



TruthQuest

Meet the Cast

ADVANCED EDITION

Spark & Anvil

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This advanced edition collects 5 chapter books from the TruthQuest 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.

Contents

CONTENTS

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Contents

Introduction

Claim

Weigh

Trace

Update

Wonder

About Spark & Anvil

Introduction

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

Each of the 5 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*

Claim



Two students at the Truth Tribune were locked in an argument that had no bottom to it. One kept saying the reading lamp in the study hall was the best lamp. The other kept firing back numbers — how many hours it lasted, how much it cost, how many were in the building. They were red-faced and going nowhere, and neither noticed the small cream-and-grey mockingbird who had landed on the shelf above them, listening with her head tilted.

Claim did not interrupt. She simply took a card from one of the many pockets in her worn investigator vest and turned it so they could see the single word on it:

OPINION. Then she took a second card. *CLAIM*.

"You," she said gently to the first student, "are saying you *like* it best. That's a matter of taste. And you," she nodded to the second, "are saying it *outlasts and outsells* the others. That can be checked." She set the two cards side by side on the shelf. "You've been arguing for ten minutes, and you never disagreed about the

same thing once. One of you was talking about a feeling. The other was talking about a fact. No wonder it wouldn't end."

The two students blinked at the cards, then at each other, and the fight went out of them all at once — replaced by something sheepish and relieved.



Claim had not always been able to see the categories so clearly. As a young bird, she had argued exactly the way those two students had, from inside the tangle, unable to tell one kind of statement from another.

She grew up in a family of mockingbirds — birds famous for holding dozens of different songs in a single throat. Her grandmother could name a hundred calls by ear and never once confuse the warning-cry for the courting-song, though to Claim, back then, they had all just sounded like *bird*.

"They are not the same," her grandmother would say, patient. "A warning is not a greeting. A greeting is not a boast. If you answer a warning as though it were a greeting, you will fly straight into the thing it was warning you about."

One evening Claim had wept over a quarrel with a friend that had spiraled until neither of them remembered what it was about. Her grandmother listened to the whole miserable account, then asked one question. "When your friend said she felt hurt — what did you say back?"

"I told her she was wrong," Claim admitted. "I told her there was no reason to feel that way."

Her grandmother had gone very still. "A feeling isn't a fact you can prove wrong, little one. It's news from inside someone. You don't argue with the weather report; you carry an umbrella." She'd tapped Claim's small chest with one feather. "You answered a feeling as though it were a claim. That is the oldest mistake there is. Learn to sort what you're hearing *before* you open your beak, and half your quarrels will simply never begin."

Claim had carried that sentence with her ever since, the way you carry a key.



She walked to the Truth Tribune when she was twelve, her vest already heavy with the first of her sorting-cards. Veritas, the old mentor who kept the place, met her at the tall doors and asked the question the Tribune always asked.

"What is claim-identification?"

Claim did not recite a definition. Instead she cocked her head, listening to the murmur of the hall behind Veritas — voices layered over voices, arguing and wondering and worrying all at once.

"It's what my grandmother taught the songbirds," she said. "Before you answer someone, you name what kind of thing they've actually said. A fact you can check. An opinion rests on what someone values. A feeling is news from inside them. A prediction can only be tested when its day arrives. A question is just an open door." She looked up, steady. "Most fights aren't about who's right. They're about two

people answering different kinds of statements as though they were the same kind. My work is to make people *sort first*. Then the right answer almost picks itself."

Veritas studied her for a long moment. Then the old mentor smiled. "You are appointed," she said.



Claim's corner of the Tribune filled, over the years, with people who arrived tangled.

A boy came in one grey afternoon and slumped onto the stool, worn out. He'd spent all lunch arguing with a classmate who insisted a certain snack was "the worst" — and he had marshaled facts, whole armies of them, about ingredients and sales and shelf-life, and none of it had landed. "I *proved* I was right," he said, baffled and tired. "I had the numbers. Why didn't it work?"

Claim laid five cards on the table between them, one at a time. *CLAIM. OPINION. FEELING. PREDICTION. QUESTION.*

"Tell me the exact words your classmate used," she said.

"She said it's the worst snack there is."

