



NOTES BETWEEN
HEARTBEATS

Private



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A private journal

SPOILER NOTICE

This journal begins after *The City of Broken Moons* and reveals the ending of the complete *Heart of Steam* trilogy.

Five entries recorded across the six months following the final events in Lunaris.

Private. Not for the registers.



THREE DAYS LATER

What the Tide Did Not Return

I have spent the whole morning helping to label objects that no one has claimed. A brass button. A child's comb. A pair of spectacles with one lens clouded by salt. Every object receives a place, a lantern, and an empty line for a name. No one is allowed to call the empty line complete.

That may be the hardest rule we have written.

Lunaris still counts its losses as if numbers might become walls. They do not. Numbers are only honest when they refuse to hide the faces behind them. Two domes collapsed. Four bridges broke. Some memories returned without the people who should have received them. Some people returned carrying memories that were never theirs. We stopped Obelisk from making one voice out of all of us, but we did not make the night harmless. I am trying not to turn survival into proof that we chose perfectly.

Evelyn has organized the stairways because apparently a city may reject her authority and still obey her when the lower terraces are flooding. Dorian no longer asks whether I should enter a room. He asks whether I want him beside me. Today I said no. He nodded and waited outside without making my answer a wound. I did not understand how much that would matter until it did.

Felix's transmitter worked for eleven breaths this evening. Most of them were static. Then Aurum struck three times against something metal, paused, and added the crooked beat that no system has managed to mistake for an order. Felix said the Heart was stable. His voice sounded tired enough to be true.

I wanted to tell him that I am stable too. I could not write the sentence.

Perhaps stability is not the right measure. The first rebuilt bridge is already crooked. Novalis crossed it and said only that it held. I think I understand. Healing may not be the return of the old shape. It may be the moment we stop demanding that a wound look beautiful before we believe it can bear weight.



THREE WEEKS LATER

The Door That Scratches Back

The new register room stands beside Felix's laboratory, exactly where the Council did not want it. That fact improves the room considerably.

It has two windows, six uncomfortable chairs, three copies of the first Witness Cities register, and a door Aurum has already marked with parallel scratches. Felix insists the damage was unnecessary. Aurum repeats it whenever someone uses the word unnecessary in his presence. I have begun to suspect he understands irony better than half the Academy.

Returning to my workbench was stranger than returning to Aetherholm. The pliers were where I left them. The brass square still carried the burn mark from my first harmonic test. A drawer refused to close because I had filled it with components I was certain would become useful and then forgot. Everything was familiar. I was not.

They have offered me titles. Provisional custodian. Intercity witness. Voice of open resonance. Every title sounds like a chair placed at the center of a room. I have refused all of them. Felix says refusing titles will not prevent people from inventing worse ones. He is probably right, which is an irritating habit of his.

Dorian works across the room now. Not always. Not officially. He brings documents that should have arrived earlier and apologies that still arrive badly. We do not pretend his silences caused no harm. We also do not require every honest conversation to become a trial. Some evenings we speak. Some evenings we repair separate mechanisms and allow the quiet to remain only quiet.

The Heart has not called me since our return. It answers through the network when a register opens in Lunaris or when a testimony is added in Velmira. The beat is distant, never identical, and never mine alone.

Home used to mean the place where I expected to find answers. Now it may mean the place where I am permitted to remain unfinished - and where the door scratches back if anyone tries to close it too well.



SECOND MONTH

The Unlit Lantern

Evelyn placed the lantern on my desk and told me not to make it symbolic. This was unfair, because it is a black lantern from Lunaris that has never held a flame and was given to her by a woman who distrusted brightly lit rooms. Objects like that arrive already guilty of metaphor.

We spent six hours preparing the short version of the register - the one meant for people who do not know the difference between Aetherium, the Veil, and the Tide, and should not need three years of forbidden corridors before being allowed to understand what was done in their name.

Evelyn crossed out every sentence that sounded merciful toward power. I crossed out every sentence that made us sound certain. Felix crossed out most of the adjectives. Dorian added two notes in the margin and then denied that either was defensive. Aurum sat on the clean pages until we acknowledged him as a contributing witness.

