Beat This, BOCES

 At John Glenn Central High School, at an undisclosed location near Myrtle Beach in Florida, United States, Earth, something was about to happen.

 That’s a great way to begin a story. And it always works, because something is always about to happen. The reader is only fortunate if it turns out to be something rather exciting, which is, fortunately for the reader, the case here.

 It was taking place in Mrs. Shwartzwenginald’s study hall third period. James “The Boinger” McArvo and his best friend, John “Standback” Collins, sat side by side. These two young men were well known all over the school, and if they had their way, that would be upped significantly to include the universe.

 John was in the process of downloading a proxy to bypass his computer’s firewall and get to a halfway decent web site. James was more apt to settle for what was available, and so he checked out the school’s page.

 “Hockey game tomorrow,” he announced to John.

 John grunted, meaning, “I had no idea just because I’m going to be in it.”

 “Dance next Friday,” he continued.

 John snorted, meaning, “I’m not allowed at those anymore, remember?”

 “Hmm… School newspaper staff are wondering who reprogrammed their computer to replace any article containing the word “his” with a random excerpt from The Guide to Alpha Centaurian Fungi, Third Edition, and changed the lead story from ‘Valedictorian Victories’ to ‘Mr. Mulroy’s Pituitary Problems, Part 1’.”

 John snickered, meaning, “That was Harold, but it was my idea.”

 James scanned the headings for a while. “Hey, what’s this?” he wondered suddenly. “Attention juniors and seniors…”

 John glanced up for a moment. “It’s probably about the parking lot regulations again,” he scoffed. “No one ever reads those. And I think they should be satisfied that no one’s driven through the doors this year.”

 “It’s a bit more exciting than that, I think,” said James. “Listen to this: ‘Do you want extra money, valuable skills, and the admiration of your peers?’”

 “What a grabber,” John remarked. “Money, good. Skills, okay. Admiration, strakkin’ sweet!”

 Mrs. Shwartzwenginald looked up and frowned at them. “Language, Mr. Collins,” she remonstrated.

 “Sorry,” he hollered. “Prude,” he muttered.

 “You should thank her for building up suspense,” said James. “Look: ‘Serve part-time as an Ensign on an official U.N. star freighter! For further details, click here.”

 “Awesome! Click it! Click it!”

 James clicked it, and another page came up. Both of them breathlessly read the words which filled the screen:

For academic eligibility, students must have a cumulative average of 90 or higher and no Level 3 or 4 offenses throughout their current school year.

 John slumped back in his chair. “Maybe I could get my old job back at Burger King,” he sighed.

 James frowned. “Didn’t you get your average up?” he wondered.

 John nodded. “It has more to do with that ‘offenses’ thing,” he said, pointing to his own screen. It said:

Student THX 1138-B!

You have been apprehended for attempting to download an illegal proxy to this server!

This constitutes a Category 3 offense and may result in further disciplinary action by school officials!

 James continued to frown. “That happened just now?”

 John continued to nod. “Life has a way of sucking like that sometimes,” he said.

 They looked up and sure enough, Mrs. Schwartzwenginald was looming over them, having silently been alerted by a pop-up on her own screen. “Our sites a bit too dull for you, Mr. Collins?” she said, raising an eyebrow.

 “More so than the facial expression of a cow on a railroad track,” retorted John.

 “And so what were we about here, mm? Looking to get to the nasties, perhaps?”

 “Well, I’ve got your face right in front of me, so I’d say I’ve found some.”

 She ignored him and looked at the ad on James’ screen. “Very clever, wasn’t it?” she said. “Putting it up without so much as a mention. This way, you see, only the most enterprising of individuals, who think outside the box and look to find things on their own, will ever find out. Only flaw being that everyone tells their friends, and we get crap in the system.” She looked disdainfully at John.

 “No need to gloat,” he hissed. “Go ahead and blow my shot out of the water. I ain’t going.”

 She frowned. “Let’s not be hasty,” she said. “I was only teasing. This is a great opportunity, and beneath your smartburro exterior, I feel you have the potential to benefit from it.” She sighed. “I never did have these sorts of opportunities when I was your age.”

 “Ah, quit your whinin.’ *We* never get to skin mastodons.”

 “Mr. Collins, if you’ll kindly dispense with the attitude, I may be able to pull a few strings and get you along,” she warned.

