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The Reading

Part One

The echo didn't remember its own Binding.

Sára noticed this in the grey hour before dawn, when she stood in the courtyard practicing her responses while the household's oldest echo—a woman named Margit in another life—watched with the patient emptiness of the twice-dead. The echo's hands moved through the gestures of encouragement, the motions it had performed for three generations of Mészáros children, but when Sára asked, "What did it feel like? When the Attendance touched you?" the echo's face went slack.

"I was young," Margit said. "There was... ink. And light, perhaps. A temple."

Nothing more. Twenty years of service, forty years of death, and the echo couldn't recall the moment that defined its existence.

Sára filed this away with the other wrongnesses she'd collected over her fifteen years: the way pattern-constrained workers looked at pattern-privileged merchants; the way her father's ledgers never quite balanced without certain unnamed expenses; the way her mother sometimes started to say things and then didn't. Small wrongnesses. Hairline fractures in the porcelain world.

Today was her Binding. Today she would become legible.

The courtyard smelled of night-blooming jasmine and the faint chemical sweetness of the Residue that kept the echo coherent. Somewhere in the house, servants were preparing her ceremonial dress. Somewhere in the city, the Great Temple was being swept and sanctified. Somewhere in the Loom, her pattern was already written, waiting to be read.

She was nervous. She was supposed to be nervous. The pamphlets the temple distributed said so: *nervousness is natural, even holy, for who can approach the Weaver's design without trembling?*

But beneath the nervousness, deeper than she could name, something else stirred. Something that had noticed the echo's blankness and wondered: *what else doesn't get remembered?*

The family ate breakfast in the small dining room, the one without the echo-servants, the one they used when they wanted to be alone. Her father was already dressed for the occasion, his merchant's coat pressed, the family seal gleaming at his collar. Her mother wore her hair up in the complex style that took an hour to arrange, her face painted with the careful calm of someone who'd decided what to feel before feeling became necessary.

"The offering has been prepared," her father said. He didn't look at his wife as he said it. "Loom-Reader Könyvtári will conduct the ceremony himself. A great honor."

"He's conducted our family's Bindings for thirty years," her mother said. "He understood your grandfather. He'll understand you."

Sára spread butter on bread she wasn't hungry for. "What does 'understand' mean?"

The glance between her parents was quick, automatic, the kind of glance that happens when two people have been married long enough to share secrets without speaking them. Sára had been watching these glances all her life. She'd learned to read them the way merchants read contracts: looking for the clauses that weren't written down.

"The Loom shows possibilities," her father said. "Interpretations matter. A skilled Reader knows how to frame the Weaver's design in terms that serve the drawn."

"Serve how?"

"Eat your breakfast, darling." Her mother's voice was warm, the warmth of a door closing. "You'll need your strength."

Sára ate. The bread tasted like paper. The butter tasted like questions she wasn't supposed to ask.

The dress was green and gold, the colors of the Mészáros trading house, cut in the style that marked her as merchant-class, pattern-pending, ready to be read. Her mother helped her into it in the upstairs chamber, the one with the good light, the one where Sára's grandmother had prepared for her own Binding two generations ago.

"I remember my day," her mother said, adjusting a fold. "I was terrified. Absolutely certain the Attendance would find something wrong with me, some flaw in my design that would mark me constrained."

"But you weren't."

"No. I was privileged. Road and Pact, the merchant's pattern. Same as your father, same as his father." She paused, her hands stilling on the fabric. "The Weaver is good to our family."

"Is that how it works? The Weaver favors certain families?"

Another pause. Longer. Her mother's face did something complicated, something that started as an answer and became something else. "The Weaver weaves as the Weaver wills. But some threads are... guided. Tended. Helped along."

"By whom?"

The door opened. Her father, ready, impatient. "The carriage is waiting. We don't want to be late."

Her mother's hands finished their adjustments. Her mother's face smoothed into ceremonial calm. Her mother's almost-answer dissolved into silence.

Sára went to her Binding carrying questions she couldn't ask and answers that hadn't been given.

