



GambitTales

Meet the Cast

STANDARD EDITION

Spark & Anvil

Copyright & License

© 2026 Spark & Anvil (501(c)(3) public charity). Chapter text and illustrations licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. App software © Spark & Anvil — all rights reserved. Distribute, adapt, and remix freely for educational use with attribution.

This book collects 5 chapter books from the GambitTales 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.

Spark & Anvil is a 501(c)(3) public charity. All apps free forever; no ads; no tracking; no in-app purchases.

spark-and-anvil.com

This is Volume 1 of 2 of the *GambitTales — 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](#)
- [Sir Pinwell](#)
- [Twin Knights of Fork Hill](#)
- [Lady Skewer](#)
- [Captain Crossfire](#)
- [The Glass Lantern \(Bella the Lanternkeeper\)](#)
 - [About Spark & Anvil](#)
 - [More chapter books from Spark & Anvil](#)
 - [Methodology](#)
 - [License](#)

Introduction

The GambitTales 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*

Sir Pinwell

The PIN — a piece cannot move because doing so exposes a more valuable piece behind it



- "2"
 - "3"
 - "4"
 - "5"
 - "6"
 - "7"
 - "8"
 - "9"
 - "10"
 - "11"
 - "12"
 - reflection-prompts:
 - beat-after: 1



In a village at the edge of the Slow Lake, there lived a bishop named Pinwell who did not enjoy speaking very much.

He worked at the village library — the only library, and the only building taller than the bakery. The library had three floors and exactly four hundred and eleven books, which Pinwell had counted twice to be sure. He liked the counting almost as much as he liked the books.

He had a system. He placed books in straight rows, in order by the colour of their spines, which the older librarian (now retired) had told him was *wrong* but which Pinwell preferred anyway. People sometimes asked him why he kept the library so tidy when nobody came to read. "I keep it tidy," he would say, "in case somebody arrives." And then he would go back to the rows.

He had noticed, in the years of placing books just so, that some of them seemed to *hold* the others. A small handbook of insects had wedged itself between two enormous atlases on the second floor. The atlases were too big to need anything holding them up — and yet, if Pinwell tried to lift the handbook out, the atlases would lean alarmingly inward, as if the handbook had been quietly doing a more important job than its size suggested.

Pinwell had not given this a name. He did not, in fact, give very many things names. He was not the naming sort. He simply walked past it each day, made sure the handbook was straight, and went on with the rest of the rows.

It would, in the end, take a child to give it a name.

One winter morning a girl named Inkling came in. She was about eight years old, with a coat too big for her shoulders and hair that wanted to argue with itself. She wanted to find a book about whales but she did not say so. She wandered the shelves picking books up and putting them back in the wrong places.

Pinwell tried very hard not to mind. He was, after all, a librarian.

But after the seventh wrong placement, Inkling reached for a green book wedged between two enormous red volumes. It was a thick book — *A History of the Slow Lake* — and Inkling tugged at it the way you tug at a stuck drawer.

The book did not budge. She tugged harder. The book held.

"This one's stuck," said Inkling, looking up. "Why won't it come out?"



"It can't move," he said.

"Why?"

"Because if it did," said Pinwell, considering his words, "the two big books on either side would fall down. The little book is *holding* them."

"So I can't ever read it?"

"You can read it," said Pinwell. "You just can't *take* it. Not while the others are watching."

Inkling thought about this. She was eight years old and she had never thought about a book having to hold up other books before. It seemed unfair. It also seemed interesting.

She sat down on the floor in front of the green book and opened it where it stood. She read about whales. There were no whales in *A History of the Slow Lake*, but there were eels, which were almost as good. She read for an hour. Pinwell brought her tea, because that is what librarians do.

When she finally went home, she stopped at the door, turned back to him, and said: "Mr. Pinwell, that book is *pinned*."



That evening he took out a small notebook. He drew the green book. He drew the two red ones on either side, larger and slightly looming. He labelled the green one *cannot move*. He labelled the others *holding it still*. Then, after some thought, he added a single word at the top of the page: *PIN*.

Over the next week he walked the rows of his library with the notebook open. He found three more places where one book was pinned by larger neighbours — and one place where it wasn't a book at all, but a small wooden bookmark Pinwell had once left between two volumes, which was now wedged in a way that meant neither volume could be opened without dislodging it. He drew that too. He used Inkling's word, because Inkling's word was correct.

He did not know yet that chess players used the same word. He did not know that bishops, in particular, were rather good at making this pattern happen — that a bishop standing on a long diagonal could pin a knight against a queen, and the knight could not move without losing the queen. He did not know any of that. He simply noticed.

Three winters passed. The handbook of insects was still wedged between the two atlases. The green book had been read by Inkling four times, always while seated on the floor.

On the morning of the fourth winter, the door of the library opened and a chunky cheerful rook in a brass-buttoned waistcoat walked in.

The rook looked around at the rows. He nodded slowly, as if at something he had hoped to find. He said his name was Captain Castle. He said he had heard there was a librarian in the Slow Lake village who could see *pins* in books that no one else could see.

Pinwell put down his cup of tea. He thought, very briefly, about what one says in moments like these.

"I suppose," he said, "I should bring my notebook."

The chessboard, Pinwell discovered, was much like the library — only the rows were shorter, and the pieces moved instead of staying put.

He met his first class of children at the academy on a Tuesday. Captain Castle introduced him as *the librarian who sees pins*, which Pinwell felt was a little dramatic but did not correct. The children watched him in the way children watch a person they are not yet sure about. One of them — a small fox in a green scarf — had brought her own notebook, which Pinwell appreciated.

