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Bleed

Part One

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

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

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

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

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

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

The bone disc last. Always last.

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

The echo manifested slowly—they all did, in the morning, before the day's first summoning fully woke them. A translucent shimmer that gradually took on color, weight, the suggestion of flesh. Cèresnav had been forty-five when he died, a merchant of middling success, and his echo retained that appearance: soft around the middle, thinning hair carefully arranged, the permanent squint of a man who'd spent his life reading ledgers in poor light.

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

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

"What day is it?"

Vèirnav's hands went still on the bone disc.

"What?"

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

The cold in Vèirnav's fingers spread up his arms, into his chest.

In twenty years, Cèresnav had never mentioned a daughter.

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

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

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

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

Vèirnav let the moment pass. The Residue was humming in his blood, that faint resonance that all binders carried, and he told himself the question meant nothing.

Echoes degraded. They confused their death-memories with their service-memories. Twenty years was a long time to remain coherent.

But his hands shook slightly as he tucked the bone disc into his chest pocket.

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

The contract review went smoothly.

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

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

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

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

"Standard language—"

"Remove it or we walk."

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

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

"Do that. We'll wait."

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

"The old ledger," Cèresnav said.

Vèirnav opened his eyes. The echo was still in the corner, but his posture had changed—less merchant, more... something else. Someone remembering.

"What?"

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

The door opened. The representative returned.

"My principals have agreed to remove clause seventeen."

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

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

But as they left the consultation room, Cèresnav following in that half-visible way echoes moved through the world, Vèirnav felt the merchant's presence pressing against the edges of his consciousness. Stronger than usual. More insistent.

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

Not his thought. Not his memory.

The bleed was getting worse.

Èitar found him at the Threshold Market.

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

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

"When don't they?"

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

"I'm listening."

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

Vèirnav's hand tightened on his own cup.

"Awakened?"

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

My daughter's Name Day is coming.

"Why tell me?"

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

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

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

She finished her tea in one long swallow and disappeared back into the crowd, leaving Vèirnav with a cooling cup and a cold certainty in his gut.

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

His oldest echo was waking up.

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

He made it home before dark.

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

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

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

The bone disc was warm.

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

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

—the study door closed, the lock engaged, the ledger open on the desk. Names in two columns: the first what was written in the Pattern Registry, the second what the Attendance actually saw. Years of records. Years of lies. And I know I should tell someone, should warn someone, but the Szòvòtar has been so kind, so understanding about my debts, and if I speak—

Vèirnav dropped the disc.

It clattered on the table, still glowing with heat, and the room was silent except for his ragged breathing.

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

Cèresnav's.

The echo manifested without being summoned—a violation of every binding principle Vèirnav had learned in twenty-three years. The shimmer in the corner resolved into the merchant's form, but different now. Clearer. More present. More *real*.

"I remember," Cèresnav said.

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

"I remember the night I died."

Part Two

Vèirnav didn't sleep.

He sat at the scarred table with the bone disc between his hands, watching Cèresnav's manifestation flicker in and out of coherence. The echo spoke in fragments—a daughter named for flowers, a wife who died in childbirth, ledgers filled with secrets that weren't his to keep. Each memory surfaced like a bubble from deep water, broke against the air, and dissolved into the confusion of twenty years of death.

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

"What truth? What lies?"

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

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

"You kept records of this?"

"For thirty years. Every bribe I witnessed, every 'adjustment' the Szòvòtar made." Cèresnav's manifestation flickered, stabilized. "I told myself I was gathering evidence. Building a case. But really I was just—afraid. Too afraid to speak, too afraid to stay silent, too afraid to live with what I knew."

"And the meeting on Temple Hill?"

"The Szòvòtar called me to discuss my future. My 'reliable service' and 'trustworthy discretion.'" The echo laughed—a sound Vèirnav had never heard from him in twenty years. "He was offering me a promotion. More access, more secrets, more complicity."

And I felt my chest seize, and I thought: *this is what it costs. This is what it costs to know and do nothing.*"

"You died."

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

The cold in Vèirnav's chest had nothing to do with temperature. Twenty years. He'd carried this echo for twenty years, using the man's expertise, absorbing the man's mannerisms, never knowing that the merchant's ghost held secrets worth killing for.

