

- [The Constrained](#)
  - [Part One](#)
  - [Part Two](#)
  - [Part Three](#)
  - [Part Four](#)
  - [Part Five](#)
  - [Triptych Closing Note](#)

# The Constrained

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## Part One

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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.

"Shift's almost done." Hòldanìn, the woman at the next basin, nodded toward the grey light filtering through the single window. "You staying for second?"

"Can't. I have—" She 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.

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

Àrnnav nodded, wrung out the silk, hung it to dry. Her hands were trembling, and not just from the heat.

One week since her Binding. One week since the Szòvòtar had looked at her with something like pity and written down the pattern that would define her life: *Tòvismah t 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.

The wealthy girls at the ceremony had received Road and Pact, Tower and Crown. Futures of travel and alliance, structure and authority. Àrnnav had received Thorn.

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

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The room she shared with Fèincal was smaller than the Szòvòtar's receiving chamber.

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 Tànít the drunk singing three doors down, thin enough to feel the cold that crept through gaps no landlord would ever repair.

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.

"You're late." Eleven years old, serious as a judge, with their mother's dark eyes and none of their mother's defeat. "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. "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.

"Your Name Day is coming," she said. "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.*

"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.

After dinner, after the lesson review, after Fèincal fell asleep in the bed they shared, Àrnnav slipped out into the Hand Quarter night.

She had *things* to do.

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

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.

"Àrnnav." He smiled when she entered, and the smile never reached his eyes. "My favorite new talent. How's the laundry treating you?"

"Like shit."

"Language like that, you'll never rise in society." The smile widened. "Lucky for you, I'm not society. I'm something better. I'm opportunity."

Three other people waited in the basement—runners, thieves, the kind of desperate that Vèircal traded in. Àrnnav took her place among them and waited.

"Small jobs have been good," Vèircal said, addressing them all. "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. "*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 named the house. The Còcalnòc family. Merchants, privileged, the kind of people whose daughters received purchased patterns and never had to know what the Binding actually meant.

The name triggered something in Àrnnav's memory. Her mother had mentioned that family, once. Had worked for them, maybe, or known someone who did. The memory was fuzzy, fragmented, buried under years of trying not to think about the woman who had died knowing too much.

"How much?" Àrnnav asked.

"Enough to pay your brother's lessons for three months. Enough to move to a better room. Enough to—"

"I'll do it."

The words came out before she could stop them. Three months of lessons. A better room. The chance to give Fèincal something more than stale bread and thin walls.

Vèircai's smile sharpened.

"I knew you would. Your pattern told me so."

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She walked home through streets that had never felt darker.

The Hand Quarter was quiet in the late hours, the kind of quiet that came from exhaustion rather than peace. Somewhere a baby cried. Somewhere a couple argued in voices too tired for real anger. The cobblestones were slick with something she didn't want to identify, and the lamps that the city maintained in Merchant City were absent here, deemed unnecessary for people whose patterns didn't require light.

Àrnnav passed the Pattern House without meaning to.

The Temple District jutted into the Hand Quarter like an accusation—clean streets, maintained buildings, the architecture of faith rising above the architecture of poverty. The Pattern House itself was dark now, but she remembered it in daylight: the line of adolescents waiting for their Bindings, the wealthy on one side and the workers on the other, the Szòvòtar who had looked at each of them and seen—what? Truth? Profit? The simple mechanics of a system that sorted human beings into useful categories?

She remembered the moment the Attendance touched her. That vast presence, brief and infinite, looking at something inside her that she couldn't see herself. And then the Szòvòtar writing, writing, consigning her to Thorn and Maze while the rich girl beside her received Road and Pact.

The rich girl. Fèinnav Còcalnòc.

The family Vèircai wanted her to rob.

*Coincidence*, Àrnnav told herself. *The city is full of merchant families. It means nothing.*

But her mother's voice echoed in her memory, speaking of the Pattern House, of records kept and secrets buried, of things that could kill you for knowing them.

Her mother had died of a fever that came on very suddenly.

Àrnnav walked faster, leaving the Temple District behind, returning to the darkness where she belonged.

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## Part Two

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Three days of preparation. Three days of watching, planning, becoming someone she didn't want to be.

The Còcalnòc house sat on the edge of Temple Hill like a declaration of success—sandstone and iron, three stories of purchased respectability. Àrnnav observed it from a distance, noting the servants' schedules, the guard rotations, the windows that stayed dark after midnight.

The documents Vèircal wanted were in the home office. Second floor, east side, accessible through a window that the household left cracked for ventilation. Simple, he'd said. Quick in, quick out, no one the wiser.

But as she watched the house, she saw other things too.

