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The Reading

Part One

Csèndmaht's hands remembered the gestures before Csèndmaht remembered why.

Fèinnav watched the household echo move through the morning ritual—fingers tracing blessing-signs in the air, palms turning upward in supplication, the whole choreography of a Binding ceremony performed with the mechanical grace of a music box. Twenty years of service to the Còcalnòc family. Forty years since the woman called Csèndmaht had drawn breath. And still her hands knew the dance.

"What did it feel like?" Fèinnav asked. The courtyard was grey with pre-dawn light, jasmine heavy in the air, and she was fifteen years old and terrified. "When the Attendance touched you?"

The echo's hands stilled.

"I was young." Csèndmaht's face did something complicated—not quite confusion, not quite pain. The space where memory should be. "There was... a temple. Ink, perhaps. And then—"

Nothing. The sentence died incomplete. The echo's hands resumed their gestures, muscle memory outlasting mind, and Fèinnav filed this away with all the other wrongnesses she'd collected over her fifteen years. The gaps in her father's ledgers. The glances between her parents that spoke volumes in a language she'd never been taught. The way pattern-constrained workers looked at the ground when pattern-privileged merchants passed—not quite fear, not quite hatred, something older than either.

Small wrongnesses. Cracks in porcelain.

Today she would be Bound.

Today she would become legible—her pattern drawn from the Loom, her future written in the Registry, her place in Fonváros's elaborate hierarchy inscribed in ink that could never be erased.

Her stomach churned. The temple pamphlets said nervousness was holy: *who can approach the Weaver's design without trembling?* But this wasn't trembling. This was the feeling of standing at the edge of something, of sensing the ground about to shift.

Csèndmaht's hands traced the final blessing-sign. The echo smiled—a reflex, empty as wind.

"You'll do well, young mistress. The Weaver favors this family."

Does He? Fèinnav thought. *Or does the family favor itself?*

She didn't ask. She'd learned long ago which questions had answers and which had only silence.

The breakfast room smelled of coffee and secrets.

Her father sat at the head of the table, merchant's coat pressed sharp as a blade, the family seal gleaming at his collar like a small bronze promise. Còcal Còcalnòc was reading correspondence—or pretending to. His eyes moved too quickly, scanning without seeing, the way they did when his mind was elsewhere.

Her mother's hair was up in the elaborate style that took an hour and three echo-servants to arrange. War-paint for a different kind of battle. Vízrav smiled when Fèinnav entered, but the smile didn't reach past her cheekbones.

"There she is. Our almost-woman."

"Almost-drawn," her father corrected, setting down the letters. "Woman comes later. Today comes pattern."

Fèinnav sat. The chair was oak, solid, the same chair where three generations of Còcalnòc children had eaten breakfast on the morning of their Binding. She wondered if they'd all felt this same crawling wrongness, or if that was hers alone.

"The offering has been prepared." Her father's voice was casual. Too casual. He reached for bread without looking at his wife. "Szòvòtar Hàlmahtfhì will conduct the

ceremony himself. A great honor."

"The Szòvòtar is old," Fèinnav said. "Shouldn't a younger Reader—"

"He's conducted our family's Bindings for thirty years." Her mother's hand found Fèinnav's across the table, squeezed. Her fingers were cold. "He understood your grandfather. He'll understand you."

"Understand what?"

The glance between her parents was a door closing.

"How to interpret." Her father buttered his bread with surgical precision. "The Attendance shows many things. Raw material. Possibility. A skilled Reader knows how to frame the Weaver's design in ways that serve the drawn."

"Frame how?"

"Eat." Her mother released her hand, and the coldness lingered. "You'll need your strength."

Fèinnav ate. The bread was ash. The coffee was questions. Her mother's smile was a locked door, and her father's casual tone was the key hidden beneath the mat where anyone could find it.

Thirty years of understanding, she thought. Three generations of interpretations.

She chewed. She swallowed. She did not ask what interpretations cost.

The ceremonial dress waited in the upstairs chamber like a shed skin waiting to be inhabited.

Green and gold, Còcalnòc colors, cut in the style that marked merchant-class pattern-pending. The fabric whispered against Fèinnav's skin as her mother helped her into it—silk and promise, wealth made wearable. The mirror showed her a girl she barely recognized: older, more serious, someone standing on the edge of becoming.

"I remember my day." Her mother's fingers worked the buttons along Fèinnav's spine, each one a small surrender. "I was certain the Attendance would find something wrong. Some flaw in my design that would mark me constrained."

"But you weren't."

"No." Button. Button. "Útcai Szèrrav. The merchant's pattern. Same as your father, same as his father before him." Her mother's reflection met Fèinnav's in the mirror. "The Weaver is good to our family."

"Is that how it works?" Fèinnav watched her mother's hands—practiced, steady, revealing nothing. "Certain families get certain patterns?"

The hands paused.

"Some threads are... guided." Her mother's voice dropped, became something almost confessional. "Tended. The Weaver weaves, but sometimes—"

The door opened. Her father, impatient, already wearing his public face.

"The carriage is here."

Her mother's hands finished the last button. Her mother's almost-confession dissolved into movement—gathering shawls, checking hair, the busywork of mothers sending daughters to their fates.

But Fèinnav had seen.

In the mirror, just for a moment, her mother's face had worn something that looked like guilt.

The Great Temple rose against the morning sky like a declaration.

Gold and crystal caught the early sun, throwing light across Temple Hill in bright accusations. The steps were crowded with families—merchants in their finest, minor nobility affecting boredom, pattern-privileged workers with hope naked on their faces. Fèinnav moved through them with her parents flanking her like honor guards or jailers, and everywhere she looked she saw performance.

The wealthy families performed ease. *This is nothing special. Our children were always destined for privilege.*

The hopeful families performed confidence. *Our children will rise. The Weaver will see their worth.*

And scattered among them, almost invisible in their plainness, the pattern-pending from the Hand Quarter performed nothing at all.

Fèinnav saw her.

A girl her own age, maybe younger, with dark hair and a dress mended so many times the original fabric was more memory than cloth. She stood apart from the crowd, arms wrapped around herself, watching the temple doors with eyes that expected nothing good.

Their gazes met.

The girl looked at Fèinnav's green-and-gold silk. At the family seal. At the parents flanking her like declarations of status. Her lip curled—not quite a sneer, something more exhausted than that.

Then she looked away, dismissing Fèinnav as completely as closing a book.

We're the same age, Fèinnav thought. *In an hour, the Attendance will touch us both.*

But they weren't the same. The Hand Quarter girl knew it. Fèinnav was only beginning to understand how much the knowing cost.

The temple's interior pressed against her skin.