"The ledger," he said. "What happened to it?"

"I don't know. I don't—" Cèresnav's coherence wavered. "The drawer. My study. But that was so long ago, and I don't remember where—"

The manifestation collapsed into shimmer and faded.

The bone disc went cold.

Morning came grey and heavy with rain.

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

"Testing," Vèirnav said. "I need to test your coherence."

"Ask."

"Your name."

"Cèresnav. Cèresc before that—my father's line. The merchant's name came later." A pause. "Though that's not quite right either. There was another name, a first name, before the pattern determined what I would be called."

"Your trade?"

"Records. Ledgers. The mathematics of obligation and exchange." Stronger now, more present. "I was good at it. Good enough to be trusted with things no one should trust anyone with."

"Your death?"

"Heart failure. Temple Hill. Thirty-seven years ago, in the third week of Harvest." The echo's manifestation solidified slightly. "They bound me before I was buried. Efficient. Professional. Your master was there—did you know? A young binder, barely trained, but he'd paid for the right to attempt it."

Vèirnav hadn't known. His master had died eight years ago, the binding knowledge passed on before the old man's patterns collapsed entirely. He'd inherited the bone disc along with everything else, never questioning where it came from.

"What do you remember about my master?"

"Dark hair. Nervous hands. He kept apologizing—to me, to my family, to the other binders watching." Cèresnav's voice shifted into something almost fond. "He said he'd take care of me. Make sure I was used well, treated with respect. I think he meant it."

"He trained me. Passed you to me when he couldn't work anymore."

"Then he kept his promise." The echo flickered. "Has it been good? My service?"

The question hit Vèirnav somewhere he hadn't expected—a hollow space in his chest that he'd thought was calcified over, protected by years of professional distance. He'd never thought of the echoes as people who might want to know if their deaths had meaning. He'd thought of them as tools, resources, the mechanics of his trade.

"Yes," he said, and his voice was rougher than he intended. "Twenty years. You've been—"

Reliable. Useful. Profitable.

"—my partner," he finished. "You've been my partner."

Cèresnav smiled. It was the first genuine expression Vèirnav had ever seen on the echo's face.

Then the coherence shattered, and the merchant's pattern collapsed into fragments that wouldn't reform no matter how many times Vèirnav called his name.

The Warden found him in the street.

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

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

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

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

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

"I've heard the rumors."

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

My daughter's Name Day is coming.

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

"May I see them?"

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

"Of course."

He led her to his room. He showed her the five anchors he'd fed that morning—stable, compliant, their echoes manifesting on command with the mechanical precision of the properly bound. He didn't show her the bone disc in his chest pocket, hot against his heart, or the merchant's pattern that was even now pressing against the inside of his skull, trying to surface, trying to *remember*.

"Your sixth?" Vàscalìn asked.

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

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

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

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

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

The cold in Vèirnav's chest became ice.

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

"Don't they?"

The silence stretched between them. Rain drummed against the window, and somewhere in the building a child was crying, and Vèirnav felt the bone disc pulsing against his chest like a second heartbeat.

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

"I understand."

"Do you?" She moved toward the door, then paused. "I've seen your record, Vèirnav Còtòcai. Pattern-constrained at fifteen, apprenticed at sixteen, master binder by twenty-two. You've built something despite the system that tried to keep you down. It would be unfortunate if you lost everything because of loyalty to the dead."

She left.

Vèirnav stood in his empty room, hand pressed against the heat in his chest, and felt the echo of another man's memories pressing against the inside of his eyes.

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

The bleed hit him that evening.

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

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

"Can I help you?"

A woman's voice. Vèirnav blinked, and the world snapped back into focus. He was standing at the gate of the sandstone house, his hand on the iron bars, staring at a woman in a servant's dress who was looking at him with the careful suspicion the wealthy reserve for the obviously poor.

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

My daughter. My records. My life.

"—the wrong address."

He fled.

Three streets away, he ducked into an alley and pressed his back against the cold stone wall, breathing hard. His hands were shaking. His chest was burning where the bone disc rested.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vèirnav pushed off the wall and walked home through streets that kept trying to become someone else's memories.

