

Mark Morgan at ARTS

Book 1

Mark of the Pirate

By

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1

One of These Days.

Mark Morgan hated the lunchroom.

Not because of the food, even though today's mystery meat looked more like something Scooby-Doo should run from than anything he should eat. Sometimes he thought he'd rather have Scooby snacks than what they dished on the tray. The 'whatever it was' tasted better than it looked, fortunately, because it looked like a science project.

And not because of the people who worked there. Some of the nicest people in his middle school worked the lunchroom, especially the mystery meat lady. Apparently, she realized its questionable nature and made sure to serve it with a cheerful greeting and a smile, probably not distracting him from an insidious scheme to poison them. Even the tables and chairs were serviceable. Nothing special, but it was a lunchroom. Leather seating would be out of place, though he wouldn't say no to a sofa or two. No, lunchroom problems ran deeper than that.

The lunchroom was a bully's paradise.

And a nerd's chamber of horrors.

Mark was the quintessential nerd. If someone looked the word up on thatsadictionary.com, they'd see his picture because he hacked the database and put it there. If he was going to be a nerd, he might as well do it right. Not bad for a kid beginning seventh grade. Unfortunately, his current audience didn't appreciate his achievements. Or even understand them.

"Well, if it isn't Sark Borgan," Justin Jacus said. "Why are you eating by yourself? Did your friends have other places to be? Again?"

"Shoot, Justin. You know he doesn't have any friends," Danny Wainwright, Justin's shadow, said.

"That's right. I forgot because you're so popular with the other students," Justin said with a tone Mark didn't understand. Was that sarcasm? It would make sense, but Mark didn't know for sure. "Isn't that right, Sark?"

"You know my name's Mark, right? You aren't having problems saying the letter 'M' again, are you? Most of us got over that when we were three. They do have speech therapists here that can help you," Mark said as he tried to ignore them and continue eating. Sitting by himself in the lunchroom invited unwanted guests. And he always sat by himself. Maybe Mark would've had friends if hanging out with him didn't make them a bully target. Then again, probably not. No one was interested in being his friend.

"What are you talking about? I can say the letter M," Justin said.

"When? In your dreams?" Mark said.

"I can say it! I just don't want to."

"Why is that my problem? Like I care if you can say it or not. And what are you doing at my table? Since I'm the only one here, seems like you'd want to sit with students whose names you can say. I don't know any kids with one-letter names, but I'm sure you could find some if you looked hard enough," Mark said, with his usual, nonexistent, tact, especially when faced by someone who could beat him up. And has.

"We stopped by to see how things were going. Oops! Sorry about that," Justin said as he knocked Mark's milk over, spilling it on his lap for the third time that week. It was Monday.

"Wow, if you're the starting quarterback on the football team, we're in trouble with that hand to eye coordination. You know what that means, right?" Mark said while trying to wipe up the mess, hoping it wouldn't look like he wet himself when he stood up. Which it would because that was why Justin did it. "I can use smaller words if you're having a problem understanding. Though not a lot smaller. I've dumbed it down about as much as I can."

"Why you smart aleck..."

"That's one of the things I like about you. Your snappy comebacks. How long did it take you to think that up? A couple of weeks? Or did you do an Internet search for the most ignorant comebacks in world history since you couldn't come up with any on your own? I have to admit you're improving, though. You can finally

say ‘smart’ even if you don’t know what it means,” Mark said. He never could tell when to stop pushing his luck. And he never had any luck, to begin with.

“I think it’s time for you to shut up again,” Justin said as he walked up to one side of Mark’s chair and his buddy Danny on the other. “Oops! Mark! You need to be more careful!”

They both put a foot behind a leg of his chair as they gave the back a push, knocking him over backward while sliding his lunch off the table on top of him. Again. He had tried eating quickly to make sure there wasn’t much left when Justin came over. He had drawn the line at the cooked prunes, which now lay all over his shirt. Along with the milk on his pants.

Lunchtime. Woo hoo.

“You know what? As smart as you are if you had friends you’d be dangerous,” Danny said, leaning over Mark’s face. “Of course, no one needs to worry about that, do they?”

From where he lay, Mark watched them walk away. There was no point in hurrying to stand up because that left them an opportunity to knock him back down. After the coast was clear, he stood up, picked up his things, stood the chair back up, and took his tray to the return area, doing his best not to hear the laughter. From pretty much everyone. Again. Unfortunately, he had excellent hearing. People talked about hating bullies, but Mark knew when push came to shove, as long as they weren’t the ones getting shoved, it was all good. No one ever stood up for him.

He looked at the clock and saw lunchtime had almost ended, at least ended enough to go to his next class. Class meant safety. Mrs. Garcia’s 7th-grade Social Studies class. He liked her. She had a good sense of humor and was smart enough to understand how to work with Mark. It was a class he learned something in, for a change. Most of the time, classes bored him because he already knew everything within the first two weeks. Since the school year had just started, the clock was ticking on the other classes before boredom set in.