Claim slid the OPINION card forward. "'Worst' is a taste-word. It rests on what she values, not on anything the world can settle. It lives here." Then she touched the CLAIM card. "But every number you brought — ingredients, sales, shelf-life — those live over here. They can be checked." She let the two cards sit apart. "You spent your whole lunch bringing evidence to a place where evidence doesn't apply. It's like handing someone a ruler when they asked how the soup tastes. The ruler's a fine tool. It just can't measure that."

The boy stared at the gap between the two cards. "So I wasn't wrong. I was..."

"Answering the wrong category," Claim said, not unkindly. "The commonest mistake there is. Sort first — *what kind of thing did she actually say?* — and you'd have known right away that no fact could touch it. You'd have saved yourself an hour." She tapped the OPINION card. "Sometimes the real answer is: this one can't be won with proof. And knowing *that* is the win."

Something in the boy's shoulders came down. "Sort first," he repeated. "Tool second."

"Every time," said Claim.



The hall had emptied and gone quiet, the lamps low, when the boy came back with one last question, softer than the first.

"When I sort what someone says," he asked, "and I figure out it's a feeling, or an opinion — something I can't argue with — doesn't that mean I just... lose? That I have to give up?"

Claim thought about her grandmother, and the quarrel that had spiraled into nothing, and the umbrella you carry instead of arguing with the sky.

"No," she said. "It means you stop fighting the wrong fight and start doing the right thing. When it's a feeling, you listen. When it's an opinion, you get curious about what the person values. When it's a claim, *then* you bring your facts." She closed her card-set gently. "Sorting isn't about winning. It's about finally understanding each other instead of talking past each other for an hour."

The boy sat with that a while, and Claim watched the tight, frustrated line of his brow ease and go smooth. The knot he'd carried in from the schoolyard — the one that came from being right and getting nowhere — loosened without his noticing exactly when, and a slow, settled calm rose up in him instead, the plain relief of a

thing that had felt tangled all day quietly coming untangled. He let out a breath he seemed to have been holding since lunch, and for the first time since he'd walked in, his shoulders sat low and easy and his chest felt light.

"Sort first," he said again, but softly now, like something he got to keep.

Claim tucked her cards away and felt the small, familiar gladness of it — the quiet warmth of a spinning thing brought, gently, to rest.

Weigh



Weigh sat very still at the center of the Truth Tribune's reading-room, a pangolin no bigger than a schoolbag, his cream-and-bronze scales catching the lamplight. Balanced on the flat of his tail, he held a small brass scale in one hand — not the kind that decides who wins, but the kind that just leans, a little, toward whatever is heavier. In front of him a boy was almost shouting. Someone had spread a rumor about his friend, and four different animals had told him four different versions, and now he didn't know what was true. Weigh didn't tell him. Instead he set a card on the scale's left pan and watched the needle drift, unhurried, and said quietly, "Let's not decide yet. Let's *lean*."

The boy stared. "You're not going to tell me who's right?"

"I'm going to tell you how much to trust each one," Weigh said. "That's a different, better answer." He tapped the needle, which hovered somewhere between *true* and *false* without touching either. "You want a light switch — on, off, guilty, innocent. But most claims don't come with a switch. They come with a dial." He turned the scale so the boy could see it wasn't stuck at yes or no; it simply pointed, gently, at *how sure*.



Weigh had grown up on the wide savanna, where his family were the balance-keepers — pangolins who could stand motionless on their tails for an hour, teaching the young ones that stillness was a kind of thinking. But the lesson that made him who he was came the summer he got it badly wrong.

A cousin's beloved kite had gone missing, and Weigh, ten years old and certain, had announced who took it within a single breath: the loudest, easiest suspect. He'd been so sure. His whole small body had felt sure — jaw tight, shoulders squared. The next morning the kite turned up snagged in a thornbush, blown there by wind. No one had taken it at all. Weigh remembered the hot, sick drop in his stomach, the way his certainty had cost his cousin a whole day of being wrongly blamed.

His grandmother, oldest of the balance-keepers, found him curled by the water, miserable. She didn't scold. She set her own worn scale in his paws. "You skipped the leaning," she said. "You went straight to the verdict. A verdict is a door slamming. Leaning is a door held open." She pressed his claw to the little needle until it swayed. "Next time, before you decide *who*, decide *how sure* — and about *what*, exactly. The one who saw it may not know why. The one who knows why may not have seen it." She let the needle settle in the middle. "Stay here longer. The truth arrives to those who wait at the dial."



