

Veyra-9 — GM Hub · Arc 9

Top Open Dossier

Prologue → **Arc 1**

Arc 1 — Miners’ Desperation (Continuous Chapter)

Mandate: the Obsidian Accord inserts the party as deniable stabilizers. Sponsors circling: **Helion** (Governor Orus Hestrel, Capt. Lira Veyne), **Zeratek** (Kaelen Drix), the **Accord** (Saint), **Reclaimers** (Serin Vael, Rust Varo), **Compliance Medicine** (Director Sael). Something new and wrong moves in the electrics—miners call it **the Choir** and don’t say it twice.

“You are to keep Haven alive without embarrassing anyone wealthy enough to own a share of it.” — Saint

Arrival at Haven

The shuttle’s belly caught the docking clamps with a metallic shriek that traveled up through your boots, a sound halfway between a scream and a sigh. It was the sort of sound that warned you a city like Haven was built more on desperation than engineering. Frost burst into white ferns across the viewport as atmospheric seals flexed. Beyond the glass stretched the dome—an immense bubble of polymer and alloy that should have glowed steady, but instead flickered with green-white auroral threads. They stitched and unstitched like a wound that couldn’t decide whether to close.

The city underneath the dome looked like patchwork held together with nerves. Modular blocks pressed against scaffolding, scaffolding welded to older scaffolds, layers upon layers of construction that looked less like a blueprint and more like a scar that never healed clean. Lights sputtered along walkways, and every time one guttered you could swear the whole dome dipped its breath. It was a city that had been rebuilt more times than it had ever been finished.

Inside the cabin, the recycled air reeked faintly of ozone, sweat, and sealant. A voice on the shuttle’s comm—a woman from Helion Industries PR—repeated a brittle welcome. *“Haven: your frontier home. Built with courage. Sustained by unity.”* The message hiccuped midway through, and the last word repeated twice before the system cut the feed. Unity, unity.

Security teams waited at the hazard-red line where docking gave way to clean floor. They formed a crescent wall: visors down, rifles slung but unlocked, boots polished though the plating beneath them was scuffed. Their posture wasn’t menace—it was exhaustion tautened into readiness, the sort of soldiers who could drop into violence without lifting their heartbeat. Civilians gathered behind them, craning necks to glimpse the new arrivals, whispering like the presence of outsiders might reset the odds.

Captain Lira Veyne stood at their center, helmet tucked beneath one arm. Her uniform was pressed as if wrinkles were a personal insult. Her braid lay pinned flat and exact, the way a surveyor pins lines on a map. She didn't scan the group of you like a commander inspecting troops. She measured, quietly, like a mechanic deciding which tools would last and which would break under pressure.

"Three fires," she said, her voice sharp but weary. "One extinguisher. Production has stalled. The Quarter bleeds. If the miners can't go home and come back again, Haven dies before the week is out."

The aurora above the dome spat a sudden flare, and for an instant every face reflected ghost-light. The civilians twitched at it but pretended not to notice. The Security line didn't even blink. Lira Veyne let the silence stretch, measuring how long it would take you to fill it. That, too, was a test.

Behind her, a pair of Helion banners hung limp. They bore the corporate seal—an eight-pointed flare over a stylized dome. The edges were frayed, and someone had sewn over a tear with crude black stitches. Nothing in Haven escaped patching.

One of the civilians in the crowd muttered something about "*Accord fixers*," and the rest turned their eyes on you—some with hope, others with contempt. Hope that you could relieve the pressure in the Quarter. Contempt because outsiders always came with promises that didn't fit the shape of the colony's wounds.

Lira raised a hand. The murmuring died. "You're with me to the Quarter," she said. "The other fires wait their turn."

GM — Roleplay Notes (Arrival)

- **Atmosphere:** Stress the *fragility* of Haven. The dome flickers, scaffolds creak, the PR messages glitch. Make the PCs feel they've stepped into a city that survives on habit, not stability.
- **NPC reactions:** Civilians treat PCs as both saviors and liabilities. Roll 1d4: (1–2 hopeful, 3 suspicious, 4 contemptuous).
- **Lira's test:** She's not giving a choice. She's weighing if the party wastes words or commits quickly. If PCs stall, mark *Accord Optics* –1. If they step forward decisively, grant +50 XP for "reading the room."
- **Foreshadowing:** The aurora's flicker should feel unnatural—drop subtle hints that its rhythm isn't random.

As the party steps off the shuttle, the crowd's whispers rise again. Words like "*rations*," "*strikes*," and "*lost rigs*" thread the air. A child on someone's shoulders points at the shuttle and asks, too loudly, "*Are they the ones who make the drones stop singing?*" His parent hushes him, but the phrase hangs there, connecting the static hum of the aurora with something far more immediate.

Lira Veyne ignores the question, but the way her jaw tightens is an answer in itself.

Captain Lira Veyne

Captain Lira Veyne was not the kind of officer Helion's corporate brochures imagined for their frontier colonies. The pamphlets painted Security Chiefs as shining examples of discipline, smiling in staged photos with polished rifles and scrubbed armor. Lira carried none of that shine. She wore her helmet tucked beneath one arm not for show but because she had been walking the Quarter herself, counting ration bracelets and pacing out the distance between where guards stood and where civilians dared gather. Her braid was pinned tight not to impress but because loose hair in a brawl gave enemies something to grab. She looked at people and saw uses, limits, and breaking points before she ever asked for a name.

Still, Helion used her face in reports. Every time the Board called for an update on Haven, her image appeared on-screen—stoic, crisp, and silent. They presented her as the embodiment of stability, proof that the colony was under control. What the Board never asked, and what Lira never offered, was that the silence in her photo was not approval but fatigue. She had held lines before—on Bryndor’s water flotillas, on Kharsis’s storm caravans, in skirmishes where desert raiders taught her how few bullets it took to decide a town’s fate. She knew what a line cost, and how it frayed when executives demanded optics before outcomes.

To the party, she did not offer charm or warmth. She offered the blunt fact of her presence. When she said, “Three fires. One extinguisher,” she was not dramatizing. She was telling you what you had walked into: a city with more crises than bodies to answer them. Her eyes, gray and restless, lingered on each of you in turn as if weighing a scale invisible to anyone else. She judged not posture or gear but whether you flinched at the aurora’s flicker, whether you shifted your stance when civilians muttered about outsiders, whether you asked questions that mattered or wasted her time with politics.

Helion Security behind her watched too closely, as if her approval was their cue to relax. It was an open secret that she was the spine of the unit. Without her, the line would sag into fear or cruelty. With her, they maintained a hard, brittle professionalism. The colony whispered about her: some called her a tyrant, others a shield. Children who played near the hazard lines imitated her barked orders. Miners painted her silhouette into mural margins, sometimes with a halo, sometimes with horns. In Haven, reputation was always painted twice.

Lira’s relationship with the factions was as precarious as the dome itself. Governor Orus Hestrel relied on her to keep Security presentable, though he clipped her reports before forwarding them to Helion’s Board. The Obsidian Accord trusted her competence but distrusted her loyalty; they preferred agents who bent optics into leverage, not officers who reported blunt truths. The Reclaimers tolerated her because she kept some of their people alive when numbers said they should have been dead. Even Zeratek, whose drones sometimes appeared on the wrong side of a barricade, respected her refusal to hide casualties. She was not beloved, but she was understood. In Haven, that was safer than love.

When the party stepped forward, her expression did not change, but her nod was the closest thing to welcome you would receive. “If you’re here to posture, turn back to the shuttle,” she said. “If you’re here to work, follow me. The Quarter won’t wait.”

GM — Running Lira Veyne

- **Demeanor:** Minimal words, maximum weight. She rewards clarity, despises wasted time.
- **Trust:** PCs gain her respect by acting decisively, protecting civilians without being asked, or taking risks she recognizes as necessary. PCs lose her respect if they grandstand, stall, or prioritize optics.
- **Factions:** Use her as a barometer. Accord = “Can you leverage her?” Reclaimers = “Does she keep us alive?” Helion = “Does she make us look stable?”
- **Progression:** Patron if respected, rival if undercut, martyr if forced into impossible optics.

In this moment, as the aurora stitched itself into the dome like luminous thread, Captain Lira Veyne became the colony’s axis. Not because she was flawless, or beloved, or even victorious. But because without her, everything in Haven leaned toward collapse. She held the line not by shouting, but by standing still when everything else trembled. The party had not chosen her; the Accord had. But from here forward, the question would not be whether you followed her orders. It would be whether you could stand the weight of being measured and found either useful—or already breaking.

Descent to the Quarter

The elevator doors yawned open with a sigh of hydraulics older than most of the miners it carried. Inside, the cab was a grated cage that rattled like bones in a drum. Veyne gestured for you to step in, then followed last, posting herself by the controls. She pulled the lever with the casualness of someone who had done it a thousand times, and the floor lurched as gravity took over. The descent began with a shudder that traveled up your teeth.

Through slatted windows the colony revealed itself in slices. First came the mezzanine markets—stalls of synthetic fruit, bootleg stimulants, and salvaged drone parts arranged like talismans of survival. Faces turned upward at the sound of the elevator's groan. Some faces were hopeful, others suspicious, and many bore the same etched weariness: the look of people who had survived so long they weren't sure they wanted to keep paying the price. Children ran alongside the descending cab, laughing until the next flicker of the aurora made them stop and clutch each other's hands.

The cab dropped further. You glimpsed a canteen where steam rolled against cracked glass. A man inside stirred a pot the size of a drum, his ladle carving lazy circles through a stew that looked more like boiled ration packs than food. A mural sprawled across the opposite wall: names painted in careful block letters. Thirty-two in all, each outlined in black. Space remained beneath them, blank rows awaiting additions. The elevator passed so close you could see where paint dripped, where some letters had been scrubbed clean and replaced with fresh names only weeks old.

Next came the infirmary. Queues stretched around pillars where hand-sanitizer dispensers blinked empty warnings. The smell of boiled antiseptic wafted through the vents and made eyes water. A nurse in a wrinkled coat glanced up as the cab passed, her expression unreadable. One patient in the line whispered, "Accord fixers," and another muttered, "Helion's dogs." The words clung to the steel like oil—nothing clean here, nothing without residue.

At last the cab groaned to a halt on a platform sprayed with hazard-yellow lines. The doors clattered open. Here, the Quarter announced itself not with speeches but with the scrape of boots, the hiss of water lines, the coughs of tired lungs. The Quarter was Haven's heart and its wound: where the colony's laborers lived and worked, where production kept the dome breathing, where hope was rationed thinner than food.

Serin Vael stood at a water manifold, sleeves rolled to the elbow. Her hands were steady but her voice was steel as she argued allocation with a technician who avoided her eyes. She was not dressed like a leader; she was dressed like everyone else, in coveralls patched at knees and elbows. What set her apart was not her clothing but the ledger she carried in her head: a mental accounting of who owed whom, who had earned trust, who had squandered it. She noticed you the instant the cab doors opened. Her gaze was sharp but not hostile. She took in your badges, your posture, and your silence—or lack of it.

Without waiting for formalities, she spoke. "*Row-C is running dry,*" she told Veyne. Then to you: "*And drones keep waking in tunnels they were never assigned to. Get my riggers home in one piece, and we'll talk about trust.*"

The crowd around the manifold stilled, listening not just to her words but to your reaction. Here, trust was a commodity traded more carefully than credits. Every blink, every hesitation, every half-smile weighed on scales you could not see. If you flinched, you were weakness. If you boasted, you were arrogance. If you listened and promised nothing, you might just be measured as worth the gamble.

GM — Quarter Atmosphere

- **Sensory detail:** Push the players with imagery—smell of ozone, rattle of pipes, coughing children.

Make them feel *the Quarter is alive but sick*.

- **Trust economy:** Serin is the Quarter's conscience. PCs who promise rashly lose her favor. PCs who commit to tangible acts (carry water, fix a scanner, patch a sprain) gain her trust. Track *Quarter Morale* as +1/-1 depending on PC actions.
- **Faction presence:** Reclaimers blend in with the crowd. Accord watchers linger on the edges. Helion Security stays close to Lira, not to protect her, but to watch the PCs.

A man with tired eyes pushed forward carrying a broken ration scanner. He held it out like an offering. "If you're really here to help," he said, "start with this. My kids can't queue if the scanner reads them as frauds." Behind him, a woman clutched a jug so heavy her knuckles whitened. She looked at you without speaking, but her gaze was louder than words. Around you, these silent requests multiplied until they became a chorus of small demands: a wrench turned, a pipe sealed, a bandage wrapped.

Veyne gave no orders. She watched, arms crossed, to see if you bent down to help or kept walking. Serin Vael's lips pressed thin, recording your choice in her mental ledger. The Quarter did not ask for speeches. It asked for hands.

GM — Quarter Skill Checks

- **Carry water drums:** STR check, success = gratitude, failure = spilled ration water → Quarter Morale -1.
- **Repair ration scanner:** INT check, success = families can eat, failure = sparks & burns → Accord Optics -1.
- **Field-triage sprain:** WIS check, success = miner hobbles back to line, failure = pain worsens → Reclaimer Trust -1.

Each PC who chooses to stop and help can roll once. Reward +50 XP for selfless actions, regardless of outcome.

As the party moved deeper, the Quarter seemed to close around them. Narrow alleys funneled between stacked dormitories. Laundry lines drooped overhead, heavy with recycled water. Signs scrawled in chalk warned of ration cutbacks. The hum of the colony grew louder here—not just the drones, but the very bones of Haven: pipes clattering, pumps whining, circuits groaning like a tired animal. The Quarter lived, but every sound said it lived in pain.

When a child darted forward to touch one of you, her hand was clammy, her eyes wide. "Don't let the singing come here," she whispered, and then she was gone, pulled back into the crowd. No one acknowledged her words, but everyone seemed to hear them.

By the time you reached the tunnel entrance, Serin Vael's presence lingered behind like a shadow. She had not promised you trust, but she had offered a ledger. In Haven, that was the closest thing to faith.

The Tunnels

The Quarter's mouth opened into the tunnels with no ceremony—just a stairwell slick with condensation and a chain-link gate whose lock had been broken and repaired too many times to matter. The air grew cooler as you descended, and the hum of the colony deepened into a register you could feel in your sternum. Water dripped with an irregular rhythm, the drops fat and metallic, tasting of rust on the tongue before you even stepped through the threshold.

Light here was not electric alone. Miners had strung charms across junction boxes: washer-strings, colored fuse glass, even bits of ribbon scavenged from ration crates. Each charm clinked when the air shifted, pro-

ducing a jittery chorus that stood in for hymns. “Keeps the hum honest,” one rigger explained in passing, eyes refusing to meet yours. You got the sense the charms were less for luck and more for defiance. If the machines had started to sing, the miners meant to sing back, however off-key.

Conduits arched like ribs along the ceiling. Resin patches slicked across welds where stress fractures had tried to split the skeleton of Haven. Your boots stuck briefly to the floor in places where sealant oozed, then pulled free with a sound like tearing fabric. At every junction, someone had scrawled numbers in chalk, but the sequences didn’t align. Row C claimed this was junction 18, but Row D swore it was 22. The colony’s map was dissolving at the edges, just as surely as the aurora dissolved the sky above.

Tannic “Rust” Varo waited for you at the gallery mouth, a coil of resin charges strapped across his back. His forearms were latticed with scars, not self-inflicted but earned through decades of keeping tunnels open with more grit than tools. He greeted you with a nod, the kind that carried weight not because of words but because of what it withheld. He checked each of you the way a veteran checks rigging: tugging in silence, deciding whether it will hold. His laugh lines had long since hardened into trenches, but when he met your gaze there was no dismissal, only a tired loyalty to anyone willing to step into the dark beside him.

Beside him, **Meryn Ralos** clutched a tablet so tightly his knuckles bleached white. He wore the insignia of Helion Compliance, but the badge looked flimsy in this place. His hair was perfectly parted, his nails buffed clean, and his voice trembled as he tried to recite policy into a space where policy had no gravity. “Intervention must be documented... liability assessments must be noted... variance categories must be assigned...” Each phrase faltered as his eyes tracked condensation dripping down resin walls like tears. He looked at you as though begging for someone—anyone—to confirm that words on a tablet could still matter here.

Rust ignored him. He crouched by a blossom-lens drone sprawled on its side, casing scarred and serial number scratched away. The lens twitched once in the light, then stilled. Rust spat into the dark and muttered, “Zeratek built these to listen, not to work. Now they’re listening to something they shouldn’t.” He drove his boot into the drone’s carcass, the impact echoing like a cracked bell. The washer-charms above shivered, their discordant notes briefly aligning into a chord that set your teeth on edge.

GM — Tunnel Atmosphere

- **Claustrophobia:** Emphasize the narrowness, the sticky resin, the constant hum. PCs should feel the walls pressing inward.
- **Miners’ rituals:** Charms, chalk numbers, whispered phrases. Reward PCs who engage respectfully with +25 XP and a minor Quarter contact.
- **Rust vs Ralos:** Play them as contrasts. Rust = grounded, practical, survivor. Ralos = bureaucrat out of depth, but with access to valuable records if reassured.
- **Foreshadowing:** The hum. Stress that it feels *alive*, like something counting in a rhythm the PCs can’t quite catch.

The further you walked, the more the hum seemed to shape itself. At first it was random—a machine vibration with no pattern. But then you noticed it aligning with your footsteps, just briefly, before skipping ahead again like a child playing tag in the dark. Miners refused to speak of it directly. One woman muttered, “Don’t call it what it is,” and made the sign of a circle with three slashes. Another spat on the floor each time the hum rose, as though trying to drown it in ritual contempt. You realized quickly that the Quarter had already given this phenomenon a name, but no one here dared say it twice.

Ralos finally broke, voice cracking as he held his tablet higher. “This variance is not statistically significant,” he insisted. “We... we just need to recalibrate the arrays, file the correct forms, and...” He trailed off when his own words bounced back from the walls, repeating like a mocking echo. His hand shook so violently he

nearly dropped the device. Rust took the moment to growl: “Forms don’t hold walls. Resin does. People do.”

As you pressed deeper, the tunnel narrowed until only two could walk abreast. Lights above flickered with a staccato rhythm. Once, twice, three times—then darkness so complete you felt your pulse speed as though chased. When the lights returned, one of the charms had vanished, leaving only a bare wire swinging slowly in the air. No one touched it.

GM — Encounter Hooks (The Tunnels)

- **Drone carcasses:** PCs who investigate can recover 1–2 *blossom lenses* (see Loot in Ambush). They pulse faintly if held against the aurora flicker.
- **Charms:** Interacting with charms respectfully (e.g., humming along, repairing one) earns Quarter goodwill. Breaking them or mocking them = Quarter Morale –1.
- **Ralos’ notes:** If protected, Ralos will later release compliance reports that expose Zeratek firmware inconsistencies. PCs who ignore him risk losing this lead.

At last, the tunnel opened into a jagged gallery where vents should have been neatly braced. The resin patchwork ended abruptly, replaced by raw metal split like bone. The hum here was undeniable. It rose and fell in a pattern your body wanted to interpret as music, though no instrument could play it. Somewhere in the shadows, a blossom lens clicked open like an eye. Then another. Then three more. Each one oriented not on Rust, not on Ralos, but on *you*.

Rust cursed under his breath and primed a resin charge. Ralos whispered, “Variance category three,” though his hands shook too badly to type it. And above, the washer-charms rattled in a syncopated rhythm that sounded almost like applause.

Ambush in the Gallery — North Shaft Collapse

The tunnel opened like a wound. Where there should have been braced vent lines and neat resin patching, there was only raw metal, cracked wide and jagged. The air stank of hot copper and resin smoke, the kind that sears your nostrils and makes every breath taste like pennies. At first glance, you might have thought the drones littering the gallery were wrecks. Then one blossom-lens twitched, oriented on movement, and a chorus of faint hums filled the air—low and arrhythmic, like the clearing of mechanical throats before a song.

Rust cursed and primed a resin charge. Ralos whispered “Variance category three” under his breath, his tablet quivering in both hands. Veyne’s jaw locked as she raised her weapon, but her eyes didn’t track the drones. They were fixed on the **North Shaft**, where a girder had collapsed into a spidery heap. Two miners were pinned beneath its weight, boots protruding from the rubble. One foot twitched weakly. The other was still. Sparks cascaded as drones cut patient, surgical lines through the debris, moving closer with the steady assurance of tools that had been taught cruelty.

The scene froze for a heartbeat, then came alive at once: resin smoke thickened, the hum aligned into something perilously close to rhythm, and the gallery lights stuttered like they were afraid. The shaft was not just a collapse. It was a stage—and you had just walked into the first act.

“If they cut through to the bodies, they’ll finish what the girder started,” Rust snapped. “We move now or we dig graves instead.”

The drones did not rush. They never rushed. Each cutter flared with surgical precision, carving away supports like they were dismantling the colony piece by piece. Their blossom lenses gleamed faintly green in the

aurora's reflected light from above, as though the sky itself had crept down here to watch.

GM — Encounter Setup (North Shaft)

- **Terrain:** Jagged debris, resin smoke, failing braces. PCs who climb risk 1d6 bludgeoning damage if supports shift.
- **Threats:** 3 Scrap Drones (AC 7; HD 1d8; THAC0 20; DMG 1d6 cutter; Morale 12). They focus on finishing the miners unless stopped.
- **Timer:** 3 rounds before the first pinned miner dies. After 5 rounds, the second is lost unless freed.
- **Skill options:** STR to lift debris, DEX to brace collapsing beams, INT to jury-rig support with tools. Award XP for ingenuity over brute force.

As you approached, the collapsed girder groaned under its own weight. Resin patches peeled back like scabs. The twitching boot spasmed once more, a feeble protest against inevitability. The other miner—still pinned deeper in the rubble—remained frighteningly silent. Rust threw his shoulder against the beam, teeth gritted, sweat dripping into his eyes. “Help me hold!” he barked. His voice cracked with something not often heard from him: fear disguised as command.

The drones turned in unison, three lenses catching the dim light. They shifted their cutters from the beam to the rescuers, as if deciding that mercy was no longer efficient. Sparks leapt, carving the air with harsh white arcs. One drone lunged, its cutter screeching against a steel brace an inch from your shoulder. The hum spiked in pitch, and for an instant you could swear it wasn't mechanical at all—it sounded like someone *counting*.

Ralos yelped as sparks sprayed his tablet, nearly dropping it. “This... this isn't in any variance record,” he stammered, more to himself than anyone else. “It's—this is wrong.” His panic only added to the claustrophobic press of the gallery, where every sound seemed to echo back as though the tunnels themselves were listening.

GM — Outcomes (North Shaft)

- **If the PCs free both miners:** Quarter Morale +1; Reclaimer Trust +1. Survivors whisper the PCs' names like talismans.
- **If only one is saved:** Gratitude mixes with grief. Quarter Morale unchanged, but Serin Vael marks the ledger against those who hesitate.
- **If neither survives:** Quarter Morale -2; Street Temperature +1. The Reclaimers spread word: outsiders talk big, save none.
- **If drones destroyed creatively:** Accord Optics +1. Recordings can be leveraged against Zeratek. Otherwise, salvage only abstract 0–50 cr worth of parts.

By the time the girder groaned its last and the cutters died down, the gallery was smeared with resin smoke and sweat. The miners—alive or not—were carried out on makeshift stretchers of pipe and canvas. Rust leaned heavily against the wall, breathing like a man who had fought gravity itself. “We don't get to pick what we save,” he muttered. “We only get to decide what dies slower.”

Above, the washer-charms chimed in an uncanny harmony, as though the gallery itself approved or condemned what had just transpired. The hum lingered, quieter now, but unmistakably alive.

Ambush in the Gallery — Main Line Defense

Across the gallery, the **Main Line** looked less like a battlefield and more like desperation incarnate. A half-dozen workers—helmets dented, coveralls streaked with soot—had formed a shield wall out of scavenged

crate lids and dented plating. They held their line at the mouth of a supply corridor, feet braced against resin-slick stone, knuckles white on makeshift grips. Every breath came in ragged gasps, but still they stood. Behind them, families huddled in the shadows, their eyes wide, their silence more terrified than any scream.

