



VESSELBORN

Book of the Witness

PROOF OF CONCEPT EDITION
CHRISTOPHER JAEPHETH CUBY

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A Proof of Concept

Christopher Jaepheth Cuby

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about this work

Prince Ashan’Raeth Vareth, son and nephew of powerful Geban emperors, undertakes an expedition intended to verify the stability and reach of the Empire’s vast infrastructure. Initially expecting routine confirmations, Raeth instead encounters disconnected territories, outdated relay systems, and unresolved insurgencies—contradicting official claims of imperial completeness.

He travels alongside three carefully chosen companions: Tharyn’Breka Kael, a fierce warrior from the northern Frost Sentinels; Caledrin Solarn-Veykar, an imperial engineer whose family legacy underpins much of the Empire’s critical infrastructure; and Eira Vey, a former priestess who abandoned her rites for deeper truths. Their mission gradually transforms from oversight into exploration, uncovering the fractures beneath the Empire’s supposed stability.

Their journey first leads them to Thazvaar, a continent that once stood as the Empire’s greatest adversary, renowned for advanced technology and military power. Now, superficially peaceful and integrated, the Thazvaari coast presents a façade of stability—its people culturally assimilated, its infrastructure impeccable. However, deeper inland, the narrative shifts drastically: outdated relay grids, resurgent criminal factions, and abandoned imperial outposts reveal that the Empire never truly conquered peace—it merely inherited Thazvaar’s internal conflicts.

Raeth and his companions begin observing phenomena known as "Vessel merging," involving the cosmic entities Velcrith and Seraveth. Although previously aware of these entities, the group had never witnessed their direct manifestation. Eira meticulously documents these events, noting profound insights carried by those merged individuals, who reveal knowledge beyond ordinary human comprehension. Velcrith merging arises

through crisis, bringing intense clarity through mental fracturing, while Seraveth merging emerges gently, preserving existing alignments. All Vessels express a deep, intrinsic connection to He Who Allows, the embodiment of free will.

Raeth's experiences prompt critical introspection. He realizes that the Empire's structure—originally designed for perpetual stability—is flawed, riddled with gaps, contradictions, and systemic neglect. His mission, no longer merely about auditing infrastructure, becomes an imperative to address these vulnerabilities.

As they delve deeper inland, encountering direct resistance and violence, Raeth grapples with the stark realities ignored by imperial doctrine. He chronicles their journey not out of historical obligation, but from necessity, hoping to correct misconceptions and compel the Empire to confront uncomfortable truths. Ultimately, Raeth's account stands as both a record and a caution: stability, when assumed rather than actively maintained, inevitably leads to decay.

CHARACTER PROFILES

Ashan’Raeth Vareth

Titles: *The Witness, Imperial Surveyor of Continuity, Raeth of the Ashan*

Era: Absolute Expansion (3,000–2,500 years before modern Geba)

Affiliation: Imperial Bloodline (Non-Ruling)

Role: Son of Emperor Ashan’Eze Narath and protégé to Emperor Ashan’Reze Karath, tasked with verifying the Empire’s relay grid. Led a decade-long expedition to document lost provinces, ongoing insurgencies, and Velcrith/Seraveth mergings in *The Book of the Witness*, preserving continuity without rejecting imperial rule.

Traits: Observant, noble, dedicated to truth, unbound by formal doctrine.

Caledrin Solarn-Veykar

Titles: *The Relay Scribe, The Architect’s Heir*

Era: Absolute Expansion

Affiliation: Geban Empire (Solarn Legacy, Engineer)

Role: Heir to Architect Varenth Solarn, cataloged fractured relays and black zones, verifying Vessel-generated technical insights. His infrastructure recovery work shaped frontier signal doctrine, despite vocal complaints about heat and mission ambiguity.

Traits: Sarcastic, technically precise, loyal, driven to rebuild.

Eira Vey

Titles: *The Unordained Seer, The Keeper of Silent Truths*

Era: Absolute Expansion

Affiliation: Geban Empire (Independent Scholar, Formerly Rite-House)

Role: Abandoned priesthood to document Velcrith’s violent clarity and Seraveth’s subtle alignments. Her writings traced divine patterns across Thazvaar, surviving piracy and war unarmed to preserve truths beyond imperial doctrine.

Traits: Intellectually relentless, quietly resilient, unclouded by ambition.

Tharyn'Breka Kael

Titles: *The Unyielding Guardian*

Era: Absolute Expansion

Affiliation: Geban Empire (Frost Sentinel Lineage)

Role: Frost Sentinel descendant of Ngorrhal's northern passes, childhood friend of Raeth, and expedition guardian. Her towering stature and silent ferocity anchored morale through Thazvaari jungles, urban games, and pirate assaults.

Traits: Silent, unyielding, combat-ready, morale anchor.

