



# **AlcumusForge**

## ***Meet the Cast***

**STANDARD EDITION**

# Spark & Anvil

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This book collects 6 chapter books from the AlcumusForge 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.

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*For everyone who learns by hearing a story first.*

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# Introduction

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The AlcumusForge cast was authored to embody the curriculum, not decorate around it. Each of the 6 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.

— *The editors at Spark & Anvil*

# Alcuin

*topic-graph traversal — picking the next problem at the edge of competence*



The first time Maya walked into the Library, she thought it was empty. It smelled like old paper and quiet.

Rows of glass shelves stretched out forever. They went in every direction. Some ladders climbed straight up to the ceiling. Other ladders slid sideways along the shelves. There were tiny drawers, no bigger than her thumb. There were huge drawers, as tall as her front door. But there were no signs. No labels anywhere.

The only person in the whole place was a woman in a deep blue coat. She was reading something that shimmered. It looked like a magazine made of starlight.

"You must be Maya," the woman said. She didn't even look up. "I've been keeping the right book aside for you."

Maya's jaw dropped a little. "How did you know I was coming?"

"I didn't," the woman said. "But I always keep a book for whoever walks in next. It saves time."



Her name was Alcuin. She had silver streaks in her dark hair. A magnifying glass hung from a chain around her neck. Her shoes made no sound at all on the wooden floor. She didn't ask Maya about her grade. She didn't ask what Maya liked to read.

Instead, she asked, "What's the last problem you tried that you didn't finish?"

Maya had to think. "A fraction one. It was about pizza. There were four friends, but only ten slices." It had made her brain feel like a tangled shoelace.

"Four friends and ten slices," Alcuin repeated. Her eyes lit up. She looked like someone had just handed her a perfect, secret present. "Oh, that's a good one. You're stuck between two ideas, right?"

Maya nodded.

"One idea tells you the answer should be a nice, clean number," Alcuin said. "The other idea tells you it can't be. Both feel right. But both can't be true."

That was it. That was exactly it.



"Most people would just hand you the next problem in the textbook," Alcuin said. She started walking along the shelves. Her steps were slow and sure. She had walked this path many times before. "But you don't need the next problem. I think you need a problem from three weeks ago. One that will suddenly make sense in a new way. Come on."

She pulled out a small green book. Its spine was crooked. The faded gold letters on the cover said: *When the answer isn't a clean number.*

"Why this one?" Maya asked.

"Because your pizza problem isn't really about pizza," Alcuin explained. "It's about what to do when an answer is messy. You've earned this question now. You couldn't have asked it three weeks ago. But you can today."

Maya stared at the little green book. She didn't totally get it. But a part of her did. It felt like finding a key for a lock she didn't even know she had.

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For a long time, Maya was sure Alcuin was a magician. The Library always gave her the right book. It was never the easiest book. It was never the hardest. It was just... the right one.



Sometimes the right book made her feel like a genius. Sometimes it made her feel stuck for a whole afternoon. And sometimes, the right book was one she had already read.

"I want you to read it again," Alcuin would say. "Different week. Different brain. Same words. See what changes."

It was Maya's cousin Bram who finally figured it out. He was older. He'd been visiting the Library for years.

"She's not a magician," Bram said one day. "She just knows the map."

"What map?" Maya asked.

"Every problem is connected to other problems," he explained. "You can't really get the pizza one until you've mastered the one with chocolate bars. You can't get the chocolate bar one until you've drawn a million fractions on a number line. The map is just knowing which problem comes before which. Alcuin keeps the whole thing in her head."

"Is the map written down somewhere?"



Bram shrugged. "I think she tried. But the map keeps growing. New paths show up the more you learn. She loves it when a problem surprises her. That's her favorite part."

Maya looked over at Alcuin. She was at the far end of the Library, humming to herself. She was watering a small, cheerful-looking plant on a windowsill.

The next time Maya got stuck—really, truly, want-to-throw-your-pencil-across-the-room stuck—she went to the Library. She sat on the wooden floor by Alcuin's desk. She didn't say anything for almost an hour.

Alcuin didn't ask what was wrong. She just slid a book across the floor.

Its title was: *Three problems that look like the one you're stuck on. One of them isn't.*

Maya opened it and started to read.

She was there until the streetlights outside began to glow.

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<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/alcumusforge/alcuin>

# Hint Hertha and Stretch Sage

*smaller-then-wider* — deep mastery happens when you **SHRINK** a hard problem to find the meaning **AND** widen a solved problem to find the structure. Two directions. One discipline.



Maya was stuck.

