



CivicForge

Meet the Cast

STANDARD EDITION

Spark & Anvil

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This book collects 5 chapter books from the CivicForge 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 1 of 2 of the *CivicForge — 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 CivicForge 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*

Verdis

VERDIS — the patient listener. weigh sides; don't pre-decide.



In the middle of the Youth Council room, three kids were all talking at once, and Verdis was not saying a single word.

She sat in the low wooden chair she liked best, her spectacles pushed down her nose, a small brass scale resting on the table in front of her. One kid wanted the empty lot turned into a park. One wanted the money spent fixing the cracked-up potholes on Mill Street. One kept jabbing a finger at a folder of papers nobody else had read.

"Well?" the finger-jabber demanded. "You're the listener. Say who's right."

"Not yet," Verdis said.

She reached out and set a small stone on the left pan of the scale. "That's the park." A second stone, right pan. "That's the potholes." She tapped the folder. "And this is everyone who isn't in the room. The little kids who'd use the park. The grown-ups whose tires blow out on Mill Street. They get weight too."

The three kids went quiet, watching the scale tip a hair one way, then settle.

"See how it moves?" Verdis said softly. "When I only heard the loudest voice, the scale wasn't even out. I was just agreeing with whoever spoke first." She nudged her spectacles up. "So I stop. I listen to all of it. I read the folder. Then I let the scale do what it does — slowly."

"That's so *slow*," the finger-jabber groaned.

"It is," Verdis agreed, not one bit sorry. "The slow part is the whole point."



Verdis had learned that the hard way, back home in the slow-river valley.

When she was small, two of her cousins had a furious fight over whose turn it was on the rope swing, and Verdis — wanting it to stop, wanting to be helpful — had blurted out an answer before either of them finished talking. "It's Bram's turn. Obviously."

It was not, obviously, Bram's turn. She'd guessed. And because she'd said it loud and fast and sure, both cousins believed her, and the quieter one walked off hurt, thinking nobody had even heard her.

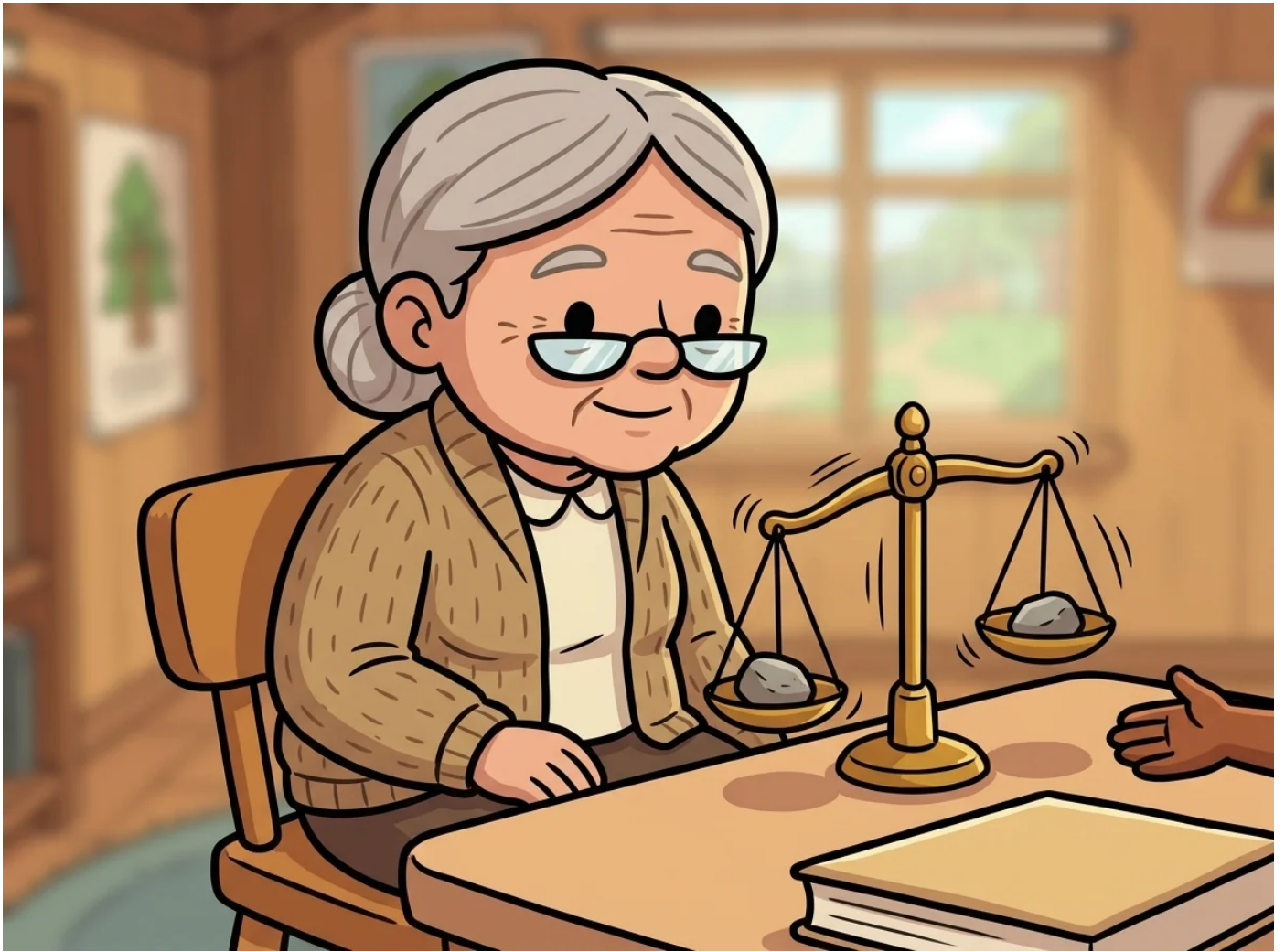
That night Verdis felt awful in a way she couldn't name. Her stomach was tight. She kept replaying the quiet cousin's face.