Tsev Haavu

Titles: *The Festival Prince, The Jeyrhan Wanderer*

Era: Absolute Expansion

Affiliation: Jeyrha (Independent Oligarch, Loosely Aligned with Geban Empire)

Role: Jeyrhan oligarch who piloted an untagged airship, guiding the expedition through Thazvaar's inland. His festival patronage and euphoric substance use masked lethal precision, revealed in repelling pirate ambushes with his thirteen combat-trained women.

Traits: Charismatic, deliberately mysterious, unbound by imperial oversight.

BOOK OF THE WITNESS

I did not set out to make a historical account, but with how much needs to be recorded—and how much of our world is broken and disconnected—that is what this will almost certainly end up becoming.

I am Prince Ashan’Raeth Vareth, son of Emperor Ashan’Eze Narath, and protégé nephew of Emperor Ashan’Reze Karath. I was permitted to verify the reach and integrity of the Empire’s presence beyond the inner ring of relay command. What began as an imperial expedition has become something else. We have uncovered regions centuries behind, peoples untouched by light, old units still fighting insurgents from wars the Empire marked as complete. And we have found things no doctrine prepared us for.

My companions—each chosen not by tradition but by necessity—have stayed at my side for more than a decade.

Tharyn’Breka Kael, of Frost Sentinel origin, is a fortress unto herself. I have known her since we were children. Her brows are deep-set, her skin a burnished copper, her voice like a chime struck in ice. She stands a head taller than any man I’ve ever stood beside and carries a rifle the length of a child without effort. Her hair falls in dark waves, thick and unbound. Her smile, when it comes, lands like a weapon. Her people have long left the northern passes of the Sentinel Range, but she carries the bearing of that exile. Many assume all Frost Sentinels are the same. They are not. Her ancestors came from the north. Their cousins from the west shared little but a common enemy—until the rise of a third, brutal line in the northeast forced them to unite. The Empire aided their survival. In return, they assimilated and swore loyalty. What they were called before us is lost. I have always been drawn to their culture, to their silence, to the scale of what they once endured. They named me honorary among them. They didn’t intend for me to take it seriously, but I took it as a challenge.

We have not yet visited the mountains of her line, but we soon will. The old proving grounds still exist. Few remain operational. Their relay systems are corroded by centuries of frost and wind abrasion, their towers stripped to bare metal by relentless ice storms. Breka insists on seeing them herself. In the

few regions we passed that still held insurgents, she involved herself directly—despite my advice. She fought as if she had once marched in the conquest.

Caledrin Solarn-Veykar is our engineer. Heir to the Solarn legacy—descendants of Architect Varenth Solarn—he holds knowledge that, in the right context, could remake entire regions. His father’s infrastructure supports nearly every functioning line in the Empire. But Caledrin joined us not to preserve what already exists, but to witness what doesn’t. In broken places, he records what must be rebuilt. In sites long failed, he writes what might still work. We do not design from the dirt. That is fiction. When we encounter a region without light, Caledrin sends word back. And when we receive confirmation that the Empire has received it, we move on. It is not perfect. But it is better than silence.

Eira Vey was never ordained. She left the rite-house before her naming. Not out of rebellion, but because she believed the closed structure of the rites no longer accounted for what was unfolding beyond the capital. She had the clarity to walk away before she was bound. Any other priestess would have been refused exit—or forced to flee and live as exile. But I had known her since youth. I had never personally befriended her due to our age gap, but I had always listened to her enrage my younger siblings through her discussions, and most times, I agreed with her reasoning. I supported her decision. Priesthood in the Empire’s capital is a coveted and notorious position. She walked away from it, for truth. And they let her go.

At the time, we knew of He Who Allows. We knew of the Seraveth. We knew of the Velcrith. But we had never heard of vessels. Never witnessed merging. Eira has been documenting the signs as we encounter them. She speaks little, writes often. And what she records has begun to reshape even my own understanding. I have kept private notes of my own. These are not isolated events. Locals from distant and unrelated regions report the same phenomena.

Velcrith merging is violent in its clarity. It emerges in collapse. It elevates through endurance. The mind breaks—but what comes through is not disorder. It is direction. Seraveth merging is quieter. It comes only to those already near alignment. It does not command. It preserves. It seals. We have met individuals who possess unexplainable knowledge—not in speculation, but in insight. Some of them carry technical solutions we could not have discovered in a century. If not for Caledrin, we would have had no way to confirm their claims. These are not accidents. They are signs.

All vessels carry an unshakable understanding of He Who Allows. Their testimonies differ in language but align in spirit. He does not merely encourage free will. He is free will. The Velcrith elevate through ruin. The Seraveth protect through restraint. Both now exist within our world—not in myth, but in form.

