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The Constrained (v2)

Part One

The water scalded her hands red, and Àrnnav kept scrubbing.

Merchant silk, soft as sin, stained with something the color of wine. The woman who owned this dress would never see the laundry house—would never smell the lye and sweat, never hear the coughing that rattled through the workers like a shared disease, never know that the girl washing her finery had arms marked with burns from water hot enough to kill what lived in rich people's filth.

Àrnnav scrubbed harder. The stain faded. Her skin didn't.

The laundry house was a long room of copper basins and wooden racks, steam rising to a ceiling black with mold, light filtering through windows so grimy they turned noon to dusk. Twelve women worked the basins—thirteen if you counted old Hòldanìn, who was too sick to scrub but too poor to stop coming. They worked in silence mostly, saving their breath for the labor, their voices for the complaints they muttered on the walk home.

Àrnnav's hands knew the work without her mind's involvement. Scrub, wring, hang. Scrub, wring, hang. The rhythm of constraint, the mathematics of survival: fourteen hours of labor for enough coin to feed two people badly, house them worse, and keep them one illness away from the street.

"Shift's almost done." Hòldanìn, at the next basin, nodded toward the grey light filtering through the single window. Her voice was wet with the cough that would kill her before winter. "You staying for second?"

"Can't. I have—" Årnnav caught herself. "Things."

Hòldanìn's face showed nothing, but her eyes flickered with the knowledge that everyone in the Hand Quarter carried: *things* meant work that paid better, cost more, and couldn't be discussed. Half the laundry workers took *things* jobs on the side. The wages here weren't enough to live on—they were designed that way, calibrated precisely to keep the constrained desperate enough to take whatever other work presented itself.

The system was elegant in its cruelty. Årnnav had learned that at fifteen, when the Szòvòtar had looked at her pattern and written down the future the city had chosen for her: *Tòvismah Vèszttar*. Thorn-marked. Maze-path. The pattern of difficult connections and complicated journeys, of someone destined to hurt and be hurt, to wander without finding home.

One week since that Binding. One week since she'd stood in the Pattern House beside wealthy girls receiving Road and Pact, Tower and Crown, while she received Thorn.

The pattern didn't lie. The pattern just told you what kind of trap you were walking into.

"Be careful with your *things*," Hòldanìn said. "Wardens have been moving through the Quarter. Something's stirred them up."

Årnnav wrung out the silk, hung it to dry. Her hands were trembling—not from the heat but from what waited after. The *things*. The work that would either save her brother or bury them both.

The room she shared with Fèincal was smaller than a rich man's closet.

One bed, one table, one window that looked out on an alley where rats conducted their own commerce in shadows. The walls were thin enough to hear Tànìt the drunk singing three doors down, thin enough to feel the cold that crept through gaps no landlord would ever repair. The floor was bare wood, warped by years of damp, and the ceiling had a stain in the corner that grew larger every time it rained.

Home. Such as it was.

Fèincal was waiting when she arrived, hunched over the table with a stub of charcoal and a scrap of paper, practicing the letters she paid too much for him to learn. Eleven years old, thin as a rail, with their mother's dark eyes and none of their mother's defeat.

He looked up when she entered, and his face did that thing it always did—lit up, then shuttered, like he was afraid to show too much hope.

"You're late." His voice was carefully neutral. "The lesson book says I should practice for an hour every day, but I finished the exercises and you weren't here."

"Work ran long." Àrnnav shed her coat, winced as the motion pulled at the burns on her forearms. The skin there was a map of her labor—red welts overlapping old scars, the geography of survival written in damaged flesh. "Show me what you learned."

He showed her. Letters that wobbled but were recognizable, words spelled badly but spelled, a whole sentence that said *I am Fèincal and I will be Bound next year*. He was proud of that sentence. He'd insisted on learning to write it first.

"Four years," Àrnnav corrected gently. "Four years until Binding. That's a long time."

"Not that long." His face did something complicated—hope and fear tangled together, the face of a child who still believed in things. "The Szòvòtar will see my pattern. He'll know what I'm meant to be."

He'll write down whatever keeps you trapped, Àrnnav thought. Whatever makes sure you stay useful to people who will never know your name. Unless I find a way to give you something better.

"We should eat," she said instead. "I have bread. And there might be cheese left from yesterday."

They ate. The bread was stale, the cheese more memory than substance, but Fèincal didn't complain. He never complained. That was the worst part—watching him accept the scraps of a constrained life as if they were all anyone could hope for, as if the world had always been this small and always would be.

After dinner, after the lesson review, after Fèincal fell asleep in the bed they shared, Àrnnav sat at the table and counted their money.

Seventeen coins. Enough for three more days of food, or one more week of Fèincal's lessons, or half a month's rent. Not enough for all three. Never enough for all three.

She thought about the *things* work. About the man who offered it, and what he wanted, and what it would cost her to say yes.

Then she thought about Fèincal's face when he talked about his Binding, the hope there, the belief that the pattern would show him who he was meant to be.

She put on her coat and slipped out into the Hand Quarter night.

Vèircal conducted his business in a basement that smelled of mold and ambition.

The stairs down were slick with something Àrnnav didn't want to identify, the walls close enough to touch both at once, the darkness thick enough to taste. At the bottom, a door that looked like it had been kicked in more than once, and beyond it, a room lit by oil lamps that turned everyone's face the color of old bruises.

Vèircal was waiting.

He was older than Àrnnav—thirty-five, maybe more—with the kind of face that had been rearranged by violence and the kind of eyes that had watched the rearranging happen to others. Pattern-constrained like everyone in his employ, but he'd found the angles in the system, the gaps where a clever man could build something that almost resembled power. He sat behind a desk made of stacked crates, and when he smiled at her entrance, the smile had too many teeth.

"Àrnnav." His voice was warm, welcoming, the voice of a man who'd practiced making threats sound like invitations. "My favorite new talent. I was starting to think you'd lost your nerve."

"I was working."

