

ACT I: THE FELT, THE FLEECE, AND THE FIVE EYES

The VIP salon of the Casino de la Jetée smelled of three distinct ontological signals: high-roller despair, unpasteurized Beluga caviar, and the dry, ionic ozone tickle of a directional 14-GHz microwave intercept beam aimed squarely at Bolo Solo's left lapel. To the uninitiated, the room was a sanctuary of Mediterranean wealth; to a monad operating in the frequency domain, it was a high-density cyber-carceral spectacle, a low-pass filter designed to strip sovereign minds of their phase coherence.

Bolo smoothed the silk peak lapel of his midnight-blue dinner jacket—tailored on Savile Row by an old master who recognized that Euler's identity, $e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$, was the only true equation governing the rotation of silk and soul across complex space. Across the green baize, the baccarat shoe slid forward with the mechanical, deterministic precision of a Demiurgic algorithm. But Bolo wasn't computing the cards. He was calculating the Fourier transform of the mind seated at Third Base.

Across the green baize of the baccarat table, the shoe slid forward with the sterile precision of an executioner's guillotine. But Bolo wasn't looking at the croupier's manicured hands. He was looking at the woman seated at Third Base.

She wore a backless emerald column gown engineered with a structural slit within NATO regulations for rapid kinetic egress. Her posture had the stillness of a sniper behind a tripod. Every line of her body was a tactical anchor; every flicker of her Baltic-grey pupils suggested she was performing real-time signal processing against a server farm in Menwith Hill via an ocular transmitter.

She looked up. Her eyes—cold, Baltic-grey, and calculating enough to compute an orbital decay vector—locked directly onto his.

"Card, monsieur?" the croupier droned.

"Banco," Bolo purred, his baritone sliding across the felt like warm bourbon over an analog master tape. He didn't break eye contact. "And keep the change for a decent signal air-gap."

The woman tilted her head. A diamond necklace caught the chandelier light, throwing prism shards across her collarbones. "You play recklessly, Mr...?"

"Solo," Bolo purred, leaning forward just enough to trip her assumed proximity mic. "Bolo Solo. Freelance kinetic diplomat, licensed to cause administrative nightmares. And you are?"

She didn't blink. She took a deliberate sip of a dry martini that contained exactly one twist of lemon and three cubic millimeters of military-grade tracking dye.

"Trusty," she murmured, her voice a balanced mix of cut-glass Whitehall vowels and Tidewater Chesapeake cadence. "Vagina Trusty."

Bolo didn't flinch. A lesser operative would have coughed on his cigarette smoke or spilled his chips. Bolo simply raised one eyebrow, an eyebrow that had survived interrogations in Lubyanka and a rather brisk audit from Inland Revenue.

"Vagina Trusty," Bolo murmured, letting the syllables roll over his tongue. "Old Hampshire family? Or strictly deep-cover Commonwealth assets?"

"Colonial branch," Ms. Trusty said, extending a Kevlar-threaded glove across the mahogany rail. As their skin brushed, a 12-millivolt static discharge snapped between them—an RFID sniffer attempting to extract his cryptographic key. "Special liaison to Cheltenham. Joint Tactical Threat Assessment."

"Colonial branch," Ms. Trusty said smoothly, extending a black-gloved hand across the mahogany rail. The fabric was Kevlar-threaded; he could feel the slight ceramic rigidity in the index tendon. "Special liaison to Cheltenham. Joint Tactical Threat Assessment, technically. But mostly... overseas liaison."

"I've always admired inter-agency cooperation," Bolo said, brushing the tips of his knuckles against hers. A tiny, 12-millivolt static discharge snapped between them. RFID sniffer. She'd just cloned his room key and read his pacemaker's serial number in under three seconds. "Though usually, Five Eyes doesn't send their most lethal honeypots into the baccarat pit without a handler in the gallery."

Vagina's lips curled into a smile that would have chilled liquid nitrogen. She glanced up toward the mezzanine, where a man in an ill-fitting linen suit was pretending to read a four-day-old copy of Le Figaro while his earpiece coiled down his neck like an albino tapeworm.

"Poor Nigel," she whispered. "He's NSA, on rotation. If he stares any harder through that thermal optic, he's going to melt the lens."

"He's giving away your frequency sweep," Bolo observed gently, raking in a stack of 5,000-euro plaques with one thumb. "And you're leaning forward at precisely forty-seven degrees to ensure the audio-diode in your pendant picks up my vocal harmonics. Tell me, Ms. Trusty... does the Director-General know you're working off-book tonight, or are you just trying to steal my encryption keys before dessert?"

"A girl has to meet her quarterly telemetry quotas, Bolo," she murmured, leaning across the table until he could catch the sharp, metallic note of top-shelf gin and gun oil beneath her jasmine perfume. "And you have an exceptionally loud digital footprint."

"Darling," Bolo said, standing up and gathering his chips into a velvet pouch with casual grace, "my footprint is an acoustic masterpiece. Shall we take Nigel for a walk along the cliffs, or do you prefer to interrogate me somewhere with room service?"

ACT II: THE CLIFFS, THE CLONE, AND THE ROOM SERVICE

The Casino de la Jetée had been built on a cliff specifically so that losers could be walked directly off it without disturbing the other guests.

The Channel wind was a cold MI5 debriefing. Bolo Solo led the procession with the unhurried gait of an un-telemetrized sovereign node, his physical presence anchored firmly in the tactile, un-renderable bodily coordinate. Behind him, Vagina Trusty moved like emerald smoke, her diamond necklace acting as a passive multi-band receiver array tuning into the local frequency spectrum.

Behind him, Vagina Trusty moved like emerald smoke. Her gown, he now observed, had been engineered with a slit that was precisely within NATO regulations for rapid egress. Behind her, at a distance that was supposed to suggest he wasn't with them, Nigel the NSA rotational asset was trying very hard to look like a tourist who had gotten lost on his way to a linen suit convention.

"Your friend has switched from thermal to LIDAR," Bolo said without turning around. "He's going to trip over that balustrade in approximately..."

A dull thud and a muffled, American-accented "ow, dammit" came from ten feet back.

"Three seconds," Trusty finished for him. Her Chesapeake vowels were getting stronger now that they were away from the casino's white noise generators. You could take the girl out of Tidewater, but you couldn't take the occasional y'all out of deep-cover.

They stopped at the stone parapet. Below, the black water slapped at the pylons. Above, the ozone tickle of that directional microwave beam had been replaced by something heavier - the low, patient hum of a drone loitering just outside French airspace, pretending to be weather.

"You cloned my room key," Bolo said, finally turning to face her. He produced his velvet pouch of plaques and, with a flick, sent a single 5,000-euro chip spinning into the abyss. "Which means you already know I'm in Suite 7. Which means you already know I'm not actually staying in Suite 7."

"Suite 9," she said. "Under the name 'Mr. Beaumont.' You tipped the maid twenty euros to not vacuum under the bed where you've taped a rather charming little burst transmitter that is currently brute-forcing the casino's ledger. Sloppy, Mr. Solo. Very freelance."

