

VESSELBORN

THE BLOOM!

A VESSELBORN Short

CHRISTOPHER JAEPHETH CUBY

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During the Modern Era of Geba...

The Empire is gone, even if its language remains. Governance lives in secrecy now, manufactories fund quiet wars over energy and relays, and the line between coverage and a black zone is the only border that still means anything. That is the ground this story stands on. It is not what the night is about.

The night is a Lux Notera concert. It is the largest single event of the year on Geba, a Solwave spectacle staged on the coast of Thazvaar and thrown out across the planetary relay to more people than any army could ever hold. Lux is the face of the genre and one of the most recognized people alive, a Coastal Thazvaari who grew up with nothing and rose to the biggest stages on the planet without ever taking a syndicate banner. That is the whole appeal, and the whole danger. He is living proof that a person can climb out of poverty on talent and endurance alone, and the wrong people cannot allow that proof to stand.

So everyone who wants him is here. The syndicates are circling, because reach and control are worth more now than any cannon, and a symbol like Lux is worth two million Auren at the floor. If they can own him, they own what he means. If they cannot, they would rather he were gone, because a star who dies unbought sends its own message to anyone else who might try to rise without them. The Jerhit are here too, calm on a private platform, and if the Jerhit want him it is to own him, not to kill him. Standing against all of it is Yelidra Veykar, the richest person alive, whose patronage made Lux and whose airships wait to pull him off the stage the moment the night turns.

Varen'Samyl Venar is under contract to hold the site through the set. The job is simple to say and hard to do. Keep the show running, no matter what moves in the service levels beneath the stage. The show has already started. The corridor under it has not stayed quiet.

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about this work

The Bloom is site protection under a broadcast, not a corridor restore. There is no frontier to cross and no signal to bring back. The job is a single building on a single night, a stage that has to keep running while the work that keeps it running is done where the crowd cannot see.

Varen'Samyl Venar is the person Veykar calls when a room has to stay a concert. He is a Master, old and unhurried and still lethal, and he does not care about the music at all. He cares that the set does not stop, because a set that stops is the failure, whatever else goes right that night.

He does not work it alone. Hela runs comms from the floor above, reading the crowd and the threats folded into it. Lux is the reason the set cannot die, a performer whose survival and whose performance are the same contract. And somewhere in the service levels moves Talin, not a teammate and not syndicate fodder, the other professional in the same room, working the far side of the same night.

What matters before the first page is simple. The fight is timed to the performance. Every body that falls below has to fall without ever reaching the stage, and stopping the show counts as losing even if every body falls correctly.

This is a story about competence at a rank the capital never sees, done in a room that has to look, once it is over, like nothing happened at all.

CHARACTER PROFILES

Varen'Samyl Venar

Era: Modern Geba

Affiliation: Independent contractor

Description: A Master Contractor, one of the few dozen at that standing alive, and the last of a Shadow Operative bloodline that the Warlord Eras bred for this work and the modern world all but forgot. Near ninety and still among the most dangerous people in any room he enters, he is a master of close combat forms, airship systems, infiltration, and, by his granddaughter's account, the noble craft of amphibious ordnance neutralization. He has taken warlords and syndicates apart from the inside for a lifetime and answers to no single manufactory, having done too much work for too many to belong to any one of them. Dry, patient, and endlessly unimpressed, he is forever rolling a Ngorrhal Root between firefights and complaining about the music. Grandfather to Hela and Nola.

Varen'Hela Aravel

Era: Modern Geba

Affiliation: Independent contractor

Description: Samyl's granddaughter and his overwatch, a Tier 4 Executor on the Solarn registry and, by her grandfather's grudging measure, nearly a master of infiltration herself. A prodigy at close range and a skilled marksman, she hides in plain sight in the bright colors and loose fashion of imperial youth, a rifle, a scattergun, blades, and explosives tucked out of view and her comms no different from a common Joxi headset. Quick, smug, and sharper than she lets on, she reads a crowd faster than Samyl reads a corridor. Like her grandfather she works unbound to any single manufactory. Sister to Nola.