She sat behind her desk at the front of the class as the students filed in, looked up, and smiled at Mark. Another thing he liked about her.

The class went fine until a student came in with a message. Mark sat in the front row and overheard what they said. Something about Mark and that crazy aptitude test.

Great. He knew there was something wrong with that test. He should have known better than to answer everything as he did. It had trouble written all over it. He should have realized it wasn’t an ordinary test no matter what everybody told him. Even now, several months later, those test questions ran through his mind. A photographic memory did that.

The test didn’t stick with him because of the challenge. On the contrary, he found it simple. And pointless. He didn’t care why, on the same track, one train headed east from Stonehenge carrying all the King’s horses while another headed west from London carrying all the King’s men, let alone how long it took before they met. Why ask how they met? What about how they ended up on the same track? Why didn’t someone stop them? What happened after they met? Who had to clean up the train cars that held those horses if they

managed to stop in time to avoid crashing? He'd seen what horses left during a parade and could only imagine those train cars' floor. Considering all of that, the most important question was how long it took before they met? Really?

Math story problems never asked the exciting questions raised by the scenario. The answers they wanted were always the easiest ones to give, but that turned out to be a problem. They weren't supposed to be easy. But Mark thought they were.

They were so easy he spent most of the time thinking up better questions to each problem (If it's a 'right' triangle, isn't the question already correct? Pythagoras must've been boring if he spent all his time thinking about triangles. Maybe he needed a real hobby, something more exciting like watching grass grow or dust collecting.) or looking around for what he felt had to be the real reason for the test; some deeper meaning to it all, which reflected his life.

When taking the test, he thought it seemed too simple. The last problem came and went (If he rode a camel backward around the earth, how fast would it need to go to complete the trip in 26 days while twirling a Hula Hoop? What?! A camel was running backward, twirling a Hula Hoop, and the only question they asked was how fast it needed to go? When was he learning how to ride a camel? Who taught it to use a Hula Hoop? Or run backward? Who came up with this stuff, and how could Mark get that job?) the mechanical pencil found its place back in his backpack, and the test turned over with its corner matching the right desk corner, awaiting the ascension to judgment. Looking around, he realized he was the only one noticing anything but the next problem on the test.

The teacher monitoring the test, Mrs. Belsky, caught his eye and mouthed the words, "Are you done?" He answered too loudly, "Yes!" Her grimace clued him to the improper volume, but with boredom such an overwhelming daily companion at school, he only wanted to get on with life.

Beside the teacher at her desk sat the official test administrator, who he had never seen before. She appeared to be something other than a human being, possibly a vampire in disguise due to her pale complexion. She stared at him with a funny look on her face he didn't understand. To Mark, it wasn't rocket science. He took the test. He finished the test. He handed it in. He didn't make the rules. He just followed them.

He was happy to see Mrs. Belsky get up and walk down to his desk, hopefully alleviating him from his imagined punishment. She picked up his paper, looked it over, and let a small smile cross her face. She crouched by his desk.

"Did you have any trouble?" she whispered.

"No," he replied, taking her cue to be softer this time.

"Did you answer all the questions?"

"Sure. They were easy."

"Easy? Really?"

"Sure. Was this a warm-up or something?"

“No. That was the real test.”

“Really? Well, okay. Here, you can have my scratch paper back. I didn’t need it. You can use it again sometime.”

She took the scratch paper, looked at it as though it were magical, and then added it to the test stack.

“Do you have anything you can work on now?”

“Can I go out and race cars in the parking lot?”

“Not today,” she said with a smirk.

“Hang gliding?”

“No.”

“Deep-sea fishing?”

“In Nebraska?”

“Planking on my desk?”

“Mark…”

“Can I read my book?”

“No… I mean yes, that’s a good idea. Go right ahead.”

She walked back to her desk and sat down beside the administrator. The vampire leaned over and started whispering but didn’t appear to make any attempt to bite her neck though that would’ve been cool. He didn’t try listening, but couldn’t help it since there wasn’t anything else going on,

“Wow, that was fast,” the bride of Dracula said. “He probably missed them all.”

“No,” Mrs. Belsky replied, “I’ll bet he didn’t miss any.”

“That’s not possible and I should know. I’ve been giving this test for over ten years. The only ones I’ve seen do it that fast didn’t have a clue how to answer anything.”

“You don’t know Mark. If he doesn’t have a photographic memory he’s close. He sees something once, twice at most, he knows it.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Then she commented on ‘high functioning’ Mark didn’t catch, but that didn’t sound like a bad thing. Who wouldn’t want people to say that about them?

That was how test day went. Now he knew his thoughts were correct. It was about more than answering questions. Somehow the horrible thing had gotten him in trouble.

