

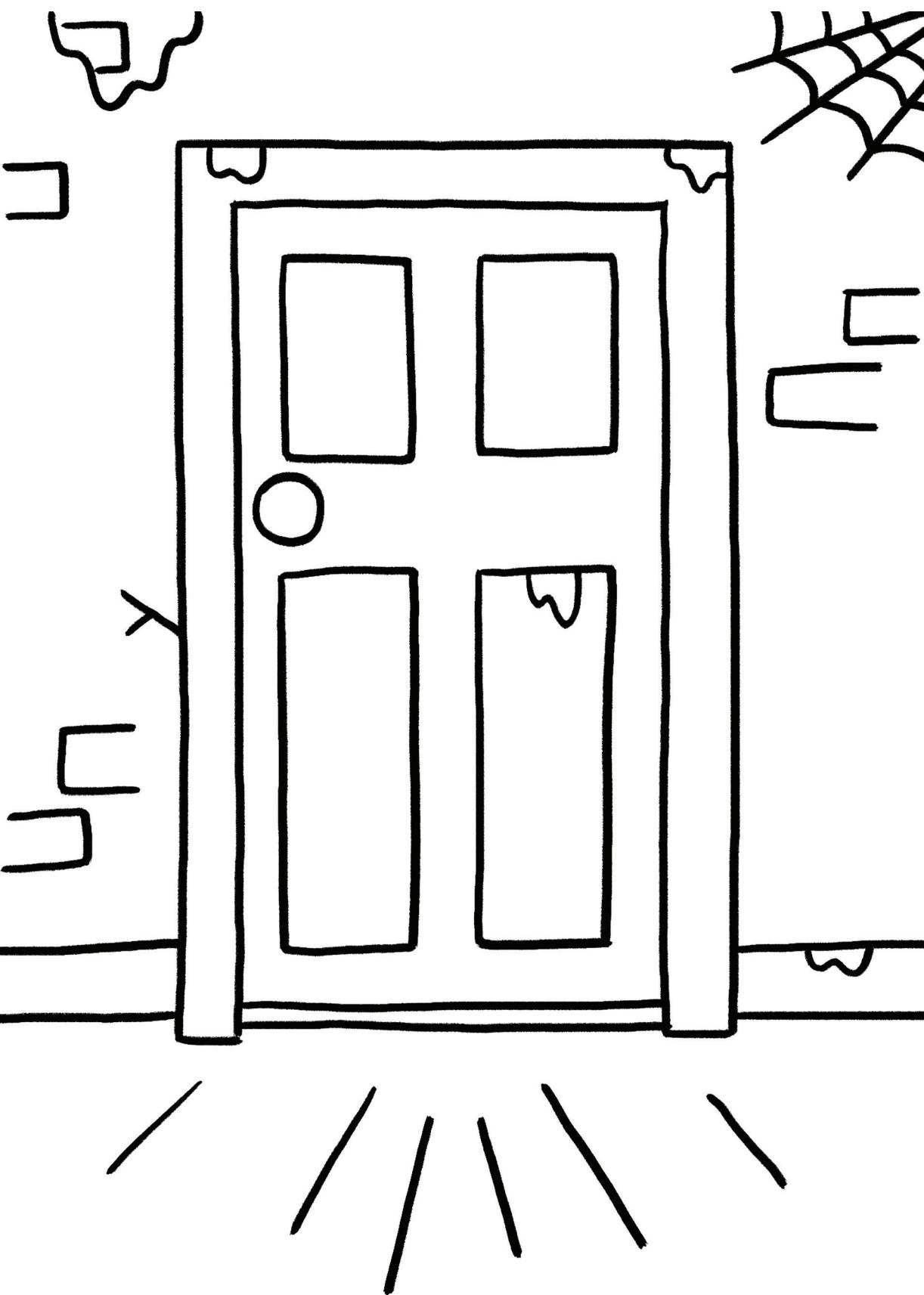
It all started  
with a rumor.



It was whispered from ear to ear, in tense  
silences after band practices and from desk to  
desk in the homerooms of my middle school.

#### The Secret Vault.

The rumor was that our school had been a  
secret bank during the Depression of the 1930's.  
Before we graduated from 8th grade, my best  
friend Gabriella and I were determined to find it.  
That's how we ended up here, locked in the  
school's basement in pitch darkness during  
Spring Break.



"Why did you let the door close?" I asked Gabriella again, and then immediately regretted it. In the past twenty minutes – after screaming until our voices hurt – we had punched, kicked, and body-slammed the locked door. But even if it was Gabriella's fault, she was still my best friend.

Gabriella picked the ragged edges of her cuticles, like she always did when she was anxious.

"Sorry," she said quietly.

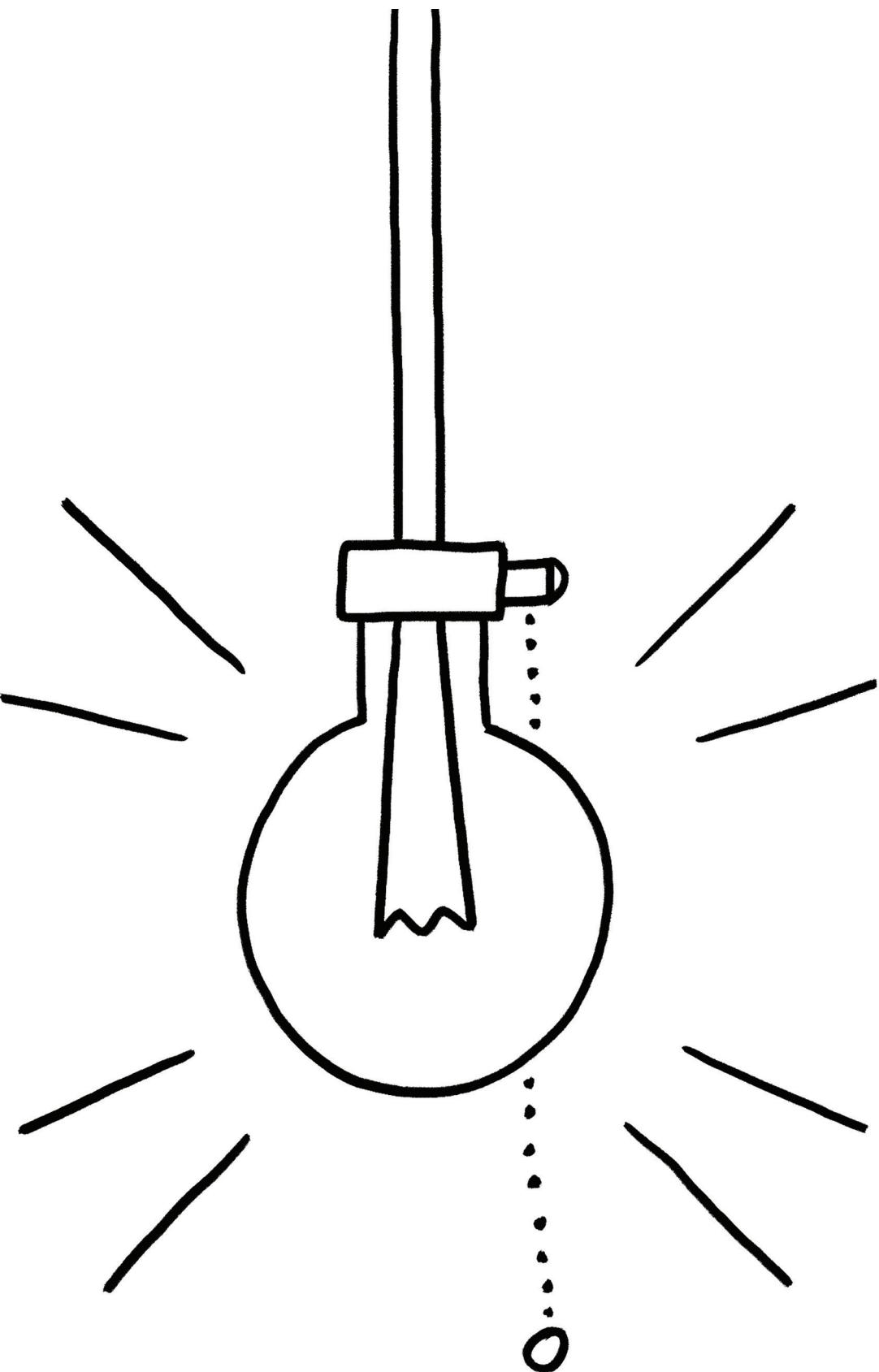
"It's okay," I said. "I'm just getting a bit nervous."

"Me too," she admitted. "But there must be another door down here. Maybe one that leads to the vault?"

"I can't believe you're still thinking about the vault!" I said. "We're locked down here in the dark, nobody knows where we are, we have no phones, no WIFI..." I took a deep breath to calm my nerves. "Let's just find a light."

Gabriella and I stumbled around in the darkness with hands outstretched until I finally felt a dangling cord. I pulled it.

**CLICK.**



It was like someone had turned on the sun.

We both rubbed our eyes in the strange, sudden brightness. The school's basement was stuffed with broken stuff from the classrooms above: a life-sized plastic skeleton from the science lab, a world globe with a dent over Europe, a pile of old yearbooks, the baseball stadium's antique scoreboard, an old projector from the media center, an orange plastic flashlight, and a chalkboard covered with mostly unreadable letters and symbols. Tacked to the chalkboard was a tattered and torn piece of paper.

## Students Missing After Following Town Rumor

APRIL 21, 1979

SHADYVILLE, MO—Mrs. Abby Jones is at her wit's end. Her daughter Julie has been missing for over 24 hours. Although she didn't see Julie before she left Saturday morning, Julie left a note stating she was going

to find a "secret vault" under Shadyville Middle School. Julie is one among five teens who have been missing since Saturday morning. Police claim it is too early to comment on the ongoing investigation.

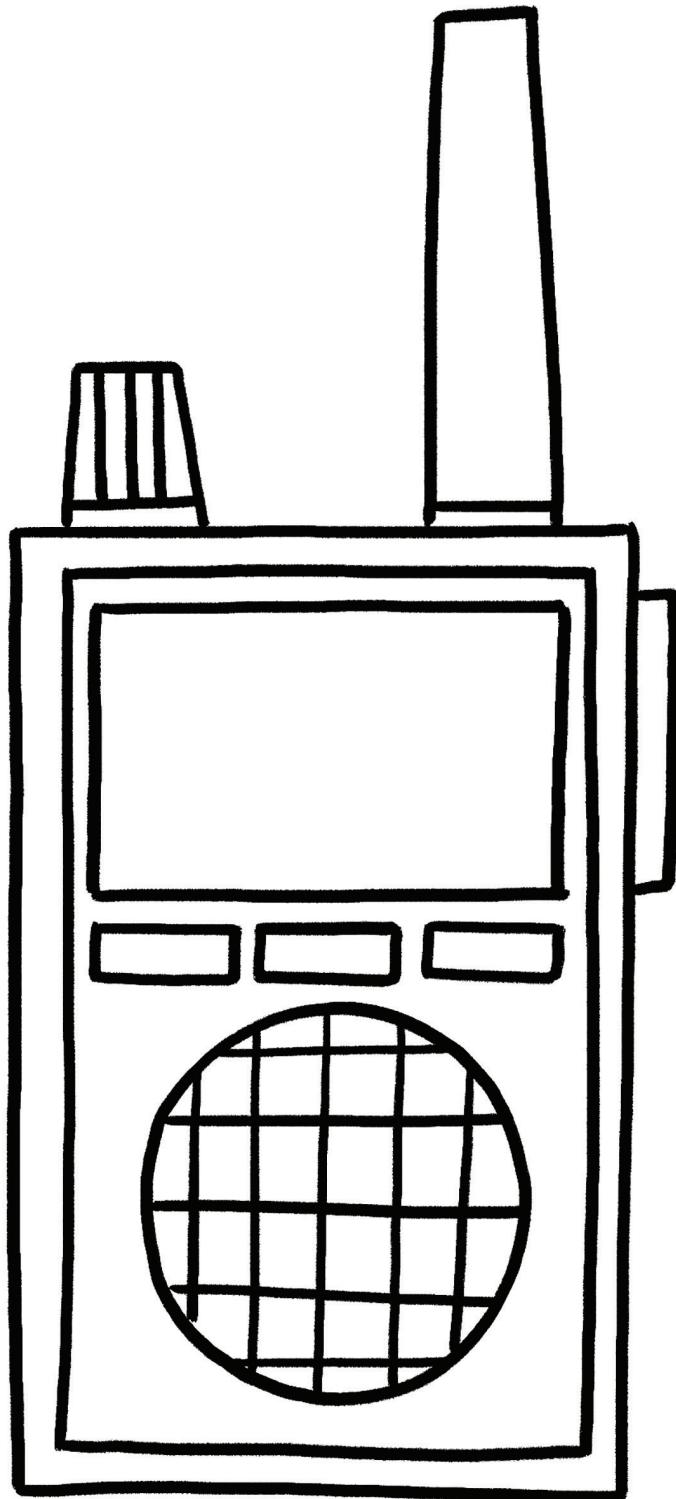
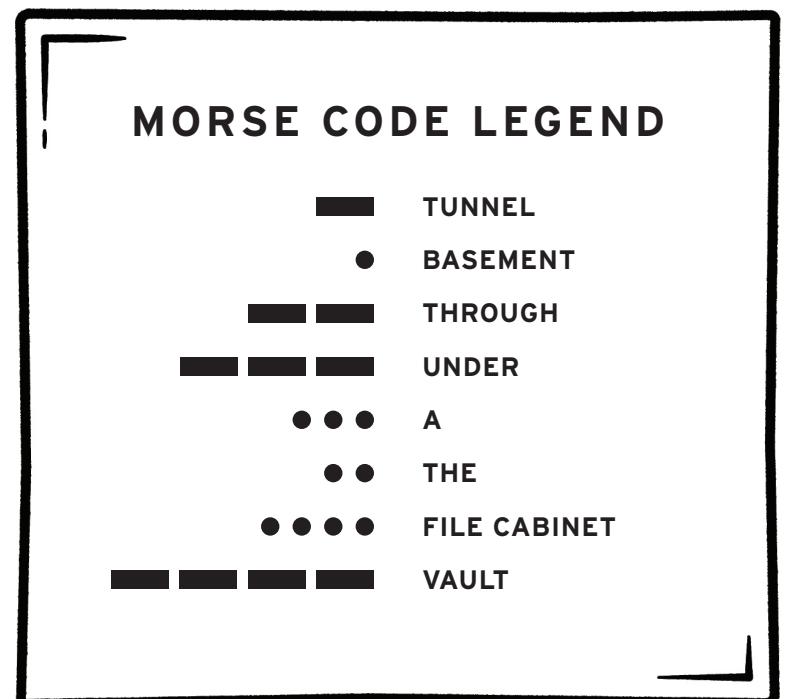


Gabriella and I stared at each other in horror.  
This whole vault thing was getting creepier by  
the minute. Right then, I just wanted to go home.  
And fast.

