
Mark Morgan at ARTS

Book 3

Mark of a Friend

By

Dion Shedd

Copyright © 2020. by Dion Shedd

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

1

Bad, Bad Medicine.

Mark Morgan walked down a strange hallway he'd never seen before. It was short, dark, plain and featureless like what existed in an old office building. The only points of interest it contained hung in place of windows; pictures, or more appropriately, portraits, of old people Mark had never known and didn't care if he ever got to know, ran down the length of both walls. They appeared a motley crew, not a smile or pleasant face among them as they watched him walk down the hallway. The gruesome gathering was supposed to intimidate, but rather than do that, they challenged him, bringing out courage in Mark like such things always did.

Suddenly he noticed something in his left hand. He held it up and saw a statue there, made of stone, about a foot tall, heavy and apparently antique. It had the appearance of a man in a black suit but with little detail like an erosion-worn artifact, dressed in clothing he'd seen on a civil war TV special. He thought the statue to be that of some dignitary.

At the end of the hall stood the only door he could see, a large wooden door that was far less than inviting. It was fair to say the door intimidated, building off the hallway of fame, or whatever it was, providing a portal to a room that also likely intimidated, not that he let that bother him. He noticed a plaque on it with a

name, but his vision never focused on it because he seemed to know already what it said, whose office it was, though no name came to mind. He opened the door and walked inside. For some reason, he knew there wouldn't be anybody there as if he'd planned it that way. He thought it a safe bet he had. A small, golden servant robot, about two feet tall, closed the door behind him.

The room beyond the door was a vast, circular office with, unlike the hallway, large windows on the walls to his left and right. Somehow he knew the windows made the room bright during the day, but only the blackness of a moonless night lay visible out the windows now, making the room, combined with the dark woodwork, appear even darker and more forbidding. And more intimidating. He didn't know why he could see because the room should have been as dark as it appeared outside the windows. As it was, he didn't have any trouble making out the mahogany desk sitting across from him or the full bookcases covering the wall behind it as he walked towards them like he knew what he was doing. Hopefully, he did. He knew his target hid in the area directly behind the desk.

As he began circling behind it, a click from the door caught his attention. Looking back, he saw the doorknob turn. His eyes darted around the room with the look of a frightened deer, searching for a place to hide, but found nothing. Besides, it was too late. The door opened without him even having the presence of mind to duck behind the desk as he watched someone come in, someone who thought the room to be empty because they didn't even look in his direction or act like they expected him to be there.

It was only a matter of time before the intruder would notice him, and as that thought crossed his mind, the face turned towards him, the eyes widened, and...

"Mark...?"

Did the intruder call his name?

"Mark? Are you in there?"

It had to be the intruder that time, didn't it?

"Mark! Wake up! I didn't hit you that hard!"

What the...?

Mark woke with a start like the dream about falling always did - Why did everybody have that dream? - but instead of avoiding death like in the dream, he knew this was worse. Much worse.

It was Coach. No 'somehow' about it.

"Ow, my head! Can someone turn off that bass drum?" Mark mumbled.

"Boo-hoo. It's your own fault. What part of 'Duck!' didn't you understand?" Coach asked.

"Duck?! I was doing push-ups. You know, the whole 'laying on the floor' type push-ups? How could I duck?"

"A real man wouldn't ask that. He'd say 'How low!'" Coach said, in his usual macho, condescending tone that harkened back to his time in the military. A sound Mark knew to ignore after two years of hearing it

derogatorily directed at him. He knew he didn't measure up, never would and had long since stopped trying. Or even worrying about it.

"At which point he would have already been hit by what he was supposed to duck beneath!"

"Why didn't you say anything? If you see a problem, you man up no matter what," Coach said.

"How about not throwing it, especially when I'm not ready to catch it?" Mark asked.

"It's a medicine ball! What else could I do with it?"

"Take it with a glass of water? It probably makes your stomach feel better or something."

"That's not why they call it a medicine ball."