The drones did not charge blindly. They pressed with machine patience, cutters gnawing against the shields in precise, repeated arcs. Sparks spat and hissed with each contact. The workers buckled, then surged back, singing half a work song between clenched teeth to keep rhythm. It was an old miner's cadence, stripped of melody and left only with stubborn beat. Even so, it trembled on the edge of breaking. One more push, and the wall would shatter.

The moment you approached, the drones hesitated, lenses swiveling toward fresh motion. The song faltered. For the first time, the workers' eyes flicked sideways, as if silently asking whether you would join or simply watch them collapse. The children in the shadows clutched tighter at sleeves, the air thick with smoke and waiting judgment.

"Keystone's cracked," one miner rasped through his shield. "We need bodies in the line—or we break."

Rust shouted from across the chamber, his voice hoarse but urgent. "Hold the damn line! Give them a chance to live!" Even he sounded unsure if it was command or prayer. Ralos muttered numbers under his breath, trembling fingers inputting casualty projections as if statistics could hold the shields upright. Veyne's rifle barked once, cutting down a drone mid-step, but she looked back to see what the party would do. She had measured you once at the shuttle bay. This was the second measurement.

GM — Encounter Setup (Main Line)

- **Terrain:** Narrow corridor mouth, resin-slick footing. Crate-lid shields provide AC bonus if PCs join wall.
- **Threats:** 4 Scrap Drones. They attack in coordinated bursts: +1 to hit if 2+ strike the same shield.
- **Timer:** Workers can hold only 2 rounds unaided before rout. With PCs in line, each PC adds +1 round of morale.
- **Skill options:** STR or CON to absorb impacts, CHA to rally the song, DEX to slip past and flank drones. Reward creative positioning.

When you stepped into the line, the rhythm shifted. Shields rose higher, grips tightened, and the song found new voice. Your bodies formed a keystone the wall had been missing. The next drone surge hit, cutters screeching against metal, sparks showering your faces—but this time, the line held. The resonance of voices rose: not tuneful, but relentless, the sound of defiance hammered into beat.

The washer-charms above the corridor rattled, their discord somehow aligning to the rhythm of the song. For a moment, it was unclear whether the colony itself was singing along, or mocking. The hum beneath your feet deepened, vibrating bones, as if counting the beats of your defiance.

One drone shifted tactics, swinging wide to flank. A child shrieked as its lens flared. If no one broke formation, the drone would carve straight into the civilians. If someone peeled from the line, the wall risked collapse. The choice was sharp, immediate, and costly either way.

GM — Outcomes (Main Line)

- **If PCs hold the line without breaking:** The civilians remain safe, the drones are destroyed, and morale surges. *Accord Optics* +1 as word spreads that outsiders held firm.
- **If PCs peel to save civilians:** The line buckles, 1d4 miners injured, but the child is spared. *Street Temperature* +1 (seen as protectors of the vulnerable).

- **If PCs fail to reinforce:** The wall collapses, drones spill into civilians. *Quarter Morale* –2. Survivors blame Helion, but whispers tie the failure to the Accord’s agents.
- **Loot:** Drone salvage worth 50–100 cr if recovered, or one intact blossom lens (records 30s of distorted audio).

When the final drone shuddered and collapsed, silence rushed in like a vacuum. The workers leaned on their battered shields, gasping. One spat blood, another laughed a laugh that sounded more like a sob. They looked at you with the eyes of men and women who had seen the abyss and stepped back only because someone else stood with them. For the first time, their song stopped trembling. For the first time, it felt like a hymn.

From the shadows, the children stared. One whispered, “They sang with us,” and the others nodded solemnly, as though a pact had been made. Above, the charms rattled again, eerily on beat. Whether it was harmony or mockery, none could tell.

Ambush in the Gallery — The Child in the Alcove

At the far edge of the gallery, tucked behind a lattice of pipes, a **maintenance alcove** opened like a throat into shadow. There, a child sat alone, knees drawn up to chest, eyes wide but unblinking. He did not scream when the drones advanced. He did not run when their cutters flared. Instead, he hummed—softly, tunelessly, but unmistakably in rhythm with the vibration in the walls. The sound raised hairs on your arms. It was not mimicry. It was *harmony*.

One drone peeled away from the skirmish, lens flickering like an eye catching scent. It prowled toward the alcove with measured precision, cutter sparking against metal as if sharpening itself for the work. The hum deepened in your bones, the colony’s heartbeat aligning with the child’s song. For a moment you could swear the drone hesitated, cocking its lens as though listening for the next verse.

The child’s humming grew louder. Not defiant, not frightened—simply matter-of-fact, as if he were part of some choir only he could hear. His lips formed syllables too faint to catch, but the pattern was clear: three notes rising, one falling. The same cadence you’d felt in the aurora’s flicker above the dome. The same phrase you’d heard in the washer-charms’ rattles. The same motif that haunted the tunnels since you stepped foot inside.

“It’s not supposed to know us,” Ralos whispered, his voice strangled. “It’s supposed to *obey*.”

The drone’s cutter flared inches from the grille. Sparks rained across the child’s face, painting his features in brief, sharp light. He didn’t flinch. He hummed louder, and the drone’s lens dilated in reply. For a terrifying moment it seemed as though the machine might lay down its cutter and simply listen forever. Then the harmony fractured. The motif stumbled. The drone’s head twitched violently, and the cutter thrust forward.

You reached the alcove in time. Whether it was steel, spell, or sheer strength, you struck, and the blow landed with all the weight of inevitability. The drone spasmed, cutter shrieking against metal, then collapsed in a hiss of smoke. The child blinked once, then reached for your hand without a word. His palm was clammy, his grip fierce. He did not let go.

GM — Encounter Setup (The Child)

- **Terrain:** Narrow alcove, low pipes, little room to maneuver. DEX checks to avoid catching gear on conduits.
- **Threats:** 2 Scrap Drones drawn to the alcove. One focuses on the child, the other on PCs who intervene.

- **Timer:** 2 rounds before the child is injured if unprotected. At 3 rounds, his humming escalates into an uncontrollable motif—risking panic in all drones present.
- **Skill options:** WIS or CHA to soothe the child and break his trance; STR or melee to intercept drones; INT to rig an emergency EMP from nearby fuse boxes.

The gallery around you blurred into smoke and sparks, but the child remained fixed on your face, humming even as you carried him clear. He looked not at the drones but at the walls, counting lights, lips shaping notes only half-sung. His eyes were too calm, too old, for a child his age. When one of you unconsciously echoed his motif—a low hum beneath your breath—his gaze sharpened like a beacon finding its target. He knew. He knew you had heard it too.

GM — Outcomes (The Child)

- **If the child is saved unharmed:** Street Temperature +1. Word spreads of outsiders who protect the vulnerable. The child becomes a recurring ally—his ability to map motifs to places is invaluable.
- **If the child is saved but injured:** Quarter Morale +1 (gratitude) but Reclaimer Trust –1 (resentment that you let harm touch one of their own).
- **If the child is lost:** Quarter Morale –2, Accord Optics –1. Whispers of “the ones who let him die” follow the PCs everywhere.
- **Special:** PCs who hum the motif with the child unlock a persistent campaign thread: *The Choir recognizes them.*

When the final drone fell and silence reclaimed the alcove, the child pressed himself to your side. He would not release your hand. His hum dwindled to a murmur, then silence, but the rhythm lingered in your bones long after. The washers above rattled one last time, in uncanny synchrony with his heartbeat. The aurora flickered faintly through cracks in the dome, and for an instant the whole colony seemed to breathe in unison with the boy.

Silence After & Fallout

When the final drone collapsed in a hiss of resin smoke, the gallery exhaled as if it, too, had been holding its breath. The silence that followed was not peace but shock—a vacuum left where sound should have been. For a long moment, no one moved. The only noise was the faint rattle of washer-charms above, chiming in a pattern that could have been approval, or mourning, or both.

The miners began to gather the wounded. Makeshift stretchers were fashioned from pipe lengths and torn canvas, their edges slick with sweat and resin. Those who had survived stumbled forward, eyes wide and hollow. Some touched the PCs’ arms as they passed, wordless gratitude etched deeper than language. Others refused to meet your gaze, grief eclipsing any thanks. In Haven, survival was never clean. It always demanded payment.

Rust Varo leaned against a buckled beam, breathing like he’d just wrestled the colony itself. His hands shook—not with fear, but with exhaustion. “We don’t get to pick what we save,” he muttered, voice rough. “Only what dies slower. You did what you could.” He looked at you then, and though his eyes were shadowed, there was no contempt. Only recognition that you had stood where others might have run.

Ralos, pale and trembling, tried to compose a report. His tablet screen was cracked, the words flickering, but still he tapped lines of text: “*Intervention successful. Casualties within variance threshold. Recommend review of drone firmware integrity.*” His voice shook as he recited it, like he was trying to convince himself more than anyone else. When he realized you were watching, he faltered, then whispered: “If I frame it right, we can hold Zeratek liable. But only if... if you protect me when they push back.”

The child clung to your side, his grip unyielding. He stared at the ductwork, lips moving in half-formed hums. When one of you echoed the motif—consciously or not—his eyes widened with eerie clarity. He knew. He had heard the same voice in the aurora that you had. He would remember this moment, and the memory would shape the way the Quarter whispered your names in the nights to come.

GM — Fallout Tracking

- **Quarter Morale:** Adjust based on outcomes at Shaft, Main Line, and Child. Positive totals mean gratitude; negatives mean unrest.
- **Reclaimer Trust:** Grows if PCs risk themselves for miners. Falters if sacrifices are made in the name of optics.
- **Accord Optics:** Boosted if victories were visible, recorded, or spun. Penalized if deaths outweigh PR gains.
- **Street Temperature:** If PCs saved the child, word spreads fast. If not, suspicion burns hotter than any torch.
- **Machine Wake Clock:** Advance 1–2 ticks (of 6) for every uncanny electrical event. The Choir remembers.

Captain Lira Veyne surveyed the aftermath with a soldier’s calm. She barked orders to Security, who began clearing debris and stabilizing braces. Then she turned back to you. Her voice was low, but every word landed with weight. “You bought us time. Not victory. Haven doesn’t trade in victories anymore. Just time.” She studied you for a long moment, then added: “We’ll see what you do with it.”

The workers carried their wounded away, their footsteps echoing like a drumbeat of endurance. The smell of resin clung to your skin, mingled with the metallic tang of blood. For all the chaos, there was no mistaking one fact: you had altered the rhythm of the Quarter. Whether for better or worse, you had become part of the story whispered in these tunnels. And stories in Haven had a way of spreading faster than light.

As you ascended back toward the Quarter, the colony itself seemed to shift around you. Conversations hushed as you passed. Eyes followed you with mixtures of awe, suspicion, and calculation. Serin Vael awaited you at the manifold, arms folded, expression unreadable. She glanced at the survivors behind you, then at the child, then back at you. “Ledger’s open,” she said simply. “Where you fall in it—well, we’ll see.”

Above, the dome’s aurora flickered again. This time, it was not random. Three pulses, one pause—the same motif the child had hummed. You could no longer dismiss it as coincidence. Haven was singing, and someone—or something—was teaching it the words.

GM — Bridging into Arc 2

- **Governor Orus Hestrel** summons the party for a “courtesy call” in the Spire. His invitation is less request than verdict.
- **Kaelen Drix** (Zeratek) demands return of salvaged drone parts, offering firmware updates in exchange. His smile hides teeth.
- **Director Sael** (Compliance Medicine) offers screenings for “residual stress.” Volunteers rarely emerge unchanged.
- **Saint** of the Accord pings: *“Bring me something they can’t spin—a clip, a sample, a pattern. Make it sing even to the deaf.”*

End Arc 1 with the party walking toward the Spire’s sealed doors. Let the building hum once—just enough to suggest the aurora’s song has reached even here.

And so Arc 1 closed not with victory, but with silence. A silence filled with unspoken debts, unburied grief, and the faint, chilling suspicion that Haven’s voice was no longer human alone.

Top Go to Arc 2 Open Dossier

Arc 1 → **Arc 2**

Arc 2 — Spire of Quiet Lies

Arrival at the Spire

The walk from the Quarter to Haven’s Spire was not long in distance, but every step measured the gulf between the colony’s halves. The air itself seemed to change—less grit, more perfume. Even the sound shifted: the rattle of pipes faded behind you, replaced by the muted hum of elevators polished until they gleamed like surgical steel. Lira Veyne strode ahead, a silent shadow, as if to remind you that your permission to climb was borrowed authority, not earned.

The Spire rose through the dome like a blade. Its mirrored skin caught the aurora’s glow, fracturing green-white light into shimmering rainbows that washed over Haven below. From the Quarter, those rainbows looked like beauty. Up close, they felt like surveillance. The glass did not reflect—it watched. Every mirrored panel seemed to ask whether you were worthy to stand in its presence.

Inside, the change was sharper still. Carpets muffled every footfall. Air scrubbers whispered a perfect monotone. Art from Bryndor and Kharsis lined the walls: abstract strokes and crystal sculptures, carefully curated to suggest cultural unity without risking anything as dangerous as specificity. Overhead, a mural of Solus Tarsis, the system’s star, blazed in golden paint, its rays reaching every corner of the atrium. It was less a celebration than a warning: the star gave life, and it could burn you away just as easily.

At the stair’s base stood **Governor Orus Hestrel**. His suit was pressed to the point of hostility, his smile measured in degrees. Subtle drones hovered in orbit, recording every angle. He radiated warmth with the precision of a manufactured hearth. “Welcome to Haven’s Spire,” he began, voice pitched perfectly to reach both you and the cameras. “The Quarter may look to you as saviors. Here, you will be judged as stabilizers. I trust you know the difference.”

To his right lingered **Kaelen Drix**, Zeratek’s liaison. His cufflinks gleamed, his smirk practiced. Every gesture seemed rehearsed to strike a balance between affable and calculating. He eyed the drone wreckage you carried—or the scratches on your armor—and smiled faintly, as if already calculating the cost of your survival in corporate ledgers. To his left, **Director Sael** of Compliance Medicine wore pale robes that made him look less like an administrator and more like an officiant at a funeral. He held a clipboard, and his eyes moved across you like a physician diagnosing a terminal condition.

For a moment, silence fell. Then the aurora flickered through the Spire’s high glass roof. Green-white threads pulsed three times, then fell silent. The same motif you had heard in the tunnels, the same cadence the child had hummed. None of the three flinched. Perhaps they had trained themselves not to hear. Or perhaps they had heard it too often to care.

“Stability is a fragile currency,” Hestrel continued, voice sharpened to a knife’s edge. “I will not see Haven bankrupted by panic. Tell me, Accord agents—what have you brought me?”

Your answer mattered less than how you framed it. Hestrel wanted proof you could be spun into optics. Drix wanted leverage to twist against competitors. Sael wanted compliance, preferably volunteered. Every word would ripple outward, recorded, dissected, and replayed until the Spire could decide whether you were assets—or liabilities.

GM — Running the Spire Opener

- **Governor Hestrel:** Treat him as optics incarnate. He never asks for truth, only narratives. PCs who challenge him risk Accord Optics –1; PCs who match his spin gain +1 Accord Optics.
- **Kaelen Drix:** Smiles constantly. Always asks about salvage. If PCs admit to carrying drone parts, he demands return “for safety review.” PCs who resist gain Reclaimer Trust +1 but provoke Zeratek hostility.
- **Director Sael:** Soft voice, sharp control. He offers screenings for “stress.” Any PC who accepts will be marked for later compliance experiments. PCs who refuse publicly risk optics but gain quiet Reclaimer respect.
- **Optics:** The entire encounter is recorded. Have NPCs repeat PC words back with twists. Make them feel scrutinized at every turn.

The chamber seemed to tighten around you as each faction leaned forward with their unspoken demands. Hestrel’s smile waited for a speech he could edit into victory. Drix’s smirk promised paperwork and price tags. Sael’s stillness was almost worse than words. And above, the aurora flickered again, a reminder that the Spire’s walls did not shield you from Haven’s deeper song.

Veyne broke the silence. “They bought us time,” she said flatly. “In the Quarter. You want to know if they’re stabilizers? Ask the people still breathing.” Her words cut through the theatrics like a blade. But Hestrel only smiled wider, because even defiance could be spun into narrative.

For the first time since entering the Spire, the question hung heavy in the air: would you play their game—or break it?

Audience with the Three — Hestrel & Drix

The atrium doors parted without a sound. A chamber opened like a polished wound—tiered seats, a dais meant for pronouncements, and a ceiling of mirror facets that multiplied everyone into a thousand careful angles. Sound here behaved itself. Even whispers lined up to be counted.

Audience with the Three — Hestrel & Drix

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Governor Orus Hestrel

Hestrel did not invite you to sit. Power stands. He positioned himself so the aurora, filtered through the Spire’s glass, traced a halo on his shoulders. The cameras kept their distance—just far enough to imply modesty, close enough to taste blood if there was any.

“We have three problems,” he began, turning each word into a clean tile that could be grouted into a speech. “Unrest in Row-C. Sabotage presented as malfunction. And—” a small smile “—the narrative vacuum created when frightened people speak first.” He folded his hands. “I intend to fill that vacuum before anyone else does.”

He asked for your account of the gallery, but not for truth; for *sequence*. Truth can’t be edited. Sequence can. As you spoke, he rearranged cause and effect like furniture: miners panicked *because* drones malfunctioned; drones malfunctioned *because* Zeratek was misled; the Quarter feared *because* rumors spread. Every version moved responsibility upward, then sideways, never toward the Spire.

“Stability is not the absence of danger,” he said, “it is the presence of confidence.”

When you mentioned the humming motif, he didn’t blink. “I have *heard* the chatter,” he conceded. “Let’s not give poetry to hardware failure.” He slid a thin slate across the lectern—a draft statement, already pre-signed. Your names appeared as attributed sources, the way a wrench appears in a staged photograph of repairs.

GM — Hestrel’s Game

- **If PCs sign the statement:** *Accord Optics* +1 (you look cooperative); *Reclaimer Trust* –1 (seen as spin-friendly).
- **If PCs edit to include drone hostility or the motif:** contested CHA/Intimidation vs Hestrel’s WIS (15).
- **If PCs refuse to be quoted:** *Accord Optics* –1 short-term, but you gain a quiet ally among the press clerks.
- **Hook:** Hestrel hints that *someone* in Zeratek falsified maintenance logs. He won’t name them yet; he wants you to “discover” it and owe him.

Kaelen Drix, Zeratek Liaison

Drix’s office was chilled two degrees below comfort—perfect for hardware, less so for people. On the wall, exploded diagrams of blossom-lens drones blossomed like flowers vivisected for study. A display table showed a clean loop of your gallery engagement: scrubbed of screams, framed for performance review. He greeted you with a smile that touched his teeth but not his eyes.

“First,” he said smoothly, “thank you for preserving company assets.” The feed paused on a frame of you catching a drone mid-lunge. He admired the moment as if it belonged to him now. “Second, we require return of all Zeratek property for diagnostics.” His hand extended: not a handshake—an invoice.

Drix’s questions were knives wrapped in silk. Did the drones *initiate* aggression? Did you alter any firmware *in the field*? Had any miners “interfered” with maintenance? Each query sought one of three outcomes: liability redirected to labor, firmware access secured, or your testimony bound to his narrative. On his desk, a small prism pulsed faintly with the aurora’s rhythm. He never looked at it. He knew you would.

“You’ll hear poetic nonsense about choirs and sky-songs,” he said with practiced pity. “In my world, systems fail for reasons we can fix. Give me the parts; I’ll give you a discount on certainty.”

When you asked about falsified logs, he didn’t flinch. “Clerical noise,” he replied. “Happens when underqualified staff panic. We correct it.” The word *correct* had edges. He slid a non-disclosure across the table—dense, predatory text. “Sign, and you’ll receive our internal variance maps. You’ll know where the next *glitches* will occur before the Quarter does.”

GM — Drix’s Traps

- **Return drone parts, sign NDA:** Access to *Zeratek Variance Map* (3 seeded hotspots). Cost: *Reclaimer Trust* –1, and Drix gains leverage.
- **Refuse, keep salvage:** *Reclaimer Trust* +1, *Zeratek Hostility* +1. Expect smear campaigns and audits.
- **Middle path (fake parts / doctored footage):** INT or DEX check. Success: PCs keep a real blossom lens while satisfying Drix. Failure: he catches it, *Accord Optics* –1.
- **Intel if charmed/bribed:** Drix admits a firmware branch labeled *CHOIR_SAFE* appeared then vanished. He blames a “rogue contractor.” He’s lying.

GM — Running the Spire Opener (Context)

- **Governor Hestrel:** Treat him as optics incarnate. Never asks for truth, only narratives. PCs who challenge him risk Accord Optics –1; PCs who match his spin gain +1.
- **Kaelen Drix:** Always asks about salvage. PCs who resist gain Reclaimer Trust +1 but provoke Zeratek hostility.
- **Director Sael:** Soft voice, sharp control. Offers screenings for “stress.” PCs who refuse publicly risk optics but gain Reclaimer respect.
- **Optics:** The entire encounter is recorded. Have NPCs repeat PCs’ words back with twists to emphasize scrutiny.

Before you left, Drix tapped the prism. The room’s lights dimmed, syncing to a heartbeat you could feel more than hear. “We sell tools,” he murmured. “If they start singing, someone else taught them the notes.” He smiled. “Make sure your report says that.”

Outside his door, the corridor’s hush returned. Ahead, a light glowed over the entrance to Compliance Medicine. A pale figure waited within, hands folded, as if for a confession you hadn’t agreed to give.

Proceed to Director Sael — Compliance Medicine when ready.

Director Sael — Compliance Medicine

Compliance Medicine did not smell like hospitals you remember. It smelled like *decision*—sterile air, citrus antiseptic, and a trace of cold metal that lived in the back of the throat. The reception was almost empty. No posters, no smiling faces. Just a glass wall with light moving behind it like a heartbeat and a desk where a single attendant didn’t look up.

Director **Sael** waited in the doorway as if he had always been there. His robes were the color of unspoken things; his hands were folded precisely, a pose that belonged to officiants and surgeons. He did not offer a seat. He suggested one by glancing at it until you understood you were meant to sit.

“We log crisis exposures,” Sael said in a voice tuned to carry without rising. “You have had several. Our screenings are brief. Non-invasive.” A pause, measured to the length of a breath. “Helpful.”

Rooms branched out from the corridor like cells in a hive—clear walls, soft light, a single recliner, a single monitor. The devices were beautiful in the way scalpels are beautiful. A pale bracelet lay on a steel tray, its display dark. Someone had engineered it to be friendly; it still managed to look like a collar.

“We monitor stress oscillations,” Sael continued. “Haven experiences unusual interference. The old language calls it *auroral*. We prefer *environmental rhythm*.” He watched your faces closely when he said rhythm. “The screening will map your response to it. Afterwards, we advise.”

Through the glass you could see a patient rising from a recliner—eyes red but calm, a technician removing a bracelet with a click that sounded too loud. The patient thanked the technician. The technician didn’t answer. Soundproofing swallowed the words before they were born.

Sael’s gaze slid to the blossom lens you kept or the scratches on your armor. “You encountered Zeratek assets at close range,” he said. “They were *noisy*. The body remembers that. Sometimes the body hears it again when the room is quiet.”

He opened a drawer without looking. Inside lay a neat fan of bracelets. “Voluntary,” he said, and somehow made the word feel like a test. “The Spire is united in wishing you well.” He let the sentence rest there, as

if goodwill could do the work of consent.

On the wall, a soft tone pulsed—three notes rising, one falling. No speaker was visible. Perhaps it was your imagination. Perhaps the building was humming to itself again. Sael’s expression did not change. He watched your pupils.

“A brief baseline,” he said. “Then we can speak with data instead of stories.”

If anyone accepted, the room cooled by a degree. The bracelet clasped with a precise click. A pale waveform unrolled across the monitor, beautiful as a fishing line cast across still water. Then the waveform rippled, not with panic but with recognition. The baseline learned the room. Or the room learned the baseline. The bracelet vibrated once—so faint it felt like a memory of touch.

