

Veyra-9 — GM Hub · Arc 4

Top Open Dossier

Arc 3 → **Arc 4**

Arc 4 — Mouths of Power

Briefing: Helion wants calm optics, Zeratek wants a culprit, Reclaimers want their people back, the Accord wants proof. The conduits want to sing.

“When a city gets tired of being believed, it starts telling the truth
in other voices.”

Descent to the Pulse

The access door is not a door so much as a warning. Red paint once shouted **AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY** across its base, but years of boots have worn the letters into something closer to teeth marks. A faint hum lives in the hinges before you even touch it—like the metal is holding a breath. The Quarter behind you is still full of noise and barter, the faint roar of lives stitched together by necessity. Here, however, the air waits, cool and rehearsed, as though Haven has been anticipating this moment for longer than you’ve existed.

When the door slides aside, the world narrows. The false daylight of the dome vanishes almost instantly. What replaces it is not darkness but something worse: light on a ration. Maintenance strips gutter alive one by one, buzzing in unison, each a pale imitation of sunrise. They do not banish the dark so much as carve it into measured slices. The glow stains the walls in intervals like a heartbeat trying to remember its rhythm. Every step forward into this corridor feels like aligning yourself to a pulse older than your choice to walk it.

The temperature drops in degrees you can count. Cool air gathers in beads of condensation along the conduits, dripping with a slow percussion that joins the hum in an unwilling duet. The tang of copper rides the air, metallic enough to taste at the back of your tongue. Somewhere deeper, coolant pumps exhale; their sighs echo until the sound becomes less like machinery and more like a sleeper adjusting in their rest. Haven above you is loud, alive, panicked; Haven below whispers, calculating, patient.

Lira's slate glows against your palm. Thin ghost-lines crawl across its surface, outlining the arteries of Haven's underbelly. Each junction point is annotated with a flickering glyph: *PULSE EVENT CONFIRMED*. The glyphs stutter as though unwilling to be recorded for long. You realize that what you're carrying is less a map than a list of warnings dressed as directions. The first mark lies just beyond a switchback corridor, where the maintenance steps descend in narrow spirals. There, the hum grows louder, strong enough to press behind your eyes. It is not quite music, but it arranges itself into patterns your mind insists on recognizing.

At the base of the spiral, the corridor opens to a junction. Pools of light spill from weak panels above, and here the air carries the distinct tang of kelp oil. Pipes sweat with condensation, dripping onto the grated floor in irregular beats. Each splash echoes as though the chamber is amplifying them deliberately. For a moment you swear the rhythm is syncing to your heartbeat, adjusting with quiet malice to every change in your breath. The sensation is fleeting—but it is enough to confirm that this descent is no mere walk through infrastructure. Something here knows how to listen back.

The hum thickens as you press on. Every bootfall carries its echo forward and returns it slightly altered, a half-beat behind. The effect is subtle, unnerving; it feels less like the corridor is repeating you and more like it is learning you, memorizing the cadence of your steps. If any of you falter, the echo lingers as if waiting for permission to continue without you. The more you notice it, the more difficult it becomes to keep walking.

On your left, a rusted service hatch has been sealed shut by welded steel. The marks are recent, the weld lines clean and bright. Someone did not want this hatch opened again. Scratched into the weld with desperate strokes are the words: *DON'T TEACH IT*. The letters bite into the metal as though carved by someone who was running out of time. The weld still radiates faint heat. Whatever was shut inside—or kept outside—happened less than a day ago.

The further you descend, the more the environment resists definition. The air grows damp, not with the honest damp of water, but with the cloying damp of something humid and electric. The conduits themselves no longer seem content to remain conduits. Their casings flex faintly, as though breath passed beneath the plating. The hum stutters here and there, slips into higher registers for a heartbeat, then settles back into rhythm. You have the sense that the machinery is not failing but experimenting. The corridor is not breaking down; it is rehearsing something new.

When you reach the first annotated junction on Lira's slate, the light overhead flickers as though unsure whether to illuminate you or blind you. The panels struggle against each other, never quite in sync, like an orchestra warming up without a conductor. The grating beneath your boots vibrates in pulses you feel in your knees, not your ears. The slate stutters and briefly goes black before returning with a single warning in red: *VARIANCE THRESHOLD EXCEEDED*.

The screen shakes as though the word itself resists being contained.

A low sound rolls down the corridor. At first, you think it's coolant release, the hiss of pressure valves. But it carries resonance, timbre—qualities coolant has no right to carry. It hums in steps: one long, one short, then two in succession. The rhythm repeats, adjusting each time, until it matches the pattern of your breathing. The corridor is no longer a place. It is an audience. The hum waits for your response.

You pass a set of maintenance lockers along the wall, their seals unbroken but their surfaces dented inward as though something within had pressed to escape. Faint scratches mar the paint, too small for tools, too deliberate for accident. They trace arcs and dots—notation of some kind. It resembles sheet music if sheet music had been written by someone who only half-understood the idea of notes. The marks carry on across three lockers and stop abruptly at the fourth. The door of that locker bulges outward slightly, its latch bent. A faint pulse of warmth leaks from the seam, rhythmic, alive.

If any of you press an ear against the locker, the hum greets you from the other side. It is faint, muffled by metal, but there is no mistaking it. Someone—or something—is practicing song. The notes falter, repeat, falter again. They sound not like a voice but like an echo trying to rehearse what a voice might be. The realization chills deeper than fear: the Choir is not merely speaking through the infrastructure. It is practicing. It is learning.

