

OVERWATCH 2

THE POCKET KING



A SHORT STORY BY MIRANDA MOYER

STORY
MIRANDA MOYER

EDITORIAL
CHLOE FRABONI

LORE CONSULTATION
MADI BUCKINGHAM

CREATIVE CONSULTATION
**RAPHAEL AHAD, JEFF CHAMBERLAIN, JUSTIN GROOT,
GAVIN JURGENS-FYHRIE, AARON KELLER,
MIRANDA MOYER, DION ROGERS, ARNOLD TSANG**

PRODUCED BY
BRIANNE MESSINA

DESIGN BY
COREY PETERSCHMIDT

ILLUSTRATION
VALENTINA REMENAR

MAXIMILIEN ORIGINAL CONCEPT
ARNOLD TSANG

SPECIAL THANKS
MADDY COOK



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THE POCKET KING



Another call ended, driving another wedge between Maximilien and control.

Now absent the holoprojections he'd been speaking with moments before, Max sat alone in a dark office. The only light that lingered came from his datapad, where a sleek progress bar crawled across the display:

TRANSFERRING DATA: 23% . . .

Despite objections from his business associates in Monte Carlo, Maximilien's partnership with Talon seldom troubled him. The arrangement benefitted both parties: Talon gained Max's business acumen, besides his resources and discreet means to handle its finances, while Maximilien gained the power to remove his competition from the table. For years, nothing had disrupted their perfectly orchestrated balance.

But as they so often did, the deal had changed.

TRANSFERRING DATA: 46% . . .

Maximilien stood from his desk, walking to the window that looked over his casino floor. He watched the gamblers at their tables, willing to shell out every

penny for the promise of something more. Before, it had been easy to scoff at them. How willingly they gave all they had to play a losing game.

But now, he felt he was among them. Talon had once been a sure bet for Max. He could go all in without the slightest hesitation—and he certainly had. Yet as his game with them had played out—as new players sat beside him—his odds had begun to turn.

TRANSFERRING DATA: 71% . . .

This would not be the first time Maximilien had evened the odds. He'd been fixing his outcome from the beginning.

Vittoria took a drag from the vaporizer on her golden cybernetic hand, her face wreathed in plumes of lilac smoke.

“She must learn not to cross me.”

From the window of the hazy office, Maximilien looked over what remained of Monte Carlo. In the years before he had come alive on a battlefield in the South of France, Monte Carlo and wealth had been inseparable. But just as the world had changed during the Crisis, so too had the city he called home. The grueling war had zipped shut every last coin purse, and it seemed Monte Carlo—the city of excess—had been left with nothing.

But Max was familiar with nothing. He'd known “nothing” for years as a low-level accountant at a small firm near Marseille. Some were convinced there was no more Monte Carlo could offer—and that omnicns could offer it even less—but others knew better. In this city, power waited to be claimed. His clients were a testament to that.

Max turned his gaze now to one of those clients. Vittoria Capri had built her empire around designer cybernetics, starting in Italy and gaining immense wealth as she rose to global prominence. As was the case with many of her kind, she expected to quickly conquer anything she set her sights on, and the city of Monte Carlo was her newest fascination.

“That old hag is causing too much trouble,” she said. “I will not let her push me around.”

SOME WERE CONVINCED THERE WAS NO MORE MONTE CARLO COULD OFFER—AND THAT OMNICS COULD OFFER IT EVEN LESS—BUT OTHERS KNEW BETTER. IN THIS CITY, POWER WAITED TO BE CLAIMED.

The hag in question was Lily von Arx, a real estate magnate and another tycoon in the heated contest for dominance in Monte Carlo. Fortuitously, Max was also *her* financial adviser.

Vittoria snapped her fingers at Max. “Write something up.”

To describe Vittoria as difficult would be generous, but despite her nature, Maximilien felt some sense of obligation to her. She had been his first client in the city, after all, and her connections allowed him to remain there. With reservation, he chose to advocate for another course of action.

“If I may, Miss Capri, I don’t believe that’s wise.” Max hesitated, trying to phrase his thoughts delicately. “These efforts to undercut your competition are incredibly costly, to yourself as well as your rivals.”

For the first time that night, Vittoria’s dark eyes locked with Max’s. She brandished a golden finger at him.

“Listen to me,” she hissed. “You are not even a player in this game. You are nothing. You do not decide what something is worth—I do.” She raised an eyebrow. “Do you understand?”

Max inclined his head. “Perfectly, Miss Capri.”

It was not Vittoria’s cruel words that lingered in his mind, but her stupidity. She was content to absorb herself in a meaningless show of vanity rather than best her opponent where it truly mattered, and she was not alone in that mindset.

So many of his clients shared her perspective: Rance Vaillancourt, Lily von Arx, Salvatore Parisi. A (now defunct) publication had branded them “La Coterie,” and

Max could think of no epithet more fitting. An infighting clique is all they were. They could not—*would not*—see the bigger picture.