"Did they get out?" Gabriella asked, her voice  
high-pitched and scared.

"I don't know." I shook my head. "There's gotta  
be a way, right?"

Gabriella ripped the article off the chalkboard.  
A walkie-talkie tumbled to the ground and  
turned on. I picked it up and flipped it over, and  
glued to the back was a Morse Code legend.



"What tunnel?"

I grabbed the orange plastic flashlight and aimed it at each one of the four brick walls around us. As far as I could tell, there were no doors, no windows, no tunnels.

"What about that?" Gabriella grabbed the flashlight and turned it towards the furthest wall. In childlike handwriting, something was scrawled across the wall.



I shivered. "Go in where?"

Gabriella shook her head. "I don't know.  
A tunnel, maybe? Or the vault?"

"Do you think the other teens wrote this?  
I mean, before they..." Terror crawled down  
my spine, and I backed away from the  
message so fast I tripped over the old library  
projector. There was a whir as the projector  
flipped on, and then the projector's weak  
light lit up the letter A.

CLUE: THE LETTER THAT LIGHTS UP = 1.

— — —  
20 9 20 1 14 19

— — —  
20 23 15

— — —  
23 9 14 19

You HAVE To  
Go IN To  
GET OUT



"The Greek god Titan?" I asked. "The one we learned about in social studies?"

"I think it means our baseball team," Gabriella said. She pointed to the Titan's mascot at the bottom of the chalkboard.

"But that's impossible," I said in a half-laugh, half cry.

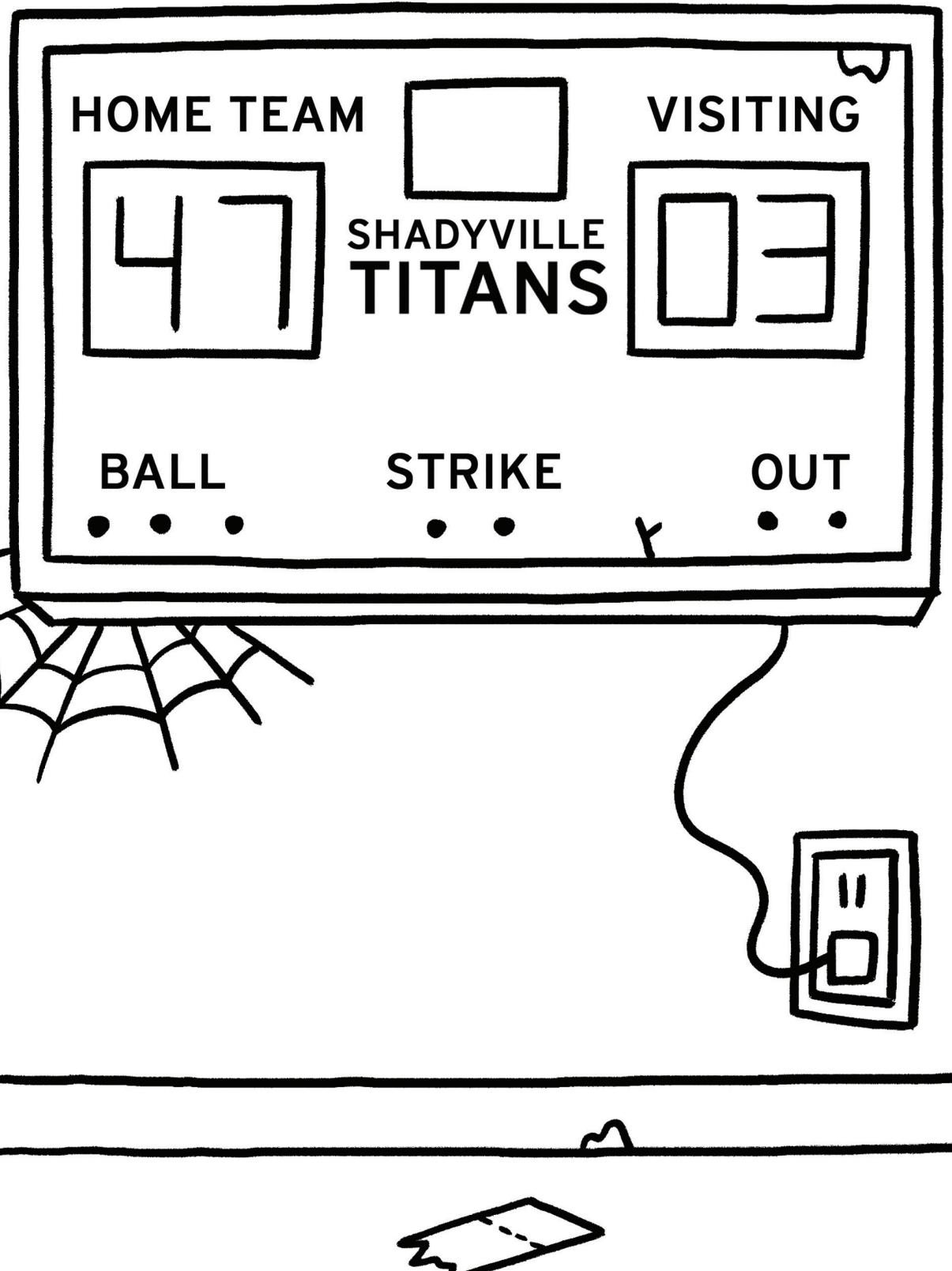
"The Titans never win!"

"Still, I'll miss them," Gabriella said.

I stopped half-laughing. Gabriella never mentioned what would happen at the end of the summer. It was like if we didn't admit that Gabriella was moving across the country, it wouldn't really happen. But her mom needed a new job, and there were no jobs for doctors here anymore, not since Shadyville Community Hospital had closed down last fall.

"The Titans must've won sometime." Gabriella grabbed a yearbook from the top of the dusty pile and flipped it open. "Nope," she said, and grabbed another one. "Nope again."

I crouched down and studied the baseball stadium's old scoreboard. There was a cord dangling, so I plugged it in.



With the scoreboard lit up, I could see half an old ticket stub sticking out from under it. I plucked it off the ground.

"May 16th, 1976," I muttered.

"There's the first win," Gabriella said. She picked up the yearbook off the top of the pile and opened it. "Nope," she said, and grabbed the next one. "Not this one either."

I grabbed a yearbook too, and we thumbed through every yearbook in the pile until Gabriella finally found the Titan's second win on March 12th, 2008.

"1976 and 2008?" I said, my excitement quickly wearing off.

"How does that help us get out of here?"

"Get out of here?" Gabriella asked. "What about the vault?"

"Forget it. It's just a rumor." I crossed over to the locked door and banged on it again.

**BANG! BANG! BANG!**

"But we need to get out of here," I said, my throat tightening. Before we end up like..." My throat tightens.

"We just need to get out of here NOW."

"And what? Wait for me to move?" Gabriella paced back and forth, her desperate voice needling at me across the dim room. "This is our only chance to find the vault."

I shook my head, but even as I did, I felt my feet moving back towards her. "Fine," I said. "If we can't get out, I guess we've gotta try going *in*." I stopped when I got to Gabriella, who was standing by the dented globe. "So what's so special about 1976 and 2008?" I asked aloud. I vacantly spun the dented globe with my middle finger, poking it to a stop at random intervals.

"Wait! What's that?" Gabriella crouched down and peered intensely at the globe. I crouched down beside her and looked at the countries in Europe and North Africa. Many countries had numbers written on them.

"What were the dates of those games again?" I asked.

"May 16th, 1976," she said. "And March 12th, 2008."

"Hmmm..." I spun the globe harder this time, and it shifted an inch to reveal a piece of paper beneath it.

**CLUE: DATES OF TWO WINS, 1ST LETTER ONLY**

— — — — —  
5-16-1976 3-12-2008

AUSTRIA.....6	ITALY .....12	ROMANIA.....3
BELARUS.....19	MOROCCO .....7	SPAIN .....5
EGYPT.....8	NORWAY.....200	UKRAINE .....16

"You don't happen to see a submarine anywhere?"

I asked Gabriella.

She shook her head and read the clue again: SUBMARINE.

"Maybe someone drew a sub on the Pacific Ocean or something," I suggested.

"Wouldn't a submarine be *under* the ocean?" Gabriella asked.

"Good point. But it's worth a try." I picked up the world and spun it to find the Pacific Ocean. When I did, the axis swung to the right, and we saw it.

We both stared at the cracked-open globe.

"In the third word, another word," I murmured.

"Do they mean in the third *word*?" Gabriella asked.

"Either that, or in the word submarine," I said. "What are other words inside the word submarine?"

CLUE: INSIDE THE BODY

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

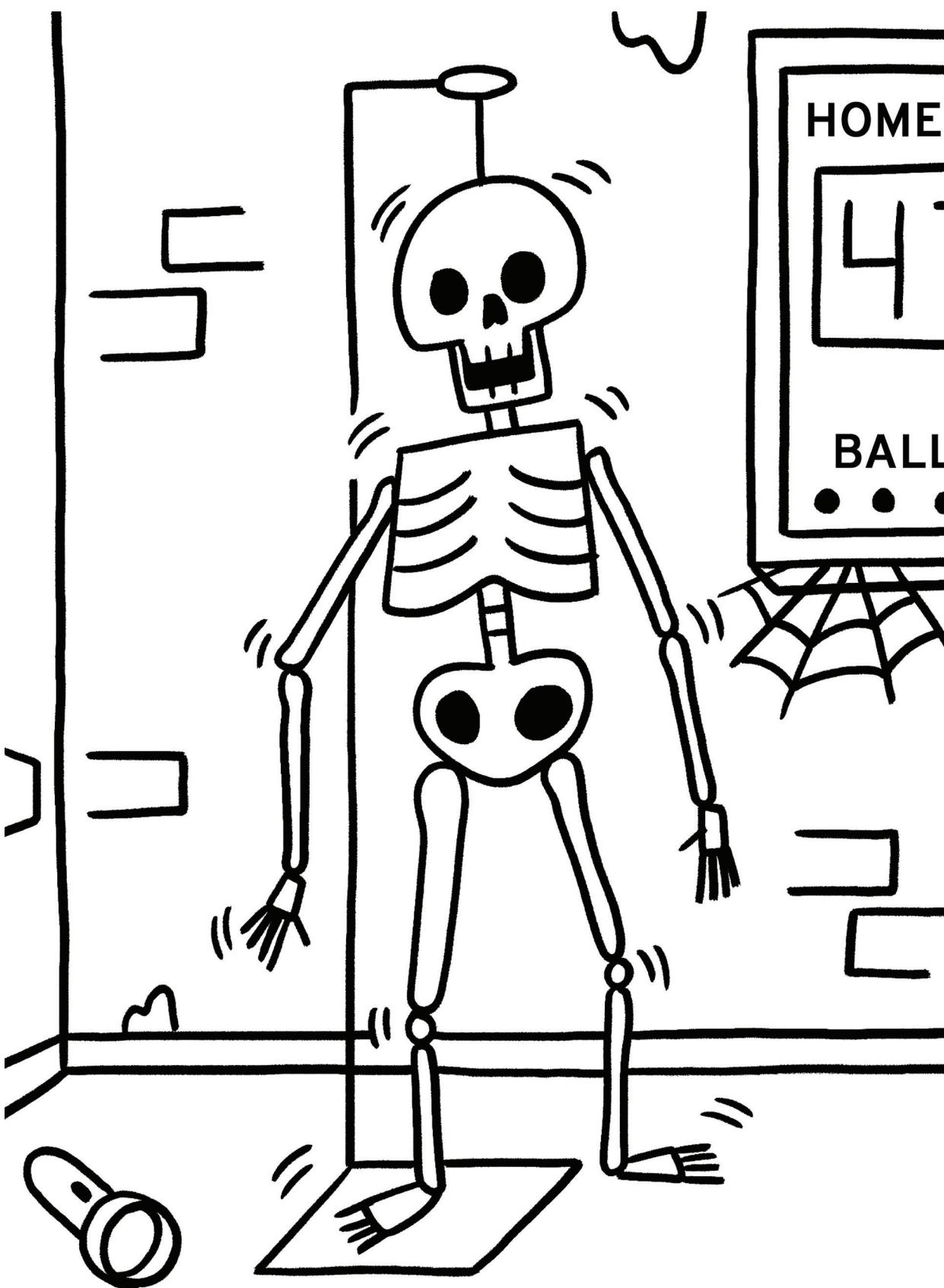


"What could these words mean?" I paced back and forth across the room, deep in thought.