Everybody watched the classroom interruption since it allowed them to look at something other than their work. When the student handed Mrs. Garcia a note, the event became riveting, especially for Mark because after reading it, she looked at him.

“Mark, you’ve been called down to the principal’s office to discuss the results of your aptitude test. The day’s almost over so put away your things before you go.”

“Sure,” he said, but he wasn’t all that sure.

Packing up his things and getting ready to go to the principal's office was like standing before the class with a booger hanging out of his nose because everyone stared at him, wondering what was going on. The attention was such that he chanced a touch of his nose to make sure everything was clean. It was, fortunately. He left quickly, removing himself as a classroom distraction, and made his way down the hall.

The principal, Dr. Turner, always treated him nicely enough. He met her a week ago when she spoke to him about the fish sculpture. Then the jazz music over the P.A. He thought this time wouldn't be so pleasant though he didn't know why. He couldn't think of anything he had done on that test that would warrant a trip to the principal's office.

Maybe the - no, they couldn't blame him for the cafeteria incident where everyone got sick except for him, even though he did it. And the fire alarm that kept going off by itself, conveniently getting him out of his worst class, gym. And the - well, it had been a busy week. Anyway, it couldn't have been that test. There had to be something else.

The principal's office sat just down the hall, but he made it seem like it was on the other side of the world. He took small steps, admiring the artwork from the drawing class hung outside their room. Some of which was pretty good. Next, he followed a beetle as it tried to escape his gaze, but none of it worked. The office door stood open a few feet away.

Then the school bell sounded.

His attempt to prolong the walk to the office would meet with some serious issues if he didn't hurry up. The hallways were moments from making the running of the bulls in Pamplona look like a stroll through a petting zoo. The nearing thunder of running feet pushed harder than the destination's anxiety, so he picked up his pace and arrived at the principal's office, stepping inside as the stampede passed.

He ducked under the tail of the enormous catfish statue sitting in the middle of the office and walked up to the desk.

"Hi, Mark," Mrs. Miller, the office admin, said.

"Hi. I love what you've done with the place," he said.

"Thanks. A huge stone fish does seem the perfect touch, doesn't it? Are you ever going to tell us how you did it? We don't know how to get it out without taking down a wall."

"Did what?"

"Oh, go on in. Dr. Turner is expecting you."

"Thanks, Mrs. Miller," he said as the thunder cloud of doom hanging over his head gave off its first loud rumble.

He passed a woman sitting in a chair working on her phone, who looked so beautiful he stopped mid-stride and stared at her on the way back to the office. Her shoulder-length dark hair, short red dress, and high heel, red pumps framed her perfectly as she sat in the only chair in the waiting area without a fish part blocking it.

Suddenly the woman glanced at him, a fleeting look of surprise on her face.

"Hello, young man," she said.

"You're beautiful," he replied.

"Why, thank you, kind sir," she said. He could tell he had caught her off guard, but Mrs. Miller interrupted before anything else could be said.

"Mark?" Mrs. Miller said. "You'd better get going."

"Yes, ma'am."

He gave the woman a quick smile then hurried toward the principal's office.

Dr. Turner's door stood ajar, and even though he knew she expected him, he knocked quietly anyway, secretly hoping she wouldn't hear him or forget why she had called him in the first place and send him home. No such luck.

"Mark! Come in. I've got some exciting news!"

'Exciting' wasn't always a good thing. Robberies were exciting. Car wrecks were exciting. Sometimes the boring, not exciting things were better. He would have loved a little boring right now. He entered the room like a firing squad stood behind her. She noticed.

"Would you relax! This is a good thing. Go ahead and sit down over there."

He did as she asked though he had a difficult time putting 'good thing,' 'relax,' and 'principal's office' in the same sentence.

"I'm sure you remember taking the Standard aptitude test at the end of last year. Well, you've created quite a stir because you didn't miss a single question. It's the first time that's ever happened. What you probably didn't realize was that test was also an evaluation for placement in accelerated courses within the school..."

"...I knew there was more to it than just a test," he said.

"Oh, Mark, it's not like that. It's a great opportunity to get ahead in school, but your score was so high you've attracted extra attention. A representative from The Fontanelle Advanced Research and Technical School came down asking about you. You know who they are, don't you?"

"Hold it. Fontanelle Advanced Res... F.A.R.T.S.? Their acronym is F.A.R.T.S.?"

"Well, yes, but they go by ARTS."

"I would, too. Isn't that the old science school south of the forest?" he asked.

"That's the one. You're right, it's old and by the forest, but it's the best school in the country. Arguably the world."

"Okay, so what does that have to do with me?"

"They want you to attend."

"Why would I want to go there? Doesn't it cost money? I don't have any money."