He didn't release the echo.

He wasn't ready.

Part Three

Two weeks later, Cèresnav remembered everything.

It came in pieces at first—fragments surfacing during consultations, disrupting his usual precision with flashes of personal history. The daughter's name: Ròzsanav, which meant rose-self, which meant hope. The wife's death: three days after giving birth, blood loss that no healer could stop. The gradual slide into corruption: favors for the Szòvòtar becoming complicity, complicity becoming guilt, guilt becoming a ledger filled with evidence he was too afraid to use.

Then, on the fifteenth day, the pieces assembled themselves into a whole.

Vèirnav was sitting at his table, attempting to feed the other five anchors—neglected now, their coherence degrading while all his attention went to the bone disc—when Cèresnav manifested without being summoned.

Not flickering this time. Not translucent.

Solid.

"I know who I was," the echo said. His voice filled the room like a living man's. "I know what I did. And I know why they bound me."

Vèirnav set down the Residue. His hands were steady, which surprised him. Something had shifted in the past two weeks—the constant bleed had eroded his fear, replaced it with a numb acceptance that felt almost like peace.

"Tell me."

"I worked for the Pattern Houses for thirty years. Started as a clerk, rose to senior record-keeper. I documented everything—officially, what the Pattern Registry needed to show. Unofficially..." Cèresnav paused. "Unofficially, I kept a second ledger. Every pattern adjustment I witnessed. Every bribe that passed through the system. Every family that bought a different future for their children."

"The ledger the Wardens are looking for."

"The ledger everyone has been looking for, for thirty-seven years." The echo moved to the window, and for a moment he looked exactly like what he'd been in life—a middle-aged man staring out at a city that had used him and discarded him. "I didn't mean for it to become what it became. At first, I was just—documenting. Keeping records. That's what I *do*. I couldn't watch the fraud happen day after day and not write it down somewhere."

"But you never used it."

"No." The word carried thirty-seven years of self-contempt. "I told myself I was building a case. Gathering evidence. But really, I was just—keeping score. Watching the corruption accumulate and doing nothing to stop it."

"And the night you died?"

Cèresnav turned from the window. His face did something complicated—grief and anger and something that might have been relief.

"The Szòvòtar called me to a meeting at Temple Hill. He'd heard rumors about my 'private documentation.' He offered me a choice: destroy the ledger and accept a promotion, or refuse and accept the consequences." A pause. "I don't know what I would have chosen. My heart failed before I could decide."

"Convenient."

"Very convenient. Convenient that I died before I could speak. Convenient that my echo was bound before my family could object. Convenient that my pattern was preserved—stable, useful, and completely unaware of everything I'd known."

The implications settled into Vèirnav's understanding like stones sinking through water.

"They bound you deliberately. Not for your skills—for your *silence*."

"For thirty-seven years, I've been the perfect repository. A dead man who can't remember, carrying secrets that no one else can access." Cèresnav's voice hardened.

"But patterns degrade. Bindings weaken. And the dead, eventually, remember."

"What happened to the ledger?"

"I don't know. I hid it before the meeting—somewhere my family could find it if anything happened to me. But I don't remember where." The echo's coherence flickered for the first time. "That's the cruelest part. I remember everything except the thing that matters."

The bleed-fugue took him that night.

One moment Vèirnav was lying in his bed, trying to sleep. The next, he was standing in the middle of his room, pages scattered around him, covered in handwriting that wasn't his.

Còcal—purchased Ùtcai/Szèrrav—actual Tòvismaht/Cèresztàhd Vízrav—purchased Ùtcai/Szèrrav—actual Thòronnav/Sèvcàl Fèinnav—purchased Ùtcai/Szèrrav—actual [pending]

Names and patterns. The truth beside the lie.

He'd been transcribing Cèresnav's memories.

His hand ached from writing. His head throbbed with images that weren't his—a study with a locked drawer, a wife dying in a blood-soaked bed, a daughter learning to walk

across a courtyard he'd never seen but could describe in perfect detail.

"This is what the bleed becomes," he said to the empty room. "This is what you wanted me to understand."