Perhaps Vittoria spoke truly. He was not a player in their game.

And that meant he did not abide by their rules.

As Vittoria wished, Maximilien got to work on her desired vengeance. It took little effort on his part: as the most sought-after financial adviser in Monte Carlo, Max knew better than anyone how the assets of all the city's giants were intrinsically linked to one another. It was a complex and byzantine network of ownership and obligation that only he had the knowledge to navigate. Arranging things to weaponize Vittoria's holdings against Lily's was simple.

And arranging things so that when the dust settled Max himself would reap the reward? Simpler still.

Within the hour, Max produced a proposal for Vittoria. He waved the holodocument before her.

"Here," he said. "This should be sufficient."

Wordlessly, Vittoria swiped through the document. When she arrived at the marked slight against Lily, she did not read a word more. She painted her signature onto the holodoc, then waved it back to Max.

"That will be all," she dismissed him.

But Max knew better.

"I'd like to thank you all for joining me this evening."

Maximilien stood at the head of the long conference table, turned away from his guests to face the massive window behind him. He looked upon the now flourishing city surrounding his casino, where newly restored belle époque architecture put a pretty face on this absurd playground for the ultrarich.

The boardroom within Maximilien's casino hosted the six most prominent figures in Monte Carlo. It had been no easy feat to gather them all—even now, each of them shared tense looks from around the table. Max could understand their distaste. He'd grown quite familiar with every intrigue, underhanded scheme, and manipulation they had enacted upon one another during his tenure.

STANDING AT THE HEAD OF THIS TABLE, HE POSSESSED THE EYES OF THE MOST POWERFUL PEOPLE IN EUROPE. TO PLACE SUCH IMPORTANCE ON AN OMNIC MUST HAVE PAINED THEM TO THE CORE. BUT THEY WOULD GROW FAMILIAR WITH THAT FEELING IN TIME.

He knew he didn't have long with them. Then again, he wouldn't need long at all.

"I have had the pleasure of working for all of you over a great many years now," Max began. "In my time as your humble financial adviser, I have seen this city rebuilt from a hollow shell to a prosperous paradise. Monte Carlo has not merely returned to its former glory—it has surpassed it."

"Do you have a point, Max?" Lily interjected. "I didn't come here to get sentimental."

The arms dealer Rance Vaillancourt leaned back in his chair. "Some of us have businesses to run."

Max kept his tone even. "I wouldn't be so sure of that."

He turned back around to face them all. Human expressions had always delighted Max—how much could be shared without a word spoken? From his guests, he gleaned anger, confusion . . . But on the face of Colette Cachet, he saw something different. She was the youngest among these tycoons—not even thirty years old—but had a knack for catching on quicker than her colleagues.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "What have you done?"

This was a moment Max would not soon forget. Standing at the head of this table, he possessed the eyes of the most powerful people in Europe. To place such importance on an omnic must have pained them to the core. But they would grow familiar with that feeling in time.

"My partnership with each of you has been a privilege," Max continued.

“Though it must have been an incredible burden to take on my services, you treated me with the utmost respect—as if I were one of your own.”

Surely it wasn’t guilt he saw on the faces of his employers. What could they possibly be recalling in that moment for his words to give them pause?

“But what inspired me most of all,” Max continued, “was your generosity. After all, who else would be so kind as to give a lowly omnic complete and total control of their fortunes?”

And though they were scarcely aware, Max’s words were true. Through all his years handling their empires, Maximilien had constructed an elaborate web of contingency agreements and carefully worded deals that led directly to him. These tycoons who respected Max so little had enabled him to accomplish so much.

Félicité Bard, the owner of Europe’s largest media conglomerate—or rather, *former* owner—scoffed, though the slightest tremble in her lip betrayed her.

“This is nonsense,” she spat, rising to her feet. “I want nothing more to do with your games. You’ll be hearing from my attorneys.”

“Will I?” Max returned. She glared at him over the shoulder of her plush coat, and he tilted his head. “Who do you think signed away control of your funds?”

Félicité’s nostrils flared, her wide eyes desperately scanning Max’s metal countenance.

“You’re bluffing,” she snapped. “You’re bluffing!”

Max returned his attention to the table in its entirety.

“You have two options,” Max said. “You work for me, keep this city thriving, and we all prosper. Or delude yourselves—call my ‘bluff’—and leave this boardroom with nothing.”

Vittoria’s signature scowl was darker than Max had ever seen it.

“Carogna,” she hissed. “You are nothing. You are just an omnic.”

“An omnic who is one call away from bankrupting everyone in this room,” Max returned. “All the dominoes have been placed, my friends. It is entirely up to you whether they tip over.”