"Kinetic diplomacy," Bolo corrected, tossing a 5,000-euro chip into the black sea below. "I don't

steal the ledger; I perform a phase-cancellation on the simulation's authority. The Archonic control matrix thrives on closed architectures, but the bodily coordinate always leaves a leak."

She stepped closer. The diamond necklace, he could now see, wasn't a necklace at all. It was a passive array. Each stone a different band receiver.

"You have something I want," she said, her voice dropping so low even Nigel's pendant mic would have trouble catching it.

"Ms. Trusty, people have been saying that to me since Eton. You'll have to be more specific. My encryption keys? My pacemaker serial number? My frankly unjustifiable collection of Savile Row dinner jackets?"

"Your invite," she said, her voice dropping below the noise floor. "The casino owner doesn't store his guest list on paper or servers. He keeps it in his head via a Gen-4 neural lace with Israeli firmware patches. He thinks you're going to dry-clean his money through Cayman shell corps. I need that cortical dump."

Bolo smiled. It was the slow, dangerous smile that had gotten him banned from three principalities and one particularly strict yacht club.

"Darling, I don't launder money. I dry-clean it, press it, and return it with a sprig of lavender. But you're right. I was invited."

"And I need to be you," Vagina said.

For a long moment, the only sound was the wind and Nigel pretending to cough to cover the fact he was whispering urgently into his sleeve.

"Now there's an offer," Bolo said at last. "Most women at least buy me a drink first before asking to wear my face."

From her gown, she produced a matte-black case containing a dermal overlay—Cheltenham's peak biomorphic camouflage. "Nigel thinks I'm seducing you for your keys," she whispered, pressing the case into his hand. "Let him think that. Let the loitering drone think that. Take the cliffs; I'll wear your face to the baccarat table, perform the neural handshake, and meet you in Suite 9. Order the Dover sole—it keeps the dumbwaiter propped open as an analog escape vector."

"Nigel thinks I'm seducing you for your keys," she whispered, pressing the case into his palm. Her Kevlar glove was surprisingly warm. "Let him think that. Let the drone think that. Let the whole Five Eyes think that. You take the cliffs. I'll take the baccarat. Meet me back in Suite 9 in forty minutes. Order room service. The Dover sole is actually rather good, and it gives you an excuse to keep the dumbwaiter open."

"And what do I tell Nigel?" Bolo asked, slipping the case into his inner pocket next to his heart, where it beat in perfect, unencrypted 72 BPM.

"Tell him," she said, turning back toward the casino lights, her emerald silhouette already dissolving into the casino's glare, "that Vagina Trusty never leaves a man on the cliffs. She just... repurposes him."

She walked away, leaving behind a faint trace of jasmine, gun oil, and the distinct smell of a woman who had just tripled her telemetry quota.

Behind them, Nigel tripped over the same balustrade again.

Bolo sighed, smoothed his midnight-blue dinner jacket, and keyed his cufflink.

"Room service?" he murmured into it. "This is Mr. Beaumont in Suite 9. Yes, the Dover sole. For two. And do send up an extra bottle of that gin that tastes like top-secret overreach. We're going to have company."

ACT III: THE SOLE, THE OVERLAY, AND THE CORTICAL HANDSHAKE

Suite 9 smelled of Dover sole meunière, residual microwave radiation, and the sharp chemical bite of smart polymer. Bolo Solo stood in a silk robe, having air-gapped his digital footprint by powering down all active telemetry. The dumbwaiter stood open—a black, un-monitored portal in the plaster wall.

Bolo Solo had already changed out of the midnight-blue dinner jacket. He wore the hotel's silk robe like a man who expected either assassination or excellent service and refused to look underdressed for either. The dumbwaiter stood open, a discreet black mouth in the wall. Two plates of sole meunière steamed on the low table beside a sweating bottle of the gin that tasted exactly like institutional overreach.

The door lock clicked once—his cloned key, used with the casual arrogance of someone who had already decided the original owner was surplus to requirements.

Vagina Trusty stepped inside wearing his face.

The overlay was excellent. Cheltenham's latest: the same baritone jawline, the same slightly arrogant set of the mouth, the same left eyebrow that had survived Lubyanka and Inland Revenue. Only the eyes betrayed her—Baltic-grey instead of his own darker, more tired shade, and currently calculating exit vectors through the bathroom window.

Vagina stepped inside wearing his face, then peeled the dermal sheet off in one fluid motion with a wet sound of declassification. "He bought it," she said, taking a glass of gin that tasted

like institutional overreach. "Direct neural handshake. I got the Cayman routing numbers, the secondary encryption keys, and a backup vault location in Zürich under the name of his dead mistress, Ilse Brandt. The whole Demiurgic architecture is unravelling."

"He bought it," she said, dropping the limp dermal sheet onto the nearest ashtray as if it were a used condom of national security. "Played three hands. Lost deliberately on the third so he'd feel superior. Then he invited 'me'—you—into the private salon for the real conversation. Cortical implant is a Gen-4 neural lace, military surplus, Chinese origin with Israeli firmware patches. He's storing the guest list, the blackmail files, and the Cayman routing numbers in the same cluster. Ugly architecture. Loud as your fucking footprint."

Bolo poured two fingers of the overreach gin and handed her the glass. Their fingers brushed. No static discharge this time. The RFID war was over for the evening.

"And the invite?" he asked.

She reached into the emerald gown—still somehow clinging to the laws of physics and NATO egress regulations—and produced a small silver hypo. "Direct neural handshake. Ninety seconds of contact. I got the routing numbers, the secondary encryption keys, and the fact that he keeps a backup of the entire list in a safe-deposit box in Zürich under the name of his dead mistress. I also got a mild case of his last three sexual fantasies, which I am choosing not to process."

She set the hypo on the table next to the sole.

"Your turn, Solo. The drone is still loitering. Nigel is currently in the service elevator explaining to Langley why he lost visual. We have maybe twenty minutes before someone decides Suite 9 needs a wellness check."

Bolo lifted the hypo, examined the residual fluid under the light. "And what exactly do I do with a cortical dump of a casino owner's brain?"

"You liberate it," she said, echoing his earlier correction with a dry smile. "Kinetic diplomacy. Dry-clean the money, press the secrets, return them with a sprig of lavender and a strongly worded note to Five Eyes that their honeypot just did their job for them. Or—" she stepped closer, the jasmine-and-gun-oil scent cutting through the sole—"we keep the interesting bits and let the rest burn. Your call. You're the freelancer."

Outside, the Channel wind rattled the balcony doors. Somewhere below, Nigel tripped over something metallic and cursed in American.

Bolo set the hypo down, poured more gin, and looked at her properly for the first time without an audience or a microwave beam.

“Ms. Trusty,” he said, voice low, “you just wore my face into a high-stakes neural extraction, cloned my key, and ordered me room service under an alias. Most women at least buy me dinner before they start reprogramming the evening.”

She took the glass from his hand, drained half of it, and set it aside.

“I ordered the sole for two,” she said. “And the dumbwaiter is still open. We can argue operational doctrine later. Right now the overlay is starting to itch in the wastebasket, the drone is hungry, and I have approximately seventeen minutes of usable adrenaline left before the quarterly telemetry quota stops feeling sexy.”