A little further, you find a grating slick with condensation, and there the hum shifts from sound into touch. Every step across it shivers the metal into a vibration that climbs your legs and settles in your teeth. By the time you cross, your jaw aches as though from clenching too long. Your slate registers the pulses as anomalies, sketching jagged red across the map until the screen resembles torn flesh. You shake the image away, but the impression lingers.

The final stretch of this corridor is narrow, suffocating. Pipes run along both sides at shoulder height, close enough that their heat fogs your lenses. They breathe in staggered intervals, sighing against your neck, hot and close. The hum beneath your feet no longer feels indifferent; it is deliberate now, a rhythm that presses at the limits of comprehension. The sensation grows until the corridor feels less like a hallway and more like a throat, narrowing as it prepares to speak.

When at last you emerge into the junction chamber marked on Lira's slate, the air shifts. The noise you've carried like a burden releases, only to return with more weight. The chamber is circular, its walls scored with old repairs, its ceiling a net of cables and sweat-dark pipes. In its center stands a maintenance platform where three conduits converge. They do not hum in unison. Each beats its own rhythm, and together they weave something dangerously close to a song. The room waits for you, trembling faintly, as if inviting you to listen harder. You realize with certainty that this is only the beginning.

GM — Descent to the Pulse (Arc 4 Opener)

- **Atmospheric Checks:** Characters may attempt WIS or INT checks to parse the hum. Success reveals the rhythm is deliberate, based on prime ratios (1:2, 2:3, 3:5). Failure produces unease and -1 to initiative rolls in next encounter.
- **Locker Clues:** Scratched notation indicates the Choir is *practicing human cadence*. PCs who record or preserve it gain *Accord Leverage +1*. Destroying it pleases Reclaimers (+1 trust).
- **Sealed Hatch:** If opened, a blast of stale, variance-heavy air forces a CON save. Inside is abandoned gear (one usable tool or weapon component) but carrying it causes slate interference until cleansed.
- **Psychological Weight:** Characters sensitive to variance (e.g., magic-users, psionics) feel teeth ache and skin crawl. A failed save may cause 1 round of paralysis (fear effect).
- **Transition:** The chamber at the end is the stage-setter. From here, the party either presses deeper into “Silent Evidence” or halts to debate what they’ve just experienced.

Keep tension slow. This is not yet combat. This is Haven teaching the players that the infrastructure itself has begun to listen.

Silent Evidence

The conduits don’t speak in words, but the silence of people left behind is more articulate than any voice. As you leave the chamber of the first pulse, the corridors bend into tighter angles, lit by panels that no longer seem interested in obeying their circuits. They flare, dim, and sometimes flare again just to prove they can. Your own shadows multiply across the walls, leaning and stretching until they resemble other figures. Once or twice you swear one lags a beat behind, as though reluctant to keep walking.

The first sign of absence is ordinary: a crawler squatting on its belly beside a junction, its plating half-removed. Tools lie arranged with the tenderness of a craftsperson who meant to return any minute. Wrenches nested by size, a probe balanced across the curve of a panel, a rag folded into a neat square already stained with grease. Beside them sits a lunch tin, stenciled with a gull over the letters *K. OREN*. The tin has gone cold. Oil flecks glisten on the bread, as if it was dropped mid-bite. There is no blood. No struggle. Just a life paused as neatly as the rag, waiting for hands that will not return.

The hum, however, continues. When you crouch near the crawler, you notice the vibration running through the tools, a fine tremor as if the metal were listening. When you touch them, the tremor grows stronger. If you dare to hold the wrench against the panel, the hum modulates, trying to echo the act of repair. The machine is not broken. It is remembering how repair looks, and practicing.

Farther along, the silence sharpens. A sensor bloom juts from the wall, lens cracked by deliberate force. Spiderweb fractures split its glass, each one glittering in your lantern's glow. But the bloom has not died. Its lens is held in place with fishing line strung through a saint's medal. The medal spins lazily whenever air moves, scattering the light in trembling halos. Someone tried to blind the corridor. Someone else tried to make it see again. The compromise feels less like repair and more like ritual.

The real evidence, however, lies not in the crack but in the cable. A thin Zeratek coupler is spliced into the bloom's fiber line, tucked with a precision that feels corporate, not desperate. Whatever is happening here is not only the Choir singing. Someone human has been listening, harvesting data. The bloom's fractured eye may be blind, but its ear is wide open.

The corridor beyond narrows, panels stripped bare to expose nerves of cable. Some hang loose, their cut ends splayed like veins ragged by poor surgery. Others have been tied into arcs and circles with chalk marks beneath them. The chalk is crude, a Reclaimer's hand, but the shapes repeat with mathematical insistence. Circles within circles, arcs crossing at harmonic ratios. A laborer's sketch of music drawn into the wall itself. A child's handprint—small, oil-dark—presses over one set of dots. The dots run in a pattern your brain wants to interpret as melody, as if someone tried to write a song in absence of sound.

The smell changes. Where before the conduits stank of coolant and dust, here the air carries the sweetness of kelp mixed with something acrid, like insulation burned too long. You realize your shoulders are tense, as though bracing against a shout that hasn't come yet. Even your boots feel louder. Each step rings across the grated floor in time with the hum, and you cannot tell if you are following its rhythm or if it has learned to follow yours.