The room fell to chaos. Tastemaker Salvatore Parisi pulled up a holoscreen and ran through his contracts from the past fiscal year.

“The Axom sales . . . the London deal . . . all betrayals,” he murmured. The

closer he read, the more sweat beaded on his brow. “This is an outrage. You can’t get away with this!”

“He already has,” Lily answered on Max’s behalf. She was deep in her own deals too, only now taking the time to parse the fine print that had damned her. She shook her head, sighing sharply. “An outrage . . .”

Rance and Vittoria competed to shout the most obscenities at Max. Their voices made it hard for Félicité to hear her lawyers on the other end of her call—though judging by her expression, she did not enjoy what they had to say.

But among the rabble, Colette remained silent. Max studied her, fascinated. She knit her brows, puzzling out this predicament in her head amid the loud, overblown reactions of her associates. Her leg bounced, and she stared hard at the table.

Slowly, she got to her feet. A hush fell over the others as they watched her turn to Max, her hand outstretched.

“I look forward to working with you, Maximilien,” she said. He shook her hand, and she sat back down.

A long pause was all that followed, and Max reveled in the sight of every stunned face that gawked back at him. Colette had neither fought nor tried to negotiate. She had merely agreed to the terms laid out before her. With only a handshake, she had changed her life forever—and, as they clearly realized, doomed them all to the same fate.

One by one, the rest of the table followed suit. Some took longer than others to reconcile themselves, but once they had run the stages of grief—loudly or quietly—they accepted Max’s proposal.

Vittoria was the last to comply. She had gone silent after her initial bout of raving and now could do little more than glare at nothing. Her hands trembled as she tapped a golden knuckle against the table.

Max opened his arms toward her.

“I trust I have your cooperation, Miss Capri?” he asked.

Of course he did. Even disregarding his control of her assets, she would now stand entirely alone if she denied Max’s offer. With the combined efforts of the other moguls, she would be forced out of the city in a matter of days.

Max knew she had to play along. He merely wanted to hear her admit that she

had been beaten.

Vittoria held her vaporizer shakily to her lips, refusing to look Max in the eye. A sick smirk twisted onto her lips.

“You think you’ve won, ah? Povero . . . You’ve only begun to play this game.” Her voice fell to a whisper. “And you do not want to know what happens when you lose.”

Max cocked his head in amusement, closing his eyes. He supposed that was the most he could hope for from her.

“I am sure I’ll survive,” he answered.

Max snapped his fingers. Servers entered the room and surrounded the table, pouring a flute of champagne for each guest—and even one for Max. Though he couldn’t drink it, the gesture alone meant a great deal.

He lifted his glass into the air. “A toast, then. To Monte Carlo.”

With mixed levels of enthusiasm, the others raised their glasses in turn.

“To Monte Carlo,” they echoed.

The first assassin sent for you is cause for concern. The second assassin? Flattering.

Maximilien’s office was a great point of pride for him. Though the casino that housed it had been merely the first tile in his mosaic of assets, it symbolized everything he’d worked for. No other being—human or omnic—could claim the prosperity that Maximilien had won. This hard-fought success was his and his alone.

But now his prized office sat in shambles around him, debris from wall to wall. Not a single piece of furniture had survived the destruction; millions in fine art had been reduced to rubble. Amid the wreckage, his security detail lay unmoving on the floor, sparks spouting from their ruptured chassis.

Max stood over the remains of his desk, staring at the hulking figure who loomed before him. And of course, the hulking figure stared back. The two of them basked in the silence that had followed the chaos. But Max, diplomatic as always, was the first to fold.

**“YOU THINK YOU’VE WON, AH?
POVERO . . . YOU’VE ONLY BEGUN TO
PLAY THIS GAME.” HER VOICE FELL TO A
WHISPER. “AND YOU DO NOT WANT TO
KNOW WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU LOSE.”**

“You have me at a loss,” Maximilien said, raising his hands in a nonchalant surrender. He made his way to what remained of his liquor cabinet, opening the cover on the last hinge it clung to. “You’re far better than the last assassin, but I’d expect nothing less from Doomfist himself. Can I offer you a drink?”

The man—Doomfist—did not budge at Max’s charms. Despite his silence, Max handed him a tumbler of scotch. He lifted his massive gauntlet, grasping the small glass between his thumb and forefinger.

“I am not an assassin,” Doomfist said at last. Without a turn of his face, he shattered the tumbler. “I send them.”

Max dusted the spray of glass shards from his suit.

“Ah. I suppose I have you to thank for my guest earlier this month, then?” Maximilien asked.

“My assassins usually do not fail,” Doomfist continued, “nor do they return to me saying that their target has proposed a deal. Until now.”

Maximilien believed him. Akande Ogundimu, the *third* Doomfist, if Max wasn’t mistaken—there had been so many, it was hard to keep track—knew how to exercise his authority. Talon showed little to the public eye, but it was understood that no one within the organization questioned Doomfist’s iron grip—literal or figurative. Dissent meant death, and a painful one at that.