"Yes, and that was a problem. When they found out, the man left and I was sure you were out of luck. Then, well, I just got off the phone with Daisy, the school's computer, and everything's taken care of. Your

tuition has been paid for as long as you attend if you wish to go. They also have an Audiology program where you can study music.”

“Really? That’s cool. You spoke to a computer? Named after a flower? That must’ve been weird. Did it speak in rhymes? Use plant terms all the time? Did it sound like a recording?”

“No, she was like talking to a regular person.”

“Awesome. A she? I never knew a computer could have a gender. It’s a boarding school, isn’t it?”

“Not necessarily but it can be, which should work out well for you. They pretty much do whatever is needed to help their students.”

“Do you think I should go?” he asked, mainly because he didn’t know anyone else to ask.

“Of course it’s up to you but honestly, this is an opportunity of a lifetime. It will give you the chance to be whatever you want to be. I know we try to do that here but we don’t have the resources a place like ARTS does. Since you’re asking my opinion, I think you should go. It’s like a dream factory. They’re on the cutting edge of...of...well, everything! You might have to work to stay up with lessons. Maybe you won’t be so bored anymore.”

He couldn’t even imagine a school that could do that, but what did he have to lose? A constant state of bullying and boring classes? People weren’t lining up to throw opportunities of a lifetime at him. He had to take advantage of anything that came his way.

“Okay. I might as well do it then.”

“Great! I don’t think you’ll regret it. ARTS is really another world.”

“I hope that’s a good thing.”

2

Goodbye Stranger.

Though probably too late, Mark raced to the library to research the school he had committed himself to, his actions only now sinking in. He had made a spur of the moment, life-changing decision based on a principal's recommendations he didn't know, who didn't know him and probably didn't know much more about the place than he did.

Sitting down in front of a computer and a quick internet search later, he saw his first pictures of the "opportunity of a lifetime." A stale, old, and boring lifetime.

The school's pictures shuffled before him in a slide show, revealing its changing face over the last 100 plus years. As far as he could tell, the only thing that changed was the size of the trees around it, which had grown quite large. The school looked miraculously unchanged over the same period, almost defiantly so, where it squat on the ground at the edge of the woods that bordered the southern part of the city.

He looked at the clock, a little too late. Again. He had already missed his bus, meaning a long walk home if he could call it home. Which he couldn't. It was easier calling it that than what it was. Prison. Okay, maybe prison was a little strong, but it certainly wasn't home. Over two years had passed since he had a real home.

Missing the bus also meant he missed dinner. Again. Same old, same old. He might as well get going. Disappointment wouldn't happen all by itself.

Mark arrived at the orphanage, home, walking up to the front door where, unusually, Mr. Rozier stood waiting for him.

"Mark! It's good to see you!" he said, speaking from his never-ending enthusiasm.

"Thanks."

"Talkative today, aren't you? Apparently you've also been busy. I've got someone in my office looking for you. You didn't get in trouble at school again, did you?"

"I don't get in trouble."

"What about that time at the party..."

"...That doesn't count. You know it doesn't. The clown sprayed his squirt gun at me first," Mark said. "And what do you mean 'again'? I never get in trouble."

"That anyone can prove," he said with a wry smile.

Mark liked Mr. Rozier. He treated Mark like an adult and helped him grow up, dealing with his current predicament better than anything else Mr. Rozier could have done.

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about. No one can prove what doesn't happen."

"Right. Follow me." Like he had a choice as Mr. Rozier put an arm around Mark's shoulders and steered him down the hall towards his office.

Mark figured anyone who didn't like Vincent Rozier wasn't worth wasting time on. Mr. Rozier could be described as large in every sense of the word, inside and out. He was a mountain of a man, six foot four and three hundred pounds, little of which was muscle. His firm, make that loud, tenor voice reverberated through the orphanage walls, telling everyone how happy he felt to be there and see them.

They walked into Mr. Rozier's office, finding someone waiting for them, someone who might have been a trick mirror reflection of Mr. Rozier. A short, thin man dressed in a long, black topcoat over what looked like a black suit with a black shirt and tie peeking through the collar's opening. It was hard telling what was what, looking at all that black, almost like a void sat in the chair in front of Mr. Rozier's desk. His black felt hat and cane sat in the chair beside him. He seriously needed someone to diversify his wardrobe.

The thing Mark found striking was his craggy face. It was one of those faces that had more stories in it than most people had hair. First of all, it looked 4 or 5 hundred years old and miserable. Well, maybe that exaggerated a bit, but not much. How about 350 years old and unhappy. His skin had the look of aged parchment, a rough, brittle look with wrinkles in places Mark didn't think were possible.

"Mark, this is Dr. Blackburn from ARTS," Mr. Rozier said.

"Pleased to meet you," Mark replied.

"Yes, yes," Dr. Blackburn said, waving a dismissive hand that stirred a strange cherry cough drop odor. "I'm here to give you your school information. The fall semester starts tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" said Mr. Rozier. "That's short notice."