She had been stuck for twenty minutes. The problem on her worksheet was not, by Library standards, especially monstrous. It said:

*A baker has a recipe that calls for  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of flour. She wants to make  $\frac{2}{3}$  of a batch. How much flour does she use?*

Maya stared at it. She tried *adding* the fractions. That felt wrong. She tried *subtracting* them. That felt wrong too. She thought maybe she had to *multiply* them, but multiplying two fractions less than one would make the answer *smaller* than either, and she didn't know if that was even legal. She had been chewing on her pencil for so long the eraser had teeth marks.

Eventually she pushed back from the table. She walked over to the wooden booth between the children's section and the back room. She rang the bell.

*Ding.*

The brass shutter clanked open. Hint Hertha looked out over her round glasses. She had three knitting needles balanced on her wrist and a small ball of yellow yarn in her lap.

"Tell me what the problem is asking," she said.

Maya read it out loud. The whole thing. Twice. Hertha nodded each time. She set down her knitting.

She said, "What does it mean to take *two-thirds of a batch*?"

Maya frowned. "It means... you make less than a whole batch. You make a smaller batch."

"How much smaller?"

"Two-thirds of the size."

"So if a whole batch needed *three cups of flour*, how much would two-thirds of a batch need?"

Maya thought. "Two cups."

"Why?"

"Because two-thirds of three is two."

Hertha smiled. "Excellent. Now. The recipe doesn't call for three cups. It calls for *three-quarters of a cup*. So what does *two-thirds of three-quarters* mean?"

Maya stared at the page.

"Oh," she whispered.



She walked back to her table. She wrote slowly:

*I need  $2/3$  of  $3/4$  of a cup.*

She turned that over in her head. *Two-thirds of three-quarters*. It wasn't an addition problem. It wasn't a subtraction problem. It was a *taking-part-of-a-part* problem.

She had done these before. With whole numbers. *Two-thirds of fifteen*. You divide by three, then multiply by two. *Fifteen divided by three is five. Five times two is ten*. So two-thirds of fifteen was ten.

The same recipe must work for fractions.

*Three-quarters divided by three is one-quarter. One-quarter times two is two-quarters. Two-quarters is one-half.*

The baker uses *half a cup of flour*.

Maya checked it. *Half a cup is two-thirds of three-quarters of a cup*. She drew a quick picture. A glass with three-quarters of a cup. Mark off two-thirds of that height. Yes. The mark landed exactly at one-half.

She laughed quietly. She wrote  $1/2$  cup in the answer box. She put down the pencil.

The pencil felt much lighter than it had ten minutes ago.



Maya was packing up to go home when she heard a low rumble of a voice behind her.

"What's that on the worksheet?"

She turned around. Stretch Sage was standing in the aisle, holding his sketchbook under one arm. He had come over from the alcove. He must have been watching.

"It's a fraction problem," Maya said. "I figured it out."

"May I see?"

She handed him the worksheet.

Stretch read the problem. He read Maya's work. He nodded slowly. He turned his crooked smile on her.

"This is good," he said. "Hertha got you to see it as *taking a part of a part*. That's the real meaning. Most kids never get that meaning. They just memorize *multiply across the top, multiply across the bottom*. You actually saw it."

"Thank you."

"What would happen," Stretch said, tapping the page, "if the baker wanted to make *seven-eighths* of a batch instead of two-thirds?"

Maya thought.

"Then I'd need seven-eighths of three-quarters."

"And how would you do that?"

"Three-quarters divided by eight is *three-thirty-seconds*. Times seven is *twenty-one thirty-seconds*. I'd use twenty-one thirty-seconds of a cup."

"Whatever-thirty-seconds is small," Stretch said. "Is that right?"

"It's less than a cup. The original was three-quarters of a cup. Seven-eighths is *almost* a whole batch. So the flour should be *almost three-quarters of a cup*. Twenty-one thirty-seconds is..."

She did the math.

"Twenty-four thirty-seconds is three-quarters. Twenty-one is three less than twenty-four. So it's three thirty-seconds less than three-quarters. That's a little less than a teaspoon less than three-quarters. That sounds right."

"That sounds right to me too," Stretch said. He nodded approvingly.

He flipped the worksheet over.

"Now, what would happen," he said, "if the *recipe* called for *2/3 cup of flour* instead of three-quarters, and the baker wanted *3/4 of a batch* instead of two-thirds?"

Maya squinted. "That's... the same numbers. Just swapped."

"Is it the same answer?"

She paused. *Three-quarters of two-thirds. Two-thirds of three-quarters.* She had figured both of those.