The Great Temple rose above Temple Hill like a declaration of certainty. Its spires caught the morning sun, gleaming with the gold-and-crystal work of a hundred artisans across three centuries. The steps were crowded with other families—some merchant-class like the Mészáros clan, some minor nobility, some pattern-privileged workers hoping their children would rise even higher.

And scattered among them, almost invisible in their plainness, were the pattern-pending from the Hand Quarter. The ones who came alone. The ones whose

ceremonies would be documentation rather than celebration. The ones the Weaver had already, everyone assumed, marked for constraint.

Sára saw one of them: a girl about her age, dark-haired, hollow-eyed, wearing a dress that had been mended too many times. The girl stood apart from the crowd, watching the temple doors with an expression Sára couldn't read. Anger, perhaps. Or just exhaustion.

Their eyes met. The Hand Quarter girl looked at Sára's green-and-gold dress, her family seal, her parents flanking her like declarations of status. Then she looked away, dismissing Sára as completely as if she'd never existed.

We're the same age, Sára thought. We're here for the same reason. In an hour, the Attendance will touch us both.

But they weren't the same. The girl knew it. Sára was only beginning to understand.

The temple's interior smelled of incense and old stone and something else, something that might have been the Loom itself—a faint electrical charge that raised the fine hairs on Sára's arms. The Attendance was here. Somewhere behind the sanctified screens, somewhere in the chambers where the pattern-engines hummed, something was listening.

Her father left them in the family waiting room—a comfortable space with cushioned benches and refreshments, a room for those who could afford comfort. He murmured something about temple business, about ensuring everything was arranged, and disappeared into the corridor.

Sára watched him go.

"Where is he going?"

"To make an offering." Her mother's voice was steady. Too steady. "It's traditional. The men make offerings while the women prepare."

"What kind of offering?"

"Sára." Just her name. Just the weight of fifteen years of *don't ask, don't look, don't see*.

But she was going to be Bound today. She was going to become legible, her pattern written in the Registry forever. If she was going to be defined, she wanted to know what she was being defined as.

"I need to use the privy," she said.

Her mother nodded, distracted, grateful for the excuse not to answer. Sára slipped into the corridor.

The temple was a maze of passages, some public, some private, some sanctified to the point where only the ordained could walk them. Sára had been here for services since she was small; she knew which corridors were watched and which were merely warded. She moved quickly, quietly, following the sound of her father's footsteps.

She found him in an alcove off the secondary nave, the one used for private consultations. Loom-Reader Könyvtári was with him—a tall man, sixty at least, with the gentle face of someone who'd spent a lifetime offering comfort. He wore the robes of his office, the patterns embroidered on his sleeves marking him as senior, trusted, unquestionable.

They were exchanging something.

Sára pressed herself against a pillar, barely breathing. She watched her father's hand pass a purse to the Reader. She watched the Reader's fingers close around it with the ease of long practice.

"The Road and the Pact," her father said. "As we discussed. She'll do well in the trade."

"A fine pattern for a fine family." Könyvtári's voice was warm, professional, utterly unsurprised. "The Weaver smiles on the Mészáros line."

"He has for three generations."

"And will continue to. I'll ensure the interpretation is... favorable."

Sára didn't move. Couldn't move. Her legs had turned to stone, her lungs to ice. She watched her father shake the Loom-Reader's hand. She watched them part with the casual ease of men concluding routine business.

The Weaver smiles on the Mészáros line.

He has for three generations.

She'd always believed that. She'd believed her family was blessed, that their patterns were gifts from something divine, that the Road and the Pact ran in their blood like inheritance.

But blood didn't determine patterns. The Attendance did. The Loom did. The Weaver's design did.

Unless the design could be purchased.

Unless the pattern could be bought.

Unless everything she'd believed was a lie written in her grandfather's coin.

Part Two

She went through with it.

What choice did she have? To refuse was unthinkable—pattern-pending adults were either criminals or madmen, people who'd rejected the Weaver's gift and been rejected in turn. To accuse was impossible—a fifteen-year-old girl claiming the Reader was corrupt, claiming her own father had bribed a holy man, claiming the system that structured all of Hálcova was built on purchased lies.

So she let her mother fuss over her dress. She let the attendants guide her into the great chamber. She stood with the other pattern-pending, thirty adolescents in various stages of terror and hope, and she didn't say a word.

