



CardForge

Meet the Cast

STANDARD EDITION

Spark & Anvil

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This book collects 6 chapter books from the CardForge 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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This is Volume 2 of 2 of the *CardForge — Meet the Cast* series; each volume is a complete standalone book you can read on its own.

For everyone who learns by hearing a story first.

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Introduction

The CardForge 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*

The Forcer

FORCER — they freely choose the card you wanted them to choose. The card-craft primitive of THE-DESIGNED-CHOICE: making chosen-feel-free what is in fact pre-arranged.



- "I"
- "II"
- "III"
- "IV"
- "V"
- "VI"
- "VII"
- "VIII"
- "IX"
- "X"
- "XI"



- "Q"
 - "J"
 - "10"
 - "Head"
 - "Odds"
 - "Tells"
gate-allow-text-pattern: '^([0-9]{1,2}|[A-Z]{1,5}|[!]{1,4}|[VX]{1,3}|[A-Z][a-z]+)\$'
reflection-prompts:
 - prompt: "Leo wondered whether a choice was really his if someone gently pointed him toward it. Have you ever felt drawn to pick something and later wondered whether the way it was offered made you feel that way?"
 - prompt: "The Forcer describes a warm, gentle nudge rather than a trap. How does it feel when someone helps you feel happy and proud about a decision instead of pressuring you — calm, warm, steady?"



"I just can't decide," Elara sighed, her finger hovering between a swirly cinnamon bun and a glazed apple tart. "The bun looks cozy, but the tart looks... adventurous."

The Forcer smiled gently. Her voice was like the soft hum of a spinning top. "A choice is a story you tell yourself about the future," she said, her gaze drifting toward the window. "Some stories are about comfort. Others are about discovery. I remember my grandfather used to say the shiniest things often hide the sweetest secrets." She subtly adjusted a silver tray on the table, and for a moment, the morning light caught the glaze of the apple tart, making it gleam.

Elara's eyes followed the flash of light. Her frown melted away. "The tart," she said, her voice suddenly certain. "I feel like an adventure today." She took the tart and bit into it, her eyes widening at the taste of spiced apple and apricot jam. "Wow. This is the best one. How did I know?"

"You listened," The Forcer said, her smile never wavering. "You always know. You just have to listen for the right story."



"One of these," her grandfather said, his voice a low rumble, "will make the little cuckoo in this clock sing again. The other will not. I want you to choose the one that holds the song."

She stared at the gears. They were perfect twins. How could she possibly know? She felt a flutter of panic. But then, she quieted her mind and just... looked. Her grandfather hummed a little tune, a wandering, happy melody. As he did, he used a pair of tweezers to nudge the right-hand gear just a millimeter forward. It was a tiny movement, almost nothing. But it was a movement toward her. It made the gear seem more present, more expectant. It was a story. A beginning.

Her hand moved without thinking. She picked up the right-hand gear.

Her grandfather's humming stopped. He fitted the gear into the clock's intricate metal heart, and with a gentle click, a tiny wooden bird popped out and sang a cheerful, perfect note. She beamed with pride. "How did you know?" she asked him later, after the clock was fixed.

He polished his spectacles. "I didn't," he said, which confused her. "Both gears were correct. I just wanted to see if you could feel which one I was hoping you'd choose. I gave it a little nudge, made it a little more important in the moment. The choice was always yours, my dear. I just helped you feel good about making it."

Her arrival at Cardforge Academy was quiet. She carried only a small leather satchel containing three silver coins and a book of blank pages. The Headmaster, a tall woman named Dean Elmsworth with spectacles perched on her nose, greeted her in a grand office that smelled of old paper and beeswax. The Dean was known for being direct, and she didn't waste time. She pushed a thick employment contract across her polished oak desk.

"Your methods are... unusual, I'm told," Dean Elmsworth said, her tone perfectly neutral. She gestured to two pens lying beside the contract. One was a magnificent goose-feather quill with a silver nib. The other was a simple, modern black pen. "You can sign with either."