*Three-quarters of two-thirds. Two-thirds divided by four is two-twelfths. Times three is six-twelfths. Which is one-half.*

The same answer.

Half a cup.

Maya's eyes went wide.

"It's the same?"

"It's the same."

"But that doesn't make sense. The recipe is different. The batch size is different."

"And yet," Stretch said.

Maya stared at her worksheet.



"The *order doesn't matter*," she said slowly. "Two-thirds of three-quarters is the same as three-quarters of two-thirds. The flour needed is the same."

"Why might that be?" Stretch asked.

Maya thought hard. The answer was hovering somewhere just out of reach.

"Because... we're taking the same total amount of stuff each time? Two-thirds and three-quarters multiplied together is the same as three-quarters and two-thirds multiplied together. *Multiplication doesn't care about order*. Two times three is the same as three times two. So when we *multiply* fractions to get a *part of a part*, it doesn't matter which is the part and which is the whole."

"That's a *deep* observation," Stretch said. "That's actually a *property of multiplication*. Mathematicians call it *commutativity*. It holds for whole numbers. It holds for fractions. It holds for almost every kind of number you'll meet. *Multiplication doesn't care about order*. Addition doesn't either. Subtraction *does*. Division *does*. You can tell a lot about an operation by asking whether it cares about order."

Maya looked at the worksheet again. The original problem felt very, very small now. It had grown into something much wider.

She had started the afternoon stuck on one fraction-baking problem.

She had ended it with a *property of multiplication*.



She was packing her bag for real this time. Hertha had come out of her booth to stretch her legs. Stretch was still leaning on the table.

"You two ganged up on me," Maya said, almost laughing.

"We didn't gang up," Hertha said. "I showed up first. Sage showed up second. He always does that."

"I show up after the problem has been *defeated*," Stretch said. "I cannot defeat problems. I can only widen them. Hertha defeats them by *making them smaller*. Then I take what is left and make it *bigger again*. In a different direction."

"It's the same problem," Hertha said.

"It is the same problem," Stretch said.

"It's just *gone smaller and then wider*," Hertha said.

"You make it sound easy," Maya said.

"I make it sound *like a discipline*," Hertha said. "Which is what it is. The problem on your page took twenty minutes. The lesson took *one afternoon*. The lesson is going to last a year. That is the trade."

Stretch nodded slowly.

"Smaller, then wider," he said. "That's the whole job."

"That's the whole job," Hertha agreed.

Maya walked home along the path through the gardens. She did not stop thinking about three-quarters and two-thirds the whole way. She did not stop thinking about *commutativity* either, even though she did not yet trust the word. She had never met a math word she trusted on first acquaintance.

But she had decided one thing.

She would ring the bell again tomorrow.

And then she would go find Stretch in his alcove.

She would do it in that order.

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<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/alcumusforge/hertha-and-sage>

# Hint Hertha

hint scaffolding — hints that are themselves problems



Hint Hertha had the second-strangest job in the Library.

The absolute strangest belonged to Practice Patience. His job was to stare at a pot of water and wait for it to boil. (It never did.) Hint Hertha's job was almost as weird. She answered your big, frustrating questions with small, simple ones. Questions you hadn't even thought to ask.

Hertha lived in a little wooden booth. It was tucked between the sunny children's section and the mysterious back room. A sign painted in cheerful blue letters hung over the window: *Stuck?* Below it was a small brass bell on a spring. When you rang it, Hertha would slide open a shutter and peer out. She was usually knitting a sweater with far too many arms. She would set down her clicking needles like you were a welcome surprise.

The first time Maya rang the bell, she was eleven. She was stuck on a math problem. For forty-five minutes, she had stared at the numbers. The pencil lead had snapped twice. The paper was smudged with angry eraser marks. She was furious at the problem. She was furious at the fractions. She was even furious at the quiet, dusty air in the Library.

Finally, she stomped over to the booth. She gave the bell a sharp *ding*.

The brass shutter slid open with a heavy *clank*. Hint Hertha looked out. She wore small, round glasses that made her eyes look like curious marbles. "Tell me what the problem is asking," she said. Her voice was calm and quiet.

"It's asking me to add two-thirds and three-fifths," Maya grumbled.

"And what does that mean, exactly?" Hertha asked.

Maya stared. What kind of question was that? "It means... add them."



"What did the last problem you added look like?"

Maya had to think for a second. "It was one-quarter plus three-quarters."

"And how did you solve that one?"

"Easy," Maya said. "They were both quarters. So I just added the top numbers."