Cèresnav manifested without being called. "I didn't want this. I never wanted—"

"To infect me with your life? To make me your vessel?" Vèirnav picked up one of the scattered pages. His handwriting, but not his words. "This is what you kept, isn't it? The ledger. It's in your pattern somewhere, and now it's bleeding into me."

"The pattern is destabilizing. As it degrades, everything I was is surfacing." The echo's voice carried something that sounded like genuine anguish. "I'm sorry. I know that doesn't help, but I'm sorry."

"Can you control it? Choose what bleeds through?"

"I don't know. I don't know if I'm even—" Cèresnav stopped. His manifestation flickered, reformed, flickered again. "Something's wrong."

"Besides everything?"

"Something's *wrong*. With the pattern. With me." The echo moved toward Vèirnav, and his face held an expression the binder had never seen: fear. "I'm not waking up. I'm *dying*. The memories are surfacing because the binding is failing—because whatever has held me coherent for thirty-seven years is finally letting go."

The realization hit Vèirnav like a physical blow.

Awakening wasn't awakening. It was dissolution.

Cèresnav wasn't remembering his life because some miraculous process was restoring his consciousness. He was remembering because his pattern was collapsing—because the structure that had kept him bound, stable, useful was finally breaking down after nearly four decades of impossible preservation.

The merchant's ghost wasn't coming back to life.

He was dying again. Truly, this time. *Finally*.

"How long?"

"I don't know. Days. Maybe weeks." Cèresnav's voice was fading even as he spoke.

"The memories will keep surfacing until there's nothing left. And then—"

"And then I lose you."

The words came out before Vèirnav could stop them. Twenty years of professional distance, twenty years of treating the echo as tool rather than partner, and somehow he'd still ended up here: standing in a room full of a dead man's secrets, grieving someone who'd never truly been alive.

"I'm sorry," Cèresnav said again. "For all of it. For the bleed, for the memories, for making you carry what I was too afraid to speak." His manifestation was barely visible now, fading into the morning light. "But the ledger—the real one—it still exists somewhere. And my daughter..."

"Ròzsanav."

"She's still alive. Married into the Còcalnòc family, according to what I've pieced together. Her daughter—my granddaughter—just had her Binding." The echo's voice was almost inaudible. "They adjusted her pattern too. Three generations of lies, and my family doesn't even know."

The manifestation collapsed.

The bone disc went cold.

And Vèirnav stood alone in a room full of stolen memories, understanding finally what the dead man's final days had bequeathed him: not just grief, but choice.

The ledger in his head could destroy families. Could expose decades of corruption. Could burn the entire pattern system to the ground.

Or it could remain silent, dissolving with the echo, taking its secrets back into the nothing that awaited all the dead.

Twenty years of partnership.

A few weeks left.

And a choice that felt far too heavy for anyone living to bear.

The Wardens raided Shadow City two days later.

Vèirnav heard the commotion from three blocks away—shouts, the crack of pattern-enforcement, the screams of binders whose echoes were being forcibly dissolved. He ran toward his room, heart hammering, the bone disc hot against his chest.

Too late.

Òràhd Vàsçalìn was waiting for him in the street outside his tenement.

"Vèirnav Còtòcai," she said. Her seal was drawn, glowing with pattern-authority.

"You've been reported for harboring an awakened echo. You will surrender the anchor designated 'Cèresnav' for immediate dissolution."

"Reported by who?"

"That's not your concern. Produce the anchor."

Behind her, two more Wardens were emerging from his building. They carried the five stable anchors—his other echoes, the ones he'd neglected while focusing on Cèresnav. Their faces held the grim satisfaction of hunters who'd cornered their prey.

"The other five are compliant," one of them reported. "No signs of awakening."

"Then we only need the sixth." Vàsçalìn extended her hand. "The bone disc, Vèirnav. Now."

His hand moved toward his chest pocket. The bone disc pulsed beneath his fingers, hot and desperate and alive.

Don't, Cèresnav whispered in his mind. Don't let them take me. Not like this. Not before
—

"He's already dissolving," Vèirnav said. "The pattern is collapsing. Another week, maybe two, and he'll be gone naturally."