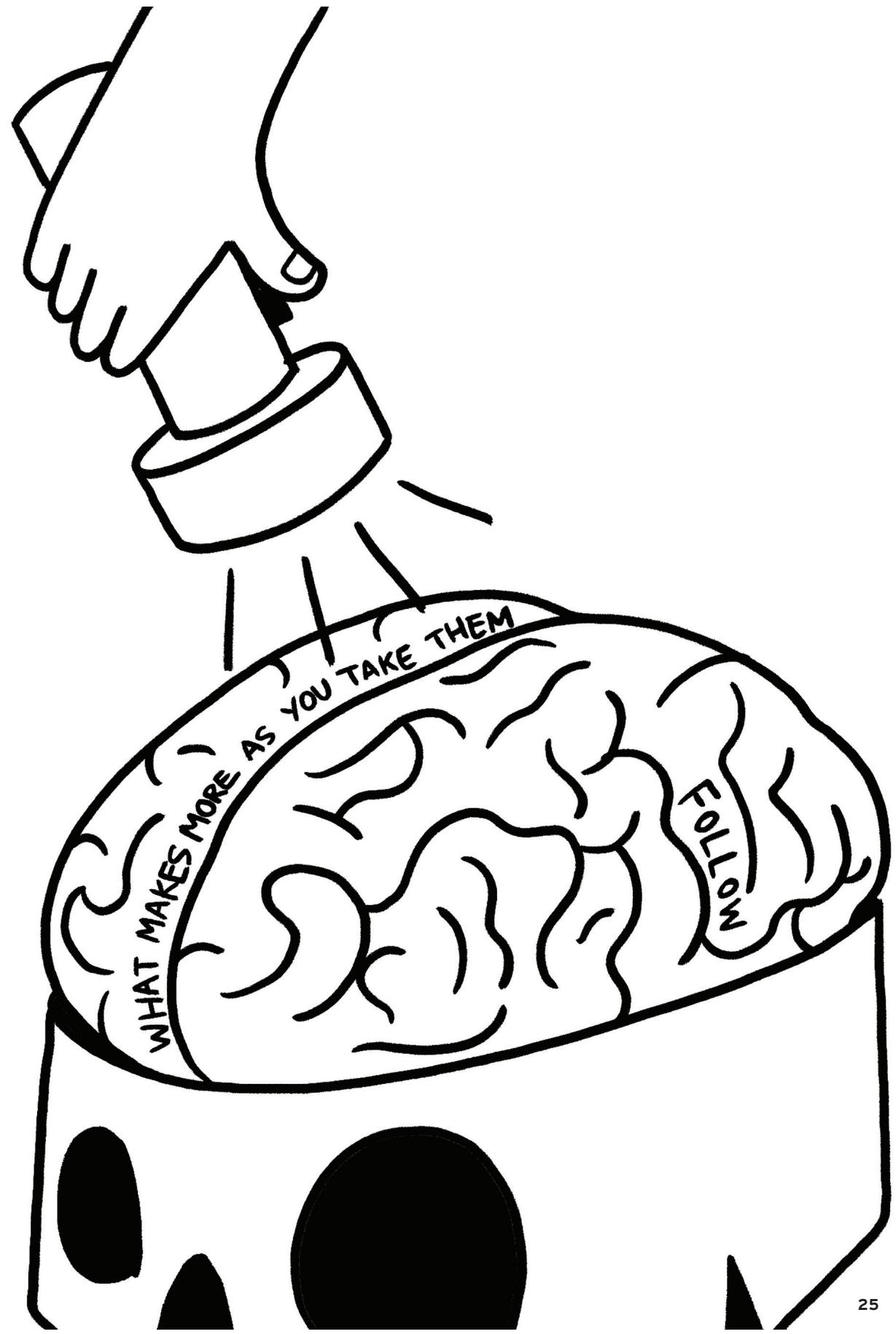
"Stop!" Gabriella yelled.

I froze, but not quickly enough to stop from bumping into the life-sized skeleton. It shook, every plastic bone in its body rattling. I shrieked and scampered away from its ghoulish eye holes, which looked straight into its plastic brain.

"That's it!" I exclaimed. "The skeleton's brain!"



Gabriella looked at me like I'd lost my mind  
as I twisted the head off the skeleton's neck  
and tilted it until I could see the brain. There  
was a line down the middle where the right  
and left brain separate. Gabriella shined the  
flashlight down into the skeleton's brain.



"Follow? That's the clue?" I kicked my feet against the floor. I was starting to get frustrated. We had been locked in the school's basement for almost an hour, and I didn't feel like we were any closer to the secret vault. Or to getting out of this room. "This is stupid," I said, kicking my feet harder into the dusty floor.

"Look," Gabriella said.

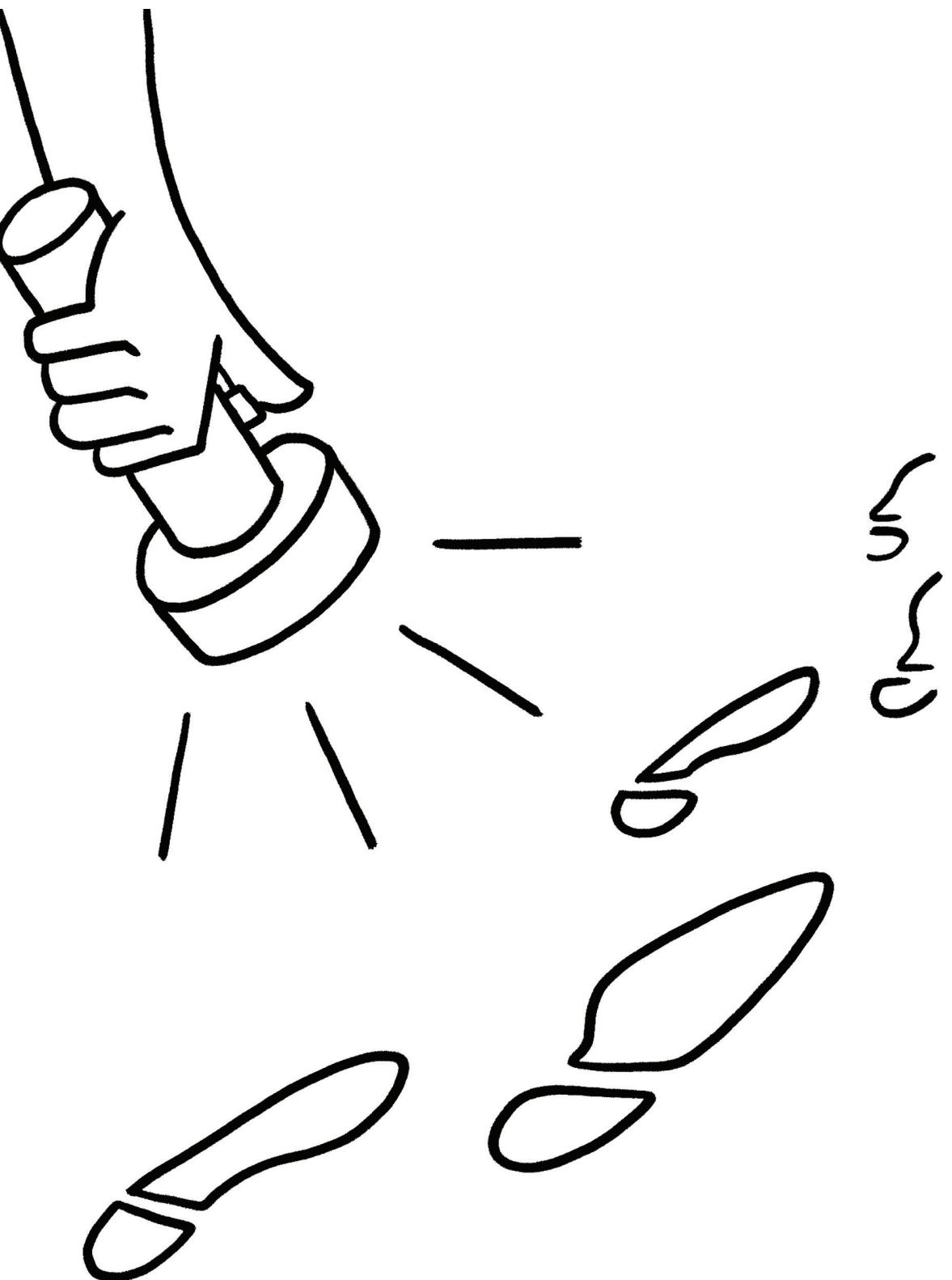
I looked down at the floor. In the dust rubbed away by my angry footprints, there was another set of footprints. Gabriella handed me the orange flashlight, and I lit up our path through the dust.

"Follow the footprints," I whispered.

So we did. They trailed around in circles, past the skeleton now missing a head, past the broken-open globe, past the chalkboard, past the article about the missing teens, to a dark corner full of trash.

Gabriella shook her head. "Now what?" she moaned.

I picked up a wadded-up piece of trash, unfolded it, and shined the flashlight at it.  
"Hey, look at this."



# SHADYVILLE TIMES

## Missing Teens Found

APRIL 22, 1979

SHADYVILLE, MO—After 36 hours of frantic searching, the five missing teens were found walking home on the road from Shadyville Middle School. “We were locked in,” said Julie, an eighth grader at Shadyville Middle School. “We only got out once we found the [REDACTED] A [REDACTED] that led to the tunnel. It was really well-hidden, in the [REDACTED] of the basement, which is why it took us almost a day to find it. We could only find it by [REDACTED] and listening for [REDACTED]. From there, it was easy. Once we got to the vault, there was an exit out of the school.”

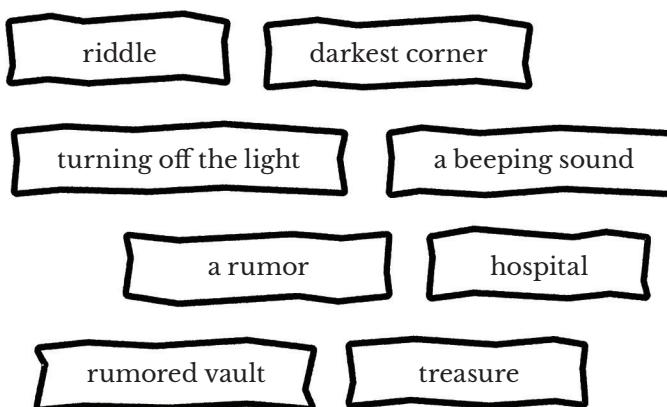
Some people believe it is all an elaborate hoax to get out of final exams. But some residents of Shadyville believe the teens. They want to try to find the vault again, but

the Shadyville police claim the vault is only [REDACTED]. Even so, they have locked up all entrances to the school’s basement, claiming potentially fatal danger lies in the depths below.

People are asking about what was in the secret vault, but the five teens are being quiet about it. However, there was a large, anonymous donation made to Shadyville to build a new [REDACTED]. “The community needs it,” the Mayor said. “It will provide hundreds of well-paid jobs, as well as positively influence the health of our community. We are thankful to whoever left it for us.” Many Shadyville residents suspect the teens found the [REDACTED] and donated the [REDACTED], but mum’s the word. For now.

Gabriella picked up a bunch of crumpled pieces of paper off the floor. “Look at these,” she said, and opened her fist to show them to me. I shone the flashlight into her open palm.

## THE MISSING PIECES ARE



"So there's really a vault," Gabriella gasped.

"This proves it."

"And those teens got out," I said. I shivered as I looked around the dim room, which was feeling more like a prison every second.

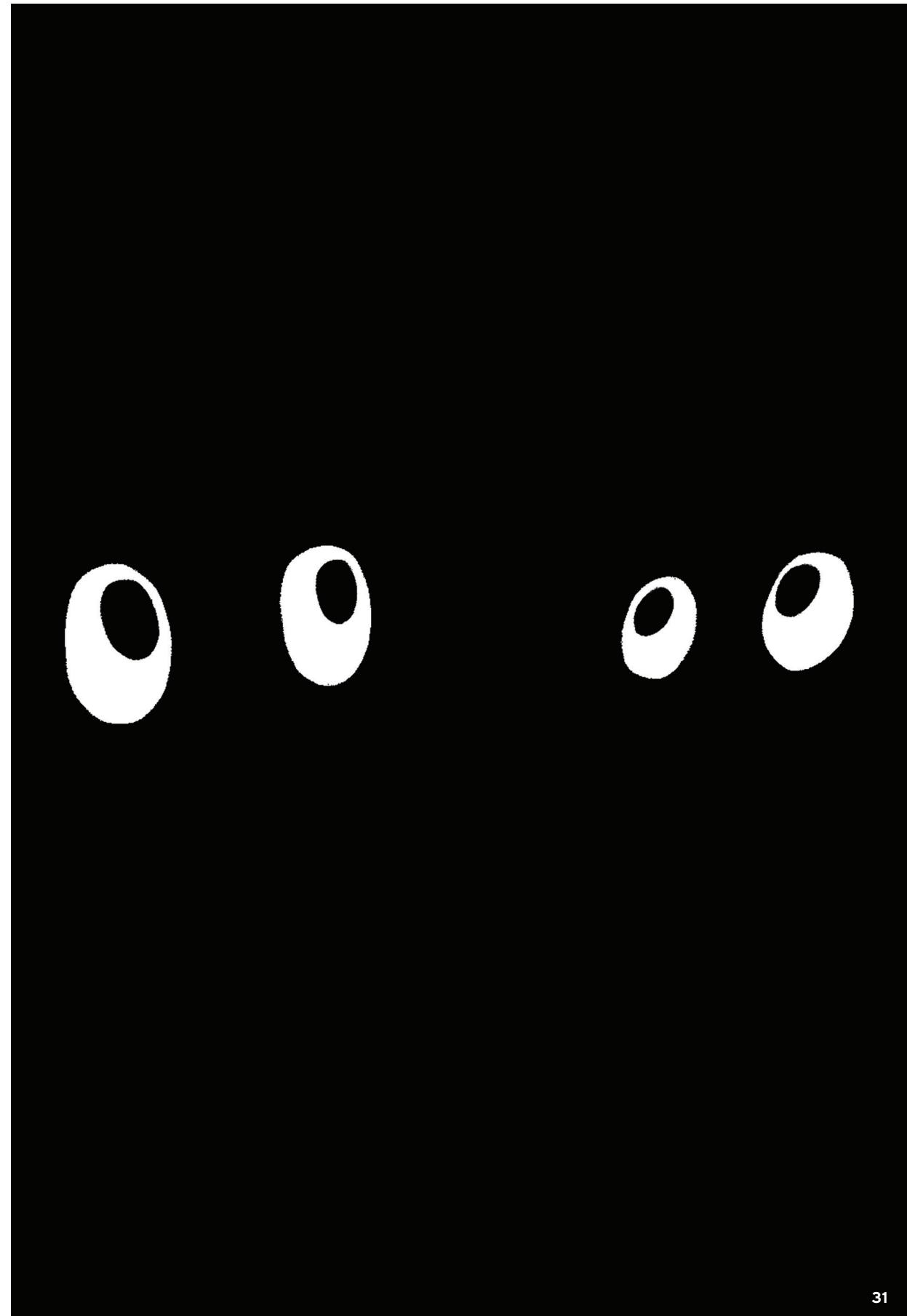
"Alive," Gabriella added.

