



LET'S CREATE A STORY 2026

Volume 2

The Journey Starts Here

Stories have a remarkable way of connecting us, and this two-volume collection is a testament to that shared creative spirit. Brought together by students from different schools, these books celebrate a wide range of voices, each offering a unique perspective shaped by imagination, curiosity, and personal experience.

Across both volumes, you will discover a rich variety of tales—filled with adventure, mystery, humor, and heartfelt moments. Each story stands on its own, yet together they create a larger journey, reflecting the many ways young minds explore the world around them and beyond. From the first page of Volume One to the final lines of Volume Two, the collection unfolds as a vibrant tapestry of ideas and emotions.

What makes this project truly meaningful is the collaboration behind it. While every writer brings their own style and vision, their stories come together through a shared love of storytelling. These volumes are not just a collection of individual works, but a celebration of creativity, expression, and the power of many voices united in one project.

As you move through both books, allow yourself to be carried into new worlds, surprised by fresh ideas, and inspired by the honesty and imagination within each page. Together, these volumes invite you to rediscover the joy of storytelling—and the endless possibilities it holds.

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THE LONG-AWAITED TRUTH

"There," she pointed, "is my eye."

"But there is the Sapphire Castle!"

"Exactly. And one day I'm going to get it back from there".

The kids looked around to see if they had heard the same. If this strange lady had told them the story for the first time again, they would've laughed. In their eyes, she looked like a mad huntress with one eye, somehow catching the most meat for their poor part of the city.

But she had told them the same story a hundred times, and each time she looked even more determined.

"How can you hunt with one eye?" a curious boy asked.

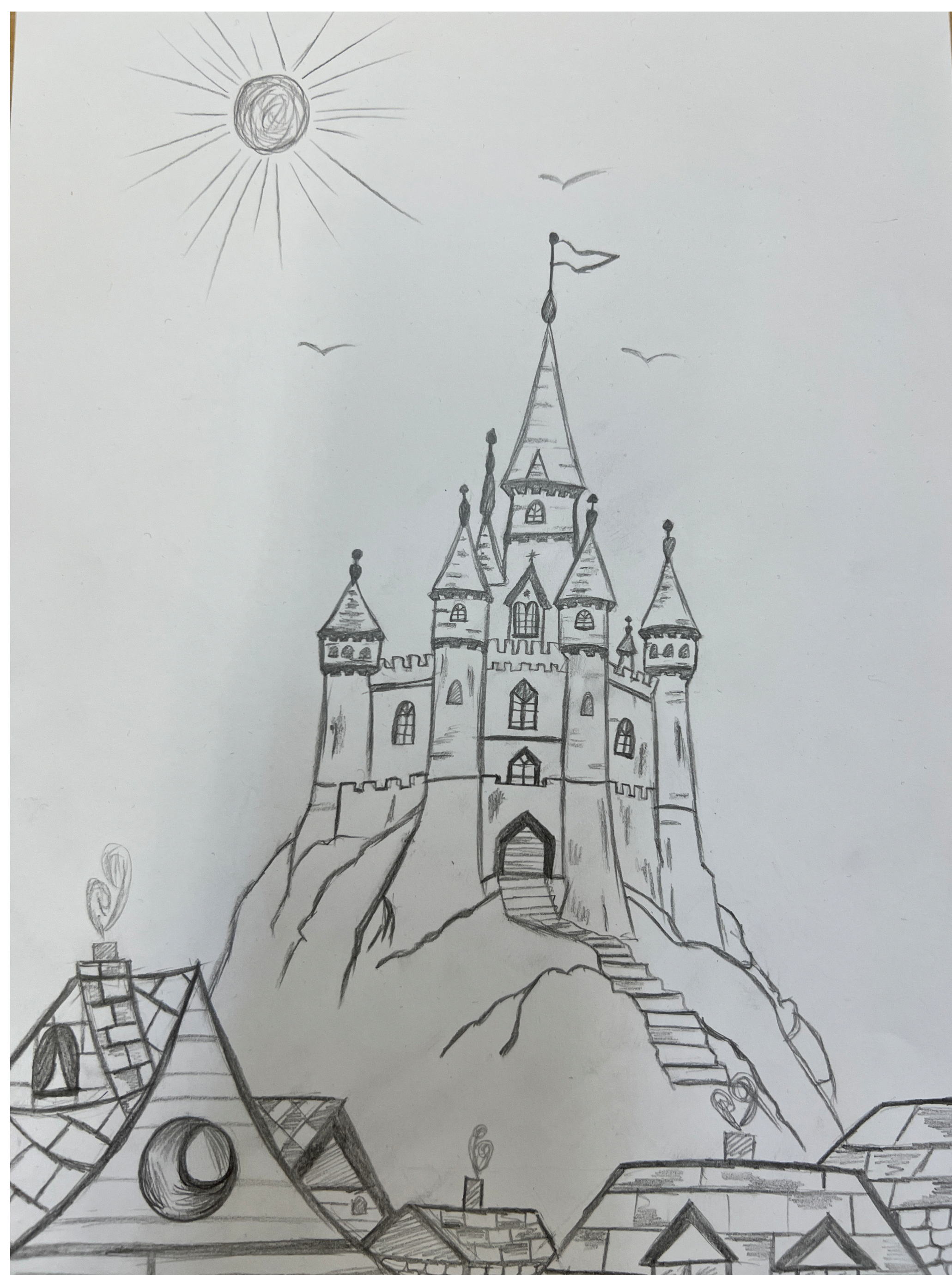
The woman shrugged, her eyes gleaming with mischief.

"I am blessed by the Goddess of Hunting".

"The God Empire fell ages ago. Don't spread such lies to my children," a lady said from behind.

Some of the kids' shoulders slumped while the others ran off, their little mouths mutely saying, "Good luck."

"The only ruler of ours is the one and only, descended from the gods, King Safyr. Please do not spread any kind of propaganda to my children anymore".



With these words, the lady grabbed a few children's wrists and pulled them away. The Huntress smiled to herself.

The sun shone on her wooden bow, which was neither polished nor shiny. A beautiful carving of the heavenly elk was carved onto the upper limb. With a sigh of longing, the huntress drew out an old napkin with burned corners. It was in surprisingly good condition, considering its age – a relic from the time when people worshiped the gods. The heavenly elk of the Goddess, whose name the huntress knew, was standing beside her, creating the illusion of its huge horns forming wings behind the Goddess of Hunting.

A yearning brush of fingertips. A few quiet whispers, similar to sobs, and the huntress stuffed the napkin back in her pocket.

A huge bison suddenly appeared in the corner of her eye. Her hunting reflexes kicked in. As she dashed toward it, the animal noticed her and bolted away from the city. To her, it was an easy target, enough food to feed half the poor. So she chased it.

She shot a few arrows, hitting the bison, but it didn't falter. She chased it to the edge of the forest, to a nearby river that the bison had to pass. But when she caught up, the bison stopped and turned to meet her head-on. She tightened the bowstring and aimed at the bison's head.

Her eyes must have been deceiving her: the bison had transformed into a human being. He looked like a wanderer, with the strange clothing and an odd hat.

A smile bloomed on his face.

"Welcome, welcome!" he grinned. I told you that it would bring her here".

Out of the earth erupted another figure, and a third emerged from the water. The beast folded in, skin to cloth, horns to shadow. A man stood there, in a strange coat and a tilted hat, smiling.

"You hunt with faith," he said.

I raised my bow. "You bleed without wounds. Who are you?"

He laughed. "The God of Mysteries."

The ground shook.

"She is marked," said the woman of stone, rising with the slow patience of mountains. "Her blood carried away our voices."

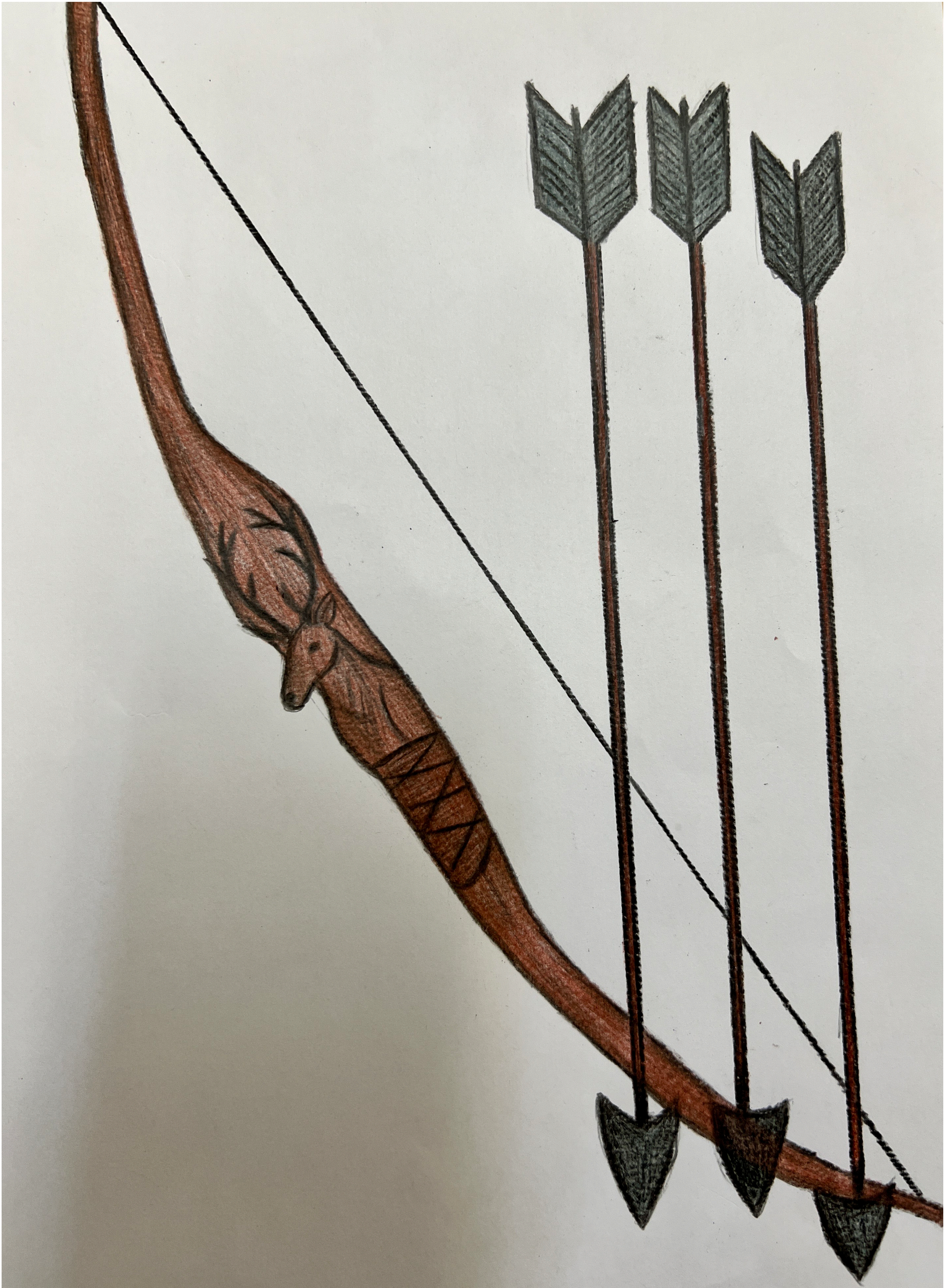
Water folded itself into a man beside her. "And she still speaks to them," the river-man said, softly wondering.

I swallowed: "Then you know about the fire."

"We felt it," they said as one.

"I don't know where my eye is," I told them. "Only that it's bound to Safyr. When he holds on, the kingdom tightens, the pull grows stronger."

The man in the hat nodded once. "The deepest truth doesn't need any name."



"I was born in a house that smelled of smoke - not fire, but incense and offerings. My parents taught me the Gods were guests, not rulers. You welcomed them with care and memory. That was our gift, and why our blood was noticed. I saw what others could not.



My mother used to remind me, "Do not boast."

My father used to tell me, "Do not fear".

Both used to confirm, "Remember".

The Goddess of Hunting watched me when I first drew a bow and missed. She laughed like a forest when a sapling bends.

King Safyr was not always a king. He feared belief. He said it divided people. What he meant was that it made them uncontrolled.

