Honeymoon

by old_blue

Summary

Eddie and Venom take a trip to a small town in search of a story. They find a lot of clues, but Eddie's still clueless. Maybe there's something in the water...

Notes

Apologies for this. Apparently, I'm thirsty for creepy towns and shitty hotel rooms.

I'm going to use the same conventions everyone uses. *Italics* are for thoughts. Venom's thoughts and dialogue are in **bold**.
Chapter 1

“Eddie.”

“Hmm?” Eddie frowns and taps on his desk, stares at nothing out the window—the old brick across the alley, a crack running zig-zag along the facade, thinking, the city should inspect that before the whole thing falls down...

Oh, yeah, right.

He sits up straighter, then types, 'The city council, when faced with a potential conflict over the interests of big business and their constituents, has never supported the rights of the lower classes over—'

“Eddieeee…”

“Hold on, V. I’m almost done. Just let me…” He deletes that last part. Lower classes isn’t right—not the tone he’s going for. Eddie sits forward and chews on his lip. He’s so close to the right phrase. Disadvantaged? Less privileged? The working poor? Disenfranch—

“Eddie!”

Fuck. And now it's gone—he's lost the thought completely. Eddie sighs and turns around. “What is it, V?”

“This place. I want to go there.”

As usual, Venom is watching TV while he works, black tendrils sprouting from his back and draped over the couch and coffee table.

“What place?” Eddie pushes away from his desk and slumps down onto the couch. The tendrils wrap around him in an embrace.

“This place,” Venom says unhelpfully.

Eddie sighs. There's no way he's getting any more work done right now, anyway. He grabs the remote, turns the volume up. It's some early afternoon news broadcast, a local interest story. There's a slick-looking reporter—Eddie doesn't know her name, has never seen her before—interviewing some old guy somewhere rural. The story is about bottled water as far as he can tell. He has to watch for another twenty seconds or so before they mention the name of the place: Mineral Springs.

Eddie's heard of it—one of those fading tourist traps just inland from the coast on the long, sleepy stretch between San Francisco and L.A.

“You want to go there? Mineral Springs? Why?”

“I want to see the water.”

“You want to see water? That doesn't make any sense, V.” Eddie scratches at his neck. He'd promised himself he'd get this piece done by five. That was the goal, anyway. Probably won't happen now. Venom’s going to want to eat soon—he can already feel the familiar, gnawing hunger clawing at his insides—and, lately, his symbiote’s been craving real weird shit. Stuff that's hard to get even in the city. That's going to take some time. It was almost easier when they just wanted brains.
Venom turns their head to look at Eddie. “I want to feel the water. Taste it.”

“Hmmm.” That's also weird.

“Please, Eddie.”

“Maybe, bud. I've got a lot to do right now. Can we talk about it later? Tomorrow?”

Venom grumbles and retreats completely back into his body, sulking. Fine, Hungry.

“Yeah, I know.” But Eddie's intrigued now—what could be so special about this water?—so he grabs his phone and googles Mineral Springs.

I want mussels.

Fuck. Eddie groans. “Does this mean I have to get wet again?”

Yes.

They've already had mussels three times this week. Before that, it was oysters Venom wanted. But oysters are fucking expensive and mussels grow everywhere in the bay, so Eddie figures the mussels are an improvement.

“Fine. But I'm not eating shells this time. That shit fucking hurts.”

Whatever you say, Eddie. I will eat the shells for us.

He can actually feel Venom grinning.

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The next morning, Eddie pulls his laptop out at breakfast and starts researching the town of Mineral Springs in earnest. He's starting to think there might actually be a story there. And not just a puff piece about their bottled water.

“Hey, V, check this out.” He shoves another bite of scrambled egg into his mouth while staring at the screen. “This place has a missing persons rate that's almost three times the national average. That's weird, huh? For such a small town?”

Venom doesn't answer, but Eddie can feel it listening. His symbiote’s been unusually quiet since they'd gotten home last night. Maybe anyone would be tired after gnawing approximately ten pounds of mussels off a piling in freezing water. Eddie had dropped right into bed and passed out in what he's starting to think of as a mussel coma. That's been happening a lot lately, too.

And now, Venom’s actually letting him catch his breath between bites of egg. “You okay there, bud? You're feeling pretty mellow this morning.”

Venom makes a sound that can only be described as a purr. Yes, Eddie. Feel good.

And that's why he's not exactly worried—Venom seems happy. He can feel that. They haven't been together long; they're still getting used to each other, their weird new relationship. Maybe this is just a
natural thing—part of symbiosis. He's decided to let it go for now.

“This guy, David Gorman, disappeared about six months ago. His daughter made a lot of noise about it, enough that the Feds came in. They didn't find anything.” He chews thoughtfully, reading. There's a photo of the local chief of police—a woman named Alana Ortiz—accompanying the article. “Official word is the guy ain't missing. There's no crime.”

None of the other investigations went anywhere, either, which is interesting. Maybe there's something going on. Or maybe not. Either way, the town has a pretty crazy history aside from mysterious disappearances. In the early ’70’s, it was the site of a bizarre turf war after a religious cult set up camp a few miles away. Apparently, the townspeople ran them off. And more than a few of the cult's leaders vanished.

Venom grows a small head from Eddie’s shoulder, presumably so it can peer at the screen, too. Eddie keeps scrolling through the official Mineral Springs website.

“Hey, V? Did you know the water there is supposed to have healing properties? Comes from a spring under the town. You can soak in it or drink it. Supposed to cure cancer or something.” That sounds like some very convenient bullshit. Or clever marketing. “And, look—they have an artichoke festival in the fall.”

“That's why I want to go there.”

“For the artichokes?”

Venom chuckles. “No. For the water.”

“Maybe, bud. Maybe.” He’ll need to make arrangements if they're going to do this. Finish that article and send it in, let Annie know where he’ll be in case something happens. He's not worried about much since he and Venom got together, but Annie still gets pissed if he doesn't check in.

“We can take the bike. It’ll be fun, Eddie.”

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The ride down to Mineral Springs is wet and miserable.

The coast along Highway 1 is beautiful in a dramatic and unwelcoming sort of way. Eddie’s always been enthralled by the Pacific Ocean in winter—how easily it slips from the blue-green placidity of summer into a maelstrom of pounding surf and fog and driving wind. They stop a few times along the road to stand at the edges of cliffs and watch the waves, feel the spray hit them.

They cut inland at Big Sur, and the wild coastline gives way to gloomy forests and hills that are lush and green with the winter rains. It's late afternoon when they drop down into the low valley surrounding Mineral Springs. The fields here are all planted with spiky, gray artichokes in neat rows. The rain has let up a bit, but the tops of the hills are still shrouded in fog.

They drive slowly through Mineral Springs. Like so many small towns along the coast, it’s a collection of cheery Victorians and brick buildings along the highway—mostly tourist places, selling knock-knacks and souvenirs—surrounded by houses and farms spreading up into the hills.
The only place to stay in town in the off-season is at the springs, themselves—the Mineral Springs Lodge. The hotel is just off the highway—one of those depression-era buildings that are so common out here in the west. All stone and logs, with the guest rooms flanking a central building. It actually does look like a lodge. The stone pools fed by the spring are all covered with tarps for the winter and surrounded by a tall metal fence.

Eddie parks the bike next to the only other vehicle in the large parking lot, a battered green Subaru with a ‘Dog is My Copilot’ sticker.

It starts to pour again as soon as they get inside the lobby. There's a fire roaring in the huge stone fireplace at one end of the room. A clock ticking somewhere. Otherwise, the only other sound is the rain sheeting off the roof. No people around. Eddie steps up to the front desk.

 Hungreeee!

Venom’s been whining almost continuously about food since he'd hopped on the bike this morning. “Yeah, just let me check in here and stash our stuff, maybe change clothes, and we’ll eat, okay? Promise.” Eddie rings the bell on the front desk and waits. He can hear a chair screech from somewhere behind a door, then slow footsteps approaching.

There's a sound like a sigh from Venom.

“You're the one who wanted to come down here, so quit it,” he mumbles.

The woman who emerges is older, but Eddie has no idea what age she might be—her face is unlined, skin unnaturally smooth. Her long, gray hair is piled up into a messy bun on top of her head. She’s wearing about twenty beaded necklaces and some kind of homespun shift. Hippy type, Eddie thinks. Familiar enough around here.

She raises an eyebrow at him. “Can I help you, hon?”

“Yeah, yes. I have a reservation.”

She smiles, showing off perfect, white teeth. “Well, then, you must be Mr. Brock. Seeing as we don’t have anyone else staying with us right now.” She shuffles through some papers behind the desk, flips a few over the counter for Eddie to sign.

“What brings you to our cozy little town, Mr. Brock?”

It sounds like a casual question, but Eddie knows it’s not. He'd bet this lady is the town's major source of gossip. So there's no way he's going to tell her he's going to tell her he's got a meeting with David Gorman's daughter tomorrow morning—the one who brought the original complaint to the Feds. In fact, Irene Gorman seemed quite eager to talk to him.

He says, “Just sightseeing. Taking a trip down the coast.” It's not exactly a lie...

The woman’s smile abruptly fades. “Oh,” she says.

Weird. “Is that…? Is there something wrong with taking a trip?”