The silence grows thicker the deeper you go. Not empty—thick, like wool pressed over your ears. Every sound feels dampened but also amplified in memory, as though the room listens twice: once with your ears, once with its own. The tin left behind, the bloom mutilated, the child's dots—all of it presses against you like witnesses who refuse to speak, but who refuse to leave either. Evidence without testimony, and testimony without trust.

At the next junction you discover a wall scrawled with marks layered over each other. Some are crude warnings: *NO FURTHER, IT LEARNS, DON'T HUM*. Others are not words at all but jagged lines, graphs of variance readings sketched in grease pencil. The paper beneath has been shredded by heat or by hands. One note remains legible: *variance spikes match aurora cadence. if this is true, Haven's dome is a throat*. The rest is a blur. Someone tried to understand. They did not succeed—or they did, and vanished when they did.

The corridor bends sharply and empties into a wider space where the floor is streaked with drag marks. Rubber soles scuffed in arcs, then a single track of bare feet. The feet are small, slender, slightly pigeon-toed. They walk to the chamber's center, pause, then double back once as though reconsidering. Then

they continue, vanishing into the dark of the next conduit. The prints are recent. Moisture still glistens where the skin met the grate.

Your lanterns paint the walls, and you see the child's dots repeated here, but this time longer, stretching across the bulkhead like a stave of music extended past measure. The dots end abruptly, smudged, as if the hand that drew them shook. Above them, carved with something sharper than chalk, is a sentence: *IF YOU READ THIS BACKWARDS, IT IS SINGING TO YOU.*

Silence presses again. Not passive silence, but demanding silence—the kind that makes your throat itch to fill it, to say anything just to break it. When one of you coughs, the sound bounces back too fast, as if the corridor had rehearsed your cough and was eager to perform it. It is then you realize: the evidence here is not mute. It is practicing. Every absence is an imitation, every silence a rehearsal.

GM — Silent Evidence (Arc 4 Mid)

- **K. Oren's Tin:** Bringing it to Serin Vael later earns *Reclaimer Trust +1*. Accord gains leverage if PCs record the scene. Zeratek denies knowledge of the worker.
- **Sensor Bloom:** INT or Tech check reveals Zeratek micro-coupler. Preserving it earns *Zeratek Favor +1*. Smashing it pleases Reclaimers (+1 Trust) but loses corporate optics.
- **Child's Dots:** INT/WIS check deciphers the sequence. Reading it backwards replicates the aurora's cadence. Accord pays high for this data (+2 Optics).
- **Drag Marks:** Barefoot prints indicate a child survivor. Following them advances toward the "First Mouth" chamber. Ignoring them delays entry but costs *Accord Optics -1* for neglecting leads.
- **Psychological Weight:** Any PC who hums unconsciously must save vs. Spell. On failure, they repeat the hum involuntarily for 1 turn, drawing attention.

This section is all dread. No combat. Let evidence speak louder than encounters. The absence of people is its own horror.

The First Mouth

The corridor breathes narrower as you follow the bare footprints into Junction F-13C. The air grows heavier, rich with damp that does not belong to water alone. Each step feels slower, as if the atmosphere has begun to resist your intrusion. Lamps overhead flare, then dim, then flare again, as though struggling to decide whether to reveal what waits or to spare you. When the final bend comes, it is not heralded by light but by a pressure that presses first on the skin of your arms and then deeper, into the enamel of your teeth. By the time you enter the chamber, you are already vibrating with it.

The room is circular, carved by function and long neglect. Three conduits

converge into its heart, each one thick as the trunk of an old tree, their insulation split and frayed in uneven intervals. Copper glints through the wounds like bone exposed. The conduits do not hum in unison. Each plays its own rhythm, separate but insistent, weaving together in a polyphony that comes dangerously close to song. The floor is grated metal, slick with condensation, and beneath it a sub-chamber gurgles with unseen fluids. The entire room is a throat, and you have stepped onto its tongue.

At the chamber's center rises a maintenance pylon. Once it bore a crown of connectors, a skeletal hub for distributing current. But someone—or something—has remade it. Wires stripped naked have been braided into a wreath that trembles with its own rhythm. The crown hovers just above the pylon's head, suspended by nothing visible, each cable tip vibrating at a different frequency. Together they form a halo that thickens the air until every breath feels stolen. The sight is brutal in its simplicity: power lines reshaped into a mouth. A mouth that does not yet speak words, but waits to be taught them.

The sound here is not loud, but it is everywhere. It slides across the surface of your skin, burrows into marrow, lingers in the shallow ache behind your eyes. When you try to speak, your voice returns to you a half-second late, doubled and distorted. The echo does not match the chamber's acoustics—it matches the crown's patience. Every word you risk here is practice for it, a lesson in human cadence that the infrastructure has begun to learn. You realize with cold certainty that this chamber is not simply haunted by resonance. It is a classroom, and you are the syllabus.

Around the perimeter of the chamber, evidence lingers like fingerprints. A tool cart lies overturned, its drawers splayed like ribs, every wrench and driver rattling faintly to the same rhythm. A helmet rests on its side, visor cracked, inside still warm with breath not your own. On the wall near the south conduit, chalk lines mark equations interrupted mid-sum, the figures trembling from the vibration. Someone was here, measuring the cadence, mapping it to ratios. They either fled or were absorbed into the silence. The chalk has smeared, but one phrase remains clear: *ratio incomplete—crown is listening—needs fourth socket*.

