Chapter 2:

The next day Simon was back to his usual routine, having had double digit hours of sleep helping to invigorate him for what he was bout to do. Everything had to be as normal as possible for him not to arouse any suspicion as he got off his bus and got his usual coffee before heading into the spire. The second he got inside he saw his boss standing there and this time there were no words shared between them as he made his way to the lab. As he got on his lab coat Simon hoped that Dr. Malcone wouldn’t take a personal interest in his destruction of the symbiote since this plan required that he be alone in order to not only grab a canister but also make the transfer without anyone knowing.

Fortunately for Simon it seemed that his boss had more important things to do and left him alone for the rest of the day. He had intentionally scheduled the destruction to be later in the night, citing that it was when the specimen incinerator was not being used, so that he would be as alone as possible. It also made for an extremely long day filled with anxiety as he wrote down the results of the other specimens in the containment area. At any second he was expecting someone from the central tower to come in and tell him that he was relieved of his post, but that would mean that his boss would have told them about his indiscretion and he wasn’t going to have any of it. It would be thanks to the hubris of his boss that he was going to be able to smuggle out the symbiote in the first place, he thought to himself as he watched the minutes tick by.

After an agonizingly long day the time that he had scheduled the destruction was at hand. As guessed most of the other scientists were either out or stuck in their labs doing final results, and after a quick glance at the office floor Simon saw that Dr. Malcone had left as well. That meant all he had to do was be weary of any night security and the cameras as he went back to the lab and began the process of extracting the symbiote from the containment chamber. It started with a full-body hazmat suit, something that reminded him of some sort of virus outbreak movie or something like that as he put on the thick plastic protective gear and hooked it up to an independent power supply.

Once Simon was in he went to place that he had only visited once before; the specimen preparation room. It was beneath the containment cells and involved a complex series of pipes that could transfer the symbiotes from the observation area down into a separate chamber for extraction or further testing. Since they were still in the first stages of the experiment there had been no reason to come down here yet, in fact he wasn’t supposed to see the inside of this room for another four months at minimum. He had just wished that it was under different circumstances as he punched in the passcode to get inside.

Like the observation area this room was kept cold, though this chill seemed to seep all the way into Simon’s bones as he grabbed the cart that would contain and transport the specimen to the incinerator. “Beginning transfer phase one,” he said out loud, the computer beeping in recognition before sliding a metal tube out that he connected to the cart. “Seals locked, begin symbiote extraction.”

Simon watched as the thick black fluid slowly oozed its way through the clear plastic tubing from the open vessel upstairs into the stainless-steel cart below. With every second that passed it was another step towards what he was about to do and the feeling of terror in his body rose from it. Part of him wanted to just do what his boss told him to and keep his job, and himself, safe, but his inquisitive mind kept steering him back to the plan. Thankfully part of it was already going his way, as he watched the symbiote get siphoned into the containment cart he saw the original specimen canisters still sitting where they had left them in the initial preparations.

After ten minutes the computer chirped as the last of the shiny black substance was pushed into the cart. “Phase one complete,” Simon stated, seeing the lights on the computer and the cart go from red to green. “Disconnecting hose, prepare system flush. Beginning phase two of moving specimen for summary destruction.”

Once more the computer acknowledged the verbal command and as soon as the hose was back in the container he saw all the pipes get rinsed with a clear substance that was likely some sort of acid or envirocide. As it was started the cycle Simon went over and grabbed one of the canisters, and as he did a different problem came to mind. It was the size of a small thermos and made of stainless steel; he wouldn’t be able to jam it somewhere in the cart and if he appeared on camera or someone saw him holding it would draw suspicion. He didn’t have much time to think about where to store it though, everything was on a timetable and if he didn’t find a place to stash it before the system flush completed he would have to leave it behind.

As Simon looked down on the floor for some options he saw something that might work in his favor. He knelt down and ripped the seal between his feet and the pent legs, allowing a gap for him to slide the container in between his pants and the hazmat suit. As he slid it inside he nearly gasped when the intensely cold metal hit his skin but all he could do was grit his teeth as he secured it as best he could. Just as he managed to tuck in the ripped seal so it couldn’t be easily scene the computer announced that the sterilization process was complete and to begin phase two of specimen destruction.

The warm air greeted Simon once more as he tried to walk as naturally as he could with a metal canister sliding around his legs, the researcher just hoping that it won’t fall out as he made his way to the elevator. It took every once of his being not to look up at the camera in the car as he pushed the button for the bottom floor. Was his boss watching right now, making sure that the deed was done? Most likely not, but that didn’t stop him from trying to be as nonchalant as possible as the elevator car slowly descended to its destination.

