

Ages on 9-12 (lower middle grade)



DealTales

Meet the Cast

STANDARD EDITION

Spark & Anvil

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This book collects 4 chapter books from the DealTales 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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Introduction

The DealTales cast was authored to embody the curriculum, not decorate around it. Each of the 4 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*

Bram

*READING PARTNERS — *the bid is the conversation. listen to what your partner is saying through their bids.**



At the corner table in the DealTales card hall, a raven-tween named Bram set down a single card without saying a word, and across the table his partner Whisp leaned in like someone had just whispered a secret.

The card said *1NT*.

To the two kids watching from the next chair, it looked like nothing — a plain little card, a plain little bid. But Whisp nodded slowly, thought for a moment, and laid down *2♣*. Bram grinned and answered *2♥*. Back and forth the cards went, quiet as a game of catch, until the two of them stopped and simply began to play the hand — no discussion, no pointing, no peeking at each other's cards.

"How did you *do* that?" one kid burst out. "You didn't even talk!"

Bram tapped the little cards fanned in front of him, well-worn at the corners from daily use. "We talked the whole time," he said. "You just weren't listening in the right language." He touched the half-locket at his throat — a partner-pendant, its other half worn by Whisp across the table. "When I put down *one no-trump*, I was telling Whisp something true about my hand. A middling amount of strength. Nothing lopsided. She heard it. When she asked back with clubs, she was asking me a question. Every card is a sentence. We were having a conversation the whole way down — I just did it out loud, in front of you, and you thought it was silence."

The kid stared at the cards like they'd started to glow.

"That's the whole trick," Bram said softly. "The bid is the conversation. The cards are just how we spell."



Bram hadn't always known how to listen like that.

He'd grown up in the rookery-village, where the ravens live in close pairs and talk to each other in a hundred small sounds most creatures never bother to hear. His family watched over the roosts, and the oldest lesson they passed down was strange for a little bird to hold: *your partner is your other half — but you cannot see inside them. You can only read what they choose to show you.*

The first time young Bram played a partnership hand, he ignored all of that. His partner made a bid he didn't expect, and instead of wondering what she meant, he got annoyed. *She's wrong*, he decided. He overrode her, played the hand his own way, and lost it badly. Afterward he sat with his feathers all puffed and sulky, sure it was her mistake.

His grandmother landed beside him. She didn't scold. She just asked, quietly, "When she made that bid — the one you thought was wrong — what do you think she was trying to *tell* you?"

Bram opened his beak to say *nothing*, *she was just wrong*, and stopped. Because now that he thought about it, her bid had been trying to say something. He simply hadn't been listening. He'd been so busy being right that he'd stopped hearing her at all.

His chest went hot and tight and small. Not because he'd lost the hand — because he'd shut the door on someone who'd been talking to him the whole time.

"That feeling," his grandmother said gently, watching him. "That's the important one. Hold onto it. The day you stop asking *what is my partner telling me*, you've stopped playing the real game."

Bram never forgot the shape of that feeling. It taught him to listen first.



He walked to DealTales at twelve, because a place that studied clever games ought to understand the games that are secretly about *people*.

Whisp met him at the door — a steady, watchful bird who would become his partner across a thousand hands. She didn't ask him to prove he was smart. She asked one question. "What does it mean to read a partner?"

Bram didn't lecture. He held up his little fan of bidding cards. "It means every one of these is a message," he said. "Not a trick. Not a bluff. A message we've agreed on beforehand, so that when I say it, you know exactly what I mean — and when you answer, I know exactly what *you* mean. No whispering. No looking at each other's hands. Just the cards, said out loud, and the trust that you're doing your best to tell me the truth."

Whisp studied him for a long moment. Then she reached up and unclasped her half of the partner-pendant, and held it out to him. "Then you and I are going to have a great many conversations," she said.

Bram took the locket. It felt heavier than it looked — like a promise.



Bram's corner of the hall was where the loud, argue-y players slowly went quiet.

A boy came in one afternoon still fuming from a hand he'd lost with his sister. "She made this bid that made *no sense*," he said, "and I knew she was wrong, so I did it my way, and we tanked. She always does that."

Bram had felt that exact heat once, on a roost, a long time ago.

