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Bleed (v2)

Part One

Six anchors. Six drops of Residue. Six dead who didn't know they were gone.

Vèirnav laid them out on the scarred wooden table the way another man might lay out breakfast—the ritual of twenty-three years reduced to muscle memory. The bone disc carved with merchant's symbols. The iron ring that had once held a finger. The leather cord, the glass bead, the copper coin, the child's tooth wrapped in wire. Each anchor hummed faintly against his palm, that subsonic vibration that meant *coherent, stable, still bound*.

The tooth was his newest. The bone disc was his oldest.

Twenty years he'd carried that disc. Twenty years of summoning the merchant it held, using the man's expertise to navigate contracts and ledgers and the mathematics of profit that Vèirnav himself had never been educated to understand. Twenty years of partnership—if you could call it that, if you could partner with something that didn't know it was dead.

The morning light through his single window was grey, filtered through Hand Quarter smog, and Vèirnav's fingers were cold as he measured the Residue. One drop each. Not generous, not stingy. The economics of death required precision.

He started with the tooth—the child-echo, barely six months bound, still learning to manifest without screaming. Then the wire, the coin, the bead. Each anchor warmed slightly as the Residue sank into it, feeding the pattern-fragments that constituted what remained of six human souls.

The bone disc last. Always last.

He caught his reflection in the window glass as he reached for it — forty-one, grey at the temples, eyes narrowed against the dawn glare. He didn't remember choosing that habit. It had arrived like a cough that never fully left.

"Cèresnav," he said, and the air thickened.

The echo came slowly — they always did in the morning, before the day's first summoning fully woke them. A shimmer, then color; weight; the suggestion of skin.

Cèresnav had been forty-five when he died, a merchant of middling success. His echo retained the look: soft at the waist, thinning hair coaxed into place, eyes pinched tight as if every number needed arguing with.

Vèirnav felt his own lids still holding the same shape.

"Good morning," Cèresnav said. His voice had that echo-quality—almost human, almost present, almost *there*. "I trust we have appointments today?"

"Three consultations. A contract review for the Vas-Eròcal guild, a pricing dispute between shipping concerns, and—"

"What day is it?"

Vèirnav's hands went still on the bone disc.

"What?"

"The day." Cèresnav's manifestation flickered, steadied. His eyes—not quite focused, never quite focused—seemed to be looking at something Vèirnav couldn't see. "I need to know the day. My daughter's Name Day is coming. I should purchase a gift."

The cold in Vèirnav's fingers spread up his arms, into his chest, settled there like fog.

In twenty years, Cèresnav had never mentioned a daughter.

"It's the third week of Harvest," Vèirnav said carefully. "Pattern Day was yesterday."

"Ah." The echo nodded, that slight delay between stimulus and response that marked all bound dead. "Then I have time. The Name Day isn't until—"

He stopped. His face did something complicated—confusion, then blankness, then the smooth merchant's mask sliding back into place.

"Three consultations, you said? We should review the Vas-Eròcal contract before meeting them. Their guild has a reputation for buried clauses."

Vèirnav let the moment pass. The Residue was humming in his blood, that faint resonance that all binders carried, and he told himself the question meant nothing. Echoes degraded. They confused their death-memories with their service-memories. Twenty years was a long time to remain coherent.

But his hands shook slightly as he tucked the bone disc into his chest pocket. And when he glanced at the window again, he couldn't tell if the squint on his face was his own or borrowed.

Something in the back of his mind—something that felt like his own thought but wasn't quite—whispered: *I had a daughter. Where is she now?*

The contract review went smoothly until it didn't.

Vèirnav sat in the cramped consultation room he rented by the hour in Shadow City's commercial district, letting Cèresnav do what Cèresnav did best. The echo couldn't touch documents—manifestation didn't include physical interaction—but he could read, analyze, speak. The guild representative sat across from Vèirnav, answering the questions the binder relayed, never quite looking at the shimmer in the corner that was doing all the actual work.

Most people didn't like looking at echoes directly. Something in the human eye rebelled at forms that were *almost* solid, *almost* real.

"Clause seventeen," Cèresnav said. "They've buried a revision trigger. If material costs rise above twelve percent, they can renegotiate the labor rate without mutual consent."

"Clause seventeen," Vèirnav repeated to the representative. "The revision trigger."

"Standard language—"

"Remove it or we walk."

The representative's jaw tightened. He'd expected a Hand Quarter binder to be easier to manipulate. He hadn't expected the binder to have a merchant's ghost whispering in his ear.

"I'll need to consult with my principals."

"Do that. We'll wait."

The representative left. Vèirnav leaned back in his chair, letting the tension drain from his shoulders. The performance of competence was exhausting—pretending he understood everything Cèresnav told him, maintaining the fiction that a pattern-constrained corpse-collector had somehow become a skilled contract analyst.

"The old ledger," Cèresnav said.

Vèirnav opened his eyes. The echo was still in the corner, but his posture had changed—less merchant, more... something else. Someone remembering. And his edges were wrong. Blurred. Like looking at a reflection in troubled water.

"What?"

"I kept an old ledger. Before. In my study, the locked drawer." Cèresnav's voice had shifted too, becoming more present, more *alive*. "The records no one was supposed to see. Names and numbers and—"

The door opened. The representative returned.

"My principals have agreed to remove clause seventeen."

"Good." Vèirnav stood, pulling his attention away from the echo's strange words, the strange blur at his edges. "We'll sign tomorrow, after I've reviewed the revision."

Business concluded. Handshakes exchanged. The fiction of normalcy maintained.

But as they left the consultation room, Cèresnav following in that half-visible way echoes moved through the world, Vèirnav felt the merchant's presence pressing against the edges of his consciousness. Stronger than usual. More insistent. He could smell something that wasn't there—old paper, ink, the dust of a study he'd never entered.

The old ledger, something whispered. I should have burned it. I should have told someone. I should have—

Not his thought. Not his memory. Not his smell.

The bleed was getting worse.

Èitar found him at the Threshold Market.

The information broker materialized from the crowd like smoke taking form—a woman his own age, dark-haired, dark-eyed, with a pattern-constrained's careful blankness and a survivor's sharp attention. She'd been selling secrets in Fonváros for fifteen years, and Vèirnav had been buying them for almost as long.

"You look terrible," she said, falling into step beside him. "The dead keeping you up?"

"When don't they?"

"Fair." She steered him toward a tea vendor, ordered two cups without asking. "I have news. The kind you pay for."

"I'm listening."