The basement area was dark and dimly lit as the doors opened, giving Simon the vibe of a horror movie as he slowly walked in with the containment cart. Though the area was well-maintained and clean there was still an aura of death on the whole thing, especially when he turned the corner and saw the primary specimen destruction incinerator. A dull orange glow already emanated from the door from the lit pilots, the hungry machine ready to devour its next meal. Simon found himself beginning to sweat as he neared it, not only for what he was about to do but also from the heat already radiating from the chamber as he moved forward.

This was the point of no return, he realized as he wheeled the cart forward. This close to the machine it was impossible to have cameras nearby without the heat frying them, which meant that if he was going to steal the symbiote it would be the best time to do it. As he approached however the cart was nearly knocked off the wheels that Simon had to brace himself in order to catch. The researcher stopped and looked at it in question, it felt like he had hit a rock or someone had punched the side of it but when he examined it neither seemed to have happened.

Simon just shrugged and kept moving forward, only for a more powerful blow to not only knock over the stainless-steel cart but himself in the process. He quickly scrambled up and as he did his eyes widened as he saw the sides begin to bulge out, denting like someone was hitting it… from the inside. “That’s… impossible… why…” he said before looking up at the incinerator. “Could it be the heat? Or maybe… it knows that it’s in danger?”

Whatever the reason Simon knew that he didn’t have time for such questions, whatever the reason for the symbiote’s agitation he needed to get the transfer done as quickly as possible. Luckily the cart on its side didn’t cover up the output port and he tried to attach the canister as best he could to it. At the same time the cart continued to bounce around and made it hard for him to get a proper seal. Once he had it completely in he immediately pushed the transfer button while trying to hold both the cart and canister together.

The second the motor turned on Simon found out that he hadn’t quite gotten the canister affixed as it immediately broke off from the force of the fluid being pumped into it. Simon gasped in surprise as his hazmat suit was immediately coated in the thick ooze, the black substance dripping over the plastic material protecting him. The scientist was at a loss for what to do as the goo continued to spill over him, what had turned into a simple extraction had turned into a complete mess. He didn’t even know how he was going to explain what just happened much less how to clean everything up as he tried to stop the process.

It was just then that he felt something that caused him to pause, his body freezing as he felt something pressing against his skin. His head slowly tilted down towards his foot, or more specifically where the seal had been broken on the suit, and saw the symbiote pooled around it like it was going down a drain. The researcher realized too late what he had just done but he didn’t know what to do, his brain freezing as the substance continued to flow into his perforated suit. By the time he realized that he should run or try to call for help the sound of the pump running dry hit his ears, signaling that the containment unit was completely empty.

Simon could feel his heart racing in his chest as he realized that the mess that he had just caused was the least of his concerns now. By the time he got to his feet most of the symbiote was already either on his hazmat suit or inside of it now, the scientist feeling it crawling up his leg as he tried to brush as much of it off as possible. The black goo stuck to his hazmat suit like glue and even as he tried to continue to tear it off of his suit. At this point the entire left leg was completely swollen to the point where the plastic was starting to stretch, though it was beginning to deflate as it spread upwards onto his exposed body.

The only thing that Simon could think of doing was trying to get his hazmat suit off but with the gloves on and the rubbery substance coating them made it impossible to try and rip a new tear in the seals. By this point he could feel tentacles of the substance coiling up and around his body, spreading along his skin. It was hard for the scientist to think rationally as he began to squirm on the floor from both the goo sliding over his skin but also from the sensations that it brought. As he continued to wiggle on the cement floor his plastic suit bulged and stretched with the tentacles that pushed the material out.

Just as Simon couldn’t think it get any stranger he began to feel something that put all his thrashing and fighting to a dead stop. The rubbery substance had not only covered his entire leg and his chest and back but somehow had also gotten inside of his pants as well. His labored grunts and breathing turned into panting gasps as the substance began to push between his butt cheeks. While he was thankful that it didn’t seem to be eating him it was far more disturbing to have something alien invading his body!

At this point Simon no longer concerned himself with getting in trouble with the company, especially with the symbiote continuing to infiltrate his body inside his hazmat suit. He started to scream, but a few seconds later it was cut off by another thick tentacle pushing into his mouth. It was like the symbiote was trying to silence him as more of the thick goo pushed itself over his face. He could feel himself losing consciousness as more tendrils began to push into his ears and nostrils, eyes rolling back into his head as the last of his body was covered…

The next thing that Simon knew he was gasping as he woke up, eyes snapping wide as he suddenly awakened. He immediately sat up and found himself no longer in the basement and, more strangely, not in his hazmat suit. As his memories returned however he began to feel over his entire body for any sign of the symbiote. When he opened his lab coat and looked at his skin he found the normal pale human flesh he was used to.

