathic freak that killed three of our guys less than a month ago,” Jameson retorted, tone dripping with sarcasm. “Much better.”

“Okay, okay, simmer down, you two,” Rutherford put in, looking between the two of them. “Look, it’s not all bad. We lost one of the symbiotes, but look at all the data we got. And Drake is no run-of-the-mill psycho. He could probably tell us exactly what went wrong.”

“And what makes you think he’s telling the truth?” Jameson shot back.

“He’s got no reason to lie,” Kim interjected. “Him and Brock are the ones who’ll suffer for it if we mess up.”

Rutherford glanced to his right. “Dora, you’ve been pretty quiet so far. What’s on your mind?”

Skirth took a deep breath. “I think you’re all right,” she said. “And before you jump on me, I’m not going to say ‘I told you so.’ But I did.”

Kim looked vaguely embarrassed, studying the rim of her coffee mug like it was suddenly very interesting.

“Yes, the host body rejected the symbiote, but I think you fail to understand that these cases are highly individualized,” Skirth continued. “We’ve all seen the security footage from the Life Foundation disaster, and observed the symbiotes interacting. They are social creatures, like us, and they have personalities and hierarchies. The black one that we tried to introduce to Drake may have been something like a runt. Not as big, not as strong, and not as capable of adaptive behavior.”

Skirth gave them all a stern look. “For now, we’ll put aside the fact that the symbiote had been starved and kept in stressful containment conditions for days prior.”

For a moment Jameson looked like he wanted to protest, but then thought better of it.

“On the other hand,” Skirth continued, patiently, “the silver one appears to be larger, stronger, and more combat-effective, as we saw from that footage. Now, we don’t know if it stayed with Drake because it had found an adequate match, or if it was simply planning to feed off his organs like the others in the lab eventually did with their hosts. But in this case, it doesn’t really matter. This points
to the idea that the silver one is overall more adaptable to a human body.”

Kim’s brows furrowed. “So what are you saying? That we should repeat the procedure?”

“And risk losing the silver symbiote and the other host?” Rutherford sounded incredulous.

Skirth maintained eye contact with them, her heart rate calm. She was quietly grateful to Vile for keeping her anxiety levels low. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. I think we picked the wrong symbiote to start with, really. They can learn from each other, and if the silver had been able to demonstrate… We may not have lost the black in the first place.”

“Wishful thinking,” said Rutherford, scrubbing a hand over his face.

“Dora, if we do this again and lose the other symbiote, McCord will have all our hides,” Kim said seriously.

“Then we’ll see what we can find in the post-mortem,” Skirth returned calmly.

Kim sat back in her chair, sighing. “I thought you of all people would be against this,” she remarked. “Especially now.”

“We’re too far in to back out now, Elaine,” Skirth responded, folding her hands on the table. “I need you to hold your nerve.”

She paused for effect, letting them squirm for a moment. “Besides, what are we going to do if not go to the next phase? Go back to vivisecting the hosts and using microscopy to look at the symbiotes? You said yourself that this is the next logical step. Face it, McCord’s going to have our hides if we don’t do this again and come up with better results.”

The other three exchanged resigned glances. They knew she was right.

Skirth kept her expression cool, even though doing this made her feel slimy inside. But if there was one thing she had learned from working with Drake for seven years, it was how to manipulate people. He was good at it. And with a little help from Vile, she could be, too.
Eddie stopped his restless pacing when he caught sight of Drake, eyes wide. He looked like a drowning man who had just caught sight of land. No sooner was the door shut than Eddie was enfolding Drake in a tight hug.

Drake was surprised at first, but the surge of longing he felt from Venom was strong enough to spill over their link and feel like his own. After a moment he relaxed, even leaned into the embrace, carefully folding his arms across Eddie’s broad back like the gesture was something alien. Eddie was warm, so warm, and familiar in both sound and scent, and for a moment Drake allowed himself to be held, trembling against Eddie’s chest. He had not felt another person’s touch—one that wasn’t meant to hurt—in what seemed like forever.

“I thought you were dead,” Eddie croaked. “And Venom… he’s…"

**EDDIE EDDIE WE MISS EDDIE,** Venom wailed inside Drake’s head, and the symbiote longed to flow back to its optimal host, squirming restlessly beneath Drake’s skin.

Eddie let go and held Drake at arm’s length for a moment, looking him up and down. “Are you okay?”

Drake just blinked, unsure of what to say. Venom’s wailing had morphed into a rolling tide of emotions that saturated their link like a river overflowing its banks, and it really was distracting. “Was I gone that long?”

Eddie let out a hoarse laugh. “Long enough for me to feel like I was going crazy in here.” He slid down against the wall into a sitting position, legs stretched out in front of him.

Drake sat down next to him after a moment’s pause, suddenly feeling like his legs didn’t want to support his weight for a second longer. He was still cold, and the concrete floor wasn’t really helping, but he couldn’t bring himself to move again.

**EDDIE IS SAD.** Venom was moping. **DON’T LIKE IT WHEN EDDIE IS SAD.**
Can you be a little quieter? Let me focus, Drake mentally interrupted the symbiote’s internal monologuing. Venom’s thoughts were so loud, Drake could barely hear himself think.

Drake didn’t realize he’d been staring off into space until he felt Eddie’s eyes on him again.

The look of utter devastation in Eddie’s eyes was enough to send a stab of guilt lancing through Drake and Venom’s shared psyche.

*WE HAVE TO TELL HIM,* Venom insisted, aching with longing. *EVEN IF WE CANNOT BE BONDED, HE MUST KNOW THAT I AM HERE.*

*Did I not remind you of the plan as soon we set foot in here?*

*DOESN’T MATTER,* Venom growled. *EDDIE CAN KEEP OUR SECRET. WANT TO TALK TO EDDIE.*

Drake had never had a plan go to hell so fast.

He supposed that maybe it was better if Eddie knew. They were going to be spending a lot of time together, and Eddie wasn’t oblivious. He was going to find out eventually. And Drake knew if their positions were switched, and he was the one sitting there thinking that Riot was dead, that he would want to know.

“Eddie,” Drake said softly. The name felt almost strange on his lips, and yet achingly familiar.

Eddie looked at him, startled.

Drake touched Eddie’s arm, cold fingers against warm tattooed skin. “We have something to tell you.”

Eddie didn’t have time to question his use of the plural, black tendrils seeping from between the tendons in Drake’s hand to wrap lovingly around Eddie’s wrist. “Holy shit,” he croaked, voice catching in his throat. “Holy *shit,* V, is that you…?”
Keep your voice down, Drake thought, and Eddie nearly jumped when he realized he could hear it in his own head. Venom was somehow stretched between both of them, just a sheen of black connecting them, skin to skin, but it was enough to briefly include Eddie in their link.

EDDIE, WE ARE SORRY, Venom said, and waves of longing and regret washed through all three of them. Flickers of memories from the time they had spent apart flowed between Venom and Eddie, letting Eddie know what had happened.

It’s not your fault, V, Eddie insisted, overjoyed just to know that Venom was alive and safe, at least for now. I just… uh, wow. So, you’re bonded with Drake now? How… how does that even work? He couldn’t help the flickers of anxiety that emanated through their bond.

JUST TEMPORARY, EDDIE, Venom assured him. DRAKE CAN HOST ME BECAUSE HE HAS ALREADY HOSTED RIOT. WE ARE COMPATIBLE, TO AN EXTENT.

We convinced them the experiment was a failure, though, Drake put in. No one else knows but us.

Fuck me. Well, I’m glad at least one of us was thinking ahead. Eddie’s relief was palpable between the three of them. Good to hear from you, V. Thanks. To both of you.

Venom gave a last loving ripple beneath Eddie’s skin before withdrawing back to Drake. Spreading itself thin like that, between two hosts, took a toll, and it couldn’t afford to expend too much energy without getting hungry soon. Well, hungrier.

Eddie sat back against the wall with a sigh. Drake felt vaguely dizzy. He was still cold, and the beginnings of a headache throbbed in his skull.

“So does this mean they’re gonna put Riot in me?” Eddie asked after a moment.

“I don’t know,” Drake admitted. Venom gave a brief flutter of anxiety at the thought, but said nothing. “Given that I survived the procedure with Venom, they may be inclined to, if human effects are what they’re looking to study. But they can always get more humans to test on. Symbiotes are considerably harder to come by.”
Eddie nodded slowly. “Still… I might be able to bond with Riot?”

Drake shrugged his shoulders. “It’s possible. But Riot will have to make some immune modifications for you to survive the process.”

“But it could work?” Eddie pressed. “And we could be… functional? Like you and V?”

“If Riot were so inclined, then yes,” Drake said, giving Eddie an odd look. “What are you getting at, exactly?”

“This is good,” Eddie said, and he looked almost excited. He glanced around, lowered his voice. “Don’t you see? This… this is our way out.”

Drake briefly wondered if Eddie was already delusional. “You’ll have to give me a few more details than that.”

“It’s perfect,” Eddie said earnestly. “None of us stand a chance in hell of getting out of here on our own. Not you, not me. Even Riot or Venom couldn’t do it by themselves. But if we’re together… we can do it. But it’s gonna take all of us.”

**ENTANGLEMENT**, Venom clarified. That was what Riot had done during their fight on the rocket. And then it had happened again, when Eddie and Venom had tried to engineer their escape for the first time.

“Entanglement,” Drake repeated aloud. So that was what it was called. “We’ve already tried that. Their sound weapons affect us all the same.”

“No, no, it wasn’t complete then,” Eddie insisted. “We’ll get it right this time. It’ll work, I know it!”

“What makes you think it will work this time, after what happened with the last two?”

“C’mon. You’re a scientist, you should know. Gotta repeat your trials,” Eddie said, flashing a grin with some of his old bravado. “Besides, third time’s the charm, right?”
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Symbiosis feels ahead! I'm enjoying writing this probably too much (in between taking breaks to write the random porn snippets that pop into my head), and I'm not gonna stop even if this fandom is slowly dying, lol. Thanks to all of you who have commented and are still reading--your feedback always brightens this author's day!!

Also, in case anyone was curious, my inspiration for a good bit of this fic came from the album Human by Three Days Grace (yes, I still listen to my emo high school faves). Specifically the songs "Nothing's Fair in Love and War," "Painkiller," and "The Real You."

Riot was alone again. They had taken Venom away some time ago, and now Riot was left in a little box barely large enough to contain its mass. This was worse even than the strange room with the heated metal separating it from Venom. There was no room to stretch, to move, to do anything, really, except sit in a puddle and press its tendrils against the walls in search of some kind of stimulation.

The humans were using some kind of radiation imaging, their auditory vibrations faint but detectable from beyond the walls. It reminded Riot of how hungry it was, how tantalizingly close it was to warm, living blood and flesh that wasn’t cold and stiff. They did feed Riot, occasionally, but what they gave it was little more than carrion, frozen and long since dead and never even close to enough.

The hunger, the stress of being kept in this tiny sealed prison, was enough to drive Riot half-mad. It tried not to dwell too much on the situation, since seething with rage at the humans had done nothing for it in the months prior.

But since signaling with Venom… Riot had much to think about.

The new information was a blessing, honestly, and not just because Riot had been starved of contact with another of its kind for so long. It had been parsing through the information Venom had exchanged, far more slowly and carefully than it normally would have, just because it was something to do in here.

Going through Venom’s memories of their first six months on Earth felt startlingly familiar when Riot finally unzipped those packets of information, unspooling proteins and laying out polymers with a precision and care not normally devoted to such things. The sensations were overwhelming in the memory, but they felt so real that Riot was startled. It felt like now. Felt like what Riot had been
Venom had suffered similar tortures in the Life Foundation labs, poked and prodded by humans who had no idea what they were dealing with. Riot caught some familiar scents in the memories—a woman with a constant background tang of fear, the metallic smell of human blood, and one that Riot would recognize anywhere… Drake.

Riot felt that strange ache again, a hollowness that was not quite hunger, when thinking of its host. It wondered where Drake was now, if these humans were hurting him like they were hurting Riot. Alone, Drake could not withstand nearly as much as Riot could. He was weak and fragile in that way that humans were. Needed Riot to protect him.

Riot’s mass rippled and pressed anxiously against the walls of its glass prison. It hadn’t been able to so much as taste Drake’s scent in the atmosphere for some time, not since they had been separated. It felt like forever ago that they had been able to touch, to communicate properly. And yet, for that brief time they had been allowed to bond again, Drake had welcomed Riot back with open arms. Despite the fact that their plan was a failure, despite that the whole thing had blown up in their faces, the only thing Riot had felt from its host was relief. Even though Riot had failed the both of them, Drake didn’t seem to care about that.

Drake was the reason Riot had survived the rocket explosion. In those last moments before searing pain rendered him unconscious, Drake’s only thoughts had been about protecting Riot from the flames.

The container shifted suddenly, lifted off the floor, and Riot’s mass shifted and bubbled irritably in response. The warmth of a human body was so close, close enough for Riot to get a hint of its scent, and the claws of hunger dug with renewed sharpness into Riot’s mind.

This situation was Riot’s own fault, really. It could have escaped. After escaping the sealed room from before, it had been trivial to hop from human to human, eating a few in between, and then find out how to knock out the power, disabling the humans’ sound weapons. The door had been open. But that would have meant leaving Drake behind, and Riot hadn’t been about to let these humans keep it from its host for a second longer.

Riot had been so very close. Venom’s attempt at entanglement had been unexpected, though, and Riot was just able to feel the edges of the bond again before that awful sound split them apart.

So close, it was maddening.
The humans carried Riot’s container to a new place, one that smelled sharp and caustic. There was no telling what would happen now. More torturous sound tests? Slicing off pieces of Riot’s flesh for dissection?

Whatever was to come, Riot resolved to be as much of a pain in these humans’ necks as possible. With its fangs in their throats, ideally.

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It still hadn’t quite sunk in, the fact that they were going through with the trials.

As Eddie was led away by the customary escort of three guards and one lab tech, he thought about how close he’d come to dying in his life. How likely it was that this would be the last time he made this walk. Was this how people on death row felt?

Eddie held back a hysterical laugh. Fuck, this was it. They were going to feed him to Riot like a mouse dropped into a snake’s cage, and that would be it. Riot had no way of knowing about Drake’s plan, and what were the odds it would take the time to actually listen to Eddie before chomping on his brains? Not great, probably.

He glanced surreptitiously between the three guards. Eddie was a fairly big man—not particularly tall but still broad-shouldered and solidly built. He could maybe catch them off-guard, take down one or two of them if he was lucky. He’d have the element of surprise if he wanted to make a run for it. But there were three soldiers, and only one of him. And they had guns. Eddie probably had better odds taking his chances with Riot.

Neither the soldiers nor the white-coated lab tech even looked at Eddie as they led him through a series of doors to the lab area. A couple other scientists were present, including Dr. Skirth. She was talking to Dr. Kim, too low for Eddie to make out, but it didn’t really matter. Another tech was taking his blood pressure and heart rate, but Eddie wasn’t really paying attention.

He was staring at the glass container within the experimental chamber, the one that held a seething silver mass. Riot was probably starving. If their treatment of the humans was anything to go off of, they probably hadn’t fed the symbiote in days. Riot’s tendrils pressed against the glass, blooms of silver patterns that shimmered like blades at their edges.
Eddie swallowed hard. He glanced between Riot and Skirth, who appeared to be taking notes. “Hey, uh,” he spoke up, clearing his throat nervously. “I just thought I’d let you know…” He gestured vaguely to Riot. “Yeah, he and I don’t really get along, you know? Maybe this isn’t such a good idea.”

Skirth looked at him, just briefly, but he couldn’t discern anything from her expression. She went back to writing. No one else spoke.

Eddie’s stomach lurched. Fuck, he was a coward, but he didn’t care. This was a terrible idea and he was going to die and no one would miss him and he’d never seen Venom or Annie or anyone ever again. “Please don’t,” he managed, as the techs led him to the experimental chamber.

It was as though he hadn’t spoken at all. The doors slid open with a pneumatic hiss, and Eddie took an unwilling step into the chamber, every instinct screaming against it. But the doors shut behind him, and he was trapped.

Eddie looked over his shoulder, trying to see beyond the glare of the fluorescent lights on the glass walls.

“Dual symbiosis, trial two,” came Dr. Kim’s voice from the other side of the wall. “Introducing symbiote one to host two. Observations to be made on behavior of host and symbiote upon contact.”

Riot’s container opened with a click, and Eddie didn’t have time to be afraid.

Bonding with Riot was like a kick to the teeth, like a punch to the gut.

Eddie couldn’t breathe, every muscle in his body constricted by Riot’s presence like the crushing grip of a python. It crawled beneath his skin like fire in his veins, claws in his heart, something made of slick shiny blades so cold it burned. He felt Riot worming its way into his mind, a deluge of sensations flowing between them. For a brief second Eddie was terrified that Riot would overwhelm him, force him down into the depths of his own mind and suborn his body.

But then Riot pulled back, as though in surprise, not finding what it was looking for.

*Not who you were expecting, huh?* Eddie’s heart was pounding, audible between them, exhilarated with the adrenaline rush.
Riot’s guttural snarl seemed to echo off the walls of Eddie’s skull. *I DO NOT NEED YOU*, it growled, vexed. *WANT DRAKE. MY DRAKE.*

Everything hurt, vaguely, like Eddie had been pulled apart and put back together again. Slowly, though, the phantom pressure he felt in his mind started to equalize. Riot was calming down, their bond solidifying. The match was a viable one.

Eddie took it as a good sign that Riot hadn’t made a meal of his brains yet. Drifting in a strange dreamlike state between waking and unconsciousness, he was vaguely aware of his body, but he was still trying to make sense of his newly forged link with Riot. *Hate to break it to you, buddy, but you kinda do need me right now.*

He got only a growl in response. There was a pause, a sensation of something foreign wiggling impatiently through his brain. It was enough to make Eddie think he’d have a very strange headache later.

*SO YOU ARE EDDIE.* Riot sifted briefly through Eddie’s memories, curious. *I HAVE HEARD MUCH ABOUT YOU.*

Eddie suppressed a shudder. The sensation of Riot in his mind took some getting used to. It was very different from Venom, whom Eddie now realized had always been so careful and precise in how it occupied Eddie’s body. Riot was… not as considerate, to say the least.

*Listen, I’ve got a plan,* Eddie tried, but Riot was barely acknowledging him.

*YOU ARE A STRONG HOST,* Riot remarked—perhaps reluctant, but not disapproving. *VENOM CHOSE WELL.*

*Yeah, well, V’s got questionable taste, but that’s not the point,* Eddie insisted. *We’ve gotta—*

*I HAVE A PLAN,* Riot interrupted with the casual authority of a leader. *AND YOU ARE GOING TO HELP ME GET BACK TO MY HOST.*
Alright, fine! But will you just listen to me?! Eddie pushed back, frustrated. Look, if you just play
dead and stay quiet in there, then I can—

NO MORE HIDING, Riot growled. It was tired of waiting. It had no patience to sink beneath
Eddie’s skin and pretend it didn’t exist, even if they were compatible. WE MUST SHOW THEM
OUR STRENGTH, OR THEY WILL TAKE US APART, PIECE BY PIECE.

Riot’s silver flesh overlaid Eddie, ignoring his protests, and the two of them were suddenly
experiencing the world as one. They stood in the center of the chamber, a nine-foot-tall silver
nightmare, and looked at the simultaneously awed and terrified expressions of the scientists behind
the glass.

Riot and Eddie could smell their fear, their excitement. The smell of prey, just beyond a barrier that
would be trivial for them to smash. The instinct was strong, as was the temptation.

Eddie could see out of Riot’s eyes, could feel the heady surge of bloodlust and predatory instinct and
fierce, gnawing hunger. The strength that rippled in Riot’s flesh—their flesh, now—was incredible,
and they both knew it would be child’s play to kill every single human in that room. They were fast;
they could probably wolf down all the bodies before the alarm was triggered.

Eddie fought it. He couldn’t speak for some reason, so caught up in the instinctual, sensory way that
Riot processed the world, but he could still push back. Symbiosis went both ways. He pulled back
against that desperate hunger, against the itch to form blades that cut so easily through flesh and
bone.

They took a step forward, releasing a low growl from deep in their chest, one massive clawed hand
resting against the reinforced glass.

That tidal wave of bloodlust was almost too much to bear, threatening to subsume Eddie in red
waves, but he stood fast against it. Riot was resistant at first, not swayed by his silly human logic, but
it was the memories that convinced Riot. Through the link, Eddie pushed through his memories of
Drake, safe and alive and waiting for their return.

The red waves subsided, fading away into nothing but a hollow hunger and an aching need that
could not be satisfied.

There was a heartbeat’s pause. Riot made a soft rumbling noise that Eddie couldn’t place, but the
feeling that echoed deep in his chest was mournful. \textit{It’s okay}, Eddie spoke within their link for the first time, because at that moment it felt right. \textit{We’re okay.}

They stood there for another moment before their hand slid away from the glass, wicked-sharp claws leaving lines scored in the surface. Riot retreated back into Eddie’s body, liquid silver soaking beneath his skin, until it was just Eddie standing there in his gray sweats and bare feet, wide-eyed.

“My god,” Dr. Kim breathed, staring at them through the glass. “It worked.”

--

Drake and Venom were alone again.

When they came to take Eddie, it took every bit of Venom’s impulse control (and a good bit of Drake’s) to keep the symbiote from lashing out and pulling Eddie back to safety in its tendrils. The pain that Venom felt, watching its optimal host be taken away to an uncertain fate, was enough to make Drake’s breath catch in his throat. The sense of protectiveness and devotion that Venom felt for Eddie really was staggering, and through their bond Drake could feel it like those emotions were his own.

Venom was so different from Riot. If Riot was titanium, unbreakable and devastatingly strong; then Venom was carbon steel, strong but flexible, capable of bending and molding itself to the situation under the right circumstances.

Drake had anticipated having to work much harder to maintain control of his own body. But Venom had proved to be surprisingly cooperative. Sure, the symbiote wasn’t thrilled about their current situation, but neither was Drake. It felt like wearing someone else’s shoes—not quite right, not what either of them was used to. But the fit was good enough, and they were getting the hang of it.

In a surprising turn of events, Venom liked to talk. Well, “talk” was a relative term. All their conversations were telepathic; it just seemed safer that way, even if from the outside it would just look like Drake was having a detailed conversation with himself.

Venom asked the most mundanely fascinating questions. Why do humans wear clothes? Why is there so much water on earth? Why are so many things green? Drake had ready scientific answers for most of them, explained in a level of detail that few people could appreciate or care about. Venom, though, was enthralled by it, and it adored Drake’s ability to provide answers to its questions.
Drake appreciated the intellectual stimulation more than he could say. This was much better than reciting poetry or working backwards through proofs. Venom even argued with him on some points, particularly some of the contradictory things about humans, which led to a surprisingly existential discussion about why humans are the way they are.

**HUMANS DO NOT MAKE SENSE,** Venom complained. **EDDIE DOES MANY OF THESE THINGS YOU CALL ‘SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS,’ BUT I AM THE UNREASONABLE ONE WHEN I WANT TO EAT BRAINS?**

Drake almost wanted to laugh. *I’d imagine that most sapient species have similarly contradictory behaviors. Don’t your people do things that might not make sense to outsiders?*

Venom gave the mental equivalent of a shrug. **THERE IS NOT MUCH TO LIFE ON KLYNTAR. WE HUNT, FIGHT FOR TERRITORY AND PREY, BREED. AND EVENTUALLY THE CORE LEADERS CHOOSE WHO WILL BE SENT TO FIND NEW HUNTING GROUNDS.**

*If there’s some kind of a societal structure, then certainly everyone could be provided for, Drake pointed out. Why do your people fight over resources?*

**WHY DO YOURS?** Venom returned dryly.

*You’ve got me there,* Drake admitted. He didn’t have a good answer to that question, really. Sure, he could blame it on humanity’s inherent selfishness or some kind of flaw like that, but humans were capable of great altruism when they put their minds to it.

And, Drake thought with a glance around their cage, with the capability for great altruism came the capability for terrible cruelty.

Wordlessly, Venom agreed.

**WHY DO HUMANS DO THIS?** it asked after a pause. Memories of its time in the Life Foundation labs drifted to the surface, unbidden but appropriate. **WHY DID YOU?**
Drake was quiet for a long moment. He knew what Venom was asking. In the moment, he had believed he was doing the right thing. The necessary thing.

*This… is something that humans have always done,* he began, finally.

*There are few people who would do such things for the sake of doing them. Most people believe they are serving some greater purpose. I did,* Drake admitted. *Lots of people do the wrong things for the right reasons.*

Another memory surfaced in their link, bits and pieces of something Venom had gleaned from Eddie: the blue glow of a computer screen, the guilt of taking something unasked for, the look of betrayal on Anne’s face that fateful day. Wrong things, right reasons.

*For what it’s worth, I didn’t know,* Drake ventured after a moment. *I didn’t know that you were… like us. Intelligent. And I know that doesn’t change anything, but I am sorry.*

Venom took a moment to parse this. *YOU BELIEVED THAT YOU WERE SAVING YOUR PEOPLE,* it said finally. Through their bond, it could sense that what Drake said was true. There were no secrets in symbiosis.

*Yes,* Drake said. He felt the same hollow pang he did when thinking of the ruins of the Life Foundation. *Once, I believed that.*

Venom remembered the long trip back from empty space, the gnawing hunger characterizing the passage of time. *WHEN WE FIRST CAME TO THIS PLANET… SO DID I.*

Hunger nagged at the both of them, a claw that sunk deeper into skin every time it pulled. It always came back to this, to hunger. They could talk themselves in circles around it, but it never went away.

*HUNGRY,* Venom said, with no real force behind the word. It wasn’t a demand, just a fact.

Drake opened his eyes, having almost forgotten they were closed. He glanced down at his own body, thinking of the dull ache of hunger that had characterized his time here even before Venom. They were feeding him intravenous nutrients at regular intervals, so he wouldn’t starve, but it was
just enough to keep him alive, no more. That meant he had lost a frankly unhealthy amount of weight despite doing nothing but sitting like a rat in a cage for months. With Venom putting an additional strain on his metabolism, it would only be a matter of time before his body just couldn’t take it. In the meantime, though, both of them would have to make do with what they had.

*Well, Venom, I’ve got two kidneys, but I can function with just one,* Drake offered. Venom would have to eat eventually, and its options were limited at the moment. *And my liver will regrow if you eat slowly.*

Venom seemed mortified at the thought. *NOT GOING TO EAT YOU,* it insisted stubbornly.

*And why not just a piece of me?* Drake could be ruthlessly practical when he needed to be. *I can feel that you’re starving.*

**DOESN’T MATTER. EDDIE WAS VERY CLEAR. NO EATING PEOPLE HE CARES ABOUT.**

*I don’t understand,* Drake said after a moment. *You said that before, but… I still don’t understand.* Eddie Brock had every reason to hate him. Being fed to Brock’s symbiote was not even the worst thing Drake could imagine.

Venom snorted, so much in the manner of Eddie Brock in that moment that it was uncanny. *YOU KNOW, FOR A SMART GUY, YOU’RE PRETTY STUPID. OF COURSE EDDIE CARES ABOUT YOU. IT WAS HIS STUPID HUMAN NEED TO CARE ABOUT PEOPLE THAT GOT US INTO THIS MESS IN THE FIRST PLACE.*

Drake was fairly sure Venom had said that before, but it hadn’t really sunk in.

**YOU AND EDDIE ARE NOT SO DIFFERENT IN THAT WAY,** Venom mused. **WANTING TO PROTECT OTHERS OF YOUR KIND HAS LED YOU TO SPECTACULAR FAILURE.**

*That’s uplifting.*

**YOU FORGET THAT I WAS ALSO A SPECTACULAR FAILURE AMONG MY KIND,** Venom retorted. It nuzzled into the space between Drake’s heart and lungs in a way that was almost
affectionate. *AND LOOK AT ME NOW.*
Hi everyone! Thanks so much for all your feedback so far!! I really am delighted to hear that y'all are enjoying this.

PLEASE READ: Also, a quick heads-up for this chapter because it contains threats of rape/use of rape threats as a coercive tactic. Fairly brief, but it's there. No actual rape/noncon happens, but if anyone wants to skip that part, it's in the second to last section of the chapter.

“You’re an idiot,” Eddie said aloud, seemingly to thin air.

YOU ARE A COWARD. MY PLAN COULD HAVE WORKED, Riot snapped, writhing irritably beneath Eddie’s skin.

They had been left in the same experimental chamber where they had bonded. The scientists had observed them for an hour or so, whispering excitedly amongst themselves and taking notes, but no one came to take Eddie back to the quarantine cell he had been sharing with Drake.

They weren’t foolish enough to get close to him now, not when they knew what Riot was capable of. And just like that, Eddie’s plan was entirely shot to hell.

“Yeah, I can see you’re a master at planning,” Eddie deadpanned. “Hard to believe Drake got anything done with you around. Was your strategy to just eat everyone in your way?”

DRAKE WAS STILL A MORE EFFECTIVE HOST THAN YOU, Riot snarked. YOU ARE WHAT OTHER HUMANS WOULD CALL A LOSER.

“Yeah, a loser who kicked your ass,” Eddie retorted, crossing his arms. “If you had just listened to me instead of trying to fuckin’ murder everyone straight off—”

I AM TIRED OF PLAYING YOUR HUMAN GAMES, Riot spat, fuming. It was hungry and pissed off; they both were, and their emotions were feeding off each other.
“Well, neither of us really have a goddamn choice at the moment,” Eddie said irritably. “So quit being a whiny little prick and get used to it. You’re not exactly in Kansas anymore, Dorothy, and on this planet, you gotta play by our rules.”

Riot did not know what this meant, but it clearly took it as an insult. Irritation flashed through their bond. **YOU ARE INSUFFERABLE!**

“Ooh, big word,” Eddie retorted, mocking. “Did that come from Drake or did you read the dictionary or something?”

The symbiote manifested a head to bare its teeth and snarl in Eddie’s face. There was no use trying to hide, not anymore. **I CAN STILL EAT YOU.**

Eddie didn’t even flinch, just grimaced and shoved the silvery head away from his face. “Yeah, but you won’t,” he pointed out, almost petulantly. “Not unless you wanna suffocate in here.”

Riot simply fumed and seeped back into Eddie’s body, seething with anger that spilled across their bond. It was mostly frustration, though, and not truly directed at Eddie. They both understood that, on some level, but they had no one to take it out on but each other.

Eddie sighed, feeling in his whole body a tired ache that went bone-deep. “Look, I don’t really want to argue with you anymore,” he sighed. “It’s not doing either of us any good.”

**NEITHER IS SITTING HERE ON OUR ASSES, DOING NOTHING,** Riot said, bitter.

Eddie shifted positions, stretching out on his back to stare up at the ceiling. The motion pulled uncomfortably at the still-healing incision in his belly, and he grimaced, but couldn’t be bothered to sit up again. “Not really much else to do,” he said. “It’s a waiting game at this point.”

**WAITING FOR WHAT?** Riot seemed agitated, but Eddie could feel that it was just as tired and hungry as he was, both of them still adjusting to their newly established symbiosis. He wondered how Venom and Drake were holding up, all by themselves.

Eddie shrugged. He didn’t know, really. An opportunity, perhaps. “We’ll know it when we see it.”
This wasn’t really a satisfactory answer for Riot, but the symbiote seemed tired of asking questions. Eddie didn’t realize it was flipping through his memories with a surprisingly delicate mental touch until it spoke again.

**VENOM IS WITH DRAKE?** Riot sounded perhaps surprised.

*Yeah, and I’d hope they’re getting on better than we are.* Eddie deigned not to answer out loud this time, just in case someone was listening.

Riot did not seem outraged by this, surprisingly. **THAT IS GOOD. THEN PERHAPS THEY HAVE A CHANCE,** it said with something like grudging respect in its tone.

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The scientists returned some time later, led by Kim, but Skirth was nowhere to be seen. Kim pressed a button on the control panel, allowing her voice to be heard clearly inside the chamber.

“Eddie? Can you hear me?” she asked. “Both of you?”

Eddie didn’t bother to stand up. He remained stretched out on the floor, hands behind his head. “Yeah, we hear you,” he responded, bored. He had been close to drifting off for a nap, having finally come to a tentative peace with Riot, but of course these guys wouldn’t leave him alone.

“We want to do a few more tests,” Kim began, carefully. “Nothing invasive this time, but we want to see the extent of your… abilities.”

Riot stirred within Eddie, and he sat up, muscles moving of their own accord.

**ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THAT?** Riot’s voice spilled from Eddie’s throat, deep and raspy and distinctly inhuman.

Kim looked visibly unsettled, and it sent a flash of satisfaction through their bond. Eddie thought
about telling Riot not to antagonize them, but he quite honestly shared Riot’s sentiment. There was nothing they could force Eddie and Riot to do now, at least not without risking their lives.

“These tests aren’t dangerous, or painful,” Kim continued after a moment, patiently. “In fact, they’re about… hunting. We just want to make some observations.”

Eddie felt Riot’s jolt of interest at the mention of hunting. He couldn’t really blame Riot; they were both starving, and he imagined Riot must be climbing the walls after six months of captivity. They were decidedly interested in talking to Riot, so Eddie decided to let the symbiote handle it for the moment instead of trying to wrest back control.