"The Òràhdar are moving. Not just the usual pattern-checks and registration sweeps—they're hunting something specific." She accepted her tea, wrapped her fingers around the warmth. "Awakened echoes."

Vèirnav's hand tightened on his own cup.

"Awakened?"

"Echoes that remember. Not just their skills, their function—their *lives*." Èitar's voice dropped. "Someone reported a bound dead speaking about things it shouldn't know. Asking questions about family, about the past. The Wardens are treating it like a contamination threat."

My daughter's Name Day is coming.

"Why tell me?"

"Because you carry six, and one of them is older than most marriages." She met his eyes, and there was something in her gaze that wasn't quite concern but wasn't quite calculation either. "Keep your dead quiet, Vèirnav. Whatever they're remembering, make them forget."

"Echoes can't forget. That's not how—"

"Then release them. Before the Wardens come asking."

Release. The word sat in his chest like a stone. Twenty years. He'd carried Cèresnav for twenty years—longer than he'd known his own mother, longer than any relationship he'd ever maintained with the living. The echo had seen him through his master's

death, through lean years and prosperous ones, through every contract and consultation that had built his small, precarious life.

How did you release twenty years? How did you let go of something that had become part of your own reflection?

"He's stable," Vèirnav said. "Well-maintained. One strange question doesn't mean—"

"Doesn't mean what?" Èitar's voice sharpened. "Doesn't mean the Wardens will come for you? Doesn't mean you'll lose everything you've built?" She finished her tea in one long swallow. "I've seen what happens to binders who get attached. The echoes always win, Vèirnav. They have forever. You don't."

She disappeared back into the crowd, leaving him with a cooling cup and a cold certainty in his gut.

Cèresnav had been strange all day. The question about dates. The mention of a daughter. The old ledger. The blur at his edges. Each fragment small enough to dismiss on its own, but together they formed a pattern Vèirnav didn't want to see.

His oldest echo was waking up.

And if the Wardens found out, they'd both burn.

He made it home before dark, but darkness followed him anyway.

The Hand Quarter was quieter in the evening—workers returning from their shifts, children called inside, the day's commerce winding down. Vèirnav's room was on the third floor of a tenement that had been old before his grandmother was born, the stairs groaning under his weight, the walls thin enough to hear his neighbors' arguments and lovemaking and grief.

He'd lived here for eighteen years. The same room, the same scarred table, the same window that never quite closed all the way. Pattern-constrained binders didn't rise in the world. They just survived.

The anchors were where he'd left them. The bone disc—

The bone disc was warm.

Not the faint warmth of maintained coherence. *Hot*, like metal left in sun, like living skin, like fever.

Vèirnav's hand closed around it reflexively, and the heat shot up his arm, into his chest, behind his eyes—

—the study door closed, the lock engaged, the ledger open on the desk. Names in two columns: the first what was written in the Pattern Registry, the second what the Attendance actually saw. Years of records. Years of lies. The ink smells like iron and guilt. The paper is soft under my fingers, worn from too much handling. And I know I should tell someone, should warn someone, but the Szòvòtar has been so kind, so understanding about my debts, and if I speak—

Vèirnav dropped the disc.

It clattered on the table, still glowing with heat, and the room was silent except for his ragged breathing. His fingers were cramped, curled like he'd been holding a pen. His mouth tasted like old ink.

Not his memory. Not his study, not his ledger, not his fear.

Cèresnav's.

The echo manifested without being summoned—a violation of every binding principle Vèirnav had learned in twenty-three years. The shimmer in the corner resolved into the merchant's form, but different now. Clearer. More present. More *real*. And the blur at his edges had spread—his left hand fading in and out of visibility, his outline wavering like heat shimmer off summer stone.

"I remember," Cèresnav said.

His voice wasn't echo-distant anymore. It was human.

"I remember the night I died."

Part Two

Vèirnav didn't sleep.

He sat at the scarred table with the bone disc between his hands, watching Cèresnav's manifestation flicker in and out of coherence. The echo spoke in fragments—a daughter named for flowers, a wife who died in childbirth, ledgers filled with secrets

that weren't his to keep. Each memory surfaced like a bubble from deep water, broke against the air, and dissolved into the confusion of twenty years of death.

But something was wrong with the surfacing. Each memory cost something. After the daughter's name, Cèresnav's left hand disappeared entirely for ten minutes. After the wife's death, his face went translucent, skull-shapes visible beneath the merchant's features. The pattern wasn't just awakening.

It was coming apart.

"The meeting was at the house on Temple Hill," Cèresnav said. His voice phased between echo-hollow and living-warm, sometimes in the same sentence. "The Szòvòtar wanted to discuss my record-keeping. My *careful* record-keeping. I'd been so careful, you see. Names in two columns. The truth beside the lie."

"What truth? What lies?"

"Patterns." The echo's face twisted—not with the mechanical confusion of degradation, but with something that looked like grief. His right eye flickered, went dark, came back. "The wealthy buy their children's futures. Did you know? The poor receive what the Attendance actually sees, but the rich—the rich receive what they can afford."

Vèirnav knew. Everyone in the Hand Quarter knew, the way they knew the sky was grey and the work was endless and the system would crush them no matter how hard they struggled. But knowing as rumor was different from knowing as *fact*, and the certainty in Cèresnav's voice made the knowledge feel new, sharp-edged, dangerous.

"You kept records of this?"

"For thirty years. Every bribe I witnessed, every 'adjustment' the Szòvòtar made." Cèresnav's manifestation flickered, stabilized, but his hands were gone now, both of them, his arms ending in blur. "I told myself I was gathering evidence. Building a case. But really I was just—afraid. Too afraid to speak, too afraid to stay silent, too afraid to live with what I knew."

"And the meeting on Temple Hill?"

"The Szòvòtar called me to discuss my future. My 'reliable service' and 'trustworthy discretion.'" The echo laughed—a sound Vèirnav had never heard from him in twenty years, and it came out fractured, breaking apart mid-note. "He was offering me a

promotion. More access, more secrets, more complicity. And I felt my chest seize, and I thought: *this is what it costs. This is what it costs to know and do nothing.*"

"You died."

"I died." Cèresnav looked at him with eyes that were, for a moment, completely present—and completely terrified. "Heart failure, they called it. The stress of success. They buried me with honors and bound my pattern before the flesh was cold."

His face began to dissolve. Not fading—*dissolving*, like sugar in water, features losing their definition, running together into blur.

"What's happening to you?"

"I don't—" The voice broke apart. Reformed. "I don't know. Something's wrong. The memories are coming too fast, and every time one surfaces—"

His mouth disappeared. His eyes remained, floating in formless shimmer, full of a fear that Vèirnav felt echo in his own chest.

