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**Morgan at ARTS**

**Book 4**

# **Mark Against It**

**By**

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## **1**

### ***Immaterial World.***

Reality was for wimps.

Mark Morgan knew that because virtual reality might kill him.

“Dr. Node, it’s ready. Give it a try,” Mark yelled to his Networking teacher.

“Thanks, Mark. Hold on while I throw the switch,” Dr. Node replied.

“Isn’t that when the monster comes to life? The holographic projector’s not giving me a sunburn again, is it?”

“With any luck at all.”

“What was that?” Mark asked.

“Nothing, nothing - except a little sun didn’t hurt you, did it? You have to admit you’re a bit pale.”

“Just because I don’t have the worlds darkest tan like you doesn’t make me pale. I think of it as healthy,” Mark said.

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“Healthy? Vitamin D is a requirement for a healthy body. You never get outside. Next time you decide to open the front doors, let me introduce you to that big glowing orb in the sky. You might not recognize it.”

“Ha. Ha. That’s because I’ve spent the summer here with you. You do realize as you leave to get in your tanning time each day you leave me with an assignment that takes the rest of the evening. When am I supposed to see the sun?”

“Details, details. If you were better organized you could find a way,” Dr. Node said.

“Yeah, like by ignoring your assignment. That would free time right there. Besides, what are you? In management? That sounds like something a really bad manager would say.”

“Only if they’re wrong.”

Summer vacation had almost come to a close, which for Mark meant summer work drew to a close since he never took summer vacations. As a ward of the Fontanelle Advanced Research and Technical School, ARTS for short (they didn’t go by FARTS for some reason), Mark spent his summers working with teachers who used the school’s equipment for research. That worked well for both teacher and student. The teacher got free labor, and the student received a free education. Sort of. He certainly paid for it in nonmonetary ways.

Daisy, the ultra-quantum computer that ran the school, was supposed to split the three summer vacation months between three teachers. Not this time. This year she had assigned him to one teacher for the entire summer. It wasn’t the first time Daisy had given him a summer assignment he didn’t understand. After Mark asked her why, she had a much better answer than the previous year when she had cursed him for two of the three months with Coach, the physical education teacher who enjoyed making Mark’s life miserable. Her excuse? It would be good for him. The fact that he came out of it in the best shape of his life - or most people’s lives - was beside the point.

This year, Dr. Node had a project that required completion before the beginning of the school year. Without help, he would be hard-pressed to get it done, and the classroom wouldn’t be ready. Being mediocre at networking, Mark thought it an excellent opportunity to improve his skills.

One good thing about special projects was they took his mind off his problems. Saving Anh, if she still lived after disappearing two years ago along with maybe saving himself along the way, considering in another three years, he would be in the same boat. Then there was Shana and what even was their relationship. How could anything be so complicated? Then figure out the ‘The Game’ and how to avoid it, according to Nicodemus, anyway. Whoever Nicodemus was. Just someone who warned him to beware of something that didn’t exist. Little details like informing him of what they were talking about never occurred to anyone forcing their way into his life.

It was yet another question he didn’t have an answer to, not that he should be bothered by that considering how often it happened around there. All he had to do was think about some part of his life, and an unanswerable question reared its ugly head. He had reached the point of going with the flow and hoping a solution presented itself. Most of the time, it did, though not always in the way he wanted. Make that usually

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not the way he wanted. Why couldn't he learn things the easy way? That being said, the summer hadn't turned out too badly.

The special project involved a complete gutting of the networking classroom. Previously each student desk had been in its own little cubicle, a cubicle with virtual walls - and all other surfaces for that matter - which Mark thought worked well, but the teacher didn't share his opinion.

"Old-school technology, Mark," Dr. Node had said on his first day helping him, likely not catching the pun. Mark pointed out that nobody else had this old-school technology, to which Dr. Node replied, "That's their problem. We aren't sitting on our butts while they catch up. We set the standards. Would you rather lead or be like those other schools trying to catch up?" Mark couldn't argue with that logic.

The first month found them stripping out the student cubicles and donating them to a local school district due for a technology upgrade. Over the next two months, they installed new equipment that was beyond cutting-edge. It had never even existed before they put it together. By the time they finished, he knew enough to set it up and get it running.

If it worked. Which it didn't, frustrating Dr. Node to no end, something he couldn't handle.

To say Dr. Node was detail-oriented would be like saying the universe was big. While true, it was a significant understatement. Dr. Node was precise in every way. Every hair on his head was in place, mostly because he didn't have any. Hair. None. Not even eyebrows. Mark figured they wouldn't stay the way he wanted, so he got rid of them. His tan, perfect. His clothes were perfectly pressed and perfectly worn. Even his actions were as precise as a person could be, right down to his gait when he walked. If Mark would've measured them, he figured each step would be precisely the same length.

Everything on his desk sat perfectly in its assigned place, in the position it always sat, precisely how it had to sit like it didn't want to move even slightly out of line for fear of retribution. That meant getting the nasty look Dr. Node had perfected when things weren't exactly the way he wanted. He usually reserved that look for students who didn't do as he requested. Mark had been on the receiving end many times, especially over the summer.