"Like that's my fault. I can't help it if someone gave it a dumb name. Excuse me while I go somewhere and lie down," Mark said, swaying as he tried standing up. "I think some quiet whimpering might be in order, too."

"You should go to the Infirmary, first. Just to be safe."

"If I can find it. Which one of those three exit doors should I take?"

"The middle one."

"Thanks. You're so helpful."

Mark weaved his way to the door, bumping into the medicine ball where it lay on the floor.

"I wish you'd make me feel better," Mark said, then picked it up and set it back in its rack. Coach yelled at him.

"At the beginning of the summer you couldn't pick that ball up let alone carry it anywhere!"

Mark didn't reply. No way would he give Coach any satisfaction.

Two months of Coach over summer vacation. Two. Mark still shook his head, remembering Daisy announcing his schedule for the three summer months, which teachers would be working with him each month. It came back to him like it was yesterday. The first month, Ares Andropolis, the Physical Education teacher. Coach for short. Okay, one month would only be temporary torture, so he was good with that. The second month, Physics, his newfound favorite subject after Audiology. Then came the kicker. Literally. The third month, Coach again. Two months with the one teacher who made his life horrible every time they met, meaning daily. Why couldn't it have been Physics twice? Even Life Skills would've been better, and he was awful at that.

Coach wasn't the only teacher staying at school over the summer, was he? Shoot, Dr. Tesla was a virtual teacher. All they had to do was fire up the computer, and he would appear. Since Daisy was always online, surely, he was still around, too. But no, two months of Coach.

Apparently, he had offended Daisy, the sentient Ultra Quantum computer that ran ARTS, in some way he was unaware of because she obviously hated him. He remembered asking her about it once or twice. A day. All summer. If she could do something, but she said no, it was for the better.

"You will thank me when it is over," she said.

“You’re right about that. I’ll be very thankful when it’s over,” he replied, though not quite in the same way she meant.

Tomorrow was the last day of Summer School at the Fontanelle Advanced Research and Technical School, ARTS, for short. The school that had become Mark’s home. Living there was like living in a year-round science fair, so a lot of fun made up his everyday life, plus a lot that qualified as far less than enjoyable. Take the summer holidays, for example. Please.

Summer School was supposed to be fun; otherwise, no one would take it. So why didn’t he get any of those fun classes? Just because he was a ward of the school and couldn’t leave, did that mean they could abuse him any way they wanted?

He barely made it to the Infirmary. The nurse practitioner settled him into one of the beds, placing him on watch to make sure he didn’t have a concussion. She figured he had a mild one at most but wanted to be sure, so the service robots stayed by his side whether he wanted them to or not. Later another robot brought him dinner. After he finished eating, the nurse pronounced him fit, no concussion, and could spend the night in his room. He happily agreed.

After getting to bed, the one he used for the last two years, his mind walked back to that dream. He tried remembering details, such as the room he supposedly knew. Why didn’t he recognize it? He knew he hadn’t seen it before. A photographic memory did that. How could he dream about a place he’d never been, holding an object he’d never seen, walking down a hallway he’d never walked down? Then have the dream replay like an MP3 set on repeat? He had no idea why

There were three things he did know. He needed to find out what was happening before it was too late. It might be already. And...um...okay...make that two things. He was tired. Oh, hey! There was the third!

How pathetic.

He didn’t know how long he’d been asleep when the new email tone came to his pad. That wouldn’t be a big deal for most people, but when he received almost no messages, it caught his attention, waking him. He looked at his pad and saw 2:30 AM. Too early for someone to send him messages. At first, he thought it spam but decided against it because scammers didn’t bother sending him an email. He had nothing worth taking.

He opened the message on his pad and read, “Don’t trust Todd. Yours, Nicodemus.”

What the? Who in the world is Nicodemus? And why would he send a note like that?

He looked at the sender and found thePharisee@GospelofJohnChapter3.com. Even stranger. Who could that be? And what did they have against Todd?