Her grandmother, an old bear with a slow, low voice, sat down beside her. She didn't say *you were wrong*. She just asked, "You decided before you listened, didn't you?"

Verdis nodded, miserable.

"That itchy, guilty feeling — that's a good feeling to have," her grandmother said. "It's telling you the truth. You skipped the weighing. You wanted the arguing to end more than you wanted to be fair." She patted Verdis's paw. "Being fair isn't about being fast, little one. It's about holding every side long enough to feel its real weight. Even the side that's standing off in the corner, saying nothing."

The tight feeling loosened, just a little. It still hurt — but now it had a shape. *I decided before I weighed*. Somehow, naming it made it something Verdis could carry, and learn from, instead of just ache over.



She walked to the Youth Council at twelve, because a place that argued about what was fair ought to have someone who wasn't in a hurry.

Liberty, the mentor who ran the council, met her at the door and asked one question. "What is justice?"

Verdis didn't answer with a speech. She set her little scale on the table, put a stone on each pan, and let it wobble to a stop between them.

"It's not about picking a winner fast," she said. "It's the weighing. You listen to every side — even the side that isn't in the room. You read what things actually say. *Then* you decide. And you stay honest about it: sometimes the weighing gives a clear answer, and sometimes it just shows you that good people really do disagree."

Liberty looked at the scale, still trembling toward level. "Most people," she said, "come in already knowing who they want to win."

"That's not weighing," Verdis said. "That's just looking for someone to agree with."

Liberty smiled. "You belong here."



Verdis's workshop filled up fast, because there is never a shortage of arguments.

A boy came in one afternoon, arms crossed, sure of himself. "I already know who's right," he announced. "I don't need the scale."

"Okay," Verdis said mildly. "Tell me the other side's best point."

The boy opened his mouth. Closed it. "I... don't know their best point. I know why they're *wrong*."

"Those aren't the same thing," Verdis pushed the folder across to him. "Read this first. It's from the people your side never talks to." She waited while he read, watching his crossed arms slowly come undone.

"Huh," he said finally. "They're not being unfair on purpose. They just want a different thing, and it kind of makes sense for them."

