



QuestForge

Meet the Cast

Standard Edition

Spark & Anvil

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This book collects 5 chapter books from the QuestForge 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.

Contents

[Copyright & License](#)

[Contents](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Sheet](#)

[Roll](#)

[Fork](#)

[Hex](#)

[Hoard](#)

[About Spark & Anvil](#)

[More chapter books from Spark & Anvil](#)

[Methodology](#)

[License](#)

Introduction

The QuestForge 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.

— *The editors at Spark & Anvil*

Sheet

SHEET — every build is a legitimate story. point-buy stat-allocation with anti-min-max framing.



At the long wooden table in the QuestForge guild hall, a small wolverine-tween named Sheet slid three fresh character sheets across to three arguing players and said, "Show me. Don't tell me who's best. Just build."

The three had been fighting for a solid ten minutes. A tall rabbit wanted every point poured into Strength. A ferret insisted the "correct" build was all Dexterity. A slow, round mole hadn't said anything at all, just chewed her pencil and looked worried.

"Twenty-seven points each," Sheet said, sliding a little pile of tokens to each of them. "Spend them however you want. Six stats. Go."

The rabbit dumped nearly everything into Strength and grinned like he'd already won. The ferret spread hers thin and fast across Dexterity and Wisdom. The mole moved token by token, careful, filling in a little of everything, glancing up like she expected to be told she was doing it wrong.

Sheet leaned over all three sheets, reading the numbers like they were opening lines of a story.

"Okay," she said to the rabbit. "You built somebody who kicks a locked door instead of picking it. Loud. Direct. The party's going to hide behind you." To the ferret: "You built the one who's already three rooms ahead, checking for traps, whispering the plan." Then to the mole, who braced herself — "And you built the one nobody expects. Not the strongest at anything. Steady at everything. The one who's still standing when the plan falls apart."

The mole blinked. "That's... allowed?"

"That's a whole person," Sheet said. "That's three stories. Not one right answer and two wrong ones."



Sheet had learned that the slow way, back in the burrow-village where she grew up.

Her family were the clan-recorders — the wolverines who kept the long scrolls of every villager's strengths and weaknesses. As a kit, Sheet had loved the scrolls, but she'd read them like a scoreboard. She'd find the strongest digger, the fastest runner, the sharpest tracker, and she'd rank everyone against them. Once she'd told a quiet older cousin, right to his face, that his scroll was "kind of weak."

He hadn't argued. He'd just gone quiet, the way the mole had gone quiet at the table.

That night her grandmother had unrolled the cousin's scroll beside the digger's, side by side in the lamplight. "You see 'weak,'" she said. "I see a whole different job. The digger opens the burrow. Your cousin is the one who remembers where everyone is when the burrow floods. Neither scroll wins. They're not in a race, little one. They're in a *story*, together."

Sheet had stared at the two scrolls for a long time, the hot, ashamed feeling in her chest slowly loosening. She'd been reading people like columns of numbers to be beaten. They were columns of numbers that *meant something* — that told you what a person would do when the flood came.

She never read a scroll as a scoreboard again.



She walked to QuestForge at twelve, because a guild that built heroes out of numbers ought to understand that numbers were never the point.

Lorekeeper, the old badger who ran the hall, met her at the door. He didn't ask her to prove she could optimize. He asked one question. "What is point-buy character creation?"

Sheet didn't answer with a definition. She took three blank sheets and built three characters right there in the doorway — one lopsided toward Strength, one toward Charisma, one balanced flat across all six. She laid them in a row.

"This one solves things by lifting them," she said. "This one solves things by talking. This one solves things by never being caught off guard." She looked up. "Same twenty-seven points. Three completely different people. If you build them to win fights, you only ever wrote one of them."

Lorekeeper looked at the three sheets for a long moment. Then he smiled. "You belong here," he said.



A few weeks later a kid slumped into Sheet's workshop, sheet crumpled in his fist. He'd built a bard — high Charisma, low everything-else — and someone at his table had laughed and called it a "trash build."