Incense first—sweet and thick, cloying at the back of her throat. Then something else beneath it, something that raised the fine hairs on her arms and tasted like the moment before lightning. The Attendance. Somewhere behind the sanctified screens, somewhere in the chambers where pattern-engines hummed their eternal calculations, something was listening.

Fèinnav felt it like being watched by a presence too vast to see.

Her father murmured something about temple business, about ensuring arrangements, and disappeared into a side corridor. Her mother guided her to the family waiting room—cushioned benches, refreshments, comfort for those who could afford it—and began fussing with her hair.

"Where did he go?"

"To make an offering." Her mother's fingers tugged at a curl. "It's traditional."

"What kind of offering?"

"Fèinnav." Just her name. Just fifteen years of *don't ask don't look don't see* compressed into three syllables.

"I need the privy."

Relief flickered across her mother's face—gratitude for the excuse, for the chance to stop not-answering. "Down the hall. Be quick."

Fèinnav went.

She did not go to the privy.

The temple was a labyrinth built by believers—corridors public and private, sanctified and merely warded, each turn a test of faith or knowledge. Fèinnav had attended services here since childhood. She knew which passages were watched and which were merely blessed.

She followed the sound of her father's footsteps.

The secondary nave. An alcove off the main corridor, used for private consultations, shadowed even in the morning light. Fèinnav pressed herself against a pillar that smelled of old stone and older prayers, and watched.

Szòvòtar Hàlmahtfhì. Sixty years old, at least, with a face made for comfort—soft eyes, gentle mouth, the practiced warmth of someone who'd spent a lifetime delivering verdicts disguised as blessings. His robes were heavy with embroidered patterns marking him senior, trusted, beyond question.

Her father's hand moved.

A purse, small and heavy, passing from merchant to priest with the ease of long practice. The Szòvòtar's fingers closed around it—no hesitation, no shame, just the smooth transaction of men concluding routine business.

"Ùtcai and Szèrrav." Her father's voice, low but clear. "As we discussed. She'll do well in the trade."

"A fine pattern for a fine family." The Szòvòtar tucked the purse into his robes. "The Weaver smiles on the Còcalnòc line."

"He has for three generations."

"And will continue to." The Reader's hand found her father's, clasped it. "I'll ensure the interpretation is... favorable. Your daughter will have options."

Options.

The word hit Fèinnav like a fist to the stomach.

Not *the Weaver will reveal her truth*. Not *the Attendance will show her design*. Options. Favorable interpretations. A fine pattern for a fine family, purchased like silk, delivered like goods.

Her legs had turned to stone. Her lungs had forgotten breathing. She watched her father release the Reader's hand, watched them part with the casual ease of co-conspirators, watched her entire understanding of the world crack down the middle.

Three generations.

The Weaver didn't smile on the Còcalnòc line.

The Còcalnòc line paid for His smile.

The purse in the Szòvòtar's robes was her future, bought and sold before the Attendance ever touched her.

She almost ran.

The thought seized her—flee down the temple steps, tear off the green-and-gold dress, disappear into the city's maze of streets and never look back. Let them explain her absence. Let them find another daughter to buy a pattern for.

But flee to where? Do what?

Pattern-pending adults were criminals or madmen—people who'd rejected the Weaver's gift and been rejected in turn. Without a Binding, she couldn't work, couldn't marry, couldn't exist in any way the city recognized. She'd be less than constrained. She'd be nothing.

And accusing them—her father, the Reader, the whole architecture of purchased fate—with what evidence? A fifteen-year-old girl's word against thirty years of favorable interpretations?

Her mother found her in the corridor, smoothed her hair, asked if she felt better. Fèinnav said yes. Her voice sounded normal. Her face performed calm. Inside, something fundamental had shattered, and she was learning for the first time that broken things could still walk and talk and smile.

"It's time," her mother said.

Fèinnav let herself be led to the great chamber.

She did not look at her father when she passed him.

Part Two

The waiting room sorted them like coins.

Wealthy families had cushioned alcoves, privacy screens, echo-servants to bring refreshments. Merchant families clustered in the middle spaces, performing respectability, careful not to crowd the nobility above or acknowledge the workers below. And along the far wall, on hard wooden benches with no privacy at all, the Hand Quarter adolescents sat in silence.

Fèinnav found herself watching them.

A boy with a scar across his chin, staring at the floor. A girl with a hungry face, picking at the hem of her dress. And the dark-haired girl from the steps—Àrnnav, someone had called her—sitting apart even from her own kind, arms still wrapped around herself, eyes fixed on nothing.

Which of you are guided? Fèinnav thought, looking at the wealthy families. *Which of your patterns have already been purchased?*

The boy in the crimson doublet, heir to shipping fortunes—was his fate his own or his father's investment? The girl with the pearl earrings, already carrying herself like pattern-privileged—had she been bought, or had the Weaver truly blessed her?

She couldn't tell. That was the horror of it. Looking at them now, knowing what she knew, she couldn't see any difference between the purchased and the true.

Maybe there wasn't one.

"You look pale."

Her mother's hand on her arm. Her mother's face arranged in concern that might have been genuine.

"I'm fine."

"The Weaver's touch can be overwhelming. When I was Bound—"

"Did you feel it?"

Her mother blinked. "Feel what?"

"The Attendance. When it looked at you." Fèinnav kept her voice steady, kept her face innocent, but her hands were shaking beneath the folds of her dress. "What did it show you?"

A flicker in her mother's eyes. There and gone, quick as guilt.

"Ùtcai Szèrrav. The merchant's pattern."

"Is that what you *felt*? Or what they told you afterward?"

"Fèinnav, what are you—"

"Nothing." She pulled her arm free. "I'm nervous. Like you said. The Weaver's touch."

Her mother's face did something complicated—relief and suspicion and something older, sadder, that might have been recognition. But before she could speak, the bells began.

The Binding ceremony was starting.

The Szòvòtar's voice rolled through the great chamber like honey over broken glass.

"We gather in the Weaver's light to witness the drawing of His threads..."

The words were ancient, handed down from the first Loom-Keepers, sanctified by three centuries of repetition. Fèinnav had heard them before, at cousins' Bindings, at neighbors' ceremonies. They'd always sounded holy.

Now she heard the gaps.

"The pattern reveals the soul's true nature..."

But you decide what nature gets written down.

"What the Attendance shows, let none deny..."

What the Attendance shows isn't what you record.

"By ink and intention, bound to the Loom..."

By silver and arrangement, bound to the lie.

The processional moved forward. Thirty adolescents in two lines—wealthy on one side, workers on the other, the physical architecture of the ceremony reinforcing the hierarchies it claimed to reveal. Fèinnav walked with the merchants, silk whispering against her legs, and watched the Hand Quarter girl move on the opposite side in her mended dress.