Many of these patterns echo the writings of Prince Venar’Nethel—the exiled son of a former Emperor, remembered only through the structure of his record. In his time, no one knew what to call what he became. Now, I wonder if he was the first record of merging.

It has been well over a decade since our first expedition, and only now have we begun to record with the clarity this era requires. I did not intend to write a formal chronicle. My original task was to confirm that our centralization efforts were operational—that the unification of the world under the three suns, as established by Emperor Vaer’Karesh, remained intact and functional.

But too much remains disconnected. Infrastructure gaps. Missing records. Variances in doctrine and policy across regions that should be synchronized. This is not a collapse. But it is not the stability we were taught to expect.

The imperial structure was designed to carry order across all provinces, borders, and generations. If that continuity is threatened, it must be corrected—not assumed. This record will serve that purpose.

It begins here.

THAZVAAR

The first territory we approached was Thazvaar, located to the near east. It had once been the most dangerous adversary our Empire had ever faced—militarily, technologically, and ideologically.

Their naval presence was massive—not for conquest, but survival. For centuries, they fought piracy along every coast—piracy born from within. Criminal warlords had divided their continent into ungovernable zones. Jungles, deserts, and mountain corridors were carved into autonomous strongholds. These factions trafficked lives, hoarded weapons, and ruled entire regions with no allegiance to a central power.

To suppress them, the Thazvaari developed infrastructure scaled for total war. Their rail systems crossed the continent in days. Their naval yards could produce and deploy warships in less than two. Their data networks remained functional in regions we now classify as black zones. Their logistical systems were so refined that even our Empire, at its height, studied them after the conquest.

It was Thazvaar who equipped the northeastern Frost Sentinels—the only lineage in the mountains to attempt full regional dominance by force. With Thazvaari backing, they nearly seized the western and northern passes. That civil war might have ended differently had our Empire not intervened. We backed the western line, reinforced their strongholds, and guaranteed the survival of the Sentinel factions that would later unify under our banner. After that, Thazvaar was no longer considered a regional power. It was recognized as a planetary threat.

The Empire made no attempt at negotiation. The campaign that followed was eradication.

I remember my uncle explaining it to me—not as history, but as pattern. He told it to me repeatedly, not to glorify it, but to prepare me. He wanted me to understand that some enemies will never yield. That peace is not always an option. And that when clarity demands it, violence must be carried through to completion. I didn't understand then. I do now.

The campaign lasted centuries. The official operations were documented under one name, but the conflict began long before—and lingered long after. The only civilians spared were women and children below a certain age. Adult males and older adolescents were eliminated. Elders were not preserved. Only a small cohort of engineers—those capable of transferring critical knowledge—were selected, interrogated, and retained. Not as prisoners. As assets.

We did not occupy their cities. We dismantled them. The land was cleared and restructured. But their architecture left its imprint. Certain structural patterns—angled for windflow, optimized for endurance—were retained in specific zones across the Empire. Some desert fortresses still reflect that origin. That was not imitation. It was utility. They had mastered these principles long before we unified our own territories.

By the time Emperor Vaer’Karesh began consolidating the mainland, Thazvaar had already reached planetary-tier engineering. Early expeditions were sent—by sea, and through what we called upper air lanes at the time. These were early surveillance missions, not combat operations. Most vessels were lost. Some returned heavily damaged. And those that reached Thazvaar rarely returned at all. Fueling systems were primitive. Range was limited. Our aircraft had only existed for just over a century. They were designed for local observation and coastal strike—not transoceanic assault.

In retrospect, I don’t know what they were thinking. Our airships were not built for recovery from deep-range missions. Our ships weren’t designed for prolonged war. We had never faced a nation that could break us. So we approached Thazvaar with the same assumptions we’d carried into every other conquest.

We were wrong.

Even my father and uncle—who agree on almost nothing—concede this.

What still strikes me is that for all their advancement, the Thazvaari never took to the skies. They had no air presence. No known aerial doctrine. For all their mastery of sea, land, and subterranean systems, they never reached above. I don’t know why.

Every credible record confirms we nearly lost. Their downfall was not caused by our strength, but by their fragmentation. The warlords they had once subdued reemerged. Fronts multiplied. And even with their precision, no state can survive that many collisions at once. That was the moment the Empire struck. Not out of opportunity. Out of necessity.

One record remains part of Imperial training curriculum: during the siege of Kharan's Gulf, a lone Thazvaari warrior leapt from a burning ship onto an Imperial transport. He carried an axe and a repeater rifle—theorized to be overheating. He threw the weapon at one of the operators when it jammed, then killed five members of the Emperor's Wrath before being neutralized. Not initiates. Not conscripts. The elite.

That is not myth. That is confirmed loss.