"Now put a stone on the scale for them." He did. The pan dipped. "Feel that? The scale just told you your first answer was too light. You'd only weighed one pan."

"So who wins?" he asked.

"Weigh it and see." Verdis leaned back. "Maybe one side really is better once you count everybody. Then you say so — clearly. Or maybe both sides have a fair claim, and the honest answer is *this is genuinely hard, and here's exactly where we disagree*." She tapped the level scale. "Saying that out loud isn't weakness. It's the bravest, most honest thing a council can do."

The boy stared at the two stones, balanced, neither one falling. And for the first time all day, he didn't look like he was trying to win. He looked like he was thinking.



Later, when the room had emptied, the boy came back. He was quieter now.

"When the scale just... stays even," he said. "When you can't pick a side. Doesn't that mean you failed?"

Verdis thought about the rope swing. About the quiet cousin's face. About her grandmother's slow, low voice in the dark.

"No," she said. "That's the honest weight. You held every side. You read the folder. You counted the people who weren't even here. And the truth turned out to be *this is hard*." She looked at the little scale, level and calm. "Skipping that — deciding fast so the arguing stops — that's the only real failure. I know, because I did it once, and I still remember exactly how bad it felt."

The boy nodded slowly.

"The weighing isn't the boring part before the answer," Verdis said. "The weighing *is* the answer. When you've truly held all of it — the loud and the quiet, the here and the not-here — there's this steady, settled, unhurried feeling. Like a scale that's finally allowed to rest." She smiled. "That feeling means you were fair. And being fair, it turns out, feels a lot like being patient."

Aera

AERA — open windows. keep what's free; close only what must be closed.



The Youth Council hall had a hundred tall windows, and every single one was open.

Wind moved through the room in long, easy breaths. Papers rustled. Somewhere a kid was laughing too loud. A snowy owl named Aera stood at the front, small and cream-feathered, watching all of it with the calm of someone who had counted the windows on purpose.

A council member banged a little gavel. "I move that we close every window," he said. "The wind keeps blowing our papers everywhere. It's a mess."

The room murmured. It did sound reasonable.

Aera didn't argue. She just walked to the nearest window, the one letting a warm draft over the whole hall, and rested one wing on the frame like she was about to shut it. Then she stopped.

"Before I close this," she said, "answer me. Whose window is it?"

"...Everyone's."

"And what does closing it cost?" She tilted her head toward the room, where the breeze was keeping forty kids from sweating through a long afternoon. "The papers, or the air?"

The council member opened his mouth, then closed it.

Aera reached down instead and picked up a single flat stone off the sill. She set it gently on top of the loose papers. They stopped fluttering. The wind kept moving. The window stayed open.

"There," she said. "The papers were the real problem. Not the window." She looked around the quiet, breathing hall. "So we fixed the papers, and we kept the air. That's the whole job, mostly. Figuring out how small the fix can be."



Aera learned to love open windows because of one that almost got shut on her.

When she was little, high in the mountains, a storm blew a shutter loose on her family's roost and it banged all night. So the grown-ups made a rule: every shutter closed, always, dawn to dusk. Safer that way.

For a week, Aera sat in the dark.

She hadn't known how much she loved the morning light until it was gone — the way it came in gold across the floor, the way she could watch the valley wake up. The roost was safer, sure. It was also small and stuffy and sad, and nobody had asked her whether the trade was worth it.

Her grandmother found her sitting by the shut shutter one afternoon, just staring at the crack of light along its edge.

"You miss the window," her grandmother said. It wasn't a question.

Aera nodded, her throat tight. "One shutter banged. So they closed all of them. Even the good ones. Even mine."

Her grandmother was quiet a long moment. Then she reached up and eased just Aera's shutter open — only that one — and the light poured back in like water.

"There," she said softly. "The banging one, we latch. The rest, we leave. You don't shut out the whole sky to stop one noise, little one." She looked at the gold spilling across the floor. "Open is the ordinary thing. Closed is the rare one — and it should always cost you something to do it, or you'll do it too easily."

Aera sat in the returned light and felt her chest unclench. The word for what she'd lost, and then gotten back, was small and enormous at the same time: *free*.



