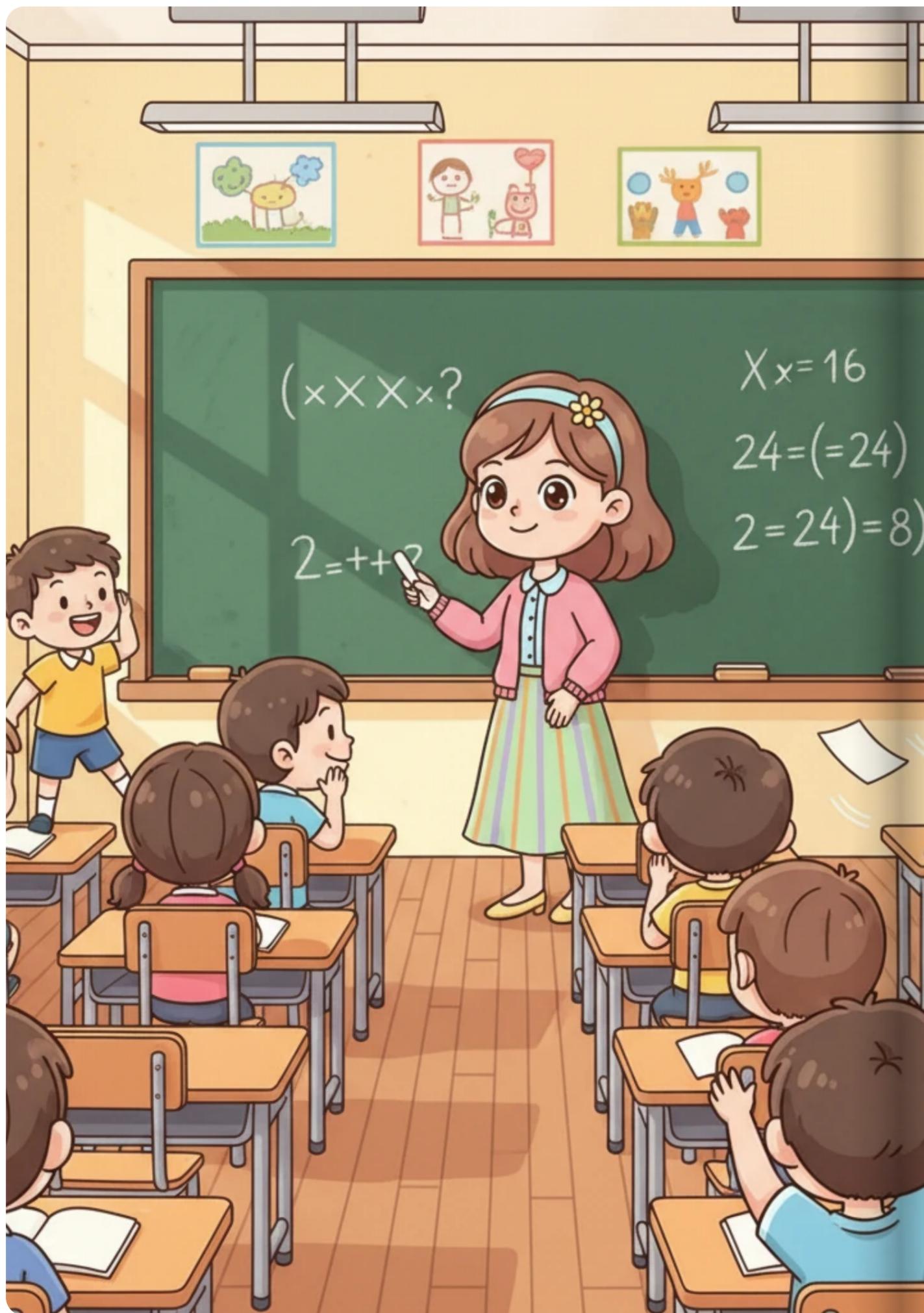
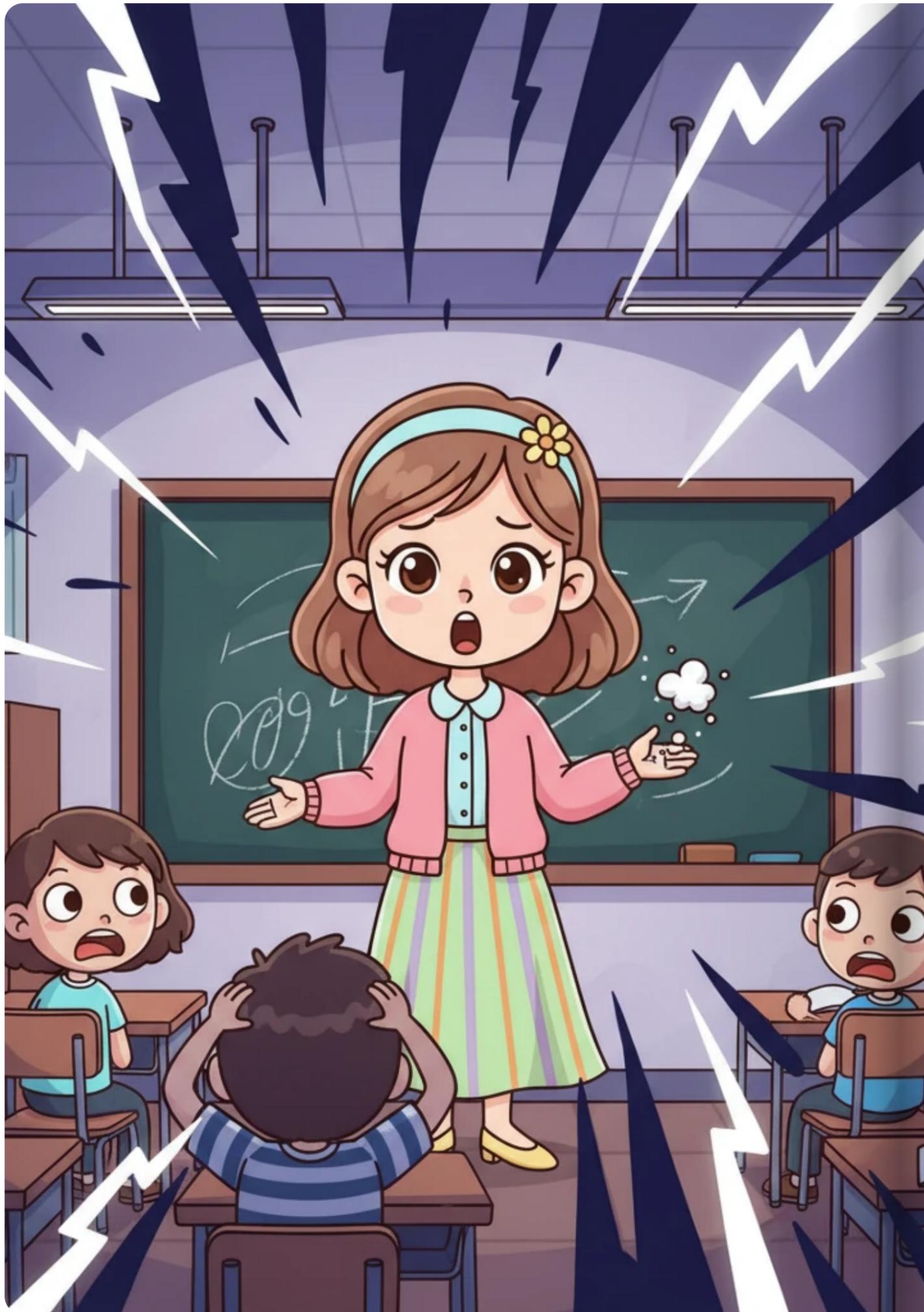