"It can't even fight," he said, not looking at her. "I did it wrong."

Sheet knew that slump. She'd put it on her cousin's face once.

"Read me your Charisma," she said.

"Eighteen." He mumbled it like it was embarrassing.

"Eighteen." She whistled. "Okay. Your party walks up to a bridge, and there's a troll on it who eats anyone who crosses. Fighter can't out-punch a troll. Rogue can't sneak past a troll who's *staring right at the bridge*." She tapped his sheet. "But you? You walk up and you *talk to the troll*. You find out he's lonely. You get the whole party across and the troll waves goodbye."

The kid finally looked up. "That's not in the rules."

"It's the whole reason for the rules," Sheet said. "Every stat you didn't pour into Strength, you poured into being the person who gets the party through the scene the fighter can't touch. That's not a broken warrior. That's a working negotiator. You didn't build wrong. You built *someone*." She slid him a fresh sheet anyway. "And if you want to rebuild him tomorrow, that's allowed too. People change. So do characters. Nobody's stuck with a story they've outgrown."

He looked at his crumpled bard, then smoothed it back out flat on the table.



Later, when the workshop had emptied, the kid stopped in the doorway with one more question. Quieter now.

"How do you *know* a weird build is okay," he said, "when everyone at the table is telling you the numbers are wrong?"

Sheet thought about the two scrolls in the lamplight. About the hot, ashamed feeling that had finally let go.

"You feel it," she said. "That's the honest answer. When you make a choice that isn't the 'best' one but it's *yours* — there's this quiet, stubborn, that's-me feeling. Like you'd rather be the person you actually built than the winning-est one on paper." She looked at the row of sheets still lying on the table, all so different, none of them crossed out. "Every good party is like that. A little lopsided. Somebody strong, somebody sneaky, somebody who just refuses to be knocked over. Not one of them the 'right' build. All of them a piece of the story."

The kid nodded slowly, and Sheet watched the slump lift off his shoulders — the same way, years ago in the lamplight, hers had.

She didn't say the rest out loud, but she thought it, warm and certain: *there's no wrong way to spend the points. There's only the story you end up telling — and every single one of them is worth telling.*

Roll

ROLL — dice don't remember. every roll is its own universe.



At the back of the QuestForge game hall, a ferret-tween named Roll sat cross-legged on the floor and rolled the same twenty-sided die, over and over, into a wooden bowl.

A cluster of players had gathered to watch, because Roll had just rolled a 1. Then another 1. Then — impossibly — a third 1. The bowl went *tok, tok, tok*, and each time the little die came up showing the same lonely dot.

"Okay," said a fox-tween near the front, grinning. "Now you're locked out of ones. No way you get a fourth. You're WAY overdue for a big number."

Roll didn't look up. He just palmed the die, shook it, and let it drop.

Tok. A 1.

The crowd groaned like they'd been personally insulted. Roll finally lifted his cream-and-russet face, looking not the least bit surprised.

"Four ones," he said, warm and calm. "Want to know the odds my next roll is a 1?"

"Basically zero," said the fox. "The die's used them all up."

"One in twenty." Roll rolled again. A 14, this time. "Same as it was the very first throw. Same as it'll be the thousandth." He set the die in the bowl and let it sit there, small and quiet. "This die doesn't remember what it just did. It can't. Every roll is its own universe."



Roll had learned that the hard way, back in the burrow-village.

His family were dice-watchers — the ferrets who sat by the village games and tracked every throw. When he was small, he'd watched an old badger lose six games in a row and slam his fist on the table. "I'm OWED a good roll now," the badger had snarled. "The dice OWE me." And Roll, only knee-high, had believed him completely. It felt so *true*. Six bad rolls surely meant a good one was building up somewhere, like water behind a wall, ready to spill.

The badger lost the seventh game too. And the eighth. And when he finally won the ninth, he shouted that his patience had paid off — and Roll had felt the whole thing knot up in his stomach, because something about it didn't add up.