"Yes, unfortunately it couldn't be helped. Normally we don't accept anyone this late in the year but Mr. Morgan's score on the evaluation test was...well...it was exceptional. We had to make room for him. So I'm here to welcome you and give you this packet. Normally you'd have more time to plan, get some clothes, but it is what it is. We're just glad to have you. Here you go," he said as he handed Mark a large, somewhat heavy brown envelope. "This has everything you need. If you have any questions call the number on the front of the envelope. Daisy can help you with whatever you need. Sorry for not taking more time but I was on my way home when Human Resources stuck this in my hand and directed me your way."

"Thanks for bringing it by," Mr. Rozier said.

"It was no problem though I do need to get going," he said after looking at his computer pad, the rough edge having left his voice somewhat. "I'll see you tomorrow, Mark."

"Yes, sir," Mark replied.

The 'Sir' in Mark's statement went over well as the man gave Mark a small smile and nod as he put his hat on and left the room, at least as fast as his cane would let him. He didn't carry it for show or self-defense. Mr. Rozier closed the door behind him and turned to Mark.

"Mark, do you know what an opportunity this is?"

"The principal told me that it's pretty good."

"Pretty good? That's an understatement. This is an opportunity people dream about like winning the lottery, marrying a super model or having your bread land on the ground peanut butter side up when you drop it."

That last didn't seem overly incredible, but Mark got the idea.

"The principal at school thought so, too. I asked her if she thought I should do it and she said yes."

"I'm glad you listened to her. This is an opportunity you must take advantage of. Do whatever it takes to succeed there. Don't worry about girls or parties or whatever. There will be time for all of that after you graduate. You won't get another shot at this school and people drop out of there like...well...a lot of them drop out. Or get thrown out. Like 55% the first year. I checked. Make the most of it and you'll be set for life. Make your life as easy as possible. Make this work."

"I will." Girls? Mark almost laughed out loud. One would have to look at him without shrieking and running away before that was a problem.

"Yes, I believe you will. It's time for you to move onto the next chapter of your life."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Rozier smiled at Mark.

"And Mark? Good luck and have a good life."

"Thank you. You, too."

Mark quickly left Mr. Rozier's office, returning to his room. He felt a little choked up, saying goodbye to Mr. Rozier. They hadn't known each other long, so this perplexed him, but the man was the only steady adult influence in his life since his parents died. Everybody needed somebody, he guessed, and Mr. Rozier had supported him. He would have to make it up to him someday.

Mark sat on his bed, looking at the notebook-sized envelope lying on his lap with some trepidation as he contemplated what the new school's whirlwind courtship had done to him. Life turned into chaos with the passing of his parents found some stability and routine. It didn't matter the routine included living in a place few considered home while attending a school that never challenged him. It had a level of comfort that he hesitated to leave. He supposed people could find comfort even in the uncomfortable if they got used to it.

Of course, not everything about the place was great. Not by a long shot.

"You're not going anywhere, are you, Gark? You just got here."

Great. Butch. At least that was what everyone called him. What was it with bullies and not being able to say his name? If he wanted to be scientific, he would consider it a dehumanizing way of showing no respect, which sounded about right. He knew no respect was coming his way.

Butch was the self-appointed leader and resident jerk of the third floor who respected no one. His real name was a mystery. After all, supervillains had secret identities, too. 16-year-old Butch had been there since the age of eight and desperately wanted out but never realized his lousy behavior came through in everything he did. No one wanted to adopt a problem.

Butch was a problem. For everyone. Including himself. He simply never realized it.

“No, I’m not being adopted,” Mark said.

“Then who was that guy, huh? The tooth fairy?”

“Yes. He wanted to thank you for all the business you’ve given him over the years, knocking people’s teeth out. He said he was eighteen and baby-faced before you came along.”

Mark always did have a knack for saying the wrong thing at the right time. Fortunately, his back-handed insult was obscure enough Butch missed it entirely.

“Haha! That’s why I keep you around, Dark. You make me laugh. Make sure you don’t get adopted before I do, got it?”

“Not a problem. No one wants me, anyway.”

“Who could blame them, you little wimp.” He left.

Butch was the usual jerk Mark had tolerated throughout his life. Being 5’ 2” and 105 pounds didn’t help fend them off, either. Mark had gotten him to stop beating him up long enough to realize he could help him. With homework, anyway.

Back to the envelope on his lap, it didn’t look special. The only thing on it was a boring label with his name, the word ‘Office,’ and a phone number, part of the reason it appeared so ominous. A spy used something like that; a storage place for a secret recording that would self-destruct 10 seconds after passing on the information. Suddenly he realized the real fun part: that could indeed be the case.