"Sit," he said. "Deal me your sister's hand — the one you don't understand." The boy laid it out. Bram looked at it, then at the bid the sister had made. "Okay. Pretend you're her for a second. She's not allowed to talk. She can't lean over and explain. All she has is this one bid to tell you what's in her hand. What was she trying to say?"

The boy scowled, then went still. He looked at the cards. "...She had almost no strength," he said slowly. "So she was warning me. She was telling me *don't push too high, I can't back you up*."

"And what did you hear instead?"

"That she was wrong." The boy's face fell. "But she wasn't. She was *helping*. I just didn't listen."

"So it wasn't her mistake, and it wasn't yours either," Bram said. "It was a missed message. That's all. Nobody's at fault — you just stopped reading each other for a second." He gathered the cards up gently. "Next hand, when she surprises you, don't ask *why is she wrong*. Ask *what is she telling me*. Then, after, ask her out loud: 'what were you saying with that bid?' She'll tell you. You'll both get better." He smiled.

"That's the game. The cards are the easy part. The partner is the point."



Later, when the hall had emptied out, the boy came back with one more question. He was quieter now.

"When you can't see her cards," he said, "and you can't talk, and all you've got is one little bid... how do you ever *trust* that you're hearing her right?"

Bram thought about the roost. About the puffed-up sulk, and the hot tight shut-the-door feeling, and his grandmother's slow question that had cracked him open.

"You listen like she's a friend who finally worked up the nerve to say what she means," Bram said. "And you decide — before the hand even starts — that she's on your side. That every bid she makes is her reaching toward you, not against you." He touched the locket at his throat. "When you believe that, something loosens in you. You stop bracing. You stop defending. You just... lean in and *hear* her. And when you get it right — when her message lands and you play it together and it *works* — there's this feeling."

"What feeling?"

Bram was quiet a moment, searching for it.

"Like being understood," he said finally, "by someone who was never going to say it in words. Warm, right in the middle of your chest. Like you're not playing alone anymore." He looked toward the door where Whisp had gone. "That's the thing I'd carry out of here, if you only take one. Not the cards. The feeling of being heard — and of finally knowing how to hear somebody back."

The boy nodded, slow and thoughtful, and Bram watched the last of the fume go out of his shoulders — the same warm, unclenched way his own had, years ago, on a roost he'd never quite stopped thinking about.

Auntie Audrey

BIDDING WISDOM — when to commit and when to pass. patience reads the table; rashness loses the contract.



Around the kitchen table, four players had their cards fanned tight against their chests, and Auntie Audrey was knitting.

Her needles clicked, slow and even. She was the oldest one there — a small grey-and-cream badger in a flowered shawl, a worn scorebook resting on her knees — and it was her turn to speak. Everyone waited. A younger player across the table drummed his fingers, sure he knew what she'd do.

"You've got a monster hand, Auntie," he said. "Big cards. You should shoot for everything."

Auntie Audrey didn't look up from her knitting. She was listening — not to him, but to the whole game so far. The way her partner had spoken. The way the others had stayed quiet. A whole conversation lived in what had already been said, and in what hadn't.

"My cards are only half the story," she said gently. She laid down one card — a small, careful commitment, not the wild swing the boy expected. "There. That tells my partner what I truly have. No more, no less."

The boy blinked. "But you could've promised so much *more*."

"I could have," she agreed, needles still moving. "And if my partner can't back it up, we'd have promised a thing we can't do — and lost the whole hand." She finally looked at him, warm and clear. "Winners aren't the boldest at the table. They're not the most timid, either. They're the ones who *read* first, then commit. Watch how the hand goes."

The hand went exactly as she'd read it. Her small, honest promise let her partner answer honestly back, and the two of them fit their cards together like a hand into a mitten. The boy, who'd bid loud and early in an earlier round and gone crashing down, sat very still.



Auntie Audrey had learned patience the hard way, a long, long time ago.

Her family were watchers — badgers who sat at the edge of the village and paid attention across whole seasons: who traded fairly, whose plans came due, which partnerships held and which fell apart. When Audrey was small, she thought watching was *boring*. She wanted to be in the middle of things, deciding fast, being right out loud.