Did someone manage to find and save him from his fate? It looked like he had been, though that meant his job and more likely his life was over. When he looked down at his hands he found that they weren’t handcuffed or anything like that. As he got up from the couch he was laying on he found that he was in the break room of the lab and that it was nearly three in the morning.

Cautiously he walked through the darkness of the lab and looked around, waiting to see if there was someone waiting to confront him. When there was no one around he went to the observation hallway and saw the tablet that he had been using in the holder. He cautiously turned on the screen and went through the history, wondering if anything had been recorded that could tell him what happened. As he scrolled through the data his brows furrowed when he saw that it had been recorded that the specimen had been destroyed.

“What in the…” Simon said as he saw his own signature on the bottom of it. “I don’t remember signing this.” He shook his head as the thoughts of what had happened to him down in the incinerator began to grow fuzzy, like something in a half-remembered dream. “Maybe I just chickened out and did the deed after all, I have been exhausted after all that working.”

In the end Simon decided to leave it be for now, the exhaustion of the night and what he had to do had taken more out of him than he realized as he dragged himself to the locker room to get changed. When he walked out of the spire he didn’t see any police cars or any of his bosses waiting for him, further indicating that this might have been something in his head after all. He sighed and began the long walk home, knowing that in less than four hours he was going to have to get up and do it all over again…

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The next morning Simon’s usual alarm went off as usual, but unlike normal the sound caused him to nearly fall off the bed as he clutched his ears. The sound was painful, like someone had put on some screeching noise, and it caused him to flail about before smashing the alarm clock to get it to stop. When he did he was surprised to hear the sound of crunching plastic and breaking mechanics, the researcher slowly looking up from his pillow at what he had done. He saw his fist sitting right in the middle of the crater that he had just made in his destroyed alarm clock and slowly lifted it up and looked at it.

At least he wasn’t using his phone, he thought to himself as he got out of bed and grabbed his trash can. “Should have known that was going to happen eventually,” Simon grumbled to himself as he picked up the pieces of the destroyed device and threw them away. “Had that thing since high school, what a cheap piece of junk.”

Once he had made sure he wasn’t going to get any late-night surprises he started on his usual morning ritual, feeling strangely invigorated despite only get a few hours of precious sleep. He chalked it up to still riding the high of not getting caught with his botched symbiote stealing plan and that he had a job that he was going to be able to return to. Of course, there was still the possibility that he missed something that was going to put him in the hot seat, but every time he started to worry he missed something he remembered another small part of that night. It was mostly glimpses but it involved things such as stashing the containment canister, hooking up the cart to the incinerator, and signing off on the destruction.

It was enough to put Simon at ease as he finished packing up everything for work and heading off to the bus. As he passed by the living room he heard a grunt and saw that his roommate was working out in their living room, doing sit-ups while eating breakfast cereal every time he went up. Did Anthony always do that, he wondered as he watched for a few seconds, and he just never noticed before now? When the other male saw that he was swearing it seemed to catch him by surprise as well, the two awkwardly waving to one another before Simon left the apartment to head down to the street.

Once Simon was at the bus station he quickly opened his phone to see if there were any pressing text messages or emails that had been sent to him for his work. Though there were about a dozen new ones waiting for him they were either unimportant memos, workplace announcements, or random spam that some co-workers sent to everyone because they thought it was funny. No where in there was an email from Dr. Malcome or anyone higher up demanding a meeting or even saying that they need to meet. He guessed that there could still be a possibility of getting there and being surrounded by government officials but that was looking less likely by the second.

Suddenly another piercing screech filled his ears and it caused him to wince, nearly dropping his phone as he looked around to see what that noise could have possibly been. When he looked over where he believed the origin of the sound was he saw the bus rocking back and forth slightly after having just stopped in front of the stop. As he continued to glance about he noticed that the few others that shared the daily commute with him were looking at him strangely and he gathered that his wince was clearly noticeable. He tried not to make eye contact with any of them as he hopped aboard and was spirited away to his workplace.

The ride gave Simon a chance to calm himself down once more and analyze his own behavior, the researcher realizing that he probably was still on edge in some way because of what happened. Not to mention the glimpse of something that he got every so often, a memory lurking in the dark recess of his mind where he saw that black ooze pushing inside his suit… and then him. While it was only brief it was enough to cause a shudder to go down his spine. It also prompted him to examine himself and once more he found his own pale body looking back at him as well as the eyes of a few others watching him with either mild interest or confusion.