"At the laundry? Yes, I know. Fourteen hours today—you must be exhausted." He gestured to a chair that looked like it might collapse. "Sit. Let's talk about something more profitable."

She sat. The chair held.

Three other people waited in the basement's shadows—runners, thieves, the kind of desperate that Vèircal traded in. Àrnnav felt their eyes on her, assessing, calculating. Fresh meat. New blood. Competition for whatever scraps the boss was offering.

"Small jobs have been good," Vèircal said, addressing them all but watching Àrnnav. "Courier work, lookout work, the occasional redistribution of property from those who have too much to those who have the skills to take it. But I have something bigger now. Something that pays enough to change lives."

He paused for effect. Àrnnav hated that he was good at this, hated that she was leaning forward despite herself.

"Merchant City. A house on the hill. Documents that someone wants very badly." His eyes found Àrnnav's, held them. "I need someone who can pass. Someone young, harmless-looking. Someone who doesn't carry the marks of this life on their face yet."

The other runners shifted. They carried their marks—scars, tattoos, the particular weathering that came from years of Hand Quarter survival. Àrnnav was young. Àrnnav was new. Àrnnav still looked like she might belong somewhere else.

"What house?" she asked.

"Does it matter?"

"I won't steal from my own kind."

Vèircai laughed, and the sound echoed off the basement walls like something dying. "Your *own kind*? You don't have a kind, girl. You have a pattern—Thorn, wasn't it? Difficult connections. Painful paths. Your own kind is anyone who shares your pain, and the people in Merchant City don't know what pain is."

He stood, moved around the desk, and Àrnnav felt the weight of his attention like hands pressing down on her shoulders. He stopped close enough that she could smell him—wine and sweat and something sharper, something that might have been cruelty.

"The house belongs to the Còcalnòc family," he said. "Merchants. Three generations of purchased respectability, built on lies they don't even know they're living." His smile widened. "But you don't care about that. You care about your brother. About the lessons you can barely afford. About the Binding that's coming in four years, and what pattern he'll receive, and whether you can give him any kind of future at all."

Àrnnav's hands clenched in her lap. She hadn't told him about Fèincal. She'd been careful not to tell him anything.

"I do my research," Vèircai said, reading her expression. "I know everything about the people who work for me. Their families, their debts, their weaknesses." He leaned closer. "Your brother's Binding will be conducted by whatever Szòvòtar the Pattern House assigns. But assignments can be influenced. Readings can be... interpreted. A helpful word from someone with connections could make sure little Fèincal gets every advantage his pattern allows."

"And if I don't take the job?"

"Then I wish you well with the laundry." He stepped back, his expression cooling. "But my offer has an expiration. Tomorrow night, there'll be a delivery at the Threshold Market. Be there with an answer, or don't bother coming to me again."

He dismissed her with a wave, already turning to the other runners, already moving on to the next piece of business.

Àrnnav climbed the slick stairs back into the Hand Quarter night, her mind racing. The Còcalnòc family. She knew that name—not from the Hand Quarter, but from somewhere older, somewhere buried in the fragments of memory she had of her mother.

Her mother, who had worked at the Pattern House before she died. Her mother, who had known things she never spoke about. Her mother, who had died of a fever that came on very suddenly, three years ago, leaving Àrnnav alone with a brother to raise and questions she'd learned not to ask.

The Còcalnòc name was connected to those questions. She was certain of it.

She just didn't know how.

The box was where it had always been—under the loose floorboard, beneath the bed, hidden in the darkness where no one would think to look.

Àrnnav waited until she was sure Fèincal was deeply asleep, his breathing slow and steady, his face peaceful in a way it never was when he was awake. Then she eased out of bed, knelt on the cold floor, and pried up the board.

The box was small—wood, unvarnished, held together by rust and memory. Her mother had shown it to her once, when Àrnnav was twelve and asking too many questions about why they were poor, why they were constrained, why the Weaver had made them this way.

"The Weaver didn't make us anything," her mother had said, her voice hollow with a fear Àrnnav didn't understand. "The Weaver just sees. It's the Szòvòtarar who decide what to write down."

Then she'd opened the box and shown Àrnnav a single piece of paper—a note in cramped handwriting, names and numbers that meant nothing to a twelve-year-old.

"If anything happens to me," her mother had said, "keep this hidden. Don't show anyone. Don't tell anyone. Promise me."

Àrnnav had promised. Three years later, her mother was dead of a fever that came on very suddenly, and the box had stayed hidden, and the promise had stayed kept.

Until now.

She lifted the lid. The note was still there, yellowed with age, the handwriting cramped and hurried. But now, with older eyes, with the Còcalnòc name fresh in her mind, she read it differently:

Adjusted patterns—Còcalnòc, Vas-Eròcal, Szòvòtarfhi—amounts paid—1000, 750, 2000—Szòvòtar Hàlmahtfì conducting. Records kept in secondary ledger, location: [illegible]. If discovered: deny, destroy, silence.

And at the bottom, in different handwriting—darker, more deliberate:

Szèrlaimhnav Cèresnavìn—silenced. Y.453.

Her mother's name. Her mother's death. Written like a ledger entry, like a transaction, like the closing of an account.

Y.453. Three years ago. The year her mother died.

Àrnnav's hands were shaking so badly the paper rattled. Five hundred coins—no, that wasn't here, but she could imagine it. Her mother's silence purchased for less than a rich family's pattern adjustment. Her mother's life worth less than a lie.

The Còcalnòc family. The documents Vèircai wanted.

This wasn't coincidence. This was connection.

And tomorrow night, she had a choice to make.

Part Two

The Threshold Market sprawled across the boundary between Shadow City and the respectable districts, a no-man's-land where commerce happened in the spaces the law couldn't quite reach. Vèircai's delivery was at the eastern edge, in a warehouse

that had been abandoned so many times it had developed its own ecosystem of squatters and shadows.

Àrnnav arrived early. She wanted to see who else was watching.