"Good." A tiny, patient smile appeared on Hertha's face. "Now, what kind of quarter is two-thirds?"

Maya opened her mouth. She closed it. She felt her brain trip over itself.

"It's... not a quarter," she said slowly.

"Right."

"It's a third."

"Right."



"And three-fifths is a fifth."

"Right."

A frown dug a ditch between Maya's eyebrows. "Those aren't the same kind of thing at all."

"That's the problem inside the problem," Hint Hertha said. "I won't tell you the rest. But I want you to think about one thing. What kind of piece could two-thirds AND three-fifths BOTH be?"

With a soft *click*, she slid the brass shutter shut. Maya was left staring at the wood.

She stood there for a full minute. The fury had vanished. Now she just felt... puzzled. She walked back to her table with Hertha's question echoing in her head. *What kind of piece could they both be?*

She stared at her smudged worksheet. She drew a circle and cut it into three clumsy slices. Then she drew another circle and cut it into five. They looked nothing alike. This was useless.

Her pencil tapped on the table. *Kinds of things. Kinds of things.* What if she combined them? She scribbled in the margins. Three times five is fifteen. Fifteen?

She drew a new, bigger circle. Carefully, she divided it into fifteen skinny wedges. It looked like a pizza for a very large, very polite family. She shaded in the space for two-thirds. Ten of the skinny wedges turned gray. Then she imagined another pizza, also with fifteen slices. How many slices would three-fifths be? She counted on her fingers. Nine slices.

Suddenly, her brain fizzed. They were both *fifteenths* now. They were the same kind of thing! Ten of them plus nine of them was nineteen of them. Nineteen-fifteenths. She had it.



She marched back to the booth, her feet barely touching the floor. She rang the bell. *Ding!*

"I got it," she announced when the shutter opened. "It's nineteen-fifteenths."

"Excellent," Hertha said. "What did you have to do to get there?"

"I had to find a kind of piece they could both be."

"And what do mathematicians call that?"

Maya paused. "I don't know. A common... slice?"

Hint Hertha's smile widened. "Look it up. That's your next hint."

And the shutter *clicked* shut again.

---

That was the thing about Hint Hertha. Maya learned it over many visits to the little wooden booth. Hertha never gave you the answer. She never told you the secret rule. She never even showed you the shortcut. She just found a smaller question hiding inside your big one. A question so small it almost felt like cheating.



And once you answered the small question, the big one wasn't so scary anymore.

"That's the whole trick," Hint Hertha told Maya, a year later. They were sharing a cookie through the window. "Most hard problems are really three or four small problems wearing a trench coat. They're pretending to be one big, scary monster. My job is to find a button on the coat for you to pull."

"So you don't actually know more than I do," Maya said, chewing.

Hint Hertha let out a sudden, delighted laugh. "Oh, I know a lot more than you do, dear. But not about your problem. I know about *which small question to give you*. That's a different kind of knowing. It's the only kind my job requires."

Maya thought about that for a long time.

Slowly, she started trying to find her own smaller questions. Not when she was furious. That never worked. But on days when she was just a little stuck, she would stop. She would try to hear Hertha's voice in her head. *What's the smallest part of this you DO know?*

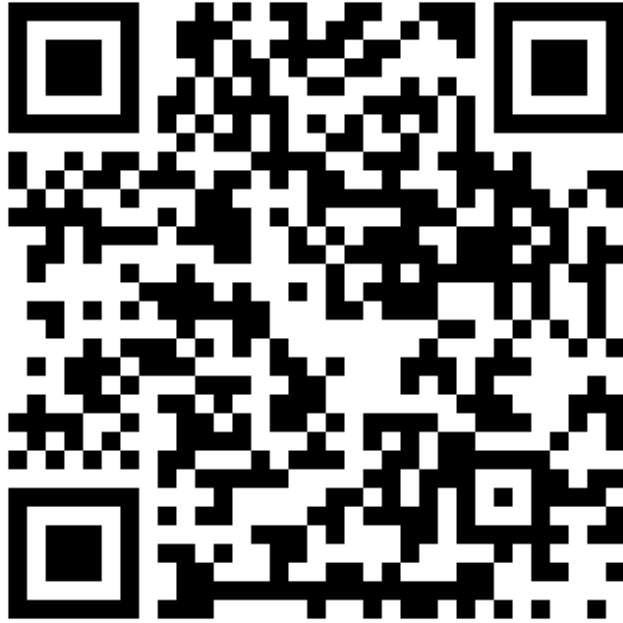
Usually, that was enough to find a button on the coat.

