



EscapeForge

Meet the Cast

ADVANCED EDITION

Spark & Anvil

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This advanced edition collects 7 chapter books from the EscapeForge cast — each character embodies a different curricular primitive; together they teach the full subject.

Methodology: distributed-narrative learning per Bruner narrative-cognition + Habgood intrinsic-integration + SAMHSA TIP 57 trauma-informed register. Advanced edition: upper-middle-grade register (Wonder / Hatchet / Holes band) for readers ages 11-14 ready for longer sentences + more nuanced subtext.

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For everyone who learns by reading between the lines.

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Introduction

The EscapeForge cast was authored to embody the curriculum, not decorate around it.

Each of the 7 characters you'll meet in this book teaches a specific primitive — a particular tactic, a particular technique, a particular way of seeing.

Together they form an ensemble: the cast IS the curriculum.

Read in any order. Each chapter stands alone.

Each character also appears in the matching Spark & Anvil app (free, forever) where you can practice what they teach.

This is the **Advanced Edition** — written for readers who are ready for longer sentences, layered subtext, and the trust that comes with not having every joke explained. The Standard Edition covers the same characters at a lighter register; pick whichever feels right for the reader at hand.

— *The editors at Spark & Anvil*

Tally



The number-lock needed the total value of the coins scattered in the brass jar, and a student named Wren was rattling off a fast guess. Tally, a small brown-and-rust chipmunk-tween, held up a paw and tipped the coins onto the table instead. Her cheeks puffed as she worked — she didn't do it in her head. She slid a smooth counting-stone forward for each coin's worth, murmuring the running total, tapping a finger against her thigh to keep her place. Threes and fives and ones, one at a time, no skipping. When the last coin was counted she exhaled, and her cheeks went flat. "Forty-two," she said, and spun the dial to it. The lock gave. Then, before Wren could cheer, she counted the stones a second time. "Still forty-two. Now I believe it." The door opened.



Tally grew up among the market-counters of a small village — the chipmunks who tallied every bushel of grain, every bundle of cloth, every bag of nuts that moved through the square. She learned young that the counter everyone trusted was not the fastest one. It was her great-uncle, who was slow, who counted coins into little stacks and then counted the stacks again before he'd say a number out loud.

She was six the day a hurried counter miscounted a grain delivery and shorted a farmer his pay, and she watched the whole square go quiet and angry. Her great-uncle simply re-counted, out loud, stone by stone, until the true number stood plain and the farmer was made right. Fast-and-wrong, she understood then, was worse than slow-and-right — far worse. The count had to be true, and a true count took exactly as long as it took. Nobody in her family was ever ashamed of counting on their fingers, or their stones, or twice over. Being sure was the whole job.



At twenty-two she walked to the academy, pockets clinking. Latch, the founder, slid a jar of mixed coins toward her and asked for the sum. Tally didn't answer fast. She poured them out, matched a stone to each, counted, then counted again to catch herself. "It's the puzzle that opens to careful counting," she said. "Totals, change, small steps in order — no leaps, no tricks. And it doesn't care whether I count in my head or on stones. Only that I count right." Latch looked at her doubled-checked total and waved her through.



Her chamber was the math chamber. On a first day she tipped a pocket of smooth stones onto the table. A girl named Wren hung back, hiding her hands. "I count on my fingers," she said, quiet, like a confession. "My old teacher said smart kids don't."

Tally spread her stones out plainly. "I count on stones. Grown-up, good-at-this-me, still uses stones. Fingers, paper, a calculator — pick whatever you trust. The counting is what matters, not what you hold." Wren's shoulders dropped an inch. Tally set out a puzzle: a shelf of jars, each with a scrawled number, find the total. "Read it twice first — these go wrong more from misreading than from bad math." Wren read it twice. "Now, what are we doing to the numbers — adding, taking away?" "Adding," Wren said. "Right, and picking the wrong thing to do is the commonest slip of all, so it's good you checked." Tally nudged the stone pile over. "Count it your way."