Then the pattern collapsed entirely, and Vèirnav was alone with a bone disc that pulsed with heat and a growing certainty that he was watching something die.

Morning came grey and heavy with rain, and Vèirnav made his first mistake.

He skipped the ritual. No Residue for the other five anchors—they could wait, stable and silent, while he focused on the one that was neither. He summoned Cèresnav three times before the echo would manifest, each summoning more difficult than the last, and when the merchant finally appeared, he was translucent almost to invisibility.

His edges were worse. Whole sections of him would disappear and reappear, like a painting being erased and redrawn by an uncertain hand.

"I should release you," Vèirnav said. The words came out rough, wrong. "Whatever's happening—if I release you now, maybe—"

"No." The echo's voice was barely audible. "Not yet. I need to tell you—there's something—"

"What's worth this? Look at yourself. You're falling apart."

"The ledger." Cèresnav's manifestation solidified slightly, as if the word itself was an anchor. "The real one. I hid it before I died. If I can remember where—"

"I don't care about the ledger. I care about—" Vèirnav stopped. What did he care about? A ghost? A tool? A presence that had been part of his life longer than any living person?

"You care about me," Cèresnav said quietly. "I know. I've known for years, even when I didn't know I was dead. The way you talk to me. The way you—" His face flickered. "You've been a better partner than I deserved."

"Don't."

"Twenty years, Vèirnav. You gave me twenty years of existence I shouldn't have had. Whatever happens now—" The echo's form wavered violently. "Thank you."

The manifestation collapsed.

The bone disc went cold.

And Vèirnav sat alone with a piece of the dead, understanding for the first time that he'd been holding on to something that was already letting go.

The Warden found him in the street.

He was walking back from the Residue dealer—emergency purchase, twice the normal price, his savings draining into the attempt to stabilize an echo that couldn't be stabilized—when she stepped out of an alley like a shadow taking form.

Òràhd Vàscalìn. Thirty-four, according to Èitar's intelligence. Attuned to pattern-violations, dedicated to orthodoxy, and looking at Vèirnav like he was a stain she needed to scrub.

"Vèirnav Còtòcai." She used his Craft name, the formal address, her voice carrying the weight of authority. "Registered binder. Six anchors, current compliance."

"Òràhd." He kept his face neutral, his body language submissive. Hand Quarter survival instincts. "How can I assist the Wardens?"

"You can answer questions." She moved closer, and he caught the scent of her—ink and incense and the faint metallic tang of pattern-sight. "We've received reports of awakened echoes in this quarter. Bound dead that are remembering their lives."

"I've heard the rumors."

"Have you observed anything? In your own echoes, or those of other binders?"

My daughter's Name Day is coming.

"No," Vèirnav said. "My echoes are stable. Well-maintained."

"May I see them?"

It wasn't a request. The Warden's hand rested on the seal at her belt—the pattern-authority that gave her the right to demand compliance from anyone with a constrained registration.

"Of course."

He led her to his room. He showed her the five anchors he'd fed that morning—no, not this morning, yesterday morning, he'd been too focused on Cèresnav—and prayed she wouldn't notice the slight degradation in their coherence. The echoes manifested on command, but slower than they should have, their edges softer, their voices fainter.

Neglect. The price of caring too much about one dead man.

"Your sixth?" Vàscalìn asked.

"In restoration. A client damaged it during a consultation—I'm waiting for the pattern to recohere."

She studied him. Her eyes had that quality all Attuned developed—the sense that they were seeing beneath the surface, reading the patterns that underlay reality itself.

"You've carried your oldest echo for twenty years," she said. "That's unusual. Most binders cycle their bound dead every five to ten years."

"Cèresnav is exceptional. His expertise is specialized—I'd lose significant income replacing him."

"Cèresnav." She tasted the name like she was checking it against a list. "The merchant who worked for the Pattern Houses?"

The cold in Vèirnav's chest became ice.

"I wasn't aware of his previous employers. Echoes don't typically remember their—"

"Don't they?" She moved toward the window, her back to him, but he could see her watching his reflection in the glass. "Twenty years is a long time, Vèirnav. Long enough for patterns to degrade. Long enough for memories to surface." She turned. "Long enough for a dead man's secrets to start bleeding into the living."

He kept his face still. His hands steady. The bone disc pulsed against his chest like a second heartbeat, like a warning.

"If your echo shows any signs of awakening," Vàscalìn said, "you will report it immediately. Awakened echoes are classified as pattern-contaminants. The penalty for harboring one is dissolution—of the echo, and potentially of the binder's registry."

"I understand."

"Do you?" She was close now, close enough that he could see the pattern-marks around her eyes, the price of her Attunement. "I've seen your record, Vèirnav Còtòcai. Pattern-constrained at fifteen, apprenticed at sixteen, master binder by twenty-two. You've built something despite the system that tried to keep you down. It would be unfortunate if you lost everything because of loyalty to the dead."

She held his gaze for a long moment. Then she smiled—thin, sharp, knowing.

"I'll be back in three days to inspect the sixth anchor. Make sure it's ready."

She left.

Vèirnav stood in his empty room, hand pressed against the heat in his chest, and felt the trap close around him.

Three days. He had three days to stabilize an echo that was falling apart, to hide an awakening that he couldn't stop, to find a way out of a situation that had no exits.

The ledger, Cèresnav whispered from somewhere deep inside him. They know about the ledger. They've always known.

The bleed hit him that evening like a fist.

He was walking toward Merchant City—he didn't remember deciding to walk there, didn't remember leaving his room—and suddenly he wasn't Vèirnav anymore. He was someone else, someone who knew these streets from a different angle, someone who had walked this route a thousand times to a house he'd never seen.

The world went grey at the edges. Foggy. His hands weren't his hands—they were softer, the hands of someone who worked with paper instead of corpses. His chest ached with a guilt that wasn't his guilt, a love that wasn't his love.

The house was sandstone and iron, three stories tall, with a courtyard visible through the gate. A merchant's house. *His* house. The window on the second floor, that was the study, and in the study was the desk, and in the desk was the drawer, and in the drawer—

"Can I help you?"

A woman's voice. Vèirnav blinked, and the world snapped back into focus—sharp, too sharp, the colors oversaturated, his body strange and heavy around him. He was standing at the gate of the sandstone house, his hand on the iron bars, and a woman in a servant's dress was looking at him with the careful suspicion the wealthy reserve for the obviously poor.

"I'm sorry," he said. His voice came out wrong—too formal, too educated. Cèresnav's voice. "I was looking for—"

My daughter. My records. My life.