Their eyes met again.

This time, Fèinnav didn't look away.

The Drawing happened one by one.

Each pattern-pending approached the altar where the Szòvòtar waited with his sacred implements: the needles of bone, the ink mixed with Residue, the cards of the Sórscad fanned before him. Each one knelt. Each one extended their hands, palms up, in the gesture Csèndmaht's empty memory still knew.

Each one received the Attendance.

Fèinnav watched it happen to the boy ahead of her—watched his face go slack, his eyes unfocus, his whole body become a vessel for something vast and brief. Two heartbeats, maybe three. Then it was over, and the Szòvòtar was speaking, and the boy's pattern was being recorded in the great ledger that would follow him all his life.

"Ùtcai and Coròncai," the Reader announced. "The Weaver marks you merchant-noble, path-finder of high degree. Pattern-privileged."

Applause from the noble section. The boy's family embracing, celebrating.

Had they paid? Was that his truth or his father's purchase?

Fèinnav couldn't tell. Would never be able to tell, for anyone, ever again.

Then it was her turn.

The Attendance did not feel like a lie.

She'd expected—she didn't know what. A hollow performance, perhaps. A staged magic, all show and no substance. Something that would confirm the corruption was total, that nothing real existed behind the purchased masks.

Instead, she felt *seen*.

It lasted two breaths. Maybe three. But in that space between heartbeats, something touched her—vast, incomprehensible, as far beyond her understanding as the ocean was beyond a single drop. It looked at her. It *saw* her. Not her surface, not her family name, not her silk dress or her merchant's future, but something deeper.

The thing she was beneath all the layers.

The thing she might become.

Then it was over, and the Szòvòtar was speaking, and the words were wrong.

"Ùtcai and Szèrrav. The Weaver marks you merchant, path-finder, keeper of bonds. Pattern-privileged."

Applause from her family's section. Her mother's face shining. Her father's careful neutrality.

Fèinnav rose from her knees.

Her hands were shaking.

The Attendance was real. She'd felt it—genuine, ancient, something actually divine or so close to divine it made no difference. It had looked at her and seen something true.

But what had it seen?

Not Ùtcai Szèrrav. She knew that with a certainty that went deeper than thought. Whatever the Attendance had found in her soul, it wasn't the merchant's pattern her father had purchased.

She walked back to her family on legs that barely held her.

What am I? she thought. *What did the Weaver actually make me?*

She didn't know. Might never know.

The Szòvòtar smiled at her from the altar, benevolent as a grandfather, and she wanted to claw his eyes out.

The Hand Quarter girl was last.

No family section applauded as Àrnnav approached the altar. No wealthy relatives leaned forward in anticipation. She walked alone, in her mended dress, and knelt before the Szòvòtar with the rigid dignity of someone refusing to be pitied.

The Attendance touched her.

Fèinnav watched—watched the girl's face go slack, watched the Reader's expression shift. There was something there, just for a moment. A flicker of genuine attention, quickly masked. The Szòvòtar looked at Àrnnav like she was a ledger entry that didn't quite balance.

Then he wrote.

"Tòvismaht and Vèszttar." His voice carried no warmth now. "The Weaver marks you difficult, path-tangled, bond-breaker. Pattern-constrained."

No applause. A few murmurs, quickly suppressed. The Hand Quarter contingent stared at their benches, each of them knowing they'd receive the same: difficult patterns, honest readings, the truth that served as a prison sentence.

Àrnnav stood.

Her face was stone. Her eyes were fire.

She walked back to her bench alone, and somewhere deep in Fèinnav's chest, something cracked open that felt like recognition.

After the ceremony: confusion.

Families surging forward, congratulating each other, the successful performances of joy and relief. Fèinnav let herself be embraced, let herself accept the murmured blessings, let herself smile until her face ached.

Her father was glowing. "Ùtcai Szèrrav! Just as we—"

He stopped himself. Just as we hoped, he'd been about to say. Or perhaps: just as we purchased.

"The Weaver favors us," he finished. "As He always has."

Fèinnav looked at him. Really looked, for the first time since the alcove, since the purse, since the transaction that had purchased her future. He met her eyes, and something passed between them—a question, a warning, a door held open just a crack.

I know, her look said.

I know you know, his answered. *Now what?*

She had no answer. She smiled. She accepted congratulations. She let her mother steer her toward the family carriage.

But as they passed the temple doors, she looked back.

Àrnnav was standing alone on the steps, exactly where she'd stood that morning. Same wrapped arms. Same eyes expecting nothing good.

Those eyes found Fèinnav's.

This time, Fèinnav saw recognition. Not dismissal—something rawer. The look of one drowning person seeing another go under.

Pattern-constrained, Fèinnav thought. *Tòvismaht Vèszttar. The truth, written down, a prison she'll never escape.*

Pattern-privileged, Àrnnav's eyes answered. *Ùtcai Szèrrav. The lie, written down, a freedom she'll never deserve.*

The carriage door closed between them.

Part Three

The celebration dinner was a performance Fèinnav watched from inside her own body.

Roast lamb. Spring vegetables. Wine poured generously into crystal that cost more than a Hand Quarter worker earned in a month. The Còcalnòc dining room glowed with

candlelight and satisfaction, and Fèinnav sat at its center like a prize on display.

"To our daughter." Her father raised his glass. "To her fortunate pattern."

Fortunate. The word tasted like copper.

"To the Weaver's wisdom," her mother added.

Wisdom you purchased at negotiated rates.

Fèinnav drank. The wine turned to acid on her tongue.

Conversation flowed around her—talk of prospects, of marriages now possible, of trading partnerships that would open to a pattern-privileged daughter. Her parents spoke of her future like architects discussing a building: foundation laid, structure sound, only the decorative elements left to arrange.

She let them talk. She smiled when smiled at. She answered questions in the right voice with the right words, and inside she was screaming.

The Attendance had been real. She'd felt divinity—or something so vast it might as well be. Whatever the Weaver was, It existed. It saw. It judged.

And none of that mattered, because what got written down was whatever the powerful could afford.

The lamb was ash. The vegetables were questions. The wine was the only honest thing on the table—at least it didn't pretend to be anything but what it was.

The Szòvòtar arrived for dessert.

"Ah, the newly Bound!" He swept into the dining room with the proprietary ease of an old family friend, embracing her mother, clasping her father's hand, turning to Fèinnav with a smile so warm it made her stomach turn. "How does it feel to be pattern-privileged?"

"Overwhelming." Her voice came out steady. A small miracle. "The Attendance was... not what I expected."