Lux Notera

Era: Modern Geba

Affiliation: Solwave and Conwave performer, patron Yelidra Veykar

Description: Known across Geba as The Glow, the face of Solwave and one of the most recognized people alive. He came up performing Conwave in the fight clubs of Coastal Thazvaar, broke out on a Jeyrha tournament broadcast, and crossed into Solwave to reach the largest stages on the planet, all without ever taking a syndicate banner. Thazvaari in a world run by imperials and Jeyrhans, he is a symbol as much as a singer, living proof that talent and endurance can still carry a person out of poverty if they last long enough to stand in front of the right patron. For Lux that patron was Yelidra Veykar. That symbolism is exactly why the syndicates want him owned, and why, if they cannot own him, they would rather he were gone.

Talin Buurgech

Era: Modern Geba

Affiliation: Contractor, New Emperor's Wrath

Description: A contractor of the New Emperor's Wrath and a Tier 3 Elite on the Solarn registry, a standing shared by only a few hundred people alive. A Tactician-Class hybrid out of the Berinu Islands, he is the first person in years to fight Samyl to a standstill, moving like instinct given muscle and breath and splitting his attention between blade and gunfire without losing either. Cold, professional, and unbothered, he fights to kill and jokes while he does it. He and Samyl part that night as something between rivals and equals, each expecting to meet the other again.

Yelidra Veykar

Era: Modern Geba

Affiliation: Veykar Propulsion

Description: The richest person alive and the force behind Veykar Propulsion. She heard the glow of a Solwave star in a Thazvaari fighter and made him the biggest act on the planet, and the airships that pull him off the stage when the night turns are hers. Her patronage is what makes Lux at once untouchable and hunted, and she plays the long game, counting a legend built tonight as worth more than any single life spent making it.

Brena Jerhit

Era: Modern Geba

Affiliation: Jerhit Syndicate

Description: Head of the Jerhit Syndicate and owner of most of the private relay infrastructure in inland Thazvaar. She has legitimized her people on Solarn public relays for global reach, which leaves the rival syndicates fighting over ground she already profits from. Her people attend the concert calm and unbothered, because Brena does not fire shots she does not need to. If the Jerhit want Lux, it is to own him, not to kill him.

The Bloom!

A VESSELBORN SHORT

The bass rolled through the floor—steady, deep, alive.

He moved with it, one step for every beat.

A man waited at the end of the corridor, rifle lifted. Behind him, a rack of power conduits shimmered blue; one mistake could drop an entire tower.

"Alright, Samyl. We've done this a thousand times. Bigger guns. Worse odds. People who actually knew I was here. Just another hallway—with bad music this time," he thought to himself.

He stayed still until the man turned his head—then cut forward. The rifle never fired. A twist, a pull, a wrist folded in half, metal grinding against skin. The knife came next. He slammed a palm upward into the face and drove the blade through the throat, covering the mouth until the legs stopped kicking.

"I'm really getting too old to be sneaking around like this. I don't even like this music," he muttered.

Above him, the world pulsed with light.

The next voice hit the air like sunrise through glass.

"I just wanted to say—this is unbelievable. I saved this one just for you. Just for now. People hear Coastal Thazvaar and think beaches and luxury. But I grew up with nothing. Solwave got me here—but Conwave made me, Geba!"

The crowd screamed so loud the towers trembled. Gold and rose detonations rained through the haze.

"He Who Allows gave me this stage so I can tell you—we can come together! We can will ourselves from nothing! We are the progress we want!"

He sighed. "Oh, give me a break."

"Where I come from, there's a structure. It feeds you. It holds you. And when you have nothing, that structure can feel like the infinite itself. Like nothing exists

beyond it. The Velcrith left the Infinite—left perfection—because they believed something greater existed beyond it. But I left the infinite. I walked into nothing to build something that was mine. And it took everything. But standing here, in front of you—I stopped being just me a long time ago. This next one is about that. About what it feels like when you stop being one thing and become something you don't have words for."

