

Danny tied him to the sofa again and handed up the dice. Walter rolled and got his gravity back, dropping to the floor with a thud. Danny moved his piece and handed him his card. “Your robot is defective,” Walter read.

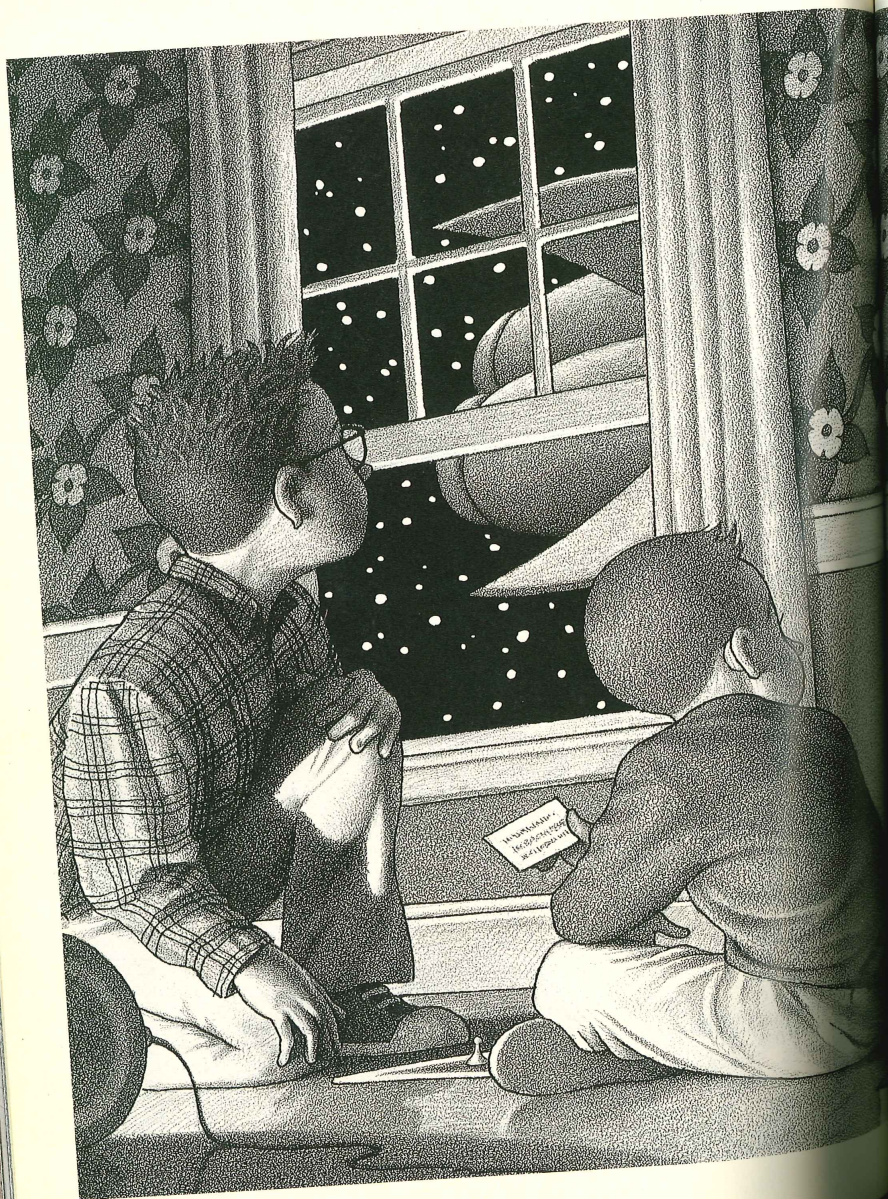
From the hallway came the sound of rattling metal and a steady *clank, clank, clank*. The boys stared at the doorway as a shiny silver robot stepped into view. He was having trouble walking on the tilted floor. His head rotated back and forth and seemed to freeze on Walter. The robot’s eyes lit up and he spoke in an odd mechanical voice: “Emergency, emergency, alien life form. Must destroy.” His clawlike metal hands snapped open and shut.