 John thought for a moment. James held his breath.

 “Deal,” he said.

 Satisfied, Mrs. Schwartzwenginald walked over to the phone. “‘Menial job’, they said. ‘Let’s hire a robot,’ they said. Eat your heart out, capitalist dweebs!”

 John shook his head. “Between ourselves,” he whispered, “sometimes I really worry about her.”

 James shrugged. “You’d be worse than that, if you had to deal with you.”

 Just then the bell rang.

 “Two minutes,” muttered John. “If I’d just waited two minutes, I’d be home free right now.”

 At lunch later that day, they continued to discuss the idea.

 “If Schwartzy gets it through, I’m a cinch to go,” John insisted. “My old man couldn’t care less if I’m dancing with the Great Bear.”

 “I don’t understand why she’s doing this,” said James. “After what a jerk you’ve been all year.”

 “Oh, don’t you start. She has it all coming. Unprovoked, I’m sweet as pie. Hey!” he shouted at a passing freshman.

 “Sir?” the kid hesitantly came forward.

 “Hey man, ‘sup? Hey, could you do me a favor and flex those sexy pipes?”

 “Well, I –”

 “C’mon, let’s go, we ain’t got all day! Annie here” he gestured at a classmate who was doubled over in laughter “can’t wait to see your manly forelimbs.”

 “Sir, I’m afraid I haven’t got any muscle.”

 “Sure ya do! You just don’t know how to flex! Here, lemme show you how it’s done!”

 A bit of a crowd was gathering by now. The freshman, whose name by the way was Bob Nicholson and who had quite a familial history of this sort of thing happening in high school although he didn’t know it because his ancestor’s journals all lied and said they were incredibly buff football captains, began to sweat as John positioned his arm and showed him how to squeeze.

 “All right kid, come on…”

 Closing his eyes and imagining a peaceful field of sunflowers and golden wheat, Bob flexed.

 Hearing the gasps that echoed through the now mostly-silent cafeteria, he opened his eyes and nearly dropped dead of fear when he saw the rock-solid basketball-sized lumps bulging from his arm. That was definitely *not* part of the familial history.

 John slapped him on the back. “Great dude, I told ya! Annie’s drooling now!” In fact nearly everyone at the table was drooling, from an inability to shut their gaping mouths.

 As soon as Bob had left, John’s mouth joined them. As soon as he could speak he said, “Holy Grabthar, who saw that coming?”

 Within the following weeks Annie would develop an infatuation with Bob, and would eventually drop out of college during his senior year to be with him. They would have several wonderfully romantic dates, and eventually be married and have several beautiful children who each grew up to invent something for the betterment of mankind. The Lord works in mysterious ways, but it is still a wonder that he managed to get something out of a twit like John.

 “So as I was saying,” he continued, “unprovoked, I’m sweet as pie. Schwartzy just needed to learn her place, that’s all.”

 James rolled his eyes. “I think you need a new recipe,” he said. “As a friend, I tell you that you’re an obnoxious crude louse. You have some redeeming qualities, but in class you manage to keep them well hidden.”

“Whatever. Hey Annie, what are you staring at?”

 Even as they spoke, John’s case was being pled before the principal, Mr. Mulroy. Mrs. Schwartzwenginald’s phone call had met with little success and now she was playing hardball.

 “Look, Fred,” Mrs. Schwartzwenginald insisted, pointing at his report printout, “All of his grades are phenomenal. He is a very intelligent young man.”

 “If he’s so intelligent, Agnes,” he retorted, “he shouldn’t have trapped himself right after he heard the news. You know our discipline policy, Agnes, and it’s always been the same.”

 “But you know the firewall is too restrictive!” she protested. “You can’t go to anything worthwhile. Even I have trouble preparing my lessons sometimes.”

 “He should have registered a formal complaint with the Tech office.”

 “Fred, *everyone*’s registered a formal complaint with the Tech office. Most of them, several times. And you know what? I went in one day for some ink cartridges, and they were playing *Space Gigolos 3*.”

 Mr. Mulroy frowned slightly. “That does seem to be an abuse of power, I will admit,” he said.

 “Oh, you think!? I nearly had a coronary right there, when I saw what they – but John doesn’t do that sort of thing, Fred! Do you realize he’s downloaded proxies several times in the past without being caught?”

 “How –!?”