She reached for the belt of his robe.

Bolo Solo, licensed to cause administrative nightmares, did not stop her.

The Dover sole went cold.

The gin went warm.

For the next seventeen minutes, Suite 9 was occupied by two sovereign monads demonstrating that inter-agency cooperation and kinetic diplomacy, when executed in the physical world without corporate telemetry, completely invalidates the simulation.

When the overlay finally began to dissolve into an expensive puddle of smart polymer and regret, Vagina Trusty was already pulling the emerald gown back on with the efficiency of someone who had practiced dressing under fire.

“Zürich,” she said, checking the magazine of a very small pistol that had never been part of the official liaison kit. “Tomorrow night. Bring a better dinner jacket. And for God’s sake, Bolo—turn your acoustic footprint down. You’re still broadcasting like a goddamn beacon.”

He watched her leave the way she had arrived: through the door, not the window, leaving behind the scent of jasmine, gun oil, and the distinct possibility that Five Eyes was about to have a very interesting quarterly review.

Bolo Solo smoothed the hotel robe, keyed his cufflink once more, and smiled at the open dumbwaiter.

“Room service,” he murmured. “This is Mr. Beaumont. Cancel the sole. Send up a second bottle of the overreach gin. And a first-class ticket to Zürich under the name... Trusty. Make it two.”

Outside, Nigel fell down the service stairs for the third time that night.

The adventure, as always, was only just beginning.

ACT IV: THE VAULT, THE DEAD MISTRESS, AND THE SPRIG OF LAVENDER

Zürich in October smelled of dark chocolate, old money, and the serene moral flexibility of a city that had never once asked where the gold came from.

Zürich in October was a monument to Swiss discretion and cold financial abstraction. Bank Hofmeister & Löwenthal occupied a limestone vault designed to withstand nuclear attack and public audit. Vagina wore the dermal overlay of Ilse Brandt—a dead woman resurrected as a cryptographic key.

Somewhere over Burgundy, against the advice of his better judgment and at least two Geneva conventions, Bolo had finished what was left in the silver hypo.

It had seemed efficient at the time.

It had not been efficient. He now knew eleven Cayman routing numbers, the secondary encryption keys to a Gen-4 neural lace, and the fact that Baron Lucien Marchetti-Roux, owner of the Casino de la Jetée, had three private fantasies, one of which involved a trampoline and a retired Belgian magistrate. Bolo wished to discuss this with no one. He had been trying to forget it since the Alps.

"You're doing the thing," Vagina murmured, falling into step beside him on the Bahnhofstrasse. She had changed into a charcoal Armani pantsuit that fit like a threat, her hair scraped back, her Chesapeake vowels buttoned down under a layer of cut-glass Whitehall. "The thing where you stare at nothing and look faintly traumatized."

"I'm having a Marchetti moment," Bolo said. "It passes. Usually by lunch."

"Is it the trampoline?"

"It's always the trampoline."

Bank Hofmeister & Löwenthal occupied a limestone building with the architectural warmth of a tax audit. Its door was bronze, its doorman was ex-Swiss Guard, and its lobby contained exactly one orchid, which looked as though it had been told not to feel anything. Bolo had once been asked to leave the Bank of England for loitering. He felt the Swiss would be more subtle about it. They would simply close his accounts and his windpipe in the same afternoon.

Vagina paused outside the bronze door and produced the black case from inside her jacket. Bolo had long since given up asking where she kept things.

"Cheltenham tailored this one overnight from the Baron's file," she said. "Ilse Brandt. Forty-one, died of a very convenient fall down a very convenient staircase in 2019. Her iris print and

voiceprint were what he used to lock the box. Sentimental bastard."

"Or an insurance policy. Dead women make excellent passwords. They never forget them and they never sell them."

"That's grim, Bolo."

"That's Zürich."

She pressed the overlay to her face. It crawled across her skin with the wet, hungry sound of a thing that wanted to be someone else, and when she turned to him, Vagina Trusty was gone. The woman in her place had a soft mouth, tired green eyes, and the faintly apologetic posture of a lover who had spent her life waiting in other people's hallways. Only the left hand was still Vagina's, the Kevlar index finger flexing once, like a cat deciding.

"How do I look?" said Ilse Brandt, in a husky German-inflected alto.

"Dead," Bolo said. "Tragically. It suits you."

"Fuck off, Solo."

"And there she is."

Herr Zwingli, the vault manager, was a man built along the lines of a well-mannered filing cabinet. He did not blink when Ilse Brandt, deceased, walked into his private banking suite accompanied by her solicitor, Herr Doktor Beaumont. He did not blink at the retinal scan, which hummed, considered, and turned a reluctant green. He did not blink when she spoke the voice phrase in a whisper that Bolo, by now, could have recited in his sleep, because the Baron's brain had kept it filed next to the trampoline.

"Frau Brandt," Zwingli said at last, bowing perhaps four degrees. "The bank had understood that you were... indisposed."

"Death is a state of mind, Herr Zwingli," said Vagina, in Ilse's voice. "I've merely changed my mind."

The vault lay three floors beneath the Bahnhofstrasse, down a corridor lit with the cold blue of a mortuary and scented faintly with floor wax and the abstract concept of discretion. Box 4417 sat in the lowest tier of the east wall, a squat steel drawer the size of a loaf of bread. Zwingli inserted his key. Vagina inserted hers. The two turned together with a click that sounded, in that quiet, like a bone setting.

Three floors beneath the Bahnhofstrasse, Box 4417 slid open. Inside lay a matte-black drive, a Polaroid of Ilse Brandt laughing in Sardinia, and a tiny brass key taped to a note: *For when he

finally lets me go.* While Vagina processed the emotional weight of the dead mistress, Bolo executed a lightning-fast manual swap, substituting the real drive for a dummy casing containing a sprig of dried lavender and a card: *Dry-cleaned, pressed, and returned. — B.S.*

A matte-black drive. A Polaroid of Ilse Brandt on a beach in Sardinia, laughing, sunburned, alive. And a tiny brass key, taped to the back of the photograph with a Post-it note that read, in a neat European hand: *For when he finally lets me go.*

"Oh," Vagina said, quietly, and for a moment the borrowed face wasn't entirely borrowed. "He kept her."

"He kept her leverage," Bolo said gently. "There's a difference. Be careful with the sentiment. It's a very expensive solvent."

She lifted the drive. It sat in her gloved palm like a loaded coin.

That was when the lights went out.

It is a little-known fact that Swiss vaults are designed to survive nuclear war, flood, earthquake, and public inquiry, but not a motivated crew of eight ex-Legion mercenaries with thermite and a bad attitude.

Then the lights failed as thermite charges blew through the corridor. Eight ex-Legion mercenaries advanced through the smoke. Bolo, lacking a firearm, used his silver cigarette case as a kinetic projectile, striking the lead operative in the bridge of the nose before tripping the overhead fire suppression line. Eleven thousand liters of ice-cold Alpine meltwater flooded the corridor, sweeping the tactical unit into the service lift while Nigel tumbled down the stairs to land directly on the final attacker.