“No, of course not, hon.” But she's still frowning as she hands him an actual room key on a chain. “There you go. Room 23, one of our honeymoon suites. Back out through those front doors and to the right. Can't miss it.”

Eddie glances out at the rain, then back at her. “Uh, thanks,” he says.
Their room, despite being a supposed honeymoon suite, actually kind of sucks.

Eddie hangs his wet jacket up in the bathroom, brushes water out of his hair. His backpack is wet, but the stuff he’d stashed in his panniers is still dry.

The room is shabby and looks like it hasn’t been updated since the mid-eighties. Wood paneling, an ugly, semi-orange carpet, one king bed that has an oversized, log cabin style headboard made of knotty pine. He’s going to whack his head on it, he can tell. It smells bad, too—like old dust and mold. And there’s a constant dripping sound coming from the bathroom.

It’s not his jacket. Eddie sticks his head in the cupboard under the sink. There are old water stains under the rusted pipes, but no water leaks currently. The huge tub has two different spigots—one with instructions for filling it with heated water from the spring—and a ring of mineral deposits, but it’s dry, too. It’s not the worst place he’s ever stayed—far from it—but he’s a little disappointed that their first semi-vacation together has them staying in this shithole.

Venom doesn’t seem to mind at all. Eddie knows that dripping will probably torment him all night. He never used to be so sensitive to sounds. “Is that coming from behind the wall, ya think?”

Don’t know. Drink some water and you’ll feel better.

Eddie snorts. “You and this water… Want to tell me what’s so special about it?” But he goes to the sink and unwraps one of the plastic cups, sticks it under the special spigot at the tub. The first sip makes him choke. Fuck, it tastes like old metal.

Selenium.

Eddie manages to stop gagging long enough to ask, “What? Are you sure this is safe to drink?”

Yes. Selenium, manganese, and zinc. They’re minerals, Eddie. This water has a high concentration of them, much like the composition of the water on my homeworld.

There’s a brief flash of something like a fond memory from Venom: sinking into a warm swamp, becoming one with the rich mud, soaking in the taste of chemistry, molecules. Pleasure, contentment… It’s gone before he can figure out what it means.

Eddie finishes off the water, grimaces. “Well, it tastes like shit, buddy. That’s just my opinion, though. What do I know about space water?”

Venom is quiet, but Eddie can feel the same kind of languid happiness coming from his symbiote that always follows a good meal. He’s a little surprised to find that he does feel better after drinking it, despite the taste. Even the dripping sound isn’t as annoying as it was before. “Do you need those things? The minerals?” They can probably afford to buy supplements. Assuming he gets the next few articles out on time.

There’s an uncharacteristically long pause from Venom, followed by faint echoes of the same swamp memory. Sometimes.

Eddie’s intrigued. He shakes his head, smiling. “V, that is such a bullshit answer.”
Eddie, it’s not about being a vagrant. It’s about making sure I’m not noticed. I’m not sure what you’re so curious about. You don’t have a right to know. I’m not going to let you just come barging through my life.

Venom’s always grumpy when they’re hungry. “Okay, okay. I’m just messing with you. Sorry.” He holds up his hands in surrender. “Let’s go get something to eat, huh? I saw a coffee shop just down the main drag, sign said they serve breakfast all day.”

That does the trick. Yes, let’s go now!

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The coffee shop is one of those fifties-style places, serving familiar comfort food. And full of locals, too, of course—these places are always the town’s social center. Everyone stops what they’re doing and stares when Eddie steps in out of the rain. He tries not to feel too self-conscious about it—he’s a stranger here after all. It’s expected.

Once they’re seated in a booth with a plate piled full of eggs, bacon, and pancakes in front of them, Eddie feels better. He hunches over their plate and tries to be as discreet as possible about shoveling as much food into his mouth as quickly as he can.

Eddie.

He swallows down seventy-five percent of a stack of pancakes in a single bite. Somehow it fits.

Eddie!

He has to take a sip of coffee before he can talk. “What?”

It’s only after he’s said this out loud that he realizes someone is standing next to their booth. Not their server. The chief of police, Alana Ortiz—he recognizes her from the photo in the article.

Shit, that was fast, he thinks.

Ortiz is shorter than he thought she’d be, and has a round face that isn’t disguised by the severe ponytail she’s pulled her hair back in. She’s not in uniform—just a cardigan over a pressed shirt and slacks—but there’s a gun on one hip and a badge on the other. She’s cute and obviously trying to cover it up, Eddie thinks. She looks younger than he’d expected, too.

Her dark eyes narrow suddenly as if he’d said that out loud.

Eddie looks away. He’d never actually say anything like that, though, feels almost guilty for just thinking it. He knows she has to be tougher than she looks to get where she’s gotten in a small town like this. How hard that fight must’ve been. She’d probably rip his balls off if he ever crossed her.

He’s not exactly surprised that local law enforcement is interested in him. He has no legit reason to be here right now—it’s not exactly peak tourist season. As a reporter, he’s used to getting hassled. And he does look a bit like a vagrant. Rough around the edges, maybe.

He can feel Venom’s amusement. Plus, you talk to yourself all the time now.

“Shut up,” he mutters into his coffee mug. He’s getting better at communicating with Venom in his head, but they still have a long way to go. His thoughts are so scattered—just naturally moving faster
than he can manage them and in random directions—he's always had trouble focusing. Sometimes it's just easier to say what he needs to say out loud.

When he looks back up, the chief is still staring at him, but her expression has turned a little less judgemental.

*Can we eat her?*

*No,* he thinks. Chief Ortiz scowls almost as if she heard that, too. Which is… *weird.* It's also weird having someone just standing over him, staring and not saying anything.

Eddie clears his throat. “Um, can I help you?”

“Edward Brock. I'd like you to come with me, please.”

“Oh, uh…” *Oh shit.* “Is there a problem? Am I under arrest or something?” He's not *that* famous. This is bad, but also… encouraging? If they're this nuts about a reporter simply wandering into town then there's a good chance something's up.

Venom grumbles somewhere inside him.

Ortiz’s mouth thins, like he's offended her. “No, you're not under arrest. I'd just like to talk to you. And I'd prefer to talk somewhere more private.” She glances around the restaurant.

Eddie does, too. And, for the first time, he notices that everyone in here seems to be staring at them again. No one’s talking either. It's fucking weird.

He turns back to the chief. “Uh, sure. Where are we going?”

*And can we take this food?*

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The police station is just two doors down from the coffee shop. And it's tiny.

They stop in front of a uniformed officer snoozing at the front desk—the only person in here, apparently. Ortiz kicks his leg and the guy shoots up in his chair, blinking at the two of them.

“Jack. I'm going to have a chat with Mr. Brock here. Stay on the radio, okay?”

“Yes, Chief. Sure.”

Ortiz sighs and gestures at Eddie to follow her.

Her office is right beside a metal door that presumably leads to the holding cells in the back. Eddie swallows and tries to resist the urge to fidget as Ortiz holds the door open for him.

“Come on in.” She waits for him to step inside and shuts the door behind them.

Eddie sits in the chair she points at and distracts himself by looking around, trying to take in as many details as he can, memorize them for later. Her office is neat and tidy—a little like the woman, herself. A shelf with a some books, filing cabinets. Some awards on the walls. A computer and a few
pictures on her desk, facing away from him—meant for her to look at, then, while she works. There's a mounted deer head on the wall behind her desk, dust-covered and a little moth-eaten, small antlers. It doesn't fit with the rest of the decor.

**Eddie, why is there a head on the wall?**

*Uh...* he thinks, trying to decide how he can explain something like that without talking.

Ortiz sits down behind her desk, shrugs. “Came with the office. The last chief was a hunter. It's traditional now.”

It takes Eddie a moment to realize she's talking about the trophy, almost answering Venom’s question. She must have noticed him staring at it. "Oh, uh... huh.” He nods.

**But why, Eddie?**

*Not now, V. Later.*

Ortiz opens a drawer and pulls out a folder with some papers inside, sets it on the desk in front of her. Eddie eyes it warily. She folds her hands neatly on top of it. “So… Mr. Brock. What brings you to Mineral Springs?”

“*It's Eddie,*” he says automatically. “*Also... you didn't introduce yourself. Back there in the coffee shop.*” He's not trying to be unfriendly, exactly, but cops have always made him jittery. And he doesn't like being pulled away from his dinner and dragged to the police station when he hasn't done a damn thing. Venom agrees.

Ortiz shrugs. “You already knew who I was.” She seems absolutely sure of this, which is strange. “How do you know that?”

She freezes for just a moment, but it's enough for Eddie to recognize the question has actually worried her for some reason. She recovers and says, “I just assumed… since you're a reporter, that you'd done some research.”

He has done research, but he's really not going to tell her about it.

Ortiz is doing her bizarre staring thing again. Eddie decides to stare back. If she wants to talk, then she can talk. The silence stretches out until it starts to get uncomfortable. He can feel Venom growing restless inside him, shifting around. Eddie starts bouncing his leg, just to relieve some of the tension.

Ortiz breaks first. “Why are you here, Mr. Brock?”

He shrugs. “Just taking a trip down the coast. Is that illegal or something?”