The Thazvaari were disciplined. Industrial. Unyielding. Their nation is gone. But the systems they created are still embedded in ours. Our long-range signal calibration. Our desert cooling models. Our post-siege reconstruction algorithms. Much of it carries their fingerprint.

They were not a border faction. Not an outpost. They were a nation that challenged the Empire when it still believed it could not be challenged, and they nearly won.

Imperial history aside, I don't like it here.

It's hot—and not the kind that breaks when the suns pass on. This heat lingers. It clings like something old, alive, and wet pressing against your face. The moisture rolls in from the jungle and settles somewhere behind the eyes. My hair stays damp even in stillness. Eira doesn't seem to notice. Breka says nothing. Caledrin, of course, complains. The deserts are a different matter entirely—sharp, dry, searing.

And yet, despite what I expected, everything works. Flawlessly.

I assumed this region would still bear the residue of our eradication. I expected fragments—half-repaired infrastructure, cautious eyes, a silence shaped by ancestral memory. I expected the children to carry some trace of what had been done. But they didn't. They don't.

What we found instead was full assimilation.

Their systems run uninterrupted. Their terminals default to Imperial script. Their speech patterns follow our grammar with only a regional tone—less a separate accent than the difference between dialects across a coastline. Their children play without fear.

It caught me off guard.

Geban and Thazvaari blood mixed. And what emerged from that fusion is not some hybrid disorder—it is a structure. A strength neither side could have produced alone. Their rhythm became ours. Our structure shaped theirs.

Even the Frost Sentinels—so common within the capital, and yet so rigid in blood tradition—rarely intermix with ethnic Gebans. They barely mix with Sentinels from the other passes. And to those who are not of their kind, they appear as a single people. Our people live near them, walk among them, train beside them—but even then, the lines hold.

But here, in Thazvaar—a land distant, humid, and overseen by a single Emperor—two peoples have merged beyond recognition. The result is a population so integrated that no dividing line remains. And it is incredible

They have a game here. No formal name that I caught. It's a mix of endurance, explosive movement, marksmanship, and vertical combat. Ten platforms, each one collapsing if you linger too long. The rifles are wide and unbalanced—difficult to grip. Your team carries a flag. If it drops, you're out. If you're hit, you're out. Some platforms have no direct access—you must figure it out. And yes, physical force is legal. You can throw your opponent from the tower.

Put simply: as a defender, your goal is to stop the attackers from reaching the top with their flag—while keeping yours in ascent. Even survival isn't enough. The flag must rise. The match is short, but it feels like war compressed into seconds.

They offered to let us play. It was meant as a gesture of honor. We accepted.

Then they brought out a transmitter—and I realized our match would be broadcast across the local relays. There was no backing out. The match began.

Eira collapsed before the second platform. Caledrin landed his shots but was too slow to reposition. I held out longer, until a moving obstacle knocked me from a ledge I thought was safe.

Breka advanced furthest. She didn't aim. She charged. She threw two competitors from the fifth platform and plowed through several more on the sixth. But higher up, her size became a liability. She was struck midair while trying to dodge in open view. You can't maneuver in all directions at once. She fell.

Our local teammates were eliminated on the ninth. We attempted a second round as defenders. It went worse. We didn't make it past the third platform. They didn't even bother ascending until we were all eliminated.

We should have played with the children.

My arms and legs were useless for days. Caledrin slept through his recovery. Eira vanished. Breka, somehow, kept playing.

I will never do this again.

But I will bring this home. The Empire deserves to see it.

We had not yet seen Emperor Tar'Kanesh Zeren, so I ensured a formal visit before traveling inland. It was Eira who suggested it. After months of study and quiet conversation, she had reached a clear conclusion: the teachings in the coastal cities—and those not far inland—were not far from those in the capital. Only less filtered. There was nothing more to gain here. And those she had learned from—elders, archivists, descendants of former Thazvaari stewards—each, in their own way, pointed to events, memories, or fractures that led not outward, but deeper inland. Into the deserts. Into the tropical ranges. If a purer understanding existed, that is where it would be. And while I had always intended to meet with the Emperor before proceeding, we had delayed it longer than we should have.

This was a man who spoke very plainly. He had once stood among the Shield of Geba—a man trained not to interpret danger, but to intercept it. Politics came later. My father, as a prince, supported his transition. My father, as emperor, respected him enough to retain him. But he is not of my generation, and I do not know him. Still, the formality was necessary.

He told me plainly:

“Everything here is functional—but only here.

The coast is governable because it is visible. The cities and ports open to trade envoys and capital observers are shaped for compliance. But inland, the Empire holds nothing. Relay grids are aged, unreliable, and patchworked with dark zones. Some regions no longer acknowledge imperial jurisdiction. In others, the original Thazvaari language resurfaces. And in many, the criminal forces the Empire thought extinguished have fully returned—this time without the native Thazvaari who once understood how to contain them.”