He set up the position himself, slowly. A white bishop on c4. A black knight on f6. A black queen on h8, sitting tall behind the knight.

"Consider this knight," said Pinwell. He did not raise his voice. The children leaned in slightly without knowing they were doing it. "The knight is allowed to move. There are several places it could go. It would like, in particular, to go to e4 — where it could threaten the bishop."

A child in the front said, "So it'll go there?"

"It would like to," said Pinwell. "But it cannot."



"Because of what is behind it."

He pointed, very slowly, to the queen. The children's eyes followed.

"If the knight moves," he said, "the bishop will see all the way down the diagonal — and there is the queen, three times the knight's value, with nothing in between. The knight cannot move without losing the queen."

The room was quiet for a moment.

The fox with the notebook said, "So the knight is doing a job by *not moving*?"

Pinwell considered this. He liked the way she had said it.

"Yes," he said. "Exactly that. The knight is holding the queen up. Like a small book holding two larger books still."

Twin Knights of Fork Hill

The FORK — attacking two pieces at once with a single move; the knight's signature double-threat



The academy training-yard has a low stone wall along one side, about waist-high to the children. The twin knights of Fork Hill are standing on top of it. They are not supposed to be standing on top of it. Captain Castle has, at some point, told them this. They have, with great politeness and great enthusiasm, ignored him.

Down on the flagstones below them, a class of nine children is sitting in a half-circle, looking up. On the flagstones, between the children and the wall, somebody has chalked an enormous chessboard. There are two wooden pieces on it — a rook on one corner, a bishop on the other. The knights are surveying the board from the wall the way two cats survey a kitchen.

"You see one target," says Knight One.

"We see two," says Knight Two.

"You walk," says Knight One.

"We jump," says Knight Two.

"Watch."

They jump. Both at once. The same instant. The same height. They land, lightly, on the same chalk-drawn square in the middle of the board — a perfect knight-move from both the rook and the bishop. They land so close together that the children, watching, cannot at first tell that there are two of them. One of them, slightly taller, is in armoured leggings the colour of summer leaves. The other, slightly shorter, is in armoured leggings the colour of summer pears. Both of them are grinning.

A child in the front row says, "Did you — both —"

"Yes," say the knights, together.

"That's the fork," says Knight One. He gestures behind himself, without looking, towards the rook. "We are attacking the rook."

"And the bishop," says Knight Two. He gestures behind himself, also without looking, towards the bishop. "We are attacking the bishop."

"At the same time."

"With one move."

"It's a fork!" they say together, as if they cannot help themselves. "It's *always* a fork!"

Captain Castle, watching from a safe distance, sighs. He has been watching them deliver this line for two years now. It has not stopped being effective. The children are leaning forward. The children always lean forward when the knights leap.



They were not always at the academy. They were, for a long time, on Fork Hill.

Fork Hill is a hill in the eastern part of the white-board kingdom that is shaped, when seen from the air or from a low-flying bird's perspective, like a kitchen fork. Two prongs, a stretch of saddle between them, and a long handle leading down to the valley. The prongs are about a kilometre apart. The saddle between them dips sharply in the middle, with a stream at the bottom that runs cold even in summer.

The road went around the hill, naturally. Anybody sensible who wanted to get from one prong to the other walked the long way. It took an hour. It was, as walks go, fine.

The twin knights did not walk the long way. They learned, before they learned anything else useful, how to *jump*.

The story their mother tells (it is her favourite story; she has told it many times) goes like this. They were six years old. They climbed the eastern prong with their lunches in their hands, took a long look across the saddle, and *just went*. Not a leap of faith; the hill had taught them how. They had spent every day for a year throwing stones and watching them arc. They knew the distance. They knew the wind. They knew that the brook at the bottom of the saddle had a smooth flat rock that you could land on if you came down at exactly the right angle.

Their mother did not learn about the jump until the twins came home for dinner. She was peeling apples.

The first knight said, "We went to the west prong today."

The second knight said, "We did not take the road."

Their mother set down the knife. She asked, very calmly, how they had gotten there.

The first knight said, "We jumped."

The second knight said, "It was very fast."

She did not, to her credit, faint.

She did, however, make them sit down at the table and walk her through, very slowly, every part of the jump. The takeoff. The arc. The landing. (The rock in the brook.) She asked them, when they were done, if they could promise to do it the *same* way every time. They both said yes. She believed them. She had to.

By the time they were ten, the twin knights could jump from one prong to the other in either direction. They could jump *over* obstacles in between — a low-flying bird, a wandering goat, a very tall person walking through the saddle. They could jump from a standing start. They could jump while carrying lunch. They could land on the rock without scuffing it.

By the time they were fifteen, they had figured out something more interesting.

They had figured out that, on certain days, when the wind was just right, they could jump in *two directions at once*.



They had been practising it, in secret, for nearly a year before the scout came.

The trick required two people leaping at the exact same moment from the exact same spot, going to two different landing places, and *not landing in the brook by mistake*. It required practice. It required communication. It required, more than anything, twins.

What they realised, over hundreds of practice jumps, was a quiet thing.

If you take off from the right place, you can threaten two places at once.

You don't need to *be* in both places. You only need to be able to *reach* both. The threat — the readiness — is the thing.

They called it, with the kind of teenage seriousness that doesn't survive into adulthood, *the fork*. (You can see, perhaps, where this is going.)

The kingdom's chess scouts came around at the start of the next spring. This was during the reign of King Pumble, who had just instituted a youth programme for unusual movers. The scout was a polite older woman named Brindle, who wore a long grey travelling-coat and carried a small folded chessboard in her bag. She arrived at Fork Hill on foot and asked, at the cottage door, whether the children of the house might be available to demonstrate *whatever it was they were said to be doing on the prongs*.