So one market-day she blurted a big prediction to the whole village square before she'd finished looking. She was so sure. She was so eager. And she was wrong — loudly, in front of everyone — and her ears burned so hot she wanted to dig straight down into the ground and never come up.

Her grandmother found her there, hunched behind the stall, small with shame.

"You feel foolish," the old badger said. It wasn't a question. She sat down in the dust beside Audrey, in no hurry at all. "You spoke before the pattern finished showing itself, little one. That's all. It isn't a badness in you. It's only *early*."

"Everybody saw," Audrey whispered.

"They did." Her grandmother nodded, slow. "And now *you* have seen something too. You've felt what it costs to jump before you've read. That feeling — that hot, too-soon feeling — is a teacher. It's the whole reason patience is worth learning." She looked out over the market. "Wait long enough to *know*, and you'll almost never feel this again."

Audrey didn't answer. But the hot feeling had a name now — *early* — and somehow a thing with a name was easier to hold. She started watching. Really watching. And the patterns began, at last, to show themselves.



She walked to DealTales at a hundred and ten, because a game of partners and promises was exactly where a lifetime of watching belonged.

Whisp, the mentor who tended the tables, met her at the door. Whisp didn't ask her to prove she was clever. Whisp asked one question. "What is the wisdom of bidding?"

Auntie Audrey settled into a chair and took out her knitting before she answered.

"Knowing when to commit," she said, "and when to pass. The bold lose. The frightened lose too. The ones who last are the *informed* — the ones who wait, and read what's been said, and read what hasn't, and only *then* make their promise." She glanced up. "A bid isn't a wish. It's a promise you and your partner have to keep together."

Whisp watched the needles move, slow and certain. "You are welcome here," Whisp said.



Her table was always the quiet one, which was strange, because the most was happening there.

A girl came in one afternoon, deflated. "I passed," she said. "I had an okay hand and I just — passed. I did *nothing*. I feel like I chickened out."

Auntie Audrey knew that slump. She patted the chair beside her.

"Tell me what your partner had said, before your turn."

"They said they were weak. Really weak."

"And your hand was only okay."

"Yeah."

"So the two of you, together, had — what? Enough to promise a big win?"

The girl thought. "...No. Not even close."

"Then you didn't chicken out." Audrey set down her knitting and met the girl's eyes. "Passing *is* a bid. It says: *I've read the table, and the honest answer is not yet*. That's not doing nothing. That's the hardest read there is — the courage to hold still when everyone expects a swing." She smiled. "Watch."

She dealt a fresh hand between them and named it out loud — the shape of it, what it could and couldn't promise. Then she laid a small, exact card. "There. Not the biggest thing I *could* say. The truest thing." Her partner-card answered, and the two fit. "See? I told the truth about my hand, so my partner could tell the truth back. Now we both know. Now we commit — together — with our eyes open."

The girl looked at the two honest cards sitting side by side, and slowly sat up straighter.



Later, when the others had gone, the girl came back with one last question, quieter now.

"When you pass," she said, "and nothing happens, and it looks like you just... gave up — how do you know you did the right thing?"

Auntie Audrey thought about a hot afternoon behind a market stall, a hundred years ago, and a grandmother in no hurry.

"You feel it," she said. "That's the honest answer. There's a jumpy, hurry-up feeling that wants you to promise big and promise now — and there's a steadier feeling underneath it that says *wait, you don't know enough yet*. Learning the game is learning to trust the steady one." She picked her knitting back up, and the needles started their slow click. "Sit with the quiet a moment before you commit. Read the whole table. And when you're finally sure — the sureness feels calm, not loud. That's how you know."

The girl nodded, and the hurried, ashamed set of her shoulders eased into something looser, easier — the same quiet settling Audrey had felt, once, when the burning finally cooled and the patterns swam gently into view.

Doubleton Sisters

SHORT-SUIT PLAY — two cards isn't weakness — it's information. plan around the doubleton, and the hand sings.



At the long workbench in DealTales, two sparrow sisters sat side by side and looked at a hand of cards fanned between them.