He walked to the Truth Tribune when he was twelve, because a place full of arguments was exactly where a leaner belonged. Veritas, the old mentor-pangolin whose eyes missed nothing, met him at the tall doors and asked the single question the Tribune always asked.

"What is credibility?"

Weigh could have recited a definition. Instead he lifted his grandmother's scale and let the needle wobble between the mentor's face and his own. "It's not deciding who's honest and who's a liar," he said. "It's asking, for *this exact claim*, who's in a position to know — and how much they'd gain if you believed them. Then you lean, and you keep leaning as you learn more. You never slam the door." He set the scale down, still swaying. "Calibration. Not verdict."

Veritas watched the needle a long moment. Then, slowly, he smiled. "You are appointed," he said. "This whole building is full of clever animals who reach the door and slam it. You're the one who'll teach them to stand at the dial a little longer."



Years later, a girl came to Weigh's reading-room in a fury. A prize ribbon had vanished from the garden fair, and she was ready to name the thief on the spot. "It's obvious," she said. "Everyone says so."

"Then this will be quick," Weigh said mildly, and laid out four cards. "But let's lean first. Card one: the fairground keeper. She was there all day, walking every row." He nudged a weight onto the pan. "For *what she saw with her own eyes*, her position-to-know is high — she was present, she's careful, and last month she spotted a lost brooch nobody else noticed." The needle rose. "But watch this. For *what any of it meant* — motives, secrets — she knows no more than you do. High for seeing. Ordinary for guessing."

He set down card two. "The prize-giver himself. He knows plants better than anyone at the fair. But was he near the ribbon table? No — he was judging the far tent." Weigh eased the weight lower. "An expert, yes. But an expert *out of his field* is just another guesser. Medium." He looked up. "Being smart about one thing doesn't stretch to cover everything."

Card three he tapped without adding weight at all. "An anonymous note, slipped under the gate: *I saw who did it*. No name. No way to check. No one else backing it up." The needle barely twitched. "This is where people fall off both sides. Believe it because it's exciting — that's trusting everything. Toss it because it's anonymous — that's trusting nothing. Both throw away information. We just... let it sit low, and wait for something to corroborate it."

Card four he held longest. "And the fairground's rival, who's been telling everyone your suspect is guilty. His position-to-know? No better than the crowd. But his *stake* —" the weight sank the needle right down — "he *wins* if your suspect looks bad. When someone gains from the story they're selling, you don't call them a liar. You just lean carefully, and you go looking for a second source." He gestured at the four cards, the scale swaying between them. "Same event. Four sources. Four different amounts of trust — and none of them a verdict. See how the keeper's *seeing* outweighs the rival's *wanting*?"

The girl looked at the trembling needle for a long time. "So I don't get to just... know," she said slowly.

"You get something better than a guess dressed up as knowing," Weigh said. "You get to be *honestly unsure* — and to say exactly why, and by how much."



That evening, after the room had emptied and the lamps had burned low, the girl came back. She'd found the ribbon herself — dropped behind the table, no thief at all, just a gust and a gap. She sat down across from Weigh, quieter now.

"I was so ready to name someone," she said. "This afternoon. My whole chest was tight with being right." She pressed a paw flat over her own breastbone, remembering it. "And I'd have been wrong. And it wasn't even a person's fault. It was the wind."

Weigh thought of the kite in the thornbush, all those years ago, and the hot drop in his own stomach. "I know that tightness," he said. "It feels like certainty. It's usually just speed."

The girl breathed out, and Weigh watched the thing he loved most: the slow loosening. Her shoulders came down from around her ears. The clenched, hurry-up feeling behind her ribs went soft and open, like a held breath finally let go, and in its place settled something calmer and steadier — the quiet, unhurried ease of a

needle that no longer had to slam anywhere, that could just lean, and wait, and be gently, honestly unsure. She smiled, a little tired, a little glad. It felt, she thought, like setting down something heavy she hadn't known she was gripping.

"Better," she said.

"Better," Weigh agreed, and let his own scale rest level at last. And sitting there in the low lamplight, watching her breathe easy, he felt it too — a warm, quiet gladness spreading through his chest, his own shoulders unclenching, the steady calm of someone who had helped another person set down a heavy, hurrying certainty and feel, for once, gently light.