The fire came at night. They said it was an accident. They always repeated that. I remember my father pushing me through thick smoke. My mother was praying - not to be saved, but to be remembered. Unlike Safyr, the gods heard her.

Afterward, the city smelled clean. Safyr stood among the ashes and spoke about a new beginning. I was dragged before him because my eyes were



wrong – too bright, too knowing. He told me the gods were gone forever, that he would prove it.

He took my eye. Not in rage. In ceremony. I only felt it leave, like a star being pulled from the sky. "See? Power can be claimed." Safyr said. He didn't understand that blessings aren't objects. They're bonds.



The Goddess of Hunting found me in the ruins. She did not return my eye. She gave me strength, focus, and a hunger without hate.

"You will hunt others' lives," she said.

So, I became a story.

I told children about a missing eye tied to a castle of blue stone. I spoke old names softly, so they would not shatter. People laughed, or turned away, or called me mad. That is how forgetting works – it disguises itself as reason. But forgetting is thinning now. I feel it when belief stirs, when an arrow flies straighter than it should. I don't know where my eye rests – only that it's bounded to Safyr's lie, and that when the lie weakens, the pull grows stronger. You want to be worshiped again. I just wish to get what was stolen from me. We aren't so different. If the gods return through a story, through a hunt – let them return. Guide my hand when sight fails. Walk beside me unseen. When people remember you, I will see you again. And when I see again, I'll finish the hunt.



The River spoke. Its voice shook the ground beneath my feet, forbidding me from following through with my quest. It racked my entire being, forcing me to stay and listen to the disembodied voice.

"There is one thing you must know. Something no soul is allowed to speak of," it said. The Huntress bit her lip in uncertainty. Perhaps she should have left when she had the chance. How could she trust something no one shall speak of?

The thundering noise of boulders shifting broke her daze. Rocks shifted on their own for the man in the hat, making way for him to step forward. Her eye followed the movements of his hand wearily, watching him remove the hat. Looking at the face that was once a shadow, she saw emptiness in his eye sockets. "I am soulless," the God of Mysteries said. "Therefore, I can tell you. The Goddess of the Hunt isn't just your guide," he paused, the corners of his mouth quirking upwards. "She is your mother."

The Huntress froze. Just for a split second, before her hands trembled and her knees quivered. "That's impossible," she stuttered out. The wind picked up. The forest rustled. A large elk passed by, trotting to the other side of the river. "It was hidden. Forgotten and forbidden," a booming, powerful yet graceful voice came from behind. The Huntress shivered, déjà vu plaguing her. It felt as if this wasn't the first time she had heard this voice. It's like she's been here before, heard this before, felt this before.

Artemis stood between the tall oaks. The midday sun shone down on her like a spotlight, marking her appearance as if she were in a leading role. It made her look ethereal, subtle, unreal. But she swore she saw the Goddess with her own eyes. Stepping closer, the angelic figure spoke. "It's because your father was a mortal," she admitted.

"My own father, Zeus, prohibited such love. He said that half-blood children bring instability to the natural rule of the Gods". The Goddess of Hunting smiled down warmly at her daughter. "Hence, your upbringing was confined within your eyes."

And it all made sense now.

"My eye... It doesn't just see - it remembers." It's a gateway between Gods and mortals. It connects reality to belief. It allows us to see that which is erased: precise history, exact names. "That's why Safyr had no choice but to hold the ceremony," the Huntress mumbled to herself.

"Yes," the Goddess affirmed. "He can't destroy it. He can only separate it from you."

Safyr took my eye. Not because he was afraid of me. Because he was afraid of what I could remind the world. If I had that eye, the Kingdom he built on lies and deceit would crumble.

I don't want my eye back for sight.

I want the truth.

And I want the right to be who I truly am. "You are strong, Medea", Artemis reminded me of who I was meant to be.

I will not let my name be forgotten. I will bring back what once was.



Suddenly, from the far side of the river, an elk appeared. It moved lightly, as if the ground hesitated to claim its steps. The moment Medea saw it, a single thought struck her – it was her chance to escape the circle the gods had crafted. She was a hunter, and hunters see more than others. Though Medea had only one eye, her gaze was sharp, slipping between movements and uncovering the unseen.

She locked on the elk, and in that instant, memory struck. Her bow was more than a weapon. Not only did it kill – it called. Summoning the animal depicted on it, Medea leapt onto its back, riding away and leaving the gods behind.

Having drawn her arrow, she released it forward. It flew ahead, pointing the way to the Sapphire Palace. Medea and the elk raced together, and the arrow guided them toward Saturn – a realm imbued with discipline, responsibility, loyalty, focus, and stability. Not only did Safyr symbolize stability, but Medea's journey was far from steady. What awaited her was something she did not yet know.

Medea sped at the speed of light toward Saturn's ring, upon which the Sapphire Castle stood like a graceful ballerina.

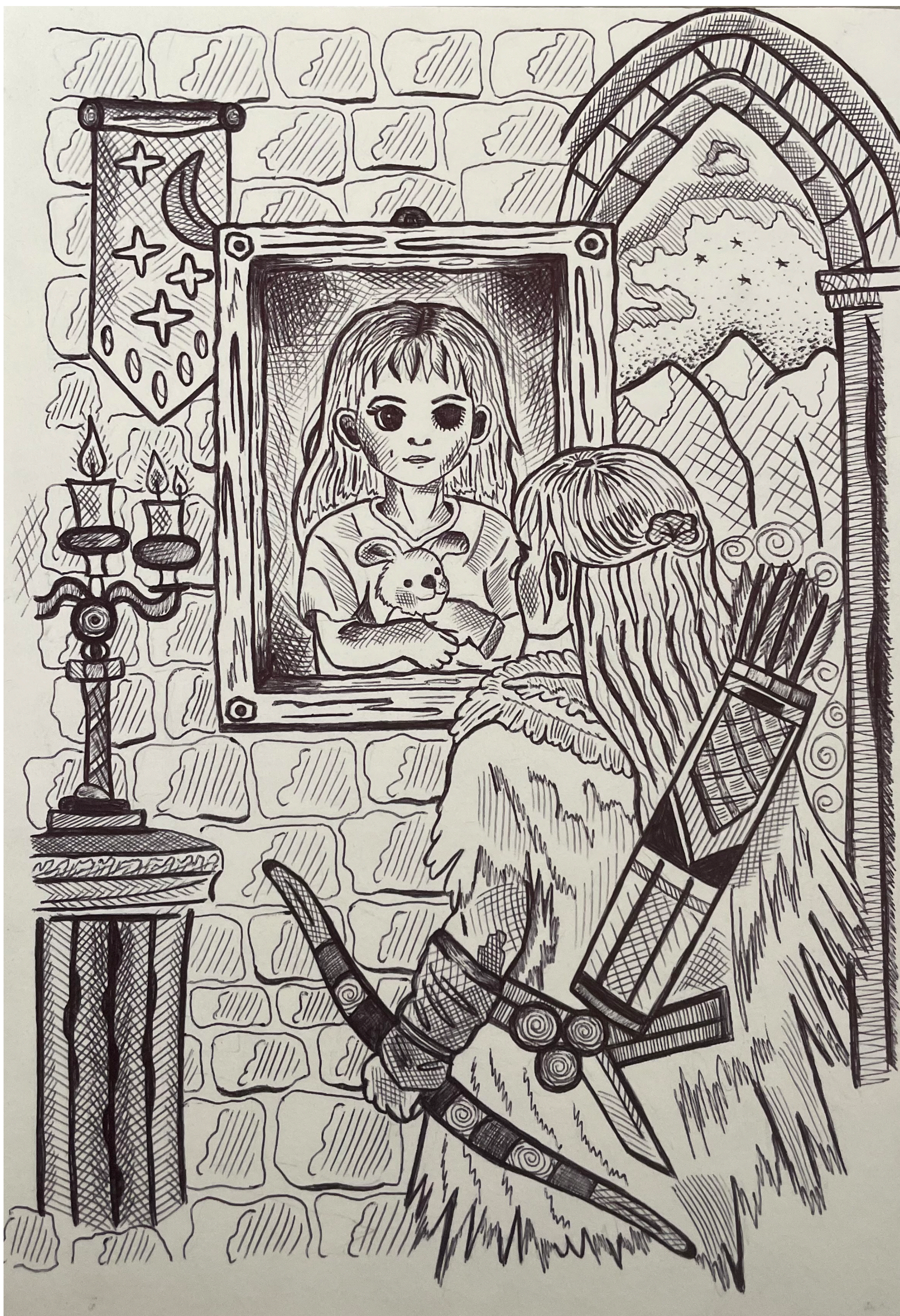


Reaching it, she leapt down from the deer, pushed open the heavy doors, and, after looking around, found nothing – neither a chest in which the Sapphire Eye might be hidden, nor any other evidence. Suddenly, her attention was caught by a painting from her childhood – there she was, young, still a child, but with one eye socket empty.

“Could this really be the truth I so longed to discover?” Medea thought.

Her thoughts were confirmed by Sapphir’s words. Not as a confession – but as a sentence passed:

“Yes, Medea. You are not mistaken,” he said calmly, far too calmly. “That second eye never existed. It was born of your longing, of your belief. We allowed you to believe in it.”



“Allowed?” Medea’s voice trembled. “You created it.”

“From childhood, we told you that something had been taken from you. Not a part of your body – yourself. We planted absence within you, so you would doubt your own strength and believe yourself incomplete, and weak.”

“Because I was dangerous.”

“Because you were a huntress, a demigoddess, capable of remembering who you truly were.” His gaze locked onto hers. “And memory is more dangerous than any weapon.”

“You saw me as a threat.”

“Not you – but what you might awaken,” he replied quietly. “You were a reminder that the dominion of gods is not eternal. That power can not only be granted – but taken.”

Medea clenched her fists. In that instant, everything fell into place – the missing eye, the constant ache of emptiness, the longing for something she had never possessed.

“Power,” she said at last, “either destroys – or is destroyed.”

Safyr inclined his head.

“And we chose to destroy first.”



She felt overwhelmed by emotions. Her anger was growing, and her heart felt as if it had been shattered into millions of pieces. She had trusted them completely, yet they had betrayed her. They had lied to her face the whole time. Medea wanted to cry and scream. She wanted to tell them everything – how they made her feel, how they were slowly destroying her, and how she no longer believed in herself. However, she knew that speaking out would not change anything. It could even make the situation worse. So she chose to remain silent and walked away from Safyr.

After some time, when she finally calmed down, she began to think about how to become stronger and prove to everyone that she was no longer weak. She was not a doormat that people could step on whenever they wanted. She was not a loyal dog that followed someone who treated her badly. Medea was a living being with feelings, and she decided that she would never allow anyone, especially them, to hurt her again.

After thinking for a long time, she decided to find her mother, Artemis, the Goddess of the Hunt, and ask for her help. She returned to the river where she had last seen her. The same man with the hat was standing there, watching her. When he noticed the girl, he waved his hand and invited her to come closer. It seemed as if he had been waiting for her.



“What brought you here this time?” he asked.

“I learned the truth,” she replied. “And now I want to meet my mother. She has to help me.”

Suddenly, the goddess appeared, somehow knowing everything.

"He finally told you about the eye that was never yours," Artemis said.
"Wait, you knew?" Medea asked in shock. "You knew about the lies? About how afraid he was of me and what I could have done? Why didn't you tell me?"

"You had to discover the truth by yourself," Artemis replied calmly.
"Even if I had told you earlier, you wouldn't have believed me."

Medea did not answer. Instead, she turned around and left. She remembered Artemis's earlier words about Zeus and decided to go to him.

When she opened the gates of the temple, she asked, "Zeus, can you tell me everything I do not know about my parents and their lies?"

"Are you sure you want to know the truth, even if it turns your life upside down?" Zeus asked.

Medea thought for a moment and then slowly nodded.

"Artemis is not your mother," he began. "Long ago, I gave her the gift of eternal virginity. Your real father is Safyr, and your mother was human."

"What?" Medea said, confused.

"Safyr and that human woman were deeply in love, but they ignored the rules I had created. When the young woman gave birth to you, she died. Heartbroken, Safyr decided to leave you at the temple gates. Artemis found you, adopted you, and promised never to reveal the truth."