Their mother, peeling apples again, said yes. She always said yes by now. The twins were sixteen.

They took Brindle up to the eastern prong. They asked her where she wanted them to land. She pointed to two flat stones on the western prong — one each, about ten paces apart. The knights nodded. They took off together. They landed on the two stones. They turned, in unison, and waved.

Brindle did not speak for a moment.

Then she said, "Have either of you ever played chess?"

The first knight said, "No."

The second knight said, "Is that the one with the board?"

Brindle said, quietly, "Yes. It is the one with the board."

She brought them down to the capital that month. She walked with them the whole way, on foot, and at the gates of the city she handed them off to the academy master, who watched them play their first three games and then said, to nobody in particular, what he had said about so many of them: "*Oh. Good. Another pair.*"



They have been at the academy for two years now and they have, in that time, taught more students to spot a fork than the entire previous decade managed. They teach in alternating sentences. They never trip over each other. They never confuse the children. (The children figure out the pattern within the first lesson, and from then on they expect it, and it works for them.)

This afternoon, after the demonstration on the wall, they walk among the children. They have set up a smaller board on a low table. Two knights — wooden ones, this time — are placed on the board. A rook and a bishop sit nearby.

The fox in the green scarf — Inkling, who is everybody's favourite — looks at the position. She points, very carefully, to a square in the middle of the board.

"If a knight moves *there*," she says, "it attacks the rook *and* the bishop."

"Yes," says Knight One.

"Both at once," says Knight Two.

"You can only save one."

"Pick the one you can save."

"Don't pick the one to defend."

A girl with a fork-pin in her hair (this is Adela Marrowstone's niece, though nobody yet knows that) asks, "What if the rook just moves? Doesn't that solve it?"

The knights look at her. They look at each other. They look back at her.

"Yes," says Knight One.

"That solves it," says Knight Two. "Then we take the bishop."

"You traded a defending move for a captured piece."

"You did not get away free."

"That is how a fork works."

Sir Pinwell, in the doorway, watches without comment. The knights have, twice now during this lesson, *jumped over his neat row* of demonstration pieces on the side table — they did not need to, the table was not in their way, they did it because they could. Pinwell has straightened the row twice. He has not said a word. The knights know he has straightened the row. They appreciate him. (They have, in fact, recently learned his name, which they took as a sign of growing maturity. They are still proud of this.)



After the lesson, Captain Castle finds the twin knights eating lunch on top of the kitchen-yard wall. They are eating apple slices, which is what the academy chef gives them every day at this hour, because (as the chef has explained) apples are the only food the knights cannot juggle while jumping.

Castle stands below them, hands clasped behind his back, looking up.

"Well done with the demonstration," he says.

"Thank you," says Knight One.

"It was easy," says Knight Two.

"Most things are."

"For us."

Castle nods. He has heard this before. He says, after a moment, "Pinwell mentioned. The row."

"We knew," say the knights, together.

"He did not mind?"

"He minded."

"He always minds."

"He straightens it again."

"He likes straightening it."

"He should not be deprived of the joy."

Castle considers this. He has, over the past two years, learned that arguing with the twin knights is like arguing with the wind on Fork Hill: technically possible, but unproductive. He says, instead, "There is a student who wants to learn the fork. She is eight years old. She has been waiting all morning. Will one of you come?"

The knights look at each other.

"Both of us," says Knight One.

"Always both," says Knight Two.

"You see one target."

"We see two."

They jump down from the wall in perfect unison. They land lightly on the flagstones. They walk together towards the academy hall, in step, the way they have walked together since they were old enough to walk. Castle follows behind, shaking his head, smiling.

Far away — and they do not know this, but they would be pleased to know — the eastern prong of Fork Hill is, at this hour, catching the afternoon light. The brook is running cold even in summer. The rock at the bottom of the saddle is, as always, smooth and flat and waiting. The twin knights have not been home in fourteen months.

They visit, twice a year, on the anniversary of their first jump. And every time they stand on that eastern prong again, side by side, they feel it rise up in them together — the same fizzing, fearless happiness they felt as six-year-olds, the day they looked across the gap and simply, joyfully, went.

Lady Skewer

The SKEWER — attacking a more valuable piece in front to force it to move, exposing a less valuable piece behind it (the mirror of the PIN)



The southwest wall of the academy library has a long oak table that nobody else uses, because nobody else needs a long oak table to teach chess. Lady Skewer needs one. She has, laid out along it this morning, an entire roast-skewer set — five thin metal pins of graduated length, polished, lined up like the keys of a small flute. Beside the pins, on a wooden board, she has placed three pieces from a chess set: a rook, a queen, and a king. The king is in the front. The queen is behind.

A small student, eleven years old, leans on the table to look. He has a green scarf and ink on one cuff. He says, "Lady Skewer, what are the cooking skewers for?"

Lady Skewer picks up the longest pin. She holds it lightly — not like a weapon, more like a tool whose properties she has always understood. She lays the pin flat on the board so that one end touches the king and the other end touches the queen. The pin's silver line bridges the two pieces.

"This," she says, "is the line."

She bows slightly when she says it. She bows slightly when she says most things. She is in her late twenties and she looks a little like a duchess on holiday — clean linen tunic, polished boots, dark hair pinned at the back of her neck with a thin silver clasp. Other teachers at the academy have tried, occasionally, to seem more relaxed in front of the children. Lady Skewer has never seen the point.

"The king is in the front," she goes on. "The queen is behind. They are joined by the line. If I attack the king" — and she taps the pin's tip gently against the wooden base of the king — "the king has to move. That is what kings do when they are attacked. They get out of the way."