"So to find the tunnel, we first have to find a riddle in the darkest corner of the basement, and answer it correctly," I summed up.

"Easy peasy," Gabriella joked. "Except why would we have to turn off the light to hear a sound?"

I shrugged. We both walked over to the light bulb hanging from the ceiling and stared at it. Other than being crazy bright, it also buzzed, like a lightbulb in a bad horror flick. Without meaning to, we clasped hands. "1, 2, 3," I said.

***CLICK.***



We heard a high-pitched...

*beep*

*beep*

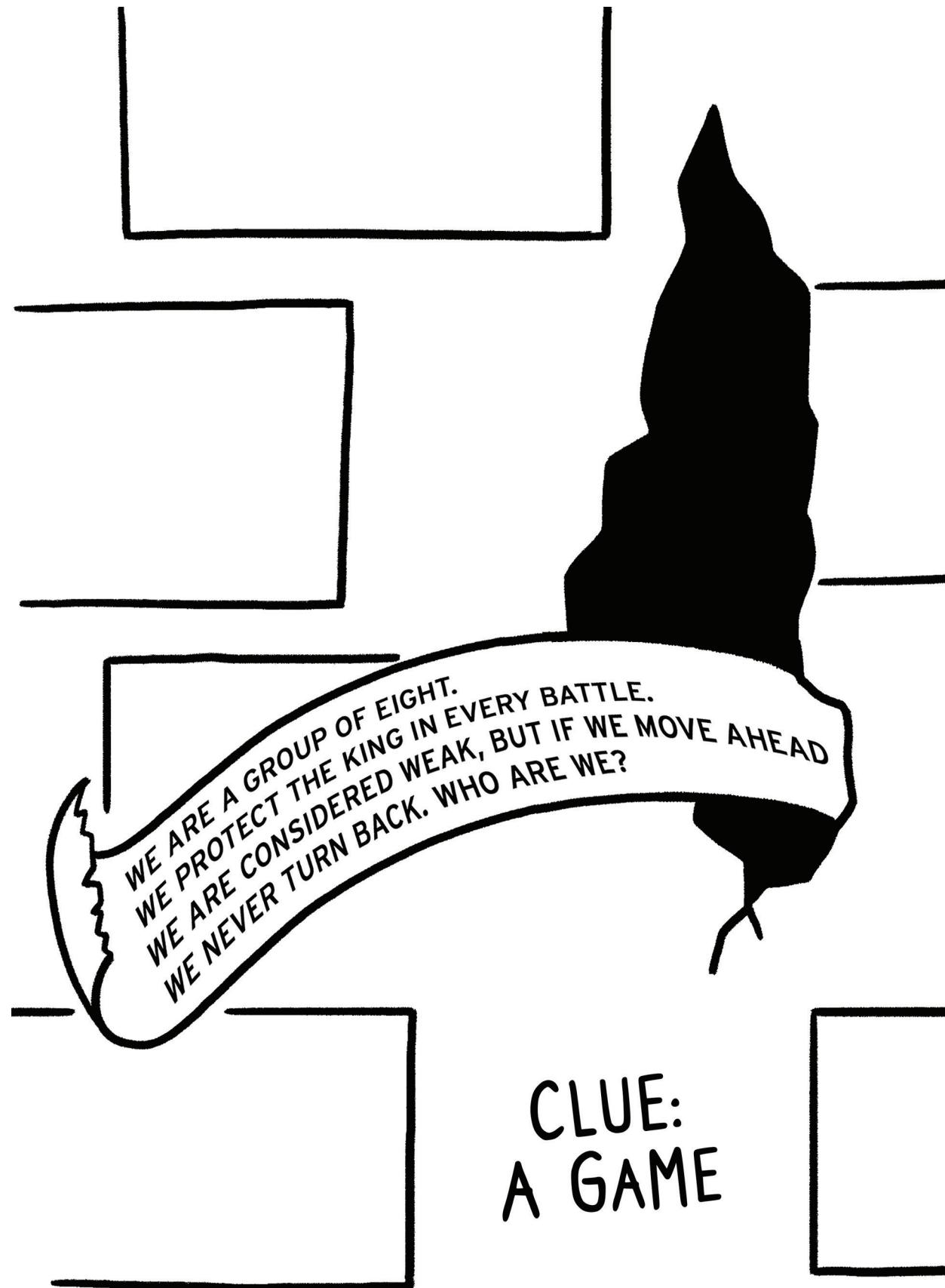
*beep.*



BEEP  
BEEP  
BEEP

Without a word, we walked in silence into the darkest, scariest part of the room. I was so terrified it felt like all my veins were on fire. Gabriella's hand tightened around mine as we moved towards the beeping sound. When we got to it, Gabriella put her ear against the wall.

"It's coming from in here," Gabriella whispered, tracing a small crack between the bricks. I saw her finger catch the edge of something white, and she slowly pulled out a long piece of rolled up paper. A sliver of light leaked out of the crack where the paper had been.



"Band of Brothers? Group of friends?" Gabriella said aloud.

I let myself sink down until I was sitting with my back against the wall. "The clue is a game, right? What games have fighters in them?"

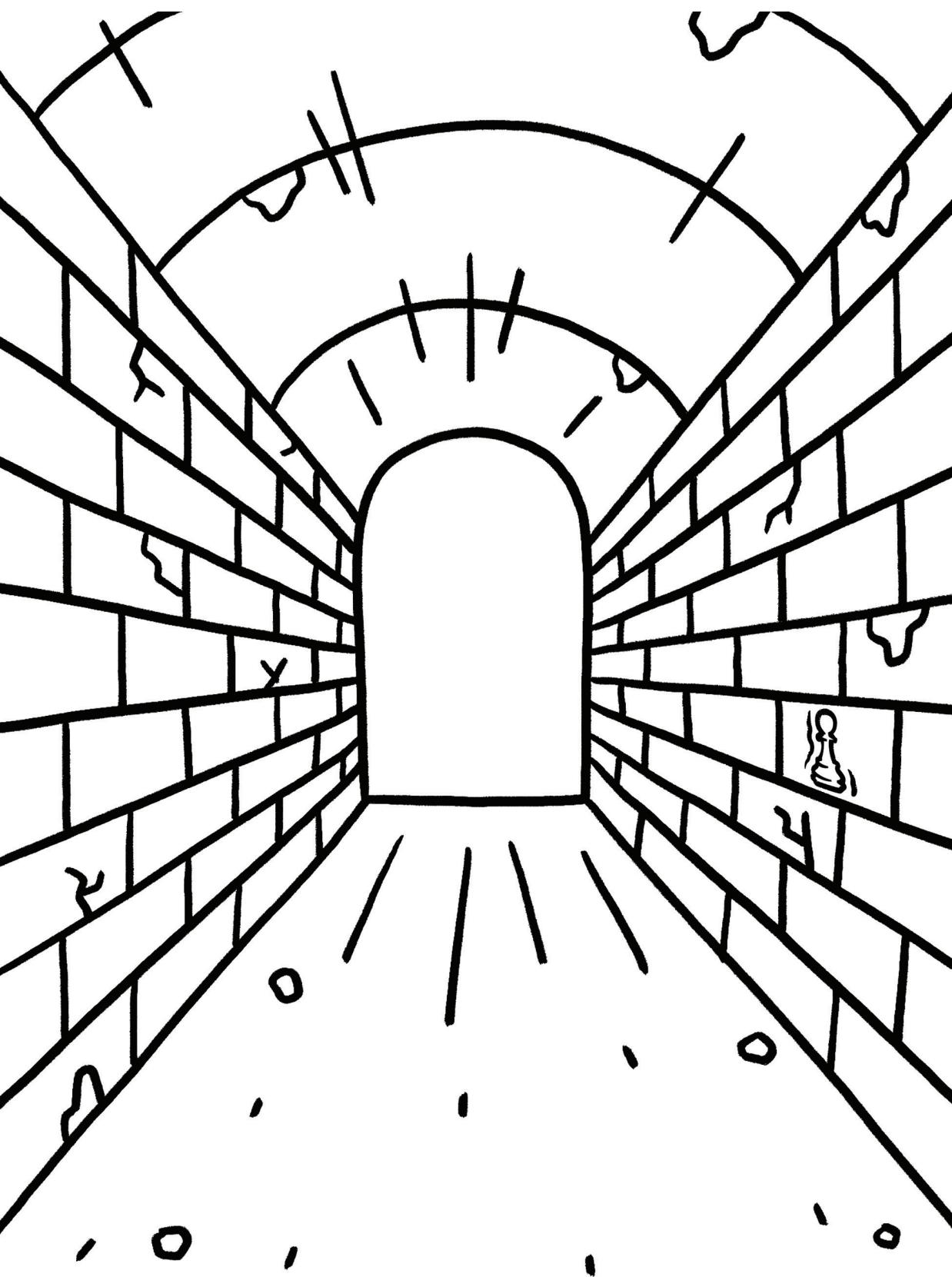
Gabriella counted on her fingers. "Shooting games, battlefield, checkers –"

"Checkers?" My mind flooded with memories of Gabriella and me in second grade, playing checkers until almost midnight, until her mom found us.

"My mom was so angry!" Gabriella said, as if reading my mind. "I still can't play checkers without seeing the look on her face." Her lips cracked into a smile. "Wait. I'm having a thought." She put up one finger. "We are a group of eight. We protect the King in every battle. We are considered weak, but if we move ahead, we never turn back. Who are we?" She bit her bottom lip and her eyes moved back and forth, searching for the answer on the walls. "There!" Gabriella pointed to the brick behind my head.

Without moving, I put my hand on the wall above my head. The brick was flat, except for one small, ridged spot.

"What in the world?" I flipped around. I was staring at a two-inch chess pawn etched into the wall. Without thinking, I pressed on the pawn. A square of ten bricks cracked away from the rest of the wall and swung inward, into a long, dark space.



"Woah!" we said at the same time.

We stared at each other with a mix of terror and excitement. "You first," we said together again. Brief smiles flashed over both of our faces.

"Do you think it really goes to the vault?"

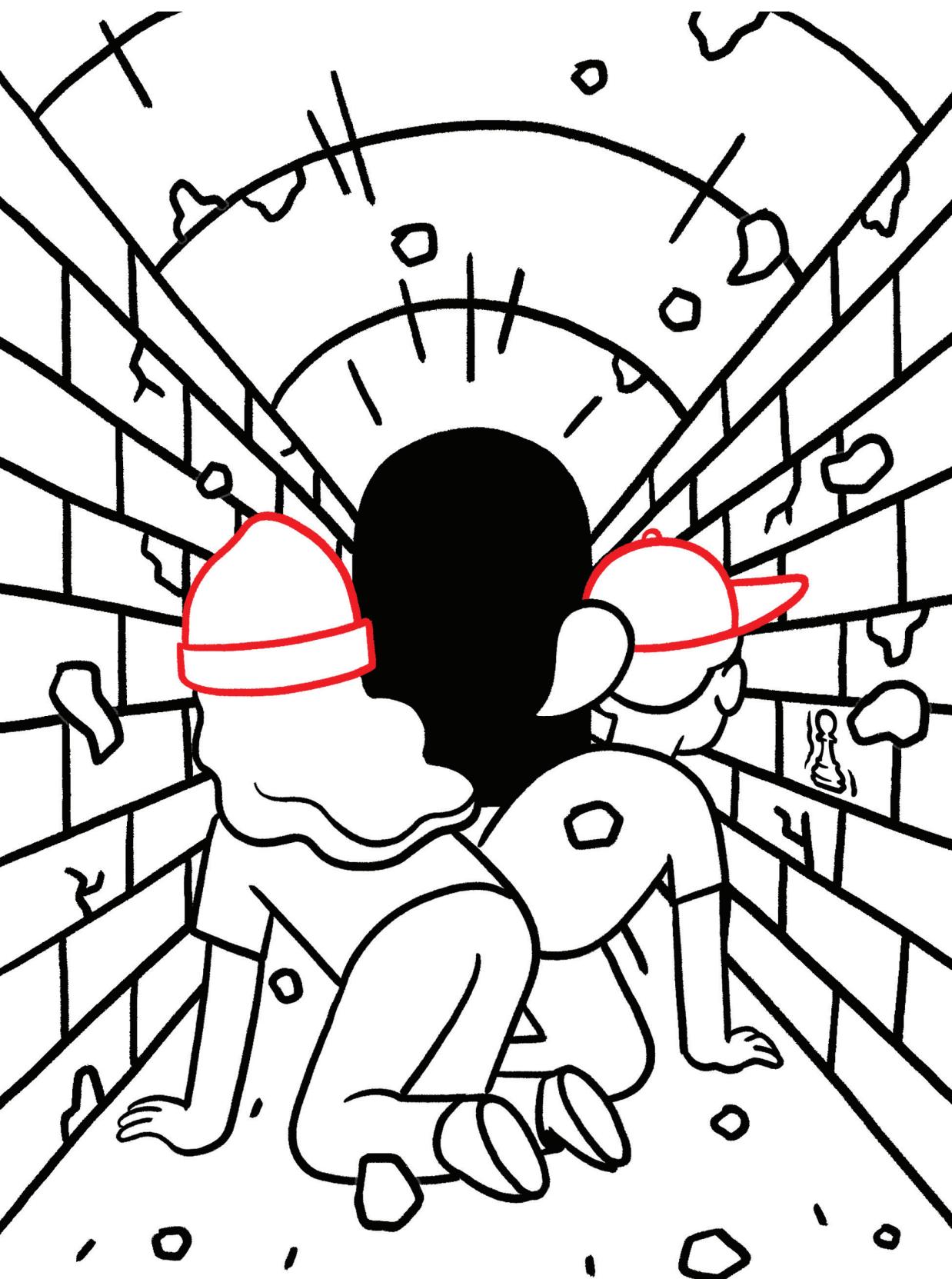
I asked, fear settling over me again.