 “The security checks run on a random basis, you see. Otherwise every student in school would be getting suspended all the time.”

 Mr. Mulroy shook his head. “I should fire you right now for not mentioning that before,” he said. “And it’s about time I knew how things are run around here.”

 “Regardless. You know what he’s done when that happened?”

 “Do I want to?”

 “Research. On the Philipulian cluster in the Origam nebula.”

 “Honestly?”

 “Cross my heart. He has a curious, explorative mind, Fred. Exactly what the recruiters in this program need.”

 Mr. Mulroy mulled it over.

 “It will keep him out of your hair,” she added.

 This tantalizing promise, and the subtle reference to the remaining hairs on his follically challenged scalp, won him over. “All right,” he said, “let’s see if we can’t arrange something.”

 Eighth period, John and James stood outside John’s locker.

 “That password is incorrect,” it was saying. “Four more failed attempts will result in notification of school authorities and subsequent disciplinary action.”

 “Bananas.”

 “That password is incorrect. Three more failed attempts will result in notification of school authorities and subsequent disciplinary action.”

 “Lava cakes.”

 “That password is incorrect. Two more failed attempts will result in notification of school authorities and subsequent disciplinary action.”

 John banged his head in frustration. “Voice recognition. Thumbprint activation. Retinal scanning. But no, the welfare school has to spring for Stone Age tools.”

 “That password is incorrect. One more failed attempt will result in –”

 “Bloody strakking gungloving malcretined son of a jackwad!”

 “That password is correct,” it said as the door opened and an avalanche of stuff tumbled out. “Hurry, John Collins. You are going to miss the bus.”

 “I drive a strakking car, thank you very much,” John sneered at it, but James turned pale.

 “I have to go,” he said, starting to run. “Bye, John, let me know how you-know-what turns out! And maybe write down the password while it’s still fresh in your mind!”

 “Why bother? It always comes to me when I need it!” John gathered his things and stuffed everything else back in. He stood up and turned to find himself face-to-face with Mrs. Schwartzwenginald.

 “Quite a vocabulary you have there, Mr. Collins,” she observed. “I should think the Tech office would have a bone to pick over that password of yours. But then, I went in one day for some ink cartridges, and –”

 “Mrs. Schwartzwenginald,” he begged, “with all due respect, please quit stalling and bite the bullet.”

 “It’s a go,” she said. “On two conditions.”

 “Name them,” said John.

 “First,” she said, listing it on her finger, “that Mr. McArvo accompany you to keep you out of trouble.”

 “Hardly seems unfair to me,” John admitted.

 “Second, that Ms. Arquiette come along to keep you both out of trouble.”

 “And I thought this was all for me.” John shook his head in admiration. “You’re all right, Schwartzy. And James is gonna be thrilled.”

 “Remember,” she warned, “I’m doing this because I see your potential. Do not disappoint me.”

 “Hey, it’s me,” he said. “Potential is my middle name.”

 As he walked away, Mrs. Schwartzweginald dearly hoped to heaven that she had done the right thing. She dearly hoped that John would exceed her expectations, and not blow up the ship on his first day.

 She was too far away by then to hear him mutter, “*Andy*’s coming. We’re *screwed*.”

 Perhaps by now you are thinking, *That whole subplot with Mrs. Schwartzwenginald was a complete waste of time.* If so you are probably right. But that wasn’t the something that was about to happen. So sit tight.

 What *was* about to happen was not the sort of thing anyone could ever be prepared for. Not the crew of an official U.N. freighter, not the highest trained astronauts at NASA, and certainly not a pair of juniors and a senior from high school.

 And the benefactress of one of those juniors, eager to rid her study hall of an untapped wall of potential, had unknowingly condemned selfsame junior to at least a dozen possible fates.

A Little Semi-Romantic Tension

 The great poet Shakespeare, unforgotten even in the distant age when our story takes place, once had the heroine of one of his plays lament, “What is in a name?”

 Many at John Glenn High had inadvertently butchered his original intent when this phrase inevitably made them think of Andromeda “Call me Andy” Arquiette.

 The first name, Andromeda. At the dawn of the space age, many parents could not resist the gimmick of naming their kids dumb space-related things, like Cosmo. Her parents, Antares and Luna Arquiette, had somehow both had this undesirable trait passed down through their families. This was evidenced by her older sisters – Cassiopeia “Call me Cassie,” Samakah “Call me Sam,” Jupiter “Uh, call me Jupe, I guess,” and Stellaluna “Please, for the love of all that is good and holy, call me anything except Stellaluna.”

