

Master Konrad Stahl

Author's note: Konrad Stahl is the “what if Will never found the stone?” future — a Third Rank who survived the full lifespan the system allows, learned exactly where the invisible lines are drawn, and has made a kind of peace with the cage. He is not a secret revolutionary. He is something more dangerous and more human: a man who still has a conscience but has also learned that open resistance is suicide. His quiet, wordless solidarity with Will is the closest thing to mercy the academy can still produce. In the larger story he can serve as living proof of the cost of staying, a source of subtle aid during the escape, and (much later) a potential contact or tragic figure when Will returns to tear the system down. The “prisoners together” dynamic is the emotional core of his relationship with the protagonist.



Master Konrad Stahl is a Third Rank combat instructor at the Thallius Academy, assigned to Sparring & Warding for the senior cadet cohorts. He is in his late fifties or early sixties — old for an active academy posting — with a permanent limp in his left hip and the weathered, economical presence of a man who has spent most of his life being useful to people who consider him disposable. He is the closest thing William Davenport has to an adult who sees him clearly without wanting to use or destroy him.

Background & Service Record

Like William, Konrad Stahl was taken from non-magi parents as a small child (age five or six) during one of the more aggressive recruitment sweeps of the previous generation. He belonged to one of the earliest large cohorts of third-tier children brought into the system after the fertility collapse among the old pureblood lines became impossible to ignore. By the time William Davenport arrived at the academy decades later, third-tier magi made up roughly forty percent of the working magi population. His home district was in the Eastern Barrens — already a punishment posting for non-compliant populations. The “introduction” teams that collected him were not gentle. He has almost no memories of his parents, only the sound of his mother singing something in a language the recruiters later beat out of him.

He was processed through the same academy system Will now endures, but in a harsher era. The doctrine of Controlled Void was newer then, the punishments more inventive, and the expectation that Third Ranks would die young in service was still openly discussed. Stahl survived by becoming **extremely** good at the one thing the regime valued from people of his rank: applied violence in defense of the barrier and the hierarchy.

After graduation he was assigned to the Eastern Suppression Commands — the euphemism for the units that put down worker revolts, “re-educated” villages that questioned generator tithes, and occasionally escorted the more troublesome dissidents to the Trans-Herridan Wall. He spent twenty-three years in those postings. The limp comes from a specific incident during the Ash River Uprising (year 87 AR): a barrier he was maintaining collapsed under the weight of too many simultaneous Void-pulls from the capital. The feedback burned through his hip and lower spine. The Ministry awarded him a commendation and a transfer to the academy rather than a medical discharge. Useful veterans are too rare to waste.

He has never married. Third Rank fertility is higher than the aristocracy, so people like Stahl are kept busy on the frontier postings. He has no living family that he knows.

Personality & Philosophy

Stahl is a man of very few words and even fewer illusions. He has seen what happens to people who believe the propaganda too sincerely and what happens to people who openly reject it. The only viable path, in his experience, is to master the exact width of the narrow corridor between those two deaths.

He is not broken. He is **armored**. The armor is made of precise, by-the-book performance in public and a private policy of never volunteering information that could be used against anyone — including himself. He corrects students with the same flat tone whether they have made an honest mistake or are being deliberately baited by a pureblood. The correction is never more than the situation requires, and never less.

He has a dry, almost invisible sense of humor that only surfaces in the presence of people who have also learned to read between the lines. With Will, it manifests as the occasional extra half-second of eye contact after a particularly absurd piece of doctrine is recited, or the way he phrases a public reprimand so that it contains the actual useful advice inside the required language.

Stahl does not believe the system can be reformed. He also does not believe it can be overthrown by any force currently imaginable on Myrah. His quiet aid to certain students over the years has never been about hope. It has been about reducing the total amount of unnecessary suffering in a world that seems to require a certain quota of it.

Appearance & Bearing

Stahl is tall but stooped, as though decades of carrying a staff and a limp have permanently shifted his center of gravity. His hair is iron-grey, cut regulation short. His face is all angles and old scar tissue — not dramatic hero scars, but the small, cumulative marks of barrier feedback, dust storms in the Eastern Barrens, and one very close call with a non-magi mob that got past the outer cordon before the generators came online.

He wears the same plain dark-grey instructor robe as the other combat staff, but the single silver thread at his collar (Third Rank) is noticeably more faded than those on the younger instructors. He never polishes it. His staff is old, heavy, and practical — willow like Will's, but reinforced with iron bands at the joints from his frontier days. It has killed people. He does not speak of it.

When he walks the academy corridors he moves like a man who is constantly calculating the shortest route that will not require him to explain his presence to anyone in authority.