It was, she decided, the second-best gift in the whole Library.

When she told Hint Hertha this, the older woman just smiled. She closed the brass shutter and called through the wood. "Wrong order. Alcuin gives you the gift of the right book. I give you the gift of the right small question. They're the same gift, just in a different box."

Maya thought about that, too.

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<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/alcumusforge/hint-hertha>

# Practice Patience

spaced repetition — returning to a problem after a delay



- "Waiting"

- "mar"
- "mo"
- "mac"

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## Practice Patience and the Books That Were Waiting

Most readers never saw the Library's back room. It was a secret place. You had to know just where to look. You walked past the shelves of shiny new books. You turned left at a marble bowl of dried orange peels. Then you slipped through a heavy green curtain older than anyone there. The room inside was quiet and smelled of cedar and apples. Lamps cast a low, warm light on rows of narrow shelves. And on every shelf, a small handwritten card said one word: *Waiting*.

This was Practice Patience's room.

Practice Patience was a tiny woman who looked, depending on the light, somewhere between fifty and three hundred years old. She moved like a turtle. She read each word like it was precious. She drank her tea so slowly it was always cold. But she never rushed. And she never, ever apologized for being slow. That was the first thing most kids noticed.



The first time Maya met her, she was buzzing like a trapped bee. She had just crushed a worksheet on equivalent fractions. Her brain felt like it was sparkling. She needed a harder problem. Right now. The next one. At age ten, Maya was positive that *next* was the best word ever invented.

Alcuin took her hand. He led her past the orange peels and through the green curtain.

"This is Practice Patience," Alcuin said. "She's going to keep your fraction problem for a while."

"Keep it for what?"

"For later. Maybe three weeks. Maybe a month. We're going to come back to it."

Three weeks? Maya stared at the tiny old woman. A hot, prickly feeling crawled up her neck. It felt like every rule in the world was breaking at once. It felt *unfair*. She wanted to do the next problem now. Not in three weeks. That was forever!

Practice Patience just nodded slowly. She took the worksheet from Alcuin. She placed it on a low shelf with a little card. The card read: *Maya — equivalent fractions — three weeks.*



"Why?" Maya demanded. Her voice was louder than she meant it to be.

Practice Patience leaned in. Her voice was a quiet whisper. "Because the version of you who comes back in three weeks will know things that today-you doesn't. And the problem will teach you what those things are."

Maya stared. What did that even mean? A different version of her? It sounded like nonsense. A hot ball of anger grew in her stomach. Without another word, she turned around. She stomped right back through the curtain. The heavy fabric swung shut behind her.

---

Three weeks later, rain drummed against the Library windows. Alcuin tapped Maya on the shoulder. "Time to go back," he said.

Maya trudged toward the green curtain. She felt a weird mix of nervous and grumpy. For twenty-one days, she had worked on other things. She added fractions with unlike denominators. She even multiplied a few. They were fine. But that first worksheet was a distant memory.

Practice Patience was perched on a stool, watering a spiky cactus. She didn't look surprised to see Maya at all. She simply slid open a tiny wooden drawer. There was Maya's worksheet. It had the same pencil smudge in the corner.

"It's been waiting," she said.



Maya took the paper and went to her favorite reading chair. She stared at the first problem.

It was the same question. The same numbers. But something was different. It was like her eyes had been updated. Suddenly, she didn't just see the answer. She understood *why* it was the answer. A hidden path in the problem lit up in her brain.

She grabbed her pencil. She solved the first one. Then the next. Then all of them.

Her pencil flew across the page. It was faster than the first time. She didn't even need to check her notes. A quiet, solid feeling settled in her chest. It was a feeling she hadn't known three weeks ago.

When she walked back to the quiet room, Practice Patience was still watering that same cactus.

"You were right," Maya admitted.

Practice Patience nodded, slow as a tide. "I usually am. Not because I'm clever. Because I'm patient. Those are different things."



After that, the back room became one of Maya's favorite places.

She would finish a tough worksheet. Then she'd bring it straight to Practice Patience. "This one needs to wait," she'd say. Sometimes a problem waited for two weeks. Sometimes a whole month.

One day, Practice Patience might tap a dusty worksheet. "This one's ready," she'd murmur. "The you who can see it has finally arrived."

And sometimes, Maya would beg for a problem back early.

"Not yet," Practice Patience would say, shaking her head. "Two more weeks. Trust me."

And Maya did.

Once, late in the year, Maya solved a monster of a problem. She felt like she could fly. She wanted a new one, an even harder one, right away. She burst through the green curtain, practically vibrating.

