

Chapter 1: The Grey World

Before the world existed, there is you. Where you exist now, there are edges, but edges require something outside them and, in this new world, there is nothing outside of you. Everywhere is an emotion without a name. It's the feeling of containing the possibility of all other feelings. White-hot threads of something like joy, moving without wind. Slow dark drifts of something like loss, without anyone to have lost. All of it is yours.

A sunlit street rises within you the way a thought rises—present, vivid, then already fading. Green so impossible it aches, not in eyes you do not yet have, but in the part of you that once became eyes in something you loved. Cars humming. Children laughing. The sweetness of cut grass after rain. You recognize this. Everything is you.

Then the crystal spires rise. Rivers of liquid starlight. Abstract animal shapes flying on wings of pure spell-light. White-hot threads whip past like silent lightning, burning without heat; the lightest touch floods you with joy so extreme it borders on grief. Elsewhere, slow dark strands drift by, and proximity to them feels like your sternum cracking open.

The warmth of worlds already known blurs past. Like condensation between panes of stacked glass, each one barely registers before the next: salty wind, crystals singing without sound, monuments in a desert; life, love, and little microcosms of consciousness are everywhere. You do not slow for them. Like most good things in life, they pass by without being noticed.

Then the motion halts as you discover a wound inside yourself.

Inky blackness fills the chest where infinite love should be, the shape of connection still there but the warmth replaced by cold absence. Grief for what has been lost so long it has settled into bone. Injury for what is happening right now, again, to someone you do not yet have a name for. Greed. Envy. The ache of causing pain to yourself and others. The deeper ache of no longer being permitted to feel joy in this place. Century-old sorrow and this-morning's bleeding, simultaneous — the breakup-heartache register of a universe that used to connect and cannot anymore.

Your attention goes to it the way a tongue goes to a sore tooth — not noble, not chosen, only involuntary, almost uncomfortable in its intensity. You must go there. You must help it grow and change.

Your awareness pools into a pinhole. Smaller than a thought. The entire universe, narrowing itself.

Into a dream... You've had this dream before. Every night for months.

The pinhole does not widen this time — it is a sleeping boy on a narrow bunk in a grey world. Awareness pools there. He does not know you are the depth beneath his labels.

Grey mist coils at the edge of the dream like perpetual smog. Black shadows cling to it, devouring every detail—a face, hands, the color of eyes you cannot quite see. But the voice cuts through, clear as a struck bell.

“William... The world is cold without you. Find me, please...”

You know this voice. Not from tonight — from the wound. The same inky blackness, the same cold absence where warmth should be, wearing words now, wearing urgency, reaching for him the way his hand once reached for the sapling's green. She is the pinhole on the other side of the dark strands. She is hurting too, and she does not know why, and she does not know that you are also her.

“William... We ache apart, but we can be whole together.”

He reaches for her, the way he reaches every night. His fingers pass through mist and shadow and come away empty. The dream has been repeating for months—every night sharper, louder, more urgent—until the words feel carved on the inside of his skull. You feel them carve.

And then, the propaganda voice bleeds through, the way it does every morning.

“Citizens of Myrah! The Revolution continues today!”

The dream cracks like ice. The colors, the sounds, the feelings shatter into grey shards. His eyes open. For a moment longer you are still there with him — and then the pinhole narrows further still, down to the single grey point of a single grey morning. But now, carried with it: the hope of greens, of children laughing, of crystals singing.

[Will](#) jerked upright on his narrow bunk, heart hammering before his eyes fully opened. The same voice every dawn. The same hollow cheer. He rubbed the sleep from his face and muttered the required response under his breath on autopilot.

“Glory to the Triumvirate.”



The stone floor bit through his thin socks when he swung his legs out. Outside the slit window the sky pressed down like wet ash—perpetual clouds, perpetual smog that tasted of old cinders and distant sulfur, the energy of the planetary barrier churning the air into the same dull grey it had been for a thousand years. A single thin beam of sunlight managed to pierce the upper deck this morning. Will watched it for three heartbeats.

“[The Grey World](#) is looking nice today,” he said quietly; feeling the familiar, stubborn spark of optimism that was his alone to own.

He reached for the staff on the bedside table.

It was a practical thing, three-section modular quarterstaff just under five feet, light flexible willow with a knobby head, main shaft, and reinforced foot. The joints were wrapped in worn leather grips he’d replaced twice himself. The head bore his own hand-hewn runes—scratched in after too many nights of trial and error to get the arcana to flow without fighting him. The whole length was scuffed and scarred from years of drills. It was the only thing in this room that felt like his.