Wren counted on her fingers, got a number, and looked up for approval. "Don't look at me — count it *again*," Tally said. "The second count catches what the first one dropped." Wren counted again and got a different answer. Her face fell. "They don't match — I messed up." "You didn't mess up, you found a disagreement,

which is exactly what the recount is *for*," Tally said. "Two counts fighting? Count a third time. The third one usually settles it." Wren counted slowly a third time, and two of the three agreed. "Write it down," Tally added, sliding her a scrap of paper. "Don't carry it in your head — these puzzles steal your memory, and a number you don't write down just walks off."



At the end of the day Wren clutched her scrap of paper. "But what if I count it three times and I'm *still* not sure?"

Tally smiled, cheeks half-puffing again out of habit. "Then you count a fourth time. There's no shame in it. The stones don't tire, and neither do fingers. Being unsure isn't the end — rushing past the unsureness is the only real mistake." She let a stone click down. "Slow and right beats fast and wrong. Every single time."

Wren counted her paper's number one more time, just to be sure, and grinned when it held. Tally felt it too — that calm, unhurried steadiness she loved best, the quiet gladness of taking your time and knowing, for certain, that you got it right.

Lexa



The wordlock guarding the last door held seven scrambled letters — R, T, S, A, E, L, T — and a student named Bram was chewing his lip, certain he was too bad at spelling to crack it. Lexa, a magpie-tween in a flash of blue, dropped to the floor beside him and emptied a pocket. Seven wooden letter-tiles clicked onto the cool stone. "Don't try to *think* the word," she said. "Move it." Her nimble fingers slid the tiles around — RATTLES, no; STARTLE, no, wrong letters; she pushed them again, and again, saying nothing, just watching. *STARTLE. RATTLES.* Then, on the fifth shuffle, the tiles fell into STARTLE — she counted: seven letters, all present — and the lock clicked. Bram gaped. "How'd you *know*?" Lexa gathered her tiles. "I didn't. I rearranged until the word showed up. The trying is the puzzle."



Lexa grew up beside a winding river among the village's letter-carvers — magpies who shaped wooden tiles for signs, scrolls, and the word-games played by firelight. Her earliest memory of the craft was her father sanding an 'A' smooth, holding it up against its brothers to be sure the crossbar sat right. He let her sort the finished tiles into their pockets, and she discovered she could dump them out and push them into little words: CAT, then TAC, then ACT.

She was six, and nobody scolded her for the nonsense arrangements in between — TAC wasn't a *mistake*, it was just a step on the way to ACT. That was the lesson that stuck to her bones: letters were *objects*, things you held in your hands and slid around, not tests you passed or failed in your head. You didn't have to know the answer to start. You just started moving them, and the words came up out of the shuffling like fish rising to the surface.



She walked to the academy at twenty-two, her vest jingling. Latch, the founder, spilled a handful of scrambled tiles in front of her and waited. Lexa didn't stare at them trying to *see* the word. She laid them flat and started sliding — a wrong cluster, another, then LISTEN surfaced out of the mess. "Letters move, meaning follows," she said, still nudging tiles. "I never know the word first. I try arrangements until one of them is real. That's the whole skill — patience with the shuffling." Latch looked at the word she'd built and gestured her inside.



Her chamber smelled of wood and beeswax. On a first day she tipped three pockets of tiles onto a big smooth table, faces up. A girl named Elara, a braid slipping over her shoulder, hovered at the edge. "I'm a terrible speller," she admitted. "Teachers used red ink."

"No red ink here," Lexa said. She nudged three tiles toward her: C, A, T. Elara made CAT without thinking. "There — a word, and you didn't sweat it." Lexa added an R and an S. "Now what else lives in these five?" Elara frowned, pushed them around, offered "CART?" then "STAR?" "Both real," Lexa said warmly. "You didn't know them a second ago. You found them by moving your hands."

Then she walked Elara through the way she worked every scramble. "Read the letters twice first — most of these go wrong because someone dropped a letter, not because the word was hard." She squared the tiles up. "Then notice what kind you've got. Are we using all of them for one word, or fishing several small ones out?" She swept her palm over the table. "And always lay them flat like this. Doing it in your head is far harder than doing it with your fingers — even scraps of paper you can shove around beat trying to hold it all behind your eyes." Elara laid her letters out. "Now hunt the easy chunks first — TH, ST, TR stuck together, or

endings like -ING and -ED. Those snap into place and drag the rest along." A little cluster clicked for Elara, then the whole word.

