



MARVEL UNTOLD

THE
PATRIOT LIST

THE DARK AVENGERS IN:

A PROSE NOVEL BY **DAVID GUYMER**

This is an excerpt from

THE THE DARK AVENGERS IN: PATRIOT LIST

A Marvel Untold Novel

BY DAVID GUYMER

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S.H.I.E.L.D. is gone, the Avengers have fallen. All that stands in defence of the world are its greatest villains, the Dark Avengers, in this high-octane adventure from the Marvel Untold line

Under Norman Osborn's jurisdiction, the Avengers have been secretly re-formed with a cabal of deadly super villains. This is Osborn's chance to finally put the Green Goblin behind him and become the Iron Patriot the world needs him to be. But villains aren't easy to wrangle into the place of heroes – doing damage control for his new line-up constantly puts his empire at risk. When S.H.I.E.L.D. loyalists break into Avengers Tower and steal the secret list of replacements for his team of maniacs, the threat to his reign becomes intolerable. Osborn unleashes the worst of the worst to crush those responsible... It's hard to be a hero!

PROLOGUE

Several dozen large TV screens bathed Norman Osborn's suite of subterranean offices in an inconstant glow. It was the nearest that Norman had come to bathing in ninety-six hours. He was in the same white collared shirt and dark green tie that he had been wearing on his flight into Andrews Air Force Base on Friday afternoon.

It was now Monday. The middle of the night.

Sleep was for less material men.

Dark rings of sweat conspired to occupy large swathes of his shirt, spreading outwards from several points of incursion at once. His tie had been pulled out around the neck and now lay over his chest as though something had crawled onto his shoulder and died. His media team were forever advising him to avoid being photographed wearing anything green. "Negative associations in the public subconscious," they said, but damned if you could get in front of the Joint Chiefs without a tie, and it was the only one his staff had been able to find aboard the Quinjet without notice.

Victoria had been fuming. "Green ties don't find their way

into the H.A.M.M.E.R. director's wardrobe on their own." She had threatened to fire the entire staff. But Norman had bigger worries than what color he was seen wearing on page nine of the *Washington Post*, or the jobs of a few aides.

He had actual worries.

Real worries.

The Secretary of Defense had summoned him to the Pentagon to discuss the unrest that was currently spreading across the Middle East from East Africa. Not that any of the men and women around that table had given a damn about what was happening halfway around the world, beyond how it made them look at home.

It was almost enough to make a person laugh.

On the multiplexed screens that made up one wall of his office, the regional networks played out soundless images of protest and riots. Baghdad. Cairo. Dar es Salaam. Repeating over and over on an endless loop of rolling news. On one screen, the picture carrying the digital stamp of Kenya NMG alongside the scrolling Swahili banner text, showed masked men waving placards as they stormed a H.A.M.M.E.R. facility in Kisumu. Another, from Al Jazeera, had civilians fleeing through the streets of Sana'a, the Yemeni capital. Norman scribbled an urgent memo to himself to find out who commanded Sana'a station and see that they got a huge pay rise and a promotion.

When he was finished, he looked down at the deranged handwriting.

He could barely read it.

Tearing the top sheet from the memo pad, he scrunched it up and threw it away. In a day or two, perhaps. After the

situation in the world had calmed down. There was no sense in making things worse.

As far as Norman had been briefed, the locals in these countries didn't seem to appreciate the S.H.I.E.L.D. outposts, situated in their territories since the Second World War, being unilaterally taken over by H.A.M.M.E.R. Nor did their governments approve, it seemed, of the manner in which a number of senior agents, liaison staff, and Nick Fury's protégés, had been replaced, extradited to the US, or mysteriously disappeared over international waters. Nor were they hugely enamored of the fact that Norman Osborn himself was an appointment of the president of the United States.

Where did they think Fury had come from exactly?

The sky?

Seething under the cold gray light of the screens, he fed the bitterness he felt at the world's ingratitude, goaded the anger. Did they have the slightest idea what he did for them, the threats he dealt with every day so that their children could sleep safely at night? Or did they know, but think that someone with a different-colored passport could do it better?

