



WonderForge

Meet the Cast

ADVANCED EDITION

Spark & Anvil

Copyright & License

© 2026 Spark & Anvil (501(c)(3) public charity). Chapter text and illustrations licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. App software © Spark & Anvil — all rights reserved. Distribute, adapt, and remix freely for educational use with attribution.

This advanced edition collects 5 chapter books from the WonderForge 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.

Spark & Anvil is a 501(c)(3) public charity. All apps free forever; no ads; no tracking; no in-app purchases.

spark-and-anvil.com

For everyone who learns by reading between the lines.

Contents

CONTENTS

Copyright & License

Contents

Introduction

Gasp

Mull

Spy

Crack

Encore

About Spark & Anvil

Introduction

The WonderForge 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*

Gasp



The magnet floated.

Gasp had suspended two ceramic disks on a wooden dowel, and the top one hovered a full finger's width above the bottom, held up by nothing a person could see. A small crowd of younger students had drifted over to the corner of Marvel's lab to watch, and Gasp — a careful-meerkat-tween, small and quick, warm-citrus-orange hair standing half on end — waited for the sound they were listening for. It came. A short, sharp intake of breath from a boy at the front. A gasp.

Gasp spun toward it like a compass needle finding north. "There," they said, delighted. "You heard yourself do that?"

The boy looked embarrassed. "I just — I thought the top one would fall."

"Exactly. You thought it would fall. Then it didn't." Gasp pulled a small card from their vest pocket — one of a thick stack, each printed with two blank lines — and pressed it into his hand. "That noise you made isn't nothing. It's your brain filing a complaint. Something you were sure of just came apart, and the gasp is the receipt." They tapped the card. "Top line: what you expected. Bottom line: what actually happened. Write down the gap while it's still fresh, before you talk yourself out of being surprised."

The boy bent over the card, and Gasp watched the pencil move with the satisfaction of someone who has just caught the exact instant a mind cracked open.



Gasp had not always trusted that sound. Years earlier, small and newer to the academy, they had sat in a lecture where an older student poured salt into a full glass of water — and the water level did not rise. Gasp had gasped, loud, in a quiet room. Heads turned. Someone laughed.

They had spent the rest of that afternoon pretending they hadn't been surprised, which felt, they later decided, like the stupidest afternoon of their life. Because that evening a tired old mentor named Marvel had found Gasp scrubbing beakers and asked, mildly, "Why the long face?"

"I gasped," Gasp had muttered. "In front of everyone. Over salt."

Marvel had set down their cloth. "You noticed the water didn't rise," they said. "Do you know how many people in that room noticed? Two. You, and the student running it. The rest were looking at their shoes." Marvel leaned closer. "The gasp isn't the embarrassing part. The gasp means you were paying enough attention to catch the world breaking its own rule. Most people miss it entirely."

Gasp had turned that over for a long time. Surprise wasn't a failure of understanding — it was the alarm that told you understanding was *possible*, right here, right now. The people who never gasped weren't calmer or cleverer. They just weren't looking hard enough to be caught out. That night Gasp made their first expectation-card, and never went to a demonstration without a fresh stack again.



When Gasp asked to join Marvel's lab for good, they did not make a speech. They simply walked in during a lesson on air pressure that had gone flat — the students bored, the demo tired — and set a hard-boiled egg on the neck of a glass bottle. Then they dropped a lit match inside and let the egg get sucked, with a wet *thwup*, down into the bottle.

The room came alive. Every head snapped up. Three separate gasps.

Gasp turned to Marvel, already handing cards down the row. "Hear that?" they said. "That's the sound of a room that stopped being bored. I can't make anyone curious. But I can catch the exact moment they *want* to be, and hand them a pencil before it fades."

Marvel folded their arms, considering the sudden, buzzing attention in a room that had been half-asleep a minute before. "Stay," they said. "You're better at the doorway than I am."