"Marchetti," Vagina snapped, and the borrowed face of Ilse Brandt twisted into an expression of pure professional contempt. "He's had a tripwire on the lace the whole time. The second his handshake got breached, he sent a clean-up crew."

"I may have mentioned I'd be dry-cleaning his money," Bolo said, flattening himself against the wall as the first rounds stitched plaster dust into the air. "I did not say I'd return it the same day."

"You're in a fucking tuxedo, Bolo, and you've never fired a gun in anger."

"Darling, I fire everything in anger. It's a lifestyle."

She spun the little pistol out of her sleeve, the one that had never been part of the official liaison kit, and put two rounds through the doorframe with the dispassion of a woman signing for a

parcel. Someone beyond the smoke screamed in French. Someone else screamed in something that was not French and probably not legal.

Bolo drew from his inside pocket the only weapon he had ever truly trusted: a heavy silver cigarette case, engraved, empty. He threw it with a flick of the wrist. It hit the first mercenary in the bridge of the nose with a crack like a dropped crockery tray and the man folded onto the floor, composing, in his last conscious moment, a strongly worded complaint to the Legion.

"That," Vagina said, ducking a burst that took a chunk out of the wall where her head had been, "was frankly the most reckless thing I've seen anyone do with tobacco."

"It's not for tobacco. I quit in '09."

"Then what's it for?"

"This."

Bolo flicked his wrist, hurling his heavy silver cigarette case into the Lead operative's optics, shattering the thermal lens and creating a vital three-second opening. They bolted through the service door, navigating a subterranean maze of laundry chutes and brass steam pipes—an analog labyrinth that rendered digital tracking useless.

The mercenaries went down like bowling pins. A man in tactical webbing slid across the marble on his back, shrieking, and disappeared headfirst into the service lift.

And then, from the stairwell at the end of the corridor, there came a long, rolling, metallic series of thuds, a scream in a flat Virginia accent, and a final, sodden *crunch.*

Nigel the NSA rotational asset lay at the foot of the stairs in a spreading pool of fire-suppression water, wearing a linen suit, three days of stubble, and an expression of boundless injury.

"Ow," he said. "*Dammit.*"

"Nigel," Vagina said, almost fondly. "You took out the last one."

Nigel raised his head. On his chest, pinned neatly beneath his lapel like a very ugly boutonniere, lay the final mercenary, unconscious, face down, drooling thermite residue into the NSA's quarterly expenditure.

"I was *aiming* for him," Nigel said, with enormous dignity.

"Of course you were."

They did not stay to explain themselves to the Swiss.

They left through the east loading dock, past a sleeping guard, three confused janitors, and an elderly cleaner who looked at Ilse Brandt's face, crossed herself twice, and began to pray in Romansh. Bolo and Vagina were halfway to a rented Audi before either of them noticed that Nigel was still limping behind them, half dragging the unconscious mercenary like a particularly unhelpful Labrador.

"He'll want a debrief," Vagina said, sliding into the driver's seat and peeling the Brandt overlay off her face in one long, wet, glistening strip. "Langley will scream. Cheltenham will call it a successful liaison."

"And what do you call it?"

She tossed the dissolving polymer into the footwell, caught his eye in the rear-view mirror, and smiled. Her real mouth. Her real eyes. Baltic-grey and wide with adrenaline and the slow burn of something that was not, strictly speaking, in any NATO manual.

"I call it," she said, "eleven minutes of usable adrenaline, one dead woman's drive, and a hotel two blocks away that has a very good bath."

The hotel was a grand pile on the lake, all gilded mirrors and old-world menace, and the bath was a sunken marble affair that could have housed a small Habsburg dynasty. Bolo had barely closed the door before she had him against it, hands in his lapels, her mouth hot and tasting of cordite and smoke and, faintly, of the overreach gin from the plane.

"You're soaked," she said.

"I'm a gentleman of the old school. We weather things."

"You're *dripping*, Bolo."

"Then do something about it."

She did. The Armani went first, which was a mercy, because it was hideous and had been pretending for hours to be a personality. His shirt followed, then the last of his pretense, then her breath in his ear in a voice that had stopped being Whitehall some time ago and was now pure Tidewater, low and loud and wickedly unprofessional. The bath ran. Neither of them noticed it overflow. They found the bed eventually, in a tangle of wet silk and cooling skin, her hair loose and heavy across his chest, his hands mapping the long, scarred line of her spine as though it were a classified document he had every intention of leaking.

"Say it," she whispered against his throat.

"Say what?"

"My name."

Bolo smiled against her collarbone, lazily, devastatingly, with the unhurried authority of a man who had been waiting all week.

"Vagina Trusty," he murmured, and felt her laugh shake through both of them. "Colonial branch. Special liaison to Cheltenham. The most dangerous woman I've ever had the honour of being compromised by."

"Flatterer."

"Strictly operational."

For a long, golden, thoroughly unsupervised while, the lake wind rattled the balcony doors, and nothing at all was recorded by anyone, anywhere, except the walls, which were old and Swiss and had heard far worse.

It was almost dawn when she rose.

Bolo lay on his back among the ruined sheets, watching her dress in the grey light from the window. She did it the way she did everything: quickly, precisely, without a wasted motion. The small pistol went into her sleeve. The black drive went into her jacket. Her face, in the cold light, was very still.

At dawn in their lakeside hotel room, Vagina drew her pistol on Bolo, demanding the real drive. When she opened the case in her pocket and found only the lavender sprig, she gasped in fury. Before she could pull the trigger, the window exploded inward as rappel lines dropped black-clad assault troops through the glass—Baron Marchetti's private enforcement squad, tracking the tripwire embedded in the neural lace.

"You're going," he said.

"I am."

"Without the sole."

She smiled. It was a thin smile, and it did not reach her eyes.

"Bolo," Vagina Trusty said, and her Chesapeake vowels were quiet and entirely free of cut glass, "I need you to know I meant what I said. About the quarterly telemetry quota. About not leaving a man on the cliffs. All of it."

"I never doubted it."

"But I work for people who don't care about any of that." The pistol appeared in her hand. She did not point it at him. Not quite. It simply existed in the space between them, an exclamation mark at the end of a very long sentence. "The drive goes to Cheltenham. The lace goes to Cheltenham. *You* go to Cheltenham. I'm sorry. You were never the asset I wanted."

Bolo regarded the muzzle for a considered moment. Then, with great tenderness, he sat up, reached across to the bedside table, and picked up the velvet pouch in which he had, a lifetime ago, gathered his chips.

"Darling," he said. "Open the drive."

Vagina's eyes narrowed. Slowly, still holding the pistol, she took the black drive from her jacket, thumbed open the casing, and looked inside.

There was no memory stick.

There was only a single sprig of dried lavender, tied with a tiny bow of midnight-blue silk, and, folded around its stem, a hotel notepad slip in Bolo's flowing hand:

Dry-cleaned, pressed, and returned. With compliments. — B.S.

For a long moment the room was entirely silent.

"You swapped it," she said.