They were nearly mirror images — Marn with cream feathers and a warm-brown back, Pell warm-brown with a cream back, so that when they leaned together they made one soft two-toned bird. Right now they were both staring at the same two diamonds sitting a little apart from the rest of the hand.

"Only two diamonds," said a young player across the table, disappointed. "That's a hole. That's the weak spot."

"Watch us with it first," said Marn.

Pell laid the two diamonds face up. "Two cards," she said.

"Not a hole," Marn said.

Together, quiet and pleased: "Information."

They played the hand slowly, showing every step. The game was hearts-are-trump — the good sort of family card game where you win little rounds called tricks. When the diamonds ran out, Marn simply played a small trump instead, and scooped the trick anyway.

"See?" Pell tapped the empty diamond spot. "Because we only had *two*, the third round of diamonds didn't cost us a thing. We were already out. So we trumped it."

"The short suit did work *for us*," Marn said. "It didn't leak. It let us cut in early."

The young player leaned closer. "So having only two of something was... good?"

"It was a *plan*," the sisters said in chorus, and the hand — which had looked thin and lopsided a minute ago — came together and *sang*.



They had not always trusted the small numbers.

When Marn and Pell were fledglings in the village hedgerow, the two of them were forever being counted and found short. Only two sparrows in the nest, when other nests had five. Only two of them at the feeder when the big flocks swept in. Grown birds would cluck about it — *just the two little ones, poor small pair* — and Marn remembered the way her chest would go tight and hollow at the word *just*. As if two of anything was almost nothing.

One winter evening, cold and hungry, Pell said it out loud. "We're too few. Everyone else has more. Two isn't enough for anything."

Their grandmother — an old, unhurried sparrow — did not argue. She just tilted her head. "Enough for *what*, though? You don't need a hundred of a thing to use it well. You need to know exactly what you've got, and plan around it."

She spread two seeds on the branch. "Two seeds. A whole flock might waste them, squabbling. You two won't. You know precisely what you have. That's not a shortage, little ones. That's *information*."

The hollow feeling didn't vanish. But it loosened. For the first time *two* stopped feeling like *not enough* and started feeling like *known*. And a knot the sisters hadn't realized they were carrying quietly came undone.



They walked to DealTales together at twelve — because a place that studied the shape of hands ought to understand the short suits, the ones everyone else called weak.

Whisp, the mentor who ran the tables, met them at the gate and asked one question. "What is short-suit play?"

Marn and Pell didn't recite. They set two cards on the rail between them, just two, a little apart from an imagined hand.

"Two cards in a suit," Marn began.

"Isn't weakness," Pell went on.

"It's information," Marn said.

And together: "Plan around the doubleton, and the hand sings. In a trump game, a two-card suit lets us cut in early with a trump when it runs out. In a no-trump game, we take our sure tricks somewhere else first, so the short suit can't leak."

Whisp looked at the two cards on the rail for a long, warm moment.

"You are appointed," he said. "Both of you. Together — the way it should be."



Their workshop table always had a hand fanned out on it, secretly full of short suits.

A boy came in one afternoon, frowning at his own cards. "Look at this," he said, disgusted. "Two spades. Only two. I've got a great long suit here and then this stupid little pair of spades ruining everything."

Marn slid into the seat on his left. Pell took the seat on his right.

"Ruining," Marn said thoughtfully. "Say what the trump suit is."

"Hearts."

"So spades aren't trump." Pell leaned in. "What happens after two rounds of spades are played?"

The boy counted. "...I'm out of spades."

"And then?" said Marn.

"Then— on the third spade I could—" He stopped. His eyes went wide. "I could *trump* it. Play a heart. I'd win it."

"There it is," the sisters said together.

"Your two spades aren't the hole in your hand," Marn said. "They're the *door*. You get out of the suit fast, and then your trumps do the rest. If you'd had five spades, you'd be stuck following along forever."

Pell nudged the two little cards. "Play the long suit for your sure tricks. Keep the short one for cutting in. Same cards you were just calling stupid — you only had to plan around them."

The boy played it out, careful and slow. Two rounds of spades. Then, on the third, he laid down a small heart and gathered the trick with a laugh he clearly hadn't expected. "It *worked*."

"Two cards isn't weakness," Marn said gently.

"It's information," said Pell.