The lights dropped. A low hum rose through the ground—pushed up from the vibration coils beneath the field, deep enough to feel in the legs and chest before the ears caught anything.

He lowered the body, slid the knife free, bit the hilt, and climbed into the rafters. Footsteps echoed below.

"Voices... Voices... Voices... I keep hearing voices... I'm hearing their voices..."

Lights fractured across the stage in sharp pulses. Explosions of gold and white burst behind Lux, each detonation synced to the rhythm.

He dropped as the next figure passed, shoulder into jaw. An elbow followed. Bone broke. The body fell without a sound.

"All this work to stay quiet down here—for what?" he whispered.

Above him, the song swelled—

"Can somebody save me? Nobody can save me. Can somebody help me? Nobody can hear me."

He spun, threw the knife—caught below the ear. The body hit the rail and slid down.

"I'm hearing their voices, seeing their patterns, feeling what they lost—I feel like Daer, I see all, but I see nothing, are these my thoughts, this is maddening—"

Dust drifted like glitter through coolant vapor. His job stayed the same: keep the stage alive, keep the illusion unbroken. No alarms. No interruptions.

Two more shadows appeared from the left passage, rifles up. He dropped to one knee and fired. First round—armor. Second—leg. Two more shots found the gap under the armplate. The man dropped.

The second aimed. Too slow. He stepped into the barrel, twisted, and they went down together. Rail, floor, a blur of limbs. A knee into ribs, another into gut. The rifle spun away. They crashed against a cooling unit. He slammed his forehead into the visor—once, twice—then pinned the knife hand under his boot and pressed both thumbs into the eyes. The man twisted for his groin; the answer came with fists, short and brutal, until the motion stopped.

"Hey, you there?" a voice cracked through the comm.

He caught his breath. "Hela?"

"Yeah."

"Why'd you go dark so long? You know who else used to do that?"

"Let me guess—my father?"

"You're damned right. I thought a granddaughter would be easier. Wrong again. You're just shorter and smugger. I should've brought Nola."

"Very funny. Think she ever got that hub-cargo job?"

"Knowing your sister, she probably did—and already quit to do something else."

"The big explosives are about to go off. Do what you need to do."

He swung the short rail from his back, ready, and lit a pre-rolled Ngorrhal root. Smoke curled through the blue light. "I'm supposed to be the old one, but you kids still can't deliver good news on time."

Above, Lux's voice cracked open again—

"—but here I am, here we are, no more I, we are one, learn it all, see it all, I've become one with—"

Lux rose above the stage on cables, arms outstretched. Columns of light speared upward through the haze. Smoke cannons dimmed the skyline. Ice fog bloomed beneath him. He looked weightless—floating through light and color.

A massive detonation erupted behind the stage, sending a wall of wind rolling through the crowd. Hair, fabric, smoke—everything moved at once.

"—higher things. Velcrith ambitions, three star cognitions, hand guides decisions—but was it me? No. Now it's we."

The harmonics hit—layered, rising, inhuman. Voices stacked on voices, frequencies that vibrated somewhere below language. The crowd lost itself. The sound was no longer music. It was pressure.

The lyric hit as the stage detonations rolled across the sky—thunder dressed in color.

Samyl took point down the corridor.

Bodies ahead: the other operatives. Silent. Cooling. The ones who stopped responding. Syndicate fighters were already moving into cover, rifles blinking red.

"Yelidra Veykar," he muttered. "Richest person alive, and even she can't stop this kind of mess."

He broke from cover, fired twice, shifted right.

"Are you saying we aren't good help?"

A round cut the air beside his head, sparking off a stage anchor.

"Shush. What's it look like out there?"

Hela moved through the crowd—bright colors, short dress, loose flowing top. The look was common among imperial youth, concealing a rifle, a scatter gun, several explosives, and knives tucked into her sleeves. Her comms looked no different from a common Joxi headset.