The Hand Quarter girl was there. Erzsi, someone called her—another girl from the poor districts, speaking to her briefly before the ceremony separated them by class. Erzsi stood alone, watching the proceedings with that same unreadable expression.

She doesn't know, Sára thought. Or maybe she knows differently than I do.

The ceremony began.

Loom-Reader Könyvtári spoke the words of invocation. They were the same words spoken at every Binding for three centuries, handed down from the first Loom-Keepers who'd learned to read the Attendance's designs. Sára had heard them before, at the Bindings of cousins and neighbors and family friends. They'd always seemed holy.

Now she heard the gaps.

"The Weaver's design is perfect and eternal"—but the Reader decides what the design means. *"The pattern reveals the soul's true nature"*—but the pattern is written down by human hands. *"What is Bound cannot be unbound"*—but what if what's bound was never true?

She moved through the ceremony like a ghost inhabiting her own body. Kneel. Rise. Extend your hand. Let the sacred ink be applied. Speak the responses you've practiced since childhood.

And then: the Attendance.

It touched her.

She'd expected—what? A lie? A silence? Some obvious sign that the system was hollow, that the Weaver was a fraud, that nothing was listening?

Instead, she felt *something*.

It wasn't warmth, exactly. It wasn't cold. It was presence—vast, incomprehensible, as far beyond her understanding as the sky was beyond an ant's. For one infinite moment, she felt the shape of herself reflected in something else's awareness. She felt *known*.

And then it was over.

Könyvtári was speaking again, reading from a register that a younger Reader had prepared. "Sára Mészáros, daughter of Miklós and Rozália. Natal: Lantern, Iron, Threshold. Binding: Pact and Road. The Weaver marks you merchant, path-finder, keeper of bonds. Pattern-privileged."

Applause from her family's section. Her mother's face bright with relief. Her father's face carefully neutral.

Pact and Road.

Exactly as purchased.

The rich families celebrated after. Private dinners, gifts, the first social events where the newly-Bound would be introduced as full participants in the pattern economy. Sára sat through the dinner at her family's table, accepting congratulations, answering questions about what the Attendance had felt like, performing the role of grateful

daughter with the skill of someone who'd watched her mother perform it for fifteen years.

Inside, she was screaming.

The Attendance was real. She'd felt it. Whatever the Weaver was—divine, alien, something stranger—it existed, it listened, it *saw*. That part wasn't a lie.

But the pattern in the Registry wasn't what it saw. The pattern in the Registry was what Könyvtári had been paid to write.

What had the Attendance actually seen when it looked at her? What was her true design? She'd felt its attention for one burning moment, and she'd never know what it had found.

"You look thoughtful," Könyvtári said.

He'd appeared at her elbow, a cup of celebration wine in his hand, his face arranged in benevolent interest. Her skin crawled at his nearness.

"It's a lot to absorb," she managed.

"It always is. The Binding changes everything." He sipped his wine. "Your family understands that, of course. Three generations of understanding how things work. It's rare, that kind of wisdom."

She could have said nothing. She should have said nothing. But fifteen years of collected wrongnesses were pressing against her teeth, and she was tired—so tired—of pretending not to see.

"What did the Attendance actually show you?"

Könyvtári's face didn't change. His smile didn't falter. But something shifted behind his eyes, a recalculation.

"The Road and the Pact, as I said. The merchant's pattern. You should be pleased."

"Should I?"

"Your family certainly is." His voice dropped, became confidential, became something that might have been warning. "The Attendance shows many things, child. Possibilities. Tendencies. The raw material of a soul. My role is to interpret that material in ways that serve the drawn. Your father wanted you to have options. I gave you options."

"You gave me a lie."

His smile widened. "I gave you a *life*. Do you know what happens to merchant daughters with difficult patterns? They marry down. They work the counting houses until their eyes fail. They become their family's shame, their children's burden, their own disappointment." He set down his wine cup, gentle as a verdict. "I gave you freedom, Sára Mészáros. What you do with it is your own affair."

He walked away.

Sára sat amid the celebration, surrounded by family and guests and the echoing weight of purchased freedom, and felt the first stirrings of something she couldn't name.