His grandmother, the oldest dice-watcher, had crouched beside him afterward. She didn't tell him the badger was foolish. She just asked, "You felt sure a good roll was owed to him. Didn't you? Felt it right here?" She tapped Roll's chest.

He nodded, miserable and confused.

"That feeling is real," she said. "But the die can't feel it. The die has no memory, no fairness, no debt. Your brain sees six losses and *builds a story* — a story where the world keeps score. The dice never read that story." She rolled one, slow and deliberate. "The pattern you think you see in a handful of rolls is almost always your own hope, dressed up as math."

Roll didn't fully understand yet. But the knot in his stomach loosened. The feeling had a shape now: his brain, hungry for a pattern, seeing one that wasn't there.



He walked to QuestForge at twelve, because a hall full of adventurers throwing dice at monsters seemed like exactly the place that needed someone to explain why the dice weren't out to get anyone.

Lorekeeper, the mentor who ran the hall, met him at the door and asked one question. "What do you know about dice?"

Roll didn't answer with a speech. He set six dice on the table — a d4, d6, d8, d10, d12, and the big d20 — and pushed the d20 forward.

"This one's fair," he said. "Every number, one to twenty, has the exact same chance. It doesn't get warmer or colder. It doesn't go on runs on purpose." He rolled it. A 3. "If I roll a 3 fifty times straight — which won't happen, but *if* — the fifty-first roll is still one-in-twenty for every number. The die can't lean. It has no memory to lean with."

Lorekeeper watched him a moment. "And when a player swears their dice are cursed?"

"Then their brain's telling a story the dice never agreed to." Roll shrugged, gentle. "I'd rather show them the real math. It's kinder than a curse."

Lorekeeper smiled. "You belong here," he said.



Roll's corner of the hall filled up fast, because losing streaks send people looking for answers.

A rabbit-tween slumped into the chair across from him one evening, ears flat. She'd rolled low all night — flubbed every attack, missed every save. "My dice hate me," she said. "I've lost so many, I *have* to be due. Right? The good rolls are stacking up somewhere."

Roll knew that slump. He'd felt it watching the badger.

"Let's test it," he said. "Roll this d20 ten times. Say your number out loud first."

"Twenty," she said, and rolled. A 4. Then 11, 7, 20 — "HA!" — then 2, 15, 8, 20 again, 6, 13.

"Two twenties," Roll said. "Now — before those two twenties, were you 'due'?"

"...I felt due the whole time."

"And the die gave you two anyway, right in the middle. Not because you earned them. Not because a losing streak paid them back. Just because each roll was fresh." He nudged the die. "Here's the sneaky part. Watch this." He picked up two smaller dice — two d6s. "One die is boring: every number equal. But roll TWO and add them, and something curves." He rolled the pair a dozen times, tallying. Sevens kept coming. Twelves and twos barely showed. "See? Seven's easy — lots of ways to make it. Six-and-one, five-and-two, four-and-three. But twelve needs a perfect six-and-six. One way only."

The rabbit leaned in. "So the numbers aren't all the same?"

"With two dice, no — the middle's crowded, the edges are lonely. That's a *distribution*. It tells you what to EXPECT over lots of rolls." He set the dice down. "But — and this is the whole thing — knowing seven is common doesn't mean your NEXT roll owes you a seven. Expectation is the long-run shape. Any single throw is still its own universe."



Later, when the hall had emptied, the rabbit came back, quieter now.

"When I was losing all night," she said, "and it felt so *unfair* — that feeling was just... wrong?"

Roll thought about the badger, and the knot in his own small stomach years ago.

"The feeling wasn't wrong," he said. "It was real. You really felt it. It's your brain doing the thing brains do — hunting for a pattern, keeping score, deciding the world owes you a turn." He looked at the die sitting still in the bowl. "But the dice can't feel owed. They can't feel anything. So when the losing feels heaviest, that's the moment to breathe and remember: the next throw doesn't know you lost. It's clean. It's brand new. Nothing is stacking up in there, waiting."

