

Chapter 3: The Blind Warp

The living moon, Mist...

The landing had not been gentle.

Will came back to himself in stages — first the cold, then the wet bark under his cheek, then the smell of pine resin and turned earth so sharp it felt like someone had scrubbed the inside of his skull with it. His lungs burned with each breath. The air was *alive* in a way Myrah's grey smog had never been: full of moisture, pollen, the faint sweet rot of leaf mold, and underneath it all a low harmonic hum that was not sound exactly but pressure, as though the forest itself were breathing in time with something vast.

He coughed until his ribs ached. Rolled onto his back. Opened his eyes.

Stars.

Not the smeared suggestion of light he had glimpsed for one heartbeat on the wall. *Stars* — thousands of them, scattered across a black so deep it had depth. Branches cut the sky into jagged pieces. Somewhere close by, water moved over stone with the soft insistence of a thing that had been doing it long before any magi built walls.

The carnelian stone rested warm in his hand and he returned it to the pocket of his grey linen robe. The frantic heat that had pulled him over the parapet had eased into something steadier; a second pulse. Will lay still and listened to both rhythms until they nearly matched.

He did not know how long he stayed like that. Long enough for the stars to wheel. Long enough for the eastern sky to pale from black to the faintest bruised violet. Long enough for the headache to gather itself at the base of his skull like a held breath.

When he finally tried to sit up, the world tilted hard to the left.

Green.

That was the first conscious thought once dawn had properly arrived — not a word so much as a sensation, a color so saturated it overrode everything else. Trees crowded the ravine on every side: trunks thick with moss, leaves layered in shades he had no names for, ferns and undergrowth pressing in with the patient aggression of things that had never been told to conform.

Will had seen green before. The struggling sapling in the academy courtyard. The impossible hue in his slate paintings. The phantom thread that had steadied him during the Void-pull. But this was not a thread or a defiant crack in ferrocrete. This was a *world* made of it.

He let out a sound — part laugh, part involuntary cry — and the ravine threw it back at him from three directions at once.

The echo was wrong. Too clean. Too much space behind the sound.

The headache answered immediately, splitting upward through his temples with the focused violence of an axe stroke. Will dropped back onto the soft ground and lay still, counting breaths the way Stahl had drilled into them during recovery forms. In through the nose. Out through the mouth. Do not fight the pain. Ride it until it crests.

It crested twice more before he could sit up without the horizon sliding sideways.

The ravine, he realized, was a bowl of hills and tree-covered slopes, the floor carpeted in leaves and grass so thick his fingers sank to the knuckles when he tested it. The ground gave under his weight like a mattress stuffed with living things. Somewhere to his left, water gurgled over stone — not the regulated trickle of academy plumbing, but a stream that had simply decided to exist.

Above, the sky was a calm, impossible blue. The sun hung almost directly overhead, white-gold and shameless, unfiltered by smog or barrier churn. Puffy clouds drifted in slow procession. Will stared until his eyes watered and still could not make himself look away.

This is not on the Grey World.

The trees alone were proof. [Myrah](#) had forests in the old maps, or so the approved histories claimed, but Will had never seen one. Not a real one. On the continents he knew, green was a rumor and a demerit-worthy daydream.

Yet it was the sky that held him. Open. Endless. The kind of openness that made his chest ache for reasons that had nothing to do with the headache.

It took several minutes before he trusted his legs enough to stand.

The stream was only twenty paces away — clear, cold, running over pale stones that looked scrubbed by centuries of current. Will knelt at the bank, cupped both hands, and drank.

The water tasted of minerals and cold depth. It hit his tongue and the headache's sharp edge dulled to a manageable throb, as though the forest had offered him the one medicine the academy infirmary never could: something that was not grey.

He was wiping his mouth on his sleeve when a familiar voice came from upslope.

“Did you have a long trip?”

Will moved before thought finished. His staff was still slung across his back — he had not let go of it on the wall, had not let go of it in the fall — and his hands found the shaft by instinct. He pulled it loose and brought it around in a defensive carry, knuckles white.

The motion cost him. Pain lanced from the base of his skull to behind his eyes. He winced hard enough to blur his vision.

“Hold there, my boy. I mean you no harm.”