The workshop Gasp ran after that became the loudest, gasp-filled corner of the academy. On the afternoon everyone still talks about, Marvel set an index card over a paper cup filled to the brim with water, and inverted it. A collective breath caught. The card clung; the water hung, impossibly, upside down.

Gasp let the surprise ring for a second before speaking. "That sound you just made — hold onto it. Right now your brain expected one thing." They uncapped a pencil and drew a line in the air. "Say it out loud. What did you think would happen?"

"The water falls out," a girl said. "It always falls out."

"Good. That was your rule. Write it on the top line." Gasp waited for the pencils, then pointed at the dripless cup. "Now the bottom line — what actually happened?"

"The card... held it. The water stayed in."

"So those two things don't agree." Gasp grinned. "Your old rule says fall. The world says stay. That disagreement — that little gap between the line you wrote first and the line you wrote second — *that's* the thing worth keeping. Not the answer yet. The gap." They looked around the buzzing table. "Mull's already frowning about *why*. Spy's watching Marvel's hands to figure out *how*. Both of them started in the same place you did — a caught breath and two lines on a card."

A boy near the back frowned. "But what if I don't know the answer?"

"You don't have to. Not yet." Gasp crouched to his level. "My whole job is the first ten seconds — the catch. The rest of the cast handles the rest. I just refuse to let a good gasp go to waste."



Later, when the tables had cleared, the embarrassed boy from the magnet demo lingered. He turned his expectation-card over in his hands.

"Can I ask something?" he said. "That first day. When I gasped and everyone looked. I felt so dumb."

Gasp sat down beside him. "I know that feeling. Salt and a glass of water. I still remember it." They tapped the boy's card gently. "Here's what took me too long to learn: being surprised isn't the same as being wrong. It means you were awake. It means you were paying such close attention that you caught the world doing something it doesn't usually let you see." They smiled, small and sure. "The gasp is the door. You don't have to know what's on the other side to be allowed to walk through it."

The boy looked at his two lines — *water falls* on top, *card held it* below — and, very quietly, he smiled too. It was the particular warmth of discovering that the thing you'd been ashamed of had been, all along, the smartest thing in the room.

Mull



Mull filled a glass with water at the front of the WonderForge lab, laid a stiff card flat across the top, and — very slowly, so everyone could see it coming — turned the whole thing upside down.

The water stayed. It hung there against the card as if gravity had simply forgotten about it.

The room made the sound rooms make. Somebody gasped. Somebody else already had a hand up. A boy near the window was halfway out of his seat, mouth open, a guess practically falling out of him.

Mull raised one hand, palm out, without hurry. Mull was a small, careful sloth-tween in a soft lab-vest, cream stripes running over dusty-lavender fur, and everything about them moved as if the clock had agreed to be patient too.

"Quiet," Mull said gently. "Thirty seconds. Everybody just sit with it."

"But I *know* —" the boy started.

"I believe you," said Mull. "Sit anyway. The first guess is loud. We want the second one."

And the room, grumbling, went still.



Mull had learned the value of that silence the hard way, back before they ever stood at the front of any lab.

As a very young sloth, Mull had been the fastest guesser in their whole village school. A teacher would show something strange, and Mull's hand would be up before the strange thing had finished happening. It felt wonderful — that snap of *I know, I know, pick me*. Being first felt like being smart.

But the guesses were wrong. Not sometimes. Almost always. Mull would fling out an answer, feel proud for one bright second, and then watch it crumble the moment anyone actually looked closely. It happened so often that being-first started to feel less like being smart and more like tripping in public over and over.

An old lab-keeper in the village noticed. One afternoon, after Mull had blurted a wrong guess about why a spinning top wobbled, the keeper didn't correct them. She just set the top spinning again and said, "Watch it. Don't answer. Watch it until you're almost bored."