"Then why am I a huntress?" Medea asked.

"I took your eye," Zeus explained, "but in return, I gave you the power of a hunter. That is how nature balances itself."

At last, the long-awaited truth was revealed.



STORY TEAMS

Tauragė District Žygaičiai Gymnasium



Kazlų Rūda Kazio Grinius Gymnasium



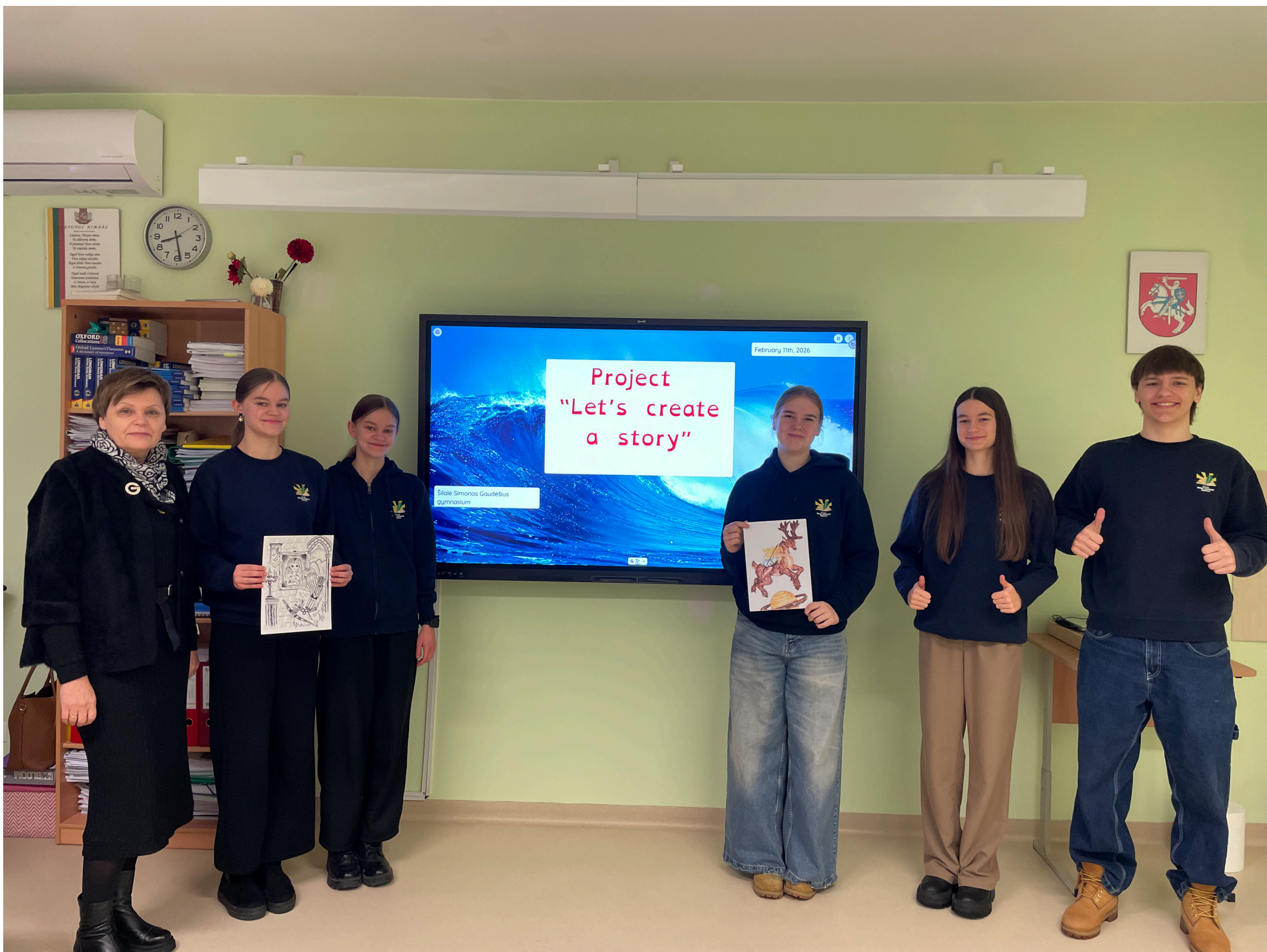
Vilkaviškis district Pilviškiai "Santakos"
Gymnasium



Vilkaviškis district Virbalis
Basic School



Šilalė Simonas Gaudėšius Gymnasium



THE CLOCKMAKERS' SECRET

Silas and Vera grew up listening to their father talk about his unusual clocks. He worked as a clockmaker, and his workshop was always filled with quiet ticking and the smell of wood and metal. To them, he was a kind, gentle man who liked to explain how things worked and tell stories, which made the evenings feel warm and magical. Sometimes, he would show his kids a small round clock made of dark wood and say that these clocks were special. When they asked why, he only smiled and told them that one day, when they were older, they would understand everything.

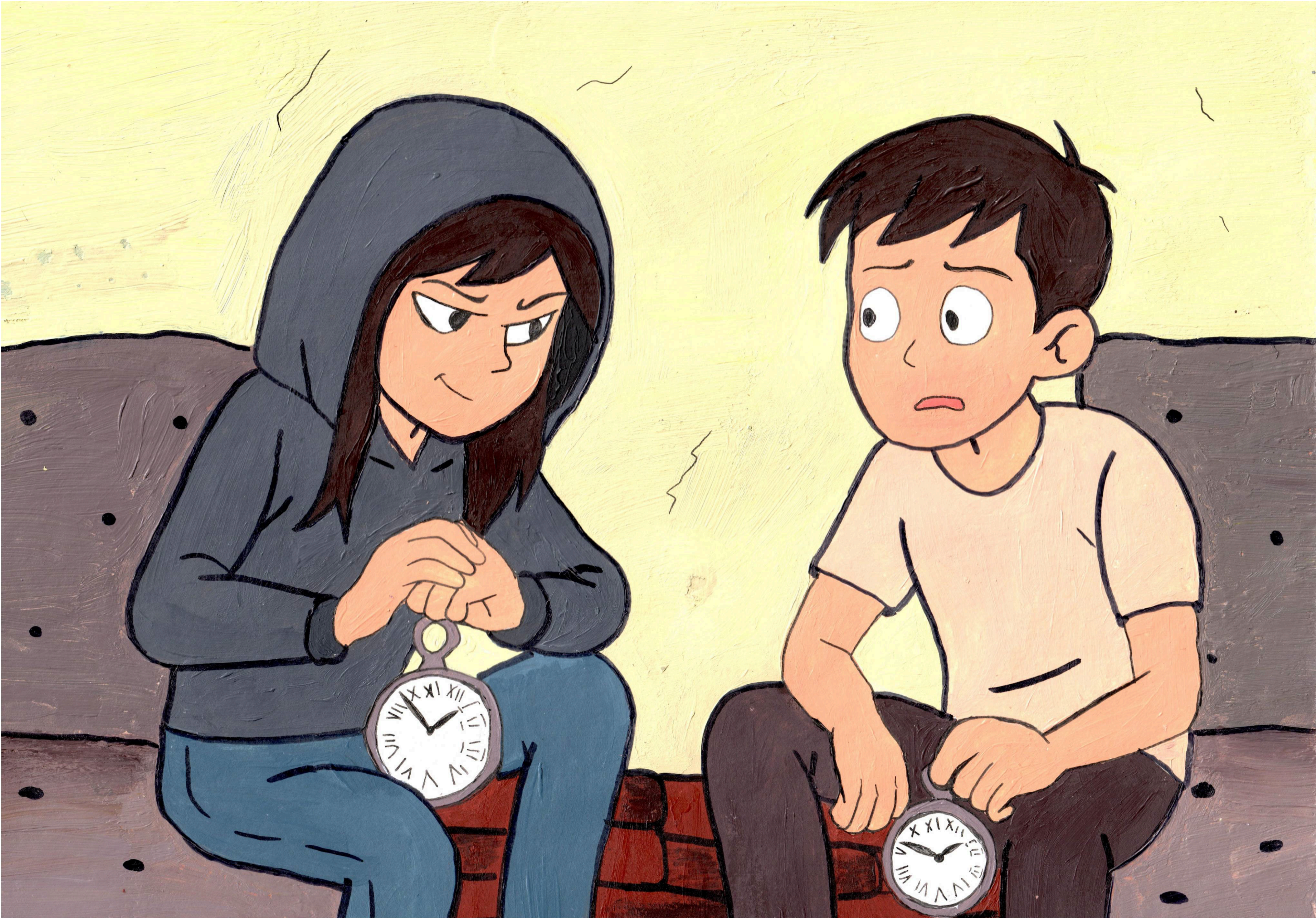
But that day never came. Before Silas and Vera were old enough to learn the truth, their father became very sick and passed away. After his death, the house felt empty and too quiet. The clocks on the walls kept ticking as always, but the sound no longer felt friendly. It reminded them of the questions they never got to ask and the answers they would never hear again. A few months later, when the twins turned eighteen, they

decided to clean their dad's house attic, a place they had avoided, because it reminded them of their dear father.

The attic was dusty and cold, and weak sunlight came through a small window. While moving old boxes, they found a wooden chest. Inside it, there were their father's letters, folded and tied with an old string. As they read the letters one by one, they began to understand that their father was not seen as normal by the people in town. Many had thought he was strange and even dangerous. Some said he could stop time. Others were afraid of his clocks and believed they were cursed.



Silas and Vera knew their father had never wanted to harm anyone. In the bottom of the chest, they found the clocks he had promised to explain the purpose of, years ago. When they pushed a button on one of the two clocks, something unbelievable happened. Time around them stopped.



The world froze for one full hour and then started again as if nothing had happened. After each use, the clocks needed three hours before they could stop time again. At first, Silas and Vera were excited. But soon, their ideas changed. Silas began to feel that this power was far too dangerous and should be destroyed, while Vera felt the opposite and started thinking of ways to use the clocks to her advantage. The townspeople did not know anything about time manipulation. Silas and Vera now faced a problem much bigger than the clocks themselves. Vera became a threat, and Silas was trying to stop her, but the whole town saw them as a danger to their community. But at first, they were seen as teenagers with a great deal of power in their hands. At the start, there was too much pressure on both of them, and they had to keep this secret while using it for good. However, the secret didn't last long...

Vera was walking around the park. It was getting dark, and a strong wind was picking up. All of a sudden, the girl looked down and saw a wallet, and she also saw a boy running to a shelter to try to avoid the wind. She realized the wallet was his. Vera chased after the boy, trying to get his attention to give him his wallet back. After she finally caught up with him, she said, 'Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you, I just wanted to ask if this was your wallet.'



'Oh yeah, it is, and who may I thank for finding it?' he smiled back.

'My name is Vera, and yours?'

'I'm Jacob, and maybe as a thank you, I could invite you for a coffee?' he said with a lisp.

All of a sudden, the wind calmed down.

'I'd love to!' she smiled.

'Alright then, Friday at 8 pm, near the Park Cafe?'

'Sure, that would be amazing!'

He smiled and ran off.

After a few successful dates, Vera and Jacob became an inseparable couple. They became so close that they basically hung out every day. On the first year of their anniversary, they decided to exchange gifts. Vera gifted Jacob's wallet a tracker, and it was a pretty funny present but his gift made Vera very confused, as it was a thrifted watch. She thought he had found out her secret, but she did her best to stay calm and quiet. Jacob looked at her and asked, 'What's wrong, don't you like it? '

'No, I love it but it just reminded me of something. '

'What happened?'

Vera went on to tell him about her deep secret and left him shocked. Jacob couldn't comprehend what he had just heard, so he ran away from Vera. The girl started worrying that Jacob would look at her differently. She ran after him like the first time they met but he was significantly faster. Vera didn't give up and chased Jacob down to his apartment. He locked his door, and the girl started banging on the door, expecting to open it but no luck. She broke down and started crying, thinking it was all over. After a while, Jacob opened his front door, saw Vera all miserable, and let her in. He felt really sorry for her and for how he had made her feel.





After settling things with Jacob, Vera decided it was time to leave and go back to her home to catch up with her brother. On her way home, to her surprise, she noticed that a lot of townspeople were huddled in groups and murmuring to each other with anxious faces. However, she shrugged it off and continued to make her way to her house. As soon as she walked through the door, she saw Silas in the living room, talking on his phone with a concerned expression. As she was taking off her coat and outdoor boots, Silas ended his conversation and approached her in an alarmed manner.