Or what did they know about Todd that Mark didn’t?

2

Iron Man.

“Where did you say this is?!” Mark yelled.

“The top of Mount Everest!” Coach replied.

“It’s the last day of class! Shouldn’t we be doing something easy like playing Tiddlywinks?”

“Easy?! This IS easy! You should have seen what I wanted to do!” Coach yelled.

“Here’s to you not getting your way! So why are we here...he asked foolishly?!”

“It’s your last summer school class with me so I thought we’d go out with a bang!”

“A what?!” Mark yelled, trying to make himself heard over the howling wind.

“Go Out With A Bang!”

“Join a street gang?!”

“NO, GO OUT WITH A BANG!” Coach said.

“Who came here and sang?!”

“NO, GO OUT WITH A BA....NEVER MIND!”

“Why is there a zip line up here?!”

“Why is there a zip line up here?! Why is there ever a zip line?! So you can go down it!”

“From the top of Mount Everest?! That’s crazy! What if I fall?!” Mark said.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you! And if you take any longer, we’ll both freeze to death!”

“But if I use it I’ll fall to my death! Freezing or falling to death! Are those my only choices?!”

“How many do you need?! Now get going!”

Mark thought about arguing but knew it was pointless. Reasoning with Coach was like reasoning with a turnip. He could talk all he wanted but never change his mind. If he had one. One thing he did know, the next stage in his triweekly endurance tests had arrived.

The handle of the zip line hung about 10 feet off the side of the cliff. Mark had given up asking why it couldn’t be right there for him to grab without risking his life. The obvious, safe way to layout the gauntlets never occurred to Coach.

With 60 miles an hour winds buffeting him from every direction, Mark ran and jumped off the cliff’s edge, arms flailing as the wind took him, grabbing the handle of the zip line pulley with one hand. He took off down the mountainside at a breakneck pace - a poor choice of words there - praying he wouldn’t lose his grip

and fall before getting his other hand on the bar. Of course, his hand had frozen to it so he wouldn't have to worry about falling, but that was another subject altogether.

The zip line gathered speed quickly as though he had fallen off a cliff of the world's highest mountain. Hmm. Why did that sound familiar?

The worst part wasn't the speed. That part was excellent. The cold took the top award for 'bad.' His gym clothes didn't protect him as his arms and legs had passed numb. While descending brought warm weather closer, he still had a long way before reaching it and figured he would freeze to death before then.

Just when he couldn't hold on any longer, a portal opened in front of him. He passed through it, landing on a warm island beach. Mark thought he might shatter moving from subzero cold to tropical heat in a second, but fortunately, people were made of better stuff than that.

After gathering his wits and looking around, he saw the next goal; a flag on the other side of the small ocean inlet before him, telling him the next course of action: swim to it.

Easier said than done.

Not that Mark couldn't swim. He had done so many endurance swims over the summer, he had become quite good at it, but this short swim had added issues. Unless he was mistaken, more than a few sharks swam between him and the other side. Even though not an expert on tropical sea life, he knew what that fin sticking out of the water meant. The movie Jaws proved to be instructional that way. Terrible thing. He might not have been scared if he hadn't seen it. Now, if he could only un-see it. Say! Not a bad idea for his next programming project. If he lived long enough to do it.

"What are you waiting for?" Coach yelled from his Adirondack chair, where he sat drinking some cold beverage. "You see the flag. Get there!"

"There's a little detail about becoming something's lunch," Mark replied. "As in I don't want to."

"You don't want to live forever, do you?"

"Somebody's got to be the first."

"Well, it ain't you. Now get in there. If you don't want to be somebody's lunch then swim faster than they do."

"Safety Tip number one. If something wants to eat you swim faster than it does. Why didn't I think of that? Oh, I know. Because it's impossible for a person to swim faster than a shark!" Mark said.

"Would you get in there?! You're wasting my time and I'm keeping track of how long it takes to complete this," Coach said.