"—the wrong address."

He fled.

Three streets away, he ducked into an alley and pressed his back against the cold stone wall. The fog was still there, at the edges of his vision. The guilt was still there, in his chest, pressing against his lungs. He could taste something in his mouth—not ink this time but blood, the copper-salt of a bitten tongue, and he didn't know if it was from the running or from the bleed or from something worse.

His hands. He looked at his hands. They were his—callused, scarred, the hands of a binder. But they were trembling in a pattern he recognized. Cèresnav's nervous habit. The unconscious gesture of a man checking for ink stains that weren't there.

The bleed was supposed to be manageable. After twenty years, he and Cèresnav should have reached equilibrium—the echo's patterns absorbed into his, the boundaries stable, the contamination controlled. Instead, it felt like the merchant was *growing*, his memories spreading through Vèirnav's consciousness like fog through empty streets.

That house, Cèresnav whispered. I raised my daughter in that house. I wrote the ledger in that house. I died with the weight of that house's secrets crushing my heart.

"Stop," Vèirnav said aloud. "Stop. You're dead. This isn't your body, these aren't your thoughts—"

But they're becoming yours. That's how it works. That's the cost of carrying the dead.

His hand found the bone disc through his shirt. Hot. Pulsing. Alive in a way that no anchor should be.

He should release the echo. Right now, tonight, before the bleed got worse, before the Wardens came back, before he lost himself entirely in a dead man's memories.

But twenty years. Twenty years of partnership, of shared work, of the closest thing to friendship a pattern-constrained binder could manage. How did you release that? How did you let go of the investment of half your life?

Sunk cost, something whispered. It wasn't Cèresnav's voice or his own—it was something older, something that sounded like the truth. *You're holding on because you've held on so long. Not because holding on serves you.*

He knew. He knew it was true. He knew that every hour he kept the disc was another hour of bleed, another hour of losing himself, another hour closer to whatever dissolution looked like from the inside.

But he also knew that Cèresnav was trying to tell him something. Something about the ledger. Something important enough that the echo was tearing itself apart to remember.

And he had three days.

Vèirnav pushed off the wall and walked home through streets that kept trying to become someone else's memories. The fog followed him all the way.

Part Three

Two days later, Cèresnav remembered everything—and Vèirnav watched him die for it.

It came in pieces at first, each piece costing more than the last. The daughter's name: Ròzsanav, which meant rose-self, which meant hope. Cèresnav lost his legs manifesting that memory, his form ending at the waist, floating torso speaking words that came out wet with grief. The wife's death: three days after giving birth, blood loss that no healer could stop. For that memory, his face went transparent, skull showing through, voice echoing like it came from the bottom of a well.

The gradual slide into corruption: favors for the Szòvòtar becoming complicity, complicity becoming guilt, guilt becoming a ledger filled with evidence he was too afraid to use. By the time he finished telling it, only his eyes remained—two points of light floating in formless shimmer, full of a terror that had nothing to do with the past and everything to do with the present.

"I'm dying," he said, and the voice came from everywhere and nowhere. "Again. Finally."

Vèirnav sat at his scarred table, watching the last fragments of his oldest echo struggle to cohere. His own hands were trembling—Cèresnav's trembling—and his chest ached with a grief that belonged to a dead man.

"Tell me what you need to tell me," he said. "Before—"

"Before I'm gone." The eyes flickered. "The ledger. They bound me to keep me silent, but patterns degrade. I was always going to remember. They were always going to have to destroy me eventually." A sound that might have been a laugh. "I've been a dead man walking for thirty-seven years. Now I'm finally dying for real."

"Where's the ledger? The real one?"

"I hid it. Before the meeting. Somewhere—" The eyes dimmed, brightened, dimmed again. "The memory is damaged. Every time I try to reach it, I lose more of myself. But I know I wanted my daughter to find it. I know I wrote her a letter. I know—"

The eyes went out.

The room was dark except for the grey light through the window, and Vèirnav sat alone with a bone disc that pulsed weakly in his pocket, barely warm, the heartbeat of something that was almost finished dying.

I'm still here, whispered something in his mind. Faint. Fading. *I'm still—*

A knock at the door.

Vàscalìn hadn't waited three days.

She stood in the hallway with two other Wardens behind her, their seals drawn, their faces set in the grim satisfaction of hunters who'd cornered their prey.

"Vèirnav Còtòcai," she said. "You've been reported for harboring an awakened echo. You will surrender all six anchors for immediate inspection."

"I have another day. You said three days."

"I lied." She smiled that thin, sharp smile. "Did you think we'd give a pattern-constrained binder time to hide evidence? The only reason you got any warning at all was because we wanted to see what you'd do." She stepped closer. "You went to Merchant City. To the old Cèresnav house. You stood at the gate like a man possessed."

Because he had been. The bleed-fugue, the walk he didn't remember choosing—they'd been watching. Of course they'd been watching.

"The echo is dissolving," Vèirnav said. "On its own. Whatever you think he knows—"

"He worked for the Pattern Houses for thirty years. He kept records. Records that a lot of powerful people have paid a lot of money to keep buried." Vàscalìn's voice was almost gentle. "I don't care about the corruption, Vèirnav. That's above my authority. What I care about is pattern contamination. What I care about is making sure that whatever's in that echo's memories doesn't spread any further than it already has."

"It's already spread." He shouldn't have said it. But the bleed was making him careless, filling his head with fog, and the words came out in Cèresnav's voice—educated, formal, the voice of a man who'd kept secrets for too long. "I've been carrying him for twenty years. Whatever he knew, I know now. If you dissolve him, you don't erase the information. You just make sure no one else can verify it."

Vàscalìn's expression flickered. "What information?"

"Names. Dates. Families who bought their children's futures from corrupt Szòvòtarar."

Vèirnav's hand went to his chest, pressed against the dying heat of the bone disc.

"Còcal. Purchased Útcai Szèrrav, actual Tòvismah Cèresztàhd. His daughter Fèinnav, same adjustment, the ink not even dry. You want more? I have three decades' worth."

The silence in the hallway was absolute.

"You're bluffing," Vàscalìn said. But her voice had changed.

"Am I? The bleed goes both ways. Every memory that's killing him is pouring into me." He tapped his temple. "It's all in here now. Dissolve him, arrest me, do whatever you want. The information exists. Someone will find a way to verify it eventually."

Vàscalìn studied him for a long moment. Then she made a gesture, and the two Wardens behind her moved.

Not toward Vèirnav.

Toward the table where his anchors sat.