She smiles, but it's not pleasant. “You have an appointment to see Irene Gorman tomorrow morning. Why?”

*What the fuck?* “Did Irene tell you that?” Why the fuck would she talk to the police about this? She'd even hinted that they were somehow involved in her dad’s disappearance.

“No.”

“Then how do you know?” He realizes he should just play dumb and deny everything, but he's
starting to get pissed off. How the fuck did she find out?

“That's not important right now. Tell me why you're here.”

There's no way he's going to tell her he's looking into David Gorman's disappearance. The daughter runs a cat rescue, he remembers, he can say he's working on a story about animal adoption rates in rural—

“Cut the bullshit. I know you're not interested in the damn cats. You're here about David Gorman.”

Eddie can't help blurring, “How in the fuck…?” What the hell is going on here? It's like every time he has a thought, she's right there, listening in. Almost exactly the way Venom does...

Eddie freezes. Oh, wait... Suddenly, he has an idea about what might be going on here. And a way to test it out.

V, I'm gonna do something stupid.

Venom grumbles in irritation as the chief narrows her eyes.

Eddie folds his hands on the desk and thinks, forming the words just as carefully in his head, the same way he’s been practicing talking to Venom.

I've got a gun in my pocket.

The look of alarm on the chief’s face is almost comical. She presses back from the desk and her hand jerks toward the gun on her hip, like she's never expected to need it before, and especially not right now, in her own office. “Mr. Brock, don’t—”

We don't have a gun, Venom offers, helpfully.

Now the chief looks confused.

Eddie grins and stabs a finger at her. “Ha! Got you.” He's not actually that worried about getting shot these days. “I don't actually have a gun, but you heard that, didn't you? You're reading my mind or something.”

She looks over at the door like someone might come in and catch them in this awkward conversation. “I'm... not.”

She is.

“You are,” Eddie agrees, still grinning. “I'm pretty sure you are. Just admit it.”

She hesitates for another few seconds and then actually surprises him. “Yes. Okay, I can hear your thoughts.”

That was almost too easy. “What? Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Eddie considers this. “How can you—”

“It's not important, Mr. Brock. What's important is that, based on what I can hear when you’re... thinking, I believe you might be a danger to yourself. Or others.”
“Oh, uh…” That makes sense, he supposes. They did sort of discuss eating her, back at the coffee shop. But he's pretty sure thought crime isn't a thing yet. “Am I in trouble here? Should I call my lawyer?” Annie would probably really enjoy this after pretending to be pissed at him—she's always had a thing for flexing her power to protect the little guy.

**We aren't little, Eddie.**

“Yeah, I know, V. Isn't this an invasion of privacy? You, as a representative of the police department, reading my mind? Don't you need a search warrant for something like that?”

“No.”

“Okay.” Eddie nods, but this whole thing still doesn't seem kosher. “Am I under arrest?” He’d actually really, really like to avoid being arrested. He's just barely scraping by, as it is. Taking another financial hit so soon would probably push him back down below the poverty line.

She looks affronted that he'd ask. “No. No, you're not under arrest. Look… I don't... I wouldn't abuse my power like that. I take the responsibilities of this office very seriously. We're just talking.”

Venom chooses that moment to say, *I'm still hungry, Eddie. Let's go back to the restaurant.*

“V, jeez... Just hold on.”

Ortiz is now regarding him with what Eddie assumes is pity. “Do you have a history of mental illness, Mr. Brock?”

He nods at the folder laying between them on the desk. “I assume you've got a file on me in front of you. What does it say?” He already knows what it says. He's been arrested a few times before, mostly for disorderly conduct, has one drug-related conviction. He was committed involuntarily once, in his early twenties, during a bad bout of depression. Though, he's pretty sure some shady government agency took care of any info related to the Life Foundation fiasco. He's only ever really been a danger to himself. And the assholes they eat, occasionally.

“I was hoping you'd tell me.”

Eddie stares at her for a while, trying to figure out what her angle is. Could be she's genuinely worried he might be some psycho. Or this could all be part of an attempt to intimidate him. He honestly can't decide.

She smiles suddenly. “Why not both?”

“Uh...” Eddie starts.

Her face reddens. “That was supposed to be a joke. Sorry.”

“I get it.” Though he's not sure it was entirely a joke. “It's just weird having someone read my mind.” Actually, it's weird having someone other than Venom read his mind.

Eddie sits back in his chair. Ortiz doesn't seem like a bad person. He's not in jail, or lying in a ditch somewhere. Not yet, anyway. She could be a good resource, actually. “I'll make a deal with you. Quid pro quo,” he says. “You answer one of my questions and I'll answer one of yours.”

She looks surprised, then suspicious. “What? You mean like in *Silence of the Lambs*?”

*I'm starting to like her, Eddie. Maybe we shouldn't eat this one.*
Eddie tries not to smile too much. “Yeah. Exactly. And I, uh, think she heard that, V.” Maybe that wasn't the best movie to bring up...

“Yes, I heard that,” she says, but one corner of her mouth has turned up in an answering smile. “Deal. But I get to go first, since you asked me if I was reading your mind and I answered truthfully.”

Now it's Eddie’s turn to be surprised. “Sure, yeah.”

“Are you a danger to the people in this town?”

He doesn't even have to think about it. “No.” That's the truth—he and Venom won't hurt anyone here. Not if they don't have to.

She squints at him. After another few seconds she nods. “Okay. Your turn.”

What to ask first? Eddie sits back and considers the question, makes a decision before he can second guess himself. “Anyone else here psychic? With the way everyone was staring at us back there, I'm starting to think they can read minds, too.”

“Yes,” she says, “but only some of us.”

Huh. Is this the story? A town full of telepaths? How would he ever prove something like that, though? And who would publish it?

Ortiz waits for him to finish thinking, before saying, “My turn. That voice in your head… What is it?”

She would never believe the truth anyway, so what does it matter? “I have an alien living inside my body. It talks to me all the time.”

“Oh, okay,” she says slowly. If she had any doubts that he was crazy before, she doesn't anymore. “How long has this been going on?”

“A… two months,” he lies. It's actually been more like six, but he doesn't really want her to connect what he's saying to the Life Foundation incident.

“I see. Do you have someone you can talk to about this? You know… a doctor or something? A therapist? Someone who can help you.”

Eddie smiles at her. “You think I’m crazy.” He doesn't really mind—he's gotten used to people treating him like he's nuts. It's a good cover, anyway. And if he ever needs proof, well… he's got Venom.

She shakes her head. “No, I didn't say that. I think you’re sick, Mr. Brock.”

“It's Eddie. And that's, like, three questions. It's my turn now.”

She blows out a frustrated breath and sits back. “Fine.”

Eddie leans forward. “Is David Gorman dead?”

He expects her to get angry or refuse to answer, but Ortiz just smiles. “No.”

Eddie stares at her. He's usually pretty good at reading people, but he honestly can't tell if she's lying right now.
“Where is he?”

“That's another question, Mr. Brock.”

“It's Eddie.”

“Look…” Her hand tightens on the papers in front of her and she lets out a long breath. “Mr. Brock…” She gives him a pointed look. “I think you need help. But this is not where you’re going to find it. And this story of yours…? David Gorman? There's nothing here for you. No mystery, no conspiracy. No missing people. I would like you to get out of my town and go back to the city. Tonight.”

Their game is over, obviously. “And if I refuse to leave… What then?”

He can see Ortiz is tough—she has to be—but he can also see that she's gotten used to people doing what she says without a fight.

She glares at him for a long time before saying, “Then things might get complicated. For both of us.”

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“You don't think that's weird? This whole telepathy thing?”

They're back in their shitty room. It's still fucking raining. Eddie paces back and forth in front of the window, peeks out the blinds. His bike and the old Subaru are still the only vehicles in the lot. He's pretty sure no one followed them back here, but he's still taking a risk, pissing off the local police.

Many species communicate like that. It's not unusual.

“In space, maybe. I'm talking about here on earth, though, V. It's weird for earth. One person…maybe I could see that. But the whole town? Nah.”

Venom says nothing so he keeps pacing.

“Do you think it's related to the disappearances? Maybe they knew something about it? Maybe they were threatening to go public?” He doesn't know enough yet to even guess what's going on here. “What could make a bunch of people telepathic?”

I don't know, Eddie. Drink some more water.

Eddie glares at nothing over his shoulder—the space where he imagines Venom is. “You know, I'm not so sure you'd cut it as a reporter. I think you lack the necessary curiosity, bud.” He stalks over to the door to make sure it's deadbolted, probably for the third time. Maybe he's paranoid, but it's not like this place isn't weird as fuck. “You want more water, you drink it.”

“Fine.” Venom pushes out of him, stretches over to the tub in the bathroom, and turns the water on. “But maybe you should try not to be such a dick.”

Eddie kicks off his shoes and shoves his pants down. He flops down on the mattress, flips over so he's facing away from the bathroom. “Whatever, V.”
The bed smells about as bad as the rest of the room. Like the sheets might have been washed once, but that was ten years ago. Eddie yanks the musty blankets as far up his body as he can with a damn tentacle coming out of his back. He can hear Venom in the tub, still splashing around. Can actually feel the water going into his body somehow. He’ll probably have to get up to piss in about five minutes.