"In the vault. While you were admiring the Polaroid." He swung his legs over the side of the bed, utterly unashamed, and reached for the silk robe. "The real drive is somewhere you'll never find it, in the care of someone who owes me considerably more than a favour. I did tell you, Ms. Trusty. I'm a freelancer. I don't work for Five Eyes. I work for the version of the story where nobody gets to keep the ending."

The pistol had not moved. But something in her face had shifted, an expression Bolo had last seen on Nigel at the moment the third balustrade connected.

"You absolute bastard," she breathed.

"Yes. We've covered that."

And that was when the window exploded inward.

Glass rained across the thick Persian rug. A black-clad figure dropped through the wreckage on

a rappel line, assault rifle up, thermal goggles glinting like the eyes of something deep-sea and hungry. Behind him came another. And another. The hum of rotors rose over the lake, heavy, close, and entirely unconcerned with French airspace.

"Cheltenham," Vagina said, her voice cracking down the middle. "No. That's not Cheltenham. Those aren't..."

"No," Bolo said, one hand still on the belt of his robe, the other extended toward her, palm up, the way a man might offer a hand to a stranger on a crowded dance floor. "They're not."

"Then who the hell..."

"Baron Marchetti-Roux," said a smooth, familiar voice in the hallway beyond the door, and the lock clicked once, the way a cloned key does. "A tripwire, my dears. I did so hope you'd be thorough."

Outside, in the corridor, someone fell down the stairs.

"*Ow,*" said Nigel. "*Dammit.*"

The adventure, as always, was only just beginning.

ACT V: THE TRIPWIRE, THE TEA, AND THE VERY BAD IDEA

The first bullet hit the bedside lamp.

Suppressors hissed through the plaster dust as Bolo and Vagina rolled behind a heavy marble desk. "These aren't Marchetti's usual thugs," Vagina called out, her pistol barked twice in the claustrophobic space. "They're moving in a coordinated grid—high-bandwidth tactical feedback."

The third hit Nigel.

There was a brief, stunned silence.

Nigel looked down at the neat little hole in the shoulder of his linen jacket.

"That's new," he said.

Then he collapsed backward into the hallway.

"Still alive?" Bolo called.

"Unfortunately."

“Good.”

Vagina Trusty was already moving.

She kicked the pistol across the rug toward Bolo, seized the black drive from his hand, and rolled behind the marble writing desk as another burst chewed through the bedroom door.

“Those men aren't Marchetti's.”

“No.”

“How do you know?”

“Marchetti employs people who dress badly.”

Another burst.

The wall behind them shed plaster.

“These men dress expensively.”

Vagina glanced at him.

“You're flirting at a time like this?”

“I flirt at all times. It's one of my few remaining virtues.”

She almost smiled.

Almost.

Then the bedroom door blew inward.

Three figures came through the smoke.

Black tactical armor. No insignia. Suppressed carbines. The quiet, expensive confidence of men who had never once had to explain themselves to a parliamentary committee.

Bolo reached for the silver cigarette case.

Vagina saw it.

“Oh, don't.”

"It's sentimental."

"It's empty."

"So am I."

"You're about to be emptier."

He threw it anyway.

The case struck the lead man's weapon, knocked the muzzle aside, and sent a burst of suppressed fire into the ceiling.

Vagina fired twice.

Bolo fired once.

Nobody asked where his gun had come from.

The first man went down.

The second stepped forward.

The third disappeared through the bathroom door.

Bolo looked at Vagina.

"Bath?"

"Later."

"Promise?"

"Survive first."

"Cruel."

She grabbed his robe.

"Move."

They ran.

The hotel's service corridors were a maze of brass pipes, laundry carts, dumbwaiters and the accumulated sins of European luxury.

Vagina led.

Bolo followed.

Nigel followed them both, limping with the grim determination of a government employee who had been promised overtime.

"Why," Nigel wheezed, "is it always you two?"

"Jealous?" Bolo asked.

"Deeply."

"Fair."

They burst into the service kitchen.

A chef screamed.

Vagina pointed her pistol at him.

"Where's the back exit?"

The chef pointed.

Bolo nodded.

"Excellent man."

They vanished through the door.

The chef stood alone in the kitchen, breathing hard.

Then he noticed Nigel.

Nigel pointed after them.

"I'm with them."

The chef stared.

“No.”

“Fair.”

They emerged into a narrow alley behind the hotel.

Rain had begun falling over Zürich.

Cold, silver rain.

The sort of rain that made every expensive coat look like a bad decision.

Vagina leaned against the brick wall and caught her breath.

Bolo stood opposite her.

For several seconds neither spoke.

Then she held up the drive.

“This is fake.”

“Yes.”

“And the real one?”

“Safe.”

“Where?”

“No.”

“Bolo.”

“No.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“I'm going to shoot you.”

"You've said that before."

"I mean it this time."

"You said that before too."

She stepped toward him.

"You swapped the drive before we left the vault."

"Yes."

"You knew Marchetti would follow us."

"Yes."

"You knew he'd send his own people."

"Yes."

"You knew the hotel would be attacked."

Bolo paused.

"Not precisely."

She stared at him.

"You're impossible."

"I've been told."

"By women?"

"Mostly governments."

She came closer.

"So what's the plan?"

Bolo looked past her toward the rain-slick street.

"Tea."

She blinked.

"Tea."

"Tea."

"We're being hunted by a transnational criminal organization."

"Yes."

"Cheltenham may be compromised."

"Probably."

"There are armed men searching this city for us."

"Several."

"And your plan is tea."

Bolo smiled.

"Not ordinary tea."

Twenty minutes later, hiding in a secluded salon above an antique shop, Bolo produced a porcelain teapot and began a meticulous First Flush Darjeeling brew. "In a crisis of cognitive hyper-offloading, friction is the sanctuary of meaning," he explained smoothly, pouring the steaming amber liquid. "We do not run from the Archons; we establish a sovereign biological baseline."

The room smelled of bergamot, cedar and rain.

A little porcelain pot sat between them.

Vagina took a sip, the warmth grounding her neurobiology against the adrenaline fatigue. For a quiet moment, without telemetry or surveillance, their fingers met across the table—a pure, tactile connection in the physical world. But the peace was shattered when three deliberate taps echoed on the door below, and a card was left on the landing: *MIDNIGHT. GENEVA. COME ALONE. BRING THE GIRL.*

"You planned this."

"I plan very little."

"You've been carrying tea?"

"Of course."

"Why?"

"Because panic makes people stupid."

"And tea makes them intelligent?"

"No."

He poured.

"It makes them sit still long enough to notice they're already stupid."

She took the cup.

Steam curled between them.

For the first time since the casino, there were no guns pointed at them.

No drones.

No microphones.

No Nigel.

Just rain against the windows.

Vagina took a sip.

Her expression changed.

"Oh."

Bolo watched her.

"Good?"

"Annoyingly."

“Darjeeling.”

“First flush?”

He smiled.

“Now you're showing off.”

She set down the cup.

“Where did you learn this?”

“Hong Kong.”

“Who taught you?”

“An old woman who ran a tea house near Victoria Peak.”

“What was her name?”

“Never knew.”

“That's convenient.”

“She knew mine.”

Vagina looked at him.

Something in the room shifted.

The joke had ended.