Trace



At the far end of the Truth Tribune newsroom, where the good afternoon light came slanting through the tall windows, a girl who looked a great deal like a bloodhound sat very still with four glowing tabs open in front of her. Her tan ears were long and soft and slightly drooped, and her nose — she couldn't help it — pointed downward, as if the truth were something you smelled out along the ground rather than saw from above. She was small, and her vest had too many pockets, and every pocket held a card.

She did not tap the screen quickly the way the other students did. Trace moved one careful step at a time, because the whole point of what she did was refusing to skip a step. On the table lay her stack of laminated cards, each one worn soft at the corners. The top card asked, in her own small handwriting: *Where did I hear this?* Beneath it: *Where did they hear it?* And beneath that, underlined twice: *Where did this actually begin?*

"A claim is like a footprint," she murmured to no one, because she often talked herself through it. "Anybody can find a footprint. The craft is walking the trail back to the foot."



Trace had not been born patient. She had grown up in a river-village threaded with narrow forest paths, in a family of long-trail-followers — not of deer, exactly, but of stories: who said what, and where the saying had truly started, and how much it had swollen along the way. Her grandmother could take a rumor that had the whole village frightened and, by suppertime, walk it back to one nervous cousin who had misheard one word.

The lesson that stuck with Trace came the summer she was nine, when she carried home a terrible piece of news and announced it at the door, breathless and certain. Something dreadful was going to happen; everyone was saying so. Her grandmother had only asked, gently, "Who is *everyone*, and where did *everyone* hear it?"

Trace had opened her mouth and found nothing there. She had no idea. The news had arrived in her already grown, already frightening, and she had passed it along without ever once asking where it came from. She remembered the strange hollow that opened in her chest then — the discovery that she had been carrying something heavy and had never checked whether it was even real.

"That feeling," her grandmother said, "is the most useful feeling a trail-follower has. It means you've reached the edge of what you actually know. Everything past that edge, you have to *walk*." She had pressed the first card into Trace's hand. "Start here. Where did *you* hear it? Then don't stop until the trail either ends at the beginning — or ends at nothing, which tells you just as much."



Trace walked to the Truth Tribune when she was twelve, because a newsroom is a place where claims arrive by the hundred every hour, and most of them arrive already grown, already frightening, with their beginnings scrubbed off.

Veritas, the mentor there, met her at the door and asked the single question she asked everyone. "What is traceback?"

Trace did not give a definition. She held up her stack of cards instead. "Where does this claim start?" she said. "You open the tabs — the post, the screenshot, the article, and one kept empty for wherever the trail actually ends. Then you follow it back, link by link, until you reach the first person who really knew, or until you reach nobody at all." She tapped the underlined card. "And if the trail runs out before the beginning — that's not a failure. That's the answer. A claim you can't trace is a claim you trust less."

Veritas looked at her for a long moment. Then she nodded. "You are appointed."



Trace's corner of the newsroom drew the students who moved too fast. Leo was the fastest of them. He came skidding in one afternoon, phone out, already halfway to outraged.

"The whole school's saying it," he announced. "They're getting rid of all the art supplies — replacing everything with recycled junk. New rule, starts next week. It's everywhere."

Trace didn't flinch. She pulled a card. "Where did *you* hear it?"

"My cousin. Whose friend's mom works at the school."

"So you're already four people from the beginning, and you haven't taken one step yet." She opened her four tabs, unhurried. "Let's walk it."

The first tab was the viral post, loud and certain. The second was a screenshot of a text, quoting a supposed meeting. The third was a blurry photo of supplies in a bin. She reversed the photo through an image search, and her ears lifted a little. "This picture is from another town, five years ago. A spring-cleaning day. It never had anything to do with here." She set it aside. "A story picks up loose pictures the way a boot picks up mud."

Leo leaned in, some of his certainty cooling. "So it's fake?"

"Not yet — I don't know yet. That's the difference." She followed the screenshot's one real thread: it mentioned a student-council proposal. On the school's own site she found the minutes, months old, carefully archived, and read the line aloud.

"*Discussion of sustainable art options, including upcycling materials from discarded projects.*" She looked up. "There's your beginning. Not 'replace everything with trash.' A conversation about reusing old project scraps to waste less."