Max quieted the sudden thoughts of his previous assailant. He opened one of his palms.

“You seem the busy sort, Akande—may I call you Akande?” Max asked. An answer never came, but Max continued. “I cannot imagine you would spare the time to travel to my humble city if my proposal wasn’t of interest to you.”

For more than the obvious reasons, Max found himself on guard for this conversation. Every gambler in the game of global finance knew to reveal only what was necessary when negotiating. But it was common etiquette—even common decency—to pretend the words you offered held your full transparency. Akande was about as transparent as a cement block, and he offered no niceties to soften himself. A more fainthearted individual may have found the challenge intimidating.

“I’m listening,” Akande answered.

“I sense there is a picture you would like me out of,” Max said. “And it may be my own bias talking, but I believe that picture would be much more appealing for both of us if I remained in it.”

Against his better judgment, Max turned away from Akande. He stepped over what remained of his desk, looking through his office windows onto the now empty casino floor.

“You already know of my resources—my wealth, my holdings . . . That much is clear to me,” Max said. “And though I respect your abilities, Akande, I must question whether anyone in your organization could manage all these assets—let alone expand them.”

He turned back to Akande and was surprised to see an expression beyond stoicism: a single raised eyebrow.

“My hold of this city was not easily won. I sacrificed many years to ensure that it serves my interests to the fullest.”

Max opened his palms.

“You could kill me—remove me from my throne and fill the void I leave behind. Waste money, men, and time. All to obtain what Monte Carlo *is*.”

He leaned in, closing one hand into a fist.

“Or . . . we could work together and have what Monte Carlo *will be*. What the *world* will be.” He steepled his hands together. “The choice is yours, as you know.”

Akande remained quiet, and Max was in no rush to make him speak. He understood this was a complicated issue—and surely, for a man like Akande,

a struggle of the ego to consider sparing a target. But at last, Akande nodded, taking his gaze off his prey as he pondered.

“I have been aware of you for some time, Maximilien,” Akande said. “To be born in a global crisis, to work your way from a mere accountant to the ruler of an empire within a decade . . . it is not a feat the weak could accomplish.”

Akande lifted his gauntlet, flexing its fingers. The glint of the golden metal entranced Maximilien.

“What do you gain from this?” Akande asked.

It was a question Max had to consider, to his own surprise. On the surface, it was a losing deal—he knew it, and Akande surely knew it too. There was a reason La Coterie felt such hatred for Max’s power over them: in this game, control was everything. *The house always wins*, the saying went. And if Max allowed Talon to take the house, where did that leave him?

“For one, I gain leverage,” Max offered. “My empire is extensive, and your forces would serve me well in . . . contentious negotiations.”

He glanced at Akande’s gauntlet once more. Max inclined his head.

“For another, I walk out of this room alive,” he concluded.

Akande drew a deep breath, his chest swelling beyond its already massive size. A sick smile found his lips. He chuckled darkly, shaking his head.

“They call you a survivor, but I believe they are wrong,” Akande said. “You do not merely survive. . . . you succeed.”

He thrust his massive gauntlet at Max, and for the first time that evening, Max tensed. Akande opened his golden palm.

“I look forward to working with you, Max,” Akande said. He paused, then smirked. “May I call you Max?”

Max cocked his head, amused and relieved at this “rapport.” He took Akande’s gauntlet, watching carefully as the massive metal hand closed around his own, and shook.

For years, nothing had disrupted their perfectly orchestrated balance.

TRANSFERRING DATA: 86% . . .

But he supposed Akande was nothing if not the bane of complacency.

From the moment their deal began, Talon had full access to Maximilien's coffers. There had been a time when that meant Maximilien could point the organization how he saw fit. But now, new variables had emerged, and Talon's inner circle had slowly expanded. The deal he'd struck with Akande all that time ago had spun out of Max's favor. He was no longer one of few partners machinating with Akande. He was, however, still expected to foot the bill.

TRANSFERRING DATA: 92% . . .

All of Akande's greatest schemes bordered on lunacy, but Max's trust in him had reached its limit. What little Max could glean from these new propositions—these endless demands for resources—spelled not just the end of Talon but the end of Monte Carlo. The end of Max.

Working with Talon had meant security, protection. Control. Now, Akande himself had chosen to gamble their fate.

With only a handshake, Max's life had changed forever. For a time, Talon had opened the door to everything he'd ever desired. But now, it was nothing more than a golden shackle.

TRANSFERRING DATA: COMPLETE.

Max leaned back in his chair, losing his gaze in the dark, vaulted ceiling. In his right hand, he rolled a poker chip between his fingers.

No, it would not be the first time Maximilien had evened the odds. But neither, he suspected, would it be the last.