The way I understood it: we did not conquer peace. We inherited their internal war.

He then explained to me that piracy no longer exists on the seas. That era ended with the fall of the Thazvaari navy—a naval force not built for conquest, but to suppress the vast criminal networks that once thrived across their own waters. When we defeated them and took the continent, we inherited the fight they had spent centuries trying to contain.

I had already known this.

But then he made me aware of something obvious that I—and all of us in the capital—had failed to consider.

Eira later told me it darkened my expression.

We brought something they had never seen. Flight.

Not exploratory vessels. Not relays. Heavy airships. Cargo-scale infrastructure engines. Designed to deliver grid components, reinforcement alloys, and full uplink spines for deep inland integration.

Thazvaar had mastered land, sea, and subterranean infrastructure. Their rail systems stretched across the continent and remained functional even after conquest. But they had never taken to the sky. Not in doctrine. Not in design. When the Empire brought airships, it was not an enhancement. It was a breach—something wholly foreign to their structure.

These were infrastructure haulers—heavy-class airships, built to implant what the terrain could not support. They ferried relay tower components, scaffold frames, foundation alloys, and civilian settlers—Geban workers and their families, willing to remain and oversee permanent inland development. Not because Thazvaar lacked transport—but because its existing systems, vast as they were, could not handle the scale of what we intended to impose. These vessels bypassed terrain entirely. They were not support. They were foundation.

The one thing we did use the rail system for was to move runway-grade materials across enormous distances—so that the haulers could land. We built platforms into regions that had never been charted. Steel bones across jungle rock. Miles of stabilized earth cut through forest. Entire rail convoys were dedicated not to settlement—but to preparing for flight.

But over time, the airships began to vanish.

Not during war. Not in a single moment. One infrastructure attempt at a time. Quietly. Without report. Without return. The Empire assumed these efforts were working—because it had to. Because the absence of data was mistaken for distance.

Imperator Tar corrected that.

“After three failed to return—and after more than ten who had been gone for extended periods of time, some nearing a decade—we issued the order to halt all inland flights,” he said.

“At first we assumed they would signal once the uplinks were stabilized. But nothing came. And eventually we had to admit the truth. That was only the ten deployed immediately before my tenure. There is no record of how many had already disappeared.”

Caledrin added that relays, in truth, can be constructed quickly and brought online within days. Which meant the time we'd spent waiting for contact was not patience—it was negligence. He then explained the specifics—how signal propagation responds to atmospheric layering, how terrain warps line-of-sight fields, how certain fault lines devour transmission entirely. But I won't pretend I understood it. His knowledge is too precise. Mine is not.

Imperator Tar warned me not to go forward.

"These few you have will not suffice, Prince Raeth of the Ashan line. I was once close to your father. I will not allow his son to vanish in this place."

I nodded. Out of respect.

But I was going regardless—and not with units.

Most of his advisors were descendants of locals who had proven their loyalty to the Empire centuries ago. The coastal stability could be traced, in large part, to their ancestors' willingness to move forward. Their information was consistent, and likely accurate. Which meant the inland was dangerous. But to send more units would risk transforming a volatile unknown into a confirmed escalation.

Breka found this fact humorous, for a reason she didn't explain.

We knew we would never receive the Imperator's permission to go inland. That had been clear. So we procured flight—quietly.

Caledrin found it absurd. A prince, maneuvering beneath his own Empire's systems. But he understood. If we asked, we would be denied. And that denial would not come alone—it would come with conditions: military escort, signal surveillance, a state-marked expedition. That was not acceptable. If I entered with a force, it would signal ownership. This was not conquest. It was inquiry.

We didn't use the rail system. It wasn't about terrain—it was about visibility. The Thazvaari rails remain the most secure infrastructure on the continent. Prince or not, my presence would be

registered. Every checkpoint would log us. Every relay would transmit. The Emperor would be informed almost immediately. I would be recalled before I ever crossed the jungle line.

That night, we remained in the outer districts and were drawn into one of the city's open festivals. I remember the music. They called it Scarlet Verse.

All of the performers were women. What they performed on that stage was more than an ensemble—it moved like a procession, shaped by memory. Part ritual. Part invocation. Their formation was deliberate. They wore adornments drawn from both ancient Thazvaari and early Geban warriors—sashes, layered mesh, and ridged fabrics once used in battle. Around their arms, necks, and ankles hung medals—metallic and irregular, designed to catch light at every pivot. When they moved, they shimmered.

Their lead vocalist had gemstones across her body—clustered along her collar, beneath her jaw, and across her shoulders. But they didn't hang like jewelry. They appeared embedded—set directly into the skin. I couldn't tell if it was real or something fashioned just for the performance. But under the light, it looked permanent.