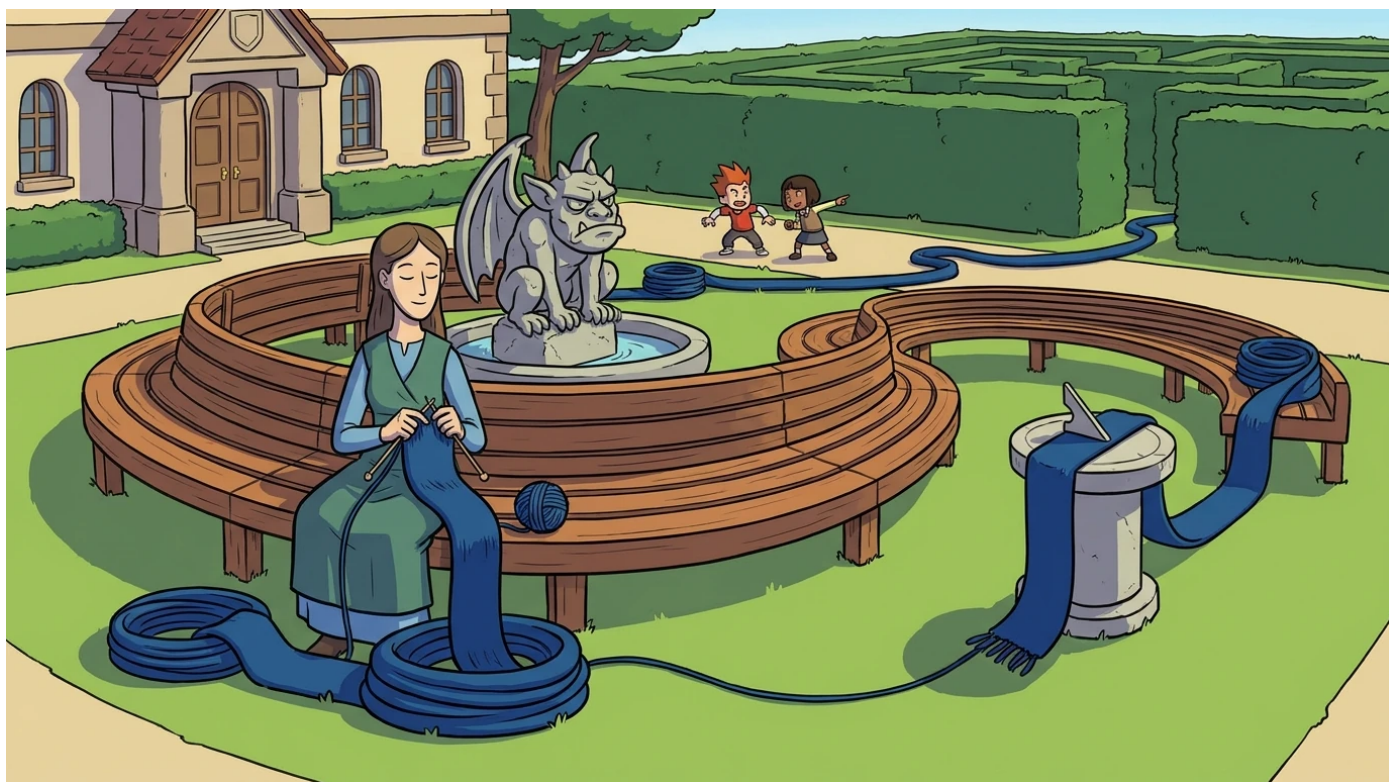
She put the pen down and looked at The Forcer, a slow, knowing smile spreading across her face. "Yes," the Dean said. "I see. Your methods are unusual. Welcome to the faculty."

In her classroom, The Forcer taught a single student at a time. Today it was Leo, a boy with restless hands who loved the idea of making games but got tangled up in giving players too many confusing options. The Forcer placed three old silver coins on the dark wood of the table between them.

"Each of these coins is different," she said. "One has a ship, for a journey. One has a star, for a destination. And one has a tree, for staying home. I'm going to turn around. I want you to look at them, and then just pick one up. Don't overthink it. Just choose."

The Long-Suit

LONG-SUIT — play out the opponent's cards in your long suit, then your small cards win. The card-craft primitive of LONG-AT-THE-FINISH: exhausting opponents' suit so your last small cards become winners.



- prompt: "Pip was sure his handful of small cards was useless and felt like he'd already lost. Have you ever felt discouraged by something that seemed too small or plain to matter, and then found it was exactly what you needed?"
 - prompt: "The Long-Suit believes patience turns little things mighty. How does it feel in your body when you wait calmly for your moment instead of rushing — steady, quiet, patient?"

The Long-Suit sat on the longest park bench in the Cardforge Academy courtyard, knitting. The bench, a proud oak monstrosity named "The F marathon," snaked around the entire central lawn. So did The Long-Suit's scarf. It was the color of a deep blue evening sky, and it pooled in neat coils at her feet before stretching out along the bench, following its every curve and corner. It disappeared behind a grumpy-looking gargoyle, reappeared on the other side of the sundial, and finally vanished into the distant hedge maze.

Two students, bustling with the hurried energy of a game just won, skidded to a stop nearby. One of them, a boy with a shock of red hair, pointed. "She's *still* knitting that thing," he whispered, not quite quietly enough. "It must be miles long by now."

The Long-Suit's needles gave a gentle *click-clack*. She didn't look up. She was a tall, serene figure, whose movements were never rushed. Her focus was on the simple, steady loop and pull of the yarn. The boy's friend nudged him. "Come on, Fidget. We'll be late for The Ruff's lecture on aggressive plays."



She remembered being small, sitting on a wooden stool in her grandmother's kitchen. The air smelled of cinnamon and drying herbs. Her task was to sort a giant basket of river stones they had collected that morning. Her grandmother wanted to build a long, winding border for her garden path. "Put the biggest, prettiest ones aside for the entrance," her grandmother had instructed, her hands dusty with soil.