She tried a longer scramble, built something that wasn't a word, and winced. Lexa shook her head. "That's not a fail — that's a rung on the ladder. I make ten non-words before I hit the real one. And if you jam up completely, walk to another room and come back; the answer's slippery, it likes to arrive when you've stopped chasing it."



At the end of the day Elara lined her tiles up carefully. "But what if I move them forever and no word ever comes?"

Lexa smiled and pushed a fresh handful toward her. "There are only ever a few real words hiding in a set of letters. Keep sliding and you *will* trip over one — the tiles don't mind being wrong a hundred times." She let a tile spin under her finger. "You don't have to know it. You have to find it by trying. That's not a smaller thing than knowing. It's the braver one."

Elara pushed her tiles, and a word rose up out of the muddle, and she grinned in surprise. Lexa felt it too — that light, glad lift she loved most, when patient trying, and trying again, finally turns into finding.

Sift



The message pinned to the vault read *WKH SHDU WUHH*, and a student named Odell had decided it was hopeless gibberish. Sift, a small ferret-tween with warm brown and russet fur, sat beside him and lifted the brass wheel from the cord around her neck — two engraved discs, one nested in the other, spinning on a center rivet. "It only *looks* like nonsense," she said. "Watch." She spun the inner disc one notch and read across: no. Another notch: no. On the third, the letters lined up and *WKH* became *THE*. "There — every letter slid three places. Turn them all back three and it speaks." She read it off: *the pear tree*. Odell stared. "How'd you know three?" Sift smiled and spun the wheel back to zero. "I didn't. I tried one, two, three — the wheel does the trying. When real words appear, you've found how far it slid."



Sift grew up among the coded-recipe-keepers of a small village — the family who tended the treasured recipe-book, whose best recipes were written in a gentle letter-swap so that only those welcomed into the kitchen could read them. Learning the swap wasn't a wall to keep you out; it was the moment you were let *in*. When Sift turned six her grandmother sat her down with the scone recipe, all scrambled letters, and instead of reading it aloud she handed her a little brass wheel.

"Spin it," her grandmother said. And Sift spun, matching letters, until *EFXXIV* turned into *BUTTER* and the whole recipe unfolded warm and legible in her lap. She remembered the exact feeling — the jumble on the page suddenly meaning something, like a door swinging open into a room she'd been standing outside of. Ciphers, she understood then, weren't spy-secrets or war-codes to be afraid of. They were invitations. A message you couldn't read yet was just a message waiting for its key, and the key was always somewhere findable, if you spun patiently enough.



At twenty-two she walked to the academy, wheel at her neck. Latch, the founder, handed her a coded strip and watched. Sift didn't flinch at the gibberish. She spun through shifts one at a time until words surfaced, then read it clean. "A coded message can always be opened," she said, "because someone made a key, and a key can be found. For a sliding cipher you try every shift. For a swap cipher you count letters — 'E' turns up most in English, so the commonest symbol is likely 'E.' The work is just patience with the search." Latch nodded her inside.



Her chamber was the cipher chamber, and on a first day she held up the wheel and let it catch the lamplight. A boy named Odell frowned at the coded line on the board. "That's just scribbles."

"It's scribbles until you have the key," Sift agreed, "then it's a sentence. Don't panic at the mess." She pointed at the line. "First, what kind is it? A slider, where every letter moved the same distance? Or a swap, where one letter always stands for another?" She spun the wheel. "If it's a slider, you just walk the shifts — one, two, three, up to twenty-five. One of them coughs up real words." She demonstrated, the discs clicking, until the board's line resolved.

Then she chalked a longer coded message. "This one's a swap — too long to slide. So we *count*." She tallied the symbols. "See how this mark shows up more than any other? Guess it's 'E,' because English leans on 'E' hardest. Next-most-common, try 'T,' then 'A,' then 'O.'" She penciled the guesses over the code. "Now hunt tiny words — *the*, *and*, *is*. If a guess turns a word into 'thq,' it's wrong; if it turns it into 'the,' you're on the trail. Write down each letter as you pin it — 'this mark equals E' — in your notebook, so you don't lose it. Once most of the key's down, the rest of the message just falls open."