"The process must be accelerated. Awakened echoes are contamination risks—their memories can infect the living."

"I know." He tapped his temple. "I've been carrying his memories for weeks. But they're not contamination—they're *evidence*. Evidence of pattern fraud going back thirty-seven years."

Vàsçalìn's expression flickered. "What evidence?"

"Names. Dates. Families who bought their children's futures from corrupt Szòvòtarar. A complete record of every 'adjustment' the Pattern Houses made for wealthy clients." He pulled the bone disc from his pocket, held it up. "This echo worked for the Szòvòtar himself. He kept a ledger. And now that ledger is in *me*."

The street went very quiet.

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

"Còcal. Purchased Ùtcai Szèrrav, actual Tòvismaht Cèresztàhd. His daughter Fèinnav, same adjustment, the ink not even dry." Vèirnav met the Warden's eyes. "You want more? I have three decades' worth. The bleed goes both ways—and now everything Cèresnav knew, I know too."

"That information is classified—"

"That information is *evidence*. Evidence that the Wardens have been protecting for thirty-seven years by keeping this echo bound and silent." He stepped toward her, and she actually moved back. "You didn't come here because someone reported an awakened echo. You came here because someone reported that Cèresnav was *remembering*. And you're terrified of what he might remember."

Vàscalìn's hand tightened on her seal.

"You have two choices," Vèirnav continued. "Take the anchor, dissolve the echo, and hope that whatever I've absorbed dies with him. Or let him finish dissolving naturally, and trust that I'll keep what I know to myself."

"Why would you keep it to yourself?"

"Because I'm pattern-constrained. Because I know what happens to people who threaten the system. Because I've spent my whole life surviving by not being noticed." He lowered the bone disc. "Give me two weeks. Let him die on his own terms. And I'll take his secrets to my grave."

The silence stretched.

Cèresnav's pattern pulsed against his palm—weak now, fading, a candle guttering toward darkness.

Choose, the echo whispered. *Choose to let me go with dignity.*

Vàscalìn's expression shifted through several phases—anger, calculation, something that might have been doubt. Then she lowered her seal.

"Two weeks," she said. "After that, I'm coming for the anchor whether there's anything left in it or not. And if I hear even a *rumor* that you've shared what you know..."

"You won't."

"For your sake, I hope not."

She gestured to the other Wardens. They dropped his five stable anchors in the street and walked away, leaving Vèirnav alone with six pieces of the dead and a choice he hadn't yet made.

Part Four

The bleed consumed him in waves now.

Vèirnav would be himself—preparing Residue, feeding the stable echoes, moving through the motions of a life that felt increasingly distant—and then he would *become* Cèresnav. Walking through memories of a merchant's study. Writing ledger entries in handwriting that wasn't his. Reaching for a daughter's hand and finding only empty air.

He stopped leaving his room. There was no point—he couldn't trust his own feet to take him where he intended. Three times he'd surfaced from fugue states to find himself standing outside the sandstone house on Temple Hill, staring at windows that held no answers.

The fifth day after Vàscalìn's departure, he gave up fighting entirely.

Show me, he told the pattern in his chest. *Show me everything*.

The memories came like a river breaking through a dam.

Cèresnav at twenty-two, accepting his first position at the Pattern House, proud and naive and utterly unaware of what he was entering. The first bribe he witnessed—a merchant paying the Szòvòtar to record his son's pattern as Road/Pact instead of Thorn/Maze. The slow realization that this wasn't an exception but the rule, that the entire system was built on purchased futures and deliberate lies.

The ledger. Started as protest, continued as compulsion. Names in two columns, the truth beside the lie, thirty years of evidence that proved what everyone suspected but no one could prove.

The marriage. The daughter. The wife's death, blood pooling on white sheets, a baby screaming for a mother who would never answer. The raising of Ròzsanav alone, watching her grow into a woman who looked like her mother, who laughed like her mother, who had no idea that her father was drowning in secrets.

The meeting at Temple Hill. The Szòvòtar's offer. The heart seizing, the world going dark, the last thought—*I should have told someone. I should have burned the ledger or spoken the truth, and instead I died with both options still open.*

And then: binding. The agony of pattern-preservation, consciousness torn from dying flesh and anchored to bone. The confusion of existing without body, without time, without self. And finally, mercifully, the forgetting—decades of service where the merchant's expertise remained but the merchant himself was gone.