Riot’s silver substance oozed out of Eddie’s skin, draped over his neck and shoulders like a dripping cowl with jagged teeth and eyes. It didn’t bother to overlay him completely; it just wanted to see the look on the humans’ face at the sight of it. Riot could detect some scents even beyond the glass wall, the delicious tang of anxiety on the edge of fear.

YOU HUMANS ARE SUCH FUN TO HUNT, Riot rumbled, teeth bared in a nightmarish grin. I WOULD BE DELIGHTED TO SHOW YOU.

To her credit, Kim’s expression remained calm and stoic, without even a hint of fear. “We’d start off with small prey animals, and work our way up if you can handle it.” There was the implication of a challenge in those words.

Just the thought of prey made something inside them both twist almost painfully with hunger, a need so strong it felt impossible to ignore. Eddie had to admit it didn’t seem like a bad deal. They would get to eat, and so what if Kim and her lackeys wanted to watch? It felt a little bit like being in a zoo, but Eddie was almost used to that feeling after spending so much time in a glass cage.

Riot was considering it carefully, it really was. Eddie could feel how badly Riot needed to hunt, to feed, to satisfy the innate drives of its species. It was maddening, how hungry they both were. He was about to say that it might be a good idea to cooperate, if only to take the edge off the gnawing pain of that relentless hunger.

It took Eddie completely by surprise when Riot bared all of its jagged teeth and said, FUCK YOU, ASSHOLE.

A couple of the lab techs couldn’t help but snicker, and Eddie was internally flabbergasted.
Really, dude? You choose now to quote Schwarzenegger movies? He wasn’t sure if Riot actually knew what that meant, but maybe he’d found it in Eddie’s memories somewhere. But Riot wasn’t focused on him, barely even hearing him across their link.

Was it really that unreasonable of a request?! Eddie internally shouted at Riot, still in the dark about the symbiote’s motives, except for maybe pure stubbornness. Still no response.

YOU THINK I AM SOME ANIMAL TO BE TAMED, Riot sneered at them, and its silver flesh overlaid Eddie’s to take the form of a monstrous humanoid thing standing nine feet tall. It stood, and walked to the glass with heavy steps, placing a massive clawed hand against the glass. HOW FOOLISH YOU ARE.

Raw hatred and disgust and rage surged within them, and Eddie could feel how tempted Riot was to smash the barrier and kill them all. That would get them nowhere, though, not with the sound alarms still active, and Riot knew it. But Riot could still refuse to cooperate, refuse to aid them in their pursuits of making it into an attack dog that could be called on a whim.

I CAN SMELL YOUR FEAR, Riot hissed at them, sibilant, its face nearly touching the glass, saliva dripping from its jaws. CAN NEARLY TASTE IT. AND DO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT TASTES LIKE? PREY. I HAVE HUNTED BEINGS FAR STRONGER AND SMARTER THAN YOU. YOU, WHO THINK YOURSELF SOME HIGHER LIFE FORM BECAUSE YOU DENY YOURSELF THE DRAW OF YOUR OWN INSTINCTS.

Some of the lab techs had taken a step back, but Kim stood steadfast. She hadn’t moved from her place in front of the control panel, though Riot and Eddie could hear the quickening of her heartbeat, the rush of hot cortisol-spiked blood in her veins.

“It would be in both of your best interests to cooperate,” Kim said calmly, with only the tiniest quaver in her voice at the end.

Riot let out a harsh, metallic grating sound that was its approximation of a laugh. WHATEVER YOU WANT FROM US, YOU WILL HAVE TO COME AND TAKE IT.

It was unmistakably a challenge, and the thud of Riot’s massive clawed hand against the glass was enough to make Kim take a sudden step back. “Alright then,” she said coolly, gathering up her papers with deliberate slowness. “I guess we’re done here.”
She followed the lab techs out the door, and Eddie somehow had a sinking feeling they had just made a terrible mistake.

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Skirth sat in the upstairs meeting space with none other than General McCord, trying not to appear as deeply uncomfortable as she felt at the moment. She knew she wasn’t in trouble; she had done nothing but what was asked of her, but still she had a sinking feeling that something bad was going to happen. They were waiting for Kim and her team to arrive, since they would be bringing with them the preliminary data from the second cross-host symbiosis trial. The news had already been passed up that the trial was a success, for now, but the specifics were going to be the interesting part.

When Kim entered the room, the look on her face told Skirth that the news was not immediately positive.

McCord’s arms were crossed, and he leaned against the wall with his back straight. Not like he would ever deign to sit at the table with the rest of them. “Tell me what you’ve got, Kim.”

Kim laid down her tablet and the folders she was carrying on the table in front of her, sighing. “Well, the good news is that host two and symbiote one have successfully achieved symbiosis,” she began. “They’ve stabilized, and their vitals are holding steady, at least for now.”

McCord nodded, looking pleased. The silver one had the most combat potential, if they could only bring it to heel. “Alright, good. So what about the next set of trials?”

Kim pursed her lips for a moment. “They won’t cooperate,” she said after a moment. “I tried earlier, and even with the offer of food, the symbiote has refused.”

“Well, that is unfortunate,” McCord drawled, sounding rather unconcerned. “No matter, though. We have our ways of forcing their cooperation. Don't we, Skirth?”

“We have the sound weapons,” Skirth admitted, and she felt a shudder inside her just at the mention. “But I don’t see how that’s going to help us here. If we use the sounds to separate the symbiote from its current host, then we’re just back to square one.”
“She’s right,” Kim admitted, glancing between Skirth and the general. “And the sounds are incredibly harmful for the symbiote. If we push too hard, we could end up killing it just by accident.”

McCord chuckled, like all this was funny somehow. “Sometimes I forget that you science quacks haven’t had the same training as the rest of us at this facility. This is almost too easy,” he said, and something about his lack of frustration or concern made the hairs on the back of Skirth’s neck stand on end.

He turned his gaze on Skirth, who forced herself not to look away. “I recall someone telling me that these parasites are particular about the bodies they choose to inhabit. They get attached. Territorial, one might say.”

“We do have some evidence to support that,” Skirth admitted, feeling her stomach do a nervous flip-flop. “But the host and the symbiote are connected. Anything you do to the host will also harm the symbiote whether you want it to or not.”

McCord chuckled. “Oh, I’m not talking about Brock. He’s just a warm body for that alien to inhabit right now. But if you recall, that little parasite got pretty riled up when we took it out of Drake.” He looked at Skirth with a sadistic gleam in his eye, and she didn’t like it one bit. “You must see where I’m going with this.”

“You’re proposing that we use Drake as leverage to force the creature’s cooperation,” Kim said, like the very idea wasn’t repugnant. If she was uncomfortable with it, she hid it well. Her concerns were purely practical. “Might I remind you that Drake is also valuable to us? I mean, if we have to get firsthand information from someone, I’d rather it be from the scientist than the crackpot journalist.”

“Don’t worry your pretty little head, Kim. I’m not planning on doing any permanent damage to him,” McCord said with a self-assured sort of smugness that spoke of his experience with such things. “We just need to make sure that Brock and his parasite know that we aren’t fucking around.”

Skirth felt sick.

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_WHEN IS EDDIE COMING BACK?_ Venom’s anxiety was palpable over their bond.
I don’t know, Drake admitted. In truth, he wasn’t sure if they would bring Eddie back at all. If the symbiosis with Riot failed and Eddie died, he wouldn’t be coming back, obviously. But if Eddie’s plan succeeded... then hopefully it would be soon.

On the other hand, if something went wrong, and Riot was able to bond with Eddie but unsuccessful or unwilling to hide inside him like Venom had done with Drake, then it was exceedingly unlikely that Eddie would be allowed to occupy the same space as another human.

**SHOULDN’T HAVE LET EDDIE GO,** Venom lamented, regret mixing with the hollow ache of its longing for Eddie.

*You know as well as I do that there was nothing else we could do.* Drake tried to be the voice of reason. *This was part of the plan, Venom. You’ll see him again.*

Venom still didn’t like it. **WANT TO GO HOME.**

The wave of homesickness Drake felt from Venom was surprisingly strong. He knew Venom wasn’t referring to Klyntar when it mentioned ‘home.’ No, all of the connotations and elements that surfaced when Venom said ‘home’ referred to Earth. Specifically, they were all focused around Eddie.

The smell of the cool night air when Eddie sat out on the fire escape with a pen and notepad, scrawling down ideas for article pitches and interviews while Venom simply watched the world through his eyes.

The rush of exhilaration that went through both of them when they were leaping from rooftops like a black shadow.

The curiosity of all the sights and sounds of other human beings when they rode the bus or the cable car or even just walked down the street.

The joy of hunting together as one, the satisfaction of a joint hunger and basking in the thrill of perfect symbiosis.

It was enough to make something in Drake’s heart ache with a strange phantom pain, missing a life he’d never lived, a love that was never his. Briefly, he wondered if he and Riot could have had something like this.
YOU CAN. Venom’s voice almost startled Drake, who had almost forgotten that Venom could hear his every thought. WHEN WE GET OUT OF THIS PLACE, RIOT WILL NEVER LET YOU GO. A PERFECT SYMBIOSIS LIKE YOURS IS TOO RARE TO PASS UP.

Just the thought made a sweet little ache flutter in Drake’s chest, something like longing and grief all mixed together.

Why? He asked finally, forcing himself to face it. Riot has no further use for me, not now that the rocket is destroyed. I have nothing left to offer him.

Venom snorted. DO NOT BE FOOLED BY RIOT’S BLUSTERING. HE SEEKS SYMBIOSIS WITH A COMPATIBLE HOST, JUST AS WE ALL DO. AND HE HAS FOUND IT WITH YOU.

How do you know? Drake wanted to believe it; he really did. But he was a scientist at heart, and it was in his nature to be skeptical. It was better that way, he told himself. Less disappointment.

EVEN IF I HAD NOT ALREADY SIGNALED WITH RIOT, THE FACT THAT HE SAVED YOU AFTER THE EXPLOSION TELLS ME ALL I NEED TO KNOW. Venom’s tendrils rippled beneath his skin in a way that could almost be called affectionate. BESIDES, I AM COMING TO UNDERSTAND WHAT RIOT SEES IN YOU.

Drake hardly had time to process that little revelation, not when there was a pair of soldiers at the door, gesturing for him to come.

Well, the peace and quiet was nice while it lasted, he said to Venom, wryly. Stay quiet in there, alright?

QUITE AS A MOUSE, Venom agreed. They had gone over this before. Venom had to stay hidden at all costs, at least for now. The element of surprise would be their only advantage when they made a break for it.

Venom could only hope they weren’t taking Drake for an MRI.
Drake noticed that the soldiers were leading him down a different path than the usual one that led to the medical wing or even the corridor where they kept the symbiotes contained. This was something different, a new place, and he couldn’t help the flicker of anxiety that passed through his mind.

They led him to a room that had perhaps once been used for observation, judging from its position adjacent to what appeared to be an experimental chamber enclosed by glass walls. Inside, McCord and Kim were already waiting.

The look in the general’s eyes immediately unsettled Drake.

At a nod from McCord, Kim flipped a switch to dim the lights in the experimental chamber, allowing the glass to become transparent on both sides. Drake was surprised to see Eddie on the other side, and Venom felt it, too. So close, and yet so far.

Drake’s gaze flitted from Eddie to McCord. “Might I ask what the meaning of this is?”

“Shut up,” the general said casually, not even looking at him. “This isn’t about you.”

“Okay, then what the hell’s going on?” Eddie asked from the other side of the glass. He looked nervous, twitchy.

“I understand that your new friend won’t cooperate with my scientists,” McCord addressed Eddie, walking a slow circuit back and forth across the length of the glass wall that separated them.

Eddie crossed his arms. “Yeah, well, he’s not interested in being a circus act. Neither am I, to be honest.”

“You sure about that?” McCord asked, unsettlingly calm.

Eddie held his nerve, meeting the general’s gaze unflinchingly. “Yeah, what are you gonna do about it?”

McCord’s grey eyes glinted. “I was hoping you’d say that.”
He turned and slapped Drake, hard.

The blow caught Drake off-guard, and he gasped in pain, stumbling back a step. It was only Venom’s reflexive steadying of his muscles from within that kept him upright. He reached up and gingerly touched the stinging skin of his face, feeling warm blood trickling from his split lip.

McCord chuckled. “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do that.”

Eddie’s eyes went wide, and he slammed a fist against the glass. Silver veins crawled beneath his skin. Riot was getting agitated. “Hey! Leave him alone, asshole! This is between you and me!”


Drake tried to steel his nerves. So this was their ploy, to use them against each other. This was undoubtedly going to hurt. He just hoped that Brock wasn’t too softhearted, that he would keep the plan in mind. This changed nothing.

*I CAN HEAL THE DAMAGE,* Venom offered, sounding almost uncertain of what to do. *TAKE AWAY THE PAIN.*

*No. They’ll know something is up if you do anything,* Drake mentally shushed Venom. *I have to feel it. Make it satisfying for them.*

A ruthless punch to the stomach drove the breath from Drake’s lungs, and he fell to his knees, clutching at his abdomen and coughing. He fell onto his side with the next kick, wheezing. The general’s steel-toed boots were heavy and painful as hell every time they impacted his ribs or his belly or his back, and Drake could do nothing but curl up and try to protect his vital organs. He was sure his ribs were going to be horrifically bruised after this, if not broken, and it was all he could do to just breathe and try not to whimper or cry out too loudly.

Venom had made itself as small as possible, curling up around Drake’s brain and spinal cord to protect his most critical functions if it became necessary, but its guilt still trickled between their link, able to do nothing but watch.
Finally the onslaught stopped, and Drake tried to ignore the fierce aches he felt all over, even if every breath hurt. There was an agonizing stitch in his left side, and he was pretty sure at least one of his ribs was cracked. He was sure the general wasn’t intending to seriously damage him, but human bodies just didn’t hold up as well under starvation and torture.

Eddie looked torn, guilt written all over his face as he could do nothing but watch it happen. Clearly he wanted this to stop as much as Drake did, but cooperating with their captors would only make it harder to escape later.

Drake managed to catch Eddie’s eye and gave a tiny shake of his head. No matter what happened, he hoped Eddie would understand that this was necessary. Sacrifices had to be made in pursuit of a goal, and if they were getting out of here, both of them had to remain uncompromising.

“You can make this stop anytime,” McCord said to Eddie. “All you have to do is cooperate. Talk to us. Show us a few of the parasite’s tricks.”

Eddie looked tormented, squeezing his eyes shut for a long moment. “No,” he said, and when he opened his eyes, the hatred that burned in his gaze was all Riot.

McCord just smirked. “Fine then. Boys,” he said, turning to the two guards who had remained stoically watching this whole time. “Have a little fun with him.”

The two guards exchanged interested glances, then shrugged off jackets and their weapons. One of them grabbed Drake like he weighed nothing and placed him haphazardly on the table in the middle of the room, forcing him to lay flat on his back.

Drake hissed in pain at being manhandled so carelessly, especially with the pain of fresh bruises already decorating his torso. The guard’s large, rough hands grabbed at his legs and pinned his hips to the table, his grip painfully tight.

An icy trickle of real fear went down Drake’s spine when the man yanked his pants off, leaving him completely exposed from the waist down. Another pair of hands pushed his shirt up around his ribs to expose his bruised abdomen, and one of them pressed at the bruises until he gasped in pain.

The first guard smirked and forced Drake’s bare legs apart, casting a long, appreciative look up and down. “Damn,” he chuckled. “I’m gonna enjoy this.”
Drake’s chest tightened with fear, and he felt panic rising up inside him. His heart was pounding so hard he could feel it in his throat, his ears, his aortic pulse. Were they really going to do this? It took everything he had not to beg them not to. That would only give them what they wanted. He dug his nails into his palms, trying to ground himself in the pain.

“Aw, c’mon now, don’t act so scared,” said the second guard in a low voice, his hands caressing Drake’s flat stomach and the sharp jut of his hips. “Pretty little thing like you probably loves the attention, huh?”

Drake was biting his tongue to keep from making any noise. He was terrified and no matter how he tried, he couldn't make it stop.

Venom felt it, too, and its desire to kill to protect its host was nearly as strong. *LET ME TEAR THEM APART. I COULD DO IT IN AN INSTANT.* It was as close to pleading as Venom had ever gotten.

“No,” Drake whispered, out loud, not sure which of them he was talking to. Not for this. He could take it.

Inside him, Venom’s tendrils caressed nerves and tried to relax tense muscles. It was agonizing to be unable to protect its host, unable to assuage that overwhelming terror, but Venom could at least make it easier to bear. *CLOSE YOUR EYES,* Venom said, softly. *IT WILL HURT, BUT I WILL TAKE IT ALL AWAY WHEN IT IS OVER.*

--

Eddie felt utterly sick to his stomach when the guards started to yank Drake’s clothes off. Until now, he had been fairly sure Drake could handle whatever McCord had in store for him. Drake was resilient; he had to be, to survive six months in this hellish place. But this… this was different.

Riot knew it, too. It *burned* to see them hurting its host, but Eddie’s reaction of visceral horror told it that this was an entirely different type of violation.

Fuck the plan. Eddie wasn’t going to let this happen. He pounded on the glass with his fists, screaming at them. “Stop, dammit!! *Stop!*” he begged. “I’ll do it! I’ll do anything you want!”
The first guard was unbuckling his belt.

McCord looked at Eddie. “I want to hear it from him.”

Riot overlaid Eddie in an instant, its form seething with hatred and helpless rage. **STOP THIS, AND WE WILL DO WHAT YOU ASK.**

McCord smirked, triumphant. “That’s better.” He held up a hand, gestured to the guards. “That’s enough, boys. Maybe next time.”

Just like that, they stopped. Neither of them had even gotten their trousers fully undone. Both guards looked somewhat reluctant, but they released Drake and backed away.

Drake just laid there, trembling and staring up at the ceiling. He was several shades paler than his usual warm brown, looking like he might pass out.

The guilt was enough to suffocate Eddie. Riot sank back into his body, surprisingly subdued, heavy with helplessness and guilt. “We’ll do anything,” he managed. “Just… don’t hurt him.”

McCord’s smile was sadistic, victorious. “Now that’s what I like to hear.”

--

It was an overwhelming relief to be put back in the familiar, safe confines of the glass cage. The knot of breathtaking fear in Drake’s chest finally started to uncoil while he sat tucked into the corner of the cage, his knees drawn up to his chest despite how it hurt his ribs.

Slowly, the pain started to fade away. It was undoubtedly Venom’s doing, but Drake couldn’t bring himself to tell the symbiote to stop. Venom didn’t totally heal the bruises, leaving the marks intact, but taking away the pain and healing his cracked ribs. Neither of them spoke for the longest time, or at least what felt like a long time.

For a while Venom thought it best not to speak. Drake was scared, hurting. Humans needed time to process things that scared or hurt them. Venom simply tried to soothe that fear the best way he knew
how, like he did with Eddie, who sometimes had nightmares of things like this.

Venom allowed its substance to drift to the surface, though staying discreetly beneath Drake’s clothes as it wrapped itself around him like a warm blanket. Slowly, after a few minutes, Drake stopped shivering.

_I WOULD NOT HAVE LET THEM DO IT_, Venom spoke finally. _HAD THEY NOT STOPPED WHEN THEY DID, I WOULD HAVE EATEN EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM._

Drake smiled faintly, head resting on his knees. Even if it was a touching thing for Venom to say, he couldn't have allowed Venom to put all four of them in danger for the sake of sparing him a little bit of pain. _That would have compromised the plan._

_DON'T CARE_, Venom growled, protective. _YOU ARE MY HOST FOR THE TIME BEING, AND A HOST MUST BE PROTECTED. YOU HURT, I HURT. THE FUTURE IS WORTHLESS IF THE PRESENT KILLS US._

_Not that I'm not grateful, but why do you care, Venom?_ Drake couldn’t find it in him to choose his words more carefully, not when the symbiote could hear his thoughts already. _Riot and I tried to kill you not so long ago. You and your friends suffered tortures probably just like this in the lab at the Life Foundation, at my direction._

Venom seemed bemused. _YES. BUT THAT WAS THEN. THIS IS NOW. MY KIND FIGHT LIFE AND DEATH ALL THE TIME, AND YET WE MUST STILL WORK TOGETHER TO SURVIVE ON HOSTILE WORLDS._

Drake almost wanted to laugh. _In some ways, you're much more forgiving than humans._

Venom rumbled softly, its substance giving an affectionate ripple over Drake’s skin, what was covered by his baggy clothes. _STILL YOU TRY TO SET YOURSELF APART FROM US_, it mused, curious.

_What do you mean by 'us'?_ Drake still wasn’t entirely certain when Venom was using the plural to refer the two of them, to Venom and Eddie, or to some other nebulous collective.
Venom paused for a moment, thoughtful. *I MEAN ALL THE WAYS THAT WE ARE… WE,* it said finally. *TO ACHIEVE SYMBIOSIS IS FOR TWO TO BECOME ONE. EDDIE AND I ARE SYMBIOTIC, BONDED FOR LIFE. YOU AND I ALSO SHARE A BOND, ALBEIT SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT THAN THE ONE I SHARE WITH EDDIE AND YOU SHARE WITH RIOT.*

*I still don’t understand.* Drake was getting a headache thinking of all the different things this could mean.

Venom seemed vaguely frustrated, unable to articulate what it wanted to say in the language of human beings. It was unfortunate that humans could not perform plasmid exchange. **DO YOU KNOW WHY THE ENTANGLEMENT OF ALL OF US WAS SUCCESSFUL ON THE ROCKET THAT NIGHT?**

Drake absently pressed his fingers into the bruises that splotched the inside of his elbow, marks of repeated blood draws and IV insertions. The pain helped to keep his attention on the present moment. *Honestly, it’s all a blur for me. That was Riot’s doing; I had no idea what was going on.*

Venom tried to illustrate the process for him as best it could, bringing up images of two writhing amorphous beings slipping into one, colors combining like ink mixing with water, the inimitable sensation of seeing in stereo.

**RIOT TOOK A GRAVE RISK. IT IS NOT USUALLY DONE WITH HOSTS,** Venom explained. **TWO OR MORE OF MY KIND CAN ENTANGLE TO BECOME ONE, EITHER OUT OF NECESSITY OR BECAUSE THEY WISH TO. BUT THEY MUST BE COMPATIBLE AT A CERTAIN LEVEL TO DO SO. THE PROCESS CAN BE COMPLEX, EVEN FOR OTHERS OF MY KIND. TO INTRODUCE TWO DIFFERENT HOSTS INTO THE MIX… I CANNOT TELL YOU HOW UNLIKELY IT WAS THAT THE PROCESS WOULD ACTUALLY SUCCEED WITHOUT DAMAGING ANY OF US.**

Drake took a moment to process all this. Thinking in the way that Venom’s people did was so radically unfamiliar that it took some time. *So you’re saying that all four of us were compatible enough to make this… entanglement work?*

**EXACTLY,** Venom said, sounding pleased. **THE FACT THAT WE ARE NOT ALL DEAD OR DYING OF GENETIC DETERIORATION MEANS THAT WE ARE, AGAINST ALL ODDS, SUFFICIENTLY COMPATIBLE.**
Drake tried not to think about what *that* might entail. It was a little disconcerting that Riot had decided to try this out of the blue that night when they had fought on the rocket launch platform, but he would have to ask Riot about it at a later time.

**THEREFORE,** Venom continued, as though it was writing an academic article, *YOU AND I HAVE INDEED BECOME ‘WE.’ EDDIE WILL ALWAYS BE MY OPTIMAL HOST, AS YOU WILL BE FOR RIOT, BUT THE FOUR OF US ARE ‘WE’ IN WAYS THAT FEW OTHER CREATURES IN THE UNIVERSE CAN BE.*

Drake could definitely feel a headache coming on. *…that’s a lot to think about,* he said after a moment. He still felt shaken, but… less alone now. Reassured.

Venom seemed satisfied with this. It slipped back into Drake’s body, curling up in its usual spot around his brain and spinal column, and began to lull both of them into restful sleep. As they were drifting off, Venom made a few slight adjustments in their brain chemistry, something to make the both of them feel a bit better, less scared. Sometimes it helped Eddie, so maybe it could help Drake, too. If the two of them could simply hold fast—hold against the dark, just for a while longer, then maybe everything would be okay.
That night, when Skirth finally walked out with her things and got in her car, she didn’t leave immediately. Instead she sat there and cried, glasses pushed up onto her forehead with her face buried in her hands. She had become the very thing she feared most, the thing she had sworn she would never be. She was a monster. Not in the way that people like Jeffrey Dahmer or the Golden State Killer were, but in the quiet, insidious way that people complicit in horrific things were.

She hadn’t been present for McCord’s little show of force, but she’d heard enough from Jameson and Kim to know exactly what kind of brutality the general had so casually threatened. It was probably best that she hadn’t been there. She didn’t know if she would have been able to stand there and passively watch.

Up until now, Skirth had been able to justify her lack of action, if uncomfortably. It was for her own safety, she had insisted, and Vile had reinforced this line of thinking. Vile was always thinking of them, no one else. But Skirth knew it would only get worse from here. Now that McCord knew he could get what he wanted, she knew just by looking at him that he wouldn’t hesitate to use whatever means necessary to force Eddie and Drake’s cooperation. Torture was a specialty of McCord and his ilk; that was no secret. Eddie and Drake (not to mention Riot and Venom too) didn’t stand a chance.

No one deserved that. Not humans, not aliens, whatever. And Skirth was done standing by and watching it happen. This madness had to stop. She had let it go on too long already.

Skirth sniffled and rubbed at her eyes. Vile was, once again, unusually quiet. “You hear that, you parasite?” she muttered. “I can’t do this anymore. I won’t. So if you wanna jump ship, now’s the time.”

It seemed unfair not to at least give Vile the opportunity. It hadn’t asked to be stuck with her, after all.

There was silence for a few moments, though Skirth could feel Vile sliding beneath her skin, over bones and muscles almost thoughtfully. Then, it manifested a tiny blue head that poked out of her sleeve, looking at her with those milky white eyes.

*WE ARE GOING NOWHERE*, said the golf ball-sized Vile head.

Skirth gave Vile a hard look. “I just told you that I’m not waiting around and doing nothing any
longer,” she started, impatient.

**THAT IS NOT WHAT WE MEANT,** Vile interjected, puffing up almost indignantly. **I AM NOT LEAVING YOU, DORA. YOU WILL NEED MY HELP TO FREE RIOT AND VENOM, AND THEIR HOSTS.**

For a moment Skirth just stared, blinking in surprise. She slid her glasses back onto her nose.

“You… want to stay? You know this is going to be dangerous, right?”

If Vile had pupils or anything vaguely resembling a human optic structure, Skirth was sure the symbiote would be rolling its eyes. **THAT IS WHY I AM STAYING, DORA. AN OPTIMAL HOST LIKE YOU MUST BE PROTECTED.**

Skirth couldn’t help but smile. “Glad you could see it my way.” She patted the symbiote’s tiny head without thinking, like petting a cat. The texture of its flesh was smooth, with a slick feeling that didn’t linger. Even though Vile looked like it might feel sticky or gooey, it was far more solid than its appearance suggested.

Surprisingly, Vile didn't grumble or snap at her fingers like it had done in the past when she tried to touch it. Instead, it let out a rumble that sounded perhaps contented.

**WHAT DID YOU HAVE IN MIND?**

“I think I’ve got a plan.” Skirth got out of her car and started heading back towards the building.

She felt Vile’s nervous flutter within her. **NOW?**

“Not quite, but there’s something I have to do first,” she said quietly as they approached the door.

The night guard on duty let her back in, and she explained apologetically that she had walked all the way to her car before realizing she’d forgotten her keys on her desk. The guard accepted the explanation with a sleepy nod, going back to sipping at his coffee at the checkpoint while Skirth walked onward.
She looked over her shoulder only once before continuing past her office and taking the stairs down to the basement level. The lights were dimmed, the space deserted. She knew from prior trips down this way that the guards only rotated down here once an hour. It was a fairly big complex, and the basement levels had only two entrances and exits. No reason to post security on something already locked up tight.

She headed for quarantine section C, which was technically supposed to be used for containing infectious diseases, but they didn’t have much of a choice if they wanted to keep Eddie and Drake separate at the moment.

Behind the glass, Skirth could see Eddie stretched out on the floor, lying on his side. She wasn’t sure if he was sleeping or not, but his eyes opened when she approached the glass. Silver swam in front of his eyes, and that cold, predatory look was unmistakably Riot.

“Eddie?” Skirth asked softly. “Can you hear me?”

*HE SLEEPS,* came Riot’s deep bass rumble from Eddie’s throat, as quiet as such a voice could be. *BUT I AM LISTENING.*

Skirth hesitated for a moment, and Vile shifted nervously inside her. “Just… tell him to be ready, okay?”

Riot pinned her with that sharp, unflinching predatory gaze. *READY FOR WHAT?*

Skirth was already walking away, not liking the feeling that Riot was looking right through her. “Just tell him. He’ll know.”

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Skirth made sure to arrive early to work the next day. Her car was the first one in the parking lot, besides those of the night shift guards, even though this meant she had to get up ridiculously early and leave her house when it was still pitch-dark out. Wasn’t easy, commuting to such an isolated place. She had left a note for her kids, telling them they would have to walk to the bus stop by themselves today. Amara was thirteen; she could handle getting her brother Avid up for school.

She took a deep breath before heading inside the facility. Walking through that door felt weightier
than usual. As expected, it was still very quiet inside. The day shift security guards were just coming in, and she waved a friendly hello to Reggie, who was always here early as well.

She and Vile had gone over the plan last night, and it was as foolproof as they could make it. Which was to say, there were still a million and one ways it could go wrong, but they had to hope for the best.

There was absolutely no one on sub-basement level two—where all the materials and equipment were stored. There was nothing of pressing need to guard down here, except for some very large and heavy scientific equipment, and keeping that behind a locked door was typically sufficient. But Skirth had access to those doors with her keycard, and it wouldn’t look out of place if she were to be found down here, given the work she did.

She swiped her ID card to gain entry to the boiler room, held her breath for a moment before the LED blinked green, signaling that the door was unlocked. Inside, she went straight for the backup generator that was hooked up but currently not in use. It would only come on if the main power failed or was turned off. There were signs all around that said “DANGER: HIGH VOLTAGE,” and Skirth swallowed hard, looking at the thick cables that connected the behemoth generator to the main power grid.

**NO WORRIES, DORA.** Vile slithered out to coat her arms in shiny dark blue that rippled like ocean depths, providing both insulation and extra strength.

She reached for the multitude of connector cables, and Vile’s strength made it easy to yank them out of place. No electrical arcs flashed or sparked, no transformers blew or caused any disruption in the power, since the thing was already off. With the generator disconnected, that left only the main power grid keeping the locks and alarms functional. Step one, complete.

Skirth then glanced around warily, even though there was never anyone down here most days, let alone at quarter past seven in the morning. All the same, though, she didn’t linger, shutting the door behind her when she left, and forced herself to walk casually back the way she had come.

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Vile slipped back into Skirth’s body once they reached the elevator and headed back upstairs, confident that no one was the wiser. Skirth let out a quiet sigh, so absorbed in her own thoughts that she nearly didn’t notice when Jameson came up behind her and said hello.

She jumped, startled. “Oh, uh, hello,” she returned, somewhat nervously.
Jameson had a cup of coffee in one hand. “You’re here early,” he commented, appearing vaguely amused at her surprise. That was good, though. It meant he didn’t suspect.

“So are you,” Skirth responded after a moment. They were both going the same way, walking towards the lab, and she internally bemoaned the fact that this meant she was socially obligated to make conversation with him.

“Yeah, well, we’ve got a big day ahead of us,” Jameson said. He motioned to his cup of coffee. “You seem like you could use a pick-me-up. I just made some more in the meeting room.”

Skirth smiled awkwardly. “Thanks, but I prefer tea.” She glanced at the folder of papers in his arm, the tab marked with today’s date. “Um, are those the outlines for the trials today?”

“Yup.” Jameson set them on the table as they arrived in the lab meeting space. “I gotta hand it to you, Dora. You were right.”

Skirth felt something uncomfortably like guilt squirm in her guts. Or maybe that was just Vile. “Well, I have had the most experience working with the symbiotes,” she said modestly. She reached out for the folder, sliding it closer to herself, and Jameson didn’t stop her.

He sat across from her with his cup of coffee in hand, looking pensive. “Does it bother you still?” he asked after a moment, glancing at her.

“Does what bother me?” She didn’t open the folder just yet, thumbing absently at one of the corners.

“Well, I guess you’re probably used to it by now,” Jameson said, shrugging. “The whole human subjects thing.”

The casual way he said it made something twist in Skirth’s stomach, but she ignored it, didn’t bother to correct him. “Does it bother you?”

Jameson gave a wry smile over the rim of his mug as he took a drink. “I thought it would, at first,” he said. “But no, not really.”
Skirth casually opened the folder in front of her, skimming the pages, dividing her attention between reading and listening to Jameson.

“I know I’m not supposed to have an opinion on this kind of stuff,” Jameson continued after a pause, though his tone suggested he didn’t really care. “But it’s kind of satisfying, honestly. Drake’s getting what he deserves.”

Skirth glanced up from the papers in front of her, which outlined the myriad of tests they were supposed to perform to gauge Eddie and Riot’s abilities. “What makes you say that?” she asked, carefully. Lots of people had a bone to pick with Drake (hell, she was one of them), but Jameson didn’t seem like the vengeful type, she thought.

