

Arbour - Political Systems

Political Systems

Arbour's political structure is designed to look like governance while functioning like control. Understanding the difference between what is visible and what is real is the first step toward understanding everything Wren uncovers.

Overview — The Two Tier System

Arbour operates under a dual political structure. The outer layer is visible, official, and largely performative. The inner layer is secret, self-perpetuating, and actually governs. Most citizens of Arbour know only the outer layer exists. Most members of the outer layer don't know the inner layer exists. This is not an accident.

The Outer Council

Structure

The Outer Council is Arbour's official governing body — the institution that passes laws, allocates resources, hears grievances, and presents a face of legitimate governance to the population. Members are elected by district and zone representatives across all tiers, with seat allocation weighted toward the upper tiers in ways that are technically legal and functionally guaranteed to produce conservative, status-quo-preserving outcomes.

The Outer Council is large — hundreds of members representing the full geography of Arbour's continental sprawl. It is also loud, contentious, and genuinely divided on many issues. Real debates happen here. Real disagreements. Real factions. This is not theatre — the Outer Council members believe in their work and many of them fight genuinely hard for their districts.

This is what makes it such an effective cover.

What the Outer Council Actually Controls

- Public law and civil code
- Official resource allocation frameworks — the formulas that determine how Flux and goods are distributed by tier
- The visible face of Branch oversight — Branch heads attend and report, though they are not Council members
- Public record — everything the Tabularium officially holds originates from or passes through the Outer Council

What the Outer Council Does Not Control

- Energy infrastructure decisions above routine maintenance level
- Military deployment of Custodians beyond declared emergencies
- Information classification and the Tabularium's restricted archives
- The actual levers of Arbour's survival systems

These are managed by the Twelve.

Branch Relationship to Outer Council

Branch heads may attend Outer Council sessions and present reports on their Branch's activities and resource needs. They are not members. They cannot vote. They can be questioned.

In practice Branch heads are among the most powerful people in any Outer Council session — they control the information the Council is working from, they control implementation of whatever the Council decides, and they have the ear of the Twelve in ways most Council members do not.

A Branch head who wants a Council vote to go a particular way does not lobby Council members. They manage the information environment until the vote becomes inevitable.

The Twelve — The Inner Council

What They Are

The Twelve are Arbour's actual government. Twelve individuals — their identities unknown to the general population and unconfirmed even among themselves in some cases — who collectively make every decision that actually matters. Energy policy. Information suppression. CRS

classifications above a certain threshold. Custodian programme oversight. The Chronalum containment strategy.

The Twelve have no official existence. They do not appear in any record. There is no document that names them, no ceremony that installs them, no official record of their meetings. They are the negative space around which Arbour's power actually organises.

Composition

The Twelve draw from across Arbour's power structure — senior Branch figures, old family representatives, individuals with specific strategic value. The composition shifts slowly over time as members die, are removed, or recruit replacements.

[PLACEHOLDER — The precise current composition of the Twelve beyond Cassan Vale is to be determined through drafting. The following is confirmed:]

- Cassan Vale — the most recently recruited member and the most influential
- At least two members from old families with multi-generational Inner Council history
- At least one senior figure with deep Azure Branch connections
- The remaining members TBD

Recruitment

Recruitment to the Twelve is secret, individual, and entirely at the discretion of existing members. There is no formal process. There is no application. Candidates are observed over years, their loyalty tested without their knowledge, their usefulness assessed, their secrets catalogued.

When the Twelve decide someone is ready, they are approached. The approach is — *[PLACEHOLDER — the recruitment process and its specific form is to be determined through drafting. Key question: what does a candidate see or experience that confirms the Twelve's existence and their invitation into it? This moment should tell us something essential about what the Twelve value.]*

Cassan Vale's Origin

A companion deep-dive covering his life before adoption — the settlement near a cluster of reliquary Installations, the theology he was raised inside and outgrew, the calculated self-offering, and his species (a snow leopard — see that document's Part Zero for the full treatment of why camouflage-as-biology vs. camouflage-as-mastery matters to his psychology). This section remains accurate from the adoption forward; the companion document adds the chapter before it.* Cassan was not born into the Inner Council.

