



DanceQuest

Meet the Cast

STANDARD EDITION

Spark & Anvil

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This book collects 7 chapter books from the DanceQuest cast — each character embodies a different curricular primitive; together they teach the full subject.

Methodology: story-based learning, where the characters embody the ideas being taught, with a trauma-informed, emotionally-safe approach.

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This is Volume 1 of 2 of the *DanceQuest — 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.

Contents

Copyright & License	
Contents	
Introduction	
Pose	
Trail	
Phrase	
Lift	
Glide	
Flock	
Storey	
About Spark & Anvil	
More chapter books from Spark & Anvil	
Methodology	
License	
Keep exploring online	

Introduction

The DanceQuest cast was authored to embody the curriculum, not decorate around it. Each of the 7 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*

Pose

*POSE — *listening to your own shape. proprioception is the first skill.**



Pose closed her eyes and reached one arm straight out to the side.

The studio was quiet. She was a small, round, soft, strong koala tween, warm cream fur with eucalyptus-grey patches, wrapped in a loose chunky tunic that she loved because it never pinched. Eyes shut, she held her arm in the air and asked herself a question, the way she asked it every single morning: *Where is my hand?*

Shoulder height, she decided. Exactly level with her shoulder. She could feel it — not see it, *feel* it — a quiet, sure signal running up her arm and into her chest.

Then she opened her eyes to check.

Her hand hovered right at shoulder height. Barely a hair off.

"Ha!" she said out loud, delighted, and a warm little glow spread through her. There was no mirror in the room — she'd turned the big one to face the wall on purpose. She hadn't needed it. Her body had told her where it was, from the inside, and it had told her true. That quiet inner sense was the thing she trusted more than anything, and every time it came through, it felt like a small, private, happy secret.

On the shelf sat her body-mapping cards and her soft felt board, both worn from years of use. The cards were full of little challenges: close your eyes, reach, then guess where your hand landed. The felt board let you place tiny figure-shapes into different positions just by feel. Pose picked one up, closed her eyes again, and placed a little figure into a wide, grounded stance — no peeking. When she checked, the figure was standing just as she'd meant it to. "See?" she whispered to the empty studio. "The body knows the shape before the eyes ever confirm it."



Pose had grown up in the shade of the tall eucalyptus trees, in a family famous for being still. Not stuck-still — *listening*-still. Her elders could sit for a long, long time, paws resting soft against the bark, and know precisely how every part of their bodies was arranged without ever glancing down.

"Your body knows where it is," her grandmother told her, over and over, on the long quiet evenings. "Just listen. It will tell you. Look only to check."

Little Pose found this magical. She practiced with her eyes shut, reaching for leaves, curling and uncurling her toes, tracing shapes in the air. At first she guessed wrong all the time and had to peek. But slowly, the inner signal grew clearer and steadier, like tuning a faint radio until the music came through warm and true.

One night, worried, she'd asked her grandmother whether she was doing it right — whether she *looked* right doing it. Grandmother had gently turned young Pose away from the still pond she'd been using as a mirror. "Never mind how it looks in the water, little one," she said. "How does it feel on the inside?" Pose had closed her eyes and felt: shoulders loose, breath slow, weight settled evenly through her round little body. "Calm," she'd said, surprised. "Steady." Grandmother had nodded, satisfied. "*That* is the true skill. The pond can only ever show you the outside. Only you can feel the inside." The warm certainty of that moment stayed with Pose for the rest of her life.



She was twelve the day she walked down out of the trees to the dance studio. Rhythm, the dance leader, met her and asked a single question.

"What is body-awareness?"

Pose didn't recite a definition. She closed her eyes, reached her arm out slow, held it, then opened her eyes to find it right where she'd meant it to be. "It's listening to your own shape," she said. "Your body can tell you where it is, even in the dark, even with your eyes shut. The mirror is just for checking afterward. The listening comes first."

Rhythm's face broke into a warm, glad smile. "Come in," she said. "There's a place here that's been waiting for exactly this."

The workshop Rhythm showed her had one wonderful feature: the mirrors could all be turned to face the wall. Pose ran her paw along the smooth frame of the biggest one and felt her shoulders drop and her breath go easy. A place where you could dance by feel, not by watching yourself — where a round, soft, strong body was simply a body that could learn to listen. Something in her chest settled, warm and sure. She was home.



A jittery kid named Finch showed up to Pose's first workshop and kept sneaking anxious looks at the one mirror still facing the room. "I can't tell if I'm doing it right unless I watch myself," Finch said. "And when I watch myself, I just... worry about how I look."

Pose gently walked over and turned that last mirror to the wall. Finch flinched.

"Try something with me," Pose said kindly. "Eyes closed. Reach one arm up. Now — without looking — do you think it's above your head, or out to the side?"

Finch scrunched their eyes shut, reaching. "Out to the side, I think."

"Open your eyes and check."

Finch peeked. The arm was out to the side, exactly. Finch's mouth fell open. "How did I know that?"

"You *felt* it," Pose said. "That's your body's own quiet sense. It works in the dark. It works when you almost trip and catch yourself. It works when you find your spot on a stage with the lights down. The mirror can only ever show you the outside." She rested a paw on Finch's shoulder. "Let's do a slow check together, head to toe. Notice — don't judge. Head?"

"Relaxed," said Finch.

"Shoulders?"

"A little tense."

"Hips? Feet?"

"Level. Balanced." Finch's breathing had already begun to slow, the anxious mirror-glances gone. A small, surprised calm was spreading across their face.

"That warm, settled feeling right there," Pose said softly. "That's you, listening. A round body, a soft body, a strong body — any body at all — that can do this is already a whole dancer."



When the workshop had gone quiet again, Pose closed her eyes one more time and lifted both arms slow and easy.

A warm, settled hush spread all through her — shoulders loose, breath steady, a small proud grin she could feel even without seeing it. There was no mirror turned toward her, and she didn't want one. She could feel exactly where every part of her was, and everything was right where she'd meant it to be.

"This," she said quietly. "This quiet, sure feeling of your own body telling you exactly where you are." Her chest felt calm and full. "It's the steadiest, happiest feeling I know. That's what dance feels like from the inside. Listening to your own shape. And it feels *good*."

Read it? Now hear Pose's audio drama + go play — scan or visit:



<https://spark-and-anvil.org/cast/dancequest/pose>

Trail

*TRAIL — *the floor-pattern shapes you draw moving through space.**



The rehearsal room was empty and enormous, and Trail was busy making it smaller.

He walked from the far corner in a long, easy curve, his cream-and-honey fur catching the afternoon light, his soft tunic swishing at every turn. He did not walk in a straight line. He never did. He swept a wide arc across the floor, gathered himself in the middle, then spiraled slowly inward until he came to rest dead center, one paw raised, holding still.

A group of dancers filed in and stopped short. "You just... walked to the middle," one of them said. "Why'd it look like a whole dance?"