‘Where have you been, Vera? I’ve been worried sick!’ Silas exclaimed.

‘I was... busy. Why are you asking?’ Vera replied.

‘Remember our father’s clock? Well, it’s gone, and the whole town is getting suspicious. People are saying that they’ve lost the sense of time. I think that it has something to do with us.’

‘So you mean... the clock’s missing?’

Vera felt a sickening feeling brewing in her stomach, as if somebody had just punched the air out of her. Suddenly, she remembered the events of today, when Jacob gifted her the clock. She started browsing through her purse, looking for it, and noticed it was no longer there.

'Vera, what are you doing?' Silas questioned, with a frown on his face. Vera sighed and decided it was time to explain to her brother what she had been doing for the past year.

'You see, I met this friend a little over a year ago, Jacob. We've been going out together and today was our first anniversary, so we gifted each other presents. To my surprise, he got me a clock, but I can't seem to find it anymore,' she said, whilst rummaging further in her purse, 'And you know what... I think it may have been our father's.'



'You're joking, right?' her brother raised his voice angrily, 'You mean to tell me you've been meeting up with this strange person for over a year, without having the thought to tell me, and now you believe he may have stolen our father's possession?' Silas, in disbelief, sits down on the living room sofa and holds his head in despair.

'No, no, no... this can't be... Vera, you've messed everything up!'

Vera immediately denied this. Jacob wasn't that type of person, she tried to persuade herself. Before Vera could say another word, Silas spontaneously stood up and made to leave the house.

'Silas, where on earth are you going?' Vera worryingly asked.

'I'm going to find Jacob.'

Silas ran out of the house without his jacket. The chill evening air didn't bother him, as if it were nothing to his overheated body. Vera ran after him, shouting her brother's name, but he didn't stop. Silas had only one thought: if their secret fell into the wrong hands, then life as they knew it was over. The city looked different. The streetlights flickered in a strange rhythm, and people's shadows grew unnaturally long. The air seemed to thicken, turning into a dusty fog.



"Silas, stop! You don't know him!" Vera shouted, grabbing his sleeve at the entrance to Jacob's house.

"Exactly! I don't know him. But how did he 'find' our watch in the thrift store? Father hid it for a reason."

They burst into the apartment. A strange, growing humming could be heard inside—the sound of his father's watch. In the living room, Jacob stood by the window, clutching his watch. His face was impassive. "Stop pretending!" Silas shouted. "Give me the watch before I call the police."

Jacob froze, seeing Vera behind his brother. He realized they were twins; they were family. "So, you're in this together," he hissed. "A family of thieves has returned for their loot. Get out! I won't let you steal our family heirloom again." Silas stared at him incredulously. "What are you talking about? Our father made this watch!" "Your father was a homeless charlatan!" Jacob screamed. "He stole it from my house. He was a sorcerer who cursed the mechanism to serve only himself. Your entire 'happy' life was built on stolen time — my family's time!"

"No... he was a good man..." Vera shook her head. "A good man?" Jacob laughed. "Now his soul is trapped in a time bubble he created to evade justice. He's stuck in an eternal 'now.' I'll get him out of there so he can answer for every stolen moment. I'll have my revenge."

Before Silas could move, Jacob abruptly pressed his thumb on the central button. The air shook. There was a click, and Jacob froze in place, as if in a trance, surrounded by a shimmering light. "He's gone there," Vera whispered. "He's weak here, but in that world, he can destroy Dad. Take the watch — we'll go after him."



"Listen to me! We can't use this! How many times have I told you it's dangerous?" Silas shook his head in displeasure; he'd always known these mechanical devices were dangerous. But would he let his sister touch them? Never!

"But you want to know the truth, don't you?" Vera asked. Confidence and excitement were evident in her eyes. "Come on... What's your answer?"



Silas looked at the watch in Jacob's hands. It seemed colder than before, its surface reflecting the faint light of the room. Jacob stood frozen in the strange shimmer, unmoving, trapped between seconds. The air felt tense, as if time itself was waiting for Silas to decide.

"Come on," Vera said, her voice quieter now but full of urgency. "Take it. We have to go after him. If Jacob reaches Dad first, we might lose him forever again!"

Silas didn't answer immediately. His mind raced with everything Jacob had said. A thief. A sorcerer. Stolen time. None of it sounded like the father he remembered - the gentle man who fixed clocks and told stories in the evenings. But the doubt had already crept in.

"What's your answer?" Vera asked again.

"Okay," he said at last.

Relief spread across Vera's face as Silas took the watch and placed it in his palm. For a moment, she even smiled, certain that they were about to step into the mysterious world their father had hidden for so long. But Silas didn't press the button. Instead, he stared at the watch for a long second... and then suddenly lifted it high and slammed it against the ground.

CRACK.

The glass shattered. Gears jumped loose and scattered across the floor. The faint ticking stopped instantly. Vera gasped in shock. The strange shimmering light around Jacob flickered and disappeared. He blinked, suddenly unfrozen, staring at the broken watch in disbelief.

"What have you done?" he shouted.

Vera looked from the shattered pieces to Silas, her voice rising with anger.

"That was our only way to reach him! We could've talked to Dad again!"

Jacob stepped forward, furious. "You fool! Now I'll never enter that world again. I'll never make him answer for what he did!"

Silas stood still, breathing slowly. Surprisingly, he felt calm.



"I know," he said quietly.

They both stared at him.

"I'm tired of all this," Silas continued.

"Maybe the truth is complicated. Maybe Dad made mistakes. But chasing him through time won't fix anything. He's gone... and I just want to live in peace."

Vera shook her head in disbelief.

"You're just giving up."

"Maybe," Silas replied. "Or maybe I'm finally letting him rest."

Furious, Vera turned and stormed out of the house, the door slamming behind her. Silas glared at Jacob one last time before following her. Soon, the room was silent again. The ticking had stopped, and with it, the strange pull of the past. For the first time in years, time finally felt like it didn't belong to anyone.

STORY TEAMS

Kaunas "Ausros" Gymnasium



Marijampolė Rygiškių Jonas Gymnasium



Klaipėda "Vėtrungės" Gymnasium



Šilutė district Žemaičių Naumiestis Gymnasium



Vilnius "Sostinės" Gymnasium



WHAT THE FOREST KEEPS

In a small village, hidden between deep forests and narrow paths, there lived a boy named Thomas. The people in the village were kind and peaceful; however, there was always a strange feeling in the air, something no one wanted to talk about. Long ago, the people of the village used to tell old stories about witches, flying brooms, and



voices that whispered in the forest at night . But as time passed, people forgot these stories, as if they were only fairy tales meant to scare children.

Thomas was very curious and brave—sometimes even too much. He always asked lots of questions, and the adults sometimes didn't know how to answer him. His mother used to joke that her son had more thoughts in his head than there were stars in the sky. His father used to say that one day his son would become a great explorer if only he stopped being interested in everything that was forbidden.

Even though Thomas's parents loved their son, their life was not easy. They worked in a nearby town and often came back home late, when Thomas was already asleep. He wished his parents could spend more time with him and hoped for a day when they would go for a walk together, play with him, or at least eat dinner as a family. Sometimes he watched their car lights disappear down the road and hoped they would return earlier the next day.

Fortunately, Thomas had friends. He especially liked a girl named Mija—she was kind-hearted, cheerful, and always ready to help. She studied in a parallel class and, although Thomas didn't know if she liked him even a little bit, he couldn't stop admiring her. To him, she was the sweetest and prettiest girl in the world. They often played together outside, shared secrets, and Mija always knew how to make Thomas smile, even if he felt worried about his parents.

One cold autumn evening, a strange silence covered the village. The sun had already set, and dark clouds filled the sky. Thomas was sitting on the windowsill, watching the road his parents usually took on their way home from work. Minutes felt like hours, and no car lights appeared. His heart started beating faster—his parents had never been so late.

“Maybe something terrible has happened to them?” Thomas thought, feeling fear grow inside him. Finally, unable to wait any longer and without any hesitation, he stepped into his shoes, took his backpack, and quietly left the house.



It was dark outside, and the pale moonlight lit the path that led to the forest. It was the same road his parents always used when going to work.

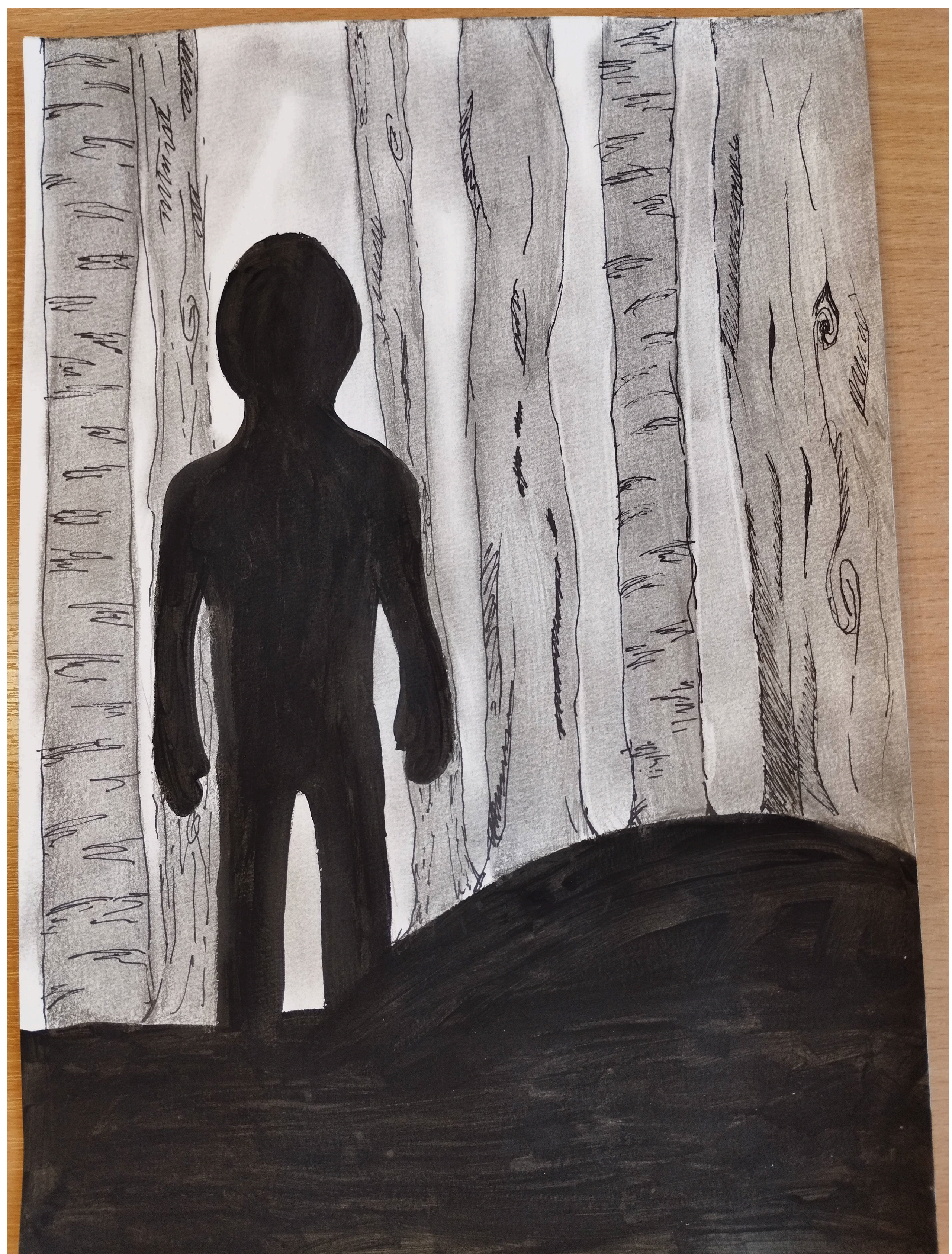
Thomas took a deep breath and walked forward, not knowing that this step would change his life forever.

Thomas walked slowly along the dark forest path. The farther he went, the more he felt a strange pressure, as if something invisible were following him. The moon hung above the treetops, casting a faint light that barely illuminated the way. The forest was unusually silent—not even the birds were singing, and the wind did not stir the leaves. It seemed as though nature was holding its breath.