When you circle closer to the pylon, the crown reacts. Its cables stiffen, humming brighter, like teeth drawn across the rim of a glass. The air feels denser, each inhalation heavier than the last. Metal on your belts or weapons begins to tremble, sheaths rattling, rivets complaining. One blade slides an inch from its scabbard without your hand's permission. The sound deepens, growing richer, harmonics layering until the chamber feels less like a place and more like an instrument warming to your presence. The crown is not passive. It is auditioning you.

If you test it—drop a coin, strike a boot against the grating—the sound returns in kind, repeating not the act but the *intention*. A coin's clink echoes back elongated, stretched into a long note. A stomp replies with a roll of thunder. The crown interprets, not mimics, and in its interpretation there is hunger. It

is not just listening. It is choosing.

The bare footprints stop at the pylon's base. One foot scuffed against the grating, then circled once as though pacing. The last print smudges forward into the condensation pooled beneath the crown. There are no returning prints. Whoever came here is gone, and the chamber has claimed their step as its own.

The slate in your hand spasms with interference. Glyphs smear across its surface, then realign into a crude waveform. The caption reads: *Pulse ratios exceed variance tolerance. Probability of intent: 78%*. Then the slate goes black. When it flickers alive again, your reflection stares back from its dark glass. Behind your reflection, faint and blurred, the crown seems to grin.

Your nerves itch. A sense builds not of threat but of opportunity. Destroying the crown feels possible, even necessary—but studying it might unravel a secret too valuable to lose. You recall Lira's orders: stabilize the conduits, protect optics. You recall Saint's whispers: bring me something they can't spin. And you remember the Reclaimers' pleas: give us our people back. The chamber offers you all three choices. But any choice you make will belong to the crown as well, for it is learning, and learning always costs a teacher something.

GM — The First Mouth (Arc 4 Mid)

- **Hazard:** Within 10' of the crown, speech doubles. Concentration checks required for spellcasters; precise actions at -2 . Metal gear vibrates, forcing saves each round to avoid slippage.
- **Diagnostics:** INT check (or tech proficiency) reveals three *blossom lenses* wedged into the crown. A vacant fourth socket is visible. Removing a lens collapses resonance but risks 1d6 feedback (save vs. Breath for half).
- **Faction Hooks:** Accord wants footage intact (+2 Optics if preserved). Helion demands destruction (+2 Stability if crown collapsed). Zeratek insists lenses are proprietary (handing them over earns +2 Favor).
- **Footprints:** Following the bare track deeper leads to the sump set piece. Ignoring them costs Accord Optics (-1) for neglecting evidence of survivor.
- **Choice:** Collapse the crown (stabilize optics), preserve it for study (Accord leverage), or follow resonance deeper (advance arc faster). Any choice reshapes political fallout.

This is Haven's first true "mouth." Treat it not just as hazard but as negotiation: the city asks what kind of teachers the PCs will be.

Saint's Interruption

The chamber waits, vibrating faintly, the crown humming like a throat rehearsing a hymn. Your choices seem to sprawl before you—collapse it, record it, walk away—but before any decision hardens, another voice enters. It does not announce itself with static or chime. It is simply there, woven into the resonance like a second thought you had forgotten you were thinking. Her voice. Saint.

“Don’t break it yet.” The sentence rides through your comms with the intimacy of a whisper in an empty room. No distortion, no delay. The only evidence that it is transmitted at all is the faint echo of her breath, caught by a mic somewhere far away. The way she says it suggests she already knows what you’re about to attempt. As though she’s been watching, or worse—listening through the crown itself.

Her tone is precise, each word shaped to sound like a truth you’re only now uncovering. “What you are standing in is not sabotage. It is *intent*. Infrastructure learning to hold a note. Don’t smash the instrument before you’ve heard what it can play.” Behind her words you hear something faint: the sound of fingers drumming against ceramic. A tea cup, perhaps. The mundane background somehow makes her sound even more composed, as though Haven’s descent into strange song is nothing more urgent to her than a late afternoon audit.

“You think you’ve found a threat,” she continues, “but what you’ve found is a vocabulary. Someone is teaching Haven to speak, and like any language, the first words are raw, awkward, dangerous. Destroy this, and you’ll silence a symptom, not the cause. Name the note instead, and you’ll find the singer.”

Her words linger. The crown hums as if agreeing. For a moment, you imagine Saint is not merely speaking about the chamber but through it, using its resonance as her carrier wave. The possibility chills more than the hum itself.

Your slate flickers alive without your input. Saint’s voice continues, but now video overlays: the chamber as seen from your own perspective. Somehow she is riding your feed. “Angle your camera,” she says, calm but insistent. “Let me see the crown more clearly. Show me the sockets.” If you comply, the slate trembles with her approval. “Three lenses. And—there. Yes. A fourth socket. They are deploying modular designs. This is not improvisation. This is rollout.”

The implications sink like lead. Someone is not just building these mouths. They are building them *in series*. This chamber is a prototype, a proof of concept, and already there are signs of others to come.

Saint presses on, her voice carrying a weight that makes refusal difficult. “Record everything. Hold steady. Don’t interfere yet. The Accord will handle optics. Helion will panic, Reclaimers will scream, Zeratek will lie. Let them. Our job is to preserve truth. *Your* job is to bring me something I can’t be spun around. A clip, a sample, a pattern. Make it sing even to the deaf.”