"It never is." He settled into the chair her father offered, accepted the wine her mother poured. "The Weaver's touch is beyond mortal comprehension. That's why

interpretation matters so much. The raw experience must be shaped into something livable."

Shaped. There it was, dressed in priestly robes. The admission hidden in plain sight.

"I wanted to offer my guidance," the Szòvòtar continued, "as your family has always trusted me to do. Your pattern—Ùtcai Szèrrav—carries certain implications. Certain paths that will open, certain bonds that will strengthen your position. I can help you understand what your future holds."

"Can you?"

Her mother's hand found her knee under the table. A warning squeeze.

"The Reader's guidance is invaluable," her father said. "We've always valued your counsel."

"And I've always valued your family's... devotion." The Szòvòtar's eyes met Fèinnav's, and something shifted beneath his grandfatherly warmth. Recognition. Assessment. The calculation of a man determining how much she knew. "Perhaps Fèinnav and I might speak privately? It's customary, after a Binding. To help the newly drawn understand their place."

Her mother's hand tightened on her knee.

"Of course," her father said. "Use my study."

The study smelled of leather and old secrets.

The Szòvòtar closed the door. The click of the latch was very loud.

"You have questions." He didn't phrase it as a question. He settled into her father's chair—the chair of authority, the chair where deals were made—and gestured for her to sit opposite. "Ask them."

"What did the Attendance actually see?"

"Ùtcai Szèrrav. As I said."

"Is that the truth?"

The silence between them was a living thing.

"Truth is complicated," the Szòvòtar said finally. "The Attendance sees... potentialities. 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."

"My father wanted me to have a *specific* pattern. You gave him what he paid for."

No shock on the Reader's face. No denial. Just a slight rearrangement, like a man setting down one mask and picking up another.

"You're cleverer than I expected." He steeped his fingers, studying her. "Your father warned me you might be. It's one of the reasons I argued for Làmphasrù in your Natal reading—the introspective mind, the tendency to look beneath surfaces."

"You chose my Natal pattern too?"

"I've guided your family's patterns for three generations. Did you think the guidance began only at the Binding?" He smiled, and the smile was terrible—not cruel, worse than cruel. Genuinely kind. A grandfather explaining the world to a child. "We are all of us shaped, Fèinnav. By family, by circumstance, by the patterns we inherit. I simply make that shaping... intentional."

"And the Hand Quarter girl? Àrnnav? Was she shaped too?"

"She received her truth." A flicker of something in his eyes—not guilt, not quite. Something more like professional pride. "I don't adjust every reading. The poor have no offerings to make. Their patterns are recorded as the Attendance shows them."

"So the wealthy get choices and the poor get prisons."

"The wealthy get *different* prisons. Better-appointed, perhaps. With nicer windows." He leaned forward. "Do you think a merchant's life is freedom? Your Ùtcai Szèrrav will determine who you marry, what trades you're suited for, how other merchants treat you. You'll spend your life walking a path someone else defined. The only question is whether that path was drawn by the Attendance or purchased by your father."

"There's a difference."

"Is there? You'll never know what the Attendance actually saw. You'll never know if the pattern you're living was true or purchased. You'll live your life in exactly the same way either way—attending to your duties, honoring your bonds, walking your road. The only thing that changes is what you believe about yourself."

Fèinnav stood. Her chair scraped against the floor. Her hands were shaking again.

"You've corrupted everything. The Binding, the Registry, the entire—"

"I've *maintained* everything." The Szòvòtar stood too, slower, calmer. "The system works because people believe in it. The privileged believe they deserve their privilege. The constrained believe they deserve their constraints. Everyone walks their paths, and society continues. Without that belief, chaos. Without that structure, collapse." He moved toward the door. "I've given your family three generations of stability. I've given you a future filled with options. What you do with that gift is your own affair."

He opened the door.

"Sleep well, Fèinnav Còcalnòc. And remember: I can always tell your parents that you've shown signs of pattern-rejection. It happens sometimes—the newly Bound struggling to accept the Weaver's wisdom. The treatment is... intensive."

The door closed behind him.

Fèinnav stood in her father's study, shaking, and understood for the first time that knowing the truth was not the same as being able to use it.

She found Àrnnav at midnight.

The Hand Quarter began where the streetlamps ended—a border as sharp as any wall, marking the edge of the city's concern. Fèinnav moved through streets she'd never walked, past buildings she'd never noticed, into a world that existed alongside her own without ever touching it.

The smells hit her first. Rotting vegetables. Human waste inadequately disposed of. The sour undercurrent of too many bodies in too little space. Then the sounds: a baby crying, a man shouting, the endless background noise of people with nowhere else to be.

And there, on the steps of a tenement that leaned like a drunk against its neighbor, sat the girl who'd received her truth.

"You shouldn't be here."

Àrnnav's voice was flat. She didn't look surprised—or if she did, she hid it well. Her eyes moved over Fèinnav's dress, her seal, her obvious wealth and obvious

foolishness in wearing it here.

"I needed to talk to you."

"About what? How fortunate you are? How the Weaver smiled on you and pissed on me?" Àrnnav laughed, a sound like breaking glass. "Go home, merchant's daughter. Count your blessings. Some of us have to work in the morning."

"I know about the fraud."

Àrnnav went still.

"The bribes," Fèinnav continued, keeping her voice low. "The purchased patterns. My father paid for my Binding. The Szòvòtar writes whatever rich families tell him to write."

"Everyone knows that."

"What?"

"Everyone in the Hand Quarter knows. Rich patterns for rich families, poor patterns for poor. The Weaver smiles on anyone who can afford His blessing." Àrnnav's voice was bitter, old, the voice of someone who'd learned too young how the world worked. "We tell ourselves it's rigged. It's the only way to live with being crushed by it."

"But I *felt* the Attendance. It's real—something actually exists, actually judges—"

"And then some old man writes whatever the fuck he wants, and that's who you are forever." Àrnnav stood, wrapping her arms around herself in that familiar gesture. "So what? So the divine is real and humans corrupt it. That's not news. That's just... everything."

"What if there's proof?"

The stillness again. Sharper this time.

"Proof of what?"

"The corruption. The purchased patterns." Fèinnav moved closer, lowering her voice further. "The Szòvòtar has been doing this for three generations. Someone must be keeping records. The bribes received, the patterns adjusted—"

"You think there's a ledger somewhere? A nice organized list of everyone who bought their way into privilege?" Àrnnav shook her head. "And then what? You expose it, burn

it all down, and the privileged just find new ways to stay on top while people like me get crushed in the rubble."