At the same time, half an eye on the news broadcasts, he studied the summary pages of the quarterly financial report, apprised himself of the latest updates from the R&D division, familiarized himself with the field reports from Ares' new spec-ops unit, skimmed the covert surveillance he had placed on his various children around the world, and drafted a press release on the "Restive Minority" in the Middle East to be ready for the Monday morning news. He popped a pill bottle without reading the label and took two with a glass of water.

Norman rarely needed more than a few hours' sleep a night. His mind had always been able to run in several directions at once. He didn't see why nobody else's could. It demonstrated a tragic inadequacy of will on their part.

Was it any wonder then, that lesser people should find the time to wash and eat and clothe themselves and—

He turned sharply in his chair.

Victoria Hand finished clearing her throat.

H.A.M.M.E.R.'s deputy director was a young woman with the stern, icy features common to such highly driven individuals. Her black hair was drawn tightly back into a long ponytail, a few red-dyed strands of loose fringe looping over the smart lenses of her glasses. She was wearing a lavender skirt suit with a Glock 18 holstered inside the jacket. She looked sharp at any time of day. Or night.

"What is it, Ms Hand?" he asked, in tight control of his demeanor in spite of his impulse to snap. "As you can probably see, I am the living definition of *very busy*."

"Sir, you've been working non-stop on this all weekend. You need to learn to delegate."

"I don't trust anyone else to do what needs to be done, or to do it right. I won't fail the way Stark and Fury failed. I won't give them that satisfaction." He gestured, idly, as though the vast wall of screens simply happened to be on in the background. "Are they ungrateful, do you think, Ms Hand? Or suffering from some kind of collective paramnesia? I remember the pictures from Tehran and Nairobi after my appointment. They were as happy to be saved from the Skrull invasion of Earth as any American citizen."

"What I think, sir, is that you need to rest. The world needs

you. Your best you. It doesn't need..." she looked down at him, her business-like outer shell softened by her obvious concern for his wellbeing, "...this."

Norman pulled his eyes from the screen. He looked at her for a moment, his anger at the world subsiding. "You came for something, Ms Hand. What is it?"

Victoria sighed, seemingly reluctant now, having come this far, and handed him a piece of paper.

"A reporter called. For you. Asking for a comment on this."

Norman took it.

He read what was on it.

"Where did she get this?" he hissed, the mask he wore every day slipping just briefly, the Goblin of which he was still the master taking the moment of laxity to show its face through his.

"Where?" Norman repeated.

"She didn't say."

"Did you even ask?"

"She didn't talk to me," said Victoria, firmly. Deputy Hand was one of the few people in this building, in the country, that refused to be bullied by Norman Osborn. It was why Norman had hired her in the first place. "She telephoned H.A.M.M.E.R.'s media department."

"All right," said Norman, composing himself. "Fire them all."

"Sir?"

"The entire department. And gag them. Literally. Or legally. I don't care which. Is any of this in the public domain yet?"

"Not yet, sir. I told them that someone would get back to her with a comment."

“Good.” Norman crumpled the memo in his fist. “Assemble the Avengers.”

“Sir, do you really think that—”

“You wanted me to delegate, Ms Hand, so I am delegating. Send in the Avengers.” Smoothing the dark green tie over his crumpled shirt, he sat back in his chair and returned his captive attention to the wall of screens, the manifest ingratitude of about four billion people for Norman Virgil Osborn on a twenty-four-hour loop. “They need to be reminded who the heroes are.”

PART ONE

NEW YORK

CHAPTER ONE

Great Being Good

The *New York Bulletin* occupied the eleventh floor of a building on East 53rd.

Bullseye didn't read newspapers. Not since he'd discovered YouTube. But the *Bulletin* was one of those that even a native New Yorker would be amazed to learn still existed. Instead of the grisly crime spree and costumed vigilantes that filled the breathless reportage of the *Bugle*, the *Bulletin* went in for the kind of serious local journalism that the internet was supposed to have killed off already and that nobody had ever read anyway. The *Daily Bugle*, meanwhile, had a glossy forty-six story skyscraper in Midtown Manhattan, while the *Bulletin* was here, sharing premises with a low-rent law firm, a couple of ESU spin-outs, and a lot of empty office space belonging to a Symkarian tax exile.