"Pairs make the hand," they finished, in chorus. "Pairs make the game."



Later, when the tables were quiet, the boy came back with one more question. He was softer now, not frowning at all.

"When I first saw those two spades," he said, "I felt kind of... small about it. Like the hand was already bad and it was my fault. How do you two not feel that?"

Marn and Pell looked at each other — the old hedgerow look, the *just the two little ones* look.

"We used to feel it all the time," Marn said. "That tight, not-enough feeling when a number is small."

"But small isn't bad," Pell said. "Small is just *known*. When you have only two of something, you know it completely. You can plan every step around it. That's a power the big handfuls don't have."

The boy nodded slowly, and the sisters watched the last of the ashamed slump lift off his shoulders — the same way, years ago on a cold branch, theirs had.

They didn't say the rest out loud. They just leaned together, cream against brown, brown against cream, one warm two-toned bird, feeling that steady, unhollow calm of two who had finally stopped believing they were too few.

The Vanderbilt

CLASSICAL CONVENTIONS — the bid-system two partners share. without it, every bid is a guess. with it, every bid is a message.



At the corner table in the DealTales hall, a small grey heron named the Vanderbilt laid two cards face-down and said nothing at all.

Across from her sat a nervous badger, hunched over his hand, chewing his lip. It was his turn to bid. He looked at the Vanderbilt, hoping for a hint, but she only folded her wings and waited, patient as a stone.

"Two clubs," the badger finally blurted, half-guessing.

The Vanderbilt's eyes brightened. She didn't answer with a lecture. She reached to the little shelf beside her, pulled down a worn, bound book, and opened it to a dog-eared page. "You just said something," she told him. "Do you know what?"

"I... bid two clubs?"

"You *asked me a question*." She tapped the page. "In the system you and your partner picked before the game started, two clubs there means: *do you have a four-card major*? Not just any old two clubs. That one." She turned the book so he could see the neat lines of it. "So — do I?"

The badger looked down at the four hearts fanned in his own hand, then back up, confused. "But you can't see my cards."

"I don't need to." She placed a card. "Two hearts. That's my answer: *yes, hearts*. Now you know where we fit, and I never said a word about my cards out loud." She leaned back, warm-grey feathers settling. "That's the whole trick. We're not guessing at each other across the table. We agreed on a language before we sat down. Every bid I make hands you real information — because we both promised what the words mean."

The badger stared at the two hearts like they'd appeared by magic. "You *told* me something. Without telling me."

"Now you're getting it," the Vanderbilt said.



She had learned what that felt like long before she came to the hall.

The Vanderbilt grew up in the marsh-keeper village, in a family of herons who kept the village records — every agreement, every promise, every "we'll meet at the low bridge when the water rises." When she was small, she'd thought all that record-keeping was dull. Words on paper. Old traditions nobody used.

Then one grey morning the fog rolled in so thick you couldn't see wingtip to wingtip. Her grandfather stood at the marsh edge and gave a single low call — one note, held. And from somewhere out in the white, another heron answered, one short note back. Her grandfather relaxed all at once.

"Who was that?" the Vanderbilt whispered. "How do you know they're safe? You can't even see them."

"Because we agreed, long ago, what that call means," he said. "One long note: *are you all right?* One short note back: *I'm here, I'm fine.* We settled it years before the fog ever came." He looked down at her kindly. "The agreement isn't the fog-day. The agreement is what lets you *reach each other* on the fog-day. We built the words when it was clear, so we'd have them when it wasn't."

Something settled in her chest that morning — a quiet, steady feeling, like a held breath let go. The old records weren't dull. They were a way of not being alone in the fog. She started reading them all.