Factions Within the Twelve

The Twelve are not unified. They share the assumption that they should govern Arbour and that the population cannot be trusted with the full truth of their situation. Beyond that, significant fault lines exist.

The Traditionalists

The oldest faction. Multi-generational Inner Council families who have been passing informal membership down through careful recruitment of their own children and allies for generations. They believe in the Council's founding purpose — maintaining order, managing the Convergence's influence at a distance, controlling the population's exposure and movement for collective protection.

They think Cassan is reckless. They think his acceleration of the Convergence agenda risks everything the Twelve have spent generations carefully managing. They are not wrong about the risk. They are wrong that their careful management was ever anything other than the same control dressed in different language.

Their weakness: They mistake inherited corruption for legitimate stability. They have been managing the Convergence's influence for so long that they have forgotten they were supposed to be fighting it.

Their relationship with Cassan: Open hostility, carefully expressed. They cannot move against him directly because he has made himself too useful in too many areas. They work around him where possible and oppose him where they must.

The Pragmatists

Don't particularly care about ideology. Care about Arbour functioning, their Branch or district remaining powerful, their position secure. They are the swing votes in any factional dispute, which makes them the most courted and the least trustworthy members of the Twelve.

They find Cassan useful. They also find him genuinely frightening in a way they don't fully understand and wouldn't admit.

Their weakness: They can be moved by whoever controls the information environment. Cassan understands this and exploits it consistently.

Their relationship with Cassan: Transactional. They work with him when it benefits them. He tolerates them because he needs their votes and because they're easier to manage than principled opposition.

The True Believers

The smallest and most dangerous faction. They know about the Convergence — not Cassan's full zealotry, but enough. They understand that the Twelve exist partly to manage an existential cosmic threat, and they take that responsibility seriously.

They oppose Cassan not because they reject his goals but because they believe his methods are reckless — that his acceleration of the Convergence agenda risks triggering a manifestation Arbour cannot survive. They want careful, controlled management. They want the population kept contained and ignorant not out of cruelty but out of a genuine — if monstrous — belief that knowledge of the Convergence would cause panic that would make everything worse.

They are the Council members who actually lose sleep.

Their weakness: They understand the threat but not its true nature. They think the Convergence can be managed. It cannot. Their caution is founded on a misunderstanding of what they're dealing with.

Their relationship with Cassan: The most substantive opposition he faces. He respects them in the way a predator respects prey that knows it's being hunted. He has not moved against them directly because doing so would unify the other factions against him. Instead he ensures they are always slightly less informed than they think they are.

How Cassan Operates

Cassan Vale does not govern through force. Force is expensive, visible, and creates martyrs. He governs through information architecture — controlling what each faction knows, ensuring they can never fully coordinate, making himself indispensable during crises.

His methods:

Information asymmetry — Each faction within the Twelve operates on slightly different information. Not false information — Cassan rarely lies directly. He curates. What the Traditionalists know about the Convergence's current acceleration rate is slightly different from what the True Believers know. Neither has the complete picture. Only Cassan has the complete picture, and even his picture is filtered through his zealotry in ways he cannot perceive.

Manufactured necessity — Cassan engineers crises that only he has the solution to. Not obviously, not dramatically. A supply chain disruption that creates pressure for a policy he's been pushing. An outbreak of CSD diagnoses in a district that was becoming restless. Events that are never provably his doing but consistently benefit his agenda.

Generational recruitment — He does not fight his opponents. He recruits their children. The next generation of Traditionalist families contains members who owe their position to Cassan's support. When the current generation dies, their replacements will be his.

Patience — Cassan operates on a longer timeline than anyone else in the Twelve. The Convergence has been approaching for millennia. He has been preparing for decades. Everyone else is reacting. He is executing.