The rabbit sat with that. Slowly, her ears came up.

"So I'm not cursed," she said.

"You're not cursed," Roll agreed, warm and certain. "You just met a bad hour. The dice already forgot it. Maybe you can too."

And he watched the weight lift off her shoulders — the same heavy, owed feeling loosening its grip, the way his own had, long ago, in a burrow lit by lamplight.

Fork

FORK — two paths, both real, both lead somewhere.



At the crossroads outside QuestForge, a magpie-tween named Fork crouched in the dust and drew a line with a twig — then, at the end of it, she drew two more lines branching apart.

Around her, four kids sat cross-legged, waiting to hear what happened next in the story she was telling. She'd stopped at the good part on purpose. A locked door. A guard asleep beside it. A window three stories up.

"So," Fork said, tapping the split in her drawing. "Sneak past the guard, or climb to the window. Which one?"

"The window," said the tallest kid.

"Okay." Fork brushed away the guard-line entirely and leaned into the window-line, following it with her twig. "You climb. Halfway up, your foot knocks a flowerpot. It falls. Now you're clinging to a ledge, and somewhere below, the guard is waking up — but you're already too high for him to reach. You made a *different* problem than the guard-path would've made. A better one, maybe. That's yours now."

The tall kid grinned like she'd won something.

"See," Fork said, "if I'd told you both paths just led to *the guard wakes up either way* — you'd have felt it. Kids always feel it. A fake choice is a hallway wearing a costume."



Fork had learned to hate fake choices young.

Her family were path-mappers — magpies who spent generations watching which roads out of the village actually went somewhere and which just looped back. When Fork was small, an older cousin used to run a "pick-a-path" game at the crossroads, letting the littler birds choose left or right. Fork chose left three days running. Left, left, left. And every single day, the game ended in the exact same clearing with the exact same berries.

The fourth day she sat down in the road and refused to choose at all.

Her grandmother found her there, scowling at the dust. She didn't tell Fork to cheer up. She just asked, quietly, "It stopped feeling like choosing, didn't it? Like your picking never touched anything."

Fork nodded, hot behind the eyes. It was worse than being told *no*. Being told *yes*, *choose* — and then having the choice mean nothing — made her feel small and tricked and a little bit invisible.

"That," her grandmother said, tracing two real branches in the dirt, one curving toward the river, one toward the ridge, "is why a crossroads only counts if the two roads go somewhere *different*. Otherwise it isn't a crossroads. It's just one road pretending." She looked at Fork. "When you make a fork for someone, you make them a promise. Both ways real. Both ways yours."

Fork carried that promise the rest of her life.



She walked to QuestForge at twelve, because a place that built whole worlds out of stories ought to care whether the choices in them were real.

Lorekeeper, the old mentor who ran the story-workshops, met her at the gate. He didn't ask her to prove she was clever. He asked one question. "What is branching narrative?"

Fork didn't answer with a speech. She knelt and drew a split in the ground — one line forking into two — and then she drew a small different picture at the end of each: a river on the left, a locked tower on the right.

"Two paths," she said. "Both real. Both leading somewhere the other one doesn't." She pointed between them. "If I put the same thing at the end of both, I lied to whoever's walking. So I don't do that."

Lorekeeper looked at the two little pictures in the dirt for a long moment. "You belong here," he said.



Fork's workshop was full of half-drawn story-trees, branches pinned to the walls like maps of decisions nobody had made yet.

A boy came in one afternoon, chewing his lip. He'd written an adventure for his friends and it had gone flat. "I gave them a choice," he said, frustrated. "Fight the dragon or talk to the dragon. And it still felt boring. What did I do wrong?"

"Show me where the two paths go," Fork said.

He shuffled his notes. "Fight the dragon — the dragon attacks. Talk to the dragon — the dragon attacks."

Fork raised an eyebrow. "So both roads walk into the same room."

"...Oh."