Their style of music was unlike anything performed near the capital. There, the dominant forms are the Thundered Dirge—a codified genre that traces back to the Frost Sentinels of the Northern Passes. What began as war hymns became rhythm, and eventually, public expression. Their ancestral pain became structure. And that structure became music—now performed even by those far removed from the Passes. The other common form is Solwave—a luminous, polished style favored by much of the Geban citizenry. I've always held a quiet respect for Solwave, especially over the entertainment relays. But this—this was something else entirely.

The festivals here were massive. Unregulated. The sound was visceral.

Scarlet Verse wraps rhythm around violence. It doesn't grieve the dead—it exalts those who endure. It sexualizes the warrior form, sanctifies proximity to death, and folds intimacy into movement. I had never experienced anything like it. Strangers pressed against me with reckless urgency—breathless, radiant with heat.

Eira fully embraced it.

Caledrin shouted that the Empire's gender ratio imbalance was on full display, and then vanished into the crowd.

I remained. Breka did not dance. She stood above the floor, arms crossed, watching from one of the raised spectator platforms. Mostly me. Her expression never shifted—but something in her gaze held weight. I felt it, though I still don't understand what it meant.

We made many friends that night. One of them—a very young boy—claimed to be from the capital. But I don't believe he was. He didn't recognize me, which would be impossible for anyone truly raised in the capital. His accent gave him away—light, deliberate, precise. And so did his appearance: light brown hair, grey-blue eyes. Jeyrha. The continent south of Ngorrhal, across the sea. The only nation we ever assimilated without war. Their people were not conquered—they were absorbed. They had something to offer. Something we allowed them to keep. Most of the Empire's biologists come from there, and they all speak as he did. Distant enough to know me by name, but not by face.

Either way, he had an airship. It wasn't military. It wasn't tagged. And it had range.

He traveled with thirteen women. Two of them were clearly pilots—the way they moved around the vessel left no doubt. The others were not soldiers. They were not wives. They bore no insignia and served no visible function I could name. And whatever they were, I didn't ask. I didn't have the room to ask.

He agreed to take us inland. From there, we would part ways.

What I had assumed would be a direct flight inland became a journey of its own.

We made several stops—sometimes for supplies, sometimes for spectacle. It soon became clear that our host was attempting to attend every major festival in Thazvaar. Caledrin enjoyed this immensely. I

did not. The deception was obvious, but I didn't object. There was no urgency behind us, only distance ahead. I stayed on the ship most days, studying what I could, listening to local relays, watching the shape of the continent shift through sound.

Eira, however, found purpose in every stop. Each province offered some new fragment of data, some preserved whisper or regional belief that—somehow—tied back to He Who Allows. She said little aloud, but I could see it: she was tracing something. Something coherent. Something old.

I still didn't know the identity of this boy.

But one thing became certain—he had unlimited energy, and seemingly unlimited financial resources. Wherever we landed, there were no questions. No clearance demanded. No names logged. We arrived and doors opened. Not because of status. Not because of threat. Because he was expected. As if the world already knew him.

He also used substances. Frequently. Openly. Liquids and eye vapors. None of it dulled him. If anything, it seemed to keep him upright. Awake. Engaged. I never saw him withdraw, never saw him falter. But I watched. And I remembered.

By the time we reached the inland, it had been nearly forty days.

From the moment we stepped off the vessel, I knew there was work to be done. The air was still, but not in peace. The people did not smile. There was no music drifting from relay towers. No children shouting in the streets. No rhythm in the stones. Only heat. Dry, unforgiving. And silence.

Caledrin voiced his displeasure immediately—cursing the beaming sun, the dust, the emptiness.

But I wasn't listening to him. I was listening to the absence.

What we saw here was what I had expected from the beginning. Not the coast. That had caught me off guard. The people there were more hospitable than even the capital. Their systems ran clean. Their children played. Their speech had already merged with ours. No bitterness. No residue of war.

What remained of their old structure had fused with ours—so completely that I'd begun to question if my assumptions about Thazvaar had ever been true.

But this—

This was the Thazvaar I had imagined.

No relay music. No street calls. No visible doctrine. The structures stood, but not with pride. The roads bent around emptiness. And the faces—those that watched us—carried no welcome.

Then the air changed.

Stillness became signal.

Moments later, we were being fired upon.

No warning. No call. Just dust, heat, and projectiles slicing the silence. Whoever they were, they hadn't stumbled upon us. They were waiting.

Their speech was fractured—half in old Thazvaari, half broken Geban. I only caught fragments: give, you, ship, now. And one phrase I couldn't place: no hard. A threat softened? A signal of mercy? Or just noise?

The boy—whose name I still did not know—reacted first. Drew, aimed, fired. No panic. Just movement.