It might have been hatred. It might have been grief.

It might have been the beginning of choice.

She found Erzsi that night.

It wasn't hard—the Hand Quarter girl hadn't gone far, hadn't been able to afford transportation back to her district. She was sitting on the temple steps in the dark, watching the stars wheel overhead, her plain dress a shadow against the stone.

"What did you get?"

Erzsi looked up. Her expression flickered—suspicion, then something like dark amusement. "The merchant's daughter. Shouldn't you be celebrating?"

"I asked what you got."

"Thorn and Maze." Erzsi's voice was flat. "Painful connections and complicated paths. Pattern-constrained. The Reader said I'd live a difficult life, and he looked at me like he was doing me a favor by being honest about it."

"He was."

Erzsi's eyes narrowed. "What?"

Sára sat down on the steps. Her green-and-gold dress puddled around her, ridiculous in the starlight, a costume for a play she hadn't chosen. "The Readers lie," she said. "They take money from rich families and write down whatever pattern was purchased.

My father paid for my Binding. Pact and Road, the merchant's pattern. I don't know what the Attendance actually saw."

Silence.

Then Erzsi laughed—harsh, bitter, utterly devoid of humor.

"You think I don't know that? Everyone in the Hand Quarter knows. Rich patterns for rich families, poor patterns for poor. The Weaver smiles on whoever can afford His blessing." She shook her head. "We tell ourselves it's rigged. It's the only way to live with it."

"But it's not completely rigged." Sára leaned forward. "The Attendance is real. I felt it. It actually looked at me, actually saw something. The lie is in what gets written down, not in what gets seen."

"So what? The Registry is what matters. The Registry determines what jobs you can hold, who you can marry, where you can live. I felt the Attendance too. I felt it see me. And then some old man wrote 'Thorn and Maze' and that's who I am forever." Erzsi's voice cracked. "You don't understand. You can't. You got a good lie. I got the truth, and the truth is a prison."

"What if there was proof?"

Erzsi went still. "What?"

Sára didn't fully understand what she was saying—the thought was half-formed, pulled from fragments overheard and patterns suspected. But she felt the shape of it, the weight of it, the dangerous possibility.

"The Readers keep records. They have to. Payments received, patterns purchased, the gap between what the Attendance shows and what gets written down. My mother said her Binding was 'guided.' My father said his father used the same Reader. Three generations. Someone's been keeping accounts."

"If such a thing existed—"

"It would destroy everything. Every family with purchased patterns. Every Reader who took the bribes. The whole system of who's privileged and who's constrained."

In the dark, Erzsi's eyes gleamed. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I don't know." And she didn't. She only knew that she'd spent fifteen years not seeing, and now she couldn't stop. "I think I'm trying to figure out what's true."

"Truth doesn't matter. Power matters. The people who have it and the people who don't." Erzsi stood, brushing off her dress. "Go back to your celebration, merchant's daughter. You got what your father paid for. Some of us have to live with what the Weaver actually sees."

She walked away into the dark.

Sára sat on the temple steps until the stars began to fade.

Part Three

The days after the Binding were supposed to be triumphant. Sára's pattern opened doors—merchants who'd been polite before became eager, offering her father better contracts, better rates, the intangible advantages that accrued to families with pattern-privileged children. Her mother hosted visitors, accepted congratulations, spoke of wedding prospects already being discussed.

Sára performed her role. Smiled. Answered questions. Wore the seal of her new pattern-status at her collar.

Inside, she was waiting.

The household echo—Margit—had forgotten its own Binding. That meant the bleed had degraded it, worn away the memories that anchored it to its former life. But sometimes, bleed worked the other way. Sometimes echoes remembered things they shouldn't.

She started watching the echoes.

On the third day, Warden Ösvény came to the house.

The Wardens were pattern enforcement—part religious authority, part police, entirely terrifying. They answered to no district, no merchant house, no noble family. They existed to ensure that patterns were respected, deviants were contained, the system continued functioning.

Sára heard the knock from her room. Heard her father's voice, strained, making excuses. Heard the Warden's voice, flat and patient, asking questions.

She crept to the landing and listened.