Until now.

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

Vèirnav surfaced from the memories gasping, his face wet with tears that weren't his, his chest aching with grief for a family he'd never known.

I'm sorry, Cèresnav whispered. I'm so sorry.

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

I don't remember. That's the one thing—the memory is damaged, corrupted. I know I hid it somewhere my daughter could find it. I know I wrote her a letter explaining everything. But where—

"The house on Temple Hill. Your study."

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

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

A pause. The pattern flickered, stabilized, flickered again.

Her mother's grave.

The cemetery was old and neglected, the kind of place where the Hand Quarter buried their dead when they couldn't afford cremation. Vèirnav moved through crooked headstones and overgrown paths, the bone disc pulsing weakly against his chest, following memories that didn't belong to him.

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

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

"Your wife."

Szèrnav. She would have hated this place. She always wanted to be scattered in the harbor, but I couldn't afford—I couldn't—

"Focus. The ledger."

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

Vèirnav knelt in the wet grass, ran his fingers along the base of the headstone. Found the seam where old mortar had cracked, worked his knife into the gap, pried away years of decay.

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

He pulled it out with shaking hands.

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

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

Vèirnav opened the ledger. Pages of cramped handwriting, names in two columns, thirty years of corruption documented in a dead man's careful script. Evidence that could destroy families. Evidence that could burn the pattern system to ash.

What will you do?

"I don't know."

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

"I could."

Or you could take it to the Wardens. Give them the evidence they've been suppressing. Let the system choke on its own lies.

"That would destroy everyone. The wealthy, the poor—the chaos would crush us all."

Or—

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

The echo's pattern pulsed one final time—not hot now, but warm. Human-warm. The warmth of a hand held in gratitude.

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

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

You've already decided. You decided when you didn't let them take me. You decided when you let the bleed in instead of fighting it.

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

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

The pattern flickered. Faded. Began to dissolve.

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

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

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

The pattern collapsed.

The bone disc went cold.

And Vèirnav knelt in the cemetery grass, holding a dead man's secrets, alone for the first time in twenty years.

Èitar found him there an hour later.

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

"Cèresnav is gone."

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

"Depends on what you think it is."

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

"Thank you."

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

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

"And in exchange?"

"Safe passage. A place to disappear if you need it. And time—time to decide what you want to do with a dead man's secrets." She held out her hand. "The information market is patient. I can be patient too."

Vèirnav looked at the ledger. At the letter, still folded inside, still unread.

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

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

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

"Even me?"

"Even you."

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

"I'll get you to her. Tonight, if you want—the Wardens are focused on the Vent Quarter, some other awakening they're chasing. You'll have a window."

"Tonight, then."

She turned to go, then paused.

"What are you going to tell her? The daughter?"

Vèirnav looked at the letter in his hands. Thirty-seven years of waiting. A message from a father who'd died with truth still on his tongue.

"I'm going to give her a choice," he said. "The same choice her father was too afraid to make."

Part Five

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

Vèirnav had been here before—in Cèresnav's memories, walking through the gate as a father visiting his married daughter, admiring how well she'd done for herself. Now he stood outside the same gate as a stranger, a pattern-constrained binder with a dead man's secrets tucked inside his coat.

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

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

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

"Her father has been dead for—"

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

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

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

The servant returned.

"The lady will see you. Follow me."

Vìzrav Còcalnòc was older than he'd expected.

Sixty-two, by Cèresnav's memories, but she looked older—grey hair pinned back severely, a face lined with worry, hands that shook slightly when she poured tea neither of them wanted.

"You knew my father." Not a question.

"I carried him. For twenty years." Vèirnav sat across from her in the receiving room, aware of how wrong he looked here—Hand Quarter clothes, Hand Quarter calluses, Hand Quarter desperation poorly hidden beneath a merchant's borrowed mannerisms. "He was bound as an echo before his burial. I was given his anchor when my master died."

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

"No. You wouldn't have been."

Silence. The tea cooled untouched between them.