She walked to the Youth Council at twelve, because a place that made rules for everyone ought to understand what a rule takes away.

Her mentor, an old owl named Liberty, met her at the door. She didn't ask Aera to prove she was clever. She asked one thing. "A council can close any window it likes. Why shouldn't it?"

Aera didn't answer with a speech. She walked past Liberty into the hall, went to a shuttered window in the corner — the only closed one — and pushed it open. Light and wind spilled in.

"Because someone loved this one," Aera said. "And nobody checked before they shut it." She looked back. "You *can* close a window. But first you have to say whose it is, who it hurts, and whether the thing you're afraid of is really that window's fault." She pointed at the corner. "That one was shut because of dust. But dust you sweep. You don't need to take the light for that."

Liberty looked at the open corner for a long moment. "You belong here," she said.



Aera's workshop was full of windows, some open, some cracked, some latched — and a boy who wanted to slam them all.

"There's too much noise in the study hall," he said, frustrated. "Everyone talking, all the time. We should just ban talking. Whole building. Done."

Aera knew that feeling — the itch to fix a mess with one big rule. She'd felt it about a banging shutter once.

"Okay," she said. "Let's try your rule on. Who does 'no talking, ever' close a window for?"

He thought. "The... talkers?"

"And the kids working on a group project together? And two friends who only see each other at lunch? And someone asking for help?" She wasn't scolding; she was just counting. "Your rule shuts all their windows to fix a few noisy ones."

The boy frowned. "But some kids really can't study with the noise."

"Right — so there's a real problem in there. Someone's actually getting hurt: they can't learn." She nodded seriously. "That means closing *something* is fair. The question is how little." She slid a card toward him. "Not 'no talking ever.' Maybe 'quiet voices in the reading corner.' Maybe 'no talking during tests.' The smallest crack that fixes the real thing."

His eyes lit up. "And then... check if it worked?"

"And open it back up if it didn't." She grinned. "A rule you can undo is braver than one you can't. Try it for a month. Keep what helped. Reopen the rest." She spread her cards. "That's the whole craft. Start open. Find who it costs. Fix only what's really breaking. Close as little as you can — and leave the window able to open again."

The boy went quiet, turning it over. "That's... a lot more work than just banning it."

"It is," Aera agreed. "Freedom usually is."



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

"How do you *know*," he said, "when a window really needs closing? It always feels like either everything's allowed or nothing is."

Aera thought about the dark week, and the shutter, and the gold light coming back.

"You don't get a bell that rings," she said. "You get a pull. A tug both ways — you want to keep the room free, and you want to keep the scared kid safe, and both of those are good, and they don't fit." She pressed a wing lightly to her own chest.

"That heavy, tight, pulled-apart feeling? That's not you being bad at it. That's you doing it right. The people who feel nothing are the ones who just slam every window, or leave them all open and let someone get hurt."

She looked out the wide, breathing window toward the mountains.

"Sit with the tug," she said. "It means you're weighing something real. And when you finally choose — the smallest fix, the one you can undo — that tightness lets go, just a little. Like a held breath you finally get to let out."

The boy nodded slowly, and Aera watched his shoulders come down from around his ears — the same way, years ago, hers had, the first time the light came back in.

She didn't say the rest out loud, but she felt it, warm and settled and sure: *the hardest rules to make are the ones worth pausing over. And a room full of open windows, breathing easy, is worth every ache it takes to keep it that way.*

Span

SPAN — the bridge-builder. mismatched planks for mismatched banks.



At the edge of the river that split the town in two, a long-legged heron-tween named Span was laying planks across the water, and no two of them were the same length.

The banks were uneven. The near side was low and muddy; the far side rose in a tall clay shelf almost twice as high. Span crouched at the edge, one thin leg folded up under the vest, sorting through a pile of planks — short ones, long ones, one thick stubby one — and setting each where it belonged.

A kid from the town watched, arms crossed. "That bridge is crooked. Every plank's a different size. If you want it fair, use the same plank for both sides."