He opened the envelope with trepidation, hoping to spring whatever booby-trap awaited inside only to find a stack of papers. They were a bit of a letdown. Just standard stuff. Nothing top secret. No dossiers on foreign agents. Nothing that required him to eat it after reading. No warnings of self-destruction. A pamphlet given to tourists that contained a bit of information about the school. That was about it. Not.

None of those things were in there except for the pamphlet. What slid out was a drone the size of a dessert plate that immediately levitated in front of him. A holographic imager projected a 10 inch tall Dr. Rose onto his bed. He knew it was Dr. Rose from the research he did at school. And the man introduced himself. He wasn’t going to eat it even if it asked.

“Good evening, Mark Morgan. My name is Dr. Rose. This is your new student orientation drone. It will be your guide to school on your first day. Tell it how you will be getting to school, do what it says and we’ll be seeing you for orientation. Welcome to ARTS!”

That sounded exciting, except the drone did nothing, hovering by his bed. Was something supposed to happen? And now that Dr. Rose mentioned it, how was he getting to school? What did he say again? Tell it how he would be getting to school? Might as well give it a try. He guessed anything was better than the current stare off.

“Well, drone, I don’t have any idea how I’m getting to school. Can you tell me?” Mark asked the flying saucer.

“Do you have access to a motor vehicle of any kind?” The drone said in a very polite male voice.

“No.”

“Do you have any physical limitations that would prevent you from walking a significant distance?” it asked.

“No,” Mark said. He didn’t like the sound of that.

“This is what you need to do. Pack all of your belongings tonight. I will wake you at 4 o’clock in the morning. That will give you approximately one hour to get ready because we will be leaving at five. I will guide you from there.”

“Can you keep it down a little bit? There are certain kids on this floor who would be happy to find you,” Mark said.

“No one can hear me but you. I am using directional sound which focuses the soundwaves on you.”

“Well, that’s awesome.”

It was about the only excellent part of the situation. 5 a.m.? That was before they served breakfast. Here’s hoping somebody had lunch lined up for him at that school, but with his luck, he’d have to go hunting in the forest to survive.

He picked up the pamphlet and looked it over, trying to find even a single reference, picture, sketch, cave drawing, piece of toast with an image burned into it, or unabashed rumor concerning what hid within those walls. Nothing. Strange. There was an outline map of the inside, but that was it. Secretive, weren’t they?

He did find school times. Dress code, not that it mattered. He had the clothes he had with no money to buy more. He had to admit the drone made him hopeful. Talk about advanced technology.

Mark followed the drone’s instructions and packed all his things into his dad’s old duffel bag, holding out the best fitting items to wear the next day. Finally, he put his acoustic guitar in its case and set it beside the duffel bag, everything ready to go. The drone appeared to have been waiting for him to do that because after he finished, it sat down on top of his duffel bag and entered standby mode with only a small red light flashing on its edge.

He then got ready for bed.

“See you in the morning, Squark!” Butch yelled.

A person could get used to anything.

3

Who Let The Dogs Out?

Four o'clock came far too early.

Which was why he missed it.

Mark awoke to the drone tapping his head, much to his surprise and annoyance.

"I'm up! I'm up," Mark said.

"That is good. You have lost 40 minutes of preparation time because you took too long to wake up. You have only 20 minutes left to prepare and must hurry," the drone said.

So Mark did. He rushed to the bathroom, showered...

"10 minutes left."

...brushed his teeth, did his best to get his hair under control...

"5 minutes left."

...then returned to his bed. Clothes on. Bed made...

"Time is up. Get your things. It is time to leave."

"Yes, Mr. Drone."

Bossy thing, Mark thought as he followed the almost UFO down the stairs and out the orphanage's front door. In some ways, he liked rushing out because it didn't leave him time to be sentimental. Not that he wanted to be. The place held more bad memories than good, but it had been there when he needed it. He did give it credit for that.

"Where are we going?" Mark asked.

"The Durham Museum. It was formerly the Union Pacific train station and the school has leveraged those facilities for transportation of students," the drone said.

"Are you kidding? That's clear downtown! That'll take hours to walk to," Mark said.

"Approximately five which is why we are leaving now. We need to arrive by 10 o'clock and unless we hurry we will not make it in time. You must walk faster. Keep up with me."

The drone took off ahead of him, moving faster than some of the cars on the road beside them as Mark ran to keep up. Never even remotely athletic, he couldn't imagine maintaining the pace for five minutes, let alone five hours. Just then, the drone slowed down.

“We have now caught up to the spot we should be at according to our schedule. If we maintain this pace we will arrive in time. Follow me,” the drone said.

Fortunately, the new pace wouldn’t kill Mark though he wasn’t sure he could keep it up for five hours, not that he had a choice other than collapsing from exhaustion. And starvation. And, well, there had to be something else that would cause him to collapse. Anyway, he needed to hurry up. He was falling behind.