"Try it like this." She took two blank branches and started drawing. "Talk to the dragon: the villagers tell you it's *hungry*. So maybe your players go find food and skip the fight entirely — and now the whole session is about a hunt instead of a battle." She tapped the other branch. "Fight the dragon: the villagers tell you it *stole their gold*. Now even winning isn't the end — there's treasure to return, a village to face, a choice about keeping some. Different setup. Different scenes. Different next choices." She sat back. "Same dragon. Completely different stories. *That's* the fork."

The boy stared at his two little branches, then laughed. "Mine wasn't a fork. It was a hallway with a fake door."

"Now you can feel it too," Fork said, pleased. "And here's the honest part — if there's really only one good road, don't dress up a fake choice. Just *tell* the story straight. A road that admits it's a road beats a maze that's secretly a road."



Later, when the workshop had emptied, the boy came back with one more question. Quieter now.

"When I give them a real choice," he said, "I don't know where it'll go. It kind of scares me. What if they pick the path I didn't plan?"

Fork thought about the crossroads. About sitting in the dust, refusing to choose, and how her grandmother had made her a promise in two lines of dirt.

"Then you get to be surprised too," she said. "That's not the scary part — that's the whole gift. When a choice is real, it stops being *yours* the second you offer it. It becomes theirs. And there's a feeling that comes with handing it over honestly — a nervous, wide-open, *anything-could-happen* feeling — that you only ever get when the choice actually matters." She looked out the window toward the crossroads. "A fake choice keeps you safe and keeps them small. A real one lets the story belong to everyone at the table. It's a little terrifying. It's also the best feeling there is."

The boy nodded slowly, and Fork watched something loosen in him — the same tricked, invisible feeling she'd once carried, finally letting go.

She didn't say the rest out loud, but she thought it, warm and certain: *the choices worth offering are the ones you can't fully steer. That open, uncertain feeling isn't a mistake. It's what it feels like when a choice is real.*

Hex

HEX — math you can SEE. range + area-of-effect on a grid.



At a low wooden table in the corner of the QuestForge hall, a small honeycomb-striped bee named Hex laid down a card, tapped one paper hexagon, and said, "There. You can reach that one. Count it yourself."

A player was hunched over the table, gripping a little wooden token like it might run away. Between the token and the far corner of the map sat a painted river, a scatter of trees, and — the player was fairly sure — certain doom. "I don't know how far I can move," she said. "I never know. I just guess and hope."

"No guessing today," Hex said. He slid a flat grid of hexagons under her token. "Your character moves four this turn. So." He touched the token's hex. "One." A hex forward. "Two." Another. "Three, four. Stop." He looked up. "That's your whole world for this turn. Everything you can touch is inside four steps. Everything you can't, isn't. No hoping."

The player stared at the little ring of reachable hexes. Then she moved her token — not to where she'd been afraid to go, but two hexes sideways, behind a painted tree, exactly on the edge of a hex she'd counted herself.

"See that?" Hex said, delighted. "You didn't guess. You *counted*. The math was sitting right there on the table the whole time. You just had to touch it."



Hex hadn't always found the grid so friendly.

He'd grown up in the hive-village, in a family of cell-builders — the bees who packed the hall walls with tidy hexagons, wax cell beside wax cell, for as long as anyone remembered. Hex had loved watching them work. What he had *hated* was the counting-day, when the elders asked the young bees to say how far apart two cells were.

The first time, Hex froze. The wall was huge. The cells blurred together. His face went hot and his wings clamped tight to his back, because everyone else seemed to just *know*, and he did not, and he was certain the number lived somewhere he couldn't reach.

His aunt, an old cell-builder with wax on her hands, sat down beside him without a word. She didn't tell him to try harder. She put one finger on the near cell and one on the far cell. "You're looking for the answer like it's hiding," she said. "It isn't. Walk it. Cell, cell, cell." She stepped her finger from hexagon to hexagon. "Four cells. That's the whole distance. It was never hiding. It was just waiting for you to count it."