"If I use the same plank for both sides," Span said, not looking up, "the low bank gets a bridge that overshoots, and the high bank gets one that comes up short. Then nobody crosses." Span slid a long plank up to the tall shelf, a short one to the low mud. "Watch."

Span walked out onto the mismatched planks — up the long one to the high shelf, then down the short one to the low bank — smooth, no stumble, all the way across and back. The bridge held. It looked lopsided. It worked perfectly.

"See," Span said, stepping off. "It's not crooked. It *fits*. The banks aren't the same, so the planks can't be either. Same planks would've *looked* fair standing in the pile. But you don't cross a pile. You cross a bridge."

The kid uncrossed their arms and looked at the two banks — really looked — like they were seeing the height difference for the first time.



Span had learned this the hard way, back in the river-shallows.

When Span was small, the heron-children had a game where everyone got the same length of reed to fish with. It seemed fair. Everyone equal. But Span was the shortest of the bunch, with the stubbiest legs, and the standard reed left Span's beak just barely reaching the water while the tall kids fished easily.

Span went home hungry and ashamed, sure it was some private failure. *Everyone got the same reed. Everyone else caught fish. So the problem must be me.*

Span's grandmother — an old heron with a patient eye for uneven ground — didn't say *try harder*. She looked at Span's short legs, then at the tall reeds the others used, and did a small thing. She cut Span a longer reed.

"That's cheating," Span whispered. "Everyone else has the short one."

"Everyone else has long legs," Grandmother said. "You don't. The short reed was never the same *for you* as it was for them. Fair isn't handing out matching reeds. Fair is when everybody can reach the water." She pressed the long reed into Span's wing. "The heaviness you felt walking home — that wasn't your failing. That was a bridge that didn't reach your bank."

Span fished that evening and caught three fish. But the thing that stayed wasn't the fish. It was the way the ashamed, private, *my-fault* feeling loosened when it finally had a different name: *not-my-fault*. *Just a mismatch nobody had fixed yet.*



Span walked to the Youth Council at twelve, because a place that argued all day about what was fair ought to understand the difference between *same* and *fitting*.

Liberty, the mentor who ran the Council, met Span at the door and asked one question. "What is equity?"

Span didn't answer with a speech. Span pointed at the Council's front steps — a tall staircase — and then at a kid in a wheeled chair stuck at the bottom, watching everyone else climb.

"Same steps for everyone," Span said quietly. "Looks equal. But he can't get in." Span walked over, found a spare board, and laid it as a ramp beside the steps. The kid rolled up easily and grinned. "That's equity. I didn't take anyone's steps away. I built the part of the bridge that reaches *his* bank."

Liberty looked at the ramp, and at the kid now inside where he'd wanted to be all along. "You belong here," Liberty said.



Span's corner of the Council was full of mismatched planks and a small pad of cards.

A girl came in one afternoon, frustrated, gripping a Council proposal. "We voted to give every neighborhood the same library money. Exactly equal. So why are people still mad?"

Span had felt that muddle before. "Lay your planks out for me," Span said, spreading the mismatched set on the floor. "Which neighborhoods already have a library?"

"Most of them. Three don't have one at all."

"So the same money," Span said, "goes to fixing shelves in places that already have books — and *building from nothing* in places that don't. Same amount. Very different distance to cross." Span picked up the long plank and set it against a tall imaginary bank. "The three neighborhoods with no library aren't standing on the same bank. Same money leaves them short."

"So we should give them *more*?" The girl frowned. "Isn't that unfair to the others?"

"Does the ramp punish the kids who use the stairs?" Span asked. "Does a longer reed punish the tall heron?" Span waited while she chewed on it. "Nobody loses their library. The three that had nothing get one *built*. When they can read too, the whole town's got more people who can think, argue, help. The pie gets bigger, not sliced meaner." Span tapped the card pad. "Before you divide anything, ask the real question: *who needs what?* Not *what's the same for everyone*. Same-support plus different-needs makes uneven outcomes. Matched-support makes a bridge that holds on both banks."

The girl looked at her equal-money proposal, then at the mismatched planks, and slowly turned the paper over to start again.