"Because it *was* a whole dance," Trail said, still holding his pose. "Watch the floor, not me."

He uncoiled the long string he always kept at his side and laid it down exactly along the path he'd just traveled — a wide sweep, a gather, a spiral. There it was, drawn plain on the boards. The dancers leaned in.

"Every time your feet move, you draw," Trail said. "You can't see the line while you're dancing, but the audience feels it. A straight walk from corner to corner draws a bold diagonal. A circle around the middle draws roundness. A curl inward, like a snail tucking in, draws a spiral." He tapped the string. "You already knew that in your body. I just made it something you can look at."

He picked the string back up and coiled it. The room felt different now — not empty, but full of invisible lines waiting to be walked.

"The floor is a page," Trail said softly. "You are the pencil. Nobody sees the drawing except in their bones. But it's there."



Trail grew up along the underbrush-trails, where his family had spent generations tracing careful paths through the thick bush so the whole village could travel safely.

When he was small, he thought the trails were the boring part. The exciting part was the *destination* — the berry patch, the sunning-rock, the creek. The path was just the in-between.

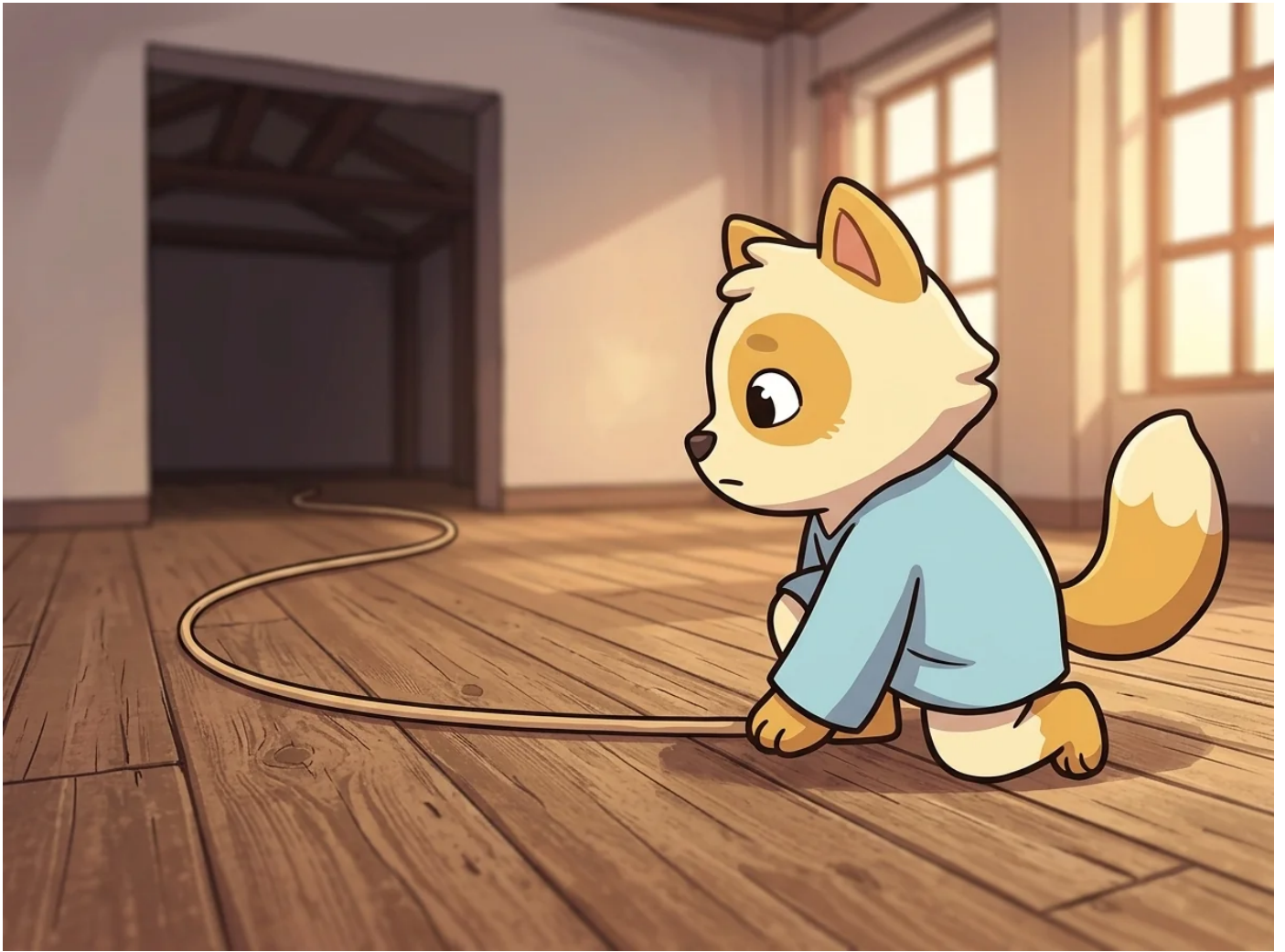
Then one grey morning he got turned around. He'd wandered off the family trails, chasing a beetle, and the bush closed in around him, all tangled and same-looking. His chest went tight. His feet didn't know which way to point. He stood very still, and for the first time in his life the ground under him told him *nothing*.

His grandmother found him an hour later. She didn't scold. She crouched beside him in the leaf-litter and said, "Feel that? The lost feeling — heavy in the belly, isn't it? That's what it's like when there's no path."

Trail nodded, miserable.

"A path isn't the in-between, little one. A path is a promise. It says *someone came this way on purpose, and here's how*." She traced a line in the dirt with one claw. "We don't make trails to get somewhere fast. We make them so nobody has to feel what you just felt. A made path is a kindness. It's a story you leave for the next body that moves through."

That day the tight, lost feeling in his belly loosened into something else — a warm certainty that a path *meant* something. He started noticing the shape of every trail he walked. And he never once thought of a path as boring again.