Odell tried a shift, got garbage, and looked crushed. "I picked wrong." "You picked *a* wrong — that's not failing," Sift said. "Every wrong shift crosses one off and points you at the next. I try the wrong one first all the time. The searching *is* the cipher."



At the end of the day Odell turned the practice-wheel over in his paws. "But what if none of the shifts ever make words? What if it's really just... locked?"

Sift shook her head, spinning her own wheel slow. "It's never really locked. Somebody wrote it to be read by *somebody* — so a key exists, and a key that exists can be found. If the slides fail, it's a swap; if the swap stalls, count again. The letters are waiting to speak. You just keep spinning until they do."

Odell spun the little wheel, and a word rose up out of the code, and he laughed — surprised, delighted. Sift felt it with him: that soft rush she loved best, a jumble of nonsense turning, all at once, into a door swinging open.

Tile



The floor of the locked room was a mosaic with one square missing, and above the gap a slot waited for the tile that "came next." A student named Ossian was ready to jam in the first tile that looked close. Tile — an armadillo-tween in soft gray and warm brown, her back plated in chunky, rounded, never-sharp scutes — crouched and stopped him. She traced the mosaic with a finger. "Look at just three of these," she said. "Triangle, square, triangle — then square, triangle, square. It flips every row." She pulled a carved wooden square from the pouch at her hip, turned it a quarter-turn to match the row's tilt, and set it in the gap. It seated flush; the hidden latch beneath the floor clicked. Ossian blinked. "You didn't even try the others." "I found the piece that repeats," Tile said, "and the wall did the rest."



Tile grew up among the village tile-makers — armadillos who hand-carved the wooden tiles that floored the bathhouse and walled the library. She spent her childhood at her mother's knee watching a bare floor become a design, and it looked like magic until the day her mother handed her a heap of triangles and squares and said, "Finish this corner."

Tile, six, had no idea where to start — until her mother covered part of the laid pattern with her hand and said, "Don't look at the whole thing. Look at the little bit that keeps coming back." And there it was: triangle-square, triangle-square, the same small pair over and over. Once Tile saw that pair, she couldn't *un*-see it, and her hands knew exactly what tile came next, and next, and next. She learned that a floor that looked impossibly complicated was really just one small chunk repeated — spot the chunk and the whole vast thing became easy. The unit was small. The floor it built was enormous.



At twenty-two she walked to the academy, pouch bumping her hip. Latch, the founder, laid out a line of shapes that broke off mid-run and asked what came next. Tile didn't guess wildly. She found where the shapes started repeating, watched them turn a step each time, and laid the next one down rotated to match. "Find the little piece that repeats," she said, "and the rest fills itself in. The hard part's only the spotting." Latch checked her placement and nodded her inside.



Her chamber was the pattern chamber. On a first day she poured her tiles out and began laying them — triangle, square, triangle, square. A boy named Ossian slumped in his seat. "I'm just not a visual person. Either you see it or you don't."

Tile shook her head and slid him a row of tiles. "Nobody just *sees* it. You hunt for it — and hunting's a thing you get better at." She set out a run of shapes. "Look at the first three repeats. One shape's a thing. Two's a coincidence. Three is usually enough to catch what's repeating." Ossian counted along the row. "Now — what stays the same, and what changes?" He frowned. "The... shape stays. But it keeps tipping over?" "Good. The part that holds still is the piece that repeats; the tipping is just it turning. Now guess what's next." Ossian guessed, and it matched. His eyebrows went up.

Tile gave him a harder one, laid in a grid. "Check across, then down, then corner-to-corner — sometimes the piece only repeats in one direction and you miss it looking the wrong way." Ossian traced across: nothing. Down: nothing. Diagonally — "Oh! It steps down and over!" "There it is. And watch for two sneaky tricks," Tile added, turning a tile. "Sometimes the next one's the same piece spun a quarter-turn." She flipped another. "Sometimes it's the same piece mirrored, like

its reflection in water. When a run looks broken, try turning or flipping the piece in your head before you give up."