Eventually, the water shuts off and Venom comes back. The tendrils wrap around his body and give him a hesitant squeeze before sinking inside. They’re only a little wet. Eddie shuts his eyes and sighs. He hates conflict, always has, feels guilty for snapping at Venom. There’s no way he can get to sleep with this hanging over them. He rolls over onto his back and stares up at the water stained ceiling.

“Hey, V? You awake?”

Of course.

Venom doesn’t sound upset, which is a relief. “Hey, bud… I just wanted to say that I’m sorry for—for being a dick, okay?”

I forgive you, Eddie. Spreading warmth inside him that means Venom’s happy. For being a dick.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the wonderful comments! I'll try to get to them when I can. Sorry!

I also had to change-up the rating and add a few tags because this chapter got a bit spicier while I was editing.

*Eddie dreams that he's sinking down into mud. And it's actually not too bad, as far as dreams go.*

The mud is cool, but he's comfortable here. Floating. Soon, he's deep down in the mud, where the weak light from distant stars can't reach him. And he's fine. He doesn't need lungs here—he's spread himself out, thin enough that gas can diffuse easily across his tissues. Carbon dioxide, nitrogen, hydrogen... The liquid around him is soft, welcoming. *Isotonic.* He feels alive.

There's the first tentative touch of the biomass of another. Someone reaching out to him through the mud. And then a wave of rapidly-degrading molecules. A request, unspoken, but understood. Eddie sends back his own molecules in return. They linger in the space between their membranes. *Acceptance.*

*He thinks it might be Annie. Or maybe it's the guy who bought him a drink in the Mission that one time...* *He can't see anything down here and it doesn't matter. He can feel everything. Taste everything.*

Close and closer, they wind pseudopods around each other. The two of them shiver in unison as their membranes fuse, and finally they're tangled together. *Joined.*

And—

Eddie opens his eyes and blinks up at the water stained ceiling.

He's awake, back in his own body. In the moldy bed in their crappy room. But he's breathing like he just ran a mile. *Fuck, is he...? Was that a dream?*

He realizes suddenly that he's hard as hell. He's fucking close to orgasm already. *That kind of dream...* Eddie groans.

He reaches down to grab his dick, but his hand encounters something warm and slick down there, instead. “The mud...” he says stupidly. *No.* something alive. *Venom.* Eddie runs his hand over the smooth surface of the symbiote’s skin. It feels like silk brushing him back.

“What the hell...?” He drags the sheets off. There's an amorphous black mass writhing between his legs. Eddie can feel it pulsing and squeezing around him, warm and soft. And it's not just outside—it's inside, everywhere—he can feel it slipping around in his damn balls. In his ass.

*God,* all of Venom must be down there right now. And it feels... so fucking good. His whole body is lit up from the inside.

He can't... fucking think, *can't...* Eddie drops his head back down, kicks his legs slowly against the
sheets. “V, hey... Venom,” he groans. “What the fuck?”

Because they're actually fucking. He's fucking his damn alien symbiote. That thought is like lightning zapping his brain, obliterating everything else.

**It's okay, Eddie.**

Every thinking, rational part of him is just giving back static right now, useless. “Oh, fuck...” is all he can manage between desperate breaths.

Venom would stop, if he asked—Eddie can feel that, the symbiote’s gentle link to his mind, ready for any hint that he doesn't want this. He's just so close that he can't stop, doesn't want to, really. It's been so long since he's been with someone, been fucked like this.

And then Venom does something inside his body—presses or rubs something, his prostate maybe, but it's more intense than anything he's ever felt before—and it sends the last of his willpower into a death spin, spiraling out of control. He rolls over onto his front and grabs at the sheets, pushes his hips down into the smooth mass beneath him, into Venom. And he comes hard, moaning into his musty-smelling pillow.

It's different, so different, this time. He's aware of everything happening in his body, in a new way, the way that Venom's aware. His heart beating so fast, a flood of sweet dopamine in his brain, and then smooth oxytocin. The clench and give of his muscles, the sudden release of blood from his dick back through the veins, the flow of different fluids containing reproductive cells.

It’s a good, long while before he catches his breath, before his nerves start giving back useful signals instead of the tingling aftermath of pleasure. Before he feels like himself again.

And he can feel Venom—languid, slow, content. A comforting weight in his chest, against his pounding heart.

Eddie flops over onto his back and whispers, “What the fuck?” Then, when his brain finally comes back online, “Holy shit, V. Did you...? Did we just...?”

Yes.

Eddie flips the sheets off his lower half. There's no mess, no trace of anything down there, not even Venom, but they did. They definitely just did. Eddie groans and clutches at his head. “Shit.”

Mmmm... **Felt good, Eddie.** Venom sounds absolutely fucked-out, which Eddie didn't even think was possible.

*Oh, God. This is probably his fault, anyway. He has masturbated a few times since he and Venom started sharing a body. But that's way down from his usual routine. He just felt judged in a weird way, with Venom watching him, probably feeling him do it. The last couple of times he'd tried it hadn't been very satisfying. He'd basically given up on ever getting off in a meaningful way again.*

*I like it when you masturbate. Feels good. You should do it more often.*

Eddie winces and scrubs his hands down his face. “Not now, okay, V?”

And then it hits him—what they just did, because there's no way in hell that was just a wet dream. *Oh God, he's a fucking pervert. He's a sick fuck. Venom is an alien and probably doesn't even know what sex is, and he just... they just... He can't even fucking think about it without freaking out.* “Oh fuck,” he gasps.
I know what sex is. Venom sounds annoyed. *The level of carbon dioxide in your blood is dropping too quickly. Stop it, Eddie.*

He pulls in a wheezing, strangled breath. “What the… fuck does that even mean?!”

Venom suddenly pushes out of him, covering him completely. And they stumble up out of bed and stomp to the bathroom, ducking to fit under the doorframe. Venom grabs the plastic cup and fills it with water from the spring. Chugs it, then does it again five more times. The cup looks tiny in their giant, clawed hand.

“That’s better.”

Venom recedes back inside, and Eddie’s left staring at his rumpled self in the mirror over the sink. He sways a little and clutches the edge of the counter to stay on his feet, blinks stupidly at his slack face. *What…? That’s… a familiar sensation.*

He leans in closer to look at his eyes—his pupils are dilated. “The fuck…? Is this water getting you high?”

Maybe. There's a pause while Venom presumably searches his memories for the experience of getting high, and then a grunt. Probably.

Eddie can't help smiling despite everything. He *does* feel calmer now. And, actually, high as fuck. “Damn, V. We got an appointment in an hour or so.”

*The effects won’t last that long. You were freaking out, Eddie. I had to do something.*

“You coulda just messed with my brain, you know, like you always do.”

You *told me not to do that anymore. You said it wasn’t okay.*

“Yeah, well… you just made me take space drugs.” He's not really mad, though. He turns on the sink and splashes cold water on his face—normal water, this time—tries to stick his hair back down. It doesn’t help much. He should really take a shower, but they're running behind. Eating always takes longer now than it used to, when he's doing the eating. There's only so much food he can cram down his throat at one time without attracting attention.

He dries his face off and brushes his teeth, pulls some clean clothes out of his bag, tugs them on. Grabs his jacket from the back of a chair. Just moving, not thinking about anything except the next step.

And then Venom has to go and say, *There’s nothing wrong with what we did. I liked it.*

“Let’s not… Can we just not talk about this right now? Please?” Venom was right—that high is fading fast, and he's already crashing back into his pathetic reality. He’ll be okay if he just doesn't think about it. Not until he's achieved a safe distance.

He can feel the symbiote’s tired disapproval of his favorite coping mechanism. *Everything will be alright, Eddie.*

“Yeah, yeah.” He pats the pockets of his jacket—phone, notebook, pen, keys—all there. “Let’s just… get something to eat, okay?
The Gorman house is out at the end of a little dirt track off the main highway that runs through the town, surrounded by the lopsided remains of outbuildings and lush fields of artichokes disappearing into the fog. No neighbors out here that Eddie can see.

At least it's not raining anymore.

The place must’ve been a working farm at a one point. But the old, two-story farmhouse looks weathered and beaten. The roof on the barn behind the house has fallen in and the remains of machinery—a tractor, an old plow, a truck—are rusting in the fields. No longer working, then.

Eddie parks his bike behind an older model Taurus in the gravel driveway.

“This is the place,” he says, mostly to himself. Venom's been quiet since ordering breakfast.

Once Eddie’s on the porch, he can see that the house is actually in decent shape. The wood trim around the windows has been replaced recently—it just needs to be painted. The porch is solid under his feet. Someone’s been taking care of this place.

He steps up to the door and knocks. After a moment, there's the sound of a deadbolt sliding back and then the door opens just a crack. A woman peeks out. “Ms. Gorman?” he asks.

The woman's eyes scan behind him and then settle on his face. “Are you Eddie Brock?”

He gives her his most charming smile. “That's me.”

“Well, come on in then.” Only she doesn't open the door, just widens it slightly.

Eddie squeezes sideways through the narrow gap and freezes.

Whoa.

There are a lot of these things in here. Anne only has one.

Eddie grunts in agreement. There are indeed a lot of cats in here.