"Not good," she answered. "Several syndicate near the stage batteries—but they haven't acted yet. And the Jerhit are here."

She moved with the rhythm, bouncing to the beat as she scanned the crowd. The Jerhit members lounged on a private platform, drinking and smoking things that looked very expensive, framed by Solarn airships behind them.

"Jer-who? Why? They usually stay inland."

"They do. But they're not doing anything odd—for now. You never know with Brena. They might just be here to show off, or find new clients. If they're after Lux, it's to own him, not kill him."

Above them, Lux drifted upward on a stage cable—slow, weightless, more levitation than spectacle. The crowd fell silent as smoke cannons dimmed the skyline and ice fog bloomed beneath him. Arms outstretched, he floated through light and color. The bass hummed low; the strings mellowed to a steady shimmer. He said nothing.

"I remember when it was simple," Samyl said. "Warlords wanted power. Syndicates wanted territory. Kill, trade, take relays, keep rivals poor. We'd collapse the whole thing, piece by piece. Now everyone wants to be seen wanting power..." He exhaled, smoke curling from his teeth. "Instead of letting people find out after they already have it."

"We've got four more songs to go. Don't nostalgia yourself to death."

He reloaded, the weapon clicking shut with a clean metallic snap.

The song above faded out. Lux was lowered back to the stage, landing in a haze of drifting ice fog. The crowd surged forward, pushing against barriers, screaming his name. Security lines held—barely.

"Show time."

Lux stepped offstage, vanishing behind a curtain of strobes to prepare for the final act.

Samyl crouched beside a junction box and began rolling more Ngorrhal roots, the movement automatic—habit built from years of waiting between firefights.

"Why do they want this guy so bad?" he asked. "Doesn't sound special. Just loud. Overly positive."

"It's not about how he sounds," Hela said. "It's what he represents. He grew up poor but never turned to the syndicates—Thazvaari in a world run by Imperials and Jeyrhans. He proves hard work still matters, and talent pays if you last long enough to stand in front of the right person. For him, that person was Yelidra Veykar. He's proof you don't need luck—just endurance."

"So?"

"Is the great Varen'Samyl Venar—master of combat forms, airship systems, infiltration, sarcasm, and the noble craft of amphibious ordnance neutralization—actually curious about a Solwave megastar?"

"Does his granddaughter, Varen'Hela Aravel—hand-to-hand prodigy, skilled marksman, and almost-master of infiltration—have a problem answering his question?"

"Not at all. I just remember you being the one who said, 'Never ask details you don't need to know about these contracts or the people. Do the work and go home.'"

"Yeah, yeah. Fine." He licked the roll, sealing the adhesive edge, and lit it with a soft crack of ember. Smoke rose, sharp and fragrant.

They paused. Only static and bass rolled through the comms—Lux's distant rhythm echoing like a second heartbeat.

"So what, he's worth a few thousand Auren?"

"Try two million, minimum. That's why the syndicates are circling. These days, influence isn't about the biggest cannons or the fastest airships—it's reach and control. If they can't have him, they'll kill him. And when they do, the message writes itself: anyone who climbs out of poverty without syndicate backing dies for the attempt."

"Why don't they just develop their own Lux instead of all this trouble? You've seen the kind of Varens they bring in on the inland jobs we've done."

"It's not as simple as using less ammo and fuel and giving someone singing and dancing lessons. You think they didn't have artists and athletes of their own? It all comes down to relays. The syndicates don't control the public ones—Solarn does. That alone cuts their reach. And of what reach they do have, it's dominated by Brena Jerhit to the point where she's managed to legitimize her people on Solarn relays for global access.

That puts them in a hard position. The Jerhit Syndicate is also the main source of private relay infrastructure in inland Thazvaar. So not only are they at war with

the other syndicates—and us most of the time—but they're also profiting from those same syndicates by providing the very infrastructure they fight over. This leaves nowhere for them to push their artists in a meaningful way. If it isn't Jerhit and it's from inland, it basically doesn't exist.