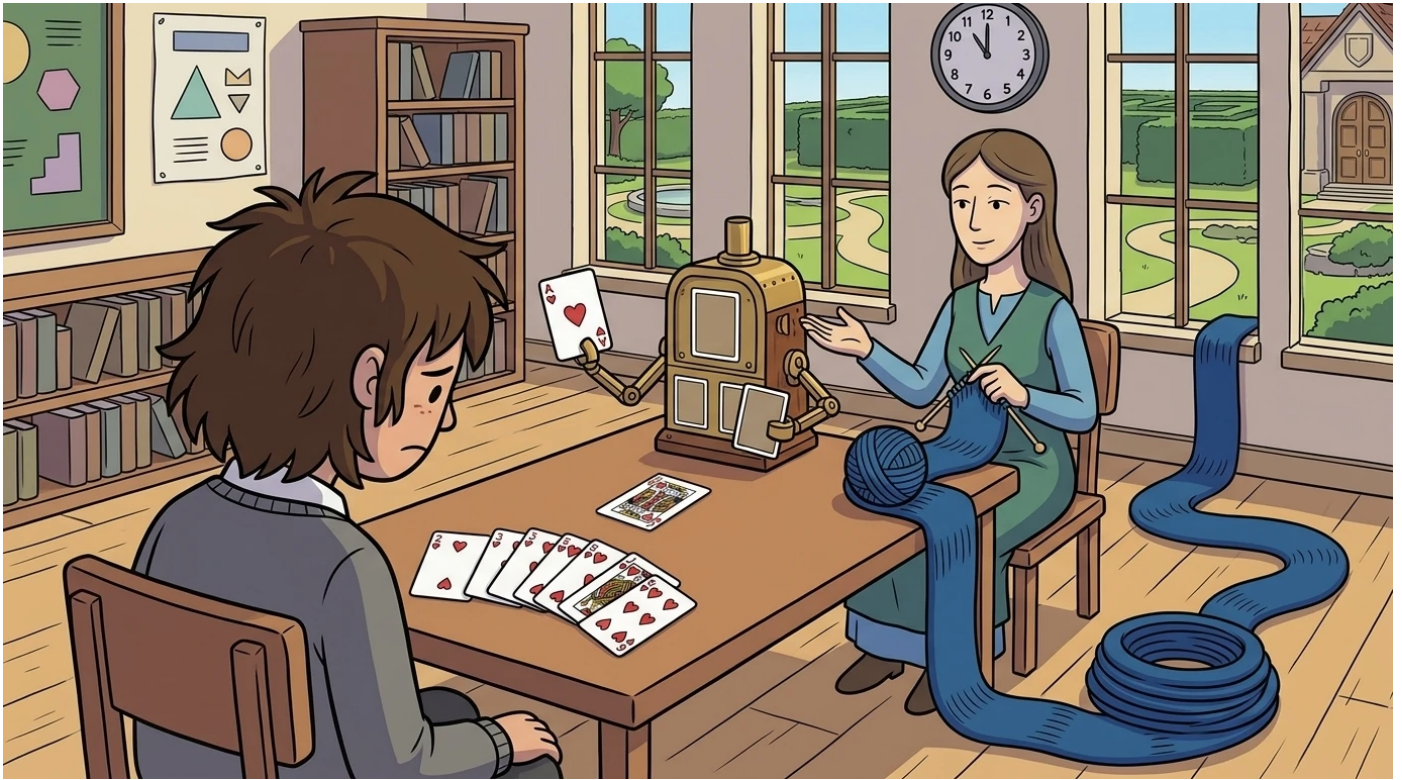


On her first day at the Cardforge Academy, The Long-Suit didn't carry a fancy briefcase or a stack of glowing tablets. She carried a large wicker basket, from which spilled the beginning of her deep blue scarf. The Head Dean, a stern but fair woman known only as The Finesse, met her in the Great Hall. The Dean's eyes scanned The Long-Suit's simple attire and her singular, strange accessory.

"Your application was... brief," The Finesse said, her voice echoing slightly off the high stone ceilings. "It just said, 'I teach the finish.'"

"That's right," The Long-Suit replied calmly.

"Cardforge is about complex strategy. Daring plays. Swift victories," The Finesse continued, beginning to walk down the hall. "We need instructors who can demonstrate immediate value."



A young student named Pip sat slumped over a table in The Long-Suit's classroom. The room was long and narrow, with windows that looked out over the winding garden paths. Pip's cards were fanned out, showing a frustrating hand: seven Hearts, but most of them were low. A two, a three, a five, a six. The only good ones were the King and the Jack.

"This hand is terrible," Pip sighed. "It's full of useless little cards. I'll lose every trick."