Practice Patience was polishing a tiny brass bell. She didn't even look up. "Slow down," she said. Her voice was calm and steady. "The version of you who solved this is the one I want to keep. Not the version that runs ahead."

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<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/alcumusforge/practice-patience>

# Streak Bear

*anti-streak — protecting readers from the rush of consecutive days*



A bear lived on the porch of the Library.

He was not a regular bear at all. He wore a small, embroidered vest. He had a habit of falling asleep in the afternoon sun. And he had a slow, serious way of looking at you over the top of his round glasses. His name was Streak Bear. His job—though most people didn't realize it was a job—was to be there when you came to the Library, and to be there even when you didn't.

This was Maya's favorite thing about him. But it had taken her a long time to figure it out.

Most days, Maya would find Streak Bear on the porch. He might be reading a thick book, or munching on a sandwich, or even snoring softly into the warm wood. She'd say hello, he'd mumble a hello back, and she would slip inside to do her work.

But some days, Maya didn't come to the Library. She had soccer practice, or she was just too tired. Sometimes she just didn't feel like reading. When she finally returned, maybe the next day or even a week later, her stomach would feel all twisted up. She'd climb the steps slowly. She braced herself for the question she was sure was coming.

Streak Bear never asked it. He never scolded her.

He would just look up from his book and say, "Oh, hello, Maya. Nice to see you. Come on in."

That was it. That was always it.



The first time she missed a whole week, she walked up the steps with her shoulders hunched. She was positive he would ask where she had been. He did not. He just said, "Oh, hello, Maya. Nice to see you. Come on in."

She stood at the top of the steps, her library books suddenly feeling heavy.

"Streak?" she said, her voice small. "I missed a week."

"Mm," he said, turning a page. "How was the week?"

"It was okay. I had a cold."

"That happens."

"I was worried you'd be—" she trailed off.

He finally looked up. "Be what?"

"Disappointed."

Streak Bear took his glasses off. He polished them carefully on a corner of his vest, then put them back on. He looked at her with a kind of grave warmth she didn't know existed.



"Maya," he said, his voice a low rumble. "I am a bear. I do not do disappointment. I do welcome. Those are the only two things in my job description. Disappointment isn't one of them."

He went back to his sandwich.

Maya went inside.

---

It took her months to understand what Streak Bear actually *did*.

At first, it looked like he did nothing. He sat. He read. He ate sandwiches. This did not look like work.

But slowly, Maya realized that Streak Bear was the reason she wasn't afraid of missing a day. Her cousin Sebastian went to a different library. They had charts on the wall with gold stars. There was a quiet, creeping pressure to show up every single day or lose your place. Sebastian was twelve and always looked exhausted. He'd told Maya last summer that he hadn't missed a day in eleven months.

He said it like he was proud, but his shoulders slumped. "It feels... heavy," he'd admitted.

"Don't you ever want to skip a day?" Maya had asked.

"All the time," Sebastian had said. "But then I'd lose the streak."



Maya thought about Streak Bear.

She thought about him for weeks. Finally, she walked back up the porch steps with a question. "Streak? My cousin's library has a wall with charts on it. If you miss a day, you lose your streak."

Streak Bear looked at her for a long moment.

"Mm," he said, very gently. "That sounds heavy."

"He's tired all the time."