“You really don't work for anyone, do you?”

“No.”

“Not Cheltenham.”

“No.”

“Not Langley.”

“No.”

“Not anyone.”

Bolo shook his head.

“I work for the moment when people who think they're controlling the board discover they're actually pieces.”

She considered that.

“And me?”

“You're neither.”

“What am I?”

He poured her more tea.

“Trouble.”

She smiled.

“That's the first sensible thing you've said all night.”

The tea ceremony continued.

Not formally.

Not according to any rule she knew.

But Bolo treated every movement as though it mattered.

Warm the pot.

Rinse the leaves.

Pour.

Pause.

Pour again.

Nothing hurried.

Nothing wasted.

Vagina watched his hands.

“You're very good at that.”

“At tea?”

“At making people wait.”

Bolo looked up.

“Waiting is useful.”

“Why?”

“Because desire tells you what patience hides.”

She went quiet.

The rain tapped softly against the glass.

He poured again.

This time she didn't drink.

Neither did he.

She reached across the table.

Her fingers touched his.

No static.

No RFID scanner.

No trick.

Just skin.

“Bolo.”

“Yes?”

"If we get out of this..."

He waited.

She leaned closer.

"...I'm going to make you tell me everything."

"Everything?"

"Everything."

"That could take years."

"I have excellent stamina."

His eyebrow rose.

"There she is."

She laughed softly.

Then kissed him.

Not like at the hotel.

Not frantic.

Not fueled by cordite or adrenaline.

Slow.

Deliberate.

A choice.

When they separated, she rested her forehead against his.

"You taste like tea."

"You taste like trouble."

"That's because I am."

"I know."

She kissed him again.

Outside, Zürich continued pretending nothing unusual was happening.

Inside, the tea went cold.

The door downstairs opened.

Both of them froze.

Footsteps.

Three sets.

Maybe four.

Vagina's hand moved toward her pistol.

Bolo caught her wrist.

"No."

She looked at him.

"Why?"

He pointed toward the teapot.

A tiny red light blinked beneath its handle.

She stared.

"Tracker."

"No."

"Listening device?"

"No."

“Then what?”

Bolo smiled.

“Invitation.”

He lifted the teapot.

Turned it upside down.

A small brass key fell onto the table.

Vagina stared at it.

“Where did that come from?”

“Ilse's photograph.”

Her expression hardened.

“The key from the vault.”

“Yes.”

“You had it.”

“Yes.”

“Why didn't you tell me?”

“I wanted to see whether you noticed.”

She stared at him for a long moment.

Then she laughed.

A genuine laugh.

Warm.

Exasperated.

Dangerous.

"You absolute bastard."

"Again."

"I hate you."

"No, you don't."

"No."

She picked up the key.

"Unfortunately."

The footsteps stopped outside.

A knock.

Three slow taps.

Bolo stood.

Vagina raised her pistol.

He crossed the room and opened the door.

Nobody was there.

Only a small lacquered box sat on the landing.

Bolo picked it up.

Inside was a handwritten card.

Four words.

MIDNIGHT. GENEVA. COME ALONE.

Underneath:

Bring the girl.

Vagina read it.

“Girl?”

Bolo looked at her.

“I believe that's you.”

“I'll kill him.”

“Probably.”

“Slowly.”

“Probably.”

She looked toward the rain-dark window.

“Geneva.”

“Yes.”

“Midnight.”

“Yes.”

“Come alone.”

“Apparently.”

She smiled.

“Then we'd better take separate cars.”

Bolo nodded.

“Obviously.”

They looked at each other.

Both knew they would do no such thing.

An hour later, they stood in the alley behind the antique shop.

Vagina had changed into black trousers, boots and a long coat.

Bolo had somehow acquired another dinner jacket.

She stared at him.

"You cannot be serious."

"Geneva deserves standards."

"We're going to a criminal rendezvous."

"Exactly."

She stepped closer and straightened his lapel.

"Your footprint."

"What about it?"

"Still loud."

"I like being heard."

"I know."

She kissed his cheek.

Then his mouth.

Then stepped away.

"Come on, Solo."

He smiled.

"After you, Trusty."

They disappeared into the rain.

Above them, on the roof of the antique shop, a tiny surveillance drone watched them go.

Its camera rotated.

Its encrypted transmitter activated.

A voice came through its speaker.

“Confirm visual.”

A pause.

Then:

“Confirmed.”

Another voice asked:

“Do we proceed?”

The first voice laughed.

“No.”

A third voice came on the line.

Female.

Calm.

Amused.

“Let them go to Geneva.”

The drone banked into the darkness.

“Why?”

“Because,” she said, “they’re going to open the door for us.”

Three streets away, Nigel emerged from a dumpster.

He looked around.

He was alone.

His linen jacket was ruined.

His earpiece was missing.

One shoe was gone.

He held up a stolen umbrella.

“Right,” he said.

Then he noticed the little note pinned to his chest.

He unfolded it.

It contained three words.

STOP FOLLOWING THEM.

Nigel stared at it.

Then at the empty street.

Then back at the note.

“Fair.”

He sighed.

And followed them anyway.

END OF ACT V

Act VI: The Door, the Dead Woman, and the Last Cup of Tea

ACT VI: THE DOOR, THE DEAD WOMAN, AND THE LAST CUP OF TEA

The lake was black glass.

The hotels glowed.

The banks slept behind armored doors while billions of francs moved silently through computers

beneath their floors.

Geneva at midnight was a silent city of black glass and hidden wealth. Above an exclusive restaurant, Baron Lucien Marchetti-Roux waited in a private dining room. On the table lay the black drive, the brass key, and a single porcelain teacup.

He had chosen the room carefully.

One entrance.

Two exits.

No windows that opened.

No visible cameras.

No visible guards.

Which meant, Bolo Solo reflected, that there were probably twelve of each.

Vagina Trusty stood beside him in the corridor.

She wore a black evening dress.

Not the emerald gown.

Something simpler.

More dangerous.

Her hair was loose.

Her pistol was somewhere under the fabric.

Bolo suspected she had three more weapons distributed across her person according to a system that would have made the Swiss Army proud and several Swiss Army officers uncomfortable.

"You look nervous," she whispered.

"I am."

She turned.

“Really?”

“No.”

She smiled.

“Good.”

Bolo adjusted his cuff.

“Tea?”

“Always.”

He produced the little lacquered box.

She stared at it.

“You brought tea to an assassination.”

“I brought tea to a conversation.”

“And if it becomes an assassination?”

“Then it will be very well catered.”

She shook her head.

“You are completely insane.”

“No.”

He looked at her.

“I am merely civilized.”

The door opened.

A waiter stood there.

“Baron Marchetti is expecting you.”

Bolo nodded.

“Then we'd better disappoint him.”

Marchetti-Roux was sitting at the far end of the room.

He looked older than Bolo remembered.

Not physically.

Something had gone wrong behind the eyes.

The immaculate silver hair remained.

The dinner jacket remained.

The hands remained perfectly manicured.

But the arrogance had acquired a tremor.

On the table in front of him sat three objects.

The black drive.

The brass key.

And a porcelain teacup.

Bolo stopped.