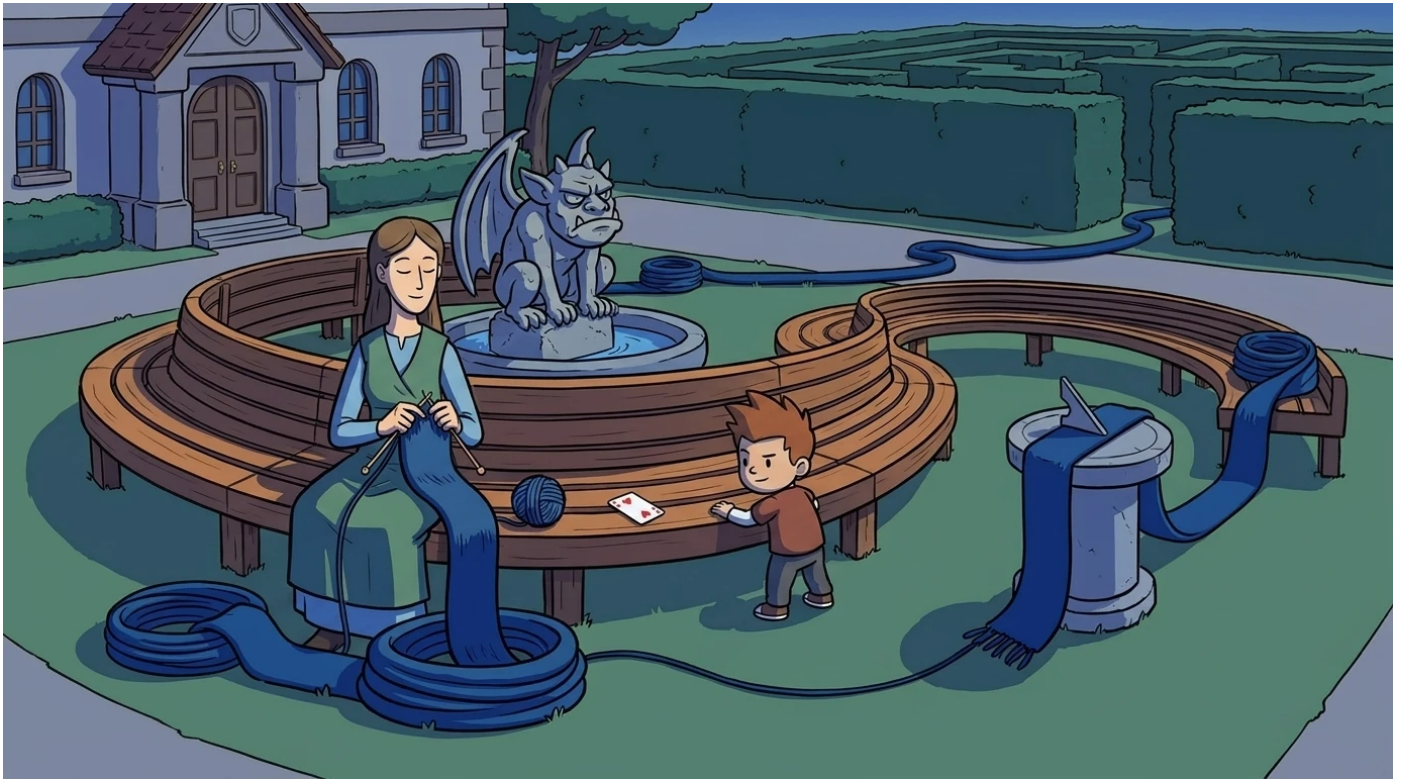
The Long-Suit pulled up a chair. Her own knitting rested in her lap, the blue scarf trailing around the legs of the table. "Show me useless," she said softly. She gestured to an opponent simulator across the table. "Play a hand with me. But do exactly as I say. Lead your highest Heart."

Pip, skeptical, played the King of Hearts. The simulator played the Ace, winning the trick. "See?" Pip said. "Lost."

"Again," The Long-Suit encouraged. Pip played the Jack of Hearts. The simulator played the Queen and won again. Pip groaned. "It's taking all my good cards!"

"Excellent," The Long-Suit murmured, a hint of excitement in her voice. "It is taking the *simulator's* good cards, too. Now, the simulator is out of Hearts. You have exhausted them. Look at your hand. What do you have left?"

Pip looked down at the five small Hearts. "Just the little ones."



The lesson was over, but Pip remained at the table, staring at the little two of Hearts. The card looked different now, holding the memory of its quiet, final victory. The Long-Suit had resumed her work, the *click-clack* of her needles a gentle rhythm in the quiet room.

"So a small card isn't always a weak card?" Pip asked, not looking up.

The Long-Suit paused her knitting, her hands resting on the soft blue wool. "Nothing is always anything," she said. "A card is only what the state of the game allows it to be. A lonely two of Hearts is weak. But a two of Hearts that is the last one standing, after all its bigger, louder brothers and sisters have done their job? That two of Hearts is a champion."

The Shuffler

SHUFFLER — the deck looks random. the order is yours. The card-craft primitive of HIDING ORDER INSIDE WHAT LOOKS LIKE A MESS: keeping a stacked deck secret while appearing to shuffle.



The Shuffler did not use a rake. Not in the typical sense. Standing in the middle of the Cardforge Academy's main courtyard, she held two long, fan-like rakes made of polished bamboo. A swirling ocean of autumn leaves, every shade from fiery crimson to dusty gold, surrounded her ankles. A young student, clutching a book to his chest, watched from the stone steps. He'd seen groundskeepers tidy leaves before. They made neat, boring piles. This was different.

With a motion as smooth as pouring tea, The Shuffler began to move. She didn't push the leaves. She lifted and tossed them, her rakes crossing and uncrossing in a quiet rhythm. A flurry of red and orange leaves would fly into the air, only to land in a slightly different place. It looked like she was just making a bigger, more glorious mess. The student squinted, certain she was playing some kind of game. But as she worked her way across the lawn, a pattern began to emerge from the chaos. The noisy, crunchy mess was becoming a quiet, flowing river of color, a perfect spiral that coiled into the center of the courtyard, with the deepest reds on the outside flowing seamlessly into the palest yellows at the heart of the design. She hadn't collected a single leaf. She had simply rearranged the mess into a masterpiece.