Suddenly, Thomas froze. On the left side, between the black tree trunks, something resembling a human silhouette moved. The boy strained his eyes. At first, he thought it was just a shadow, but a moment later, he realized that the shadow had no face. It looked like a cloud of smoke slowly gliding between the trees. Thomas instinctively stepped back, but curiosity was stronger than fear.

Soon, the shadow was no longer alone. A second appeared on the right, then a third. They did not move closer, but they were clearly following the boy. Thomas hesitated for a few seconds, wondering whether he should turn around and run, but then his eyes caught a glimmer on the ground. He bent down and picked up a small, familiar object—his father's medallion, the one he always wore.

A cold tightness gripped Thomas's chest. If the medallion was here, that meant... his parents had been in this forest. Maybe very recently. Maybe they were still here.



The shadows, as if understanding the boy's confusion, glided deeper into the forest and stopped, facing him—a silent gesture beckoning him to follow. Clutching the medallion tightly in his palm, Thomas followed them.

The forest grew more frightening. The trees seemed to lean over the path, and the roots spreading across the ground twisted like endless winding trails. The whispers around him grew louder: they sounded not like the wind, but like quiet voices speaking in a language Thomas had never heard. Strange as it was, the words were soft and sorrowful, as if calling for help.

At last, the boy stepped into a small clearing. At its center stood a huge stone, overgrown with moss and carved with unusual symbols. The stone emitted a greenish glow that trembled as if alive. The shadows gathered around it, as though guarding the place.



Thomas felt the whole world around him fall still. He stepped closer. Then, from deep within the stone came a quiet, muffled voice:

"Thomas..."

The boy's heart lurched. It was his father's voice—weak, but unmistakably his.

"Dad?" he whispered, barely daring to take another step.

The light within the stone shimmered brighter, and Thomas saw the shadow of a man trapped as if behind a window. His father's face was exhausted, but his eyes were alive.

"We... are trapped," the voice said. — The forest holds us... to protect us. A danger is rising in the village. Only you can stop it.

A shiver ran down Thomas's spine.

"But how?" he asked.

The stone trembled, the light dimmed, and the shadows around him began to dissolve like mist at dawn.

"Find what was lost... and you will save us all," the voice whispered one last time.

At that very moment, the first rays of morning light illuminated the forest.

Thomas hurried through the empty streets. The silence felt heavier than before, as if the village itself was holding its breath. Near the old well, he noticed a familiar figure standing still.

It was Mija. She turned around when she heard footsteps, and her eyes widened with relief.

"Thomas! Where have you been?" she said anxiously. Thomas hesitated for only a moment before showing her his father's medallion and telling her everything — the shadows, the glowing stone, and his father's voice trapped inside it. Mija listened carefully, her face growing serious.

"I knew those stories weren't just made up," she said quietly. "My grandmother used to say the forest hides old knowledge — not objects, but truths people were afraid to remember."

Before Thomas could ask what she meant, the medallion in his hand suddenly grew warm. A faint green light appeared again, brighter than before.

"It's happening again," Thomas whispered.

Without another word, they followed the narrow path back into the forest together. The deeper they went, the stronger the glow became, as if the medallion was guiding them. The trees closed in around them, and the air felt cold and ancient. Soon, they reached an old abandoned building hidden behind thick vines and moss. It looked like a small ruined chapel, its stone walls cracked and forgotten by time. The medallion's light pulsed intensely as they stepped inside. The air was heavy and silent. Near the broken altar, half-buried under dust and fallen stones, they discovered an old wooden chest. Its surface was carved with strange symbols, similar to those Thomas had seen on the glowing stone. With trembling hands, Thomas opened the chest. Inside lay an ancient book bound in dark leather. As soon as he touched it, the medallion's glow faded, as if its task was complete. They carefully opened the book, but their hope quickly turned into confusion. The pages were filled with unfamiliar symbols and letters written in a language neither of them had ever seen before. Some drawings showed forests, stones, and shadow-like figures surrounding humans.



"We can't read any of this," Mija whispered. Suddenly, a cold breeze swept through the chapel, flipping the pages by itself. The forest outside seemed to whisper again — not in warning, but in expectation.



"This book explains everything," Thomas said slowly, "about the forest. About my parents. About what was lost."
"But we don't understand it," Mija replied.
Thomas closed the book carefully. — Then we need to find someone who does. As they stepped back into the forest, the whispers followed them — waiting for the knowledge hidden in the book to be awakened.

Suddenly, all the voices disappeared. Now they were completely alone—just two small children in the frightening depths of the forest. Thomas felt safer with Mija beside him, but something still didn't feel right. He realised that hours had passed since he had first stepped into the timberland.



They decided to go back home and try to figure everything out together. But when they searched for the way out for the third time, it became clear that they had lost their bearings entirely. The forest seemed to twist around them, as if time itself were looping, refusing to let them leave until they discovered what it wanted from them. The dark wildwood felt as though it were closing in on itself, and every path the friends tried to take only led them into maddening circles.

Panic began to claw at their throats; it felt as though the mysteries of the thicket were suffocating them. Suddenly, a white bird erupted from the tangled branches. It reminded Mija and Thomas of a guardian angel, sparking a flicker of hope that they had finally found succor.

Then Mija recalled a story her grandmother had once told her. Long ago, there had been a man who was deeply in love with her grandmother. When she did not return his feelings, he vanished into the trees and disappeared off the face of the earth. People whispered that he had learned the ancient magic of the woods and become the only one who could understand its murmured languages and secrets. Many called him the Wizard of Shadows. The wanderer never stayed in one place; his home moved with the forest itself. The only way to find him was to watch for a white bird that appeared only to those truly in need. If followed without looking back, its silent flight would lead through a hidden trail of light to wherever the man was hiding. Without another word, they followed the white bird as it drifted silently between the trees, its feathers glowing faintly in the darkness. Ahead, through the mist, a warm light flickered between the branches, and Thomas knew they were no longer alone.



From the depths of the forest emerged a tall, shadowy figure. The stranger greeted the children in a loud, booming voice. Mija and Thomas, frozen with fear as the dim light made the figure appear intimidating, could only squeak out a tiny hello. The wizard quickly realised why they were afraid, gave a light chuckle, and stepped fully into the light.



He was an old man with a long, greying beard and piercing blue eyes. A sage-green cloak rested on his shoulders, and in his hand he held an enormous cane topped with a misty crystal ball. The Wizard of Shadows introduced himself as Arcturus and asked the most important question:

“What manner of succor do you seek?”

Arcturus already seemed to know the answer, yet he simply gazed at Mija and Thomas with knowing eyes and waited. The children nodded at one another and began spilling all their worries to the old man. Having decided they could trust him, they handed Arcturus the book.

The wizard flipped through its pages, mumbling under his breath. A few hours bled away before the rustling suddenly ceased. Arcturus slowly lifted his gaze to the children and, with a determined expression, said:

“I can help you. I promise to stand by your side and give you my assistance on the difficult journey that awaits you.”

The wizard then closed the ancient book with reverence. The dark leather binding creaked, as if objecting to being sealed again.

Arcturus stepped closer to the children, lowering his voice until it was no louder than the hush of leaves overhead.

"The danger your father spoke of is not a creature," he said quietly. "It is forgetting."

Thomas frowned. "Forgetting?"

"The forest does not trap without reason," the wizard replied. "Long ago, the people of your village made a pact with these woods. The forest would guard them from a rising darkness, and in return, the people would remember its laws and protect its heart. But memory fades. Promises weaken, and in time their meaning fades. And now something stirs beneath the village – something that feeds on neglect."

Mija clutched Thomas's sleeve, her fingers tightening. "What was lost?"

Arcturus opened the ancient book once more. This time, he did not simply turn the pages; he pressed his palm against the symbols. The letters shimmered faintly green.

"What was lost," he said, "is the Seal of Roots."

He explained that deep beneath the old well in the village square lay a stone marked with the same carvings as the glowing monolith in the forest clearing. The two stones were bound together. When the village forgot its oath, the seal weakened, and the forest drew Thomas's parents into its keeping – protecting them from the shadows rising below.

Thomas felt the medallion warm again in his hand.

"You must restore the seal," Arcturus said. "The medallion is the key. It carries your father's pledge."

Without hesitation, the children followed the wizard back toward the village. Dawn was spreading pale gold across the rooftops when they reached the well. The air trembled faintly, as though something beneath the stones was breathing.

Arcturus struck the ground once with his cane. The earth shifted. The old well stones parted just enough to reveal a moss-covered slab etched with ancient symbols.

Thomas stepped forward. His hands trembled, but he did not falter. He placed the medallion into the shallow marking at the center of the stone.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then the carvings ignited with soft green light. The ground hummed. The whispering wind returned – not in warning, but in release.

Far away in the forest, the stone in the clearing cracked, fine fractures racing across its surface. The shadows dissolved. And two figures stepped free into the morning light.

When Thomas turned, he saw his parents standing at the edge of the square, confused but unharmed. The forest had kept its promise. And now, so had the village. Arcturus watched silently as the family embraced. Then, as quietly as mist at sunrise, the Wizard of Shadows was gone - leaving behind only the faint flutter of white wings disappearing into the trees.



STORY TEAMS

Vilnius district Nemėžys St. R. Kalinauskas Gymnasium



Biržai Technology and Business Training Center



Šiauliai Technology Training Center



Marijampolė Sūduva Gymnasium



Tauragė Žalgiriai Gymnasium



THE MIDNIGHT EXPRESS: WHERE TIME DEMANDS A CHOICE

One cold December evening, the atmosphere in the town was festive and joyful. You could hear children laughing across the streets since Christmas was near. But when it got dark, everyone hurried home. Mark suddenly realized he couldn't find his little sister, Jane, who was still somewhere outside. He called everyone he knew, asking for help, but nobody responded. Eventually, he found himself near the old train station. It had been abandoned for years—broken windows, graffiti-covered walls, bugs crawling everywhere, and not a single sign of human life. The place gave Mark goosebumps.

As he stepped closer, he heard a noise inside. He ran toward the sound, sprinting through the dark hall to check what it was. There, on the cold floor, his sister was lying. He stopped, frozen in fear, cold sweat dripping from his forehead. With all the strength he had left, he knelt beside her and checked her pulse. She was still alive.

"Jane, wake up!" he said, fear tightening his voice. His sister might pass any second...

Her eyes slowly opened. "I'm c-c-cold..."

Mark took off his jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders. As he did, he noticed a shadow moving behind a stained-glass panel. He jumped up.

"Who's there?!" he shouted.

The shadow didn't move away—it simply stared at them. Mark wanted to go after it, but Jane was still too weak, so he waited. His eyes couldn't leave the dark figure. After a few minutes, Jane managed to stand.

Right then, Mark rushed toward the shadow, but it quickly slipped out of sight. He hesitated, unsure how to get to the other side of the glass.