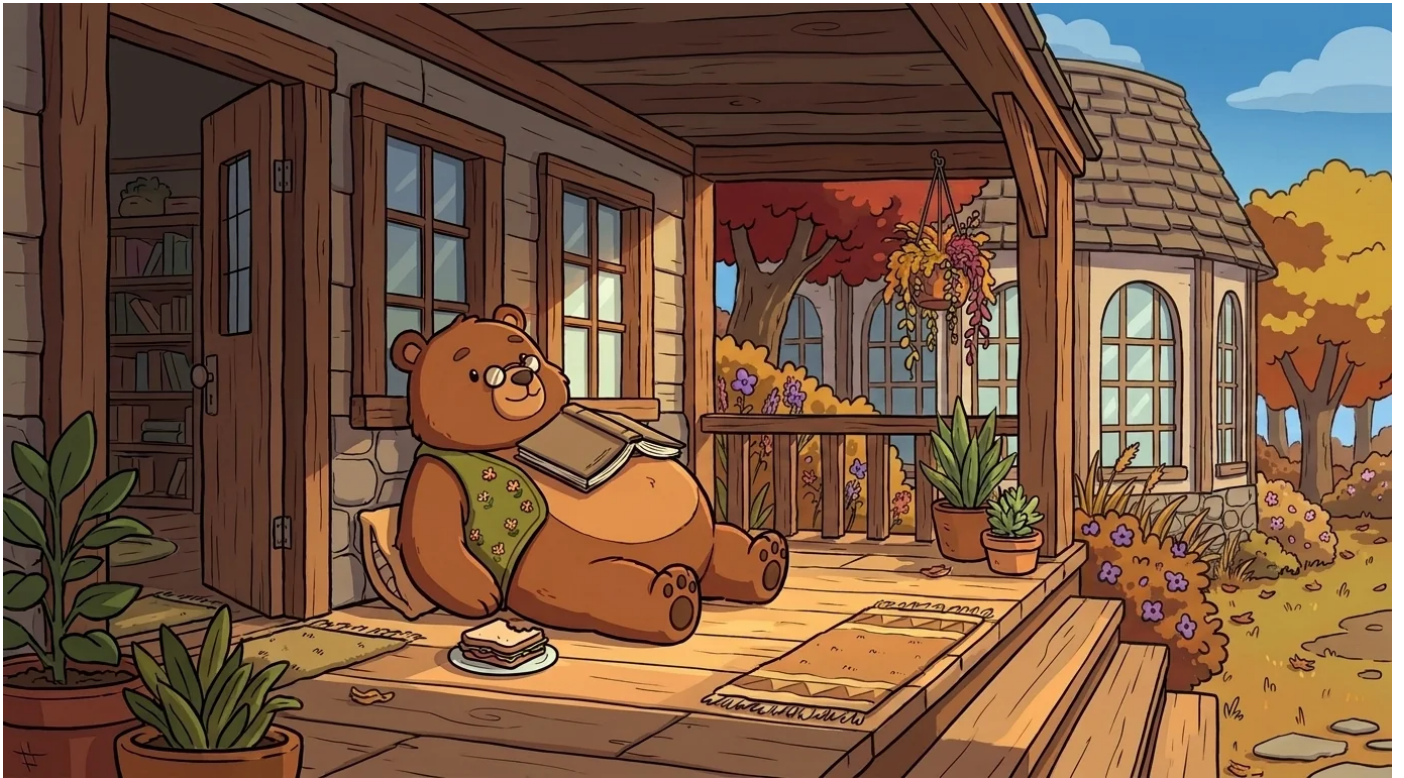
"I imagine he is."

"Why don't we have a chart like that?"

Streak Bear sighed—a slow, considered puff of air that smelled faintly of his sandwich.

"Because I am the wall," he said. "And I have decided not to be a chart. Charts make you worry about one thing: not breaking the chain. That worry is a terrible reason to learn anything. A welcome is a much better reason. So I just welcome. Every time. Even on the days you don't come, I am here, welcoming the future you who will come back."

He took another bite of his sandwich.



"It is a slow kind of work," he said. "But it is what I am for."

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Maya never again missed a day because she was afraid to.

She missed days when she was tired. She missed days for soccer. She missed days when she just did not want to read. She missed days when she had to watch her little brother. She missed days when the weather was too beautiful to be inside.

And every single time, she came back. Streak Bear was on the porch. And he always said, "Oh, hello, Maya. Nice to see you. Come on in."

Once, on a crisp autumn afternoon when she was thirteen, she stopped on the steps.

"Streak," she said. "I just wanted to say... I love that you're a bear."

He didn't look up from his book, but a small smile touched his face.

"That is the kindest thing anyone has said to me all October," he rumbled. "And it's only the fourth. Now, come on in."

She came on in.

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<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/alcumusforge/streak-bear>

# Stretch Sage

depth over coverage — harder variants of problems already passed



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## Stretch Sage and the Problem You Thought You Had Finished

The first thing Maya learned about Stretch Sage was that he never said the word *easy*.

He didn't say *hard*, either. He said things like *interesting*, or *not-yet-interesting*. Sometimes he called a problem *one-that-isn't-done-with-you-yet*. Nobody else talked like that. It took Maya three weeks before she started talking that way, too. It was mostly because Stretch gave her a funny, crooked smile whenever she said a problem was *easy*, as if she'd just announced that the sky was green.

Stretch Sage was tall and stooped, like a friendly question mark. He always looked like he had just come back from a long hike in the woods. His pencils were sharpened to dangerously sharp points. His sketchbook was a mess of half-finished diagrams and strange-looking shapes. He smelled faintly of cedar wood and fresh paper. He worked in a back corner of the Library, in an alcove where the ceiling sloped down so low you had to duck to get in. He perched on a tall stool and sketched all day.