The *Bugle* probably didn't get midnight calls from Avengers with seriously ticked off bosses either.

Go figure.

The reception desk was in the ground floor lobby, black and chrome and big enough to stop a bus. During work hours there would have been a receptionist, pretty probably, with a light smile and breezy telephone manner. Bullseye would have preferred to be doing this during work hours, and not just for the probably pretty receptionist. Witnesses were inevitable, even at night, and a daytime visit was easier to explain.

And, not least, because he'd barely had a night off in weeks.

If he'd known that being an Avenger would be so much like *work*, he'd have told Osborn where he could stuff it, and seen out his tour with the Thunderbolts in peace.

The woman behind the desk looked up as he pushed his way through the doors and shrugged off the cold.

She was a little under average height, somewhere in her fifties, with gray hair in a tight bob and faded tattoos across her knuckles. She was wearing a black ballistic vest with the corporate logo of a private security firm emblazoned across the breast panel. There was something about her, in the way she sat, that put Bullseye instantly on alert. She was lounging back in a swivel chair, reading from a battered thriller novel in a plastic library sleeve, a single desk lamp and a couple of black and white security monitors the only sources of light. A large milkshake from the Turkish place across the street sat on the desk in a puffy Styrofoam cup.

What Bullseye saw was a skin-deep veneer of relaxation over a wire-taut core of aggressive watchfulness.

It said *ex-military*, and not especially happy about the *ex* part either.

Her eyes widened a little as Bullseye approached. She set down the book. "Hey, you're Hawkeye. I saw you on TV. That

was some good work you guys did out in San Francisco.”

Bullseye smirked at her.

Spending a weekend shooting at peaceful protestors and putting down west coast mutant kids had done it for him, too. And who could have imagined it would be so popular with Joe Public as well? Osborn had spent a whole week almost happy. Even after having his backside handed to him by the X-Men on live TV. Bullseye had turned the thirty-second clip of him getting pasted by Cyclops into the screensaver on the giant display in the Avengers Tower briefing room.

The guard gestured enthusiastically to one of the visitor chairs. “What can I do for you, buddy?”

Bullseye remained standing. “I need you to let me through to the eleventh floor.”

“The *Bulletin* offices?”

“One of their reporters has been a naughty girl. It seems she’s gotten hold of something she shouldn’t have.”

The guard sucked in through her teeth and shook her head. “No one there right now.”

“Yeah, that’s probably best.”

“I’m sorry.” The woman spread her hands. “I can’t let you up without the nod from my boss.” She opened up a drawer and pulled out a pad of post-it notes. She started rooting around for a pen. “I can give you her cell.”

Bullseye glanced up. He marked the CCTV cameras, two of them in the rear corners, their angles covering the entrance and intersecting at the security desk, and idly fantasized about stabbing the night guard through the eye with a milkshake straw or slicing her carotid artery with a bookmark. “Look. Your boss works for my boss. Everyone in this country with a

gun and a badge is pretty much working for my boss. So just open the damned elevator.”

“I don’t wear a badge. And maybe your boss should have got himself a warrant.”

Bullseye leant across the desk. His body armor, a flexible composite of carbon steel and fiberglass painted in a deep shade of purple, creaked menacingly. “I’m an Avenger, you know.”

“I know. I’ve seen you on TV.”

She reached back into the desk drawer.

For a weapon, probably.

Bullseye *hoped* it was a weapon.

“Don’t make me ask this guy to cut in.” His gaze flicked upwards.

The woman followed his eyes.

“Hi.”