"What are you—"

"You want to negotiate? Fine. Let's negotiate." She watched as her Wardens gathered the five stable anchors—the tooth, the ring, the cord, the bead, the coin—and sealed them in a containment case. "These five are now evidence in an ongoing investigation. You'll get them back when we're satisfied that the contamination has been contained."

"Those are my livelihood. Without them—"

"Without them, you're a pattern-constrained binder with one dying echo and a head full of secrets that could get you killed." She moved toward the door, then paused. "You have twenty-four hours. When I come back, you'll surrender the bone disc for dissolution, and you'll submit to memory examination. If you cooperate, you keep your registry. If you don't—"

"I lose everything."

"You lose everything." That smile again, sharp as a blade. "Twenty-four hours, Vèirnav. Use them wisely."

She left with his five echoes, and Vèirnav stood in his empty room with one dying ghost and no way forward that didn't end in ruin.

The bleed-fugue took him that night, and this time he didn't fight it.

Show me, he told the pattern in his chest. Show me everything. If I'm going to lose myself anyway, at least let me know what I'm losing myself to.

The memories came like a river breaking through a dam.

Cèresnav at twenty-two, accepting his first position at the Pattern House, proud and naive and utterly unaware of what he was entering. The smell of the building—old paper, older secrets, the dust of generations of documented lives. The first bribe he witnessed—a merchant paying the Szòvòtar to record his son's pattern as Road/Pact instead of Thorn/Maze. The weight of the coins in the Szòvòtar's palm. The scratch of pen on paper, writing a lie that would shape a child's entire life.

The slow realization that this wasn't an exception but the rule, that the entire system was built on purchased futures and deliberate lies.

The ledger. Started as protest, continued as compulsion. Names in two columns, the truth beside the lie, thirty years of evidence that proved what everyone suspected but no one could prove. The ink staining his fingers. The guilt staining his soul. The growing weight of knowing and doing nothing.

The marriage—her face, clear as morning, a woman who laughed easily and loved completely and died three days after giving birth to their daughter. Blood pooling on white sheets. A baby screaming for a mother who would never answer. The helplessness of holding something precious and watching it slip away.

The raising of Ròzsnav alone. Her first steps in the courtyard of the sandstone house. Her first words, her first questions, her growing understanding that her father carried burdens he wouldn't name. Watching her grow into a woman who looked like her mother, who laughed like her mother, who had no idea that her father was drowning in secrets.

The meeting at Temple Hill. The Szòvòtar's office, all dark wood and false respect. The offer: destroy the ledger and accept a promotion, or refuse and accept the consequences. The weight of the choice, pressing down on his chest. The heart seizing. The world going dark. The last thought—I *should have told someone. I should have burned the ledger or spoken the truth, and instead I died with both options still open.*

And then: binding. The agony of pattern-preservation, consciousness torn from dying flesh and anchored to bone. Vèirnav felt it like fire, like ice, like being pulled apart and pressed into a shape too small to hold him. The confusion of existing without body, without time, without self. And finally, mercifully, the forgetting—decades of service where the merchant's expertise remained but the merchant himself was gone.

Until now.

Until the binding failed, the pattern collapsed, and everything came flooding back.

Vèirnav surfaced from the memories gasping, his face wet with tears that weren't his, his chest aching with grief for a family he'd never known. He was on his knees in the middle of his room, and he didn't know how long he'd been there. The light through the window was grey—morning or evening, he couldn't tell. His hands were cramped, curled around nothing. His mouth tasted like blood and ink and guilt.

I'm sorry, Cèresnav whispered from somewhere faint and far away. I'm so sorry.

"Stop apologizing." His voice was hoarse, wrung out. "Just tell me where you hid the ledger."

I don't remember. That's the one thing—the memory is damaged, corrupted. Every time I try to reach it, I lose more of myself. I know I hid it somewhere my daughter could find it. I know I wrote her a letter explaining everything. But where—

"The house on Temple Hill. Your study."

No. I moved it before the meeting. Somewhere outside the house, somewhere they couldn't find it if they searched.

"Where would you hide something you wanted found by someone specific?"

A pause. The presence in his mind flickered, stabilized, flickered again. Weaker now. Almost gone.

Her mother's grave.

The cemetery was old and neglected, the kind of place where the Hand Quarter buried their dead when they couldn't afford cremation.

Vèirnav moved through crooked headstones and overgrown paths, the bone disc barely warm against his chest. The fog was in his eyes now—permanent, he thought, the bleed settling into his patterns like sediment in still water. He would carry pieces of Cèresnav forever, whether the echo survived or not.

Third row. Seventh stone. The one with the rose carved into it.

He found it as dawn was breaking—a simple marker, weathered nearly smooth, the rose barely visible after thirty-seven years of rain and neglect.

"Your wife."

Szèrnáv. The voice was barely a whisper now. *She would have hated this place. She always wanted to be scattered in the harbor, but I couldn't afford—I couldn't—*

"Focus. The ledger."

Behind the stone. There's a cavity in the base, sealed with mortar. I hid it there the night before the meeting. The letter too.

Vèirnav knelt in the wet grass, ignoring the cold that soaked through his trousers. Ran his fingers along the base of the headstone. Found the seam where old mortar had cracked, worked his knife into the gap, pried away years of decay.

A cavity. A leather-wrapped bundle, preserved by the stone's protection.

He pulled it out with shaking hands—Cèresnav's shaking, his own shaking, the distinction meaningless now.

The leather fell away to reveal a ledger—thin, water-stained, but intact. And folded inside the cover, a letter addressed to *Ròzsanav, my heart, my hope.*

That's it, Cèresnav whispered. *That's everything I was too afraid to speak.*

Vèirnav opened the ledger. Pages of cramped handwriting, names in two columns, thirty years of corruption documented in a dead man's careful script. Evidence that could destroy families. Evidence that could burn the pattern system to ash. Evidence that the Wardens had killed to suppress and would kill again to bury.

What will you do?

"I don't know."

You could burn it. End what I started, let the secrets die with me.

"I could."

Or you could take it to the Wardens. Let the system choke on its own lies.

"That would destroy everyone. And Vàscalìn would just bury it deeper."

Or—

"Or I could take it to your daughter. Give her the choice you never made." Vèirnav closed the ledger, held it against his chest beside the cooling bone disc. "Let her decide what to do with her father's truth."

The presence in his mind pulsed one final time—not hot now, but warm. Human-warm. The warmth of a hand held in gratitude.

Thank you, Cèresnav said. For carrying me. For choosing.

"Don't thank me yet. I haven't decided anything."