Irene shuts the door quickly behind them, presumably to keep the cats inside. Eddie takes two steps and then stops in the middle of the room because at least three cats are now twining around his legs and he’s afraid to move.

Irene starts shooing them away from Eddie with her feet. “Sorry about the cats,” she says. “I run a cat rescue and we got a pretty bad feral problem here. I take in as many as I can, try to get them adopted out.” She picks up a floppy orange tabby, kisses it on the head, and dumps it into an easy chair. “Since my father disappeared, I haven't had as much time to find homes for them.”

“No problem.” Eddie steps carefully over to a bare spot on the couch, lowers himself down between the cats sleeping there. They blink up at him with their weird, alien eyes. Eddie blinks back. He was never really a cat person.

The room is dark and cluttered with random decorations. Equal measures of cat and religious art, crosses on the wall made of sticks and fake flowers that look like Irene might have crafted them herself. Eddie thinks it would probably smell more like cats, except for the overpowering miasma of smoke—both tobacco and weed—in the air.

Irene Gorman shoves a cat out of a chair and pulls it over to the couch, sits down across from him. It
hits him abruptly that she’s just about the oldest person he's seen in Mineral Springs. And she doesn't even look *that* old—maybe late forties, not much older than he is—but compared to everyone else he's seen here, she's looks rough, like she's had a hard life. Dry, dirty-blond hair pulled back from her face, tired eyes, smoker's voice.

“Mr. Brock, thanks for coming all the way down here. You're the first person who’s cared about what I got to say since those cops gave up on the case a couple months ago.”

“It's no problem.” He pulls his little notebook and a pen out of his pocket. “Do you mind if I take down some notes while we talk?”

She waves a hand at him. “Course not. That's why you're here, isn't it?”

Eddie nods. When he'd asked her about her father, she'd implied his disappearance was part of a bigger conspiracy. He still has no idea if he’ll find anything here that might be worth publishing. But he figures he can listen, and maybe there's some way he and Venom can help her out, so he gets right to the point. “Can you tell me what you think’s going on here?”

“It's this town,” she says. “There's something wrong with it.”

“What's wrong with it?”

She leans in close. “There's a spirit, Mr. Brock. An entity.”

“Oh…” Eddie looks around stupidly like it might be in the room with them right now. He can feel Venom stirring with interest. “A spirit?”

“Yes. It lives in the town. It's part of this place.”

“Is it like…?” He realizes he has no idea where he was going with that question, and starts again, “What kind of spirit?”

“I've never seen it. No one has. But it's been here forever. Some say it was here even before people came and settled. It's what gives everyone who lives here their special gifts. I'm sure you've noticed by now that our town’s a little… *odd*.”

Eddie smiles. “Hard to miss.”

Irene nods, still serious. “It's the spirit. That's why we're like this.”

“Like what… exactly?”

“The people here don't get old. And they don't ever get sick. I don't think they even die, Mr. Brock. I've never been to a funeral for anyone who’s from Mineral Springs in my life. The spirit takes care of them.”

“No one dies?”

“That's right.”

The interview has definitely taken an unexpected turn. Eddie taps his pen against the notebook. The black cat on his left unfurls and digs its claws into his thigh. He can feel his symbiote bristle inside, swelling under his skin.

*Don't eat it,* he thinks at Venom.
Eddie glances up when he realizes Ortiz would’ve heard that for sure, but Irene obviously hasn’t noticed him thinking about eating her cat. Interesting. “Can you read minds, too?” Eddie asks.

She shakes her head. “Not much. Not anymore. When I was a little girl I could hear everything, all the time. It drove me crazy, but I liked it, too. Made me feel special, powerful.”

“What changed?”

“I changed. I found God, Mr. Brock. I realized the people here were evil. They worship this thing like it’s their god. A false god. I wanted no part of that anymore.”

“What do they do that's evil?”

The question seems to confuse her. “Well, they… well, they’re not Christians, are they?” She narrows her eyes suddenly. “Are you a Christian, Mr. Brock?”

He wants to tell her that it’s really none of her damn business, but that might be a bad move if he wants her to keep talking. He shifts on the sofa and the cats open their eyes and squint at him. “Uh, I'm Catholic.”

She makes a disapproving sound. “I’m only asking because”—she looks around and leans even closer, forcing Eddie back into the couch—”they might get you, too.”

“Huh,” he says, and writes, spirit only gets non-christians?, in his notebook. “So, what, do they… sacrifice people to this spirit?”

She looks at him like he might be crazy. “No.”

“Murder people to keep their secret?”

“No! Don't be ridiculous.” A worried look crosses her face. “I mean, I don't think they do…”

Eddie lets out a long breath. He can feel Venom getting hungry again. He's getting hungry again. “So, let me see if I understand…” He consults the notes he's taken so far. “There's some kind of invisible force in the town. No one’s ever seen it. But it somehow makes people psychic and cures any diseases. And it keeps them alive and healthy forever. But it's evil. Is that right so far?”

Irene’s mouth thins in disapproval. “I knew you wouldn't believe me. No one from outside does.”

“I believe you—trust me, I do. I've seen some real wild… stuff, lately. I'm just trying to understand what's going on here. You think your father’s disappearance is somehow linked to this… spirit thing?”

That seems to satisfy her. “I know it is. My father was a part of all that—just like the rest of them. Part of the inner circle. Before he disappeared, he told me he was dying. That he was sick. It was all a lie, Mr. Brock. He was never sick a day in his life. Just like all of them. He got his friend, Doc Reed to lie for him, make up some papers saying he had cancer.”

Eddie sits up straighter. This might be the first, actual tangible proof that something’s going on. “You still have those papers?”

“No. He hid them somewhere. Or got rid of them.” Irene’s eyes light up. “There’s more, though—at the library, where they keep the town records. Birth records and death records. A lot of those are fake. I looked them up. Doc Reed did those ones, too.”
Eddie writes, *check death records library*. He still feels like he has only pieces of the whole. And none of them seem like they should fit together.

“Why do you think your father lied?”

Irene takes a deep, shuddering breath and her eyes glisten. “I think he was going somewhere. Somewhere I couldn't go with him. And that was his way of saying goodbye.” She pulls a frayed tissue out of the pocket of her jeans and wipes her eyes. “Sorry, excuse me. You have to understand... He loved me. I know he did. And I still loved him, even if... It broke his heart when I told him I was done with... with being like the rest of them.”

“You don't think he's dead. What do you think happened to him?”

“I don't know, Mr. Brock. I just don't know.” She shakes her head. “Sometimes, people in this place, they just... disappear.”

***

The basement of Mineral Spring’s tiny library, where the older county records are kept, is dark and musty. The main floor isn't much better. Eddie’s starting to think everything in this town must be perpetually damp for it to smell like this all the time.


“Stop it, V. You’re turnin’ me on,” Eddie teases, but then it hits him again, what they did this morning, and his smile fades.

The librarian, who seems to be the only other person in here today, tilts her head curiously, probably listening in. She looks like she just stepped out of a period drama set in the forties. And, in Eddie’s admittedly useless opinion, she’s way too young for her somber calf-length skirt and gray turtleneck sweater. He wonders if she might actually be from the forties.

He still has no idea what to make of this place. They obviously don’t want him here looking around, asking questions. But they’ve done absolutely nothing to stop him. For a bunch of possibly evil, spirit-worshipping, non-Christian, secret psychic cultists, they've all been surprisingly decent to him so far.

Case in point, forties librarian could’ve easily led him astray or lied and just said they didn't have what he was looking for, but she helped him find the records he needed. In a brusque and unfriendly way, sure, but she'd done her job.

Once she's got him settled at a table with a binder full of yellowed and mildew-splotched papers in front of him, she retreats behind her desk and watches him over the edge of her newspaper.

Unfortunately, now that they're in the quiet of the library, there are no more distractions, just a pile of boring as shit documents to stare at. His thoughts keep circling back to what happened this morning.

It's one of those things, Eddie thinks, that are out of his control. Wet dreams are normal. He just doesn't have them anymore. Not since he was eleven and figured out how to jerk off. And he's mostly gotten over that old, tired guilt, all those crippling hang-ups about sex his dad beat into him. It's not even that it happened in front of Venom, who’s already had to watch him do all kinds of
stupid human crap...

No. It's just that he can't help feeling like he took advantage of his best friend. And that's what really makes him feel like shit.

**You didn't take advantage of me. I wanted to have sex with you.**

Eddie squeezes his eyes shut and waves a hand in the air next to his head, like he can just sweep that thought away. **“God, V. Just… just don't say it like that, okay?”**

**Like what? Sex? We both enjoyed it. I don't see what the problem is.**

“Can we please not do this right now?” Eddie hisses. He’s getting the distinct impression that their conversation isn’t private.

The woman behind the desk looks up from her newspaper and glares at him. Eddie gives her an apologetic smile, hunches back over his work. “Look,” he whispers, “this is not a good place to have this particular conversation. We can talk about it later.”

**You always say that, Eddie, but then we never talk about it.**

Eddie winces. “Ouch, V.” **God, he's the worst. The worst boyfriend. The worst fucking reporter. And, now, the worst host.**

**Best host,** Venom grumbles.

Eddie turns a few more pages, tries to focus on the task in front of him. Every single record looks exactly the same, almost like someone photocopied them. They are old, though—the foxing on the paper looks authentic. So these aren't recent forgeries, if that's what they are.