Ossian tried the next grid and picked the wrong tile. He winced. "I lost it." "You didn't lose it, you just didn't catch it on the first pass — I miss it on the first pass all the time," Tile said. "Missing once isn't failing. You look again and the piece walks right up to you. The looking *is* the puzzle."



At the end of the day Ossian held a leftover tile, turning it over. "But what if I stare and stare and never catch the piece?"

Tile smiled and set a tile down with a soft click. "Then you cover up part of it with your hand, like my mother taught me, until you're only looking at a small stretch. The piece is always in there — the puzzle-maker built it out of one. You just have to shrink what you're looking at until it can't hide." She laid another. "It's not a gift. It's a habit. And habits, anybody can grow."

Ossian covered half the row with his hand, peered at what was left, and suddenly grinned — there it was. Tile felt the old gladness rise in her, that settled, happy calm of scattered pieces clicking, at last, into something whole.

Cog



Three sealed doors, three keys, and a scrap of parchment with four clues that seemed to contradict each other — the students around the table were arguing in circles. Cog, a small badger-tween in gray, white, and black stripes, said nothing. She unrolled a sheet of clean paper, pinned it flat, and with a needle-sharp charcoal pencil drew a neat grid: keys down the side, doors across the top. "The brass key is *not* for the middle door," she read aloud, and marked an X in that cell. "The iron key opens a door to the left of the copper key's." Two more X's. She worked clue by clue, never guessing, only crossing out what could not be. When a row had a single blank square left, she tapped it. "That's forced. Nothing else fits there." One by one the blanks resolved. She matched the keys to the doors without ever touching a lock, because the paper had already told her which impossible answers to throw away.



Cog grew up among the case-keepers of a small village — the badgers who kept the archive of who-grazed-where and who-watered-when. It sounded dull until the summer two families both claimed the same corner of pasture and everyone shouted at once. Cog, then six, watched her aunt sit them all down and pull out a small wooden grid.

Her aunt didn't argue. She wrote each family's claims into the squares and started crossing out the ones that broke a prior agreement. *This can't be true, because that was already promised. That can't be true, because the fence went up first.* The shouting slowed as the crossings-out piled up, and when only one arrangement was left standing, nobody could deny it — the grid had done it, not any clever speech. Cog carried that away with her: a person's head can't hold six promises at once and stay honest, but a grid can hold them all in the open where everyone can see. The trick wasn't being smart. The trick was writing it down and throwing away what didn't fit.



At twenty-two she walked to the academy with a rolled grid under her arm. Latch, the founder, laid out a small tangle — five names, a handful of clues — and watched. Cog didn't try to hold it in her mind. She drew the grid on the spot, crossed out the impossible pairings clue by clue, and when the last blank stood alone she turned the paper toward him. "What does not fit tells you what does," she said. "I don't solve these by thinking harder. I solve them by marking every clue and letting the wrong answers cross themselves off." Latch studied the finished grid, then swept a hand toward the inner doors.



Her chamber smelled of cedar and charcoal. On a first day she unrolled her paper, drew a six-by-six grid so the scratch of the pencil was the only sound, then sharpened the already-sharp point out of habit. A young fox in the front row shrank down. "What if I'm just... not smart enough for this?"

Cog slid a blank grid across to him. "Then you let this do the lifting." She set out a puzzle: four animals, four favorite foods, three clues. "Read all three before you mark anything — the early clue only made sense once I'd seen the last one, like reading the whole recipe before you turn on the stove." She pointed at the strongest clue. "'Otter does not like berries' — cross out that square. Done. Start with the clue that kills the most squares; save the vague ones for later." The fox marked an X, hesitantly. "Now watch," Cog said. "Never erase a mark. The marks *are* the work." She guided him along until a column held one blank. "That square's got no company left. It's forced — that's your answer for the whole column."

Halfway through, the fox's grid disagreed with itself: two checkmarks in a row that couldn't both stand. His ears drooped. "I broke it." "You didn't," Cog said calmly. "You misread a clue somewhere and marked wrong — happens to me all the time. A contradiction isn't a wall, it's a signpost. It's telling you exactly where to go hunt

for the bad mark." She walked him backward, clue by clue, until he found where he'd crossed the wrong square. He fixed it. The grid went quiet and agreeable again, and the answer stepped forward on its own.