Now they spent their time fixing it, but their window of opportunity had all but closed. Class started in three days, and the only thing working was how to create virtual static with Mark getting some extra vitamin D beyond what he wanted. The vitamin D was part of the improvements Dr. Node had made to his system because the test simulation was a beach scene. When everything worked, it would be like standing on the beach, sun overhead, wind blowing, surf rushing in. The works. It should feel like it in all ways. The ultimate simulation.

Unfortunately, the only thing they got right was the Ultraviolet rays. They hadn't realized that before Mark had a serious sunburn, which he thought too accurate a simulation. Maybe a good reason existed to include the negative parts of the scenario, but he couldn't think of one at the moment. Now they were figuring out why that worked, and nothing else did.

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During the past week, Dr. Node had checked the network configurations while Mark debugged the code that ran the room. Both had their share of success, if finding problems could be called a success, and were ready to test it again. Probably.

“Okay, Mark. If this doesn’t work we may not be ready for school to start - but no pressure,” Dr. Node said.

“You’re right. There’s absolutely no pressure. If this doesn’t work that means less work for me. I guess you could say I’m motivated for this to fail miserably.”

“Oh. Right. I hadn’t thought of that. It’s a little like having the criminal lead the investigation into his own crime.”

“Something like that. So...are you ready for abject failure?” Mark asked.

“Do you know something I don’t?”

“Not that you know of,” Mark said, grinning. “Anyway, what are you complaining about? You’re sitting in your climate controlled and protected booth while I’m the one in the line of fire.”

“I don’t like it when you say ‘fire’.”

“Hear that. I’m the one with the sunburn, remember?”

“When did you become such a whiner?” Dr. Node asked.

“Right after I became the crash dummy for your experiments,” Mark said.

“Hey, just because someone asks you to do something doesn’t mean you have to agree to it.”

“Now you tell me. Bye!”

“Come back here. You aren’t going anywhere.”

“Didn’t you just say I could?” Mark said.

“Absolutely. Right after this test,” the Dr. said.

“There’s always a catch. So what simulation are we starting with? Not the volcano one again - please.”

“No, that one is a little dangerous when everything is working properly...”

“...you say now after the damage was done.”

“Hey, that wasn’t my fault. It should have worked. Anyway, your hair grew back,” Dr. Node said. “I thought we’d start with a tour of the bottom of the sea. Since the simulation doesn’t actually use water I thought that would be safe.”

“I guess I’m good with that. Okay, fire it up!”

“I told you I don’t like it when you say ‘fire’.”

“Fine. Start the simulation. Happy now?”

“We’ll see. Daisy, please start simulation ‘Deep Blue.’”

“Starting now,” Daisy replied.

Mark stood in the middle of the empty classroom waiting for the simulation to begin. All around him sat unusual shaped blocks and objects whose sole purpose was to provide the simulation surfaces to map

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images. While figuring out how to create images and atmospheric forces, they still hadn't figured out how to dynamically create solid images. Instead, solid objects sat about the room with surfaces that could have images mapped on them by the program to create virtual reality. Give the virtual rock substance.

Slowly, the simulation powered up as Mark watched the seafloor take shape. The solid objects became a coral reef. The walls, either more of the reef or water extending into the distance. Holographic fish swam by. Suddenly the smell generators kicked in, and a breath of salt air hit him like a refreshing slap, which he thought somewhat out of place. After all, if he were undersea, there wouldn't be a lot of salt air smell going on. All in all, the simulation appeared to be a success.

Then something odd happened. It was like the room's gravity went crazy because suddenly, he felt like he weighed 1000 pounds. He collapsed to the ground. Then he realized it wasn't gravity. It was pressure, the same pressure he felt at the bottom of the swimming pool, but since he was much farther underwater than that, the pressure was much higher. Too high. If something didn't happen quickly, he wouldn't survive.

"Dr. Node? Um, a little help here?!"

No response. He couldn't even turn his head to see what was going on in the control booth but figured Dr. Node busied himself with something far less critical than what Mark experienced at the moment.

"Daisy?" Mark mumbled.

"Yes, Mark?"

"Please...turn...simulation...off," Mark managed to choke out.

"I am sorry, Mark, but you do not have the authority to stop the simulation. Only Dr. Node has that authority."

Okay, this had gone from bad to worse. Dr. Node was not paying attention to what happened in the room, and Daisy wouldn't follow his requests. What other choices did he have? He couldn't move to leave the room. He couldn't turn off the simulation. If he stayed there much longer, he would either suffocate or be crushed. Or both.

Just then, he remembered his portal generating wristband, not that it mattered because he couldn't move his other hand to reach it, but maybe he didn't have to. Perhaps he could leverage the pressure that threatened to kill him into doing the work for him. Randomly pushing buttons on a portal generating tool that could literally open one to anywhere sounded safe.

After all, what could go wrong with that?