"Great. Now I'm an experiment," Mark mumbled as he sized up the sharks one last time before diving into the water.

Thinking that creating a commotion would attract them faster, he swam as quietly as he could, which still splashed around quite a bit. No Olympic swimmer would feel threatened watching his style. Even with

that, the sharks noticed him far faster than he would've liked and began circling before he was 20 feet into the lagoon. And getting closer every second.

One brushed his foot. He checked quickly to make sure he still had one before continuing. Another bumped his shoulder as it swam by, a love tap letting him know Coach had served lunch. He swam faster though it still wasn't much compared to the speed of the hungry sharks.

Suddenly he saw one coming straight for him, mouth open and not to smile a welcome to their home. He reached up and grabbed its nose with his left hand, pushing it back, or more correctly, pushing himself back with its momentum as he swung a fist, hitting it in the eye. Not hard enough to do any damage because he couldn't get any force on a punch underwater, but hard enough to discourage it as it swam off.

He started swimming again, but things weren't looking any better as sharks swam in every direction, not more than an arms-length away. Having reached the lagoon's center, he couldn't see a way forward through the predators and decided to make his stand there. The path couldn't be blocked more thoroughly if a wall stood in his way. Too bad he didn't have a wall.

The sharks circled faster and faster, coming closer until touching him on all sides.

"Great," he thought to himself. "I knew Coach would be the death of me."

Just then, a portal opened beneath him, dropping him out of the lagoon like being flushed from a toilet into the middle of the desert with sand as far as the eye could see. Except for a sign in the distance Mark recognized as one of Coaches' directional guides. He knew from experience he needed to head in that direction and to do it quickly.

He began running toward the sign, happy to be alive and not someone's dinner but less happy about the 120° heat, no shade, no sunscreen, no hat, no Mountain Dew, or Nintendo Switch. Not even someone to pat him on the back and say, "There, there. Yes, Coach sucks and so does the horse he rode in on." Where was Shana when he needed her? On second thought, that wasn't fair to the horse.

After covering about 100 feet of loose sand, he came to the edge of the dune, which gave way as he slid 300 feet to the bottom, getting sand in every part of his body, some he didn't know could have sand in them. Talk about chafing. He stopped to brush off, noticing ancient ruins that desperately needed crossing between him and the sign. Coaches' first students probably lived there.

As usual for one of Coaches' gauntlets, he couldn't just follow a road to the other side. There was never anything quite so simple. The ancient ruins he had to cross always looked like the remains of a war zone. Oh, and he had to do an archaeological study of the region, which Coach would expect a written report on the next day.

"Pay attention to your surroundings! You never know when it might save your life!" Coach would say, usually while throwing something harmless Mark's way like a javelin or a lit stick of dynamite. Mark learned whenever Coach said, 'Catch!' it was code for "Run the other way!"

As he made his way toward the other side of ancient Town-berg, he ran into what appeared to be a bottomless chasm with the only way across being the remains of a crumbling, stone aqueduct. Of course. Why did there always have to be a crumbling aqueduct he had to use for a bridge? With little other choice and afraid it might crumble even further if he waited, Mark took off running across its top-level while trying not to look down from the height because it was the only one with a straight path, meaning no pillars blocking the route. At the halfway point, the entire structure began shaking, leaving Mark the choice of hanging on for dear life or running faster. Running faster might collapse it quicker, but he was afraid its existence could be counted in seconds and not moving would guarantee him going down with it.

He kicked it into overdrive as the aqueduct began collapsing behind him, finally catching up and dropping him down to the next level of the multi-tiered construct, which immediately began collapsing. Moving as fast as he could, he jumped the last 15 feet to the stable ground at the wall's base that marked the far end of town.

A 30-foot wall blocked him from his exit into the dunes beyond. A quick evaluation showed nothing to help scale it except old masonry work that allowed handholds between the massive blocks. He had tried going around such obstacles earlier in the summer only to find portals that dropped him back on the wrong side of the wall, which had magically increased in height by 10 feet. In other words, he either did it the right way, or the task became more challenging.