“Check this out.” He stops on a death certificate for someone named Ellen Resnick, deceased as of 1987. “All of these people have the exact same cause of death, metastases, and the underlying cause just says cancer. Same exact wording on all of these.” It's also not specific enough to be correct. He's been through enough death certificates to know. “And”—he flips back through the last few records to confirm—”they all have the same birthday. April 1st, 1946. What the fuck?”

The librarian clears her throat.

**“Shit, sorry,”** Eddie says.

He catches just a glimpse of a smile on her face before she disappears behind the newspaper again.

Eddie continues in a quieter voice. **“V, take a look at this... This person died in 1987. Same cause of death, same everything. Check out the signature here.”** He taps at the bottom of the paper, where the attending physician and officials sign. **“Look familiar?”**

Venom's not impressed. **We’re supposed to be on vacation, Eddie.**

These records are his best—his only—lead so far. **“Yeah, we’ll… Look, I promise I'll make it up to you. Just give me a few more hours to chase this down. Then it's your turn. We’ll do whatever you want.”**

Hmmm… He can feel Venom thinking it over. **Deal.**
He's not at all surprised to find Chief Ortiz leaning against her cruiser when he comes back out. The librarian probably sent her a psychic message as soon as he showed up. She's parked at an angle behind his bike, effectively blocking him in. He and Venom could lift it out if they needed to, but she's actually the person he wants to see right now.

“Mr. Brock.”

“Chief.” He grins at her.

She looks tired and stressed. Her shoulders are tight, arms crossed defensively. “I'd like you to come with me, please. We need to talk.”

He freezes. “Again? Am I under arrest?” If she's here to kill him, that's one thing, but he's not sure how he and Venom will deal with being arrested. He still has to be able to function in society.

She gives him an exasperated look. “No. Nothing like that. That's not the way I run things here. I already told you that. I just thought we could get coffee somewhere. Talk.”

His grin grows wider. “Oh, so it's a date.”

She rolls her eyes, but the rigid set of her shoulders loosens just a bit. “Don't flatter yourself, Mr. Brock. You're really not my type.”

“So, what's your type?” he asks as he’s sliding into a booth across from her at the coffee shop.

Ortiz gives him a wary look. “What?”

He shrugs, easy, loose. He's good at disarming people—it's a gift. “Back at the library you said I wasn't your type. So I'm wondering what is. Your type, I mean.”

She shakes her head, but she's smiling again. “Man, you're a real pain in the ass. Anyone ever told you that before?”

“Once or twice.” He's honestly not trying to fuck with her or make her uncomfortable, he just always wants to know more about people. He’ll take any opportunity someone gives him and run with it, can't help himself.

Ortiz gives him a long, considering look and says, “You're not my type because I've already got someone. Someone I love very much.” She pauses and looks down, folds and unfolds her napkin on the table. “She’s the best thing that ever happened to me. And I'd do anything for her. I hope you can understand that, Mr. Brock.”

He nods because, yeah, he can understand that.

Ortiz gives him a tiny nod back, then waves at the server over his shoulder, holds up two fingers. “Coffee okay?”
“Yeah, thanks.”

**Water. I'm thirsty.**

She gives him a sharp glance. “And a water, please, Gale,” she calls.

“Thanks,” Eddie says again.

**Thank you.** Venom echoes.

When the water arrives, Venom grabs the glass using Eddie's arm, and they drink the whole thing down in what feels like a single swallow.

**Ooh, that's nice.**

It tastes like old metal to Eddie—familiar, and not in a good way—but Venom seems to enjoy it. It's not quite the pure spring water they'd shotgunned this morning, but he can feel a shiver of pleasure go through their body. Echoes of this morning. Eddie tries to keep his mind blank—because he's sitting across from a damn telepath—but it's really becoming a challenge.

Ortiz has been watching him curiously this whole time. Hopefully she didn't hear too much of that. God knows what the hell she'd make of it.

Eddie takes a sip of coffee to chase the taste of the water out of his mouth. “So what's it like?” He asks, desperate for a subject change. “Reading minds?”

She gives him a knowing look.

Fuck, she probably did hear everything.

Ortiz takes a slow sip of her coffee before saying, “It's… a little like hearing my own thoughts. Only they're not mine. Some of it is very clear and some of what I hear out there is… very confusing.”

Eddie nods. He can only imagine what that's like. Venom is just one person, but the constant commentary had driven him to distraction, initially. They're better now. Eddie doesn't even hear his symbiote's unformed thoughts so much as feel them.

Venom chuckles, low and lascivious. **Only when I want you to, Eddie. But I can feel you all the time.**

Ortiz smiles at him and Eddie tries to stop the blush that creeps up his neck. It's her fault if she gets an earful, he figures, since she's the one spying.

She finally takes pity on him and continues. “You're… a lot harder to read than most people I've met. Actually, your thoughts are really soothing. A little like white noise.”

“Really?” Eddie finds that hard to believe. He figures he spends ninety-percent of the time jumping randomly from thought to thought, and the rest of the time stuck in a frustrating loop, obsessively chasing an idea. It's not exactly soothing for him.

“I think that's why,” she says, answering his unspoken question. “So many people are thinking about things in a logical order, a progression, all the time. They drift, of course, but it's coherent enough that I can follow it. It's a little like… overhearing someone’s phone conversation. I can't just tune it out. Your thoughts are only like that when you're talking to yourself.”
“Exactly. Or when you're thinking about your story. Or the next lie you're going to tell me.” She smirks at him.

*Fuck*, that's right—the story. This psychic angle is interesting, too, and he wants to keep talking about it, but Eddie’s not sure how everything’s connected yet. He should probably stick to something tangible. “So, what can you tell me about David Gorman?”

Ortiz chuckles. “You're persistent, I'll give you that much.”


Her expression closes off again. “He's fine.” And they were just getting along so well...

“You're sure he's alive?” Eddie pulls his little black notebook out of his jacket pocket, flips to the last page he’d written on. “‘Cause his daughter said he told her he only had a few weeks left to live. Some kind of fast-moving brain cancer. And that was, what? Six months ago?”

Ortiz gives him a tight smile. “Like I said before… He's fine.”

“Where is he, then? Irene says she hasn't seen him in six months. Says it's not like him to take off like that. And right before he disappeared, he started acting strange—not sick at all, but hinting that he was going somewhere, giving away all his stuff, making sure she'd be okay, financially. Do you think he knew something was going to happen?”

“He sounds like a man who was getting his affairs in order. Maybe someone who knew he had a terminal illness and wanted to make sure his daughter would be okay without him.”

“Right,” Eddie says slowly. “But he's fine…”

She raises an eyebrow. “Did Irene also tell you there's an evil spirit haunting Mineral Springs?”

*Fuck.* Eddie shrugs. “Maybe.”

Ortiz folds her hands on the table and leans forward. “I don't want to speak ill of anyone in our town, Mr. Brock. They're all like family to me, in so many ways. But Irene Gorman has had a troubled life. She's been in and out of hospitals since she was a teenager. Has a history of drug abuse, two suicide attempts… She's not the type of person who’s, shall we say, believable.

“And from looking at your records, Mr. Brock… I guess you’d probably know what I'm talking about.” And there's that hardness in her eyes he’s been waiting for. The look that says *do not fuck with me because we will both regret it.*

“It's Eddie,” he says absently. He leans back in his seat, taps his knuckle on the table. He's used to being threatened—nothing new about that—but he's surprised she’d go there. “You know, you guys really suck at this whole cover-up thing.”

“That's because there is no cover-up, Mr. Brock. There are no missing people. And there's certainly no evil spirit.”

They stare across at each other for a long time in silence. Eddie’s surprised to find that it's not entirely uncomfortable. He wonders if she's enjoying the white noise of his thoughts right now.

*Can we eat her?*
Eddie rolls his eyes. “No,” he says out loud.

We should order something then. I want pancakes.

Ortiz doesn't look surprised anymore. “That voice in your head...” she starts.

“What about it?”

“You really think it's an alien living inside you?”

“I know it is. Why?” And then because she's shaking her head at him, “What?”

“Nothing, just...” The corner of her mouth quirks up. “Well, it's obviously your voice, just... deeper.”

He leans back and huffs. “That's not my voice. I don't sound anything like that.”

Venom chuckles in his head.

Ortiz shrugs. “You're doing a weird accent, too, but it's definitely your voice. And it feels like it's part of you.” She spins her half-empty mug slowly on the table, looks back up at him with soft eyes. “Doc Reed says you're exhibiting all the classic signs of schizophrenia.”

“I'm not crazy,” he says. “And maybe you shouldn't trust the opinion of a doctor who’s never met me before.” How did this conversation get turned around on him again?

“Does the voice tell you to do things?”

Eddie crosses his arms defensively. “No.”

Yes, I do, Eddie. All the time. You just don't listen.

“Not helping, bud,” he mutters.

Ortiz nods like he's just confirmed something. It's the same look people always get when they think they've figured him out. Eddie doesn't like it. He grabs his pen again and taps it on the table, thinking.

“How old are you?” he finally asks.