The thirteen women moved as one. No screams. No questions. Positions taken. Rifles, rail arms, light-heavy arrays from the vessel itself. As if they'd trained for this. As if they expected it.

I dropped behind a port barrier. Breka checked on me, nodded once, and ran headlong into the fight.

Caledrin shouted mid-sprint, voice breaking with disbelief:

“This is why we need functioning long-distance relays across the entire planet! To make this impossible! I guarantee it—they’re pirates! We’re being robbed!”

It was a terrifying moment.

But I fell into laughter—sharp, uncontrollable.

He was correct, of course. But hearing those words during a firefight, while running for cover, was one of the most absurd and unintentionally hilarious things I’d ever been exposed to.

He survived.

We all did.

Once the fire ceased, there was no call of retreat. No surrender. Just the quiet after violence.

I found Eira near the ramp. Silent. Red in the face. She hadn’t been hit. She hadn’t screamed. But she hadn’t moved, either. Just sat there—eyes wide, hands clenched.

And I had to consider the truth.

Even I had never seen war, but I’d been trained. Firearms. Evacuation posture. Instinct hardwired through repetition. Enough to survive.

She hadn’t. As a priestess, she would never have been exposed to this. No simulations. No drills. No rhythm for fear.

I could only imagine what she had gone through in those seconds. So I said nothing.

When I finally confronted the boy from Jeyrha, it wasn’t because of his lies. It was because of his preparation.

He and the women with him had clearly expected something. Their reaction during the attack had been too synchronized, too clean. They didn't panic—they performed. That kind of response doesn't come from wanderers. It comes from intention.

Before I could speak, he looked up from where he sat, brushing grit from his palms.
“Are you fine, Ashan Prince?”

The words were soft, quick, almost melodic—each one delivered like it could have ended in a question. Which meant he had known who I was the entire time—and had chosen silence.

I didn't threaten him. I didn't raise my voice. But I did ask:
“Who are you? Did you expect that attack? And why say you were from the capital?”

“I didn't lie,” he said, shrugging a single shoulder. “I said capital. I am from Reykhaal.”

The name grounded me. Reykhaal—lowland jewel of Jeyrha. Endless plains. Tall green trees. Fields engineered from ruin. Their people could make anything grow—anything live. They weren't soldiers. They weren't engineers. But even their children understood cellular structure, environmental correction, root logic.

“I didn't expect the attack,” he continued, cadence rising. “But inland? It happens. It's common. My mother says Jeyrhari disappear here because we come soft. No weapons. No edge. We are not raised for this.”

He gestured at the landscape. “This land should be green. We could make it green. Grass. Orange. Green. No more hard thorn and sand. Worst case—we begin extending the jungle. But the Empire plants nothing. I was taught it's been this way for centuries, which means it will not change. Whatever. The desert leaves nothing. The cities sing. The coasts shine. But the center—no roots. No pulse.”

Then, with a shift in rhythm:

“The pirates are dead. So, good. We leave, yes? The Keiunya of Thazvaar perform in three days. Floods of women. Colored vapors. They fire lights into the sky—then the lights break and fall like dust. Everyone breathes it. It’s...” He paused. “Euphoria.”

I didn’t move.

“We’re not here for the festivals,” I said. “We’re here to stop the kind of attack that just happened.”

He blinked—still crouched, hand on his knee.

“Oh. You travel like this to stop war? Without escort?”

All thirteen women turned to look at me. One of them placed her palm to her forehead and sighed.

And the truth is—he had a point.

I searched for outrage. But it didn’t come. His logic disarmed me before I could speak.

At that point in our journey, I was already exhausted. And we hadn’t even begun. So I pivoted.

“Do you have weapons? Maps?”

He nodded. “Small arms, yes. The maps—only air charts. But they are accurate.”

It was better than nothing.

I took what I could. Caledrin looked visibly crushed when it became clear we would not be attending any more festivals. Breka, carrying a dead pirate back toward the airship, cut through his sorrow with precision:

“If we finish the mission and plant lasting infrastructure, you can attend all the festivals you want.”

He said nothing. Grabbed a rail arm and ammunition from the corpse. Rolled the air charts. Walked off with the papers tucked beneath his arm. I could swear I saw him wipe a tear—but he did it like an engineer might wipe dust from a lens. With intention.

He asked if I was sure I didn't want to come to the festivals. Said Caledrin looked disappointed.

He wasn't wrong.

Then, more carefully—still in that fast, deliberate accent—he offered a final warning.

“Not to discourage you, my Prince. But what you are tempting... the fathers of your fathers and their fathers could not attempt. Even with armies. Even with fleets. Every record says this land was like this before the Empire ever touched it.”

I declined. Gave my thanks.

He bowed—low, without hesitation. A gesture meant for my father and uncle. I told him to stand. I've never cared for those formalities.

That was when he finally told me his name: Tsev Haavu.