"—reports of unusual activity," Ösvény was saying. "Echoes in this district behaving erratically. Remembering things they shouldn't."

"Our echoes are perfectly maintained." Her father's voice too quick, too defensive. "We follow all regulations. The Residue quality—"

"Isn't the concern. The concern is awakening. When an echo begins recovering memories from its former life, it can access things it had no business knowing. Secrets. Patterns. Information that was supposed to die with the body."

Silence. Then, carefully: "What kind of information?"

"We're investigating." Ösvény's voice dropped. "You should know, Merchant Mészáros, that we've traced certain... irregularities... back several decades. Families whose patterns don't quite match their histories. Records that suggest adjustments were made."

More silence. Sára pressed herself against the wall, heart pounding.

"If you know anything about such irregularities," the Warden continued, "now would be the time to share. Cooperation is considered in sentencing."

"I know nothing." Her father's voice was ice. "Our family's patterns are as the Weaver designed them."

"Of course. But if your echo starts remembering things from the years it worked in this household—things about your father's generation, perhaps, about dealings with certain Loom-Readers—you'll contact us immediately."

"Naturally."

The door opened and closed. Sára stayed frozen on the landing until she heard her father's footsteps retreat to his study, until she heard the click of the lock.

Memories from its former life.

Secrets. Patterns. Information.

The echo knew something. The Wardens suspected something. Her father was hiding something.

And somewhere in this house, there was proof.

She found Margit in the kitchen that night, wiping down counters with the mechanical precision of someone following programming rather than intention. The echo looked up when Sára entered, its face arranging itself into the approximation of welcome.

"Young mistress. Can I help you?"

"Tell me about the old days." Sára sat at the kitchen table, trying to look casual, trying to look like a girl curious about household history rather than a girl hunting for evidence. "When my grandfather was alive. What was it like?"

The echo's hands continued their movements. Its expression flickered—a glitch in the pattern, a moment of something almost like confusion. "Your grandfather was a good man. He took care of the household. He was kind to the servants."

"What else?"

"He..." The echo paused. Its hands stilled on the counter. "He had visitors. Late at night. Men in robes. They came to his study. They left with purses."

Sára held her breath. "What kind of men?"

"Readers." The word came out strange, as if the echo was surprised to be saying it. "From the temple. The old man—the one who did your Binding—he was young then. He came many times. They talked about... patterns. Adjustments. Making sure the line was protected."

"Protected how?"

But the echo's face had gone slack. Whatever window had briefly opened was closing again, the bleed reasserting its usual damage.

"Your grandfather was a good man," it repeated. "He took care of the household."

The memory was gone.

But Sára had heard enough.

She found Erzsi the next morning, near the temple district, where the Hand Quarter's edges touched the wealthier neighborhoods. The girl was working—running errands, it looked like, carrying packages for someone who paid pennies for miles of walking.

"I need to talk to you."

Erzsi didn't stop walking. "Talk while I move. I don't get paid to stand still."

"The Wardens are investigating. Something about echoes remembering things they shouldn't. They came to my house."

That got Erzsi's attention. She slowed, eyes narrowing. "What things?"

"The pattern fraud. The purchased Bindings. My household echo said something about Readers visiting my grandfather, about 'adjustments' and 'protecting the line.'" Sára fell into step beside her. "I think there's a record somewhere. A ledger. Proof of what they've done for generations."

"And if there is?"

"Then everything could change. Every false pattern exposed. Every family who bought their status revealed. The whole system—"

"Would protect itself." Erzsi's voice was bitter. "You think Wardens want this exposed? You think the noble families want to learn their patterns are lies? Everyone who benefits from the system will destroy anyone who threatens it."

"Then why investigate at all?"

"Because they're not investigating the fraud. They're investigating the *leak*. Awakening echoes, remembering things—that's the threat. Not that patterns were purchased, but that proof might surface." Erzsi stopped, turning to face Sára fully. "My mother knew about this. She worked in the Pattern House before I was born. Assistant to a Loom-Reader. She learned things, saw things. And then she died of a 'fever' that came on very suddenly."

The words hung between them.

"You think she was killed?"