The tightness in Hex's back let go all at once. The wall stopped being a scary blur and became a thing he could *walk with his finger*. Not memorized. Not guessed. Counted. From that day on, whenever a number felt too big to hold, Hex would find the grid underneath it and just — step across, one cell at a time.



He walked to QuestForge at twelve, because a place full of adventurers who kept *guessing* how far their spells reached clearly needed a bee who counted.

The Lorekeeper met him at the door and asked one question. "What is grid geometry?"

Hex didn't answer with a speech. He set his paper hex-grid on the table, placed a token, and pointed. "This character can move three. So watch." He walked a finger across the hexes. "One, two, three — this far, no farther." Then he laid a round paper template over a cluster of hexes. "And this is a firebloom spell. It burns everything inside two hexes of the center. These cells." He touched each one. "Not those. You can see it."

The Lorekeeper looked at the little ring of paper hexes for a long moment. "Most people tell me grids are just where the pieces stand."

"They're where the *rules* stand," Hex said. "How far you go. What's in reach. What gets caught in the blast. The grid is the math, sitting still so you can touch it."

The Lorekeeper smiled. "You belong here."



Hex's corner of the hall was always the loudest, because it was where arguments came to get settled.

Two players were mid-fight, both certain, both wrong. "My arrow reaches him," one insisted, pointing across the map at a goblin behind a low wall.

"Does it, though?" Hex said mildly. He slid the grid between them. "Your bow's range is five. Count."

The player counted, jabbing hexes. "One-two-three-four-five. Ha! Five! I reach!"

"You reach the *distance*," Hex agreed. "Now look at the wall." He laid a thin ruler-line of string from the archer's hex straight to the goblin's. It clipped the corner of the painted wall. "Your arrow has to travel that line. The wall's in the way. So?"

The player's face fell, then brightened. "So I move first. If I step one hex left —" she walked her token over — "the string goes clean, past the wall. *Then* I shoot."

"Then you shoot," Hex said. "You had two choices hiding in the same turn. Move-then-shoot, or shoot-and-miss. The grid showed you which was which. That's the whole trick — the crowded, too-many-choices feeling shrinks down to something you can count and see." He grinned at the other player. "And now it's your turn, and *you* get to argue with the grid instead of with him."



Later, when the table had emptied and the tokens were back in their box, the first player — the one who used to guess and hope — lingered.

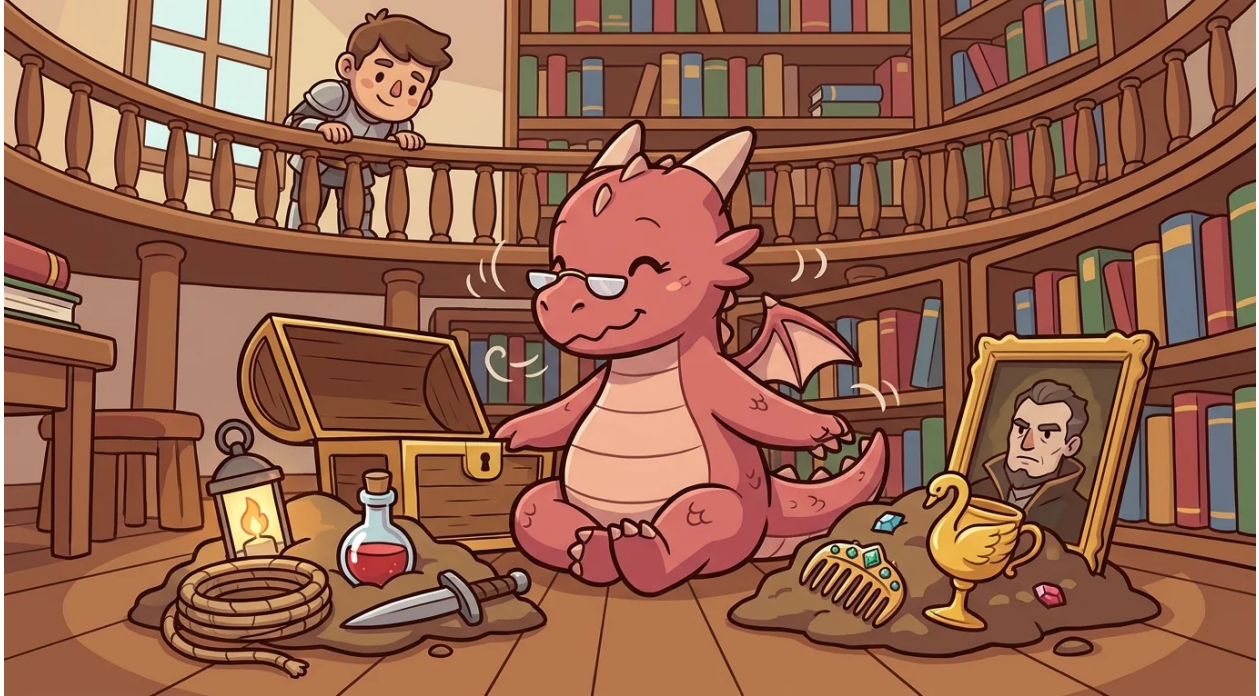
"When it's your turn and everything's happening at once," she said, quieter now, "how do you not freeze? There's so much to keep track of."