Have you ever noticed during corridor flights—when we're trapped between syndicate fire—that when it's over, sometimes the other side doesn't even shoot at us? It's usually Jerhit. Unless it's their relay we're after, they have no interest. They already own most of the large infrastructure inland, but they've positioned it so the manufacts never need them acquired or taken offline."

"That was just an overly complicated way of saying they don't have a choice." He shook his head. "Next time, just say they really don't have a choice. And I see you stopped taking my advice about doing the job and going home."

He moved deeper into the complex, careful steps echoing against the metal grating. Syndicate fighters were still pushing forward, drawn by the distant pulse of music above. He picked them off one by one, precise, and silent where possible. The smell of heated coolant and burned circuitry hung thick in the air.

Then a new flash caught his eye—a glint from a scope, far ahead. He ducked back behind cover as a round punched through the pipe beside his head.

He leaned out to return fire—but the shooter had already moved, appearing from another angle, firing before Samyl could react. Sparks sprayed across the corridor. Just like that, he was pinned down.

This operative looked familiar. Not by face, but by the way he moved—measured, centered, deliberate. Samyl had seen that kind of posture before. This wasn't syndicate fodder. If he didn't close the gap fast, he would die.

"I'm going dark for a while. Keep up the good work."

"Don't forget that—"

He cut the line and pulled the earpiece free.

Every time he peeked, the flash came instantly. A half-second slower and his thoughts would've been scattered across the floor behind him.

"Where's a smoke when you need one?" he muttered.

He slid under the walkway rail, keeping low. The other syndicate fighters were moving deeper into the complex—closer to the stage's main power conduits and entry lifts. He didn't have time for a duel, but he had no choice.

Above the exit platform, a reserve fog emitter blinked in standby. He grinned. "My lucky day."

He lit a Ngorrhal root, took a long drag, and pressed the burning end onto the rim of a support beam directly in front of the emitter, where it would be visible if anyone was watching. It needed to look like he was taking cover there. A strip of belt adhesive held it in place.

"That should do it."

He tossed an empty magazine toward the glowing root. The sound drew fire—the operative fired instantly, hitting the fog generator behind it. The impact burst a thick cloud of vapor across the walkway. Samyl used the noise and haze to flank.

He'd barely cleared a few meters before a shin caught him across the side of the face. Out of the smoke, the enemy closed fast—no hesitation, no wasted motion. Every strike was meant to kill. Samyl blocked, deflecting elbow and knee, catching glimpses of tattoos beneath the armor plates.

"New Emperor's Wrath," he thought. "That explains it. He's not syndicate—he's a contractor, same as me."

He kicked the operative in the chest to open space and line up a shot, but the man was already firing. The rounds sparked off metal inches from Samyl's head. He dove aside, rolled, drew his knife, and charged.

"I'm going to retire after this," he muttered—just as an elbow hammered his ribs and a knee crushed his gut. Every strike he threw missed or glanced. The opponent moved like instinct given muscle and breath.

Samyl broke off, ducked behind a generator—only to see the man vault over it a second later.

Samyl caught his leg mid-air, twisting his body to slam the operative head-first into the grating. The carbine skidded away. Samyl lunged with the knife, but the man turned, caught the blade mid-thrust, and locked eyes with him. His muscles trembled under strain, yet his stare didn't waver—cold, unreadable. A true professional.

"You smell like root," the man said, straining against the blade. "Mind if I have some after we're done here? Could really use it right about now."

"There's not much left," Samyl grunted. "But if you walk away and I don't—sure, why not."

"Talin Buurgech."

"Samyl Varen."

Talin yanked the knife toward himself, pulling it just off his throat, then pivoted—switching grip mid-motion, seizing Samyl's wrist, and sweeping his heel across the back of Samyl's head. The kick connected hard.

"What the hell?" Samyl hissed, staggering from the sheer flexibility of the move.

He rolled, grabbed the fallen carbine. Talin snatched up a nearby scattergun from a dead syndicate fighter. They opened fire almost simultaneously—Samyl ducked low, slugs tearing past his shoulder, muzzle flashes strobing the air.