Mull had squirmed. Watching without answering was agony; the itch to speak sat right in the throat. But they held on — ten seconds, twenty, thirty — and somewhere in that stretched quiet the top's wobble stopped being a mystery to *win* and became a thing to actually *notice*. A slower, truer guess arrived on its own. And it was right.

That was the day Mull stopped chasing fast and started trusting quiet.



Word of a sloth who taught by *waiting* eventually reached WonderForge, and they sent for Mull.

The head of the lab — a brisk, bright otter named Marvel who liked to get straight to the point — met Mull at the door with the question WonderForge always asked its cast. "So. What do you teach here?"

Most visitors answered fast. Mull didn't.

Mull looked around the busy lab, at all the eager hands and half-formed guesses flying, and then said, "May I show you instead?" They filled a glass, laid a card across it, and flipped it. The water held.

Marvel's mouth opened at once. "Oh — that's atmospheric —"

Mull lifted a hand. Marvel, startled, stopped.

"Thirty seconds," Mull said kindly. "Even for you."

Marvel waited. It was clearly uncomfortable for someone who lived at top speed. But when the thirty seconds ended, the guess that came out was slower, more careful, hedged with a maybe. "I *think* the air outside is pushing up on the card. Harder than the water pushes down. But I'd want to check."

"That," said Mull, "is what I teach. Not the answer. The waiting that makes the answer worth having."

Marvel studied the small sloth for a long moment, then stepped aside from the doorway. "You belong here," she said. "This whole lab is brilliant and it never once stops to *think*. You're the pause we've been missing."



Mull's corner of the lab became the place where surprises went to be sat with.

One afternoon Spy — a sharp, restless kid who wanted to investigate everything *immediately* — came to Mull with the inverted-cup trick still fresh in mind, jittering with impatience.

"I already know it's air pressure," Spy said. "Can we just skip to testing it?"

"Tell me your guess first," said Mull.

"Air pressure. Done."

Mull tilted their head. "That's a label, not a guess. *Which* air? Pushing which way? On what?" They set the cup and card down between them. "Sit with it. Thirty seconds. Say what you actually *think* is happening, in plain words, like you're explaining it to someone younger than you."

Spy huffed, but sat. The lab went quiet around them.

When the time was up, Spy spoke differently — slower, in their own words. "Okay. There's air all around the cup. Outside, it's pushing *up* on the bottom of the card. Inside, the water's heavy and pulls down, but... maybe the air outside is stronger than the water's weight? So the card doesn't fall." A pause. "*That's* what I'd test."

"Now you have a real guess," Mull said warmly. "Not borrowed words. Yours. You could be wrong — and that's fine, that's what testing is for. But you got there by looking, not by grabbing the loudest label first."

Spy blinked, and something in their restless energy settled. "Huh. It's a better guess than what I walked in with."

"The waiting made it better," said Mull. "It always does."



Later, when the lab had emptied and the benches were quiet, Spy lingered by Mull's corner.

"It's hard," Spy admitted. "The waiting. There's this — this itch. Right here." They pressed a hand flat to their own chest. "Like if I don't say the answer *right now* I'll burst."

Mull nodded slowly. They knew that itch better than anyone; they'd lived inside it for years by the village top.

"I know exactly where that lives," Mull said. "I used to feel it every single day. I thought it meant I was clever — that the fastest answer was the best one." They looked at the darkening lab. "It just meant I was scared of the quiet. Once I let the quiet be there instead of racing it, the itch didn't vanish, but it stopped bossing me around."

Spy was still for a moment. Then, experimentally, they took a slow breath and just — waited. Sat in the empty, unhurried lab and let the quiet be quiet.

The itch in their chest was still there. But it was smaller now, softer, like a held breath finally let go. Their shoulders, which had been up near their ears all afternoon, came down. And in the space where the frantic *I-have-to-answer* used to be, there was something calmer settling in — a slow, easy patience, warm and steady, the feeling of no longer needing to run.

"Better," Spy said quietly, surprised.