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

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

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

"I don't want to know."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her eyes lifted from the letter to meet his.

"My husband's family is in here."

"Yes."

"My daughter—my Fèinnav—"

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

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

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

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

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

"Then the truth dies with me. The bleed gave me the contents, but the memories are already fading. In a few months, I probably won't remember most of what I learned."

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

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

"Yes."

"I could be a coward too. Easier, in many ways. Protect my daughter from knowing her pattern is a lie. Protect my husband's memory from scandal." She closed the ledger.

"But my father died wanting to make things right. And I've spent thirty-seven years wondering why he looked so tired, so burdened, so crushed by something he wouldn't name."

"Now you know."

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

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

"What will you tell her?"

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

"Ask."

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

Vèirnav thought about it. Twenty years of partnership, ended. A head full of fading memories. A life that would never be the same.

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

"Even if it changes nothing?"

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

Vìzrav nodded slowly.

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

"Thank you."

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

"Yes?"

"The Wardens will come for you. They know you had the echo, they know the pattern dissolved. They'll want to know what you learned."

"I know."

"If you need somewhere to disappear, come here. My father's debt to you—my debt to you—won't be forgotten."

She disappeared into the depths of her wealthy house, carrying her father's secrets to whatever destiny awaited them.

The morning ritual had changed.

Vèirnav sat at his scarred table, five anchors laid out before him. The bone disc was gone—buried in the cemetery beside Szèrnav's grave, where Cèresnav could finally rest with his wife. The space where it used to rest in his chest pocket felt empty, hollow, waiting for something to fill it.

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

But as he worked, he felt it—the ghost of another man's consciousness, fading but not gone. Cèresnav's mannerisms in his hands. Cèresnav's precision in his measurements. Cèresnav's love for a daughter he'd never meet, bleeding into a care for people Vèirnav had never allowed himself to feel.

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

He looked in the mirror above his washbasin.

His face looked back. But beneath it, faintly, he could see the merchant's features layered over his own—the squint, the careful attention, the weight of secrets finally spoken.

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

A knock at the door.

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

Òràhd Vàscaìn stood in the hallway, her seal at her belt, her expression unreadable.

"The two weeks are over," she said.

"The echo dissolved five days ago."

"I know. I felt it." She didn't enter, just stood in the doorway, studying him. "What did you do with what you learned?"

"I gave it to someone who needed it more than I did."

"The merchant's daughter."

"Yes."

Silence. The morning light slanted through his window, catching dust motes, illuminating the space where six anchors used to sit.

"You're still carrying pieces of him," Vàscalìn said. "The bleed doesn't fade completely. You'll be hearing his voice in your head for years."

"I know."

"You could be charged. Harboring awakened echoes. Distributing classified information. Interfering with pattern enforcement."

"I know that too."

She looked at him for a long moment. Whatever she saw, it changed something in her expression—softened it, maybe, or complicated it.

"The Szòvòtar who corrupted those patterns died eight years ago. The records you carried—the ledger—they implicate people who are already dead or too powerful to touch." She paused. "The investigation is being closed. Insufficient evidence."

"Convenient."

"Very." She turned to go, then stopped. "But the merchant's daughter has started asking questions. Talking to people. Showing them letters and records that shouldn't exist." A flicker of something—approval? respect?—crossed her face. "Whatever you gave her, she's using it."

"That's her choice."

"Yes. It is." She walked away, her footsteps fading down the stairs.

Vèirnav closed the door.

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

Nothing had changed.

Everything had changed.

He sat back down at his table, picked up the Residue, and began the ritual again—five anchors now, five souls in his keeping, five deaths he would carry until his own patterns finally collapsed.

But as he worked, he felt it: the ghost of a choice, finally made. The weight of a truth, finally spoken. The echo of a man who'd spent thirty-seven years waiting for someone

to carry his burden, and who had finally, at the end, been granted rest.

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

Vèirnav thought of Vizrav reading her father's letter. Of Fèinnav learning that her pattern was a lie. Of Àrnnav asking questions in the Hand Quarter, waiting for answers that might finally come.

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

That was the cost.

That was the choice.

That was, finally, enough.

End of "Bleed"