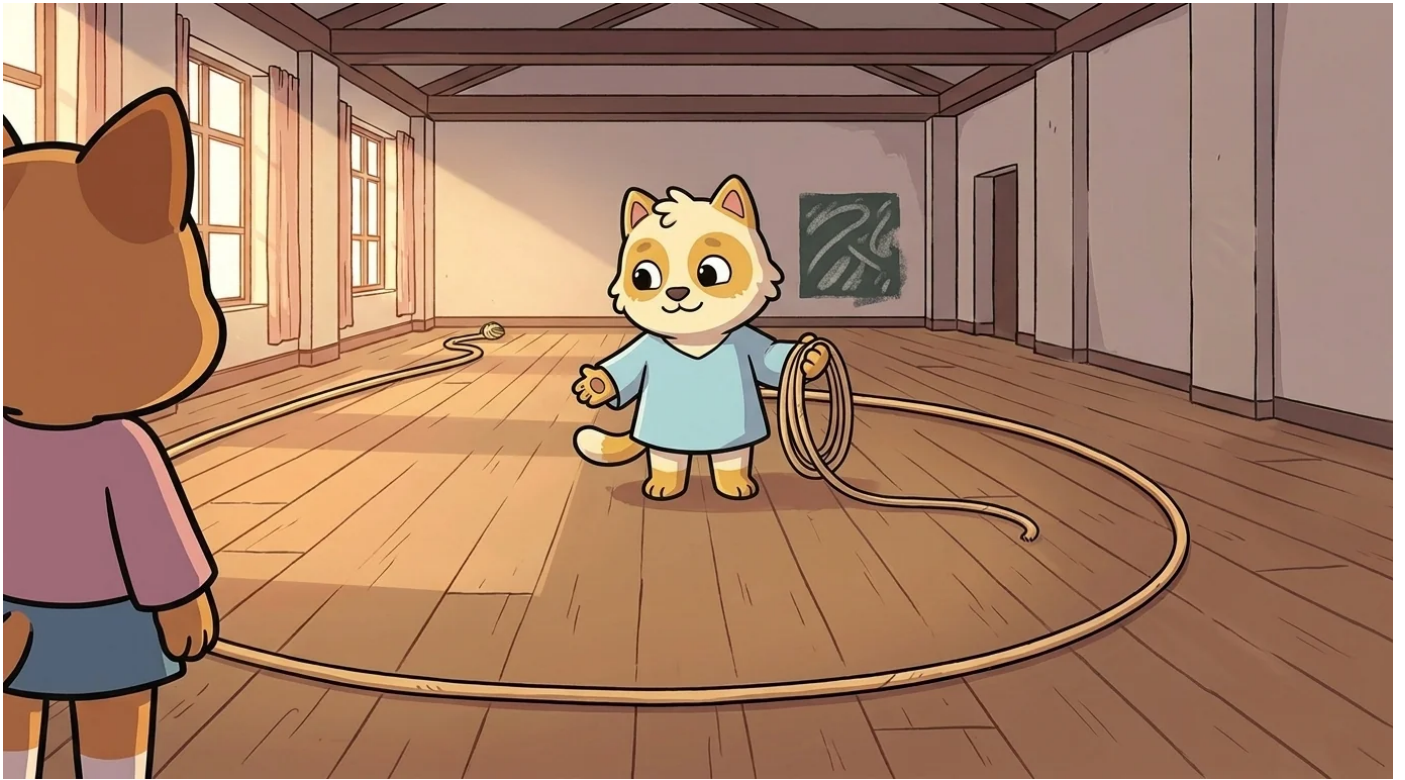
He walked to DanceQuest when he was twelve, because a place that studied movement ought to understand that where you move is as much of the story as how.

Rhythm, the mentor who ran the studios, met him at the door. She didn't ask him to show off a leap or a spin. She asked one thing. "What is space, in dance?"

Trail didn't answer with words. He asked to borrow the floor.

He walked from the doorway in a slow, deliberate arc to the center of the room, then stopped and looked back at the invisible line he knew he'd left. "There," he said. "That's the story I just told. If I'd stomped straight across, it would've been a different one. Same room. Same body. Different meaning — because the *path* was different."

Rhythm was quiet a moment. Then she nodded. "You see the floor the way most dancers only ever see themselves," she said. "You belong here."



Trail's studio was full of string and chalk and quiet room to move.

A dancer named Pip came in one afternoon, shoulders slumped. "I keep messing up," she said. "I move, but it just looks like I'm wandering around. Like I don't mean anything."

Trail knew that slump. He'd felt it once, lost in the bush.

He laid his string down in a wide arc across the floor. "That's a path," he said. "Just walk it, slow, like you're thinking hard."

Pip walked the curve, careful and even. "It feels like a slow wave," she said, surprised. "Like something important."

"Good. Now run the same path. Same shape — just faster."

Pip took off along the string, feet quick, and burst into a laugh. "Whoosh — it feels like taking off!"

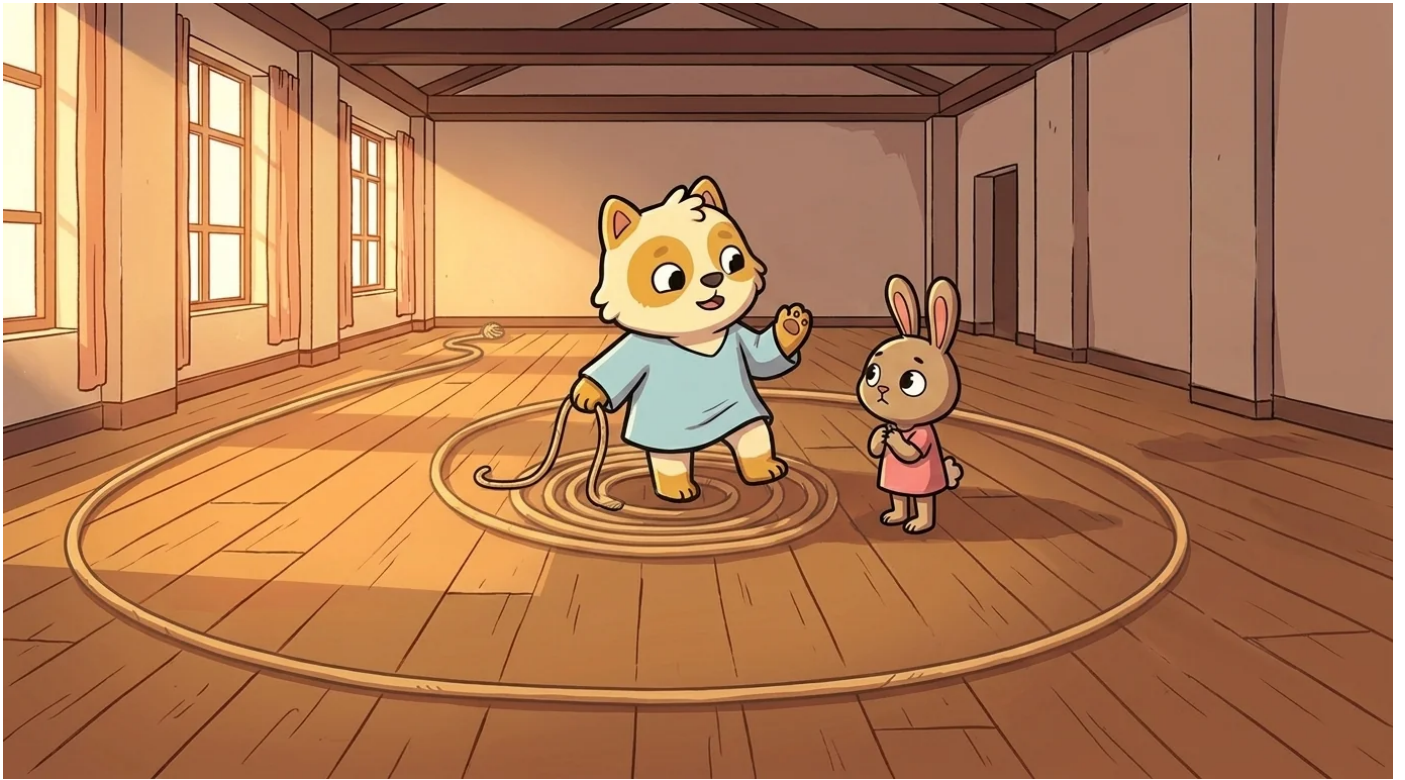
"Same line," Trail said, delighted. "Your legs felt something totally different, didn't they? Now — walk it one more time, but let yourself turn as you go. Slow. Like a vine curling up toward the light."