The daughter—Fèinnav—coming and going with the careful movements of someone carrying weight she couldn't show. A friend visiting from the Hand Quarter, dark-haired and defiant, the kind of girl who didn't belong in Merchant City any more than Àrnnav did. Conversations on the steps that looked urgent, secretive, dangerous.

And once, late at night, a woman emerging from the servants' entrance with a bundle under her arm and grief written on her face. The mother, Àrnnav realized. Vízrav Còcalnòc. Walking somewhere private to cry.

*They have sorrows too, she thought, and hated herself for thinking it. Rich sorrows. Comfortable sorrows. Sorrows that don't include wondering if your brother will eat tomorrow.*

She went home to her mother's things.

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The box had been hidden under a loose floorboard since before Àrnnav could remember.

Her mother—Szèrlaimhnàv, a name that meant contract-flesh, a name that spoke of binding and obligation—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. "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.

"I worked at the Pattern House," her mother said. "Before you were born. I assisted a Szòvòtar. I saw things. Wrote things down." Her face had been hollow with a fear Àrnnav didn't understand. "If anything happens to me, 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 Àrnnav was raising Fèincal alone, and the box stayed hidden because there was no one to show it to anyway.

Now she opened it.

The note was still there, yellowed with age. She read it with older eyes:

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

And at the bottom, in different handwriting:

*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.

Àrnnav sat in the darkness of her room, Fèincal sleeping beside her, and felt something shift in her chest. Not grief—she'd spent years processing that. Something colder. Something that felt like purpose.

The documents Vèircal wanted were connected to this. The Còcalnòc family, the Pattern House, the ledger of adjusted patterns that her mother had helped maintain and died for knowing about.

She wasn't just being sent to steal. She was being sent to retrieve evidence of murder.

*Her mother's murder.*

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"You're asking too many questions."

Vèircal's basement felt smaller tonight, the shadows deeper, the mold-smell stronger. He sat behind his makeshift desk—crates stacked to suggest authority—and studied her with eyes that calculated everything.

"I want to know what I'm stealing."

"You're stealing documents. Papers. The kind that have value to people who pay me."

"What kind of documents? Why from that house? Who's paying you?"

"Questions like that will get you killed." His voice was mild, almost friendly. "Questions like that have gotten people killed. People you knew, maybe."

The air in the basement went very still.

"My mother worked at the Pattern House," Årnnav said. "She kept records. She died."

"Lots of people die."

"She died of a fever that came on very suddenly. Right after she started asking questions about ledgers and adjustments and wealthy families buying their children's futures."

Vèircai's expression didn't change, but something in his posture shifted. Subtle. Dangerous.

"You're smarter than I gave you credit for. That's not necessarily a compliment." He stood, moved toward her, and she forced herself not to step back. "The documents in that house are worth more than you can imagine. Worth enough that people have killed for them, yes. Worth enough that people will kill again to get them or keep them hidden."

"Who's paying you?"

"Someone who wants the truth exposed. Someone who thinks the pattern system is rotten and wants to prove it." He was close now, close enough that she could smell the wine on his breath, the corruption in his certainty. "I'm not the villain here, Årnnav. I'm just the mechanism. The documents exist. Someone will retrieve them eventually. Why shouldn't it be you? Why shouldn't you profit from your mother's death instead of just suffering from it?"

She should walk away. Every instinct she had screamed that this was deeper than she could handle, darker than she wanted to be.

But Fèincal needed lessons. Fèincal needed food. Fèincal needed a sister who could provide for him, whatever the cost.

And somewhere in that house was proof of what had happened to her mother.

"I'll do it," she said. "But I want double."

"Double?"

"You said the documents are worth more than I can imagine. I'm imagining quite a lot." She met his eyes, held them. "Double, or find another girl who looks harmless."

Vèircai laughed. It was an ugly sound, but genuine.

"Your pattern was Thorn, wasn't it? Difficult connections. Painful paths." He nodded slowly. "Double. But if you fail—if you're caught, or if you try to play games with what you find—I'll make sure your brother's Binding is conducted by someone who owes me favors. Do you understand what that means?"

She understood. The poor received their true patterns, but *how* those patterns were recorded, *what* opportunities were noted, *which* constrained categories were assigned—all of that was subject to interpretation. Vèircai could ensure that Fèincal received not just a difficult pattern, but a *ruinous* one.

"I understand."

"Good. The job is tomorrow night. Pattern Day eve. The household will be distracted with preparations." He returned to his desk, dismissing her. "Don't disappoint me, Àrnnav. I have such hopes for our partnership."

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Pattern Day eve.

The city hummed with anticipation—banners going up in Temple District, merchants preparing their finest displays, the wealthy families rehearsing their celebrations while the Hand Quarter prepared to work through another holiday that wasn't meant for them.