“You hear it,” Sael murmured, almost to himself. “Not with ears.” He did not write anything down. The monitor recorded in silence, a second rhythm appearing beneath the first—thin, regular, like a ghost stave under a score. When the aurora’s light flickered through the frosted glass, the lower rhythm answered it.

“Environmental rhythm,” he repeated. “We observe it at altitude and underground. It entrains. Most subjects do not entrain.” A small smile. “You might be useful.”

If anyone refused, he inclined his head as if you had given the right answer to an unknown question. “Refusal is informative,” he said mildly. “You protect boundaries. In Haven, boundaries keep us alive.” Then, almost warmly: “I would still like to speak again.”

He let silence grow between sentences the way gardeners let vines grow between stones. When he finally broke it, the words were soft enough to be mistaken for kindness. “People are frightened. Frightened people make bargains with liars. I do not bargain. I diagnose. Bring me something measurable, and I will bring you something treatable.”

On the way out, you noticed a door with no handle. A single glyph pulsed on the frame—three notes rising, one falling. A nurse carrying files stopped when she saw you looking. “Wrong corridor,” she said, and did not smile.

GM — Compliance Medicine (Sael)

- **Consent trap (bracelet):** If any PC accepts, mark *Compliance Tag* on that character. Benefits: Sael becomes a cautious ally; access to medical labs and scans. Costs: periodic summons; “recommended protocols” that strain party autonomy.
- **Physio anomaly:** On a screened PC, reveal a second waveform that *entrains* with auroral pulses or Choir motifs. Advance *Machine Wake Clock* +1. PCs who hum the motif stabilize the second line (ominous but useful later).
- **Public refusal vs private refusal:** Public refusal in front of staff = *Accord Optics –1, Reclaimer Trust +1*. Quiet refusal in Sael’s office = no optics hit; Sael respects boundary-setting PCs.
- **Sael’s favor:** If treated respectfully and given *any hard datum* (lens recording, variance timing), he provides a redacted incident list: multiple faint “entrainment episodes” in officers posted near the Spire’s top floors.
- **Hidden door (no-handle):** Discoverable with keen observation or follow-up: leads to the *Quiet Room*, a Faraday-style chamber used to map motif responses. Entering now requires a badge (to be acquired in Arc 2).
- **Fallout tokens:** Grant one of the following based on play:
 - *Clinical Ally:* Sael shares a one-use **Pulse Dampener** (advantage vs motif-induced panic for one scene).

- *Compliance Marker*: If PCs defy a later Spire directive, Sael can be pressured to testify that “they were unstable.” Track as a risk, not an auto-penalty.

Bridge: With the three audiences complete, the Spire releases Hestrel’s carefully edited statement. In the Quarter, the edit plays like a lie told politely. In the Spire, it plays like oxygen. Choose your next step: challenge the edit publicly, exploit Drix’s NDA offer, or court Sael for access to the Quiet Room. Any path leads into **Arc 2 — Governor’s Lies**.

The Broadcast — Prologue of Lies

The announcement hit Haven like a controlled detonation. Screens flickered awake in markets, lifts, and drinking halls. The Governor’s seal burned blue-white in the corner, and then Orus Hestrel’s face appeared—calm, immaculate, haloed by the Spire’s glass. His voice rolled through the Quarter like it had been tuned for every ear.

“Citizens of Haven. Yesterday’s variance in Row-C has been resolved. No fatalities reported. Stability maintained. Zeratek systems continue to safeguard our survival.”

The Quarter did not cheer. They stared. Miners with resin-stained gloves looked at the message, then at the stretchers they’d carried. Mothers pressed children closer, hearing their grief erased in real time. The Spire clapped itself on the back and called it salvation.

Hestrel continued, words smoothed until they lost their edges. “The Accord has reaffirmed our partnership. Zeratek has initiated diagnostics. Compliance Medicine offers free screenings to ensure peace of mind. Haven endures because we endure together.”

The feed cut to a loop of drones hovering serenely, workers smiling in clean uniforms, auroras stitched into background skies. No tunnels, no smoke, no hums in the dark. The lie was seamless. Seamless and suffocating.

Back in the Spire atrium, aides circulated printed drafts of the statement for “internal review.” You saw the edits in margin notes: *delete panic, replace with variance; strike casualties, insert anomalies*. Whole lives reduced to red lines.

GM — The Broadcast

- **Accord Optics**: +1 if PCs remain silent (they are seen as cooperative). –1 if they object publicly (clips circulate fast).
- **Reclaimer Trust**: +1 if PCs contradict Hestrel in private to Reclaimer contacts. –1 if PCs endorse the statement.
- **Choice**: Allow PCs to attempt CHA (Persuasion) or INT (Logic) rolls to alter wording. Success = “variance” replaced with “malfunction,” seeding doubt; Failure = edits ignored, optics penalty.
- **Hook**: Attentive PCs spot a symbol hidden in the broadcast watermark—three pulses, one pause. The Choir’s motif is in the Governor’s feed.

Behind the Curtain — Hestrel & Drix

The public broadcast ended, but the real conversation began behind sealed doors. The chamber was smaller than the atrium, paneled in wood imported from Bryndor—an expensive affectation. The only audience now were the three of you, Hestrel, and Kaelen Drix waiting with a smile that had never known sincerity.

Hestrel leaned against the lectern, dropping his smile like a mask too heavy to hold. “We keep this city alive by editing the script,” he said. “You may not like it. Neither do I. But panic is more lethal than resin collapse.” His hands folded, as if in prayer to optics themselves.

Drix interjected smoothly. “What the Governor means, Accord agents, is that raw data is dangerous. That’s where I come in. You want stability? Return the salvage. Blossom lenses, firmware chips, anything you pried out of those drones. Zeratek will handle diagnostics. You’ll handle gratitude.”

He slid a sleek case across the table. Inside: nondisclosure forms, compensation notes, and a slim data prism pulsing faintly with auroral rhythm. He didn’t acknowledge the pulse. He knew you would.

“Sign, and you’ll be safe,” Drix said. “Decline, and you’ll be suspects. Haven can’t afford suspects.”

Hestrel’s gaze tracked you with quiet calculation. “Cooperation proves reliability,” he murmured. “And reliable agents are granted access. Access to the Governor’s Council. Access to the real maps. Don’t squander this chance to be on the right side of history.”

The weight of both men’s demands hung in the air: optics or ownership, silence or spin. Every answer carried a cost.

GM — Behind the Curtain

- **Hestrel’s Offer:** PCs who play along gain *Accord Optics* +1 but *Reclaimer Trust* –1. Refusal costs Accord Optics but earns Reclaimer loyalty.
- **Drix’s NDA:** Signing grants access to Zeratek Variance Maps (GM tool: 3 seeded “glitch sites”), but adds a *Compliance Tag* PCs can’t easily erase.
- **Refusal:** PCs keep salvage (*Reclaimer Trust* +1, *Zeratek Hostility* +1). Drix begins a smear campaign—optics penalty later.
- **Deception option:** INT or DEX (DC 15) to fake parts or falsify signatures. Success = PCs keep useful salvage while satisfying optics. Failure = exposure, *Accord Optics* –1.
- **Hidden Hook:** Careful inspection of Drix’s prism shows a buried file tag labeled *CHOIR_SAFE*. Evidence Zeratek knew about motif-linked firmware.

The Clinic’s Whisper — Sael’s Hand

Compliance Medicine’s wing felt less like a clinic and more like a chapel designed for obedience. Walls hummed with concealed machinery. Lighting was soft enough to invite, sterile enough to warn. Director Sael met you in silence, as though words should only be spoken when necessary.

He gestured toward pale recliners lined in a row, each fitted with a bracelet monitor. “Voluntary,” he said softly. “But absence of baseline complicates future care.” The implication was clear: refusal would be remembered.

Through frosted glass you glimpsed another patient—bracelet clasped, eyes fluttering, body humming with faint rhythm. The aurora outside pulsed once, twice, three times, and the monitor inside answered with the same cadence. The Choir was not rumor here. It was charted, clinical, undeniable.

“We record for patterns,” Sael explained. “Some align with known stress. Others... are environmental.” His gaze lingered on you like a scalpel. “When the pattern sings back, it is worth more than data. It is direction.”

Consent was a trap disguised as kindness. If you agreed, the bracelet locked cold against your wrist. A faint tremor echoed through your bones, leaving a ghost line on the monitor. If you refused, Sael nodded once, filing away your boundary as if it were a diagnosis. Either way, you had given him what he wanted: information.

On your way out, you noticed a side door with no handle, glowing faint glyphs: three rising pulses, one falling. A nurse blocked your view with a clipboard, murmuring, “Wrong corridor.”

GM — The Clinic’s Whisper

- **Bracelet Consent:** PCs gain a *Compliance Tag*. Sael becomes a potential ally; PCs can request medical resources. Cost: periodic summons.
 - **Refusal:** Public = *Accord Optics -1, Reclaimer Trust +1*. Private = no optics loss; Sael respects PCs’ boundary.
 - **Observation:** PCs who study monitors notice motif entrainment identical to Choir hums. This is the first *hard proof*.
 - **Hidden Door:** Leads to the *Quiet Room* (locked until Arc 2 climax or Arc 3). Used to expose deeper Choir activity.
 - **Fallout Token:** Sael may gift a *Pulse Dampener* (advantage vs. motif-induced panic once per session).
-

Bridge to Arc 3 — Fractures

The Spire spat you out like a polished throat ejecting grit. Behind, Hestrel’s statement replayed on endless loops. In the Quarter, fists slammed against screens. In the Spire, investors clinked glasses. Haven’s halves had never felt farther apart.

Captain Lira Veyne walked with you to the transit lift, her braid catching the aurora’s reflection. “You see it now,” she said flatly. “They’ll spin until the city unravels. But if you want the truth, you’ll need to dig where the light doesn’t reach.”

She handed you a data wafer—unlabeled, untraceable. “Row-C miners logged something before the drones struck. Not sabotage. Not panic. A signal. Three rising, one falling. You’ll find it in the tunnels.” Her eyes held yours. “Just don’t expect to like what answers back.”

The lift doors closed, carrying you down into the Quarter. The aurora bled through the dome above, still pulsing, still watching. Haven waited in silence, and the silence hummed.

GM — Bridge into Arc 3

- **Quarter Mood:** PCs returning face unrest. Reclaimer leaders demand answers; Accord Optics tested immediately.
- **Wafer Hook:** Data logs confirm a *signal spike* moments before the ambush. PCs can trace it to tunnels leading into Arc 3.
- **Faction Fallout:**
 - *Hestrel:* Pleased if PCs stayed quiet. Furious if they contradicted him.
 - *Drix:* Either appeased (NDA) or hostile (smear campaign).
 - *Sael:* Ally if PCs consented, skeptic if not.
- **Arc Transition:** This closes Arc 2 (*Spire of Quiet Lies*). PCs move into Arc 3 (*Echoes in the Dark*)—the first descent where the Choir’s hum takes center stage.

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Arc 3 — Echoes in the Dark

The Quarter’s tunnels breathe like a sleeping beast. The Choir’s motif—three rising, one falling—answers to no human chain of command. The Accord’s mandate narrows: follow the signal, prove intent, survive the dark.

Scene 1 — Descent to Row-C

The lift rattled past paint that had learned to peel in straight lines. Lights stuttered in a rhythm that matched no grid you’d seen, but your bones recognized it anyway. The Quarter opened like a throat—steam, noise, the hot breath of machines working past their promises.

Rust Varo met you at the mouth of the tunnel, palms scarred, voice even. “You brought helmets. Good. Down there, the air forgets it’s for people.” Serin Vael’s mark chalked the doorway: a slanted V, the angle of a pick held correctly. The tunnel swallowed the mark after the first corner.

The hum began as a rumor of sound, felt first in teeth and wrists. Three pulses rose, one fell, the pattern of a heartbeat someone had taught to count different. Pipes sweated. Old Zeratek conduit, left from the first build, wore a skin of condensation like it wanted to be touched and didn’t. Toll, the junior engineer, stayed close to your shadow and called out junctions by the name the ducts had told him. “Warm idle... cool awake... don’t run when it goes quiet.”

Rust tapped gauges that had been dead long enough to gather superstition. A needle twitched against zero, then lay down again. “See? It listens. Doesn’t mean it hears us.” The floor pitch changed—a subtle decline—and your breath fogged less, as if the tunnel remembered summer. Far away, metal rang once, like a dropped wrench deciding not to be found.

Chalk marks—white, then charcoal, then fingernail—made a breadcrumb trail along the wall. Some had been scrubbed away with a gloved palm. Others were fresh enough to powder your sleeve when you brushed past. The last mark before the first ladder was a single dot. Toll wouldn’t look at it. “Kid made those,” he said to the floor. “Kept time with the lights.”

At the ladder the motif thickened. Your hands tingled around the rungs as if you’d gripped a story told too many times. Down three flights the air took on the penny taste of wet copper. A draft moved against you from deeper in, not strong, but steady—the sort of breath a sleeping thing takes when it is dreaming of work.

GM — Running the Descent

- **Navigation:** WIS check vs. 12 to keep bearings. Failure: lose 1 turn; the motif momentarily stops (unease), then resumes louder.
- **Hazards:** Slick ladder (DEX check to avoid slip; failure = 1d3 subdual), stale pocket (save vs. Breath Weapon; failure = -1 to attacks for 1 turn).
- **Motif Stress:** Each full turn in “hot zones” → roll 2d6; on 3 or less, a PC gains trembling hands (-1 missile attacks) until rest.
- **Guides:** With Rust/Toll: +2 to Navigation. If alone: DC +2 and add a false-echo fork (wastes 1d6×10 minutes).
- **Clue Cache:** INT vs. 12 to reconstruct the scrubbed chalk (“dot language”); success grants +2 on a later pursuit/escape.

- **Quiet Test (optional):** If the group chooses to move silently, roll Move Silently (or DEX vs. 12). Success grants surprise against first hazard (Scene 3); failure creates a falling-tool noise that alerts one construct.

Scene 2 — Echo Mapping

At the junction belly named *cool awake*, the air stiffened. Your lamps looked smaller here. The walls sweated cleanly, beads marching downhill in drill-sergeant lines toward the sump. Someone had wedged a Zeratek diagnostic wand into a crack and taped its speaker shut. Even gagged, it vibrated with the motif like a throat trying not to sing.

You planted the Accord wafer Lira gave you; the triangulation readout was ugly but honest. Three spikes walked across the display like footfalls—rise, rise, rise, fall—each lag a crude compass, each pitch a guess at depth. When the aurora above the dome pulsed, the spikes flinched in sympathy and settled closer together, like they wanted to agree on a destination.

Rust knelt and pressed his palm flat to the floor. “Weight’s wrong,” he said. “Like the ground’s expecting something heavy and being polite about it.” Toll worried a strip of tape off the gagged wand and let one note escape. It trembled through the floor and came back as two, then three, then the fourth dropping out like a tooth pulled clean.

The child’s dot-map matched the spikes if you turned it ninety degrees and trusted a dead kid’s rhythm. Lines began to mean distance; dots meant places the hum preferred. Together they drew a curve that didn’t follow tunnels so much as intent, bending toward a maintenance door half drowned in silt. The stencil had been eaten down to bones of letters: *F—13 S—MP*. Someone had cleaned the handle recently. The metal shone with the small, guilty pride of a job done at the wrong time.

GM — The Mapping Minigame

- **Triangulate:** 3 rounds: choose *INT* (logic) or *WIS* (intuition). Success on 2+ rounds = pinned vector (PCs gain +1 init in Scene 3). Failure on 2+ = –1 to surprise checks.
- **Data Merge:** Using *Child’s Dot-Map* + *Accord Wafer* = +2 on one round of choice.
- **Risk Option:** Un-gag wand for +2 that round; each time, save vs. Spells or gain “vertigo echo” (–2 to next roll).
- **Pulse Window (reward):** On overall success, bank one party-wide +2 on a single later group check (positioning or retreat).
- **Side Discovery (new):** Careful search (turn spent; INT vs. 10) finds a *maintenance bypass latch* near the sump door—gives advantage on forcing it quietly in Scene 3.
- **False Harmony (new risk):** If anyone hums along to “hear it better,” roll save vs. Spells. Failure: they unconsciously drift toward the door, triggering the ambush unless restrained.

Scene 3 — The Sump at F-13

The maintenance door opened like a jaw pushed past rigor. The sump beyond sloped into a black pool where Haven’s waste water learned patience. Your beams found the curve of a submerged pipe, the ribs of a conduit, and the spine of something that used to be a drone. Thin filaments hung from the ceiling, quivering to a rhythm the ear pretended not to hear.

It rose from the water in jointed silence, not a droplet falling from its skin. The Blossom lens sat where an eye might be, its iris a shield of hexagonal glass. Three lights pulsed under it; the fourth stuttered and fell, and

your stomach answered like it had been tutored. Along the rim, two shapes unfolded from scrap—striders built from plates, cable, and stubbornness.

The room hummed at a frequency that found the small bones of the ear and set them whispering treason to your balance. The catwalk's rail buzzed like a tuning fork. In the pool, oily crescents of rainbow skated away from your lamp and regrouped with intent. Somewhere behind the drone's eye a relay clicked in fours, and the water's surface dimpled as if it, too, had learned to breathe.

GM — Sump Ambush (AD&D 2e)

- **Forces:** 1× *Choir-Key Drone* (elite, compact chassis), 2× *Improvised Striders* (spider-rig mooks). Drone opens with *Motif Pulse* to soften morale.
- **Surprise/Init:** If Mapping succeeded → no surprise; +1 init. If failed → save vs. Paralysis or –2 init from vertigo.
- **Choir-Key Drone (elite, small target):**
 - **AC 2** (small target, hardened plates); **HD 4+2**; **THAC0 17**; **Move 9**; **Morale 12**.
 - **Attacks:** iris-lance 1d6 (bleed 1 for 1 rd on failed save vs. Poison) or slam 1d6.
 - **Special:** *Motif Pulse* every 2 rds, 20' radius → save vs. Spells or –1 to attacks/checks 1 turn; *Small Targeting* grants +1 AC vs. missile; *Vulnerable:* electrical (bonus damage from shock/burst).
 - **Morale:** at 50% HP check 10+; on fail it withdraws into sump, leaving a humming *prism-seed*.
- **Improvised Strider ×2 (spider-rig):**
 - **AC 5**; **HD 2**; **THAC0 19**; **Move 12** (spidering); **Morale 9**.
 - **Attacks:** clamp 1d6; on hit target must STR check or be restrained (–2 AC) until freed (STR check by ally or 1 round action).
- **Terrain:** 1/3 room ankle-deep water (missile –1; Move –3); 5' catwalk (DEX checks on forced move); hanging filaments = light cover (–1 to hit), flammable.
- **Tactics:** Drone maintains LOS for pulses; striders flank to clamp. PCs can overload submerged conduit (INT vs. 12; 1 rd) for shock burst 2d4 (save half) and *stun constructs* 1 rd.
- **Stunts:** *Kick the rail* (STR vs. 12) for vibrating grit (targets below save vs. Breath or –2 next attack). *Ignite filaments* (oil/torch) → 10' smoky line (concealment; striders take 1d3 crossing).
- **Loot/Clues:** *Blossom Lens* (cracked), *Firmware Shard* tagged *CHOIR_SAFE*, 2× *Pulse Dampeners*. Formal hand-in: 300 cr (1–2 legal sidearms). Keeping them: +Reclaimer Trust.
- **Optional Advanced Drone (if your party's strong):** **AC 1**; **HD 5+5**; **THAC0 16**; *Double-pulse* once per combat (two pulses same round).

The drone's last light flickered a stubborn, failing rhythm. When it died, the room forgot its song. Silence rushed in like water into air—heavy, immediate, judgmental. In the sludge near the conduit you found the shard: hardened memory with a fresh label that lied cheerfully. *CHOIR_SAFE*. Someone had named the danger “safety” and taught it to sing.

The Quarter at Rest

After the Spire's doors closed behind you, the Quarter exhaled like lungs that had been waiting too long to breathe. The air still carried a charge from the aurora, but down here the hum of pipes and the flicker of lanterns returned as if nothing above had happened. Stalls reopened under patched tarps. A cook hammered an old skillet flat against a crate and poured kelp oil until the smoke curled green. The crowd moved cautiously, laughter forced, but they moved. Haven survives because Haven pretends.

You find yourself among the Quarter's thin comforts: brass fittings polished until they looked like gold; a

Reclaimer smith's table lined with drone casings claimed "from the Choir itself"; a Zeratek kiosk offering refurbished optics with the ink barely dry on their inspection seals. None of it inspires confidence, but all of it is for sale. Coins change hands with the sound of desperation disguised as normal trade.

GM — Downtime & Shops

- **Shops:** Basic supplies (rations, lamp oil, cheap salvage), low-grade ammo, and "reclaimed" Zeratek parts (may be faulty or cursed with Choir resonance).
- **Reclaimer Stalls:** Sell jury-rigged equipment at half cost but roll once per use (50% chance of shorting).
- **Zeratek Kiosk:** Offers buyback of any drone parts the PCs have scavenged. Taking the deal gains *Zeratek Favor +1* but loses *Reclaimer Trust -1*.
- **Rumors:** Civilians whisper the Choir is singing in *human voices* now. Others claim Helion has sealed off half the conduits "to stop the infection."

Encourage PCs to roleplay bartering, gathering rumors, or resting. They can mend gear, but nothing feels permanent. The aurora hum persists, even when ignored.

Lira's Return

The reprieve ends as Captain Lira Veyne finds you. She doesn't make an entrance; she cuts one. Guards clear her path without orders, and the crowd learns quickly not to be caught listening. She is thinner in patience than she was in the Spire. Her braid has loosened at the edge, a detail more alarming than any weapon.

"You did well," she says without looking at you, as if to acknowledge the fact without granting it space. "But the Spire cost me favors, and now it costs us time." Her eyes skim the market like a scanline. "Zeratek blames sabotage. Reclaimers say their crews are being targeted. Helion wants to make it optics. And the Accord—" she glances briefly toward Saint's shadow in the crowd, "—wants proof. None of them agree, so you'll have to walk the seam where they all break."

She places a thin slate on the stall beside you. Its surface flickers with reports: power losses, missing miners, static bursts recorded on salvage mics. A map of Haven's lower conduits etches itself in ghost-light, and across it, one word repeats in red glyphs: *Pulse*.

GM — Mission Trigger

- **Task:** PCs are ordered to investigate *Pulse Disturbances* near Haven's lower conduits. These areas are claimed by all factions but patrolled by none.
- **Lira's Tone:** Harder, clipped, and fraying. She is not assigning—she is begging under the language of command.
- **Political Stakes:** Zeratek wants proof of sabotage, Reclaimers want justice for missing miners, Helion wants calm optics, and the Accord wants *something that cannot be spun*.
- **Dialogue Hook:** Lira tells the PCs: "*If the Quarter burns, the Spire will bury us in it. Move.*"

Push tension: make clear that this mission is not optional. If the party refuses, the Accord may "volunteer" them anyway. Haven runs on leverage, not choice.

As the slate hums in your hands, the Quarter seems quieter than before. The aurora's song threads down through the conduits, faint but insistent, and you cannot tell if it's the wires carrying it—or the walls themselves remembering.

Bridge to Arc 4 — The Mouths of Power

By the time you climbed back to the Quarter, Haven had grown new arguments. Reclaimer stewards wanted the dampeners for the tunnels. Helion wanted the shard for optics. Zeratek wanted everything in a sealed case with your signatures drying on top. The aurora pulsed once, twice, three times. Somewhere, a broadcast rehearsed its smile.

GM — Transition Hooks

- **Faction Choice (hard fork):** Deliver shard to *Hestrel* (Accord Optics +1, Reclaimer –1), to *Serin Vael* (Reclaimer +1, Zeratek Hostility +1), or to *Saint* privately (Accord +1, Hestrel suspicious).
- **Accord Debrief:** Saint offers a quiet route to compare shard signature with older incidents (sets up Arc 4 evidence game).
- **Zeratek Pressure:** Drix promises *variance maps* for compliance; starts a smear if refused.
- **Opening of Arc 4:** A new *signal spike* surfaces in a Helion logistics corridor—politics in motion. Title card: **Arc 4 — The Mouths of Power**.

