

THE UPPER HAND



A SHORT STORY BY JUDE STACEY

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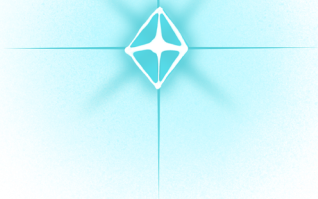


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THE UPPER HAND

“I hope you’ve placed a wager,” Vendetta said to her guest as she led her to their seats. “It would be a pity to have such an incomparable view of today’s race while risking no stake in its outcome.”

“Oh yes,” the woman replied. “I’ve backed Cloelia. Horatius may be undefeated, but one should never underestimate the fire of a fresh competitor.”

Vendetta had contacted the Vishkar Corporation shortly after her encounter with Maximilien. All the initial conversations had been with Sanjay Korpál—a man so inadequate she doubted he had fought for anything in his life beyond his next promotion. But when the time came to meet in person, she had demanded a change: if Vishkar had any real intention of partnering with Vendetta, she insisted they send someone more competent to talk business.

Seeing a new face—someone who might respect the significance of the Colosseo and the power she wielded through it—was a welcome sign that Vishkar was taking her seriously . . . even if their newest representative *had* arrived late.

“I must apologize again for my tardiness. Drivers these days . . . Perhaps I ought to hire one of your little racers down there instead.”





For a moment, the only sound was the thundering of hooves against earth as the circuit began. The crowd roared after each chariot, but Vendetta had long since learned to tune out the din of the populace. Instead, she shifted her focus to size up her company.

Vaira Singhanian was the Vishkar Corporation's latest vice president of operations and development . . . and the granddaughter of its late founder. Statuesque and impeccably tailored, Miss Singhanian carried herself with an inimitable confidence that had made Sanjay look spineless by comparison. A pair of well-engineered robotic arms framed her silhouette, emitting a faint blue glow as the executive floated delicately into her seat.

Miss Singhanian's folded hands and elegant posture were all too familiar; Vendetta had once been trained to present herself the very same way. Such effortless grace was mandated of the upper class. "I cannot imagine a woman of your refinement barreling down the streets in a chariot. Cloelia is my most ruthless champion—and she drives much like how she fights: dirty."

"Oh, I'm well aware of her talents. But women such as ourselves . . . well, we have no problem breaking a few rules in the name of creating our own. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I would, Miss Singhanian."

"Oh, please, call me Vaira."

Vendetta raised an eyebrow at the sudden intimacy of a first name, but she did not protest.

"Vaira, then," she replied with a bared smile. "Has Sanjay briefed you on our negotiations?"

"He has, though he described them less as negotiations and more as . . . 'delicate conversations regarding the value of your partnership.'"

Vendetta ran her tongue against the edge of her teeth. "His proposal was an insult. For years I've fought against the poor estimations of those around me—those who failed to see my worth. I did not make it to the top by accepting scraps."

Vaira brought a well-manicured hand to her face, perhaps to conceal her smile. Her nails, sculpted out of hard light, flickered with the movement. "My, you are a fiery one."

Vendetta ignored the remark but leaned closer to Vaira with a look that suggested she was correct. Vendetta had been waiting for the right moment to play her hand, to hint at the depth of her knowledge and capture Vaira's interest. "I only hope you've come prepared with a more suitable offer. After all, Vishkar's shields would serve as a far better defense for your tattered reputation than they would for my fighters."

Quick to protect the company, Vaira waved away the remark. "I assure you, Vishkar's reputation is well managed."

"I'm not so certain it is," Vendetta replied as she reached forward to pass her hand over a control panel in front of Vaira. She projected a collection of documents between them, partially obscuring Vaira's view of the race. Vendetta looked past the pages as she swiped through them, having already familiarized herself with Vishkar's recent failures.

"Your careless construction in Suravasa, inciting a popular uprising in Rio, trouble with a runaway architect, among other, more unsavory matters . . . Your company is one failure away from a formal investigation."

Vaira neatened her expression in what Vendetta could only assume was an attempt to maintain her composure.

"But a public connection to Talon? Oh, that would *ruin* you." Vendetta sighed as she leaned back in her chair, pleased.

Dismissive, Vaira swiped away the projection. One of the robotic arms at her back reached forward with precision to smooth a wrinkle on the shoulder of her jacket. "Well, you've certainly done your research, haven't you?"

"I have." Vendetta watched Vaira carefully, waiting for a sign that she'd been caught off guard. It did not come.

"What a rare pleasure to meet with someone of your caliber," Vaira replied with a confident smile. "With that sort of attention to detail . . . I imagine you've brought your own offer to the table."