Rotating his arm so the wristband buttons faced up instead of sideways, he hoped the pressure would push a button that would move him out of the room to someplace safer. By safer, he meant a place not at the real bottom of the ocean\inside a volcano\floating in deep space\a stall in the girl's bathroom or the lunchroom when they were out of pizza. It worked, sort of. One out of two wasn't bad.

The pressure pushed the buttons on his wristband, miraculously opening a portal beneath him, so that part was all good. Unfortunately, it had pushed all the buttons at once - as it would - and the location of the

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other side of the portal left something to be desired as he found himself momentarily suspended 30 feet above the gym floor, the room directly below the networking room. Like the coyote after he ran off a cliff in the old Looney Tunes cartoons, he felt life pause as he reached down, realizing no ground existed beneath him.

He might've survived being crushed only to fall to his death. As it often reminded him in the past, gravity was not a good idea, it was the law. It decided to exert itself at that moment, pulling him down, leaving him milliseconds to save his life. If he reacted too slowly, he would've gained too much speed to portal jump onto something other than a fireman's net, swimming pool, pole vaulter's mat, a large pile of Jell-O or a damp sponge. Though the pile of Jell-O might be fun. Maybe for this year's Mad Event? He could - Focus!

After already dropping a third of the way to the gym floor, he opened a portal over his bed, landing on it not as softly as he would have hoped. That was a nice way to say it shattered on impact. He figured that, along with the mattress, absorbed the force of the fall instead of him doing it after hitting the ground, which wouldn't have gone anywhere in response.

"Any bed you can walk away from is a good bed," Mark said to himself. "Daisy?"

"Yes, Mark?"

"There's a problem with my bed. Please have someone fix it."

"Yes, Mark."

"Thank you."

He couldn't wait to return to the networking classroom to find out what Dr. Node had to say about that turn of events.

And who knows, maybe by now, he'll have noticed Mark was gone.

It was always nice to feel indispensable. He'd heard.

Then again, maybe he'd skip the classroom.

After all, he had a date with a brain.

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### *Girls. Girls. Girls.*

Mark sat at the meeting/workbench/Mad Event scheming table in the Pirate's Den, the secret room beneath the school they had discovered during seventh grade. The brain for Ashok, the robot they had built during the mad scientist challenge in eighth grade, on the table in front of him.

Since its construction, the robot had received significant modifications, becoming a hobby and test bench as they used everything learned in their classes to see what they could do to improve the huge, 6'8" machine that resembled a 22-year-old Indian man. Make that an Indian bodybuilder.

Most of the credit for Ashok's improvements belonged to Mark's friend Vijay Okai, considering Mark had all but forgotten about him after eighth grade. Ashok, not Vijay. Vijay found him lying in the corner, dusted him off and decided to do something with him. Considering the robot helped save their lives, he felt it the least they could do. Of course, if Eamon Adler, a kid of African heritage from England who was one of the world's wealthiest kids and the twin to Mark's old girlfriend Vida, hadn't tried to kill Mark, there wouldn't have been any need for Ashok to save them.

When not locked in the Networking classroom, Mark had spent much of the summer tinkering with the robot. Vijay dropped in from time to time to help.

They upgraded everything about Ashok from the strength of its motors to its processor, which still left something to be desired. They needed a processor that could more closely simulate real thought, a processor much like the one Daisy used. Unfortunately, that turned out to be far more problematic than they would've liked. He remembered the conversation well.

"So, Daisy, you're telling me there's no way to get a bio processor like yours?" Mark asked.

"That is correct. The design for the processor is locked in Dr. Rose's private workshop," Daisy replied.

"Right. A workshop that requires three keys, only one we have in our possession, sort of. Dr. Rose has it. Ulysses has the second in Electric City. The third one is lost. Does that sum it up?"

"Correct."

"That's too bad. It would be so cool if Ashok could think like you, don't you agree? You'd have another friend to work with."

"Yes, it would be fun," Daisy replied.

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“Isn’t there any way you could study the design of your own processor so that we could duplicate it?” Mark asked.

“Unfortunately there is not. Considering my tower is locked in the private workshop, I can only get performance data which is not helpful in this case.”

“Okay. But don’t you have a processor design that’s better than the one we’re using? It’s too simple and doesn’t do what we need.”

“I do have the design for an earlier prototype of my bio processor but it contained one critical bug plus other minor bugs, and wasn’t used past functional testing,” Daisy said.

“Is it better than the one we’re using?” Mark asked.

“Yes. It is geometrically more powerful.”

“I’m not sure that’s what I asked but any power’s good power. Probably. I wonder if that’s what Dr. Frankenstein said when he built his first monster? Anyway, let’s give that a spin.”

Daisy brought up the design on Mark’s pad. The first good news was the schematics weren’t beyond his understanding, which had concerned him. After all, he wasn’t a genius in biological processors, though he might be after finishing the project.