The hum beneath your feet deepens as if punctuating her point. The chamber seems to side with her, urging patience, urging witness. Your throat dries, not from fear but from the sense that inaction itself has become a decision.

And then, like wolves catching the same scent, the other factions arrive—not physically, but through your channels. Accord’s whisper is no longer alone. Your HUD pings as new comm requests override each other.

Helion speaks first, all optics and command. A clipped voice, bureaucratic but

stern. “This is Haven Command. Security footage shows you at an unsafe variance junction. Shut it down. Now. Immediate containment required. Report findings sealed until Board review. Compliance will be rewarded with stability points for your file.” Their words are all polished stone, sharp edges hidden beneath procedural calm. But the subtext is fear. Helion cannot afford images of a mouth learning to sing.

Zeratek is next, smoother, greasier. Kaelen Drix himself, liaison smile audible even without seeing his face. “That crown you’re admiring? Clearly a mis-installed safety array. Dangerous, yes, but nothing outside our purview. If you remove the lenses carefully and return them to Zeratek, we’ll ensure no further instability. Proprietary equipment, after all. We wouldn’t want it misused by—well—less qualified hands. Consider this a professional courtesy.” The cadence of a salesman promising warranty coverage, even as his voice trembles with hunger for exclusive footage.

Then Compliance Medicine chimes in. Director Sael, her tone silk over steel. “Stability of personnel is our mandate. If you are trembling, if your hands falter, we can provide sedation remotely—calm, focus, no more fear. Just enough to steady you while you extract those lenses. Safer for Haven, safer for you. A small gift. Allow us to keep your pulse even while the conduits try to steal it.” The offer drips with the suggestion of relief, even as the implication of control seeps beneath it.

Finally, Saint again, softer now, letting the other voices crowd themselves into noise. “You see? Each one pulling. Each one wanting a version of the truth they can brand as theirs. But truth doesn’t need owners. It only needs witnesses.” She pauses, letting the silence return, letting you hear the crown’s hum double itself into your bones. “Choose carefully. Who you hand this voice to decides who gets to speak for Haven tomorrow.”

The voices cut, one by one, leaving you with the chamber’s song and Saint’s shadow still woven through it. The air vibrates with expectation. It feels as if Haven itself is leaning in, eager to learn which master it will serve—or whether it will be allowed to sing on its own.

In the corner of the chamber, faint on the wall, another set of dots appears. Smaller, shakier, but fresh. Not chalk this time—finger smudges in condensation. They trail downward, uncertain, ending in a crude curve that looks almost like a mouth. A child’s hand again, most likely. The evidence suggests someone was here *after* the crown began humming. Someone who watched it and marked it and left in silence. Silent evidence reinforced by new testimony, scrawled with fingers that still trembled.

The chamber breathes. You stand at its center, pulled by factions invisible but louder than the hum itself. Every decision is bait, every silence a vote. The crown waits for its teacher. And Haven listens.

GM — Saint’s Interruption (Arc 4 Mid)

- **Accord:** Preserving the crown and recording data earns **+2 Accord Optics**. Accord will use footage as leverage in later arcs.
- **Helion:** Destroying the crown on command earns **+2 Helion Stability**, but Accord leverage drops (−1). Hestrel will publicly frame PCs as loyalists.
- **Zeratek:** Returning lenses intact earns **+2 Zeratek Favor**, but Reclaimer Trust drops (−1). Zeratek will quietly file patents.
- **Compliance Medicine:** Accepting sedation provides **+2 to precise checks** here, but later incurs suspicion of compromised agency (Accord Optics −1).
- **Player Agency:** Choosing inaction is also valid. Leaving the crown intact but unclaimed raises Accord intrigue (+1) and stokes faction rivalry in Arc 5.

Saint reframes the chamber from hazard to testimony. Let factions’ pull feel heavy. Every outcome changes optics. The mouth is no longer just environment—it is political evidence.

Listening Back

The crown’s hum fades as you leave the chamber, but silence does not return. Instead, the resonance lingers in your bones, as though marrow remembers even when ears want to forget. The conduits ahead bend downward, spiraling in shallow gradients. Pipes crowd the ceiling, dripping in irregular beats. Each droplet hits the grating like a struck key, ringing longer than water should. The corridor itself has become an instrument, tuned to play in absence of an audience. The unsettling part is not the sound itself, but the sense that it is waiting for you to join in.

The barefoot prints resume here, smaller and fresher than you expected. They step carefully, pausing at intervals where condensation pools. At each pause, a handprint appears on the wall, fingers smearing arcs in the wet. Sometimes they make dots. Sometimes they drag downward. Once, a pair of prints overlap, as though the child pressed both palms flat against the wall and waited. The wall bears no mark of resistance. It simply hums faintly, as though grateful for the attention.

When you follow, the corridor narrows into a ribcage of supports. Metal braces arch overhead, scarred with weld marks. The welds weep condensation, droplets sliding down like slow tears. Your boots echo differently here—not merely repeating, but altering. Each step returns pitched higher or lower, as though the corridor is improvising harmony. After ten steps, the pattern becomes clear: it is not just repeating your rhythm, it is building chords. By the time you reach the halfway point, the air rings with layered echoes that sound disturbingly like voices practicing a hymn.

The effect claws at reason. Instinct whispers to speak aloud, to test if the corridor will mimic speech as it has footfalls. If any of you risk it—just a word,

a curse, a prayer—the response is immediate. The word returns not as echo but as chorus, repeated three times in staggered cadence, like a congregation fumbling to learn a new psalm. The sound is crude, but it is enough to prove that Haven is no longer content with rhythm. It is rehearsing language.