Three of Vèircal's runners were already there—positioned at exits, trying to look casual, failing. Two men she didn't recognize loitered near a tea vendor, their attention a little too focused on the warehouse entrance. And at the edge of the crowd, moving with the particular purposefulness that marked people who didn't belong, a woman in a Warden's coat.

Òràhd Vàscalìn. Àrnnav didn't know the name yet, but she knew the type—pattern-marked around the eyes, authority in every step, the kind of person who could destroy a constrained life with a single word.

The Wardens were watching Vèircal. That meant the job was more dangerous than he'd admitted.

That meant she should walk away.

She didn't walk away.

"You came." Vèircal's smile was sharper tonight, his eyes brighter. "I knew you would. Your pattern told me so."

"My pattern tells me lots of things. Doesn't mean I listen."

"Clever girl. That's why I like you." He gestured her deeper into the warehouse, away from the runners at the exits, into a corner where the shadows were thick enough to hide what happened in them. "The job is simple. The Còcalnòc house, tomorrow night—Pattern Day eve. The family will be distracted with preparations. You go in through the east window, second floor. Find the home office. Find the strongbox. Take the documents inside."

"What documents?"

"Papers. Records. The kind of thing that has value to people who pay me." His eyes glittered in the dim light. "You don't need to know more than that."

"I think I do." Àrnnav kept her voice steady, but her heart was hammering. "I found something. In my mother's things. A note about adjusted patterns. About families who

bought their children's futures from corrupt Szòvòtarar." She paused. "The Còcalnòc name was on that note."

Vèircai went very still.

"Your mother," he said slowly. "Szèrlaimhnav. The Pattern House assistant."

"You knew her?"

"I knew of her. Everyone in a certain business knew of her—the woman who kept records, who saw things, who died before she could speak about what she'd seen." His smile had changed, become something harder and more calculating. "I didn't know she had a daughter in my employ."

"She was killed for what she knew. Wasn't she?"

"People die for all sorts of reasons."

"She was *killed*. Silenced. There was a note—"

"Stop." Vèircai's hand closed around her wrist, tight enough to hurt. "Stop talking. Stop thinking. Stop asking questions that could get you buried beside her."

His face was close to hers now, and for the first time, Àrnnav saw something in his eyes that wasn't calculation or cruelty. It was fear.

"The documents in that house are worth more than you can imagine," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Worth enough that people have killed for them, yes. Worth enough that people will kill again to get them or keep them hidden. Your mother died because she knew what was in those documents. If you're smart—if you want to live—you'll take them without reading them, bring them to me without asking questions, and forget that any of this ever happened."

"And if I'm not smart?"

His grip tightened. "Then I'll find someone who is. And you'll discover exactly how much your brother's future is worth to the people who influence Bindings."

He released her. Stepped back. His smile returned, but it was a mask now, a performance.

"Tomorrow night. The east window. The documents." He turned away. "Don't disappoint me, Àrnnav. I have such hopes for our partnership."

She went to the Còcalnòc house at dawn.

Not to break in—that would be stupid, suicidal, everything Vèircai had warned against. Just to look. To see what she was dealing with. To find a way into a world that had never wanted her.

The house sat on the edge of Temple Hill like a declaration of success—sandstone and iron, three stories of purchased respectability. A courtyard visible through the gate. Windows that caught the morning light and threw it back like coins. The architecture of wealth, built to intimidate people like her.

Àrnnav found a spot across the street, in the shadow of a bakery's awning, and watched.

Servants came and went. A carriage arrived, discharged packages, departed. Through an upper window, she caught glimpses of movement—people preparing for Pattern Day, living their comfortable lives, unaware that anything was wrong.

Then the front door opened, and a girl stepped out.

About Àrnnav's age. Dark hair, fine clothes, the particular softness that came from never having to scrub your own hands raw. She moved across the courtyard with the unconscious grace of someone who'd never had to watch where she stepped, never had to make herself small to avoid notice.

Àrnnav recognized her.

The Pattern Day ceremony. One week ago. They'd stood in the same line, received their Bindings from the same Szòvòtar—but the rich girl had received Road and Pact, futures of travel and alliance, while Àrnnav had received Thorn.

Except, if the documents in that house said what she thought they said, the rich girl's pattern was as much a lie as everything else.

The girl—Fèinnav, she thought the name was—paused at the gate. Looked out at the street. For a moment, her eyes seemed to find Àrnnav's position, seemed to focus on the shadow where she was hiding.

Then someone called from inside, and she turned away, and the moment passed.

Àrnnav slipped back into the crowds of Temple Hill, her mind churning. The rich girl looked worried. Frightened, even. That wasn't the face of someone whose life was comfortable and certain.

That was the face of someone who'd discovered something wrong.

The second time she saw Vèircal's people, she knew she was being watched.

They were good—Hand Quarter good, trained to blend into crowds and watch without being seen. But Àrnnav had grown up in those same streets, learned the same skills, developed the same instincts. She spotted the first one near the market, the second outside the laundry house, the third waiting at the corner of her own street.

Vèircal didn't trust her. Fair enough—she didn't trust him either.

But his people were between her and her brother.

She took the long way home, through alleys she'd known since childhood, through gaps in walls and shortcuts across rooftops. By the time she reached the tenement, she'd lost two of the watchers and confused the third. Small victories. The kind that wouldn't matter if Vèircal decided she was more trouble than she was worth.

Fèincal was waiting, his face pale with worry.

"There were men," he said. "Outside. They looked at me through the window."

"I know. It's nothing." She pulled him close, felt his thin body trembling against hers. "Just some people I owe money to. It's fine. Everything's fine."

"It doesn't feel fine."

"I know. But trust me. I'm going to fix it."

She held him until he stopped shaking, until the tension in his shoulders eased, until he pulled away with the embarrassed dignity of an eleven-year-old trying to be brave.

"I have lessons tomorrow," he said. "The teacher says I'm almost ready to start on numbers."