Ortiz’s eyes widen just slightly. He’s surprised her with that question—he can tell. She covers it up by pretending to be offended. “That's a rude question to ask a lady, Mr. Brock.”

Eddie shrugs. “Sorry. How about this, then—how long have you been the chief of police here?”

“That's a matter of public record. And you can do your own damn research.” He's pissed her off.

“I have been doing research. There are records in the library that are over twenty years old. And they've all got your signature on them. As Mineral Springs’ chief of police. Which is just...” He smiles and shakes his head. “Incredible. ‘Cause you don't look a day over thirty.” Eddie leans back. “So what's your secret?”

She opens her mouth, but before she can say anything, Venom says, Maybe there's something in the water.

Ortiz goes deadly still. The whole dining room goes silent around them, too.
Huh. Eddie looks around. The five or so people in the place are staring at them, their coffee, and pie, and served-all-day breakfasts forgotten. “What is it? Was it—?”

“Nothing,” Ortiz mumbles. She turns abruptly, meets the eyes of the server who’s wiping down a table nearby—Gale, he remembers. They share a long look that Eddie can’t interpret. And there’s a strange sound rising, almost like whispering, just at the edges of his hearing. He shakes his head and it stops just as suddenly. Weird.

Ortiz turns back to him, eyes troubled. Then she’s sliding out of the booth. “I’ve got to go, Mr. Brock. And you should, too, if you know what's good for you. If you had any damn sense.” She throws a few bills onto the table, strides out before he can even open his mouth.

Eddie just sits and stares at the door slamming behind her. That wasn't a threat, he realizes. It was a warning.

**Pancakes,** Venom growls.

***

It's dark by the time they get back to their shitty honeymoon suite. And it's raining again, of course. The sound of water rattling in the gutters outside is louder than the constant dripping from the bathroom at least.

Eddie checks to make sure the door is deadbolted. “We pissed her off, V. Or scared her, or something. Did you see the look on her face before she took off?”

*Something happened*, he thinks. Either his question about her age or… that thing Venom said. Or both.

“And what about those death records? Those birthdays? Come on, man. I've never seen documents that were so obviously fake. It's like they're not even trying. This place is fucked up in a very deep way. I'm starting to think Irene isn't completely, mmhfmmm—”

Venom shoves his shirt up over his head.

“V, what the hell?” Eddie realizes he's been so distracted, that he's just been letting Venom pilot his body around the room since he shut the door. Once the shirt’s off his face, he finally looks around. He's in the bathroom, standing in front of the tub. It's full of steaming water. Weird chemical-smelling water.

“What... are we taking a bath now?”

**Yes, I want to have a bath. Right now. You promised. You said, whatever I want.**

He’d rather get out his laptop and write everything down while it's still fresh in his mind, but V’s earned a break from his bullshit. And he did promise they'd do… whatever Venom wanted. Which was kind of a dumbass move on his part, now that he's thinking about it. Because it usually involves eating someone.

“Fine. Yeah.” Eddie takes over the task of getting undressed, stripping off his pants and socks, tries not to worry so much about what happened in the room this morning. It's not like Venom isn't
touching his naked body all the time.

He shakes his head to stop that thought from spreading and taking over his brain, steps into the tub before he can change his mind about this. The water smells fucking terrible, but it actually feels pretty damn good—just the right side of too hot. Eddie ducks his head under the surface and comes back up, swipes the water off his face before any can get in his mouth. Doesn't matter, though.

Venom leaks out of him and spreads into the water, biomass turning liquid, filling the whole tub. Eddie’s never seen them do that before. Not that they've ever taken a bath in their shitty shower before. “You alright there, bud?”

Yes. Happy.

Okay, then. Eddie relaxes into hot water mixed with happy symbiote. It does feel pretty good. He’s happy, too, he realizes. Oddly, probably inappropriately, after the day they've had. Maybe it's Venom he's feeling. Or it could be getting a good lead on a weird story. Or maybe he's just happy. Probably the water getting them both high again. Doesn't matter anymore, really.

He closes his eyes and lays back, thinking that he could really use a cigarette right now.

Those things'll kill you, Eddie.

“Aww… you could just fix me.”

They smell like shit, too. Anne and Dan agree with me.

“Yeah, yeah.” There’s a whole committee now: People Who Think They Know What's Best for Eddie Brock. Venom’s in charge, apparently. Chief Ortiz is an honorary member. Eddie finds that he doesn't mind so much.

He can feel Venom moving lazily in the water, brushing against his skin like a caress. And he can feel what Venom’s feeling, more clearly than usual—his intricately textured skin brushing against Venom’s smoother... matter. He lifts a hand and watches black water form into a little pool in his palm. Two small, white eyes open and blink at him. Eddie laughs and lets the dark liquid slide off his palm, drip back down into the tub. Not quite as viscous as he's used to.

“You really like this water, huh? What was that mineral…? Selenium, right?”

Venom rumbles in agreement—a happy sound. Eddie’s insides grow warmer just hearing it.

“Is that why we’ve been eating all that weird shit lately? Mussels have selenium, too?” His phone is still in his pants on the floor next to the bath. Eddie rouses himself enough to reach down and grab it, lean over the edge so he doesn’t risk dropping it in the water, types, what foods have selenium.

Mmm, no. Not selenium. Manganese. We need that, too.

“Yesterday, you said you sometimes need them. For what?” Google confirms that mussels are a good source of manganese. Learn something new every day, Eddie thinks. “Just to get high? What do you need them for?”

Silence from his better half. Just Venom swirling around his body, inside and out, content. But Eddie can feel them choosing not to answer.

He settles back into the water, closes his eyes and mumbles, “Okay, fine. Don't tell me. Dick.”
Venom chuckles and swirls some more. Eddie can feel ripples, like the smallest waves, lapping at his skin. Whatever spell Venom's under—selenium high, maybe?—it's affecting him, too. He doesn't mind. If he can swallow a whole fucking person and eat shellfish off a rock in the bay to keep Venom happy, then he can probably tolerate taking a bath in some weird chemical water. And, anyway, he feels good like this. They both do.

He drifts and remembers sinking into the mud again, spreading out, enjoying the passive diffusion of ions across his membranes, achieving balance…

Weird.

That thought reminds him of Ortiz and the coffee shop, and he opens his eyes again. “Back there, at the restaurant… you said maybe there's something in the water. Remember that?”

Of course I remember.

“Were you talking about the minerals? The… ions? Or… something else? The spirit?” Eddie hazards. “What did you mean?”

Nothing. It's just a figure of speech. Something humans say.

Eddie hums, considering. “Do you think the water has something to do with the telepathy thing? The fact that these people don't seem to age? Or get sick? Ortiz got pretty freaked out when you said that.”

Hmmmm… Don't know. Maybe. I don't know enough about humans yet.

“You know everything about me, though.”

Yes. But you're special, Eddie. Mine.

Eddie smiles. “Aww, thanks, bud. I think you're pretty special, too.”

He drifts for a while, loose and relaxed. Venom moving in the water around him is almost like getting a massage. He feels really good, like he's floating in a warm ocean instead of soaking in an old tub. There's a strange tingling sensation somewhere inside him, down deep in his groin. He's used to feeling Venom moving around his body, the faint shifting of the symbiote's mass, but it doesn't normally feel like this. This feels more deliberate, maybe. There's a heaviness in his balls, too, which he belatedly realizes is arousal.

Eddie's not surprised to find that he's getting hard. “Are you up my ass again?”

Always up your ass, Eddie. We're always together.

Eddie snorts. “I mean literally, V. What are you doing in there?” The tingling gets more intense for a moment and Eddie shifts, trying to relieve some of the pressure. It feels… it feels a lot like what Venom did this morning when they were, when he…

He's definitely hard now. He knows Venom can feel that, too.

And Eddie's surprised to find that he's not panicking right now. He should be panicking. The water is absolutely doing something to his brain, he thinks.

Venom flashes the mud image again in their mind and, along with it, a feeling of pleasure, of being with others of their kind. And then a memory from this morning—Eddie at the moment of orgasm,
nerves firing, muscles tensing, blood flowing out of swollen tissues, a flood of dopamine and oxytocin. Eddie’s mind and body completely open, sharing everything with Venom.

The two of them together, a single organism. Complete.

“Are you trying to tell me something, V? What’s with the mud?”

Yes. I want to spawn. With you.

That finally jolts Eddie out of his daze. “Uh… what?” A little water sloshes over the side as he sits up. Bizarrely, his mind conjures up an image of salmon swimming upstream, probably something he saw once in a nature show. “Spawn, like… in a sexual way?” And then, he remembers how good it felt to sink his dick into black goo, because that seems to be what Venom really means.

You heard me. Venom sounds amused. And, yes, I mean in a sexual way.

“Uh, because, this morning… that was probably just, like, an accident or something…” Now he can actually feel the heat creeping up his neck. Can't quite blame that on the bath. “I thought you guys didn't have different sexes—I mean, you don't have a gender?”

We don't. Don't need to have a gender to enjoy sex, Eddie. Venom doesn't bother to add you idiot to the end of that, but it's implied.

Eddie scrubs a hand through his wet hair. “What I mean is… Don’t you just, uh, split in half when you need to make more of you? Like a… like a starfish or something. Because that seems like the way you guys would do it, you know, if you had to. Do it.” He's rambling now, but Venom doesn't seem to mind.

