



# VESTED INTERESTS

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## VESTED INTERESTS

Max stood before the floor-to-ceiling pane of glass that overlooked his casino floor. The rhythmic flashing of slot machines and the way the warm light reflected off the crystal chandeliers always seemed to lull him into a state of introspection. Behind him, identical windows provided a view of Monte Carlo, a muted tapestry of ivory and shadow.

The glass exploded inward in a hail of glittering shards.

A dark figure tumbled into the room. Max dropped, scrambling across the floor to flee the intruder, but he stopped short at his desk. There was nowhere to run.

Backlit by the moonlight pouring through the shattered window, Max could only make out the general shape of the person looming above him now, though that was more than enough to recognize his attacker. Tall and broad, her stance wide so as to appear even more imposing, a wild mane of curls whipping in the wind. She reached a muscular arm over one shoulder, and with a practiced swipe, the blade of a massive sword extended to point directly at Max's face.

*Vendetta.*

Her face held no rage, no hesitation. Only purpose.





“Well,” Max said, struggling to regain his composure. “It appears I wasted money on all those new security measures.”

Vendetta only tightened her grip on her sword.

Max would need to speak fast if he had any hope of surviving. “I understand you’ve been busy. You’ve already paid a visit to two of my associates from the Talon council . . . and now me.”

“Tell me, Max: I want to know if Doomfist so much as flinched when I killed them. Or if he simply slotted in another pawn, as he did once my father’s seat was empty.”

Max did his best to remain calm, to maintain some dignity despite cowering on the floor. “I wouldn’t pretend to know what Akande thinks. Why he does the things he does.”

“Don’t play innocent. You were there when they portioned out the riches. Just like you were there when they threw me out onto the street. Yes, I am carving up the Talon council to send a message to Doomfist. But for you, Max . . . this is personal.”

Max had been waiting for an opening to bargain for his life—but it seemed no such time would come. Pleading or offering money would only get him killed faster. He had to give her something she wanted more than his death: a path to *Doomfist*.

“Don’t let the suit fool you. I’ve been in your position before . . . left with nothing, after the Crisis,” he began. “I remember what it was like to toil in silence while the cruel and unworthy sat in a palace they’d forged from luck and the labor of others.” He turned his head to face her. “And I remember the moment I took my revenge . . . although *moment* doesn’t quite encapsulate it.”

The energy on Vendetta’s sword flickered, and Max wondered whether he should take that as a sign to stop, but he pressed further. “I made them watch for years while I managed and grew what they had happened upon by chance or inheritance. My vengeance was a living thing—is *still* living, in fact. Something tells me we’re alike in that way. And if my hunch is correct, that makes me far more useful to you alive than dead.”

Vendetta angled her sword toward him. “You’ve overestimated your value. Loyalty bought at the end of a blade is worthless.”

“If you’ve been watching Talon, then you’ve seen the same thing I have: We are barreling toward ruin. Akande’s alliance with Null Sector and its fanatical leader was a disaster.”

“You cannot think me so foolish, Max. You may have helped yourself to my inheritance, but my trust is not so easily won.”