"That's good. That's really good." She touched his face, memorized it in case—in case things went wrong. "Go to your lessons in the morning. Stay with your teacher until I come for you. Don't talk to anyone else. Can you do that?"

"Àrn, what's happening?"

"Just some grown-up things. Complicated things. I'm handling it."

"Is it about Mother?"

The question hit her like a fist. Fèincal never talked about their mother. He'd been eight when she died—old enough to remember, young enough that the memories had softened into something bearable.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you look like she did, sometimes. Right before—" He stopped. "Right before she got sick."

Sick. That's what they'd told him. That their mother had gotten sick, that fever had taken her quickly, that these things happened and you had to keep living anyway.

"It's connected," Àrnnav said finally. "To what happened to her. I'm trying to find out—" She couldn't finish. Couldn't explain murder and conspiracy to an eleven-year-old. "I'm trying to make things right."

"Be careful."

"I will."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Another lie. The kind that parents told children, that sisters told brothers, that the desperate told the people they loved.

She watched him climb into bed, watched him close his eyes, watched the worry fade from his face as sleep took him.

Then she pulled out her mother's note and read it again, and again, and again, until she'd memorized every word of her own family's death warrant.

Part Three

Pattern Day eve. The night the city prepared to celebrate the system that sorted and defined them.

Àrnnav moved through Merchant City like a ghost, dressed in clothes she'd stolen from the laundry—servant's dress, plain but clean, the kind of thing that made you invisible to people who didn't look at servants anyway. The streets were busy with last-minute preparations, deliveries and decorations, the wealthy putting on their finest masks for the holiday.

No one looked at her twice.

The Còcalnòc house was lit from within, warm and golden, the sounds of dinner drifting through closed windows. She circled to the east side, found the window she'd identified, and waited for the household to settle.

An hour. Two. The lights dimmed. The servants finished their work. The family retired.

Àrnnav climbed.

The drainpipe was old iron, cold under her fingers, slick with the evening's damp. She'd climbed worse—tenement walls, warehouse scaffolding, the precarious architecture of Hand Quarter survival. But this was different. This was Merchant City, where the buildings were taller and the falls were fatal.

She was halfway up when she heard the footsteps below.

A guard. Night watchman. Moving along the house's perimeter with a lantern that threw shadows across the courtyard like reaching hands.

Àrnnav froze. Pressed herself against the wall. Tried to become stone, shadow, nothing at all.

The footsteps passed. The lantern light faded.

She climbed.

The window was cracked open—rich people's carelessness, the assumption that no one would dare intrude on their purchased safety. She eased it wider, listening for sounds inside. Nothing. Just the quiet of a sleeping house, the distant tick of a clock, the settling of old timbers.

She slipped through.

The hallway was dark, lit only by moonlight through windows at either end. She waited for her eyes to adjust, for the shapes to resolve into furniture and doorways, for the map in her head to match the reality around her.

Second door on the right. The home office.

She moved. Silent. Careful. Every step a negotiation with the floorboards, every breath a calculated risk. Three years of Hand Quarter survival had taught her how to move without being noticed. Tonight, she'd find out if those lessons were enough.

The office door was closed. Locked.

She'd expected that. The picks Vèircai had given her were crude but functional—she'd practiced on every lock she could find, learned the language of mechanisms, the patience that came from knowing failure meant hungry nights.

Click. Click. *Click*.

The door swung open.

Inside: a desk, a cabinet, bookshelves lined with ledgers. And in the corner, a strongbox that practically announced *important things here*.

She crossed to it, knelt, pulled out the picks again.

This lock was better than the door's. More complex, more resistant. Her fingers cramped as she worked, sweat beading on her forehead despite the room's chill.

Click. Click.

A sound from the hallway. Footsteps. Coming closer.

Àrnnav's hands went still. She held her breath, listened.

The footsteps paused outside the door.

Silence.

Then they moved on, fading down the hall toward the stairs.

She exhaled. Returned to the lock.

Click.

The strongbox opened.

Inside: papers. Dozens of them, organized into folders, labeled with dates and names. She rifled through them, looking for—

Còcal Còcalnòc—purchased Ùtcai/Szèrrav—actual Tòvismah/Cèresztàhd. Payment: 3000. Szòvòtar Hàlmahtfhì conducting.

Vízrav Còcalnòc—purchased Ùtcai/Szèrrav—actual Thòronnav/Sèvcal. Payment: 2500. Szòvòtar Hàlmahtfhì conducting.

Fèinnav Còcalnòc—purchased Ùtcai/Szèrrav—actual pending. Payment confirmed.

Generation after generation of purchased patterns. The whole family, three deep, built on lies about who they were.

And there, near the bottom of the stack, in a separate folder marked *RESOLVED*:

Silenced: Szèrlaimhnav Cèresnavìn. Pattern House assistant. Knowledge of secondary ledger. Method: induced fever. Cost: 500. Authorized: Szòvòtar Hàlmahtfhì.

Five hundred coins. That was what her mother's life had been worth. Less than a pattern adjustment. Less than a wealthy family's lie.

Àrnnav's hands were shaking as she gathered the documents. Proof. This was proof—not just of fraud, but of murder. Decades of corruption, and her mother's death recorded like a line item in—

"Don't move."

She spun.

Fèinnav Còcalnòc stood in the doorway, a candle in one hand and a fire iron in the other. Her face was pale in the flickering light, her eyes wide, her whole body vibrating with a fear that Àrnnav recognized.

The fear of someone who'd discovered something they couldn't unsee.

"I know you," Fèinnav said. "From the Binding. You were—you received Thorn."

"And you received Road." Àrnnav didn't move, didn't lower the documents. "Except you didn't, did you? Your father paid for that pattern. Just like he paid for his, and his father paid for his."

The candle trembled in Fèinnav's hand.

"You're here to steal the ledger."

"I'm here to find out who killed my mother." Àrnnav held up the page with her mother's name. "Szèrlaimhnav. Silenced. Five hundred coins. Does that mean anything to you?"