Spider-Man, or the thing that a combination of powerful drugs and exceptional PR had somehow tricked a gullible planet into believing was Spider-Man, dangled from the lobby’s high ceiling by a thread of glistening black slime. He looked more-or-less humanoid, an athletic physique wrapped in a black latex suit, but his upper body was dribbling like candlewax, running towards a head that was already looking too large and was too full of teeth by half. The smell, though, was something else altogether, and the thing that the TV cameras just couldn’t catch. He stank like something that had been cut open and left to die in a sewer.

And Bullseye should know.

“He hates the mainstream media,” said Bullseye.

“*I hate them a lot.*”

“And he hates newspaper people most of all.”

“I want to eat them.”

Bullseye smiled indulgently and tapped his finger on the desk by the woman’s computer keyboard. “Eleventh floor. Pretty please.”

“I’m not... I’m not afraid of you.” Her gaze was fixed upwards. Venom was annoying as hell, but he had a way of getting a person’s attention. Her hand closed around something in her desk drawer. Bullseye saw the flex in her bicep and the stiffening of the tendons in her arms. Definitely ex-military. But Bullseye doubted she’d seen anything close to what she was asking for right now. “This is America.”

“This is Osborn’s America, sweet cakes. The rest of us are just living in it.”

“Osborn gives me pills to stop me wanting to eat people,” Venom added. His jaw hung open, too wide, his neck stretching as though his head was weighted and his spine was made of warm plastic. Disgusting alien goo dribbled onto the expensive tiles and over the surface of the black and chrome desk. *“They work sometimes.”*

The guard pulled her hand from the drawer, clutching an X-26 military issue TASER.

Venom’s distended jaws snapped over the woman’s shoulders.

Her feet kicked as she was lifted off her chair and shaken. Electricity buzzed around Venom’s many rows of teeth with a *tick-tick-tick* sound as the guard’s TASER discharged inside his mouth. Black smoke billowed from Venom’s nostrils as though he was some kind of long-necked Chinese dragon. There was a crunch of Kevlar, a gristly choking sound as

Venom tried to swallow the woman while dangling upside down above her desk.

“Gross,” said Bullseye, and slurped the dead woman’s shake.
Banana. His favorite.

It was great being good.

CHAPTER TWO

Violent and Warlike

It was half past one o'clock in the morning, March, and Irkan's Kitchen on the corner of 53rd and 1st was full.

Ares, God of War, admired the oily pita that had been delivered to his side-counter table by a cowering peon in an apron. It filled a brawny fist.

He loved America.

Tearing into the wrap released spiced meat to dribble down his coarsely stubbled chin and to drip, like the blood of cowards, onto the plate from whence it came. Chewing stolidly, determined as any soldier, he stared through the giant, partially opaque 'K' of *Irkan's* and the general condensation that covered his window.

Four lanes of traffic grumbled from right to left, headlights beaming into the bumper of the vehicle ahead. Pedestrians in heavy winter coats flocked the sidewalks. Right outside his window a vehicle of the local law enforcement had parked up on the curb. Two officers, a male and a female, sat inside eating

the same bad Turkish food as Ares, the windshield steamed up in the cold. A pair of bikers loitered over the handlebars of their massive, ground-hogging machines and conversed in a language that Ares could have followed had he cared to but could not have named.

New York may not have been the capital of this land, but it was the truest inheritor to Athens and Rome. All roads led there, and drew all peoples to it.

The city that never slept.

That was what its people called it.

He approved of the chest-beating exceptionalism in those words. He admired it. The city that never sleeps. *The* city. It reminded him of Athens, of Sparta, of Macedon even, in its pomp, when Alexander had put his sword to half the known world. It was why he had chosen America as a home-in-exile for himself and his half-human son. Why he had remained to fight for it rather than simply leave and find another. It was why, even though Tony Stark was enjoying his own taste of exile, and the Super Hero Registration Act with which he had blackmailed Ares into joining his Mighty Avengers was dead, and even though his son had since left him to side with his enemies, he was still fighting for his city.

The city that never slept.

A metaphor, yes, for no city literally slept, but also true.

The city did not sleep, but in darkness its character changed, like the harpies of Orcus, at once beautiful and bestial to behold.

Ares was a giant amongst mortal men.