Talin pumped the weapon one-handed in the same rotational motion as a slash toward Samyl, already stepping back to fire again. Samyl dodged, countered, parried—each movement split between gunfire and blade. Their fight became a rhythm of impacts and flashes, steel and recoil moving in sync.

A massive detonation roared from the stage above them. The blast shook the entire platform. Neither knew if it was part of the show or something gone wrong.

Talin broke contact, stepped back into the haze, and touched his headset. "We can still get him. I'm on the way," he said, voice steady.

"Maybe next time, Samyl." Talin smirked, lighting a stolen Ngorrhal root—one he'd lifted from Samyl at some point during the fight—and disappeared into the

smoke.

"You're welcome," Samyl muttered, half-laughing.

He dropped to the floor and sat against a stage anchor, chest heaving. "Damn. That guy almost killed me."

He reached for his pocket and realized his last preroll was gone.

He put his headset back on. "What's it like up there?"

"About time you came back," Hela snapped. "It's chaos! Absolute chaos!"

"Why? They get Lux?"

"No, but Lux just announced he's retiring to bring in new faces—and Yelidra's backing him. His fans are rioting. He had to leave the stage early."

"What was that boom I heard?"

"They brought in one of the Veykar Propulsion airships to pull him out—the superfast ones. That sound you heard was them leaving. I've been up here fighting off these lunatics waiting on further instructions. Where have you been?"

Samyl stayed silent for a long moment, eyes on the empty walkway. He exhaled slow, thinking of the man he'd just fought.

The airship hummed at altitude, cutting through cloud cover without turbulence. The cabin was dim—onyx suede lining the walls, the overhead lights turned low. Yelidra Veykar sat across from him, legs crossed, jewels catching light that shouldn't have been there. The stones were so clean they pulled clarity from nothing—bright against the dark interior like small, patient stars.

Lux leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "Was that the right call? Telling them there—at the festival. In front of everyone. I could've done it over the relay. Given them time to process it before reacting."

Yelidra lifted her Berinese salt tea and took a slow sip before answering. "The timing couldn't be more perfect." She set the cup down. "You will live on forever because of today. And everyone you choose to come after you—they'll be hated for a time. That's unavoidable. But they will forever be associated with the

legend you've become. That's a gift most patrons would kill to give."

She smiled—brief, certain—then reached into a small case beside her and drew a thin glass vial. Ngorrhal Cliffspire vapor. She tilted her head back, sprayed it into both eyes, and blinked slowly as the effect settled in. Her posture softened. The jewels on her wrists shifted with the movement, catching light one last time.

"Everything is going to be fine," she said, her voice already drifting. "We have a long time before we reach the capital. Get some rest." She paused, eyelids heavy. "And if you're not going to rest—start writing. Whoever you decide to patron is going to need music. And they're going to need it from you."

Her hand drifted toward the table beside him. "There's Emberbriar in the drawer. Be careful—it's pure. I had some earlier while I was watching you."

Her eyes closed. The cabin was quiet except for the low drone of the engines and the faint rattle of ice in her cup.

Lux sat back and stared at the ceiling for a long time.

— END OF SHORT —

NEXT SHORT

Under joint contract of Solarn and Veykar, Samyl is entered in the Thazvaar-Jeyrha Endurance Route, the long Global-tier tour that starts and ends in Jeyrha and runs east through the Berinu Islands, Berinu, Coastal Thazvaar, deep Inland Thazvaar, Kela, Ukhaalstaag, and the Ngorrhal Ocean before it comes home. Crews race nested vehicles, ship, airship, rover, and change craft at beacon windows. Veykar hosts that tier. Solarn has a relay on the inland stretch of the same route, in a corridor Haavu and Zhikhan are already fighting over.