The boy nods, slowly.

"And when the king moves," she says, "what do you suppose happens to the queen?"

The boy says, after a moment, "She's just sitting there."

"Yes," says Lady Skewer. "She is sitting there. With nothing in front of her. With my pin still pointing at her."

She smiles, politely, courteously, and waits for the boy to catch up.



She was not born knowing the line. She was born into a family that made cooking skewers, which is a different thing, though it turned out, much later, to be the same thing.

Skewer House — her grandfather's name for the family workshop — sits in the foothills of the eastern range, about three days' walk from the Slow Lake. (The Slow Lake, as it happens, is also the village Sir Pinwell came from, though neither of them knew this until they were both grown.) Adela Marrowstone of Skewer House grew up watching her grandfather hammer skewers, her father hammer skewers, her mother run the family books, and her aunt manage the shipping crew. She was, until the age of eleven, a perfectly normal Marrowstone child. Competent. Polite. Slightly bored.

Then, at eleven, she became *interested*.

She used the word "interested" the way other children would use the word "amazing." It was the strongest word she allowed herself. What she was interested in was the *line*. She had watched ten thousand skewers being made and noticed something the rest of her family had stopped noticing: a skewer, as a tool, has a peculiar property. The front of it pierces. The back of it supports. The line between is what makes the whole thing work. If the back is heavy, the front has to go where the back sends it.

Adela began to look for the line in other places. She watched her aunt's shipping crew load barrels onto a cart. A heavy barrel placed behind a light one pushed the light one forward, whether the light one liked it or not. She watched her mother sort the accounts. A number written here changed a number written three lines down. She watched her father's apprentice carry a long board through a narrow doorway — the back of the board, swinging, decided where the front of the board had to point.

She wrote, at twelve, a notebook entry that her family still has on a shelf at Skewer House:

The piece behind decides what the piece in front has to do. If the piece behind is heavier, the piece in front has to move. The piece in front does not get to choose.

Her family thought this was charming. They did not realise they were watching the early career of one of the kingdom's premier chess tacticians.

She was sixteen the first time she saw a chess game. Two old men at a fair, playing on a board outside a bakery. She watched for an hour and understood most of it not at all. She understood the bishop instantly. The bishop moved along a line — that was all she needed to know. When the bishop attacked the rook, and the rook had to move, and the queen was three squares behind on the same diagonal, she saw it before the players did.

She walked back to Skewer House. The walk took her ten days. She told her grandfather, who was that day hammering skewer number nine hundred and seventy-four thousand, that she was leaving in the morning to become a chess player.

Her grandfather considered this. He set down the hammer. He said, "Adela. Have you ever played chess?"

"No," she said. "But I understand the line. It is the same line."

He looked at her for a long moment. Then he reached for the longest skewer on his workbench — a polished outdoor-roasting pin, the kind they sold for cooking lamb — and put it into her hand.

"Take this," he said. "If anyone ever asks you what you are doing, hold this up. People will understand."

She took it.



She walked to the capital. It took ten days. Her boots were new at the start and not at the end. The academy gates were taller than she had imagined and the courtyard inside was smaller. There was nobody to receive her. The academy did not formally admit students; you simply turned up, and someone, eventually, agreed to play with you.

A clerk at a high wooden desk asked her name.

"Lady Skewer," she said.

She had decided this on the walk. *Adela Marrowstone of Skewer House* was too long, and *Adela* by itself sounded like somebody's daughter, which she was, but which she had not come here to be. *Lady Skewer* told the truth about what she had come to do.

The clerk wrote it down. He did not look up.

She unfastened her satchel. She drew out her grandfather's cooking skewer and held it up — silver, thin, a little over a foot long, polished to a mirror at the tip. The clerk looked up.

He laughed. Adela did not. After a moment, the clerk stopped.

He found her a board, and an opponent, and she played three games. She lost the first one, because she did not yet know the names of the pieces. She drew the second one, because she had figured most of them out. She won the third one, with a bishop and a rook, by attacking a queen and capturing the king behind it on a diagonal so clean that her opponent set his pieces back up, looked at her, and said, "Do that again."

The academy master had wandered over during the third game. He watched from over her shoulder. When the game ended he stood quietly for a moment, his hands clasped behind his back. Then he said, to nobody in particular: "*Oh. Good. Another one.*"

He had been doing his job for twenty-seven years. He had seen many of these. He still smiled when he saw one.

Adela bowed slightly. She put the cooking skewer back in her satchel — in the velvet pouch her aunt had stitched for her on the night before she left, which she had not, until that moment, used. She has used it every day since.

She has been Lady Skewer ever since.



This morning, in the library, with the cooking skewers laid out and the boy in the green scarf still looking at her, she does what she always does when she teaches the skewer pattern for the first time. She moves the king-piece off its square, slowly, so the boy can see exactly what happens. She lifts the pin clear of the king. She lays the pin's tip against the queen.

"The line," she says, "did not move. *I* did not move. The *king* moved. And now the queen is at the end of the line."

The boy looks at the queen.

"Take it," Lady Skewer says, politely.

The boy reaches over and picks up the queen. He sets it carefully aside.

"That," Lady Skewer says, "is the skewer."

By now four other students have drifted over to the table, attracted by the cooking skewers, which are not what children expect to see in a chess library. Sir Pinwell is there too, leaning on the doorframe at the far end of the room, watching with his arms folded. He has been watching for a while. He does not interrupt her lesson. He never does.

Lady Skewer continues, as if to the whole room now. "You will see this pattern again. You will see it on diagonals. You will see it on ranks. You will see it on files. You will see it with bishops, with rooks, with queens. You may, sometimes, see it with a king in the front — and when you see that, remember: the king *must* move. There is no choice. That is the absolute version of the pattern."