His neck was thick. His back was broad. His muscles strained against the sleeveless black vest he wore. He was

bristled like a wild boar. And beyond any overt measure of stature there was simply *more* of him than there should have been. His fellow diners could sense what he was, even if they could not form their understanding into words, and none dared sit too close. Even so, he could feel the terror that every man and woman in that place had for him, and for each other. He could feel it through the glass from the pedestrians on the sidewalk, from the four lanes of traffic and beyond, across the concrete gulfs of the great metropolis where eight million turbulent souls dwelled in constant, unconscious fear of one another and hated themselves, in their enlightenment, for the knowledge that it was so.

It was contemptible.

Humanity was a violent and warlike species. It had flourished in the darkness, even as it feared the shadows it cast.

And in that paradox, there was Ares.

His sense of New York by night was that of standing in a still lake, surrounded by the reflection of eight million stars. Only each point of light was a human being, silently, often unwittingly, wishing harm upon one another.

Those two bikers, for instance...

They were planning some specific act of violence.

Ares felt it. He felt it and intended to do absolutely nothing to intervene. To do so would have been to cheat another of the honor. Perhaps the next Spider-Man, the next Daredevil or Punisher, would be made in New York this night?

He saluted the unsuspecting pair.

Where would anyone be, human or Olympian, without conflict to give them purpose, the foe against whom to define them?

He tore another bite off his pita and turned to his companion. In his towering arrogance, the mutant believed himself fearless, though even he sat with the buffer of an empty seat between himself and the God of War.

“Eat, Wolverine,” he said, spraying half-chewed meat from his full mouth. “There is crap enough here to fill both our boots.”

Daken, as Wolverine was truly named, reclined in his corner chair. His arms spread across the cushioned back, legs folded under the table, as though supreme indifference was the virtue of kings, and an elixir that could be traced back to its wellspring and imbibed at need. In spite of his tattoos, smooth chin and tall mohawk, in his yellow uniform and mask he was instantly recognizable as Wolverine.

And no one seemed particularly interested.

Because this was New York. Home of the Avengers Tower. The Fantastic Four. The Taylor Foundation. Stephen Strange. Even in half-decent Mediterranean restaurants in East Midtown, at half past one in the morning, the presence of a renowned super hero was less comment-worthy than the Turkish Süper Lig soccer on the radio.

“I would sooner deep fry my middle claw and eat that,” said Daken, with a world-weary contempt that belied his apparent youth.

“An army marches on its stomach,” Ares declared.

Wolverine’s grin was a flash of smirking white. “Even if Norman had never told me, I’d know that you were the God of War. You paraphrase Napoleon Bonaparte like a champion.”

Ares scowled and returned his attention to his pita wrap and window view.

“Don’t be like that,” said Daken. “Give me some Sun Tzu, you Mediterranean stallion, and then finish me off with a bit of Churchill.”

Ares put his head in his hand.

As one whose very existence served to manipulate the basest instincts of those around him, he was not entirely unaware of the similar, albeit subtler, influence being worked on him whenever he was in Daken’s presence. The only thing that he struggled to comprehend was how it functioned. He was a god, was he not? Not a villain like Bullseye, Moonstone, or Venom, none of whom could stand to be around the same table as Daken without tearing out somebody’s eyes.

They were mighty, Osborn’s Avengers, and greater, like for like, than their ousted counterparts.

Mac Gargan was a superior, if unreliable, Spider-Man. Karla Sofen had proven herself the equal in battle of the original Ms Marvel although she was, as the humans of this time and place would put it, a dangerous sociopath. Lester was both a better shot and a more dangerous hand-to-hand combatant than Clint Barton, with only the minor drawback that he was murderously insane. Daken, meanwhile, was unquestionably the more skillful and intelligent warrior than his father. If he only cared enough about anything but his own pleasures to put those skills to work, he would finally cut free of Logan’s shadow.

And then there was the Sentry.

What was there to be said about the Sentry?

He was, quite possibly, the mightiest being that Ares had ever encountered. He was a god, even to the eyes of a god, the one hero Ares had stood beside and had no idea how to kill.