Àrnnav moved through Merchant City as darkness fell, 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 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 window opened easily—rich people's carelessness, the assumption that no one would dare intrude on their purchased safety. She slipped inside, found herself in a hallway that smelled of beeswax and money, and followed her mental map toward the home office.

Second door on the right. Unlocked. Inside: a desk, a cabinet, a strongbox in the corner that practically announced *important things here*.

She knelt beside it, pulled out the picks Vèircai had given her, and went to work.

The lock was good. Her skills were better—hours of practice in the basement, hands learning the language of mechanisms, the patience that came from knowing failure meant hungry nights.

Click. Click. 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, a separate page:

*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 something that might have been a weapon 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."

Silence. The candle flame danced. Somewhere in the house, a clock struck midnight, marking the beginning of Pattern Day.

"The Szòvòtar," Fèinnav said slowly. "The old one. He's been adjusting patterns for generations. My friend—Àrnnav—" She stopped, caught by the coincidence of the name. "Another Àrnnav. She's been investigating. We both have. The whole system is —"

"Rotten. I know." Àrnnav held up the page with her mother's name. "They killed her for knowing what you're just now figuring out. Induced fever. Five hundred coins."

Fèinnav's face did something complicated. Horror, guilt, recognition.

"What will you do with it?" she asked. "The documents?"

Àrnnav looked at the papers in her hands. Evidence of murder. Evidence of fraud. Power, if she knew how to use it.

"I don't know," she said. "I was supposed to give them to someone. A man who paid me to steal them. But now—"

"Now you're wondering who he's working for. What he'll do with proof of pattern fraud. Whether you're trading one kind of corruption for another."

The wealthy girl understood more than Àrnnav expected. Maybe that's what happened when you discovered your whole life was a lie—it made you smarter about other people's lies.

"I have a brother," Àrnnav said. "Eleven years old. Four years until his Binding. The man I work for—if I don't deliver these documents, he'll make sure my brother's pattern is the worst it can be. Not falsified. Just... interpreted badly."

"And if you do deliver them?"

"Then I'm complicit in whatever happens next. And I still don't know if my mother's death gets any justice, or just gets used by someone else."

Fèinnav set down her candle. Set down whatever she'd been holding—not a weapon, Àrnnav saw now, just a heavy candlestick. The rich girl's idea of self-defense.

"My mother has been looking for this ledger," Fèinnav said. "My grandfather kept it—the original, not these copies. He wanted to expose the fraud, but he died before he could. Now she's—we're—trying to decide what to do with the truth."

"Your grandfather." Àrnnav thought of the binder, Vèirnav, who'd been mentioned in Hand Quarter whispers. The echo that awakened. The merchant who remembered. "The one who was bound as an echo?"

"You know about that?"

"Everyone knows about that. The Wardens were searching the whole Quarter." Àrnnav looked at the documents, at the proof of three generations of purchased lies, at the record of her mother's death. "Your family is at the center of all of this. The fraud, the murders, the whole rotten system."

"My family is a victim of it too. We just—" Fèinnav's voice cracked. "We just didn't know. We thought we were blessed. We thought the Weaver favored us."

"The Weaver doesn't favor anyone. The Weaver just sees. It's people who decide what to write down."

Her mother's words, coming out of her mouth. The inheritance of the constrained—wisdom that couldn't save you, only explain why you couldn't be saved.

Fèinnav stepped closer. Her face had changed, become something harder and more determined.

"Don't give them to your employer. Not yet. Let me talk to my mother—she has connections, resources. If we work together—"

"Work together?" Àrnnav laughed, and the sound was bitter even to her own ears. "You and me? The merchant's daughter and the laundry girl? We're not the same, Fèinnav. We'll never be the same. Your family paid for your future. Mine paid with her life."

"That's exactly why we should work together. We both want the system exposed. We both have pieces of the truth. Alone, we're vulnerable. Together—"

"Together, I'm still the one who gets caught if something goes wrong. I'm still the one whose brother ends up with a ruined pattern. I'm still—" She stopped. "Why do you even care? You're privileged. You could burn these documents and go back to your comfortable life."

"Because it's not comfortable anymore." Fèinnav's eyes were bright with something that might have been tears. "Because I found out my whole identity is a purchase. Because a girl from the Hand Quarter showed me that we received the same truth and different lies, and I can't unknow that."

The clock struck again. One in the morning. Pattern Day had begun.

Àrnnav looked at the documents in her hands. Proof. Power. Danger.

"I need to think," she said. "I need time."

"How much time?"

"Until tomorrow night. I'll meet you—" She thought. Public, crowded, somewhere neither of them would be noticed. "The Pattern Day celebration in Temple Square. Evening. Bring your mother if you want. Bring whoever you trust. But if I see Wardens, if I smell a trap—"

"No trap. I promise."