Five hours later found him at the Durham Museum, thirsty and entirely out of breath, walking onto the loading platform for the Ion Tube train that took students to ARTS. He was the only student on the platform, the only person of any kind, for that matter. The train hadn’t arrived. A huge, transparent tube, like what a bank drive-through used for sending containers back and forth between the cars and tellers, sat in front of him, doors closed.

“When will the train arrive?” Mark asked.

“Now.”

Mark didn’t realize how accurate his comparison would turn out to be as the ‘train’ came to an abrupt stop in front of him. Calling it a train didn’t work. He figured they used the term more out of familiarity than accuracy. It more resembled a capsule than a train. The door opened automatically, not a person to be seen. The drone led Mark onboard, where he sat down. The drone locked itself into a small chamber in the ceiling.

“Fasten your seatbelts. The train moves quickly,” the drone said.

The understatement of the year.

No sooner had Mark fastened his seatbelt than the capsule launched forward like a rocket blasting off, pushing him back into the seat with significant G forces. The pressure continued to build as the capsule accelerated, the landscape outside the tube having blurred into nothingness almost immediately. Two minutes later, it came to a stop. The little drone detached from the ceiling.

“How far did we go?” Mark asked.

“Approximately 30 miles.”

“In two minutes? That’s like, what? 900 mph!” Mark said. Maybe he could do it again.

“No, you do not time,” the drone said, seemingly reading his mind.

The capsule doors opened onto another platform, again absent of people, as the drone led Mark out. The platform connected to a small building with only one door leading to a wide path through the woods and up the hill beyond. He couldn’t see anything else. Walking the path from the station gave him the feeling of leaving the civilized world behind.

He wondered if he could see the Missouri river lying to the east. He’d have to check it out after getting settled.

Halfway up the hill, Mark began hearing noises in the forest around them.

“What are those sounds?” Mark asked the drone.

“Coyotes. They prowl these woods.”

“Are they dangerous?”

“Yes. We should hurry,” the drone said.

Too late.

Suddenly three coyotes stepped onto the path in front of him. Their growls didn’t make him think they wanted to play though he did get the feeling he was invited to dinner. He could go for dinner right now after having missed the last two meals, but he figured that wasn’t what they had in mind.

Thinking the way forward a loser, he decided to make a hasty retreat to the train building, finding two more coyotes had dropped in behind him.

Talk about disappointing. Mark used to like dogs, too. His best, make that only, friend was a little Jack Russell terrier named Bandit, but he had to give him up to a rescue group when he went to the orphanage. Hopefully, he found a good home.

Now, what was he supposed to do? Shouldn’t there be guards on the path or some anti-coyote weaponry built into the drone, like a dog biscuit launcher to distract them, making sure he made it to school safely? It looked like the only thing getting him out of this was him. Like always.

As the dogs closed in, he thought about what he could do. What was the first rule? Know his opponent. His strengths: a sharp mind. Their strengths: speed, teeth, numbers, nose, and outstanding hearing. They had him beat almost everywhere. His only hope was to use their strength against them, and he knew how to do it.

Sort of.

Mark was a sound guy. So what could he do with that? If he had his equipment, he could’ve built something, but he didn’t. What else was there?

“You must hurry,” the drone said like that was helpful.

“Hurry to where?” Mark asked.

Wait a minute. The drone. That was it.

Mark grabbed the drone out of the air (“Release me, you ruffian!”), tried to take its cover off only to find no easy way to do it, so he smashed it against a tree until its case broke open.

“Sorry about this,” Mark said.

He disconnected the lead from the power supply to the motherboard then shorted it across the speaker, creating a high pitched feedback whine that hurt even his ears. It immediately put the dogs in agony as they took off running into the forest.

He let out a sigh of relief. That worked out as well as he could have hoped except for the whole ‘trashing the drone’ thing. Maybe he could fix it later. He put the drone into his duffel bag then continued up the path.

He came out of the woods in front of a large building, which hopefully was the school. Standing before it, he admitted not being overly impressed. The principal had said a whole new world awaited him. What kind

of world he foolishly never asked. Maybe the refrain from that song in the movie Aladdin had run through his mind, dropping his guard to reality. A wondrous place, all right. Just not the good kind.

Only now did he realize how the conversation should have gone: Mark – “A new world? What kind of new world?” Dr. Turner – “A run down, creepy one,” because that’s what it was.

He wondered why a school that supposedly produced geniuses never thought of applying a coat of paint. Or doing grounds maintenance. Or washing windows. Or repairing mortar. Or trimming trees. Or calling an exterminator. Or...anyway.

The school reminded him of those English castle tours he watched on the Travel Channel. The tour guide pointed out all the castle’s formerly beautiful features, which had since fallen into disrepair. A wolf howled in the distance like it had been given a copy of the show’s script and followed its lines. The wolf never actually appeared during the show, and he never saw anyone bitten. He always thought an excellent werewolf appearance would have livened things up. There had to be at least one werewolf waiting to chomp someone somewhere.