Simon decided not to think about it for the rest of the bus ride and when he got off he saw his usual coffee vendor sitting there on the corner as though waiting for him. “Well if it isn’t my favorite customer!” the man greeted him in his usual jovial tone as he wrote his name on the cup. “You’re looking particularly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed this morning. Can I get you your usual?”

“Yeah…” Simon replied, looking around at the food items on the cart. Normally he didn’t bother with such things since he skipped breakfast or got something cheap from the vending machine, but suddenly there was a powerful gurgle in his stomach as though to tell him how empty it was. Everything was so expensive though and he knew that if he just waited about half an hour he could get-

*Muffins…*

“Muffins?” Simon said out-loud, glancing around to see who just spoke as the coffee vendor looked up at him from where he was making his beverage.

“If you want a muffin the blueberry jumbos are currently on sale,” the vendor replied as he put the lid on the cup. “Two for five bucks or six for ten. Funny though, never really pegged you for a baked good guy.”

“Oh… I…” Simon replied, suddenly finding himself faltering as he realized that he was alone and the vendor was talking to him. “I don’t-“

*Six muffins!*

The scientist practically jumped and looked around, causing the vendor to look at him with slightly widened eyes as he watched Simon continued to swing his head back and forth. “Six muffins…” he said, once more thinking that he was talking to himself before he saw that the vendor had grabbed one of the large bags filled with muffins and put it on the counter along with his coffee. “Um, I just-“

“That will be twelve-fifty,” the vendor said, Simon at a loss for what to do. Instead of encountering potential embarrassment he just gave the man his card, watching his precious money funnel away into the coffer of the vendor before he was handed back his card and the goods. “Have a nice day!”

Simon managed to mumble out a thanks before he continued to walk towards his work, holding the bag in his hands and staring at the contents within. He wasn’t sure what he was going to do with all of them since he remembered last time he had a regular muffin he couldn’t even finish it. Once more though he felt the pangs of hunger in his stomach and he decided since he bought them he may as well have one and then decide what to do with the rest later. The second he ripped open the bag and smelled the contents within all thoughts of how much he had bought went right out of the window.

They smelled so good, and the second he put one in his mouth the flavors practically exploded on his tongue. How had he never realized how good these were before, he thought to himself as he continued to stuff the confection in his mouth. The hunger became ravenous and he didn’t stop eating even as he got into the spire and to the break room. Only when he had gotten to the area where he would have to change into his lab coat did he stop since food was not allowed in the area.

“Guess I could leave the rest here for others to eat,” Simon said before he looked down at the bag to find it completely empty. “…or not.” The researcher was flummoxed at how he managed to pound away all those muffins, but that thought was quickly cut short when he heard someone clear their throat behind him. He looked back to see Dr. Malcome standing there staring at him, arms crossing his chest while he tapped his foot on the ground.

“If you’re quite done stuffing your face…” his supervisor said as Simon felt himself blushing in embarrassment. “There are things that we need to discuss.”

“Alright…” Simon replied cautiously. “Shall we go to your office?”

“I would much rather do this in the observation room if you don’t mind,” Dr. Malcome said as he gestured to go into the changing area. For Simon that was a warning bell; the only reason why his boss would choose the freezing cold of the observation room over his old office is so that they definitely won’t be overheard. But that didn’t mean necessarily he was in trouble, the fact he didn’t want this documented in any way usually indicated that it was something that he didn’t want anyone to know besides the two of them.

Still Simon couldn’t help but feel dread as he put on his lab coat and started to walk into the observation hallway, the chill in the air was nothing compared to the feeling between the two. Simon still grabbed his tablet and began his usual daily routine while Dr. Malcome continued to stare at the back of his head. When a few minutes passed Simon wondered if he should say something or if his supervisor was going to do it. Just as he started to get close to the empty vessel where the destroyed symbiote used to be he finally heard the other researcher speak up.

“So it appears that we lost a specimen yesterday,” Dr. Malcome stated as he looked over, Simon nodding as he felt his nervousness start to increase. “From the report that you submitted you stated that the symbiote fell beneath the expected threshold that they were required to hold. That is the official report, correct, not going to find anything unexpected that you might have forgotten to report, are we?”

Simon knew exactly what his supervisor was asking, making sure that he wasn’t going to say anthing about the findings that he had discovered with the EEG. With the evidence gone and the relevant sample destroyed it meant that they could bury him if needed, but it was just easier to play ball and admit that he wasn’t going to say anything. Once Simon confirmed that he wasn’t going to be saying anything he felt the supervisor clasp him on the shoulder and told him what he was doing was best for everyone. As Dr. Malcome finished up and left the room Simon couldn’t help but roll his eyes after the doors had closed.

