

Veyra-9 — GM Hub · Arc 5

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 steeped 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 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.