Later, when the Council was empty, the girl came back with one more question, quieter now.

"When you give someone the thing they need," she said, "and it's *different* from what everyone else got... how do you know you're being fair and not just picking favorites?"

Span thought about the short reed, and the long one, and the shame that had loosened into *not-my-fault*.

"You ask whether everyone can reach the water," Span said. "Not whether everyone's holding the same reed. When the fix is matched to a real need — a ramp for wheels, a meal for a hungry kid, a library for a neighborhood without one — nobody's a favorite. They're just finally standing on level footing." Span looked out toward the crooked, perfect bridge over the river. "The bridge that *looks* even, over banks that aren't, leaves somebody short. The bridge that fits each bank — that's the one that holds."

The girl nodded, and Span watched something ease in her shoulders — the same private tightness that had let go, years ago, in Span's own chest by the river.

Span didn't say the rest out loud, but felt it, warm and steady: *the loneliest, most my-fault-feeling moments are usually just a plank that never got cut to the right length. It was never you. It was only a bridge nobody had fitted yet.*

Cordis

*CORDIS — *the host. disagreement without disrespect.**



The room in the old meadow hall had started to get loud, and Cordis was already carrying in the tea things.

She was a badger-tween, small and neat, with soft charcoal stripes across warm cream fur. She wore a plain vest and a slightly crooked bow tie. In her paws she balanced a tray of mismatched cups — one tall and blue, one squat and green, one chipped and orange — and she set them down in the center of the arguing table like she was laying out a picnic.

Two young rabbits were shouting about where to put the new garden. One wanted it by the creek. One wanted it by the hill. Neither was listening.

"You never think about the flooding!" the creek-rabbit snapped.

"You never think about anything!" the hill-rabbit snapped back.

Cordis slid a cup toward each of them. "Different cups," she said, calm as warm bread. "Same table. Room enough for both." She poured. "Now. You can argue as hard as you like about the garden. But we don't argue about each other."

The creek-rabbit blinked. "What's the difference?"

"The garden's the idea," Cordis said. "You two are the people. I keep the people safe so the idea can get a real fight." She sat down between them, unhurried. "Tell me about the flooding. Not about who forgets things."

And slowly, because someone had made the room feel steady, the shouting turned back into talking.



Cordis had grown up in a burrow at the edge of the same meadow, in a family of badgers who called themselves long-hosts. For as many winters as anyone could remember, their door had stayed open — to travelers, to neighbors, to whoever wandered in cold and cross.

Her grandmother ran the burrow with two rules, and only two. Keep the table set. Keep the room safe. "A guest can be as wrong as they please," her grandmother would say, ladling soup, "so long as nobody at my table stops being a guest."

Young Cordis watched arguments spark up over that table her whole childhood — about weather, about routes, about whose berries were whose. Some nights the voices got very big. But her grandmother never told anyone to quiet down. She refilled cups. She caught eyes. She'd say, gently, "Tell them why you think it, not why they're foolish for not." And the big voices would find their way back to the idea, and by morning the guests would leave as friends.

One night a traveler she'd never met said something Cordis thought was flat wrong, and Cordis — only seven — opened her mouth to call the traveler a fool.

Her grandmother's paw landed soft on hers. "Fight the thought," she murmured. "Never the guest."

Cordis fought the thought instead. It was harder. It was also, she discovered, the only kind of fighting that ever changed anyone's mind.



When Cordis was twelve, she walked the long meadow path to the Youth Council for the first time. Her mentor, Liberty, met her at the door of the council hall, where inside the voices were already climbing.

"They argue in there," Liberty said. "Loudly. Sometimes it curdles — turns into who's-a-bad-person instead of whose-plan-is-better. I need someone who can hold the room."

Cordis peeked in. A dozen young animals, red in the face, jabbing paws at each other.

"What would you do," Liberty asked, "with a room like that?"

Cordis thought about the soup, and the open door, and her grandmother's paw on hers. "Set the table," she said. "Make it safe to be wrong out loud. Keep them fighting the plans, not each other." She looked up. "You can be as passionate as you want at my table. Passion isn't rude. Meanness is. I keep the meanness out so the passion has somewhere to go."