Jameson set his mug down on the table, glancing at her. “My older brother used to be an astronaut,” he said after a moment. “Worked for NASA, all that shit. Then he got a job at the Life Foundation when the space program got cut. The probe crashed, my brother died in Malaysia. And for what? Some goddamn aliens and the batshit crazy ambitions of some rich asshole, that’s what.”

Ah. That made sense. Skirth had thought his name sounded familiar.

“I’m sorry about what happened to your brother,” she said after a moment. She remembered that day very well. “But you can’t think that Drake was directly responsible for the probe crashing.”

She didn’t know why she was defending Drake, even if Jameson's logic really was flawed. For some reason, though, she felt like she should. Working with someone for seven years meant you got to know them pretty well. Even if he had made some unconscionable choices and very much tried to kill her, indirectly, she didn't think Drake was all bad. At the very least, she didn't get a thrill out of torturing him.

“Yeah? Just like he wasn’t directly responsible for the deaths of all those people in the first human trials?” Jameson retorted. He took another sip of coffee. “Tell it to all those people, and my brother, too.”

Skirth didn't really know how to respond to that. Fortunately, she was saved from the heavy, awkward silence that followed when Kim walked into the room with her purse in hand, clearly having just arrived. Kim glanced between the two of them, seeing the looks on their faces.

“What did I miss?”
Eddie guessed it was still early when he woke up. He wasn’t really sure why he was awake, other than the weird sensation that made him feel like he should be. Huh. Even when Riot wasn’t thinking in words, its thoughts were such that Eddie couldn't ignore them.

“What’s on your mind?” he said out loud, staring at the ceiling as he rolled onto his back.

Riot didn’t deign to respond verbally. Instead, it showed Eddie the memory of last night, of Skirth coming by and giving them her cryptic message. It was sort of bizarre, really, because it was a memory he could see through his own eyes, but with Riot’s enhanced senses. In the unfamiliar memory, he could scent her human warmth, hear her heart beating in her chest, her blood flowing in her veins. Hunger permeated the memory.

“Too much detail, man,” Eddie muttered, throwing an arm over his eyes as though it would help. His stomach ached hollowly.

*SHE SAID YOU WOULD KNOW WHAT IT MEANT*, Riot prodded after a moment.

“Why the hell would I know would she meant?” Eddie mumbled, still sleepy. Be ready, she had said. Ready for what?

Riot snorted. *HUMANS*, it muttered, more out of frustration than actual insult towards Eddie.

A thought popped into Eddie’s mind. “Are you eating my organs?”

*NO. A reluctant, but direct response.*

“Are you sure?” Eddie couldn't help but be suspicious.

*IF YOU WERE ON A BOAT IN THE MIDDLE OF A POISONOUS OCEAN, WOULD YOU START STRIPPING THE PLANKS TO MAKE AN AIRPLANE?*
Eddie was maybe a little impressed at the aptness of the metaphor. And the fact that Riot knew what an airplane was. “Alright, alright. Point taken,” he said. A pause. “…Thanks for, uh, not eating me from the inside out. I know you’re hungry.”

Riot let out a low rumble that seemed to bounce off the inside of Eddie’s skull. **I AM NOT UNREASONABLE, EDDIE. YOU ARE TOO GOOD OF A HOST TO SIMPLY EAT.**

Eddie blinked, surprised. Had Riot just addressed him by name? And not insulted him?

“That’s what Venom said, too.” Weird how Riot and Venom were so very different, and yet Eddie had managed to convince them both he wasn’t entirely worthless. Under different circumstances, of course, but the point stood.

Eddie shifted positions uncomfortably, his shoulders and hips aching from lying on the hard, unforgiving floor. He sighed and finally just stood up, rolling his shoulders and walking slow laps around the perimeter of the cage. He always did his best thinking when he was moving, anyway.

**WHAT ARE YOU DOING? SIT DOWN,** Riot grumbled after a moment.

“Somebody’s bossy all of a sudden,” Eddie commented, stopping at the edge of the glass to peer out into the hallway. He didn’t want to go back to lying on the hard floor like a dead fish.

**YOU ARE WASTING ENERGY. WE MUST CONSERVE OUR STRENGTH.**

Well, Riot wasn’t wrong, but Eddie couldn’t help but think it was kind of a moot point. “C’mon, lighten up a little,” he said, trying for casual. “Hopefully they’re gonna feed you today. They wanna see what you can do with, uh, y’know…”

Eddie mimed slicing through the air with his arm and was briefly shocked when his arm morphed into a wickedly sharp silver blade, heavy but sleek. He startled, eyes wide as he stuttered out something terrified and incoherent, but it was gone as quickly as it had come. In the time it took Eddie to blink, his arm was back to normal, flesh and blood and nothing more.

“Jesus, warn me next time,” Eddie muttered, rubbing cautiously at his left forearm, as though to make sure no lingering sharpness still existed along the familiar flesh.
INTERESTING, Riot rumbled, sounding almost pleased. YOUR BODY IS RESPONSIVE TO MY ABILITIES. NOT AS MUCH SO AS DRAKE’S, BUT THIS IS GOOD ENOUGH.

“What happened to conserving our strength?” Eddie needled Riot, just because he could. He sat down against the wall again, having gotten bored with his little walk.

ONLY STRETCHING, Riot remarked absently, and Eddie could feel the symbiote’s mass shifting and moving inside him, passing through body cavities and slinking along muscles and tendons.

The sensation made Eddie shiver. It wasn’t like the familiar touch of Venom, who always kept its presence discreet, barely noticeable. “Hey, mind being a little gentler in there?” he asked, glancing down at his abdomen.

WHAT IS WRONG NOW? Riot groused, not pleased at being interrupted.

“Nothing, I’d just appreciate it if you could be a little more careful when you’re poking around my insides,” Eddie said, prodding at his stomach where he thought Riot might be. “Humans are kinda fragile, y’know.”

Riot knew this all too well. It gave the faintest little shiver behind Eddie’s ribs, and vague imprints surfaced in their link: delicate tissue scorched by flames, raw nerves alight with pain, the look of helpless fear on Drake’s face as he was laid out on that table. Humans were such breakable things, so soft and easy to hurt. After the rocket explosion, feeling the incomparable agony that Drake had suffered, that both of them had suffered… Riot had sworn to never let such a thing happen again.

Then Eddie’s attention was drawn away, and the sight of Dora Skirth approaching sent an anxious shudder vibrating through Riot’s mass within Eddie’s abdominal cavity.

Skirth stopped just short of the door with the guards behind her, smiling thinly. “Ready?”

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The next set of trials were far less painful than Eddie had been dreading. Compared to what Riot had been subjected to before (and Eddie had seen it through their link), this was a walk in the park.
Eddie agreed to hold still and keep Riot in check while a quietly terrified lab tech drew his blood and took his vitals. Riot had wanted to scare the poor tech, just a little, but Eddie had said absolutely not while the guy had a needle in their arm.

This time, the guards gave him a wide berth as Skirth and Kim led the way to another room, one that was much bigger than the others. Eddie couldn’t help but feel a little twinge of satisfaction at the looks on their faces, even though he knew it was Riot and not Eddie himself that had these guys looking like they were gonna piss themselves.

Eddie let them shut him in the wide empty room without protest, like an animal in a new zoo exhibit. He crossed his arms, looking at them from the other side of the glass. Kim gave a short explanation about what they would be observing and what they might ask to see from Eddie and Riot, but Eddie wasn’t really paying attention, honestly. The gnawing edge of Riot’s hunger had become an insistent burn with the knowledge that they would be fed soon, and it was making them both impatient.

It was so laughably easy that it could hardly be called hunting, as the scientists released various small mammals into the chamber for Riot to snap up in the blink of an eye. There wasn’t any space to run or chase, and Riot chafed for something that was more of a challenge.

The little animals, ranging from as small as a guinea pig to as big as a deer, were pathetic mouthfuls for the symbiote, but Riot scarfed them down all the same, too hungry to care. Eddie let Riot take the lead here, figuring it was best to let Riot blow off some steam in a way that didn’t involve further unbalancing their precarious situation. Outside, the scientists watched with wide, curious eyes, taking down notes and whispering to one another. Or at least most of them did.

Somehow, Eddie felt like Riot was more hungry now than before. Even though they’d eaten two guinea pigs, a raccoon, three dogs, and a tranquilized deer, Riot was somehow more ravenous than ever. Predatory instinct surged between them, a need as sharp as claws digging into their shared psyche. Riot wanted more, wanted something that would truly sate their hunger. But more than that, Riot wanted to hunt. It wanted the prey to run, wanted to chase, to smell the tang of prey-fear just before Riot’s teeth tore into soft flesh.

**WE WANT A REAL HUNT,** Riot hissed, pacing impatiently along the length of the room, crawling along the walls and the ceiling with eerie, liquid grace. **WANT A CHALLENGE.**

Eddie’s mind was swimming in a haze of killer instinct. He could smell and taste blood in the back of his throat, though it wasn’t his, and some part of him echoed Riot’s desire for more.
Skirth was looking at them from the other side of the glass, her gaze intense and quietly desperate, like she wanted to speak but couldn’t. The other scientists were taking diligent notes and discussing with one another the output on their computer screens, but she was taking slow steps back, toward the electrical panel on the wall.

They watched her carefully, mind hazy with bloodlust, but some part of Eddie’s human curiosity kept their attention focused on her.

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Skirth could feel Riot’s gaze on her. Even if the symbiote had no pupils, she could tell from the narrowing of its opalescent eyes and the tilt of its head that it was watching her. That was good, even if Vile shuddered uncomfortably within her.

Her colleagues were busy taking notes, discussing the high-speed playback of the symbiote forming its biomass into blades and spears. Rutherford was at the desk, adjusting camera speed and angles, and Kim seemed deep in thought as she watched the playback. Jameson and some of the other techs were taking notes for later use, pens scribbling urgently on paper.

No one noticed her slow, quiet walk toward the wall that held the electrical panel.

At least, no one except the General.

She heard the ominous click of a loaded gun and froze, shoulders stiff.

“And just what do you think you’re doing?” McCord asked coldly, his silver .45 pointed at her from only a few feet away. Point blank, really.

Skirth felt the familiar breathless tension of fear within her, but this time, it didn’t crash over her like a tidal wave, didn’t render her frozen and terrified. Instead, she took a breath, feeling the adrenaline surge within her like a live wire, but without fear. She had looked death in the face before, and it wasn’t so scary the second time.

She looked McCord in the eye, unwavering. “What I should have done a long time ago.”
She threw the switch, Vile’s flesh overlaying her arm and ripping the whole thing out of the wall in a shower of sparks, and he pulled the trigger in the same second.

The lights went out immediately, but there was no backup generator to kick on, and the room was bathed in pitch black. The gunshot rang out in the dark, and the scientists screamed. The guards scrambled to turn on their flashlights, amid the faint light from the sparking ruins of the fuse box, but none of them lasted long.

Blue tendrils lashed out in the dark, choking off screams from the men with guns, and in the beams of light the scientists got only glimpses of seething blue flesh and nightmarish long teeth, hearing the crunch of bone and the warm thick splatter of blood on the walls and floor.

The reinforced glass shattered in a rain of mirror-like shards that twinkled in the flashes of white light, while massive silver blades sliced through anything still standing, and Riot’s deafening screech echoed through the corridors.

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There was no stopping Riot now.

Even in the throes of bloodlust, Riot was far from stupid, and it knew an opportunity when it saw one. They would never get a better chance than this. Eddie knew he was basically just along for the ride at this point, heart pounding with both excitement and terror as Riot crashed through the reinforced glass barrier like it was nothing.

Riot’s optics were different than Eddie’s own, and even in the pitch black, they could see very well, and scent even better. Skirth and her symbiote were nowhere to be seen, Eddie noted faintly, but the thought was just as soon gone. Riot’s blades had killed the three techs and Rutherford in one fell swoop, while Kim had made it out the door, bleeding heavily from a gash across her front. McCord, too, appeared to have run, but they weren’t concerned about that right now.

Riot ate the heads of the three remaining humans, uncaring that they were already dead—food was food, and they were starving. It screeched again, full of bloodlust and triumph and incandescent rage, before tearing its way out of the room with a slice of blades that cut through the walls like butter.

Eddie was trying to think, trying to form words, trying to get something across to Riot in terms of a plan, but the symbiote needed no instruction. Its rage burned thick and hot like a wildfire haze across
their shared psyche, but Riot’s cunning as team leader was sharp as ever. There were no words shared between them, but they knew all the same what to do. Find Venom, find Drake, get out. The in-between could be figured out along the way.

The corridors were pitch black, full of echoed shouts of both terror and frantic orders, but with the sonic sound alarms disabled, the humans were nothing but nuisances with their pathetic projectile weapons.

Riot could smell the sharp reek of their fear, and it was intoxicating. Bursts of gunfire came from both ends of the corridor, briefly illuminating the place with muzzle flashes, but Riot’s flesh merely absorbed and spat out the bullets like they were nothing. Riot snagged one of the soldiers in its claws and bit his head off in one fell swoop, tossing the body into his fellows with a triumphant shriek.

_Eat later, dammit!_ Eddie managed to get across, even though the shared sensation of eating brains was so savagely satisfying in a way it definitely should not have been. _The plan! Venom and Drake first!_

He wanted to say more, but Riot just growled its affirmation, tearing its way through the soldiers with devastating efficiency that left the humans little more than bloody smears on the floor. Riot tore the doors off the elevator with a screech of tearing metal, and crawled up the shaft until they reached another set of doors, which were summarily torn off and used to bisect the unfortunate guard who was standing outside.

There was a contingent of guards already waiting, armed and armored in ways the ones downstairs had not been, the glare of flashlights on their helmets. They were in formation, barricading the corridor from both directions with guns pointed at Riot.

Riot let out a terrifying snarl, blood and saliva dripping from its jaws. _I WILL GIVE YOU A CHANCE TO RUN_, it growled, _IF ONLY BECAUSE I LIKE MY PREY BEST WHEN IT STRUGGLES._

To their credit, the soldiers didn’t appear to flinch. “Flash bang!” one of them called out, tossing a metal canister across the floor.

Riot watched the thing sliding closer, unsuspecting, and then the grenade exploded with a burst of blinding light and a high-frequency sound blast that was like a punch to the head.
Riot screamed, structure rippling for a moment, but it recovered just as quickly, lashing out with an arm morphed into an axe to eviscerate three of the nearest group of soldiers, cutting them clean in half.

The remaining soldiers, however, pressed their advantage. They all started throwing flash bangs, tossing the metal canisters in volleys of two or three, just enough to keep Riot agonized and disoriented. It screamed and bashed its head and torso into the wall with every burst, tearing off doors and pipes and lashing out blindly as the pain threatened to destabilize it.

Riot was starting to get scared. Eddie could feel it in the way the symbiote screeched in pain, and in the way the swipes of its claws were getting sloppy and desperate, cagey in the way a cornered animal was. This wasn’t working. Eddie tried desperately to regain control, tried to make Riot see sense and *get the hell out of here*, but they were out of sync, dazed and confused with the effects of the damn flash-bangs.

The soldiers were getting closer, boxing them in, but then another screech reverberated through the corridor. The soldiers froze, terrified, as something rapidly approached from the rear. Black tendrils shot out from the dark like liquid shadows, snatching the soldiers and their weapons away, tearing them apart with a meaty rip of torn flesh and crunch of shattered bones.

Venom picked off the group with devastating efficiency, letting out a shriek as it approached, moving as though it were simply part of the formless black night, vengeful and hungry. It didn’t hesitate. Venom reached out with a tendril, coiling itself around Riot and Eddie, and as soon as they touched, the world seemed to fall away around them.

Drake used to have dreams of falling from a dizzying precipice, then sinking deeper and deeper into suffocating dark water, unable to scream. In the dreams he could never reach the surface no matter how hard he tried, and the primal fear of drowning was always so sharp and terrifyingly real.

This felt like those dreams, except the crush of the dark water wasn’t enough to wake him up, gasping for breath and shivering in a cold sweat. No, this felt like a dream made reality, drowning in a storm of sensory input, overwhelming and strange and familiar all at the same time.

He felt like he was falling, but somewhere he felt Venom’s touch bracing him against the storm.
DO NOT BE AFRAID, said Venom’s voice—or maybe it was Riot’s—seeming faint amid the crashing waves of sensation, nameless instincts and slivers of memories, pain and aching need and the blurring of borders between four separate minds. Even with all the things Venom had told him about entanglement, the sensation was still overwhelming.

Drake remembered being afraid, the first time Riot had done this. That time, it had felt like a battle, fighting against slipping under the crushing weight of another symbiosis.

This time was different. This time, all of them reached out for one another, a whole greater than the sum of their parts. The edges of three other minds were bleeding into his own like watercolor paints on a page. Sensations and emotions flickered across a bond that stretched four ways, wordless but somehow familiar, like the touch of silver-black tendrils and the embrace of strong tattooed arms. It was so much all at once, the flow of sensory memories and instinctual ripples that came too quickly to fully decipher, and Drake thought he would be afraid. But now, he wasn’t afraid.

This time, Drake let himself fall.

The stormy sea began to settle, and four became one. Their vision focused, their form settling at last—a sleek and muscular nickel-gray body shot through with marbled black and silver, massive clawed hands, back covered in jagged spikes. Slavering jaws hung open, blood and saliva dripping from long needle-like teeth, breath coming in time with the double heartbeat that thudded rhythmically from within them. They tossed their head back and let out a grating metallic screech, euphoric and starving in the throes of rebirth.

The soldiers had already fled, out of effective weapons and in terror for their lives.

A single gunshot pinged off one of the spikes on their back, and they snarled, turning to face the threat. McCord stood between them and the way that led upstairs, aiming both a flashlight and a pistol at them.

“Stop right there, you fucking—!” He didn’t get to finish his sentence as the silvery-black symbiote grabbed him by the throat and pinned him against the wall, letting out a deep growl.

Their long, wet tongue slithered across the man’s face, tasting the salt and sweat of fear on him, their nightmarish face illuminated in stark, ghoulish light from the flashlight beam.

McCord choked, grabbing at the massive clawed hand around his throat, the struggle of soft prey-things in their last moments. “W-what the hell are you…?” he choked out.
The symbiote let out a low, throaty chuckle, a bass rumble with a growling, distinctly inhuman note, claws pressing threateningly into the soft skin of the man’s neck in a deadly caress.

*WE… ARE VENGEANCE.* They unhinged their jaw to engulf his head, and his scream was abruptly cut off with their teeth in his throat.
Dora Skirth was running down the empty corridor, breath coming in shallow gasps, blood streaking her clothes and her skin. She was close, so very close. All she had to do was get out of the building, and then she’d be home free. Vile was working on healing the bullet wound in her abdomen, which was really quite a strange sensation in and of itself, once the waves of agonizing pain stopped. Skirth had never been shot before. It wasn’t an experience she wanted to repeat.

It was easier to navigate on the ground floor, with some ambient light coming in through the windows, but the haze of smoke from electrical fires started on the lower floors was starting to choke the concrete corridors. Her lungs were aching, her legs trembling, but she was running on adrenaline and Vile’s suppression of her pain receptors. It would have been faster for the symbiote to simply take over and get them both out, but they didn’t need to attract any more attention at the moment. That, and Vile currently had its metaphorical hands full repairing Skirth’s shredded left kidney and spleen and stopping the bleeding into her abdominal cavity.

She was running, but not fast enough. There was a horrible metallic shriek from behind her, and Vengeance was upon her in an instant.

It pinned her against the wall with a snarl, its massive hand pressing against her chest with what felt like enough force to crush her ribs. She gasped in pain, frantically trying to draw breath while Vile attempted to help her chest expand and contract against the crushing force.

It was huge, this thing that was a combination of Venom and Riot, more terrifying and nightmarish than either of them individually. It growled low in its chest, regarding her with narrowed opalescent eyes. Why it hadn’t eaten her yet, Skirth didn’t quite know.

She felt on the verge of panicking, trembling beneath the symbiote’s crushing hold and wondering why the hell Vile wasn’t getting her out of this.

“Please,” she begged breathlessly, not sure which of them she was speaking to. “Please…”

*WAIT*, Vile said from within her, its substance trembling even as it was repairing her kidney. *JUST WAIT, DORA. HOLD FAST.*

Skirth tried to do as it told her, forcing herself to look into the monster’s eyes. It was still growling, its long thick tongue lolling out to lick at her skin as though tasting for something.
She was trembling so hard she could barely form words, but something told her she had to try. “C-can you hear me in there?” she asked, breathless, locking eyes with the silver-black symbiote.

Skirth let out a shuddering breath as the thing tilted its head, rumbling low in its chest, jagged teeth terrifyingly close to her face. “Eddie… Carlton… I know you’re in there, both of you,” she pressed. “You remember me.”

The symbiote’s face pulled into what could have been a grin or a snarl, exposing even more teeth—if that was possible.

**VILE,** it rumbled in a voice that was both alien and familiar. Monstrous, but sharply intelligent. **WE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN. AND YOU, DORA… CLEVER, AS ALWAYS.**

Skirth swallowed hard. She felt her skin tingle as Vile coalesced around her, though leaving her face and hands free, like a living suit of armor. It was protecting her, nothing else.

**ARE YOU GOING TO KILL US?** Vile’s voice came from her throat. What a strange sensation. The terror that thrummed in her veins was coming from both of them. She got flashes of what the entangled symbiote could do to them—tear them apart, consume them. In Vile’s memories, there was a terrifying flicker of being subsumed into another entanglement, dragged into a combined consciousness on some distant world.

The silvery-gray symbiote’s features twisted into a snarl so reminiscent of Riot, just for a moment, an expression that said they might have wanted to. Riot had always had a bit of a temper. Then it calmed, letting out a low growl.

**YOU SPARED US. SO WE WILL DO THE SAME FOR YOU.**

It dropped her then, letting Skirth fall to the floor, like a cat that had grown bored of a dead mouse. Vile cushioned her fall, though, and went back to closing up the bullet wound in her abdomen. She watched it bound away on all fours toward the exit, closed her eyes and felt her very core tremble while Vile fixed her up.
They were close, so very close they almost couldn’t believe it. Their double heartbeat quickened, and a surge of adrenaline from the two human bodies entwined within them lent them speed and strength as they barreled towards an exit familiar from a distant memory.

A left. A right. A familiar door here, the touch of light from the left side. They were going the right way. The crush of bone between their jaws, gush of hot blood over their tongue as they tore limbs from bodies in their path. The screams of their prey barely registered. They saw distant memories of a world beyond walls, the open road, the roar of a motorcycle engine, the touch of the memories suffused with a want like hunger, like thirst, like home.

They crashed through the doors with a crunch of shattering glass and a groan of tearing metal, followed by a plume of billowing smoke like that rising above the building already. The air outside was cool and damp, the sky overcast and grey with intermittent drizzling rain, and its touch against Vengeance’s skin was joyous.

They didn’t stop there, though, not for a second, running on all fours into the field of rippling green grass. They ran until they couldn’t run anymore, coming to a shuddering halt and tilting their great silver-black head up towards the sky.

Thunder rumbled overhead as the rain rolled off their metallic gray skin, and Vengeance let out a deafening shriek that echoed into the distance. A roll of thunder came again in response.

Vengeance laid down in the grass, uncaring even as it began to rain harder, the water cool and clean upon their skin like absolution. Slowly, the two symbiotes bled apart into silver and black, their combined form melting away. Now that the imminent danger was past, they could finally rest. Black and silver slipped away out of sight, and Vengeance fell apart until there was nothing but two sleeping human bodies lying there in the embrace of the grass, limbs tightly entwined like twins in the womb.

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Eddie woke up to the sound of rolling thunder, surrounded by the smell of wet grass and rain on the cool breeze. The world felt distant from behind his eyelids, and the quiet inside his own head seemed strange. When he opened his eyes, he realized he was lying on his back underneath a tree with leafy branches not quite thick enough to keep the rain from dripping down onto him, the water cool against his warm skin. He was soaked through, feet muddy and joints aching, but just the sensation of the wind against his skin was enough to reassure him that this was real.
He laughed weakly, letting his head drop back against the grass. Rain was drizzling steadily from the uniformly overcast sky, and the soft sound of droplets against the canopy of green leaves was the most beautiful thing Eddie had ever heard.

His eyes drifted shut again, feeling a deep sense of exhaustion in the pull of his muscles and the working of his lungs. He felt like he could just fall asleep right then and there, amid the sounds of the rain and the gentle breeze. Then, a thought passed through his mind, and he felt a flicker of concern.

Venom? he tried, searching for any sense of the symbiote within him.

There was a gentle flutter from somewhere inside him, too vague for him to tell whether it might be Venom or Riot. It was enough, though. Judging from how Eddie himself was feeling, it was probably to be expected that the symbiotes were exhausted, too. He decided not to worry too much about it for now.

When he opened his eyes again, he noticed Drake sitting quietly next to him, his back against the tree trunk. He was looking up at the sky through the branches of the tree with a look of wonder on his face, like the sight was something fascinating, a quiet, uninhibited sort of curiosity in his wide brown eyes.

For a moment Eddie wondered what he was thinking about, but then he remembered that this was the first time Drake had seen anything outside of that lab in six months. The thought made something ache in Eddie’s chest.

“Hey,” Eddie managed hoarsely. His voice seemed quiet against the backdrop of rain.

Drake glanced over at him with that mysterious little half-smile of his, the one that Eddie still didn’t quite understand what it meant. The man was always so hard to read.

“You know, at first I didn’t really think we could do it,” Drake said thoughtfully, his voice soft. “After they captured us—you for the first time, me again—I thought that we were going to die in there. All of us.”

Eddie let out a long breath, not bothering to move from his position lying down in the grass. “Jesus. Aren’t you a ray of sunshine?”
Drake looked again at Eddie, who couldn’t quite decipher his expression, the look in those fathomless dark eyes. “You proved me wrong, though. That doesn’t happen often.”

**EDDIE IS FULL OF SURPRISES.** A tiny, sleepy Venom head peered out from Drake’s shirt collar, opalescent eyes slitted as though it had been drowsing.

Eddie felt a wave of relief from a tension he hadn’t realized he’d been holding in his muscles at the sight of his symbiote. It was sort of strange to see Venom from the outside like this, but he was just happy to know that Venom was safe and sound. He smiled, reaching out with one hand, and Venom met him halfway with a slender black tendril twined around his wrist.

“Getting comfortable in there, V?” Eddie said, fondly. “Riot’s still sleeping, I think.”

**MUST REST, EDDIE,** Venom said. **THE FIRST SUCCESSFUL ENTANGLEMENT IS TAXING FOR ALL THOSE INVOLVED.**

Eddie could sure as hell agree with that. He felt like he’d just run a marathon or climbed a mountain, and his thoughts felt somehow out of place in his own head. “Should probably get out of this rain, though,” he said. Now that he was a little more awake, he was becoming aware of the unpleasantness of wet clothes and the muddy ground they were sitting on.

“It might be a long walk back to San Francisco, from… well, I’m actually not sure where we are,” Drake remarked.

Eddie sat up with a grunt, feeling his core muscles ache. “We’re only a couple hours outside the city,” he said, scratching at his stubble. “Sides, my bike’s around here somewhere.” He attempted to stand but didn’t get far as his knee gave a painful spasm, and he sat back down with a sharp hiss through his teeth.

“Shit,” Eddie muttered, grimacing as he rubbed at his right knee. It was an old injury from a motorcycle accident years ago in New York, one that hadn’t healed quite right, and it only flared up at the most inconvenient times.

“What’s wrong?” Drake asked, and Venom’s rumble of concern echoed the sentiment.

“It’s nothing, my knee’s just acting up again,” Eddie tried to brush it off. Every muscle in his body
felt like it had been pulled and stretched to its limit, but that particular joint was rather temperamental.

Riot chose that moment to materialize a head from Eddie’s arm so it could speak aloud. **VENOM IS RIGHT. YOU MUST REST.** Like Venom, Riot also seemed sluggish and tired. The process of adjusting to entanglement had taken a lot out of them.

Eddie startled briefly, then sighed. “Well, we can’t just keep sittin’ here, or we’ll end up with pneumonia,” he protested. He chose not to dwell on the distinctly odd feeling of his own thoughts being out of place in his head, like something was missing.

“He’s right,” Drake said, but he seemed distracted, his gaze lingering on Riot.

Riot gave a low rumble, its silvery head nuzzling at Drake. Drake seemed vaguely surprised, but he leaned into the touch, one hand reaching up after a moment’s hesitation to stroke Riot’s smooth silver flesh.

Eddie wondered how long they had been apart, wondered if Drake truly hadn’t been able to see Riot for six whole months. He couldn’t imagine being apart from Venom for that long. Hell, even in the couple days it took while Venom was recovering from the rocket explosion, Eddie had felt lost. Even now, he could sense Riot’s longing, the emotion strong enough to feel like his own—the desire to touch Drake’s skin, to just… be close to him.

**WE WILL BE BONDED AGAIN SOON. WOULD DO MORE HARM THAN GOOD TO SWITCH HOSTS NOW, WHEN BOTH OF US ARE STILL WEAK,** Riot explained without prompting. **I TRUST THAT VENOM WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU FOR THE TIME BEING.**

“No need to worry,” Drake said, a touch of wistfulness in his tone.

**HE IS SAFE WITH ME. YOU MUST TAKE CARE OF MY EDDIE,** Venom responded, gently butting its head against Riot’s in a gesture that could have been called affectionate.

“I’ll be okay, V,” Eddie said, though he couldn’t deny that he missed Venom’s familiar presence in his mind. “Just gotta rest my knee before we go look for the bike.”

**LET ME SEE WHAT I CAN DO,** Riot said as it sank back beneath Eddie’s skin.
Eddie leaned back against the tree trunk, closing his eyes for a moment. He wasn’t sure what Riot was going to do; Venom hadn’t been able to fix it previously because, technically speaking, the wound was already healed, even if improperly.

“Wouldn’t bother with it, Riot. Venom couldn’t do anything for it,” Eddie said aloud. Old wounds, and all that. He was starting to get a little cold, sitting there in wet clothes, but there was nothing to be done for it.

**I KNOW A FEW TRICKS VENOM DOES NOT,** Riot mused, poking around in Eddie’s knee ligaments with a surprisingly delicate touch. **DID SOMETHING SIMILAR FOR DRAKE. HOLD STILL.**

There was a strange sort of itching, needling sensation in Eddie’s knee as Riot worked, and he had to resist the urge to rub at the joint or stretch it. “I’ll definitely be impressed if you can fix a bum knee when two surgeries couldn’t,” he chuckled.

Quiet settled over the other three while Riot worked.

“How’d you do it?” Drake asked after a pause. “Your knee, I mean.”

“Motorcycle accident, back when I lived in New York,” Eddie replied, glancing at him. He gave a crooked smile. “To be young and stupid, y’know?”

Drake nodded slowly, looking thoughtful.

“Riot said he fixed something similar for you,” Eddie continued after a moment. “Care to tell the story behind that?”

Drake smiled wryly. “Long story short, I was in a car accident when I was nineteen. Fractured my hip in three places, dislocated my femur, and cracked two lumbar vertebrae. Riot healed some lasting damage in that area.”

Eddie let out a low whistle, eyebrows going up. “Shit. Sounds like it’s a miracle you can still walk after something like that.”
“Oh, it certainly is. But that’s another long story,” Drake said, absently stroking Venom’s head as it laid on his shoulder.

**YOUR JOINT SHOULD BE FULLY OPERATIONAL NOW,** Riot spoke up, its face protruding from Eddie’s arm. It huffed. **HUMAN BODIES ARE SUCH FRAGILE THINGS. NOT MADE TO LAST.**

Eddie blinked, realizing he could no longer feel even little twinges of pain from his knee. He carefully flexed the joint, poking at it as though making sure it was all there. Then he stood up cautiously and put his weight on it, letting out a breathless laugh when there was no pain at all. “Well, shit,” he said, amazed.

“You’re a damn genius,” Eddie said, affectionately patting Riot’s head like he was so used to doing with Venom, realizing only in the moments after the fact that he wasn’t at all afraid of Riot biting his fingers off. “Thanks.”

**SIMPLE MAINTENANCE.** Riot tried to brush it off, but it did sound rather pleased.

The rain had slowed to a gentle drizzle by the time they left the shelter of the tree. Though their footsteps squished in the mud and the wet grass, they weren’t quite soaking wet by the time they located Eddie’s motorcycle in a tangle of tall grasses near the ditch alongside the road. All four of them were exhausted, but they all agreed they had to keep moving. They had escaped the facility, but staying the night so close to the place just seemed like tempting fate. That, and Eddie reckoned that sleeping outside in the rain in the middle of goddamn nowhere probably wasn’t a smart choice in general.

With Riot’s help, Eddie was able to drag the bike back onto the road and tentatively try to start it. The engine sputtered and wheezed for a moment, but it started right up, much to Eddie’s relief. He was silently grateful they wouldn’t have to hitchhike all the way back to San Francisco, and he wouldn’t have to answer any awkward questions.

The backpack he’d brought was also unbothered, thankfully, and the stuff inside was only slightly damp from the rain, like his leather jacket and phone, which did not appear broken but had a dead battery. He didn’t know what had become of his apartment keys when the men in the facility had searched him.