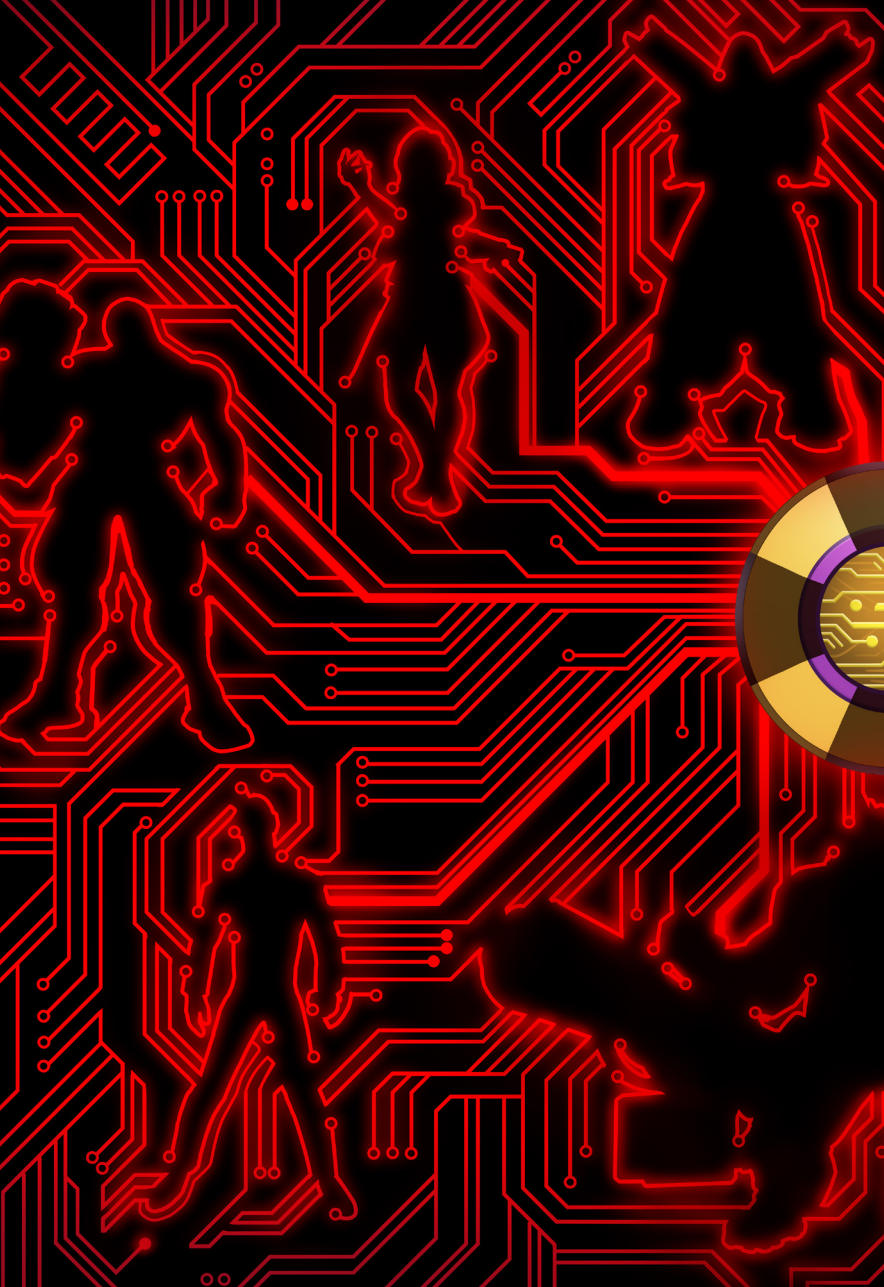
From his suit jacket, Max produced a single poker chip, the circuitry on its face gleaming in the moonlight spilling through the shattered window. “Then maybe *this* will satisfy you. I see your taste for power, your desire to rebuild Talon with your own vision. The keys to bending every major player to your will are right here, on this chip. Weaknesses. Leverage. Talon is less an organization these days than a collection of powerful individuals with selfish interests. If you assure them you can advance those interests . . . they will fall in line.”