Long before she came to the academy, The Shuffler had learned her craft in a library that smelled of old paper and dust motes dancing in sunbeams. It wasn't a tidy library. Books overflowed from shelves, living in teetering stacks that rose from the floor like ancient trees. Her grandmother, the Head Librarian, never seemed worried by the clutter. "It's not a mess, my dear," she would say, her voice a low hum. "It's just resting."

One afternoon, a man in a hurry asked for a very specific book: *Turtles and Their Peculiar Notions of Time*. It hadn't been checked out in fifty years. The Shuffler's grandmother simply nodded. "My granddaughter will find it." The young Shuffler looked at the thousand-book towers with wide eyes. But her grandmother knelt beside her and whispered, not a location, but a rhythm. A sequence. "Two from the top of the poetry pile, slide them under the history stack by the window. Then three from that stack, move them to the fables corner. Go."

To the man, it looked like a child making a game of shuffling books. She moved stacks, slid volumes, and spun piles around with a focused, playful energy. The towers of books shifted and settled. But she wasn't being random. She was following the path her grandmother had whispered. After a minute of this frantic, yet graceful, reorganization, she stopped. She walked to a tall, wobbly stack of biographies, reached two-thirds of the way down, and pulled. The book slid out as if it had been waiting there for her. *Turtles and Their Peculiar Notions of Time*. Her grandmother smiled. "You see?" she murmured later, "Chaos is just a story you haven't learned to read yet. We just taught it a new chapter."



The Shuffler's arrival at the Cardforge Academy was a quiet affair. She carried a single leather satchel that seemed to contain nothing but decks of cards. The Headmaster, a stern man named The Caliper who valued straight lines and sharp corners above all else, greeted her in his office. His desk was buried under a mountain of student application files. He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "It will take me all night to sort these," The Caliper said, gesturing to the paper chaos. "A necessary evil. We must impose order."

The Shuffler set her satchel down. "Perhaps the order is already there," she said softly. "It's just hiding." The Caliper raised a skeptical eyebrow. With a nod of permission from him, she approached the desk. She did not read the files. She simply gathered the towering pile into her arms. Then, in a series of movements too quick and fluid to follow, she began to shuffle them. Not like cards, but like a baker kneading dough. The pile was split, folded, merged, and fanned in a flurry of paper. It looked utterly destructive. The Caliper winced, certain his entire filing system was now ruined.

After a few moments, she stopped. She calmly dealt the files into three distinct, perfectly squared-off piles on his once-cluttered desk. "Accepted," she said, tapping the largest pile. "Wait-listed," she said, tapping the medium one. "And these," she finished, touching the smallest, "are the interesting ones. The ones you'll want to read twice." The Caliper stared, then picked one at random from the "Accepted" pile. It was his top candidate. He picked another. His second choice. He looked at The Shuffler, his rigid posture softening just a little. "Welcome to the Academy," he said.



"It's just luck," said a student named Leo, slumping in his chair. "I build the perfect deck, but the cards come out in the wrong order every single time. It's useless." They were in The Shuffler's classroom, a cozy room that felt more like a den, with mismatched chairs and shelves filled with card boxes of every shape and size.

The Shuffler picked up Leo's deck. "You think the cards are in charge," she said, her voice gentle. She held the deck in her hands and began to shuffle. It wasn't a fancy magician's shuffle. It was a comfortable, slightly messy one. A few riffles that didn't perfectly interlace, an overhand shuffle where some clumps seemed to fall at random, and a simple cut. It looked exactly like the way Leo's dad shuffled when they played Go Fish. It looked, for all the world, completely and totally random.

She placed the deck back in front of him. "Don't draw," she instructed. "Just close your eyes. Imagine your first five turns. What cards do you need to see?"

Leo sighed but did as she asked. He imagined his first turn, needing his little resource card, the Sun-Stone. Then the Sky-Serpent on turn two. The Shield of Glass on turn three. The Twin-Feather Amulet and the Mountain-Caller on turns four and five. It was the perfect opening. An unstoppable sequence he'd never once drawn.

"Okay, I've imagined it," Leo said, opening his eyes.

"Good," The Shuffler said with a small smile. "Now, turn over the top five cards."

Leo did. There was the Sun-Stone. Then the Sky-Serpent. The Shield of Glass. The Twin-Feather Amulet. And the Mountain-Caller. They were all there, in the exact order of his perfect dream. His mouth fell open. "But... you shuffled it," he whispered, his voice full of awe. "I saw you. It was a mess."

The Shuffler's smile widened. "Was it? Or did I just make the mess look convincing?"



Leo stared at the five perfect cards laid out before him, then at the rest of the deck, then back at his teacher. He looked troubled. "But... isn't this cheating?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

The Shuffler had moved to the window, watching the last of the autumn leaves drift down from the trees in the courtyard. She didn't turn around immediately, letting his question hang in the quiet air of the classroom. The spiral of leaves she'd made earlier was still there, a perfect pattern on the grass.

"Is it cheating for a river to know which way it's flowing?" she asked, her voice calm and even. She turned to face him, her expression warm. "You didn't change the cards in your deck, Leo. You just learned the path they wanted to take. All a good shuffle does is hide that path from your opponent, while making it clear to you."