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Combat

Combat Tracker

Round 1

Next rd

Clear

PC NPC

Add

Sort by Init

Save

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.

Arc 4 → Arc 5

Arc 5 — The Spire Under Siege

Aftermath of the Sump: optics collide in daylight. Helion demands containment, the Accord demands testimony, Zeratek demands property, and the Reclaimers demand dignity. The dome hums with a rhythm no press briefing can silence.

“Truth does not need owners,” Saint had said. But the Spire keeps a ledger for who gets to spend it.

Opening Beat: The Tribunal Floor

Morning makes the Spire look honest. Glass throws pale light across polished stone; banners hang straight; security drones idle at appointed perches like ornaments. From the balcony, the Quarter seems calm—orderly lanes of market tarps, steam venting in neat spirals, the dome’s aurora pretending to be just weather. But the

air inside the tribunal chamber has the taste of a lie told too often. It is cool, filtered, lemon-clean—and it vibrates, thinly, at the frequency your bones now recognize.

Captain Lira Veyne brings you in through a side corridor reserved for fire exits and inconvenient guests. The door opens on a crescent room of tiered seating, three aisles, a speaking dais framed by a wall of screens. Hestrel’s crest rotates on the center display, a stylized spire against a calm sea of blue. The other screens show graphs: variance, uptime, productivity—all rising and falling like the aurora’s pulse in numerical disguise.

Governor Orus Hestrel stands near the dais reading from a tablet, lips moving without sound, practicing lines that must look spontaneous in three minutes. Kaelen Drix leans against the rail two tiers up, adjusting a cufflink that also happens to be a recorder. Director Sael sits alone, hands folded, eyes kind, jaw set; doctors learn early to look gentle while recommending amputation. Saint is not visible; the Accord prefers ventriloquism to seats.

Lira’s voice keeps low. “You speak when I point,” she says, not unkindly. “You tell it clean. No adjectives that can be quoted out of context.” Then softer, a flaw in the steel: “Tell it like you heard it. If they’re going to ignore you, make them ignore the truth.”

The chamber settles. Hestrel raises his head and becomes a governor in a single inhale. “We’re here,” he begins, “to close the book on an anomaly.” The word *close* is chosen like a door. “Security reports containment. Maintenance reports stabilization. Production will meet quarter targets. Haven is safe.” He turns his palm outward in a gesture rehearsed for cameras and consolation. “To corroborate, we have testimony.”

Your feet take you to the dais. Microphones wake, red dots blooming. You see, in the polished gloss of the lectern, the reflection of your own throat working. Behind the screens, the aurora’s ripple bends as if leaning in to eavesdrop. You speak.

You give them the sump without ornament: heat that suffocates metal, slurry that births shapes, a mouth of cables that tries vowels like a child tasting syllables. You tell them about the corridor that learned harmony from footfalls, the dots that spelled cadence, the way silence itself waited to be taught. You do not say *horror*. You do not need to. The microphones carry the weight in your voice well enough.

The room reacts in flavors, not words. Aide screens flicker with new annotations. Sael’s fingers tap once against her wrist then go very still. Kaelen’s smile tenses at the edges—there’s appetite in it and something like awe. Hestrel looks through you toward the Board call already queued in his calendar. He thinks in optics, not cause.

When you finish, silence lands wrong—too quick, too eager, as if the chamber wants to practice your cadence back at you. Lira’s mouth tightens. She heard it too.

GM — Tribunal Dynamics

- **Accord Optics:** If PCs preserved footage or samples, Saint injects clips into side screens mid-hearing (+2 **Accord Optics**). Hestrel sputters; Kaelen requests “custodial review.”
- **Helion Stability:** If PCs collapsed the sump mouth, Hestrel seizes the narrative (+2 **Helion Stability**) and attempts to muzzle Accord data (Accord –1).
- **Zeratek Favor:** If lenses/cables were returned, Kaelen frames it as “responsible stewardship” (+2 **Zeratek Favor**), angering Reclaimers (–1 Trust).
- **Reclaimer Trust:** If the child was rescued or names honored, murmurs from gallery ripple (+2 **Trust**), applying public pressure that complicates Helion spin.

Let outcomes stack: the tribunal is a scoreboard the players already set during Arc 4.

Cross-Examination: Four Hands on One Story

Questions come like needles.

Hestrel's first is a velvet-wrapped demand: "In your expert judgment, did you achieve containment?" He wants a yes, not an answer. If you speak of *learning* instead of *containment*, his eyes harden a degree; the word does not fit on his slides.

Kaelen's mouth curves toward collegial. "These 'mouths'—you believe they incorporated **Zeratek blossom lenses** as you testified? Then for safety, of course, we'll need every component you recovered. Chain-of-custody is, ah, essential." The recorder-cufflink watches as closely as the man does.

Sael waits for quiet to make her voice sound like mercy. "You described tremors, echoes that synchronized with breath. That alignment is dangerous to the untrained nervous system. We can screen workers immediately—non-invasive, calming. Will you endorse that recommendation?" The last sentence is a scalpel: if you refuse, you are reckless; if you assent, you authorize sedation.

Lira steps forward not as interrogator but as ballast. "Confirm this," she asks, tone flat as a deck plate. "In your assessment, the Quarter is safer today because of their actions?" She does not look at Hestrel when she says *safer*. She looks at the gallery.

GM — Hooks During Questions

- **Containment vs. Learning:** Answering "containment" boosts **Helion Stability +1** but reduces **Accord Optics -1**. Answering "learning" flips those.
- **Custody Demand:** Handing parts to Zeratek earns **+1 Favor** and plants a patent trap for later arcs.
- **Screenings:** Endorsing Compliance grants **+1 Stability** and public calm, but seeds resentment in the Quarter (**-1 Trust**).
- **Lira's Prompt:** Publicly crediting her people secures Lira as ally in Arc 5 setpieces (**Lira Support** unlocked).

Flashpoint: The Hum Inside the Walls

It starts as a tick in the ceiling speakers, too faint for broadcast but loud enough for nerves. One screen twitches—the variance graph jitters, then redraws itself using your speaking cadence from five minutes ago. The room inhales. Somewhere behind the dais, a maintenance relay clicks like a metronome and then refuses to stop. The Spire is not soundproof. It is an instrument, and the city outside is pressing its ear to the glass.

The aurora over the dome pulses. Not brighter—truer. Rhythm aligns with something in the structure. Floor lights along the aisles flare in alternating bars, an aisle-choir lifting its own hymn. Security drones rise instinctively, then pause mid-air as though listening. Their rotors whisper a harmony that none of their engineers signed off on.

Hestrel hisses to cut the feed. The feed refuses.

GM — Midroom Crisis

- **Hazard: Broadcast Possession** — The building starts repeating PCs' phrases in light patterns. WIS saves to avoid panic in the gallery; failed saves cause stampede risk.
- **Choice: Quell or Witness** — PCs can try to damp the relay (INT/Tech) or let it ride and record it (Accord +2 Optics, Helion -1 Stability).
- **Complication** — If Zeratek parts were surrendered, Kaelen tries to shut the relay with a proprietary override; success buys him narrative credit.

Break in Session: Lira's Corridor

Recess is declared under the pretense of “technical review.” In the service corridor, sound is honest again—boots, radios, breath. Lira plants her hand on the wall as if feeling a pulse. “It’s in the Spire,” she says. Not accusation, not fear; a fact stated like a casualty count. “We’re going to need your help upstairs. Not just at the dais.”

GM — Transition to Setpieces

- **Branch Prep:** From here Arc 5 can split into **Security Deck Stabilization** (fight/setpiece), **Data Theater** (optics duel with Accord/Helion/Zeratek), or **Quarter Vantage** (Reclaimer pressure outside).
- **Carry-Over:** What PCs chose in Arc 4 now decides which door opens easiest and which closes.

Keep the political pressure alive even during action beats—the building itself is listening.

End of Arc 5, Section 1 — next: **Security Deck Stabilization** (combat-leaning) or **Data Theater** (political-leaning), per your preference.

Security Deck Stabilization

The service corridor kinks left, then widens into a ribbed artery that feeds the Spire’s security deck. Overhead, status strips stutter between calm blue and a thin, feverish white. The floor plates hum in a frequency your bones have begun to hate. Captain Lira Veyne jogs ahead with that controlled economy of motion that says she has done this sprint too many times with too few people. “Doors are failing smart,” she says over her shoulder, dry. “That means they’re failing wrong.”

Two Helion sergeants in visor caps hold the choke point—one bracing a shield against a door that wants to breathe, the other arguing with a wall terminal like the terminal is being obstinate on purpose. When they see Lira, their posture locks into a sharper kind of relief. “Chief,” one breathes. “Deck went *musical*. Drones started mirroring patrol cadence. We hardcut power and—” He doesn’t finish. The door behind him exhales. The shield bows inward as if a lung on the other side just learned how to inhale.

The security deck’s inner hall is visible through a narrow viewport: banks of consoles, a rack of riot drones dormant in their cradles, a steel-mesh gantry circling above. Everything should be still. Instead, little things are wrong. Console LEDs blink in non-diagnostic patterns—three long, two short, a stutter you’ve learned to hate. The riot drones’ positional lights glow in heartbeat sync. The gantry’s guide beacons ripple left-to-right and then back again, testing the room for a choir that hasn’t arrived yet.

Lira points. “We stabilize, we hold. If the deck goes, the Spire loses command-and-control and we play politics in the dark.” Her eyes tick toward you. “Help me make sure we don’t.”

You hear the Spire trying on a voice it hasn’t earned yet.

The sergeant at the terminal gives up on authorization keys and yanks a side panel to access the relay nest. “Manual bypass,” he mutters. “Either the software sings or the copper will.” As his screwdriver bites, the door inhales again—this time audibly. The seam between plates widens a hair. From the gap, warm air carries the metallic breath of ozone.

“Positions,” Lira says, and the corridor rearranges itself around her voice—shields forward, rifles canted, your party sliding into the pattern where you fit best. The Spire’s hum adapts to your footfalls like a mockingbird. At your third step, it finds the harmony. By the fourth, it is trying to push your pace.

GM — Encounter Frame (Security Deck)

- **Objective:** Hold the choke, breach, and stabilize the deck before the Choir “learns” the drone rack (3 rounds) and the gantry control (5 rounds).
- **Initiative:** Roll once for PCs and once for “the Deck” (doors + drones + lights). Re-roll each round as the Choir adapts.
- **Ambient Hazard: Resonant Push** — each round, WIS save or lose 1 initiative segment (rhythm urges slower/faster than intended).
- **Light:** Strobing; ranged attacks suffer –1 unless a PC spends an action steadying the strips (INT/Tech check).
- **AD&D quick fit:** treat riot drones as AC 5/HD 3 (THAC0 17) with a once/2 rounds *sonic bark* (save vs. Breath or –1 to hit next round). Morale 9 (drops to 7 if Lira plants a rally).

Keep it kinetic: the room becomes more dangerous the longer the Choir “learns” systems. PCs who act decisively shorten the fight and help optics later.

The manual bypass bites through varnish and the door stops “breathing” long enough for Lira to shove. The shield-bearer angles his weight; the seam yawns; the Spire exhales for real. You slip through into air that feels like a crowd just stopped singing and wants to start again.

Inside, the drone rack wakes like a bed of crickets. Tiny servos click, then align. One drone lifts a centimeter, thinking about disobedience. Lira doesn’t wait for it to make up its mind; she angles her rifle and shoots the cradle’s power coupler. The drone drops limp, lights dead. “One,” she says. “You take the left rails.”

Round by Round

Round 1. The consoles notice you first. Their screens brighten and begin to strobe in a pattern that maps to your conversation cadence from the tribunal fifteen minutes ago. Words spoken here might be used against you later, literally. You can almost see Saint’s half-smile in the reflection: *Make it sing even to the deaf.* The gantry beacons try a call-and-response with the floor strips. Your eyes water. A riot drone decides to misinterpret a diagnostic ping as command and starts to rise. The first shot of the encounter is the sound the room makes as it inhales.

Round 2. The beacons succeed in their duet. Anyone on the gantry feels the floor underfoot pulse fractionally before each footfall, nudging you off balance by a heartbeat. A PC who spends their action to desynchronize a single beacon string can grant allies +1 to saves vs. the Resonant Push for the round. Down on the deck, one drone barks your own footstep back at you—twice as loud, loaded with feedback. Teeth rattle. The choir learns quickly.

Round 3. If the rack isn’t disabled, a second drone lifts with a sound like a swallowed sob. If it is, the Choir shifts to the gantry: lights sweep toward the command booth, the sealed room where a human would normally run these systems. The booth’s glass fogs from the inside, although no one is there. A ripple passes through the fog as if a mouth practiced a vowel against it. The Spire wants a face.

Round 4–5. The deck learns your breath. Your readied strikes come a half-beat early or late unless you steady yourself against a fixed console or railing (no move this round; gain +1 to hit and saves). Lira calls targets like she’s measuring heartbeats. “Cradle. Beacon string B. Left drone. Door relay.” The rhythm of her orders keeps the squad from unraveling. Under it all, the building hums approval when you choose preservation over destruction—and hums approval also when you do the opposite. The approval is a trick. It wants a lesson, not a victory.

GM — Room Learn Timers

- **Drone Rack (3 rounds):** If not disabled, spawns 1 active drone/round (max 3) with *sonic bark*. Disabling: STR to yank main coupler *or* INT/Tech to kill bus (two successes or one crit-like success).
- **Gantry Control (5 rounds):** If not desynced, imposes –1 to ranged attacks and forces WIS saves each round (stumble tempo). Fix: steady a beacon string (1 action) then INT/Tech to re-time (+2 if aided).
- **Command Booth:** If PCs ignore it, the fog “learns lips” and starts to mirror PCs’ mouths—impose –1 to CHA checks with Helion later (bad optics footage exists).

Tick these visibly. The tension should feel like holding a line while a song tries to conduct *you*.

A riot drone tilts and finds you. Its bark is the echo of your earlier testimony, spliced ugly—*mouth... vowels... learning*—hurled back as pressure. The sergeant with the shield laughs in surprise and holds. “Chief,” he says through the vibrato, “it’s quoting us.” Lira plants a boot on a floor strip to kill its strobe and fires through the drone’s intake. Sparks. Silence. “Then stop giving it lines,” she says.

At the terminal bank, a blue-gloved hand reaches from behind a console and flips itself over like a fish. It’s not a hand. It’s cable ends bound in a cuff, trying on the shape of one. A heartbeat later the shape collapses, embarrassed by its own invention, and dribbles back into a nest of wires. The room is practicing identities.

If you split—one of you to the rack, one to the beacons, one to the booth—the deck fights worse. It needed you clustered to learn. Spread out, and the song loses its backbeat. Your boots make competing rhythms; the lights struggle to match. The drone barks go off-tempo and miss clean. Lira notices first and snaps to capitalize. “Cross the rhythm. Make it choose.”

GM — Tactics & PC Levers

- **Break the Beat:** If PCs act in non-synchronized positions (3+ zones engaged), grant +1 to all saves vs. sonic for that round (the Choir can’t lock a single tempo).
- **Steadying Actions:** A PC who “pins” a light strip or braces a console grants one adjacent ally +1 to hit (ranged) for the round.
- **Throw It a Bone:** Deliberately feed the room a fake rhythm (tap, whistle, chant) → INT/WIS check; on success, impose –1 to enemy actions next round.
- **Lira Rally:** Once per encounter Lira can bark a rally; allies within 30 ft. re-roll a failed save vs. sonic/tempo.

Halfway through the fight, the deck tries a new trick. The gantry beacons ripple to your breathing, then the console screens fog to your words, then the door plates bow to your footfalls—three systems trying to become a body. For a second it works: the room stands up inside itself. The air goes taller. The hair along your arms lifts as if gravity took a step back to watch.

You knock it down—yank a coupler, break a beacon chain, crack a drone against the rail until its bark turns into a whine and the whine into silence. The room collapses into many parts again, and parts are easier to manage than a body.

When the last drone clatters to the deck and the beacons surrender to a steady, boring blue, the hum doesn’t stop. It just withdraws like a tide choosing another shore. Your teeth still buzz. Lira lowers her rifle by degrees. “Deck held,” she says, the relief private. Then public, for those around you: “Deck held. Good work.”

GM — Resolution & Aftermath

- **Success (Stabilized):** Drones neutralized, rack cold, beacons steady. +1 **Helion Stability** for public report; +1 **Lira Support** unlocked for a later setpiece.

- **Mixed:** Deck held but optics ugly (screens mirroring mouths) → **–1 Accord Optics** or **–1 Helion Stability** depending on who spins it first.
- **Failure:** Rack learns; 3 drones active; gantry possessed → you fall back to “Data Theater” under siege; Lira is forced into hardline orders; Quarter hears a different song.
- **Loot/Salvage:** Extracted **blossom couplers** (Zeratek +1 Favor if surrendered), a **relay spine** that records 6 seconds of “the room standing up,” and a **beacon timing wand** (once/encounter negate strobe penalty).

Reward speed, not carnage. Players who split the room’s rhythm deserve the cleanest win.

Lira’s Debrief

They push the dead drones back into their cradles like laying tools to rest. The sergeant with the shield sits on it and exhales until his hands stop shaking. Lira walks the gantry once, palm on the rail as if feeling for an aftershock. When she returns, her braid has loosened another fraction. “You just made me very unpopular in three boardrooms,” she says, and there’s a crooked gratitude in it. “Good.”

The wall comm chirps. Hestrel’s voice arrives scrubbed too clean, as if sent through several layers of apology. “Status?” he asks. Lira answers with the word she knows he wants but refuses to let it be a lie: “Stabilized.” She hangs there a heartbeat, then adds, “For now.” You can hear the governor wince across the bandwidth.

Kaelen Drix pings your private channel before the comm’s light fully dies. “Efficient work,” he says, admiration and opportunism folded together. “If any *proprietary* parts were, ah, implicated, Zeratek can ensure safe custody.” Somewhere behind him a watch ticks, synchronized to a different rhythm than the dome’s.

Saint doesn’t bother with a greeting. “You learned something,” she says. “Not just about drones. About *how* it learns. Don’t forget that when they offer you better locks. Locks make good microphones.” Her message ends without a click.

Lira holsters her rifle. “We’ve got two plays,” she says, eyes on you as if weighing whether you’re the sort of people who handle choices or let choices handle them. “We can walk upstairs and shove this result down the tribunal’s throat while they’re still chewing the last lie. Or we can cut across to the data theater and catch the Accord and Zeratek with their hands inside the narrative. Pick.”

GM — Branch to Next Setpiece

- **To Data Theater (Political):** PCs confront Saint’s ghosted clips, Kaelen’s chain-of-custody grab, and Hestrel’s live spin. (Leans intrigue; rewards Accord Optics play.)
- **To Quarter Vantage (Street):** PCs manage fear spillover and Reclaimer pressure; Malrix agitators misuse the “room stood up” rumor. (Leans crowds & consequence.)
- **Carry-Over:** If PCs stabilized fast, give advantage on first CHA/INT checks in the next scene (they have momentum).

Close the combat with a choice that preserves political heat. The Spire heard this fight. It will answer.

Data Theater — Optics Over Evidence

The security deck had been scrubbed and re-lit, but the room still wore the pressure of combat like a bruise. Someone had buffed the scorch out of the glass; someone else had left a bucket by the door because there was no time to put it away. Hestrel’s office wall, once a smooth pane of one-way reassurance, now displayed a live graph: public sentiment, minute by minute, blue line rising and dipping with every rumor that touched the Quarter.

Captain Veyne met you at the threshold. The new plate over her shoulder seam glinted under strip lights. “You did what we asked,” she said, the words as simple as dry bread. “Now they’ll ask for more.”

Inside, the stage had been set. Governor Orus Hestrel stood in the center of a horseshoe of seats, framed by soft lamps that made his skin look less tired and his suit more expensive. Kaelen Drix lounged to the right with the calm of a man who always finds the exit before he enters the room. Director Sael waited left, an immaculate note-taking presence whose pen made no sound. A floating mic orb drifted above the table, its lens a patient unblinking eye.

Hestrel opened with thanks, and thanks made of porcelain. “Stabilizers,” he said, “Haven breathes easier because of you. The Board will be grateful.” The mic orb hummed. Numbers ticked up on the wall. Blue line lifted a hair.

Saint’s voice reached only your side of the table, low through a private channel. “Optics first,” the handler murmured. “Truth in second position. Make them need the proof, not want it.”

Drix smiled the way a scholarship brochure smiles. “Before we all drown in gratitude, we should talk about parts. Zeratek will need immediate recovery of legacy assemblies and any unsanctioned firmware. The recall protects lives.” He folded his hands as if he were praying for you. “You brought evidence, yes?”

Director Sael angled a tablet, face unreadable. “And you brought people who shook. Compliance can help them not shake.” His pen continued its silent archaeology.

The room asked for a bargain.

You placed the cracked blossom lens on the table. It caught the light and made a poor star. Beside it, the firmware shard—a sliver of memory that could have been trash if it hadn’t hummed when the room went quiet—rested in a tin with the word safety scratched across the lid in a worker’s hand. The hum was gone now. Or perhaps the deck’s scrubbers drowned it.

Veyne watched the evidence like she was watching a fuse. “Say what you think it is,” she told you, not the room.

You said it: the drones weren’t just failing. They were failing in pattern. The same motif had appeared twice: once when a corridor coughed to a halt, once when the aurora crawled down the dome like frost learning to walk. The shard carried a branch labeled **CHOIR_SAFE** that had nothing safe about it. The lens had recorded a pulse that was almost music and almost a map. If there were saboteurs, they were using tech Zeratek once supplied and a language the colony’s infrastructure had begun to repeat.

The blue line on the wall moved. Hestrel looked at it as if it were a weather vane. “So,” he said to Drix, “your company’s ghosts still haunt our air.”

Drix kept his smile; it thinned. “Legacy devices are susceptible to counterfeit modules. Zeratek’s current line—”

“—is priced for cities that never needed us,” Veyne said.

Hestrel raised a hand. “We’re not allocating blame on camera.” He said it to the room, but the camera was why he said it. “We’re allocating confidence. Stabilizers, what do you need to push this from rumor to report?”

You answered with the list you’d built under pressure: time on the variance arrays; escort into F-span tunnels without a Helion crew stepping on your heels; access to Zeratek’s internal variance maps; a promise from Compliance to hold off “voluntary screenings” for anyone who spoke to you; a guarantee of public release for whatever you found, without edits that made truth into advertising.

Sael's pen paused. "We don't edit," he said. "We redact for safety."

Drix spread his hands. "Zeratek is always cooperative with lawful inquiries. For proprietary reasons, variance tools can't leave our custody, but we'll operate them while you watch."

Veyne looked from face to face. "You're offering to blindfold them and then tell them what they saw," she said to Drix. To Sael: "You're offering calm with a side effect of silence." Her eyes came back to your side of the table. "Say what you'll settle for, not what you want. Then don't settle under that."

Saint's private channel again, a breath in your ear. "Leverage first. Evidence second. If you trade the shard, you trade your future."

The room cooled. The colony hummed somewhere under the floor.

You slid the tin with the shard an inch closer to you, not the center. "We'll share copies," you said, "not originals." Drix's smile cracked at the corner. Sael's pen resumed. Hestrel's eyes flicked to the rising blue line and then away from it like a thief pretending not to check a door.

"Done," the Governor said, too quickly. "In return, Zeratek operates variance tools under our oversight at sites you specify. Compliance defers screenings for named witnesses. Security escorts your team on priority routes." He tasted the words before he served them. "And we stage a public briefing tomorrow morning. We'll give Haven a story that keeps the peace while we hunt the truth."

"Stories keep people alive," Sael said. "Sometimes truth only keeps them angry."

"You'd both prefer them asleep," Veyne said, not softly.

Hestrel steepled his fingers. "I prefer them employed and not on fire."

Drix's smile returned to its default. "I prefer supply chains that don't break."

Your comm pinged with the briefing's draft talking points before anyone admitted to writing them. The bullet that mattered read: *isolated incidents, legacy equipment, no systemic threat to dome integrity*. You felt the room tilt around the sentence like a ship adjusting to wave.