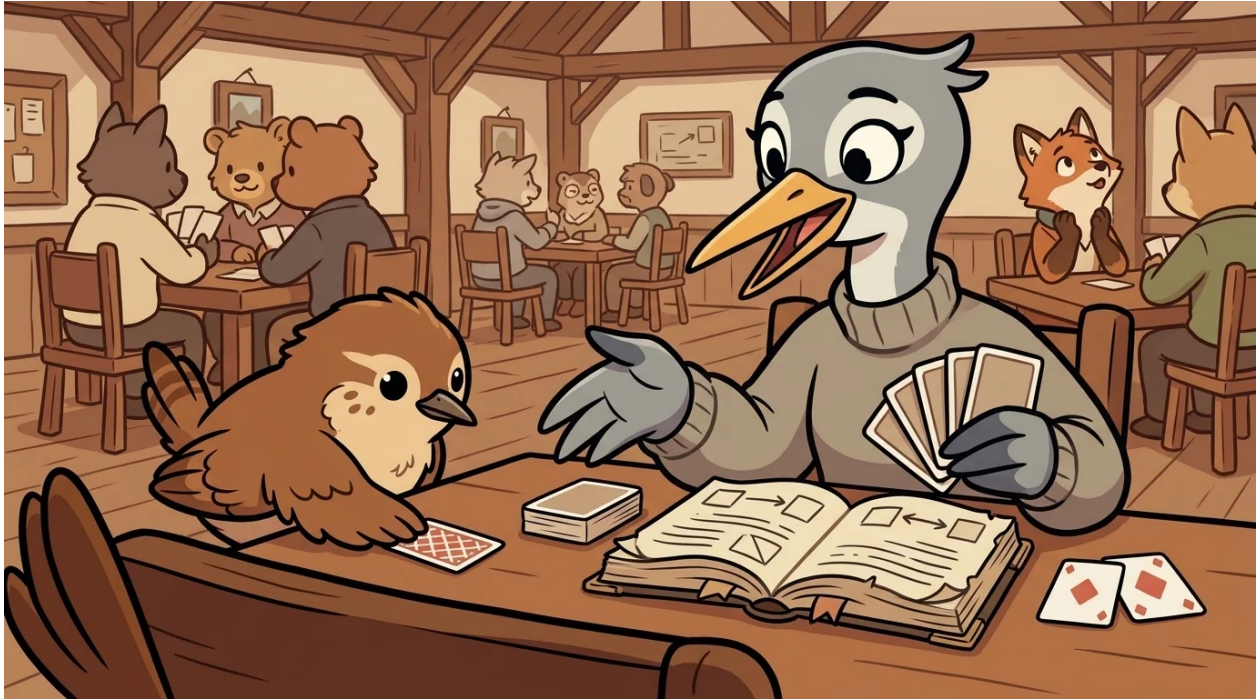


She walked to DealTales when she was fifteen, carrying her grandfather's book under one wing.

Whisp, the mentor, met her at the door and asked the question every newcomer got: "What are the classical conventions?"

The Vanderbilt could have listed a dozen. Instead she opened her book to a blank page and drew two little birds facing each other. "It's the language two partners agree on before they ever sit down," she said. "Without it, a bid is just a hopeful guess. With it, a bid is a message the other one can trust." She looked up. "Partners can't chat about their cards during the game — that would be cheating. So the bidding *is* the conversation. But it only works if they built the words ahead of time."

Whisp studied the two little birds on the page for a long moment. "You are appointed," she said.



The Vanderbilt's workshop filled up fast, because everyone was scared of the bidding at first.

A wren came in one afternoon, flustered. "There are so many systems," she said. "Stayman, Blackwood, transfers — it feels like a secret club. Like you have to be born knowing it."