She walked back to the table and tapped the deck gently with one finger.

"The deck looks random," she said. "The order is yours."

Leo let out a slow breath, and the worried knot behind his ribs came undone. He felt calm now, and quietly proud — not because he had a secret trick, but because the world felt a little less random and a little more his to understand.

The Squeezer

SQUEEZE — late in the hand, an opponent who guards two suits must let one go. The card-craft primitive of **FORCING SOMEONE TO MAKE AN IMPOSSIBLE CHOICE**.



- prompt: "Mina felt her breath catch as she was forced to choose, then let out a long breath once she did. How does it feel in your body when you finally make a hard choice — does the tightness ease, does your chest feel calmer?"





The Squeezer arrived at the Cardforge Academy on a Tuesday. She didn't have a trunk full of powerful cards or a staff that crackled with energy. She carried a small, polished wooden box. The head of the academy, Professor Deckard, met her in the grand entrance hall. He was a man who liked things to be clear and simple.

"Welcome," the Professor said, extending a hand. "We're eager to see your methods."

The Squeezer smiled faintly and opened her box. Inside, resting on velvet lining, were two identical, smaller boxes wrapped in plain brown paper. They were impossible to tell apart. "A small gift to mark my arrival," she said in her quiet voice. "You may choose one."

Professor Deckard looked from one box to the other. "How will I know which one to pick?" he asked.

"You won't," The Squeezer replied. "In this one," she said, tapping the box on the left, "is the key to your new, upgraded office. It has a lovely view of the ink-gardens." She then tapped the box on the right. "And in this one is the key to the faculty dining hall, where a surprise welcome cake is waiting for you."

The Professor frowned. He needed to get into his office to start his work, but he didn't want to be rude and miss the welcome cake his staff had prepared. He needed both keys. But he could only choose one box. He stood there for a full minute, caught. Finally, he pointed to the box on the left. The Squeezer handed it to him. He opened it and found the office key.



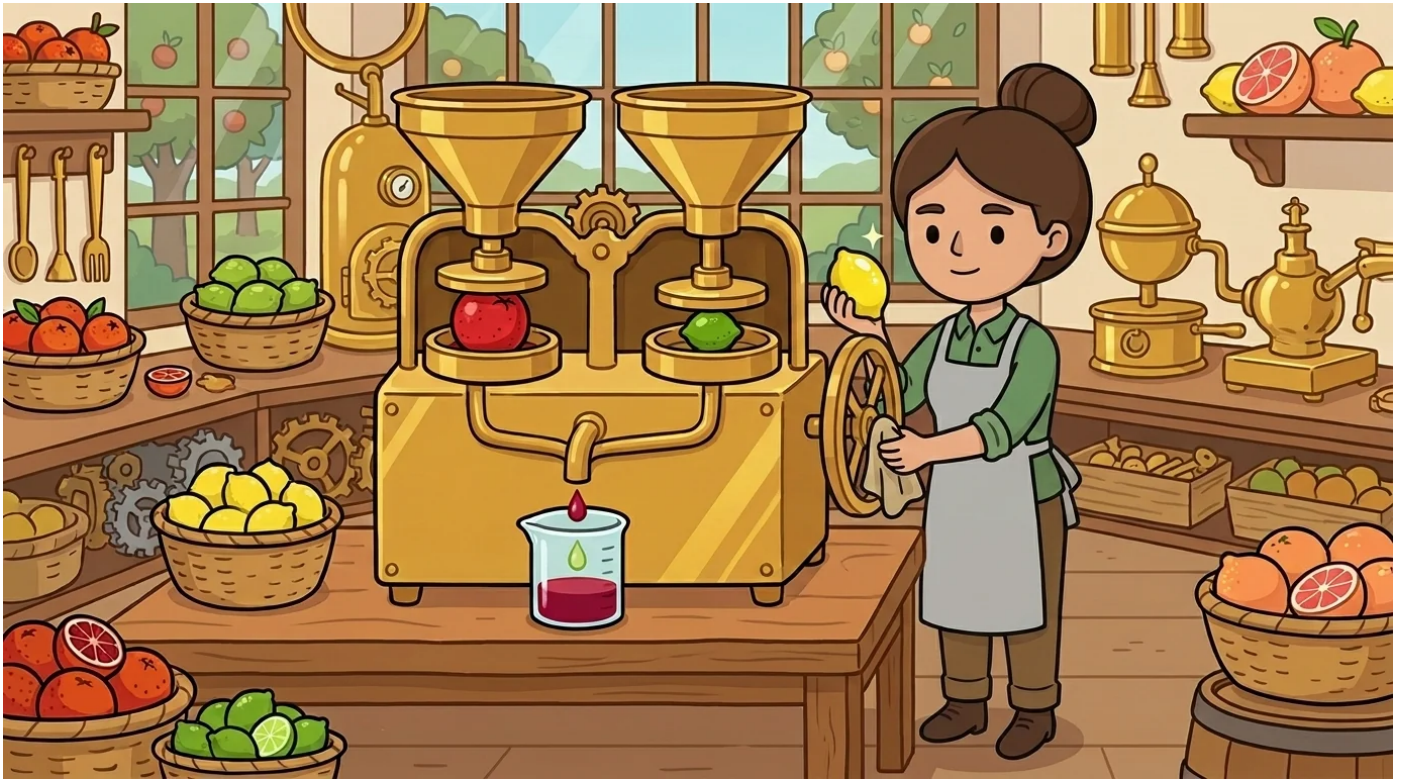
"My deck keeps losing at the last minute," said Mina, a young student with bright, frustrated eyes. She had her cards spread out on the table in The Squeezer's workshop. "I have my Crystal Guardians to protect my library, and my Stone Sentinels to protect my hand. But my opponents always seem to break through one of them."