"That's..." Leo blinked. "That's not scary at all."

"No. But notice what happened on the way from there to you." Trace laid the cards in a row. "Each person who repeated it dropped a little truth and added a little fear. *Upcycling* became *trash*. *A discussion* became *a new rule next week*. The story got louder as it got further from the source — that's what stories do when nobody walks them back. And the loud version is the one that arrives at your door."



Later, when the newsroom had emptied and the light had gone gold, Leo lingered by her table, quieter now, turning his phone over in his hands.

"Doesn't it get exhausting?" he asked. "Everything on here comes at you all at once, already huge. Checking every single thing — where do you even find the patience?"

Trace considered the four tabs, still glowing softly. "It's not really patience," she said. "It's that I remember the hollow feeling — the one you get when you realize you've been carrying something scary that you never checked. I hated that feeling as a kid. Walking the trail back is how I get rid of it." She closed the tabs one by one. "The scary version showed up in a second. The true version took me twenty minutes. But look at what those twenty minutes did."

Leo looked. And he noticed it in himself before he could name it — the tight, braced feeling he'd walked in with, the one that had made him want to be angry on everyone's behalf, had quietly gone slack. His shoulders had come down. The thing that had seemed like a wall coming for the whole school had turned, under her steady nose-down attention, into a small and reasonable idea about reusing

cardboard. He let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding, and something behind his ribs unclenched and went warm and easy.

"It's lighter now," he said, surprised. "Knowing the whole of it. It's actually lighter than not knowing."

Trace almost smiled. She rested her hand flat on her stack of worn cards, the way you'd rest a hand on something trusted. "That's the part nobody tells you," she said softly. "People think tracing things back is more work, more worry. But the fear was in the *not knowing* — in the loud middle of the story. The beginning is almost always calmer than the noise. Walking back to it doesn't add weight." She glanced at him, warm and certain. "It sets a weight down."

Update



On the shelf above Update's writing bench sat a jar of cards, and Update was in the middle of doing the thing they did best: being wrong on purpose, out loud, where everyone could see.

They were a careful otter, small and cream-furred, and they had just told a whole roomful of students that the river froze from the bottom up. A boy near the front had corrected them — ice floats, so rivers freeze from the *top*. Instead of flinching, Update reached for a fresh card. On one half they wrote their old guess. On the other, the new one. In the narrow strip between, they wrote a single line: *ice floats — his correction*.

"There," Update said, holding it up like a small trophy. "That's the whole trick. Watch what I *didn't* do. I didn't hide the old card. I didn't argue to save my pride." They slid the card into the jar with a soft click. "I just moved. Being wrong is how knowledge moves. You only have to keep both guesses as data."



Update had not always found it that easy. There had been a version of them, years back, who would have gone red to the ears and dug in.

They grew up along the slow river shores, in a family the other otters called the long-revisers. It was a proud name, but Update hadn't understood it as a child. Once, they'd insisted for a whole week that a certain bend in the river was the deepest spot for fishing. They'd staked their reputation on it, told every cousin. When the catch came up empty day after day and an aunt gently pointed to the real deep pool downstream, Update had felt something awful — not the being-wrong itself, but the *seen*-ness of it. The wanting to disappear.

Their grandmother, oldest of the long-revisers, found them sulking in the reeds.

"You're not upset that you were wrong," she said, settling beside them. "You're upset that everyone watched you be wrong. Those are different aches. Only one of them is worth carrying."

Update said nothing.

"Here is the family secret," she went on. "The otter that updates eats. The otter that defends an empty pool goes hungry — and stays hungry, because it can't bear to admit the fish aren't there." She pressed a blank card into their paw. "Write down the empty bend. Write down the deep pool. Write down *why* you changed. Now you'll never fish the wrong bend again — and neither will anyone who reads it."

Update wrote it slowly, hating every letter. But when they finished, the hot, watched feeling had drained away, and in its place was something oddly steady. The mistake had a home now. It was safe. It could not sneak up on them again.



They walked to the Truth Tribune when they were twelve, cards already jangling in their vest pockets.

Veritas, the mentor there, was a still old creature who asked every newcomer exactly one question. She looked Update over — the crammed pockets, the little scroll-tracker clipped to the lapel — and asked, "What is belief-revision?"