"Your promises don't mean much. You come from a family built on broken ones."

Fèinnav flinched, but nodded.

"Tomorrow night. Temple Square. I'll be there."

Àrnnav gathered the documents, tucked them inside her dress, and moved toward the window.

"Wait." Fèinnav's voice stopped her. "The other Àrnnav. My friend. She's from the Hand Quarter too. She received Thorn, like you. If you want to talk to someone who understands—"

"I don't need to talk. I need to survive."

She climbed out the window and disappeared into the Pattern Day dark.

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## Part Three

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Vèircal's people were waiting at her room.

Two of them, flanking the door, their presence announcing that she'd taken too long, that she'd missed the rendezvous, that patience had limits even in the criminal economy.

"The boss wants to see you," one of them said. "Now."

"I was going to bring the documents to him. I just needed—"

"Now."

They took her through Hand Quarter streets that felt hostile in ways they hadn't before. Every shadow held threat. Every face that looked away was a judgment.

Fèincal was still asleep when they'd arrived. She'd seen him through the window—her brother, dreaming of letters and lessons and the Binding that would determine his future. If she didn't handle this perfectly, that future would be ruin.

Vèircal's basement was crowded tonight. His people ranged along the walls, their presence a message: *we are many, you are one, don't forget your place.*

"You're late," Vèircal said from his desk. "The window closed two hours ago. Where have you been?"

"There were complications. The household was—"

"The household was what? Awake? Suspicious? More difficult than a laundry girl could handle?"

"I got the documents."

The basement went still.

Àrnnav pulled the papers from her dress, held them up. The evidence of decades of fraud, the record of her mother's murder, the leverage that could change everything or destroy her.

"The Còcalnòc family," she said. "Three generations of purchased patterns. Names, dates, amounts paid. And—" She pulled out the page about her mother. "Records of people who were silenced for knowing too much."

Vèircai stood slowly. His eyes never left the documents.

"Give them to me."

"Not yet." Her heart was hammering, but her voice stayed steady. "You didn't tell me what these were worth. You didn't tell me they were connected to murders. My mother's murder."

"I told you what you needed to know."

"You told me what made me useful. That's not the same thing." She stepped back, keeping the documents against her chest. "Who are you working for? Who wants these papers, and why?"

"That's not your concern."

"It is now. These documents are proof of pattern fraud. They're also proof that the Pattern House killed my mother to keep her quiet. If I give them to you, I want to know what happens next."

Vèircai moved closer. His people shifted along the walls, a slow tightening of threat.

"What happens next is you give me the documents, I give you your payment, and you go back to your brother and your laundry and your small life. That's the deal. That's always been the deal."

"The deal changed when I found out my mother's death is recorded like a ledger entry." She met his eyes. "I want to know who ordered her killed. I want to know who's paying you. I want—"

"You want too much." His voice had gone cold. "You're a constrained girl from the Hand Quarter with a Thorn pattern and no future. What you *want* doesn't matter. What matters is what you can deliver."

"Then I'll deliver to someone else."

The silence that followed was the silence before violence.

"I have people watching your room," Vèircal said softly. "I have people who know where your brother goes to his lessons. I have people who can make sure the next four years of his life are very, very difficult." He held out his hand. "The documents, Àrnnav. Now."

She thought about her mother. Thought about Fèincal. Thought about the Còcalnòc family with their purchased patterns and their complicated griefs.

Thought about what Fèinnav had said: *Together, we're less vulnerable.*

"No."

The word came out clear and certain, and it surprised her as much as it surprised Vèircal.

"What?"

"I said no. I'm not giving you the documents. Not tonight, not until I know what they're for." She backed toward the stairs, and his people moved to block her, and she felt the trap closing but kept talking anyway. "You can threaten my brother. You can threaten me. But if I disappear tonight, the documents disappear with me—and I've already made arrangements for them to reach people who will use them in ways you won't like."

A lie. She'd made no arrangements. But Vèircal didn't know that.

"You're bluffing."

"Am I? My mother was killed for these records. You think I'd carry them around without a backup plan?"

They stared at each other across the basement. Criminal and constrained. Power and desperation.

"Twenty-four hours," Vèircai said finally. "You have until tomorrow night to bring me those documents. If you don't—if you try to run, or sell them to someone else, or go to the Wardens—your brother will pay the price."

"And if I do bring them?"

"Then we conclude our business like professionals, and you walk away with enough money to give your brother a decent life."

"Plus information. Who ordered my mother's death. Who you're working for."

"That wasn't part of the deal."

"It is now."

Another silence. Then Vèircai smiled, and the smile was worse than his threats.

"You really are a Thorn," he said. "Painful connections. Everything you touch, you make difficult." He gestured, and his people stepped aside. "Twenty-four hours, Årnnav. Use them wisely."