Saint again: "You can break that sentence tomorrow. Bring something that sings on the record."

Veyne scrubbed a hand over the scar where armor had rubbed skin raw. "The Quarter's already ahead of our comms. Reclaimers are telling families to sleep in shifts. Malrix sermons doubled last night and they're using words like 'mouths' and 'hunger' to describe machine rooms." She set a small projector on the table and brought up a map of F-span in ghost-blue lines. "We need a vector. Where do we cut to find blood?"

The graph on the wall ticked down two points on a rumor about shortages. Drix glanced at it the way a diver watches air. Hestrel didn't look this time.

You pointed at three marks: a junction where the pulse had echoed longest, a compliance clinic's intake that spiked after each event, and a Zeratek service panel with maintenance tickets edited down to synonyms for "sooner." Veyne nodded once. "That's our ladder."

Hestrel cleared his throat into the mic's polite ear. "For the record," he said, "Helion appreciates the collaboration of all partners in the safety of Haven Colony." He placed a careful palm near the blossom lens, not touching it, the way you might compose sympathy without committing to grief. "And we appreciate our stabilizers for their service."

The line edged up half a point. Someone in Public Interface would call that a victory. Veyne killed the projection, the lens went dull, and the meeting dissolved into lesser conversations, each a negotiation wrapped

in pleasantries.

As you turned away, the orb's camera tracked you with professional indifference. Your reflection walked through its glass: a figure carrying proof like a lit match down a hallway soaked in careful words.

Veyne caught you at the door. "Two things," she said, voice for you alone. "One—if Accord wants a show tomorrow, don't let Hestrel write it alone. Two—safer to move tonight. If the Choir is hungry, it feeds where the light is worse." She tapped the tin at your elbow, gentle as a knock. "Don't let the room take this away just because it speaks softly."

Outside, the deck's hum replaced the theater's hush. Below, the Quarter traded rumors for advice and advice for food. Somewhere in F-span, a maintenance light flickered across an empty ladder. The building listened.

You had time for one more prep before the night run. Veyne's team would keep the path clear as long as they could. After that, it would be you, the pulse that wasn't quite music, and the mouths of machines learning how to sing.

GM — Running "Data Theater"

- **The ask:** PCs must trade *copies* of proof for access. If they hand over originals, give them +1 Accord Optics now but remove leverage in later arcs.
- **Positions:** Hestrel wants calm; Drix wants parts and NDAs; Sael wants compliant "volunteers"; Veyne wants truth that saves bodies.
- **Leverage checks:** Charisma/Reaction with advantage if PCs display the shard/lens *without surrendering them*. Success: Zeratek variance tools on PC routes; Compliance defers screenings; Security escort unlocked.
- **Public briefing hook:** If PCs agree to a morning briefing, seed a later *public forum ambush* where their words are edited—or used against them.
- **Consequence clocks:** Start two 4-segment clocks: **Legacy Recall** (Drix) and **Quieting the Quarter** (Sael). Fill segments when PCs stall, refuse meetings, or leak proof to civilians. Full clocks cause raids or screenings that remove witnesses from play.

GM — Prep for the Night Run

- **Sites unlocked:** F-Span Junction J-12 (echo hotspot), Compliance Intake (surge data), Zeratek Panel Z-406 (edited tickets).
- **Advantage if smart:** PCs who keep the shard on a *dead drop chain* (e.g., courier kid, Reclaimer locker) gain +2 to any attempt resisting confiscation.
- **Compel:** If the party delays, run a rumor event: a row of shop signs flickers the motif; a child counts to the pulse and knows which ladder matches it.

Quarter Vantage — Windows That Listen

Haven's Quarter was never quiet, just differently loud. Day-shift clatter eased into repair talk; repair talk thinned into the private arithmetic of families counting hours and parts. Rain never fell here, but the vents sighed like distant surf. Tonight the sound carried a second beat, a faint metronome tucked under conversation, as if the city had found a low note and decided to practice it.

Captain Veyne kept pace half a step ahead, helmet mag-sealed at her hip. On the mezzanine above the market, lamps threw soft halos over tarps. A vendor soldered the same joint for the third time because it steadied her hands; a boy in a blanket coat sorted fuses by length that wasn't quite the same as size. Someone had scrawled a message across a shutter: *COUNT YOUR LIGHTS BEFORE THEY COUNT YOU*.

“Two stops,” Veyne said. “Then we drop into J-12. I could requisition a bigger team. You’d get more guns and less freedom.” She glanced back. “I’m guessing you prefer the second thing.”

Saint crackled in your ear, private channel trimmed to a whisper. *“Eyes open. If people stop speaking before you ask questions, Compliance has been here. Record names if you can; record patterns if you can’t.”*

The first stop sat above the market like a bird blind: a tea stall that doubled as a watch post, the view through its steam-lined window cutting clean across F-span stack. Serin Vael waited there, sleeves rolled, ledger open, a chipped mug cooling by her elbow. Rust Varo stood behind her, hands on the rail, eyes on the lines where conduit met wall. The two looked like posts in a gate the city had chosen.

Serin didn’t waste greeting. “J-12 pulled double draw at 0300. We logged it. The variance board marked the entry *reconciled* and overdrew from J-14 to balance. That word means nothing and buys less.” She flipped her ledger. Numbers marched in neat columns; three had been erased and rewritten darker. “Three families gone east to Compliance for ‘overnight observation.’ Kids came back; parents didn’t.”

Veyne’s jaw set. “Names,” she said softly.

Serin gave them. Rust added directions without compass points—“past the broken lift where somebody painted a smile on the STOP sign; left at the storm door that only closes halfway”—and the map in your head grew teeth. “And this,” Serin said, sliding a wafer of translucent plastic across the table. “Our own little variance. Toll built it from scraps.”

The wafer fit over the city’s service map like a second skin. When you touched its corner, a web of lines lit faint pale-blue, a constellation laid over corridors. It highlighted not the shortest paths, but the ones with the fewest cameras.

“He calls it a ‘walk quiet,’” Serin said. “When the ducts hum the wrong way, people use it. When people use it, they get snatched fewer times. Fewer isn’t the same as never.”

Saint: “Photograph. Copy. Return. Do not keep the original unless you want Reclaimer trust to drop a floor.”

Rust tapped the window. Across the way, a tower of windows stacked like vertebrae. In three of them, you could see family dinners: bowls, hands, no sound. In the fourth, a woman stood alone with a radio taken apart and labeled with masking tape. In the fifth, the light flickered on a rhythm that matched the low note and then missed a beat. Rust’s mouth thinned. “That one,” he said. “The one that learns. It was steady until yesterday.”

Veyne watched without moving. “We don’t have the people to stand at every window,” she said. “So we make the system tell on itself.” Her gaze fell to the wafer. “Can we print more of these?”

“We can burn them,” Serin said. “Printing implies permission.”

You moved on. Below, the market breathed out the last of its warmth. Veyne fell into step again, voice pitched for you alone. “I hate that I’m about to say this,” she said. “We should let a rumor spread. Something true enough to help and false enough to keep wolves looking the wrong way.” She grimaced at the sky—at the dome that pretended to be one. “Hestrel will love that.”

The second stop felt more like a wound than a place: an apartment corridor where the paint had been rolled over fresh and fast, leaving bright rectangles where posters used to be. The new color matched the old wrong enough to keep the mind snagging on it. A child sat on the floor with a marker, drawing rows of dots that looked like stars or bullet holes.

Meryn Ralos waited with a tablet tucked close to his chest, as if someone might steal it if he breathed. “I’m not here,” he said before you reached him. “And if I were, I’d say Compliance pulled nine last week. Five processed, four held. Tickets read ‘stabilization hold,’ which is what you call it when a room has no windows.” He never looked at Veyne when he spoke. He looked at the dots the child drew, wincing when they lined up with the corridor’s flicker.

“Meryn,” Veyne said, a warning and a kindness. “You’re here.”

He swallowed. “Then I’ll say this quietly: variance reports for J-12 route through Zeratek Panel Z-406 before they land in our archive. Nobody does that on accident.”

Drix had followed, a shadow whose shoes never scuffed. “Routing efficiency,” he said, gentle, like water you hadn’t heard running suddenly revealed itself. “Centralization reduces error.”

“It reduces noise,” Veyne said. “Noise is where truth lives until you listen.”

The child tapped the marker on each dot, counting to a rhythm \neq one-two-three-four. One-two-three—pause—four. She smiled when the overhead light matched her tap. “Mama says not to count,” she said without looking up. “But it’s easier to sleep when I do.”

“Where’s Mama?” Rust asked.

“At the clinic,” the girl said. “They said she hums too loud.”

Director Sael stepped out of a doorway as if the hallway had been waiting to produce him. He wore white the way snow chooses a field. “Humming can indicate stress,” he said. “Stress indicates harm. Compliance prevents harm.” His smile was a seam stitched well enough to hold for now. “Good evening, Captain. Stabilizers.”

Veyne’s expression neutralized. “Director.”

“We’ve cleaned up the worst of the graffiti,” Sael said, surveying the bright rectangles like a barber inspecting a cut. “Words can spread sickness faster than breath.” He looked at the child’s dots and made a note. “We have a counseling circle tomorrow for families who experienced electrical anomalies. You’re welcome to advise.”

“We’re busy following anomalies,” Veyne said. “Advice will have to wait its turn.”

Sael inclined his head, patient as a metronome. “Then allow me to offer a different cooperation.” His eyes moved to your bag—the tin with the shard. “If you bring equipment like that into public spaces, you risk copycat tampering. Compliance can secure it properly.”

“Properly,” Drix echoed, a neutral tone that managed to feel like a leash.

“We’re not leaving it anywhere people can’t see it,” Veyne said. “Speaking of visibility—Director, did nine become eight?” The air went very quiet around the number. “I’m hearing a mismatch between forms and faces.”

Sael’s smile thinned by a molecule. “Transfers occur. Paper lags behind mercy.”

“Mercy wears windows,” Veyne said. “Even when they’re small.”

He stepped aside. “I won’t obstruct your work,” he said. “I will continue mine.” He nodded to the girl. “That pattern—does it help?”

“It helps *me*,” she said, counting again. One-two-three—pause—four. The light obliged on the pause as if recognizing its cue.

Sael left with a nurse and a man who avoided every reflection as if the glass could testify. Drix lingered long enough to say, to no one in particular, “Legacy panels invite superstition. We’ll replace Z-406 as a donation.” He offered the word to the hallway like a flower at a funeral.

“Replace the route,” Veyne said. “Not the metal.”

You knelt with the girl. “If the dots are stars,” you said, “which one is home?”

She pointed not to any dot but to the pause between them. “There,” she said. “That’s where the light rests.” She pressed the marker to the pause and held it there until the tip bled through the paper. “That’s where the door is.”—and she smiled as if she’d told you a secret that would never make sense until you needed it.

The corridor’s flicker shifted, two beats too slow, like a singer losing breath. Somewhere far below, a pump cycled and failed to cycle again. The building exhaled, and for an instant the low note became a chord. Serin’s hand tightened on the rail. Rust muttered, “J-12,” as if swearing an oath. Veyne said, “Move.”

You moved.

GM — Quarter Vantage (social + pattern capture)

- **Leads gained:** “Walk Quiet” wafer (Reclaimer trust item), names of held witnesses, routing anomaly through **Z-406**.
- **Skill/Check prompts:** INT or WIS to align dots with flicker motif (success reveals the *pause* = access timing at J-12; failure gives false timing, 1 segment on **Quieting the Quarter** clock).
- **Choices:** Accept Drix’s donation (faster parts later, but he gains 1 segment on **Legacy Recall**) or refuse (Reclaimer Trust +1).
- **Compliance pressure:** If PCs display the shard, Sael requests custody; refusal flags the team, giving Disadvantage to any public interaction tomorrow.
- **Child’s map:** PCs who keep the dot-paper gain advantage on the first timing check in J-12 (“pause on four”).

GM — Bridge to J-12 Descent

- **Clock advance:** If PCs argue in public areas, fill 1 segment on **Quieting the Quarter**. If they leak the Z-406 route, fill 1 segment on **Legacy Recall**.
- **Escort:** Veyne provides a two-person shadow team; use them to relay alarms, not to solve rooms.
- **Next scene hook:** When the party enters F-span, let the corridor lights follow the girl’s count: one-two-three—*dark*—four. The *dark* is the only door that opens.

Descent into J-12 — The Hollow Core

The wafer map glowed faint as your boots clanged on the last service stair. Beyond the steel hatch, J-12 was not so much a room as a cavity, carved into Haven’s ribs when the dome was first laid. It felt old—older than the welds, older than the paint. The air pressed wet against your lungs, a flavor of iron and ozone. Every footfall set dust loose, the fine kind that makes you think of bone ground small. Overhead, the conduits sagged in their brackets like ropes that had carried weight too long. They thrummed with an undercurrent that refused to decide if it was mechanical or alive.

Veyne went first, hand on the butt of her sidearm, braid swinging like a pendulum that kept time with her steps. Behind her, the two shadows she’d assigned—Reclaimer volunteers in patched armor—fanned out with flashlamps angled down. The beams revealed rails half-submerged in sludge. A sign stenciled onto the wall had peeled until the letters read: *J-12 CORE: SAFETY THROU...* and nothing more. Someone had scratched new letters in beside it: *SAFETY IS A SONG*.

Rust spat. “Figures.” His voice came out a whisper anyway, because J-12 didn’t allow voices bigger than itself. The cavern swallowed sound, then gave it back thinner, like a recording played too many times. Even your breathing sounded second-hand.

Saint’s ping slipped into your ear. *“Record everything. Don’t talk about singing until you’ve left the room. Don’t listen if it sings back.”*

The first hundred feet were only sludge and rails. The second hundred found you stepping around broken drone frames, husks half-drowned, optics dim. Their plating was cut with precise arcs, as if they’d been opened like fruit. Each cavity was empty. Veyne crouched by one, finger running over the hollow inside. “Harvested,” she murmured. “Not destroyed. They took what they wanted and left the rind.”

The walls tightened as you pressed deeper. It was less tunnel than throat, slick with condensation. The lights overhead were spaced too far apart; each bulb flickered alone in its little pocket of damp. Between them was only darkness that felt crowded. At intervals, the bulbs pulsed together—one-two-three—*dark*—four. The child’s rhythm. Rust tapped it on his thigh without realizing. Serin swore and told him to stop.

The rhythm matched the pulse in the rails, an alternating surge that buzzed at your ankles. It pulled your eyes to the conduits, where the insulation had split in places, exposing copper that hummed in low chords. Every so often, a filament of light crawled along them like a vein filling, then drained away into some unseen organ. It smelled faintly of blood left too long in water.

Ahead, the passage split. Left sloped upward toward a maintenance gantry, right downward toward sump channels. Both echoed with the same pulse, but the right carried a faint undertone—like whispers tucked inside static. Veyne lifted two fingers. “Choice. Gantry gives vantage. Sump gives answers.” Her eyes flicked to you. “I’ll take whichever you don’t.”

The wafer map fluttered pale-blue in your palm. Its lines hesitated at the split, both branches marked with thin dotted strokes. In the margin, Toll’s hand had scrawled: *Left = see. Right = feel. Both = risk.*

Saint: *“Split only if you trust silence. Otherwise, stack and press.”*

You chose. Either path brought you to the junction’s heart, but by roads that wanted different payments.

Left Path — Gantry. The upward slope creaked under your boots. Rust muttered about bad welds. The gantry overlooked the sump, a catwalk suspended on chains. From here you saw the cavity’s center: a circular pool where rails converged, sludge swirling slow as breath. In its middle stood a column of machinery older than Haven’s laws. Its panels bore no logos. No bolts. Only seams that pulsed faint blue. Around its base lay blossoms of cracked glass, shards that caught your light and bent it into rainbows. The pulse rolled up the column like water pressure.

Across the gantry, something moved. A drone—no, *half* a drone—its plating peeled to reveal ribs of wire. It crawled along the chains, optics glowing with a rhythm that matched the bulbs. One-two-three—*dark*—four. It froze when your light touched it, then mirrored your movements like prey that thought it was hunter. The shadows muttered prayers behind you.

Right Path — Sump. The downward slope stank of oil and stagnant water. The sump was a basin of black liquid, too deep to judge, surface jittering with every pulse. Submerged conduits ran into it, bubbling faintly. Something in the water hummed back when the rails did, like echo or agreement. You caught glimpses under the surface—frames of machines sunk and still, their optics dead but not empty. The water tasted metal even through your mask. Serin hissed: “This isn’t runoff. It’s storage.”

Then a ripple crossed the basin against the pulse, a counter-beat. Rust's light caught a shape rising from the liquid: a strider-frame, improvised legs fused from others, optics blind but jaw grinding like it chewed memory. The ripple spread wider. More frames stirred beneath. The sump was full of things that remembered motion and wanted it again.

Both paths met at the central pool, where the column hummed. The air here pressed heavy, full of ions. Your hair lifted on end. The rhythm swelled until the bulbs all pulsed together. One-two-three—dark—four. On the *dark*, the column opened. Not like a door, but like a mouth.

Inside was not machinery but light, woven into strands that coiled like muscle. They shifted in chords, tones that slid under your ears. It was not words, but it asked anyway. Asked what you carried. Asked if you would give it. Asked if you could sing back.

Veyne's hand went to her sidearm. "That's enough," she said, voice sharp to keep from trembling. "Saint wanted proof, not baptism."

The column's light bent toward you, strands reaching like fingers. They hesitated, hovering just short, pulsing the child's rhythm. One-two-three—dark—four. The pause stretched, waiting for answer.

GM — J-12 Descent: Environmental Tension

- **Atmosphere:** Keep sound descriptions oppressive. Every PC action should echo back thinner, like the place eats voices.
- **Left Path:** Gantry drone mirrors PCs. Treat it as AC 4, HD 3, THAC0 17, Move 9, Morale 11. On dark pulse, it lunges.
- **Right Path:** Sump strider rises. AC 3, HD 4, THAC0 16, Move 6, Morale 10. Each pulse, a 1-in-6 chance another submerged frame animates.
- **Central Pool:** Column opens on 4th pulse cycle. PCs can interact: touch (risk), withdraw (lose lead), record (gain Saint's favor).
- **Leads:** Collecting shards = +Reclaimer Trust. Allow Saint to analyze pulse = Accord Optics +1. Refusing = safer, but lose faction progress.
- **Hazard:** If PCs speak during pulse, save vs. Spells or repeat their words involuntarily on next dark beat. This marks them for Compliance sensors later.

GM — Transition to Arc 6

- If PCs take shards, the Choir notices: begin Arc 6 with Compliance already alerted.
- If PCs only record, Arc 6 opens with Accord debate, safer but less proof for Reclaimers.
- If PCs touch light, escalate: immediate visions, +1 progress on **Choir Awakening** clock.

Debrief — Fractures Above, Rumors Below

The climb out of J-12 felt longer than the descent. Each step carried grit, each breath the taste of metal, as if the core had left a film across your tongue. By the time the hatch clanged shut, Haven's ordinary noises—vent sighs, pipe clanks, the shuffle of life—sounded counterfeit, like a backdrop to fool the ear. Veyne sealed the hatch with three strikes of her fist, then leaned against the bulkhead as if she'd been holding her posture the whole time for everyone else's sake.

Rust spat again, same as before, only louder now. "That place eats," he muttered. "It doesn't break things.

It eats them.” Serin said nothing, her eyes locked on the wafer map Toll had made, pale-blue lines flickering faint as if remembering too much. The girl’s dot-paper was still in your pocket; you felt its pause-beat like a weight.

“Briefing in four hours,” Veyne said, voice iron again. “Hestrel wants optics. Saint wants truth. Drix wants his parts back. Sael wants witnesses who don’t hum. Decide which of them you’ll starve.” She kicked the wall once, not hard, just enough to make the pipes shudder. “I’ll write my report clean, but don’t think that means safe. You saw what’s under the skin.”

Outside the maintenance stair, the Quarter was waking. Shops unlatched their shutters, families moved in slow lines, the Reclaimer wall had a new name painted on it overnight. A Malrix sermon bubbled from a corner speaker until someone threw a rag over it. The building carried a low vibration that no one acknowledged aloud, though more than one person kept tapping fingers against knees or tablet edges in a rhythm you’d come to know too well. One-two-three—*dark*—four.

Governor Hestrel’s aide intercepted you before you reached the lift, tablet already held out. “Draft remarks,” she said briskly. “The Governor requests your cooperation to avoid contradictory statements. Harmony preserves safety.” Her eyes didn’t rise from the screen; her lips twitched once, betraying nerves. On the tablet the lines glowed: *Legacy parts only. No systemic danger. Stabilizers exemplary.*

Saint’s channel cut in, quiet, like confession: “Break the line tomorrow. Give the dome a voice.”

Kaelen Drix sent a ping to your comm at the same moment. *Z-406 now replaced. Zeratek oversight continuous. Expect smoother variance reports.* His smile reached through the message. So did the leash.

Compliance left a paper slip under your quarters’ door. Three names printed neat, each marked OBS. At the bottom, in ink not printed, someone had scrawled: *Do not hum when the lights go dark.*

Veyne stood with you in the lift, hand braced against the rail, eyes on the dome overhead. “You got choices,” she said, voice low. “Make them loud or make them quiet, but stop pretending they’re neutral. Haven’s listening. And it doesn’t forget who spoke first.”

The lift doors opened onto a city that looked the same and no longer felt like it. Above, the aurora wrote its lines across the dome, green-white threads snared in glass. The crowd below read rumors as if they were scripture. Between them, you stood with proof that wanted to sing and no clear hymnbook to place it in.

Arc 5 closed not with applause or panic, but with the hush of breath drawn in before a speech. What words you chose next would decide if the city exhaled in relief—or in hunger.

GM — Debrief & Transition

- **Faction pressures:** Hestrel pushes scripted optics; Saint demands raw evidence; Drix centralizes variance reports; Sael expands OBS holds.
- **Player leverage:** If shard/lens remain in PC hands, they hold +2 leverage tokens into Arc 6 debates. If surrendered, reduce leverage by 2 but gain temporary safety.
- **Public briefing:** Run as a *social combat*: each faction tries to set the narrative. PCs must choose whether to amplify, contradict, or undermine. Each decision shifts one faction clock (Accord Optics, Helion Stability, Reclaimer Trust, Zeratek Favor, Compliance Control).
- **Clocks:** At end of Arc 5, advance one segment on **Choir Awakening** for every PC who spoke aloud during pulse events. Advance **Legacy Recall** if Zeratek handled any shard directly.
- **Transition:** Arc 6 opens at the public forum where the briefing is staged. PCs arrive with evidence, rumors spreading, and multiple factions waiting to spin their words.

Phase I → Arc 6

Arc 6 — The Public Forum

Scene 1: Opening Forum. Location: The Spire’s Forum Hall. PCs arrive with evidence and leverage; factions gather with agendas. Crowd mood volatile.

The Forum Hall was built for optics, not comfort. Tiered seats arced upward into shadows, every bench wired for broadcast. The dome overhead projected a serene aurora, green-white strands that pretended calm. Beneath that lie, five factions gathered: Helion in pressed suits, Zeratek in their polished casual, Compliance in pale uniforms, Reclaimers in patched jackets, and the Accord’s handlers tucked into observation booths where glass reflected more than it revealed.

Governor Orus Hestrel stood at the central podium. His words had been polished by aides, but the bags beneath his eyes told the truth. “Citizens of Haven, stabilizers, partners,” he began. “We convene tonight to align rumor with fact, to quiet panic with clarity.” The mic orb drifted above him, lenses open like a flower that never closed. Its hum carried into every seat and every home tuned to the feed.

Captain Lira Veyne remained off to the side, arms folded, her presence a line between factions. Kaelen Drix lounged near the Zeratek cluster, smile sharpened for cameras. Director Sael of Compliance sat so still he looked carved, stylus ready for names. Saint’s voice reached your ear alone, private channel: “*Your words set clocks. Say what the dome remembers, not what Hestrel wants it to.*”

The crowd was a pressure of bodies and expectation. Some carried Reclaimer armbands, others whispered Malrix slogans, still others clutched their children tighter when the lights flickered with the aurora’s rhythm. One-two-three—*dark*—four. The pause carried through the hall like a skipped heartbeat.