Mull smiled, and said nothing at all, and let the good quiet stay.

Spy



At the edge of the WonderForge courtyard, where the older kids had already wandered off bored, one small figure was still crouched over a puddle, watching a leaf spin.

Spy did not look like much — a slight, slate-blue kid in a scuffed lab vest, hunched like a careful mongoose over something no one else had bothered to look at twice. The leaf turned slowly in the water, then faster, then stopped, then turned the other way. Anyone else would have called it wind. Spy did not call it anything yet. Spy was watching *why*.

A hand tugged the vest. "It's just a leaf," said a younger kid.

"Everything's just something," Spy said, not looking up. "Until you find the thing making it move." They pointed, without touching, at a thin dark line snaking across the puddle. "See that? Warm water from the sun-side, cold from the shade. The leaf isn't spinning for no reason. Something hidden is pushing it." Spy finally

glanced up, eyes bright. "There's always a something. That's the fun part. That's the whole game."



Spy had not always trusted that there was a something.

When Spy was little, the world had been full of tricks that grown-ups waved off. A coin vanished behind an uncle's hand. A candle went out under a glass and no one could say why. And every time Spy asked *how*, the answer was the same tired shrug: *magic*, or *that's just how it is*, or worst of all, *you'll understand when you're older*.

Spy hated that last one most. It felt like a door being shut in a warm house they weren't allowed into.

Then one rainy afternoon, an old teacher named Professor Chronos had caught Spy staring, furious, at a cup of water that stubbornly refused to drain from a bottle no matter how Spy shook it. Chronos hadn't laughed. He'd knelt down, spectacles sliding, and asked one question. "What are all the things it could be?"

Spy blinked. No adult had ever asked that.

"The bottle. The water. The air. My hands," Spy said slowly.

"Now change *one*," Chronos said. "Only one. And watch."

Spy tilted the bottle so a bubble of air could climb up the neck — and the water gushed out at once. The whole rainy afternoon rearranged itself in Spy's chest. It wasn't magic. It was *air*, all along, and Spy had found it by changing one thing and leaving the rest alone. The shut door had swung wide open, and it turned out anyone could walk through it. You just had to go slowly.



Spy came to WonderForge on the day the letter arrived — a plain card that said only, *We heard you refuse to say "magic." Come teach the others how you find the how instead.*

At the gate, Professor Chronos was waiting, older now, the same spectacles. He didn't ask for a résumé. He held up a lit match and let it burn down toward his fingers, then dropped it, unharmed, and asked, "How didn't that burn me?"

Most newcomers guessed. Spy didn't. Spy studied Chronos's hand, the angle of the match, the little puff of breath he'd let out. "You blew, quietly, right at the end," Spy said. "You changed one thing — the air moving past the flame — and cooled it just enough. Everyone was watching your face. Nobody watched your breath."

Chronos smiled and pocketed the burnt match. "That's it exactly. You don't watch the trick. You watch the *variable* everyone else ignores." He opened the gate wide. "Half the world calls that suspicion. Here we call it the whole point. You belong inside."



Spy's corner of WonderForge filled quickly, because Spy's corner was where the impossible things happened.

One morning Professor Chronos set a glass of water on the bench, laid a playing card flat across the top, and flipped the whole thing upside down. The water stayed. The card clung to the rim as if glued. The kids gasped.

"The air's doing something," Mull said at once. "It has to be."

"Good," Spy said, pulling out a small blank how-card. "But 'doing something' is where most people stop. Let's not stop." They wrote as they spoke. "Things we can see: the card, the water, the cup, the air outside, the room's warmth, and how fast Chronos flipped it. Now — how do we test the air idea without just believing it?"

Crack leaned in. "Use a thicker card?"

"That tests the card. Save it." Spy tapped the how-card. "Mull said *air*. So — what's the one thing that would break if air were really holding the water up?" Spy looked from the cup to the card and back. "The seal. If the card seals the edge, air can't sneak in from below. So let's break the seal — change one thing — and watch."