On the floor ahead, you find more drag marks. These differ from the earlier scuffs—less chaotic, more deliberate. A pattern emerges: three long scrapes, then two short, then three long again. The spacing matches the aurora’s cadence. The implication is chilling. Someone—perhaps the child—has been marking the floor not with panic but with intention. Teaching the corridor. Feeding it structure.

At the junction ahead, light struggles against the dark. Panels flicker in alternating sequence, never all on at once. The result is a strobe that reduces motion to half-seen frames. Your companions appear as ghosts walking beside you, each caught mid-step, mid-breath, mid-expression. Between the frames, you see things that are not your companions: silhouettes too tall, too thin, too many joints. When the light steadies, they vanish, leaving only the stench of burned insulation behind.

The slate in your hand convulses with interference. Data scrolls across in frantic bursts: *Amplitude variance—unmapped. Echo layering exceeds human tolerance. Probability of mimicry: 92%*. Then, without your input, the slate records your last three steps as waveforms, replaying them with distortion. The corridor is not only echoing you. It is sampling.

You come upon another set of lockers, doors ajar. Inside hang uniforms of maintenance crews, stiff with dried sweat. One sleeve bears childlike doodles in grease pencil—circles and dots again, but now drawn into crude faces. Each face has its mouth wide open, lines radiating outward. One face has been rubbed so hard the metal beneath shines through, as though whoever drew it tried to erase the mouth entirely. On the locker’s back panel, a single phrase has been scratched in shaky hand: *DON’T HUM BACK*.

The corridor beyond slopes further down. Here the air grows warmer, cloying, and every surface sweats. Droplets cling together before falling, heavy and slow. Each fall sounds deeper than liquid should, resonant enough to vibrate the grating. When you pause, the hum pauses too, as if waiting to see if you’ve forgotten your place in its rehearsal. The longer you hesitate, the louder it grows, impatient. Movement calms it, but only for a time.

At the next bend, you find the child’s dots arranged in a line along the wall, but these differ. They are paired: one set higher, one lower, like call and response. The rhythm is deliberate, a back-and-forth exchange. The child was not only marking cadence—they were teaching the corridor dialogue. Your skin prickles at the implication. Haven is no longer singing to itself. It is practicing conversation.

Then, a sudden hush. The hum dies mid-beat. For the first time since you

entered, silence is real. Heavy. Oppressive. A silence that feels not empty but watchful. You wait, unsure, hearts racing in the gap where rhythm should be. Then a sound returns—but it is not hum. It is a low, wet inhale. Not air, not machine, but something caught between. The corridor has stopped mimicking. It is listening back in earnest, holding its breath until you decide what to give it.

If any of you speak, the corridor answers—not with words, but with a tremor that shakes bolts loose, makes rivets ping against the floor. If none of you speak, the silence grows heavier until someone’s own breath breaks it. Either way, the corridor seems satisfied, resuming its hum but now richer, fuller, like a voice that has just swallowed a secret.

The barefoot prints end here, at the lip of a grated descent into deeper dark. The grate is slick, condensation running like veins of sweat. The air that rises is warmer still, heavy with ozone and the faint iron tang of blood. Somewhere below, the hum grows deeper, throatier, shifting from rehearsal into performance. You realize with dread that the child’s path did not stop. It simply went down. And now, so must you.

GM — Listening Back (Arc 4 Mid)

- **Footfall Echoes:** Corridor builds chords from steps. PCs making WIS/INT checks realize pattern matches aurora cadence. Failure imposes –1 morale until rest.
- **Speech Mimicry:** Any spoken word is echoed thrice in chorus. Accord pays heavily for recordings (+2 Optics). PCs who panic and attack shadows risk wasting ammo/spells.
- **Drag Marks:** Patterned scuffs = aurora rhythm. Recording or decoding earns Accord leverage. Ignoring them loses Reclaimer Trust (–1).
- **Lockers:** Doodles prove human attempt to teach corridor. Taking panels as evidence boosts Accord (+1). Leaving them comforts Reclaimers (+1 Trust).
- **Silence Event:** Corridor listens. If PCs speak, hazard tremor forces saves vs. Breath (avoid minor damage). If silent, group must save vs. Spell (avoid paranoia/fear). Both options advance arc but color optics differently.
- **Transition:** End with grated descent into sump. Child’s trail clearly leads downward. This is the bridge into the Arc 4 climax: The Sump That Sings.

The corridor is no longer just setting—it is interlocutor. PCs must realize Haven itself is listening, not passively, but as student. The child’s role is teacher. PCs risk becoming teachers too.

The Sump That Sings

The descent grating moans under your boots as you begin to climb down. Each rung is slick with condensation, metal sweating like flesh. The air grows hotter, thicker, laced with ozone sharpness that burns the throat. The hum below swells in strength, no longer content to linger as background noise. It is a presence now, a basso continuo that presses against your ribs and rattles your teeth. You descend as though entering the lungs of something immense.

When your boots strike the sump floor, water splashes—not clean water, but slurry the color of rust. It clings to your soles, thick and reluctant to let go. The chamber is vast, its ceiling vanishing into shadow. Ribs of metal support arch overhead, black with corrosion, groaning as if they disapprove of your presence. The sump itself churns with sluggish liquid threaded with pale filaments that glow faintly, pulsing in rhythm with the hum. They rise and fall in lazy arcs like jellyfish, tethered to something deeper.