You've already decided. You decided when you didn't let them take me. You decided when you let the bleed in instead of fighting it. You decided when you came here, to my wife's grave, to find the truth I was too afraid to speak.

"And if I'm wrong? If giving this to your daughter destroys her?"

Then you'll have done what I couldn't—spoken the truth and let someone else choose what to do with it.

The presence flickered. Faded. Began to dissolve.

My daughter is Vizrav Còcalnòc now. She married into the family whose patterns fill this ledger. Her daughter—my granddaughter—just had her Binding.

Fèinnav. The name in the ledger, the purchased pattern, the most recent entry in thirty years of lies.

Tell her I loved her. Tell her I'm sorry. And tell her—

The presence collapsed.

The bone disc went cold.

And Vèirnav knelt in the cemetery grass, holding a dead man's secrets, alone for the first time in twenty years. The fog in his eyes didn't clear. It never would. He was carrying Cèresnav now—not as echo, but as scar, as memory, as the permanent bleed of a man who'd finally been allowed to die.

Part Four

Èitar found him there an hour later—or maybe it was longer; time had gone strange, slippery, measured in heartbeats that weren't entirely his.

"You look like death," she said, settling onto a nearby headstone with the casual disregard for propriety that marked everything she did. "More than usual, I mean. Significantly more."

"He's gone."

"I know. I felt the pattern dissolve—half the binders in the city probably felt it. Twenty years of accumulated resonance doesn't go quietly." She nodded at the bundle in his hands. "That what I think it is?"

"Depends on what you think it is."

"Evidence. The kind people kill for." Her eyes glittered with calculation and something that might have been admiration. "The Wardens came to my people asking about you. Wanting to know if you'd shared anything, talked to anyone. I told them you were the most private man I'd ever met."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. I want payment." She slid off the headstone, moved closer.

"Whatever's in that ledger—whatever Cèresnav died to protect—I want a copy. Not to sell. Not yet. But to hold, for the day when holding it becomes valuable."

"And in exchange?"

"Safe passage to Merchant City. A distraction for the Wardens while you do whatever you're planning to do. And afterward—" She smiled, and the smile had teeth.

"Afterward, you owe me. Whatever that means, whenever I decide to collect."

An open debt. The worst kind. The kind that could cost him anything, at any time, for any reason.

But Vàscalin was coming. She'd taken his five echoes, she had his registration in her hands, and in a few hours she'd have his freedom too. He had no leverage, no options, no way forward that didn't go through someone else's power.

"Why help me?" he asked. "What do you gain from this?"

"Information is my trade, Vèirnav. And you're carrying the biggest secret this city has seen in thirty-seven years." Èitar's smile sharpened. "Wherever that secret goes, I want

to be close enough to catch the ripples. Consider me an investment in your survival."

He looked at the ledger. At the letter, still folded inside, still unread. At the grave of a woman he'd never known but whose husband had loved her enough to hide his secrets beside her bones.

"There's a woman I need to find. Vízrav Còcalnòc. She lives in Merchant City."

"The merchant's widow? She's easy enough to locate." Èitar's smile sharpened. "Why her?"

"Because she's his daughter. And she deserves to hear what I have to say before anyone else does."

"Even me?"

"Even you."

Èitar studied him for a long moment. Then she nodded.

"I'll get you there. The Wardens are watching your room, but they're not watching the tunnels under the Threshold Market. I know a way."

"And the distraction?"

"Already arranged. Someone will report an awakened echo in the Vent Quarter—something dramatic, something that requires immediate attention. You'll have maybe two hours before Vàscalìn figures out she's been played."

Two hours. To find Cèresnav's daughter, deliver a dead man's secrets, and disappear before the Wardens caught up with him.

"That's not much time."

"Then stop wasting it." Èitar turned to go, then paused. "Vèirnav?"

"Yes?"

"Whatever you're carrying in your head—whatever the bleed gave you—be careful who you trust with it. Information like that doesn't just destroy the people it's about. It destroys the people who carry it too."

She disappeared into the morning fog, and Vèirnav followed, the ledger pressed against his chest like a wound that wouldn't stop bleeding.

The tunnels under the Threshold Market smelled like sewage and secrets.

Vèirnav moved through darkness, one hand on the damp wall, the other clutching the leather-wrapped bundle. The fog in his eyes made the shadows deeper, turned every flicker of distant light into something that might have been memory or might have been hallucination.

Cèresnav was gone, but pieces of him remained. The way Vèirnav's hand kept reaching for a pen that wasn't there. The way his eyes kept trying to read patterns in the brick walls—columns of names, dates, payments. The weight in his chest that felt like thirty years of guilt compressed into a space where his heart used to be.

This is what it costs, he thought. *This is what it costs to carry the dead.*

The tunnel opened into a cellar beneath a merchant's warehouse, and Èitar was waiting with a change of clothes and a false confidence that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"The Wardens moved faster than I expected," she said. "Vàscalìn didn't buy the distraction. She's heading to Merchant City now."

"How long?"

"Maybe an hour. Maybe less." She thrust the clothes at him—merchant's dress, respectable, the kind of thing that would let him pass without comment in the wealthy quarter. "Change. Move fast. And whatever you do, don't let her catch you with that ledger."

"What happens if she does?"

"You disappear. The ledger disappears. And whatever chance there was to use what's in there dies with both of you." Èitar's face was hard, calculating. "I've invested in your survival, Vèirnav. Don't make me regret it."

He changed. He moved. And all the way through the streets of Merchant City—cleaner than the Hand Quarter, brighter, the architecture of wealth rising around him like an accusation—he felt the ledger burning against his chest, the dead man's secrets demanding to be spoken.

The Còcalnòc house rose against the evening sky like a monument to purchased futures.

Vèirnav had been here before—twice now, once in bleed-fugue, once in memory. He knew the sandstone and iron, the courtyard visible through the gate, the window on the second floor that had been Cèresnav's study. He knew the weight of standing here, looking up at everything a dead man had lost.

But this time, he wasn't a ghost. He was a messenger.

The servant who answered didn't want to let him in.

"The lady of the house doesn't receive visitors at this hour. If you wish to schedule an appointment—"

"Tell her someone has a message from her father."

"Her father has been dead for—"

"Thirty-seven years. I know. Tell her anyway."

The servant's expression shifted from disdain to something more complex. He disappeared inside.

Vèirnav waited. The evening air carried the scent of the wealthy quarter—clean, floral, nothing like the Hand Quarter's perpetual reek of industry and desperation. Above him, windows glowed with warm light, and somewhere inside, a family was preparing for dinner without knowing that the foundation of their lives was about to crack.