He acquired the parts from the electronics and science labs, then returned to the Pirate’s Den and started creating the bio processor. It was part circuitry and part biomaterial, meaning living matter. The best way Mark could describe it was to say the processor used a virus to pass data in the form of proteins from one cell to another within the processor’s brain while the circuitry integrated it with the rest of the machine. Not only was it a cool design, but Mark hoped they could get extra credit in both electrical engineering and chemistry. If Ashok worked as planned, maybe they’d get credit in Life Skills and Robotics, too.

The biggest issue turned out to be building it, which wasn’t limited to the actual processor itself. Everything involving the processor required jumping one hurdle after another. He even had to create a clean work area to keep any dust, fingerprints, pizza, dog water or wayward sour patch kids from contaminating the processor. One speck of pepperoni in the wrong spot could ruin the entire thing, which just seemed wrong. Didn’t pepperoni make everything better?

Also, the processor’s components were so small he needed special equipment even to see what to do. To make that easier, he brought Daisy into the work. They had made good progress, the only strange thing being its appearance. He was informed of that by someone returning from summer vacation.

“Hey, Mark. I thought I’d find you down here. How are you doing? Um, I mean, what are you doing? Is that a - brain?! Are you making a brain?” said the voice he’d recognize in a crowded room. Shoshana Oliver, who went by Shana.

“Hey, lady. What do you mean? I’m not making a - then again, it does look a lot like a brain, doesn’t it?” Mark replied. He stood and hugged her. “How are you? Speaking of working on something, what’s with the purple hair? And everything else, for that matter.”

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“Do you like it?” she asked. “I needed a change.”

“Stand back and let me look you over.”

“That sounds kind of kinky,” she said, backing away, giving him a modeling turn. “I like it.”

She had let her hair grow over the summer, bleached it blonde, then added purple highlights. Along with that, her wardrobe had changed significantly. The artistic side of her was coming out as she wore a pair of black Chuck Taylor’s, tight black jeans, a faded green Bob Dylan T-shirt draped with silver necklaces, silver bracelets and black nail polish. He could see Boomer’s, the robotic guard dragon he had given her last year, tail wrapped around her neck, which fit her new look. She hadn’t gone quite Goth, still wearing regular makeup and her favorite red lipstick, but the trip wouldn’t take long from there.

It was quite a change, though Mark should’ve expected something like that after what happened last year.

“I’ll admit the change is a little bit of a surprise but it works for you. You look very cute, but I’m biased. I always think you’re cute. Do you like it?” Mark said.

“Yeah, I do. I’m sure I’ll change my mind sometime but that’s okay. It’s just clothes and hair. They’re easy to change.”

“What did your dad say?”

“He laughed and said something about it being about time I started spreading my wings,” Shana said.

“Sounds like a cool guy. I like the red lipstick. It gives you a nice splash of color.”

“I’ll remember that. You’re welcome to try my lipstick on anytime you want.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve worn lipstick,” Mark said.

“That’s not what I meant by trying it on,” she said.

“What did you mean?”

“Hold it. Look at me. Make eye contact,” she said. “Something’s wrong. What aren’t you telling me? Out with it.”

“How do you do that? There’s nothing. It’s fine.”

“It’s the hair, isn’t it?”

“It’s fine. Do whatever you want. There’s nothing you need to do on my account. I’m fine with whatever you choose.”

“Wow. You really hate it, don’t you?”

“What? I didn’t say anything. It’s fine,” Mark said.

“Fine? Ugh. That’s so not good enough. I’ll change it tonight,” Shana said.

“...You’d change your hair for me? Because I didn’t like it?” Mark said.

“In a second. I want to do it now. Do you think there’s someone else I’m trying to look nice for? It’s just for you.”

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“I don’t even know what to say to that, but really, don’t change it. I like you. However you want to be. Seriously.”

“You’re so sweet, but that’s why I’m changing it. If you were a jerk I’d leave it. So it’s your turn. What about the brain?”

“Vijay and I have been working on Ashok, turning him into his own robot, you know, let him think for himself instead of being an order taker. The problem we’ve run into is his central processor isn’t strong enough to take care of it so Daisy helped us, at least the best she could. We wanted to use the same type of processor she has but the design for it’s been lost.”

“Lost? You’re kidding!”

“Sort of. Everyone knows where the schematic is but no one can get to it because it’s locked in a room and two of the three keys are missing,” Mark said.

“That sounds like our next adventure,” Shana said.

“Actually it already has been. One of them, anyway.”

“One of them?” Shana asked.

“You missed a few things last year. I’d tell you but it’s too much for the first day back from summer vacation.”

“No arguments there.”

“Anyway, Daisy gave us this prototype design instead but since the processor doesn’t exist on anyone’s shelf...”

“...you had to build it yourself,” Shana said. “I understand. That makes more sense than most things around here.” She sat on the bench beside him, looking at the brain. “It smells funny, too. That doesn’t look like any processor I’ve seen before. Since when do they have liquid in them?”

“It’s a bio processor, part machine, part organic matter. That’s what Daisy uses,” Mark said.

She scooted over beside him and looked through the magnified viewer, cheek to cheek, an arm wrapped around him.

“Here, let me move out of the way so you can get a better look,” Mark said.