After what he experienced over the summer, a huge wall didn't even provide a challenge as he quickly reached the top only to find a 30-foot drop on the other side. Of course. Why couldn't there ever be a smoothie stand or swimming pool?

He could either climb down or jump off the top onto the dune going up the other side of the makeshift archaeological find\valley\ant lion den\little kid's sandbox. He chose the latter because he felt too tired to think it through very well, hitting the dune about halfway up, which gave way and slid him down to the bottom. All in all, more manageable than climbing down the other side, but he had to stop and de-sand again.

He made his way up the dune and ran to the sign. As soon as he touched it, he found himself back in the gym. A typical summer day with Coach.

"Isn't summer vacation supposed to be fun?" Mark asked, dirty, sunburned, sand in every crevice of his body and back with Coach (the worst part of his situation), who acted like Mark had just been for a walk in the atrium gardens.

"That WAS fun," Coach said, "Look around you. What do you think this is?"

"Yeah, it's the gym. What a great view."

"Right. Fun as far as the eye can see."

"I must need glasses because I'm missing the whole 'fun' part. To me this looks like hard work. Maybe torture. You know, come to think of it, the weight room does remind me of a torture chamber."

“Torture? Hard work? Shoot, you don’t know hard work. You couldn’t handle hard work. You should join the military then you’ll know hard work. This summer’s been nothing. I’ve gone easy on you. Look at today. How long were you on top of Everest? Five minutes, tops? That was nothing. I’ve been a regular sweetheart.”

“If all sweethearts were like you no one would ever go out on a date,” Mark replied.

“Just for that, drop and give me twenty pushups,” Coach said. “This is the most fun you’ve had since you were born.”

“You and I have a seriously different definition of fun,” Mark said as he started doing another set of pushups, his fifth set of the day, because of the communication issues he had with Coach. That didn’t mean he couldn’t communicate with Coach. He didn’t know when to stop communicating with Coach. The more he thought about it, the more that applied to his dealings with everyone, but that was another story.

“...18...19...20. Done,” Mark said. “Now what?”

“I know this is the last day of Summer school,” Coach said, “and your namby pamby keister will be back in a seat all through the school day so I had to do what I could while I had the chance.”

“You didn’t succeed. I still live.”

“I’ve still got a year’s worth of PE classes to go. Besides, you should appreciate what I’ve done for you.”

“What YOU’VE done for ME? Oh, no no no. I’ve been doing the ‘doing’ around here. What have you done for me besides beat me to a pulp?”

“Have you weighed yourself?”

“Weighed myself?” Mark said. “What difference does that make?”

“Daisy? What does Mark weigh?” Coach asked.

“Mark Morgan weighs 213 lbs.”

“Thank you, Daisy.”

“You are welcome.”

“What? I don’t weigh 213 pounds, do I? I’ve weighed 130 for a year now.”

“You didn’t even notice. There is a mirror in your room, isn’t there? You know how to use one, right?” Coach asked.

“Of course I know how to use a mirror but you know the whole vampire thing.”

“Vampire thing?”

“You know, how they can’t see anything in a mirror?” Mark replied.

“Ha. Ha. Next time you’re in your room, look in the mirror and see what stares back. You’ve put on 83 pounds of real man muscle this summer and lost that baby fat you walked in here with two years ago. Muscle weighs more than fat, punk. I’ll bet you’ve even got a six pack.”

“And chickens have lips...” Mark began as he pulled up his shirt and flexed his stomach muscles. “...Are you kidding me? I’ve got a six pack! How can an uncoordinated music nerd have a six pack? This isn’t possible. Where’s a chicken?”

“You did it anyway. What did you think? You could get a six pack sitting around playing piano? Hate me all you want. I’ll make you a man before you leave here.”

“Oh, I never hated you. I only wanted you to eat nothing but unflavored tofu the rest of your life,” Mark said.