Eddie tossed the jacket to Drake and said, “Put this on.”
Drake caught it and just blinked for a moment, looking from the jacket to Eddie. “You’re not going to wear it?”

Eddie shook his head. “I’ll be fine, but you’re already shivering.” It would be a cold ride back to the city in just his damp gray sweatshirt, but he was more worried about the way Drake was trembling like a leaf in the wind.

Drake looked ready to protest, but he didn’t seem to have the energy to argue. After a moment’s pause he slipped the jacket on, along with the backpack, and got on the motorcycle behind Eddie.

“I’ve never done this before,” he admitted.

“What?” Eddie glanced over his shoulder, smiling. “Escaped from a secret government lab, or ridden a motorcycle?”

“Both.”

“Well, of that list, the second one’s not so bad. Kinda fun, actually,” Eddie said casually, revving the engine. “I’m taking care of the hard part. All you gotta do is put your arms around me and hold on.”

Inexplicably, he was reminded of the first time he’d picked up Anne on his bike, how nervous she’d been and how tightly she’d held onto him as they zipped through downtown San Francisco under the glow of streetlamps reflected in the mirror-like glare of skyscrapers and the dark of the night sky. It seemed like so long ago, now.

Drake wrapped his arms around Eddie from behind, tentative at first, but he clutched tight at Eddie when the bike’s engine snarled and suddenly they were moving, the wind whipping past them. As he shifted up and settled into the roar of sixty miles an hour on the empty rural road, Eddie quietly appreciated the warmth of Drake pressed up against his back, and tried to tell himself the sense of longing to return that touch was purely Riot’s.

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Dora Skirth stood outside the smoking remains of the building she used to work in, uncaring that her
soot-streaked clothing was getting soaked by the rain as she listened to the structure groan and twist in its death throes, collapsing inward. The gas explosions in the lower level must have devastated the structural integrity, and now it was falling in on itself. Crushed by the weight of its own design.

It was almost poetic, she thought.

**YOU WERE RIGHT, DORA,** Vile said from within her, something like admiration coming through their link. It might have even been impressed with her. **WE ARE FREE NOW. ALL OF US.**

“Something like that,” Skirth said after a moment, taking off her glasses and absently cleaning them with the hem of her ruined shirt. She had called her sister yesterday and asked her to pick up the kids from school and keep them for the weekend. That would give her time to get her affairs in order, pack up the apartment. They would have to move, hide for a while at least. Even if everyone in this facility was dead, that wouldn’t be the last of them. McCord was only one head of the deadly hydra, and in time, more were certain to take his place.

She sighed, rubbing her eyes and then sliding her glasses back on. No rest for the wicked, she supposed.

**WHAT DO WE DO NOW?** Vile asked. It hadn’t thought this far ahead, really.

“What, you’re not worried we’ll have to constantly watch our backs now?”

Vile gave a snort. **VENOM AND RIOT HAVE COMPLETED A SUCCESSFUL ENTANGLEMENT. WITH TWO HOSTS, NONETHELESS. THEY WILL BE VERY BUSY TRYING TO SORT ALL THAT OUT FOR SOME TIME. WE WILL NOT EVEN REGISTER AS ATTENTIONABLE OBJECTS ON THEIR METAPHORICAL RADIO WAVE PROPAGATION DETECTION SYSTEM.**

Skirth had to think for a moment. “You mean we won’t be on their radar?”

**THAT IS WHAT I SAID.**

Skirth couldn’t help but laugh. “That’s good,” was all she said. “You ready to go home, Vi? I think I need at least a shower and a nap before we pick up Amara and Avid.”
AND A SNACK, Vile added on.

Skirth got in her car and started the engine, smiling tiredly as rain pattered against the windshield. “That, too.”

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Eddie had no idea what time it was when they got on the road, but it was getting dark by the time they made it over the bridge and a couple blocks into the South Beach district. That was when the bike ran out of gas, sputtering to a stop outside a strip of crowded little shops.

Their options were rather limited at this point. Eddie had no money for a motel, no gas for the bike, and no energy to think of another plan. That, and he was traveling with a fugitive, plus two man-eating aliens. All he could hope for was that they hadn’t been followed. He hadn’t heard a peep from Venom or Riot the whole way here, and he could only hope that meant the symbiotes were resting for the time being.

The bike he left in the parking lot of one of the little stores nearby. It wouldn't look out of place among all the vehicles there, and he could retrieve it in the morning. A glance around the neighborhood revealed that the area was fairly run-down, crowded and not well zoned for all the businesses and residences that were around.

It was one of the less pretty parts of the district, the ones that the wealthy storefronts and landowners had pushed out to build new luxury apartments and organic grocery stores. Homeless people dotted corners and alleyways, and no one seemed to pay them any mind. Poverty had a way of making people invisible, and even if it made Eddie’s gut twist with guilt, thinking of Maria, right now it served his purposes.

After some thought, Eddie realized they probably didn’t need to worry too much about being caught, either by cops or pursuers from the facility. One glance at either of them—in their filthy institutional gray sweats, no shoes, dirty and bloody—and any average person would just assume they were another pair of homeless vagrants. This way, there was no record of them checking into a motel, no one to see them enter and leave. Hiding in plain sight, as it was.

In a narrow alleyway not far from the parking lot, Eddie pulled some cardboard from a recycling dumpster and laid it down on the ground, then sat down with a sigh. He leaned against the wall, patting the spot next to him on the crushed refrigerator box. “C’mon, sit down and rest,” he told
Drake. “You look like you’re practically falling asleep on your feet.”

Drake pinned Eddie with a disbelieving look, glancing from him to the dingy alleyway around them. Even though he was possibly more disheveled-looking than Eddie at the moment, he still managed to put on an air of supercilious disdain. “You must be joking.”

“Do I look like I’m joking?” Eddie retorted, eyes already closed as he leaned his head back against the brick wall. God, he couldn’t remember being this tired in his life. Everything ached dully, and he was freezing cold from the rain and the motorcycle ride. “Maybe it never occurred to you, but this is how the other half lives. The other half who doesn’t have the money to invest in space travel.”

Thunder rumbled distantly overhead, and the rain started to pick up again, pattering on the roofs and against the metal lids of garbage cans. With his eyes still closed, Eddie listened to Drake sigh and then sit down next to him on the cardboard.

“This doesn’t seem like a terribly smart idea,” Drake said after a pause, keeping his voice lowered. Eddie knew what he meant. They had no way of knowing that they hadn’t been followed, and while Venom and Riot were still recovering from the entanglement, they were all vulnerable.

“Trust me when I say that being on the streets has a way of making you invisible,” Eddie said, opening his eyes to glance at Drake, who looked almost dazed as he stared up at the cloudy, overcast sky. His gaze was unfocused, rain dripping from unruly locks of black hair that had escaped his ponytail. Maybe it was just a result of being dead-tired, but he seemed to lack that sharp-minded, ruthless focus that Eddie had always associated with him. He seemed… lost, somehow.

“What’cha thinkin’ about?” Eddie found himself asking.

Drake blinked, as though he hadn’t expected the question. After a moment, he smiled wryly. “Just contemplating how badly I’ve fucked up, to go from CEO of a company sending rockets into space, to sitting on a sheet of cardboard in a filthy alleyway with the man who was determined to ruin my career.”

Eddie let out a long breath. “Y’know, there is such a thing as too much honesty.”

Drake laughed hoarsely. It sounded like his throat hurt. “I wasn’t finished.”
Eddie held up his hands in a gesture of mock surrender. “By all means, continue. We’ve got nothing but time to kill here.” And it was going to be a long night if this damn rain kept up.

“I was thinking,” Drake said softly, “about how the same man who was so determined to ruin me, was the one who risked his life to come and save me from a hell of my own making.”

There was a pause, and Eddie cleared his throat awkwardly. “That’s, uh, more… poetic than I would have put it.”

Drake looked at him, his gaze searching, like Eddie was a chemical equation he couldn’t figure out how to balance. “You could have left me there, and simply carried on with your life. But you didn’t. And I still don’t understand why.”

Eddie felt tongue-tied of a sudden, his mind blank of words, what with Drake’s dark eyes on him, eyes a fathomless deep brown so dark they seemed almost black in the low light. “‘S complicated,” he said, ineluctably. He was too tired for this, his brain feeling scrambled. “I, uh... don’t have a good answer at the moment. Ask me later.”

To Eddie’s surprise, Drake acquiesced. He merely nodded, leaning back against the brick wall behind them. “Alright.”

Rain dripped down from the overhang, directly onto their heads, and Eddie sighed. “C’mere,” he said after a moment, reaching out for Drake.

Drake seemed briefly surprised, but he did move closer to Eddie, who wrapped his arms around Drake’s middle, letting him lean back against Eddie’s chest. They were both cold enough that neither resisted the closeness. It didn’t feel quite as weird after having shared a consciousness, Eddie thought, and Drake’s lean body fit nicely against his own.

“I’m not trying to get hypothermia out here, after all the shit we just got out of,” Eddie mumbled. His foot nudged another piece of cardboard closer to them, and as they laid down, he pulled it over the two of them like a blanket.

“See, it’s just like camping,” Eddie remarked. In between the two pieces of cardboard, they were both sheltered from the rain and marginally warmer, pressed up against each other.
“Even as someone who has never been camping, I can tell you with certainty that this is not it,” Drake murmured, though the sarcastic edge to his tone was softened with sleepiness.

Even though the ground was hard and his feet were freezing cold, Drake's human warmth against his chest was soothing, as was the familiar feeling of a symbiote nestled within him, and Eddie was asleep before he could think of a reply.
In which our boys (and their symbiotes) finally catch a break. Bless all of you who’ve read through 50k words to get to this point with me.

When Eddie woke up again, it was to the unyielding nudge of heavy boots against his back and the brightness of a flashlight beam in his face. He groaned, squinting against the blindingly bright light.

“That’s right, wake up,” said an unfamiliar male voice, and Eddie startled, sitting up halfway on his elbows. There were two SFPD officers standing in the alleyway, clearly on a routine patrol to rout the homeless in the area. Eddie knew the type.

The cop’s boot kicked away the damp piece of cardboard, revealing both Eddie and Drake curled up beneath. “You know it’s illegal to sleep here?”

Eddie swallowed, blinked hard to try and wake himself up fully. Fuck, this was not what they needed at the moment.

“Hey,” said the cop, annoyed, shining the flashlight in Eddie’s face again. “I asked you a question.”

“Uh, no sir,” Eddie managed after a moment, looking away from the beam. Drake stirred, and Eddie put a hand on his shoulder, hoping to let him know things were alright. Hopefully Venom would get the message, too, if it was awake. “We don’t want any trouble, sir.”

“Uh-huh. What have you and your friend been taking?” asked the second cop. She glanced around their impromptu encampment, noticing the backpack next to them. “What’s in the bag?”

“Nothing. No drugs,” Eddie said, keeping his gaze lowered. He knew this was a power trip for the two officers. Or they were just trying to meet their quota. Next to him, Drake sat up slowly, though he had the good sense not to ask any questions. Eddie could sense his tension, though, and he silently hoped that the cops wouldn’t look too closely at either of them.
The first cop squinted at them. “You boys from the state hospital?”

Well. Being mistaken for escaped mental patients was one of the slightly more favorable outcomes in this situation, in Eddie’s mind.

“No, sir. Just had some bad luck,” Eddie said, keeping his voice as steady as possible. Even if this didn’t go well, he was quietly hoping that Riot would stay asleep within him. He hadn’t felt the symbiote stir, but if Riot came to when something was threatening its host, he wasn’t sure he would be able to stop the symbiote’s instinctual reaction.

The cop glanced towards his partner. “What’s the APB description for those two guys that broke outta the looney bin upstate?”

“One Caucasian, average height and build, and one Latino, short, slender build,” the other cop recited, bored. She gestured vaguely to the two of them. “I mean, close enough. You wanna take ‘em in?”

Eddie felt his heartbeat quicken with anxiety. Shit, shit, shit. He really didn’t want to resort to letting Riot eat these guys, but if they got arrested now…

The second cop’s radio crackled, and a scratchy voice came through: “We have an armed robbery down on 9th street, one victim injured, requesting backup from available units.”

The female cop exchanged reluctant glances with her partner, who nodded to tell her to pick up. “This is car 4611, responding. We can be on the scene in ten,” she spoke into the radio, then glanced at her partner again. “Let’s go. Unless you wanna drop ‘em off at the station on the way.”

The first cop scoffed and lowered his flashlight. “Couple of homeless junkies aren’t worth the paperwork. Let’s just go see what MacDonald needs on 9th.”

“Fine by me.” The second cop turned and led the way back towards the squad car, and the two officers left without another word.

The lights and sirens faded as the car pulled away, and Eddie let out a sigh of relief, his limbs shaky with the adrenaline rush. “Holy shit,” he muttered.
“A bit of a rude awakening,” Drake said, watching them go. But he didn’t seem as tense as before.

It was only then that Eddie noticed the way black tendrils of Venom were visible at the edges of Drake’s sleeves, ready to overlay him at a moment’s notice. Those officers had no idea how close they had come to the jaws of death—literally.

“Thanks for letting me handle it,” Eddie said. “Both of you.” The last thing they needed was a trail of bodies. Although, it did worry him a little bit that Riot had slept through the whole thing. Was Riot okay in there? Eddie hadn’t felt so much as a twitch from Riot since it had fixed his knee.

“We got lucky,” Drake said, absently touching the black tendrils that were caressing the back of his hand like living shadows. “Venom was getting hungry.”

“So, uh, sleeping rough might not have been the best idea,” Eddie said, rubbing the back of his neck. He was cold, wet, and his back hurt from lying on the ground. He was getting too old for this kind of shit.

“We didn’t have much of a choice,” Drake admitted, glancing around. It was pitch-dark now, or as pitch-dark as it got in the city.

Eddie looked down the alley, seeing that the streets were mostly deserted, a few cars parked around but only a couple homeless people sleeping. Otherwise, the place was quiet. No better time to siphon some gas from one of those parked cars and hightail it out of there. Something was telling Eddie that it was best not to stay any longer than they had to. They had gotten a couple hours’ rest, at the very least.

“We gotta keep moving,” Eddie said as he stood up, stretching his back with a grimace. “We’re not that far from my apartment—probably half an hour if we can get some gas in the bike.”

Drake nodded after a moment and stood, balance wavered for only a second. He looked too tired to argue. “How’s Riot?” he asked after a pause.

“Still resting,” Eddie responded. He was starting to get hungry again. That was a good sign, right? “I guess he was pretty tired after the whole entanglement thing, and then having to fix me up.”
I WAS KEEPING WATCH. MAKING SURE IT IS SAFE FOR RIOT TO REST, Venom assured them, its head peeking out from Drake’s sleeve. DO NOT WORRY.

Eddie smiled. “Good to know, buddy.” In the dark of the San Francisco night, he knew Venom would make certain no one else bothered them. Absently, he reached out to hold Drake’s hand so he could touch Venom as they were crossing the parking lot, and Venom twined its tendrils around both their hands, silently reassuring.

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After about half an hour’s ride, they were passing into familiar territory. Eddie happened to glance to the right and see the familiar glow of Mrs. Chen’s convenience store, slowing the bike to a stop near the edge of the sidewalk and cutting the engine. Eddie looked at the door, seeing that the lights were still on and the sign still read “OPEN.” Thank whatever god was listening for small miracles.

Eddie glanced at Drake. “We’ve gotta make a quick stop here,” he said. Then, he had another thought. “If anyone tries to talk to you, you’re either deaf or don’t speak English, got it?”

Drake looked faintly amused, but mostly just very, very tired. “Je comprends.”

They walked into the store, the familiar bell ringing as the door opened, and Mrs. Chen glanced up tiredly from the newspaper she was reading.

“What’s up, Mrs. C.?” Eddie greeted.

“Long time no see, Eddie,” she remarked after a moment, eyebrows going up. “…you look like shit.”

Well, Eddie couldn’t deny it this time. He was a little embarrassed, honestly; he couldn’t remember the last time either of them had showered or shaved, and here they were, damp and bedraggled and tracking dirt onto Mrs. Chen’s clean floors. Hell, neither of them were even wearing shoes. “Yeah, things have been a little rough,” he admitted, standing in front of the counter.

Mrs. Chen looked from him to Drake, who was half-hidden behind him, keeping his head down. “Who’s your friend?”
Eddie internally winced. He had been hoping Mrs. Chen wouldn’t ask too many questions, but she wasn’t blind, and he did usually come in here alone. “Oh, this is, uh… Bodhi. We…” He gestured vaguely. “…met through another friend.”

Behind him, he could practically feel Drake rolling his eyes. God, he wasn’t usually this bad at coming up with a story on the fly, but he’d had so little sleep and was so goddamn exhausted that he couldn’t do much better.

Mrs. Chen looked like she had questions, but she just shook her head and didn’t ask them. “What can I do for you, Eddie?”

Eddie blinked, refocusing. Shit, yeah, he was supposed to be asking her for something. “Uh, you know that spare key I dropped off here a couple months ago? I… lost my keys, so I kinda need it now.”

After Anne had broken up with him and he’d managed to find another apartment, Eddie didn’t have many friends left, or at least none he trusted enough with a key to his place. And it would have been too weird to give the spare to Anne, who had been his go-to person for responsible things like that, right up until she wasn’t. Mrs. Chen, though, had accepted the responsibility without asking for many details, only promising to keep it safe should Eddie ever need it. She had been a friend to him when he needed it most—in her own somewhat abrasive, grandmotherly sort of way.

“It’s in the back room. I’ll go and get it,” Mrs. Chen said with a nod. She left her paper on the counter and disappeared through a door behind the counter.

While she was away, Eddie picked up a couple sandwiches marked with red half-price stickers and set them on the counter. Drake and Venom silently added to the pile with two liter-size bottles of Gatorade, some Jello cups, and a chocolate bar.

“What, are we gonna be hung over tomorrow?” Eddie joked.

“Neither of us have eaten solid food in a significant amount of time. I suggest we start off easy on our stomachs,” Drake was saying, while a black tendril of Venom extended from his back to search for more candy bars.

“Venom!” Eddie hissed, swatting at the black tendril, and both Venom and Drake jumped at the
sensation. “What happened to subtlety?”

“What was that?” Mrs. Chen had come back with the spare key to Eddie’s apartment, passing it across the counter for him.

“Oh, nothing,” Eddie said quickly, offering an awkward smile as he picked up the key. “Thanks, Mrs. C.”

“Anytime, Eddie,” Mrs. Chen said absently, bagging and adding up the other items. She had probably seen weirder things that night than Eddie Brock and his mysteriously quiet companion. “Eight-fifty-five.”

Eddie reached for his wallet, only to realize his pants had no pockets and his wallet was not in those nonexistent pockets. He patted his thighs, as though searching for a pocket that would suddenly appear.

Drake silently nudged his arm, holding out the wallet that had been in the pocket of Eddie’s leather jacket.

“Thanks,” Eddie murmured, feeling his ears go red. He handed Mrs. Chen a ten dollar bill and told her to keep the change.

“Go home and get some rest, Eddie,” Mrs. Chen said, somewhat more gently, as she handed Eddie the plastic grocery bag.

“Um, one more thing. D’you mind if I park my bike here, just for tonight?” Eddie asked. Outside, it had started to drizzle again, and the glare of streetlights reflected sharply off the black puddles in the cracked streets. They were going to be soaked either way, but Eddie would rather not be soaked in addition to freezing cold from the wind whipping past on the bike. It was only four blocks. He could walk back tomorrow and get it.

Mrs. Chen sighed, then muttered something under her breath in Mandarin. “Put it around back,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “But just for tonight. I got a produce delivery coming tomorrow afternoon.”

“Thanks again, Mrs. C.,” Eddie said with a tired smile.
He stowed the bike around the back of Mrs. Chen’s store, in the parking spot meant for delivery vehicles. Then he and Drake walked the last four blocks and three flights of stairs up to Eddie’s apartment in the pouring rain, chilly and barefoot and too tired to care.

The apartment was just as Eddie had left it—drafty, cluttered, a chilly breeze blowing in through the window that had been broken for six months. Eddie let out a quiet sigh, exhaustion weighing heavy on his shoulders. A dull ache throbbed between his temples, feeling like he hadn’t slept in days. His legs and back hurt, not from any real injury, but simply from total exhaustion.

The clock on the microwave read 1:51AM.

He turned to say something to Drake, but when he looked toward the couch, Drake had already laid down, his eyes half-closed. The rhythmic rise and fall of his chest told Eddie he was probably already asleep. Eddie could hardly blame him.

Eddie sighed and leaned against the wall for a moment. If he sat down, even at the kitchen table, he didn’t think he’d have the willpower to get back up again.

“You okay in there, buddy?” he murmured to Riot, looking down at himself as though the symbiote would push on his stomach or something to give him the ok. “Starting to get a little worried out here.”

He listened carefully for a few moments, waiting for something, anything that would give him a clue. It could be hard to ascertain exactly where Venom was in him at times, but Riot had always made its presence very clear. After what felt like a long time, standing there in the darkness of his apartment, he felt a little flutter come from within him, a soft but definitive ripple of a symbiote nestled somewhere in his chest cavity.

Riot didn’t say anything in words, but Eddie felt the press of a sensation through their link, a solid, steady warmth that felt like a reassurance, like the comforting pressure of a weighted blanket.

Eddie let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding, shoulders sagging with relief. “Thanks,” he said softly.

For a moment Eddie regarded his messy apartment, the chilly draft coming in through the broken window, the distant sounds of sirens and traffic and barking dogs coming from outside in a familiar
auditory haze. He felt like he’d been away a long time, somehow. Everything felt… distant. Like things had changed. And they had, really. He had broken into a government facility, killed probably a lot of people, was possibly still a target of a sinister paramilitary organization, and was now harboring a fugitive as well as a second man-eating alien in his apartment. What a story it would make, if only his editor wouldn’t laugh in his face for submitting such a thing. Or tell him to go get a psych eval.

“Shit,” he muttered, rubbing his eyes. It was too late—or maybe early—to be thinking about these things.

It was all Eddie could do to flop onto his bed and close his eyes, hoping that he could justify all this to himself in the morning.

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Eddie woke up to the sound of the shower running, feeling hungry and thirsty and his whole body aching. He was briefly confused, because he still lived alone, if he remembered correctly, until the memories of last night caught up to him a second later. He sighed, letting his head drop back against the pillow and staring up at the ceiling through half-closed eyes. It was morning—still somewhat early, even, judging from the light that was streaming in through the window.

A tendril nudged at his shoulder, and Eddie reached up to pat it tiredly. “Go back to sleep, Venom,” he muttered.

The guttural rumble of amusement that came in response immediately reminded Eddie that it was not Venom, and he sat up, startled into full awareness. “Jesus,” he muttered, scrubbing a hand over his face and then watching Riot’s silvery head poke around nearby cluttered shelves and piles of laundry. “How long have you been awake?”

LONG ENOUGH, Riot responded. EDDIE, YOU LIVE IN WHAT I BELIEVE OTHER HUMANS WOULD CALL, ‘A SHITHOLE.’

“Hey, it is not!” Eddie protested. They hadn’t even been awake for five minutes, and Riot was already judging his living space? “I just haven’t had time to clean up, okay?”

The apartment was actually somewhat spacious for a studio in San Francisco, but Eddie got away with paying very little for it because it was in such a terrible neighborhood. Which was fine with
him. On a freelance journalist’s income, he couldn’t afford to be picky.

“You’ve just got high standards because you’ve been living with Drake,” Eddie grumbled. “He is—well, was one of the richest guys this side of the planet. After the whole disaster with the Life Foundation that tanked their stocks, probably not anymore, though.”

Which was partially Eddie’s fault, really. After his editor had agreed to publish the exposé and the photos from the lab, the public backlash had been fairly steep for the first couple months. The company had floundered without Drake’s leadership—the board had only been in it for the money, not the science, so they had thought it best to cut their losses and run. The Life Foundation, inundated with lawsuits and an ongoing police investigation, had been quietly cut up and sold off in pieces. They were mostly into geothermal energy now, and some low-level pharmaceutical stuff, if Eddie remembered correctly.

Riot looked uninterested, though, more focused on poking at the threads unraveling from Eddie’s blankets and sifting through piles of junk with its tendrils with a vaguely curious touch. Eddie wondered if Riot even knew what money was. Or maybe it just didn’t care.

Then the bathroom door opened, and Drake stepped out wearing only an oversized black t-shirt that came down almost to his knees.

“Might I borrow some clothes?” was the first thing Drake asked, looking vaguely embarrassed.

Eddie looked him up and down, eyebrows raised. “What have you got there?”

Venom’s face appeared on the front pocket of the t-shirt, grinning. GOOD MORNING, EDDIE.

“Hey, you never told me you could do that,” Eddie said, surprised as he realized the whole shirt was made of… well, Venom.

NEVER GOT THE CHANCE. YOU ALWAYS MAKE ME HIDE IN PUBLIC, EDDIE,
Venom practically pouted.

“I’d just like some pants, if possible,” Drake was saying, tugging awkwardly at the hem of the black t-shirt.
Eddie grinned. “Y’know, I’ve been in this situation before—come back to my apartment with someone, and I wake up to said someone wearing nothing but my shirt—but not quite like this.”

DON’T REMEMBER THAT HAPPENING, Venom spoke up innocently.

The tips of Eddie’s ears went red. “Hey, that was before you came along,” he said defensively. “So, uh, how about breakfast?”

Some part of Drake still couldn’t believe that this was really happening. Here he was, sitting on the couch in Eddie Brock’s apartment, wearing a too-big t-shirt and sweatpants that were not his, alive by some combination of a miracle and Eddie’s sheer dumb luck. He had never been so happy to do simple things like take a shower and put on clean clothes. He’d woken up early despite being exhausted; Eddie’s sagging couch was just not that conducive to comfortable sleeping.

Eddie had woken up a bit later, taken a shower and otherwise cleaned himself up, and then cooked a quick breakfast with a minimum of disasters—with a little help from Riot, who was surprisingly adept at cracking eggs in a way that Venom, as Eddie had assured them, was definitely not.

Venom had pouted, but only briefly. Eddie ate breakfast, but Drake could hardly stand to think of eating at the moment. He actually felt sort of sick, despite having been starving for longer than he could remember, and the thought of food made him vaguely nauseous.

“You really should eat something,” Eddie was saying in between bites. He ate like a starving man, which made sense at the moment.

Riot, for its part, turned up its metaphorical nose at the runny eggs. It wasn’t hungry enough to hunt again yet; the gorge of human brains during their escape had sated its appetite for the moment. It did eat a couple strips of bacon, though.

Drake only shook his head, lying back against the sagging couch cushion. He wasn’t hungry, but he had a dull headache that was slowly going away the more water he drank. “I’m alright for now.”
Eddie gulped down some orange juice, then burped. He paused a moment. “Wait, is it the bacon? Shit, I didn’t think about the whole pork thing…”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” Drake assured him. Nice that Eddie was considerate, though. “I just… don’t feel so well.” Eating felt like a monumental effort that he just couldn’t muster at the moment, not when he was already cold and aching despite having taken an inordinately hot shower.

“I can imagine you don’t, after the six months you’ve had,” Eddie said, a measure of sympathy in his tone.

Venom gave a low rumble, its substance draped over Drake like an amorphous blanket. It was helping to speed Drake’s healing as much as it could, but his body would need time to adjust. There just wasn’t a quick fix for some things, although the symbiote’s presence certainly made things easier.

_THEN I WILL EAT FOR YOU_, Venom said, snapping up several pieces of bacon from Eddie’s plate.

Riot gave a halfhearted growl; it looked like it had maybe wanted those, but it couldn’t begrudge Venom at the moment.

“How exactly does that work?” Drake wondered, curious. “I’d imagine our metabolic needs aren’t the same.”

_NO, BUT I CAN PERFORM DIGESTION AND NUTRIENT ABSORPTION FOR YOU, JUST AS YOU CAN METABOLIZE OXYGEN FOR ME_, Venom responded. Its tongue mopped up bacon crumbs and runny egg mess from Eddie’s plate once all the bacon was gone.

“Interesting. So, you could sustain a host indefinitely if you ate enough, even if the host was not fed?”

“Don’t get any ideas. You’ve gotta eat, like, at least a salad or something for lunch,” Eddie said as he got up to put his plate in the sink. “You’re so freaking skinny it’s starting to worry me.”

_IT IS POSSIBLE, THOUGH NOT IDEAL_, Venom said. _RIOT COULD DO IT BETTER,_
Eddie looked like he wanted to respond, but the subject was forgotten as there was a sudden knock at the door. Both Eddie and Drake froze, wide-eyed. Riot felt the spike in Eddie’s heart rate, and Eddie’s skin prickled with the beginnings of silver blades.

Then, the knock came again, less aggressive this time. “Eddie? Are you in there?” called a familiar female voice, and Eddie’s shoulders sagged with relief.

“It’s only Anne,” he said in a low voice, sighing. Half a second later, he swore under his breath. “Shit, it’s Anne…!”

Eddie tried to step quietly as he herded Drake and Venom into the bathroom, while Venom made a displeased sort of noise.

_BUT EDDIE, WE LIKE ANNE_, Venom was saying, sounding rather put out.

“Yeah, yeah, but she can’t know about you,” Eddie said quickly, gesturing to Venom. “And she _really_ can’t know about you,” he added as an afterthought, looking at Drake.

“What are you going to do?” Drake asked, his gaze flicking to the right as another impatient knock came from the front door.

“I’m gonna take care of it! Just stay quiet in here, okay?” Eddie said. “Both of you.” He shut the door on them and ran back to the living area.

“Eddie, _please_, I just want to make sure you’re okay,” Anne called through the door, sounding strained. “Just talk to me, won’t you?”

_WE ARE READY_, Riot growled, transforming Eddie’s arm into a wicked blade.

Eddie sputtered, gaping at the scythelike weapon in place of his arm. “What the _fuck_, no, that is _not_ what I meant!” he hissed, flailing his normal flesh arm. “Change it back!”
WHY? YOU SAID WE WERE GOING TO TAKE CARE OF IT, Riot shot back, irritated. I CAN MAKE SHORT WORK OF HER.

“Please, can you just listen to me for one second?!” Eddie said urgently under his breath. “I swear she is not gonna hurt us or do anything as long as you let me handle it.”

Riot grumbled but finally acquiesced, slipping back inside Eddie and allowing all his limbs to turn back to normal. Eddie then ran to the door and opened it just as Anne was about to knock again, leaning against the doorframe and trying to act natural.

“Hey, Annie,” he greeted, only slightly out of breath. “Uh, long time no see. What brings you… all the way over here?”

Anne sighed with relief. “Jesus Christ, Eddie, you scared me half to death.” She glared. “I’ve tried to call you like a dozen times in the past couple days! Why the hell didn’t you answer your phone?”

Eddie thought of the phone in his damp backpack, its battery dead. “Uh, my phone died,” he offered lamely. “Forgot my charger when I left.”

Anne rolled her eyes. “You are unbelievable,” she said. “You said you were going to be on this trip for a couple days. It’s been a week and a half, Eddie! I was on the verge of filing a missing persons report!”

Eddie didn’t really know what to say, heart still pounding just from answering the door. He realized he didn’t even know what day it was. “What can I say? Time kinda got away from me,” he said with an awkward chuckle. “But I, uh, got a pretty good story out of it. Gonna be a big one, I think.”

“I’m sure you did,” Anne said, crossing her arms. She looked him up and down, frowning. “Eddie, is everything okay?”


WHO THE HELL IS SHE? Riot grumbled inside Eddie’s head, and he jumped at the sound.
“Can you shut up for a second?!” he snapped at empty air, only realizing half a second later that he’d said that out loud.

Anne was giving him a strange look. “Eddie?” she said after a moment. “Is there something you want to tell me?”

“Uh, not really, no,” Eddie said awkwardly, feeling his stomach lurch as he recognized that look in her eyes. She suspected something, and it was only a matter of time before she figured it out. Anne was far from stupid, and she knew him far too well for him to keep up a convincing lie.

“Look, um… this isn’t really a good time…” He was desperate for a way to get rid of her, at least for right now, but there was no way he could just shut the door in her face without her knowing something was up.

Her gaze shifted to something over Eddie’s shoulder, and then the bathroom door quickly shut with an audible thud, a black shadow seeping away so quickly it could have been a trick of the light.

Eddie sighed. Venom had never been good at following directions.

Anne looked briefly surprised. “Oh my gosh, Eddie, I-I didn’t realize you had… company,” she said, awkwardly clearing her throat. “Not that I’m upset about that! I’m glad you’re… meeting people.”

Eddie felt his cheeks heat up at the implications. “Annie, I promise, it—it’s really not like that.”

“No, no, you don’t have to explain yourself to me,” Anne insisted. She seemed flustered, clearly not having expected this. “You were just… gone a long time, and I was worried. I know you’re… having a hard time with all this. Since the whole Venom thing.”

Eddie rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “It’s complicated at the moment.”

Anne’s eyes widened briefly. “Oh, so you guys are serious?” she asked, lowering her voice to a whisper and glancing pointedly to the bathroom door.
Eddie desperately wished he could just melt into the floor and end this conversation, and it must have showed on his face.

“Sorry, I know that’s none of my business,” Anne said with an apologetic smile. “But... I’m rooting for you, Eddie. And if you need anything, I’m here.”

“Thanks, Annie,” Eddie said after a moment. “You’re always lookin’ out for me. I appreciate it.”