And it all became clear.

The Haavu family—old-line oligarchs from Jeyrha. Not public. Not theatrical. But known. Anyone familiar with the deeper structures of imperial diplomacy or infrastructure would recognize it. They didn't hold office. They held access. Routes. Quiet stakes in ancient contracts.

Suddenly, his movement made sense.

How he passed from city to city, possibly continent to continent, without clearance. Why no one questioned his vessel, his entourage, his festivals, or the substances he carried. He hadn't just inherited wealth. He had inherited immunity.

One of the women was already returning to the vessel. The others followed without a word. The engines rose into a hum. Dust spiraled across the hardened runway.

Then they were gone.

GLOSSARY

Empire (Geba Empire): A global power founded by Emperor Vaer’Karesh over 6,000 years ago on Geba, enforcing unified language and identity via relay systems, but struggling with inland instability, notably in Thazvaar.

Frost Sentinels: Elite hunters and warriors from Ngorrhal, assimilated after a Thazvaar-backed civil war. Physically massive, they form the backbone of the Emperor’s Directive, with a distinct culture rooted in silence and endurance.

- **Northern Pass Sentinels:** Fought in Ngorrhal’s civil war, aligned with Western passes against Thazvaar-backed Northeastern forces, known for towering stature and unyielding combat resilience.
- **Western Pass Sentinels:** Supported by the Empire to defeat Northeastern forces, accepted assimilation to survive, forming the core of the Emperor’s Directive with steadfast loyalty.
- **Northeastern Pass Sentinels:** Backed by Thazvaar, sought to unify Ngorrhal by force, were completely eradicated; survivors fled to Thazvaar, their names erased from history.

He Who Allows: A metaphysical force embodying free will, permitting Velcrith and Seraveth to merge with humans without dictating outcomes, ensuring choice remains sacred.

Relay Systems: The Empire’s communication network, critical for governance but often corroded or nonfunctional inland, especially in Thazvaar’s dark zones.

Scarlet Verse: A Thazvaari performance art blending music, ritual, and warrior aesthetics, performed by women adorned with gemstone-like embeds and battle-inspired sashes. It exalts endurance, sanctifies proximity to death, and weaves intimacy with violent rhythms, distinct from Geba’s Thundered Dirge or Solwave. Performed at unregulated festivals, it draws massive crowds, reflecting Thazvaar’s coastal vitality and cultural fusion.

Seraveth: Eternal beings residing within the Infinite, in perfect unity with He Who Allows. Guided by patience and trust in free will, they observe humans with higher awareness, selecting those aligned for subtle merging—regardless of human will—with flawless precision, to prevent collapse. Their merging is gentle, preserving consciousness, fostering clarity, and creating quiet leaders who shape harmony without conquest.

Jeyrha: A southern continent in the Geban Empire, peacefully assimilated during the Era of Imperial Conquest. Renowned for its lush plains and advanced biological sciences, Jeyrha is characterized by its expertise in environmental engineering and cellular structure, producing many of the Empire’s biologists. Its people, distinct for their light brown hair, grey-blue eyes, and precise, melodic speech, integrated into the Empire without conflict, retaining their cultural identity. Jeyrha’s oligarchic families, such as the Haavu, hold significant influence through access to ancient trade routes and diplomatic networks, operating with near-immunity across imperial territories. The continent’s capital, Reykhaal, is a hub of innovation, known for its engineered fields and vibrant, hedonistic festivals that celebrate sensory indulgence and artistic expression. Jeyrha is uniquely welcoming to foreigners across the entire Empire, fostering open cultural exchange and integration. Its people are noted for their hedonistic tendencies, embracing pleasure and extravagance in social and cultural practices.

Thazvaar: A conquered eastern continent, once a technological and military rival. Its coast is assimilated with advanced rail and water systems, but the inland harbors pirates and unrest.

Velcrith: Beings who freely departed from the Infinite, seeking something beyond perfection, only to discover no greater existence and that their departure was irreversible. Driven by sorrow and an unending desire to restore lost perfection, they selected Geba—a wounded planet formed by cosmic collapse—as the focal point for their meticulous orchestration. By manipulating gravitational forces, orbital patterns, and celestial debris with extraordinary precision, they created conditions necessary for life to inevitably arise. Humanity and all life on Geba emerged not from random chance but from Velcrith's profound attempt to recreate the perfection they once abandoned. Although their methods evolved, their fundamental sorrow and intention remain, now acting through direct merging with carefully chosen individuals to guide humanity toward enduring stability.

Vessel Merging: A phenomenon where humans, selected by Velcrith (intense, crisis-driven clarity) or Seraveth (gentle, preservative alignment) based on predisposition for higher awareness, merge to gain profound knowledge tied to He Who Allows, shaped by the beings' differing motives.