The Puppet's Perilous Game

Ngân Thu



The notorious Class 12/8 buzzed with restless energy, a vibrant whirlwind of chatter and bouncing chairs. Their kind and patient teacher, Ms. Hoang Lan, stood at the blackboard, diligently writing equations in neat, flowing script, her gentle smile a beacon amidst the playful chaos.



Suddenly, with a tiny 'snap!', the chalk in Ms. Lan's hand crumbled into dust, startling her. Before anyone could react, the classroom lights began to flicker wildly, plunging the room into chaotic flashes of light and shadow, making the students gasp in surprise.



When the lights finally steadied, a collective gasp filled the air. Ms. Lan was gone! In her place, perched ominously on the teacher's desk, sat an old, wooden puppet. Its face was painted a ghostly white, and its carved smile was twisted into a chilling, permanent grin.



The puppet's head slowly, eerily, began to turn, its wooden joints emitting dry, creaking 'crack... crack...' sounds that echoed in the suddenly silent room. Though its painted mouth remained shut, a high-pitched, reedy voice filled every corner: "Hello, brilliant minds!"



The puppet continued, its voice chillingly calm, "Your beloved teacher is in a very... cramped place. Want to see Ms. Lan again? Easy. I've planted my 'friends' right here in this classroom. They're sitting right next to you, looking just like you." The class erupted into a cacophony of screams and panicked whispers.



"Shhh..." the puppet's voice cut through the noise, "Don't be hasty. The winner is the one who finds the difference. Each puppet has one flaw compared to a real person. You have one class period. Every 10 minutes, if a puppet isn't found, one of Ms. Lan's fingers will... disappear." The air grew thick with suffocating tension.



Leo, a quick-witted student, exchanged a nervous glance with his best friend, Mia. A wave of suspicion swept through the classroom as everyone started to eye their classmates, even their closest friends, with dawning mistrust. The hunt for tiny, abnormal details had begun.



The puppet's voice chimed in again, offering a cryptic clue: "The first friend is always the center of attention due to their scruffy appearance, eyes always gleaming with a mischievous glint, and a hot-tempered personality." Leo's gaze darted across the room, trying to match the description to a face.



"The second," the puppet continued, "has a bright, sharp face with a strong personality, seemingly unapproachable at first glance but actually very friendly." Leo narrowed his eyes, picturing the different personalities in their diverse class, each one now a potential suspect.



"And the third," the puppet concluded with a dry chuckle, "is 'here and there,' possessing silent movement and holding all important class information. They often appear in dark corners or suddenly behind others." Leo gripped his pencil, realizing the game was real, and the clock was already ticking.