The Squeezer didn't look at the cards. Instead, she placed two delicate teacups on the table. She filled one with sparkling apple cider and the other with rich hot cocoa. "Your Guardians are the cider," she said. "Bubbly and clever. Your Sentinels are the cocoa. Strong and comforting. Both are good. Now, hold them." Mina cupped her hands around the two teacups.

From the ceiling, a large, flat wooden panel began to descend, suspended by silent pulleys. It was moving very, very slowly. "This is the end of the game," The Squeezer said calmly. "You have few cards left. Your opponent is applying pressure. You can hold both cups for now. But the press will not stop."

Mina watched the panel get closer. Her arms were steady. But soon, the panel was just inches above the cups. To save one, she'd have to snatch it away. But in doing so, she would have to abandon the other to be crushed. "I can't save both," Mina whispered.

"No, you can't," The Squeezer agreed. "So you must ask yourself: which one do you need more? The cleverness of the cider, or the comfort of the cocoa? There is no wrong answer. But you must choose. If you try to save both, you will lose both."



Mina sat quietly for a moment after rearranging her deck. She had removed the Crystal Guardians entirely, replacing them with cards that made her Stone Sentinels even stronger. Her deck felt smaller, but more solid. More certain.

"But doesn't it feel... a little mean?" Mina asked, looking up. "Forcing someone into a corner like that? Making them give something up?"

The Trumpkeeper

TRUMPKEEPER — trump cards are saved bullets. spend the right one at the right time. The card-craft primitive of TEMPO MANAGEMENT through trump-card timing.



- prompt: "The Trumpkeeper waits quietly for the perfect moment. How does it feel in your body when you hold back and stay patient instead of rushing — calm, steady, quietly ready?"







Elara sat quietly, looking at the Stonebreaker Giant in her hand, then at the other, smaller cards in her deck. The classroom was peaceful now, the only sound the soft ticking of a wall clock. The Trumpkeeper sat at their desk, using a soft cloth to polish a single, dark, and impossibly ancient-looking Spiced Acorn that they kept under a small glass dome. "But what if I wait too long?" Elara asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "What if I save my Giant, and the game ends before I get to play him? Then he's just... wasted." The Trumpkeeper looked up, their eyes kind. They stopped polishing the acorn and met her gaze. "A saved card is never a wasted card," they said. "It is a lesson for the next game. And the game after that. The most powerful weapon is not the giant in your hand." They paused, giving the words time to settle. "It is the giant your opponent *knows* you are holding back." The Trumpkeeper then reached into a simple wooden bowl on their desk and held out a plain, unshelled peanut. "Patience," they said with a small smile. "It's a skill. And it tastes better when you open it at just the right moment."

Lead and Follow

partnership signaling — the cards you legally play are a code to your teammate; one partner signals with a card (high-low, suit-preference), the other reads it and responds; two hands play as one plan



The partnership table at the CardForge academy sat four to a game, two against two, and the rule everybody learned first was the hardest one to believe: *you cannot tell your partner what you have*. Not out loud. Not with a wink. The only language allowed was the cards themselves.

Lead and Follow were partners, seated across from each other, and for the whole first week they were terrible. Not because they played badly — each of them played *beautifully*. The trouble was that they played *alone*. Lead would win a trick with a clever card and Follow, having no idea what Lead was planning, would throw away exactly the card Lead needed. Two good players, two good hands, sitting an arm's length apart, and somehow always working against each other.

"We keep losing," Follow said after another hand slipped away, "and I don't even know *why*." She fanned her cards and stared at them like they might explain. Across the table, the opposing pair — the Sharps — shared a small, knowing smile, and it stung, because the Sharps didn't seem to be doing anything clever at all.



Their coach, an old card who had seen ten thousand hands, pulled up a stool. "You two are trying to win with your own hand," she said. "But partnership isn't two hands. It's one hand split between two people who've learned to talk without talking."

She tapped Lead's cards. "The cards you *choose* to play are a sentence. When you lead a suit, you're saying something. When you throw a card away, you're saying something. Your partner is *listening* to every card — and so are your opponents, but only *you two* share the code." She looked at Follow. "You've been reading your own hand. Start reading *his*."