She climbed the stairs without looking back, the documents burning against her chest, and emerged into a Hand Quarter morning that had never felt more dangerous.

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Fèincal was awake when she got home.

"Where were you?" His voice was small, frightened. "There were men outside. They looked at me through the window."

"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 today," 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. 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 physical blow. Fèincal never talked about their mother. He'd been six 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."

The lie came out smooth and easy, the way all necessary lies did. She watched him gather his lesson books, watched him head out into the Hand Quarter morning, watched the life she was trying to protect walk away from her one step at a time.

Then she pulled out the documents and began to plan.

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# Part Four

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The Warden found her at noon.

Àrnnav was sitting in a tea house that served the Hand Quarter poor—weak tea, stale bread, a moment of rest in a life that offered few—when Òràhd Vàscalìn slid into the seat across from her.

"Àrnnav Vonalnòc." The Warden used her Lineless designation, the technical term for someone without family name or registration. "Pattern-constrained. Recently Bound. Tòvismah Vèszttar—Thorn-marked, Maze-path." She set her seal on the table between them. "You've been busy."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You broke into the Còcalnòc house last night. You took documents from the family strongbox. You're carrying evidence of pattern fraud that half the powerful families in Fonváros would kill to possess or destroy." The Warden's eyes were steady, assessing. "Don't insult both of us by pretending ignorance."

The tea house around them continued its quiet business—workers too tired to notice, too worn to care. Àrnnav felt the documents pressing against her body, hidden but not hidden enough.

"What do you want?"

"I want to know what you found. I want to know who you're working for. And I want to offer you a deal."

"What kind of deal?"

"Information for protection. You tell me what's in those documents, you tell me who hired you to steal them, and I make sure the consequences of your theft are... manageable."

"Manageable how?"

"No arrest. No prosecution. Your brother's Binding conducted by someone fair and honest." The Warden leaned forward. "I know about Vèircai's threats. I know what he does to people who disappoint him. Work with me, and I can make sure he never touches your family again."

It was tempting. The Wardens had power—real power, the kind that could reach into Hand Quarter basements and pull out criminals who thought themselves untouchable.

But the Wardens had also protected the pattern system for generations. They'd looked the other way while wealthy families bought their children's futures. They'd done nothing while people like her mother were silenced for knowing too much.

"How do I know you're not working for them?" Àrnnav asked. "The people who killed my mother. The ones who benefit from keeping this buried."

"You don't." The Warden's honesty was surprising. "You have no reason to trust me, and I can't prove my intentions any way that would satisfy you. All I can offer is a choice: work with me and take a chance on protection, or work alone and take a chance on survival."

"Or work with someone else."

Something flickered in the Warden's expression. Interest. Calculation.

"The Còcalnòc daughter. You met her last night. She offered to help."

"How do you know that?"

"I've been watching that house for weeks. The pattern fraud investigation—the echo that awakened—it all connects back to that family. They're at the center of something larger than you understand."

"Then tell me. Make me understand."

The Warden was silent for a long moment. Then she spoke, her voice lower, almost confessional.

"Thirty-seven years ago, a merchant named Cèresnav Cèrescnav was bound as an echo after his death. He'd worked for the Pattern House, kept records of every fraudulent Binding conducted by the Szòvòtar. When he started to remember—when the echo began awakening—people got scared. The documents you have are connected to that ledger. They're proof that the fraud goes back generations, involves dozens of families, and has been protected by people with the power to silence anyone who threatens it."

"Including my mother."

"Including your mother." The Warden's eyes held something that might have been sympathy. "She was killed because she knew too much. You're in danger because you're carrying proof of what she knew. The question is: what do you want to do with that danger?"

Àrnnav thought about Vèircai, waiting for his documents. Thought about Fèinnav, waiting in Temple Square. Thought about Fèincal, trusting her to make everything right.

"I want justice," she said. "For my mother. For everyone they've silenced."

"Justice is complicated. Justice requires evidence, trials, due process. And the people you're trying to expose have spent decades making sure those processes serve them."

"Then what's the point? If the system is designed to protect them—"

"The system is designed by people. People can be exposed, pressured, forced to change." The Warden slid a card across the table—a location, a time. "Tomorrow night there's a gathering of Pattern House officials. Szòvòtarar, Registry keepers, people who've been part of the fraud. If you can get those documents to me before then, I can make sure they're seen by people who might actually do something."

"Or I give them to the Còcalnòc family and let them decide."

"You could. They have resources, connections. But they also have interests. Whatever they do with that evidence, it will be colored by the fact that their own family is implicated."

"And you're different? The Wardens aren't implicated?"