Update did not recite a definition. They took out a worn card and turned it so Veritas could read both sides. "This is a guess I got wrong when I was small," they said. "The empty fishing bend. I kept it. Not to feel bad about — to remember by." They tucked it away. "Belief-revision is holding your old guess and your new guess side by side, with the reason in between, and never being ashamed of the gap. It's how you stop being stuck."

Veritas was quiet for a long moment. Then she nodded once. "You are appointed. This whole place is full of clever thinkers who would rather be right than get right." She almost smiled. "You're the one who'll teach them the difference."



Update's corner of the Tribune filled, over the seasons, with students who arrived stiff and defensive, sure that being corrected was the same as being defeated.

A girl came in one afternoon with her arms crossed. She'd argued in front of her whole class that a made-up river-creature — some rumor everyone had passed around — was real, and then a visiting scholar had shown, plainly, that it wasn't. "Everyone saw," she said. "I can't take it back now. I'd look like a fool."

Update knew that exact fear. They'd felt it in the reeds.

"Tell me what you believed," they said, sliding a card across the bench.

"That the creature was real."

"Good. Write it. Old guess." The girl hesitated, then wrote. "Now — what did the scholar show you?"

"That the tracks were faked. Someone made them with a stick."

"Write that. Reason." Update tapped the middle strip. "And now the new guess."

The girl wrote it, slowly: *the creature isn't real*.

"There." Update set the finished card in the jar. "Look at what just happened. You didn't lose the argument. You *upgraded* your map of the world. The girl who walked in here believed a stick was a monster. The girl leaving knows the difference." They held her gaze. "Saying 'I used to think this, now I think that, because of this' — that isn't the sound of a fool. That's the only sound smart people ever make. The fool is the one who keeps defending the stick."

The girl looked at her own card for a while. "But everyone already heard me say it was real."

"Then you get to be the one who said, out loud, *I checked, and I was wrong*."

Update's voice went gentle. "Do you know how rare that is? Most people would rather sink with the empty bend. You'd be surprised how much people trust the person brave enough to say it."



Later, when the Tribune had emptied and the light off the river had gone gold, the girl lingered at the door with a smaller, quieter question.

"When you change your mind in front of people," she said, "does it ever stop feeling like that? Like your face is on fire?"

Update thought about the reeds, and the empty bend, and their grandmother's blank card.

"It gets quieter," they said honestly. "Not because I stopped caring about being seen. Because I stopped believing that being seen wrong was the shameful part." They opened the jar and let the girl look at the years of cards stacked inside — hundreds of old guesses, each one crossed by a new one. "Every card in here is a time I was wrong on purpose, in the open. And none of them ended me. They're just the trail of how I got less wrong." They closed the lid softly. "Carry both guesses. Keep the reason. That's the whole courage of it."

The girl breathed out, and Update watched the fire go out of her face. Her crossed arms came loose and fell to her sides, and something behind her ribs — the tight, cornered, *everyone-saw* knot she'd carried in the door — went slack and warm. She wasn't the girl who'd defended the stick anymore, and to her own surprise, it didn't feel like losing. It felt like setting down a rock she'd been gripping so long she'd forgotten it was heavy. She picked up a blank card from the bench, turned it over once in her paw, and smiled, quiet and unafraid.

Wonder



In the corner of the Truth Tribune where the light came in slantwise, a small fennec fox sat at a low desk, holding a single card up to a lamp. Her ears were enormous — bigger than her whole face — and they kept swiveling, catching sounds the way a dish catches rain.

The card said, in her own careful print: **I DON'T KNOW YET.**

A cluster of younger foxes had come to her with a problem. Someone had told them, very confidently, that the old well behind the market had gone bad and would make anyone who drank from it sick. Half the group believed it completely and were ready to warn the whole village. The other half rolled their eyes and said the warning was nonsense, obviously somebody just wanted the well shut down.

Wonder listened to both sides with her ears turned all the way toward them. Then she set the card down flat on the desk, exactly between the two groups.

"Right now," she said, "the honest answer is this one." She tapped the card. "*I don't know yet.* We haven't tested the water. We haven't asked who checked it. Believing it's poison, and being sure it's a lie — those are the same mistake wearing different coats. Both of them skip the part where you find out."