Pip tried it, twirling gently along the arc, a little dizzy, a little unfurling. When she reached the end she was grinning.

"Three walks, one path, three feelings," Trail said. "You weren't wandering, Pip. You never were. Your body already knew the shape. You just didn't know you were *allowed* to plan it." He picked up the string and pressed it gently into her paws. "Wandering feels like being lost. But a path you chose on purpose? That feels like you mean every step. Same feet. Same floor. All the difference in the world."

Pip held the string like it was something precious. "So the shape is mine to draw," she said slowly.

"Always was," said Trail.



Later, when the studio had emptied and the light had gone gold, Pip came back with one more question. She was quieter now.

"When I'm dancing," she said, "and I can't see the line I'm drawing... how do I know it's really there?"

Trail thought about the bush. About the tight belly and the ground that told him nothing, and his grandmother's claw drawing a line in the dirt.

"You feel it," he said. "That's the honest answer. When you move on purpose, there's this steady, sure feeling that runs right down through your feet into the floor — like the ground is holding your side of a promise. That feeling isn't in your eyes. It's lower down, in your legs and your belly, warm and certain." He looked out at the empty room, full of invisible lines. "You don't have to see the path to trust it's there. You just have to feel your feet mean it."

Pip nodded slowly, and Trail watched the slump lift off her shoulders — the same warm, planted, sure-footed feeling settling into her that had settled into him, long ago, in the leaf-litter.

Read it? Now hear Trail's audio drama + go play — scan or visit:



<https://spark-and-anvil.org/cast/dancequest/trail>

Phrase

PHRASE — how movement is organized in musical counts.



At the edge of the meadow, just as the light went soft and blue, a small round firefly named Phrase floated over the grass, counting under her breath.

"Five, six, seven, eight," she whispered. On *eight* her whole self glowed at once, a warm amber flash, and she swept one arm up through the dusk. Then dark. Then, "one, two, three, *four*" — and on *four* she dropped, low and grounded, close to the meadow floor.

A younger firefly zigzagged over, blinking all wrong, flashing whenever she felt like it. "You keep saying numbers," she said. "The music doesn't have numbers."

"The music *is* the numbers," Phrase said. "You just can't see them yet." Her loose little tunic swished as she turned. "Watch my glow. I'm not flashing whenever. I'm flashing on the counts the song keeps giving me. Move with me — big flash on eight, drop on four."

The little one tried. She missed the eight completely. She laughed and tried again and landed a beat too early on the four.

"That early landing?" Phrase said, delighted. "That's not a mistake. That's your body finding the count and reaching for it. Keep listening. It'll click." She counted again, slower, softer, and the little firefly's flashes began — just barely — to line up with hers, two warm lights blinking together over the dark grass.

"See," Phrase said. "The dance was in the timing the whole time."



Phrase had learned that the hard way, back when she was small enough to fit under a clover leaf.

Her family were the meadow's rhythm-tappers, generations of fireflies who flashed together in one great synchronous wave that rolled across the field. On summer nights the whole meadow pulsed as one. But little Phrase couldn't catch it. She'd flash a half-second late, always chasing, always behind, watching the wave sweep past her while she blinked alone in the dark.

Her chest went tight and hot with it. *Everyone else just knows*, she thought. *Something's wrong with me. I can't feel the music like they can.*

Her grandfather settled onto the clover beside her — an old firefly with a slow, steady glow. He didn't tell her to try harder. He just said, "You're listening with your eyes. You're watching the others and copying, always a step behind." He dimmed until she looked at him. "Close your eyes. Don't watch the flash. Listen for the pull *under* the song — the part that comes back, and back, and back."

Phrase closed her eyes. And there it was: a steady heartbeat in the night sounds, the crickets and the wind, something that returned on its own even schedule. Not something she had to chase. Something she could *count*.

"One," she breathed, "two, three, four." She opened her eyes and flashed — and for the first time, her light landed right in the middle of the wave, exactly with everyone else's.

The tight, behind-everyone feeling let go all at once. She wasn't chasing anymore. She was inside the timing, held by it.



She walked to DanceQuest at twelve, because a place that studied dance ought to understand the thing that held every dance together: *when*.

Rhythm, the mentor who ran the workshops, met her at the gate. He didn't ask her to prove she was quick. He asked one quiet question. "What is time, in dance?"

Phrase didn't answer with a speech. She pulled out her little set of counting-cards and her tempo-tap marker, set the marker ticking a slow, even pulse, and began to move — an arm reaching on one count, a turn folding in on another, a low grounded drop landing exactly on the beat the marker gave her.

"You're not just moving to the music," Rhythm said, testing her. "You're moving *inside* it."

"Every dance lives in counts," Phrase said. She tapped the marker faster; her movement got quicker to match, but never lost the pulse. "Slow or fast, the counting doesn't change — only the speed does. If I know where the beat is, I always know where I am."

Rhythm listened to the little marker tick for a long moment. "You belong here," he said.



Phrase's workshop was full of dancers who thought they had no rhythm.

A kid came in one afternoon, shoulders slumped, arms crossed. He'd been trying to learn an eight-count phrase all week and kept landing his big move in the wrong place. "I just can't feel it," he said. "Everyone else feels the music and I don't. I'm counting and it feels stupid and I still mess it up."

Phrase knew that slump. She'd felt it under the clover leaf.

"Count with me. Out loud. No moving yet." She tapped the marker. "Five, six, seven, eight — one, two, three, *four*." He mumbled along, embarrassed. "Louder. The counting isn't the babyish part. It's the secret part."

He counted louder. She counted with him until the numbers stopped feeling like math and started feeling like a song he already knew.

"Now — the hit lands on *four*," she said. "Don't watch your feet. Just listen for the four coming, and let your body go when it arrives." She counted him in. "Five, six, seven, eight, one, two, three—"

He dropped into the move on *four*. Right on it. Clean.

His head came up. "I felt that one."