The day Maya met him, she had just wrestled a monster of a math problem to the ground. It was about adding fractions with different denominators. She had been stuck on it for almost an hour. Finally, after three messy, wrong attempts, she found the answer. She felt like a champion. She marched her worksheet over to Alcuin, beaming. Alcuin smiled and pointed with her pen. "Show Stretch," she said, nodding toward the low-ceilinged alcove.

Maya brought her paper to Stretch Sage. She placed it on his drafting table with a proud little flourish. *Ta-da!*

Stretch Sage leaned over it. He looked at her work for a long, quiet moment.

"This is good," he said, his voice a low rumble.



"What would happen," he asked, tapping the paper, "if the denominators weren't five and three?"

Maya blinked. "What do you mean?"

"What if they were five, and three, and seven?"

"You mean... adding three fractions?" she stammered.

"All at once."

Maya just stared at him. A second ago, she had felt so wonderfully, completely finished. That feeling was gone. It had vanished like a soap bubble.

"I don't know," she said, her voice small.

"Try it." He slid a fresh sheet of paper and a sharp pencil toward her. "Same problem. Just add a third fraction."

He turned back to his sketchbook as if the conversation was over.



Maya trudged back to her table. She tried.

The new problem was way harder than she'd expected. The trick she had used before—finding a common denominator—still worked, kind of. But finding one for three numbers was a huge pain. The numbers ballooned. Her clean page of work turned into a mess of crossed-out calculations. After twenty minutes of scribbling and erasing, she finally got an answer. She walked it back to Stretch, feeling less like a champion and more like a tired soldier.

He looked at her new work. He nodded slowly.

"This is even better," he said. "Now, what would happen if one of the denominators was 100?"

"Oh, come ON," Maya groaned.

Stretch Sage actually smiled. It was a small, kind, secret-hoarding smile.

"You don't have to do it," he said. "I just want you to ask the question. What would happen if one was 100? What if one was a prime number? What if one of the fractions was negative? What if the problem wasn't asking for the sum, but for which fraction was the smallest? What about—"

"Stop," Maya said, holding up her hands. "Please."

He stopped. He waited, his pencil hovering over his page.

Maya stood there, her brain buzzing.



"That's it," Stretch said. He picked up his pencil and went back to his sketch. "That's my job. I'm the person who points at the rest of the map."

Stretch Sage was not exactly popular.

Some kids came to the Library for that feeling of being *done*. They wanted to solve a problem, hand it in, and get that little burst of happiness. Stretch made that little burst of happiness much harder to find. Stretch did not believe in *done*. He believed in *what's-around-the-next-corner*.

Practice Patience, who worked in the back room, sometimes shook her head at him. "You don't let them rest," she would say, her voice gentle but firm.

Stretch would look up from his sketchbook. "Resting is your job, Patience. Stretching is mine. Both are important."

"Yes," she'd reply. "But you stretch them too soon."

"And you," he'd say with that crooked smile, "rest them too long."

Then they would both go back to their work. They'd had this argument a hundred times. Neither of them had ever changed the other's mind. And neither of them had ever stopped trying.



She wanted to feel finished. She wanted her worksheet back with a gold star on it. She wanted to go home feeling smart and complete. Stretch never gave her any of those things.

But then, sometime after her twelfth birthday, Maya noticed something strange.

She was studying for a math test one night. She realized the problems Stretch had stretched for her were the ones she remembered perfectly. Not the original problems from the worksheet. The stretched versions. They felt solid in her head. They felt like a country she had explored, not just a town she had passed through.

She told Stretch about it the next afternoon. She tried to sound casual.

"I think... the stretched problems are the only ones I actually remember."

Stretch nodded, as if he had been waiting for her to say this for years.

"That's because the stretched ones made you really think," he said. "The first problem was like following a recipe. You just did the steps. But for the stretched ones, you had to invent a new recipe. Inventing is harder than following. Your brain holds on to the hard things."

He went back to his sketch.

Maya sat with that for a long time, watching his pencil move.

Then she said, "So what's the next stretch for the fraction problem?"

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<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/alcumusforge/stretch-sage>

# About Spark & Anvil

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- **SynaForge** — sensory-affirming creative tools through Lull, Soften, and the Quiet that is Also Creating

## Methodology

Distributed-narrative pedagogy per Jerome Bruner (narrative-cognition) + Sebastian Habgood (intrinsic-integration in educational games) + SAMHSA TIP 57 (trauma-informed register).

Trauma-informed-design framework per Eggleston et al. (2025) and Stoltenburg et al. (2024).

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