“No problem, Eddie,” Anne said, and the genuine affection in her voice tugged at Eddie’s heart.

She left without asking any more questions, and Eddie shut the door with a sigh, leaning against it for good measure. He tried to tell himself it could have been worse. She could have noticed the pile of gray clothes in the middle of the floor, stained with mud and blood. She could have wanted to come in, could have tried to touch him and freaked Riot out. That would have been tough to explain.

The bathroom door opened again, and both Drake and Venom peered out, looking almost sheepish.

Drake came and sat on the couch when Eddie gestured the all-clear. “How did it go?”

Eddie scratched absently at his two-week-old stubble. “She thinks you’re my rebound. Or possibly a one-night stand. Really not sure which.”

To his credit, Drake didn’t even blink twice, just nodded thoughtfully. How he could remain so absurdly calm, Eddie had no fucking idea. “It’s a good cover story,” Drake offered. “So long as she doesn’t insist on meeting me.”

Eddie sighed. This was getting more complicated by the minute. He sat back against the couch cushion, grimacing as he realized the roiling in his stomach was not just nerves. The adrenaline rush of trying come up with a decent cover story—and Anne staring him down as he did so—had not done good things for the food sitting heavy in his stomach. Maybe he’d overdone it a little with breakfast.

WHAT’S A REBOUND? Venom asked, seemingly unconcerned.
Eddie’s stomach did a queasy flip-flop, unrelated to Venom’s question. “‘Scuse me for a second,” he managed, then rushed to the bathroom before voiding the contents of his stomach into the toilet.

“I did tell you to take it slow,” Drake called from the living room.

“Fuck you,” Eddie groaned, still on his knees in front of the toilet.

Riot seemed vaguely disgusted. **WHAT DID YOU DO THAT FOR? YOUR BODY COULD HAVE USED THE NUTRITION.**

Eddie flushed the toilet and went to the sink to rinse out his mouth, already feeling for the tube of toothpaste he knew was somewhere in the medicine cabinet, mumbling, “Fuck you, too.”

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“So, uh,” Eddie said after he finished stacking the dishes in the sink, ignoring them for later. He gestured to the way Riot was oozing over his arm, its head manifested from near his elbow. “Wanna trade?”

Drake felt Venom perk up at the notion, and he couldn’t deny the flutter of longing he felt at the thought of having Riot back. “If you’re ready,” he said, glancing at Venom, who rippled with delight at the suggestion.

Riot didn’t show its enthusiasm as obviously, but Drake noticed the way the silver symbiote’s gaze turned toward him, a less noticeable ripple going through its mercury-colored flesh. **YOU MAY WANT TO SIT DOWN FOR THIS,** it told Eddie. **THE TRANSITION CAN BE… JARRING.**

Eddie sank into the couch next to Drake, feeling suddenly uncertain. “Any, uh, side effects I should be worried about?”

Riot seemed amused. **NO MORE THAN USUAL.**

“Oh, so now you have a sense of humor?” Eddie said, poking at the silver head that was already melting into more featureless silver goo.
**TOUCH HIM,** Venom instructed, gathering up its mass in preparation. Skin to skin contact made things easier.

Drake looked from Riot to Eddie, hesitating only a moment before reaching out and clasping Eddie’s hand.

Riot and Venom flowed between them, and when the two symbiotes met at the point of contact, both Eddie and Drake shuddered and gasped as flickers of sensation and thought rippled through the momentary four-way link between them. It was a brief touch, just a split-second glimpse into that connection, an echo of entanglement in the electric feeling of being so close to one another.

Drake felt the briefest moment of pained emptiness, but then Riot was there—god, **Riot was there,** and the reestablishment of the connection between them was enough to take Drake’s breath away. He felt Riot permeate through every part of him, settling into familiar places like the symbiote was made to be there. It felt right in a way he didn’t know he’d missed, felt like coming home.

Tentatively, Drake reached out across their link, for the first time in what felt like forever. **Riot?**

Riot gave a low rumble in response, and the sound was so close and familiar that it almost ached. **LOOK AT WHAT THEY DID TO YOU,** it growled, already taking stock of the damage done to Drake’s body. Nothing that couldn’t be fixed with Riot’s capabilities, of course, but the fact that such hurts had been inflicted in the first place made Riot’s protective instincts surge.

*And what about you? Are you alright?*

The question took Riot by surprise. **I AM... FINE. MY KIND ARE NOT NEARLY AS FRAGILE AS YOURS.**

Drake couldn’t help but be relieved. **You had me worried there for a while.**

Riot made a noise somewhere between a purr and a growl as it settled into place, carefully wrapped around Drake’s brain and spinal cord. Riot had had other adequate hosts in the past, on other worlds, those whom it could become accustomed to, with some modifications. But a perfect match like this… it was truly once in a lifetime. And Klyntar lived a long time. Riot sent out delicate filaments through Drake’s body, surveying what had changed since they had last been together.
Drake’s memories were better at filling in the gaps, as Riot perused the information drifting osmotically though their bond. The new marks were surgical scars, mostly. Laparotomy, liver biopsy, and more. Others, though, had been inflicted just for the hell of it. Drake’s memories were hazy for some of them, but he remembered the pain. Remembered being unable to scream, not quite knowing what was happening, only that some animal part of him had been afraid, trying to escape the pain.

The memories, vague and hazy as they were, made Drake tense up subconsciously, cortisol spiking his blood.

**WE ARE SAFE NOW,** Riot rumbled. It made a few careful tweaks to their endocrine system to calm the fear response, waiting for the effects of cortisol and adrenaline to fade away. There was no real danger, only echoes of what had already been inflicted. **WILL NOT LET ANYONE HURT US EVER AGAIN.**

Drake could feel that Riot meant every word.

“Us,” he repeated softly, aloud. It was almost strange to hear Riot refer to the two of them as ‘us.’ Strange, but not bad.

The snap of fingers near his ear made Drake refocus on his surroundings, startled.

“Hello?” Eddie was waving a hand in front of Drake’s face, brows slightly furrowed in concern. “Earth to Drake? Everything okay?”

“I’m fine,” Drake managed, finally finding his voice. “We were simply… catching up.”

“I get it.” Eddie smiled, though he looked tired and maybe slightly ill. Riot hadn’t been lying about the swap being rather jarring. “Thanks for taking care of Venom for me.”

“Likewise,” Drake said after a pause. He looked at Eddie, then glanced down at their still-connected hands, feeling the caress of Eddie’s roughened thumb over his knuckles. Eddie had big hands, warm and dry, and the sensation was… nice, actually.
Eddie followed his gaze and seemed to realize what he was doing, quickly releasing Drake’s hand and clearing his throat awkwardly. “…sorry.”

Eddie stood up and looked around for the damp backpack that had his phone in it. “I should, uh…” He took one step and paled, swaying unsteadily on his feet, then thought better on it. “…or maybe I shouldn’t.”

**REST, EDDIE.** Venom made Eddie sit back down, leaving no room for argument. It extended a tendril to drag the backpack closer, and inside Eddie found his phone and tangled charger, plugging it in with trembling hands.

“Alright, alright, if you insist,” Eddie said faintly. He was still pale, breathing hard like he was trying to push through a dizzy spell.

Drake glanced over his shoulder at the convenience store bag still sitting on the kitchen table from last night. “Riot, if you would, please?”

Riot gave a rumble of assent, cooperative for once, and reached out a tendril to grab the remaining bottle of Gatorade from the plastic bag and set it down next to Eddie.

“Drink that,” Drake instructed. “It’ll help replenish your electrolytes.” If he was feeling anything like Drake was at the moment, he probably felt like shit from not eating or drinking for an extended period of time.

Eddie scrubbed a hand over his face, blinking hard. “Y’know, it says that on the bottle, but what the fuck does it actually mean?” he asked, huffing out a laugh. All the same, though, he uncapped the bottle with shaky hands and took a few cautious sips. “Shit. This is like the worst hangover ever. Th’fuck does that mean?”

“It means that your body is experiencing some… unpleasant side effects of continued strenuous exertion without the proper nutrition,” Drake explained, closing his eyes for a moment. He felt sort of dizzy, even sitting down. He needed to drink more, but the effort of reaching for the water bottle on the coffee table seemed like too much at the moment.

“Yeah? And what about you?” Eddie glanced at him, and even with his eyes closed Drake could practically hear the way Eddie’s brows were furrowed with concern.
“I’ve been better,” Drake admitted, pulling his knees up to his chest to curl up in his corner of the couch. His stomach was beginning to cramp with hunger in a way it hadn’t done in months. That was most likely a good sign. Now that he wasn’t being fed intravenously, his appetite was returning, although he was uncertain if his stomach would be able to handle real food at the moment. Fleetingly, he wished he could be sleeping this off in his own bed, wished Eddie would stop looking at him like that.

Eddie looked like he maybe wanted to say something, but the sound of his phone ringing made them both jump, and Riot growled at the noise. It had never liked the shrill pushiness of cell phones. Eddie swore under his breath, then glanced at the caller ID.

“One second,” he muttered as he picked up the phone. He cleared his throat before pressing the ‘accept call’ button, then put the phone to his ear.

“Hey, Annie, what’s up?”
Eddie didn’t know why he was so nervous. Anne had invited him out to dinner with her and Dan so they could catch up, and any other time, he would have looked forward to it. Now, though, he couldn’t have said no, both because he genuinely did want to see her, and because it would seem suspicious if he tried to bail. And really, after damn near two weeks spent as a captive lab rat and a multitude of near-death experiences, a nice dinner sounded pretty good. Venom had been fixing him up as efficiently as it could, and he was feeling good enough to be fairly confident he could make it through dinner without a hitch.

Right now he was trying to pick something to wear, and his brain was just kind of short-circuiting every time he looked through his closet. Venom was useless with these kinds of things. It had absolutely no sense of what matched and what didn’t—even less so than Eddie himself. Venom had only somewhat recently mastered colors, something it was very curious about since it could only experience them through Eddie’s optical structures.

This meant that Venom was less than helpful when asked for suggestions. The symbiote preferred dark blues and grays, or things that contrasted, generally speaking, (they were easier for Venom to distinguish). But it was mostly concerned with texture. It liked soft things most of all, like Eddie’s plush duvet and the fleece lining of his winter jacket. More than once Venom had suggested that Eddie simply wear a blanket over his pajamas rather than real clothes.

Drake, however, was surprisingly helpful. After Eddie told him where they were going and what the occasion was, he merely nodded like he’d done this a thousand times before. Probably because he had. Eddie knew Drake had gone to at least a couple Met Galas (and looked fucking flawless at all of them).

“Pick something that’s a step up from your usual, but still casual,” he told Eddie. “Since you’ll be with friends, you don’t need to go too dressy.”

Eddie blinked, then nodded. That made sense. It did not, however, translate to whatever he had in his closet. “So, uh… then what do I wear?”

Drake rolled his eyes. “Do I have to do everything for you?”
He nudged Eddie out of the way to get to the closet, which was in sort of a strange place in the studio apartment—nestled outside the alcove where the bathroom was. He sorted through Eddie’s clothes with what Eddie was sure was a judging stare, mimicked by Riot’s face peering over his shoulder.

LIKE THIS ONE, Riot said, a silver tendril tugging at a long-sleeved red shirt. Riot was partial to red.

Drake hummed, considering it for a moment. “Too much of a statement for a casual night, I think.”

Finally, he pulled out an only slightly wrinkled white collared shirt and a pair of tapered dark jeans, along with the long navy wool coat that had been hanging with the rest of Eddie's clothes for two years without being worn. “Try these.”

Eddie was sort of doubtful, but when he put them on and looked at himself in the mirror, he was pleasantly surprised. He did look dressier than usual, but it wasn’t stiff or overly formal. He could probably do with a shave, he mused, but decided against it. He didn’t want to go for too polished, otherwise Anne might think he was actually getting his shit together.

“I’ll say, I’m impressed,” Eddie admitted, admiring himself in the cheap full length mirror propped up against the wall near the bed, the mirror balanced on top of a box of CDs so he could see all of himself. “You’ve got good taste.”

Drake scoffed, like it was obvious. “Of course I do.”

It would have been less funny had Drake not been standing there in a pair of Eddie’s sweatpants and an old Van Halen t-shirt, long hair pulled back into a messy bun.

WHAT IS FUNNY? Riot asked, sounding put out. Its long tongue licked Drake’s face, like an affectionate cat. YOU DO TASTE GOOD. ALREADY KNEW THAT.

“Whoa, PDA much?” Eddie snickered, and Drake rolled his eyes at the implication.

“It’s an idiom, Riot,” Drake explained while Eddie admired himself in the mirror.
"I get the feeling I’m being insulted here," Eddie said as he adjusted his shirt collar underneath the navy coat. He knew Riot wasn’t happy about it and Drake being left at home, but he couldn’t exactly show up to dinner with Anne and Dan with Drake and Riot on his arm.

Venom was going to be enough of a handful already.

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Dinner with Anne and Dan went… marginally better than Eddie expected. They met up at a nice little seafood place, one that Eddie would have never gone to of his own volition, but Anne had insisted it was her treat. She had been genuinely worried about him while he was away on his… business trip, having been unable to get in contact with him, and Eddie had been scrambling to come up with a cover story on his way to the restaurant.

He could only hope that Anne would interpret his nervousness as simply Eddie being his normal awkward self. It felt weird, being out in public, being around other people just doing their own thing. The silence and isolation of the facility had taken a bigger toll on him than he’d anticipated. Venom was doing its best to be helpful, though, calming his brain’s anxious responses and helping to keep him focused on the conversation. The lack of running commentary and questioning about whether they could eat various people was a relief, too.

They were eating some kind of shrimp pasta dish, one that Eddie was finding a bit too heavy for his stomach at the moment, but Venom was enjoying it by proxy, speeding up his digestion so he could eat more.

YOU REQUIRE MORE NUTRITION, EDDIE, the symbiote had told him even before they sat down. With his stomach in nervous knots, Eddie couldn’t say that he was enthusiastic about the prospect, but he knew he needed to eat.

“So you went all the way to Sacramento to meet this guy, your source?” Dan was saying, curious. “That’s dedication, man.”

“Yeah, thereabouts,” Eddie said vaguely. “I, uh, had a feeling that this was important.”
“He couldn’t have called you on the phone?” Anne asked. “I mean, it seems a little fishy that you had to go and meet some stranger in a city two hours away just for the promise of some information.”

“C’mon, Annie, don’t worry about me,” Eddie said with a smile, trying to play it off. “I’ve been in this business a long time. You learn to trust your instincts.”

**THAT IS ONE WAY OF PUTTING IT**, Venom remarked inside Eddie’s head. It nudged him for another bite of shrimp pasta. Even if it was dead meat, Venom could enjoy it through Eddie’s sensory systems.

“I got worried when you didn’t answer your phone,” Anne said, giving him a look as she poked at her salad. “It’s not like you to just be unreachable like that.” The fact that she wouldn’t let the matter drop hinted that she had suspicions about his story, and Eddie tried not to squirm under her scrutinizing stare. She was a lawyer; she could pick him apart with questions if she really wanted to.

Eddie shrugged, going for another bite of pasta even though he wasn’t really hungry anymore. “It happens, y’know. Forgot my phone charger.”

Dan looked from Eddie to Anne, sensing that there was something unsaid here. Ever the mediator, he tried to simply change the subject. “So, can you tell us anything about the story? Can’t wait to read it.”

Eddie gave a nervous chuckle. He wasn’t even sure if he still had a job at this point. He’d have to go into the office tomorrow and see just how pissed Jack was at him for dropping off the face of the earth for almost two goddamn weeks. “It’s not finished yet. You’ll see when it gets published, though.”

Dan smiled. “Keeping us in suspense, I see. Well, I’ll look forward to seeing it in print,” he said with genuine warmth, and Eddie’s stomach twisted with guilt.

He hated lying to people he cared about, but he barely knew how to rationalize this whole thing to himself, let alone Anne and Dan. What was he going to say? That he’d broken into a top-secret government facility to rescue the guy who’d ruined his career and his murderous alien companion, who had wanted to feed the planet to the rest of his murderous alien species? Oh yeah, and by the way, he’d been lying to them for six months about the alien living inside his own body? Yeah, not happening.
Anne must have seen the look on his face. She exchanged glances with Dan, then reached out to place her small hand over Eddie’s own. “Eddie, if something’s wrong, you can tell us,” she said, so gently that it made Eddie’s heart ache. “We just want to help you. I know that none of this has been easy for you. But we’re here.”

“Guys, nothing’s wrong,” Eddie insisted, hoping his smile came across as relaxed and easygoing, even if his stomach and chest felt tight with anxiety. “I don’t know why you’re so worried. I’m doing fine. Promise.” To his own ears, it sounded like he was trying to convince himself as much as them.

“Eddie, I’ve been thinking,” Dan said with genuine concern, leaning in a bit closer and glancing left and right. Eddie could sense that his concern wasn’t pitying, but borne of a true desire to help. “After the whole… Venom thing, I know it was a lot for you, all at once. And you seem to be doing better now. But I’d like it if you came in for some tests at the hospital, just to make sure.”

At the mention of ‘tests’ and ‘hospital,’ Eddie’s muscles involuntarily tensed, and he drew away from Anne’s touch, his whole body feeling abruptly shaky. Vivid impressions flashed in his mind—from both him and Venom—white hallways, a glass cage, needle pricks and the bright lights of an operating theatre. Within him, Venom surged with the instinct to protect, quivering just beneath his skin. But it stayed put, recognizing at the last second that Eddie was only reacting to memories that flashed between their bond.

“No,” Eddie said, too quickly. He tried to recover, forcing himself to breathe normally. “I mean, I’m totally fine! B-besides, now that I’m freelance, I don’t really have insurance or anything…”

“Don’t worry about any of that. I’ll take care of it,” Dan assured him, and the genuine worry in his eyes was almost too much for Eddie. “And if you’re not comfortable with it, that’s okay, too. Just… consider it, that’s all I ask.”

Eddie managed to nod after a moment. “Thanks, Dan,” he said finally, his heart rate beginning to slow. “I… I’ll get back to you on that.”

It soon became apparent that none of them were much in the mood to eat any more.

“How about we go to that little sweet shop down the street?” Anne suggested. “For dessert? They have really good hot chocolate there.”

Venom perked up at the mention of chocolate, and Eddie couldn’t deny that something warm and
sweet sounded kinda good. “Yeah, that sounds great, Annie,” he said with a small but genuine smile.

They got the check—Anne insisted on paying since the place had been her idea—and headed to the confectionary down the street. The chill of the breeze blowing in from the bay felt good on Eddie’s heated skin, and as he walked with Anne and Dan, who talked pleasantly about their careers and how their day had gone, Eddie relished in the chance to feel at least somewhat normal again.

Even if he was hanging out with his ex-fiancée and her new boyfriend and it was maybe a little weird given the events that had transpired six months ago, it all felt… okay somehow. He knew (well, he was reasonably certain) that Anne had kept in touch with him and wanted them to remain friends not because she pitied him, but because she genuinely still cared about him and their friendship. And the fact that she had stuck around even during and after the whole Venom thing told him that she meant it when she said she still cared.

They sat on a bench outside the shop with their drinks, the hot chocolate warm against the cool night, the three of them comfortably close in the chill. Venom was absolutely tickled pink by the treat, and the symbiote’s contentment rolled through Eddie like an endorphin high.

WE MISSED CHOCOLATE, EDDIE, Venom purred, just between the two of them, while Dan was telling a funny story about a patient’s family and their little dog that liked to bite the nurses’ ankles without fail whenever they came into the room.

Eddie smiled against the rim of his cup when he took another sip, letting the pleasant warmth that saturated their bond do the talking for him.

They sat and talked for a while longer, about mundane things and funny things and things that didn’t matter. It was the most relaxed Eddie had been in a long time, and for that, he was immeasurably grateful. He declined Anne’s offer to come back to their place for drinks; it was past ten at this point, and he still wasn’t back to a hundred percent after the day he’d had yesterday (not to mention the weeks before that).

WE LIKE ANNE, Venom said after they had parted ways, and Eddie was headed home. He’d walked, since he hadn’t gotten any more gas for the bike after retrieving it from Mrs. Chen’s.

“That’s good,” Eddie said out loud, not afraid of being overheard talking to himself now that they were alone. “She’s our friend.” And hopefully it would stay that way. Anne hadn’t asked him any hard questions about his… rebound, and for that he was grateful.
DAN IS OKAY, TOO, Venom decided. EVEN IF HE DIDN’T LIKE US AT FIRST.

“In his defense, you were eating my organs.”

ONLY A LITTLE! Venom protested. AND WE FIXED YOU AFTERWARDS. SO IT’S FAIR.

“I know, V. I still love you,” he said, only half-joking.

It took him off-guard when Venom rumbled softly in response, and he felt his cheeks heat up as a tendril wrapped itself delicately around his hand while Venom said, gently, LOVE YOU TOO, EDDIE.

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Coming back to her empty apartment was somehow more depressing than Skirth had anticipated. She had been meaning to move for nearly a year now, hoping to find a bigger place for her and the kids, maybe someplace with a yard. But the real estate market was cutthroat, and even though her job at the Life Foundation and then working at the military research facility had paid well, it wasn’t enough for a house in San Francisco.

The apartment was quiet in a way it usually never was with two kids around. She looked around, letting out a quiet sigh. Her feet hurt, and something in her abdomen still ached with the phantom pain of a gunshot.

HUNGRY, Vile rumbled from inside her skull. Neither of them had had a chance to eat since.... well, she couldn't remember. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

“Sure, Vi,” she murmured, walking to the fridge on autopilot. There were a couple frozen turkeys in the freezer, and even though Vile didn’t much like dead meat, it wouldn’t turn its nose up at the offer. It had been able to make do with less in the past.

Getting a snack, packing a bag with her things and some of the kids’ things, and gathering up her important documents and whatnot were all done on autopilot. Skirth felt sort of numb, and maybe it was just the shock, or maybe she was finally realizing the gravity of what she’d done. By aiding in the escape of Eddie and Drake and their symbiotes, she’d painted a target on her own back. Even if
everyone else in that facility was dead, there would surely be investigations, and when they didn’t find her body among the rest… There would be questions. Difficult questions.

She stopped at the door, taking one last look at the place. She’d have to take the kids elsewhere, she knew. It would be hard for them, but she couldn’t afford to take chances, not when the stakes were this high. There would be people looking for them, at least for a little while.

**WHY WORRY SO MUCH?** Vile asked as they were leaving. **OUR BIGGEST THREAT WAS YOUR FILTHY HUMAN COWORKERS, AND THEN VENOM AND RIOT. BOTH ARE NOW EFFECTIVELY NEUTRALIZED.** Even if Vile wasn’t physically manifesting itself, Skirth could feel its dark grin. **WE CAN TAKE CARE OF MOST OTHER THINGS.**

Skirth sighed. “We can’t just eat everyone who comes by to question us.”

**AND WHY NOT?** Vile sounded put out.

“Because that’s not good problem-solving,” Skirth said as she shut and locked the door, hoping it wasn’t for the last time.

Skirth arrived at her sister’s address to the sound of sirens and a crowd of emergency vehicles. The apartment block was scorched black with flames. Her heart leapt into her throat at the sight, and she ran out of the car, stricken with terror. No, no, no, this couldn’t be happening! She had been so careful, how could they have…?

“**What happened here?**” she asked one of the firemen outside the burnt shell of the building, both desperate and terrified to know.

“**Probably a gas leak, but we don’t know for sure,**” the fireman said, looking grim. “**It burned hot and fast. Place was empty for pest control at the time, thankfully.**”

Skirth felt her knees go weak with relief. She swallowed hard. “Thank you.”

She dialed her sister’s number with shaking hands, holding her breath as she listened to the line ring monotonously.
Leyla picked up on the second ring. “Hello? Dora?”

Skirth was nearly overwhelmed with relief. “Leyla…! Where are you?”

“We’re at a hotel,” Leyla responded, sounding distracted, and Skirth could hear the sound of muffled voices in the background. Her kids. She resisted the urge to ask to talk to them. “I’m guessing you heard what happened. We’re okay, Dora. Here, I’ll text you the address.”

Skirth had to hold back the emotion she could feel rising up in her chest. “Okay,” she managed. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Okay. We’ll see you soon.” Leyla hung up, and Skirth put her phone back in her pocket, feeling numb.

An accident, they’d said. Skirth knew better.

Vile shifted beneath her skin, sensing her distress. YOUR OFFSPRING ARE SAFE. AND YET YOU ARE STILL AFRAID.

Skirth slipped away from the crowd of emergency responders and concerned neighbors, getting back into her car and pressing her face into her hands. Shit. Shit. This was no coincidence. It was a warning.

They knew. And if they knew, then she and her kids and her sister were all in danger.

KNOW WHAT? For a creature that could read her mind, Vile sure did make her explain a lot of things.

“About us!” Skirth hissed. “I don’t know how, but we have to assume they know. And that means we’re all in danger.”

Vile growled. I KNOW RIOT AND VENOM. THEY WOULD NOT HAVE LEFT ANYONE ALIVE IN THAT PLACE.
Skirth gave a thin, wry smile. “Doesn’t matter. Those people that we ate at the facility? They’ve got friends. Lots of them.”

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Eddie was exhausted by the time he got back to his apartment, even though it was only around eleven. It was probably the social interaction that had worn him out, rather than the actual physical exertion, although his body wasn’t too happy about that, either. He sighed softly, locking the door behind him and feeling the tiredness weighing heavy on his shoulders.

“How did it go?” Drake asked from where he was curled up on the couch, reading something on Eddie’s laptop.

“Pretty good,” Eddie responded after a moment. “I mean, better than I expected. Anne was just worried about me up and disappearing for almost two weeks.” She hadn’t pressed the issue, though, which was a relief. He still didn’t know how to explain all of this, or what he would say even if he wanted to tell her.

Eddie glanced around the apartment as he tossed his keys and wallet on the table, feeling like something was different. “Did you organize my bookshelf?”

“Yes. It was a mess,” Drake responded mildly. “...I didn’t know you liked science fiction.”

Eddie shrugged as he took off his jacket and shoes, leaving both by the door. “I was big on it in college.” God, this felt so weird.

TIRED, EDDIE, Venom said, manifesting a tiny head to lay on his shoulder. It could sense his exhaustion, and keeping him together at dinner had been more taxing than it let on.

Eddie sighed. “Well, uh, I’m gonna go to bed,” he said after a pause. “I’ve gotta go into work tomorrow. See if I still have a job after all this.”

Drake nodded, then closed Eddie’s laptop and set it on the coffee table. At least he was a considerate roommate.
Normally Eddie would have sat down to watch some TV or something before actually going to sleep, maybe surfed the internet or outlined ideas for pitches, but right now he was too tired to think of anything but changing into pajamas and going to bed.

As he turned out the lights and then sank into the mattress, Eddie let out a contented sigh. He had almost forgotten how nice it was to sleep in a real fucking bed. He was asleep almost immediately, the familiar weight of Venom settled behind his ribs.

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Eddie dreamed of bright lights and sharp, antiseptic-smelling air. He dreamed of lying on a cold metal table, unable to move, unable to scream even as he felt the scalpel slicing into his flesh, deep enough to steal his breath away with the bloom of agony that followed in its wake. He was sure he was bleeding, but the masked doctors didn’t seem to care. They spread the incision apart with a pair of forceps, and Eddie couldn’t breathe.

There was a mask over his mouth and nose, but with every little, strangled breath he took, he was dizzy and his throat felt dry. It was as though there was no oxygen in the room, and the doctors’ gloved hands feeling around in his abdominal cavity were so, so cold against the pulsating slickness of his viscera. He wanted to cry, wanted to scream, but somehow he was a spectator in his own body, his mind drifting somewhere disconnected from his physical self but unable to stop watching.

Something reached into his open abdomen, an awful slick caress around some organ—he didn’t know which one—and Eddie could only shut his eyes and scream inside his head, trying to stave off the lurking madness waiting to subsume him from within.

Eddie’s eyes opened suddenly in darkness, and he jolted awake, gasping as he clutched at his belly protectively. His skin was damp with sweat, his heart pounding, while Venom was caressing him from inside, trying to calm him. He could still feel the phantom cold sensation of those hands reaching inside him, and he pressed a hand over the now-healed surgical scar that stretched horizontally across his belly, as though to keep what was inside from spilling out again.

“Fuck,” he muttered, breath coming in shaky gasps.

**ONLY A DREAM, EDDIE,** Venom was saying softly, tendrils stroking his shoulders in a way Eddie knew was meant to be comforting, but right now the touch made his skin crawl. **NOT REAL. TRIED TO WAKE YOU.**
Eddie swallowed hard, trying to slow his racing heart. The apartment was still dark. The clock on the bedside stand read 2:21AM. “‘S’okay,” he managed hoarsely. “We’re okay, right?”

Quietly, Venom withdrew its tendrils back inside Eddie. *YES. WE ARE OKAY.*

When Venom said nothing else, Eddie let out a quiet, shaky breath. Briefly, he sat and listened to the distant sounds of traffic, far away in the night. Then, tossing the covers off, he went quietly to the kitchen and found the bottle of bourbon his coworkers had given him as a gift two years ago, celebrating the success of a piece he couldn’t even recall at the moment. Now, Eddie wasn’t much of a hard liquor kind of guy, but at the moment he needed something to steady his nerves. He didn’t have a shot glass, so he settled for a short, wide-mouthed glass and just eyeballed it as he poured.

For a moment Eddie just held the glass in one hand, sitting at the kitchen table and staring out the window at the yellow streetlight that illuminated the craggy brick buildings. Already, he was losing track of what was real and what was simply dreams. Objectively, he knew the surgery had happened; he had the scar to prove it, and he remembered Skirth taking him to the operating room, but nothing after that.

That meant that the nightmare had to be just that, right? Nothing but a dream conjured up by some dark part of his mind. But since escaping from the facility, Eddie had had a strange feeling, like the thoughts in his head weren’t all his own. Of course, he’d sort of gotten used to that, what with Venom occupying space in his body and mind, but this… this was different. It was like… walking into a familiar room, and everything was still there, but it had all been taken out and put back together in a slightly different way. There were subtle differences, small enough that he might be able to just brush them off as a trick of his imagination, but others he couldn’t deny.

*WE ARE OKAY, EDDIE,* Venom said again, trying to reassure him. *SAFE.* And it was true, for the most part.

Eddie was quiet for a long moment, watching the amber ripple of the bourbon in his glass. “What did you call it, before?” he asked finally. “When I kept having those dreams?”

Venom thought for a moment. *RECOMBINANCE,* it said. That was the best way that Venom could describe it, in the human way.

Recombinance. Eddie tested the word in his mind, trying to see what it felt like. He could do that now, with Venom. Some words felt different than others, had sharp edges or rounded ones, an odd
shape or a regular one, and sometimes it gave him clues about what it meant in the alien modality that was Venom’s native tongue.

There was a quiet whimper just then, soft but distinctly audible in the dark of two in the morning. Eddie’s gaze immediately went to the couch, where Drake appeared to be still sleeping. He listened to Drake’s shallow, irregular breathing, watching his body twitch with phantom sensation.

After a moment Eddie got up slowly, approaching the couch with quiet steps. It was apparent that Drake was dreaming, and it wasn’t anything pleasant. His expression was twisted into something like pain, his breaths coming fast and shallow. In the faint light coming in through the window, Eddie could see tear tracks on Drake’s face, his eyes tightly shut as though in pain. His legs were tangled in the blanket he had previously been all but hidden underneath, and his body occasionally tried to curl in on itself, as though trying to get away from something.

Eddie felt a twinge of sympathy, and without thinking he reached out to gently shake him by the shoulder. “Drake,” he tried quietly. “Drake, can you hear me?”

Drake flinched away from the touch, even in his sleep, and his breath caught in his throat.

“Hey,” Eddie said softly, kneeling next to the couch. “Carlton, wake up.”

In the blink of an eye, a silver blade glinted in the moonlight, and Eddie barely had time to throw himself backwards onto his knees to avoid having his throat cut. He was leaning back on his palms, the point of that wicked-sharp blade less than an inch from his carotid artery.

Drake was awake, breathing hard, wide-eyed as he sat in a defensive crouch, his arm morphed seamlessly into a blade, at the end of which Eddie was held at length. For a moment there was silence as the two of them looked at each other, and finally Drake seemed to come back to himself.

Silver goo withdrew back into Drake’s body, the blade morphing back into human flesh, and Drake sat back against the couch, curling up with his knees against his chest. He looked… scared. Vulnerable in a way Eddie had never seen before.

“Bad dreams?” Eddie asked finally, just to break the heavy silence between them.

“You could say that.” Drake’s voice was barely above a whisper, but Eddie took it as a good sign
that he was talking at all.

“Yeah? Me too.” Eddie got up off the floor and gestured to the kitchen table. “Want a drink?”

After a brief pause, Drake nodded. The two of them sat at the table, and Eddie downed a shot before pouring another for Drake.

Drake regarded the glass for a moment, as though it were something alien, then tossed it back with a grimace. His expression twisted, and he coughed, eyes watering. Eddie chuckled, patting him on the back.

“That should settle your nerves,” Eddie said. He was already feeling the warm burn settling in his stomach, feeling less like he was about to unravel like a loose thread.

Drake looked at Eddie, his dark eyes searching. Like he was looking for something he couldn’t find. Or maybe he did. Eddie couldn’t tell. “You look like shit,” he said finally, and Eddie actually laughed.