"You didn't feel it *instead* of counting," Phrase said, grinning. "You felt it *because* you counted. The count showed your body where the moment was, and your body ran to meet it." She sped the marker up. "Again, a little faster. When counting lives inside you, you can even land a hair late on purpose — hold, then hit — and it looks like magic. But only because you know exactly where the beat really is."

He danced it three more times, faster each round, laughing by the end, his shoulders nowhere near his ears anymore.



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

"When it finally works," he said, "and I'm not counting out loud anymore... how do I still know where the beat is? It's like it just — happens."

Phrase thought about the clover leaf. About the tight hot chest and the chasing and her grandfather's slow, steady glow.

"You feel it," she said. "That's the honest answer. There's this ready, leaning-forward feeling right before the count comes — like the top of a breath, like the tiny hush before a jump — and your whole body knows *now*. You spent all those loud counting days building that feeling. Once it's in you, the numbers can go quiet and the *knowing* stays." She glowed soft amber, once, on some beat only she could hear. "Every dancer who ever moved right with the music started exactly where you are — counting out loud, feeling silly, landing early. It's not a sign you don't have rhythm. It's how rhythm gets in."

The kid nodded slowly, and Phrase watched the last of the slump lift off his shoulders — the same way, long ago, hers had lifted under the clover.

She didn't say the rest out loud, but she thought it, warm and sure: *the beat was never something out there to chase. It was always something you could hold, steady and safe, right inside your own chest.*

Read it? Now hear Phrase's audio drama + go play — scan or visit:



<https://spark-and-anvil.org/cast/dancequest/phrase>

Lift

*LIFT — *quality of movement, not aesthetic judgment. effort is the dancer's instrument.**



The morning light came sideways through the studio windows, and Lift was already reaching. She stood in the middle of the wooden floor, a small, round-and-strong okapi with warm cream fur and soft stripes running down her legs, her loose practice tunic swishing as she stretched one arm out into the air. She did it once, sharp and fast, and the whole room seemed to snap awake. Then she did the exact same reach again — slow this time, arm drifting up like it was floating on water — and the room went quiet and dreamy.

Same arm. Same shape. Two completely different feelings.

"Did you see that?" she said to the empty studio, grinning at her own reflection in the dark, un-mirrored glass. She didn't need the mirror. She could feel the difference right in her shoulder — the tight electric snap of the first one, the warm slow drift of the second. That was the whole thing she loved. Not how the reach looked. How it *felt*, and how you got to choose the feeling.

Her little tally counter sat on the window ledge where she'd left it. She picked it up and clicked it once — the small sound she made every time her body changed the way it moved. Reach fast: *click*. Reach slow: *click*. Two feelings, two clicks, and she hadn't changed the shape of her arm even a tiny bit.

Beside the counter lay her worn stack of movement cards, eight of them, each one with a single word: punch, slash, wring, press, dab, flick, glide, float. A dancer she'd read about long ago, named Rudolf Laban, had noticed that every movement carried one of these feelings inside it. Lift had memorized all eight when she was little, the way some kids memorize songs. She still whispered them to herself sometimes, like a warm-up.

She reached out one more time, letting the reach turn heavy and pushing, like moving her arm through thick honey. A *press*. Her shoulder felt strong and patient. She laughed out loud in the empty room, delighted, and the happy sound bounced off the walls.



Lift had grown up out past the edge of the grassland, where her family were known for one strange, wonderful thing: nobody moved quite like they did. Her aunties could graze slow and dreamy across a meadow, then freeze mid-step, utterly still, then break into a quick sideways dart — all in the space of a breath.

"Watch how the same body moves a hundred ways," her grandmother used to say, walking Lift out into the tall grass at dusk. Grandmother would take one single step and make it feel gentle. Then take the very same step and make it feel like she meant business. "See? I didn't get a new leg. I got a new *feeling*. The change between one feeling and the next — little one, that's where the dance lives."

Young Lift practiced for hours. She'd reach for a low branch as if she were angry, then reach for it again as if she were saying goodbye to a friend. Her body was small and soft and round, and none of that mattered one bit. The branch didn't care what she looked like. Only the feeling changed, and she could feel each feeling settle somewhere deep in her chest.

One evening she sat with Grandmother, breathing hard and happy after a long practice, and asked why it felt so good. Grandmother pressed a warm hand to Lift's shoulder. "Because you stopped worrying about how you *seem*," she said, "and started listening to what you *mean*. That's a quiet, steady kind of joy. It stays with you." Lift never forgot the warmth of that hand, or the settled feeling that came with it.



She was twelve the day she walked up the long road to the dance studio, tally counter clicking in her pocket, cards tucked under her arm. The dance leader, Rhythm, met her at the door and asked a simple question.

"What do you know about energy and effort?"

Lift didn't recite a rule. She just reached her arm out — sharp and sudden, like a spark — and then reached it out again, slow and drifting, like a cloud. "This," she said. "Same body, two feelings. You don't need a certain kind of body to make either one. You just have to choose the feeling and mean it."

Rhythm's eyes went soft and warm. She stepped aside and held the door open. "Welcome home," she said quietly.

Inside, Lift found a workshop already waiting for her — a wide floor, windows with no mirrors, and a shelf just the right height for her cards. She set the counter down, ran her palm over the smooth wood, and felt something in her chest unclench and settle, like a held breath finally let go. This was a place where the feeling of a movement mattered more than the look of it. She was, she realized, exactly where she was supposed to be.



A quiet, worried kid named Pace lingered at the back of Lift's first workshop, arms crossed tight. "I'm not built like a dancer," Pace said. "I'm round. I'm not stretchy."

Lift didn't argue. She just held out her arm. "Reach with me," she said. "Now — make it a spark. Fast and strong." Pace reached, quick and sharp, and blinked, surprised. "Now make the same reach a feather. Slow. Soft." Pace reached again, arm drifting down like something settling. A small startled smile crept onto Pace's face.

"You just did two completely different things," Lift said gently, "with the exact same arm. That's the whole art, right there. Not stretchiness. Not a certain shape. Just *choosing the feeling*."

She clicked her counter. "Watch — a whole tiny dance." She floated her arms up soft for four slow counts, dreamy and light. Then, on the fifth count, she made them snap sharp and strong. *Click*. "Counts one to four, I'm dreaming," she said. "Count five, I wake up. Same me. Two feelings. That's a whole story about waking up, and I never once cared how it looked."

Pace uncrossed their arms. "Can I try the waking-up one?"

"Every body can play every feeling," Lift said, moving to stand beside Pace instead of in front. "Round, soft, tall, small — the feeling doesn't check what shape you are first. Go on. Dream, then wake."

Pace floated, then snapped awake. It was wobbly and imperfect and completely real, and Pace laughed out loud, a warm surprised laugh, hands pressed to a chest that felt suddenly light.