"Then we use it differently. Leverage, instead of exposure. Force them to—"

"We?" Àrnnav stepped back. "There's no we, merchant's daughter. You've had one bad day. I've had a lifetime. You found out your pretty cage is made of lies—I've always known my ugly cage is made of truth. We're not the same."

"But we are. That's what I'm trying to tell you." Fèinnav reached out, stopped herself. "The bribes don't change what the Attendance sees. They just change what gets written down. Your pattern—Tòvismaht Vèszttar—that's what the Szòvòtar recorded. But it might not be what the Attendance actually showed him."

Àrnnav's eyes narrowed. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying the corruption works both ways. Rich families buy good patterns they might not have. Poor families get... whatever the Readers decide to write. Who's to say you weren't given a harder pattern than you deserved? Who's to say they don't constrain people just to maintain the system?"

The silence stretched between them.

"My mother knew something about this," Àrnnav said finally. Her voice had changed—still bitter, but something else now. Something like hope, half-drowned in cynicism. "She worked in the Pattern House. Assistant to a Szòvòtar. She learned things, saw things. And then she died of a 'fever' that came on very suddenly."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Be useful." Àrnnav's eyes burned in the lamplight. "If there's proof—real proof—I want to see it. Not to burn it all down. That's rich-girl thinking, the fantasy of someone who can afford to rebuild. But to *know*. To understand what they did to her. What they're doing to all of us."

"I'll find it."

"You'll try." Àrnnav turned back toward her tenement. "Don't come back here at night. You'll get robbed or worse. And next time—" she glanced back, almost smiling, "—wear something that doesn't scream 'I have things worth stealing.'"

She disappeared into the darkness.

Fèinnav walked home through streets that felt different now. The same buildings, the same lamps, the same distances—but she was seeing them for the first time as a girl with two patterns: the lie in the Registry and the truth she didn't know.

Tomorrow, she would look for the ledger.

Tonight, she let the darkness walk beside her like an old friend.

Part Four

The echo was singing.

Fèinnav heard it from the hallway—a melody without words, fragments of something that might once have been a lullaby. She followed the sound to the kitchen, where Csèndmaht stood at the counter, hands still, voice wandering through notes that belonged to a different century.

"Csèndmaht?"

The echo stopped. Its face did the familiar complicated thing—not quite confusion, not quite recognition—and then smoothed into servant's blankness.

"Young mistress. Can I help you?"

"What were you singing?"

"I don't..." The echo's brow furrowed. "I don't remember."

"You were singing a song. Just now. Something from before."

Before. The word seemed to trouble the echo like a stone dropped in still water. Ripples of something—almost memory, almost awareness—moved across its face.

"There was a child," Csèndmaht said slowly. "I think. A child I sang to. In a house that smelled of... lavender. And there was a man who came at night, a man in robes, and he spoke to my employer about—"

The echo stopped.

Its eyes were different. Sharper. Present in a way they hadn't been in years.

"Adjustments," Csèndmaht whispered. "He spoke about *adjustments*. And there was a ledger—he showed my employer entries, names and patterns, and my employer laughed and said the investment was worth every—"

"Csèndmaht?"

The sharpness faded. The presence drained away. The echo was just an echo again, standing in the kitchen with its hands empty and its memory hollow.

"Can I help you, young mistress?"

Fèinnav's heart was pounding.

The echo had remembered. Just for a moment, just in fragments—but it had remembered a conversation about adjustments, about ledgers, about investments. From a house that smelled of lavender.

Her grandfather's house had smelled of lavender. Her mother still kept dried sprigs in her clothes-press, a memorial to the man Fèinnav had never met.

Csèndmaht had worked for her grandfather before passing to the current household. Twenty years ago. Forty years dead. But something was surfacing—memories the bleed should have erased, information that was supposed to have died with the woman.

Fèinnav needed to find that ledger.

And she needed to do it before the Wardens found Csèndmaht.

She'd heard her father on the landing, the morning after her Binding.

He'd been speaking to someone—a messenger, perhaps, or one of his business contacts. His voice had that careful quality it took on when he was worried but didn't want to show it.

"The Òràhdar are investigating awakening echoes. Something about memories surfacing. They've been asking questions in Merchant City."

The other voice, lower, indistinct: something about risks, about exposure.

"Our echo is old but stable. Nothing to worry about. But we should... review certain holdings. Just in case."

Review certain holdings. In her father's language, that meant hide or destroy.

If there was a ledger, if there was proof of three generations of purchased patterns, her father would be moving to protect it. Which meant it was somewhere in this house, somewhere accessible, somewhere he could reach it quickly if the Òràhdar came calling.

Fèinnav began to search.

The study was the obvious place.

She waited until her parents were out—her father at the trading house, her mother paying calls—and slipped inside with the spare key she'd known about since childhood. The one hidden in the decorative urn in the hallway, the one her father thought was secret.

The desk yielded nothing. Business ledgers, correspondence, contracts—the ordinary papers of a merchant's life. The cabinet held legal documents, property deeds, family records going back four generations. Nothing about patterns. Nothing about bribes.

But the locked drawer...

Every merchant had a locked drawer. Fèinnav had always known it existed. She'd always assumed it held sensitive contracts, private negotiations, the kind of business that wasn't discussed at dinner.

The spare key didn't fit.

She searched for another key—under the desk, behind the books, in the jar of sand her father used for blotting ink. Nothing.

Her father wore his keys on his belt. She'd need to get them while he slept, or find another way in.

Think, she told herself. What would he do if the Òràhdar came unexpectedly? He'd need access quickly. He'd need to destroy whatever's inside without fumbling for keys.

She looked at the drawer again.

It was oak, solid, built into the desk. But desks had backs, and backs could be removed. She circled behind, examined the construction. Old joinery, expert work—but there, at the bottom, a panel that sat slightly differently than the others.

She pressed.

The panel swung open.

Inside the drawer, visible now from behind: a bundle of letters tied with black ribbon. A smaller ledger bound in red leather. And a single sheet of paper, folded, newer than the rest.

Fèinnav reached in.

The letters were old.

Yellow paper, faded ink, the handwriting of someone long dead. Her grandfather's, she realized—the sharp angular script matched the samples in the family records. He'd written to someone about arrangements, about the Reader's fee, about ensuring the line continues unquestioned.

The responses were missing—whoever he'd written to had kept his letters but not sent their own. But the meaning was clear enough: generations of Còcalnòc men writing checks and receiving favorable patterns in return.

The smaller ledger was worse.

Her father's handwriting. Dates going back thirty years—before Fèinnav's birth, before her father's own Binding, into the era when her grandfather still lived. Amounts paid. Readers compensated. Names of officials who'd looked the other way.

A record of corruption so thorough it read like a business plan.

