

Years 7 & 8

1st Place: Aadhithya Vishnuu

Year 8, Harrisdale Senior High School

Room 36

Everyone at Rockvale High had heard of Room 36, but no one had been inside it in over a decade. The hallway it lived in was cold and shadowy, a quiet corridor at the far end of the school where even the lights flickered uneasily. The door, tall and covered in layers of chipped green paint, stood like a silent warning. No one could remember what the room had once been. Some said a science lab; others swore it was used for detention until a student mysteriously disappeared. Whatever the truth was, it had vanished behind the locked door and the silence of teachers who avoided the subject completely.

Jake Collins didn't believe in ghosts. He preferred maths and science over English – subjects with clear answers. Room 36 didn't have one. That made it interesting.

"Let's just peek at it," Jake said one overcast afternoon, sitting beside his best friend Lily behind the science block. "It's just a room. No one's even touched it for years." Lily narrowed her eyes. "Jake, the janitor crosses the hallway to avoid walking past it. And you remember the stories. That kid, Liam Jenkins, vanished after getting locked in there."

"He moved to Queensland," Jake replied with a chuckle. "I follow his dog on Instagram." But Lily wasn't laughing.

Still, when Jake pulled out an old walkie-talkie he'd found at the door of Room 36 – screen shattered but still operable, dusty and covered in spiderwebs – she didn't look away. He fiddled with the dial and clicked the button, grinning like a kid about to play a prank.

Then it happened. A burst of static. Then a voice – faint, desperate, almost like a whisper floating through wind.

"Help . . . Room 36 . . . I'm trapped . . ."

Jake's grin vanished. Lily's face drained of colour. "Was that –?" she whispered. The device crackled again. "They're watching me . . . hurry . . ."

Jake met Lily's gaze. For once, they didn't need to argue. Something was wrong.

That night, the sky rumbled with distant thunder as they met behind the school. Jake wore gloves and carried a flashlight. Lily had a crowbar and her mum's phone, just in case.

The school grounds were silent. A few lights buzzed from the gym, but the rest of the building sat like a sleeping giant. They slipped through the side door, hearts pounding. The hallway leading to Room 36 was even darker at night, like the shadows themselves were watching.

Jake knelt at the door with a bent paperclip, his fingers trembling slightly. "If I die, tell my brother not to touch my gaming laptop." The lock gave a click, and the door creaked open.

Room 36 smelled of dust and old secrets. Faded posters of the solar system clung to the walls like ancient text. Stacked desks sat crookedly in the corners. Every footstep stirred a cloud of dust, and it felt like the air had been sealed for centuries.

And in the centre of the room, beneath a hanging light bulb that flickered like a dying firefly, stood a single desk. It was clean. Untouched. A soft, pale blue glow pulsed from the surface.

Lily pointed. "That's not normal."

On the desk sat a small leather-covered book. No title. Just a symbol on the cover – a rune-like spiral, sharp but fluid, as if it was in motion. It glowed faintly.

Jake reached out. The second his fingers touched the cover, the room groaned.

The book snapped open, pages flipping wildly. Symbols spun into the air like glowing insects. A low hum filled the room, vibrating through their bones.

Then, darkness.

When Jake opened his eyes, everything had changed. Room 36 looked brand new. Bright. Clean. The posters looked freshly printed, the floor gleamed, and sunlight poured through the windows. But there was something wrong with the light. It shimmered like it was underwater.

"Lily?" Jake called. No answer.

The book was gone. The desk stood empty. Panic twisted his stomach.

Suddenly, the walkie-talkie on his hip crackled again.

"Jake . . . it's me. I don't know where I am. I think the book . . . it moves us through time."

Jake stared at the walkie-talkie. "Where are you?"

"I'm trapped. I picked the wrong door."

Then the message cut out.

Jake turned slowly. On the wall behind him, letters began carving themselves into the wood: *To escape the loop, solve the puzzle. Three doors. One way out.*

And then they appeared. Three doors – red, green, black. They weren't there before. They didn't even look like they belonged in this world. The green door gave off a soft hum.

He took a deep breath and stepped through it.

He found himself in an impossibly tall library. Books hovered in mid-air. Ladders moved on their own. The air smelled of old pages and electricity.

"Jake Collins," a voice echoed from above.

Jake looked up. A robed figure stood atop a floating platform, its eyes glowing like lanterns.

"Uh . . . hi?" Jake said. "Can I ask –"

"You must answer to proceed," the figure boomed. "One question. One chance."

A golden orb hovered before Jake. A riddle pulsed within it: *What exists only when it's shared, disappears when kept, and multiplies when given away?*

Jake's mind raced. He'd heard this before. His mum had said it once.

But before he could answer, something else caught his attention.

His head turned – too fast, too smoothly. His feet carried him across the floating floor toward a high shelf tucked in shadow. A book rested there, thick and bound in cracked black leather. It pulsed, just once, as if breathing. Jake's fingers twitched. Something inside him leaned toward it.

He didn't know why he was reaching for it. His hand hovered over the cover. The title shimmered in red: *The Language of Forgotten Names.*

Then he blinked.

His hand dropped away. He stumbled back like he'd just woken from a dream.

"What . . . was I doing?" he muttered.

The orb pulsed again, the riddle glowing brighter as if urging him to focus.

Jake took a shaky breath. "A secret," he answered.

The figure bowed. The orb exploded in light. And then the library vanished.

He was back in Room 36. The three doors stood waiting again.

This time, he chose the black door.

Silence. Cold.

The room was grey and lifeless. The windows were gone. A single mirror stood in the centre.

Jake approached it and froze.

The reflection wasn't his. It was him, older. Tired. Pale. Eyes sunken with exhaustion.

The reflection spoke. "You've been here before. Dozens of times. The room erases your memory every time you fail."

Jake stepped back. "That's not true."

The reflection's eyes glowed. "The room feeds on your time."

Suddenly, the walls aged. The floor cracked. Jake fell to his knees as time accelerated, wind howling through the empty space.

Then he saw it – a loose floorboard. With shaking hands, he pried it open and pulled out a torn scrap of paper: *If you're reading this, I didn't make it. But maybe you still can. The red door is the only exit. – L*

Jake stood. And ran.

The red door was waiting. He didn't hesitate.

The light was blinding as he stepped through, and then he was falling, spiralling through colour and wind and whispers that weren't quite words.

He landed hard on a cold wooden floor. When he opened his eyes, the world was still.

Room 36 was back to normal. The dust. The silence.

And across the room, Lily. She was sitting beside the desk, clutching the glowing book.

Her eyes met his. "You saw the note."

He helped her to her feet. "Let's never talk to books again."

They opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

This time, the air was warm. The lights were steady. The hallway looked normal.

They turned back to see Room 36.

But there was no door. Just a smooth wall, as if the room had never existed.

The next morning, Jake asked their history teacher about it.

"Room 36?" the teacher laughed. "There is no Room 36. That hallway only has two classrooms."

Jake and Lily exchanged looks. No one remembered it.

But that night, as Jake placed the walkie-talkie back into his drawer, he noticed something new etched into the surface: *Curiosity has its price. But sometimes, it finds the truth.*

He saw it. And it smiled back from the darkness.