“Wow, that’s harsh.”

“These are harsh times.”

“Right. Since you worked your can off and did everything I asked without complaining too much, I’ll give you the rest of the day off as a treat. You’re a good worker, and have more stones than anyone I’ve ever taught. It’s like I always say. You want to be strong? You have to work at it. You want to be coordinated? You have to work at it. You don’t get anything without work. Six packs don’t come in a pill...”

“...though it would be cool if they did...” Mark interrupted.

“...you have to work for them and you did. You got that because you earned it. Now get out of here!”

“Finally an order I want to follow,” Mark said as he all but ran out of the room. The grueling ordeal had ended, signaling the school year’s return, starting with orientation at noon tomorrow.

Even though still sweaty and dirty from surviving the gauntlet of death, he went down to the cafeteria because hunger motivated him more than being clean. He sat down for dinner, only then realizing how exhausted he felt. After eating, he returned to his room, practiced for a little bit, then fell asleep watching TV, hoping to dream about a life without Coach.

And not dream about the crazy hallway and room he didn’t know.

3

Vacation School Year.

Mark woke early the following day, showered (still getting sand out of every crevice of his body), dressed, ate breakfast, then practiced for a couple of hours. By then, lunch and orientation had arrived, so he placed an order for lunch (a combination pizza) then headed down to the cafeteria, hoping to run into his friends as quickly as possible. Without hurting them.

He sat at his usual table and began eating. No sooner had he done so than his best friend, Shoshana Oliver, who went by Shana, joined him. Sort of.

“Mark?” Shana asked.

“Who else would I be?” Mark replied as he stood to hug her.

“That’s your voice all right and your face is the same - though thinner - but you don’t look like you from behind,” Shana said as she returned it. “Wow. This didn’t come through on Facetime.”

“Who does my behind look like?”

“Let’s just say I’m not complaining,” she said, still hugging him. “You look different in a good way. Make that a great way. So what happened?”

“What do you mean? Nothing happened. I’m the same person I was last year.”

“Not hardly. You don’t look anything like you did last year. Except for still being really cute. Maybe even cuter. And you’re totally bricked,” she said, running her hands over his back. “You look like Mr. Hard Body because - well - because you are. You even got a tan. Forget the boyfriend. I’d really like to see you with your shirt off...Oh, shoot! Did I say that out loud? Forget I said anything. Or don’t if it works to my advantage,” she said as she gave him a quick kiss.

“Now you sound like me. All flustered,” Mark said.

“I kind of do, don’t I? I missed you so much this summer. The phone calls aren’t the same. So what happened?”

“I missed you, too. I told you Daisy stuck me with Coach for the summer. Two of my three months, eight hours a day, four days a week. I thought I’d die.”

“Don’t worry about dying. That totally didn’t happen. You look good,” she said as they sat down. She scooted her chair beside his, like always, and hooked her hand inside his arm.

“Thanks. All that torture had to be worth something besides making me regret life. Can you believe I got a six pack?”

“If I say no will you prove it to me?” she said with a giggle as she leaned her head against his shoulder.

“It’s you, isn’t it? You’ll have to try your luck and see what happens. Have you had any lunch? Or did you come down here to make me feel good?”

“Nope, no lunch and I’m starving. You’ve made me feel good, too, just seeing you again. I’m sorry you had a tough summer but I don’t think you’ll regret it.”

“So how was your summer?”

“Boring. No excitement since my last phone call. My dad didn’t get any time off from the restaurant so we didn’t do anything. Just hung around the house. Tell you the truth, it was nice. How’s your pizza?”

“You know me. Pizza is always good. Want a slice?”

“Sure. You haven’t seen Todd, have you? Umm...this is good.”

“No, you’re the first. Did you talk to him over the summer?”

“Oh, yeah. He came down and visited me once. Seemed kind of upset like he wanted to get away from home. You know, it’s not the first time I felt like he didn’t want to be there.”