“No, you can stay where you are. I’m liking it as is. Look at me.” He turned to her only to find her doing the same to him, their faces inches apart, eyes met. “I might as well just say this. Ever since the end of last year when that spark happened, I’ve been wondering if we have a chance to get together.”

“Get together?” Mark asked.

“You know, a boyfriend/girlfriend kinda deal?”

“Oh, right,” Mark said, feeling amazed yet again at how slow he was on anything involving relationships.

“We had a moment before the summer - you know the one - and I blew it. I was too afraid, had too many things to resolve. I’m so mad at myself. I should’ve done it right then, but I wasn’t ready. I wasn’t ready

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for a relationship with anyone. Even you, which was so stupid. I've been sorry about that ever since. So I spent the summer getting myself straightened out. Thanks to you, your support last year and the phone calls over the summer, I'm about as close to my old self as I'll ever be.

"The reason I'm saying this is because I want to try again," Shana said. "I figure the only way to know if something could happen between us is to give it a shot. I know we're close friends, I've never felt closer to anyone..."

"...What about Todd? You went out with him for almost three years," Mark said.

"...He's not even second. Not even a little bit. What about you? How do you feel about me?" Shana said.

"I think you're my favorite person in the world. And my best friend. There's nobody I'd rather see every day."

"What about Vida? How do I compare to her?"

"It's hard to answer that. Vida and I were not close friends before we started going out. Friends, yes, but not close like you and I are. I also hadn't spent three years forcing myself to think about her as only a friend like I've had to with you. Honestly, my feelings for you are a jumble. I don't know where I am with you right now. I know I care about you more than anyone. That's not even a question. It's not even close. I figured that out last year," Mark said.

"I guess it's my fault you're like that. We, make that I, need to do something to get you straightened out. We're right there. Think about it. Does anyone else know you like I do?"

"Not hardly."

"See? There it is. As much as we care about each other and know each other, we need to figure this out. That's why I - we - have to try this. What you and I have is special. It really is. I'm not sure either of us realizes how special. I have to find out if there's a way we could be more than good friends - or whatever it is we are. So, I know this might sound a little forward but what else would I do?"

"I can't argue with that," Mark said. "Do you even have a gear other than full speed ahead?"

"Not really. Besides, subtle never works on you so let me come out and say it. I'm making a pass at you to find out if we could be more than friends. Okay?"

"Okay."

"So would it be okay if I...kissed you?" She said, a blush crossing her face.

"You've kissed me before."

"Not like what you're about to get."

"I guess that's the most direct way to do it, isn't it? You might as well..."

That was all she needed. Apparently, she had been waiting all summer to give it a go because as soon as he gave her an opening, she went for it and didn't get cheated, either. Instantly, Mark found himself in a full-

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blown, passionate kiss. They put their arms around each other, trying to do the thing right, but for some reason, it just wasn't. They separated.

"Did that work?" Shana asked.

"Don't get me wrong, it was a great kiss but something wasn't quite - I don't know," Mark replied. "Like I said, my feelings are a mess toward you right now."

"I understand, and it makes sense. After three years of thinking of me as only a friend - including last year when I wasn't open to anything with anyone - plus you still have feelings for Vida, it was too sudden. I'm sorry. This was silly. There was no buildup, no mood. You're working on a brain, and I try this. It wasn't going to work because the spark wasn't there. The more I think about it, the spark is the key. It would cut through the mess I've made of your feelings, take you right where you need to be. Our relationship hasn't reached the point where we can kiss and have it blow up into something more. I really think you're cute. Actually, I think you're way better than cute - don't let that go to your head - and I do love you. If there's a chance it can work between us, we have to find out. We can't go on not knowing and, worse than that, never trying to know.

"Darn it! I feel like we'd be there already if I hadn't bailed last year," Shana said, more to herself than Mark. "I screwed it up. I just hope I didn't blow our chance. I'd never forgive myself if I did, but I didn't have a choice. I couldn't do it - I really hate Todd for what he did to me - but I'm not giving up. I only made it more complicated. I want this to work between us and I think it can. We care too much for each other for it not to work. We only need to turn it the right direction. There was a spark there. I have to figure out a way to get that burning again. I feel like - oh, this might take more work than I thought. But it would totally be worth it."

"What are you talking about? What would be worth it? You're talking to yourself again," Mark said.

"You would be, silly," she said, kissing him on the nose. "Totally worth it. You won't tell Vijay about this, will you?"

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't even know where to start. I can hear it now, 'After Shana and I stopped making out, I worked on your brain.' No, I'm not going there. Besides, I don't share everything with him."

"That's good. I'd be too embarrassed if he found out. Anyway, knowing we need more work takes me to something else," Shana said. "I've been thinking about your love life this summer..."

"No you don't. Leave my love life alone. It's fine."

"What are you talking about? It's nonexistent. That's the first real kiss you've had since Vida broke up with you..."

"Thanks for the reminder. And don't keep track."

"...and since you're too darn cute - in every way - to let that keep going, I thought I'd try it first and see if I'd fit. Since there's obviously complications to that right now, I have to ask. Are you still stuck on Vida?" Shana asked.