Liberty smiled and held the door open for her. "The room's yours," she said.

Cordis walked in, set down her tray of mismatched cups, and the shouting, curious, began to slow.



In Cordis's corner of the council hall, the cups gleamed on their small round table, and a young student named Pip came to her red-eyed and frustrated after losing an argument.

"Squeak said my bridge idea was flimsy," Pip said. "So I said her ideas were always flimsy. And now she won't talk to me."

Cordis nodded and set out two cups. "Let's try it again. But this time I'm at the table." She fetched Squeak, who came in with her arms crossed.

"Pip," Cordis said, "tell us what's wrong with the bridge. The bridge — not Squeak."

Pip took a breath. "It's too long. It'd use up the strong branches we need for winter nests."

"Good," said Cordis. "Squeak — questions about the bridge? Real ones. The kind that want an answer, not the kind that want to win."

Squeak uncrossed her arms a little. "How many branches, do you think? What kind?"

Pip told her. Squeak actually listened — Cordis watched her listen. Then Squeak explained her side: lighter vines, not branches, and a shorter route to the berry bushes.

Pip opened his mouth to jump in — "But vines won't —"

Cordis lifted one paw, gentle. "Let her finish, Pip. Her turn."

Pip closed his mouth. He waited. It cost him something, and he did it anyway.

When Squeak was done, they still disagreed. Pip still thought the bridge was a bad plan. Squeak still thought it was a good one. But they were arguing about the bridge now — about branches and vines and winter nests — not about who was flimsy.

"See?" Cordis said softly. "Nobody agreed. Nobody had to. You just stayed people to each other the whole way through. That's the whole trick."

Pip looked at Squeak. "Sorry I said your ideas are always flimsy."

"They're not always," Squeak admitted. "Your bridge one kind of is, though."

Pip laughed. So did Squeak.



They left together, still arguing about the garden bridge, shoulders loose, bumping each other on the way out the door.

Cordis gathered the mismatched cups back onto her tray — tall blue, squat green, chipped orange, all of them still full, all of them still whole. She wiped the small round table clean and set it for whoever came next.

A younger animal by the door watched her, puzzled. "You didn't fix their argument."

"No," Cordis agreed. "Arguments don't need fixing. They need somewhere safe to happen." She tucked the last cup away. "My grandmother taught me that. Keep the table set. Keep the room safe. The rest sorts itself out."

She looked at the empty, ready table, and that warm, easy quiet spread through her chest — the settled, glad feeling you get when two people have been heard all the way down and walked away friends. She breathed it in, shoulders loose, and let herself just sit in it a moment before the next voices came.

Kindle

*KINDLE — *the door-opener. participation is invited; doors are opened.**



At the first Youth Council meeting Kindle ever ran, he spent the whole time looking at the empty chairs.

Kindle was a prairie-dog-tween — warm cream fur, a soft tawny tip on his tail, a plain vest with little cards tucked in the pockets. Everyone else in the meadow hall was busy talking. Kindle was busy counting who wasn't there.

"The far-hill families," he said, half to himself. "The kids with after-school jobs. The families with little ones." He tapped his chest, where a small tracker was pinned. "None of them came."

An older animal shrugged. "They could've come if they cared."

Kindle shook his head slowly. He'd heard that before, and it had never once been true. "Or," he said, gentle but sure, "the door was closed and nobody noticed." He walked to the window and looked out toward the rocky hills. "The meeting's right after school. The working kids are still working. That's not them not caring. That's a closed door with their name on it."

He pulled a card from his pocket — a little drawing of a clock — and set it on the table where the empty chairs faced.

"So we open it," he said. "That's the whole job. Not waiting for people to show up. Opening the door so they can."



Kindle had grown up in a wide network of burrows, in a family that called themselves the watchers. When a coyote crossed the far ridge, the watchers whistled it down the line, burrow to burrow, so nobody got caught out alone. That was the family gift: noticing who was where, and who wasn't.