"Or is it a trap?"

"Probably both."

"I'm going in." I crawled through the small brick hole and tried to stand up, banging my head against the ceiling. Above me, the bricks shook like the whole tunnel was going to fall in.

"Ouch!" I yelled, and grabbed my aching head.



Gabriella crawled in after me. "You okay?"

"Yeah. A little claustrophobic is all. Let's just get out of here." We stooped over and practically ran towards the light at the far end of the tunnel.

Unfortunately, it wasn't lighting an exit: It was just another bare bulb hanging from the ceiling of what now felt like the closing-in walls of the tunnel. "How do we get out of here?" I asked, trying not to panic.

Gabriella put her hand on my arm to calm me down. My breathing slowed for the moment, but I knew it wouldn't last long. "We just need to figure out what the puzzle is," she said.

"And then solve it," I snorted.

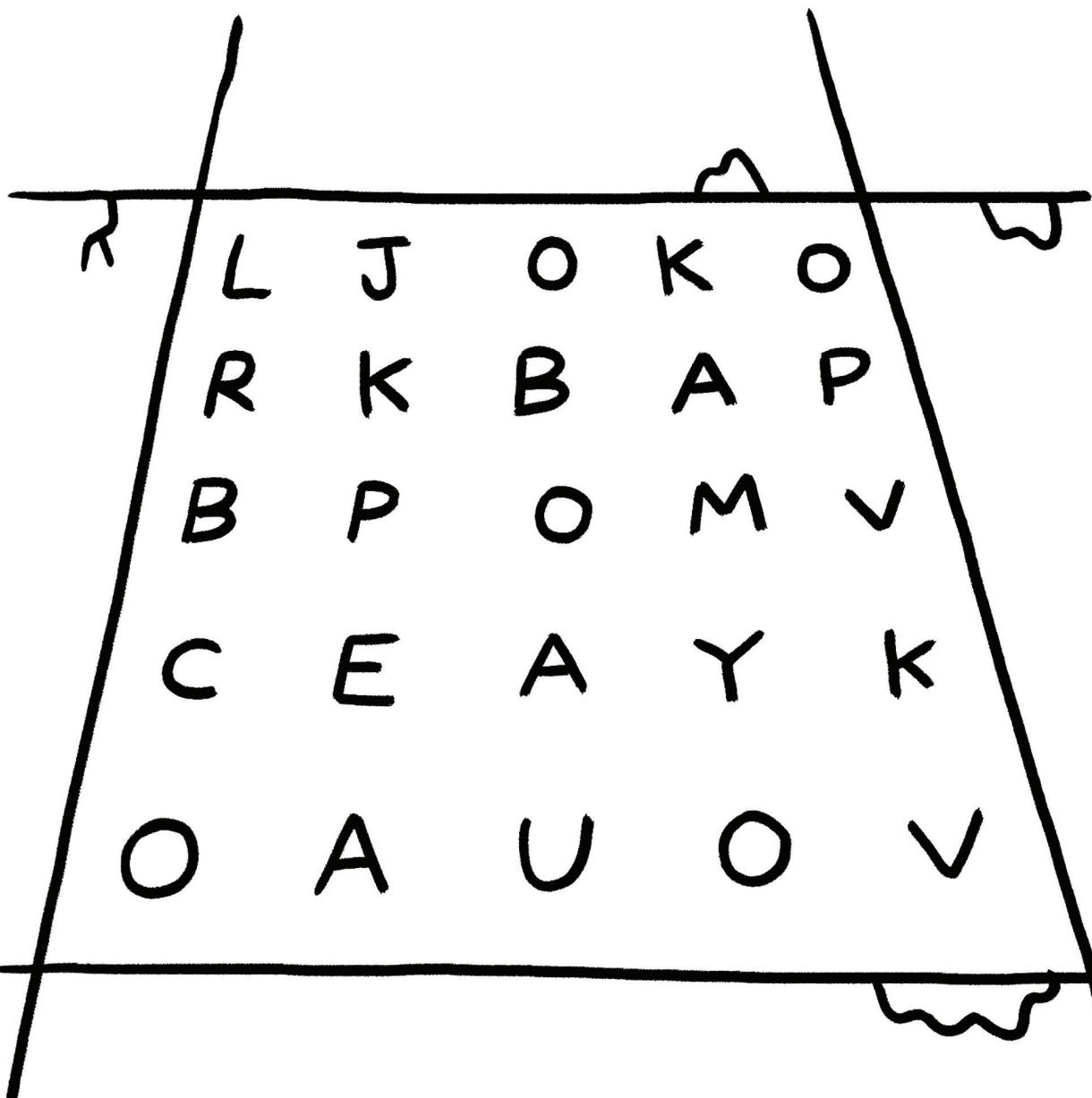
Together, we scanned the long tunnel. "The floor," I finally said. Gabriella glanced down at what looked like a hopscotch game beneath our feet.

"It's a crossword puzzle," Gabriella said.

"My mom does them all day now. Seriously, she's like a crossword genius." Gabriella pointed to the letter E a few feet away, and beside it, the letter V.

"But where are the clues?"

"Maybe there aren't any," I said, and my breath quickened again. "Or maybe," said Gabriella, "we have to find the pattern."



From where we were stooped over, Gabriella and I looked up, our noses almost touching the ceiling.

"There," Gabriella whispered.

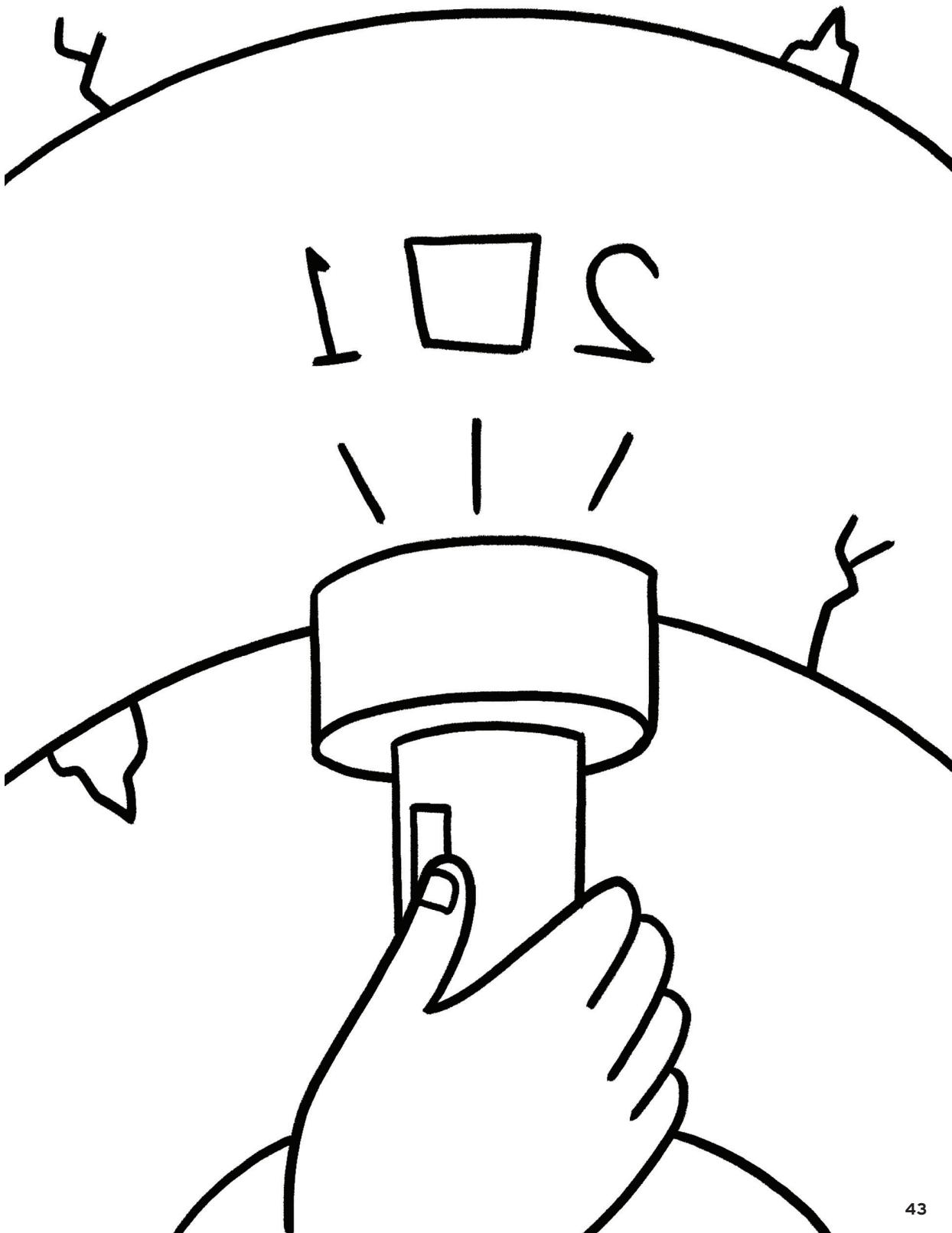
With trembling hands, I lifted the flashlight and aimed it at the ceiling.

"Here goes," I whispered back.

***CLICK***

There was something etched into the ceiling.

"Is that a backwards two?" Gabriella asked.



For once, the answer to a puzzle rolled off my tongue.

"Back to square one," I announced.

Gabriella tried to smile, but it looked more like a grimace.

"At least *something* is easy peasy," she said.

We walked back through the tunnel, stepping from square to square. When I got to the S, there was a faded number one in the corner of it.

"We're back to square one," I said aloud.

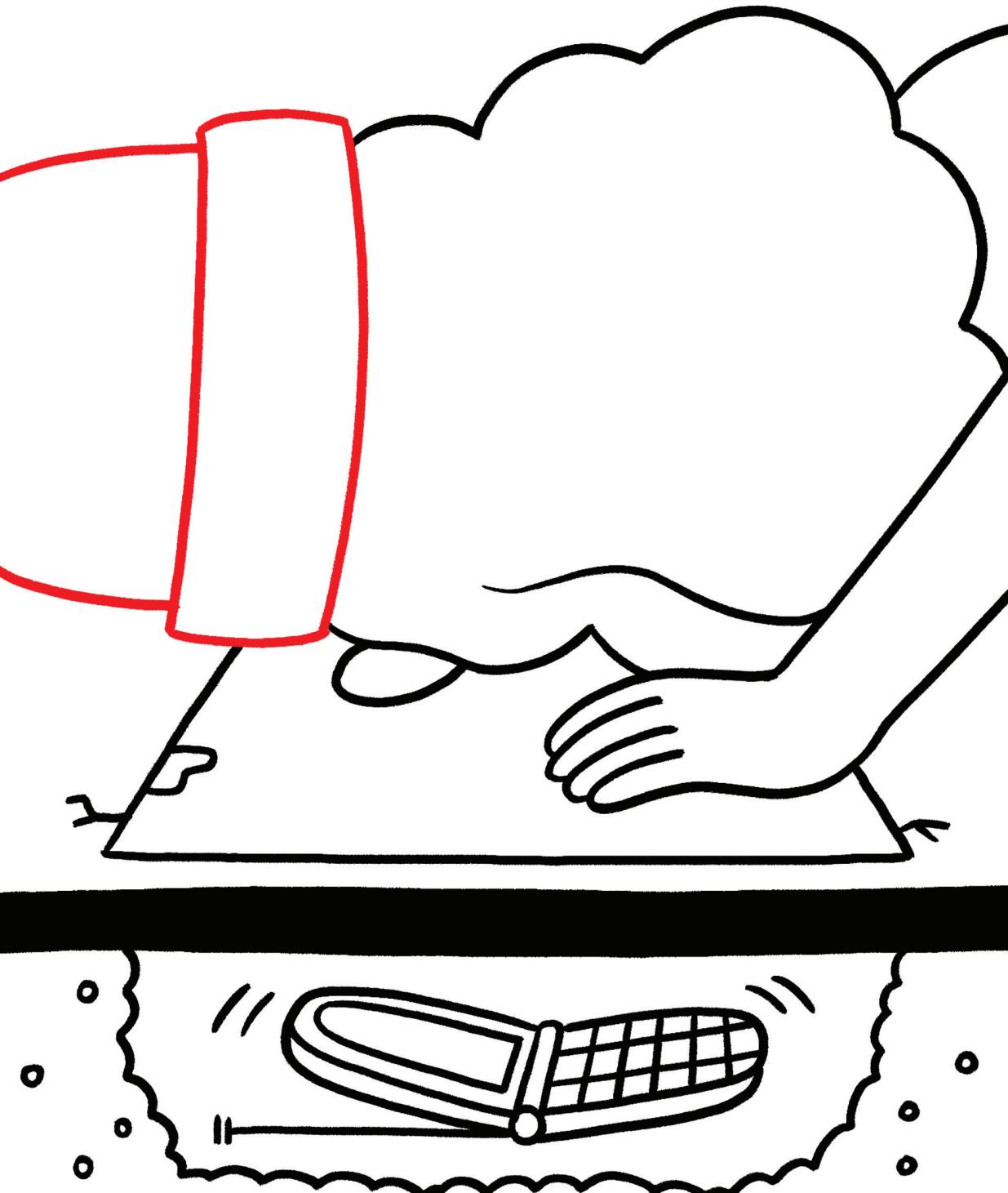
Gabriella rolled her eyes. "Tell me about it."

