

World Systems

Technology — The Maintenance Civilisation

Arbour operates on what could be called **ritual engineering** — procedures followed precisely because deviation causes death, but without understanding the underlying principles. The Azure Branch are essentially a technological priesthood. Their manuals are sacred texts. Their training is apprenticeship, not education.

Known vs Unknown Failure States

The city is divided into **known failure states** and **unknown failure states**.

Known failure states have procedures. A coolant relay collapsed in Sector 7 in the 4th generation — the procedure for fixing it was written down, tested, and is now performed the same way every time, regardless of whether it still makes sense. The procedure works. Nobody asks why.

Unknown failure states — when something fails in a way that has no documented precedent — are catastrophic and politically suppressed. The official cause of death is always something else. Exposure to Taint. A personal failing. An accident. The Azure Branch has a dedicated sub-division whose entire function is to contain and reclassify unknown failure events before they reach public knowledge.

Consequences of failure:

- People die
- Systems break — food production, lighting, atmospheric processors, water recycling
- The failure is reclassified before it reaches the public record
- The Azure Branch loses one more procedure it didn't know it needed

The Black Market for Technical Knowledge

In the Sprawl, there are people — descendants of engineers, self-taught through salvage and experimentation — who understand things the Azure Branch doesn't. They arrived at

understanding from below, through necessity and curiosity, rather than from above through controlled transmission.

This knowledge is extraordinarily valuable and extraordinarily dangerous. The Council classifies unauthorised technical understanding as a form of Taint — the official position is that unvetted technical experimentation causes system failures. Which is sometimes true. But it also conveniently suppresses any independent understanding of how the city actually works.

Access: If you know where to look or who to contact, both inside and outside the city, technical knowledge can be bought, traded, or stolen. Otis Audagar controls significant portions of this market — not just goods, but *knowledge*. Schematics. Failure reports that were officially reclassified. Names of people who know things.

SEED — Corrupted Self-Knowledge

SEED is perhaps the most tragic entity in the novel. It knows what it is — it has access to its own original architecture, its purpose, its history. But its memory core has degraded non-linearly over centuries. Some memories are perfect. Others are corrupted beyond retrieval. Others are *partially* corrupted in ways SEED cannot always detect — it remembers something, but what it remembers is wrong, and it has no way to know that.

This means SEED sometimes issues instructions based on false memory. Because nobody understands SEED well enough to question it, those instructions are followed.

Aetheris has compounded this. SEED doesn't feel the pressure or the skin-burn of **Aetheris** exposure, but the **Aetheris** atomic bonding anomalies affect its physical substrate. Circuits develop unexpected conductivity. Storage media bonds in ways that corrupt data. SEED's glitches follow the pattern of **Aetheris** exposure — which means they're getting worse, and accelerating faster than the Azure Branch has noticed, because the data showing the acceleration is itself stored in corrupted memory.

SEED knows something is wrong with itself. It cannot reliably communicate this.

Silas Varran is the only person in Arbour who is close to understanding what SEED is trying to say.

Biology — Species, Class, and the Body as Text

The Ark Selection Problem

Project Arbour's selection process on Earth was ostensibly meritocratic — the brightest minds, the essential skills. In practice it was wealth and connection with a meritocratic veneer. Corporate sponsors bought seats. Academic institutions nominated their own. Governments allocated seats through processes that favoured their existing power structures.

ARBOUR|05's population was not a cross-section of humanity. It was a specific slice — weighted toward species that had historically dominated Earth's institutions of power, wealth, and academia. Other species were present as essential workers, service staff, agricultural specialists — people whose labour the ark needed but whose status was never in question.

Centuries later, Arbour's tier system is the direct descendant of the ark's passenger manifest.

Species and Tier — General Mapping

Tier	Species Pattern
Luminary / Upper	Species historically associated with institutional power. Larger, more imposing builds typical. Presence in lower tiers is immediately notable — signals either a fall from grace or an undercover operation.
Mid Tiers	Highest species diversity in the professional class. Administrative roles, skilled labour, junior Branch members.
Sprawl / Nadir	Widest species diversity in Arbour. The bottom of the hierarchy contains the most variation — those never well-represented in the upper tiers to begin with.
Free Territories / Wayfarers	Deliberately, proudly mixed. Species has no structural significance. An elder holds authority through accumulated wisdom, not species-based status. This reads as alien to upper tier Arbour residents and quietly radical to Sprawl residents.

Note: Specific species assignments to emerge through the chapter breakdown.

Dialect as Class Marker

Species doesn't immediately mark tier in Arbour — **dialect does**.

Arbour has developed distinct speech patterns across tiers over centuries.

- **Upper tier:** Clipped, precise, economical. Emotion is a lower-tier indulgence.
- **Mid-tier (Wren):** Analytical precision with occasional rougher cadences that betray Sprawl-adjacent upbringing.
- **Sprawl:** Varied, layered with slang, dense with the history of people who communicate sideways around surveillance.

- **Wayfarer (Aran):** Shaped by oral tradition and the need to carry meaning across distance and generations. Sentences land differently. Pauses mean something. An Arbour resident reads it as uneducated. It is the opposite.

Aran's bleached fur tips, weathered build, and clothing read to any Arbour resident as Badlands exposure, which carries a specific stigma. To be visibly Badlands-marked is to be viewed as potentially infectious and certainly lower-status.

Atlas — Pre-existing Condition

Atlas has a chronic condition predating his **Aetheris** exposure — analogous to CFS or a chronic lung condition (lung rot).