Marvel produced a thumbtack. Spy pressed a tiny hole through the center of the card, refilled the cup, and flipped it.

For a heartbeat the water held. Then a drop slid through the hole, then a thread, then the whole glass emptied into the basin with a splash.

"There," Spy said quietly, grinning. "Air pressure from outside was pushing up on the sealed card harder than the water's weight pulled down. Poke a hole, air gets in from below, the push evens out — and gravity wins. It was never magic. It was one hidden variable, waiting."

Crack's face lit. "So *that's* the how!"



Later, when the others had drifted off and the basin sat quiet, one kid stayed behind, turning the punctured card over and over.

"Doesn't it ever bother you?" the kid asked. "Once you find the how, isn't the wonder kind of... gone? Ruined?"

Spy sat down on the bench, thinking about the leaf, and the bottle, and the shut door that had finally opened. "That's what I was scared of too, once," they admitted. "That finding out would make everything flat." They shook their head slowly. "But it's the opposite. The cup was a nice surprise for one second. Knowing *why* — that stays. I can see the air pushing now, everywhere, all the time. The whole world got louder, not quieter."

The kid was quiet a moment, and Spy watched something settle in them — the tight, cheated look loosening into something calmer and wider, the way a held breath finally lets go. There it was: that warm, steady gladness Spy knew so well, the feeling of a door swinging open in a house you were allowed into after all. The kid reached for a fresh how-card, and Spy felt their own chest go warm and quiet, glad all the way down, the way they always did when someone else discovered

there was no such thing as *you'll understand when you're older* — only *let's find out now, together, slowly.*

Crack



Crack turned a full cup of water upside down over his own head and let go of the card holding it in.

The Wonderforge students went rigid. The cup was brimming, and only a thin index card stood between the water and Crack's face — a small iguana-tween in a chunky lab vest, tail twitching, staring up at the wobbling card with an expression less like fear and more like appetite. The water did not fall. The card held, pressed flat against the rim by nothing anyone could see.

"Cool, right?" Crack said, water hovering an inch above his snout. "This is everybody's favorite part."

"Don't explain it," a girl said quickly, almost pleading. "You'll wreck it."

Crack's tail thumped the floor, once, happily. Behind his wide eyes something kindled. "That's exactly what I used to think," he said. "Watch what happens when I'm wrong." He tipped the cup, peeled the card, caught the splash in a bucket, and tapped the small click-card he kept in his vest. "The whole sky is leaning on that card harder than the water leans down. And the second you *know* that — the trick doesn't die. It splits into ten more tricks."



Crack had learned that the hard way, and it had frightened him first.

When he was small, a street performer had made a coin vanish from one hand and reappear behind Crack's ear, and for a week he'd carried the mystery around like a warm stone in his pocket. He guarded it. He was certain that if anyone explained it, the warmth would drain out and leave him holding something dead. So when an older cousin finally showed him the palm and the flick, Crack braced for the hollowing-out.

It never arrived. Instead his stomach did a lurching flip — the over-the-hill-too-fast feeling — and a crowd of new questions rushed the gap where the mystery had been. *If a hand can hide that, what else can it hide? Why does my own eye get fooled? Could I learn to do it?* The mystery hadn't emptied. It had cracked, and more had poured out of the crack than had ever gone in.

He'd lain awake that night, buzzing, turning one thought over and over: *I was afraid understanding would shrink the world. It made it enormous.* By morning the feeling had a name. He called it the click, and once it was named he could not stop hunting it.



He walked to Wonderforge at eleven, reasoning that a school built on wonder ought to have room for the kind of wonder that *grows* instead of ending.

Marvel, who ran the wonder-workshops, met him at the door and asked a single question. "Some people say explaining a mystery kills it. What do you say to them?"