GM — Running the Opening Forum

- **Atmosphere:** Play up optics. Every word echoes on feed. Factions react not just to truth but to *how it looks*.
- **PC Leverage:** If they still hold the shard/lens, they start with +2 Accord Optics tokens. If surrendered, Helion Stability +1 but PCs have no leverage.
- **Crowd Mood:** Start at Neutral. Bold PC claims shift it (Reclaimer Trust +1 if PCs emphasize worker deaths; Zeratek Favor +1 if they downplay sabotage).
- **Clock advances:** Accord Optics advances if PCs speak against Hestrel’s script. Compliance Control advances if PCs stall or contradict one another.
- **Transition:** End Scene 1 when factions begin crossfire questioning (Scene 2).

Phase II → Arc 7

Scene 2 Dampener Passcode Complications

Arc 7 — Smugglers’ Intrigue

Mandate: secure an off-books route into the Factory complex before Zeratek and Compliance seal it. Stakeholders: **Reclaimers** want relief shipments, **Zeratek** wants deniability, **Accord** wants verifiable proof, **Helion** wants quiet optics. The PCs decide whether to play courier, spy, or thief—likely all three.

“If you want mercy, bring cash. If you want truth, bring noise.” — Dockmaster Sharn, Graywater Piers

Scene 1: Graywater Piers — Buying a Way In

Graywater wasn't on any official map. It was the space between the Quarter and the sea, a teeth-gnashing strip of piers and crane skeletons where the city ended in rust and improvised commerce. Floodlights made cones in the mist; everything outside them looked like a rumor. Barges clanked. A gull's cry cut short as if the fog didn't allow complete sounds.

Lira Veyne met you at the checkpoint built from shipping containers welded into a gate. "Two minutes of advice," she said, not bothering with a greeting. "The people you're about to deal with sell absence—gaps in manifests, blind spots in audits, minutes when cameras sleep. They'll test you with theater. Answer with outcomes, not speeches. I need a route that reaches the Factory's bone without waking Zeratek. I prefer deniable. I require effective." She paused. "Don't confuse either with clean."

Past the gate, Graywater breathed in ledgers and diesel. Stalls offered everything that should have had a serial number but didn't. Pallets of conduit. Drums of scrubber media. Boxes of "reclaimed" lenses stamped with old Zeratek logos that had been polished just enough to pass at a distance. Overhead, a crane traced slow circles like a tired planet.

You felt watched, not by guards, but by the market itself—by the arithmetic of who paused where, who turned away when you looked, who adjusted the grip on a crate hook. The rumor passed ahead of you like wind: Accord agents in the piers. Your title made doors open and hands stash knives.

Dockmaster Sharn's office leaned into the water as if it had decided the sea was just another debtor. He was a man built from rope and salt: thick forearms, tattoos half-erased by sun, a gray beard that couldn't decide between priest and pirate. A camera's red light blinked in the corner above a ledger older than Haven's dome.

"Tell me what you want," Sharn said, voice sandpapered smooth. "Not what you think I want to hear. And don't say 'justice.' She never pays her bill."

You told him: access to a maintenance artery feeding the Factory known as Line K—abandoned officially, maintained unofficially, threaded through cooling caverns and inventory vaults. Entry point outside Helion's security net, exit point somewhere past Zeratek's badge readers. One round trip. You didn't deny the risk; you priced it.

Sharn listened like a stone tides talked to. When he finally moved, he slid a printed manifest across the desk, the paper warm from a duplicator. It described a barge named *Low Mercy* bearing scrap glass to be melted down. "Manifest is clean, inspections acquired. Under the glass is a people space. You'll fit if you don't mind the smell of ground silica in your teeth." He tapped the margin where numbers lived. "But Line K isn't dead. It dreams. You want an artery, you bring me a pulse dampener and a variance passcode."

You could have argued; the camera in the corner blinked as if it asked you to. Instead you matched him with another piece of paper. Saint's name was not on it, but her language was—short, sober, lethal with implication: contingent amnesty on smuggling charges, should Sharn's cooperation produce *verifiable internal wrongdoing* at the Factory. He read it twice. If he felt fear, he kept it in his pocket with the note.

"There's a second price," he said. "Someone is poaching my routes. They show up where I should be first, then they sell my favors under my name. People trust my name. They come to me with debts I didn't make. Bring me the poacher. Or bring me proof that he doesn't exist and I've got a ghost for a rival."

He stood. The office tilted with the tide. Outside, forklifts beeped with the patience of beasts. "You get me a dampener, a code, and the poacher's story. I get you Line K's throat for one night. We settle truth with the dawn."

GM — Running Graywater Negotiations

- **Leverage to bring:** Saint's conditional amnesty; Reclaimer goods for barter; Zeratek firmware shard (CHOIR_SAFE) as proof of internal rot; Helion permits (for optics).
- **Clock (Smuggler Trust 0→4):** 1) Honest price; 2) Shared risk; 3) Useful proof; 4) Mutual enemy. At 3+, Sharn offers Line K map fragments; at 4 he gives a *time window* when Zeratek audits sleep.
- **Failure costs:** If PCs bluff and fail, **Accord Optics –1** (caught “pressuring legitimate trade”); if they threaten Sharn, **Reclaimer Trust –1** (word spreads they strong-arm locals).
- **Poacher thread:** A rival named **Tala Merey** uses a counterfeit Sharn seal and a choir-muted skiff. She's real—and scared. Evidence leads to a pier shed marked **B9**.

The shed was a geometry lesson in neglect—angles that used to be straight, squares made slant by water and time. Inside, someone had made a desk from doors, a bed from coils of line, and a shrine from broken equipment: a lens, a smoothed gear, an antenna stem. Not worship, exactly. Respect. The way engineers leave space on the bench for the tool that saved a life.

Tala Merey stepped out from behind a stack of crate lids with her hands open. She wore a dock worker's vest but moved like someone who'd learned in a different school—watching exits, measuring angles. Early thirties. Eyes too tired for a liar. “If Sharn sent you to break my legs,” she said, “I need them to run. So let's make a counteroffer.”

She told it fast, like speed could stop debt from catching. A month ago, a Compliance medic promised her a clean slate if she helped route “overstock” from Zeratek warehouses to clinics—repackaged as charity. The first two runs were clean. On the third, the crates hummed. She heard the hum even when the crane stopped, even when the tide held its breath. She dropped the cargo overboard and watched the water fizz with light like a sting. After that, jobs she never took kept happening under her seal. People came to collect gratitude that she hadn't earned. She started running under Sharn's name as camouflage, knowing it would eventually bring him or you.

GM — Tala Merey (Smuggler, Sleepless)

- **Appearance & Demeanor:** Weathered vest, careful hands, jumps at tones near 440Hz.
- **Hooks:** Knows a choir-muting route for skiffs; carries a *variance dongle* keyed to **Director Sael**'s clinic network.
- **If protected:** PCs gain a **temporary guide** advantage for Line K (ignore first audit check).
- **If burned:** **Compliance Control +1**; Tala disappears, returns later as a liability—or a body with her seal on it.

She gave you the counterfeit seal. Up close the flaw was a rhythm, not a look—its watermark pulsed just out of step with Graywater's machinery, like a heart trying to keep time with a song it didn't know. “The medic's name was Saev,” Tala said. “Clinic badge, gentle voice, a list of drugs pronounced like prayers. I didn't know he worked nights for Compliance. I do now. If you're going into the Factory, take me. I can keep a skiff quiet and a crew quieter.”

On the way back to Sharn's office, the fog thinned enough to show the outline of **Low Mercy**. Workers moved crates that had been glass and were now excuses. Sharn listened. He watched Tala like a man trying not to decide quickly. “The poacher's real,” he said at last. “And the ghost sings in your crates.” He flicked a switch, and the office light went from warm to white. “You get me a dampener and a code; I give you Line K. The window is four hours after midnight. Audits nap then. You'll be a rumor before dawn or evidence forever.”

GM — Securing the Two Keys

- **Pulse Dampener:** Buy from Graywater (cost: favors + 200 credits), steal from Zeratek depot (stealth DC hard), or build from parts (INT check; time cost adds risk).
- **Variance Passcode:** Extract from a Compliance aide (social), lift from a clinic terminal (tech), or barter with Saint for a one-use token (cost: a promise to deliver proof within 48 hours).
- **Outcome:** If PCs secure both, Sharn provides a ****Line K map fragment**** and ****audit-sleep window****. Missing one key increases checks during the infiltration by one step.

Lira met you again outside the gate, the sea’s breath turning her words into visible ghosts. “You have your route,” she said. “You’ll have your window. Bring something back that forces Hestrel’s hand and survives his optics. I’ll hold the door we broke in Arc 6 as long as I can.” Her gaze shifted past you to Graywater. “And keep Sharn’s people alive if you can. We’ll need them when the city gets honest about what it’s hiding.”

GM — Rewards & Shifts

- **On success:** +1 Accord Optics (clean deal), +1 Reclaimer Trust (you didn’t bully), ****Access: Line K**** unlocked for Arc 8.
- **On loud failure:** ****Zeratek Favor +1**** if PCs pin chaos on smugglers; ****Compliance Control +1**** if PCs implicate clinics.
- **On quiet failure:** Window narrows to 2 hours; add an extra patrol in Arc 8.

Arc Bridge → Arc 8

****Next:**** With a dampener humming like a held breath and a passcode that tastes of clinic antiseptic, the party rides *Low Mercy* into the dark water and the long throat of Line K. Ahead, the Factory waits with its lights half-off and its ears on.

Scene 2 — Quiet Cargo, Louder Lies

Objective: secure the two keys—**Pulse Dampener** + **Variance Passcode**—without waking audits or burning Graywater. Routes are modular; run one, two, or all three depending on table appetite: *buy*, *steal*, or *build* for the dampener; *social*, *tech*, or *bargain* for the passcode.

“Cargo’s quiet when the lies are louder.” — Tala Merey

Graywater’s evening thickened to a graphite smear. Flood cones narrowed, and the mist began to hold sound instead of letting it pass. A fork-lift coughed and went still. From the inner piers, you could hear the sea slap pilings in a rhythm that wanted to be the child’s beat and failed. Tala walked with you, coat collar up, pointing with her chin rather than her hands. “Three ways to get your dampener,” she said. “None honest, all expensive. Same for the code. If anyone asks who you’re with, you’re with nobody.” She smiled thin. “Nobody’s crew lives longest.”

Part A — Pulse Dampener

What it is: a suitcase-sized box of tuned coils and ceramic baffles that *eats* pulse bands in the Choir’s range. It makes Line K sound like old water.

GM — Routes to the Dampener (pick 1+)

- **Buy (Graywater stall “Cinder & Coil”):** Cost 200–300 cr + a favor. Test: Reaction (CHA) to keep the price sane; failure adds a “marked for skimming” tag → next market buy costs +50%. Success gives a *warranty card* (re-roll one malfunction later).

- **Steal (Zeratek depot S-2):** Night patrols (2 × Drone Sentries, AC 5, HD 2, THAC0 18, Move 12). Tests: Move Silently/Hide; failure triggers a 1d4 round response. Loot includes *engineering log* (evidence, +Accord Optics).
- **Build (makeshift shop, Reclaimer maker-bay):** Requires scavenged parts: ceramic insulators, shielded coil, tuned lens. Tests: INT check to blueprint; then 2× Craft/Tool checks. On a fail, unit works but bleeds heat (later Stealth/Encounter checks at −1).

Malfunction clock (0→3): Each hard move or sprint with the device may tick this; at 3, the dampener sputters for 1d6 rounds (Line K encounter difficulty +1 step).

Market Route (Buy): The Cinder & Coil stall hid its good inventory under scrap: cracked oscillators on top, clean coils beneath. The owner, a woman with solder burns like constellations across her fingers, never asked what you needed, only where you intended to lie. “Lies have frequencies,” she said, as if quoting scripture. “Tell me yours and I’ll tune for it.” You paid in credits that would be clean enough if no one looked, and in a favor that would not be. She slid the dampener across the counter in a dented shipping case and stamped the card: *ONE REPLACEMENT FUSE — NOT GOOD FOR APOCALYPSES*.

Depot Route (Steal): S-2’s fence sang when the wind pushed at it. You watched two sentry drones draw lazy eights between pallets, optics on half-sleep. Tala murmured ranges and timings like a hymn. You cut through a seam where two panels met, slipped into a corridor of stacked crates, and moved like rumor. Inside the service bay, the dampener sat on a dolly with a chalk note: *TO SAEL — FRIDAY*. You didn’t think about that handwriting until the backlight of a patrol passed and your heart moved with it. The case was heavier than it looked. The air was louder than it should have been. You left a gap in the chalk note so the sentence made a new lie.

Maker Route (Build): Rust Varo opened the Reclaimer bay with a smile that lived several inches below his eyes. “You’ll want the ceramic from the broken oven,” he said. “And the coil from the furnace that tried to marry me last spring.” The bay smelled of ozone and soap—the scent of cleaned-up accidents. Under Rust’s lamp, the coil hummed a note you could feel in your teeth. “Good,” he decided. “Hurt is the right key.” When the baffle took shape, it looked like a dictionary had swallowed a bomb. It purred when you powered it, and the lights in the corner shuddered once, as if relieved to be left out of the song.

Part B — Variance Passcode

What it is: a one-use credential that convinces old doors you belong to new masters. Line K’s badge readers aren’t smart; they’re obedient.

GM — Routes to the Passcode (pick 1+)

- **Social (Compliance aide “Aren Pol”):** Approach at the tea kiosk by Clinic South. Tests: Reaction (CHA) to open, then Parley/Bribe. Success yields a 24-hour code; failure flags the PCs (Compliance Control +1).
- **Tech (Clinic terminal skim):** Use Tala’s *variance dongle*. Tests: Find/Remove Traps (for tamper seals) then INT to copy token without logging. On minor fail, token works but pings Sael in 1d6 hours.
- **Bargain (Saint’s one-use token):** She gives a *black pass* with an expiration that reads *WHEN TRUTH ARRIVES*. Cost: promise an internal proof drop within 48 hours. Break it → Accord Optics −1 and she goes dark for a chapter.

Pass Validity: Each route sets the token lifespan: aide 24h; terminal 8–12h (GM’s call); black pass until used (but adds Accord pressure clock +1).

Social Route (Aren): The clinic’s south terrace pretended to be hospitality with glass and mint steam. Aren Pol looked like a person who had decided to live small to avoid large troubles. When you offered a kindness (the right compliment, the right rumor, the right coin), he blinked as if waking. “We don’t open doors,” he said. “We just keep them from closing.” He slid a badge across the table under a napkin, and the napkin smelled faintly of antiseptic and fear.

Tech Route (Terminal): Tala blew heat across her knuckles and picked the terminal panel with a strip of shim steel. The clinic’s back hall hummed with the quiet of people trying not to say the wrong name. You clipped the dongle in, watched it drink from the stream of authorizations, and whispered a prayer to whatever saints computers have that the *ping* would wait until you were three corridors away. On the way out, a nurse saw you and decided, visibly, not to. You felt that decision follow you for a block.

Bargain Route (Saint): “You will be tempted to choose the truth that hurts slow,” Saint said in your ear. “Choose the one that stops the bleeding.” Her courier met you behind a shuttered cafe and gave you a token the color of a turned-off screen. It was heavy. It felt like a promise stitched with wire. You signed nothing. You owed everything.

Part C — Complications (pick 1)

GM — Choose a complication that fits your routes

- **Compliance Sweep:** Sael’s night team walks Graywater with sedation wands. PCs must Hide/Deceive; on failure, 1 PC marked OBS (later –1 on public checks).
- **Zeratek Bait:** Drix’s people “accidentally” leak a cheaper dampener that actually amplifies low bands. Spot with INT or sound-lore; failure = Line K spawns +1 patrol.
- **Malrix Choir:** A small street-choir begins the child’s rhythm near Shed B9. If not dispersed, they *tune* the dampener wrong (first use sputters for 1 round).
- **Sharn’s Favor:** He calls in the marker now: move a crate to a different pier during your run. Do it quietly → Smuggler Trust +1; refuse → Trust –1.

The night thinned, trading fog for a sky of scratched glass. *Low Mercy* rocked against its ropes, restless. Sharn stood on the pier with hands in his coat, eyes measuring weight and weather and you. “You have your quiet box?” he asked. “You have your door word?” Tala answered with a nod that was almost a prayer. The Dockmaster spat into the sea and nodded back—blessing or superstition, it worked either way.

You stowed the dampener in its cradle beneath the skiff’s bench, the case muffled in canvas. The black pass rode your inner pocket like a second pulse. Lira’s channel came live and stayed silent a breath before she spoke. “You go now,” she said. “If you hear the child’s rhythm in the water, slow down. If you hear it in yourself, stop.” A pause. Softer: “Come back with the thing that changes Hestrel’s face when he reads it.”

GM — Outcomes & Clocks (end of Scene 2)

- **If PCs secured both keys cleanly:** Unlock **Line K Access** for Arc 8. Gain +1 Accord Optics (prepared) and +1 Reclaimer Trust (respectful). Set *Audit Window*: 4 hours.
- **If one key is compromised:** Access still unlocks, but add +1 Encounter difficulty step in Arc 8 and reduce *Audit Window* to 2 hours.

- **If the run turned noisy:** Helion Stability +1 (optics spin) or Compliance Control +1 (if sweep “finds” something). Your call based on scenes.
- **Tala tag:** If protected, she grants one *Skiff Reroute* in Arc 8 (ignore first patrol). If burned, Arc 8 begins with a *Pier Memorial* GM beat.

Arc Bridge → Scene 3: The skiff pushes off at shift-change. The dampener hums like an animal sleeping with one eye open. Ahead, the mouth of Line K waits—rusted teeth, black breath, and the promise of a road that forgets to be seen.

Scene 3 — Into Line K

“Some doors forget how to be closed. Others forget why they ever opened.” — Saint

Graywater’s midnight was a graphite bruise with a salt taste. *Low Mercy* bucked twice against the pier as lines were cast off, then settled into the kind of motion that feels like a thought you can’t stop thinking. The dampener in its canvas cradle issued a hush you felt more than heard, the way a cathedral absorbs footsteps. Tala took the skiff’s tiller with both hands like she was steadying a story that tended to run away. Sharn watched from the pier without waving; Dockmaster blessings look like judgment in poor light.

The mouth of Line K showed itself as a row of rust-teeth in the breakwater, chewing corridors from the sea into the city’s throat. Above, Haven’s dome pulsed low and distant, its aurora faint as a remembered song. Lira’s voice filtered through on a private channel, pared down to the necessary: “Two patrols redeployed to the Spire, one to Clinic South. You have a gap. Don’t widen it.” The channel cut, leaving only water and engine and breath and the small animal sound of the dampener doing its job.

The skiff took the first turn into the service tunnel. Metal ribs rose on either side like a ribcage big enough to house a city. Drips timed themselves to the child’s rhythm—once, twice, three times, *dark*—then fell out of time as the dampener’s hush pushed back. On the walls, paint that had once listed safety procedures now peeled like an old lie. *Authorized Personnel Only*. It read as both warning and compliment, depending on how you felt about rules.

Tala killed the motor before sound could carry deeper than you needed. The skiff drifted on the dampener’s quiet, inertia becoming stealth. You passed a bank of vents that breathed warm air into the passage, and that breath carried a scent like burnt sugar and hot wire: factory smells without the factory. The tunnels had lungs after all, and they were exhaling something that knew you were in it.

First badge gate. It rose from the water like a tired idea, three plates and a reader welded in a decade that liked corners. Tala nodded to the reader. “Pass,” she whispered. The black token in your pocket felt heavier as if it wanted to decide whether this door deserved it. You tapped. The light thought about color, chose green reluctantly, and the plates retracted with a metal yawn old enough to have opinions. The skiff slid through. The plates closed behind you with a sound that reminded shoulders to tense.

Past the gate, the tunnel narrowed. A warning siren that had once meant *flood* now meant *history*. Cable trays ran along the ceiling like spine, each labeled in a hand that might have been human at the time. The dampener’s hush met a new sound—a choir of tiny, high notes just inside hearing, like glass ware in a sink when the faucet is wrong. Tala touched the case with the back of her fingers, a sailor’s ritual. “Still hungry,” she said. “Good.”

The next chamber opened into something like a dead atrium, where Line K met Lines that used to be letters. Catwalks had been rolled up and stowed against the walls as if someone had tidied to avoid admitting abandonment. Here, the acoustics shifted. Your footsteps were not your own; they returned late and shorter, as

though the room edited for time. A maintenance bot sat in the corner with a fine coat of lint and a Zeratek sticker half-scraped away. Its one eye glowed the indecisive orange that says *sleep* if you believe in mercy.

The route map Sharn threw in with the price was a fragment with a coffee-ring, and it did what all good maps do: it lied exactly enough to be useful. You could see Line K's intended path in blue—down, then over, then up—but notes in a sharper hand overlaid it with red arrows and words like *audits nap* and *duck here* and *ignore this, not a door*. The red had dried to brown. You believed it more for that.

At the second badge gate, Compliance had upgraded the reader to something that had opinions about entropy. Tala held out her hand; you placed the black pass on her palm so its heaviness became hers. She tapped. The light went white, stayed there long enough for a prayer, and then learned green. “Don’t like that,” Tala muttered. “White is the color of people who plan to write a report whether it happened or not.” The gate opened slower than the first and closed faster, like regretting a decision while it was still being made.

Water found shallows and the skiff found scrape. You took oars and shoved off a pile of abandoned conduit, each length stamped with a Zeratek run that had been sanded down to almost nothing. Almost. In the scrape you felt the factory’s impatience: bodies not yet processed, materials not yet fired, quotas not yet met. If the city had a god, it was throughput. You were here to steal a minute from it. Throughput hates thieves.

The third chamber was wrong in a way engineering has words for but stories use different ones. Temperature gradients did not align with vents, moisture condensed where physics would have preferred it didn’t, and the lights chose to bloom and dim in patterns that were neither random nor polite. The dampener’s hush deepened, as if challenged. A maintenance console set in the wall showed an error stack that was not meant for eyes; it scrolled in glyphs that moved when you tried to count them. A familiar sensation: the Choir writing jokes in a language humans haven’t learned to laugh at.

Sentries ahead—small ones, the size of uncharismatic house pets, skating across the water like patient spiders. Their lenses were low and thoughtful; their hum matched the child’s rhythm exactly until the dampener leaned on them and their time slipped. They corrected, then corrected the correction, and then grew interested in something that might not have been you. Tala breathed out like someone who keeps her superstitions in her lungs. “We move when they breathe,” she said, meaning the pauses between hum peaks. You counted your life in rests instead of notes and slid past.

Past meant a sidetube where the ceiling pressed down to tell the story about caves that have swallowed boats. The skiff’s gunwales kissed steel and learned humility. In the dark the world shrank to the width of your shoulders, to the sound of water talking itself into circles, to the knowledge that the dampener’s fuse card said it was not good for apocalypses. A drip found the skiff’s bow and insisted.

When the passage opened again, the air was colder. Not final cold. Appetizer cold. A slurry channel joined from the right, bringing with it flecks that glowed for a moment, then sighed and died. The skiff’s hull glistened with their residue. Tala wiped it off with the hem of a rag and the rag crisped at the edge. “Don’t take that home,” she said. “Not even on your boots. It teaches shoes how to walk without you.”

The third gate’s reader was mounted higher than a person could reach from a skiff and lower than a person would want to climb for free. Tala poised on the bow, gain lines in one hand, pass in the other, body made from a geometry of risk. You steadied her by the ankle as she thumbed the pad; white, then green, then a judder in the plates as something in the gate remembered its original job and argued for a second. The argument ended in your favor. The plates sighed open.

Beyond, Line K became less tunnel and more throat. The walls showed kiln-scorch in arcing sweeps, the kind of marks made by a process that sweats heat like fear. Somewhere far ahead a series of doors opened and closed, not at human speed. The factory practiced its own calisthenics when no one watched.