Hex thought about the wall of cells and the hot face and his aunt's wax-covered finger. "You stop trying to hold it all in your head," he said. "You put it on the table. The distance, the reach, the blast — you don't have to *remember* any of it if you can *touch* it. Count the hexes. Walk the line. Let the grid do the worrying." He set the little paper hexagon in her palm and folded her fingers over it. "The scary part was never the math. It was carrying it all invisibly. Once you can see it, your shoulders come down. Everything you need is right there, sitting still, waiting for you to count it."

She held the paper hex a moment, then tucked it into her pocket. Hex watched the tightness leave her shoulders — the same way, years ago, it had left his — and thought, warm and certain, that the crowded, impossible turns were usually just the ones nobody had laid out flat yet.

Hoard

HOARD — tools, not trophies. counter-tropic friendly dragon.



At the back of the QuestForge library, a small rose-scaled dragon sat cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by a spilled treasure chest, sorting it into two piles.

Hoard was not a fierce dragon. She was round-bellied and bookish, with soft little spectacles that kept sliding down her snout, and she was humming while she worked. Into the left pile went a coil of rope, a lantern, a healing potion, a plain iron dagger. Into the right pile went a gem-crusted comb, a goblet shaped like a swan, and a painting of a stern man nobody in the room recognized.

An adventurer leaned over the railing above her. "That's the dragon's hoard? You're just... sorting it?"

"I'm budgeting it," Hoard said, not looking up. She held up the rope. "This gets used. Bridges, cliffs, tying up bandits — it earns its place every week." She held up the swan goblet. "This has never touched a lip. It's beautiful. It's also dead weight in someone's backpack." She set the goblet gently in the right pile. "Tools go here. Trophies go there."

"Aren't dragons supposed to *love* trophies?"

Hoard smiled, and it was a genuinely kind smile, which was somehow the most surprising thing about her. "Dragons are supposed to do a lot of things," she said. "I read the rules. I decided not to."



Hoard had grown up in the library-village, where her family had been archive-keepers for longer than anyone could count.

Dragons live a very long time, and that had taught her family something slow and quiet: they had watched hundreds of adventuring parties pass through, load up on treasure, and stagger out the gates bent double under the weight of it. Half of what they carried, they never used. It just clanked around in their packs, souvenirs of quests they'd survived, until it got left behind at the next inn.

Little Hoard used to feel a strange ache watching that. She kept a shelf of her own once — a shelf of pretty things she'd been given, none of which did anything. She'd look at it and feel proud and also, underneath, faintly heavy, the way you feel when a room is too full.

Her grandmother, an enormous dragon with a voice like a warm avalanche, found her staring at the shelf one evening. "You don't play with any of it," her grandmother observed.

"I'm keeping it," Hoard said. "It's a hoard. Dragons keep hoards."