The servant returned.

"The lady will see you. Follow me."

Vìzrav Còcalnòc was older than he'd expected.

Sixty-two, by Cèresnav's memories, but she looked older—grey hair pinned back severely, a face lined with worry, hands that shook slightly when she poured tea neither of them wanted. The receiving room was elegant, expensive, full of the weight of purchased respectability.

"You knew my father." Not a question.

"I carried him. For twenty years." Vèirnav sat across from her, aware of how wrong he looked here despite the merchant's clothes—the fog in his eyes visible if you knew to

look, the trembling in his hands that wasn't quite his own. "He was bound as an echo before his burial. I was given his anchor when my master died."

"I know. The family was told—" She stopped, collected herself. "We were told his expertise would be preserved. That he would continue serving, in a sense. We weren't given a choice."

"No. You wouldn't have been."

Silence. The tea cooled untouched between them.

"He remembered," Vizrav said finally. "Didn't he? That's why you're here. After all these years, he remembered who he was."

"Everything. His life, his work, his family." Vèirnav pulled the bundle from his coat, set it on the table between them. "His secrets."

Vizrav stared at the leather-wrapped ledger like it was a snake.

"I don't want to know."

"He wanted you to know. He hid this before he died—hid it where you'd find it if anything happened to him. But then he was bound, and his memories were taken, and thirty-seven years passed before he could tell anyone."

"And now he's gone." Her voice cracked. "Truly gone."

"Yes. He dissolved yesterday. But before he did, he asked me to bring you this." Vèirnav unwrapped the bundle, pulled out the letter. "He asked me to tell you he loved you. That he was sorry. And that he kept this ledger because someday he wanted to make things right."

Vizrav's hand trembled as she took the letter. She unfolded it slowly, read the first few lines, and her face did something that hurt to watch—grief and anger and love all tangled together, thirty-seven years of questions finally meeting thirty-seven-year-old answers.

"He documented the fraud," she whispered. "The pattern adjustments. The bribes."

"Thirty years of records. Every family who purchased a different future for their children."

Her eyes lifted from the letter to meet his.

"My husband's family is in here."

"Yes."

"My daughter—my Fèinnav—"

"Her pattern was adjusted at her Binding. Two weeks ago." Vèirnav kept his voice gentle. "The purchased pattern is Road/Pact. The actual pattern is Thorn/Crossroads. The same pattern her grandfather had."

Vizrav set down the letter. Her hands had stopped shaking—something had settled in her, some decision crystallizing behind her eyes.

"Why bring this to me? You could have sold it. Given it to the Wardens. Used it for leverage."

"Because it's not mine to use. It belonged to your father, and he wanted you to have it. What you do with it—that's your choice."

"And if I choose to burn it? Protect my family from the truth?"

"Then the truth dies with you. The bleed gave me the contents, but—" He stopped. He could lie. Tell her the memories were fading. But he'd carried too many lies already, absorbed too much of a dead man's guilt. "The truth is, I'll remember everything. The bleed doesn't fade completely. But without the physical evidence, without proof, it's just one pattern-constrained binder's word against decades of established records."

"So you're trusting me with the power to validate or destroy everything my father knew."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Because Cèresnav had loved her. Because the dead deserved to be heard. Because Vèirnav had spent twenty years carrying a man's expertise without carrying his truth, and something in him needed that to end differently.

"Because he died wanting to make things right," Vèirnav said. "And I think—I think you might be braver than he was. I think you might actually do something."

Vizrav picked up the ledger. Opened it. Traced her fingers across her father's handwriting—thirty years of evidence, thirty years of silent rebellion, thirty years of truth waiting to be spoken.

"My father was a coward," she said. "He kept these records instead of acting on them. He documented corruption instead of stopping it. He died with the truth still locked in his desk."

"Yes."

"I could be a coward too. Easier, in many ways. Protect my daughter from knowing her pattern is a lie. Protect my husband's memory from scandal." She closed the ledger. "But my father died wanting to make things right. And I've spent thirty-seven years wondering why he looked so tired, so burdened, so crushed by something he wouldn't name."

"Now you know."

"Now I know." She stood, the ledger cradled against her chest like something precious. "There's a girl in the Hand Quarter—a friend of my daughter's. She came to our house asking questions about patterns, about fraud. She knew something was wrong."

Àrnav. The shadow-girl from Fèinnav's Binding. Vèirnav remembered her from Cèresnav's fragmented observations—a constrained girl with Thorn-patterns, asking dangerous questions.

"What will you tell her?"

"The same thing you told me. The truth, and a choice." Vízrav moved toward the door, then paused. "My father asked you to carry a message. You've carried it. But I have a question for you, binder."

"Ask."

"What do you want? Not for my father, not for me—for yourself. You've lost your oldest echo. You've gained secrets that could make you powerful or get you killed. What will you do with what you know?"

Vèirnav thought about it. Twenty years of partnership, ended. A head full of fading memories—no, not fading, permanent, the fog in his eyes that would never clear. A life that would never be the same.

"I want to honor him," he said finally. "Not by burning down the system or protecting it—by doing what he couldn't. Speaking truth to the people who need to hear it, and letting them decide what to do."

"Even if it changes nothing?"

"Even then. The choice matters more than the outcome. That's what he taught me, in the end."

Vízrav nodded slowly.

"I think he would have liked that answer. And I think—" She opened the door. "I think he would have been proud to have you carry him."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. We're both just doing what he was too afraid to do." She gestured toward the hallway. "I'll have my servant show you out. And binder—"

"Yes?"

"The Wardens are at the gate."

Part Five

Vèirnav didn't run.

There was nowhere to run. The Còcalnòc house had one entrance, and Òràhd Vàscalìn was standing at it with two Wardens flanking her, their seals drawn, their faces set in the satisfaction of hunters who'd finally cornered their prey.

"Vèirnav Còtòcai." Vàscalìn's voice carried across the courtyard like a blade. "You failed to present yourself for inspection. You left your registered address without authorization. You're in possession of classified information pertaining to pattern security."

"The echo dissolved," Vèirnav said. His voice came out steady, which surprised him. Something had settled in his chest—not peace, exactly, but acceptance. The fog in his eyes made the Wardens look almost soft, their edges blurred, their threat faded. "You can't dissolve what's already gone."

"But we can examine what remains. The bleed you carry. The memories you've absorbed." Vàscalìn moved closer, and her eyes—pattern-marked, Attuned—narrowed. "You've been busy, binder. The ledger. You found it."

"I delivered it. To the dead man's daughter. Where it belonged."