“So you do have a sense of humor,” Eddie said, only halfway sarcastic. Then, he had another thought. It was something he had no idea how to approach, but there was no time like the present, right?

“So… you wanna talk about that whole entanglement thing?”

Drake didn’t seem surprised. “I was wondering when you’d bring it up.”

Eddie blinked. “How’d you know?”

“We have been in each other’s heads, Eddie,” Drake said, like it was obvious. His elegant fingers drummed absently on the tabletop, in time with Eddie’s own. “A couple times, now.”

Eddie nodded slowly. He didn’t really know how to go from here. This was a subject that felt… weird to discuss in words. Like this. “I’ve been having… dreams,” he began after a moment. “Not like, PTSD dreams. I mean even before this whole thing happened. After the thing with the rocket,
and I thought you and Riot and Venom were all dead… I was dreaming about things, but I don’t think they were dreams.”

“Dreams of what sort?” Drake was looking at him carefully now, brows slightly furrowed in thought.

“Like… memories,” Eddie said after a moment. It felt weird to say out loud, and he could admit that it really did sound crazy. “But I know they’re not my memories.”

Drake was silent, thoughtful, and Eddie took that as permission to continue.

“Can I ask you something?” Eddie ventured after a moment. A name attached to a face he didn’t recognize had been drifting around in his mind for weeks now. “Who’s Soraya?”

Drake just stared at him for a moment, going very still, and there was a brief look of utter shock on his face. Finally, he chuckled softly. “You know, at first I was disinclined to believe you about the memories, but….” He paused a moment, staring down at the stained tabletop like it was suddenly very interesting. “…it’s a long story.”

Eddie gestured vaguely into the darkness. “We've got time, and I'm willing to listen.”

Drake took a deep breath, let it out slowly. “She was… a friend,” he began. “We met in college at NYU. It was a stipulation of my father’s that I had to get a business degree, but I double majored in biology. Soraya and I worked in a research lab together.”

Eddie raised his eyebrows. “That’s not that long of a story.”

“It doesn’t end there,” Drake said. He glanced up at Eddie. “You remember how I told you I was in a car accident when I was nineteen?”

Eddie nodded, not sure where this was going. “Yeah.”

“It happened my second semester at NYU. I was crossing a street late one night, coming back from doing some work in the lab, and a drunk driver clipped me. Didn’t hit me straight on, or I’d be dead.
But it was enough to fracture my hip in three places, and the impact dislocated my femur and cracked two vertebrae.” Drake recited the details with the passive sort of objectivity of someone reading a report. “Or at least, that’s what they told me afterwards. I don’t remember much of the actual accident. Shock, they said.”

Eddie let out a breath. “Holy shit.” He’d done his reading on Drake, back when he had been tasked with that fateful interview, but this was a detail none of the magazines and newspapers had mentioned.

Drake smiled wryly. “See, there are some things about me that aren’t public knowledge. Anyway, I had six metal plates holding my pelvis together for about a year. It was all a terrible mess, really.”

“Shit,” Eddie repeated, blinking. “So, what does all this have to do with Soraya?”

“I’m getting there. I all but moved in with Soraya and her family after my last surgery, since my parents were both overseas at the time—my apartment was on the ninth floor, and the doctors told me I’d likely never walk again without crutches.” Drake fell silent for a moment, his gaze distant. “In retrospect, we should have known that she was sick.”

“What happened to her?” Eddie asked, even though he had a feeling he already knew.

“We were working on this new drug in the lab, something that had the ability to heal damaged or defective tissue rapidly if given a pattern to follow. In petri dishes and mice, the results were incredible,” Drake explained. “We thought we’d found something that could change the world. To prove it, I tested it on myself. Not the safest or smartest choice, I know,” he added, before Eddie could comment.

“Well, obviously it worked pretty well,” Eddie observed, looking Drake up and down.

“I got lucky,” Drake said with a small smile. “The doctors were baffled. The fractures were healing so quickly they were pushing out the stabilizing plates in my hip. Which hurt like hell, by the way. After I had surgery to remove the plates, there was some residual scarring around my hip joint, but I still made a better recovery than anyone had expected.”

“But it didn’t work for her,” Eddie ventured after a moment, thinking.
Drake shook his head. “She had been sick for a while, but she found out she had a brain tumor around that time. I thought that with the proper modifications to the drug, it could be used to both eliminate her tumor and regrow the tissue it had killed, but…” He went quiet for a long moment. “…she died four months later.”

Eddie thought of the dream he’d had of the woman he’d never known, the memories of her laughter. Of wanting to save the world with her. For her. Those memories, those feelings weren’t his own, but in the dream, he had felt them all the same.

“I’m sorry,” Eddie offered, if only because he didn’t know what else to say.

Drake didn’t say anything after that. He sat there with his elbows on the table, staring off into nothing.

Sometimes it was best not to let people get caught up in their own thoughts. Eddie knew from experience. After a pause, Eddie put his arm around Drake, who didn’t shy away from the touch. It took a moment, but he leaned ever so gently into Eddie. Drake’s hand found Eddie’s, and he laced his long fingers through the spaces between Eddie’s larger, thicker ones.

“Will you tell me why you left New York?” Drake asked softly.

It only seemed fair that he did. “Well, that story’s not as good as yours,” Eddie admitted with a little laugh. “But I’ll tell you.”

Drake only hummed softly, leaning his head against Eddie’s shoulder as he listened.

“So, uh, being an investigative journalist in New York City isn’t the safest job in the world,” Eddie began. “But I knew that going in. Didn’t care, really. The truth was more important to me. At the time, I was reporting on a couple big business mergers that were coincidentally happening around the same time as some important political decisions about subsidized housing.”

Eddie paused, thinking. “Dunno if you’ve heard of him, but Wilson Fisk is a powerful guy in New York—his nickname on the streets is Kingpin. I interviewed him once before. Most terrifying experience of my life. Dude is as big as a house. But anyway, I knew he had hands in it somehow, I just needed evidence.”
“So one night,” Eddie continued, remembering how absolutely terrified he’d been that night, but stupidly determined all the same. “I was tailing him, and he goes to meet these guys in an office three floors up. I got the bright idea to climb this tree with my camera so I can get a better shot—”

“—and you fell out and broke your wrist,” Drake finished, looking to Eddie for confirmation.

Eddie gawped at him. “Yeah, I did,” he said, blinking in disbelief. “…I guess you saw some of my memories, too. So, you know how this story ends?”

“I think so, but I’d like it if you told the rest of it anyway,” Drake said with the ghost of a smile on his lips.

Eddie laughed softly. “Well, it ends pretty much how you’d expect. My editor agreed to publish the shots, but I got my ass beat a couple days later by some thugs trying to intimidate me. I tried to stick it out, but by the time my apartment got firebombed, I figured it was time for a change of scenery.”

“You’re a brave man, Eddie,” Drake remarked after a pause. “Brave, but stupid.”

“You know, I get that a lot,” Eddie chuckled.

Drake was looking sleepy now, his eyes half-lidded and his posture relaxed as he leaned into Eddie’s side. “I can imagine so.”

“You ready to go back to bed?” Eddie asked, giving Drake’s hand a gentle squeeze, and Drake made a soft noise of assent.

When Eddie climbed into the bed and moved over to make room, gesturing for him to follow, Drake hesitated at the edge of the mattress. He seemed skittish, reminiscent of a deer with those wide dark eyes.

“I mean, you don’t have to if you don’t wanna, but the bed’s comfier than the couch, and I promise I don’t snore that bad,” Eddie said, patting the spot next to him.

Black tendrils of Venom oozed out of Eddie’s arm, reaching out to delicately wrap around Drake’s
wrist. **STAY**, said the tiny, gooey Venom head peeking out of one of the tendrils, big white eyes dominating most of the round little face.

“C’mon, V, don’t be pushy,” Eddie admonished.

But then silver tendrils of Riot flowed from Drake’s skin to twine around Venom’s inky black substance, not defensive but gentle, perhaps even affectionate, and Drake smiled.

“It’s alright. We’ll stay.”

We. Drake had said ‘we,’ Eddie realized as Drake climbed into the bed with him. That meant Riot was on board with this, too. The thought made Eddie feel oddly pleased. It could have been just Venom practically vibrating with contentment within him, but the warmth of another body pressed up next to him under the blankets, curled up against the cool air coming in through the window, made him feel like just maybe, things were getting better.

**Chapter End Notes**

Fun fact about the author: Drake’s accident is based on something that actually happened to me IRL (although not nearly as bad!)
Chapter 16

Eddie tried to calm his nerves as he walked into the familiar lobby. He’d received a tersely worded email from his editor yesterday afternoon, asking him to come in whenever he was available. Jack was probably pissed as all hell, and Eddie couldn’t exactly blame him. Eddie would be lucky to keep his job after this, though he was hoping luck would be on his side this time. Even if he was no longer blacklisted in the journalism industry, he really could not afford to be unemployed at the moment.

In the lobby he greeted Richard, who was still working security. If Richard noticed anything different about Eddie, he didn’t mention it, just greeted Eddie as warmly as ever and relayed that his daughter was doing tremendously in her first year at Brown.

Eddie gave a shaky smile and said he was there to see Jack.

Ever dutiful, Richard had to phone it in upstairs. Standing there, Eddie couldn’t help but feel like a kid waiting outside the principal’s office, knowing he was about to be scolded. Once it checked out, Eddie was allowed to proceed, with encouragements from Richard to keep his head up.

“This is a ‘me’ thing, okay? Eddie reminded Venom on the elevator ride up. *Let me do the talking, and stay quiet, alright?*

Venom didn’t seem terribly pleased with the idea; it had wanted to go out and just roam the city, maybe eat a few bad people along the way. But Eddie had to do this annoying thing called work. It acquiesced, if reluctantly. *IF YOU INSIST.*

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In the desk chair with his long legs crossed and his hands folded in his lap, Jack regarded Eddie with a long, unimpressed look. “So, you just come into work whenever you feel like it now?”

“Look, I-I promise I can explain,” Eddie began, imploring. This was starting to feel like a familiar situation. “I was chasing a lead, a big one, and—”

“I’m sure you can regale me with that story all day,” Jack cut him off, curtly. “You dropped off the map for two weeks. No call, no email. Nothing. I’ve given you chances, Eddie. And you’re a good journalist. You are. But I don’t know what to do with you anymore.”
Eddie stared at the floor for a few moments, hoping it came off as penitent rather than obstinate. “I know. I should have called, I should have let you know,” he said, finally looking up at Jack. “I messed up there. But I wasn’t skipping out, I promise.”

Jack gave him a hard look. “Eddie, let me be frank with you for a moment. You look like a damn mess.” His gaze was steely. “Be honest with me, Eddie. Are you using again?”

“What?” Eddie wheezed out a laugh. That was what Jack thought? That he’d been out on a two-week bender? “No. Shit, no. Jack, I swear that’s not it. I promise I can give you something good out of this.”

Jack sighed. “You did a good thing, in the end, what you pulled with Carlton Drake and the Life Foundation, so I gave you another chance.”

Eddie swallowed hard. “Yeah. And I’m grateful for that.”

“But you’ve proven to me again that you’re unreliable, Eddie. I can’t keep taking chances on you,” Jack said, shaking his head. His tone was almost halfway apologetic. “I’m done, Eddie.”

Eddie’s eyes went wide. “Please, Jack, I need this job.” Shit, he had an alien parasite to feed! Not to mention an impromptu roommate and his alien parasite.

“I know,” Jack said, and he didn’t look too happy about it. “Which is why I’ll let you stay on as a freelancer. That’s the best I can do for now. Show me that I can trust you, and then we’ll see about getting you back on staff.”

Eddie nodded after a moment. It was better than nothing, and probably more than he deserved. “I promise I’ll do right by you this time.”

Jack glanced out the massive floor-to-ceiling window, the one that still made Eddie a little nervous, even now. “Better be one hell of a story.”

Eddie gave a thin smile. “You bet.”
In an unnamed compound somewhere south of San Francisco, Elaine Kim was sitting on a cot in a sparse white room, wondering how long she had left to live. Not because her wounds were life-threatening, at least not at the moment, but because she was the only one left alive to take the heat for the disaster that had led to the symbiotes’ escape. Something told her that the higher-ups were going to be less than pleased about that.

There were twenty-seven staples holding her deeply lacerated torso together, underneath a swath of bandages covered by her plain blue hospital scrubs. At least they hadn’t put her in a gown that left her ass hanging out.

She still felt fuzzy and sort of nauseous with all the pain meds, but her head was mostly clear. She sat on the cot shivering and dreading the moment the door would open. She could feel nothing on the left side of her chest, nothing but curious numbness. She wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

But they had to have kept her alive for a reason, right?

The door opened, and Kim felt her blood run cold.

The two men who entered the room were obviously military, with dark tactical vests and sidearms at their hips. One was tall and broad, with slicked-back hair and mean-looking eyes, and the other was shorter and leaner, a cruel look about him.

“What brings you here, Commander Rumlow?” Kim dared to speak first.

“Seems like we’re always cleaning up your division’s goddamn messes, huh, Kim?” said Rumlow, the shorter of the two. “You really fucked up this time.”

Kim glared at him, her skin pale and washed-out against the black of her hair in the fluorescent lighting. “You think I wanted this to happen? We took every precaution to keep the symbiotes contained.”
“Apparently not enough, Doc,” Rumlow said. There was a sharp, cold edge to his voice, like a knife. “So do us a favor, Kim. Tell us what happened down there.”

Kim stared at the floor, the tile cold against her bare feet hanging over the edge of the cot. “You already know all the important stuff. The… the creature escaped containment and went on a rampage. They escaped. That’s it. That’s all I know.”

“Not good enough, Kim. I need more than that,” Rumlow said. Beside him, his broad-shouldered lieutenant stood in front of the door, which was once again shut. “Where did they go?”

“I don’t know.” Kim shut her eyes, feeling the staples in her chest throb with a dulled sort of pain.

Rumlow sighed. “You don’t get it, do you?” he said, barely disguised impatience in his tone. “I’ve got a job to do, and I need some information out of you to do it. Where’s the bug, Kim? The one you managed not to kill.”

“I told you, it escaped,” Kim said after a pause. “And…” The details of her memory were blurry, after the lights went out. The gunshot, the screams, the blue tendrils striking out in the dark. But she knew there had been a black and a silver. Never a blue. Not before. “…there’s another symbiote.”

Rumlow looked sharply at her. “What?”

“A-a third symbiote,” Kim stammered, anxious and jittery just at the memory. “A blue one. Records indicated that it died in the Life Foundation lab, way before this, but it… it helped the silver one escape.”

Rumlow exchanged glances with his lieutenant, looking displeased. “You said you had two hosts,” he said, turning back to Kim. “Two. Not three.”

“We did. But there was another symbiote all the same,” Kim said, looking up at him with steely eyes. “Does this complicate things for you, Commander?”

“You let me worry about that. All I need from you is some information I can actually use.”
“You know just as much as I do,” Kim shot back, obstinate.

Something flashed in Rumlow’s eyes, something dark and cruel. He took a step closer to her. “We’re on the same team here, Kim,” he said, trailing a hand over her collarbone, below which bandages peeked out from under her shirt. He smirked. “I heard that monster sliced you up pretty good.”

Kim didn’t dare to move, but she didn’t look away from his eyes, either.

Rumlow’s hand moved further up, tracing her throat and then gripping her jaw. “But if you don’t start giving me what I need to know, then trust me when I say I can be more creative than that.”

Kim knew very well that he wasn’t lying. She jerked back from his touch. “If you’re going to retrieve the remaining symbiote, then look for Brock.”

“I thought Drake was host for the silver one,” Rumlow interrupted sharply.

“We pulled it out of him, switched the two,” Kim explained curtly. “The first attempt failed, with Drake and the black symbiote, but we succeeded with Brock and the silver. All I know for sure is that Brock and Drake have escaped, and I’d bet anything they’ve headed back to San Francisco.”

Rumlow smirked. “That’s all I needed to hear.” He glanced at his lieutenant. “Rollins, prep the STRIKE unit. We’ve got three targets. We’ll round ’em all up and sort out who’s got which alien back at HQ.”

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Drake was getting rather tired of doing nothing but lying on Eddie’s couch, but that was just about all his body was up for at the moment. He had thought he was doing better once his appetite started to return, but his stomach was proving finicky. Earlier, he’d attempted to eat a granola bar from the cupboard and then the only unexpired yogurt from the fridge, and had summarily vomited both times. He hadn’t been able to keep down anything but water since Eddie left earlier that morning.

Riot was not pleased. **WHY DO YOU KEEP REJECTING NUTRIENTS? YOUR BODY IS HUNGRY**, it growled, irritated. Normally Riot would just take over the process itself, but Drake’s body needed to stabilize on its own after six months of near-starvation and what amounted to torture.
Laying on the couch under a blanket, Drake was trying fruitlessly to persuade his body to feel less sick. “Riot, I haven’t eaten solid food in six months,” he mumbled with his face partially pressed into a pillow. “My body is trying to readjust. It’s not easy.” In the background, the TV droned on whatever local news channel was available. Eddie didn’t have cable.

It had been an hour since the yogurt, and around twenty minutes since his last glass of water. Drake was trying to convince himself to try some toast, but his stomach was still not happy about the last couple attempts.

Riot could feel how poorly Drake felt, of course, but it was frustrated upon finding that the source of their unwellness was simply a lack of nutrition. Drake needed to eat, but he got sick almost immediately upon doing so. It was a cycle, and an irritating one.

“I would appreciate some help, you know,” Drake prodded.

**WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO ABOUT IT?** Riot growled, even though it really did want to help. What was good for its host was good for Riot, too. **YOU MUST EAT. THAT IS THE SOLUTION.**

“Yes, but I’m sure you could tweak something to help with the symptoms. Perhaps make me less nauseous?” Drake responded, eyes still closed. He hadn’t moved an inch in the past half hour, but his mind was working as restlessly as ever, even as Riot’s tendrils roved over his skin in what it hoped was soothing motions.

That was an idea. And a good one, Riot had to admit. It delved back into Drake’s body, prodded at a few things in his brain—it had figured this out while keeping Eddie from suffering a bad reaction to their temporary symbiosis. After a few minutes, they both began to feel better as the nausea faded and Drake’s stomach settled. Slowly, Riot resumed its careful touches, relaxing its host’s tense muscles and the ache held within.

Drake sighed softly at the sensation, feeling himself melt a little further into the couch, the voices on the TV blurring into a fuzzy background noise. It was tempting to simply fall asleep again, now that he wasn’t vaguely ill and aching all over.

**EAT,** Riot nudged him, insistent. When Drake made no move to get up, Riot gave an impatient growl.
DO I REALLY HAVE TO DO EVERYTHING FOR YOU? it grumbled, though there was no real edge to the words. Extending a dexterous silver tendril to the kitchen, Riot opened the fridge to retrieve the loaf of bread from inside, and dropped a slice into the toaster like it had seen Eddie do for breakfast. Across their bond, Riot could feel Drake’s quiet contentment. A bit strange, Riot thought, since the human experience of illness was not a pleasant one.

After a few minutes, the toaster popped, and Drake found the energy to get up and eat at the table. He made himself eat slowly, but so far there had been no real protest from his stomach. That was a good sign. Riot had manifested a small head from his upper arm, something it normally only did when it was curious.

YOU ARE… HAPPY, Riot observed, cautiously, feeling out the emotions in their link. EVEN THOUGH YOU ARE ILL. WHY?

Drake couldn’t help but smile. He caressed Riot’s face, felt the symbiote’s flicker of surprise. But Riot didn’t move away from the touch. “I’ve got you, don’t I?”

Riot didn’t know what to say to that.

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Upon leaving the office building, Eddie couldn’t decide whether to consider himself extremely lucky or extremely unlucky. On the one hand, he still technically had a job. That was good. But on a freelance basis, he’d have to really get his ass in gear if he wanted to make rent next month. That meant writing a lot of bullshit that wasn’t necessarily groundbreaking, but it was what people wanted to read. That, and he’d already promised Jack a bombshell piece on his two-week disappearance, which made him vaguely queasy just to think about. Shit.

Now, sitting in a coffee shop a few blocks from the office and sipping an overpriced latte, Eddie was wondering how the hell he was going to make this work. He’d bought a chocolate-filled pastry for Venom, who was sneaking little nibbles when it extended a tiny head from Eddie’s sleeve. So far, no one had seemed to notice that the pastry was dwindling and Eddie hadn’t taken a single bite.

Eddie had his notebook and pen out, staring at the blank page as though willing words to appear. He needed something. Something that wasn’t… well, the truth.
“Because that would require writing about… us,” Eddie explained under his breath. If he tried to publish what really happened during those two weeks, Eddie was sure people would either think he was crazy, or those freaks from the facility would put out a hit on him. Probably both.

**THOUGHT YOU WANTED TO EXPOSE THE TRUTH, EDDIE.** Venom took another nibble off the pastry, then looked up at Eddie with its teeny-tiny head, big white eyes taking up most of its face, the piece of pastry between its little needle-like teeth. It tipped its head back to swallow, like a tiny snake.

Eddie sighed. “Sometimes the truth gets you nowhere, V,” he said quietly, leaning forward with his elbows on the table.

Venom rumbled softly within him. It briefly flipped through Eddie’s memories of breaking into the Life Foundation for the first time, echoes of what was going through his head at the time. **YOU GOT ME.**

Eddie smiled. “Yeah, I guess you’re right,” he admitted, still tapping his pen absently against the blank paper.

At a nearby table, the woman sitting at her laptop was giving him a strange look. Apparently her earbuds weren’t playing any music, and she could hear him talking to himself. Eddie smiled nervously, then quickly turned the other way.

**SHOULD WE—**

*No, we should not eat her,* Eddie interjected before Venom could finish that thought. He sighed. *Shit. I just need something for this article.*

Venom knew that most of its suggestions probably weren’t what Eddie was looking for. Chocolate, tater tots, and fluffy blankets likely weren’t on Eddie’s list of possible topics for his big article.

**YOU SHOULD ASK DRAKE,** it suggested finally.
Eddie stopped tapping his pen, actually surprised. Whatever suggestions he was expecting from Venom, it wasn’t that. Why?

**DRAKE KNOWS LOTS OF THINGS**, Venom responded, sounding almost eager. **EDDIE, DID YOU KNOW THAT SO MANY THINGS ON THIS PLANET ARE GREEN BECAUSE THEY ARE FULL OF THIS PLANT CHEMICAL CHLOROPHYLL?**

*Uh, yeah, I guess,* Eddie responded, bemused.

**NO, YOU DIDN’T**, Venom responded with a huff. **I ASKED YOU BEFORE, AND YOU SAID YOU DIDN’T KNOW.**

*Okay, so it’s been a while since I took high school biology,* Eddie retorted. **What’s your point?**

**DRAKE IS VERY SMART. HE COULD HELP.**

*Well, you’re not wrong about the first part. He’s a goddamn genius, but I don’t think that extends to investigative journalism,* Eddie thought to Venom as he continued tapping his pen against the still-blank notepad. He’d left his laptop at home, thinking he’d be more productive without the distraction of the internet. Wrong again.

Eddie had another question. **What was it like?** he asked after a pause.

There was a flutter of curiosity from Venom in their bond. **WHAT WAS WHAT LIKE, EDDIE?**

*Being bonded to… someone who wasn’t me.*

Venom knew exactly who Eddie was referring to. Why he was so shy about it, though, Venom wasn’t sure. **WAS… DIFFERENT,** it mused, not sure how to explain the nuances of host bonding in the human way. **DRAKE IS A GOOD HOST.**

*Better than me?* Venom thought it could detect a hint of hurt from Eddie’s side of the bond.
OF COURSE NOT. Underneath Eddie’s sweatshirt, Venom’s tendrils caressed him, a gentle squeeze of reassurance. YOU ARE MY OPTIMAL HOST, EDDIE. ALWAYS. PERFECT. WE MISSED YOU EVERY MOMENT YOU WERE AWAY.

Eddie swallowed. He had stopped tapping his pen some time ago, hadn’t noticed. “Missed you, too,” he murmured aloud. He could feel that strange sort of nudge, a barely noticeable tickle in the back of his mind as Venom sifted through his memories.

DID YOU LIKE BONDING WITH RIOT?

Eddie was sort of surprised at the question, though he supposed he shouldn’t be. He took a sip of coffee. Uh, the process? Not so much. The part that came after was okay, though. He was, uh… different than you. It had certainly been an adjustment, but Riot had been good to him, relatively speaking. How it felt, though… He didn’t quite know how to describe it, now that it was no longer happening in real time.

VERY DESCRIPTIVE. Venom seemed amused.

Hey, I’m doing the best I can here! Eddie had picked up his pen again, scribbling aimlessly in the margins. He took another sip of coffee, hoping to motivate himself.

I THINK YOU SHOULD WRITE ABOUT THE TRUTH, EDDIE. YOU LIKE WRITING. THE TRUTH IS IMPORTANT TO YOU.

Eddie sighed. “I don't know if I can, buddy,” he said quietly. Maybe Venom had a point, though. He didn’t have much else to work with. It might be a good place to start.

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Riot was getting restless. It was starting to get sort of hungry again, but more than that, it was bored. After being shut up in a cage for six months, Riot had no interest in sitting still at the moment. Sure, it had taken a little bit to settle into its optimal host again, but what they both needed was fuel. Needed to shake off the lingering specter of that place.
Drake could feel the pressure of Riot’s restlessness through their link, and he couldn’t really blame Riot. He knew the best thing for both of them at the moment was to rest, but hey, they had both been kept in a glass cage for six months. The thought of going outside even briefly, was tantalizing, especially now that he was feeling steadily better as time passed. Eddie had told them not to go anywhere, since he had only one set of keys for the apartment, but that was pretty much a non-issue with Riot around and the window open.

“I can feel you thinking, you know,” Drake said aloud, putting aside Eddie’s laptop and shutting the lid. He’d been doing some reading on the current state of the Life Foundation, catching up on what he’d missed for the past six months. The news was, to say the least, rather grim. He was trying not to think too much about it. “What’s on your mind?”

WANT TO HUNT, Riot growled.

No, perhaps that wasn’t it. It was difficult, sometimes, to put its thoughts and desires into words, but it was making an effort for Drake. WANT TO EXPLORE. OUTSIDE. WITH YOU.

It hadn’t actually seen much of the city, except for what it had gleaned from Eddie’s memories, and the need to just be moving, to take in the world around them, was even stronger than the need to hunt.

Drake glanced at the window, which had been broken for months and didn’t lock, apparently. It led out to a fire escape, which would provide a convenient means of egress without ever having to go out the door and reveal their presence to Eddie’s neighbors. It was a tempting prospect, he had to admit. Drake knew it would be more sensible to wait until nightfall, when there was less chance of anyone seeing them, but it was still mid-morning now. The prospect of waiting in this tiny apartment for so long felt maddening.

“You’re feeling up to it?” he asked, feeling Riot ripple inside him. It was a curious feeling, one he had missed in the time they’d been apart.

Riot could sense that Drake was receptive to the idea, and a flash of excitement went through their bond. MORE THAN UP TO IT.

Drake got up and went to the window, taking in the sights and sounds of San Francisco. It all felt like so… so much after the quiet, maddening isolation of the lab. But it wasn’t bad. After a moment he climbed out onto the fire escape, feeling the chill of wind against his skin and contemplating his lack of shoes.
I WILL TAKE CARE OF IT, Riot assured him as its silver substance overlaid Drake’s skin, and they scaled the wall of the apartment building with a predator’s lethal grace, going to the roof to find a better vantage point.

When they were like this, so closely together that they were operating as one, communication was nearly seamless. Riot didn’t bother to parse its thoughts into words, just sending impressions and feelings, images and sounds and scents that made intuitive sense across their link.

Drake found that he didn’t need to speak to respond, either. Riot could feel what he felt, see what he saw, know what he wanted just from the touch of their connected minds. It was hard to tell where he ended and Riot began. The sensation was indescribable, on the edge between euphoric and terrifying.

Riot was not yet in the mood to hunt. For now, it was content to explore, even if hunger was starting to make itself known again. So much of this place was new to Riot, even if through Drake’s memories it had a pretty good sense of where things were. Was there anyplace in particular they wanted to go?

A familiar image flashed across their link. I think I have an idea.

--

Drake knew that, logically speaking, his house was probably under surveillance and had already been raided by the cops months ago. The draw of the familiar place was a strong one, though. He wanted to see what was left of his old life.

Walking in the front door was not an option, of course. There didn’t appear to be anyone currently at the place, which was cordoned off with police tape, but Drake still resolved to be careful. He and Riot entered through the skylight in the solarium on the third floor.

Riot observed the place through Drake’s eyes, briefly sifting through memories of how it looked before it had been ransacked and then left sitting empty for six months. By human standards, it had been quite nice.

“Thank you,” Drake said, having caught the tail end of Riot’s thoughts. “I like to think I kept a clean house.”
Riot was briefly surprised that Drake had heard all that. It hadn’t thought he was listening. Why here? it asked as they wandered from room to room, from indoor garden to upstairs library to office. Most things looked like they had been pawed through and then haphazardly discarded, and Drake prickled at the lack of care with which his things had been manhandled. The investigators seemed to have turned the whole house inside out.

“There are some things I wanted to get back,” Drake responded, keeping his voice low, just in case anyone was around. It felt like a bit of an indignity, having to break into his own damn house; but then again, he was supposed to be dead.

They made their way to the master bedroom on the second floor, where Drake found all of his cabinets and drawers opened, the sheets stripped off his bed. He rolled his eyes. The cops had been exhaustively thorough, it seemed. His laptop, tablet, and phone were all gone. Drake wondered if they’d managed to break the encryption on any of his devices yet, though it likely didn’t matter now. They would have access to all the data on the Life Foundation servers via the computers in the lab.

Most things in the room had been tagged with evidence markers, catalogued and photographed. Shit. That meant nothing in the house could be disturbed without arousing suspicion. Drake sighed. So much for retrieving some of his personal effects.

Riot prickled in alarm as the sound of human voices became audible from the hallway.

By the time the two cops walked in, Drake and Riot were on the ceiling, keeping to the shadows and staying very quiet. If it came down to it, they could simply eat the two men, but Drake really didn’t want to start a trail of bodies now.

One of the cops sighed. “Why are we even still here, anyway?” he asked, sounding bored. “I mean, we’ve got all the evidence we need from the Life Foundation. And it’s not like we can prosecute the guy now that he’s dead.”

His partner, a middle-aged detective with a grim face, didn’t seem swayed. “The evidence is still being processed. Besides, between you and me, I think the feds know something we don’t.”

The first cop frowned as the two of them walked a slow circuit around the room, their shoes leaving wet footprints on the carpet. “What do you mean?”
“I mean that there’s something they’re not telling us,” said the detective. “About this whole thing. Military police came by the precinct the other day, said they’d be conducting their own investigation.”

“Shit,” said the first cop. “Military was in on this mess, too?”

The detective grunted in the affirmative. “Looks like it’s more than just us who wanted a piece of Drake’s hide. Nothing we can do. Just be on your toes, Gonzalez.”

Drake and Riot didn’t stick around to hear more. They slipped out through the open bay window in the next room, headed back to the relative anonymity of the city. So his house was still being watched, and while Drake didn’t know if the aforementioned military police that had gone to the precinct had any relation to McCord and his ilk, it was probably best to err on the side of caution.

Besides, they had other places to be.

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The Life Foundation campus was dark and empty. They had waited until nightfall to come here, just in case. Riot had only been here once or twice, but from Drake’s memories, it got the sense that the place had once been teeming with… well, life.

The bridge that led to the building itself was blocked off, with multiple signs and barriers proclaiming that the place was both unsafe for human habitation and the site of an ongoing police investigation. There was no one investigating at the moment, though, and it was a simple matter for Riot to leap over the concrete barriers topped with barbed wire, barely sparing a glance at all the signs.

Riot slowed to a stop once they got past the abandoned checkpoint. It could sense Drake’s desire to see with his own eyes again. There was a conflicted knot of feelings on Drake’s side of the link, and Riot didn’t know quite what that meant, or how to acknowledge it.

It sank beneath Drake’s skin once again, though remaining alert for possible threats in the area. Even though most humans were hardly a threat to the two of them, Riot had learned that this planet was anything but predictable.

For a moment Drake just stood there in silence, taking in the dark, gaunt emptiness of the place, the
ruins of the launch platform that had once towered over the bay. Something like grief ached behind his ribs, something that left him feeling hollow inside.

Had it really been six months since everything had gone so terribly wrong? It felt like the time had gone by in the blink of an eye and spanned an eternity all at once. Drake had built the Life Foundation from the ground up, an idea birthed while he was still in grad school, and it had taken twelve years of hard work, sacrifice, and no small amount of luck to make it into a force of change for the better.

Now? It was all gone. Nothing but an empty shell.

A chilly sea breeze blew in from the bay, whistling softly against the night. Drake couldn’t even bring himself to care that he was standing out here wearing nothing but a t-shirt and sweatpants. The damp concrete was cold against his bare feet.

Drake swallowed hard, feeling emotion rise up in him like a tide: the ache of grief mixed with the bitter, humiliating sting of failure.

Riot felt it, too, and it gave a low, curious rumble. All these human emotions, all jumbled up like a hopeless knot, were unclear across their link. **WHAT IS WRONG?**

“I’m sorry,” Drake said finally, wishing his voice didn’t sound so raw with emotion.