His detachment — Cassan does not hate his opponents. He does not fear them. He does not particularly enjoy defeating them. He finds them, in a clinical sense, interesting — problems to be solved, variables to be managed. This detachment is what makes him most frightening. There is no emotional lever anyone can pull on him. There is no appeal that reaches him. He has already done the moral calculus and closed the ledger.

Why the Council Does What It Does

This is the question that seems to have a simple answer — power — and actually has a more complicated one.

The Original Sin

The first Council did not suppress the Vault and the Frames out of malice. They suppressed them out of fear. In the immediate post-crash chaos, energy was the only lever of control available. The tier system was forming organically from the ark's existing hierarchy. Releasing unlimited energy to everyone equally would have dissolved that hierarchy before it calcified into something stable.

The first Council made a pragmatic decision in a crisis and told themselves it was temporary.

It was not temporary.

Institutional Momentum

By the second and third generation, the suppression wasn't a decision anymore. It was inherited assumption. The people running the Council didn't sit in a room and decide to keep the Sprawl in the shed — they simply never questioned why the Frames were cordoned off, because the cordoning had always been true, because the people who remembered the decision were dead, because the records had been tidied.

Cael Morrow is the moment it becomes active suppression again. Someone finds the truth and the institution reflexively destroys them. Not because the Council that day was uniquely evil — because the institution had evolved to protect itself, and Morrow was a threat to the institution.

The Convergence Complication

Not all of the Twelve know what they're actually managing. The Pragmatists, by and large, do not — Cassan's confidence and his colleagues' wariness both read to them as ordinary political instinct, nothing more, which is precisely how Cassan prefers it. It is the Traditionalists and the True Believers — Cassan's circle, in the sense of the only people in the room actually arguing about the right thing — who know about the Convergence. They know **Aetheris** is worsening. They know it traces back to the Penumbrans — the dead civilisation whose installations litter the Penumbra Reach, called the First-Walked in Wayfarer oral tradition — and they know what came for that civilisation is coming again. What neither faction knows, per their own documented weaknesses, is what it actually is or how it actually works: the Traditionalists have managed its influence for so long they've forgotten they were supposed to be fighting it, and the True Believers, despite knowing the most of anyone besides Cassan, still believe — wrongly — that it can be managed at all.

Some of them believe that energy independence in the Sprawl would accelerate the problem. Their logic — twisted, self-serving, but internally consistent — is that controlled scarcity keeps the population contained, keeps them away from **Aetheris** hotspots in the Badlands, keeps them dependent on Council-managed healthcare that suppresses CSD symptoms. In their framing, they are managing the Convergence's spread by managing the population's movement and exposure.

They are wrong. But they believe they are right.

The Thematic Core

The Council does this because institutions that form around power never voluntarily redistribute it. Because the original sin compounds across generations until nobody remembers it was a choice. Because the people at the top have convinced themselves that control is protection.

They are not protecting anyone. They are protecting the control that they have mistaken for protection.

This is the same sin as the Convergence. The Convergence believes it is saving humanity by rewriting it without consent. The Council believes it is protecting humanity by controlling it without consent. Both are certain they know best. Both have removed the possibility of choice from the people they claim to serve.

When Wren understands the power grid suppression completely, they are not just uncovering an injustice. They are understanding the pattern that will eventually help them understand the Convergence itself.

Cassan Vale — Origin and Psychology

Cassan was not born into the Inner Council. He was adopted before his teenage years by a high-born family with multi-generational Twelve membership — taken in by someone who saw something in him and brought him into their household.

Whether that was genuine affection, calculated political strategy, or something in between is ambiguous. Probably both.

He grew up inside the machine, watching how power worked from a position that was always slightly adjacent to real belonging. Present at the table. Never quite of it in the way blood members were. The Traditionalists of his adoptive family's circle treated him with elaborate courtesy that never quite concealed their contempt. A foundling in a room full of people who believed in bloodlines.

He filed that away.

His adoptive parent died under ambiguous circumstances. So did at least one other family member whose continued existence might have complicated his inheritance. Whether Cassan accelerated these deaths or simply ensured he was never in a position to prevent them is a question that cannot be answered with certainty. This is deliberate. Cassan does not leave answerable questions behind him.