Arcana & Combat Style

Stahl's magic is entirely practical and almost entirely defensive. Years of holding barriers against desperate, dying crowds taught him that the prettiest spells are the ones that fail first when reality pushes back. He favors thick, ugly, over-engineered wards that can take a beating and still stand. His offensive work is minimal and brutal — suppression fields, kinetic hammers, the occasional “containment flare” that is really just a directed explosion with a doctrinal name.

He is one of the few instructors who still occasionally demonstrates casting **without** full incantation in the advanced classes — not because he is a rebel, but because on the frontier you sometimes could not afford the half-second the words required. He never teaches the shortcuts. He simply shows them once, says “This is what the manual forbids,” and moves on. The students who are paying attention remember.

His personal relationship with arcana is exhausted. He feels the pollution in Myrah's flow like a constant low-grade fever in his bones. The only time the ache eases is during the rare moments when he is alone in the old training halls at night and allows himself to cast something that is purely his own — a small, private light that has no tactical purpose whatsoever.

Relationship to William Davenport

Will is the first student in many years who has reminded Stahl of himself at that age — not the surface competence, but the **wrongness**. The sense that the cage is visible to this one in a way it is not to the

others. Stahl has watched dozens of bright Third Ranks either break, become useful monsters, or simply disappear into the generator crews and Ministry desks. He has learned not to invest.

With Will he makes an exception in millimeters only.

The arm squeeze during the sparring correction is the most overt gesture of solidarity Stahl has allowed himself in a decade. It is also a test: if Will reports it, or even acknowledges it too openly, then Stahl will know he misread the boy and can return to safe distance. The fact that Will simply resets his stance and continues the drill tells Stahl everything he needs to know.

He has no intention of helping Will escape. That would be suicide for both of them. But he has begun, very quietly, to leave certain doors unlocked a few seconds longer than regulations require when Will is nearby, and to schedule his own evening inspections of the eastern service passages on the nights when the Third Rank in question has been unusually quiet at dinner.

It is not hope. It is the smallest possible reduction of the quota.

Secrets & Private Life

- Stahl keeps a small, locked chest in his quarters containing three things: the singed remains of his original recruitment papers (the only proof he ever had parents), a single non-magi folk carving of a bird that he took from a dead rebel's pocket during the Ash River Uprising and has never been able to throw away, and a list of names (written in a cipher only he understands) of every Third Rank he believes he helped survive one more year than the system intended. - He has, on two previous occasions, quietly arranged for a promising but "problematic" student to be transferred to a less lethal posting rather than the frontier. Both students are still alive. He has never checked on them. - Once a year, on the anniversary of the Ash River collapse, he walks the outer academy wall at night and casts a single, invisible, perfectly spherical barrier around himself — the same size and strength he failed to maintain that day. He holds it until his hands shake and the old burn in his hip screams. Then he releases it and returns to his quarters without speaking to anyone.

Thematic Role

Konrad Stahl is the ghost of the path not taken. He functions as a shadow-father / future-self figure for Will: the version of the protagonist who learned to survive inside the machine rather than breaking it or fleeing it. Their silent, high-risk, low-word relationship is one of the few places in the academy where genuine human connection is still possible — and even that connection must be conducted almost entirely in the negative space of what is **not** said.

He is also a living indictment of the regime. The fact that a man this competent, this experienced, and this quietly decent has been reduced to teaching children how to hold perfect formation while the world slowly dies around them is the system working exactly as designed.

When Will eventually returns to Myrah, Stahl will be one of the people he will have to decide whether to recruit, protect, or leave behind. The answer to that question will say a great deal about what kind of

liberator (or conqueror) William Davenport has become.

Practical Notes for Writing

- Voice: Short sentences. Almost no adjectives. He speaks like a man who has learned that every extra word is a potential weapon that can be turned against him or someone else. When he does use more than the minimum, it is always deliberate. - Physical tells: He unconsciously shifts his weight off the bad hip when he is thinking. When he is genuinely moved (rare), the corner of his left eye tightens as if he is expecting a blow. - Future hooks: Possible quiet assistance during Will's actual escape night, a later scene where he is ordered to hunt the "fugitive Third Rank" and must choose how much effort to actually expend, or a reunion years later when Will returns and Stahl is still at the academy — older, more broken, and forced to decide whether the smallest possible mercy was ever enough.

Stahl exists to prove that Myrah does not only destroy the weak. It also slowly grinds down the strong until even their acts of resistance are measured in half-seconds and unlocked doors. He is not a hero. He is a survivor who has kept just enough of his soul to recognize when someone else still has a chance to keep more of theirs. That recognition, offered without hope and without expectation of thanks, is the most honest form of love the grey world still permits.

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