Fèinnav's face went whiter still.

"I didn't—I didn't know about that. I only found out about the patterns last week. My friend has been investigating, and I—" She stopped. Took a breath. "Who sent you?"

"Does it matter?"

"It matters if I'm going to decide whether to scream for the guards."

The fire iron was still raised. Fèinnav's arms were shaking, but she hadn't backed down. Hadn't run. Hadn't called for help.

That meant something. Àrnnav wasn't sure what.

"A man named Vèircal," she said. "He wanted the documents. He said they were worth money to people who pay him."

"Vèircal." Fèinnav said the name like she was testing it. "I don't know him. But I know who he works for—or at least, I can guess. There are people who've been trying to expose the pattern fraud for years. And there are people who've been killing to keep it hidden."

"Which people sent him?"

"I don't know." The fire iron lowered slightly. "But I know that whatever you do with those documents, people will die. Either the people who've been silenced will finally be heard, or the people who are trying to speak will be silenced too."

"Like my mother."

"Like your mother." Fèinnav's voice cracked. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. I didn't know any of this until—"

A sound from somewhere in the house. Both girls froze.

Footsteps on the stairs. Coming up.

"The night guard," Fèinnav whispered. "He makes rounds every hour. If he finds you here—"

"Then help me." Àrnnav stuffed the documents into her dress, moved toward the window. "Cover for me. Tell him you heard a noise, you came to investigate, you found nothing."

"Why should I help you?"

"Because your pattern is a lie, and my mother died protecting the truth about it, and maybe—" She paused at the window. "Maybe you want to be better than the people who bought your future."

The footsteps were closer. A light appeared at the top of the stairs.

Fèinnav made a decision. She set down the candle, stepped into the hallway, and called out: "It's me, Vàros. I heard a noise—I think it was just the wind. Go back to your post."

A muffled response. The light retreated.

Àrnnav was already on the drainpipe, descending into darkness.

She was three streets away when she realized she was being followed.

Not the night guard. Not Fèinnav. Someone else—someone who moved through the Merchant City shadows with the practiced ease of someone who'd been doing this longer than she'd been alive.

Vèircai's people. They'd been watching the house.

She ran.

Through alleys and side streets, across plazas and through market stalls shuttered for the night. The documents pressed against her chest, evidence of murder and fraud, worth more than her life and worth dying to protect.

Her pursuer was good. Hand Quarter good. Every time she thought she'd lost them, they appeared again—a shadow at a corner, a footstep behind her, the sense of being watched that never faded.

She ducked into a temple alcove, pressed herself against the cold stone, and waited.

Silence. The city holding its breath.

Then a voice from the darkness: "You can stop running. I'm not here to hurt you."

A woman. Older. Wearing a Warden's coat.

Òràhd Vàscalìn stepped out of the shadows, her hands raised, her expression carefully neutral.

"We need to talk," she said. "About what you found in that house, and about who's going to die if you make the wrong choice."

Part Four

The Warden took her to a tea house that stayed open all night for the Pattern Day crowds.

Not arrested. Not dragged. Just... taken, with a grip on her elbow that was firm enough to be a command and gentle enough to be a request. Àrnnav went because she didn't have a choice, because Vèircai's people were still out there, because the documents against her chest were burning with urgency and she didn't know what to do with them.

The tea house was crowded with revelers—people celebrating the holiday, drinking and laughing and living their comfortable lives. Vàscalìn led her to a table in the corner, away from the noise, and ordered tea neither of them would touch.

"Àrnnav Vonalnòc." The Warden used her Lineless designation, the technical term for someone without family name or registration. "Pattern-constrained. Recently Bound. Tòvismaht Vèshtar—Thorn-marked, Maze-path." She set her seal on the table between them. "You've stolen documents from a merchant family that implicate them in pattern fraud going back three generations. You're carrying evidence that could destroy half the wealthy houses in Fonváros."

"I'm carrying evidence that someone murdered my mother."

"Yes." Vàscalìn's expression didn't change. "That too."

Silence. The tea cooled between them.

"What do you want?" Àrnnav asked.

"I want to know what you're planning to do with what you've found. I want to know who sent you and why. And I want to offer you a deal."

"What kind of deal?"

"Information for protection." The Warden leaned forward. "You tell me who hired you to steal those documents, you tell me what else you know about the pattern fraud network, and I make sure you survive the next twenty-four hours."

"That's not much of a deal."

"It's the only deal you're going to get." Vàscalìn's voice hardened. "Right now, three different groups want what you're carrying. The reformers who want to expose the fraud. The families who want to keep it hidden. And the criminals who want to use it for leverage. By morning, at least one of them will try to take it from you. Probably violently. Definitely permanently."

"And you? Which group do you belong to?"

"I belong to the Wardens. My job is to maintain pattern order—which means I don't care about exposing fraud or hiding it. I care about making sure the chaos stays contained."

"So you want to bury it."

"I want to *control* it. There's a difference." Vàscalìn picked up her tea, took a sip, set it down. "The documents you're carrying could start a revolution. Or they could disappear into an archive somewhere, studied by scholars who'll never publish what they find. The choice isn't yours to make—you're not powerful enough. But you could help determine which powerful people get to make it."

"By giving you the documents."

"By telling me what you know. The documents themselves..." She shrugged. "Keep them, burn them, sell them—I don't care. What I care about is the information in your head. What you've seen. What you've learned. What you can tell me about the people who are trying to tear this system apart."

Àrnnav thought about it. Thought about her mother, silenced for knowing too much. Thought about Fèincal, asleep in their tiny room, vulnerable to anyone who wanted to use him as leverage. Thought about Vèircal, who had men watching her, waiting for her, ready to take what she'd stolen.

"I'll tell you what I know," she said. "But I want something in return. Something specific."

"Name it."

"My brother. Fèincal. He's eleven years old—his Binding is in four years. I want a guarantee that his pattern will be read honestly, that no one will 'adjust' it to punish me or reward someone else."