The voice was slightly gravelly, unhurried, and... familiar.

Will lowered the staff a fraction but did not put it away.

“Show yourself,” he said. His own voice came out rougher than he intended.

Branches shifted upslope. A figure emerged from the tree line with the careful pace of someone favoring his left leg.

For one disorienting second the headache and the green and the impossible sky all dropped away, and he was back in the sparring circle with Master Stahl’s fingers tightening once on his elbow—approval smuggled inside correction. The same left-side favor. The same practical length of wood that was neither can nor weapon but something in between: too long to be the former, too short to be the latter, the wood dark and polished by use.

Salt-and-pepper hair, a short beard, dark red hat. Full-length robes that belonged in the old history projections, except these robes carried no insignia, no rank thread at the collar, no state seal. They were simply *cloth*, travel-worn and practical, the deep brown trying to emulate the trees.

The man stopped at a respectful distance and offered a small, open-palmed gesture.

“I would have called out sooner, but you looked like a man who needed a moment with the stream before he needed a moment with a stranger.” A faint smile. “Understandable. I was much the same when I arrived.”

There was no performance in the voice. No blood-drawn pleasantness like Elizabeth Voss. Just a man speaking as though truth were the default setting. Will had heard that tone only once before—from the instructor who had survived twenty-three years on the frontier and still sometimes tried to be a person instead of a rank. The memory made something in Will’s chest pull tight.

Will’s grip on his staff did not loosen. “Master Stahl?”

The older man blinked. The name clearly meant nothing to him. His eyebrows lifted, not in recognition but in simple surprise at being addressed that way.

“Stahl?” he repeated, testing the unfamiliar word. He shook his head once, slow and certain. “I am no Master Stahl.” A faint, almost apologetic smile touched his mouth. “Though I can see how an old man with a bad leg and a staff might look like someone’s master to a frightened young magician. My name is Hiram September. And you are...?”

“Third Rank Davenport.” A beat, “William Davenport. From a place called [Myrah](#).”

Hiram’s brows lifted slightly. “Myrah. Can’t say the name has ever reached me — but then, I have been out of circulation for some time.” He tapped his staff once on the soft ground, testing the leg. The limp was real and habitual, not performed. “As far as I can tell, we are both outsiders here. I came from [Geb](#). You came from... considerably farther away, if I’m reading the state of you correctly.”

“Where *is* here?”

Hiram gestured at the ravine, the stream, the impossible sky. “The moon [Mist](#), unless every observation I’ve made since my arrival is wrong. It circles Geb — or circles *over* Geb, depending on which poet you ask. Lush, green, saturated with arcana, and, as far as I have been able to determine, devoid of

settlement.” He paused, and the warmth in his eyes thinned into something older. “Devoid of *human* settlement. The distinction matters. You will understand shortly.”

Will had never heard of Mist or Geb. His education on the Myran solar system was limited despite his curiosity. Other than the moon and sun, the rest of the objects in the sky had little influence on daily Myran life so the Triumvirate considered it a novelty not worth attention.

He had crossed a distance no sanctioned text had ever acknowledged.

The thought should have terrified him. Instead, standing in the ravine with cold stream water still drying on his chin and green pressing in on every side, he felt something dangerously close to relief.

Will set his staff down into a resting pose.

“How do you feel?” Hiram asked. “A bit jarred, I suppose.”

“My head feels like it was split with an axe and sewn back together by a first-year student.”

Hiram winced sympathetically. “The backlash of a blind warp, I would guess. You did not choose a destination. Something pulled you through and the current decided where you landed.” His gaze sharpened. “That is not a common talent on any world I know.”

Will's hand moved, almost unconsciously, to the slight bulge at his breast pocket. The stone answered with a pulse of warmth — gentle now, but unmistakably *aware*.

He did not take it out.

“My joints aren't as bad as they should be,” Will said instead. “If I fell from — from where I was — I should be broken.”

“Arcana took the brunt of it.” Hiram settled himself on a flat stone near the stream, staff across his knees. “The body is a vessel. I can tell you poured a great deal through yours in a very short span. The headache is the receipt.” A pause. “Be grateful the receipt was only a headache.”