Once Simon was alone in the observation hallway he couldn’t help but breathe of sigh of relief. It appeared that everything had gone according to plan, save for the fact that he couldn’t extract the symbiote himself. At this point it was a small price to pay for his job and his livelihood, though as he got to the end of the hall and saw the empty container he felt a pang of remorse for what he had to do. Not just for the fact that he lost all of his extra research but because he felt like he had destroyed something that was on the cusp of being remarkable.

*Not us, them…*

There it was again, that voice, and this time Simon was sure that he was alone now ass he instinctively turned around to try and see where it was coming from. “Hello?” He called out, knowing that no one else was there. “What’s going on? Is this some sort of joke?”

Silence was the only thing that returned to him and as he stood there he began to become more aware of the chill that surrounded him. Though normally he didn’t mind such a thing he found to be… painful, but not in a physical way. It was like it was reminding him of a bad memory, or something like how a smell can trigger a reaction. It was enough for him to step back outside for a minute to catch his breath, looking around first to make sure that his supervisor wasn’t hanging around before sitting in one of the chairs.

While he sat there to once more compose himself he looked down and was surprised to see his hands shaking slightly. It wasn’t from the cold, he was used enough to the cold that it rarely affected him this way, and what he was seeing didn’t look like that. Had his meeting with Dr. Malcome really agitated him that much that he was shaking from it? Or was it something that was a result of what happened the other night?

Once more he tried to think back to what happened down there in the incinerator room and once more all he could extract from it was bits and pieces. Somehow he had gotten himself free and managed to finish the job, but then he would remember how the symbiote managed to get inside his suit. Perhaps he managed to get the hose connected to the containment cart and suck it back in? And why if he did that was his memory still messed up concerning the events that had unfolded down there?

It was a mystery that he couldn’t afford to think about at the moment as he looked up at the time and saw that if he didn’t get back into the observation room and start documenting the remaining symbiotes he was going to get yelled at. As he suited up once more and went to the door however he still felt a bit of trepidation for going back in there, like something bad was going to happen if he did. Simon steeled his resolve and went through anyway while quelling any fears that he had. Once he had stepped in and given himself a chance to breathe the frigid air he found himself relaxing once more, feeling the tension start to ebb away as he grabbed his tablet once more.

The rest of the day passed by uneventfully for Simon, though his co-workers seemed to get even more on his nerves than usual with their whiny voices. Most of his time was spent in the observation hallway with the other symbiotes, watching the gooey mass churn and bubble while he sat there in the cold. With whatever initial anxiety he had still filtered away he found himself becoming more introspective, wondering if it was possible to replicate the experiment and get another one to become sentient and not make the mistake of cluing in another. He sighed, knowing that even if he could there was no way to get into the containment cells and replace the equipment without someone knowing he had broken the seals.

The second that he was able to get out of the spire he did so, making sure to avoid anyone and everyone so that he could get home. There was still the data that he had collected up to this point that he could sift through waiting for him, as well as his roommate that had just come out of his bedroom as he walked in. “Oh hey, early again I see,” Anthony said, pointing at him with his cell phone. “I was just thinking about ordering a pizza, if you want in I’ll split the delivery fee and tip with you.”

Loan dollars hard at work, Simon thought to himself as he stifled the urge to roll his eyes. Even though he had remained hungry all day despite his muffin binge he had limited himself to his packed lunch. Despite the urge he knew that it wouldn’t be a good thing for him both calorie and budge wise so he-

*Extra-large meat-lovers, extra cheese extra meat.*

“Whoa, sounds like you got quite the hunger there!” Anthony said with a laugh as he started typing into his phone. “Alright, I’ll send you the invoice through the payapp for your cut and tell you when it gets here.”

Anthony just stood there blinking in disbelief as he saw the other man walk into the door and shut it behind him. Had he… actually ordered the pizza? He heard the voice that had been whispering to him that morning, but was that really something in his head? It apparently was not as he saw his phone buzz and the price of the pizza was there on his screen.

Though part of him wanted to tell him to cancel he didn’t want to be rude and ended up paying it before going into his room to start work on his research. The rest of the night passed by in a blur, at one point he remembered getting pizza and eating pizza, but most of his focus was on the screen. At one point he found himself in bed without even remembering how he got there, just he blinked once and found himself on his back with his covers over him. Though there was more work to be done the idea of sleep was too alluring to resist and he found himself quickly drifting off…