Crack didn't argue the point. He asked instead for an empty metal drum, a splash of water, and a hot plate. He boiled the water inside the drum until steam chased the air out, capped it fast, and stepped back with everyone else to wait.

The drum sat there, doing nothing. Students began to shuffle and lose interest. Then the steam cooled inside, and with a low groan and a sudden *CRUNCH* the drum caved inward and folded like wet paper — crushed by the same ocean of air that had been holding his cup all along.

The room jumped. Crack didn't. He turned to Marvel, beaming. "Same air. Two completely different wows. And there's more where those came from." Marvel looked at the ruined drum, then at him, and said, "You belong here."



His corner of the workshop filled quickly, mostly with kids chasing that lurch in the stomach.

Spy, a detective-tween, wandered in one afternoon looking pleased with herself. "Case closed on your cup trick," she announced. "Air pressure. The outside air pushes on the card harder than the water pushes down. I get it." She shrugged, as though the fun had been safely filed away and shelved.

Crack tilted his head. "How hard, though?"

"Hard. I don't know. Hard."

"About fourteen and a half pounds on every square inch." He held up a claw and turned it over. "This hand's maybe thirty square inches. So right now the air's pushing on it with — what, four hundred pounds?"

"You'd feel four hundred pounds," Spy said, frowning.

"Would I? It pushes from every side at once, so it cancels. I only notice it when something's *un*balanced — like your cup." He leaned closer, voice dropping. "So if air can hold water up in a cup, tell me — what happens when you suck the air out of a straw?"

Spy's eyes narrowed, and he watched her actually think it. "The drink climbs. The outside air pushes it up the straw. You don't *pull* it at all."

"A suction cup on a wall?"

"Air pressure, holding it there." She was sitting straighter now.

"A sealed bottle that crumples if you drink from it too fast? A weather report that keeps saying *pressure*?" His tail was drumming the floor. "It's all the same air, Spy. One idea you already understood."

Spy stared at him, then laughed — a startled, delighted sound — and snatched his click-card to scribble on it herself. "I thought I was *done*," she said. "I closed the case, and it just opened seven more."

"That," Crack said quietly, "is the click. You didn't lose the first mystery. You multiplied it."



Later, when the workshop had emptied and the benches had gone quiet, a small new kid named Pip hung back by the door.

"I saw a magic show once," Pip said, half-defensive. "It was the best thing ever, and I still don't want to know how it worked. If I knew, it'd stop being magic. Doesn't it ever feel like that for you — like knowing takes something away?"

Crack thought about the coin behind his ear, and the flip in his stomach, and the long buzzing night when the world had gotten bigger instead of smaller.

"I was scared of exactly that once," he admitted. "I thought understanding would leave me holding something empty." He shook his head slowly and pressed a claw to his own chest. "But when the coin trick finally clicked, I didn't feel smaller. I felt *this* — right here — like cresting a hill too fast. Wide awake. Carrying more questions out than I brought in."

Pip said nothing.

"You don't have to look tonight," Crack said gently. "The mystery keeps fine in your pocket. But when you're ready, I promise you won't lose the wow. You'll just be standing there with your stomach doing that little flip, and the whole world suddenly a size larger than it was a second ago."

Pip still didn't answer. But at the doorway he paused, and Crack caught it — the almost-smile, the small lean forward, the exact quiet gladness of a mind getting ready to fall happily over the edge into knowing. Watching it, Crack felt his own chest go warm and loose, that old buzzing settle into something steady and content, like a lamp turned low and left glowing.

Encore



The living room had gone the particular kind of quiet that only happens when people are waiting to be surprised, and Encore stood very still at the little table, letting it build. A paper cup of water. An index card laid flat across the rim. A bowl set out of sight below the tablecloth, in case the physics decided to disagree with them tonight. Encore did not look at the cup. They looked at the room — at the aunt leaning forward, at the little cousin with both fists pressed to her cheeks — because the cup was only ever half the trick. The room was the other half, and the room was the harder one.