 And finally the last name, Arquiette. It was a lovely indicator of her ancestors’ origin, in the St. Lawrence County of New York, United States. At one time the name had been as common there as “Smith” or “Jones” everywhere else, seconded only by the ever-popular “Ramsdell.” Andy’s family had moved to Florida several decades ago, but they could never shake their redneck roots.

 For all the information this availed one, however, none could ever guess from these facts alone at the complex multifaceted gem that was Andromeda. Within her raged an inner turmoil that had kept her awake at night for most of her life. Whenever she tried to reach the eye of the storm, however, and find what it was all about, her mind went blank and she was incapable of higher motor functions for hours at a time.

 Not that she ever did much anyway. Andy’s body was run on autopilot, more literally than most imagined, and went through its daily motions like a well-oiled machine. She masked her turmoil with a lack of emotion and only spoke in response to direct questions. When one looked into her eyes, one could see pools of hopelessness which, while undeniably beautiful, served to rob one of any enthusiasm for life. Where it went was a mystery, because she certainly had none of her own.

 And by the way, something should be said of her incredible brain. Andy was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, one of the greatest geniuses the human race had ever seen, and therefore her eccentricities were always forgiven. Simply by staring at a problem, dealing with subjects she had never come anywhere close to encountering before, her brain could analyze it within seconds and somehow pull missing information out of probability and logistics and how much carbon was in the paper. Then she would quickly solve it, where an educated expert on the topic had taken weeks.

 Needless to say, the school begged her to skip to college, and many prestigious ones offered impressive scholarships. Andy knew she was different. She knew she was special. She knew she could become the most renowned scientist in the universe with no effort whatsoever.

 But for whatever reasons, she always politely refused their offers. And when they looked in those eyes, they found it very difficult to insist.

 James had a crush on her.

 “Hey Andy!” he called. She nodded at him and continued walking.

 James rushed to catch up. “How’s it going?” he asked.

 She raised an eyebrow. “Okay,” she lied. It was the same load of space spit as usual and they both knew it.

 “So,” he continued, “Did you hear the news?”

 She nodded.

 “I mean, about being Ensigns?”

 She nodded.

 “So what do you think?”

 “I think a lot of things, McArvo,” she said coldly. “Pertaining to the exciting new job opportunity you have seen fit to remind me of, as I assume you are referring to with your most recent of thoughtless questions, I think it is a worthy use of my time. And, in anticipation of your next thoughtless question, I am preparing to go.”

 James grinned. “That’s great!” he said. “Maybe we’ll be on the same ship!”

 They reached the doors. James dearly wished, as he always did, that he could hold them open for her. But they slid open by themselves as usual. James thought he detected an unusually smug tone in their “Have a nice day.”

 James hesitated. Then, heck with it, he thought.

 “Andy,” he said, “can I ask you something?”

 “You may ask me an additional question, if you have first put into it an appropriate amount of thought.”

 “Oh, believe me, I think about this all the time,” said James. “Wanna go to Fergie’s tonight?”

 As if on cue, they had reached her car. Andy stopped and turned to stare at him.

 “No,” she said.

 Their eyes locked. James saw the pools of hopelessness, and he knew she wanted nothing. For her, nothing could hold value. For her, life was a way to kill time.

 Andy saw that she was robbing him of his enthusiasm for life as well, and berated herself silently for making eye contact. She would make it up to him, she decided. She would give him a second chance.

 “Precision of language is a wise man’s tool,” she said.

 James mulled it over. A flicker of hope returned to his eyes.

 “Andy,” he said, “*Will* you go to Fergie’s tonight?”

 “That I will,” said Andy. “Will you come along?”

 “That would be great,” said James, positively beaming.

 “In anticipation of the question you do not dare to speak, yes, you may ride home with me.”

 James shrugged. “Oh, I couldn’t impose like that, I – hey! You just spoke without responding to a direct question!”

 This time, James thought he saw a flicker of hope in *her* eyes. Maybe even a little happiness? But then it was gone, and she was opening her car, and saying, “It is your choice. Balance the desires of your heart with the wisdom of your mind.” Then she was gone, and James was left in a cloud of dust.