"Where it belongs is in the Pattern House archives, classified and secured. Not in the hands of a merchant's widow who doesn't understand what she's holding."

"She understands perfectly." Vèirnav felt Vizrav behind him, still holding the ledger, still deciding. "She understands that her father was killed to keep those records hidden. She understands that her husband's family bought their futures with fraud. She understands that her daughter's pattern is a lie."

"And you told her all of this?"

"Her father told her. Thirty-seven years ago, in a letter he hid at his wife's grave. I just carried the message."

Vàscalìn's expression flickered—anger, calculation, something that might have been grudging respect.

"You've created a mess, Vèirnav. A significant mess. The kind of mess that gets people silenced."

"Like Cèresnav was silenced? Bound before his body was cold, his memories stripped, his secrets locked in a pattern that was never supposed to wake up?" Vèirnav stepped forward, and for once the Warden didn't move to meet him. "The system you're protecting killed a man for keeping records. It kept him imprisoned in death for thirty-seven years. And when he finally started to remember—when he finally started to become himself again—you came to dissolve him. To silence him all over again."

"Pattern contamination is a serious threat—"

"Pattern contamination is an excuse. A way to destroy evidence that threatens powerful people." He tapped his temple. "The contamination is in here now. In me. You can arrest me, examine me, dissolve my registration—but you can't unwrite what I know. And neither can anyone else."

The courtyard was silent. Behind him, Vèirnav heard Vizrav's quiet breathing, the rustle of paper as she held the ledger tighter.

"What do you want?" Àscalìn asked finally.

"I want you to walk away. Let the merchant's daughter make her own choice about what to do with her father's truth. Let me disappear back to the Hand Quarter with

whatever scraps of my life I can salvage." He paused. "And I want my five echoes back. They had nothing to do with any of this."

"You're not in a position to make demands."

"I'm in exactly that position. Because right now, you can arrest one pattern-constrained binder and seize one ledger. But the information is already spreading. The merchant's daughter knows. Her daughter will know by tomorrow. The girl from the Hand Quarter who's been asking questions—she'll know too." Vèirnav smiled, and it felt strange on his face, unfamiliar—Cèresnav's smile, maybe, the one the merchant had worn when he finally understood a game's true stakes. "You can silence one voice. But you can't silence all of them."

Vàscalìn stared at him for a long moment. Her eyes flickered to Vízrav, to the ledger, to the house that represented three generations of purchased respectability.

Then she made a decision.

"The investigation is being closed," she said. "Insufficient evidence. The echo designated 'Cèresnav' dissolved naturally, taking any alleged information with it. The binder Vèirnav Còtòcai will be released with a formal warning about registration compliance."

"And my echoes?"

"Returned within the week. Assuming no further complications."

It wasn't justice. It wasn't victory. It was compromise—the kind of deal that left everyone dissatisfied but alive.

"And the ledger?" Vízrav asked from behind him.

Vàscalìn's jaw tightened. "Private family documents are outside my jurisdiction. What you do with your father's records is your own concern."

She turned and walked away, the two Wardens following. At the gate, she paused.

"Vèirnav."

"Yes?"

"The contamination you carry—the bleed that won't fade—it's going to change you. You'll be hearing his voice for years. Seeing his memories. Feeling his guilt." Her face

was unreadable. "Some binders go mad from less. Make sure you're stronger than they were."

She left.

And Vèirnav stood in the courtyard of a dead man's house, the fog in his eyes making the evening light soft and strange, and felt the weight of thirty-seven years of secrets finally begin to lift from his chest.

The morning ritual had changed.

Vèirnav sat at his scarred table, five anchors laid out before him—returned yesterday, as Vàscalìn had promised, their patterns slightly degraded from their time in Warden custody but recoverable. The bone disc was gone—buried in the cemetery beside Szèrnav's grave, where Cèresnav could finally rest with his wife. The space where it used to rest in his chest pocket felt empty, hollow, waiting for something to fill it.

He fed the remaining echoes their Residue. One drop each. The economics of death, unchanged.

But as he worked, he felt it—the ghost of another man's consciousness, fading but not gone. Cèresnav's mannerisms in his hands. Cèresnav's precision in his measurements. Cèresnav's squint when the light was too bright. The fog at the edges of his vision that wouldn't clear, that was the color of old paper and the weight of secrets finally spoken.

The dead were never fully gone. That was the truth of binding—not that you carried echoes, but that they carried you. Changed you. Left pieces of themselves in your patterns that no dissolution could remove.

He looked in the mirror above his washbasin.

His face looked back—forty-one years old, grey at the temples, the permanent squint that had never been his own. But beneath it, faintly, he could see the merchant's features layered over his own—the soft jaw, the careful attention, the weight of a man who'd finally been allowed to rest.

Thank you, something whispered. Not a voice, not a memory. Just the echo of an echo, fading into the light.

A knock at the door.

Vèirnav set down the Residue. Crossed to the door. Opened it.

No Wardens this time. Just a woman—young, constrained by her clothes and her posture, with dark eyes and darker questions.

"Àrnnav," he said. The shadow-girl from Fèinnav's Binding. The one who'd been asking dangerous questions. "Vizrav sent you."

"She said you might be able to help me. That you carry information about—" The girl hesitated. "About my mother. About how she died."

The fog in Vèirnav's eyes shifted, and for a moment he saw something—a name in a ledger, a payment recorded, a silence purchased.

"Come in," he said. "I think we have things to discuss."

Later, after the girl had left with information that would change her life, Vèirnav sat alone at his scarred table.

The morning continued. The echoes waited. The city outside his window hummed with the thousand small corruptions that kept it running.

Nothing had changed.

Everything had changed.

He picked up the Residue and began the ritual again—five anchors now, five souls in his keeping, five deaths he would carry until his own patterns finally collapsed. But as he worked, he felt the weight of a choice finally made. The fog in his eyes that was both burden and gift. The echo of a man who'd spent thirty-seven years waiting for someone to carry his burden, and who had finally, at the end, been granted rest.

The ledger of my life, Cèresnav had whispered in those final moments. *Someone else holds the pen now.*

Vèirnav thought of Vizrav reading her father's letter. Of Fèinnav learning that her pattern was a lie. Of Àrnnav walking out into the Hand Quarter with the name of her mother's killer burning in her mind.

The truth was spreading. Person by person, choice by choice. Not a revolution—the system was too strong for that. But something. Cracks in a structure that had stood for generations. Light getting into places that had been dark for too long.

The dead carried the living. The living carried the dead.

That was the cost.

That was the choice.

That was, finally, enough.

End of "Bleed" (v2)