He inherited his parent's seat in the Twelve. The Traditionalists' contempt became something more careful after that.

The estranged sibling — there is one surviving member of his adoptive family who was displaced by his inheritance. They are alive because killing them would raise questions. They are powerless because Cassan has spent years ensuring their isolation from any position of influence. They know what he is. They cannot prove it. They have been managed so thoroughly that the estrangement itself functions as a cage.

They do not appear in Book One. They exist. The Chronalum may know they exist without understanding why that matters.

The psychological core:

Cassan's relationship to the Convergence's promise of transformation is personal in a way it isn't for anyone else in the Twelve.

He was already rewritten once. Adopted young, reshaped by a family that wasn't his, transformed from whatever he was before into something that could inherit power. He survived it. He emerged from it stronger, more capable, more himself in some ways than he might have been otherwise.

He drew entirely the wrong lesson from this.

He thinks transformation is something you can master. Something you endure and come out the other side of stronger. He has mistaken *surviving being rewritten* for *controlling the rewriting*.

The Convergence's promise — *we will transform you, we will make you more than you are* — resonates with the deepest experience of his life. He doesn't believe it because it's true. He believes it because it rhymes with something that already happened to him and that he survived.

He thinks he can control it. He cannot. The Convergence does not offer transformation you can direct. It offers consumption that feels like transformation until the moment you understand the difference.

By then it will be too late.

His tragedy: He is not simply a villain who chose evil. He is someone whose deepest wound taught him a lie, and he built an entire worldview — and an entire political strategy, and an entire cosmic agenda — on that lie. The lie is going to consume him. And part of him, the part that was rewritten as a child and never quite stopped feeling the edges of that reshaping, will recognise what's happening and not be entirely able to call it wrong.

The Branch Political Landscape

Inter-Branch Relationships

The six Branches maintain significant independent operational power within their domains while existing in a web of rivalry, alliance, and mutual dependence.

Known alliances:

- Azure and Obsidian have historically cooperated — technology and security share obvious interests, and the surveillance infrastructure is jointly maintained
- Verdant and Golden are in constant low-level conflict over resource allocation — the people who grow the food and the people who distribute it have fundamentally different interests

Known fault lines:

- Scarlet operates with more independence than any other Branch due to the Custodian programme's classified nature — other Branches resent this opacity
- Violet is consistently underfunded relative to its cultural mandate, which produces a Branch full of people who understand narrative and resentment in equal measure

Branch heads and the Twelve: Branch heads are not automatically members of the Twelve. Some are. Most are not. A Branch head who doesn't know the Twelve exist is a Branch head whose

cooperation can be assumed — they're executing policy they believe comes from the Outer Council, never questioning why certain directives arrive with unusual force or unusual speed.

A Branch head who does know the Twelve exist is either a member or a liability. The Twelve prefer members.

The Outer Council's Self-Image

This is important: most Outer Council members are not corrupt. They are not knowingly part of a system of suppression. They are people who believe in governance, who fought for their seats, who genuinely advocate for their districts within the framework they've been given.

The framework is the problem. Not the people within it.

This matters for the story because it means Wren cannot simply expose the Council and watch it collapse. The institution is larger than its worst members. The people who would need to dismantle it are the same people whose identity and purpose is built around maintaining it. Reform from within is not impossible — but it requires those people to accept that everything they've built their lives around was constructed on a foundation of suppressed truth.

That is the hardest thing to ask of anyone.

Open Questions

To be resolved through drafting:

- The precise current composition of the Twelve beyond Cassan Vale
 - The recruitment process — what a candidate experiences when approached
 - The identity and current situation of Cassan's estranged sibling — how much do they know, and when do they become plot-relevant
 - Whether any current Outer Council members have independent knowledge of the Twelve's existence
 - The specific mechanism by which the Twelve communicate and coordinate without leaving records
 - Whether Voss Shearwall knows about the Twelve or only about the Convergence agenda through Scarlet Branch channels
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