But the folded sheet...

Fèinnav opened it with trembling hands.

A list. Two columns. Names on the left—families she recognized, trading partners and social connections and names she'd heard at dinners all her life. On the right, patterns. Two sets for each name: one labeled *Purchased*, one labeled *Actual*.

Còcal Còcalnòc — purchased Ùtcai/Szèrrav — actual Tòvismaht/Cèresztàhd

Her father.

Vìzrav Còcalnòc — purchased Ùtcai/Szèrrav — actual Thòronnav/Sèvcal

Her mother.

Fèinnav Còcalnòc — purchased Ùtcai/Szèrrav — actual—

The entry was incomplete. No actual pattern recorded. Just the purchased one, with a note in different handwriting: *Reading pending. Payment confirmed.*

The Szòvòtar's hand. She recognized it from the Registry records she'd been shown at her ceremony.

Her actual pattern. The thing the Attendance had seen when it looked at her soul.

No one had bothered to write it down.

Footsteps on the stairs.

Fèinnav shoved the papers back, pressed the panel closed, slid out from behind the desk. She was at the door when it opened.

Her father.

He stood in the doorway, key in hand, and his eyes went immediately to the desk—to the position of the chair, the angle of the lamp, all the tiny details that told a careful man someone had been where they shouldn't.

"Fèinnav."

"Father."

Silence.

Then he stepped inside and closed the door, and his face did something she'd never seen before: it stopped performing. The merchant's mask, the father's warmth, the carefully constructed expressions of a man who'd spent fifty years presenting the right version of himself—all of it fell away.

What remained was older. Harder. More honest than she'd ever seen him.

"You found the drawer."

"Yes."

"You read the ledger."

"Yes."

He moved to his chair—the chair behind the desk, the chair of authority—and sat heavily. For the first time, he looked old.

"Sit."

She sat.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything."

Her father laughed. It wasn't a pleasant sound.

"Everything would take longer than we have. Your mother will be home within the hour, and this conversation needs to end before then." He steeped his fingers, studying her.

"Ask specific questions. I'll give specific answers."

"Did you buy my pattern?"

"You know I did."

"What did the Attendance actually see?"

"I don't know. The Szòvòtar handles that part. I pay him; he writes what I've paid for. What the Attendance shows him isn't my concern."

"It's my soul."

"It's a business arrangement." Her father's voice was flat. "My father made the same arrangement for me. His father made it for him. We buy futures for our children. That's what wealth is *for*."

"To lie about who we are?"

"To give you options." He leaned forward. "Do you know what happens to merchant daughters with difficult patterns? The marriages they're offered, the work they're given, the way society treats them? Tòvismaht and Cèresztàhd—that's apparently what the Weaver actually saw in me. A life of painful connections and constant difficult choices. Instead, I got Ûtcai Szèrrav. I got a trading house, a wife, a daughter. I got a *life*."

"A life built on lies."

"A life built on protection. Love. The desire to give my children better than what the world would hand them." He stood, moved to the window, looked out at the city that his purchased pattern let him inhabit. "I'm not sorry, Fèinnav. I would do it again. I would purchase a thousand patterns to spare you from what the Attendance sees in constrained souls."

"And the people who don't get purchased patterns? The Hand Quarter, the workers, everyone the system crushes?"

"They get what I cannot give them." He turned to face her. "I am not the system. I am a man protecting his family within the system. If you want to burn it all down, you'll have to become someone larger than me. Someone willing to destroy their own house along with everyone else's."

Fèinnav stood.

"The Òràhdar are coming," she said. "They're investigating awakening echoes. Csèndmaht remembers things now—things about grandfather, about the ledger, about adjustments."

Her father went pale.

"If they question her—if they find what she knows—they'll find everything. Your ledger. The Szòvòtar's ledger. Three generations of fraud."

"How do you know this?"

"Because I've been listening. Because I've been *seeing*." She moved toward the door. "You have a choice, Father. Destroy the evidence before the Òràhdar find it, or trust that your purchased pattern will protect you when the truth comes out."

"Where are you going?"

"To find out what the Attendance actually saw in me." She opened the door. "And to decide what to do with a truth that could destroy everything."

She didn't look back.

Part Five

Pattern Day.

The city woke to celebration.

Banners in every color flew from temple spires and merchant houses and the makeshift flagpoles of Hand Quarter tenements. Children wore paper masks of the Sòrscad cards — Ùtcai and Thòronnav and Tòvismaht and Coròncal—playing at futures they couldn't yet imagine. Music echoed from every square. Food vendors hawked festival treats. The air itself seemed to vibrate with collective performance of faith.

Fèinnav moved through it all like a ghost.

She'd slept badly—fragments of dreams where the Szòvòtar's face merged with her father's, where the Attendance looked at her with Csèndmaht's empty eyes, where Àrnnav asked *what will you do* and the answer kept changing. Now she walked the festival streets with her family, wearing the smile expected of her, and felt the weight of everything she knew pressing against her ribs.

The Grand Ceremony was in the temple. Every Szòvòtar in the city would be honored. Every pattern-privileged family would parade their status. And Szòvòtar Hàlmahtfhì—the architect of three generations of Còcalnòc fraud—would receive recognition for his forty years of faithful service.

Fèinnav's father walked beside her, silent since their conversation in the study. Her mother chattered about the decorations, the music, the other families they'd see. The performance of normalcy, maintained by someone who'd never known any other way.

Thòronnav and Sèvcal, Fèinnav thought, looking at her mother. *That's what you really are. The structure others build on and the pain you carry for them. And you've spent your whole life being Ùtcai Szèrrav instead.*

How much had her mother lost? How much of herself had been erased by the pattern her father-in-law had purchased?

How much of Fèinnav herself was missing, buried under the lie?

The ceremony was interminable.

Hymns to the Weaver. Prayers for the Bound. Speeches about the sacred trust of pattern-reading, the holiness of the Loom, the order that held society together. Fèinnav sat in the Còcalnòc family section and watched the Szòvòtar accept his honors.

Forty years of faithful service.

Forty years of taking bribes, corrupting readings, selling futures to the highest bidder.

The other Readers applauded. The wealthy families applauded. Even the constrained workers in the back sections applauded, because what choice did they have? The system owned their applause along with everything else.

Fèinnav didn't applaud.

Her father noticed. His hand found her knee, squeezed once—warning or pleading, she couldn't tell.

She looked at him.

In the temple light, dressed in his finest, her father looked exactly like what he was: a successful merchant, a pillar of the community, a man who'd played the game well enough to win. No one looking at him would see the fraud. No one would know his pattern was a lie, his success built on purchased ink, his whole life a performance of someone he wasn't.