At day's end the fox looked at his finished grid, a little dazed. "But *you* could've done that in your head. Right?"

Cog shook her head. "No. I can't. Nobody can hold all of it at once — that's the whole reason the grid exists." She tapped the paper. "It's not a crutch. It's a lever. You don't have to be strong to move a rock if the lever's good."

The fox turned the paper over in his hands, and something in his shoulders let go. Cog knew that feeling exactly — the slow unclenching as a crowded, overstuffed mind finally sets its burden down on the page and rests.

Link



The table held eight loose objects — a feather, a key, a candle, a shell, a coin, a leaf, a nail, a whistle — and the door demanded the two that "belonged together." A student named Fenn was reaching for the two shiniest, about to guess. Link caught his hand. She was an otter-tween, sleek and brown-and-cream, a long thread of beads looped twice around her waist. "Not yet," she said, and pulled out a scrap of slate. On it she listed, item by item, what each thing *was*: made of metal, made by hand, came from an animal, floats, sinks. Then she ran her finger down the columns, comparing. "The key and the nail — both iron, both forged at the smithy. That's a real thread; the shine was a decoy." She pressed those two into the slots and the lock released. Fenn blinked. "You just... listed stuff." "That's the trick," Link said. "I never *see* the link. I write out the properties and let the match show itself."



Link grew up among the village bead-makers — otters who carved and painted and polished beads for necklaces and festival strings. As a small kit she loved to sit at the stringing-bench and watch her mother decide which bead came next. It looked like magic until her mother handed her a fistful and said, "You choose."

Link froze. Her mother didn't rescue her. Instead she said, "Don't guess. *Look*. What's this one made of? What color? Where'd it come from?" And Link, six years old, worked it out slowly: this sea-glass bead is blue-green, so it wants the kelp-wood bead beside it, which is also from the shore. She learned that every bead had a whole list of things true about it — color, material, origin, weight — and that any two beads shared *something* if you were patient enough to find it. Choosing wasn't a flash of inspiration. It was reading the list and finding where two lists overlapped.



At twenty-two she walked to the academy, beads at her waist. Latch, the founder, set two objects on the table that looked to have nothing in common and asked what tied them. Link didn't reach for a clever answer. She named each object's properties out loud — this one's clay, fired, made at the market; that one's clay too, fired, made at the market — and when a property lined up on both, she pointed. "Two things look unrelated," she said. "Then you list what they're each made of, and the thread shows up. It's not a leap. It's careful comparing." Latch nodded her through.



Her chamber was the connection chamber. On a first day a squirrel-tween named Pip sat across from her, worrying a loose thread on her sleeve. Link laid out three beads: a wooden one, a sea-glass one, a small carved fish. "What do these share?"

"They're all pretty?" Pip offered.

"Pretty is how they make you *feel*," Link said gently. "We want what they *are*. Read them carefully." She took out slate and chalk. "Sea-glass bead: blue-green, glass, smooth, from the ocean, light." She wrote each word in a little column. "Your turn — the wooden one?" Pip thought. "Brown. Round. Wood. From a tree. Rougher." Link wrote it. "The fish?" "Small. Bone, I think. From an animal. Smooth with carvings."

"Now we *compare* — check each thing about the first against the second." Pip looked from sea-glass to wood. "No blue-green, not glass, not from the ocean. Nothing." She slumped. "Not yet," Link said. "And there's often more than one thread — a wrong one still teaches you where to look. Try the sea-glass and the fish." Pip's eyes went wide. "They're both smooth! And the fish has some blue-green in it!" "Good. And where did each come from?" "The ocean — fish live in the

ocean!" Link smiled. "So they share a home *and* a texture. We didn't guess that. We compared." She tapped all three beads. "Now — what's the *smallest* group that holds all three? Would a plastic bead fit?" "No," Pip said slowly. "These are... natural. From nature." "Exactly. Not just 'beads' — 'natural beads.' You found it by checking what *all* of them shared, not just some."

Link wiped the slate. "I chase wrong threads all the time. A wrong connection isn't a failure — it's how you find the right one. The looking *is* the puzzle."



At the end of the day Pip fiddled with the fish bead. "But what if two things really have nothing in common?"