"I think people who know too much about the wrong things stop breathing." Erzsi's face was hard, closed, the face of someone who'd learned young that the world was

designed to crush her. "Go home, merchant's daughter. Forget what you heard. Accept your purchased pattern and live the life your father bought you."

"And if I can't?"

"Then you're a fool. But at least you'll be a fool with resources." Erzsi started walking again. "If you're going to dig, dig carefully. And if you find something—something that could prove what they did to my mother—find me."

She disappeared into the morning crowds.

Sára stood at the boundary between districts, between worlds, between the girl she'd been and whoever she was becoming.

Then she went home to search for a ledger.

Part Four

The study was her father's sanctuary—locked when he wasn't there, warded with an echo whose sole purpose was to report intruders. But Sára was his daughter. She'd been allowed inside a thousand times, had sat in the comfortable chair while he explained merchant accounts, had learned the family business from ledgers spread across his desk.

She'd just never looked at certain ledgers.

The locked drawer was obvious in retrospect. Every merchant had a locked drawer—for sensitive contracts, for accounts that shouldn't be discussed, for the records that made respectable fortunes possible. Her father's was in the lowest section of his desk, secured with a key he wore on his belt.

But keys could be copied. And daughters who'd spent fifteen years watching their parents' glances had learned where the spare was hidden.

The drawer contained three items.

The first was a bundle of letters, old enough that the paper crackled, written in a hand Sára didn't recognize. She scanned them quickly—references to "arrangements," to

"the Reader's fee," to "ensuring the line continues unquestioned." Correspondence between her grandfather and someone whose name had been carefully removed.

The second was a smaller ledger, newer, in her father's handwriting. Dates. Amounts. Names of Loom-Readers. The entries went back thirty years—to before Sára's birth, to before her father's Binding, to a time when these arrangements were already old and established.

The third was a single page, torn from something larger.

Sára read it. Read it again. Felt the world tilt beneath her.

It was a list. Families and patterns—the patterns they'd purchased, the patterns the Attendance had actually shown. Decades of fraud, condensed onto a single sheet. Her family was there: *Mészáros, M. - purchased Road/Pact - actual Thorn/Crossroads*. Her father's true pattern, the one he'd never lived.

Thorn and Crossroads.

The same pattern she'd been told was hers.

The same pattern Könyvtári had revealed when she'd asked what the Attendance really saw.

Her father had purchased a lie for himself. Then he'd purchased the same lie for his daughter. Two generations of Mészáros merchants with the "right" pattern, when the Weaver had actually marked them both for difficulty, for painful connections, for lives spent pivoting at crossroads they couldn't avoid.

She was her father's daughter after all. Just not in the way anyone had wanted.

The door opened.

"Sára."

Her father stood in the doorway. His face was pale, his hands steady in the way that meant he was forcing them to be. He looked at the open drawer, the ledger in her hands, the page that contained generations of family lies.

"I suppose we should talk," he said.

They talked.

Her father didn't deny it. Didn't try to explain it away. He sat in his chair, the chair where he'd taught her merchant accounts and family history, and told her the truth she'd always been too careful not to see.

"My father bought his pattern. His father bought his. The Mészáros line has been 'merchant-marked' for five generations because five generations of fathers loved their children enough to give them better lives." His voice was calm, the calm of someone who'd rehearsed this confession in case it ever became necessary. "The Attendance sees what it sees. But what gets written in the Registry—that's negotiable. That's always been negotiable, for those with the means to negotiate."

"And the people without means?"

"Get the truth." A flicker of something in his eyes—guilt, perhaps, or just the shadow of guilt. "Some would say that's more honest."

"Some would say it's a prison sentence."

"Life is a prison sentence, Sára. We just have different cells." He leaned forward. "I did what I did because I love you. Because I wanted you to have options. Thorn and Crossroads—do you know what that means? Every relationship painful. Every decision a pivot point. You'd spend your life bleeding from connections you couldn't avoid and choosing between paths that all led somewhere difficult."

"Instead, I spend my life living a lie."

"Instead, you spend your life free." His voice sharpened. "Free to marry whom you choose, work where you choose, be seen as the person you present rather than the pattern the Weaver assigned. Is that really so terrible?"