"Watch closely," Encore said, and in one clean motion turned the cup upside down.

The water stayed. The card clung to the inverted rim as though it had been nailed there.

Somewhere near the front a boy sucked in a breath. The aunt's hand drifted up toward her mouth. Encore held the silence — not by accident, but for exactly the length they had rehearsed in front of a mirror a hundred times, because they had learned that a gasp given one second too long curdles into confusion, and one second too short never fully lands.

"That's the surprise," they said, and let their voice warm. "Now here's the part I like better."

They righted the cup and pointed at the card. "The air we're all standing in isn't nothing. It's an ocean — miles deep, pressing on every one of us from every direction. Right now it's pushing up on this card harder than the water inside is pulling down. That's the whole thing. It holds — but only while the seal is perfect." They raised a pin so the light caught it. "Watch what happens the instant it isn't."

They pricked one small hole. The card let go. The water dropped into the waiting bowl with a satisfying slap, and the room erupted, and Encore bowed — but even mid-bow they were listening past the applause, hunting for the sound they actually wanted, and there it was: three kids in the front, heads bent together, whispering *wait, so if you sealed it even tighter*— That whisper was the whole reason Encore performed. Not the gasp. The wondering that came after it.



Encore had not always understood that the whisper outranked the gasp. For a long time they'd had it exactly backward.

When they were small they had loved being astonishing more than almost anything. They'd learned a coin trick — a genuine sleight-of-hand, the kind that takes weeks of dropped coins to make look effortless — and they had performed it endlessly, and never, not once, revealed how it worked. There was a power in that withholding. People would lean close and beg *how, how did you do that*, and Encore would only grin and turn their empty palms over, and for a season that grin felt like the finest thing they owned.

Then one grey afternoon their younger cousin watched the coin vanish for the fifth time and, instead of laughing, began quietly to cry — a small, defeated crying, worse than a loud one. "I'll never do it," the cousin said. "You're just better than me. That's all." And Encore felt the grin fall off their face, because that was the precise opposite of what they had wanted the trick to mean.

So they sat down on the floor beside the cousin and, for the first time in their life, gave a secret away. Slowly. They showed how the coin folded into the crease of the palm, where to send your eyes so no one followed your hand, how the whole illusion lived in misdirection rather than magic. And a strange, almost dizzying thing happened while they explained: the trick they'd performed a hundred times went suddenly, startlingly *clear* to them, every fuzzy corner of it snapping sharp, as though saying it out loud had switched a light on inside their own head. The cousin tried it. Dropped the coin. Tried again. On the sixth attempt it worked, and the cousin's face lit like a window at nightfall — and Encore understood, all at once, that the secret hadn't shrunk by being shared. It had doubled. Two people knew it now instead of one, and somehow Encore knew it *more* than before, not less.



They walked to WonderForge the year they turned eleven, because it was the rare place that treasured the *how* as fiercely as the *wow*, and Encore had finally learned those were the same treasure.

Marvel, who ran the demonstrations, met them at the door and asked for no résumé and no list of tricks. Marvel only said, "Show me something."

Encore didn't reach for anything grand. They picked a rubber band off the desk, stretched it taut, and pressed it fast against their upper lip. "Feel this," they said, offering it over. "Stretch it quick and touch it to your lip — it goes warm. Ease it slack again — cool. Try it yourself, don't take my word."

Marvel stretched the band, touched it, blinked. "Huh. It genuinely does."

"That's the surprise. The science is that stretching crowds the molecules together and they shed a little heat; relaxing lets them spread and drink it back." Encore pressed the band into Marvel's hand. "Now the important part — explain it back to me while you're doing it. Out loud. Because until you've said it and done it at the same time, you've only *watched* it. You haven't got it yet."

Marvel laughed, stretched the band, and narrated it back — clumsily at first, then clean. Something in their face changed on the clean pass.

"There," said Encore. "*Now* you understand it."