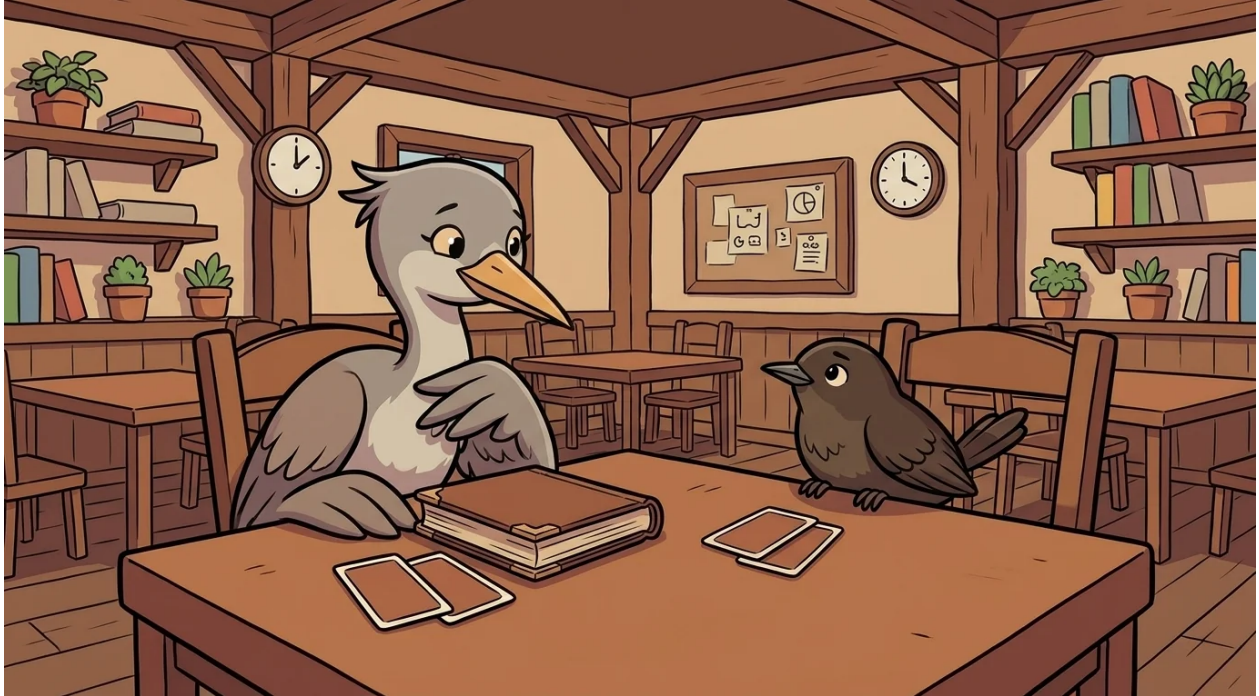
The Vanderbilt shook her head slowly. "It's the opposite of a secret club. A secret keeps people out. A convention lets people *in* — the second you learn it, you're speaking the same language as everyone else who learned it." She set her hand of cards on the table. "Watch. Partner opens one notrump. I want to know if we share a major suit. So I bid two clubs — Stayman."

"And that means...?"

"It means *do you have a four hearts or four spades?* Nothing else. Partner answers two diamonds for *no*, or names the major for *yes*." She played it out, calm and unhurried. "See how steady that is? I'm not sweating. I'm not fidgeting. Not because I'm clever — because I *practiced*. We agreed on the words when things were calm, so I stay calm when it's my turn."

The wren tried it herself, hesitant, then got it right. Her shoulders dropped an inch.

"There," the Vanderbilt said gently. "That calm you feel? It isn't a gift some players are born with. It's just being prepared. Anyone who learns the words gets to feel it. Nobody's locked out." She smiled. "The system belongs to whoever bothers to learn it. And it's alive — people still invent new conventions, still polish the old ones. You could add a page to this book someday."



Later, when the hall had emptied, the wren came back with a quieter question.

"When you bid," she said, "and you can't say a single word out loud... how do you *know* your partner really understood?"

The Vanderbilt thought of the fog, and the two notes crossing the white, and her grandfather letting his breath go.

"You trust the agreement," she said. "You settled the words together, back when it was easy. So when it's hard — when it's your turn and your heart's going quick — you don't have to be brilliant. You just have to remember what you promised each other." She closed the book softly. "That's what the calm really is. It's not being fearless. It's knowing you're not guessing alone."

The wren nodded, and the Vanderbilt watched the tight, worried set of her go loose — the same easy breath she'd felt at the marsh edge as a chick, the day the fog answered back.

About Spark & Anvil

Spark & Anvil is a 501(c)(3) public charity. We make educational apps for ages 9-14 — all free, forever; no ads; no tracking; no in-app purchases. DealTales is one of 140+ apps in the portfolio.

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- **ProofQuest** — formal proof techniques through Direct-Proof Dora and the Lemma Library
- **CuriosityQuest** — Texas geography exploration through Linger, Notice, and the Lantern in the Dark
- **QuillSpell** — spelling craft through the Word Wizard cast
- **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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