 *If* she *had any desires in her heart,* James thought, *I would give her them all.*

 “Don’t get me wrong, I know it’s a pity date,” he said to John on the way home. “She isn’t interested in me. But still… it’s pretty sweet!”

 John snorted. “It ain’t just you,” he said. “She ain’t even interested in *guys*. Or anything. I tell ya, the chick is a walking database and that is *it*. Capische? Kaput.”

 “I wish there was something I could do to help,” said James.

 “Don’t push it, that’s all I can say. If she wants help, she knows where she can go.” They turned onto an intersection and all was silent.

 “I know it’s just a crush,” James said suddenly.

 John rolled his eyes. “Random,” he pointed out.

 “Really. I know it’s just a hormonal reaction to stuff and it isn’t real love and there’s no reason to act like we’re destined to be together or anything. I know it. The feelings are strong, but they won’t last.” He folded his arms. “It’s just a pity date.”

 John shook his head. “You know that, but you don’t *believe* it. Your mind is programmed to accept this at face value. Not so deep down, you remain convinced that you’re going to have some big adventure and save her life or something, and throughout its course she will fall in love with you and find her missing happiness. I’m not criticizing you, mind, but don’t try to deny it. Just go with the flow.”

 James squirmed. “Now *you’re* sounding like a database,” he said.

 “I tell it like it is, pal,” John insisted. “Life can suck like that.” He laughed. “Listen to us. Here we are about to go into space, and we’re talking about a girl. A neurotic, psychotic, incredibly disturbing girl, but a girl nonetheless. Funny how things work out.”

 They drove the rest of the way in silence, until they reached James’ house.

 “Thanks for the ride,” he called, waving.

 “Hey, no prob, see ya Monday,” John called back. “Oh, and James?”

 “Yeah?”
 “Good luck.”

Ooh… Pretty

 “This is my telescope,” said Andy. She unveiled a small handheld device that looked surprisingly like a case of dental floss.

 James was impressed. “Did you make it yourself?” he wondered.

 Andy nodded. She handed it to him.

 When James looked through the lens, the night sky suddenly enfolded him. He was warped into the midst of the stars and the planets, and could see them more clearly than he ever had in an observatory.

 “It’s time for my astronomy session,” she said. “I need it back.”

 James handed it back over and watched in fascination as she opened the lid and made a few seemingly minor adjustments. Then she looked through it and arched her neck to the sky.

 She stood like that for two hours, moving her head constantly but at such a slow rate that no one could discern it, in rapt fascination with the cosmos. The night air blew coldly and mosquitoes landed on her, but she did not notice.

 Meanwhile, James was equally absorbed watching her. His heartbeat began to accelerate and his palms began to sweat. He felt that he could do this all night.

 Then, suddenly, she put it away and turned to him. “When one observes the heavenly bodies,” she said, “one is looking into eternity.”

 James quickly tried to say something clever. What came out was, “You have the most heavenly body *I’ve* ever observed.”

 Instantly he wanted to slap himself. Stupid, stupid, stupid. What would she think now? That he was some kind of slobbering pervert?

 Fortunately, or rather unfortunately most of the time but fortunately at this moment, she still didn’t care. She was contemplating something else. “It’s a great night for observing them with the naked eye,” she said. “Why don’t we set up some deck chairs, make some popcorn and invite your friend Collins to join us. It shall be the perfect segue to our forthcoming journey.”

 James nodded. “S-sure,” he said. “That’d be great.” On the one hand, he figured, he would rather have Andy to himself. But on the other hand, with John here it would be slightly less likely that he would say or do something even stupider. Stupid enough for even her to notice.

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 “Now this is the life, and no mistake,” John said as he leaned back in his chair. The others had to agree.

 “Mr. Jacobs’ Astronomy class was a real yawn-a-minute,” added James. “He really should have fit in more of the real stuff.” He turned to Andy. “What’s your interest in all this?”

 “It kills time,” she replied. “It is, of course, a worthwhile pursuit. If ever an asteroid should threaten the Earth, I shall know of it.”

 James and John laughed. *Was that a joke?* James wondered. He thought he saw a twinge of mirth in her eye, but he could not be sure.

 “So, you’re not thinking of doing it professionally, or anything?” he pressed.