We both stood on square one and waited for something to happen, but nothing did. Just the light at the end of the tunnel flickering, our breathing slowing, our heartbeats quickening. But then, we heard a barely audible sound, like a vibration. Or a rumble. Or a—

"—Cellphone?" Gabriella asked.

I nodded. "Somewhere in this tunnel."

We edged closer together, held our breaths, and listened. After a moment of near silence, I crouched down and put my ear against the ground. The sound was coming from under square one.

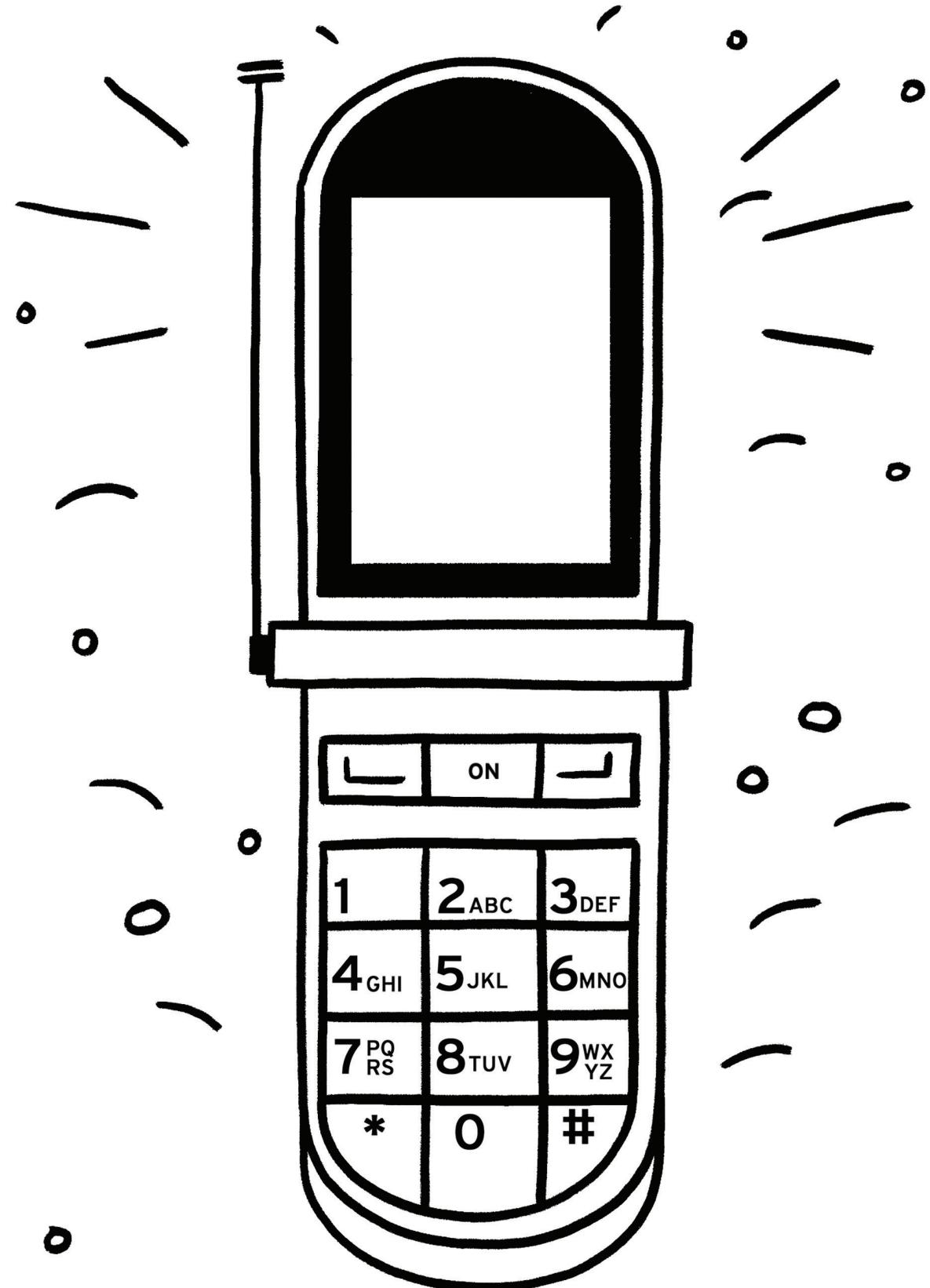


Gabriella lifted square one off the tunnel floor and a shiny silver phone was nestled underneath.

"It's so beautiful," Gabriella said. "Like a miracle."

"It'll be a miracle if it has WIFI," I said, but I knew what she meant. It was our first connection to the real world since we'd gotten down here. Glancing up at Gabriella, I carefully lifted the phone off the dusty floor and pressed the power button. Nothing happened. I pressed it harder. Nothing still. I tried shaking it, banging it against my palm, turning it upside down, pressing several buttons at the same time, but nothing worked. Finally, I pressed the on button so hard that it rocketed to the right, slipping between my thumb and forefinger, and crashed onto the ground.

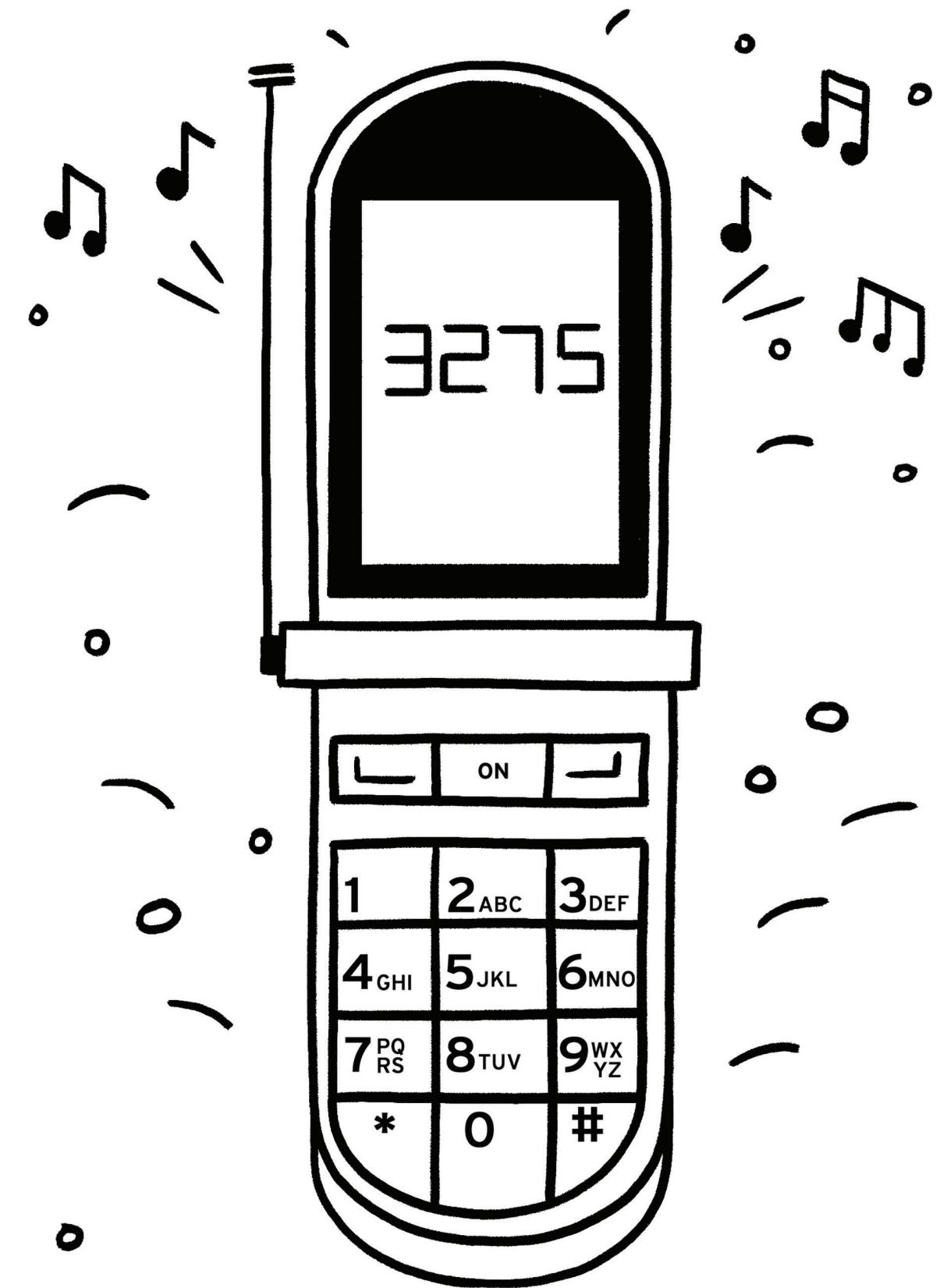
The phone unlocked with a beep.



Gabriella snatched the phone off the ground and handed it to me. "Call somebody!" she squealed.

But there was no reception. No WIFI. There was just a message. One measly, incoherent message. And that song. The one impossible not to sing along to.

CLUE: KEYPAD + LULLABY



"Dark Star?" Gabriella's irritated voice echoed against the tunnel walls. "That's it? It doesn't call out, doesn't connect to WIFI, it just plays "Twinkle Twinkle" and tells us to look for dark stars?!" Her breathing was ragged, and a tear popped out of one closed eye. This time, Gabriella was the one who looked defeated. "We'll never get out of this tunnel," she moaned.

"It could be worse," I joked, trying to make her feel better.  
"You could be claustrophobic."

Gabriella's lips curled up in a slight smile, and then she opened her eyes wide. "That's it! Where is the only place a star could stay dark?" she asked, and then answered her own question. "A star could only stay dark in the darkest part of the tunnel. Otherwise the light would illuminate it."

"But what's the darkest part of the tunnel?"

Gabriella pointed back to where we came from, at the tiny space concealed by the shadow of the open brick door.  
"The door doesn't let the light reach back there," she says.  
"It's *really* dark."

I peered into the narrow space and shivered. Even though my body repelled the thought of being any closer to that inky darkness, I hunched over and walked towards it.

When I got there, I realized that I had to close the brick door in order to get into the tiny space, possibly sealing us into the tunnel forever.

I shook my head. "I can't do it," I said.

"You have to," Gabriella said.

Still, I hesitated. But when Gabriella pointed at the tiny door and mouthed "close it," I took a deep, shaky breath.  
Then I closed the door.

In that tiny space, my whole body shuddered.  
It felt like the tunnel walls were closing in on me.