Jerhit has put a large explosive in one of the racing vehicles. The charge is built to detonate and then bloom into further detonations. Infiltrated syndicate channels say it is in the field. They do not say which hull. Jerhit does not do work this size in the open. The drop is timed to the stretch where the race passes over that corridor, so the hit on the relay reads as a race accident and both manufactories in the region are left weak enough to encircle.

Samyl is on a joint Veykar and Solarn contract to find that vehicle and stop it. Solarn wants the relay protected. Veykar wants the race to continue without interruption. Veykar supplies the crew. Talin Buurgech is on it. They are in the field as racers, and get no respect as they are unknown. The other crews do not know there is a charge. They do not know who Samyl is. They run him because he is another race crew on the route.

If the vehicle is not found and stopped before that stretch, the relay in the corridor is damaged, the race is ruined on the broadcast, and a racing crew dies live.

GLOSSARY

Auren (AUR): Primary high denomination currency of the Geban Empire, equal to 100,000 Varen. Named for Emperor Varethis'Auren Kel'varesh.

Black zone: A region without relay connectivity. No communication, no emergency response, no imperial oversight. The opposite of the venue this short takes place in.

Brena Jerhit: Head of the Jerhit Syndicate and owner of most private relay infrastructure in inland Thazvaar. She has secured her people global reach on Solarn public relays, an advantage no rival syndicate holds.

Coastal Thazvaar: The coastal region of Thazvaar, taken by outsiders for beaches and luxury though rarely by those who grew up there. Home of Lux Notera.

Conwave: A high energy musical genre tied to Veykar entertainment culture, common in hub advertising and in the largest live shows.

Corridor: A timed foothold forced open through black zones, a chain of small relays creating temporary connectivity, held only long enough to complete an operation.

He Who Allows: A figure of Geban belief invoked as the power that permits and grants, called on by Lux from the stage as the reason he is allowed to stand where he stands.

Jerhit Syndicate: The syndicate led by Brena Jerhit and the main source of private relay infrastructure in inland Thazvaar. It wars with the other syndicates while profiting from the infrastructure they contest, and it rarely acts in the open.

Joxi: A manufactory known for cheap, durable, and ubiquitous civilian gear, common enough that its headsets draw no attention in a crowd.

Manufactory: One of the great industrial powers of Geba, among them Solarn, Veykar, Haavu, Zhikhan, and Joxi, that build, arm, and fund much of the modern world and its wars.

New Emperor's Wrath: A contractor faction. Talin Buurgech fights under its mark.

Ngorrhal Root: A rolled smoke favored by Samyl, lit between firefights out of long habit.

Relay: The infrastructure that carries signal and marks the line between coverage and exposure. Public relays belong to Solarn. Private relays belong to whoever can build and hold them.

Shadow Operative: Not a rank but a bloodline, one of the lineages the Warlord Eras bred for operational work and the modern registry no longer produces. Those who carry it are not publicly identified. Samyl is the last of his line still working, a contractor like any other on paper and something older underneath.

Solarn: The manufactory that owns and runs the public relay network, among much else. On Geba, reach begins with Solarn.

Solarn Contractor Registry: The planetary record of professional contract history kept by Solarn, closer to a reputation score than a measure of raw skill. Standing runs from Tier 9, the general population, up to a Tier 1 that does not appear in public. Tier 4 Executors and Overseers are the leadership ceiling of the public system, Tier 3 Elites and Wardens number only a few hundred, and Master Contractors at Tier 2 fewer than fifty alive. A contractor's tier is private, shown only to them except when a crew is assembled for a job.

Solwave: A popular musical genre and the scene Lux rose through before Conwave made his name.

Syndicate: One of the criminal and commercial powers that run the black zones and contest territory, relays, and now influence against the manufactories and one another.

Tactician-Class: An Engineered subclass refined for command and precision. Talin Buurgech is a Tactician-Class hybrid.

Veykar: The manufactory of propulsion and spectacle, host of the great tours and the power behind much of Geban entertainment. Led by Yelidra Veykar.

Yelidra Veykar: The richest person alive and the head of Veykar Propulsion, patron of Lux Notera.

V E S S E L B O R N

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