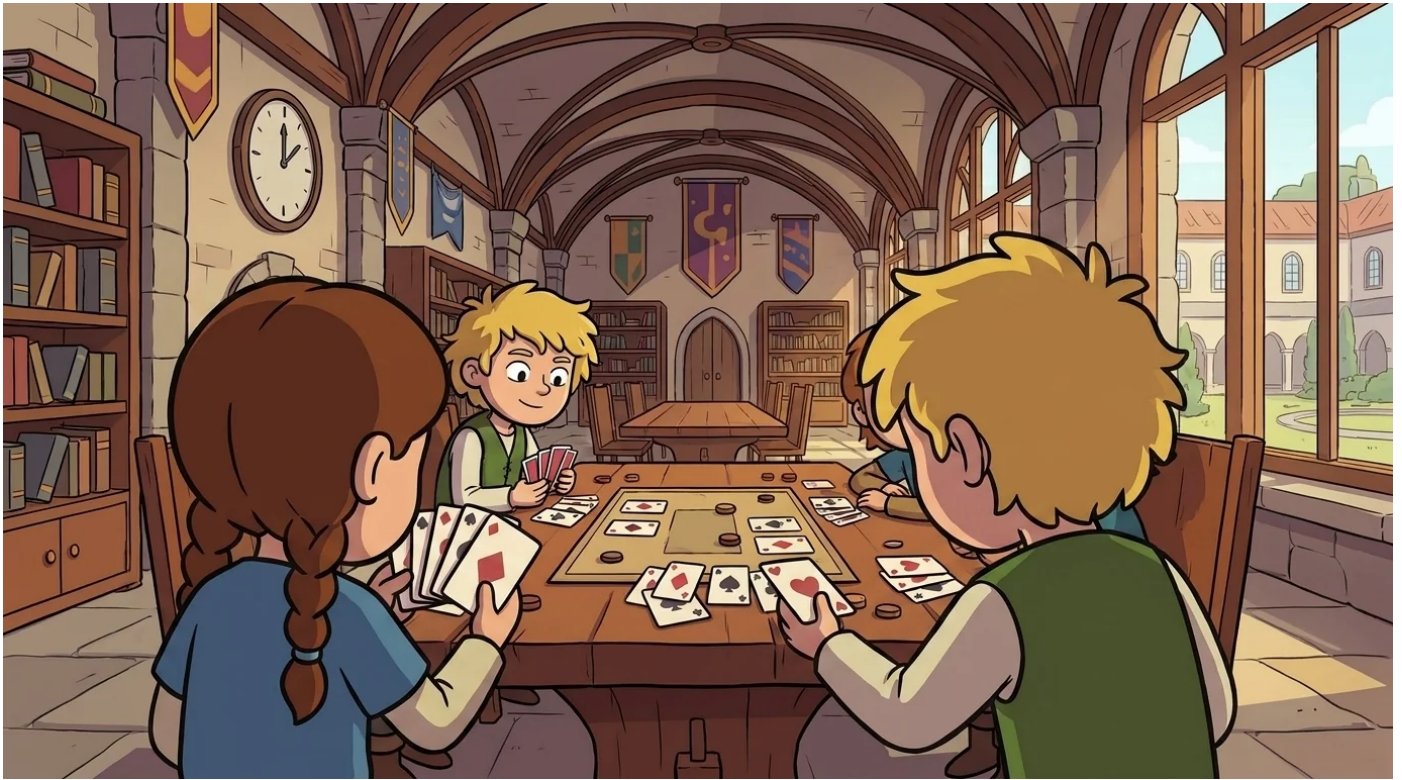
Lead turned this over slowly. A card as a sentence. He'd always thought of a card as just a move. But of course — Follow could see every card he played. What if which card he chose could *mean* something?



So they built a language, one legal signal at a time.

"High-then-low," the coach said, "means *I like this suit — keep leading it*. Low-then-high means *I've got nothing here, get out*." She dealt a practice hand. Lead, holding strength in hearts, played his nine of hearts first — deliberately high — then, next chance, a two. A little sentence: *hearts, partner, hearts*.

And across the table Follow *heard* it. Not with her ears — with her attention. High then low. *He likes hearts*. So when her turn came she led hearts straight back into Lead's strength, and Lead's carefully-saved cards came marching home, trick after trick. The Sharps blinked. They had seen the exact same nine and two that Follow had seen — the signal was played in the open, right there on the table — but they didn't share the code, so to them it was just two cards. To Lead and Follow, it was a whole plan spoken out loud in a language only they two knew.



By the end of the month, they barely seemed to think at all.

Lead would drop a card and Follow's eyes would flick to it and she'd simply *know* — play the diamonds, save the spade, he's out of clubs. And she'd answer with a card of her own that told him something back, and the two of them wove hand after hand like they were passing notes in a language made entirely of hearts and spades. The coach watched them and nodded. "*That's it,*" she said. "Two players, one mind. You're not guessing what your partner has anymore. You're *listening* to what they told you." The signals were never secret — everyone could see them — but only a partnership that had built the code together could actually speak it.



They won the academy's partnership round that spring, and afterward Follow said the strangest part wasn't the winning.

It was the quiet. She and Lead had spent the whole final hand not saying a single word, and yet she'd felt closer to him than to almost anyone — that warm, clicked-in feeling of being *completely understood* by someone who could read her perfectly and still keep every promise the cards had made. They gathered up the deck together, and Lead shuffled, and neither of them needed to say *good game*, because they'd been saying it to each other all afternoon, one honest card at a time. Two hands. One plan. And somewhere under all the strategy, the simple, steady joy of not having to play alone anymore.

About Spark & Anvil

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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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