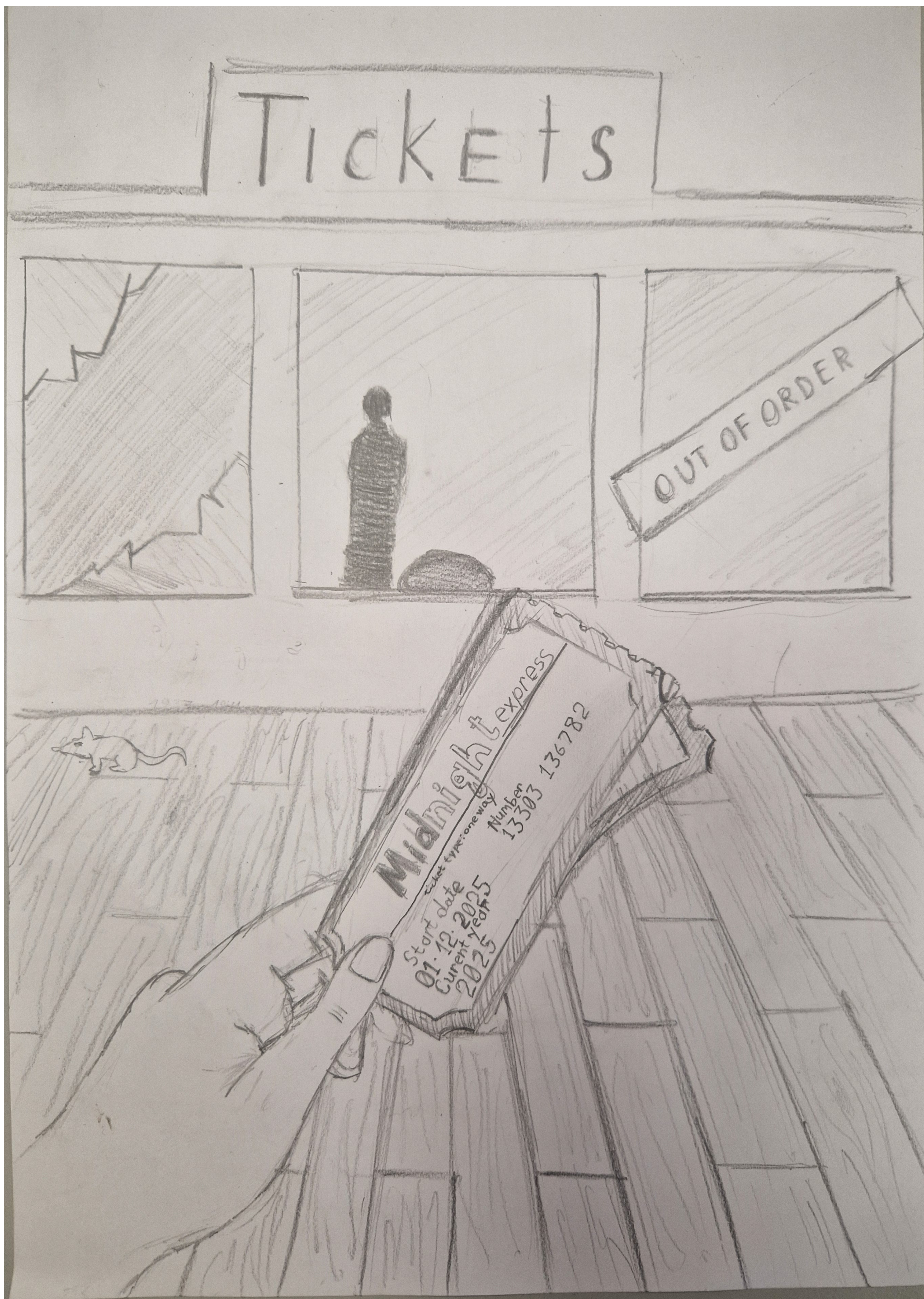
Suddenly, Jane said quietly, "Mark... He's my friend. He's not dangerous. He helped me."

Mark turned to her. "Your friend? Then why were you lying unconscious?"

"I don't know who it was, but he was friendly to me. He told me to escape."

She held out two tickets. "He gave me these."

Mark took a closer look.



"Midnight Express? This station is closed," Mark whispered. "There are no trains here..."

But before he could finish, lights appeared through the thick fog. A long train glided silently into the station. The doors opened with a soft hiss, and a mysterious, distorted voice said:

"Tickets, please."

Mark looked at Jane in confusion. Jane pulled out the tickets. "Here."

"You may enter," the voice replied.

Inside, they saw a long hallway filled with cabins. Every cabin looked different. They walked past each one, trying to choose the most comfortable space, since they had no idea how long the journey would be. Jane noticed something strange.

"Mark... look. When we walk away, the cabins behind us look different!"

Mark glanced back and nodded. "Let's pick a room quickly. The train might start moving."

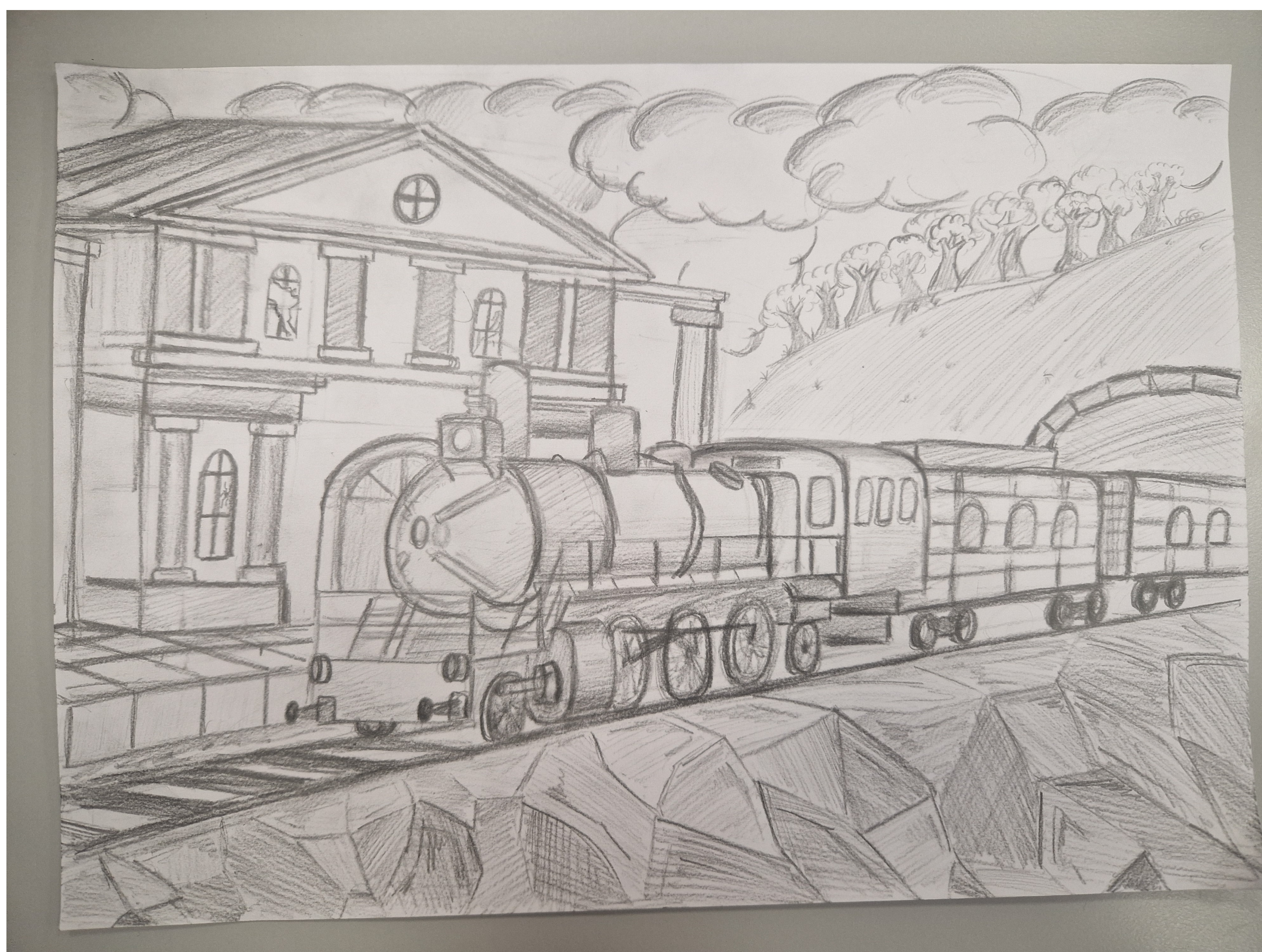
They stepped into the first cabin they saw. The door shut behind them. The train began to move.

Mark turned to Jane. "What exactly did he tell you?"

"He said the tickets are very important... because this train doesn't stop at places. It stops at different times."

As she finished speaking, her ticket began to glow. Jane gasped.

"Mark... Look at the date! It's changing! It's different!"



The train suddenly slowed down, and the light in the carriage became soft, almost amber.

Mark felt a strange pressure in his ears, as if they were sinking deep underground. The fog outside the windows dispersed, and another world opened before them.

A huge plane stretched out ahead. Giant ferns grew everywhere, their leaves swaying slowly in the wind. The air was humid and heavy, smelling of earth and something ancient. The ground trembled slightly, and Mark could feel it even through his feet.

"Mark..." Jane muttered. "You see it too, don't you?"

Mark's eyes widened. His heart began to thump faster. He approached the window, unable to believe his eyes.

A huge creature slowly emerged from the thick undergrowth – its large body moved smoothly, long neck stretching toward the tops of the plants. Mark shuddered, feeling small next to this giant. Others appeared behind it, a whole herd. Some ate calmly, others stared intently at the train, as if they understood that their presence disturbed something.

"Are those... dinosaurs?!" Mark gasped, stepping back. "They're... real! I... I don't believe it!"



The train stood still, but everything inside was shaking. Mark almost let go of the handrail, overcome with fear and amazement at the same time.

A shadow appeared at the end of the car – long and vague, like a figure out of the darkness. Its voice was calm but tired:

“This train does not run on ordinary rails, it travels through long-lost eras and stops where someone might get lost... or make a choice.”

“Can we get off?” Jane asked, her eyes fixed on the giants.

“You shouldn’t,” replied the shadow. “It may be dangerous outside the train, but it's up to you to decide.”



Mark took a deep breath and stepped back from the window. “Then... all we can do is watch,” he murmured, still not believing his eyes.

He looked at the herd again. “Can they... hear us?” he whispered, unable to believe what was happening.

“Sometimes,” replied the shadow.

The tickets in Mark and Jane's hands began to heat up, the dates flashing too quickly to read. Mark felt a mixture of anxiety, surprise, and fear.

"Jane, something's wrong," he warned, his voice trembling.

The train jerked sharply and accelerated. The landscape outside the windows melted into the fog, the silhouettes of the dinosaurs disappeared, but the feeling of a foreign world lingered for a long time.

Before dissolving into the darkness, the shadow said:

"Remember this stop. Next time, the train will take you to a place where the choice will be more difficult. Then you will have to decide not only where to go, but also to interfere with the past, change events, and accept the consequences of your actions. Every decision will have real consequences."

The light went out.

When it came back on, Mark and Jane were standing at the old station. The lights were on, people's voices could be heard, and the snow crunched quietly underfoot. Everything looked normal, but the uneasiness remained.

"Mark... I think the train will come back," Jane said.

Mark silently put his hand in his pocket. There was a ticket with no date, bearing a mysterious symbol that looked like a claw.

And he realised – this was only the beginning.

Fifteen years passed.

The memory of the Midnight Express never truly left Mark and Jane, even as they grew older. Life carried them forward – school, work, new friends, but the uneasiness lingered, like a shadow just out of sight. Neither of them spoke often about that winter night, yet both felt the same pull drawing them back. They returned to their old town on a quiet winter evening. The streets looked smaller, the houses worn by time. Without planning it, their steps led them far from town: towards the abandoned station. What they found there made Mark's heart sink.

A rusted train wreck lay half-buried in snow, its metal twisted and blackened as if burnt by fire. A claw symbol was carved deep into one of the broken doors.

"This is it", Jane whispered. "It was real".

The air grew colder. Fog rolled across the tracks, thick and unnatural. A familiar hiss echoed through the station as lights flickered on. Slowly, impossibly, the Midnight Express emerged from the mist, whole once again.

The door opened.

They had no chance.

Inside the carriage, time felt wrong. A tall man waited for them, his face hidden beneath a long, crooked hat. His voice was calm, but carried weight.

"To survive", he said, "you must pass two obstacles".

The first obstacle dropped them into a narrow corridor of mirrors. Each reflection showed moments they regretted, words left unsaid, choices that hurt others. The walls began to close in, and only by admitting their guilt aloud did the mirrors shatter, allowing them to escape.

The second obstacle led them into a flooded chamber. The water rose with every second they hesitated. To move forward, one had to hold the lever, keeping the door open,, while the other crossed, knowing the water would drag the one left behind under. Mark forced Jane forward, holding on until the last possible moment, barely escaping himself.

Exhausted and shaken, they reached the final cabin. The man removed his hat.

“Only one of you can leave”, he revealed. “A sacrifice is required”.

Two potions appeared in his hands.



“The blue one brings death. The pink allows survival – but with consequences”. Jane stepped forward immediately. “It’s my fault”, she said loudly. “I should do it”.

Mark shook his head, tears in his eyes, but she didn’t hesitate. She reached for the pink potion.