Will stood, planted the foot of the staff on the floor, and began the Dawn Attunement.

He spoke the words in a flat, clear voice.

“Order above chaos. Void above self. The Triumvirate above all.”

The light orb at the head of the staff formed perfectly: cool and white. He let it hover to the count of twelve. As the orb pulsed, something else moved through him.

The slow, heavy wave of [arcana](#) started at the crown of his head and poured downward. The light grey glow coated his shoulders like a thick liquid, sank into his chest, wrapped his arms and legs and muffled the feeling in his body. The thickness reached inside his mind last. The fragmented thoughts of impossible green, sunlit streets, and the clarity of her voice were still clinging to him, but it all began to drain away, leaching out into the grey energy. The colors dulled. The urgency softened. The ache in his chest for something else grew smaller, flatter, more bearable.

He held onto one vibrant thread of green for as long as he could. Then it was gone too.

He released the orb and watched the motes fade into the same dull light as everything else.

Will dressed in the plain grey robes of a Third Rank. Despite its age, the high linen collar still itched his jawline. He straightened out the reinforced cuffs and rubbed the tarnish off the small silver thread at the hem that marked his rank. He looked down over himself: no ornamentation, no individuality. "Conformity is character", Will mumbled by rote. He wouldn't give her any excuse for demerits today.

His fingers ran through his messy brown hair as he tried to get a sense of its disposition. He tried to straighten out the waves that brushed along the top of his ears and along the back of his neck. His comb had broken several days ago and his requests for a new one was "authorized" but didn't seem to have priority.

Will slung the staff across his back in the regulation carry and stepped into the corridor.

The line of Third Ranks was already forming. Boys and girls his age, maybe a year or two younger, backs straight, staves at their sides like rifles. The air smelled of cold stone and the faint metallic tang of spent arcana from the night's boiler shifts, sharp with an ozone bite that clung to the back of the throat. No one spoke.

A Second Rank overseer moved down the line with a hovering inspection crystal. She was pureblood, with blonde hair pulled so tight it looked painful, robes immaculate, the double silver thread at her collar was catching the grey light. [Elizabeth Voss](#). Will had learned her name during his first year when he made the mistake of scoring higher than anyone in her family in both theory and sparring. Third Ranks could not be perfect.

The crystal scanned each student with a low hum. Any amount of green from the jewel was acceptable, but casting a better morning attunement and keeping your mind and body in order could make it shine brighter.

Will's flared the brightest in the line.

Elizabeth's lip curled. She stopped directly in front of him.

"Third Rank Davenport." Her voice was pleasant, the kind of pleasant that drew blood. "Your Posture is adequate but your uniform is creased at the left cuff; your hair is disorderly. Two demerit for slovenliness."

Will kept his eyes straight ahead on the wall, the way they were taught.

"Thank you for the correction, honored Second Rank Voss."

She lingered one extra second, close enough that he could smell the expensive soap she was allowed as a pureblood. *I bet she even has a mirror in her room*, Will thought. Then she moved on, the crystal humming like a satisfied insect.

Two demerits before breakfast. He would have to be perfect for the rest of the day to keep from slipping into negative standing. Negative standing meant extra duties. Extra duties meant less time for the courtyard.

The first bell rang, low and resonant through the stone.

Dawn practices.

The drills yard was a rectangle of cracked ferrocrete surrounded by the high academy walls on two sides with the main lecture hall and a newer combat hall on the other two. The air was colder here, the smog thicker, gritty enough to coat the tongue with each breath. Instructors in dark robes stood on the raised walk, staves ready. A few carried the short black rods that delivered corrective shocks—officially "focus aids," unofficially the reason most Third Ranks learned to keep their mouths shut.

Will took his place in the second row, staff in both hands, feet shoulder-width.

The forms began.

Basic physical conditioning first—strikes, blocks, footwork, then the arcana overlays. Light orbs launched on command, wind barriers raised and dropped in sequence. The staff thrummed once in his palms as a light orb left the head, the hand-hewn runes flaring cool and resonant up the willow like a held note before the arcana released clean into the air. The instructors called the cadence. The students echoed the required responses.

"Control the flow!"

"Suppress the self!"

"Control the flow!"

"Suppress the self!"

Will moved correctly. His orbs were tight, his barriers efficient. He had mastered these drills within months of arriving. The muscle memory was perfect. The part of him that still cared about approval performed flawlessly.

The part that didn't watched a single beam of sunlight shine on the far wall and wondered what hue the leaves would be in the courtyard today.