“I thought that last year, too, but figured it was my imagination because, you know, I’m clueless at that kind of thing...”

“...Clueless is a complement...”

“...Yeah, I know, so I’m happy to hear someone else say it about his home life. He doesn’t even talk about home. Then there’s the odd thing he does - one of the odd things, anyway - where he acts jealous of me. Like that’s even a thing,” Mark said. “Talk about bizarre moments in life. I’m an orphan who lives in a school. His family has money, a huge house, servants - shoot, forget the money, he has a family. I don’t even have that. Plus you. Talk about spoiled. Why would he be jealous of me?”

“You know, I’ve been thinking the same thing. I’ve asked him about home, you know, without sounding like I was asking about it, but he wouldn’t tell me anything. If there’s nothing going on why not say something? If I had to guess, I think there’s something really wrong at home.”

“Like what?”

“No idea. Everything seems...off,” Shana said.

Just then, Mark’s friend Vijay Okai, and Todd Symsmith, Shana’s boyfriend, came walking up.

“Shana? Who are you hugging...Mark? Is that you?” Todd asked as he sat down beside Shana, pulling her chair over toward him.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Dang!”

“Okay, what have you done with Mark and how did you steal his face?” Vijay asked.

“I’ll never tell,” Mark replied.

“Shoot, you are bigger than the last time I saw you. Did Coach ever let you out of the gym?”

“Sure, when he wanted me to run one of his gauntlets through the desert. That was it and trust me I asked. Make that begged. I’m not proud of my groveling, especially since it didn’t work.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. I think the girls will be quite happy with your change,” Shana said. Todd gave her a strange look Mark didn’t understand.

“If it’s all right with you, I’d like to quit talking about it. Girls, too.”

“Hey, I did not want to talk about it to begin with but you leave me with no choice. You make us look bad,” Vijay said with a chuckle.

The other students gradually filed in while they talked, most finding seats at their usual tables except for the new kids who always managed to find each other. Mark figured the fear and trepidation they felt attracted better than nerds to a new sci-fi movie.

After everyone finished eating, Dr. Blackburn, the vice president of the school who Mark felt was older than dirt - really. Not just a saying - stood and began the yearly orientation ritual. The 19 new seventh grader introductions came first as they got their computer pads, the device they would carry for the next six years. They looked as frightened as Mark remembered feeling that first year. He didn’t feel sorry for them. They had some cool stuff awaiting them. If they weren’t expelled.

Raven Dimmett...Skyler Dragun...David Hammer...

“You guys seen the class schedule?” Mark asked, tuning out Dr. Blackburn.

Gustavo Hernandez... Grace Güter... Theodore Schinella... Carly Murph...

“No, not yet,” Shana replied.

Emma Cutchel... Uros Antonovich... Kameron Ricketts... Xixi Xang...

“Here, take a look. I’ve got mine pulled up on my pad.”

Charlie Fridge... Roman Maroni... Ali Muzic... Anurag Patel...

“Is he reading the names randomly this year?” Mark asked.

“Seems like it. They are usually in alphabetical order,” Vijay said.

Amna Babineaux... Lucie Lesauvage... Chibueze Okafor and Paora Kahurangi.

While he thought so last year, this year confirmed it. Dr. Blackburn’s orientation script was nearly word for word the same from year to year, except for the whole alphabetical thing, most likely figuring if it worked, why break it. After noticing the seniors mouthing the words with Dr. Blackburn last year, he found himself doing the same thing, quickly stopping while hoping nobody noticed. Turning into his parents was one thing, but turning into Dr. Blackburn was something to be avoided. While not a bad guy, Mark never considered him a role model. He was too weird.

“...the tablets are a direct link to the school’s main computer who I will now introduce to you. Daisy? Tell everyone a little about yourself.”

“Thank you, Dr. Blackburn. My name is Daisy, the worlds’ first Ultra Quantum computer and the most powerful machine in existence.” As his class did, the new students gasped in surprise. “Supercomputers are pocket calculators compared to my processing power.”