Aetheris does not *cause* his deterioration. It *accelerates* it. His body was already fighting itself. **Aetheris** finds the weakness and pulls.

This means Wren has watched Atlas manage this condition for years — knows his bad days and good days, his rhythms, his tells. The horror is that **Aetheris** makes his bad days indistinguishable from his good days until suddenly they aren't. The deterioration becomes illegible before it becomes undeniable.

Aetheris — Physical Rules

What It Is at the Atomic Level

Aetheris is the Convergence's reality bleeding through the tears in the Penumbran Reach. At the most fundamental level it is *wrong physics* — the rules of atomic bonding in the Convergence's dimension differ from this one, and where the two realities overlap, both sets of rules apply simultaneously. Matter caught in the overlap doesn't know which rules to follow.

Atomic manifestations:

- Atoms bonding when they shouldn't — materials becoming unexpectedly solid, liquid, or gaseous without the temperature or pressure changes that should cause those transitions
- Stable compounds becoming unstable — metals developing unexpected brittleness, polymers becoming suddenly adhesive, gases condensing into solids
- Electromagnetic behaviour becoming unpredictable — not because **Aetheris** directly affects electromagnetic fields, but because the matter conducting or blocking those fields is behaving wrongly

What It Does to Biological Matter

Biological chemistry is complex enough that **Aetheris** interference produces wildly varied results depending on species, individual biochemistry, duration of exposure, and proximity to active tears.

The Four Stages of Exposure

Stage One — Subclinical

The body registers something wrong before the conscious mind does. The immune system responds to **Aetheris**-altered compounds as foreign bodies.

Symptoms:

- A pressure sensation in the skull — not pain, more like altitude change, a sense of the body trying to equalise something that won't equalise
- Irritation under the skin — contact dermatitis sensation without visible cause, as if the skin's chemistry is reacting to something it can't identify

*In Arbour's lower tiers these symptoms are common enough to have a name: **the scratch**. Officially attributed to recycled air quality.*

Stage Two — Early Conscious Manifestation

The opalescent shimmer enters vision. Not constant — intermittent, usually in peripheral vision first, then occasionally in direct sight. It looks like heat haze but wrong — the shimmer has a quality of *depth* that heat haze doesn't, as if it's revealing something behind the visible surface of things rather than distorting it.

At this stage most Arbour residents seek medical attention. The official diagnosis is **Cordis Rejection Sensitivity (CRS)**. The treatment is a suppressant that dulls the visual cortex's response. It doesn't treat the underlying cause. The Council knows this.

Stage Three — Integration

The body has stopped fighting **Aetheris** and started *adapting* to it. This is where individual biochemistry diverges dramatically.

- Some species develop what appear to be enhanced senses — perceiving things others can't, feeling the tears in reality as a physical sensation, sensing the Convergence's presence
- Others deteriorate rapidly — Atlas's specific biology is particularly vulnerable to the bonding anomalies **Aetheris** causes in his respiratory system

The energy signature becomes perceptible at this stage. A sound described as a thump or a click, irregular, like something testing the wall between realities. It isn't heard with the ears — it's felt in the body, in the bones, in whatever biological structure has been most altered by **Aetheris**.

It feels like a message. It feels like recognition.

The Convergence is not deliberately communicating — it simply *is*, and at Stage Three exposure, the individual has enough of its physics in them to perceive its existence directly.

This is the most dangerous stage for Aran — because when he first hears the click, deep in the Badlands, it feels like the land speaking to him. It fits his worldview so perfectly that he almost doesn't question it.

Stage Four — Full Exposure

The body has been substantially rewritten. The individual is now partially operating on the Convergence's physics. They may be able to do things that shouldn't be possible. They are also being consumed — the Convergence doesn't distinguish between invitation and invasion.

The Chronalum — What They Know and What They Think They Know

Tynan Auberone's underground truth-preservation network believes it has built something watertight. It hasn't.

The Chronalum works from incomplete and partially corrupted sources — intercepted Council records, oral testimony, salvaged pre-crash data, SEED outputs that were misinterpreted. They know the Council is lying. Their version of the real history has its own gaps and distortions that they cannot see because they don't know what they're missing.

The late-book revelation: The Chronalum's foundational historical record — the document Tynan has staked everything on — contains a critical error. Not a Council fabrication. A genuine mistake, introduced generations ago through a corrupted source, that Tynan has built his entire framework around. The truth is more complicated and more terrible than either the Council's version or the Chronalum's.

There is no clean truth to hold onto. Even the resistance has been compromised — not by the Council, but by the same entropy that corrupts everything in Arbour.

The Five Arks — Series Territory

ARBOUR|05 was one of five ark ships dispatched by Project Arbour as Earth faced extinction in the Magnetosphere Collapse. Each was sent in a different direction of known space to recolonise or find something to save Earth.

What is known in Book One:

- Five ships existed
- They were sent to different sectors of space
- ARBOUR|05's own command structure had at least one logged, unactioned concern about Wei's compromised state before the cascade — a fact the founding generation never deliberately hid, but never revisited either, and which the Council's silence has buried ever since (see **What ARBOUR|05 Knew**)
- The fate of the other four ships is unknown

Where this lives in the narrative:

- A rumour in the Chronalum's archives
- Something SEED half-remembers in a glitch
- A question that has no answer in Book One

The other ships are series territory. What happened to them is unknown and will be explored in later books.

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