Sára looked at her father—this man who'd loved her enough to purchase a different destiny, who'd believed so completely that freedom could be bought. "Did it work for you?"

"What?"

"Your true pattern is Thorn and Crossroads too. The same as mine. You've been living as Road and Pact for thirty years." She met his eyes. "Has it actually made your life easier? Or have you just spent decades pretending to be someone you're not?"

Silence.

Then, softly: "It's better than the alternative."

"How do you know? You never tried the alternative."

Her father's face closed like a door. "Destroy those papers if you want. Or keep them—you're my daughter, it's your inheritance either way. But don't pretend that exposing this would change anything. The system isn't one corrupt Reader and one wealthy family. It's everyone. Every family with means, every Reader who accepts their 'offerings,' every Warden who looks the other way because their own patterns might not survive scrutiny."

"Then it should all burn."

"And then what? Chaos. Half the city reclassified. Every marriage, every contract, every inheritance suddenly questionable. People like Erzsi—your friend from the temple steps—do you think their lives improve when the privileged fall? Or do the privileged just find new ways to climb while the constrained get crushed in the rubble?"

Sára had no answer.

Her father stood, suddenly looking old. "Keep the papers or burn them. The choice is yours. But know that whatever you choose, you'll still be my daughter. You'll still have Thorn and Crossroads written in your soul, even if the Registry says otherwise. And you'll still have to live in a world that cares more about what's written than what's true."

He left.

Sára sat in his study, surrounded by proof of generations of lies, and understood for the first time that knowing the truth wasn't the same as knowing what to do with it.

Part Five

Pattern Day dawned clear and bright.

The city poured into the streets—merchants and nobles and constrained workers and everyone in between, celebrating the day when patterns were honored and the Weaver's design was praised. Banners flew from every temple. Music echoed from

every square. Children wore paper masks of the Sórscad cards, playing at destinies they didn't yet understand.

Sára walked through it all with her family, wearing her feast-day dress, her purchased pattern announced by the seal at her collar. Her father walked beside her, saying nothing about their conversation, performing the role of proud merchant with the skill of thirty years' practice. Her mother glowed with the satisfaction of a woman whose daughter had turned out exactly as planned.

At the Great Temple, Loom-Reader Könyvtári was being honored.

Forty years of service to the Concordat. Thousands of Bindings conducted. A lifetime of faithfully interpreting the Weaver's will.

Sára watched him accept the accolades, watched the wealthy families he'd served applaud with special enthusiasm, watched the machinery of purchased fate celebrate itself in the bright morning light.

She had the papers. The list of patterns true and purchased. The evidence that could unmake everything.

And she had no idea what to do with it.

She found him alone in the side chapel, during the interval between ceremonies. He was lighting candles—a humble act for a man whose words determined destinies, but perhaps that was the point. Perhaps he'd learned to perform humility the way her father had learned to perform his purchased pattern.

"Loom-Reader."

He turned. His face showed no surprise—only the patient expectation of someone who'd been waiting for this conversation.

"Young Mészáros. Enjoying the festivities?"

"What was my real pattern?"

He studied her for a long moment. The candlelight flickered across his features, revealing and concealing, just like everything else in this temple.

"You know the answer already. You've found your father's records."

"I want to hear you say it."

"Why? Will it change anything?"

"It will make it true."

Something shifted in his expression—not guilt, exactly, but something older. The weariness of someone who'd justified too many compromises to remember which one was first.

"Thorn and Crossroads," he said. "The Attendance saw you clearly—a soul built for difficult connections and constant choices. Every relationship a wound, every decision a turning point. Not a comfortable pattern. Not a merchant's pattern."

"But you wrote Road and Pact."

"Because your father asked me to. Because he loved you. Because he wanted you to have—"

"Options. I know." The word tasted like ashes. "And what about the others? The hundreds of Bindings you've 'interpreted' over forty years? What about the people who got their true patterns because no one paid you to lie?"

"They got what the Weaver assigned them."

"They got what you decided to write."