There was no shame in admitting that the certainty that he would one day be forced to do so frightened him a little.

Zeus himself would tremble if forced to do battle with the Sentry.

Nevertheless, Ares knew himself to be a more than marked improvement on the Asgardian God of Thunder.

The one member of Osborn's Avengers that Ares could not, with confidence, call an upgrade on their predecessor was Osborn himself.

But there, events still had lessons even for the God of War: if Tony Stark, Nick Fury, and Steve Rogers had been more deserving, then Osborn would not be ruling from their former citadel now.

Drawing his hand from his face, he looked back at his companion. Daken had risen partway out of his chair and, for once, was actually looking across the street at their target.

Ares turned back to the window, just as a large black road-modified Stryker APC cut across the four lanes of traffic and screeched to a halt outside the front entrance of the *Bulletin* building. The rear hatch flew open and a five-man squad of private troops wearing tactical armor and toting assault rifles jumped out before advancing on the building. All five were inside, the doors to the building closing behind them, by the time the two startled police officers from the car outside Irkan's Kitchen were popping their doors and pulling on sidearms, the female talking urgently into the radio velcroed to her ballistic vest.

Daken, bored, checked the time on an elegant-looking cellphone.

"Less than ten minutes. I owe Karla fifty dollars."

Ares wiped his mouth on his bicep and got up out of his chair.

He picked up his axe where it had been resting against the side of the table. Nobody in the restaurant showed any more shock or interest in the weapon than they had in Wolverine.

Ares really did love America.

“Follow them.”

CHAPTER THREE

Super Villain-Dense Environment

Bullseye whistled along to the elevator jingle as the car ascended. The lights, buried under the plastic buttons, blinked off the floors. *Five. Six. Seven.* Running ever further out of tune, he knelt to unpack and assemble his compound bow. It had fiberglass limbs, an aluminum riser bristling with scopes, cameras, stabilizers, and an automated quiver keyed to RFID tags in his gauntlets that allowed him to switch munition types with the flick of a toggle, and a brazen Oscorp logo around the grip.

One of Osborn's first acts as director of H.A.M.M.E.R., after eliminating everyone on Nick Fury's most-dialed list, of course, had been to tear up all those contracts that Stark Industries had enjoyed with the US military and the now-defunct S.H.I.E.L.D. and award them to Oscorp subsidiaries, coincidentally making himself about half a trillion dollars richer than he'd been as leader of the Thunderbolts.

Bullseye's kind of hero.

He attached the bowstring and checked the tension.

The bow was fully collapsible, breaking down to the size of an aircraft carry-on bag, but still packing a draw weight of over two hundred pounds.

Eight. Nine. Ten.

At the eleventh floor the jingle cut out. The speakers emitted a satisfied *ping*, as though together they had scaled mountains, and the doors slid open.

Venom was already there, clinging to the ceiling on all fours, about half a yard ahead of the elevator door. The ceiling wasn't high, so his head, albeit upside down, was level with Bullseye's. It looked as though he'd been there some time. The puddle of drool underneath him was wide and deep.

"That's a neat trick you got there, Mac, but don't expect to make me jump."

Gargan's upside-down mouth lolled open, a tongue rolling out from it like a rope ladder and dangling an inch off the nondescript office carpet.

Bullseye brought up his bow. A little sleight of hand positioned a thirty-one-inch-long steel arrow with a high-explosive tip onto the string.

Mac Gargan had presumably had some kind of redeeming quality once. You needed something about you to survive this city as a PI long enough to get noticed. But, given how he'd allowed himself to be bribed into being transformed into the Scorpion, he'd probably never been all that bright. Since bonding with the Venom symbiote there was even less of the original man left inside that ever-shifting outer skin of alien hunger and neurotic rages. It was only a cocktail of dangerously off-label Oscorp medications, and a shared

loathing of the hero whose identity they were trashing, that held it all together.

“Put those teeth where I can’t see ’em, Mac, or look forward to six kilotons of Osborn’s finest in your happy place.”