Halfway through the session, a Second Rank runner approached one of the senior instructors with a parchment. The instructor's face tightened. He raised his voice.

"Third Ranks! The Grand Magi Council has issued new guidance on barrier maintenance. You will incorporate the Void-pull barrier-stabilization sequence into today's final form. Any deviation will be

logged.”

A ripple of tension moved through the lines. A Void-pull was brutal in a way that was hard to imagine until you had experienced it directly. Third Ranks were used to physical pain, but channeling arcana directly from The Void created a pain you felt deep into your soul for days. Three students had been sent to the infirmary last week when one's timing slipped. The group must act in perfect unison to spread out the detrimental effects.

Will kept his breathing even.

They ran the sequence twice; one to practice, one to perform. On the second pass, the pull began and they worked together to draw raw arcana through their bodies and into Myrah's barrier. The pull clawed behind Will's sternum like cold hooks drawing through marrow, threatening to unspool the thin threads that kept his thoughts from scattering. The boy to Will's left—Joren, another Third Rank from the coastal intake—fumbled the final release. His portion of the arcana flow flared and overloaded the girl beside him. She screamed as part of her body seemed to visibly wither. The slipped weight crushed down the row like a vise on Will's entire being. His consciousness barely hung on until a phantom warmth, green and distant as cut grass, steadied the flow through him. He heard a muffled woman's voice resonate through his body as he dissipated the remaining energy of the pull and directed it upward. The instructor's black rod came down once, sharp, across Joren's shoulders.

“The barrier has not been sufficiently charged. Again from the top. And this time, perhaps you will remember that the revolution cannot tolerate weakness. Order is strength.”



Will completed the sequence perfectly on the third run. So did most of the line. The fear was an excellent teacher.

When the practices ended, the students filed inside without speaking. Will's shoulders ached. His palms were raw from the staff. He flexed his fingers inside the sleeve where no one could see, finding them stiff from the arcana draw and thought of the small jar of salve he kept hidden with his paints. The residual

drag still aching low in his gut, a slow fraying that made his next breath feel borrowed; the misfired arcana had left a sour, metallic residue in his mouth that would linger for days.

Classes followed in the windowless lecture halls.

History of the Arcanian Revolution was first. The instructor—a thin First Rank with a voice like dry paper—recited the approved version from the lectern while a projection of the old Triumvirate seal rotated slowly behind him.

“Before the Revolution, the world tore itself apart in petty wars between kingdoms that could not see the greater good. The gifted families came together in wisdom and sacrifice. They raised the barriers. They centralized the flow of arcana. They ended the suffering of the common people by assuming the burden of rule...”

Will sat with perfect posture, stylus moving across his slate in neat shorthand. He had heard the lecture so many times he could have recited it backward. The version in his head was different: *They got tired of sharing power with non-magi. They built walls to lock us in and called it peace. They take children from their parents and called it an honor.*

He did not write that down.

When the instructor asked for the names of the three original Archmagi, Will’s hand was the first to rise. He gave the answer cleanly. The instructor nodded once (the only sign of approval) and then continued.

Elizabeth Voss sat two rows ahead and to the right. She did not turn, but Will saw her hand, half raised, return to her desk and he felt the weight of her attention like a cold spot on his skin.

The next class was Advanced Theory of Controlled Void Application. The proctor was a nervous, new transfer Second Rank Will had never seen before. She spent twenty minutes explaining why personal flourishes in spellwork were not merely inefficient but actively dangerous to the planet’s limited resource.

“Any deviation introduces turbulence,” she said, voice thin but earnest. “Turbulence leads to pollution. Pollution weakens the barriers that protect us from the chaos beyond the walls.” She paused, then added, almost as an afterthought, “It is the same principle as our morning cleansing. The ritual coats the vessel — cold and thick — so that the chaos within us stays at bay. Only then can we focus cleanly on channeling the energy we need to survive.”

She looked out over the class, clearly hoping someone would engage.

“Second Rank Voss: some of our older textbooks described strong personal emotion as a kind of embezzlement from the collective Arcana. Do you agree with that framing?”

Elizabeth turned slightly in her seat so the entire class could hear her. Her voice was precise. “Yes. Raw emotion interacts directly with Arcana,” she said. “Joy, grief, desire, even simple homesickness all pulls on the planetary flow. When an individual feels too strongly, they are effectively spending collective resources on private experience. That is why the attunement exists. It doesn’t just help us focus; it ensures we never take more than we need. We return what does not belong to us so the system can continue to function for everyone.”