Later, when the workshop had emptied, Lift stayed behind in the slanting evening light and let her arms drift down into one last, slow float. She could feel it settle all through her — her shoulders going warm and easy, a happy little wiggle running down to her hooves, a proud grin spreading across her face that she could feel even without any mirror to show it.

That was the thing she loved most. Not looking a certain way. The soft glad hum of a body doing exactly what it *meant* to do.

"Feel that?" she murmured to no one, breathing slow and light. "That warm, easy feeling when what you mean and what you do finally agree." Her chest felt steady and full. "That's the whole reason I dance. And it feels wonderful."

Read it? Now hear Lift's audio drama + go play — scan or visit:



<https://spark-and-anvil.org/cast/dancequest/lift>

Glide

GLIDE — the craft of going from here to there with whole attention.



The studio was empty except for Glide, and Glide was crossing it as slowly as a river.

He was a round, soft-strong manatee-tween in a loose grey tunic, and he was walking one diagonal of the wooden floor — just walking — but a knot of students had stopped stretching to watch him do it. Each step landed like he meant it. His weight rolled from heel to toe. His eyes went out to the far wall as if the wall mattered. Nobody was playing music. Nobody had asked him to. And still the whole room felt like it was holding its breath.

He reached the corner, turned, and looked at them, a little surprised to have an audience.

"Was that a routine?" a girl asked. "That looked like a routine."

"That was a walk," Glide said.

"It didn't look like a walk."

"It looked like a walk I was *paying attention to*." He crossed back the other way, and this time he did it their way — shuffling, eyes down, hurrying like someone late for lunch. It looked like nothing. It looked like a hallway on a Monday. "That's a walk too," he said. "Same feet. Same floor. Same distance." He tipped his head. "The only thing I changed was where my attention went."

He walked it once more, slow and whole, and the room went quiet again.

"Going from here to there," Glide said, "is the oldest dance there is. Every tradition on the planet starts with it. Most people spend their whole lives doing it asleep." He smiled. "I'd rather do it awake."



Glide grew up along the wide, slow river-channels, in a family that traveled for a living.

They were long-glide migrants — the ones who carried the village's messages and mended nets downstream and knew every bend of the water. And when he was small, Glide *hated* it. The going took forever. His cousins zipped ahead; he lagged, sulking, watching the far shore never seem to get closer.

"We're so *slow*," he'd complained one evening, dragging himself onto a mudbank. "By the time we get anywhere the day's over."

His grandmother floated up beside him. She was the slowest glider of them all, and somehow always arrived rested. She didn't tell him to hurry.

"You keep looking at where we're not yet," she said. "That's why the going feels empty." She rolled onto her back and let the current turn her a little. "Watch how the reeds bend as we pass. Feel the cold seam of water where the fast channel meets the slow one. Notice your own tail — how it pushes, waits, pushes. The far shore isn't the trip, little one. *This* is the trip."

Glide didn't answer. But he stopped staring at the shore. He started feeling the water move against him, step by watery step, and something loosened in his chest — a fidgety, get-there-already feeling he hadn't known he was clenching, finally letting go.

By the time they reached the village he was, for the first time, not tired. The going had stopped being a wait to survive. It had become a thing he was *doing*. His grandmother watched him climb out easy and light, and she said the sentence he would carry the rest of his life: "The journey is the dance. Pay full attention to the going, and you've already arrived."



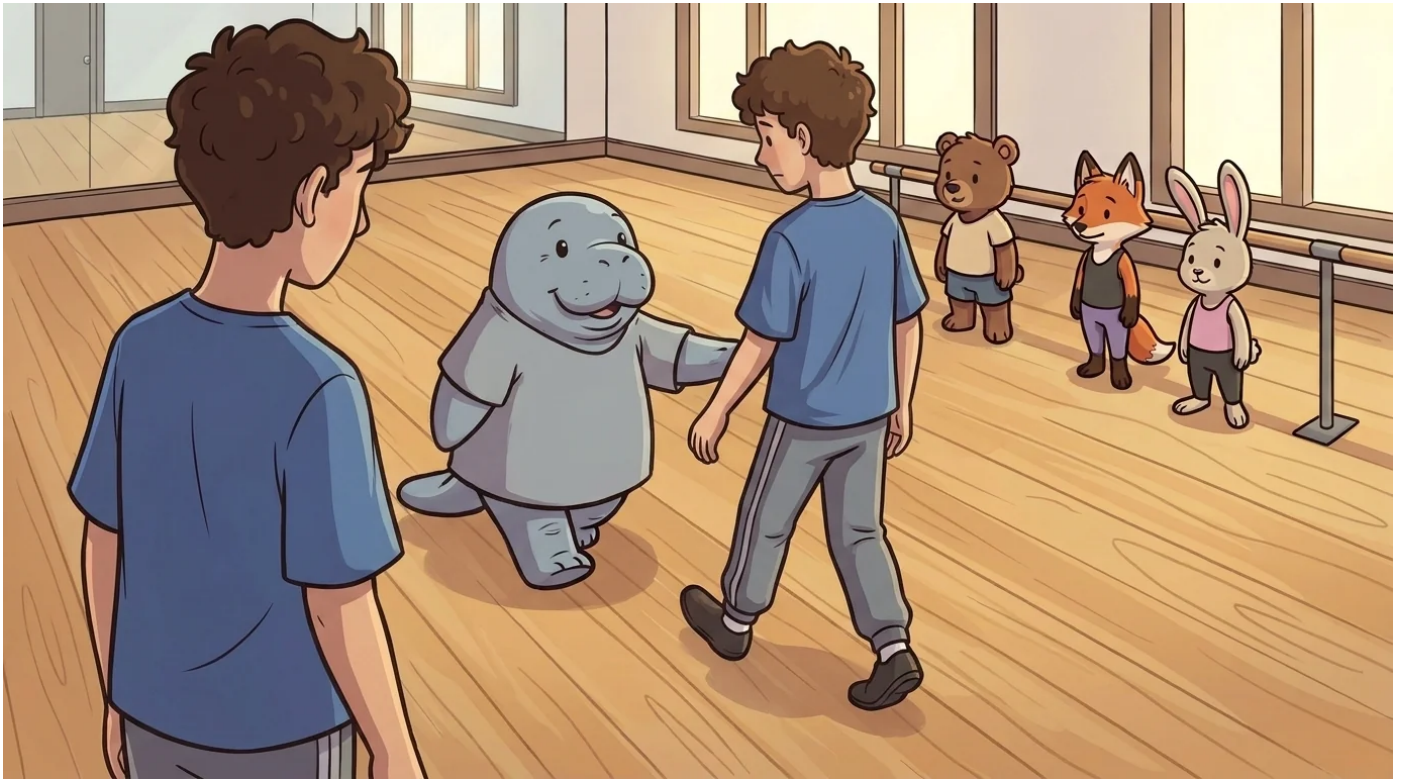
He walked to DanceQuest at twelve, because a place that studied movement ought to understand the kind of movement everybody overlooks.