Vàscalìn studied her for a long moment.

"Done," she said finally. "What else?"

"That's all. Just him. Just honesty." Àrnnav met the Warden's eyes. "I know I can't save myself. But I can save him."

Something flickered across Vascalin's face—surprise, maybe, or something like respect.

"Tell me about Vèircal," she said. "Tell me everything."

Àrnnav talked.

She told the Warden about the basement meetings, the delivery jobs, the slow escalation from courier to lookout to thief. She told her about the Còcalnòc house, the documents, the connection to her mother's death. She told her about Fèinnav, the merchant's daughter who'd helped her escape instead of calling for guards.

She didn't tell her about the mother's note, still hidden in the floorboard beneath her bed. She didn't tell her that she'd memorized the most damaging names and dates. She didn't tell her that she had no intention of giving up the documents until she knew exactly how they could help her.

Some leverage you kept for yourself.

When she finished, Vascalin nodded slowly.

"You've confirmed what we suspected. Vèircal is connected to a larger network—people who've been gathering evidence of pattern fraud for years, waiting for the right moment to expose it." She paused. "What you probably don't know is that he's also connected to the families he's trying to expose. Double agent. Taking money from both sides, playing them against each other."

"So he was going to betray me."

"He was going to sell you. To the highest bidder—probably the Còcalnòc family themselves. A Hand Quarter thief caught with stolen documents, easily executed, the evidence conveniently disappearing along with her."

Àrnnav's stomach went cold.

"But now you've complicated things," Vàscalìn continued. "The merchant's daughter knows about you. She helped you escape. That means she's involved now—which means her family is involved, whether they want to be or not."

"So what happens next?"

"Next, you go home. Sleep if you can. Tomorrow is Pattern Day—the city will be distracted, celebrating. I'll have people watching Vèircai's operation." She stood. "Keep the documents for now. But Àrnnav—"

"Yes?"

"Don't trust anyone. Not the reformers, not the families, not the criminals. And especially not me." Her smile was thin, sharp. "We're all playing games with your life. The only question is which game you want to lose."

She walked away, leaving Àrnnav alone with cold tea and colder certainty.

She made it home as the sun was rising. Pattern Day morning. The city waking to celebration while her world crumbled.

The door to her room was open.

Àrnnav's heart stopped. She pushed through, already knowing what she'd find, already feeling the absence like a wound.

Fèincal was gone.

His lesson books were scattered across the floor. The chair was overturned. There were marks on the wall—small handprints, pressed there in panic, smeared as if someone had been dragged away.

And on the table, a note in Vèircai's precise handwriting:

The documents by midnight. The Threshold Market, eastern warehouse. Come alone, or your brother's Binding will be conducted by people who specialize in creative interpretation.

Don't make this difficult, Àrnnav. You're not clever enough to win.

She read the note three times. Then she read it again. Then she folded it carefully, tucked it inside her dress next to the stolen documents, and sat down on the bed where her brother should have been sleeping.

She didn't cry. Crying was for people who had the luxury of grief. She was constrained—pattern-marked, maze-walked, thorn-touched. She didn't get to collapse.

She got to plan.

Fèinnav came to her an hour before noon.

Àrnnav didn't know how the merchant's daughter had found her—didn't know how she'd navigated the Hand Quarter's maze of streets and alleys, didn't know what kind of courage it took for a rich girl to walk into poverty like it was just another neighborhood.

But there she was, standing in the doorway of Àrnnav's tiny room, her fine clothes dusty and her face pale with determination.

"I heard what happened," Fèinnav said. "My mother has contacts in the Quarter. She heard that Vèircai took your brother."

"And you came to help?" Àrnnav's voice was flat, dead. "Why?"

"Because I let you go last night. Because I helped you escape, and now a child is paying for it." Fèinnav stepped inside, closed the door behind her. "I'm not going to pretend I understand your life. But I know what it means to discover that everything you believed was a lie, and I know what it feels like to want to make things right."

"Making things right won't get my brother back."

"No. But this might." Fèinnav pulled out a folded paper, handed it over. "My mother has been investigating the pattern fraud since she found out about her own family's involvement. She has allies—merchants, reformers, people who want to expose the corruption. They can't move openly, but they can apply pressure."

Àrnnav unfolded the paper. A list of names, locations, resources. The kind of power she'd never had access to.

"Why give this to me?"

"Because you have the documents. The physical evidence. Without that, my mother's allies can suspect all they want, but they can't prove anything." Fèinnav's voice strengthened. "If you're willing to share what you found—if you're willing to work with us instead of against us—we might be able to help you get your brother back."

"And in exchange?"

"In exchange, we get copies of the documents. Not all of them—just enough to prove the fraud exists. Enough to start exposing the truth."

"What about the murder? My mother's death?"

Fèinnav hesitated. "That's... more complicated. The Szòvòtar who authorized it is dead. The people who carried it out are probably dead too, or protected by people we can't touch. Exposing the murder might not get you justice—it might just get you killed."

"So I should forget it."

"I'm saying you should choose your battles." Fèinnav met her eyes. "You can have revenge, or you can have your brother. I don't think you can have both."

The words hit like a blade. Because they were true. Because they were the same calculation Àrnnav had already made, in the dark hours of the morning, sitting on her brother's empty bed.

"The exchange is at midnight," she said finally. "Threshold Market, eastern warehouse. Vèircai wants the documents. If I don't give them to him—"

"Then we need a plan that gives him something while keeping what matters." Fèinnav's face hardened. "Come with me. My mother is waiting."

Part Five

The Còcalnòc house looked different in daylight.

Àrnnav entered through the front door this time—escorted by Fèinnav, dressed in borrowed servant's clothes, trying not to stare at the wealth that surrounded her. Crystal chandeliers. Silk curtains. Furniture that cost more than her mother had earned in a lifetime.

The home she'd broken into twelve hours ago. The family whose secrets she carried against her chest.