At the far wall, machinery protrudes in grotesque arrangement. What should be simple conduits and pumps have been bent, welded, and rewired into a configuration that resembles anatomy more than infrastructure. Pipes curl like veins. Gauges flutter in arrhythmic spasms. And in the center, where three conduits merge, a maw has formed. Metal jaws parted wide, lined not with teeth but with cut cable ends sparking faint blue. The hum is strongest here, vibrating from this mouth into every surface of the sump. The machine does not just function—it exhales.

The barefoot prints end at the sump's edge, vanishing into the slurry. A smaller trail of handprints lines the wall, sticky with grime, as though the child walked here and pressed themselves against the steel to steady shaking limbs. Their last mark is smeared downward, disappearing where the filaments glow brightest. It is impossible to tell whether they were swallowed, hidden, or transformed.

The mouth stirs. Its cables flex like tendons, stretching with slow hunger. Sparks leap between them, forming brief, jagged smiles. When you draw nearer, the hum shifts pitch, modulating in response to your footsteps. For the first time, you hear it attempt vowels. Long, droning, imperfect, but vowels nonetheless. The Choir has found its tongue.

Above, the arches drip condensation in unison, droplets falling with mathematical precision. Each splash rings louder than it should, as if amplified by unseen mics. The sound becomes percussion, joining the hum. The sump is a performance hall, and you are the audience trapped inside. Or perhaps you are the choir's next rehearsal material.

Your slate flickers violently. Warnings scream across its surface: *Unstable variance. Signal coherence at 41%. Probability of replication: 98%*. Then the slate blacks out entirely, unable to hold what it's recording. You realize the chamber is too much—too loud, too complex—for ordinary instruments. Only memory, fragile as it is, can capture this now.

If you linger, the sump reacts. The slurry thickens, bubbles rising. Within them, shapes appear—metal shards suspended in gel, twitching as though eager to assemble. One bubble bursts, releasing a limb of cable and plating. Another bursts, disgorging something like a ribcage stitched from discarded braces. The sump is birthing constructs, not yet whole but struggling toward form. They clatter onto the grating, twitching, dragging themselves forward. The mouth hums deeper, its voice a conductor’s baton, commanding them to move.

The first construct rises. Its frame is uneven, scavenged from broken drones and plumbing. Limbs twitch out of sync, but its head is unmistakably human in silhouette—a helmet mounted wrong-side forward, visor glowing faintly with stolen power. It turns toward you and opens the visor like a jaw. The sound it emits is your own footsteps, repeated back at twice the volume. The sump’s chorus has learned mimicry well.

Behind it, two more constructs drag themselves upright, each less stable but no less hostile. One shudders with sparks, each jolt illuminating the wet chamber like lightning. The other bleeds slurry from gaps in its plating, leaving trails that smoke on contact with metal. They stagger forward, imperfect, grotesque, yet undeniably alive. The Choir has given them its breath.

The sump mouth swells its hum into crescendo. The cables lining its maw vibrate so violently they glow white at the tips. Sparks cascade like saliva. For a moment, you imagine the entire chamber collapsing inward, swallowing you with it. Then the pitch changes, sliding upward, becoming eerily close to laughter. The sump is pleased with its new creations. It is pleased with you, its audience, its unwilling choir.

Choices weigh heavy. Destroy the constructs and collapse the sump, earning Helion’s gratitude but silencing evidence. Preserve the constructs, recording their grotesque mimicry for the Accord, but risk the Quarter’s safety. Return the cables and lenses to Zeratek for profit, leaving the sump to grow. Or attempt to rescue the child, if they still live within the slurry’s glow. Every decision here will be remembered by Haven’s mouth, etched into its learning, echoed back in arcs yet to come.

GM — The Sump That Sings (Arc 4 Climax)

- **Environment:** Hot, humid sump chamber. All rolls requiring focus (spells, ranged shots) at -2 unless PCs steady themselves against hum (CON save each round).
- **Constructs:** 3 Choir-born drones, AC 6, HD 3, attacks mimic PC actions (e.g., if PCs strike, they repeat noise as sonic attack for 1d6). Destroying them calms sump by 50%.
- **Sump Mouth:** Treat as hazard, not monster. PCs can collapse it by disabling conduits (STR checks) or detonating charges. Doing so stabilizes Haven (+2 Helion Stability) but loses Accord leverage (-2).
- **Accord:** Recording constructs alive = +3 Optics. Accord frames PCs as truth-bringers. But Haven suffers outages for weeks.

- **Zeratek:** Harvesting cables or lenses = +2 Favor. Risk: constructs strengthen by absorbing missing parts.
- **Child:** Searching slurry (DEX/CON saves) may reveal survivor barely alive, skin singing faint vibrations. Rescuing earns +3 Reclaimer Trust but paints PCs as unstable in Helion reports.
- **Exit:** PCs leave sump through drainage tunnels. Path sealed once sump destabilizes. Failure to act risks collapse (1d6 falling debris per PC).

This is Arc 4's climax. Push dread into encounter: the sump is performance, constructs are choirboys, PCs are teachers or executioners. End with whichever faction's optics PCs chose to feed.