The finished copy is shorter than the truth and longer than comfort. It names what each city attempted. It names what each city lost. It does not turn Rheya's remorse into innocence, Maeron's grief into pardon, or my refusal into heroism. I did not know a document could feel kinder for refusing to console.

After the others left, Evelyn remained by the window. The lantern between us was dark. I asked whether she regretted carrying her family name into every room. She said regret was too simple and inheritance was too convenient. Then she asked whether I regretted carrying my father's questions.

I told her that I no longer know which questions were his and which became mine because I kept answering them.

She said, 'Good.' Only Evelyn could make that word sound like both a warning and permission.

We did not light the lantern. We did not need to. Darkness is not always concealment. Sometimes it is the part of a room no one has claimed the right to interpret for you.



FOURTH MONTH

The Distance Between Two Hands

Dorian asked whether I wanted him at tomorrow's hearing. I said no before he had finished the question.

He accepted the answer. This should not still surprise me. It does.

Months ago, his fear would have entered the room before me, inspected every door, and called itself protection. Mine would have answered by choosing the most dangerous threshold simply to prove I could. We were both very skilled at turning care into machinery.

Tonight he came to the laboratory after the lamps had been lowered. Felix had gone to argue with the Curia about access seals. Evelyn was in the register room correcting someone's attempt to replace 'responsibility' with 'stability.' Aurum occupied the only chair that did not wobble.

Dorian did not ask me to change my answer. He handed me a cup of tea and sat on the floor. After a while I told him I was afraid the hearing would make me into a symbol again. He said symbols are difficult to cross-examine. I laughed hard enough to wake Aurum, who looked offended that the evening had developed without his supervision.

I asked Dorian to come after all - not to speak for me, not to stand between me and the questions, only to be present when I walked out. He said yes without treating my change of mind as victory.

There are grander ways to describe love. Velmira would have designed a rite. Lunar is would have given it a tide. Aetherholm would have built a mechanism and argued over the tolerances. I think all three would have missed the simplest part.

Love is not the hand that closes around another hand and calls the grip safety. It is the hand held near enough to be chosen, open enough to be refused, and steady enough to remain when the answer changes.



SIX MONTHS LATER

Notes Between Heartbeats

Six months ago I believed an ending would feel like a door closing behind me. Instead it has felt like returning to a workshop after an explosion: the walls still standing, the tools scattered, everyone arguing about what can be repaired, and no one permitted to pretend the damage was part of the design.

The network holds. Not elegantly. Messages arrive late. Velmira's annotations are too careful until Evelyn adds a sentence sharp enough to let air in. Lunar is still leaves blank lines beside objects whose names have not returned. Aetherholm continues to confuse a committee with a conscience, but the register room remains open and the chairs remain uncomfortable. Felix says this proves the system is functioning as intended.

Aurum has learned to open the lower cabinet by striking the latch at an angle. He uses this ability only to remove the blue cloth Felix keeps there for delicate instruments. The cloth now belongs to Aurum. No formal transfer of property has occurred. No appeal has succeeded.

Dorian and I still disagree. Evelyn still notices what we avoid. Felix still turns fear into instructions and then denies having been afraid. I still hear my father's name in rooms where it should no longer decide who I am. None of this has resolved into peace. I am beginning to distrust peace when it arrives too smooth.

The Heart beat once this afternoon while I was alone. I waited for the old pressure behind my eyes, the command, the map, the sense that somewhere a door had chosen me before I could choose myself.

Nothing followed.

The beat was only an answer to the work being done in three cities by hands that do not agree and have not surrendered their differences. I placed my palm on the workbench and listened until the silence returned.

I will not put this journal in the public register. Some truths need many witnesses. Others need a drawer, a key, and the right not to become evidence. I think both can be forms of custody, provided the choice remains with the living person whose heart made the words.

Between one beat and the next, nothing commands me. There is only space enough to breathe, to choose, and to leave the next line unwritten.

For now, that is enough.



HEART OF STEAM

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A post-finale bonus from Wonders Workshop.

Original bonus edition: 2026

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This document is intended for readers who have completed the full trilogy.