Will slowly lowered himself to the opposite bank. The moss was cool through the grey linen. His staff lay across his thighs, within easy reach.

“You said you arrived the same way.”

“Not the same way, perhaps. But similarly displaced, yes.” Hiram's fingers traced a worn groove in his staff's shaft — an old habit, Will suspected, rather than a spell. “I am a Chrono-Magi. A time wizard, in lay terms. I was conducting an experiment on Geb that went... sideways. Time and space seem to be connected in a way that I was not expecting. Instead of moving through time, the current seemed to relocate me.” He looked up at the canopy, where green light filtered in shifting coins. “I have been here long enough to lose precise count of the days. Long enough to make peace with the stream and the hills. Not long enough to stop missing home.”

There was no rank in the way he said it. No performance of sacrifice for a superior's approval. Just homesickness, plain and unhidden.

Will did not know what to do with that.

On Myrah, vulnerability was leverage. You offered the minimum. You filed the rest under *suppress the self* and hoped the morning attunement was strong enough to keep it buried. Hiram September sat in plain robes on a mossy stone and spoke of missing his family as though it were a fact of weather.

"Perhaps introductions are in order beyond names," Hiram said, rallying with a small flourish. "You are a Third Rank magi? On Geb that phrase means nothing. Are you a soldier? A student? A priest?"

Will almost laughed. "A student. An academy inductee. Third Rank means I was born to non-magi parents but I had a gift they needed. It was an honor to be taken when I was four years." He kept his voice flat, the way you recited approved history. "In reality, it means I am destined to be maintenance staff for the people in charge: first-rank magi. I'm not trusted. Not pure enough. Expected to be useful and invisible in equal measure."

Will gripped his staff hard as the anxiety washed through his body. "I'm not supposed to say that part out loud."

Will watched Hiram intently. The older man was quiet for a long moment as he visibly processed the news.

"On Geb," he said at last, "magi and non-magi live alongside one another. Not equally — there are kings, lords, barons, feuds enough to fill a library — but not *centrally*. No ministry that owns every breath of arcana in a child's lungs." His grey eyes held Will's. "I do not say this to shock you. I say it because you look like a man who has never heard it before, and I find that unbearably sad."

Will looked at the stream instead.

He did not trust himself to speak.

They talked for the better part of an hour.

Not the compressed exchange of academy debriefs, where every answer had a correct shape and deviation was logged. A real conversation — questions overlapping, answers doubling back, silence allowed to sit without penalty.

Will told him about the grey sky and the barrier. About dawn attunement and Void-pull sequences. About the Grand Magi Council and the propaganda voice and the courtyard where a single sunbeam could make a man paint impossible streets on stolen slate.

Hiram told him about Geb's wild arcana — currents that moved like weather, spells shaped by focus and gesture rather than library incantations, vast territories no human flag had ever claimed. About the World Clock that recorded arcanic activity and, according to Geb scholars, protected time itself from paradox. About chrono-magi so rare that Hiram's own teacher had been, by Hiram's estimate, one in a hundred with the talent.

Will felt himself unwinding as the minutes passed. The headache dulled to a low pulse behind his eyes.

The stone at his breast stayed warm but quiet, as though it too were listening.

“You said there are no humans here,” Will said.

“None that I have found. Which is not the same as none that exist — Mist is large, and I am one man with a bad leg and no urgent reason to explore every hill.” Hiram's mouth quirked. “But there are *inhabitants*. You may feel them before you see them. The arcana here is... denser. More intricate. Less like the broad grey channels you described and more like — forgive the metaphor — a forest of small living threads.”

Will was opening his mouth to ask what that meant when the shadows moved.

Not the shadows of clouds across the ravine floor. The shadows *themselves* — stretching, folding, enlarging with a fluid independence that made the hair on Will's arms rise. The arcana in the air shifted texture. Where Myrah's energy had always felt like thick coating — cold, suppressive, applied from outside — this felt *sampled*. Exploratory. As though something smaller and more complex than any spell he had ever cast was reading him the way Elizabeth's inspection crystal had, but with curiosity instead of contempt.

Hiram did not startle. “Ah. You feel them too. Good. That means you're not as badly drained as you look.”