Today, looking at the building, he kept waiting for someone to cue the wolf howl.

Four stories tall and rectangular with towers on the corners, it looked like the designers had seen those same English tour television shows and figured that was the perfect prototype layout for a spooky old place. They likely even stole the plans from merry old England. He never could figure out why people called England ‘Merry.’ The ‘old’ part certainly made sense. Its ancestors dated back a few thousand years. Still, between the rain, fog, werewolves, zombies, and people getting killed left and right in all those mystery books, he wondered how there was a living person left, let alone a ‘merry’ one. Honestly, if not a wolf, how about an owl hooting a couple of times?

The building’s narrow side, which wasn’t narrow at all, placed a pair of huge, old oak doors in front of him but not in the usual manner of a door, which was an entrance welcoming him to its interior. These could hardly be less hospitable.

The handles were so large and high on the doors; Mark’s hand couldn’t wrap around one even if he could reach it. Any attempt at opening one proved futile. He also didn’t know if a door had been sitting there partially open that he would’ve been strong enough to move it as big and bulky as they looked.

Mark guessed the drone would have likely opened the door for him, but with it out of commission, the next step was up to him, a recurring theme to his life. He thought about ringing the doorbell, but couldn’t find one to ring. Knocking on the door with his fist, foot, head, shoulder, rear-end, or any other body part sounded like nothing more than a lesson in self-inflicted pain. Some other options had to be available.

He found a good-sized branch and used all his strength to hit it against the door. The sound it made echoed, reverberating like a set of chimes. He did it again. The beauty of the tone surprised him. He could have sworn it had been tuned to the middle ‘C,’ which seemed absurd considering the door was wooden, but he was the only one paying attention because no one answered his knock/ring/thing.

He looked around for another entrance. Climbable vines grew up the building's sides, allowing him to exhibit his total lack of strength and physical coordination in the process. Windows ran along the sides of the building, which, if broken, could allow access and get him expelled before ever attending. Probably a new record there. Trees grew tall enough to jump from onto the top of the wall, though considering he couldn't climb a vine, climbing a huge tree and dropping onto the top of a four-story building looked like an option of last resort.

The place couldn't make him break a window every time he wanted to get in. There were over 200 genius students, 15 faculty members plus who knew how many other employees, many of whom did not live on the grounds. The door had to be easy to open, or they had to hire somebody to replace windows regularly. It also made no sense to ignore a door knock when they were expecting someone. Not a lot of genius had been involved if that was the case. Then a thought came to him that he immediately realized was correct. No one ever answered the door. If someone couldn't figure out how to get in, they didn't belong inside.

Now it was personal. That door was going down.

Risking his knuckles, he knocked on another area of the door. His soft knock created a surprisingly loud tone with a much higher note.

"Let's see if there are any other notes built into this thing," he said to himself.

He grabbed two sticks and began using them like mallets, tapping the door. The sounds returned were perfect. Real notes. There was an A, B, D, F...he found over a full octave, perfectly in tune, which was easy for him to tell since he had perfect pitch. He played almost every instrument, including guitar and piano (his favorite), but unfortunately, none of those instruments were 'door,' so he'd have to wing it.

Of course, the only reason to make a door with notes in it was to use them to open it, but what tones would do the job? He thought of the old, standard two-tone doorbell notes, the whole "Ding Dong" sound. He played it, but nothing happened. Then he thought about the chime of Big Ben, but that didn't work, either. Now what?

Brilliant minds lived there, geniuses who pondered the universe's ways and couldn't match a shirt and pants. In other words, Geeks. Nerds. The social outcasts of society. He had to think like one, which wasn't hard since he already did. What would occur to them? Ten notes weren't very many. It had to be pretty simple nerd music from video games and movies, but not just any movies. Nerd movies. Geek movies. Science Fiction, Anime, Superhero, or fantasy movies.

What simple note combination was a science fiction geek anthem? The first five notes of the "2001, a Space Odyssey" theme from music titled "Also Sprach Zarathustra" by Richard Strauss? He gave it a try. Nothing. How about the theme to George Lucas's "Star Wars"? Again nothing. The Star Trek theme? As he started thinking through that, figuring out the notes, it hit him.

Of course.

How obvious.

Had to be.

He played G, A, F, lower octave F than middle C. The communication melody from Steven Spielberg's movie "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." Instantly, the door dropped into the ground with a hiss, a panel closed over it, creating a smooth walk path.

"Welcome to ARTS, Mr. Morgan," said a woman's voice, seemingly from nowhere.

"Who said that? How do you know who I am?" Mark said.

"My name is Daisy. I am the school's central computer.

"I have been expecting you."