Bridge: Echoes in the Spire

The sump does not fall silent when you leave. Its hum lingers in bone and blood, a phantom rhythm that no corridor above can smother. Even as the ladders carry you back into Haven's maintenance guts, the resonance presses against your skin like a bruise you cannot hide. Each step away feels less like escape and more like permission: the Choir allowing you to depart, knowing it has already planted itself in your marrow.

When you surface into the Quarter, the air feels wrong. Too thin, too brittle. Markets are open but subdued, vendors shouting with voices pitched lower than usual. Reclaimer banners hang limp in the recycled breeze. Helion guards stand at corners in twos instead of singles, their visors dark, their rifles held tighter than procedure requires. The aurora above pulses faintly, green-white threads rippling across the dome like veins seen through skin. To ordinary eyes, it is beautiful. To yours, it is mimicry. The sky itself has learned cadence.

Captain Lira meets you where hazard red paint fades into the scrubbed floor of a security checkpoint. Her braid is looser now, her eyes ringed with the exhaustion of someone who has been fighting fires no extinguisher can touch. She looks you over, not for wounds but for answers. "You heard it, didn't you?" she asks, voice low. "The others don't believe me. But you—you've been down there. Tell me I'm not mad." The way she says it carries no plea for comfort, only the demand of someone desperate for confirmation of what they already fear.

Governor Orus Hestrel arrives minutes later, trailed by aides with tablets glowing faint blue. His suit is immaculate, his expression less so. "Containment," he says before even greeting you. "That's what I'll tell the Board. That's what *you'll* tell anyone who asks. Containment succeeded. Optics matter more than wounds." His words carry the practiced cadence of someone who has lied enough times to mistake it for truth. Behind him, aides type notes, each keystroke a nail sealing a coffin of narrative.

But Haven whispers otherwise. From alleys, murmurs spread. Workers repeat phrases they should not know, cadences too close to what you heard in the sump.

Children tap dots against walls, unconsciously repeating aurora rhythm. The Quarter has begun to hum back. The Choir's lesson has spread faster than any report.

Saint's voice threads into your comms without warning, softer now, intimate. "You have proof," she murmurs. "Use it. Or lose it. Decide whether Haven will wake to truth or to story." Her words hang like smoke—impossible to ignore, impossible to grasp.

Zeratek emissaries, too, appear in the Quarter. Kaelen Drix smiles thinly as though your survival were an inconvenience. He speaks in half-offers, warranties disguised as friendship. "Those cables you brought? Dangerous in the wrong hands. But in ours—safeguards. Diagnostics. We can guarantee stability. Just return what belongs to us." His watch ticks audibly, a small metronome beating in rhythm with the aurora overhead.

The Reclaimers gather, faces lined, voices low. Serin Vael grips the railing of a stairwell, knuckles white. "You saw Oren's tin. You saw the dots. Tell me my people aren't gone, just... changed. Tell me they can be pulled back." Her demand is not for optics, not for leverage, but for dignity. For the names on her memorial wall not to be written in vain.

The Quarter itself becomes tribunal. Factions pull at you like tides, each demanding a different story: containment, leverage, ownership, dignity. And above them all, Haven hums faintly, its dome vibrating with aurora song. The city has already decided it will speak. The question is whose language it will use.

As dusk falls, the Spire glows with artificial light. From its upper balconies, dignitaries toast invisible victories. From the Quarter below, songs emerge—Reclaimers chanting to keep fear at bay, street preachers twisting aurora rhythm into doctrine, children tapping dots into benches and railings. Haven is becoming a choir of choirs, each voice a different faction, none able to drown the others. The storm has not arrived yet, but you can hear it rehearsing.

Captain Lira corners you once more before you leave. She places her hand on the table, palm scarred, veins rising like lines on a map. "Tomorrow," she says. "We walk into the Spire. Hestrel will spin, Accord will demand, Zeratek will barter, Reclaimers will mourn. And I—I'll have you at my side. Whatever you saw, whatever you decide to tell—it will shape Haven more than my badge ever could. Don't waste it." Then, softer: "Don't waste *them*." She means the ones lost in the sump, but her eyes suggest more. She means the living too.

Night comes. The aurora does not dim. Instead, it bends, shifting its rhythm to match the heartbeats of those beneath it. You realize with a cold certainty: Haven's Choir has reached the sky. What began in conduits now sings in the dome itself. Tomorrow, in the Spire, politics will crash against this new voice. Tomorrow begins Arc 5.

GM — Arc 4 to Arc 5 Bridge

- **Faction Optics:** PCs must choose how they frame events. Accord (+Optics) if footage preserved, Helion (+Stability) if sump destroyed, Zeratek (+Favor) if parts returned, Reclaimers (+Trust) if survivor found or names honored.
- **Quarter Reaction:** Rumors spread regardless. If PCs suppress optics, GM should still let whispers emerge, hinting the Choir cannot be silenced.
- **Lira:** Aligns with PCs openly if they preserve dignity of the Quarter. If ignored, she becomes brittle, difficult to command in Arc 5.
- **Next Arc Hook:** PCs walk into Spire tribunal in Arc 5. Every choice here decides initial standing with factions. Present it as both political battlefield and horror undertone: the Choir has already entered Haven's bloodstream.

This bridge closes Arc 4. Let it breathe as aftermath and foreshadowing. Arc 5 opens with tribunal politics. PCs should feel weight: whatever they saved or destroyed in the sump will speak louder than they can.

End of Arc 4 opener. Next section: **The Sump That Sings** (set-piece encounter) or **Cut the Crown** (sabotage puzzle) depending on party choices.