One of the shadows detached from the base of a fern and *jumped* onto Will's leg.

He jerked — instinct, academy training, the reflex to suppress and control — and then froze, because the thing on his shin was not an attack.

It was a creature the size of a large cat, if a cat were made of shifting light and suggestion. White, Will thought first. Then bluish-green as it turned its head. Then a pale gold when it blinked. The color changes were effortless, like breathing.

It had eyes — large, luminous, tilted with an expression that was not quite canine and not quite reptilian. The best comparison Will's exhausted mind could assemble was a dog-shaped thing with the stillness of a lizard and the directness of something that had never learned to lie.

It looked at him with intense interest.

Then, unmistakably, *sympathy*.

More emerged from the undergrowth. Two. Five. A dozen, their shades rippling as they arranged themselves in a loose semicircle at a respectful distance. None approached with threat. All watched with the focused curiosity of scholars who had finally acquired a new text.

“What are they?” Will asked quietly.

“On Geb we would call them monsters.” Hiram said it casually, as though the word were not a curse. Hiram noticed Will's unease, “Not to be confused with the dangerous fauna — those are simply animals. *Monsters*, in the old sense, are something else.”

Will's academy lexicon supplied: vile, harsh, dangerous, Void-touched anarchy, to be suppressed.

These creatures radiated none of that.

"Below on Geb," Hiram continued, "there are the Eight Sacred Monsters — keepers of the other side, the 'other us.' When a person dies, the old stories say they may be reborn as a Monster to protect the world they loved. Where the monsters go when *they* pass on, no living man knows." He watched the nearest shade pulse from white to soft violet. "Those that live *here* on Mist are... simpler. Younger, perhaps. Or a different branch of the same root. They know nothing of Geb's Eight. But they know *interest*. And they know sorrow, when they encounter it."

One of the shades pressed closer to Will's knee and made a sound that was not a bark and not a chirp but something in between — a inquiry, offered without demand.

"There's an old legend," Hiram said, quieter now. "On Geb. A monster of monsters — the first born. The stories never agree on the details. Those who live here know less than the stories." He shrugged. "I mention it because you look like a man who has just discovered that worlds can be so different that the words stop meaning the same things. I did too. It does not get less strange. You simply learn to carry the strangeness."

Will reached out, slowly, palm up.

The shade on his leg flowed into his hand like warm smoke with weight. For one heartbeat he felt a flicker of something vast and grieving and *old* — not his emotion, not the stone's pull, but a residue of lives he had never lived. Then it was gone, and the creature was simply curious again, colors rippling as it studied his fingers.

Will had never known anything could feel like that.

The pain of travel continued to ebb as the afternoon settled into the ravine.

Will drank from the stream again. Ate nothing — he had no rations, and hunger had not yet returned — but the water alone seemed to replenish something the grey world had been leaching from him for years.

He did not have to go back.

The thought arrived quietly, without triumph, and settled in his chest like a stone that was not the carnelian: heavy, but his to hold.

"Feeling better?" Hiram asked.

"Better." Will flexed his fingers. The headache was a dull pulse now, no worse than the residual drag after a hard Void-pull day. "I don't understand why you're helping me."

Hiram did not take offense. If anything, he looked pleased by the question — as though direct suspicion were a healthier response than blind gratitude.

"Because I am a guest here, same as you. Because I have always found other cultures worth the listening. Because it has been a long time since I spoke to another human being, and loneliness is a poor teacher." He paused, and the sorrow Will had seen earlier returned to his eyes like weather. "And because helping you helps *me* remember what kind of man I was on Geb. The kind who helped younger

people because it's what I wished for when I was young."

Will turned that over. On Myrah, Stahl had been the closest thing to that man—the one who still remembered how to be decent inside a system that punished the memory. Hiram September was what Stahl might have become if the cage had ever opened.

"So there is no ruling class of wizards on Geb?" Will asked. "No high ministry that micromanages every breath?"

"There are elites. There is politics. There is danger — creatures, wars between fiefdoms, territory no map has finished charting." Hiram's voice turned uneasy on the last part, as though Geb's dangers were more honest than its freedoms. "But no single apparatus that owns gifted children or asks us to give up our thoughts."

"Then how does anyone know what to do with themselves?"