Riot was confused. From what it knew, humans only said those words when they had done something wrong. Something to hurt another. Something they should not have done. Drake had done none of that. **WHY?**


Riot was quiet for a long moment. It thought about what Venom had said back in the facility. It was true that they were marooned here, and something about that was still frightening. And yet… Riot’s tendrils slid over Drake’s skin in a cautiously gentle caress, like it had seen Venom do in Eddie’s memories. Riot still wasn’t used to these behaviors with a host, this gentleness, and the openness of their bond even outside of combat, but something about this felt… right.
NOT EVERYTHING, Riot said. YOU STILL HAVE ME. US.

Drake’s expression twisted into a wry smile, devoid of mirth. “No need to keep up the act. I can’t give you another rocket, Riot. That makes me all but useless to you now. You don’t have to pretend otherwise.”

Riot growled, manifesting a head so it could look Drake in the eyes. YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND, it snapped. THE ROCKET NO LONGER MATTERS. MY MISSION IS ALREADY A FAILURE. TO MY PEOPLE, I AM NOW JUST AS MUCH OF A TRAITOR AS VENOM. YOU ARE A PART OF ME, JUST AS I AM A PART OF YOU. DO YOU THINK THAT THE CORE LEADERS ON MY WORLD WOULD NOT SEE THIS?

The look in Drake’s eyes was guarded. “What are you talking about? You could find another host—maybe a less compatible one, but that never stopped you before.”

Riot snarled, the amalgam of their emotions pulsing through the link, frustration and pain and the underlying fear of revealing so much of itself. EVEN IF I WERE TO LEAVE YOU, GO BACK TO MY PLANET, THE CORE LEADERS WOULD PICK APART MY MEMORIES AND KNOW ALL OF THIS. HAVING ENTANGLED WITH ONE SUCH AS VENOM WOULD SHAME ME FOR AS LONG AS I LIVED, AND TO COMMIT SUCH AN ACT WITH A HOST? I WOULD BE OUTCAST FOREVER.

Drake could feel echoes of some kind of desperate, longing emotion from Riot, but he couldn’t figure out what it was. He crossed his arms, unconvinced. “So you can’t go back to your planet because you’re ashamed of having committed your species’ equivalent of fucking a dog?”

NO! Riot growled, frustrated. WHAT I AM SAYING IS THAT WE HAVE BOTH FAILED. BUT I DON’T CARE. IT IS NOT ABOUT THE MISSION ANYMORE, OR THE ROCKET. OR LEAVING THIS STUPID PLANET. IT IS ABOUT YOU, CARLTON. ALWAYS YOU.

Despite his normally eloquent nature, Drake couldn’t find the words to respond. He could only stare at Riot, shocked and confused. There was a strange, fluttery tightness in his chest that was almost like hope.

Even though they were sharing a consciousness, Riot couldn’t parse the emotions coming from Drake at the moment. It opted to simply continue, hoping that this was a good reaction. YOU
SAVED ME, Riot said after a pause, more quietly now, and its silvery head gently nudged Drake’s forehead. I ONLY SURVIVED THE EXPLOSION BECAUSE OF YOU. YOU WANTED TO PROTECT ME, EVEN AT THE COST OF YOUR OWN LIFE.

Riot gave a soft rumble, wrapping its substance around Drake’s shoulders in the mimicry of an embrace, the way humans so liked. I HAVE LIVED A VERY LONG TIME, HAD MANY HOSTS ON MANY WORLDS, BUT NONE LIKE YOU. WE HAVE EACH MADE MISTAKES, FAILED SPECTACULARLY, BUT TOGETHER... WE COULD BE SOMETHING MORE.

Drake’s expressive brown eyes were shiny and strangely wet, Riot noticed. “Nothing will be like it was before,” he said softly, perhaps more to himself than to Riot.

NO, NOT LIKE BEFORE, Riot agreed. WILL BE BETTER.

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The apartment was dark and empty when Eddie and Venom returned. They had stayed out late, doing some writing and some research, and just spending some time out in the world together. He had let his guard down, Eddie realized.

Eddie’s heart leapt into his throat, and he looked around frantically for signs of a struggle. There were none, though, and no signs that anyone had broken in. Drake and Riot were nowhere to be seen, but the window was open. How long had they been gone?

“Shit,” Eddie muttered, his nerves frazzled. “Where they hell could they have gone?” He didn’t know if those goons from the facility were still after them, if Riot was going on a killing spree, or—

“We have to go look for them,” Eddie decided immediately.

Venom gave a thoughtful rumble. It didn’t seem as concerned as Eddie was, so Eddie hoped that was a good sign. I THINK I KNOW WHERE THEY MIGHT BE.

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Eddie let Venom lead the way, leaping between rooftops and vaulting from tall towers as they followed the symbiote’s instinctive sense of direction. Eddie didn’t quite understand how it worked, but if Venom had been able to find Riot once, it stood to reason that it could do it again.

Somehow Eddie was both surprised and not when he realized Venom was taking them in the direction of the Life Foundation, or what was left of it. It had begun to rain again not long after they stopped at the apartment, and even from within Venom, Eddie was beginning to tire of getting wet and cold. San Francisco living wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

Hopping the barriers that blocked off the bridge leading to the remains of the Life Foundation, they spotted a lone figure silhouetted against the night, sitting on the edge of the bridge and facing the derelict launch pad in the distance.

Riot was draped over Drake’s shoulders like a blanket, or some kind of silvery scarf. They were just sitting there, quiet, perhaps having a conversation only the two of them could hear. Neither of them turned around when Eddie and Venom approached, but Eddie knew their appearance hadn’t gone unnoticed.

“Venom thought we might find you guys here,” Eddie said at last. Rain pattered against the concrete, seeming loud against the quiet of the bay.

“You could have told me that my company had been hacked to pieces and sold for parts,” Drake said without turning around. His gaze was fixed on a nondescript point in the distance, past the ruins of the launch pad.

“Wasn’t the most pressing thing on my mind,” Eddie admitted. He knew the lawsuits were still ongoing, but news about the Life Foundation had become something like background noise in the busy backdrop of the city. “The dissolution’s been going on for a while. But there was no way Life was gonna last without you. Too many lawsuits. The board ran for the hills.”

Drake chuckled, the sound dry and mirthless. “Of course they did. I spent years convincing them that space exploration was a viable option. I’m sure they would have loved to gloat over proving me wrong.”

Eddie didn’t know what to say to that. “You nearly gave me a heart attack, disappearing like that,” he said instead. “Could have let me know first.”
“Didn’t have my phone with me,” Drake responded without missing a beat, not quite sarcastic.

He did have a point there. Eddie coughed awkwardly, unsure of how to continue. The sound of the rain against the waters of the bay was like a whisper, a familiar cold damp settling over the city.

“Do you know what the worst part of all this is?” Drake asked quietly.

Eddie got the sense it was a rhetorical question. In lieu of answering, he simply sat down next to where Drake was perched on the edge of the bridge, legs dangling over the concrete barrier. He nodded to Riot, whose head was manifested from the silver goo draped over Drake’s shoulders. Venom manifested in kind, nudging at Riot in greeting.

“It’s not that my company is defunct, or even the fact that the project I’ve devoted my entire adult life to developing is an utter failure,” Drake continued, still staring out into the black waters of the bay. “The worst part is that even after all that I’ve done, all I’ve tried to put forth… in the end, no one will even remember who I was.” He chuckled bitterly. “Six months out from the rocket explosion, and it merits what? A thirty-second sound bite on the eleven o’clock news?”

Eddie was quiet for a long moment. “Are you sure you don’t need glasses?” he asked finally, and Drake gave him an odd look. “Because for a guy who was supposedly protecting the future, you’re so goddamn short-sighted I can’t even believe it.”

Drake just looked at him, brown eyes wide with confusion. “…I’m not following.”

Eddie looked from Drake to the launch pad, then sighed. “You know, some of the things you did made a lot of sense,” he began. “Funding science education for kids all over the state? Donating tech and education materials to schools? Hell, a couple years back I heard the way you talked at that public forum with the state senators—and to this day, I’ve never seen anyone else able to shut a politician up like that.”

Drake blinked. “Well, yes, the Life Foundation was also meant to—”

“I’m not finished yet,” Eddie cut him off. “The solution to all the problems you wanted to solve is still here on Earth. But you didn’t see it, did you? So you thought you personally had to save the world from itself with your space crusade.”
Drake had the grace to look abashed, but he couldn’t say that Eddie was exactly wrong.

“Man, it’s not gonna be you or me that saves the world,” Eddie continued, gesturing out at the city. “It’s gonna be them. All those kids that you inspired to learn more about science? You couldn’t have just waited about twenty years or so for them to grow up and, I dunno, invent cold fusion or solve global warming or something?”

Drake said nothing for a long moment, and the wind sighed through the quiet night between them. “While I think that hindsight is always 20/20,” he began at last, “you may have a point there.”

Eddie actually laughed, if only to break up the tension. “Shit, I never thought I’d see the day I won an argument with Carlton Drake.”

“That wasn’t even arguing. I merely conceded that you had a point.”

Now that sounded more like Drake. “Alright, whatever you say,” Eddie said lightly. “So, you ready to go home and get out of this godforsaken rain? I feel like we’ve been soaking wet like, a lot lately.”

Drake sighed. “I can’t keep sleeping on your couch, Eddie.”

“Yeah, I know it’s shit for sleeping on, it always kills my back, but there’s always room for you in the bed, and—”

“That’s not what I meant,” Drake said, not unkindly. He looked out at the bay again, rain dripping from his clothes and hair, though he didn’t seem to notice or care. “…I should go.”

Eddie blinked, a little embarrassed he hadn’t caught on sooner. The idea had caught him off-guard. Maybe part of it was his own lack of foresight; he had never given a whole lot of thought to long-term plans, except maybe in the vaguest sense. Drake, on the other hand, was always planning ahead. That much was obvious. It made sense that he’d want to get out of the city, maybe out of the country; Eddie couldn’t expect him to want to stay holed up in a shitty little apartment for the foreseeable future.

But there was some part of Eddie that ached at the idea. Even if all this mess was partially Drake’s
fault, and Eddie had nearly died more than once because of it, if it hadn’t been for Drake’s experiments and his space exploration, Eddie would have never met Venom. And where would he be then? (Probably still doing his show, and planning a wedding with Anne, though that dream seemed distant and unreal now).

Maybe it was just because Drake was the only other person on this planet who understood what it felt like to be bonded with a symbiote, and then to lose them, but... There was a strange sort of intimacy in the fact that Drake had hosted Venom, and in that Eddie had hosted Riot. And the entanglement… Eddie still wasn’t quite sure what it was or what it meant, but there was an almost overwhelming intimacy about it. About being in someone else’s head. About being part of something that was both of them. It was a part of each of them that they would never be able to share with any other human, and there was some part of Eddie that didn’t want to lose that.

“Where are you gonna go?” Eddie found himself asking. It was a genuine question. While Drake had been presumed dead after the explosion six months ago, the authorities had never recovered a body, and so the arrest warrant was likely still active.

Drake shrugged. “My cousin Tommy lives in London. Maybe I’ll go there.”

Slowly, Eddie’s logic started to come back to him. “You’re supposed to be dead. How’re you gonna get out of the country? You’ve got no IDs, nothing. And all your accounts are frozen until the feds finish investigating this whole thing.”

“I suppose I’ll figure something out.” Drake didn’t seem too concerned, and something about that frustrated Eddie.

Eddie shifted his legs underneath him, fidgeted restlessly with the bracelets on his wrist. Finally, another thought came to mind. “You asked me why I came to that place to find you.”

“At first, it was just selfish reasons,” Eddie began, hating the way his voice shook ever so slightly. Fuck, why was he so nervous all of a sudden? “If those guys captured you and Riot, I knew they’d come after me and Venom one day. But…” He swallowed, his throat feeling dry. “…then I—well, I thought about it some more. And I realized something. As far as I knew, you were the only other human on this planet who was… like me. The only other one who knew how it felt.”

Drake was looking at him, but didn’t speak. Just listened.
“And I, uh, I thought about what it would be like. If it was me they got instead of you. Well, us. Me and Venom, instead of you and Riot. And I knew I couldn’t leave you there.” It was the truth, but admitting it made Eddie feel somehow unbearably exposed, like opening his chest to expose his beating heart.

“After all that I did, to you and to others, you didn’t think that I deserved it?” Spoken with all the unflinching, ruthless logic of a scientist.

Eddie looked at him, incredulous. “Fuck, no. Yeah, you did some pretty awful things—or at the very least masterminded them, and I could probably get into a lot of trouble for not handing you over to the cops—but that doesn’t mean those freaks had any right to turn you into a goddamn science experiment.”

“Are you going to?”

Eddie blinked. “Am I going to what?”

“Hand me over to the cops.” If he was nervous, Drake didn’t show it.

Eddie hesitated. He couldn’t say he hadn’t thought about it. Objectively, it was probably the ‘right’ thing to do. But what purpose would it serve, now? Most of the world thought Drake was dead. The Foundation was shuttered, lawsuits reaping justice for what they could. There would be no alien invasion force to consume the planet. At most, it would bolster Eddie’s reputation and maybe get him some airtime on networks news and talk shows.

Six months ago, Eddie knew he would have done it. But now? He didn’t think he could.

Eddie shook his head. “No. And I won’t stop you from leaving, if that’s what you wanna do.” And how could he? He hadn’t freed Drake from one cage, only to trap him in another.

Drake cast a long look at Eddie, as though unsure of how to continue. “And if I wanted to stay?”

Venom chose that moment to manifest a head from Eddie’s arm. It felt the way Eddie’s heart rate quickened, took a leap it knew Eddie would not. **WE WOULD WELCOME IT.**
Eddie felt his ears go red. Venom certainly wasn’t one to mince words.

Drake’s eyes went wide, and for a moment he just looked at Eddie with that deer-in-the-headlights expression. Riot’s head peered over his shoulder, regarding Venom with those unreadable opalescent eyes.

**THIS IS YOUR TERRITORY, VENOM. WE WILL RESPECT THAT,** Riot rumbled. **THERE ARE ONLY THREE OF US LEFT NOW. NO NEED FOR US TO SHARE ON A PLANET THIS SIZE.**

Venom snorted. **NOT THE POINT. WANT YOU TO STAY. BOTH OF YOU.**

Riot’s eyes narrowed, curious and perhaps a bit suspicious. **WHY?**

**MORE FUN THAT WAY,** Venom responded. **NEW PLANET, NEW RULES. REMEMBER?**

“Yeah,” Eddie put in, because he felt like he should. “Things don’t have to be… like they were before.” He was already mentally kicking himself for sounding like such an idiot.

But Drake seemed to treat the words with a quiet, serious sort of thought, the way he always did about things he felt were important. “You’re not worried that you and Venom will be in danger if some… unsavory characters come looking for us?”

**DANGER?** Venom snorted. **THOSE WHO WOULD DARE TO CHALLENGE US ON OUR OWN HUNTING GROUNDS WILL REGRET IT.**

“We’ve got the home field advantage,” Eddie agreed, though Venom’s confidence didn’t entirely assuage the nagging worry in the back of his mind. But really, a little danger was nothing new in his line of work. An occupational hazard, as it were. “Besides, we can cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Drake regarded him for a moment with those big dark eyes, considering. “You know you don’t have to do this. I can disappear, get out of the country. Wire you some money for your trouble.”
“I didn’t have to do a lot of things. But, y’know…” He paused, clearing his throat. “…this is something I wanna do.”

**THAT WE WANT TO DO**, Venom interjected, its gooey black tendrils draped over both of them like a child who couldn’t choose a favorite toy, and Eddie could have sworn Drake blushed just a little bit.

“...you never cease to surprise me. Both of you.”

Eddie wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not, at least until he felt the gentle probing touch of tendrils that were definitely not Venom’s, tendrils that were wrapping around his arm like some kind of writhing, cuddly python. The touch pulled him closer to Drake, and the two of them were shielded from the rain by a thin silver canopy that glistened like moonlight reflected from the waters of the bay.
It was still early when Eddie headed down to Mrs. Chen’s store to grab something to eat. It had been another late night after the events of yesterday, but Eddie wasn’t tired. No, his mind had been working constantly, about a myriad of things he didn’t quite know how to process. He’d had more dreams last night. These ones were mostly vague impressions, brief flickers of unrelated things from a past Eddie was fairly sure wasn’t his. The icy pain of a needle in his spine. Standing by himself, alone in a crowd of other children in a concrete schoolyard with an overcast sky above and the taste of blood in his mouth.

He rounded the corner of a narrow alleyway with his hands in his pockets, leaning against the brick wall of a building for a moment. There were relatively few people out around this time, so he felt safe speaking out loud. “Venom?”

Venom gave a curious ripple inside him, inviting him to continue.

Eddie cleared his throat, unsure of how to begin. “About this whole… recombinance thing,” he said slowly, keeping his voice low, just in case there were other people about. “I’ve got some of Drake’s memories, and he’s got some of mine. Does… does that mean you have some of Riot’s memories, too?”

Venom seemed perplexed. **OF COURSE.**

“Okay, so maybe sharing memories with other people doesn’t weird you out like it does me,” Eddie mumbled as they approached Mrs. Chen’s convenience store. He lingered outside, watching a few weak rays of pinkish morning sun trying to pierce through the cloud cover.

Venom shifted under Eddie’s skin, seemingly thoughtful. **HUMANS ARE SO FIERCELY**
PROTECTIVE OF THEIR... ALONENESS, it mused. **YOU WILL DEFEND YOUR SPECIES AS FIERCELY AS YOUR RIGHT TO BE APART FROM THEM. YOU DO NOT WANT TO BE AS A WHOLE WITH THEM.**

Eddie found himself vaguely wishing for a cigarette, even though he’d quit years ago. It would give him something to do with his hands (and make it less weird for him to be just standing out here by himself). He frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

**ON MY HOMEWORLD, EDDIE, WE ARE ONE. ALL OF MY KIND ARE PART OF THE HIVE, SHARING AND KNOWING AND BEING. TOGETHER. ALWAYS.**

That made Eddie feel claustrophobic just thinking about it. He thought of what it might be like, to know everything that every other person on earth was feeling or thinking. Worse, that they would know what he was thinking. It made him reflexively self-conscious. Sharing his every thought and feeling with Venom was one thing (and it was a hell of an adjustment), but with every other member of his species? Nope, pass.

Venom seemed almost amused by this. **IT WAS NOT SO BAD, SOMETIMES. COMFORTING. YOU ONCE SAID THAT YOU WANTED TO BE PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER THAN YOURSELF. I WAS, FOR A LONG TIME.**

Eddie got flickers of alien memories through their bond. Venom’s memories were not like his own, and he was often left with impressions, like tastes and scents and feelings, rather than a concrete picture. This time, it was... Security. Safety. Being one among many. The dizzying flow of knowledge and thoughts and feelings in a cascade that was not words, ebbing and flowing into a self that was not so much an island of consciousness as a reservoir that was constantly filling and emptying.

But there was an undertone of... longing to the whole thing. Like the warm, metallic taste to water when Eddie drank from a water fountain on a hot day. An emptiness that could not be satisfied by that which flowed from others of Venom’s kind. There was a desire to press deeper, to curl up in the tangle of amorphous colored tendrils until there was no space between them. But it could not be.

“But it wasn’t enough for you, was it?” Eddie asked after a moment. “You said you were kind of a loser on your planet.”

**YES.** The lightness was gone from Venom’s tone now, replaced with a solemnity that felt weighty across their link. **MY PEOPLE CONQUERED MILLIONS OF WORLDS, EDDIE. I**
KNOW AND SEE AND FEEL ALL OF THEM, BECAUSE WE ALL KNEW. WE TOOK FROM THOSE WORLDS ALL THAT THEY HAD—KNOWLEDGE, FOOD, BODIES TO RIDE—BUT WITHOUT THEM WE CANNOT SURVIVE. THAT IS THE GIFT AND THE CURSE OF BEING KLYNTAR. WE ARE THE HUNTERS; THERE IS NO PREY WHO CAN ESCAPE US. BUT WE ARE NOTHING WITHOUT THEM.

There was a pause, and Eddie felt in their bond the uncomfortable, heavy sensation of what could only be shame.

I WAS A SOLDIER. I TRIED TO OBEY, TO GIVE OUR PEOPLE WHAT WE NEEDED. BUT I WANTED SOMETHING MORE. Venom’s mental voice seemed quieter now despite its deep bass rumble. I WAS RIDICULED AND OSTRACIZED FOR IT. A HOST IS NOTHING BUT A RIDE, TO MOST OF US. A TOOL. A THING. CAN BE A PRETTY THING, OR A STRONG ONE, BUT IT WILL INEVITABLY BE REPLACED, TRADED FOR SOMETHING BETTER WHEN THE TIME COMES. WE TAKE WHAT WE CAN FROM THEM, AND THAT IS IT. I WANTED TO BE MORE THAN WHAT WE TOOK FROM THOSE OTHER WORLDS. WANTED TO LIVE FOR MORE THAN FLESH EATEN AND BLOOD SPILLED.

Maybe it was just the overflow of emotions through the bond, but Eddie felt his throat tighten and something behind his ribs ache. “‘S’okay, buddy,” he said quietly. If Venom had been physically manifested, he would have wanted to touch the symbiote. He smiled faintly. “No worries. I’m not big on, uh, spilling blood and eating flesh. Well, no more than necessary.”

The phantom sensation of Venom’s affectionate touch fluttered beneath Eddie’s skin. I HAD ALL BUT GIVEN UP ON SUCH FOOLISH DREAMS WHEN WE CAME TO THIS WORLD. BUT YOU, EDDIE… YOU CHANGED ALL THAT.

“Hey, I can’t help it I’m such a catch,” Eddie joked, but he could feel Venom’s fondness like the gentle pressure of an embrace through their bond.

His phone vibrated in his pocket, and he pulled it out to glance at the screen. It was the reminder he’d set up yesterday, with only two words: CALL DAN.

If Eddie had his way, he would have waited a couple days before calling again. But if his instincts were correct, then he didn’t have that kind of time. He had given some thought to what Dan said at dinner the other night, about doing some tests to make sure nothing was wrong, and his first instinct had been a resounding ‘hell no.’ Just the idea of going back to a hospital made Eddie’s skin crawl, and after what had happened the first time they went to a hospital together, he knew Venom didn’t
like the idea, either.

But then he’d thought about it. Yeah, they’d escaped from the facility, killed everyone inside. But Eddie had no fucking idea what all had been done to him, or what had been done to Drake in the six months they’d kept him captive. For all they knew, HYDRA could be tracking them via some chip implanted in their bodies, or even in Venom, shit—

**IT IS OKAY, EDDIE.** Venom interrupted his thoughts before they could spiral any further. **WE TRUST YOU.**

Eddie took a deep breath and pressed the ‘call’ button before he could think any more about it.

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**THAT WENT WELL,** Venom said after Eddie hung up the phone.

“Yeah, mostly,” Eddie mumbled as he went into the convenience store, waving hello to Mrs. Chen while she was ringing up another customer. He picked up a basket, tossing a few chocolate bars in at Venom’s insistence before moving on to more important things, like pudding cups and frozen burritos, which would keep him alive long enough to crank out a few articles and get more money for real groceries.

“Now we’ve just gotta convince Drake and Riot to let Dan do his thing,” Eddie muttered, debating on whether a jar of peanut butter was worth five dollars. “I mean, I can probably make Drake see sense, but Riot’s gonna be our problem.”

Venom gave a low rumble. **I CANNOT SAY I BLAME RIOT,** it said, thinking of how disastrously their first meeting with Dan had gone at the hospital.

“Hey, I thought you were supposed to be on my side.” Eddie tossed the peanut butter into his basket, deciding to splurge. It had been a long week.

The guy shopping in the freezer section nearby was giving him a weird look. Eddie avoided eye contact and moved to the next aisle over.
JUST SAYING, EDDIE, Venom said mildly. YOU DO NOT WANT TO GO TO A HOSPITAL, EITHER.

Venom had a point there, Eddie was forced to admit. “You like Dan, though,” he pointed out. “I trust Dan, so you can trust him, too. I just need Riot to… y’know, not freak out or anything.”

Eddie went to the counter and set his basket down, getting his wallet out.

“Morning, Eddie,” Mrs. Chen greeted, scanning and bagging his purchases. “How are you feeling? You look better today.”

“I’m feeling better,” Eddie said with a small smile. “It was a rough couple weeks. Happens, though.”


Eddie chuckled, embarrassed. “Aw, c’mon, Mrs. C., I don’t think I’m—”


Eddie nearly choked on his own saliva. “W-what? No, i-it’s totally not like that,” he said quickly, feeling his cheeks burn. “We’re not… We’re just roommates.”

“I’m not judging your choices, Eddie,” Mrs. Chen assured him. “My nephew has boyfriend, too. No big deal.” She gave him a hard look. “Be good to him, Eddie. Don’t make the same mistake twice.”

Eddie paid for his groceries, embarrassed, and assured her that he would make better choices this time around.

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Dora Skirth took a deep, steadying breath as she approached the hotel room door. She double checked her phone, making sure this was indeed the room number her sister had texted her. With a glance left and right to make sure the hallway was clear, she knocked quietly. There was the sound of shuffling and movement from inside, and her sister opened the door with a relieved smile.

When Dora walked through the door, both of her children dropped what they were doing and ran to embrace her with wide eyes and open arms.

It was enough to bring tears to her eyes. She knelt down and hugged them both tightly, blinking away the tears. She could feel Vile watching, quiet but curious behind her eyes, but she was hardly paying attention to the symbiote at the moment. “Hi, kids.”

“Mom, where did you go?” Surprisingly, it was shy Avid who spoke first, his voice barely audible with his face buried against her shoulder. At nine years old, he probably didn’t understand the danger they’d been in.

“Mom just had to work late, sweetie,” Dora said softly, kissing his forehead. “Nothing to worry about right now.”

“We were scared,” said thirteen-year-old Amara, quietly.

Dora pulled back so that she could look at them both, stroking their hair and feeling a twist of guilt in her stomach at seeing the frightened looks on their faces. “There’s nothing to be scared of,” she assured them. Even if it was a lie, she didn’t want them to be afraid. That wasn’t a burden they should have to bear.

“Well, unfortunate accidents aside, we’ve had a fun weekend, haven’t we, kids?” Leyla spoke up from off to the side.

Avid nodded enthusiastically, smiling.

“Yeah, it was fun,” Amara agreed. “Except for Aunt Leyla’s apartment burning down.”

Dora gave an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry about all this, Leyla,” she said, looking at her sister. “The short notice, the fire, everything.” And all the things she couldn’t say, too.
Leyla just shook her head. She seemed to be taking it all in stride. She had always been the less anxious of the two sisters. “Don’t worry about it, Dora. None of this is your fault. I’m just glad you’re okay. I heard about the incident at your work on the news.”

Dora felt her stomach give a nervous lurch. She hadn’t even thought about the fact that this might make the news. “What?”

“The fertilizer explosion at your work,” Leyla specified, giving her sister an odd look. “I was going to call you, but then, well… I got caught up in some other things, as you can see.”

“Oh. Right,” Dora said after a moment. “I, um, wasn’t in the building at the time. Do you have another place to go?”

“No,” Leyla admitted. “But I’ll figure something out.”

Dora patted her kids’ heads, encouraging them to go back to playing, then stood up once they ran to the TV, moving closer to her sister so they could speak privately. “Leyla, we have to leave.”

Leyla frowned. “Dora, what are you talking about? I’ve got the room booked through this week; I’ll be fine here with the kids until I can either find another place or you can look for another job. Or at least, I’m assuming you’ll have to find another job while the ag department relocates.”

“We can’t stay here, or at least you guys can’t,” Dora insisted. “I know it doesn’t make sense right now, but you have to trust me.”

Leyla gave her a concerned look. “We can’t just skip town. I have a job. The kids have to go to school on Monday.”

“I know it sounds crazy,” Dora said, quietly pleading. She couldn’t explain fully, not here, not now. “But you have to trust me when I say that we are all in danger, Leyla.”

“You’re starting to worry me, Dora,” Leyla said, looking wary. Her gaze shifted briefly to Amara and Avid, who were back to watching cartoons on the couch. “What’s going on?”
Dora bit her lip. “I wish I could tell you,” she said with genuine regret, and she placed her own hand over Leyla’s. “But I can’t. It would only put you in more danger. I know that I have no right to ask this of you, but I need you to take Amara and Avid and leave the city. Please.” She could only hope that Leyla would listen.

Leyla’s eyes were dark with concern, but she had never been easily swayed. “I’m sorry, but I need more than that. If I’m going to be running from something, I need to know what it is.”

Dora wished desperately that she could explain. But she couldn’t. She couldn’t have her kids thinking she was a monster. Seeing her like… that. She couldn’t let them get hurt because of her choices, either.

But she couldn’t keep Leyla totally in the dark. “You know how I couldn’t talk about my work?” Right now, breaking an NDA was the least of her worries.

“Am I about to hear something that could get me killed?” Leyla asked cautiously.

“Hopefully not,” Dora said, glancing left and right and making sure the door was locked. “…Leyla, I worked for some people who were doing bad things. Now I have to live with that, but what’s important right now is that they might be coming after us.”

Leyla frowned. “Why us?”

“Because of me,” Dora said urgently, and the lurch of guilt she felt in the pit of her stomach was like a stone in her belly. “They might hurt you or the kids, and I can’t—”

There was a tug on her sleeve just then, and she felt Vile startle within her, but it was only for a moment. Dora looked down to see Avid standing there, looking up at her with wide eyes.

“Mom, why are you scared?” he asked quietly.

Dora knelt down to face her son, stroking his cheek with one hand. “Avid, honey, what do you think would ever scare your mom?” she asked with a little smile, hoping to reassure him.
“Dunno. But you looked scared.”

“What’s happening, Mom?” Amara asked, looking at them over the back of the couch. Her brown eyes were watchful, anxious.

Dora tried to put on a convincing smile. “We’re going on a trip, kids.” She glanced at her sister. “Aunt Leyla’s going to take you to see Grandma and Grandpa.”

“Where are you gonna go?” Avid was uncannily perceptive for a nine-year-old.

Dora smiled and patted her son’s head, running her fingers through his hair. “Don’t worry about me, sweetie. I’ve got to go visit some friends first.”

Leyla was giving her an odd look, but didn’t speak up. She was probably wondering what was going through her sister’s head, but the less she knew, the better. It was probably best that they didn’t travel together, anyway. Besides, there was something Dora had to do first. She had to warn Eddie and Drake. She owed it to them, after what she’d done.

“You guys go, and I’ll meet you there in a little while, okay?” Dora said, looking to Leyla.

“But you just got back,” Amara protested, standing up from the couch. “Is this about your job?”

“No,” Dora said after a moment. Well, it was, but really it wasn’t. Not anymore. “I just… have to do the right thing.”

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Eddie ran a few more errands before coming back to his apartment, mostly having to do with scraping together the last of the money in his checking account to placate his landlady’s ire at him being three days late with the rent. She wasn’t pleased, but she had accepted the money without much complaint and sternly told him not to be late again. Eddie was quietly grateful that she hadn’t made too much of a fuss, even if he didn’t know where or how he was going to come up with next month’s rent. That was a problem for future Eddie to deal with. Like, maybe next-week-Eddie.
He walked in the door and set the groceries down with a sigh. He’d figure something out, even if he had to call in a few favors.

**HUNGRY, EDDIE,** Venom nudged him impatiently for the chocolate bar in one of the bags. It hadn’t expressed any desire to hunt again just yet, but Eddie suspected this was for his benefit. Eddie understood that Venom had to sustain itself, but that did nothing to lessen the instinctive unease Eddie’s human self felt at their shared cannibalism. Chocolate was a better substitute, at least for now.

“Sure, V,” Eddie responded absently as he dug the chocolate bar out from underneath a couple of frozen burritos, which were summarily stuffed into the freezer alongside the bag of tater tots and a couple slightly squashed ice cream sandwiches.

Finally taking a look around, Eddie was somewhat surprised. The place was neater than he last remembered. That, and there were a couple black duffels and a backpack he didn’t recognize laying next to the couch. Then the lump of blankets on the couch shifted, and Drake looked up from the book he was reading.

Eddie blinked, startled. Drake had ditched the “scruffy cargo pilot” look in the time Eddie had been gone, and looked a bit more like his old self now, having shaved his stubble and cut his hair into an approximation of the style Eddie was used to seeing him with. Eddie wondered if Riot had helped him with that. There were still faint dark circles under his eyes, and there was a sickly sort of pallor to the usual warm brown of his skin, but Eddie thought some rest had done him good.

Eddie realized he was staring, cleared his throat awkwardly. “I, uh, got some groceries,” he said, for lack of a more eloquent response, briefly holding up the bag.

“Good to hear. Your fridge is pretty barren.”

**IT IS A WONDER VENOM HAS NOT STARVED,** Riot grumbled. It hadn’t been pleased at the lack of options, either.

Venom stuck out its tongue at Riot, still holding the half-eaten chocolate bar in one tendril.

“Looks like you’ve been busy,” Eddie remarked, looking from his now-slightly-neater apartment to
the bags sitting next to the couch. His eyebrows went up. “Where’d all this come from?”