Vìzrav Còcalnòc was waiting in the drawing room. Sixty-two years old, grey-haired, with the kind of face that showed every worry she'd ever carried. Her husband stood behind her—Còcal, the patriarch, the man whose purchased pattern had started three generations of lies.

"You're the one who broke into my house," Còcal said. His voice was cold.

"I'm the one who found proof that your family has been buying futures for decades. And I'm the one who found proof that someone murdered my mother to keep that secret." Àrnnav didn't flinch. "So yes. I broke into your house. And I'd do it again."

Silence. The kind of silence that could become violence, or could become something else.

"She's right," Vìzrav said quietly. "About all of it. I've seen the documents she found—Fèinnav showed me. The fraud, the murders, the entire corrupted system." She turned to her husband. "We knew the patterns were purchased. We accepted it as the price of our position. But I didn't know people had died to protect those lies."

"People die for all sorts of reasons."

"Not like this." Vìzrav's voice hardened. "Not murdered and recorded like a business expense. Not silenced because they dared to keep records of the truth."

Còcal's face was unreadable. "What do you want?" he asked Àrnnav.

"I want my brother back. Vèircai has him—he's using Fèincal as leverage to get the documents." She pulled the papers from her dress, held them up. "I don't care about exposing your family. I don't care about justice or reform or any of the things the people behind Vèircai claim to want. I care about an eleven-year-old boy who has nothing to do with any of this."

"And you think we can help you get him back?"

"I think you have contacts Vèircai doesn't know about. I think you have resources I don't have access to. And I think—" She took a breath. "I think you owe me. For what your family's lies cost mine."

Another silence. Longer this time.

"My father was bound as an echo," Vizrav said. "Thirty-seven years ago. A binder carried his pattern until last week, when the echo finally dissolved. Before it did, my father's memories returned—he remembered everything about the fraud he'd witnessed, including the people who'd been silenced to protect it."

Àrnnav went still. "Your father worked at the Pattern House?"

"He kept the secondary ledger. The one that documented the adjustments, the bribes, the silencing." Vizrav's voice cracked. "Your mother was one of the names in that ledger. I didn't know until the binder brought me my father's letter."

"Then you understand."

"I understand that we're both carrying secrets that could destroy us. I understand that my family's corruption killed your mother and now threatens your brother." Vizrav stood, moved toward Àrnnav, stopped an arm's length away. "I can help you. But I need to know—what are you willing to do with those documents?"

Àrnnav thought about it. Thought about revenge, about justice, about the impossible choice between her brother's life and her mother's memory.

"I'm willing to give Vèircai something," she said finally. "Enough to satisfy whoever's paying him. But not the murder records. Not the proof of what they did to my mother." She met Vizrav's eyes. "I'll let your family keep its secrets, if you help me keep mine."

"And afterward? The documents that remain?"

"Afterward, I don't know. Maybe I burn them. Maybe I hide them. Maybe I find someone who can use them without getting people killed." She paused. "But right now, all I care about is midnight. All I care about is Fèincal."

Vizrav nodded slowly.

"Then let's make a plan."

The Threshold Market at midnight was chaos.

Pattern Day celebrations had spilled out of the temples and taverns, filling the streets with revelers, musicians, merchants hawking festival goods. The perfect cover for an exchange that no one was supposed to see.

Àrnnav moved through the crowds alone—or what looked like alone. Vizrav's contacts were positioned throughout the market: merchants who owed favors, guards who'd been paid to look the other way, a network of quiet power that Àrnnav had never known existed.

And somewhere in the shadows, Vàscalìn's Wardens were watching too.

The eastern warehouse was dark, abandoned, the kind of place where bad things happened and no one asked questions. Àrnnav approached the entrance, the altered documents pressed against her chest, her heart hammering with a fear she couldn't afford to show.

The door opened before she could knock.

"You came." Vèircal's voice echoed from inside. "I wasn't sure you would."

"You have my brother."

"I have insurance. There's a difference." He stepped into the doorway, his face half-lit by distant festival lights. "The documents?"

"Show me Fèincal first."

A pause. Then Vèircal gestured, and one of his men emerged from the darkness, dragging Fèincal by the arm.

Her brother looked terrified. Small. Eleven years old and caught in something he didn't understand. His eyes found Àrnnav's, and she saw hope there—desperate, fragile hope that she would make this right.

"The documents," Vèircal said again.

Àrnnav pulled the papers from her dress. "Copies. The originals are somewhere else—insurance of my own."

"I wasn't born yesterday."

"Neither was I." She held up the papers. "Names, dates, payments. Three generations of Còcalnòc fraud. Everything you asked for."

"And the murder records?"

"Destroyed. I burned them." The lie came out smooth, practiced. "I decided I cared more about my brother than revenge."

Vèircai studied her for a long moment. His eyes flickered to the papers in her hand, to the warehouse shadows where his men waited, to the crowds beyond that might or might not contain threats.

"You're smarter than I gave you credit for," he said finally. "Your pattern didn't prepare me for that."

"My pattern doesn't determine what I do. It just describes how it feels to do it."

A thin smile. "Philosophical for a laundry girl." He gestured to his man. "Release the boy."

The grip on Fèincal's arm loosened. Her brother stumbled forward, and Àrnnav caught him, pulled him close, felt his thin body shaking against hers.

"The documents," Vèircai said.

She handed them over. He rifled through them, checking, assessing. His expression didn't change, but something in his posture relaxed.

"Pleasure doing business." He stepped back into the warehouse darkness. "Don't make me come looking for you again, Àrnnav. Next time, I might not be so—"

"Vèircai."

A new voice. A woman's voice.

Vàscalìn stepped out of the crowd, her Warden's seal gleaming in the festival lights. Behind her, a dozen more Wardens materialized from the chaos, sealing the warehouse exits.

"You're under arrest for conspiracy to commit pattern fraud, extortion, and the kidnapping of a minor." Her voice was flat, official. "The documents in your possession are evidence in an ongoing investigation."