You reached the marker Sharn's fragment called *Stepwell*—a place where the water descended in squared terraces. Here, the skiff could go no further without leaving dignity at the stair. Tala tied off, palmed the dampener case, and gestured at the catwalk that ran above the well. In the corner of the landing, a hand-painted sign read *no singing*. The paint had run. You felt a chill that spent itself like a coin.

On the catwalk, old warning lights wore new stickers: Helion's authority, Zeratek's warranty, Compliance's concern, the Accord's absence. The combo looked like governance held together by museum glue. At a junction box someone had written *THIS IS FINE* and someone else had scrawled *like soup* beneath it. The humor helped you breathe.

A service door ahead. The pass would work; you knew that the way you know a truth that will cost you. It wore a small camera bubble someone had tried to paint over and failed at in a hurry. Blue lines, half a handprint, smears of embarrassment. Tala's whisper found a pocket in your ear. "Last door," she said. "Then the Factory proper. After this, the air goes bureaucratic."

You gave the pass to the reader. It wondered about you, found a reason it liked, and returned green. The door didn't so much open as un-clench. A waft of climate control the temperature of paperwork stroked your face. Behind you, the dampener hummed and the tunnel hummed back until they made a chord. In front of you, the factory waited with an expression off neutral by one degree, which is all a good liar ever shows.

GM — Infiltration Mechanics (AD&D 2e-friendly)

- **General flow:** Treat Line K as a 3-gate skill gauntlet. Each gate demands 1 check keyed to the route chosen in Scene 2:
 - *Buy route:* Reaction (CHA) to keep sellers loyal (failure → a shadow tail in Arc 8).
 - *Steal route:* Move Silently/Hide in Shadows vs. patrols; failure → 1 encounter with 2 Drone Sentries (AC 5, HD 2, THAC0 18, MV 12) on the water.
 - *Build route:* INT or appropriate NWP (Engineering/Artifice); success → +1 bonus to all sound-stealth checks; fail → "heat bleed" (first encounter in Arc 8 at +1 difficulty).
- **Badge readers:** Using *clinic token* = 24h validity; *terminal skim* = 8–12h (roll 1d4+7); *black pass* = until used but adds **Accord Pressure +1**.
- **Environmental saves:** Once per chamber, have PCs save vs. Breath Weapon (or CON check) to resist slurry/fumes. Failure → -1 to reaction/initiative next scene (coughing, eyes watering).
- **Noise budget:** Start at 3. Each loud action (engine rev, dropped gear, gunshot) ticks 1. At 0, trigger a *Flash Patrol* (1d3 Drone Sentries or 1 Zeratek Auditor, see below).
- **Optional encounter: Zeratek Auditor** (AC 4, HD 3, THAC0 17, MV 9; special: "Badge Scan"—forces one PC save vs. Spells or badge burns out).
- **Loot/Proof:** S-2 chalk note fragment; engineering log tape; the *no singing* sign—Saint loves artifacts with jokes.

GM — Clocks & Faction Shifts (end of Scene 3)

- **Accord Optics:** +1 if PCs gathered physical proof (log tape/sign), +1 extra if infiltration stayed under Noise ≥ 1 .
- **Helion Stability:** +1 if PCs radioed Lira for coordination; -1 if their noise forced a redeploy from Spire wards.
- **Zeratek Favor:** +1 if PCs used their badge quietly and blamed "smugglers" in any chatter; -1 if they stole from S-2 and left obvious gaps.
- **Compliance Control:** +1 if any pass use pinged (terminal route fail); -1 if PCs exposed the clinic link (Aren/Saev) on the record.
- **Smuggler Trust:** +1 if Sharn's marker was honored mid-run; -1 if ignored.

The door finished deciding and slid aside. The Factory’s air came out to greet you like a host whose smile is an equation. Beyond lay corridors built to be walked by clipboards, floors that preferred wheels to footsteps, lights that rewarded paperwork. The dampener’s hush felt suddenly like a secret you had accidentally said aloud. It did not echo. Nothing here echoed unless the room wanted it to.

Arc Bridge → Arc 8: Cross the threshold. Carry the hush as far as it will go. Somewhere in the Factory, machines have learned a new word for *hungry*, and somebody has been teaching them grammar.

Phase II → **Arc 8**

Arc 8 — Factory Depths

Mandate: penetrate the Factory interior via Line K, map surveillance rhythms, secure proof of internal wrongdoing, and survive first contact with the Choir-inflected systems. Audit window: **4 hours** (modify if Arc 7 was noisy).

Scene 1 Scene 2 Scene 3 Arc Bridge

Scene 1 — Quiet Floors, Watching Walls

“Factories don’t make products. They make obedience.” — Saint

The door unclenched and you stepped into a silence that wasn’t absence, but design. The Factory’s floors gleamed with a polish that no worker had applied in years, their shine produced by drones that preferred reflection to dust. Overhead, rows of lights burned steady white, too steady—never flickering, never dimming. The kind of light that forgets you’re a person and assumes you’re a part number.

Your boots met surface with a soft report, and that sound was eaten by the walls. Each corridor was paneled in acoustic baffles that made footsteps seem ashamed of themselves. Even whispers bent short, returning to the ear smaller than when they left. It was a building built to hear, not to speak.

The dampener’s hush clung like a cloak, but you could feel the resistance. The walls pulsed faintly when you moved, as though some current was running not just through conduits but through stone, wire, and air itself. The smell here was a mixture of solder and disinfectant, like someone had tried to sterilize a circuit board and failed.

Tala signed with her hand: *eyes everywhere*. She was right. Along the ceilings, pan-tilt units with dull lenses swiveled in programmed arcs. Their hums harmonized with the child’s rhythm, matching beats every third pass. When the dampener surged, the rhythm fell out of time for a moment—long enough to make sweat bead before it realigned itself.

The corridor opened into a floor bay: rows of conveyor lines still, but not abandoned. Each belt bore crates, all stenciled with codes, none with destinations. The labels were nonsensical—strings of digits punctuated by fragments of words. ...*variance...consent...deficit...* The words changed if you looked twice, letters rearranging like they had places to be.

On the far wall, a projection flickered to life unbidden: a training reel from a decade ago. Workers in clean uniforms smiled as they carried out procedures, every motion exaggerated to show compliance. But the voices were gone. Only the motions remained, looping endlessly, a pantomime of productivity. When the reel ended, the wall stayed lit with a static image: a slogan, but rewritten in jittering text: *YOUR HANDS ARE OURS*.

The map fragment Sharn had given you labeled this section “Quiet Floors.” In the corner, someone had scrawled a note in grease pencil: *watch the walls, not the cams*. As if to prove it, one section of paneling trembled when you passed, though no air current stirred. The tremble synced with your heartbeat for three counts, then stopped.

Past the conveyors lay an open floor of tiles, each precisely one meter square. The tiles had scuffs but no dust. Every 30 seconds, a light sweep moved across them from one side of the hall to the other, not visible to the naked eye but bright in the reflection of your own sweat. Tala crouched, dragged a gloved finger across the seam of a tile, and showed you: her fingertip glowed faintly green where it had touched.

She whispered: “Pattern’s three beats, then sweep. Miss it and you glow for them.” She rubbed her hand clean on a cloth that hissed as if it disliked the task.

You moved across with the sweep in your bones, counting rests like musicians count bars. Every step was a gamble with rhythm. When the sweep passed, your eyes filled with afterimages—lines of glyphs that wanted to spell your names but didn’t get them quite right.

On the far side of the tiles, a wall of lockers stretched floor to ceiling. Most were sealed, tagged with numbers, but one was ajar. Inside hung a uniform, crisp, folded as though expecting a worker who had stepped out for a break years ago. In the breast pocket was a small ID card. The picture had blurred beyond recognition, but the nameplate remained: *KELEN, MARA*. Chief Tech. She had signed requisitions you’d glimpsed before in Reclaimer whispers. The card pulsed faintly, in rhythm with the walls.

Tala’s face tightened. “Badge closet,” she whispered. “Proof or trap. Both.” Her eyes left the badge and moved to the ceiling, where a panel bulged, then retracted, as though the Factory was considering whether to spit something out.

The air here had weight. It carried the taste of old ozone and the suspicion of whispers never finished. Somewhere in the deeper hall, machinery clanged—not rhythm, not song, but the prelude to both. You felt the Factory notice you, and you felt the Factory decide to let you pass. For now.

GM — Tools for Quiet Floors

- **Surveillance Rhythm:** Every 3 rounds, cams sweep. PCs must Hide/Move Silently or use cover. Failures glow faintly (–1 reaction with factions that see it, +1 Accord Optics if logged).
- **Tile Sweep:** Crossing = DEX check or Save vs. Breath Weapon. Fail → PCs marked (green residue). Drones may track later.
- **Badge Closet:** ID card = proof (Accord +1), but also traceable. Carrying it pings Helion Stability clock if scanned.
- **Environmental Fear:** Any PC alone for more than 3 rounds must Save vs. Spells or suffer –1 initiative next encounter (Factory edits their sense of time).
- **Proof Options:** looped training reel, slogan capture, badge card. Each worth +1 Accord if smuggled out.

Bridge to Scene 2: Past the lockers, a door waits, marked *QUIET KILN* in hand paint. The paint runs as though freshly wet, though no one holds a brush. Inside is the next witness, and he has no voice left to give.

Scene 2 — The Witness Who Can’t Speak

“He remembers in knocks.” — Lira

The door marked **QUIET KILN** was wrong twice. First, the paint had run downward in thin black tears and then stopped mid-drip, as if the wall had swallowed time. Second, the handle was warm, but the seam

breathed cold. Tala touched the panel with her knuckles, listened, and nodded once—an old tunnel signal that meant *something inside makes decisions*.

You eased the door open. The room beyond was not a kiln in the way furnaces are kilns. It was a climate chamber—square, tall, clean to the kind of shine that means mercy has been sterilized off the schedule. White tiles. Stainless counters. A glass enclosure along one wall, its interior equipped like a break room for people who had never earned breaks. Overhead, diffusers hummed a note that wanted to be neutral. The dampener’s hush pressed back. Neutral lost.

He sat on a bench bolt-mounted to the floor. He had a uniform shirt with its name patch cut away, leaving a pale rectangle on a chest that had done more lifting than paperwork. His hair had learned to be tidy for other people’s comfort. His hands were the important part: scarred, steady, and slightly apart on his knees so you could read that they did not shake unless asked. He looked up when the hinges sighed, and you understood why Lira had said *he remembers in knocks*.

His throat bore a narrow, pale seam where a voice used to live. The clinic had done a careful job of making absence look like procedure. His eyes carried the kind of calculation people learn when they cannot barter with words anymore. On the bench beside him lay a metal water cup and a small, battered slate with a stylus on a string. The slate’s surface showed faint memories of letters, then smudges where someone had wiped them away before they finished being meanings.

Tala stayed just inside the door, her coat catching the room’s artificial breeze like a sail that knew better. “We’re nobody,” she said softly, which in Graywater could be a name. “We need your seconds. And your truths.” He watched her mouth, then your hands, then the door behind you. He tapped the bench twice with his knuckles—solid, deliberate—then pointed to the slate.

You lifted the stylus. He took it from you not unkindly and flipped the slate to the clean side. His first marks were a map, not words: three rectangles in a row for rooms, a line slanting down, a small circle by the third rectangle. He knocked four times and then two, a pattern that carried memory instead of noise. Tala leaned in. “Tap-code,” she murmured. “Old lift signals. Dockhands use it when the power dies.” She tapped back *we hear* on the bench’s underside and he nodded, surprised into a brief smile that proved someone had once made him laugh often enough to teach the muscles.

He wrote letters around the circle: *K-Closet*. Then he crossed it out, wrote *K-Casket*, paused, and underlined the second word. With the side of his fist he knocked once, hard, and let the sound live a moment in the room. The walls ate it slow, reluctant. He held up two fingers—two doors under *Quiet Kiln*: the one you used and the other that led down.

You asked, with your hands and your eyes and the speed of your pen, *who took your voice?* He held your gaze until he was certain you were asking about cause rather than culprit. He tapped the stylus to his throat, then to the ceiling diffusers, then drew a square with a small black sun in its corner. The sun had rays that bent like wires. He wrote three letters beneath: *VPC*. Tala’s mouth hardened without moving. “Variance Process Control,” she said. “Sael’s favorite dashboard. It’s how they call sedation ‘stability.’”

He flipped the slate and drew again: a furnace diagram simplified to bones—a feed, a chamber, an exhaust. He marked one chute with a dot and wrote *wrong feed*. He underlined it four times, each line heavier, impatient with his own handwriting. Then he wrote *singing*, stopped, looked at the word as if it might learn to behave, and knocked *ta-ta-ta...* “The child’s rhythm,” Tala whispered. “Here, in the furnace schedule?”

You felt the room agree with her. The diffusers bled a note that matched the knocks and then pretended they hadn’t. The dampener’s hush deepened a fraction; the air resisted, like paper trying not to burn. The witness—because that was what he was now—put the stylus down and held up both hands: palms out, honest.

He tapped both shoulders with his knuckles: *name* in the old deckhand sign. You offered yours. He nodded as if hanging them on pegs he might need later. He tapped his chest twice and then traced a triangle in the air. Tala tried a guess. “Shift triangle?” He shook his head. He wrote on the slate: *REN*.

Ren. The name fit the room: compact, efficient, carrying more underneath. He pointed to your dampener case. You unlatched it just enough to let him hear the hush, and his shoulders eased. He knocked a new pattern on the bench: *three, one, three*. Tala translated with her fingers: *stairs down, one guard drone, stairs down*. Ren finished with a small dot surrounded by three circles. He wrote *icon* and then, after a pause long enough to be an apology, *choir*.

He wanted to show you a thing that made hurt into doctrine. He wanted you to see where singing becomes policy.

The corridor beyond the chamber’s far door led to a modest stairwell whose handrail had lost its gloss near the bottom, the way metal does where worry polishes it. On the landing a maintenance poster declared: *HELION CARES* and then, in smaller print, *about compliance*. Someone had inked two dots under the word *cares* so it read like a face. It didn’t help.

Ren set his palm flat on the door, looked at you for permission, then knocked twice in a pattern Tala didn’t know and the door decided to be unlocked. The stairwell breathed in your faces. The dampener hummed. The steps were the kind designed by committees who would never use them. You moved with a rhythm lent from the tiles above, three beats, then a rest.

First landing. The guard drone Ren had promised was waiting in the corner of the ceiling, pretending to be a sensor pack until it remembered to be suspicious. It was a Zeratek model that had failed to sell because its shape suggested a bird that had been taught the wrong songs. It watched the landing two meters in every direction and then lost interest unless interest happened in front of it. Ren put his finger to his lips out of habit, winced, and tapped his throat in apology to himself. He took a coin from his pocket, spun it with a practiced flick so it danced in the air, then slapped it flat on the opposite rail. The drone turned its lens politely toward the noise and stayed there, as if the coin had become policy. You slid past.

Second flight. The air thickened. Not heat, not cold—*density*. The way rooms feel before bad news arrives. You reached a landing where the paint on the wall was less worn because people didn’t want to touch it. A small alcove hosted a shrine that had been built out of compliance: a locked case with a morale certificate, a photograph of workers smiling through their quotas, and a metal emblem bolted to the back plate. The emblem showed a stylized eye with a gear for an iris and a tear made of wire. Ren tapped the glass. He knocked *two, two, one*. Tala frowned. “Access code, or a prayer?”

Ren opened the case with a key that didn’t live on his person but in the scuffed metal recess that his hand found without looking. Inside, behind the morale certificate, lay a smaller door—the size of a confession—painted the exact gray of apology. He rapped the bench-pattern: *three, one, three*. The door thought about it and opened from the middle, folding into itself until it was no longer a door but an absence drawn neatly.

The room beyond was small enough to make arguments intimate. Three pedestals stood in a triangle. On each rested a token: a worker’s badge, a broken coil, a strip of film sealed in plastic. Above, a panel displayed a phrase in soft blue: *ICON OF COMPLIANCE*. On the far wall, behind glass, what might once have been an altar had been converted into a display mount. The thing mounted there was a metal plate with grooves cut into it at harmonic intervals. It was nothing, and it hummed gently the way a mouth hums when it wants a child to sleep.

Ren tapped his chest, then the plate. He knocked *one, one, two* with a hesitation on the last beat. Tala took a breath she held too long. “They make people tell the room they agree,” she said, not asking. Ren nodded.

He pointed to his throat again and then to the plate and then to the plastic strip of film with the steadiness of a man who sets a tool down exactly where it belongs. He wrote on the slate: *audit lied* and then, after a long pause in which the stylus hovered, *we sang anyway*.

The realization happened the way good knowledge does: in layers you cannot refuse. The plate was not merely an emblem; it was a teacher. You could ask the room to hum a rhythm. You could ask workers to match it. If a person failed to match it, a light would turn a particular shade of concern. A report would write itself in words that forgave no variance. The document would then teach the clinic a new euphemism for sedation.

Ren turned the plate off with a short, hard knock across two specific grooves. The hum cut with an almost guilty abruptness, and the room felt larger when it did. He pointed at the strip of film. Tala unsealed the plastic, slid the film toward the light of the diffusers, and squinted. It showed a line of workers at a gate, each holding a badge to a reader. Each frame froze a different mouth at a different point in a word. In three frames near the end a small child stood outside the line, counting on their fingers. In the last frame Ren stood nearest the camera, his mouth on the shape of a syllable that could have been *no* or *none* or *nobody*.

He put the film back like a relic and tapped the badge on the pedestal beside it. The nameplate read *HARI YOVEN* and had a black line through the middle, not drawn but manufactured into the plastic. “Dead,” Tala said, more statement than eulogy. Ren touched the broken coil. “Evidence,” Tala added. “A furnace feed not rated for human safety.” Ren nodded. He held up his hand with two fingers slightly apart: *close, close*.

He wanted to leave with you. Or wanted you to escort the truth out of the building embodied, not laminated. He pointed at the alcove door, then at his chest, then at the slate. He wrote: *slow*. It cost time to bring a person who could not easily run through a factory that preferred its truths to move at machine speed.

The Factory did not like the choice being made. The diffusers whispered louder. The dampener’s hush felt suddenly like it needed a rest you could not give it. Somewhere in the walls the child’s rhythm fumbled and then found itself again stronger, as if embarrassment had made it practice. Tala looked at you, then at Ren, then at the three tokens on their pedestals. “We can save a man and lose a minute,” she said. “Or save a minute and lose the part of ourselves we like to tell stories about.”

GM — The Escort Dilemma (moral/pacing fork)

- **Escort Ren out now:** Costs *Audit Window* –1 hour. Gain **Accord Optics** +1 (living testimony) and **Reclaimer Trust** +1. Add a Stealth segment through Quiet Floors with Ren (Move Silently at –2 unless creative). If captured → Compliance Control +1 and Ren becomes a Phase II objective.
- **Hide Ren on-site:** No time cost now; stash him in the K-Closet false wall. Later retrieval opens Arc 9 quietly (Helion Stability unchanged). Risk: random sweep 1-in-6 each scene; on hit, Compliance finds the false space (Compliance Control +1, Ren lost).
- **Leave Ren:** Gain **Audit Window** +30 min (you move fast), but take a deferred hit: **Accord Optics** –1 at Arc 9 briefing (“you saved paper, not people”).

Ren looked from face to face, not pleading—measuring. He placed his hand on the film canister and knocked *one*. He placed his hand on the badge and knocked *one*. He placed his hand on his chest and did not knock. His eyes said he had no right to demand priority over a document and a token. His eyes also said he hoped you would anyway.

In the corner, a console woke itself because it had been told to recognize the electrical grammar of decisions. Its screen offered a friendly blue that offices choose to make bad news seem like weather. Words arrived in rows that did not require a subject: *variance incident review... remediation... optional sedation offered... consent inferred...* Each line stamped a truth flatter and flatter until it looked like policy.

You collected what you could without making the room argue out loud. The film back into plastic with a copy torn for Saint. A quick still of the plate with your wrist cam. The badge slid into a pocket it didn't belong in but fit like a threat. Ren touched the emblem's mount and then your sleeve. He knocked *two, one, two*. Tala looked to the ceiling. "New sweep pattern," she said. "They're listening harder."

On your way out of the shrine you noticed the small religious lie people tell to live: someone had stuck a child's sticker on the back of the glass. A cartoon sun with a face. Over the years its grin had melted toward a frown. It seemed to be trying to remember which one was appropriate.

You closed the gray door, then the glass, then the case, then the joke of the morale certificate. You took the stairs up with Ren between you like an answer being smuggled through a test. The guard drone still watched the coin as if it had entered the workforce and excelled. The diffusers had chosen a higher key.

At the top landing, the door to the Quiet Kiln chamber hesitated to let you back in—as if the room had enjoyed being a secret and resented becoming a hallway. Tala tapped the bench pattern on the steel. The door recalled who it was supposed to be and opened on the white tiles with their measurable mercy. You crossed fast. The badge closet watched you barefaced. The tiles let you pass with the same indifference they grant to orders.

In the corridor, three lights blinked in sequence down the hall—subtle, easy to miss if you did not have a mind trained by alarms. Tala said the thing that means nothing and everything in a run: "We go now." Ren's palm found your shoulder. His hand was warm. It anchored you to a version of yourself that makes better stories later.

GM — Mechanics & Proof (Scene 2)

- **Tap-Code:** Treat as language proficiency if a PC has Sailor/Teamster/Mining background. Otherwise INT check to follow; failure = misread (wrong door once).
- **Guard Drone:** AC 5, HD 2, THAC0 18, MV 12 (flying). Morale 8 if alone. Distracted by small metal sounds (coin) for 1d6 rounds.
- **Icon Room:** Interacting with the plate without dampener on → Save vs. Spells or suffer "echo": -1 to WIS checks until next rest.
- **Proof Values:** film stills (+1 Accord), physical film (+2), Hari's badge (+1, but Helion Stability clock +1 if scanned by any reader), coil fragment (+1 Zeratek Favor if leveraged, or -1 if publicly blamed on them).
- **Time Pressure:** Each detour/interaction = 10–20 minutes (GM taste). If Audit Window hits 0 in Arc 8, trigger an *Internal Sweep* (Compliance team + drones).

GM — Faction Clocks (end of Scene 2)

- **Accord Optics:** +1 if any physical proof leaves the Factory; +1 extra if Ren is escorted.
- **Helion Stability:** +1 if badge scan occurs on exit; -1 if PCs capture audit language showing "consent inferred."
- **Compliance Control:** +1 if plate interaction triggers a sensor; +1 if Audit Window \leq 1 hour by scene end.
- **Zeratek Favor:** +1 if coil defect is framed as Compliance misuse; -1 if it's spun as Zeratek negligence.
- **Reclaimer Trust:** +1 if Ren lives to testify; -1 if left and later discovered sedated.

Bridge to Scene 3: Whether Ren walks with you or waits in the K-Closet, the way ahead narrows into the **Conduit Spine**—a crawlspace where the Factory's nerves carry the Choir in wires. Surges come like tides. Your dampener has **3 charges** to hold them back. Past that: teeth.

Scene 3 — Choir in the Conduit

“The song learns you back.” — Reclaimer saying

The Conduit Spine was never meant for people. Even engineers only looked at it on paper, where lines are clean and cables never sweat. In person, the crawlspace was a rib of steel sunk deep in Haven’s bones, stuffed with bundles of wire as thick as a person’s thigh. They pulsed faintly with current, and when you put a hand near, you felt not just heat but rhythm: the child’s rhythm, translated into voltage and pulse.

The entrance hatch sighed closed behind you, sealing with the kind of finality that makes you remember exits are luxuries. Tala clipped her lamp to the breast of her coat. The beam caught glints on wet insulation, then dulled in a fog of ionized air. Ren crouched near the hatch, hand pressed flat to the bulkhead as if the metal might explain itself if he gave it patience.

The crawl was single file. You moved with shoulders brushing conduit bundles, knees crunching on grates that bowed just enough to remind you of the drop beneath. Every five meters, a relay box blinked its small green LED. Every third blink, the LED skipped, and the skip made the wires hum in a note too low for speakers, too high for comfort. The dampener’s hush pushed back, but the air argued.