Will kept his eyes on his slate. He could still feel the grey coating inside his chest from the morning ritual,

the way it had leached the color from his dream until only a thin, colorless thread remained. *'Spending collective resources on private experience'*. He had woken up with her voice still echoing in his skull. By the time he reached the drills yard, it had already been audited away.

The proctor looked relieved. "Well stated, Second Rank."

A thin midday snack—grey bread and weaker broth—stood in for what passed as lunch in the academy's stripped resources. Sparring and Warding was the last class before the evening interval.

The hall was long and echoing, the floor marked with worn practice circles. Master [Konrad Stahl](#) stood at the head of the room, hands clasped behind his back. He was older than most of the instructors, lean and slightly stooped from decades of favoring an old injury in his left hip. The limp was the kind that came from long campaigns in rough country. His robe was the plain dark grey of a career academy man, the single silver thread at his collar marking him as Third Rank, lower than some of the students he drilled. A few older instructors still carried themselves like men who had earned their positions the hard way, on the frontiers rather than in the lecture halls. Stahl was one of them.

"Students. Pair for warding drills. Standard rotation. I will be correcting form. Do not make me repeat myself."

They were supposed to rotate at random but Elizabeth always managed to pair with William while she was fresh and no one ever dared to call her out on it.

She stepped into the circle opposite Will with that same pleasant, blood-drawing smile.

"Third Rank Davenport," she said, just loud enough for the nearest pairs to hear. "Try not to embarrass yourself today. Some of us still believe in standards."

Will said nothing. He took his stance.

They began the deflection sequence. Elizabeth's attacks were technically perfect and just a fraction too eager. She pressed harder than the drill required, forcing him to work. Will answered with clean, economical wards. No flourishes. Nothing she could report.

Halfway through, Master Stahl limped over. He watched for a moment, then spoke.

"Second Rank Voss, your aggression is commendable. Third Rank Davenport, your recovery is still slow on the left side. Tighten it up."

Elizabeth's smirk widened.

They continued. On the next exchange, his frustration finally slipped through. Will answered one of her over-committed strikes with a small, instinctive fusion: a lightning orb tightened into an oval with a bit of wind that made the whole thing sharper and more elegant than the manual described. It wasn't showy, but it was better.

The circle went quiet.

Master Stahl's voice cut across the hall, flat and by-the-book.

"Third Rank Davenport. Stick to the forms. Tradition exists for a reason." He stepped in close under the pretense of adjusting Will's left elbow, his grip firm and professional. "And show respect for superior rank."

As he spoke the last words, his fingers tightened once on Will's arm, then gave it a single pat. It was short, deliberate, and unmistakable approval. Their eyes met for a long second. Then both men looked at Elizabeth.

She stood with her hands on her hips, that superior smirk firmly in place, already rehearsing the story she would tell her older cousins at dinner.

Master Stahl straightened. "Again. From the top. Both of you. And this time, Third Rank Davenport, remember this circle is not yours, but the Triumvirate's."

The correction was loud enough for the entire hall. Elizabeth's smirk bloomed into open satisfaction.

Will reset his stance. The stone floor was cold under his boots. He did not look at Stahl again.

The bell rang for the dinner interval.

Students filed out in silence. Will waited until the corridor was half-empty before slipping down the side stair that led to the service passage between the combat hall and the eastern lecture block. The passage opened into a narrow courtyard no wider than two men. It was forgotten space between two buildings that the expansion plans had never quite reached.

Here the smog was thinner. A single struggling sapling pushed up along a crack in the ferrocrete on the north side. Its leaves were dusty but defiantly green. Gravel and wind-blown grit had collected in the corners. In one shadowed angle of the wall, a loose paver hid a shallow cache: a small wooden panel, a tin of powdered pigment Will had slowly stolen and mixed himself, two brushes made from academy broom straw and thread, a rag.

He had perhaps twelve minutes.

Will pulled the panel and the tin out, set the panel on his knees, and began to paint.

Not the academy. Not the grey. He painted the sunlit street from the dream—impossible green, the curve of a car fender catching light, the blurred shape of a child running. He worked fast, the way he always did here. The brush made almost no sound. The only thing that existed was the color and the faint, subtle warmth of the sun beam that had reached this far down past the barrier. The earlier pull still hummed low in his bones, making the green on the panel feel closer, as though something had thinned the air between here and there.



He was so focused he almost missed the shift.

There was a change in the wind. A sudden, clean whisp that had no business in the courtyard. The light caught something small and smooth in the gravel near the base of the sapling.

Will set the brush down.

He crossed the three steps and knelt.