"Like cheap construction paper on a Faberge egg."

"Nice. But she's the other complication to us."

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“I know. I was trying to be funny, and this may sound stupid, but that’s not an easy question. I don’t think ‘stuck’ is the right word. We had a great relationship and I haven’t found anybody that I connect to like that. I mean, I have a number of girls who are friends but it’s not the same. It’s not like I’m spending all my time thinking about her because I’m not. I just can’t find anybody I get along with better, at least as a girlfriend,” Mark said, giving Shana a bump with his shoulder. “I’m not including you in that. No one’s better than you.”

“No, it doesn’t sound stupid,” Shana said as she leaned against him. “In fact I guessed that was the way things are because you don’t act like you’re depressed or your life’s fallen apart not having her around. You act like you haven’t found anybody you want to be with since then.”

“I also can’t help but wonder what would have happened if Eamon hadn’t broken us up,” Mark said. “Would we still be going out? Would it have fallen apart? We never got the chance to find out, to make it work or not.”

“I know, so I’ve been giving that some thought.”

“No. Don’t think about me,” Mark said. “Don’t help my love life. Let’s move on to my brain here...”

“Oh, come on. Don’t you trust me?”

“I-I guess so. On a subject I like talking about.”

“No, you need to trust me on this because I have it worked out. I know how to fix this. One way or another.”

“Really? That makes one of us,” Mark said, the similarity of her statement to Vida’s last year wasn’t lost on him except Shana had a solution. “How?”

“Just follow my lead, be my good friend and don’t shy away when I do or ask you to do something. Don’t question it, just do it because timing is everything. I think one of our problems is you haven’t completely stepped away from Vida. It’s still in the back of your mind that you should be with her. I think that needs to be dealt with first, but we’ll see. Hopefully not, because that scares me to death, but that’s up to her.”

“Scares you? Why?” Mark asked.

“Because she’s tough competition. The toughest, to be honest, but if she wins it’s all good for you. I’m looking out for you so all you need to do is trust me and things will work.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Why do I feel like this isn’t a quick fix, is it?”

“Did you think it could be?” Shana asked.

“I didn’t think it could be fixed without Eamon having a change of heart. And when I say that I mean either a heart attack or some major surgery to have an actual heart implanted in his chest because I’m sure there’s a cold cavity where one should be right now. How long are you talking?”

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“I don’t know. It’s hard to say but I’m thinking by Christmas at the latest we’ll know one way or the other. I’m only guessing but if it doesn’t work by then, I wouldn’t worry about getting back together with her because it’s not happening. At least you’ll know instead of waiting around like you are now.”

“Really? Your plan’s that bulletproof?”

“Like I said. I’ve given it a lot of thought so trust me, okay? Play along and hope for the best. One way or the other, I think you’ll be happy with how this turns out.”

“I do trust you. Besides, what do I have to lose with you giving it a go? I’ve already lost everything on how many occasions. Thanks for trying - since you’re not taking ‘leave my love life alone’ for an answer - even if it doesn’t work.”

“Sure. What are friends for?” she said. “By the way, now that I’ve given you the real deal kiss, don’t be surprised if I start kissing you more often when I feel like it, and not those ‘friend’ pecks anymore. We’re done with those.”

“Really?”

“After all we’ve been through together, I care about you too much to pat you on the back whenever we have a close moment, you know?”

“Okay, I’m good with that. Just don’t get all slobbery. So what about my project here?”

“Slobbery? I’m never slobbery. Anyway, I’m sorry I interrupted your date with your brain.”

“The sad part is those are the only dates I’ve had lately. How good are you at fine motor skills?” Mark said.

“Excellent, of course.”

“Cool. Maybe you can help me with this. I need a break. It gets a little intense staring through this magnifier.”

“Sure, I’d be happy to.”

Mark wrapped an arm around her as they began working on the brain, enjoying being together again. She truly was his best friend. Now if she’d only leave his love life alone he’d have a quiet year.

Except for The Game.

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# 3

## ***Welcome Back.***

“So, did you tell her?” Vijay asked. “Nice hair, by the way.”

“Thanks. I’m changing it. Tell me what?” Shana replied.

“Changing it? Why?”

“Mark doesn’t like it,” she said.

“Ah, I understand,” Vijay said.

They sat at their usual table in the lunchroom, listening halfheartedly to the orientation spiel as Dr. Blackburn handed out the new students’ pads.

“Cecil Freleng.” Cecil got his pad.

“I didn’t say anything about her hair. She can wear it however she wants. And tell her what?” Mark asked.

“Carter Landslide.” Carter got his pad.

“You know, about the email.” Vijay said.

“Lyudmila Smith.”

“What email? You tell her since you know everything.”

“Cassie Trent.”

“Do you receive a surplus of emails where you might be confused concerning which one I am referring to? Fine, I will take care of it. Mark received an email after we had gone home for the summer. It read ‘Beware the game. Yours, Nicodemus.’”

“Archival Vance.”