She places the king back on the board. She lays the pin against the king once more.

"The piece in front," she says, "does not get to choose. That is the whole craft."

A girl, eight years old, with a fork-shaped pin in her hair, asks, "Lady Skewer, but what if the front piece is small? What if it isn't the king or the queen? What if it's a pawn?"

Lady Skewer considers this. She likes the question. She looks at the longest cooking skewer on the table.

"You would not skewer a single mushroom alone," she says. "You need something worth moving. If the front piece is small, the line still exists — but nobody minds losing the front piece, so the line does no work. You skewer when the front is valuable. That is the rule of the kitchen, and it is the rule of the board."

The girl writes this down in a small notebook. (The notebooks at this academy are spreading, Lady Skewer thinks, the way ivy spreads on a stone wall — slowly, then all at once.)



After the children file out for lunch, Lady Skewer remains at the long oak table, packing the cooking skewers back into their flat leather case. Sir Pinwell pushes off the doorframe and crosses the room.

He stops at the table. He looks at the chessboard, which still has the rook and the queen on it, and at the empty square where the king used to be.

He says, "Clean."

"Thank you," she says.

He nods. After a moment he says, "The lantern was watching. From the gallery."

Lady Skewer looks up. The gallery — a small wooden balcony along the south wall of the library, where the older students sometimes sit and read — is empty now. But it would not have been empty during the lesson.

"What did she think?" Lady Skewer says.

"You will have to ask her."

"I will."

She buckles the leather case shut. She slides the case into her satchel. Her grandfather's cooking skewer, the one she has carried since she was sixteen, lives in a separate velvet pouch tied to her belt; she pats it gently, the way some people pat a dog they have known for a long time.

She says, half to Pinwell and half to nobody, "She thinks the simultaneous is more elegant than the sequential."

"I know," says Pinwell.

"I have told her," says Lady Skewer, "that she is wrong."

"I know," says Pinwell.

"But politely."

"Always politely," says Pinwell.

They walk together out of the library, towards the dining hall. At the door Sir Pinwell asks — because he has not yet had the chance — what she will be teaching this afternoon. Lady Skewer thinks about it. Then she smiles, the small pleased smile of somebody placing a thing on a shelf where it belongs.

"I move the front piece," she says. "Then I take the back one."

"Yes," says Pinwell.

They go in to lunch. And walking beside her oldest friend, the velvet pouch tapping gently at her belt, Lady Skewer feels the small, settled happiness of someone who left home to find the line — and found, at the end of it, a place she belongs.

Captain Crossfire

The DISCOVERED ATTACK — moving one piece to reveal an attack from a different piece behind it



There is a particular kind of silence in the academy hall that happens only when Captain Crossfire is about to enter. The children have been told he is coming. The children are not, by any stretch, quiet — they are reading, fidgeting, swinging their legs under the bench, debating whether a knight or a bishop is more interesting (it is the knight; it is always the knight) — but they have lowered their voices, the way people lower their voices in a stairwell when they hear a large coat being hung up downstairs.

The double doors at the back of the hall swing inward.

"GOOD MORNING, CHILDREN!"

The voice arrives before the man does. Captain Crossfire follows it in, bowing slightly under the lintel because he is tall and the lintel is not, his long blue coat catching against the doorframe and then unsticking with a flourish that he definitely meant. He has white hair tied back at the neck. He has a beard that is precisely as tidy as a beard can be when its owner waves his arms a great deal. He is sixty-one years old and he has not had an indoor voice since he was twenty-four.

"WATCH THIS!" he announces, before he has even reached the front of the room. The children sit up straighter. They cannot help it. He has trained them.

He arrives at the chessboard at the head of the hall. The board has been set up by Captain Castle, who is sitting on a stool to one side, with the patient face of a man who has been an adult around children for a long time. Castle nods at Crossfire. Crossfire nods back. Their nods are the same height. They have practised.

Crossfire turns the board so the children can see it properly. There are five pieces on it: a white knight on c3, a white bishop on b2 — sitting cleanly behind the knight on the long diagonal — a black queen on g7, and two black pawns on the side that do not matter to anybody.

"What," Crossfire says, "is the knight about to do?"

A child in the front says, "Move?"

"YES!" Crossfire says. "EXACTLY! Move *where?*"

Another child says, "Anywhere?"

"ANYWHERE!" says Crossfire. "Wherever it likes! The knight is *free*! And — watch this — it doesn't matter *where* the knight goes. It only matters that the knight *moves at all*. Because behind the knight" — he points, very theatrically, at the bishop — "is my dear friend the bishop. And the bishop sees" — his finger traces the long diagonal across the board — "all the way to the queen."

The children look. They see it. They lean in.

The knight moves. The bishop sits perfectly still. The bishop has not moved an inch. But suddenly the bishop is *attacking the queen*.

"AHA!" says Crossfire, with the full satisfaction of a man whose lesson has landed.

Captain Castle, on his stool, sighs the small sigh of a man who has heard *AHA* approximately four thousand times. He is not, however, frowning. He never frowns at Crossfire. He couldn't if he tried.



Crossfire was not born loud, but he was born early, and he has been making up for it ever since.

His real name is Henrik Vohnr. He came from a southern garrison town called Vohnrmouth — narrow streets, a long curving harbour, a fish market at one end and a watch-barracks at the other. His parents were both fishmongers. They are still fishmongers. They write him letters once a month and address them to *Henrik*, not *Captain Crossfire*, because they refuse to acknowledge that the new name is the official one. (He keeps the letters in a small wooden box at the academy.)