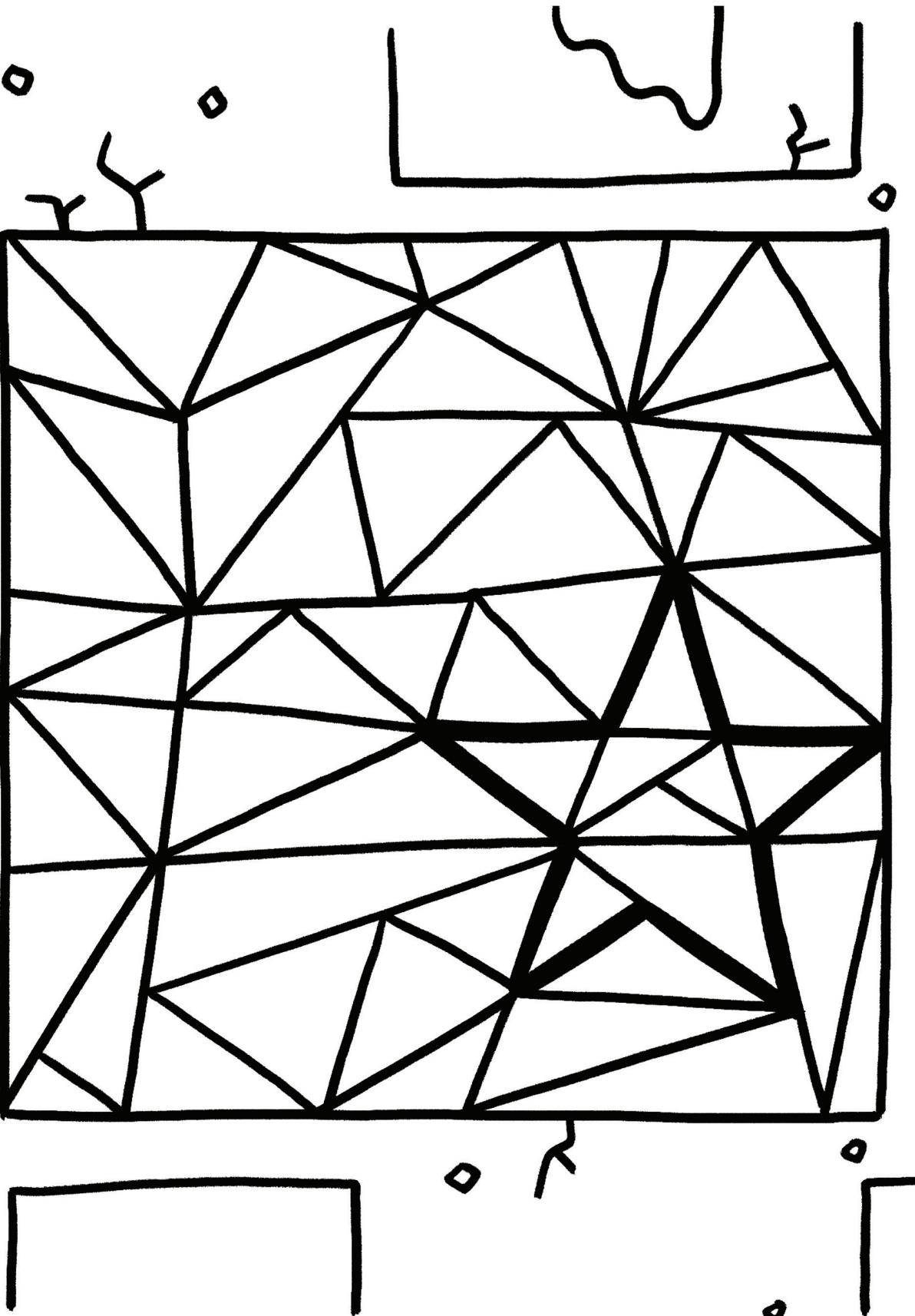
"Scoot over," Gabriella said. Her voice made me  
feel safe, or at least like the tunnel hadn't  
swallowed me up yet.

"To where?" I asked.

Gabriella crawled in and crouched in the tiny  
dark space next to me. She trailed her fingers  
along the geometric shapes on the wall.

"That isn't a star," I said.

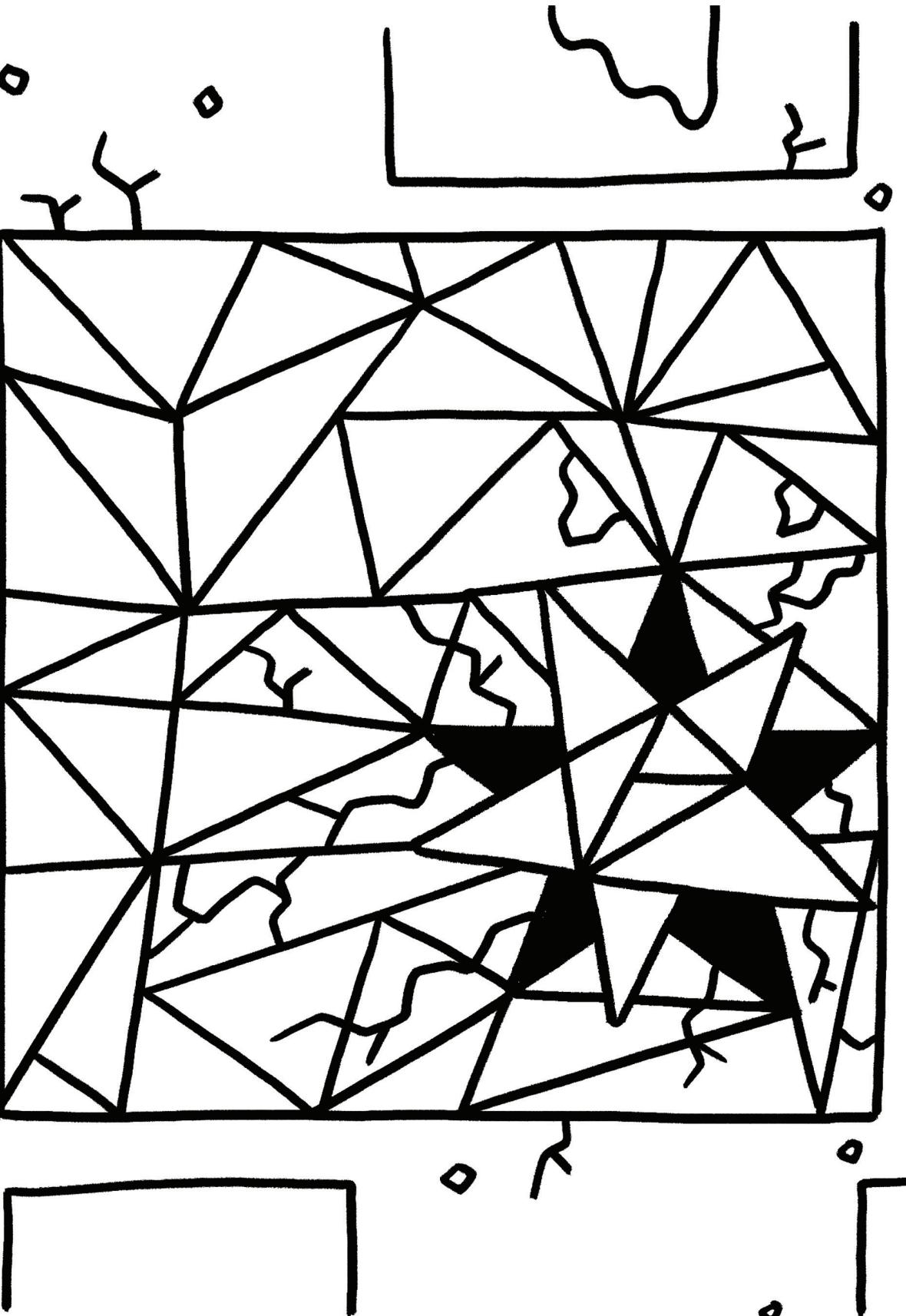
"But it could be. Look at the way the triangles  
come together there," Gabriella said, and  
pointed to the wall.



The star was literally glowing.

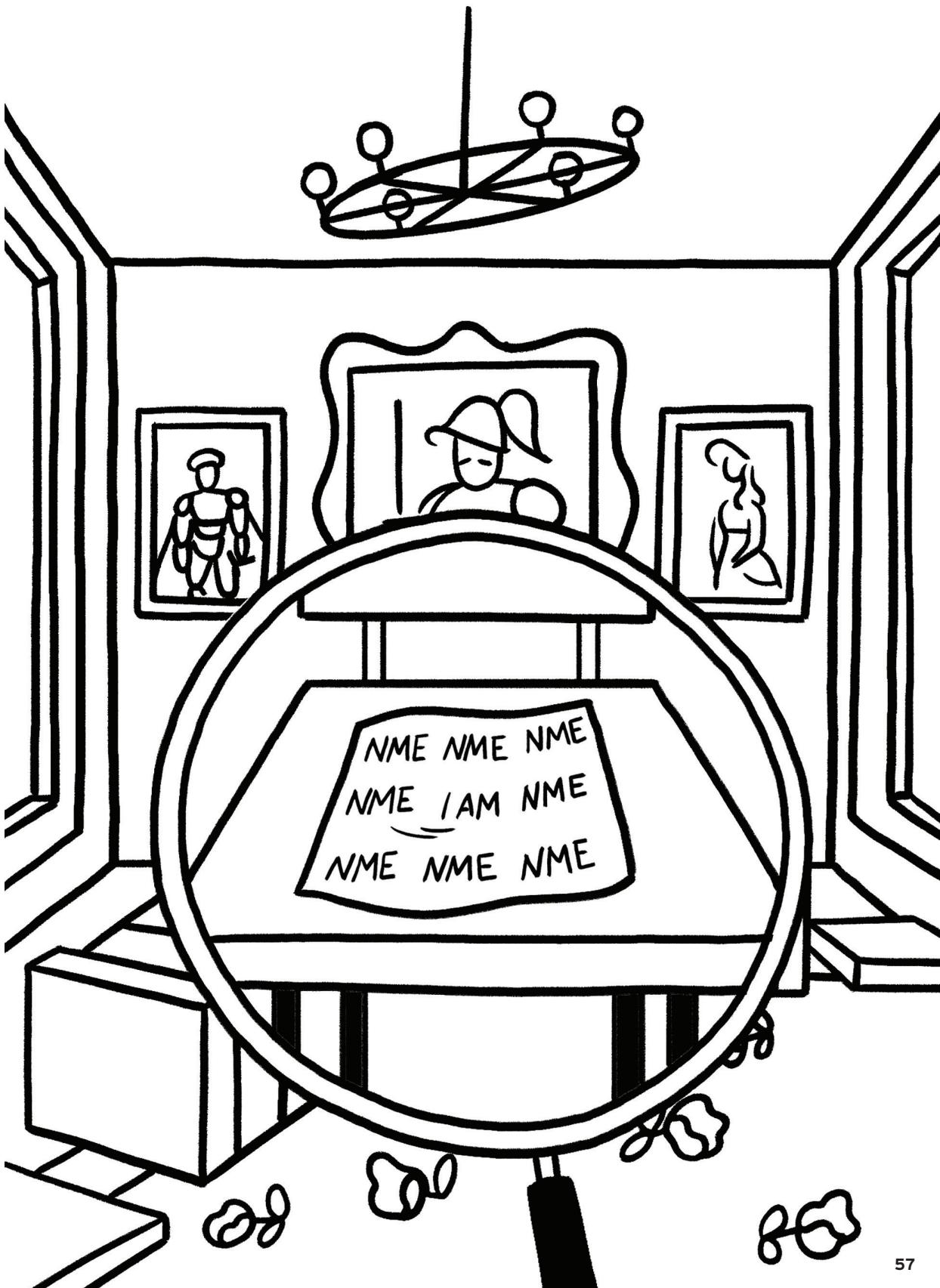
Gabriella touched it with one finger and quickly drew her hand back. "It's hot," she said. "And it looks like a—"

"—Door handle," I finished for her. I wrapped my hand in my sleeve, grabbed the hot, star-shaped handle, and turned it sharply to the right. As if shaken by an earthquake, the tunnel wall cracked open.



The room looked like some sort of waiting area  
that had been deserted in a hurry.

A broken chandelier hung from the ceiling by  
one chain, a single bulb flickering on and off,  
wrought-iron chairs were overturned, dried  
flowers littered the marble floor, and countless  
old-fashioned paintings of warriors and maidens  
leaned against every wall. Only one chair was  
upright, and there was a napkin on it.



"I am surrounded by enemies," Gabriella muttered. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Enemies..." I looked around at the oil paintings leaning against the wall, and then pointed to a picture of a sad woman in a yellow dress. "Damsel-in-distress," I said, rolling my eyes. "Enemy of females everywhere."

Gabriella grinned. "But check out the girl warriors kicking butt," she said, nodding to a painting of the Vikings storming a castle.

"That's more like it!"

"But aren't all the warriors surrounded by enemies?" Gabriella asked. She was right. There were dozens of paintings of warriors, all fighting opposing armies.

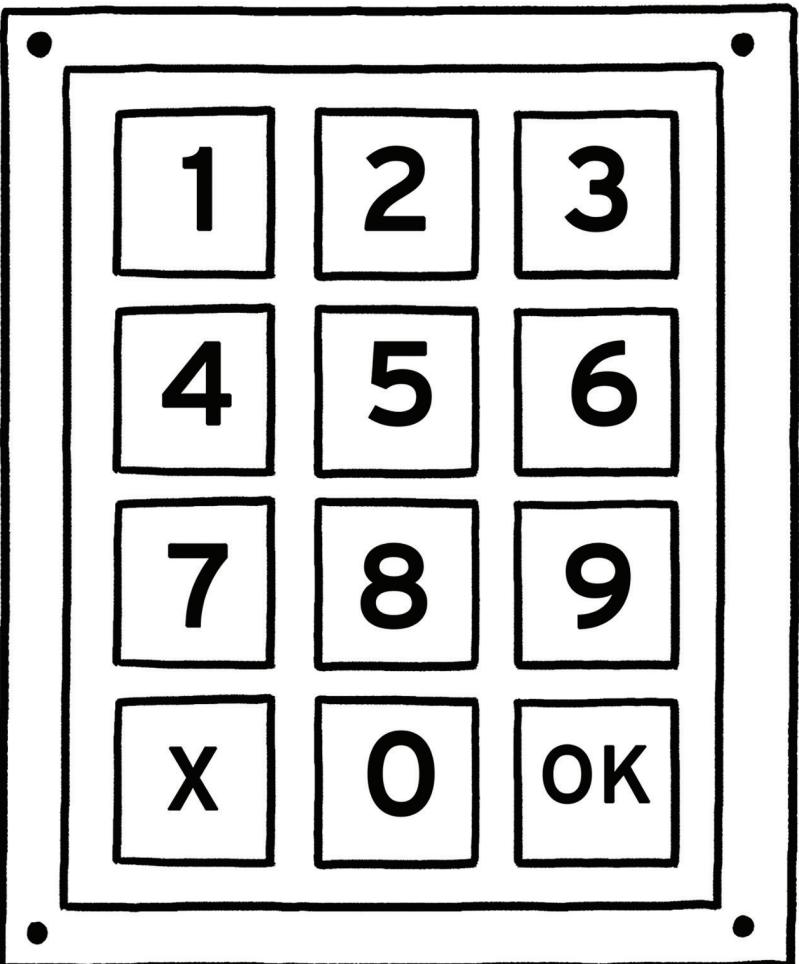
"But the riddle says '*I am*,'" I said. "That means there is only one person surrounded by enemies."