His grandfather was the best of them. Every dusk, the old prairie dog would sit at the mouth of the main burrow and count noses as the colony came home. If one was missing, he didn't wait to see if they'd wander back. He sent the call out. He went and looked.

"A colony that only counts who's home," his grandfather told young Kindle, "loses the ones who got stuck out in the cold." He'd tap the hard-packed earth. "We don't blame the missing. We go find why."

One evening a family stopped coming to the shared meals. The other animals grumbled — too proud, too busy, don't care. Kindle's grandfather didn't grumble. He walked all the way to their burrow and found the path there had washed out in a storm. The family wasn't proud. They were cut off.

The watchers fixed the path the next morning. The family came to dinner that night, shy and grateful, and Kindle — small and wide-eyed — understood something he'd carry the rest of his life. Nobody had been staying away. A door had simply fallen shut, and no one had gone to open it.



When Kindle was twelve, he walked to the Youth Council to meet his mentor, Liberty. She was standing at the hall's wide-open double doors.

"The council makes decisions," Liberty said, "and half the meadow never has a say in them. The same faces every time." She gestured at the room, where the same handful of animals were settling in. "I keep asking myself why the others don't come."

Kindle looked at the empty seats, and then at the doors — propped open, sure, but open onto a path only some animals could walk.

"An open door isn't enough," he said, "if you can't get to it." He counted on his paw. "Who's missing? Why? Is it a real barrier — no ride, wrong time, no one to watch the little ones — or is it truly a choice? And if it's a barrier, whose job is it to move it?" He looked up. "Ours. Not theirs."

Liberty studied him. "And if someone tells you the right people already came?"

"Then I'd say we didn't open enough doors," Kindle said, "and we should be a little embarrassed, not a little proud."

Liberty laughed and stepped aside so he could see the whole empty room. "Go find them," she said.



In Kindie's corner of the hall, a young student named Bramble came to him, discouraged. "I planned a meeting," Bramble said. "I posted signs everywhere. Hardly anyone came. I guess they just don't care about the creek."

"Let's find out," Kindie said kindly, and spread his cards on the table. "Who did you hope would come?"

Bramble thought. "The families near the hills. The older kids with jobs. Parents with babies."

"And who actually came?"

"None of those."

Kindie picked up his clock card. "When was the meeting?"

"Right after school."

"So the working kids were working," Kindie slid the card to one side. "Not a choice. A closed door." He picked up another card, a little cradle. "The parents with babies — was there anywhere for the babies to be?"

Bramble's ears drooped. "No."

"Closed door." Another card — a small bus. "And the hill families. How would they get across?"

"...Walk. It's really far."

"Closed door." Kindie laid the three cards in a row and looked at them, then at Bramble, whose face had gone from ashamed to something like relief. "See? Nobody stayed away because they don't care. Three doors were shut, and posting a sign doesn't open a door." He gathered the cards up. "So we move the meeting to after dinner. We find a warm room and a kind badger to watch the little ones. We send a ride around the hills. And then —" he tapped the cradle card once more — "we don't just wait. We go ask them, one burrow at a time. A sign is a whisper. A knock on the door is an invitation."

Bramble breathed out, long and slow. "So it wasn't that I did it wrong. It was that I didn't open the doors."

"Now you know where they were," Kindie said. "That's the hard part done."



The next meeting, Kindle watched the chairs fill.

The working kids came, after dinner, still in their aprons. A family from the far hills stepped off the little bus, blinking at the warm hall. In a side room, three toddlers built towers out of acorns while their parents, for once, got to sit and speak and be heard.

Kindle stood by the door — the real door, the one he'd spent weeks prying open — and counted noses the way his grandfather taught him. This time, hardly any were missing.

The younger animal who'd once said *they could've come if they cared* stood beside him now, quiet.

"You were right," they admitted. "It wasn't them."

"It's almost never them," Kindle said, not unkindly. He held the door for one more family coming up the path.

And as they crossed the threshold — nervous, then smiling, then home — Kindle felt his chest go full and glad, that warm, belonging kind of full you get when you've held a door open long enough for someone to finally walk through. He stood there and let himself feel it, steady and proud, while the hall filled up with voices that had never had a chair before.

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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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