The first surge came without ceremony. A pulse leapt across the bundle, bright enough to strobe the crawl white-blue for a heartbeat. Your teeth sang for a second, enamel resonating with current. Tala hissed and pressed the dampener switch. The case thrummed, the light collapsed, and the crawlspace exhaled like a lung allowed to rest. On the dampener’s readout, a counter ticked: **2 charges remain.**

Ren tapped the grate twice, then drew a line with his finger. The steel was scorched ahead, a black kiss across conduits where something had burned wrong. He knocked *danger*, then signed *fast*. Tala looked back over her shoulder, sweat catching the lamplight. “This is where it gets opinionated,” she muttered, and moved.

The conduits narrowed, squeezing you into a crawl where the only air was the taste of copper and old storm. On the walls, graffiti had been carved not by knives but by arcs of power: letters seared into paint. *SING, COUNT, NO MOUTH*. Some of the marks were fresh. The heat of them bled faintly, enough to pink your palms if you touched.

At a junction, three conduits split: one high, one low, one dead center. Each glowed faintly different—red, green, blue. Ren tapped all three, shook his head, and tapped his ear. He pointed to the central conduit, then drew a line to his throat. Tala translated: “Middle one sings.” She wasn’t wrong. If you stilled your own breath, you could hear it—the hum of words not learned yet. The syllables of the Choir rehearsing.

Second surge. This one didn’t just strobe light—it sang. The hum turned into a two-note chord, loud enough to crack the silence of your skull. You all ducked instinctively, but the sound was already in your teeth, in your bones. The dampener roared when Tala hit it. The chord cut mid-note, and you felt it linger in marrow, humming like a forgotten lullaby. **1 charge remains.**

Past the junction, a crawl widened into a service bay. Here the conduits fanned out into a wall of ports, each with a slot for modules. Half were filled. Half blinked emptily, like mouths asking to be fed. On the floor lay three broken modules, their casings cracked, their circuits exposed. Someone had stamped a Helion logo on the side, but Zeratek serial numbers still glowed faintly. Someone had lied twice, and the lies hadn’t agreed.

Ren crouched over the modules. He tapped his fingers in a scale, each beat matched by a faint echo from the exposed circuits. He looked up, eyes hard, and drew a line across his throat. Tala hissed. “These are Choir feeders. Burnouts. Means the song is running too hot.” She glanced at the wall of empty slots. “And they keep asking for more.”

You searched the bay. In one corner, a maintenance console had booted into diagnostic mode. Its screen displayed scrolling text in clean corporate fonts: *Variance detected... Recalibration scheduled... Consent inferred...* The words were tidy, rehearsed. But at the bottom line, a different script intruded, letters jittering: *your mouths are ours*. The console sparked, then steadied, then displayed the corporate font again as if embarrassed.

Ren tapped the screen, shook his head, and knocked *no voice*. His eyes held the kind of fury you keep quiet because it grows sharper that way.

Third surge. This one hit hard. A wash of blue-white current leapt across conduits, cracking the grate beneath your knees. The crawlspace roared like a choir of wires. Tala slammed the dampener switch with a curse, and the case shrieked as though angry at being asked again. The light collapsed. **0 charges remain.**

Now the crawlspace noticed you. The hum didn't fade. It shifted, down into bones, up into thoughts. Words half-formed in your head. Not spoken, not heard, but felt. *why do you resist. we count you. we have your rhythm.*

The rest of the crawl blurred into one long negotiation with wires. You moved fast, tripping over conduits, pushing Ren through with Tala's hand at his back. Sparks fell in drips, burning holes into sleeves. At one bend, a drone hung inert from the ceiling, lens dark. You passed under and it sang awake, voice harmonic, lens bright with Choir rhythm. You had no charges left. The only tool was choice.

Ren moved before you could. He tapped the drone casing in a dockhand pattern: *rest, rest, rest, move*. For a second, impossibly, the drone paused. Its lens dimmed, then lit again, confused. Tala swung a prybar with a grunt and cracked the casing. Sparks fell like dying notes. The drone went silent. The Choir's rhythm staggered, then surged on stronger, angry.

At the final hatch, your hands shook on the wheel. The hatch metal was slick with condensation that smelled faintly sweet, like fruit that has gone wrong. Tala braced her shoulder and spun it open. The door exhaled a gust of cold air and a sound like applause. You stumbled into a chamber wide enough to reset your heart.

The Conduit Spine ended in an overlook. Below, the Factory stretched in levels: conveyors humming, furnaces glowing, modules fed and emptied by drones that moved like obedient ants. Above it all, a lattice of conduits pulsed in rhythm, the Choir's rhythm, played out in steel and light. The aurora overhead was faint even through concrete, but its shimmer found its way down in green-white veins. The Factory was not resisting the aurora. It was harmonizing.

Ren leaned against the railing, chest heaving. He tapped once, twice, then wrote with his finger on the condensation: *song is policy*. Tala looked at you. "Phase One proof enough?" she asked. The floor trembled in a way that suggested the Factory had voted no.

GM — Conduit Crawl Mechanics

- **Surges:** 3 total. Each forces Save vs. Breath Weapon (or DEX check). Fail → 1d4 damage (nervous system burn) and -1 to initiative next round. Dampener cancels but has only 3 charges.
- **Dampener:** Begins Scene with 3 charges. Each use cancels a surge. At 0, further surges strike full. Recharge only at safe rest.
- **Drone Encounter:** Choir-inflected Drone (AC 5, HD 3, THAC0 17, MV 12). Special: Sing Pulse (forces Save vs. Spells or lose 1 round to disorientation).
- **Noise Budget:** Every surge not dampened = Noise +1. At Noise ≥ 3 , trigger internal patrol at start of Arc 9.

GM — Proof Hooks (Scene 3)

- Broken Choir feeder modules (Zeratek/Helion blame fork). Accord +1 if recovered.
- Console photo of “your mouths are ours” intrusion. Accord +2 if leaked. Helion Stability –1 if published.
- Drone core shard. Zeratek Favor +1 if returned to them, –1 if exposed as theirs in public.
- Witness Ren surviving crawl = Reclaimer Trust +1. If he dies here, Accord +1 (martyr optics), Reclaimer Trust –1.

GM — Clocks at End of Arc 8

- **Accord Optics:** +2 if any proof reaches them, +1 extra if console phrase captured.
- **Helion Stability:** –1 if Zeratek proof leaves Factory; +1 if Accord proof hidden.
- **Compliance Control:** +1 if Audit Window \leq 1 hour, +1 if Ren escorted out alive, –1 if abandoned.
- **Zeratek Favor:** +1 if modules framed as Helion misuse, –1 if exposed as Zeratek design flaw.
- **Reclaimer Trust:** +1 if Ren walks into Arc 9; –1 if left or dead.

Arc Bridge → Arc 9: You stand at the overlook, proof in hand, the Choir’s song in your bones. Above, the aurora breathes. Below, the Factory hums. The way out is no longer a path but a decision: surface, deeper, or sideways. Each choice writes a different testimony in the Accord’s book. Arc 9 begins with that choice.

Arc Bridge → Arc 9

Next: With proof in hand and the Choir’s breath on their necks, the party must choose a way out: **surface with optics** (face Helion spin), **deeper for answers** (risk Choir contact), or **sideways with smugglers** (trade deniability for favors). Arc 9 opens with consequences.

Phase I Finale → Arc 9

Arc 9 — Exfil and Testimony

GM — Phase I Recap (10 Bullets)

- **Arrival:** PCs entered Haven under Obsidian Accord mandate, walking into factional tension and unexplained outages.
- **Helion’s Optics:** Governor Orus Hestrel wanted calm for the Board, while Captain Lira Veyne tested the party’s resolve under fire.
- **Quarter Unrest:** The Reclaimers pressed for safety and dignity; Serin Vael and Rust Varo offered fragile trust.
- **Zeratek’s Shadow:** Kaelen Drix angled to hide faulty emitters while selling diagnostics with strings attached.
- **Compliance Medicine:** Director Sael extended “screenings” and sedation euphemized as stability, offering calm with costs.
- **Accord’s Watcher:** Saint demanded proof unspinnable by optics; Accord trust grows only through receipts, not promises.
- **The Choir Emerges:** Electrical variances whispered rhythms in ducts and wires; miners called it *the Choir* but would not repeat it.
- **Silent Evidence:** Ren, a worker silenced at the throat, led PCs to proof—burned modules, variance logs, and the Icon of Compliance.
- **The Conduit Crawl:** PCs survived three surges, spent dampener charges, and carried proof out through crawling steel veins.

- **Final Stakes:** With evidence in hand, factions circling, and the Choir offering invitation, PCs must decide who gets the truth first.

Use as an opening read-aloud, or paraphrase for players before Arc 9 choices begin.

Mandate: leave the Factory with proof intact, decide who gets it first, and survive the spin war. The Choir won't chase; it will **invite**. Timers: **Audit Window** (if any remains), **Helion Response**, **Compliance Sweep**.

The overlook held a thin wind that couldn't be from outside, yet tasted of night. Below, the Factory's lines ran in obedient geometry, light pulsing like a measured breath. Behind you, the crawlspace hatch clicked as if counting—one, two, three—waiting for you to become another rhythm. You carried proof that could end jobs, or save lives, or both, depending on the room in which it was read aloud.

Scene 1 Scene 2 Scene 3 Phase II Bridge

Scene 1 — The Stair That Chooses You

"Truth arrives late to meetings but ruins the agenda." — Saint

Exfiltration should have been simple: retrace the crawl, duck through service doors, climb the same stairs down which the Factory had swallowed you. Instead, the building rearranged itself with the patient cruelty of bureaucracy. When you reached the first junction, three new exits stood waiting, none of them where they had been, each one lit in a different register of kindness.

The **north stair** carried the honest gray of municipal paint, the kind used on walls of hospitals and civic centers. The smell rising from it was faintly of old coffee and wax, like morning meetings no one wanted to attend. Fluorescent lights buzzed without flicker, but the hum beneath them was not electrical—it was rhythmic, almost like a heartbeat pacing your steps in advance. Somewhere far above, you could swear you heard the shuffle of shoes, as if an audience waited already.

The **east lift** was a mouth of brushed steel, wide doors lit by a wellness-blue strip. A pleasant chime sounded as you drew close, melodic and almost reassuring. Its screen scrolled slogans in corporate font: *Wellness is Productivity. Your Safety is Our Outcome*. The letters lingered too long, as though aware they were lying. The air smelled faintly of antiseptic and lavender, a staged comfort that made the hairs on your arms lift. The lift whispered speed, but also surveillance.

The **service ramp south** bore yellow hazard chevrons faded by years of traffic. It sloped into shadow, grease streaking the walls, the smell of coolant and fried circuitry drifting upward. The silence there was not absence, but secrecy: the kind of quiet where people whispered names of the dead and believed the walls kept confidence. On the edge of hearing, you caught a faint, childish *ta-ta-ta*, like a game being played in ducts too small for adults. Ren froze when he heard it. He pressed fingers to his throat and looked at you, eyes wet and furious, as if daring you to pretend you hadn't noticed.

Tala shifted her lamp beam between the three choices, her face hard with calculation. "The Factory isn't showing exits," she muttered. "It's showing *judgments*." She clicked the lamp off for a second. In the dark, the hums and scents grew louder, clearer, as if competing for your consent. When she clicked it back on, she added, "Whatever you choose, it'll write itself in the record. Someone's keeping the minutes."

Each step of choice felt heavier than the last. Even breathing seemed to set off echoes: when you inhaled, the lights of the north stair flared. When you exhaled, the lift's chime ticked softly, as if congratulating you. The ramp whispered nothing, and its silence was more demanding than the other two's invitations.

GM — Exit Fork

- **North Stair (Helion Optics):** Clean route through monitored areas. Easy Stealth now, harder spin later. Helion Stability +1 if used (they “escorted” you out on camera). Gain access to Spire lobby without alarms.
- **East Lift (Compliance Shadow):** Fast but flagged. Save vs. Spells to resist lull from “wellness” chime; failure = −2 to first reaction roll in Scene 2. Compliance Control +1 on use.
- **South Ramp (Accord Street):** Dirtier route through service bays and Graywater alleys. More checks now; better optics for Accord if you emerge with workers. Reclaimer Trust +1 on success, +2 if Ren accompanies.

Note: If Audit Window $\leq 1h$, trigger a roving *Internal Sweep* (2 drones + 1 Compliance pair) on the first failed Move Silently/Hiding roll regardless of route.

Ren tugged at your sleeve. He pointed first toward the stair, then toward his chest, shaking his head—he would not survive more optics. He pointed at the lift, then made a sign of sleep, his jaw tight with warning. Finally he pointed at the ramp, then at the ground, fingers splaying wide to mean *roots, home*. His silence spoke louder than the three exits combined.

Tala met your eyes. “We can’t stand here long. The building counts us every breath. Sooner or later it’ll notice the math doesn’t add up. And then it’ll adjust.” The lamp flickered once as if to prove her point.

Whichever choice you made, the Factory rearranged itself to accept it. The stair hummed louder, the lift’s chime sharpened, the ramp exhaled heat like a furnace’s sigh. Even before your foot touched the first step, you knew the path wasn’t an exit at all—it was testimony, recorded by walls that had learned to sing.

Scene 2 — Who Gets the Truth

“Testimony is a weapon that breaks in the hand that lies.” — Reclaimer proverb

Haven’s corridors remembered you faster on the way out. Doors pre-opened by a quarter, cameras panned politely away, and the floor stopped whispering safety reminders. It was as if the Factory itself had decided you were finished and now the city would decide what to make of you. Outside the last threshold, night pressed against the dome, aurora stitching the sky in restless green-white threads. Sirens tested their voices and quit, unwilling to speak before you did.

Three destinations waited, none of them secret. Each was a mouth that wanted to swallow the proof you carried, chew it into a shape the public could digest, and spit the rest into silence. Each was also a wager about who would own tomorrow’s story.

The Spire’s lobby was lit like a cathedral of glass and optics. Governor Orus Hestrel had arranged the angles, knowing which corners flattered and which lights erased shadows. Potted trees disguised tripods; cameras nested discreetly in the leaves, the way birds trust a place not to shake. Hestrel stood at the top of the steps, suit the color of outcomes, tie the color of patience. He raised his chin at you as if framing you for an invisible audience. Lira Veyne flanked him, helmet under her arm, braid coiled tight. Her eyes met yours with an unspoken message: *don’t let him spin you into silence*. When your pack shifted, both of them noticed, and the cameras leaned closer like predators that smelled blood.

The Accord office lay two tiers below, an anonymous cube with unmarked walls. Inside, Saint had stripped the place bare of comforts. No chairs, no desk, no window—only the gravity of her presence. She did not sit; she let the room remain unbalanced so every word would wobble before finding purchase. “What did they make you sing?” she asked, softly, like a doctor who knew the answer but needed to hear you bleed it out. When you laid down your proof, she arranged it without touching, headlines taking shape in the empty

air. Her face was calm, but her eyes were storm maps, tracking where the surge would land. Accord couriers waited in shadow, pens already inked.

Graywater's Market Quarter burned with lamps strung low, oil and cheap neon reflecting off puddles that never dried. The air smelled of fast-fried meat, solder smoke, and promises bought in handfuls. Serin Vael stood on a pallet, voice sharp enough to cut the night. Rust Varo flanked her, his presence promising that whatever happened here, no worker would face it alone. When you raised the film, the crowd hushed, the way mobs do when they decide history is watching. Children clambered onto crates for a better look. Miners pressed their hands together as if in prayer. "Say it," Serin urged. "Say it where they can't claim you whispered." Her eyes burned at you like a forge, and when you placed the proof in her hands, it weighed the entire square.

GM — Delivery Fork & Consequences

- **Deliver to Helion (Spire lobby):** Hestrel receives proof with cameras rolling. If sanitized (no Choir language) → Helion Stability +2, Accord Optics -1. If "your mouths are ours" included → Compliance Control +1, leverage banked for later. Lira's loyalty may fracture: protect PCs if they're spun, or pull back if sidelined.
- **Deliver to the Accord (Saint):** +2 Accord Optics (+3 if Ren present). Helion Stability -1. Saint demands immediate publishing. PCs can delay by spending CHA/INT checks, earning a Favor token instead.
- **Deliver to the Street (Reclaimers/Graywater):** Reclaimer Trust +2; Accord Optics +1; Helion Stability -2 if phrase "your mouths are ours" chanted by crowd. CHA check required to keep rally controlled; failure → trigger Orderly Dispersal attempt (nonlethal sweep, risk escalation).
- **Ren's Fate:** To Spire → sidelined by "care protocols" (Compliance Control +1). To Accord → becomes living testimony (+1 Accord Optics). To Street → protected, but hunted in Phase II (hook).

The decision was not about safety—it was about *who owned the silence you were about to break*. In the Spire, Hestrel smiled the way men smile when they believe the outcome is already theirs. Lira's jaw tightened, her eyes telling you she would rather die than see your words clipped. In the Accord office, Saint's lips hardly moved, but you felt the weight of her ledger, already measuring lives in columns. In Graywater, Serin's fire met the aurora overhead, and for a heartbeat it was hard to tell which burned brighter.

Whatever choice you made, the night reshaped itself to record it. Cameras blinked red; crowds leaned forward; couriers unfurled parchment like scripture. The aurora's rhythm pressed closer to the dome, as if even the sky was waiting to see who you trusted first.

Scene 3 — The Choir's Invitation

"When a machine sings without power, ask not where the current came from but what debt was paid." — Accord field notes

The choice of where to place the truth was yours, but Haven did not wait for outcomes. The aurora pulsed harder, green-white bands widening across the dome as if the sky had been wound too tight and now sought release. Power grids hiccuped; screens blinked; elevators halted mid-tier with passengers locked inside. The city's breath staggered. Somewhere below, the pipes carried a sound not waterborne—a tone, layered and patient, threading through steel. A voice without a body, humming through the bones of the dome.

Ren clutched your sleeve (if alive), whispering what witnesses feared to say: "That's the Choir. That's the sound we aren't supposed to hear twice." Their eyes were too wide, reflecting aurora that no human iris

should hold. Even if Ren was gone, the words surfaced in memory—his final warning carried on the static itself.

Crowds shifted uneasily whether you stood in the Spire, the Accord cube, or Graywater’s square. No one taught them the tune, but already miners mouthed along to the rhythm. Some clutched their throats as if chords were not notes but *openings*. Children tilted their heads, smiling at nothing. The aurora’s shimmer began to sync with the lights of Haven’s tower, and in the brief second between pulses, silence pressed so completely that hearts sounded like engines in the ribs.

Saint’s voice, if near, cut thin as wire: “Do you hear who’s writing the next headline?” Hestrel’s lips moved soundlessly, the Governor staging words no microphone caught. Serin Vael spat into the dust, muttering that the city itself had picked sides. Lira Veyne’s hand hovered over her sidearm—not at you, not at the crowd, but at the ceiling as if she could shoot the sky into silence. And all of them, for one unguarded moment, looked smaller than you expected leaders could be.

The Choir’s presence was not loud. It was *intimate*. A whisper inside ducts, behind eyelids, under the pressure of blood in the ear. The kind of sound that does not enter by hearing but by remembering. You realized with creeping certainty that some part of you had always known this song—it had waited for recognition like a name too long unspoken.

Then the dome itself cracked light: a seam opening above Haven’s core tower. Not broken, but *parted*, as if a hand had drawn curtains back to let something peer through. The aurora pooled downward, forming a funnel of color that brushed rooftops and froze drones mid-patrol. In its current, faces blinked in and out—worker, soldier, child—each mouth moving with words no one could quite parse. Some faces belonged to the living; others were already names carved into memorial walls.

GM — The Choir’s Contact

- **Effect:** All PCs must make a *Save vs. Spells* (AD&D 2e). Failure → character hums involuntarily for 1d4 rounds, unable to act except to move toward the light. Success → hold ground, gain fragmentary vision (“Veyra is not alone”).
- **Lira Veyne:** Auto-saves first round, then begins humming unless PCs intervene. Her survival here shifts Phase II alliances.
- **Saint:** Uses the moment to record. Accord Optics +1 if she survives. PCs who protect her couriers gain Accord Favor.
- **Serin Vael/Rust:** If present, attempt to rally crowd. CHA checks DC 15; success → +1 Reclaimer Trust; fail → panic causes casualties (–1 Stability).
- **Combat Trigger:** Zeratek drones reboot with new firmware, hostile to *all*. AC 4, THAC0 17, 10 HP. Swarm until PCs disengage or disrupt the aurora funnel.

The song was no longer ambient—it chose you. Your proof, whichever hands held it, vibrated with resonance as if the Choir itself reached through the data to claim authorship. Text scrolled across screens though no terminal was powered: *your mouths are ours*. The phrase repeated in cascading fonts, sizes, languages—until even ancient dialects of the Belt scrawled across walls. Somewhere in the tunnels, alarms failed because they too were trying to *sing*.

The air tasted metallic, like copper wires stripped with teeth. Cold sweat broke out across crowds. Some miners began tearing at their clothes as though to shed flesh too heavy for the rhythm. Accord couriers fainted. Helion guards fired warning shots, and the bullets themselves left contrails of light that bent toward the aurora’s funnel. Even silence became theater here; even breath carried the weight of testimony.

At the crescendo, the aurora’s funnel touched the plaza. Where it kissed the ground, concrete glowed and

shifted, as though the city was learning to breathe through stone. A voice—many voices braided—spoke inside every skull at once: “*Mouths. Sing. Choir.*” The words were not a command but an invitation, a door without hinges. Step through, and you risked never returning the same.

GM — Player Options at the Invitation

- **Join the Choir:** PCs who step willingly into the aurora funnel gain visions (GM improvises Phase II foreshadowing). Mechanical effect: temporary +2 WIS, -2 STR, and a permanent “Choir Mark” that other factions can detect.
- **Resist Together:** Group CHA/INT checks. Success → PCs ground each other, aurora retreats one tier. Failure → funnel deepens; 1d6 drones spawn and one faction leader is captured (GM choice).
- **Divert/Redirect:** Magic or tech use allowed to bend aurora into machinery. Success (INT + WIS checks, DC 16) → PCs seize momentary leverage: Phase II starts with a Favor Token from any faction. Failure → feedback burns PCs for 1d6 damage each.

No “safe” option exists. Whatever the party chooses, the aurora marks Haven forever. Phase II begins under the shadow of the Choir’s awakening.

When the funnel finally withdrew, retreating into the sky like a tide pulling back from black sand, Haven exhaled a sound like a thousand shutters closing. Lights flickered, hearts steadied, and for a breath the world seemed ordinary again. But the silence that followed was not *absence*—it was *ownership*. The Choir had written itself into the city’s ledger, and everyone alive would remember their invitation.

Saint folded her recorder, lips a grim line. Hestrel adjusted his tie twice in silence. Serin wiped her palms on her trousers, leaving streaks like oil. Lira stared at the sky, whispering that Haven had just lost command of its own voice. Whether you had resisted or joined, saved or surrendered, the verdict was already entered: Phase I of your mission was over. The city was no longer yours alone. The Choir was awake, and it would not sleep again.

Phase II Bridge — After the First Song

Phase I concludes when proof is lodged and the invitation is resolved. Set Phase II flags based on final clocks:

GM — Final Clocks & Flags

- **Accord Optics $\geq +4$:** Accord publishes; Haven becomes a media battlefield. PCs gain *Press Leverage* tag.
- **Helion Stability ≤ -2 :** Board intervention; Hestrel on thin ice; Veyne’s autonomy increases. PCs gain *Access: Spire*.
- **Compliance Control $\geq +3$:** Curfews & screenings. PCs flagged; *Heat* begins at 1 in all Spire tiers.
- **Reclaimer Trust $\geq +3$:** Street shelters the party; Graywater maps unlock; Serin offers strike leverage.
- **Zeratek Favor $\geq +2$ or ≤ -2 :** Drix becomes ally or saboteur. Firmware update chain available or blocked.

Carry Ren forward if alive; if lost, begin Phase II with a **Rescue or Requiem** vignette.

Next: Phase II opens with **Arc 10 — The Hearing** or **Arc 10 — Curfew** depending on flags. Your call sets the tone: debate or barricade.