He joined the watch at nineteen. He was promoted twice in three years, both times against his commanding officer's recommendation, because his commanding officer thought he was — and this is a direct quote from the personnel file — "*insufferable, but reliable*."

His job as a junior officer was to lead a small unit of watch-soldiers on patrols through the harbour district. The harbour was complicated. Warehouses pressed against each other along narrow lanes. Market stalls appeared in the morning and disappeared by evening. There were a great many ways for a person to get jumped from behind by an opportunistic thief.

Vohnr lost two soldiers to such jumpings. (They had not been seriously hurt. But they had been *embarrassed*.) He thought about this problem a lot. He thought about it loudly. He thought about it on long walks, on short walks, at breakfast, and once — memorably — during a wedding. (The wedding was his cousin's. The cousin has forgiven him. Mostly.)

The conventional answer — the answer his commanding officer kept suggesting — was: *patrol in tighter formation*. Put the soldiers closer together. Have them watch each other's backs. Reduce the gaps.

Vohrn tried it. It mostly worked. The thieves adjusted. They started aiming at the very front of the formation instead of the very back, and the back of the formation could not turn around fast enough to help. The unit was a closer cluster, but the *front* was now exposed.

Vohrn was, by this point, very frustrated. He swore a great deal. He wrote angry letters that he then crumpled up. He stomped through the harbour at night with his hands clenched behind his back and his coat dragging through puddles, and he thought, over and over:

The problem is that we're all moving at the same time.

This thought, when it arrived, was so quiet that even Vohrn (who is loud) heard it as a whisper. He stopped walking. He looked at the harbour.



The harbour had a long row of bollards along its edge — short fat iron posts that fishermen tied their boats to. Vohrn sat on one of them.

He sat for an hour. He watched the boats come in. He watched the deckhands hopping between vessels. He watched, in particular, a small dinghy moored alongside a much larger trade-ship. The dinghy was tied to the trade-ship with a single rope. When the wind shifted, the dinghy *moved* — but the trade-ship did not. The trade-ship had been there all afternoon. The trade-ship had appeared, to anybody walking by on the dock, to be *part of the landscape*.

And from behind the trade-ship, every now and then, a fisherman with a long pole would casually reach out and check a crab pot that the dinghy's movement had revealed.

The trade-ship hadn't moved.

The dinghy had.

The crab pot got checked.

Vohrn stood up so suddenly he nearly fell into the harbour. He walked home. He drew a diagram by lamp-light. He did not sleep.

The next morning he proposed, to his commanding officer, a new patrol formation. It was not tighter. It was, in fact, looser. He proposed that the unit move in a *staggered* pattern — one or two soldiers visibly walking through the district, the others positioned at *fixed posts*, hidden behind market stalls and warehouse corners, *not moving at all*. When a thief approached the visible soldiers, the visible soldiers would simply move *aside* — and reveal, behind them, a line of fixed posts with crossbows already aimed.

The commanding officer said, "That is the most absurd plan I have heard this year."

The commanding officer let him try it.

It worked spectacularly. Two thieves were apprehended in the first week. Three more in the second week. The total apprehensions for the month were higher than the previous year's total for the harbour district.

The commanding officer, who had been doing his job for thirty-one years and was not a fool, promoted Vohrn again. He also gave him a nickname.

Captain Crossfire.

"Because," the commanding officer said dryly, "you stand still, and the attack comes from behind you, and the thief never sees the second line."

The nickname stuck. Vohrn liked it. He used it on his next promotion paperwork. By the time he was thirty, *Captain Crossfire* appeared on every official document in the kingdom and *Henrik Vohrn* appeared only on his mother's letters.



He retired from the watch at thirty-eight. He had, by then, become a famous tactician. The kingdom's chess academy invited him to come and teach. They had, they explained, recently identified the *discovered attack* — the move where you shift one piece aside to reveal an attack from a second piece behind it — as one of the most under-taught tactical patterns. The academy needed someone to teach it. They wanted a teacher who *understood it in his bones*.

Captain Crossfire said, "HA!"

(He said this loudly.)

He has been teaching the discovered attack ever since.

He has, this morning in the academy hall, just finished his fourth demonstration of the day. The children are still leaning forward. He likes that about children. They never get tired of *AHA*. He sometimes wonders, privately, in the quiet moment before he falls asleep at night, whether the adults in his life have ever leaned forward in quite the same way. He suspects not. He does not mind.

A small student — eight years old, with a fork-pin in her hair — raises her hand.

"Captain Crossfire," she says, "what if the front piece is *also* a piece I want to keep? What if I don't want it to move?"

Crossfire grins. It is the slow grin of a man who has been waiting for this question all morning.

"AHA!" he says. "AHA — *but* — listen. The front piece doesn't have to *die*. The front piece just has to *get out of the way*. It can move to another square. A safe square. A useful square. The discovered attack is not a sacrifice. It is a *reveal*. The trade-ship doesn't sink. The dinghy doesn't drown. The crab pot just gets checked."

Glass Lantern, sitting near the back of the hall, smiles very faintly. (Glass Lantern's smile is a thing that requires close attention to see. The Captain has, over the years, learned to look for it.)

He nods at her, across the hall. She nods back. They are co-teaching this kit. She is the quietest person he has ever respected.



After the lesson, Crossfire sits at the back of the hall on a low wooden bench, helping Glass Lantern pack up the demonstration pieces. He is unusually quiet while he does this. He is always unusually quiet around the Lantern; he likes the way the silence feels when somebody else is in it with him.

"You hinted at the king-version," the Lantern says, after a while.

"I did," says Crossfire.

"The double-check. You hinted at it twice."