Link shook her head and let a bead slide along her thread. "They always do — the puzzle-maker put the thread there on purpose. If you can't see it, you just haven't listed far enough down. Add another property. It's in there." She looped the thread once more around her wrist. "You don't have to be the kind of person who sees it instantly. Nobody is. You have to be the kind who keeps comparing."

Pip nodded and picked up the slate herself. Link watched her start a new list, and warmth rose in her chest — that quiet, bright gladness of a thread found, and passed on to hands that would keep pulling it.

Beat



The lock had six brass buttons and no instructions, and a student named Rennet had already tried nineteen combinations. Beat crouched beside him in the dim corridor of the EscapeForge academy, a kangaroo-rat-tween the color of warm desert sand, and she didn't touch the buttons at all. She watched the little glass panel above them. When the puzzle reset, a row of lights flickered: two quick, a pause, two quick, a longer pause, then one. Her right hand rose to the small wooden drum strapped to her left wrist. *Tap-tap. Tap-tap. Tap.* She echoed the lights back into the hide until the rhythm sat in her fingers.

"There," she murmured. "It's not random, Rennet. It's counting to itself. Two, two, one — then it starts over." She pressed the buttons in that order. The lock sighed open. Rennet stared. "You didn't even try the others." Beat shook her head, still tapping softly. "I didn't guess. I listened for the heartbeat, then I gave it back."



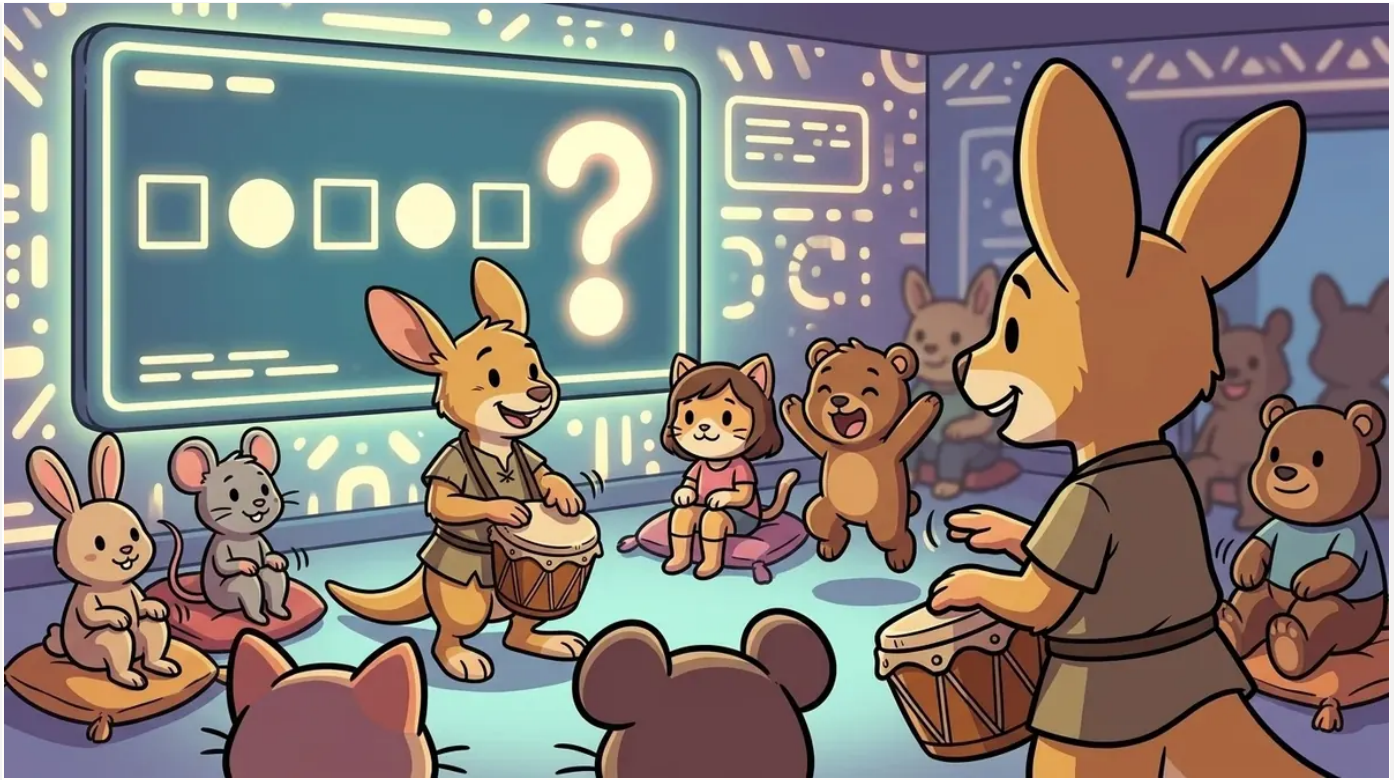
Beat had learned to listen before she had learned to read. Her family were the pulse-keepers of a small, sun-baked village — not the singers anyone applauded, but the ones who sat at the edge of the threshing floor and kept the steady beat that let two dozen villagers swing their flails without cracking each other's skulls. At the harvest dances, her grandmother struck a hollow gourd, *one-two-three, one-two-three*, and the dancers found their feet in it. Beat was six the summer she was handed the little drum and told to hold the pulse for the corn-huskers.