Vèircai's face went pale. His eyes found Àrnnav's, and she saw understanding there—and fury.

"You sold me out."

"I made a deal." Àrnnav held her brother tighter. "The same kind of deal you would have made, if our positions were reversed."

"You have no idea what you've done. The people I work for—"

"Will have to find another pawn." Vàscalìn gestured, and her Wardens moved forward.
"Take him."

The arrest was quick, efficient, professional. Within minutes, Vèircai and his men were bound and led away, and the warehouse was empty except for Àrnnav, Fèincal, and the Warden who'd orchestrated the whole thing.

"You kept your end of the bargain," Vàscalìn said. "The information you provided led us to Vèircai's handlers. Several prominent families are going to have very uncomfortable conversations tomorrow."

"And my brother?"

"His Binding will be conducted honestly, as I promised. No adjustments. No interference." The Warden's eyes flickered to the shadows. "Though I notice you didn't give Vèircai all the documents."

"I gave him what I promised. Names and dates and payments."

"But not the murder records."

Àrnnav met her gaze. "Those were destroyed. I burned them. Remember?"

A long pause. Then Vàscalìn smiled—thin, sharp, knowing.

"Of course. My mistake." She turned to go, then paused. "Àrnnav?"

"Yes?"

"Your pattern is Thorn. Difficult connections. Painful paths." Her eyes were unreadable.
"You've made a lot of connections tonight. Some of them are going to hurt."

"I know."

"As long as you know." She walked away into the festival crowds, leaving Àrnnav and Fèincal alone in the wreckage of a conspiracy she'd never meant to join.

Dawn came soft and grey, the way it always did in the Hand Quarter.

Àrnnav sat at her small table, the hidden documents spread before her. Not the copies she'd given Vèircal, not the ones the Wardens had seized. The originals—the murder records, the silencing orders, the proof of what had been done to her mother and a dozen others like her.

Fèincal was asleep in their bed, finally peaceful after hours of trembling and questions and tears. He didn't know everything—didn't know about the murders, didn't know about the deals she'd made, didn't know that his sister had become someone who traded in secrets and lies.

He just knew he was safe. For now, that was enough.

A knock at the door.

Àrnnav tensed. But the knock was soft—two quick taps, a pause, then one more. A signal.

She opened the door to find Fèinnav standing in the hallway, dressed in servant's clothes that didn't quite fit, looking as out of place as Àrnnav had felt in Merchant City.

"My mother sent me." Fèinnav held out a small pouch. "Payment. For the documents you shared."

"I don't want payment."

"Then call it investment. Call it alliance." Fèinnav stepped inside, closed the door behind her. "What happened last night—it's not over. Vèircal was just one piece of a larger network. The families he was working with, the reformers who were funding him—they're all still out there, and they all know you exist now."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying you have choices. You can disappear—take your brother, leave Fonváros, start over somewhere else. Or you can stay, and use what you know, and maybe—" She paused. "Maybe change something."

Àrnnav looked at the documents on her table. At the murder record with her mother's name. At the proof of a system designed to sort and constrain and silence anyone who threatened its power.

"My pattern says Thorn," she said slowly. "Difficult connections. Painful paths."

"So does mine. My actual one, not the one my family purchased." Fèinnav's smile was crooked, uncertain. "Maybe that means something. Maybe we're supposed to hurt together."

"That's a terrible basis for an alliance."

"It's the only one we have."

Silence. The morning light crept through the grimy window, turning the documents to gold.

"I'm not going to disappear," Àrnnav said finally. "This is my home. My brother's home. The only place we've ever known."

"Then what are you going to do?"

Àrnnav gathered the documents, folded them carefully, tucked them into the hidden space beneath the floorboard. Her mother's secrets. Her mother's death. The leverage that might keep her alive, or might get her killed.

"I'm going to make connections," she said. "Difficult ones. Painful ones. The kind my pattern says I'm supposed to make." She looked at Fèinnav—the merchant's daughter, the privileged girl, the unexpected ally. "And I'm going to write things down. Keep records. Document what I see and hear and learn."

"Like your mother did?"

"Like my mother did. But smarter. More careful." She pulled out a blank sheet of paper, a stub of charcoal. "She kept secrets because she was afraid of what would happen if she spoke. I'm going to keep secrets because I'm afraid of what will happen if I don't."

Fèinnav watched as Àrnnav began to write—names and dates, connections and debts, the beginning of a new ledger.

"What is that?"

"The truth. Or as much of it as I can figure out." Àrnnav didn't look up. "My mother died with her secrets locked in her head. I'm going to make sure mine survive me."

"And if someone finds them?"

"Then someone will know what I knew. Someone will be able to continue what I started." She paused in her writing, met Fèinnav's eyes. "That's the only kind of

immortality people like me get. The only way we matter after we're gone."

Fèinnav nodded slowly. "Partners, then?"

"Something like that. Thorns together."

"Thorns together."

They clasped hands—callused worker's fingers and soft merchant's palm—and Àrnnav felt the connection form. Painful, yes. Difficult, certainly. But real.

The system had tried to sort them into separate boxes, assign them separate futures. But they'd found each other anyway, in the spaces between the lies.

Her pattern said Thorn. Her pattern said Maze. Her pattern said she would hurt and wander and never find home.

But patterns didn't determine. They just described.

And Àrnnav was writing her own description now, in a ledger of her own making, with ink that no one else could read.

End of "The Constrained" (v2)

Triptych Closing Note

Three stories. Three perspectives on the same system. Three people discovering that the patterns they were assigned—purchased or true—don't determine who they become.

Fèinnav learned that her privileged future was built on lies, and chose to live her true Thorn pattern in her own way.

Vèirnav learned that the dead carry secrets worth dying for, and chose to give those secrets to someone who could use them.

Àrnnav learned that the constrained can still make choices, and chose to build connections that might outlast the system that tried to crush her.

The ledger remains open. The patterns continue to be drawn. But the pen—the pen is starting to change hands.

End of the Fonváros Triptych