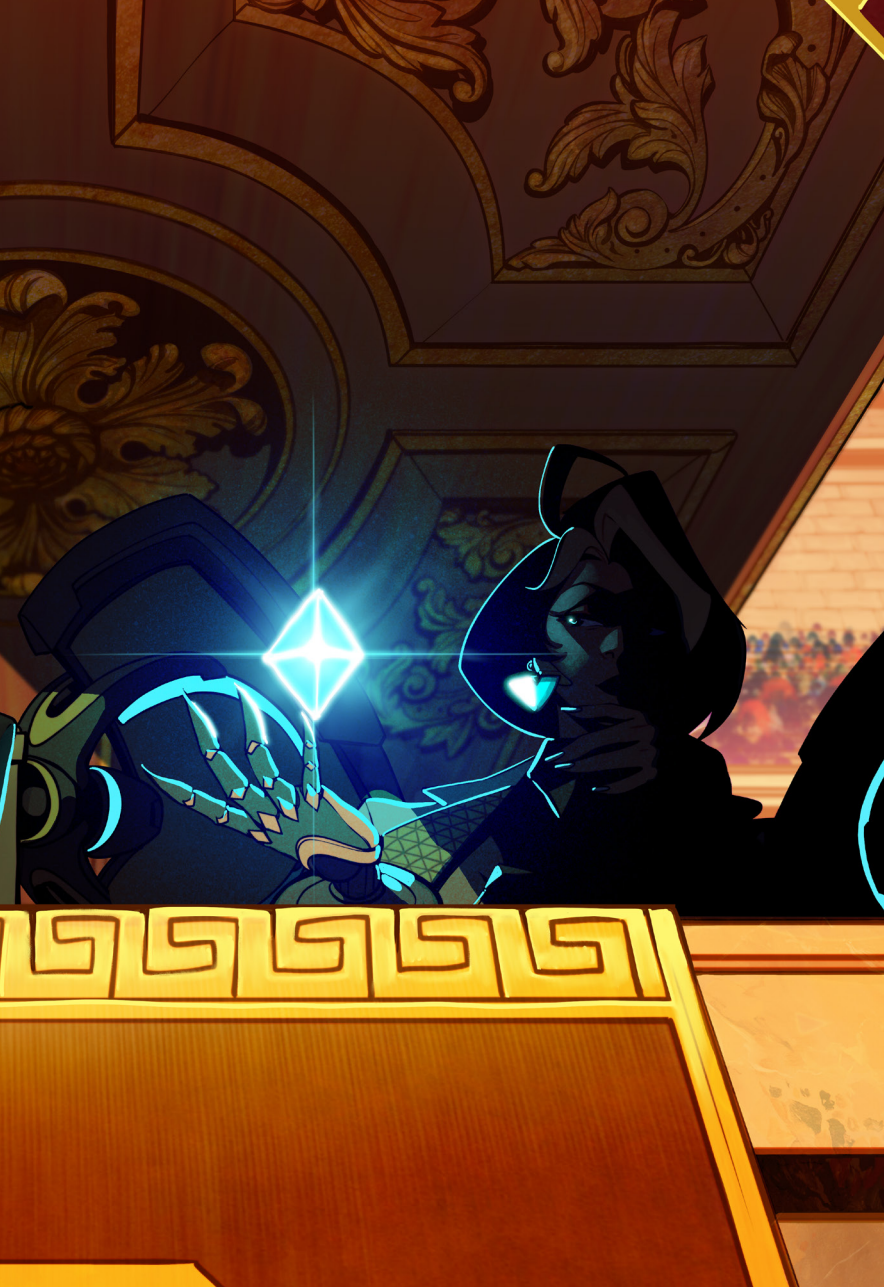
Vendetta swept back the length of her hair and drew closer to Vaira once more, her hand hovering over the projection controls.

"Vishkar's public image has suffered greatly. It will take more than sponsoring a few winning matches to fix what your organization has broken . . . just as I will require more of you if we are to form a partnership."



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Vaira raised an eyebrow, her interest suddenly piqued—exactly as Vendetta had planned. “And what, pray tell, would you require of me?”

“Your loyalty. Vishkar’s shielding technology would be effective in the Colosseo, but I believe it could have . . . broader applications.” Vendetta reactivated the projection, navigating toward a set of schematics she’d drawn up herself.

“Threatening to expose my company’s secrets *and* enticing me with a business proposition in the same breath? My, you certainly live up to your reputation.”

“I *am* my reputation,” Vendetta promised.

For a moment, the crowd hushed. Then the chorus of competition—of violence and victory—rose out of the silence. Familiar cheers echoed throughout the Colosseo as Cloelia began her winner’s lap.

“And Vishkar’s reputation is mine. Let me be clear: any success from this endeavor is mine to claim . . . but any faults will fall on your shoulders alone. Are we in alignment, darling?” Vaira smiled, adopting a manipulative mask that Vendetta herself had worn many times before.

Vendetta returned the look and offered her hand across the table to shake. “We are.”

“Marvelous,” Vaira purred. “Let us begin.”