



Dinner

Variable Geometries, Volume III

Antonino Fischetti

Preface

There is a time for measuring, after the time for listening. It is the moment when numbers stop being mere data and become decisions: how much to risk, whom to trust, what to let happen and what to stop in time. This book is born from that time, and from the time that comes right after, when measure is no longer enough and you must answer for what you have measured in front of people who do not know you, in a language that is not your own.

Paris, Brussels, the return home: three cities, three different ways of being tested, and the same question running through all of them, never said aloud all the way to the end. Those who read this novel as a story will find a family learning, one chapter at a time, how difficult it is to build something worthy of outliving the one who built it. Those who read it as a tool will find, in every city, a piece of the method that can be applied right away, starting from their own table, their own numbers, their own inheritance.

Dinner, in many homes, is the meal where the day gets tallied up. In this family, it has become the meal where a whole life gets tallied up, without ever ceasing to be, first of all, a dinner.

Alberto Ferri

Part One: Paris, the Measure — Chapter 1

The Measure of Numbers

Paris does not impose the chaotic frenzy of Anglo-Saxon financial squares, nor the austere severity of northern regulatory tables. The French capital welcomes those who know how to decipher it with the geometric elegance of an Enlightenment treatise, where finance is never abstract speculation, but the rigorous measure of value and form.

The reserved table at Le Gabriel, in the heart of the eighth arrondissement, offered a discreet view of manicured gardens with the same millimetric precision with which KINTEL indexed the holding's cash flows. No screen, no device resting among the glasses, and yet the wine arrived poured an instant before anyone asked for it, the place setting was cleared without a hand ever being raised, the temperature of the room shifted imperceptibly whenever a window stayed open too long. Those who did not know better thought it was simply impeccable service. Those who did recognized the same grammar of numbers that, every morning, put the Corridors in order.

Alberto Ferri sat at the center of a conversation that joined the great engineering of industrial flows to the diplomacy of international private capital. Beside him, Ariane Vencourt scrolled through the closing summaries of structured investments for Corridors VII and VIII, while Mapi handled, with easy naturalness, relations with the heads of the Parisian institutional funds. They had arrived on three different flights, landed at three different times, and yet they sat at that table with the synchrony of people who had

long since stopped needing to coordinate schedules and had simply learned to trust that the other would be ready when it mattered.

Beyond the windows, Paris slid into evening with the discreet slowness of something that has nothing left to prove to anyone. A waiter lit, without anyone asking, a small lamp at the center of the table, in the very instant the natural light slipped below the threshold where faces remain legible without effort.

Among those present was Heinrich Voss, a German in his forties representing a consortium of Bavarian pension funds, distinguished from the others by a poorly concealed impatience: he checked his watch every few minutes, not out of rudeness but from a habit that seemed more physical than intentional, like someone who had spent a career measuring time in billable minutes.

“Mr. Ferri,” he said, politely interrupting a pause in the conversation, “I appreciate the setting, believe me. But my principals sent me here for one question only: how long does it take KINTEL to pay for itself?”

Alberto did not flinch. “Eleven months, on the first Corridor. Seven on the second, once the model had already been tested.”

“And if I asked you for a written guarantee on those numbers?”

“I’d tell you I’m already giving you one,” Alberto replied, “only the guarantee isn’t a piece of paper with my signature on it. It’s the fact that every euro that enters the system stays traceable by an algorithm that I myself cannot modify without leaving a trace visible to all of you. A signed

sheet of paper I could write tonight, just to please you. A system I can't rig, even if I wanted to, no."

Voss stared at him for a moment, then checked his watch one last time, more from habit than need. "That's the first answer all evening that hasn't sounded like a brochure," he said, with the shadow of a smile that suited him poorly. "Keep answering like that, and maybe my principals will stop making me check the time every five minutes."

Lacombe, from the other end of the table, watched the exchange without intervening, but with the attention of someone filing away every detail to use later in the evening.

Halfway through dinner, Alberto's phone buzzed twice in quick succession. He glanced at it only long enough to recognize Raffaele's name, then slipped it back into his pocket without answering.

Mapi noticed. "Everything all right?"

"Yes," said Alberto. "Raffaele always checks the parameters before an important dinner, even when there's nothing to check. It's a habit he's had for years."

The phone buzzed a third time. This time Alberto looked at it longer, then briefly excused himself from the table to answer. He came back two minutes later, his expression unchanged, and explained nothing to anyone. Only later, that night, would he tell Mapi that Raffaele had simply wanted to check, for the third time in an hour, that everything was going according to plan, with the same meticulous anxiety that had always characterized him and that, in eleven years, had never once let him miss an important detail.

During the second appetizer, Lacombe noticed that Alberto kept his cutlery exactly parallel between one bite and the next, a habit Lacombe recognized at once, having seen it only in people raised with a certain discipline at the table since childhood.

“Did your father teach you manners, or your mother?” he asked, with the curiosity of someone who notices a detail and cannot let it go.

“Neither one, directly,” said Alberto. “My mother only ever told me that crooked cutlery at the table was the first sign of a mind distracted elsewhere. I never forgot it, even when I would have preferred to.”

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Free excerpt — the full book is available on Amazon.