Hiram laughed — a real sound, startled out of him. "Badly, often. Messily. With more mistakes than your Triumvirate would tolerate." He sobered. "But also with room. Room to paint on stolen slate. Room to fail without being logged. Room to be a person instead of a rank."

Will's hand found his breast pocket again. The stone pulsed once, faintly, as though in agreement or warning — he could not tell which.

"If Myrah and Geb are two different worlds," he said slowly, "there could be countless others."

"A strong possibility." Hiram's gaze was steady. "Distance is the obstacle. Or was... You crossed it without a destination, Will. Whatever pulled you through the wall did not consult a map. That changes the arithmetic considerably."

Will did not mention the stone. Not yet. Something in him — academy caution, or a deeper instinct he could not name — kept the carnelian hidden beneath grey linen.

Hiram, for his part, had not asked.

The rest of the day passed by the stream.

They spoke of smaller things: the taste of Geb's autumn rains, the sound of Myrah's boiler shifts, the way Mist's arcana made Hiram's minor light-orbs brighter than they had any right to be. The shades came and went, investigating, retreating, returning with new colors and new questions. Hiram called them poor conversationalists, but Will noticed the older man spoke to them anyway — low comments, observations offered into the air as though company did not require fluency.

Slowly the light changed.

Will had read about sunset in approved texts. He had seen it twice in person on Myrah, on days rare enough that the smog thinned and the sky admitted a little color before the grey reclaimed it. He was not prepared for *this*.

The sun descended toward the rim of hills in layers of red and orange so saturated they looked painted — the same impossible hues he had smuggled onto slate in the courtyard, except here no one would confiscate the pigment.

Then the stars returned.

Not the brief, shocking glimpse from the wall. Not the smeared suggestion behind barrier churn. A sky *crowded* with light — diamond points, cold fire, distances so vast they made the ravine feel like a single breath in an endless lung. Perhaps, Will thought, each of those lights was another world's sun. Perhaps somewhere out there another boy in grey robes was looking up through smog and seeing nothing.

It was harder to appreciate beauty when your own sky had been drowned in dust and shadow for a thousand years. Here, on clean air and untouched green, the universe showed its face without apology.

They lay back in the soft grass as the night deepened. The shades arranged themselves in a loose ring at the edge of the clearing, colors dimmed to respectful blues and silvers. Hiram talked about his students on Geb — their names, their faults, the way one boy had always mispronounced a chrono-incantation — and his voice roughened when he spoke of his family.

Will listened, and thought: *maybe different worlds create different people.*

Or maybe different worlds simply allowed different people to remain themselves.

Hiram September was sincere in a way Will had never encountered outside his own hidden courtyard. Not soft. Not naive. But *unarmored* in a manner that would have been eaten alive in the Third Rank dormitory wing.

Will found he liked him. That, more than the stars or the green or the absence of demerit ledgers, felt dangerous.

Sleep came at last — the first real sleep in months.

No inspection countdown. No Elizabeth Voss calculating tomorrow's demerits. No propaganda voice cracking the dream at dawn. No Void-pull ache waiting in his gut like a debt.

Will lay on his back with his staff within arm's reach and the carnelian warm in his pocket and let the forest's hum carry him under.

For a while there was only darkness and the smell of wet earth and the distant movement of the stream.

Then something reached for him.

Not the grey coating of morning attunement. Not the violent pull of the wall. Something *yearning* — familiar and strange at once, pressing against the inside of his ribs with the same desperate clarity as the woman's voice in the dream.

William...

Calling.

Waiting.

Will turned in the dark, half dreaming, half awake. His fingers found the stone through linen. It was warm. Bright orange even in the black, he somehow *knew*, though he could not see it.

Was it her? The woman in the mist? The voice from the dais in wine-colored robes?

Was it the stone itself — origin unknown, purpose unknown, the thing that had torn him from Myrah and dropped him on a living moon circling a world he had never heard of?

He did not know.

But for the first time since the courtyard, the reaching did not frighten him.

He held the pulse in his palm and drifted deeper, the stars still visible behind his closed eyes, and let the forest breathe around him while somewhere across the dark — across worlds, perhaps — something called his name and would not stop.

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