“Oh, that email. Why didn’t you say so to start with?”

“I thought I did,” Vijay said.

“Ruck Williams.”

“Yeah, he told me over the summer. So who’s Nicodemus?” Shana asked.

“Woodley Yates.”

“Not a clue,” Mark said. “He started sending me emails last year. You didn’t hear about him because you weren’t our friend at the time. You missed out on a lot.”

“I was there and do not know much of it,” Vijay said.

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“And what game?” Shana said. “You weren’t playing a game that I didn’t know about, were you?”

“No. You know I stink at games.” Mark said. “I’m a casual player at best.”

“You embarrass yourself in first person shooters,” Vijay said.

“Hey, I’ll have you know not everyone can die within five seconds at the start of every match,” Mark said.

“Especially from friendly fire. Your teammates immediately shoot you,” Vijay said.

“You’re kidding! Why do they do that?” Shana asked.

“You do not know?” Vijay asked.

“No. I’ve never seen him play.”

“It is a survival thing. He is more likely to shoot his teammates than the opposing team, so when he’s matched in a game they immediately kill him to protect themselves.”

“They do not!” Shana said.

“Oh, yes, they do,” Vijay said.

“That’s awful. That isn’t right.”

“I am afraid it is. I have done it myself,” Vijay said.

“Actually, I think you started it,” Mark said.

“Vijay! Tell me you didn’t. He’s your friend.”

“Yes, but I want to win and he has shot me in the back more than once. A game. Probably not intentionally. After that everyone else started doing it as well.”

“It’s okay, Shana. I really do stink. I stopped playing because everyone kept insulting me the moment the game started. Curse words don’t bother me but I get tired of hearing them thrown my way. Especially when I deserve them.”

“That’s just wrong,” Shana said. “You know what? I’m making it my job to teach you how to play this year.”

“Wow. You are braver than I am,” Vijay said, “and a sucker for hard luck cases. Or just a sucker for Mark.”

“Maybe all three. Besides, I’m sure I can get you turned around. After all, how bad can you be?”

Mark and Vijay started laughing.

Dr. Blackburn finished his orientation speech then asked if anyone wanted to challenge Mark for the mad scientist crown, which no one did since they had so much fun at his Mad Events last year. Even the students that didn’t like him enjoyed them, so there was no need to break what wasn’t broken. Besides, Mark was the only one in the school who needed his tuition paid, and no one appreciated the coolness of the cloaking lab coat nor the virtual room that went to the mad scientist each year.

As Mark looked around the room, he noticed the usual students had returned. Eamon Adler sat at the head of the three tables comprising his kingdom, holding court over the same students as last year. As usual,

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he didn't meet Mark's eye mainly because he didn't acknowledge Mark's existence directly in any way. Indirectly, on the other hand, he had already tried killing Mark at least twice. Eamon was nice that way.

His twin sister - and Mark's former girlfriend - Vida sat on his right, hardly being more of a contrast from her brother and looking as beautiful as ever. She caught Mark's eye like she had a knack for doing and gave him a wink. If only that could work out, he'd be the happiest person on the planet. Maybe Shana could fix what nothing else could. After all, they hadn't broken up because of any issues with their relationship. Everything always went back to Eamon.

Todd Symsmith, who was afraid of his shadow, and his neighbor's shadow, and a gnat's shadow, sat at one of the three tables and as far away from Eamon as possible, through Eamon's choice, not Todd's. He was Mark's ex-first friend ever, Shana's ex-boyfriend and current bane-of-her-existence, and had sat at Mark's table at the beginning of last year.

Mark figured Eamon's only interest in Todd was to get Mark. Since Todd was the most cowardly human being on the planet, none of that worked out quite as planned and only succeeded in leaving Todd without any friends on a team he hated. Considering how he treated both Mark and Shana last year, abusing then attempting to kill her followed by trying to kill him, under Eamon's orders as he made his way from Mark's team to Eamon's, no one felt sorry for him. The pity train had left the station long ago.

The Losers were gathered around their table, looking happy as always. Mark liked that team and thought they were more fun than any except his own. Remi Blanding and Sarah Langston were back again, and Mark was glad to see the two informal team leaders. Remi was a great drummer, and Sarah might be the most brilliant student in the school, which reminded him of something. He had to get the Friday Think Tank meetings together again.

Mark took out his pad to look at the class schedule. Vijay and Shana did the same.

"This looks like fun," Shana said. "I'm taking even more art classes."

"Art classes?" Mark said. "How much further from fun can you get?"

"Said the musician," Shana said. "You realize music is art, right?"

"It's entertainment not - oh. I guess you're right. I never think of it that way."

"Speaking of fun, that invitation for you to model to help me with my homework still stands," Shana said.

"I'll keep that in mind," Mark said.

"But do not tell me about it!" Vijay said. "Mark, it appears that my classes are once again similar to yours. Which makes sense because we put them in together."

"What are you taking?" Shana asked.

"Here, take a look," Mark said.