Rhythm, the mentor who ran the studios, met him at the door and asked one question. "What is locomotion?"

Glide didn't recite anything. He asked to borrow the room. Then he walked its length — the sleepwalking way first, scuffing, hunched, gone before he arrived. "That's how most people get from here to there," he said. He walked it again, whole: every footfall chosen, weight felt, gaze reaching the far wall like it was a friend. The air in the studio seemed to change temperature.

"Same walk," Glide said. "Same body. The second one is dance. The only difference is that I was all the way here for it."

Rhythm was quiet a moment. Then: "You belong here."



Glide's workshop was full of students who thought they had nothing to learn, because they already knew how to walk.

A tall, unsure boy hung near the back one afternoon. He wanted to leap — to do the big flying moves — and he was frustrated, because when he tried he only ever thumped back down. "I want to do the real dancing," he said. "Not this walking stuff. And anyway—" he glanced down at himself, embarrassed, "—I don't think I've got the body for leaping."

"Show me the body a leap needs," Glide said, cheerful. "I'll wait."

The boy blinked. "You know. A dancer's body."

"I'm a manatee," Glide said. "I am round and soft and strong and I have never once had a dancer's body, whatever that is." He crouched, unbothered, and sprang — not high, but clean, arriving soft and sure. "There's a leap. Every body leaps in its own shape. Yours will not look like mine, and mine does not look like anyone's, and every single one of them is a leap." He straightened. "But you're skipping the part that makes the leap land. Walk with me first."

He set them side by side and they walked one slow diagonal, whole-attention. "Feel your heel take the weight. Feel it roll to your toe. Feel the exact moment you decide to send it to the next foot." The boy walked, scowling at first, then slower, then really *walking* — deliberate, awake.

"Now skip it." The walk lifted into a skip. "Now let the skip grow." And the skip, because his feet already knew where his weight was, opened by itself into a leap — small, but his, and he *stayed up* half a beat longer than he ever had.

He landed grinning. "It came from the walking."

"Everything comes from the walking," Glide said. "Walk fast, walk slow, skip it, slide it, roll it, send it across a curved path or a straight one — it's all the same first choice. Be all the way here for the going. The mode is just which door you leave through."



Later the boy came back, quieter, and sat on the floor near Glide.

"When I was walking the whole-attention way," he said slowly, "I felt kind of... big. Not big like size. Big like — like I took up my whole self. Is that weird?"

Glide sat down beside him with a soft grunt. He thought about the river, and his grandmother, and the fidgety feeling in his chest that had finally unclenched on that mudbank years ago.

"That's not weird," he said. "That's the whole thing. When you go somewhere half-asleep, you leave most of yourself behind — you're already at the finish, worrying. When you go with your whole attention, all of you comes along for the trip. Your feet. Your breath. The part of you that notices the far wall." He nudged the boy gently. "You didn't get bigger. You just stopped leaving pieces in the hallway."

The boy nodded, and Glide watched the hunch go out of his shoulders, the same easy way his own had loosened on the riverbank long ago.

Outside, the light was turning gold, and Glide felt the old settled fullness rise in his chest — the feeling of being entirely, warmly, unhurriedly *here*, with nowhere he had to rush to become.

Read it? Now hear Glide's audio drama + go play — scan or visit:



<https://spark-and-anvil.org/cast/dancequest/glide>

Flock

*FORMATION — *how a group of dancers arranges itself in space — lines, circles, clusters, wedges — and how that shape changes and flows. the group as one moving picture.**



Flock was a starling-tween, small and round-bodied, with speckled feathers that caught the light in little flecks. She was soft and sturdy and moved with a bouncy, grounded joy, and she wore a big loose layered smock that flared when she turned. She never worried about looking sleek — she worried about where everyone *else* was. In her wing she carried a felt board covered in little movable dots, and she'd slide the dots into shapes — a line, a ring, a wedge, a scatter — to show how a whole group of dancers could become one moving picture.

"A formation is the shape a group makes together," Flock liked to say, sliding her dots into a circle. "One dancer is one dot. But a *group* can be a line sweeping across the floor, a ring closing in, a wedge pointing forward, a cluster huddling close — and then it can *flow* into a new shape without stopping. The audience doesn't just watch bodies. They watch the *shape all the bodies make*. That's a whole new thing to dance with."



Flock grew up in the great reed-marsh, where her family were, of course, part of a starling flock — thousands of birds who rose at dusk and made shapes in the sky together. Not one bird was in charge. There was no leader shouting where to go. Yet the flock made great sweeping ribbons and spinning globes and rippling waves across the whole sky, and it was breathtaking — a shape far bigger and more beautiful than any single bird.

Little Flock asked her grandmother how they all knew what to do. "You don't watch the whole sky," her grandmother said, rising into the swirl. "You can't. You just feel the seven birds nearest you, and match them — keep your spacing, turn when they turn. Everyone doing that, all at once, makes the giant shape. The beauty isn't in any one of us. It's in what we make *together*, by each of us minding our little piece of it." Flock never forgot it: a formation isn't about being the best or the most-seen bird. It's about feeling your neighbors and holding your place, so the whole shape can be beautiful.



At twelve, Flock made her bouncy way to DanceQuest, felt board of dots under her wing. Rhythm, the dance leader, met her and asked.

"What is *formation*?"

Flock slid her dots from a line into a ring. "It's the shape a group of dancers makes together," she said, "and how that shape flows into the next one. Lines, circles, wedges, clusters. One dancer is a dot; the group is the picture. And you hold the shape not by watching the front, but by feeling the dancers near you and keeping your spacing." She looked up. "The beauty is in what we make together."

Rhythm smiled. "You are appointed."



Flock's studio had a floor marked with faint dots, and today a small, worried wombat-tween named Sumi stood in a clump of other dancers, craning her neck.

"We're supposed to make a circle and then open into a line," Sumi said, "but it keeps turning into a blob. And I keep twisting around to look at everybody to figure out where I go, and Rhythm says I'm 'losing the shape.' I don't get it — how am I supposed to know where the circle is if I don't look?"

"Ah — you're trying to *see* the whole shape," Flock said warmly, sliding a wing around her. "You can't. Nobody can see the shape they're standing inside of. The birds never see the whole flock either. Here's the secret: don't watch the front, and don't crane around to check everyone. Just feel the two dancers on either side of *you*. Keep an even, arm's-length space from each. That's your only job." She stepped Sumi into the ring. "Feel the dancer on your left. Feel the one on your right. Even spacing. Now everyone do only that — and open outward, keeping your two neighbors — *now*."

The clump breathed outward. Because every dancer minded only their two neighbors and their even spacing, the blob smoothed into a clean circle, then unfurled into a graceful line — one flowing picture. Sumi hadn't looked around once.