 Andy sighed. “McArvo,” she said, “in all modesty, I must remind you that any occupation I should happen to choose is one I shall happen to excel at. Additionally, none of them hold any interest for me whatsoever. And so this is as much of a possibility as any.”

 They remained silent for a while so they could actually stargaze. It really was a beautiful night, and everyone realized how lucky they were to see it. Not ten years ago, before the gargantuan environmental cleanup projects, this very spot had been so obscured by smog that foghorns were used to direct traffic. Now it offered a gorgeous view of a gorgeous sky.

 “There’s the Big Dipper,” said James, pointing.

 “And the little one,” he said a minute later, pointing again.

 “Those are the only constellations I know,” he said a minute later, turning to Andy. “You probably know all of them, right?”

 “Correct.”

 “So where’s Cassiopeia?”

 “After she graduated high school, she went to Clarkson University in New York and graduated with a Master’s degree in cubism, and moved to the thriving metropolis of downtown Buckton where she currently resides with her husband Frank, two children, and a pet Chihuahua named Skippy.”

 James was confused for a minute. “Oh, your sister!” he laughed. “I meant the constellation. You know, she’s like this mythical chick who got tied to a chair and thrown into the ocean and then Hercules rescued her. I think.”

 Andy sighed again. “I am aware of what you meant,” she said. “However, I harbor a disdain for the constellations and do not enjoy discussing them.”

 James raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

 “For the ancient Greeks, who doubtless had nothing to do, it may have been perfectly logical to find pictures in the stars,” she said. “However, times have changed. It is now a perfect waste of time.”

 “How so?”

 “Honestly, McArvo, must I completely spell it out? Connect-the-dots is child’s play. At this age, with the scientific knowledge that we now have, more mature studies are in order. This, of course, only makes the stories behind them more patently ludicrous. They are combusting balls of hydrogen. Not mythical characters.”

 “I always thought Cassiopeia looked more like a *W* anyway,” said John.

 James thought long and hard before responding. “Sometimes,” he said, “it’s healthy to turn off the calculator, and turn on the soul.” He tried to convey the sort of emotion that you get when they say sappy things at the climaxes of movies.

 Andy continued in a movie role of her own. “I have no soul,” she said simply.

 He looked into her eyes again and could not deny this. She had finally put her finger on it, hit the proverbial hammer on its proverbial head, and blatantly pointed out what had been wrong all along. It was an incredibly disturbing revelation, and no one spoke for a long time.

 When snoring began to come from John’s chair, Andy decided it was time for them to go. “We have a lot of preparing to do for the voyage,” she reminded them both.

 James looked up at the stars again and forced a smile. “We’ll be up there. Citizens of the universe.” Truthfully, the thought of journeying through space with a soulless partner was beginning to daunt him.

 John stumbled out the gate. “See y’all later,” he slurred. “Oy, who needs alcohol to get drunk?”

 “Good night,” Andy called. James hastened to follow John, but Andy motioned him back. Tentatively, he followed.

 She leaned into his ear. “Thank you for the date.”

 “Oh –” he had no idea what to say.

 “I know it brought you pleasure. And so for me it was a worthwhile use of time.”

 “Uh –”

 “I would, in fact, even offer this moment as an opportune one for kissing. However, as you well know, kissing can increase heart rate by at least three percent, and this close to bedtime, I would hate to interfere anymore than I already have with our sleep schedules.” She sighed. “I am sorry.”

 James was very confused now. He felt an astonishing wave of different emotions. While he was still disturbed, he could feel his infatuation creeping back. And the trouble was that they did not seem mutually exclusive.

 “Apology accepted,” he assured her.

 “And also,” she added, lowering her voice until it was barely audible above the crickets, “thank you for the compliment.”

 “Uh – what compliment?”

 “You know the one, McArvo.”

 Even in the dark, one could see from quite a distance that James had turned completely red. And then he saw it. The flicker was once again in her eyes. And it lingered for a while longer before disappearing this time.

 “Good night,” she repeated, and turned and went into the house.

 A few weeks into the job, life on a spaceship became incredibly boring. They rarely made contact with other life-forms, and only ever stopped for minor maintenance and refueling. The Ensigns’ lifestyles consisted of eating, sleeping, and performing menial odd jobs all over the ship. Andy had taken to wandering the corridors alone (and she insisted on this part) during her spare time, and so James and John were forced to amuse themselves somehow.