Drake glanced at Eddie over the edge of his book. Asimov’s *Foundations*, if Eddie recognized the dusty cover correctly. He’d never gotten all the way through it. “You thought I wouldn’t have a backup plan in place for situations like this?”

“Shit, I don’t know,” Eddie said with a breathy laugh. “You anticipated this kind of thing?”

“I like to be prepared. I had a few bags packed at a safehouse of sorts.”

Eddie saw the edge of an American passport peeking out of the front pocket of the black backpack. He pulled it out and flipped it open. The ID page had a somewhat older photo of Drake, but the name on the page read ‘Elias Rahim.’

Eddie looked from the photo and then to Drake. It didn’t surprise him that Drake had a fake ID at the ready, somehow. “Hm. Pretty good fake, but you don’t look like an Elias to me.”

“You don’t think so?” Drake glanced up from the book, letting it lay across his lap. “...My mother wanted to call me Nasir. It means ‘victorious one.’”

Eddie was again surprised. Drake didn’t often volunteer information about himself, so Eddie was always intrigued when he did. He sat down on the couch after a moment, absently flipping through the pages of the fake passport.

He glanced at Drake with a raised eyebrow. “And she went with ‘Carlton’ instead?”

“My father insisted that I have a proper English name.” Drake’s long fingers played with the edge of a page. “Didn’t want the other kids at school to make fun of me. At least, not for that.”

“I thought that moms always won that argument,” Eddie joked. “I mean, I get it, though. I’m named after my dad.” Not that he was particularly proud of it. Edward Brock, Sr. hadn’t been the most illustrious role model for his son.

Drake gave a little smile. “You didn’t know my father. He was an international businessman, doing
corporate liaison work between England and Pakistan for years. No one said no to him. Not even his wife.”

The Drake family name was known to Eddie, in an academic sort of way. He’d combed through Carlton Drake’s Wikipedia page once or twice (okay, maybe several times, obsessively). He was the only son of renowned English businessman Danomyr Drake and UN-honored physician Nabila Khan. Such things didn’t hold much weight here in the States, but twenty, thirty years ago, the Drake family had been well-respected in England.

Eddie decided a ‘daddy issues’ comment might not be appropriate, if only because such things hit a little too close to home for him, too. “Bet your mom wasn’t too happy about that.”

Drake shrugged. “She accepted it. If she’d had her way, I would have been Nasir Khan, after her favorite grandfather. But she understood why he did it. My father chose his own name after he left Pakistan, just so he could get a job.”

Eddie nodded slowly, quiet for a moment. “It was actually my mom’s idea to name me after my dad,” he said. “At least, that’s what he told me. She left when I was little.” He didn’t blame her, though. At least, he didn’t now. His father had been… difficult to live with, even when he was sober.

Eddie cleared his throat, suddenly feeling awkward. “‘S’all in the past, now, though. Doesn’t matter.”

“The past is a part of us, Eddie. It shapes us. Part of the future is also, in some ways, part of our past. It’s never truly gone, and like all things we cannot banish, we must accept it,” Drake intoned softly. His dark eyes were fixed on Eddie, in a way that felt somehow intimate. Like Drake was looking through him rather than at him.

“Okay, you’ve lost me there,” Eddie chuckled, trying to lighten the mood. “Bachelor’s degree in journalism here. I didn’t take quantum physics. And I was never great with poetry.”

Drake’s lips quirked up into a familiar, mysterious little smile, like he knew something Eddie didn’t. Which, honestly, he probably did. Eddie could never guess what the guy was thinking. “It’s neither of those things. Merely something I’ve learned.”

Drake seemed to remember something just then. He nuded Eddie’s shoulder. “Oh, by the way, the
small bag on the floor is for you.”

Eddie was confused. “What is it?” He answered his own question as he pulled the bag closer—it was heavier than it looked—and unzipped the top. His eyes went wide as saucers as he realized the bag was filled to the brim with stacks of cash. Eddie could only gape at it for a moment. He’d never seen this much money in his life. At least, not in person. There had to be a hundred thousand dollars in that bag, at least.

“What the fuck,” Eddie breathed at last. “Drake, what the hell is this?”

“Something for your trouble. I thought you’d probably lose your job after all this, so you might need it,” Drake responded, like it was nothing.

“Jack agreed to keep me on as a freelancer,” Eddie said, perhaps a bit defensively. “Seriously, you didn’t have to do this.” Whatever he’d been expecting, it certainly wasn’t this.

Drake gave him a haughty look, one that was almost laughably at odds with the fact that he was curled up in a threadbare blanket and wearing one of Eddie’s old college sweatshirts. “Eddie, I have four Swiss bank accounts under several aliases, and three more in the Cayman Islands. I just need time to find a way to access them. Yes, most of my US-based assets are frozen at the moment, but did you really think I didn’t have a contingency plan? Please. This is practically pocket change.”

“Well, how was I supposed to know that?” Eddie grumbled, a little embarrassed. He’d always had a hard time accepting help from others, but he couldn’t deny that he needed the money. “…well, at least I don’t have to worry about rent next month.”

“Just give me a little bit more time, and you won’t have to worry about anything,” Drake said with an almost unbelievable casual confidence. “You can… I don’t know, go on a vacation. Get a better apartment.”

Eddie let out a long breath, sitting back against the sagging couch cushions. “How about we worry about, like… making sure they didn’t mess us both up too badly first?”

There was a wary look in Drake’s eyes now. “And what do you mean by that?”

Eddie’s explanation, like many of his stories, began with, “Well, I know a guy…”
It didn’t take as much effort as Eddie had anticipated to convince Drake and Riot to let Dan look them over. Drake had tensed at the idea of going to a hospital, and Eddie could hardly blame him. He was glad for having talked Dan into meeting at his and Anne's place. But overall, Drake had been amenable to the whole thing, agreeing that he and Eddie both probably needed a checkup, especially since they weren’t sure of what all had been done to them. Riot was a little more reluctant, but Eddie had assured it that Dan was a friend. Perhaps a bit surprisingly, Riot had accepted this explanation. Eddie wasn’t sure if it was Drake’s logic that had convinced Riot, or if it really had been the simple explanation that Dan was Eddie’s friend. Either way, Eddie was grateful that it had worked. Anne had texted Eddie to offer to pick them up on her way home from work, but he had declined. He was still thinking about the best way to introduce her to the fact that he was both harboring a fugitive in his home and that they were both part of something that sounded like a conspiracy theory.

He just had to hope that Anne and Dan wouldn’t freak out when he introduced them to Drake and Riot. Venom they could probably handle without too much hysteria, even if they would doubtless be angry with him for keeping such a secret from them for months.

Eddie’s stomach did a nervous flip-flop at the thought, but he knew it was inevitable. There was no way he could hope to keep Venom a secret from them forever. Or Drake and Riot, for that matter. Anne and Dan were his friends; he couldn’t exactly not tell them.

That didn’t mean he wasn’t dreading the conversation, though. Eddie already felt pretty damn guilty for having lied to Anne repeatedly about all this, especially when she was just trying to make sure he was okay. There was nothing he could do about that now, though. All he could do was hope they understood.

This, though, definitely ranked in the top ten most uncomfortable conversations Eddie had ever had in his life. The look on Anne’s face when he brought Carlton fucking Drake into her apartment was nothing short of horrified, looking like she’d seen a ghost for about half a second before shock turned to flickers of anger. Eddie could already see her hackles rising, and he hurried to reassure her.

“I promise I can explain,” were the first words out of Eddie’s mouth, and this seemed to calm Anne somewhat, though the pinched look on her face remained.

“You must be Ms. Weying. I don’t believe we’ve met in person,” Drake said with a nod towards Anne, polite as ever.
Anne pointedly ignored him and stared daggers at Eddie. “I’ll let you explain,” she said, her tone carefully neutral, “but it better be damn good.”

Mr. Belvedere took one look at both Eddie and Drake, fur immediately puffing up to twice its normal volume, and he hissed and growled with his ears pinned back. When the apartment door shut, the cat dashed away to the bedroom, likely to hide under Anne’s bed. Animals didn’t seem to like Eddie much anymore, since Venom had become part of his life. Likely as not, the cat could sense the predator hiding beneath his skin. Venom prickled with interest at the scent of possible prey, but Eddie quickly nixed that thought, just in case the symbiote had any ideas.

“Don’t mind him,” Eddie said to Drake, trying to break the tension in the room. “He doesn’t like anybody. Well, except for Anne.”

They sat on the sectional sofa in the living room—the very same one that Eddie remembered sitting on and watching movies with Anne, so long ago—and Eddie tried not to fidget. Venom shifted inside him, a soothing touch, watching but saying nothing for now. It seemed to understand how important this was for Eddie.

“So,’’ Anne began, looking between the two of them, while Dan sat uncomfortably beside her. “Eddie, I’m guessing this has something to do with you not answering my calls for two weeks.”

“Yeah, that’s about the long and short of it,” Eddie said, rubbing the back of his neck as he internally scrambled for words. He was usually so good with words. Although, he’d always tripped over himself around Anne. She had a way of doing that to him, even now.

Anne’s eyes narrowed. “You’re going to have to give me more details than that, Eddie,” she said with a sharp edge to her voice. “You both look like you’ve been starved and kept in a closet, or something.”

Drake looked like he wanted to laugh, but his eyes were mirthless and distant. He stayed silent, though, ceding the floor to Eddie, who cleared his throat awkwardly.

Eddie let out a weak laugh. “You wouldn’t believe me even if I told you.” He desperately wanted to tell her the truth, he really did, but it all sounded insane. That, and he didn’t want to put her in danger with the knowledge. He still didn’t know who could be listening, watching.
“Well, you won't know unless you try,” Dan offered, calm and supportive. He glanced between the two of them. “I’d like to hear both your stories, actually, if you’re willing to talk.”

“I don’t even know all of it myself,” Eddie admitted. “All I know is that I want to make sure we’re okay.” He glanced at Drake. “Well, mostly him. He had it worse than I did.”

Mostly, Eddie wanted to make sure that no permanent damage had been done either to himself or Drake. Sure, the symbiotes could heal most things, but hearing the okay from a human doctor would go a long way for Eddie’s peace of mind. And really, it wouldn’t be hard to come up with a convincing cover story. If Eddie didn’t know any better, he’d say Drake looked like a heroin addict: thin and tired, with bruises and track marks still splotching the insides of both arms.

“Eddie, you haven’t told us anything,” Anne spoke up, her impatience barely disguised. It was clear she was worried, but she was tired of being kept in the dark. “What the hell’s going on here? You’re acting weird, you just… disappeared for almost two weeks, and now…” She gestured helplessly to Drake, who had remained carefully silent throughout all this.

“I would think,” Anne continued, her gaze carefully trained on Eddie, “that after the disaster you had with that alien parasite—”

**PARASITE**?! Venom surged up and out of Eddie before he had a chance to try to calm the symbiote, engulfed by its waves of anger and maybe a little bit of hurt. Its huge, hulking form seemed to take up nearly all the space in the room. **WE ARE NOT A PARASITE!**

Dan nearly fell over the back of the couch in his haste to get away, but Anne remained unflappable. She glared at Eddie. “I knew it!”

Even Venom took a step back at that, perplexed. It was enough for Eddie to wrest back control, and he held up his hands as though in surrender. “Annie, I’m sorry! I-I really am, but I didn’t know how to tell you...”

Anne crossed her arms, not convinced. “Eddie, I had your little friend *riding around in my body!* You really thought you couldn’t tell me Venom was still alive?”

Eddie scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. “Well...”
“I can’t believe this!” Anne threw up her arms, exasperated. “Eddie, I swear you are just—just trying to get yourself killed sometimes! And—and him?!” She gestured helplessly to Drake, who seemingly knew better than to interject, looking vaguely uncomfortable. “What the hell is going on here?!”

“I was trying to protect you!” Eddie burst out, hurt. He knew that Anne was just concerned, that she was upset because she wanted to help and he wouldn’t let her, but her anger still made some part of him hurt.

“Protect me from what?” Anne shot back. “You think I can’t protect myself? News flash, Eddie, I’m not as helpless as you think I am.”

“I know that!” Eddie said, desperate to get through to her somehow, but all this was just so fucking complicated and he didn’t even know where to begin. “But Annie, you gotta believe me when I say I was trying to keep you safe! This… all this shit, I don’t know what to do!”

“Then let us help!” Anne’s tone was less angry now, some other longing emotion bleeding through into her voice, and it made Eddie ache with how much he missed her sometimes.

There was a beat of silence after that, and Dan looked between the other three people in the room. “Hey, how about we all just take a step back?” he suggested with a professional sort of calm. “Now that we’ve got all this out in the open, we can just… talk about it, okay?” He placed his hand over Anne’s, giving it a gentle squeeze.

Eddie felt some of the tension leave his muscles. God bless Dan’s de-escalating capabilities. All this had to be so fucking weird for him, but he was taking it all in stride.

“Eddie simply wants to ensure that we aren’t in any immediate medical danger.” Drake spoke for the first time, and he held Anne and Dan’s stares with measured calm.

“That’s my job,” Dan said with a small smile. He stood and offered his hand to Drake, while Anne watched with an expression of vague incredulity. “Dr. Dan Lewis. I don’t think we’ve met.”

“A pleasure, Dr. Lewis,” Drake returned smoothly, polite and easygoing as ever. It was weird, Eddie thought, to hear him talk like he was being interviewed again. “I’d introduce myself, but you already know who I am.”
One of Venom’s tendrils nudged at Drake’s shoulder. **YOU ARE BEING RUDE, RIOT.** It sounded almost chastising, and Eddie might have wanted to laugh under different circumstances. Since when did Venom know anything about manners?

Anne blinked. “Riot? Who’s-- *oh my god.*”

The rest of her question was cut off as liquid silver coalesced along Drake’s arm, and Riot manifested a head from Drake’s shoulder, much like Venom was doing with Eddie.

**WE ARE RIOT,** said the silver symbiote. Its teeth were bared, much like Venom’s, and while Eddie knew that was just how Riot looked all the time, he knew it was probably pretty damn scary for Anne and Dan. He couldn’t help but wish that Riot had toned down the whole freaky alien thing just a little bit.

“You… you’ve got one, too,” Anne breathed. She had gone white as a sheet, looking at Drake and the amorphous silver alien that was regarding them with narrowed opalescent eyes.

“You apologies if he startled you,” Drake said mildly, while Riot simply snorted, clearly not sharing the sentiment.

“So, uh, Annie, Dan, this is Riot,” Eddie said, gesturing to the silver symbiote. “Riot, these are my friends, Anne and Dan. Um, don’t eat them.”

**WASN’T PLANNING ON IT,** Riot sniffed, seemingly dismissive, but Eddie could tell the symbiote was still on its guard.

Dan didn’t really look reassured, but he seemed to be doing his best to appear unbothered. “Well, um, I can take a look at you guys, if that’s okay with you,” he ventured.

Sensing Drake’s hesitation, Dan glanced at the door. “We can go in the other room, if you’d like.”

“We would appreciate that.” Drake didn’t look back, avoided glancing at Eddie as Dan led him into the room that was used as an office-slash-spare-bedroom.
The door was shut, and that meant Eddie was left alone with Anne. It seemed like the first time in ages, especially in this place. The very air seemed heavy with old memories, somehow. For a few moments there was silence between them, and Eddie just stared at the floor, knowing that he should say something but entirely unable to come up with anything that felt appropriate.

**WE ARE SORRY, ANNIE**, Venom spoke aloud, surprising Eddie. He almost wanted to shush the symbiote at first, but Venom’s bluntness was maybe what he needed right now.

Anne jumped slightly at the sound of the symbiote’s deep bass rumble. “I… it’s okay, Venom,” she said with a small, awkward smile. “This is just… a lot.”

**YES. A LOT. FOR US, TOO. EDDIE IS STILL UPSET**, Venom explained, and Eddie couldn’t bring himself to be annoyed at the fact that they were talking about him like he wasn’t even there. He knew Venom didn’t mean it that way. It was vocalizing his feelings when he couldn’t, and he appreciated that. **BAD THINGS HAPPENED. LOTS OF BAD THINGS.**

“I’m sorry,” Anne said after a moment, genuinely.

“Me, too,” Eddie spoke up with a wry smile. “...I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. About Venom. About everything. But I’m still trying to make sense of it all myself, y’know?”

Anne nodded slowly, wringing the sleeves of her cardigan like she was squeezing water from it. “I know. And I’m sorry I pushed you about it,” she said softly. Her blue eyes met his, and when she looked at him like that, like she cared so much, it made Eddie wish he could go back to a time when things weren’t so damn complicated.

“‘S’okay.” Eddie shook his head.

“No, it’s not.” Anne got up from the opposite couch and came over to sit next to him, taking one of his big hands in her smaller ones. “And it’s okay if you can’t tell me. Or don’t want to. I’m still your friend, Eddie, and I’m here if you need me.”

Eddie wanted to tell her. He did. Maybe she could help him make sense of the whole thing. But despite his famed ability to put words to a page, this was a story he didn’t know how to tell properly.

Venom’s tendrils seeped from Eddie’s wrist, gently twining over Anne’s delicate hands, but not
Anne glanced at Eddie, as though to affirm it was okay, and then nodded.

One of Venom’s delicate black tendrils came up to attach to her temple, sinking painlessly beneath her skin, and Eddie felt her involuntary shudder as the connection was made. He could feel her there was Venom replayed the highlights: flickers of sights and sounds and scents during their capture, the claustrophobia of white walls during their captivity, the cold prick of needles and the warm touch of skin against skin, the smell of fear and desperation. There was a flicker of an adrenaline rush, the wild instinct of the hunt, and the strange colorless blur of their escape, experienced as the rhythmic thump of a double heartbeat and a distant ringing in her ears, muffling the sound of screams and then thunder and the smell of rain.

Anne gasped like she had just come up from underwater when Venom broke the connection, and she leaned against Eddie’s shoulder, catching her breath.

“Sorry,” Eddie immediately apologized, feeling bad for overwhelming her. “I know that was probably... weird. You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Anne said after a moment, composing herself. “You’re right. That was... a lot.” Eddie wasn’t sure if she meant the whole psychic connection thing or what Venom had showed her, but it was probably safe to assume she was referring to both.

Just then the door to the other room opened, and Dan stepped halfway out, stethoscope around his neck. “Eddie, you can come on back now.

—

Dan was in full doctor-mode once the door shut and they were alone, and Eddie was quietly grateful for the lack of personal questions. Dan asked him where it hurt, what he thought might be wrong, and asked for permission every time he had to touch Eddie’s person. Most of his questions were easy enough to answer, just yes or no, and when he did ask for more detail, he didn’t seem put off when Eddie couldn’t answer.

“Do you mind taking your shirt off?” Dan asked once he was done checking Eddie’s pulse and blood pressure.
“Don’t stress; it’s absolutely fine if you don’t want to,” Dan assured him, seeing the way Eddie gripped the hem of his shirt and hesitated.

“No, it’s okay,” Eddie said after a moment, pulling his shirt up and over his head. It wasn’t like Dan hadn’t seen him shirtless before, in the hospital. “What’s your conclusion so far, doc?”

“Well, your pulse and blood pressure are normal, and lung functioning appears to be fine,” Dan said, conversationally. “That’s a good sign. Can you lie down for me?”

Eddie swung his legs up onto the bed and laid flat. “So, I’m not dying?” It was only partially a joke.

“No, Eddie, you are not dying,” Dan assured him. “I just want to do a quick abdominal exam, so I’m gonna press on your stomach a little bit. Is that okay?”

“Yeah.” Eddie nodded, tried to relax. Dan’s hands were gentle as they pressed on his ribs, his belly, the soft flesh above his hips. Eddie’s abdominal muscles tightened when Dan’s hands moved over the horizontal scar on his abdomen.

Dan paused. “Does that hurt?”

“No,” Eddie said after a moment. It was the truth, but the sensation of being touched there made his body instinctively tense up. “Just sensitive. Doesn’t hurt.”

Dan nodded. “Eddie, can I ask you what this scar is from?” His voice was gentle, patient, but not patronizing. Eddie was suddenly glad that San Francisco had a doctor like him.

Eddie swallowed. “Uh, I don’t remember why, but they did some kinda surgery on me. I think they just wanted to poke around and see what they could find.”

“Well, if we were at the hospital, I’d want to do a scan just to make sure nothing is out of place, but the fact that you’re not in any pain and that your body appears to be functioning normally are both good signs,” Dan said after a pause.

**ALL OF EDDIE’S ORGANS ARE INTACT**, Venom spoke up, perhaps just the slightest bit
“Oh. Well, that’s good to know,” Dan said. He didn’t seem as disturbed by the appearance of Venom, and Eddie wondered if he was just trying to be professional or if he saw weirder things on the daily at the hospital. “Do either of you have any questions for me?”

“Is Drake okay?” was the first thing out of Eddie’s mouth as he sat up.

“You’ll have to ask him yourself. Doctor-patient confidentiality, Eddie,” Dan said, not unkindly.

“Oh. Right,” Eddie said, vaguely embarrassed. “Um, am I okay?”

“For right now, I’d say you seem healthy to me,” Dan said after a moment. “Although I would like to follow up with you in a couple weeks, if that’s okay. Your advanced rate of healing is incredible, and although you look like you could use some rest, you look pretty good for someone who’s recently had multiple non-consensual surgeries.”

“Thanks, Dan.” Eddie paused for a moment. “Can I ask you to keep all this a secret? Y’know, Venom, Drake, all that.”

“Of course,” Dan said, and Eddie believed him. He looked at Eddie with serious eyes. “Eddie, can I give you some advice? As your friend?”

Eddie was briefly surprised that Dan considered them friends, but he nodded all the same. “Yeah, sure.”

“Now, I’m not going to tell anyone about all this,” Dan said gently, sitting on the edge of the bed next to Eddie. “Not unless you ask me to. But I want you to be careful, Eddie. Carlton Drake is a dangerous man, and even more so with that alien. He’s already proven that. And you yourself proved that he’s done some pretty bad things.”

For a moment Eddie was taken aback. He could see how this might look from Dan’s point of view, though, and it was admittedly suspicious. “I mean, you’re not wrong,” Eddie admitted. “He is dangerous. But so am I.”
Dan glanced at the door, then back to Eddie. “Frankly, Eddie, I trust you a lot more than I trust him.”

“Then you can trust me when I say he’s not going to hurt me, or anyone else,” Eddie returned, his gaze steady as he looked Dan in the eyes. “We’ve talked.”

“Alright.” Dan nodded. He didn’t seem entirely pleased with the explanation, but he accepted it. “I’m glad you’re alright, Eddie.”

“Thanks,” Eddie said with a small smile. “Me, too.”

—

“You doing okay?” Eddie asked finally. It was dusk when they left Anne and Dan’s place, the sun beginning to set in the distance. It was actually a fairly balmy day for San Francisco, a few hours’ break in the clouds allowing the sun to shine through as it sank over the horizon.

They had decided to take a bit of a walk instead of returning directly to Eddie’s apartment, all the way down to the shoreline, with the Golden Gate Bridge silhouetted in the distance. Venom and Riot were tired of staying inside, and Eddie couldn’t say he blamed them. Now that he and Drake had recovered some of their strength, staying inside was less and less appealing. Venom would need to hunt soon, Eddie knew, but so far the symbiote had said nothing about such things, even when Eddie was eating. He didn’t know if this was for his benefit, or if there was just something Venom wasn’t telling him.

“Fine, as far as your friend Dr. Lewis tells me,” Drake said, hands in the pocket of the hoodie he was wearing. It was one of Eddie’s old college sweatshirts, colors washed out and worn thin, but the way it draped over Drake’s thin figure was perhaps endearing. “I could stand to gain a little weight back, but otherwise I’m okay.” There was a pause. “And you?”

“I’m good. Venom says all my organs are intact, and Dan believes him, so I think I’m okay,” Eddie said with a small smile.

**OF COURSE YOU ARE FINE. I MADE SURE OF IT,** Riot spoke up. While Riot had tolerated the trip to Anne and Dan’s, it was clear the symbiote still didn’t fully trust Eddie’s human friends. Maybe it could sense Dan’s hesitations about Drake.
“Yeah, but I feel better knowing that, y’know, another human agrees with you,” Eddie said with a shrug. “No offense, but Dan is probably more of an expert on human bodies than you are, being a doctor and all.”

**DRAKE IS ALSO A DOCTOR,** Riot said, almost petulantly.

“I’ve opened up a few humans before. I could operate on a live one if I had to,” Drake remarked, and he sounded so serious that Eddie glanced at him with wide eyes, startled.

The little smile upturning the corners of Drake’s mouth told Eddie that he was joking. Mostly.

Eddie looked out at the waters of the bay, watching the sun slowly sinking behind the clouds. The air was getting cool, but it felt kind of nice. He found that he was more comfortable in darkness these days, a preference he attributed mainly to Venom. Probably not so great for his depressive tendencies, but there was a sense of safety that came from being enshrouded in darkness, a certain animal comfort that let Eddie relax ever so slightly more. Venom’s contentment pulsed through their link, no words needed between them.

They were standing underneath a sort of rocky overhang, a shallow sort of cave that was exposed now that the tide was out. It meant they were draped in shadows as the sun set to their right, a peaceful quiet interrupted only by the sounds of the waves and the faint din of city noise.

Eddie glanced at Drake next to him, noticing the way the light caught his eyes in a cloudy, luminous sort of way in the shadows. It reminded him of catching a coyote in the headlights of his motorcycle at night, eyes gleaming in the dark. Eddie frowned, stepping a bit closer to Drake to get a better look.

“What’s up with your eyes?” Eddie asked, curious but also kind of concerned. Drake was kind of young to be getting cataracts.

Drake blinked. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” Eddie admitted. “Hold still a second, lemme look.” It was a bit weird, but also cool, Eddie thought. He got closer, until there was only a few inches between them, one hand coming up almost unconsciously to cup Drake’s cheek and hold him perfectly still.

Drake was perhaps an inch or so shorter than Eddie, and he tilted his head back ever so slightly so
their eyes could meet.

“Whoa,” Eddie breathed. Now that the sun was at their backs, and they were in the shadows of the overhang, the dying light of the sunset made the strange luminous reflection in Drake’s eyes stand out. “Can you like… see in the dark?”

“I’ve never really thought about it,” Drake said softly, but he didn’t seem too focused. His deep brown eyes stared into Eddie’s greenish-gray ones, and suddenly Eddie realized how close their faces were, how intimately warm the touch of his hand against Drake’s face was.

Eddie felt his cheeks heat up suddenly, and he abruptly took a step back, his heart beating altogether too hard. “Sorry,” he said, clearing his throat awkwardly, keeping his hands to himself. “Just, uh, got curious.”

It took Drake a moment to recover his wits, blinking. Even in the low light, there was perhaps a hint of a blush to his cheeks as well. “I’m not sure myself,” he said, sounding rather distracted. “Riot?”

_I made some improvements when I put you back together after the rocket explosion_, Riot responded almost lazily. _GOT THE SEQUENCES FROM OTHER HOSTS._

“Tapeta lucida,” Drake said after a moment, surprised.

“What now?” Eddie asked, confused.

“It’s a retroreflective layer in the eyes of some animals that gives them superior night vision,” Drake explained. He sounded rather pleased, actually. “That’s… quite a brilliant idea, actually.”

“Hey, how come you didn’t give me cool upgrades?” Eddie jokingly prodded Venom.

Venom snorted. _Building new eyeballs takes a lot of energy. I would have to eat the old ones first._

“Okay, never mind,” Eddie said quickly. Talk about a mood killer.
“Does that mean you had to rebuild me from scratch?” Drake asked Riot curiously, sounding far less horrified by that prospect than any normal human should.

**PARTS OF YOU,** Riot said, like it was nothing. Eddie suspected this was the symbiote version of a humble-brag. **ONLY THE ONES I COULDN’T REPAIR, DELICATE TISSUES LIKE EYES ARE THE FIRST TO MELT OR SCAR IN FIRE.**

“Hm. No wonder I haven’t missed my contacts since then.”

“Jesus. Anyone ever told you guys you’re morbid as hell?” Eddie muttered, though he was privately grateful for the change of subject. It was getting darker now as the sun set, and the greenish gleam of Drake’s eyes in the fading light would have been unsettling if Eddie didn’t already know better.

It was… eerily beautiful, in a way. Maybe that was Venom’s thoughts seeping through the link again, the appreciation for the aesthetics of a hunter.

Eddie felt a flicker of impatience from Venom. **YOU ARE STUPID SOMETIMES, EDDIE,** it said inside his head, exasperated.

“What the hell is that supposed to— hey!” Eddie barely had time to exclaim a protest as Venom’s tendrils suddenly extended from his body and pulled his body flush against Drake’s.

Eddie babbled something incoherent, barely even listening to himself, something about apologizing for Venom’s overenthusiasm as its black tendrils twined around both of them, but that wasn’t all that was happening. Riot didn’t react aggressively, as Eddie had feared, but instead its silver tendrils twined and interwove with the black of Venom, weaving ever tighter together until they seemed to be connected with metallic gray-black silk, like gossamer shadows.

It was like completing a circuit.

The four-way connection opened, and the sudden *rush* that followed was a shudder of euphoria that made Eddie and Drake tremble and clutch at each other for balance. Eddie didn’t even realize he’d stopped talking. He didn’t need to. He was suddenly seeing and feeling in four dimensions, seeing in stereo, the flow of information between minds ebbing and flowing like a river. It wasn’t frightening this time, not overwhelming or choked with adrenaline and fear. No, this time it felt like… like
something perfect. Like a piano tuned to perfection, playing a beloved song. Like the touch of a favorite texture long forgotten.

Somewhere, in a layer of consciousness lower than his own, Eddie could sense that Venom and Riot were exchanging information, talking in a way only they could understand. They were messages that humans were not equipped to interpret, chemical signals of a nuance that human endocrine responses could only dream of.

The sensation of touching and being touched by his own hands at the same time was unique, Eddie thought. He’d experienced it with Venom before, but to feel the warmth of another human being, through a sensory system that was a mirror of his own, was special. The waves of euphoria he was feeling were echoed back from the link, and while he could feel Venom in there, closer to him, he could feel the tide of emotions from Riot and Drake lapping at the edges of his mind like the surf at his ankles.

The sensation of Drake’s emotions was like the touch of his hands on Eddie’s shoulders—careful, restrained, but trembling with the same rush of want that Eddie felt in his own mind. Heart. Wherever. He felt it, too.

They were so close, nearly chest to chest with Drake’s back against the cool rock, and Eddie realized he was clutching at Drake’s upper arms like he never wanted to let go. The expression on Drake’s face was one he had never seen before—a look of wonder and wide-eyed fascination, delicate pink lips parted as he took shallow breaths to steady the heartbeat Eddie could hear in his own ears.

If Eddie let himself drift, caught up in the flow of information, he could see himself through Drake’s eyes, the look of sheer, vulnerable need in his own eyes. Had he looked at Annie this way? He didn’t know.

Their faces were inches apart again, and there was a shimmering wetness to Drake’s dark eyes, a tremble in the tide of his emotions that made Eddie wonder if he was going to cry or laugh. He didn’t know which he might do himself.

Drake’s eyes were unfocused, like he was looking at some distant star, but Eddie knew he was looking inside themselves. “Fascinating,” he breathed. “You… you feel it, too.”

“Yeah,” Eddie managed after a moment, nearly breathless. Some part of him wanted to tell Drake to shut up and stop taking mental notes for later analysis, even now, but words were becoming difficult to come by. “I feel it.”
One of Drake’s hands slid to the back of Eddie’s neck, as though to pull him closer, and Eddie paused, swallowing hard as he tried to hold onto the words he was about to say.

Eddie’s thumb brushed over Drake’s lower lip. “...Can I kiss you?”

Drake let out a breathless laugh. “We are quite literally reading each other’s minds, Eddie,” he said. “You can feel what I’m feeling.”

Eddie felt his cheeks and the tips of his ears burn. “Hey, I-I just thought it was, y’know, an important thing to ask, since—”

And just like that, Drake was kissing him, gently at first, but then Eddie’s tongue swiped across his lower lip, and he opened up enthusiastically. He was warm and soft, strange and familiar all at once, and maybe Eddie shouldn’t want this but he did. This was like nothing else on Earth.

When they parted, Eddie’s legs were trembling so hard he could barely hold himself up, leaning against Drake and pressing him up against the rock wall. They slid down to sit together in the sand, panting softly. The initial dizzying rush of euphoria had started to fade, and now they simply sat together in contented silence.

Slowly, Venom and Riot withdrew back to their respective hosts, leaving the two humans to sit and collect their scrambled thoughts. While it was natural for Klyntar to bond in such a fashion, it put a strain on a human body, and both symbiotes knew it. Their hosts simply weren’t made for prolonged psychic contact, even if it was enjoyable in short doses.

Eddie felt wrung out, like he’d swam across the bay. His head was aching a little bit, and he wondered if Drake was feeling the same effects. He still had an arm around Drake, who was leaning against him as they sat in the cool dry sand, warm against the chill of the breeze coming in from the bay.

“'You good?’ Eddie asked. His voice was soft, hoarse. He glanced down at Drake, whose gleaming eyes were half-lidded and sleepy.

Drake’s hand came up to grasp Eddie’s, lacing their fingers together loosely, and Eddie noticed he still wore the woven blue bracelet on his right wrist. “Yes,” he said softly, his posture loose and utterly relaxed against Eddie. “I think we are.”
Chapter End Notes

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