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8:00 to 9:25 a.m.	Advanced Electrical Engineering II
9:30 to 10:55 a.m.	Advanced Robotics, the Sequel
11:00 to 12:25 p.m.	Life Skills
12:30 to 1:25 p.m.	Lunch
1:30 to 2:55 p.m.	Sound Engineering II
3:00 to 4:30 p.m.	Advanced Computer Programming II
8:00 to 9:00 p.m.	Meditation

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8:00 to 9:25 a.m.	Advanced Chemistry II
9:30 to 10:55 a.m.	Anthropology
11:00 to 12:25 p.m.	Advanced Networking II
12:30 to 1:25 p.m.	Lunch
1:30 to 2:55 p.m.	Astrophysics
3:00 to 4:30 p.m.	Physical Education.
9:00 to 10:30 p.m.	Advanced Astronomy II

“Everything appears too much this year, do you know what I mean?” Vijay asked. “Get it? Two? Too?”

“Unfortunately yes. And I should be worried about that,” Mark said. “You’d think they’d come up with more imaginative class names. I replaced Biology with Anthropology, not that Anthropology’s all that exciting. I just didn’t see myself going down that road anymore. But what’s up with the whole ‘Advanced Robotics, the Sequel’ thing?”

“I think it’s obvious,” Shana said. “You wanted imaginative names? There you go. Dr. Smith didn’t want his class to be another ‘too.’ I mean ‘two.’ I mean...Um...right.”

“Leave it to Dr. Smith.”

“I’m in your Anthropology class, too. I wonder what he’s doing for the EXROCK tournament,” Shana said. “Since none of us are on a team, maybe we can just relax this time.”

“Relax? You don’t mean that, do you? That sounds as ‘un-you’ as something can be,” Mark said. “Vijay and I did it last year and I’ll be the first one to tell you it sucked.”

“Totally,” Vijay said. “Besides, I do not see the best robot pilot in the school being content - or happy - sitting this one out.”

“You guys know me too well. That’s actually why I brought it up,” Shana said.

“I had a feeling,” Mark said.

“So are we making a team, or what?” Shana asked.

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“Let us consider our assets,” Vijay said. “Mark has turned into a good robot builder. We have me to program it and you to drive it. That does sound like an excellent start.”

“Yes, it does. What do you think, Mark? Are you game to building an EXROCK? I’ll make it worth your while,” Shana said with a wink, leaning her head on his shoulder.

“Worth his while?” Vijay said. “How about my while?”

“Sorry, just his.”

“Why does he have all the luck?”

“Sure, it sounds like fun, but I think we need a bit more help designing our bot. If you think about it, Todd’s gone over to the dark side...” Mark said.

“...quicker, easier, more seductive...” Shana said.

“No! Not a Yoda reference! What were you thinking?” Vijay said.

“And knows, he does, my Jedi weapon’s secrets. Yes.”

“Whoops! I forgot,” Shana said. “Sorry.”

“Help, I’ll get. Find more friends, I will,” Mark said with his ever-improving Yoda imitation.

“He is getting better every year,” Shana said.

“That is small consolation as far as I am concerned,” Vijay said. “I will never give him the satisfaction of thinking I like it.”

“Find more friends? Like who?” Shana asked.

“A powerful Jedi was he. Powerful Jedi.”

“Shana...”

“I can only say I’m sorry so many times,” Shana said.

“Cranial research compiled I have. Leverage our resources, we should. And yes, expertise beyond our resources.”

“Expertise beyond our resources?” Vijay said. “What was that? Yoda doing a Dilbert imitation?”

“Not that you know of.”

“Great. Though it actually might be better than either of them alone.”

“Who did you have in mind?” Shana asked again since they ignored her first one.

“Now that you brought that up, it leads me into another subject. I think we have to get the Think Tank meetings back together. We have to do it this year,” Mark said.

“I’m good with that,” Shana said.

“Me, too,” Vijay said. “But we do not have enough people to make it work.”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been thinking about. And in answer to the question Shana keeps asking...”

“...And you keep ignoring...”

“...but have been listening to, I think we should ask some of the Losers to join us. Remi and Sarah, to be specific. While Remi might be some help, Sarah is absolutely brilliant.”

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“You think so?” Shana asked.

“No question. You know those weird accidents she keeps having?” Mark said.

“Who does not?” Vijay said. “Nobody sits by her because they are afraid to get caught up in one.”

“It took three weeks for one of my belt buckles to stop flashing different colors after the one time I sat beside her,” Shana said.

“They’re not accidents. I’ve been talking to her and those are actually experiments she’s been trying the rest of us don’t even understand. She’s on another plane than we are.”

“And that plane is headed for outer space,” Vijay asked. “Are you sure about this?”

“Oh, man. You won’t even believe it. I think they both would be a lot of help with EXROCK. Besides, neither of them have ever been on a team before and I think they would get a kick out of it.”

“I like both of them, though I don’t know them very well,” Shana said. “If you think they’d be helpful let’s go ahead and give them a try.”

“Remi and Sarah?” Vijay said. “Interesting. Adding walking chaos and the perpetual accident to our team? I think this will be a year to remember.”

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