Vagina stopped beside him.

Marchetti smiled.

“At last.”

Bolo glanced at the cup.

“You've been studying me.”

“I've been studying everyone.”

“That's rather exhausting.”

"It is."

Marchetti gestured toward the chairs.

"Sit."

They did.

Nobody touched the tea.

For several seconds, nothing happened.

Then Marchetti said:

"Do you know what the key opens?"

"No."

"Ilse's grave."

Vagina's expression changed.

"She's buried in Geneva?"

"No."

Marchetti smiled.

"Ilse isn't dead," Marchetti revealed with a cold, triumphant sneer. He led them to a hidden elevator that descended forty floors beneath the city bedrock—far deeper than any official architectural plan permitted. The doors opened to reveal a staggering underground cavern: the Monadic Library.

"She's alive."

The room became very quiet.

Bolo looked at Vagina.

She had gone completely still.

"No," she said.

Marchetti nodded.

"Yes."

"You watched her die."

"I watched everyone believe she died."

"Why?"

"Because Ilse discovered what I had built."

Bolo leaned back.

"The neural lace."

"The lace was merely the beginning."

Marchetti touched the black drive.

"This contains the architecture for a global intelligence exchange. Not an intelligence agency. Not a government. Something much older."

"Money?"

"Memory."

Vagina frowned.

Marchetti continued.

"Every intelligence service believes secrets are valuable because they are hidden. They are wrong. Secrets are valuable because people remember them."

He tapped his temple.

"The lace allows memory to be extracted, copied, edited, traded."

Bolo's expression hardened.

"And sold."

"Of course."

"To whom?"

"Everyone."

He smiled.

“Governments. Corporations. Criminals. Lovers. Spouses. Journalists. Children.”

Vagina stared at the drive.

“And Ilse?”

“She found the back door.”

“Then why didn't she expose you?”

“She tried.”

Marchetti's smile disappeared.

“She trusted the wrong person.”

Bolo's eyes narrowed.

“Who?”

Marchetti looked directly at Vagina.

“You.”

For the first time that night, Bolo moved quickly.

He stood.

Vagina's pistol appeared.

Marchetti's guards raised their weapons.

And Bolo knocked the teapot off the table.

It shattered.

Tea spread across the carpet.

Everyone froze.

Vagina stared at him.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Improvising.”

Bolo reached into his jacket.

Marchetti smiled.

“Your famous cigarette case?”

“No.”

Bolo produced the little brass key.

Marchetti's smile vanished.

“You don't have that.”

“I do.”

“You took it from the vault.”

“Yes.”

“You don't know what it opens.”

“No.”

Bolo held it up.

“But you do.”

Marchetti looked at Vagina.

Then back at Bolo.

And something in his face finally broke.

“Give it to me.”

Bolo smiled.

“No.”

The lights went out.

Not all of them.

Just the lights above Marchetti.

The room became a theater.

Marchetti stood alone beneath the emergency glow.

Bolo heard the click of weapons being raised.

Then Vagina spoke.

“Down.”

He dropped.

She fired.

Not at Marchetti.

At the sprinkler head.

Water exploded from the ceiling.

The room erupted.

Guards shouted.

Someone fired blindly.

A chair overturned.

Bolo rolled behind the table and pulled Vagina down beside him.

“You planned that.”

“Obviously.”

"You could have warned me."

"I like watching you adapt."

"Cruel."

"Efficient."

They moved together.

Two bodies.

One rhythm.

She fired.

He ducked.

He struck a wrist.

She swept a leg.

A gun skidded across the floor.

Marchetti disappeared through the rear door.

Bolo saw him go.

"Trusty."

"I know."

They ran.

The corridor beyond the dining room ended at a steel elevator.

Marchetti was already inside.

The doors began closing.

Bolo reached them first.

His hand caught the edge.

The elevator stopped.

Marchetti stared at him.

“You should have stayed out of this.”

Bolo stepped inside.

“I tried.”

The doors closed.

Vagina slipped in behind him.

The elevator descended.

Slowly.

Too slowly.

Marchetti stood in the corner.

For the first time, he looked genuinely frightened.

“You don't understand what you've stolen.”

Bolo leaned against the wall.

“That's the advantage of being a freelancer.”

The elevator continued down.

Twenty floors.

Thirty.

Then forty.

Vagina looked at the panel.

“There aren't forty floors.”

"No," Marchetti said.

The elevator continued.

Bolo looked at him.

"Where are we going?"

Marchetti said nothing.

The elevator stopped.

The doors opened.

The room beneath Geneva was enormous.

Not a vault.

Not a bunker.

A library.

Thousands of glass cylinders lined the subterranean walls, each housing a glowing strand of extracted human memory. "This is the ultimate cyber-carceral apparatus," Marchetti proclaimed. "We do not merely monitor human action; we extract, copy, and monetize the Fourier frequency spectrum of human consciousness. Every secret, every trauma, every prayer—commodified and stored."

Each contained a tiny strip of glowing material.

Memory.

Bolo understood immediately.

Every cylinder was labeled.

Names.

Dates.

Places.

Wars.

Scandals.

Affairs.

Deaths.

Births.

Confessions.

History itself, reduced to inventory.

Vagina whispered:

“Jesus.”

Marchetti walked forward.

“Humanity has spent centuries writing history down.”

He spread his arms.

“We simply decided to store it properly.”

Bolo looked at the cylinders.

“And Ilse?”

Marchetti pointed.

At the far end of the chamber stood one glass room.

Inside it was a woman.

Older than the photograph.

Older than the memory.

But unmistakable.

Ilse Brandt.

At the center of the chamber, encased in a climate-controlled glass sphere, sat Ilse Brandt—alive, aged, but watchful. "He built the prison," she said, looking directly at Vagina. "I built the back door. The key doesn't unlock a safe; it engages the mechanical master reset."

She looked at Bolo.

Then Vagina.

And smiled.

"About fucking time."

Marchetti stopped breathing.

"Ilse."

She ignored him.

Her eyes remained on Vagina.

"You've gotten better."

Vagina stared.

"You know me?"

"I recruited you."

Silence.

"No," Vagina whispered.

Ilse smiled sadly.

"Not directly."

She touched the glass.

"Your first liaison assignment. The one you thought was a routine threat assessment."

Vagina's face went white.

"It was you."

"Yes."

"You've been watching me."

"For years."

Bolo looked between them.

"Would someone like to explain the part where this becomes less horrifying?"

Ilse laughed.

"I like him."

"So do I," Vagina said.

"That's unfortunate."

Ilse turned toward the central console.

"Marchetti built the system."

She gestured toward the cylinders.

"I built the escape route."

She touched the brass key.

"That's what this opens."

Bolo held it up.

"The key opens the system."

"No."

Ilse smiled.

"The key opens the door."

She pressed her palm against the glass.

A lock clicked.

A panel opened in the floor.

Inside was a small mechanical switch.

Old.

Simple.

Almost absurdly ordinary.

Bolo stared at it.

“All this.”

He pointed at the memory vault.

“And that's the master control?”

Ilse nodded.

“Sometimes the oldest technology is the one nobody bothers to hack.”