She was terrified she would speed up. So she did the only thing she could think of: she stopped trying to *feel* clever about it and just counted. Out loud, under her breath, tapping her own knee to check herself. *One-two-three*. The huskers moved together, sacks filling in easy time, and afterward an old woman told her the work went faster when the beat didn't wobble. That was when Beat understood the pulse wasn't decoration underneath the important things. The pulse was the thing everything else stood on — and holding it steady was just careful counting, nothing more magical than that.



She walked to the academy at twenty-two with the drum still on her wrist. In the entrance hall, Latch — the academy's quiet founder — set a strip of paper in front of her, marked with a row of dots and gaps. "Tell me what happens next," he said.

Beat didn't answer straight off. She tapped the row into her drum first, giving each dot and each silence the same honest weight. Three dots, gap, three dots, gap, three dots. "It repeats in threes," she said. "So the next mark is a dot, then a gap." She tapped it once more to be sure. "I can't read a pattern by staring. My eyes skip ahead and lie to me. But my fingers won't skip. They hold every beat the same." Latch turned the paper over — the answer matched — and gestured her through the doors.



Now Beat had a chamber of her own, hung with half-solved patterns and a shelf of little practice-drums for anyone who wanted one. On a first day, a girl named Ivy hung back near the wall. "I got told once I couldn't carry a tune," she said. "So I'm bad at this stuff."

Beat handed her a drum. "This isn't music. Watch." She spread six colored cards face up. "Red, blue, red, blue, red — what's the sixth?" Ivy said blue before Beat finished asking. "See? You just did it. That's the whole trick — listen for what repeats." Beat swapped the cards for a trickier row. "Now tap each one as you look at it. Not fast. Give them all the same beat, because your eye wants to rush the boring middle bit and that's where the answer hides." Ivy tapped along, slower, and her mouth fell open. "Wait — that fourth one's a *light* blue, not blue. I almost missed it." "That's the recount catching you," Beat said. "The tapping makes you look at everything, not just the ends."

They tried a row of flashing lamps next. Ivy guessed the next flash, guessed wrong, and flinched. Beat only shrugged. "Wrong guess isn't a fail — it's news. It means your rule's close but not the real one. Look again." Ivy looked again, found a shorter pattern hiding inside the long one, and got it. "For the recipe puzzles," Beat added,

"you do the same thing sideways — write out every step, then find the ones that don't depend on anything else. Those go first. Always."



At the end of the day Ivy lingered, turning the little drum over in her hands. "But what if I never *hear* it? What if my head just isn't built for rhythm?"

Beat sat down beside her, tapping softly, *one-two-three*. "Then you count on your fingers, or on a table, or out loud in an empty room. The rhythm doesn't care where you keep it. It only cares that you keep it steady." She smiled. "I still count out loud when it's hard. Every single day."

Ivy nodded slowly and tapped, once, tentatively. Then again, matching Beat's pulse. And beneath her own fingers Beat felt the thing she loved most — that warm, settled steadiness, the quiet gladness of a heartbeat you were afraid you'd lost, found again in someone new.

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