"The Wardens have been complicit in ignoring what we didn't want to see." The honesty again, sharp as a blade. "I'm trying to change that. One investigation at a time."

She stood, leaving the card on the table.

"Tonight. Vèircai's deadline. You'll have to choose before then—give him the documents, give them to the Còcalnòcs, or give them to me. Three paths, three different futures." Her eyes found Àrnnav's. "Choose the one you can live with."

She left.

Àrnnav sat alone with her cold tea and her impossible choices, and felt the weight of the documents pressing against her heart.

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Vèircai came for Fèincal at sunset.

Àrnnav was heading toward Temple Square when she saw them—two of Vèircai's people, walking her brother between them with grips that looked casual but weren't. Fèincal's face was white with fear, his eyes searching the crowd for her.

She pushed through the Pattern Day revelers, reached them before they could disappear into a side street.

"Let him go."

Vèircai's people stopped. One of them smiled.

"The boss wants insurance. You understand."

"He's a child."

"He's leverage. There's a difference." The man's grip tightened on Fèincal's arm. "Bring the documents to the usual place in one hour. The boy comes home safe. Everyone wins."

"And if I don't?"

"Then tomorrow morning, your brother visits the Pattern House with some friends of ours. And his Binding gets... interpreted creatively."

Fèincal was crying now, silent tears cutting tracks through the Hand Quarter dirt on his face. Àrnnav wanted to reach for him, wanted to tear him away from these men and run until they found somewhere safe.

But there was nowhere safe. That was the lesson of the Hand Quarter. That was the truth of the constrained.

"One hour," she said. "I'll be there."

They took her brother into the crowd and vanished.

---

Temple Square was chaos.

Pattern Day celebrations filled every corner—musicians, performers, merchants hawking festival goods, families in their finest clothes celebrating the system that

sorted and defined them. Àrnnav pushed through bodies that didn't see her, past faces that looked through her, searching for Fèinnav Còcalnòc.

She found her near the central fountain, dressed in merchant's clothes that probably cost more than Àrnnav earned in a year. With her was an older woman—her mother, Vízrav—and a man whose face Àrnnav recognized from the documents.

Còcal Còcalnòc. The father. The one whose purchased pattern had started three generations of lies.

"You came." Fèinnav's voice was tight with relief. "I wasn't sure—"

"They took my brother."

The words stopped everything.

"Who took him?" Còcal stepped forward, his face shifting from wariness to something sharper. "The same people who sent you to steal from us?"

"Vèircal. He's a—" She couldn't find words that would translate between their worlds. "He's someone who has power in the Hand Quarter. Criminal power. He was hired to get those documents, and when I didn't deliver, he took Fèincal as insurance."

"What does he want?" Vízrav asked.

"The documents. All of them. In exchange for my brother's safety."

"Then give them to him," Còcal said. "If it saves your brother—"

"If I give them to him, someone else controls what happens. Someone I don't trust, working for people I don't know." Àrnnav pulled out the documents, held them up. "These are proof of everything. The fraud, the murders, your family's involvement going back three generations. If Vèircal gets them, he'll use them for leverage—blackmail, probably. The families implicated will pay to stay hidden, and nothing changes."

"And if you don't give them to him?"

"My brother's Binding gets sabotaged. His whole life gets ruined before it starts." Her voice cracked. "I can't let that happen. But I can't let these disappear either. Not when they're proof of what happened to my mother."

Silence. The festival continued around them, oblivious.

"There's another option," Vízrav said quietly. The mother, Cèresnav's daughter, the woman whose father had died knowing too much and whose daughter had recently discovered the same truths. "My father wanted this information exposed. He kept the original ledger for thirty years, hoping someone would have the courage to use it."

"And did they?"

"A binder brought me copies last week. Pieces of what my father knew." Vízrav's face was lined with a grief that Àrnnav recognized. "I've been trying to decide what to do with them. Exposure would destroy families—including my own. But silence means the killing continues."

"What about compromise?" Fèinnav stepped between them, her face intense. "We give Vèircai something—enough to satisfy whoever hired him—but we keep the most important pieces. The proof of murder. The names of the people who ordered the killings."

"He'll know if I hold back."

"Not if we give him copies. Altered copies—real enough to pass inspection, but missing the parts that matter most."

Àrnnav looked at the documents in her hands. Decades of fraud, recorded in her mother's careful handwriting. Evidence of a system designed to sort humans into useful categories and silence anyone who questioned the sorting.

"The Warden wants them too," she said. "She offered me protection if I help her expose the Pattern House."

"Vàscalin?" Còcal's expression hardened. "She's been investigating our family for months. I don't trust her motives."

"Neither do I. But she's right about one thing—the system won't change by itself. Someone has to force it."

"And you want to be that someone?"