My kind can reproduce asexually or sexually depending on the need. Sometimes we clone our matter and produce an identical organism. Sometimes we combine our matter with that of another to produce a new organism.

“Oh, uh… Huh. That's…” He nods. Venom hasn't shared much about the Klyntar—just the barest hints and impressions—and that's all new information. And everything suddenly makes more sense, including Venom’s reluctance to talk about anything lately in a straightforward way. The mud dream must be Venom’s memories of sex. “Is that why we're here? Why you've been eating all that weird stuff? Is it a spawning thing?”

Yes. We need high concentrations of certain minerals to spawn. Manganese, selenium, zinc. Foods on this planet have some of those things but not enough. This water, though… It's perfect. Exactly what we need.

“Isotonic,” Eddie says. It's not a word he would use, but something that came from Venom, probably stored in his brain—something he heard once or read somewhere.

That's right.

“You know we can't, uh, combine our matter, right? The two of us? It doesn't work like that. We're not the same species.”

I'm not an idiot, Eddie. I know that won't work. Venom doesn't really sound annoyed, though, just fond. There's a longish pause and Eddie can feel Venom considering how to explain. When you masturbate, do you do it to make a new organism?
“Uh, no…” he answers carefully. He can already see where this conversation is going and he's not sure if he wants to go there with it.

You've had sex with Anne many times. And you had sex with that guy who had a piece of metal in his tongue one time. Did you make a new organism then?

“Well, uh, that’s like…” Eddie stammers. “I mean, no, I didn’t. We didn’t.”

You did it because it feels good. For Klyntar, spawning feels good, too.

“And splitting yourself in half doesn’t?” He knows he's steering the conversation away from the point Venom’s trying to make, but he can't help be curious.

No. The opposite—the process of fission is painful for us. But spawning… Venom’s voice trails off in a low rumble, and Eddie feels… the molecules of his body loosen and spread out into the solution, biomass tangling with the biomass of the others. Three, maybe four, together, joining as one, biological information mingling...

There's a jolt inside him that feels like a gentle buzz of electricity running up his spine to his brain, exploding in little, shivery bursts. Eddie's hands spasm on the edges of the tub. He actually gasps with how good it feels. “V…” he warns.

Let me show you, Eddie.

Oh, God. “You just… you want to, uh, masturbate?” That seems fair. If he gets to do it when he feels the urge, why shouldn't Venom be allowed? Even if it's weird, alien goo masturbation in a bathtub full of mineral water. While he's also in the tub, with the alien goo. “That's it, right?”

That's not sex, is it? Not exactly. Even if they're in the same body, there must be a line you could draw somewhere. Technically, it's just masturbation. That wouldn't be too weird, would it? Not as weird as what happened this morning...

Eddie, you're thinking too much, Venom admonishes.

Sometimes he can't stop his mind from taking off in a million different directions at once. “Yeah, yeah. Sorry, bud. It's just… a lot to think about.”

Then don't.

He's not a fucking prude, but it's hard to get past that old Catholic guilt. On the other hand, he's always been a terrible Catholic. And maybe the chemicals in the water are making the decision easier than it should be. Or he just wants this because he's a pervert. But if Venom's okay with this—wants it, even—then is it really wrong? Doesn't matter, he decides.

“Okay, V. Yeah.” Eddie nods to himself. “Let's do this.”

He can feel Venom’s happiness surge through him. It feels good to be wanted like this. “What do you… What do you need me to do?”

Just relax and let me in.

“Isn’t that pretty much what I do all the time?”

Yes. But there is always always a part of yourself that you try to keep hidden from me. Separate.
Does he? If he does, it’s not a conscious thing. Eddie scratches at his eyebrow. “I’m... not sure how to stop doing that.”

This morning you let me in. I felt what you felt. You felt what I felt. We were one.

Oh. “Yeah, that was...” Eddie wants to say weird as fuck, but it was actually pretty great.

I think I know how to help. Can I touch you, Eddie?

Venom is touching him right now, is always touching him, but Eddie knows what they mean. “Yeah. God, yeah.” He's so fucked up that he wants this. “Just... just take it easy, okay?”

Would never hurt you.

"I know that," Eddie murmurs. He shuts his eyes and tries to relax, let Venom do... whatever they need to. He's just along for the ride right now.

The black slides around him more insistently, caressing, pushing, pulling. Drifting back in through his skin and out again. The electric, tingling feeling is back, doubled. Then tripled. He can feel something in his ass, now, moving smoothly teasing him open. Almost like a tongue, only better. He tries to clench down and finds he can't. That should be terrifying—being controlled like this—but a hot rush of excitement goes through him instead.

“Fuck, V...” He melts back into the water, lets his legs fall open.

Venom rewards him with the perfect amount of pressure against his prostate. Eddie drops his head back against the edge of the tub and pants. He's shivering, but he's not cold—if anything, he's too hot—he's just feeling too much right now.

Something touches his erection under the water. His arm has moved, he realizes, without his input. He looks down at the hand wrapped around his dick, stroking. It's not his hand—it's their hand. The sight, almost more than the feeling, pushes him right to the edge.

Oh, shit... "V, I'm gonna... I'm—"

Together, Venom rumbles. At the same time.

“Yeah,” he gasps. This might be too close to sex—or is this, like, the definition of sex? getting off at the same time?—fuck, he doesn't even know, but he doesn't give a shit right now because he feels too fucking good.

Their hand speeds up, but he doesn't even need it anymore because he’s already there. Oh, God, he's so close... But Venom’s stopping him, holding him back. “Please, V...”

Almost, Eddie. Almost time...

He's aware of something else happening to his skin. Something weird. He feels like he's merging with the water somehow, like the cells on the surface of his body are coming unstuck and drifting away. He honestly can't tell if that's just what Venom's feeling, or if it's actually his own body coming apart. He jerks in the tub, tries to moves his legs just so he knows they’re still his. Water sloshes over the side.

Stop trying to keep yourself separate. There is no need. We are us.

“I just...” he grabs at the words, which are getting farther away, harder to remember, “I don't know
"We're okay, Eddie. I promise. Let go."

"Oh, God," he gasps, and then he does. He closes his eyes and stops fighting to hold himself together, to make sense of what's happening. And he's suddenly slipping out into the water with Venom.

He’s coming apart. And it's a release, it's ecstasy.

It's like nothing he's ever felt before—*indescribable*. The closest thing is the only time he'd shot up cocaine, an experience so intensely pleasurable that he'd been terrified to ever try it again, knowing he'd never want anything else after that.

But this is gentler, sweeter. And it’s so much better.

He can feel his own orgasm, distantly, in the background. A layering of physical pleasure under whatever’s happening in his brain. He's aware of his body functioning as a wonderful sum of complex parts working together, can follow how action triggers reaction, can savor each moment. It's so good, *so good*.

His brain is whiting out, explosions of stars and sparks obliterating the last human thought, the last barrier between them, until there’s nothing else. Nothing… except *them*.

Because they are Venom.

***

He comes back to awareness slowly, little flashes of *now* mixed with *then*. *I* mixed with *Us, Human* mixed with *Other*.

Venom wakes as he wakes. They open their eyes together and stare at the ceiling. And their thoughts are the same: *water stain looks like smoke, human dwelling, shitty hotel, fungal hyphae, bacteria, calcium sulfate dihydrate over cellulose pulp, old drywall, mold spores…*

He can *taste* the fucking spores drifting in the air.

Eddie struggles to pull himself back, disentangling his thoughts from Venom’s. The edges of *him* are fuzzy, bleeding into their perfect whole. It feels amazing, but he can’t stay like this. He needs to be human. Talking will help, he thinks, putting his thoughts into order, using words to articulate an idea instead of these alien feelings.

“The water’s gettin’ cold, V.” He’s surprised when his voice comes out sounding like his own.

*Hmmmm?*

He slides out of the bath, feeling like some deep sea creature brought up from the depths—a jellyfish, maybe, limp and boneless. An alien from a planet somewhere far across the galaxy, climbing out of a primordial swamp. Black matter as smooth and slow as tar slips out with him and pools on the floor around his feet.
“Come on. Get back in here. You're making the floor all slippery,” Eddie slurs. Sleep first. He can clean up the water they spilled tomorrow. Right now, he's almost too tired to move. The sex—whatever they just did—has fucking wrecked him.

There's a sleepy grumble from Venom, but the black seeps languidly across the floor and tangles itself back around his legs, enough that he can move. Eddie stumbles into the other room and crash lands on the bed. They're both still soaking wet, but who gives a fuck? The bed's already growing fungus.

He has an incredibly vague thought about his phone, and Venom slaps the thing into his hand before he can even articulate it. “Thanks, bud,” he mumbles. There's one new text from Annie, asking how things are going. He's too tired to do anything about it, though, and he shoves the phone under his pillow and wraps himself up in damp sheets and black tendrils.

“V, that was…” He's not actually sure what he's going to say, even trying to say.

_It was good. Perfect. We are perfect. Go to sleep, Eddie._

_Fuck, yeah_, he thinks, _sleep_, and the soothing darkness of alien skin folds him into an embrace.

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