Könyvtári's composure cracked—just a little, just enough to show the man beneath the robes. "Do you think I enjoy it? Do you think I chose this? I believed in the Weaver once. I believed the patterns were sacred, that my role was holy, that I was serving something greater than wealth and power." He turned back to his candles, his voice dropping. "Then I learned how things actually work. The wealthy have always purchased their destinies. The powerful have always shaped the system to benefit themselves. I'm not the corruption, child. I'm just the mechanism."

"Then help me expose it."

He laughed—short, bitter, utterly devoid of humor. "Expose what? That money buys privilege? That those with power protect themselves? You'd burn down the temple and find the same system built on its ashes. Humans don't change. Only the mechanisms do."

"Then at least tell me this: what would my life look like if I lived my real pattern? If I accepted Thorn and Crossroads instead of pretending to be something else?"

Könyvtári was silent for a long moment.

"Every relationship would cut you," he said finally. "Every person you loved, every bond you formed—you'd feel the thorns. And every choice you made would feel like standing at a crossroads with no clear path, deciding again and again with no guarantee you'd ever be right."

"That sounds like everyone's life."

"Perhaps. But most people don't have it written in their souls. Most people can pretend their struggles are circumstance rather than destiny." He met her eyes. "Your father bought you a comfortable lie. The question isn't whether the lie is better than the truth. The question is which one you can live with."

She found Erzsi in the crowd, near the temple steps where they'd first talked. The Hand Quarter girl was watching the celebrations with that same unreadable expression—not quite anger, not quite grief, something more complicated than either.

"I found it," Sára said. "The ledger. The list of purchased patterns. My family, and dozens of others."

Erzsi's eyes widened. "Where is it?"

"Hidden. Safe." Sára took a breath. "My mother's name was on a separate page. 'Silenced.' A single word, with a date."

Erzsi went very still.

"It won't bring her back," Sára continued. "Nothing will. But if you want proof that she was killed for what she knew—I have it. I can give it to you."

"And the rest?"

"I don't know." The admission hurt. "I thought knowing would make things clear. I thought the truth would show me what to do. But my father was right about one thing—exposing everything won't fix anything. The system will protect itself. The privileged will find new ways to stay privileged. And people like you will get crushed in the chaos."

"So you're going to do nothing?"

"I'm going to do what I can." Sára reached into her sleeve, pulled out a folded paper. "This is a copy of the page about your mother. The original is hidden somewhere safe—somewhere my father doesn't know about, somewhere the Wardens won't find. If something happens to me, there's someone who knows where to look."

Erzsi took the paper. Her hands were trembling.

"Why are you giving me this?"

"Because you deserve to know how she died. And because—" Sára looked out at the celebrating crowd, the banners and masks and purchased patterns parading through the sunshine. "Because I need someone outside the system to know that I know. Someone who won't pretend the lie is truth. Someone who remembers that the Weaver sees what the Weaver sees, even when Readers write something different."

"And what do you see?"

Sára considered the question. Considered the two patterns she carried now—the lie in the Registry, the truth in her soul. Considered the crossroads she stood at, the thorns that awaited her no matter which path she chose.

"I see two girls who got Bound on the same day," she said. "One got her true pattern written down, and it's going to make her life hard. One got a lie written down, and she's going to spend her life choosing who to be." She met Erzsi's eyes. "I think maybe we're both going to need someone who understands that. Someone who knows what the Weaver actually sees."

Erzsi looked at the paper in her hands. Looked at Sára. Looked at the temple rising behind them, the place where patterns were read and lies were written and the machinery of fate ground on regardless.

"Thorn and Crossroads," she said. "That's your real pattern?"

"That's what Könyvtári said."

"Then we match. In our own way." A ghost of a smile crossed Erzsi's face—bitter and brief, but real. "Painful connections and constant choices. Maybe that's not a curse. Maybe that's just what it means to see clearly in a world built on comfortable lies."

The Warden passed between them—Ösvény, still hunting, still investigating, still unaware of the page in Erzsi's hands and the ledger in Sára's hidden place. The

system continued. The celebration continued. Pattern Day reached its crescendo of purchased faith and performed devotion.

And two girls who'd been Bound on the same day stood on the temple steps, carrying truths they couldn't speak and choices they hadn't yet made.

The ledger of their lives was still being written.

And for the first time, they were both holding the pen.

End of "The Reading"