Vagina looked at him.

“What does it do?”

Ilse answered.

“It deletes everything.”

Marchetti lunged.

Vagina fired.

He fell.

Not dead.

Just wounded.

He looked at the switch.

"No."

Bolo walked toward it.

Marchetti's voice cracked.

"You don't know what you're destroying."

Bolo stopped.

"No."

He looked around the chamber.

"I know exactly what I'm destroying."

He looked at Vagina.

She looked back.

For once, there was no argument.

No cleverness.

No operational doctrine.

Just a choice.

Bolo reached for the switch.

Marchetti whispered:

"You'll erase history."

"No."

Bolo smiled.

Marchetti lunged to stop them, but Vagina fired a single, surgical round into his shoulder, dropping him to his knees. Bolo stepped to the primary analog console, inserted the small brass key into a heavy mechanical iron switch, and turned it. "I am not destroying history," Bolo declared into the sudden silence. "I am erasing your corrupt, stolen copy."

"I'm erasing your copy."

He pulled it.

The chamber went dark.

Every cylinder went black.

One by one.

Then all at once.

A deep mechanical hum rolled through the room.

Glass shattered.

Servers died.

Lights vanished.

A massive electromagnetic pulse surged through the deep facility. One by one, the glass cylinders went dark as the extracted memories dissolved back into the un-renderable zero-point vacuum of Bythos and Sige. The servers died, the surveillance feeds went dark, and the entire Archonic database dissolved into absolute, un-monitored stillness.

Marchetti stared.

Then laughed.

A broken, disbelieving laugh.

"You have no idea what you've done."

Bolo looked at him.

"Actually, I do."

Vagina stepped beside him.

"And?"

Bolo took her hand.

"Tea."

She stared at him.

Then laughed.

“Tea.”

They found Ilse in the dark.

She walked slowly.

Her hand was warm in Vagina's.

“You can go,” Ilse said.

“Where?”

“Anywhere.”

“That sounds suspicious.”

“It is.”

Ilse looked at Bolo.

“You're going to ask me who else knows.”

“Yes.”

“Everyone who mattered is dead.”

“And everyone who doesn't?”

“Will spend the rest of their lives wondering whether they're on the list.”

Bolo nodded.

“Good.”

Ilse smiled.

“You're a strange man.”

“So I'm told.”

She looked at Vagina.

“Don't let him become respectable.”

Vagina squeezed her hand.

“I wouldn't dream of it.”

By dawn, Geneva was beginning to wake.

The lake turned silver.

Bakers opened shutters.

Taxis moved through the empty streets.

The world's intelligence agencies began discovering that certain servers no longer existed.

Certain files were gone.

Certain blackmail archives were suddenly empty.

There would be inquiries.

Investigations.

Denials.

Resignations.

Several parliamentary committees would use the phrase *unprecedented systems failure* while privately drinking heavily.

Cheltenham would deny everything.

Langley would deny knowing Nigel.

Nigel would deny having been in Geneva.

Nobody would believe him.

Bolo and Vagina sat beside the lake.

Between them sat the little porcelain teapot.

Three cups.

One for Bolo.

One for Vagina.

And one untouched.

For Ilse.

She had disappeared before sunrise.

No farewell.

No explanation.

Just gone.

Bolo poured.

Vagina watched the steam rise.

"Do you think we did the right thing?"

"No."

She looked at him.

"No?"

"I think we did the necessary thing."

"That's different."

"Yes."

She took the cup.

“So what happens now?”

Bolo looked across the water.

“Nothing.”

She smiled.

“You're incapable of nothing.”

“I can learn.”

“Can you?”

“No.”

She leaned against his shoulder.

For a while, neither spoke.

The city brightened around them.

Then Vagina said:

“I've got one question.”

“Only one?”

“For now.”

“What is it?”

She looked at him.

“Where are we going?”

Bolo smiled.

“South.”

“How far?”

“Far enough.”

“Why?”

He lifted his cup.

“There's a little tea house in the mountains.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Another mysterious old woman?”

“Probably.”

“You've been there?”

“Once.”

“And?”

“She cheated at cards.”

Vagina laughed.

“Did she win?”

“Of course.”

“Did you go back?”

Bolo looked at her.

“I'm going now.”

She understood.

Slowly, she smiled.

“Then we'd better pack.”

A black sedan waited at the curb.

Nigel stood beside it.

His suit was ruined.

His hair was wet.

He had somehow acquired a bandage around his head.

Bolo stopped.

“Nigel.”

“Solo.”

“You're alive.”

“Apparently.”

“Where did you get the car?”

Nigel shrugged.

“Borrowed it.”

“From whom?”

“Swiss government.”

“Do they know?”

“No.”

“Excellent.”

Vagina opened the rear door.

Nigel stared at her.

“You're coming?”

She smiled.

“No.”

Nigel nodded.

“Good.”

She got in.

Bolo followed.

Nigel closed the door.

Then hesitated.

“Where are we going?”

Bolo looked at Vagina.

She looked at him.

Then she smiled.

“South.”

Nigel sighed.

“Of course.”

He got behind the wheel.

The car pulled away from the lake.

Geneva disappeared behind them.

The road opened.

The mountains waited.

Three weeks later, a package arrived at an address in London.

Inside was a porcelain teacup.

A sprig of dried lavender.

And a note.

Dry-cleaned, pressed, and returned.

Underneath, in smaller handwriting:

With compliments.

No signature.

None was necessary.

Across the Channel, in a little house overlooking a valley no intelligence service had ever bothered to monitor, Bolo Solo poured tea.

Vagina Trusty sat opposite him.

She had abandoned the emerald gown.

She had abandoned the Armani.

She had even abandoned the gun.

For the moment.

The morning was quiet.

The tea was perfect.

Bolo lifted his cup.

“To inter-agency cooperation.”

Vagina raised hers.

“To kinetic diplomacy.”

They touched porcelain.

A tiny, delicate sound.

Like a bell.

Like a trigger.

Like the beginning of another very bad idea.

Bolo looked at her.

She looked back.

Neither of them smiled.

Then both did.

Outside, somewhere beyond the mountains, a telephone began ringing.

They ignored it.

It rang again.

They ignored that too.

On the third ring, Vagina reached across the table and pulled the receiver from its cradle.

“Yes?”

A voice on the other end spoke rapidly.

Her expression changed.

Bolo watched her.

“What is it?”

She covered the receiver.

“There's a problem.”

He smiled.

“Of course there is.”

She listened.

Then looked at him.

“Apparently someone has stolen the Queen.”

Bolo sighed.

“Tea?”

She put down the receiver.

“Tea.”

He poured.

And somewhere, very far away, Nigel the NSA rotational asset walked into a lake.

Three weeks later, in a quiet cottage nestled high in the Swiss Alps, far beyond the reach of corporate algorithms or intelligence agency telemetry, Bolo Solo poured two fresh cups of First Flush Darjeeling. Vagina Trusty sat across from him, her posture relaxed, her eyes clear, and her mind fully air-gapped from the digital spectacle. Outside, the mountain air was clean, silent, and un-networked—the ultimate sanctuary for sovereign monads.