 “So anyways,” John was saying one typical day, “there’s an Ardavian Brak and an Earthling at this party.”

 “What sort of party?” James, always the overanalyzing one, wanted to know.

 “A galactic interplanetary space party. And there’s –”

 “Why are they at the party?”

 “It’s a sorority thing and they crashed it.”

 “Together?”

 “No, they’ve never met before. They each came with a separate gang of drunk fraternity jackwads.”

 “So wouldn’t they be in a fight?”

 “Yes. They’re in a bloody brawl with broken bottles and then they all die, which serves as a valuable lesson to youth everywhere.”

 “And what about the Ardavian Brak and the Earthling?”

 “No, they don’t die. They’re the designated pilots and they stayed off the booze so they weren’t involved. So the Brak is looking over and –”

 “With the normal, compound, infrared or ultraviolet eyes?”

 “All of them.” John sighed in exasperation. “Will you let me tell the darn joke?”

 “Shutting up now,” James assured him.

 “Okay. So there’s an Ardavian Brak and an Earthling who have crashed this galactic interplanetary space sorority party with their separate gangs of drunk fraternity jackwads and narrowly escaped a bloody brawl with broken bottles due to the wisdom of their abstinence, and the Brak looks over at the Earthling with all of its eyes and flips its skreeble. So then –”

 “Wait, are you saying it’s got the hots for him?”

 “Or her, doesn’t matter, but yeah –”

 “Under the described circumstances, I don’t think the skreeble would come into play. Too risky environment, and I don’t think another species could generate the pheromones right. I believe it would use the krambloch.”

 “Well, that’s why *you* passed biology. Anyway, the Brak gets twitterpated and works up the nerve to ask the Earthling to dance.”

 “Wait – oh, never mind.”

 “What?”

 “Never mind.”

 “For Grabthar’s sake, what!?”

 “It’s just that… well… Earthlings were voted like the third least sexy species in the universe or something like that in Wegbertt’s last poll, right?”

 “Nah, just in the galaxy.”

 “But still –”

 “The room was really dark.”

 “You said it was using its infrared eyes.”

 “It was drunk and couldn’t see straight.”

 “You said it was the designated pilot.”

 “It had just undergone a nearly fatal krambloch transplant with a Malgovian Schnoob and still had a few kinks in the system. So it asks the Earthling to dance, and the Earthling kind of likes it too, and gets kind of shy, and kind of shrugs and says, ‘Gee, thanks, but you don’t want to dance with *me*. I’ve got two left feet.’” John squinted at James suspiciously. “Are you getting ready to say something?” he demanded.

 James shook his head.

 “You’re not going to ask what the temperature was, or what time it was, or why pigs don’t have wings?”

 James shook his head.

 “Well then. The Ardavian Brak shrugs, laughs and says, ‘Don’t worry about that. I’ve got a hundred sixty-four.’”

 There was a brief silence.

 Then they both burst into laughter. James fell off his bunk and began pounding on the floor. They laughed, and laughed, until dark spots appeared in their visions and each was sure his spleen was about to rupture.

 “I… get it!” James wheezed between guffaws. “It’s… funny!... because… when you say… two left feet… it means… clumsy!… but the Brak… actually means… that it literally has… a hundred… and… and… sixty-four left feet!” He howled.

 Eventually the room fell quiet. Both of them were sure, as they lay there, that they had either died and gone to heaven, or had simply spent far too much time laughing at a rather stupid joke.

 There were a few more weak chuckles, and they both slowly raised themselves up off the floor.

 “You know what?” said James, wiping tears from his eyes.

 “What?” wondered John, massaging his cheeks.

 “I think you told it funnier yesterday.”

 But this revelry was not to be for much longer. Neither of them, or even Andy, could fathom what was to happen within just a few hours. If they could have, possibly none of them would have ever left Earth. Or then again, perhaps they would have been all the more enthusiastic. Who could tell?

 One thing is for certain, however, and that is that their lives were about to be not boring, not by a long shot. In fact, they were in danger of being completely gone. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves, eh?

 “Okay,” said James, “I’ve got one. How many Karlinian Jhuggs does it take to change a light bulb?”

To be continued! Duh duh duuuuuuuhn! Stay tuned for the rest of the book somewhen within my lifetime! And if you hated it, I don’t care! Shut up! I hate you too! jk ;)