Àrnnav thought about her mother. Thought about Fèincal. Thought about all the constrained children who would be Bound in the coming years, receiving true patterns that would trap them in lives designed by people who would never know their names.

"I want my brother back," she said. "I want justice for my mother. And I want—" She stopped, surprised by the certainty rising in her chest. "I want the truth to matter. Even if I can't control what happens next."

"Then we work together." Vízrav's voice was firm now, decided. "My husband has contacts—people who can pressure Vèircai without violence. If we can get your brother free, we can control how the documents are distributed. Some to the Wardens, some to families who will use them for reform instead of revenge."

"And Vèircai?"

"Receives a version of the truth. Enough to satisfy his employers, not enough to give him permanent power." Còcal's jaw was tight. "It's not justice. It's compromise. But it might save your brother and expose enough of the system to start real change."

Àrnnav looked at them—the merchant family whose purchased patterns had made them complicit, whose awakening conscience was offering her something that felt almost like alliance.

*Thorn*, her pattern said. *Painful connections*.

Every connection she made would cost something. That was the truth the Binding had revealed. But maybe the cost was worth it. Maybe the pain served a purpose.

"How do we start?" she asked.

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## Part Five

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The exchange happened in the Pattern Day crowds.

Vèircai had chosen the location carefully—a narrow street off Temple Square, public enough to discourage violence but private enough for business. His people held Fèincal at one end. Àrnnav approached from the other, documents in hand.

But she wasn't alone.

Còcal's contacts—merchants, guild representatives, people with legitimate power in Fonváros's commercial hierarchies—had spread through the crowd. Wardens too, though these Vàscalín swore were loyal to reform rather than protection of the old system.

It wasn't an army. It was a web, delicate and dangerous, designed to catch anyone who tried to hurt a constrained girl and her brother.

"You brought friends." Vèircal's voice carried through the noise of celebration. "I'm disappointed. I thought we understood each other."

"We understand each other perfectly. You want power. I want my brother." Àrnnav held up the documents—copies, carefully altered, real enough to pass inspection. "Here's your leverage. Names and dates and payments. Enough to blackmail half the wealthy families in Fonváros."

"And the murder records? The proof that people were silenced?"

"Removed. Destroyed." A lie, but a convincing one. "I don't want anyone to have that kind of power. Not you, not the Wardens, not the families who would pay anything to keep it buried."

Vèircal studied her. His eyes were calculating, searching for the angle he was missing.

"You're smarter than I expected, laundry girl. 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 long pause. Festival music played somewhere nearby, bright and cheerful, utterly wrong for the moment.

"Fine." Vèircal gestured, and his people released Fèincal. "The boy goes. You give me the documents. And we're done—until the next time I need someone who can pass in Merchant City."

"There won't be a next time."

"There's always a next time. That's how the Hand Quarter works." He smiled his ugly smile. "Your pattern says Thorn, Àrnnav. Painful connections. Every relationship you build will draw blood eventually. You can fight it, pretend you're different, but in the end —"

"In the end, I choose what hurts and why." She met his eyes. "Today I'm choosing to save my brother and give you enough rope to hang yourself. Tomorrow—"

"Tomorrow is a different negotiation." He took the documents, rifled through them, seemed satisfied with what he saw. "Pleasure doing business."

He disappeared into the crowd with his people and his leverage, and Àrnnav was left holding her brother in a street full of strangers celebrating a system that had nearly destroyed them both.

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The Wardens moved that night.

Vàscalìn had coordinated with reformers inside the Pattern House—people who'd known about the fraud and been waiting for proof. The documents Àrnnav had provided (the real ones, the unaltered copies) were enough to open formal investigations into three Szòvòtarar, including the old man who had conducted her Binding.

It wasn't revolution. The wealthy families who'd purchased patterns weren't publicly exposed—that would have caused chaos, Vizrav had argued, harmed innocent children who had no control over what their parents had bought.

But the mechanism was damaged. The people who had facilitated the fraud were being removed. The system would continue, but it would be watched now, scrutinized, held to standards it had avoided for generations.

Àrnnav watched the Pattern House from a distance as Wardens entered, as Szòvòtarar were led out in restraints, as something that had seemed eternal showed its mortality.

"Is it enough?" Fèinnav had found her, standing in shadows while the powerful were held accountable. "The compromise. The partial truth. Is it what you wanted?"

"What I wanted was my mother back. That's not possible." Àrnnav watched the old Szòvòtar—the one who had looked at her with pity and written Thorn into her future—being escorted into a Warden carriage. "But this is something. The people who ordered her death are being exposed. The people who would have done the same to others are being stopped."

"For now."

"For now is all anyone gets."

They stood together—the merchant's daughter and the laundry girl, the purchased pattern and the true one—watching justice that was incomplete but real.