Marvel studied them a long moment. "You belong here," they said.



Encore's corner of WonderForge was always the loudest in the building, because it was the one corner where kids were doing the demonstrations instead of watching them.

A boy came in one afternoon carrying a particular kind of discouragement. He'd mastered the whole air-pressure demo — could recite it flawlessly, ocean of air and perfect seal and all — but at his school's science fair he had frozen in front of the crowd, tangled his words, spilled the water on the judge's shoes, and walked home certain he was a fraud who'd only memorized somebody else's cleverness.

"I *knew* it," he said, dropping onto the stool. "I just couldn't do it when people were looking."

Encore nodded as though this were the most ordinary ailment in the world. "Then you knew it a little. Not all the way through yet." They set out a cup, a card, a bowl. "Do it for me. Only me. No crowd, no judges."

He did. It worked cleanly.

"Good. Now again — but this time talk me through every step while your hands are moving. Not after. During."

He tried, and it fell apart. The words ran ahead of his fingers, or lagged behind them; water went everywhere. Encore didn't reach in to rescue it — they simply waited, patient as weather, through the second failed attempt and into the third. And on the third the words and the hands finally locked into the same rhythm, and the boy heard his own voice explain *the seal has to be perfect* in the exact instant his fingers made the seal perfect.

"Oh," he said, very softly. "*Oh*. It's one thing. Saying it and doing it are one thing."

"That's the whole of it," said Encore. "First you show it — that's the gasp. Then you explain it while your hands repeat it — and that's the moment it stops being borrowed and becomes yours. Then you hand it to somebody else and watch them catch it, and only then do you fully own it." They set the pin in his palm. "You didn't fail at that fair. You just hadn't taught it to anyone yet. A thing you can't hand to another person is a thing you don't quite have."

The boy grinned, pricked the hole, and laughed out loud when the card let go.



Late in the afternoon, when the tables had emptied and the light had gone long and amber across the floor, the boy lingered at the door with one last question turning over in him.

"Doesn't it bother you?" he asked. "Giving all your secrets away like that. Now anybody could do them."

Encore thought about their cousin on the grey floor years ago, and the window-lit face, and that dizzy doubling sensation of understanding a thing better the very moment they let go of it.

"That's the best part of it, not the cost," they said. "A secret you keep just sits inside you, still and quiet and a little lonely. A secret you teach comes alive — it's living in you *and* in them at once, and there turns out to be more of it in the world, not less." They looked out over the abandoned tables, the drying puddles, the pin still on the desk. "Wonder was never a thing that a few clever people are allowed to own. It's a craft. You gasp at something. You sit with the wondering. You dig down into the how of it. And then — this is the part everyone forgets — you hand it on. And when the person you handed it to lights up—"

They stopped. Their throat had gone tight, in the good way, the way it does when something true is being said out loud for the first time.

"—that light," they finished, quieter now, "and that warm, brimming, *passed-it-on* feeling that rises up under your ribs when you watch it happen — that's the real signal it landed. Not being able to answer a question about it. Being able to give it away and see it become somebody else's."

The boy nodded slowly and went out into the evening. Encore stayed on a moment in the amber quiet, and felt the warmth spread and then settle low and steady in their chest — not the sharp thrill of the gasp, but the deeper, fuller gladness of a day's worth of small wonders handed safely on, folded away inside them like something living they'd get to open again tomorrow.

About Spark & Anvil

WonderForge is one of 140 educational iOS apps from Spark & Anvil — a 501(c)(3) public charity making free, ad-free, tracking-free learning apps for ages 9–14.

Every app uses distributed-narrative methodology: named recurring characters embody curricular concepts. The cast you just met appears in the matching app, in mentor scaffolding, in puzzle solutions, in celebration moments. Reading the chapters first means meeting old friends when you open the app.

Visit **spark-and-anvil.com** to download apps, browse the full portfolio, or [donate](#) to support the work.