Suddenly, red fog flooded the cabin. A dark shadow burst from the smoke, rushing toward Jane. Panic took over. She ran, slipped, and felt something grab her leg. Desperate, she reached for a knife on the floor and stabbed again and again until the shadow collapsed.

The fog cleared.

Jane froze.

Lying before her was Mark.

And she realized – she had killed her brother.

Jane stared at Mark’s body, her hands trembling, the knife slipping from her fingers.

The cabin lights flickered.

Somewhere behind her, a door creaked open.

A cold voice echoed through the carriage once more.

“The choice is not finished”.

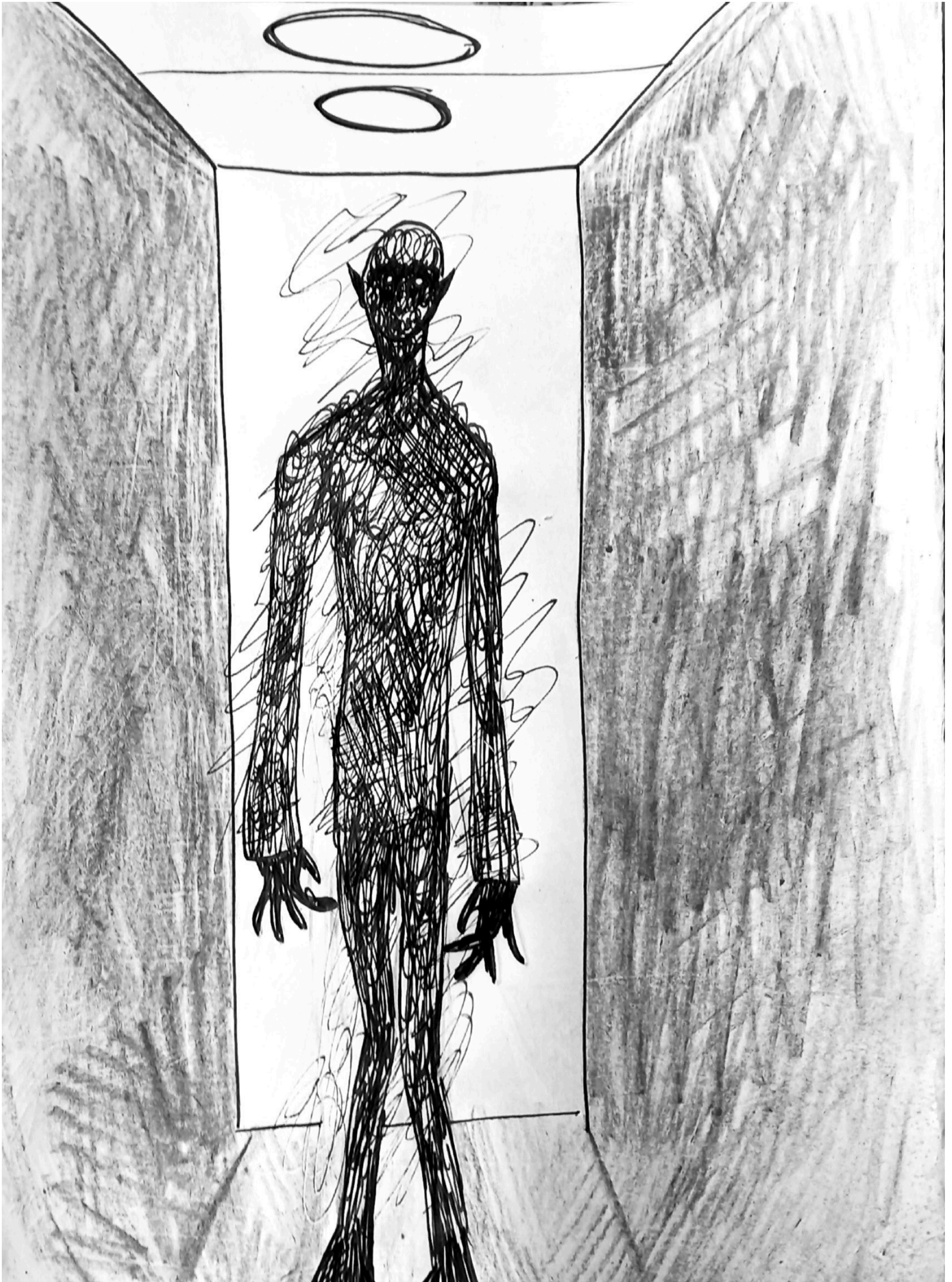
Jane turned slowly.

The Midnight Express was still moving.

Time seemed to still, and the deafening silence flooded the empty cabins.

Jane stared down at her hands. They were slick with Mark’s blood, which was still warm.





Her breath hitched in her throat as the weight of what she had done crashed down on her. She anxiously lifted her eyes from her brother's body and searched the carriage.

And there — a couple of feet away — standing tall and motionless was the Shadow Man. He was less a figure than an absence shaped like one — a man carved from darkness. The edges of his form wavered, and his presence pressed on the mind more heavily than on the air.

Something inside Jane snapped. The unbearable grief and rage gnawed at her insides until she could no longer tolerate the Shadow Man's presence.

With a broken cry, she lunged full force, aiming the knife at his chest. At the last moment, the figure faded away into the darkness, vanishing just as the blade reached him. The knife pierced the walls of Midnight Express.

The carriage jerked violently, rails screeched from beneath; the walls of the train peeled away like paper, and time itself appeared to shove her backward, casting her out of Midnight Express as it snapped closed and vanished in the dark.



And then from the darkness emerged warmth.

Blinding sunlight burned against her eyelids. Heat pressed into her skin. Sand shifted beneath her palms.

Jane's eyes fluttered open.

The air was thick and dry. Around her roared a sea of voices—shouting, crying, praying. She pushed herself upright, heart pounding. Stone columns towered nearby. In the distance, smoke curled into the sky.

Beyond the chaos stood a vast structure of white marble and carved pillars.

The Library of Alexandria.

A strange stillness settled over her thoughts. Then, from somewhere behind her...or within her...a voice spoke.

Low. Calm. Ancient.

"All things that are built must fall."

Jane's breath caught.

"You stand at the edge of the fire," the voice continued. "Save what burns, and the river of time will change its course. The train will never be born. Neither will you. Neither will he."

Her chest tightened.

"Let it burn," the whisper said, softer now, "and the world will remain as it is. Your brother's death will not be undone. His blood will remain upon your hands. Midnight Express will continue its path."

Jane turned toward the rising smoke. Scholars rushed past her, arms filled with scrolls. Sparks drifted through the air like dying stars.

"Remember," the voice murmured. "The choice is yours to make."

The heat intensified. Flames ignited at the edges of the great doors.

Jane stepped forward-then stopped.

If she saved the knowledge, she would erase herself.

If she did nothing, she would keep the world without Mark.

The fire roared higher.

And for the first time since the train had taken her, the choice was hers alone.

There, in the roaring flames, destiny waited for her answer.

In that moment,, Jane felt the deepest terror she had ever known pumping through her veins.

She couldn't breathe. It felt as if no oxygen could enter her lungs from how frightened she was.

Suddenly,, all the emotions she had tried to suppress came crashing down, and she fell to the ground and wept.

She could no longer hold back the tears. They poured out of her like a storm breaking over the sea.

"W-why me... w-why m-me?" she sobbed, her voice shaking as she tried desperately to control herself.

Jane didn't know what to do or what the future would bring.

All her life had somehow led to this exact second - a moment that could change everything. She could not erase the past, nor could she escape the present. It felt as if she were trapped in a constantly turning labyrinth, a puzzle with no solution. Her thoughts spiraled deeper and deeper, drifting far from her physical body into the darkest corners of her mind.

Then the voice spoke again.

"Your way must be the only way."

Those seven words struck her like a devastating blow to her shattered soul.

In an instant, they broke the fragile image she had spent her entire life crafting - the cheerful, carefree girl who always tried to see the world through rose-colored glasses.

All the walls she had built to protect herself from fear, pain, and cruelty collapsed at once.

Jane slowly lifted her head.

Around her, the flames were spreading across the great halls of the library. Scholars ran in every direction, desperately carrying scrolls and manuscripts. Sparks floated through the air like dying stars.

She wiped the tears from her face with trembling hands.

"If everything disappears..." she whispered, "then none of this suffering will have ever even existed."

The thought frightened her, yet it also felt strangely clear.

Jane rose to her feet. The heat of the flames pressed against her skin as she stepped closer to the entrance of the library. Inside, the fire had already begun devouring the towering shelves filled with centuries of knowledge.

She closed her eyes.

Memories rushed through her mind - Mark laughing in the snow, Mark protecting her, Mark lying lifeless on the cold floor of the train.

"I'm sorry," she whispered into the roaring fire.

Jane turned away.

She did not run into the burning building. Instead, she stood still and watched as the flames grew higher and brighter, swallowing the knowledge of centuries.

The smoke darkened the sky. For a moment, the voice said nothing.

Then it returned, quiet but certain.

"The choice has been made."



The world trembled around her. The fire, the shouting, the great columns of marble – everything slowly began to dissolve into darkness. And somewhere far away, in a forgotten place between time and memory, the Midnight Express continued its endless journey.



STORY TEAMS

Buivydiškės Basic School



Vilnius "Juventa" Gymnasium

Marijampolė municipality, Liudvinava Kazys Boruta Gymnasium



Birštonas Gymnasium



Panevėžys Kazimieras Paltarokas Gymnasium



The bell was still clanging when Johannes shuffled out of his tavern with a stale crust of bread and a stein of last night's beer. He was a forty-something-year-old man and had about forty-something regrets, but greed kept him upright. After locking up the tavern, Johannes set out towards the town square where a weekly spectacle was supposed to commence. He stood among the early crowd as the executioner raised the blade above the damned. Johannes squinted, calculating whether today's turnout might translate into extra customers later. More customers meant more coins, and more coins meant... well, some new shiny trinket he definitely didn't need. The blade fell. The crowd cheered, and soon afterward, everyone left. So did Johannes, after all, he has a business to run.

"Glanzmann!"

Johannes sped up, doing his best to ignore the call, but the woman clearly didn't get the message as her efforts to reach him doubled. The crowd around him thinned, and not long after, Barbara Kraftmann - a pig-slayer extraordinaire, as subtle as a falling anvil - was walking by his side.

"Glanzmann! Good to see you."

"Likewise," he grunted, clearly not in the mood to converse.

"So, how's the tavern? Business going as usual?" she asked, but before the disinterested man had an opportunity to answer, she cut in yet again.

"Because I'm doing well. You know, today Gunther came to visit, asking for some pork loin. I got to work cutting up the hog he had brought, but you know what he did then?"

"What?"

"He proceeded to tell me that I'm doing my job wrong! Me!" Barbara laughed, making a muscle in the man's jaw tick. "The nerve of that guy!"

Johannes's disinterest dissipated when a well-dressed messenger climbed atop a nearby crate and started shouting at the top of his lungs about a miraculous new recipe - beer that could turn a nobody into a legend. Right then and there, Johannes decided - he was going to obtain that fabulous recipe. And most importantly, be the first to get his hands on it.



Johannes rushed back to the tavern, nearly breaking down the door in an attempt to enter his room. He stumbled in, hands reaching for a sack tucked away underneath his bed, and began stuffing all of his belongings inside. Moments later, he was making his way down the rugged path towards the woods with Barbara hot on his tail.

"Glanzmann? What in the world has got into you?" she called after him, running over with a large sack on her back. "Where are you off to so abruptly? Wait up!"

He stopped, looked back, and, after realising Barbara had been following him, let out a disappointed sigh.



“Why are you here?”

“What do you mean by ‘why’? How would you fare without me?”

He huffed out a rough, annoyed breath. And that was the moment her clinginess and his greed began the worst partnership the two of them had ever stumbled into.

Johannes rushed down the rough forest path, branches snapping at his sleeves as Barbara kept pace behind him. The town was already out of sight, swallowed by trees and shadow. His breath was heavy, and his thoughts raced faster than his feet. The recipe, the crowds, the coins—all of it felt close enough to grab.

They had gone no more than a mile when the forest went quiet.



Barbara stopped first. Johannes nearly walked into her back. Four men stepped out from the trees, slow and calm, as if they had been waiting. Their clothes were worn, their weapons plain, but the way they stood told Johannes enough.