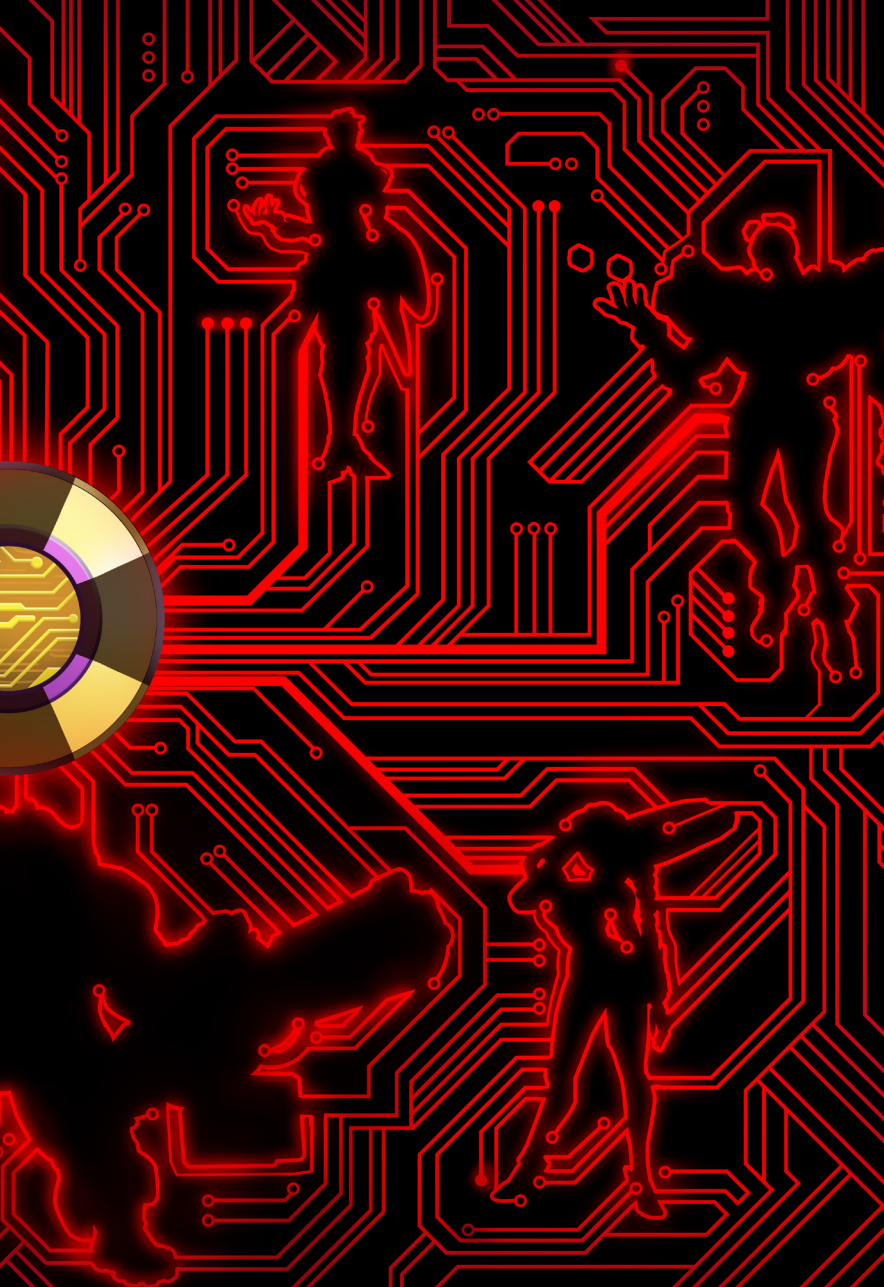
He ran through the council and its players—undoubtedly those lower on Vendetta’s list. “The scientist—Moirra O’Deorain—she’ll follow anyone who will fund her research into genetic modification. *Anyone*. Speaking of which—Amélie, the Widowmaker. She relies on a steady supply of drug formulations to maintain her skill and suppress bad memories. Vishkar . . . Vishkar will be more slippery. But their reputation is no longer as flawless as they’d like others to believe. They miss the days of the Crisis when they were the shining heroes, rebuilding the world at a massive profit. As for the other agents at Talon’s table . . . yes, Doomfist has his loyalists—lieutenants he’s won through strength or vision—but if we play our cards right, not all of them will follow him out the door.”

Vendetta stared at the token, hesitating but clearly tempted. “I could kill you now. Take the chip for myself.”

“You could.” Max smoothed his shirt. “But the information alone will only get you so far. You’ll need other allies if you hope to stand against Doomfist. I can organize them for you.”

How many assassins had attacked Max in this very office, over the years? Max had never kept track. But his arc in Talon appeared to have come full circle. He first met Doomfist here, when he sought to establish himself as leader, and now Vendetta was here to do the same. But he’d managed to convince Akande to spare him, to bring him on. And now Max would do the same with Vendetta. Always agile, always a step ahead, no matter who he had to step on to save himself.





And just as Akande had asked him then, Vendetta asked him now: “Tell me what you gain from this.”

“I simply require a seat at your table, maintaining my current position, which I assure you will be to your benefit.”

The silence stretched between them. Then, with deliberate slowness, Vendetta took the chip. She studied it momentarily, pinched between her forefinger and thumb. The energy sparking from her massive sword dissipated, and she slung it over her shoulder. “Betray me, and I will run you through . . . before you can utter a single word with that silver tongue. I will not allow you to jeopardize my plans.”

Vendetta walked toward the broken window, the wind whipping her hair.

“I’d say you’ve made your terms . . . vividly clear. I look forward to building a new Talon by your side.”

Her gaze was steel as she met his. “We are not equals, Max. I have spared you so you can serve me. Do not forget that.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Max said.

Then Vendetta stepped onto the windowsill and vanished into the night.

Alone again, Max sat in the chair behind his desk. Finally, the pieces were set, and the real game could begin.