Tòvismaht and Cèresztàhd, she thought. Painful connections and constant choices. That's what you really are. Is that why you're so careful with everyone? Why you hold people at arm's length even when you love them?

Is that what she was too?

The Attendance had looked at her and seen something. Something that wasn't Ùtcai Szèrrav. Something her father had paid to erase before she ever had a chance to understand it.

She stood.

"Fèinnav—"

"I need air."

She walked out before he could stop her.

The temple garden was quiet.

Fountains played into basins carved with the shapes of the Sórscad cards. Flowers bloomed in arrangements meant to represent the Weaver's design—ordered,

purposeful, everything in its place. Fèinnav sat on a bench and let the festival sounds wash over her from beyond the walls.

"You missed the conclusion."

The Szòvòtar. Of course.

He settled beside her—uninvited, proprietary, the ease of a man who'd spent forty years being welcomed wherever he went.

"I've heard enough conclusions."

"You've heard enough lies, you mean." He smiled, grandfatherly, terrifying. "That's what you're thinking, isn't it? That everything you heard in there was performance, corruption, the machinery of fraud celebrating itself?"

"Wasn't it?"

"Some of it. Not all." He looked at the fountains, the flowers, the ordered beauty of the garden. "The Weaver is real, Fèinnav. The Attendance is real. Whatever you believe about me, about your father, about the system we've built—that part is true. Something exists that looks at human souls and sees them clearly. My role is merely... editorial."

"Your role is to lie."

"My role is to interpret. Every Reader interprets. We take what the Attendance shows us and translate it into patterns that humans can understand. The corruption you've discovered isn't in the Attendance—it's in the translation. In who gets favorable translations and who doesn't."

Fèinnav turned to face him fully.

"Tell me what the Attendance actually saw in me."

Silence.

"Why?"

"Because it's mine. Whatever it is—difficult, painful, constrained—it's *mine*. You took it from me before I could even understand what I was losing. I want it back."

The Szòvòtar studied her. The grandfatherly mask shifted, and beneath it she saw something older: the calculating mind that had survived forty years of corruption

without consequence, the intelligence that had navigated between wealthy families and divine power and his own survival.

"Tòvismaht and Cèresztàhd," he said finally. "The same pattern as your father. Painful connections, constant pivoting—a life defined by difficult relationships and impossible choices."

The words hit her like stones.

"That's..." She swallowed. "That's what you wrote for him. As his actual pattern."

"Yes. And now I've written Ûtcai Szèrrav for you, as I wrote it for him. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, it seems. The Attendance saw in you what it saw in him—and what it saw in your grandfather, and his father before him. Four generations of Còcalnòc souls with Tòvismaht and Cèresztàhd carved into them, all of them living as something else because someone loved them enough to purchase a different future."

Four generations.

The lie went back further than she'd known. Deeper. The Còcalnòc line wasn't merchant-blessed—it was merchant-*made*. Every generation, another father purchasing a different destiny for another child. The pattern repeating, thorns hidden beneath roads, crossroads paved over with pacts.

"Why tell me this?"

"Because you'll find out eventually. You're too clever not to, and I'm too old to keep running from clever girls." The Szòvòtar stood, brushing off his robes. "The question isn't what pattern you have, Fèinnav. The question is what you do with the knowing. Your father knew his truth, and he chose to live the lie anyway. To give you the same choice he was given."

"That's not a choice. That's—"

"The only choice most people get." His voice was gentle now, almost sad. "The Attendance sees our souls and the world doesn't care. The constrained get their truths written down and live in cages; the privileged get their lies written down and live in nicer cages. The only freedom is in knowing—in understanding that the cage is a cage, that the pattern is a pattern, that you are more than any ink can capture."

He walked toward the temple doors.

"Happy Pattern Day, Fèinnav Còcalnòc. May the lie you live be kinder than the truth you bear."

She found Àrnnav in the crowd.

The Hand Quarter girl had no reason to be at the festival—the celebrations weren't for her, the ceremonies didn't honor her, the whole elaborate performance was designed to remind her of her place—but she was there anyway. Standing at the edge of the square, watching the privileged parade past, her eyes cataloging every silk dress and family seal.

"You came."

"Free food." Àrnnav's voice was flat, but her eyes were sharp. "The merchants throw scraps on Pattern Day. Charity for the constrained. It almost makes up for the rest of the year."

"I found it. The ledger."

Àrnnav went still.

"My father's study. Records going back three generations—bribes paid, patterns purchased, families who bought their futures." Fèinnav moved closer, lowering her voice. "And a list. Two columns: what was purchased, what the Attendance actually saw."

"Your family?"

"All of them. Purchased Ùtcai Szèrrav, actual..." She hesitated. "Actual Tòvismaht and Cèresztàhd. Four generations of Còcalnòc children with the same difficult pattern, all of them bought a different future."

Something flickered across Àrnnav's face. Not quite sympathy—she had too little left for that—but recognition.

"Tòvismaht," she said. "Like me."

"Like me."

They stood in silence while the festival swirled around them. Two girls with complicated patterns—one written true, one written false—standing together in a city that would never see them as the same.

"What are you going to do?" Àrnnav asked.

"I don't know." And she didn't. The ledger was still in her father's study, evidence that could destroy a dozen families or save no one. The Òràhdar were still investigating, hunting for awakening echoes who remembered too much. Her parents were still performing their purchased patterns, still living lies they'd inherited before they could choose.

And Fèinnav was standing at a crossroads—which was, apparently, exactly where she was supposed to be.

"My mother's name," Àrnnav said. "If it's in there—if there's any mention of what happened to her—"

"I'll look."

"Why?"

"Because we're both Tòvismaht." Fèinnav met her eyes. "Because everything is painful connections and we might as well make the pain mean something."

Àrnnav almost smiled.

Then the crowd shifted, and Òràhd Vàscalìn was there.

"Young Còcalnòc. Young Vonalnòc."

The Warden's face was stone. Her Òràhd seal gleamed at her collar like an accusation, and her eyes moved between them with the patient attention of someone cataloging evidence.

"A strange pairing on Pattern Day. The merchant's daughter and the Hand Quarter orphan."

"We met at the Binding ceremony." Fèinnav kept her voice steady. "We're the same age."

"You're nothing alike." The Warden moved closer, and there was something in her posture that suggested she wasn't here by accident. "I've been investigating certain irregularities, young Còcalnòc. Echoes that remember things they shouldn't. Patterns that don't quite match their histories. Families whose good fortune seems... statistically unlikely."

Fèinnav's heart hammered.