"I did."

"They'll ask you next week."

"They will."

The Lantern places a small wooden bishop into a velvet-lined box. She closes the lid. She says, very softly, "Tell them about the bollard."

Crossfire considers this. The bollard is something he does not, usually, mention. The bollard is the moment when he sat down by the harbour and realised that the problem was that everybody was moving at the same time. The bollard is the actual beginning of his career. He has been a captain for nearly forty years now, but the boy who sat on that bollard was twenty-four and very frustrated, and the captain in the academy hall knows, in a place he does not often visit, that the boy is still doing the thinking for him.

"All right," he says.

He says it quietly. The Lantern hears.

They walk out of the hall together, towards the staircase that leads down to the kitchen-yard. Captain Castle, still on his stool, watches them go. He shakes his head slowly. He is, despite everything, fond.

The trade-ship doesn't move. The dinghy does. The crab pot gets checked.

He is the captain who stood still and won. And when he thinks about that — the boy on the bollard, tired and cross and finally quiet — something in his chest goes warm and grateful, and he is glad, all over again, that he sat down that night instead of stomping home.

The Glass Lantern (Bella the Lanternkeeper)

The DOUBLE ATTACK — a single move that threatens two pieces at once, not via jumping (knights' fork) but via geometric position (the bishop's diagonal forking two pieces, or a queen attacking two targets along different lines)



In the smaller of the academy's two classrooms, on an afternoon in early winter, there are three lanterns on the front table and no other light in the room. The windows have been shuttered. The door is closed. The children sit in a half-circle on the floor, knees drawn up, watching.

At the front of the room, the Glass Lantern stands between the lanterns. She is small — not much taller than the bigger children — and dressed entirely in soft grey wool, with a thin silver chain around her neck from which a tiny round magnifying lens hangs. Her hair is white and short and tucked behind both ears. She is, in this room, the calmest thing.

She lights the first lantern. She does not announce it. She simply touches a candle to the wick and a small steady flame catches. The lantern is a strange shape — not a square box, but a glass shell with two flat angled sides and curved sides between them. The light, when it falls from the lantern, falls in two directions at once. Two clear bright beams, one going to the left of the room and the other going to the right.

The children's eyes follow the beams. The beams land on two small wooden chess-pieces that the Lantern has placed, very deliberately, on opposite sides of the room.

The Lantern lifts her hand. She says, in a voice almost lower than the candle's hiss:

"Two pieces. One light. Both seen."

She pauses. The children wait. She has trained them, over eight years, to wait through her pauses. The pauses are part of the teaching.

"This is what we mean," she says, "when we say *double attack*."

She moves to the chessboard at the front of the table. The board has been set up before the children arrived. There is a white bishop on b2 and two black pieces — a rook on h8 and a knight on g7. She points at the bishop with the tip of her index finger. She does not raise her voice.

"The bishop sits," she says. "It does not move. It does not jump. It does not advance. It only sits. But it sees" — she traces the long diagonal with her finger, slowly — "the rook. And it sees" — she traces a short diagonal — "the knight. Two pieces. One light. Both seen."

The children look at the board. They see it. The room is so quiet that the candle on the table actually pops audibly, and a small child near the back jumps.

The Glass Lantern smiles, very slightly. It is the smile of a person who has been a teacher for a long time and has not stopped enjoying it.



She has not always been a teacher. She was, for forty-five years, a glassmaker.

Her name is Bella. (She has stopped trying to be called Bella here at the academy. She lost that fight to the children eight years ago. She does not mind.) She was born in a small town on the western edge of the kingdom called Marrowmile, where her family had been making windows for four generations. Bella was good at windows. She was also, for reasons her family found mildly worrying, *interested in light*.

Not the kind of interest that ends in being a poet — she was not romantic about light. She was interested in the *geometry* of it. She had spent (her older sister Maren kept count for a while, then gave up) three thousand hours sketching how rays of light passed through different shapes of glass. She filled fourteen notebooks. Maren had stopped commenting on the notebooks the way older sisters eventually stop commenting on most of their younger sisters' choices.

Bella was twenty-eight years old when the Marrowmile town council came to her workshop.

The council had a problem. Just outside Marrowmile, two streets met at a sharp angle to form a crossroad. The streets were called Long Street and Short Street, which were not romantic names but were accurate ones — Long Street went east for about a mile and a half, and Short Street went south-east for about three hundred yards. Both streets were narrow. Both had high stone walls on either side. After dark, the corner where they met was the kind of corner where a cart could meet another cart head-on and neither driver would see the other until it was much too late.

There had been three accidents in the last winter. One of them had been bad.

The council, which was a sensible council, wanted a lantern at the apex of the corner. A single light, mounted high, that would illuminate *both streets at the same time*.

They told Bella the budget.

Bella said, "Give me three weeks."

She took the budget, walked back to her workshop, and stared at the wall for almost two days.



The problem was geometric. A normal lantern — a candle inside a glass box — lights everything around it equally. But the council didn't need equal light. They needed *focused* light, in two directions. They needed the lantern to *throw* light down Long Street to the east and *throw* light down Short Street to the south-east, while *not* wasting light on the high stone walls in between.

A normal lantern, mounted at the corner, would have given each street about a third of its candlepower and wasted the rest on the walls. Bella worked out, on a long sheet of paper, that this was the same as having two-thirds of a candle. She did not want to give the council two-thirds of a candle. She wanted to give them two whole candles. That was the entire job.

She designed, over those three weeks, a glass shell that no Marrowmile glassmaker had ever made before. It had two flat sides — one facing Long Street, one facing Short Street — and the flat sides were cut at very precise angles so that the candlelight inside reflected off the inside surfaces of the other walls and *focused* itself outward, doubled, in only those two directions.