“Thank you, Daisy,” Dr. Blackburn said. “Yes, folks, she IS all that on a chip. For those of you who must know what your tablet’s system specs are - and you know who you are - don’t try and take them apart. Go to the system intranet site, and find all you need to know, including pictures of the internal boards. The tablets are nothing more than a terminal running an internet browser - a really cool terminal - but a terminal nonetheless. All the software is on Daisy, creating a virtual desktop that gives the appearance of having everything on your computer like you’re accustomed to when in fact, the only thing the tablet does is act as an input device and monitor using chips that remember their last position, so it is instantly on at a touch.

“Your class schedules, meal orders, assignments, homework, textbooks, even some of your experiments are done with your tablet. Besides the touch screen, you can input information with voice commands and two keyboards. The blue-tooth headset for the phone snaps into the back. While they have batteries, the tablets don’t need to have their batteries charged since they run on broadcast power like everything else. Your first assignment is to know them inside and out - which doesn’t mean take them apart. It’s a figure of speech - so that you can function properly in class tomorrow.

“One final item. If there are any challengers, we will again have the Mad Scientist competition with the winner’s prizes being the ever popular virtual room like Dr. Rose’s except on a smaller scale, the deluxe, stain proof lab coat with built in cloaking device and a full year’s paid tuition. Mark Morgan won the title from Mr. Hyde last year, no small feat considering he had held it for 16 years, so if anyone wants to challenge him they had better plan ahead. Any challengers? No? All right, then. New students follow me.”

“No challengers. That makes a calmer year,” Vijay said.

“I could use a calmer year,” Mark said.

“What was that about classes, Mark?” Shana asked.

“Here, take a look.”

M, W, Fri

8:00 to 9:25 a.m. Advanced Electrical Engineering

9:30 to 10:55 a.m. Advanced Robotics

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

3:00 to 4:30 p.m. Advanced Computer Programming

8:00 to 9:00 p.m. Meditation/Yoga

T, THU

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

“What? No advanced lunch?” Vijay asked. “I was looking forward to that.”

“I put in for that but it was full,” Mark said.

“Nice. I am not taking astronomy this year,” Vijay said. “It keeps me out too late.”

“Speaking of, I’m dropping programming,” Shana said. “I wasn’t any good at it and I’m picking up Art instead. I’m also getting rid of Electrical Engineering and picking up Latin.”

“Art? Latin?” Mark said. “Do they even teach Art here? And do I care if they do?”

“Cute. They teach music, don’t they?” Shana replied.

“Not really. It’s independent study. No one helps me.”

“Maybe you should sign up for Art, then. You’d make a great model. Maybe you could help me with my class work,” Shana said with a wink while she held his hand under the table, the sign that she was kidding him. Todd gave them another strange look.

“Sure, right after I volunteer as a test dummy for ‘no anesthesia’ dentistry,” Mark replied, ignoring the compliment.

“You have the dummy part down,” Vijay said.

“Cool! I finally found my niche. Everyone has to be good at something,” Mark said. “We’re done with lunch so let’s head back to my room.”

“Sounds good.”

The next morning found Mark, Shana and Vijay in the cafeteria eating breakfast as Todd walked up. He sat down in his usual seat on the other side of Shana from Mark.

“Todd! Good morning!” Mark said. “Did you have a good night’s sleep?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Todd replied.

“You never said yesterday, but did you have a good summer?” Mark asked.

“What difference does it make to...! Look. No, not really. I’d rather not talk about it, okay?”

“Sure. Whatever. I was only making conversation,” Mark said. “It’s time for class anyway.”

“Come on, Shana,” Todd said. “Let’s get out of here.”

She ran a hand up Mark’s arm as she stood to leave, following Todd out of the room.

No doubt existed. Something was going on with Todd.

And Nicodemus' warning sounded more ominous than ever.