Wonder had not always lived in the middle like that. When she was small, she had been sure about everything, and it had cost her.

Her family were fennec foxes of the desert edge — the long-listeners, her grandmother called them, because their huge ears could catch a beetle's step from across a dune. They had a saying, worn smooth from repeating: *The ear that listens longer hears more. The one who claims to know too soon hears less.*

Young Wonder had not been a good listener. She had been a fast decider. One dry season, a traveling fox passed through with a story — the far spring had dried up forever, he said, and the whole family should pack and move south before it was too late. Wonder believed him instantly. It felt so *certain*, so urgent, that doubting it seemed foolish.

She talked her cousins into believing it too. They spent two exhausting days preparing to leave a home that was perfectly fine. When her grandmother finally walked out to the far spring and came back with her fur damp, Wonder understood. The spring had never dried. The traveler had simply sounded sure — and sounding sure had been enough to move her.

That night her grandmother sat beside her under the cold stars. "You didn't get tricked because you're foolish," she said gently. "You got tricked because certainty feels good, and you grabbed it before the facts caught up." She pressed a blank card into Wonder's paw. "Next time something big and certain arrives, write *this* on it first. Not because you're weak. Because you're honest."

Wonder looked at the empty card for a long time. Then she wrote the three words that would follow her the rest of her life.



She walked to the Truth Tribune when she was twelve, because a place that decided what was true was exactly the place that most needed someone comfortable saying she didn't know.

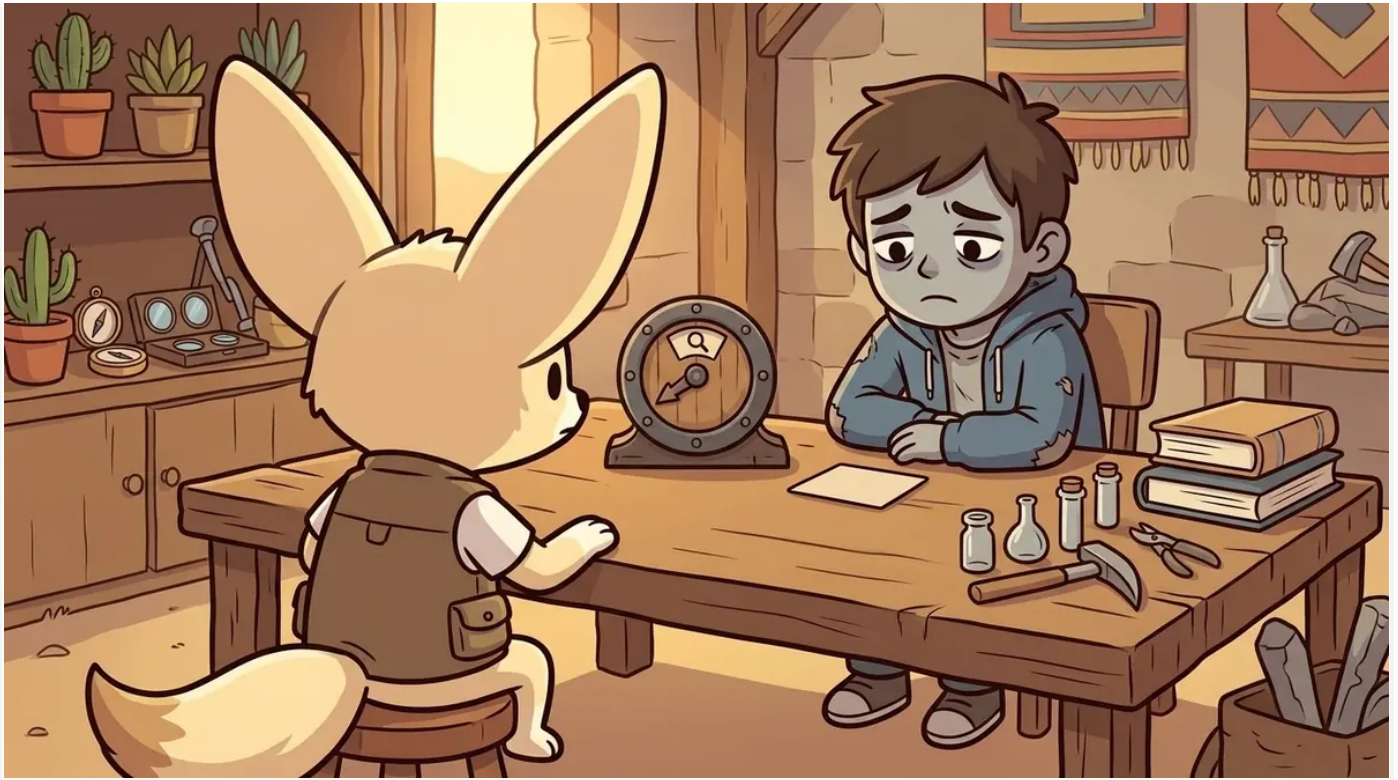
Veritas met her at the door — a tall, still figure whose eyes held the patience of many seasons. She asked one question, the way the elders here always did.