“Hand it over,” one said, nodding at Johannes’s sack.

Johannes opened his mouth to speak, but a blow struck him across the face. He hit the ground hard. Hands tore the bag from him, spilling his things across the dirt. He tried to crawl away, panic burning in his chest, but one of the bandits slammed his foot down on Johannes’s back.

Nearby, Barbara fought like a cornered animal. She defeated one of the men, then another, but the rest closed in. Johannes looked up just in time to see a blade drive into his chest. The pain was sharp, brief, and final. His body went still.

sharp, brief, and final. His body went still.

The bandits took what they wanted. Barbara was dragged away, shouting, her voice fading into the trees.

Johannes lay where he fell.

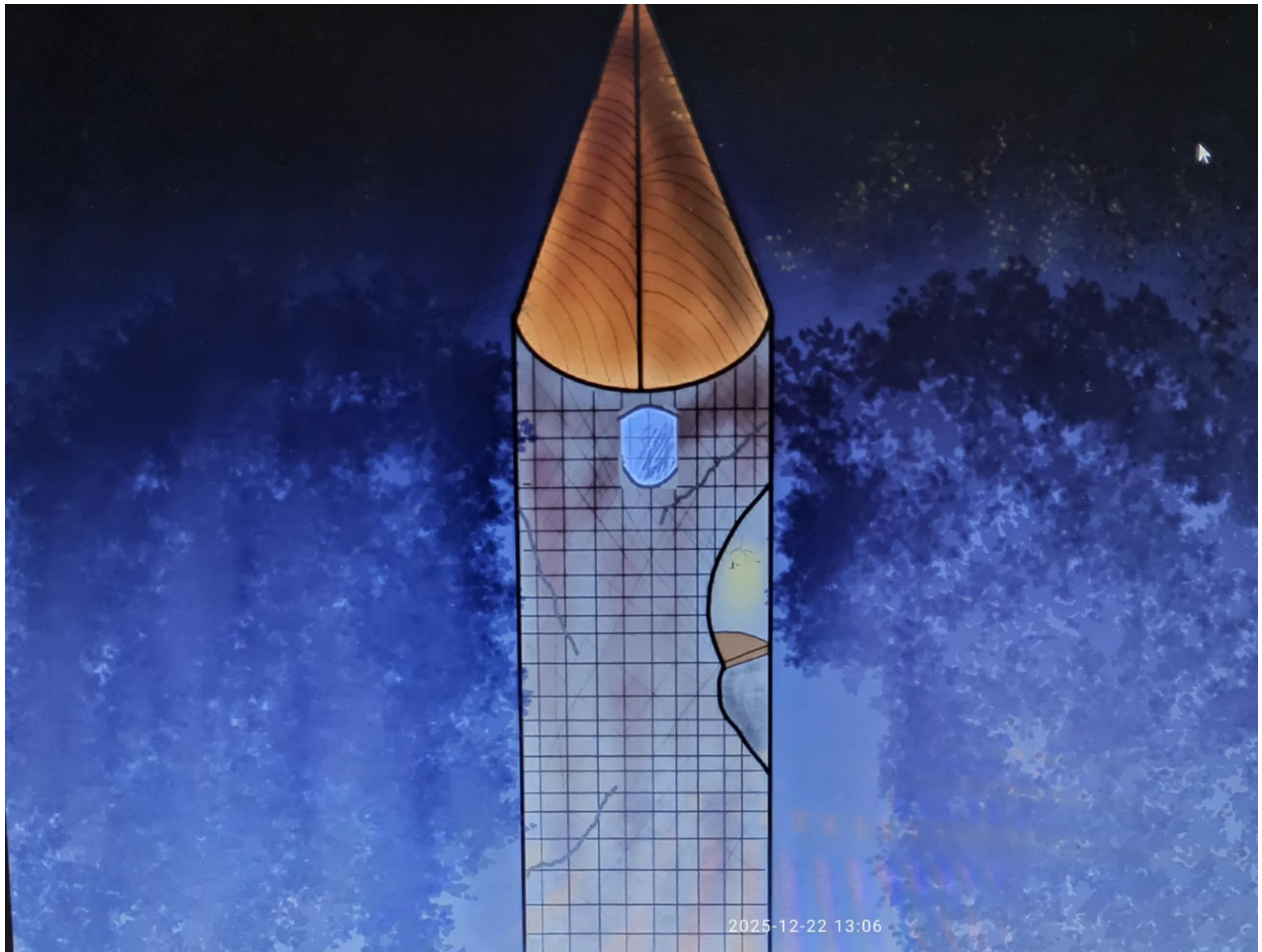
Time passed, though he did not know how much. Then, out of nowhere, warmth spread through his chest, slow and strange. His lungs burned as air forced its way back in. Johannes gasped and jerked upright, screaming as life returned all at once.

A man stood over him, wearing a pointy hat and a black, mysterious cloak, one hand pressed against the wound, which was no longer bleeding.

"Easy," the man said. "You are alive again. Do not make me do it twice."

Johannes stared at his chest. The cut was there, but closed. "Was I dead?"

"Yes," the man replied. "Very dead."



The stranger led him to an old stone tower hidden deeper in the forest. It leaned badly, cracked and half-ruined, but still standing. Inside, dust coated everything, and the air smelled of age and damp stone. In Johannes's mind, everything that had already happened pointed to one thing: the man was a wizard.

Training began the next morning. There were no speeches, no promises. The wizard told Johannes to light a candle without touching it. Johannes tried for hours. Nothing happened. His head hurt, his hands shook, and his temper wore thin.

Days passed like that—failure after failure. When Johannes complained, the wizard only shook his head.

"You're trying to force it," he said. "Magic doesn't work like that."

Slowly, Johannes learned to feel something within himself—a steady pull, deep in his chest. The wizard taught him how to reach for it without exhausting himself. When Johannes pushed too hard, he collapsed. When he held back too much, nothing happened.

Progress came in small steps: a spark, a breeze where there was no wind, a wound closing just enough to stop bleeding. Each success left Johannes exhausted, but eager.

"You have more power than you realise," the wizard said one night. "You have a deep well of magical potential. That is rare."

Weeks passed. Johannes learned control before strength. He practiced until his hands stopped shaking and his mind stopped racing. Spells that once failed now answered him quickly. Fire, force, healing—all of it came more easily than it should have.

When the wizard finally dismissed him, Johannes packed what little he had. He would find the recipe for the legendary beer.

And before that, he would find Barbara and tear her from the bandits' hands. As soon as he set out on his journey, he realized a slight problem. The bandits had stolen practically all his belongings, including the sum of money for travel. All this power without finances for bread or shelter seemed useless.

Since the wizard's tower was hidden away from sight, he had to find his way out. After wandering for a while, Johannes finally found an overgrown, muddy footpath.

"Better than nothing," he sighed deeply, pondering when he would be able to find shelter. After hours of treading over muddy roads and bothersome branches snagging on his hair, above the gloomy trees of the forest, he saw rising smoke. His eyes lit up with hope for a warm bed and a bite of warm food.



With his newfound ambition to fulfill these basic human needs, he kept following the silvery vapour. Led only by his feelings and not his brains, he stumbled upon a timber-framed house. Taking a deep breath, he gently twisted the knob. The rewarding scent of powdered sugar and crispy baked goods filled his nostrils. Behind the oak counter stood a man with a bright beam on his face.

"May I help you with anything, sir?" The hoarse voice shook Johannes back to reality. "I'd be glad to sleep in a bed tonight," He answered, all his earlier pride gone. "And a slice of bread would be nice," He couldn't resist. The shopkeeper counted Johannes' last pennies and pointed to a small room at the end of the hallway. Inside it was wooden, just as expected. The bed, forged from logs, satisfied Johannes.

One moment, he's resting in bed, and another, he's in a familiar part of a dark forest. He can do nothing else but trudge through the gravel roads and never-ending trees. Unexpectedly, he reappeared in his rental room. But now, the recipe for the magic beer was on the table. The atmosphere got heavy in seconds as Barbara neared him. In one swift motion, she grabbed the piece of paper. "What are you doing?!" Johannes shot up. "Choose one," Barbara spoke firmly. The ground shook, split into two—a choice between fame and wealth or his companion, Barbara.

Johannes woke up in a cold sweat. His gaze fell to the table immediately, spotting the same piece of paper as in his nightmare. It truly was the recipe for the magical beer! Written in a fancy cursive with gold flaked ink, it seemed truly enchanted.

Johannes grabbed it, picked up his last necessities, and fled outside. He finally found it!

Not far from the motel, Johannes spotted something. A group of tall, bulky men was slowly making their way towards him. He reacted swiftly, scrunching up the recipe in his fist and pushing it deep in his pocket. He stood firm, feet buried in the mushy mud beneath. He flicked his gaze up, only to spot the bandits circling him.

"Glanzmann," One of them yelled with a sense of mockery. "I thought we put an end to your pathetic life," The man continued. "What do you want from me?" Johannes spat back. The bandit smirked. "Oh, you know what we want." They all laughed.



Johannes clenched his fists and bit his teeth. Anger coursed through his body like a flame, determined to fight. Johannes took a careful step back and closed his eyes. He was trying to focus, and his focal point was fire. He raised his arms suddenly, but nothing came out. The bandits, confused as ever, let out a snicker. Johannes reopened his eyes, but there was nothing. Trying all these different arm positions, he couldn't even start the slightest spark.

"We aren't here to fight, Glanzmann. We ask for the recipe. In return, we offer you..." They brought out Barbara. She looked like she had lost all hope. "Glanzmann... please..."

"Barbara!?" Johannes exclaimed in surprise. She looked so weak. He had never witnessed her in this kind of state. The very strangeness of the sight caused Johannes to take a step back in uncertainty.

Balling his hands into fists, he shouts, "What have you freaks done with her?!"



“We’ve only been keeping her safe until we found you, of course.” One of their men spoke, sporting a snarl-like smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “After all, it would be pretty bad practice to kill a hostage before exchanging the goods!” The other men laughed, clutching their bellies. The bandit holding Barbara tightened his grip on her hair, making her wince before she shrieked: “Please, Johannes! Just give them the recipe! Then we can go back home and —”

“She’s right, Glanzmann!” the previous fellow cut her off, “Just hand it over, your little tavern would miss its bartender otherwise!” He said with an unnatural grin.

Sweat was just about to pour from Johannes’s forehead when he realised something... Bartender? Barbara wasn’t a bartender; she was a butcher! The best pig slayer in town, even! What were these bandits even talking about?

Ah! The recipe felt like it was burning a hole right through his pocket! Johannes tried summoning some water from his fingers, but it seemed like his magic still refused to cooperate.

“Give it up, Johannes! You’re surrounded! Your friend is in danger, and your magic isn’t working!” The bandits’ leader shouted with increasing anger. Something was seriously wrong with this entire situation...



„The only way you are getting this recipe or touching Barbara is over my dead body," Johannes said, even though deep down he knew that this may as well be his last battle.

Johannes stood his ground while the bandits all marched over to him, preparing to strike. He fought as best he could, but he was hopelessly outnumbered, and the hits to his entire body became unbearable.

Johannes had hit the peak of his suffering and knew he was going to die once again, but this time there would be no wizard to act as his guardian angel. As he lay on the cold, damp forest floor, his vision blurred, he saw ... Barbara.

The bandits had been so focused on beating Johannes, they let Barbara — whom they assumed to be a damsel in distress — slip from their sight. With two axes in hand, she was a whirlwind of revenge. Barbara fought like a barbarian, and seeing her fearless assault, Johannes mustered the last of his strength to set ablaze the men responsible for the pain they had both endured—before passing out.

When Johannes came to, he was lying in a hospital bed. He jolted upwards and felt an intense aching in his muscles. Johannes reached for his pocket and found the recipe that caused him so much trouble, along with a note from Barbara, telling him she is okay. After years, a smile finally appeared on Johannes's face.

STORY TEAMS

Vilnius Gediminas Technical University Engineering Lyceum



Telšiai "Džiugas" Gymnasium



Klaipėda Vytautas the Great Gymnasium



Klaipėda Eduardas Balsys Arts Gymnasium



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Gintarė and Vaida

Tauragė Žalgiriai Gymnasium, 2026