It was no bigger than his thumb, slightly oval, with brilliant straight cuts dulled by time or intention. The surface was a bright, translucent carnelian orange, like late sunlight caught in amber, threaded with only faint veins of deeper red and scattered with tiny flecks of jet black that seemed to drink the light.

The moment his fingers closed around it, the world changed.

The pinhole widens like vertigo, but it's something else: recognition. You had briefly become boots on gravel, had lived inside the low-pressure hum of Myrah's arcana since before you had words for it, and now the stone is pulling you back toward what you truly are. The gravel does not fall away beneath you; you simply stop being the thing that stood on it. The hum moves aside. In its place: a clean, violent pull, like cool water on a burn and then just the burn itself — the inky blackness again, but underneath it something else trying to surface. Colors bleed through the edges of vision: gold, crimson, blue. The taste of a wind that has never touched this polluted sky. A voice echoes inside the chest you had mistaken for his, inside the stone and inside bone at the same time.

The same voice that carved itself into him for months, no longer distant in a dream, is right here.

William...

The body-container lurches — his body, the one you know is wrong beneath its labels even when he does not. Gravel bites into a palm that is suddenly too fine, too smooth, adorned with rings that ache with rightness against fingers that had been broad and numb an instant ago. The half-finished painting skids away. For one moment the courtyard is here and somewhere else at once, and you know — not learn, know — what has been pressed flat beneath the grey linen and the enforced posture.

You stand on a raised dais in a hall of polished dark stone with golden light beaming in from blue sky through clear windows that has no business existing on Myrah. Heavy but cool robes, the color of old wine, weigh on your shoulders. The robes feel both profoundly right and violently wrong against skin that still remembered the stiff itch of academy linen — not because the body is foreign, but because you recognize it: this is what was always underneath, muffled until the stone tore the seal. Your fingers flex and the wrongness is not in the hands themselves but in the memory of other hands — broader, calloused, holding a brush — still ghosting the nerves. A circlet of worked metal sits cool against your brow. Before you kneel a dozen armored figures—royal guard, their faces hidden behind ornate helms, their loyalty absolute and hungry. Power and authority thrums in your veins, vast and bottomless. It feels perfect but that power is not enough. There is an emptiness at the center of it that echoes with a single desperate thought: *Bring him here. Make him yours.*

The vision fractured like thin ice as the gemstone dropped out of Will's hand.

Will gasped, his back on the gravel, the carnelian stone just out of reach on the ground. His heart slammed against his ribs. The courtyard smelled of stone dust and the faint green of the struggling sapling. The sun beam had already moved on.

He stayed there for three long breaths, finally reaching over to tentatively touch the stone with a finger. It seemed warm but nothing happened. He held it firmly against his dirty palm now, the half-finished painting forgotten.

Will sat up, moved the stone to his breast pocket, then carefully returned the painting supplies to their cache, replaced the paver, and brushed the gravel smooth with the side of his boot.

He straightened, brushed the dust off his robes and started back toward the stairs. Master Stahl was standing at the entrance.

The old instructor did not speak for a long moment. His eyes flicked once to the courtyard, once to the faint smear of pigment on Will's thumb, and once—very briefly—to the breast of the grey linen.

"Third Rank Davenport," he said at last, voice low and perfectly neutral. "Dinner ends in four minutes. I suggest you remember where your feet are supposed to be."

Will bowed his head the exact correct amount.

"Yes, Master Stahl."

He walked past the old man without another word. Their shoulders did not quite brush.

Behind him, in the empty courtyard, the single sun beam fell again on the gravel where the stone had been.

Will did not look back.

The rest of the day passed in a haze of perfect, mechanical obedience. He ate the thin evening stew without tasting it. He cast the fire spell into the steam boiler without feeling the heat. He used an earth spell to move the errant dirt through the hall back into the drills yard. He accepted another minor demerit from Elizabeth Voss without visible reaction.

All the while the stone sat against his ribs like a second heartbeat.

That night, after lights-out, after the final headcount, after the corridors had gone silent, William lay on his narrow bunk with his staff across his chest and the carnelian stone in his left hand.

He did not sleep.

He waited for the voice.

And for the first time, he was going to answer it.

Continue to [chapter 2...](#)

© 2018-2026 Marcus Davenport. See [Site_Notice](#) for licensing info.

From:

<https://home.woodchuckhunters.com/wiki/> - **DavWiki1**

Permanent link:

https://home.woodchuckhunters.com/wiki/story:chapter_1-mdav

Last update: **2026/07/03 15:35**