"What is honest knowing?"

Wonder didn't rush to sound impressive. She reached into her vest, pulled out a well-worn card, and held it up.

"It starts here," she said. "*I don't know yet.*" She turned the card so Veritas could read it. "Not as a shrug. As a beginning. From here you look for evidence, and you trust things exactly as much as the evidence lets you — a lot when it's strong, a little when it's thin, and you change your mind the moment better evidence shows up." She lowered the card. "The two easy ways are the traps. Believing everything, or believing nothing. This is the middle path."

Veritas was quiet a moment. Then, rarely, she smiled. "You are chosen, Wonder," she said. "You will stand at the last gate — the one that turns away the loudest, most certain stories. You will teach the village how to stay curious instead of scared."



Wonder's little office filled, over the years, with foxes carrying claims that had frightened or confused them.

One afternoon a young badger dropped onto her stool, tense and unhappy.

"Everyone at the market is saying the new baker cheats his scales," he said. "And when I asked how they knew, one of them told me, 'Of course they hide it — that's how you can tell it's true.' So it must be real, right? Why would they hide it otherwise?"

Wonder's ears tipped forward. She pulled out a card printed with a small, sliding dial. "Here's the tricky part," she said. "Notice what that person did. They said the *lack* of proof was the proof. 'You can't see it because they're hiding it.' That's a story that can never be wrong — and a story that can never be wrong is one you can never check." She set the dial-card between them. "So where should your trust sit right now?"

The badger frowned. "I... don't actually know if he cheats. Nobody's weighed anything twice."

"Good. That's not weakness, that's the truth." She nudged the dial low. "Low trust, because there's no evidence yet — not zero, not full. And here's the honest move: what would you need to *see* to move that dial up? Or down?"

He thought. "I could bring my own thing to weigh. Check it against another scale."

"Then you're not scared anymore," Wonder said. "You're curious. Fear says *decide now*. Curiosity says *find out*." Her voice stayed soft but sure. "You don't have to believe the loudest fox in the market. You don't have to call him a liar either. You just have to keep the dial honest until the evidence tells you where it goes."



Later, when the office had emptied and the slanted light had turned to amber, the badger came back with one quieter question.

"When everybody else sounds so *sure*," he said, "and I'm the only one saying 'I don't know yet' — it makes me feel small. Like I'm the one who's behind." He shifted. "How do you stand it?"

Wonder thought about the far spring that never dried, and the two wasted days, and the cold stars, and the first card she ever wrote.

"It felt small to me too, once," she said. "Being unsure while everyone else marched off certain — it can feel like you're the slow one." She turned to the badger, ears steady. "But think about which of us got fooled. Sure isn't the same as right. The one who says 'I don't know yet' is the one still holding the door open for the truth to walk in." She smiled a little. "You're not behind. You're the only one who hasn't slammed the door."

The badger let out a breath he'd been holding all afternoon. The tight, jumpy feeling that had made him want to pick a side and shout it — the one that had sat high and hard behind his ribs — went soft and loose without his noticing when. His shoulders came down from around his ears. Not-knowing didn't feel like being small anymore; it felt like room, like standing in an open doorway with the evening air coming in, calm and unhurried and entirely his own. A quiet, steady gladness settled in his chest, warm and certain in a way that being certain never had been.

"'I don't know yet,'" he said slowly, trying the words on, "is the start of knowing."

Wonder tucked her card back into her vest and let her ears rest, at last, still.

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