"My family has been blessed by the Weaver—"

"Your family has been blessed by something. Whether that something is divine or financial remains to be determined." Òràhd Vàscaìn's eyes found Fèinnav's and held them. "I understand your household echo has been exhibiting unusual behavior. Memory fragments surfacing. Conversations about 'adjustments' and 'investments.'"

How did she know? How could she possibly know?

"My echo is old," Fèinnav said carefully. "Degradation is common in echoes of her age."

"Degradation usually means *losing* memories, not recovering them." The Warden turned her attention to Àrnnav. "And you—your mother worked in the Pattern House before her death. She would have had access to records. Registry entries. The kind of documentation that proves what patterns were assigned and what... offerings... were received."

Àrnnav's face was blank. Whatever she was feeling, she'd learned long ago not to show it.

"My mother died of fever."

"Your mother died suddenly, conveniently, before she could share what she knew with anyone outside the system." Òràhd Vàscaìn's voice dropped. "I'm not your enemy, young Vonalnòc. I'm not either of your enemies. I'm looking for the truth—and in my experience, the truth has a way of serving the people the lies were designed to hurt."

The offer hung in the air.

Tell me what you know. Help me expose the corruption. Let me be the weapon that destroys the system you both hate.

Fèinnav looked at Àrnnav. Àrnnav looked at Fèinnav.

And in that look, something passed between them—not trust, exactly. They'd known each other less than a week. But recognition. Understanding. The shared awareness of two people who saw the world clearly and knew that clear sight was rarely rewarded.

"I don't know anything about corruption," Fèinnav said. "I'm just a newly Bound merchant's daughter celebrating Pattern Day with an acquaintance."

"And I'm just a Hand Quarter orphan eating festival scraps," Àrnnav added. "We don't know anything about ledgers or adjustments or purchased patterns."

Òràhd Vàscaìn's expression didn't change.

"Of course you don't." She stepped back, adjusting her cloak. "Enjoy the festival, young women. And remember—if you ever decide you do know something, the Òràhdar are always interested in truth."

She disappeared into the crowd.

"That was stupid."

Àrnnav's voice was shaking. The blankness had cracked, and beneath it Fèinnav could see the fear—genuine, throat-closing terror of someone who'd learned what happened to people who attracted Warden attention.

"Maybe."

"She knows. She knows about your ledger, about my mother, about all of it. She's going to keep investigating until she finds proof, and then—"

"And then what? She exposes the fraud, the wealthy families panic, and people like you get crushed in the chaos?" Fèinnav shook her head. "That's what my father said. That's what the Szòvòtar said. Everyone agrees that exposing the truth would be catastrophic—so catastrophic that we should all just keep living the lies."

"They're not wrong."

"They're not right either." Fèinnav looked out at the festival—the banners and music and celebrating crowds, all of it built on purchased patterns and corrupted readings and the elaborate fiction that the system served the divine instead of the wealthy. "If the choice is between comfortable lies and chaotic truth, maybe both options are wrong. Maybe there's a third way."

"What third way?"

"I don't know yet." Fèinnav took a breath. "But I know this: I'm going to live my real pattern. Tòvismaht and Cèresztàhd. Painful connections and constant choices. The Registry says I'm Ûtcai Szèrrav, and I'll let everyone believe that—I'll walk through the

world wearing my purchased future like armor. But underneath, I'll know. I'll choose. I'll make every crossroads matter."

Àrnnav stared at her.

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"Probably."

"It changes nothing."

"It changes me."

Silence.

Then Àrnnav laughed—a real laugh, surprised out of her, carrying something that might have been the first genuine amusement she'd felt in years.

"Tòvismaht and Cèresztàhd," she said. "Living a lie while knowing the truth. Making painful connections and impossible choices." She shook her head. "Fine. If you're going to be stupid about this, I might as well be stupid too. What do you need?"

"Help. Information. Someone who knows the Hand Quarter, who can move in places I can't." Fèinnav met her eyes. "Someone who understands what it means to carry a pattern the world doesn't see."

"And what do I get?"

"Access. When I find anything about your mother in those records—if there's proof of what happened to her—you'll see it first." Fèinnav extended her hand. "Tòvismaht together. Painful connections. Whatever we find, we find together."

Àrnnav looked at the offered hand.

"You know this is dangerous. Whatever we dig up, whoever we threaten—they'll come for us. The wealthy families, the corrupt Readers, maybe the Òràhdar too. People have died for knowing less than we already know."

"I know."

"And you're still offering?"

"I'm standing at a crossroads. That's what I do now." Fèinnav kept her hand extended.

"Choose."

Àrnnav hesitated.

Then she took Fèinnav's hand.

Her grip was callused, work-roughened, the hand of someone who'd spent her life laboring while others lounged. But the strength in it was real, and the look in her eyes was something Fèinnav recognized: the determination of someone who'd finally found a fight worth fighting.

"Tòvismaht together," Àrnnav said. "But if you get me killed, I'm going to haunt you."

"I'm going to haunt everyone anyway. That's what Tòvismaht do."

The festival continued.

Fèinnav returned to her family, let her mother fuss over her absence, let her father's worried eyes follow her without meeting them. She ate the feast-day foods and accepted the congratulations and performed the role of pattern-privileged daughter with the skill of a lifetime's practice.

But something had changed.

She felt it in the way she moved through the crowd—aware, now, of which families had purchased their status and which had earned it. She felt it in the way she looked at the Szòvòtarar—holy men and holy frauds, impossible to tell apart. She felt it in the weight of the Warden's gaze following her through the celebration, cataloging, calculating, waiting.

Tòvismaht and Cèresztàhd.

Every relationship would cut her. Every choice would matter.

She'd spent fifteen years living a lie she didn't know about. Now she knew—and the knowing didn't set her free. It just made the cage visible.

But visible cages could be understood. Mapped. Eventually, escaped.

Her mother was laughing at something another merchant's wife had said. Her father was performing ease, his eyes occasionally finding Fèinnav's with something that might have been pleading or might have been warning. The echo Csèndmaht stood at the edge of the family gathering, hands moving through serving gestures, memories surfacing and sinking in the depths of her borrowed consciousness.

Somewhere in the crowd, Àrnnav was watching.

Somewhere in the city, the Warden was hunting.

Somewhere in her father's study, a ledger held the truth about generations of purchased souls.

And Fèinnav stood at the center of it all, wearing Ùtcai Szèrrav like a costume, carrying Tòvismaht and Cèresztàhd like a blade, choosing for the first time in her life what kind of person she was going to be.

Not the lie the Registry recorded.

Not the truth the Attendance saw.

Something new. Something chosen. Something written in her own hand, in ink that no one else could read.

The ledger of my life, she thought, is still being written.

And I'm holding the pen.

End of "The Reading"