"What happens to your brother?" Fèinnav asked.

"His Binding is in four years. I'll make sure it's conducted by someone honest."

Àrnnav's voice hardened. "Someone who sees him instead of his pattern. Who writes down what he is instead of what the system needs him to be."

"And you? What pattern do you choose to live?"

Àrnnav thought about it. Tòvismah Vèsztar. Thorn-marked. Maze-path. Difficult connections and complicated journeys. A pattern that predicted pain, suggested struggle, promised nothing easy.

"I choose to make the thorns matter," she said. "To hurt for reasons I believe in instead of reasons someone else decided. To walk the maze instead of letting it walk me."

"That's not much of a choice."

"It's the only choice the constrained get. But it's real." She turned to face Fèinnav fully.

"Your pattern says Road and Pact—except it doesn't. Your pattern says Thorn, like mine. What are you going to do with that?"

Fèinnav was quiet for a long moment.

"I'm going to stop pretending," she said finally. "Stop acting like the Road my father bought. Start living the Thorn that's actually mine." A ghost of a smile. "Maybe start walking the maze with someone who knows the way."

"I don't know the way. I just know how to survive it."

"That's more than most people have."

The Warden carriages pulled away. The crowd began to disperse. Pattern Day was ending, and tomorrow the city would wake to discover that something fundamental had shifted.

"My mother left me a box," Àrnnav said. "Things she wanted me to know, if anything happened to her. I've been carrying it for years without really understanding."

"And now?"

"Now I think I understand. She wasn't just documenting the fraud. She was building something—a record that could outlast her. Something she could pass on." She touched the hidden pocket where she kept the one page she'd held back from everyone—her mother's name, her mother's death, the five hundred coins that had been the price of silence. "I'm going to do the same. Not a ledger of fraud, but a ledger

of truth. Records of what we did tonight, what we're trying to build. So if someone comes after me—"

"The truth survives."

"The truth survives."

They looked at each other—two girls who had received the same Binding and been assigned to different worlds, who had found each other across the gap the system created, who were choosing to make something new from the wreckage of what had been.

"Partners?" Fèinnav asked.

"That's a rich person's word. The constrained don't have partners—we have debts." But Àrnnav's mouth curved slightly. "But maybe something. An arrangement. A painful connection that we choose instead of one that's chosen for us."

"Thorn together."

"Thorn together."

They clasped hands—callused worker's fingers and soft merchant's palm—and let go, and went their separate ways into a city that was changing beneath their feet.

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Fèincal was waiting when she got home.

He'd cleaned the room while she was gone—swept the floor, straightened the bed, arranged his lesson books in a neat stack. The kind of things a child did when they were scared and wanted to feel useful.

"Is it over?" he asked.

"This part is over." She sat beside him on the bed, pulled him close. "There will be other parts. Other complications. That's how life works in the Hand Quarter."

"Will they come for me again? The men who took me?"

"Not if I can help it. And I have—" She hesitated. "I have people now. Connections. They'll help keep us safe."

"Rich people?"

"Complicated people. Some rich, some not. People who want the same things we want."

He was quiet for a moment, processing this in his eleven-year-old way.

"My teacher says that Pattern Day is when the Weaver shows us what we're meant to be," he said. "That our patterns are gifts, designed to help us find our place."

"Do you believe that?"

"I don't know." He looked up at her, and his eyes were older than they should have been. "I believe that you're my sister. I believe that you saved me. That seems more important than what the Weaver thinks."

She held him tighter, feeling the thin bones of his shoulders, the heartbeat that matched her own.

"Your Binding is in four years," she said. "Whatever pattern they give you—Thorn or Road or something else entirely—it won't change who you are. It'll just tell you what kind of pain you're going to face."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"It's supposed to make you prepared." She kissed the top of his head. "And whatever pain you face, you won't face it alone. I promise."

"You promised before. That you'd be careful."

"And I was. In my way."

"Your way involves a lot of danger."

"My way involves a lot of survival. They look similar from the outside."

He almost laughed. She counted that as a victory.

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Later, after Fèincal was asleep, Àrnnav sat at the small table and opened her mother's box.

The note was there, the cramped handwriting, the record of fraud and silence. But now she added to it—her own writing, her own record. The names of people who had helped. The compromises they had made. The threads of connection that might someday become something stronger.

*Tòvismah Vèszttar*, she wrote at the top. *This is my pattern. This is my maze. This is what I choose to make of both.*

The ledger of her life was still being written.

She held the pen.

And somewhere in the darkness of the Hand Quarter, surrounded by systems designed to constrain her, Àrnnav began to write a future that no Szòvòtar had predicted and no Binding could define.

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*End of "The Constrained"*

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## Triptych Closing Note

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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*