Venom gave a demented grin, his mouth growing so wide that it split down the middle, drifting apart on a sea of tar to become two.

“I’ve got more mouths than you’ve got arrows,” said Venom, his voice coming like slurry from both mouths at the same time.

Bullseye grimaced. “Damn it, Mac. Your pills are way off today.”

“Wanna swap?”

“Nah. I’ve got a whole other set of problems.”

Venom dropped from the ceiling, somehow shifting his orientation so that he was now facedown, and landed on the carpet on all fours.

“You’re just so sloooooooooow.”

Bullseye lowered his bow, easing the tension off the string. “Yeah, well, Osborn doesn’t trust you on your own, so suck it up.”

He stepped out of the elevator.

Bullseye had been inside a few newsrooms in his time. Usually, to kill journalists. Sometimes, like today, it was to destroy whatever the powerful and rich thought incriminating or embarrassing. Often, it was both. He’d also given his share of interviews to the press. He understood the power of media fascination as well as Osborn did.

And kind of like gas stations, they were the same everywhere.

The *Bulletin* offices conformed neatly to type.

Power display lights and monitors on standby mode described a maze of crisscrossing paths through the two dozen or so desks.

Bullseye took a moment to train his eyes to the gloom.

"What's this reporter woman's name?" said Venom.

"Greene, I think."

"Sounds tasty. Healthy. She got a desk here?"

"Nah, this is for the nobodies. She's got an office over the street."

"If we find her, can we eat her?"

Bullseye smirked. He couldn't think of a good reason why not. *"If you've still got room in there."*

Venom made a sound like a dog with an ice cream.

"This way," said Bullseye.

Leading with an array of tactical scopes and his arrow knocked, Bullseye zigzagged through the desks. Objects came and went. Framed photos of important people in famous places. Awards no one cared about. Old-fashioned telephones. Big computers with beige cases. Filing cabinets. Wire drawers full of clippings. All glinting under Bullseye's scopes and then fading as he passed them.

At a gloomy kitchenette palisaded with glass and smelling of coffee, he took a left, then another, instinctively doubling back on himself and tracking towards the front of the building. Passing a row of cheap laminate wood doors leading to a row of streetside offices, he silently mouthed the names on their frosted window panes until coming to the one that read *'S. Greene'*.

Bullseye put his ear to the glass and listened.

Nothing.

If there had been even one living soul on the floor then Venom would have smelled them, and eaten them, long before Bullseye became aware of them. But he hadn't become the world's most famous living assassin by trusting in other people's ability to not screw up.

Not Osborn's, and sure as hell not Gargan's.

He sidled up to the door, easing the arrow from the bowstring and hanging the stave over his shoulder as he tested the handle.

It wasn't locked.

He laughed quietly.

Chumps.

He went inside.

Greene's office was a neat freak's sanctum. Seriously, this was the room of a person with problems, and Bullseye had enough of those to know. Papers and stationery lived in neat stacks in desktop organizers. The chair had been pushed in under the desk when the last occupant had gone home for the night. The only clutter on the wall was some kind of professional accreditation from Empire State University, which surprised Bullseye.

His experience of the *Daily Bugle* was that any hack with a laptop could be a journalist.

The windows onto East 53rd rattled gently with the passing traffic. Even eleven stories up they were barred, an observation that'd earn the non-native a smug, "That's New York" and a wry shrug.

It was the cost of doing business in the most super villain-dense workplace on Earth.

Venom would've made short work of that particular security feature, but the number of eyes on the street had made brazening through the front desk the better option, and even with one security guard eaten he stood by his choices. Moonstone might have gone straight in through the roof with her intangibility, but Karla had her hands full with her own assignment. And the Sentry... well, it turned out Osborn was one of those people who preferred Manhattan without big glassy craters in it.

You think you know a guy...

Venom panted loudly as he surveyed the room. "*She's not here.*"

"Yeah, we knew that already."

Venom looked confused. "*We did? Why are we here then?*"

"Why do you even bother going to Osborn's briefings?"