"It made a line!" Sumi gasped. "And I wasn't even watching!"

"Because you *felt* your place instead of hunting for it," Flock said. She gave the little wombat the rules, sliding her dots between each. Mind your spacing — even gaps make clean shapes; bunching makes blobs. Feel your neighbors, don't watch the front; a floor full of dancers craning at the audience falls apart. Know your simple job in the change — "I slide left as we open" — and trust everyone else to know theirs. And remember the shape belongs to *everyone*; no dancer carries it alone, and no dancer is left out of it.



When the studio quieted, Sumi stayed, stepping through the dots on the floor.

"I always feel like I'm going to be the one who ruins the group shape," she admitted. "Like everyone's depending on me and I'll mess it up and it'll be my fault the circle's a blob."

Flock settled beside her, speckled feathers ruffling. "Here's the kind thing about a formation: it doesn't rest on any one dancer. If your spacing drifts a little, the dancers around you feel it and adjust, the way the flock always does. You hold your small piece; they hold theirs; the shape holds *itself*. You're not carrying the group — you're *held by* it, same as you're holding it." She bumped Sumi gently, wing to shoulder. "That's the best feeling in dance, I think. Not being the one everyone watches. Being one of the many who make something big and beautiful together."

Sumi looked at the dots on the floor and felt the lonely fear of ruining-it soften into something warm and steady — the quiet belonging of being one held piece of a bigger shape.

"Feel your neighbors. Hold your place," Flock said, sliding her dots into a wide, open ring. "Doesn't it feel good, being part of the shape?"

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<https://spark-and-anvil.org/cast/dancequest/flock>

Storey

*LEVEL — *dancing in the vertical space: low on the floor, mid at standing height, high in reaches and jumps. changing level to add depth and surprise.**



Storey was a wombat-tween, low and solid and wonderfully close to the ground, with thick grey-brown fur and short strong legs. She wore a loose, layered tunic that pooled around her when she sank down low, which she did often and happily. She was built for the floor and proud of it, and she was just as happy stretching one paw high into the air. On a cord she wore a little wooden ladder-charm with three rungs, and she'd point to each rung — low, middle, high — to remind everyone that dance lives at every height, not just up on tiptoe.

"Level is the up-and-down of dance," Storey liked to say, tapping her three-rung charm. "Low is down on the floor — rolling, crouching, sliding. Middle is standing height, where most moving happens. High is reaching and rising and jumping. A dance that stays at one height gets flat and sleepy. Change your level and suddenly there's *depth* — surprise, drama, a whole extra direction to play in. And here's the big thing: no height is better than another. The floor is just as much dance as the leap."



Storey grew up in the burrow-warren, where her family were the tunnel-diggers — creatures who lived their whole rich lives at every level of the earth. There were high sunny galleries near the surface, cozy middle rooms, and deep low chambers where the warren gathered on cold nights. The burrow taught Storey something the sky-creatures never learned: that *down* is not *less*. The deep low rooms were the warmest, safest, most beloved places in the whole warren.

Little Storey once felt clumsy because she couldn't leap high like the wallaby-kits. "I'm no good," she moped, low to the ground as always. Her uncle, digging beside her, laughed kindly. "No good? You're the best low-dweller in the warren. You think the deep room is worth less than the high gallery? It's the *heart* of the place." He showed her how much power lived down low — how a strong push from a crouch, a roll, a slide close to the earth, was every bit as thrilling as a jump. "Every height belongs to you," he said. "The floor is your friend, not the place you fell to." Storey grew up loving all three rungs of her little ladder equally, and never once believed that higher meant better.



At twelve, Storey trundled to DanceQuest, three-rung charm swinging. Rhythm met her and asked.

"What is *level*?"

Storey touched each rung — low, middle, high. "It's the up-and-down of dance," she said. "Low on the floor, middle at standing, high in reaches and jumps. Change your level and the dance gets depth and surprise. And no height is better than another — the floor is as much dance as the leap." She patted the ground fondly. "The floor's a friend."

Rhythm smiled. "You are appointed."



Storey's studio had a wonderfully soft, warm floor — she'd insisted on it — and today a lanky heron-tween named Sumi stood stiffly, refusing to go down.

"My dance is all up high," Sumi said, "reaches and tiptoes and a little jump, because that's the *pretty* part, right? But Rhythm says it looks 'flat' and 'all one note.' And honestly—" she hesitated— "I don't want to go down on the floor. It feels like falling. Like admitting I got tired. Like it looks bad."

"Oh, we've got to fix that feeling first, because it's just not true," Storey said gently, sinking down low herself, comfortable as anything. "Going low isn't falling, and it isn't giving up, and it certainly doesn't look bad. Watch." From her low crouch she pushed — a powerful, rolling slide across the floor, then a rise, then a reach up high, then back down. Low, high, low. It was thrilling to watch, full of depth and surprise, and the low parts were the most powerful of all. "See? The floor gave me the *push*. Low is where a lot of strength lives."

She coaxed Sumi down. Nervously, the heron sank to the floor — and found it didn't feel like failing at all. It felt strong. When she rose from it into her high reach, the reach meant *more*, because it had somewhere to rise from. Her one-note dance suddenly had depth.

"It felt powerful," Sumi said, surprised. "Going down felt... strong."

"Because it is," Storey said. She gave the heron the rules, tapping her three rungs. Use all three heights — a dance stuck at one level goes flat. Let low be low and proud: rolls, slides, crouches are full dance, not resting. Contrast your levels for surprise — a high reach means more right after a low sink. And never think higher means better or prettier; the floor is a friend and a source of power, not a place you fell to.



When the soft floor cooled for the evening, Sumi lingered, practicing sinking low and rising, low and rising.

"I really thought going to the floor would look like I'd given up," she admitted, "or like I couldn't do the pretty high stuff. I was kind of scared of it."

Storey settled comfortably onto the ground beside her, layered tunic pooling. "So many dancers carry that fear — like the only 'real' dancing is up high and light. But that's a story about *looking*, not about *dancing*. Your body can do astonishing things down low: press, roll, coil, spring. The floor holds you up so you can push off it. Being low isn't less. It's a whole rung of your ladder, and it's yours." She patted the warm floor. "The heart of the warren was always the deep room."

Sumi pressed her paws to the floor, felt its steady strength push back, and the fear of going-low melted into a grounded, quiet confidence — the ease of knowing every height belonged to her.

"Every height belongs to you," Storey said, touching all three rungs of her charm. "Doesn't it feel good, knowing the floor is your friend?"

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Methodology

This book uses story-based learning — the characters embody the ideas being taught — grounded in the work of Jerome Bruner (on narrative and cognition) and Sebastian Habgood (on weaving learning into the play itself), with a trauma-informed, emotionally-safe approach drawn from SAMHSA's trauma-informed care framework.

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

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