"Mm." Her grandmother nudged the swan goblet's ancestor — a jeweled thimble — with one careful claw. "A hoard is more useful when it's *shared*, little one. And a thing is more useful when it's *used*. Keeping isn't the same as treasuring. Sometimes keeping is just... holding on."

Hoard didn't clear the shelf that night. But the ache had a shape now, and the shape had words: *tools earn their place; trophies just take up room.*



She walked to QuestForge at fifteen, which is barely more than a hatchling for a dragon, because a place that built whole games out of treasure surely needed someone who understood what treasure was *for*.

Lorekeeper, the old mentor, met her at the gate and did not seem alarmed to be greeted by a dragon, which Hoard appreciated. He asked her one question. "What is resource economics?"

Hoard didn't lecture. She unslung her pack, tipped it out on the flagstones, and sorted the contents into two quick piles — rope and flint and a waterskin on one side, a tarnished medal and a chipped figurine on the other.

"This pile does jobs," she said, tapping the tools. "This pile does nothing but come along for the ride." She looked up at him over her spectacles. "A game gives players gold and gear as rewards. If you give too much, the gold means nothing and the packs overflow. If every item is a tool that solves a real problem, the players actually *reach* for their treasure. That's the whole trick. Reward them — but let the reward do work."

Lorekeeper crouched, picked up the chipped figurine from the trophy pile, and turned it over. "And this dragon at my gate," he said mildly, "who is friendly and bookish and sorting her own hoard onto my nice clean stones?"

"That's part of it too," Hoard said. "Nobody expects the dragon to be kind. Which is exactly why it's worth doing."

Lorekeeper set the figurine down. "You belong here," he said.



Hoard's workshop was the tidiest room in QuestForge, and one afternoon a young game-maker came in looking genuinely distressed.

"I gave my players *so much* good stuff," he said. "Three magic swords, a bag of gold, a flying carpet, a talking mirror. And now they're bored and the game's too easy and I don't understand what I did wrong."

Hoard nodded slowly. She'd expected this exact slump; she saw it often. "Lay it all out for me," she said, and he did, on her big oak table.

She picked up the first magic sword. "What problem does this solve?"

"Fighting monsters."

She picked up the second. "And this one?"

He hesitated. "...Also fighting monsters."

"And the third?"

"...Okay, yeah."

"Three tools for one job," Hoard said gently. "The moment they had one good sword, the other two became trophies. Cool trophies! But the players stopped feeling clever, because there was nothing left to *choose*." She slid the flying carpet forward. "Now — this. What does this let them do that nothing else does?"

His face changed. "Cross the canyon in chapter four. And spy on the tower. And escape the flood."

"That's a *tool*," she said, and she was almost delighted. "One item, three problems, real decisions. Keep that. And here's the kind part —" she gathered the two extra swords — you don't have to throw the trophies away. Let them hang on a wall. Let them be a story the players tell. Just stop counting them as rewards, because a reward that solves no problem isn't a reward. It's clutter with a shine on it."

The game-maker laughed, surprised, and started sorting his own table into two piles without being asked.



That evening, when the workshop was quiet, the young game-maker came back with a smaller question.

"The dragon thing," he said. "You could've made yourself scary. Everyone would've expected it. Why didn't you?"

Hoard took off her spectacles and thought about the shelf of pretty useless things she'd kept as a hatchling, and how light the room had felt the day she'd finally let it be shared.

"Because scary would've been a trophy too," she said. "It's the expected thing. It looks impressive and it does no work." She tapped the table where the tool pile sat, quiet and ready. "Friendly does work. Friendly gets you a table full of someone's whole game and a question at the end of the day. I'd rather be useful than fearsome." She smiled at him, warm and a little tired. "Turns out you get to choose what you are. Same as the treasure. Same as the story. You just have to be brave enough to pick the one that's actually good for something — instead of the one that only glitters."

The game-maker nodded, and Hoard watched the worried tightness go out of his shoulders, the way a too-full room feels when you finally open a window.

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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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