"*Vicki brings pizza.*" Venom drooled with remembered pleasure. "*The Sentry let me finish his pepperoni.*"

The Sentry didn't eat. It freaked Bullseye out a little.

Sliding a thumbnail-sized flash drive with another shameless Oscorp logo on the case from the cuff of his gauntlet, he walked to the woman's computer.

"*What's that for?*"

"Didn't ask. Didn't care. Still don't, if I'm completely honest."

"*What's this reporter have on Osborn anyway?*"

Bullseye hesitated.

He still didn't know what some local hack could possibly have over the most powerful man on the planet. Osborn had a *literal* army of H.A.M.M.E.R. goons to make problems like this disappear, not to mention a chokehold on every city,

state, and federal law enforcement and homeland security agency in the country. As far as Lester was concerned, this was a job for H.A.M.M.E.R.'s ridiculously over-resourced legal department. If Osborn was using the Avengers instead then he was either cracking a nut with a hammer or he was sending somebody a message.

Either way, it told him that there was something worth having on this computer. Bullseye wasn't the sort to care what rich guys did with their flash drives. He just killed people. Getting paid for it was kind of a bonus. But he couldn't deny a tickle of curiosity.

Venom put his hand on Lester's shoulder.

"Let me."

Bullseye closed his fist around the USB stick. "Don't think I'm letting those fingers anywhere near this drive."

"Don't need it. Don't trust Osborn." Venom hunched over the computer, a pair of eyes and a slobbering mouth squirming out from the inky flesh between his shoulder blades. He leered up at Bullseye. *"I'm better than a USB."* As he spoke, he extended his hands and spread his fingers, each one then splitting into more fingers and sprouting in turn into tendrils that whipped towards the computer's ports. They burrowed into the computer case, swarmed over the monitor, ensnaring the tower and its peripherals in a slimy black web of alien tissue.

The computer groaned, blinking, lurching into its startup sequence as the Venom symbiote squeezed its tiny buttons.

Bullseye watched, appalled but horribly fascinated. It wasn't two am yet and this was only the second most disgusting thing he'd seen today.

He loved it.

The monitor flickered on, immediately presenting a password demand before just as swiftly withdrawing it under Venom's hideous probing.

The operating system booted up.

Like the office, the desktop background was tidy and plain.

A truly sick mind.

"You really are good for something," said Bullseye.

Venom bared his teeth. "*What are we looking for?*"

"You think Norman tells me that? Maybe that's what the USB was for."

"*Maybe I can—*" A second, grisly set of features grew out of the back of Venom's head. Bullseye recoiled from the hideous face manifesting under his nose, snarling as if in disgust to mask his moment of shock. "*Fresh meat,*" Venom growled. "*Five, riding in the elevator, armed.*" He licked his lips. "*Heavily.*"

"This is what eating security guards gets you in Manhattan," said Bullseye, rattled by Venom's latest display of unsettling weirdness and hating himself for it.

The night guard's bodycam must have been beaming a live feed to a mobile HQ roving around nearby. Private security in New York had upped their game in the years since Bullseye had first set up his stall in the city.

He turned to Venom. "You can take five guys."

Both of Venom's mouths grinned, but there was just enough humanity buried under all that mutational therapy and tarry alien skin to be suspicious. "*And leave you alone with the computer?*"

"It's your fault they're here, Gargan. Time to take one for the team."

“Going through the front was your idea.”

“Do Osborn’s doctors really need to find out that they’ve got to up the dose on your meds again?”

Venom visibly shrank to a more human form. *“I can take five.”*

From a standing start, Venom leapt at the window, molding his body perfectly to its size and shape and punching through it like a river of sewage through a blockage at the outlet of a pipe. Broken glass and bits of mangled steel drizzled over East 53rd Street.

To the distant sounds of screaming from the sidewalk below, Bullseye pulled up the office chair and, tentatively, in case Venom had left any of himself on it, put his hand over the mouse.

“So then, Norman,” he said, leaning forwards, ignoring the barks of automatic gunfire from further down the hall. “What’s your dirty little secret?”

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