She made the shell in her workshop. She made it twice, because the first one cracked on cooling. She mounted the second one at the corner herself, on a wooden scaffold that her sister Maren held steady from below. The council attended a small ceremony at dusk. They lit the lantern.

Long Street, half a mile to the east, lit up clearly. Short Street, three hundred yards to the south-east, lit up clearly. The walls in between stayed mostly dark, which was fine — nobody walked on the walls.

A cart driver who happened to be passing said, with feeling: "*Two streets. One light.*"

Bella heard him say it. She wrote it down that night in her notebook. She underlined it twice. (She rarely underlined anything twice.)

The crossroad has not had a serious accident since.

Bella made nineteen more lanterns over the next ten years — for other dangerous crossroads, for harbour entries, for the front gates of public buildings that needed to throw light in unusual ways. She became, in the polite phrase of the time, *the kingdom's two-direction glassmaker*. Some of her lanterns are still in use. The original Marrowmile lantern is still hanging at the crossroad. (It has been re-glazed twice. Bella did the re-glazing herself.)



When the chess academy began searching for somebody to teach the *double attack* — the tactical pattern where one piece, by sitting in exactly the right square, threatens two enemy pieces along two different lines — the academy master remembered Bella.

He sent her a polite letter. He was sixty-three years old by then and Bella was sixty-five. He had visited Marrowmile, once, on a walking holiday twelve years before, and had spent a long evening at the crossroad watching the lantern shine in two directions at once. He had remembered the lantern. He had, over the years, occasionally remembered the lantern at unexpected moments — once, in particular, while teaching a child the bishop-fork pattern.

His letter said:

Bella — there is a tactic in chess that has no good teacher. It is when one piece looks down two different roads at the same time. We have nobody who teaches it well, because most teachers teach moves rather than positions. We need somebody who teaches positions. Who teaches light. Will you come?

Bella, by this point, had taught one apprentice glassmaker who had moved away. She had been getting bored. She had been sketching, in her notebooks, increasingly geometric drawings that her sister Maren found unsettling. She had been catching herself, in conversations, going quiet at unhelpful moments.

She wrote back: Yes.

She arrived at the academy in early autumn with three lanterns wrapped in soft cloth and a notebook in her bag. The notebook had her grandfather's name written on the inside cover. (Her grandfather had also been a glassmaker, in case you were wondering.) The academy master met her at the gates and walked with her, in companionable silence, to the smaller of the two classrooms.

She set up the lanterns at the front. She lit them. She stood between them, in the doubled light, and waited for the children to file in.

When they had all sat down, she said — very quietly — "Two pieces. One light. Both seen."

The room went silent. The academy master, watching from the doorway, said afterward that it was the first time he had ever seen Captain Crossfire shut up voluntarily. (Captain Crossfire had insisted on attending the Lantern's first lesson. He had been hopping with anticipation. He stopped hopping the moment she lit the second lantern.)



She has been teaching at the academy for eight years now. The children call her the Glass Lantern. She has stopped trying to be called Bella here. (She lost that fight to the children. She does not mind.)

This afternoon, after her lesson, she stays in the small classroom for a few minutes to put the lanterns away. The candles are blown out. The shutters are still closed. The room smells very faintly of beeswax and metal.

A small student — eight years old, with a fork-pin in her hair — has lingered at the door. She is not quite sure whether she is allowed to ask a question after the lesson. The Glass Lantern looks up. She nods, once.

The girl says, "How do you find the square?"

The Glass Lantern thinks about this. She wraps a lantern in its cloth carefully, the way other people wrap presents.

"You don't find the square," she says, finally. "The square finds you. You set up the position. The square appears."

The girl thinks about this. She says, "But what if I can't see it?"

"Then you have not set up the position yet."

The girl nods. She runs off to find her friends. The Glass Lantern watches her go.

A moment later there is a soft knock at the doorframe. Captain Crossfire is standing there, holding two cups of tea. He has, somewhere along the way, learned to knock softly when approaching the Lantern's classroom. He carries the tea carefully. He does not spill it.

"Tea?" he says, at less than half his usual volume.

"Please," says the Glass Lantern.

He sets the cups down on the front table. He sits on a low wooden bench. The Glass Lantern sits beside him. The shuttered room is dim now, with only the late sun bleeding through the cracks in the shutters. They drink their tea in silence for a long minute.

Then Crossfire says, "You did the lantern again."

"I did."

"The new ones liked it."

"They did."

He sips his tea. He says, after a moment, "The kingdom's quietest teacher."

The Glass Lantern smiles, very faintly. She lifts her cup in a small toast. He lifts his.

She is the lantern that lit two streets. She is the most precise teacher in the cast. And sitting in the dim, beeswax-scented quiet with her old friend and a warm cup in her hands, she feels — very quietly, the way she feels everything — deeply, calmly happy.

About Spark & Anvil

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

More chapter books from Spark & Anvil

Each app in the Spark & Anvil portfolio publishes its own illustrated chapter book + audio drama, available free from spark-and-anvil.com/books. Highlights include:

- **GambitTales** — chess tactics through Sir Pinwell, Lady Skewer, Queen Vesper, and the Twin Knights of Fork Hill
- **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).

License

© 2026 Spark & Anvil (501(c)(3) public charity). Chapter text and illustrations licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. App software © Spark & Anvil — all rights reserved. Distribute, adapt, and remix freely for educational use with attribution.

Cover art, chapter illustrations, and chapter text are reviewed for age-appropriate, trauma-aware content before publication. Audio drama transcripts available at spark-and-anvil.com/cast.