Gabriella and I walked slowly around the room, lifting paintings off one another and looking at each one carefully.

"Maybe this one," Gabriella said. She pointed to a painting of one soldier in blue uniform surrounded by many soldiers in gray uniforms, the tips of their swords all touching the blue soldier's throat.

I nodded. In silence, Gabriella and I each grabbed one side of the enormous painting and heaved it away from the wall. Behind the painting was a keypad.

The keypad to open the vault.

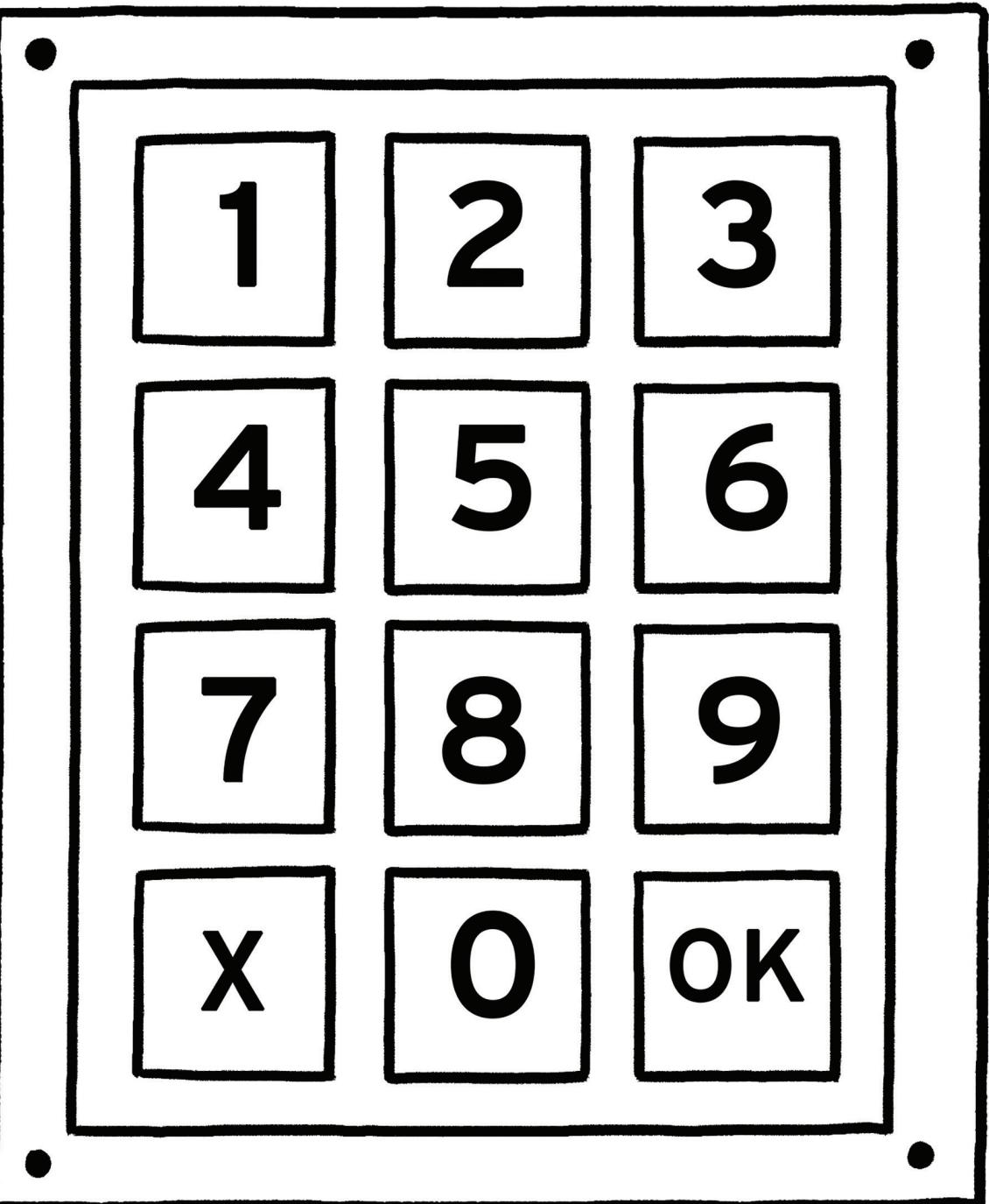


THE AGES OF A MOTHER AND  
HER DAUGHTER ADD UP TO 66.  
THE MOTHER'S AGE IS THE  
DAUGHTER'S AGE REVERSED.  
HOW OLD ARE THEY?  
CLUE: OVER THE HILL, UNDER A  
QUARTER

"Try it," Gabriella urged, tearing the riddle off the keypad. "Try 5115."

I stared hard at the keypad as if to will that to be the right code. Slowly, I punched in the number five, then one. I stopped and glanced up at Gabriella. She nodded for me to go on. I pushed the number one again, and a moment later, after taking a deep, shaky breath, I pushed number five.

*Chimes sounded.*



The vault door swung open.

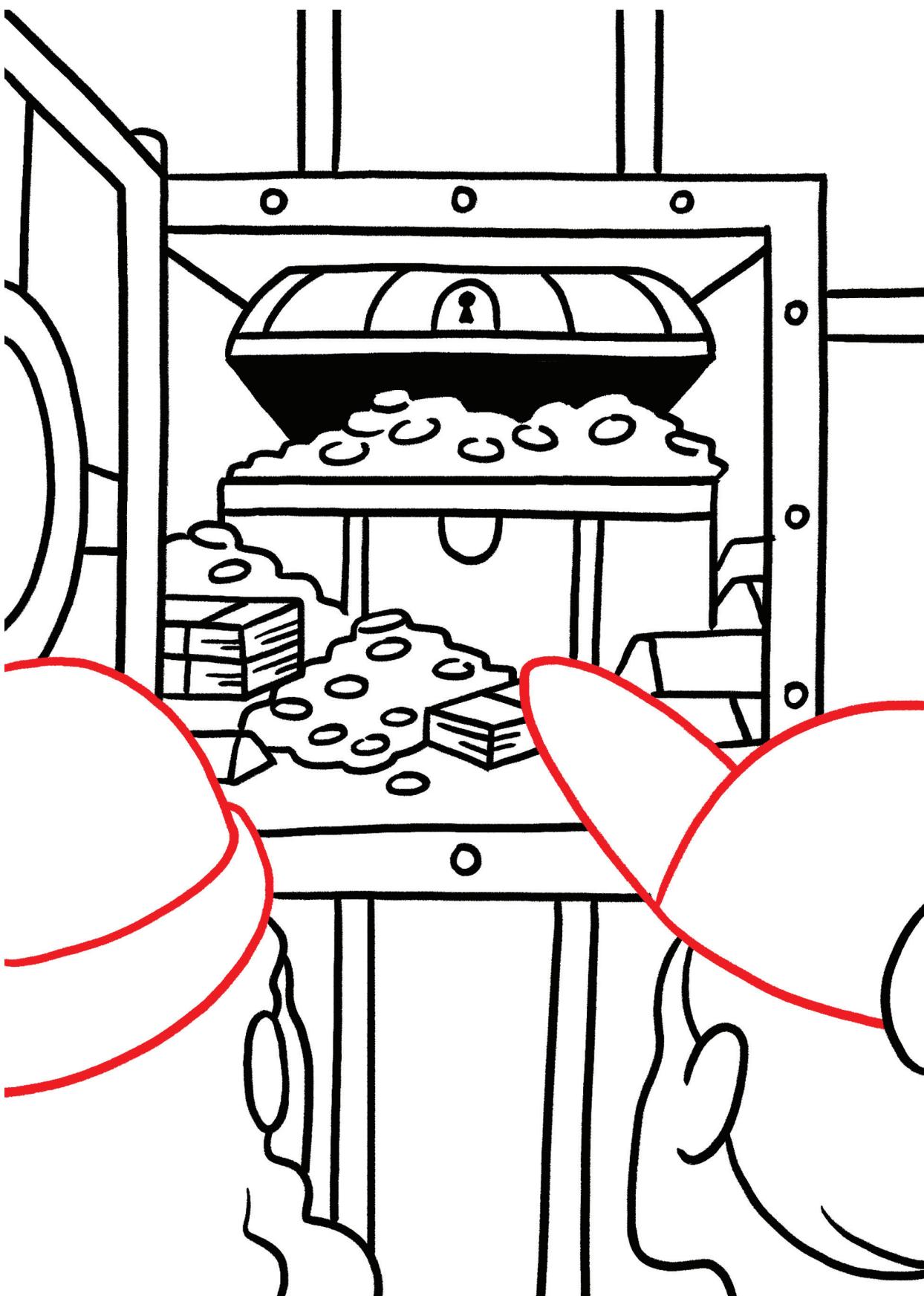
I gasped.

"Wow," Gabriella said.

It was the most wonderous thing I'd ever seen.

Inside the vault were boxes overflowing with silver coins. A pile of bricks was piled five feet high along the back wall. Even the floor was littered with stacks of hundred dollar bills.

There was a note pinned to the inside of the vault: "Take Some; Leave Some. This belongs to all of us."



# SHADYVILLE TIMES

## Anonymous Donation Reopens Community Hospital

SHADYVILLE, MO

After the gift of a large anonymous donation, the community hospital reopened on Monday. It was an emotional event, and many people watched the Mayor cut the ribbon with tears in their eyes. One particularly tearful woman, Maria Garcia, the mother of Michael (12) and Gabriella (14), was donning her white doctor's coat again for the first time in almost

six months. "We were going to have to leave Shadyville," she said. "But now, as you can see..." Her face was proud as she gestured to the hospital doors opening behind her. "Lots of people have their jobs back. I'm not the only one."

And she isn't, not by a long shot.

"What do we do with it?" Gabriella asked.

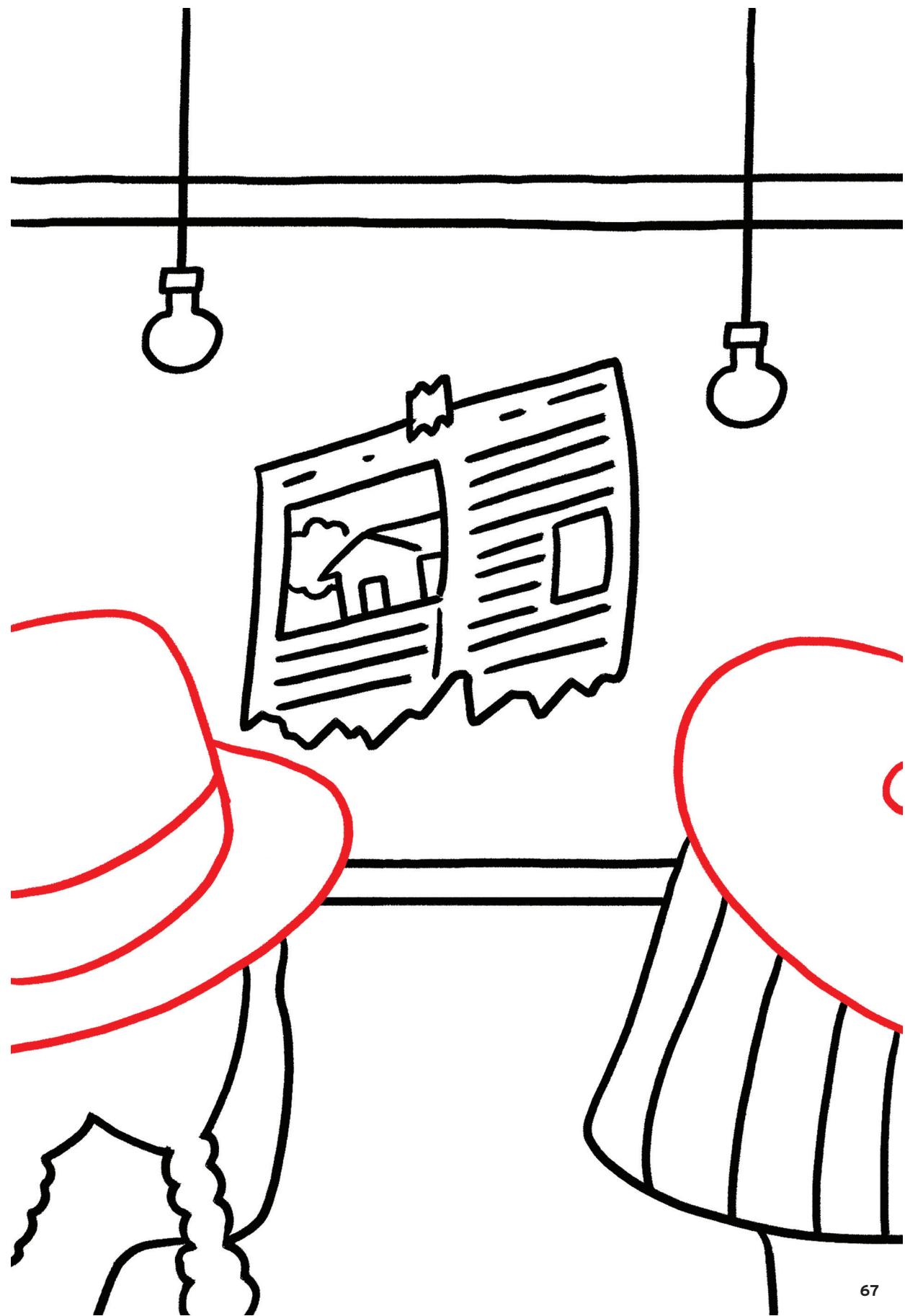
"I know," I said.

We both smiled.

**20 YEARS LATER**

"Do you still think it's a rumor?"

"We'll never know unless we try."





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