“Uh-oh,” Danny whispered, “I think he’s talking about you.” Fortunately, when the robot stepped forward he missed the door, banged into the wall, and fell to the floor. He got up and did it again. And then again.

“Better hurry up and roll,” said Walter, “before he makes it in here.”

Danny rolled the dice and took his card: “‘You pass too close to Tsouris 3, gravity greatly increased.’”

The room began to level out, but something strange was happening to Danny. Walter looked at him. “Holy smoke,” he said. Danny was getting shorter, and wider too. Soon he was about the shape and size of a large beach ball.



“Waaalter,” he said in a low voice. “I feeeel verrrry heeeavy.”

“Destroy alien life forms,” the robot repeated from the hall as he picked himself up again. This time he made it through the door and headed for Walter.

Danny yelled to his brother, “Puuush meee!”

“What?” said Walter.

“Puuush meee,” Danny yelled again. “Juuust puuush meee.”

Walter bent down and gave his brother a shove. Danny rolled across the room and, like a giant bowling ball, knocked the robot over and flattened his legs. “Did I geeet hiiim?” asked Danny, who couldn’t see because he’d rolled up against a wall and was upside down.

Walter pushed him back to the game board. “You sure did,” he said, patting his brother’s head. “You were terrific.”

Walter picked up the dice and rolled. He took his card, and his hand trembled as he read, “Zorgon pirate ship launches photon attack.”

Through the window, the boys saw a spaceship. Two points of light shot from the ship and headed directly for the Budwing house. The first one hit the chimney and sent bricks falling into the fireplace. The second hit the upstairs bathroom. Water began dripping down from the hole in the ceiling.

Walter handed the dice to Danny, who had a hard time lifting his short, heavy arm. He rolled, and as Walter moved his token for him, he slowly returned to his normal shape. A card popped out. Danny read it silently. “This is bad,” he said. “Zorgon pirate boards your vessel.”

The room shook as the spaceship banged up against the house. The boys heard footsteps on the roof. Through the opening in the ceiling they saw someone or something climb through the hole in the roof and enter the room above them. Danny and Walter moved to the hallway, standing behind the flattened robot. They held each other, too terrified to move. A humming sound came from their feet. They looked down and saw the robot’s eyes light up.

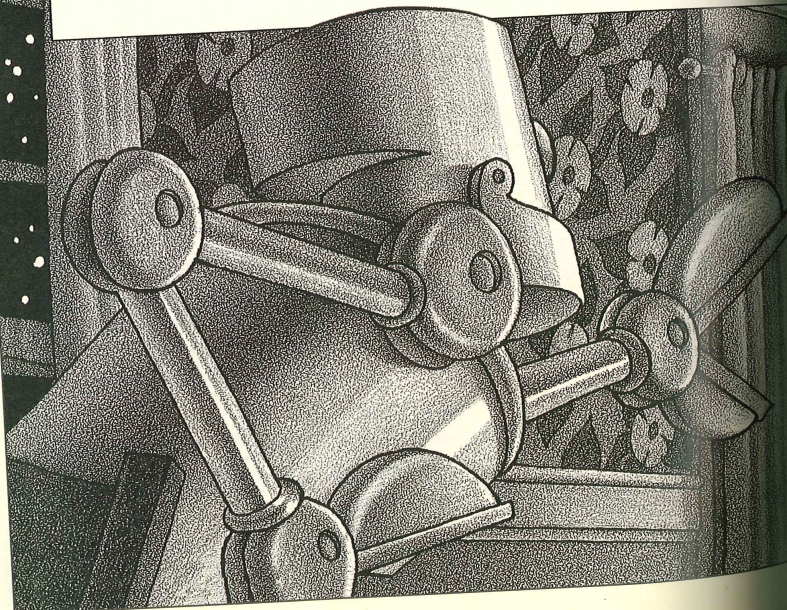
He lifted his head, fixed his eyes on the hole in the ceiling, and spoke: “Alien life form, must destroy.” His clawlike hands twitched but he couldn’t get up.

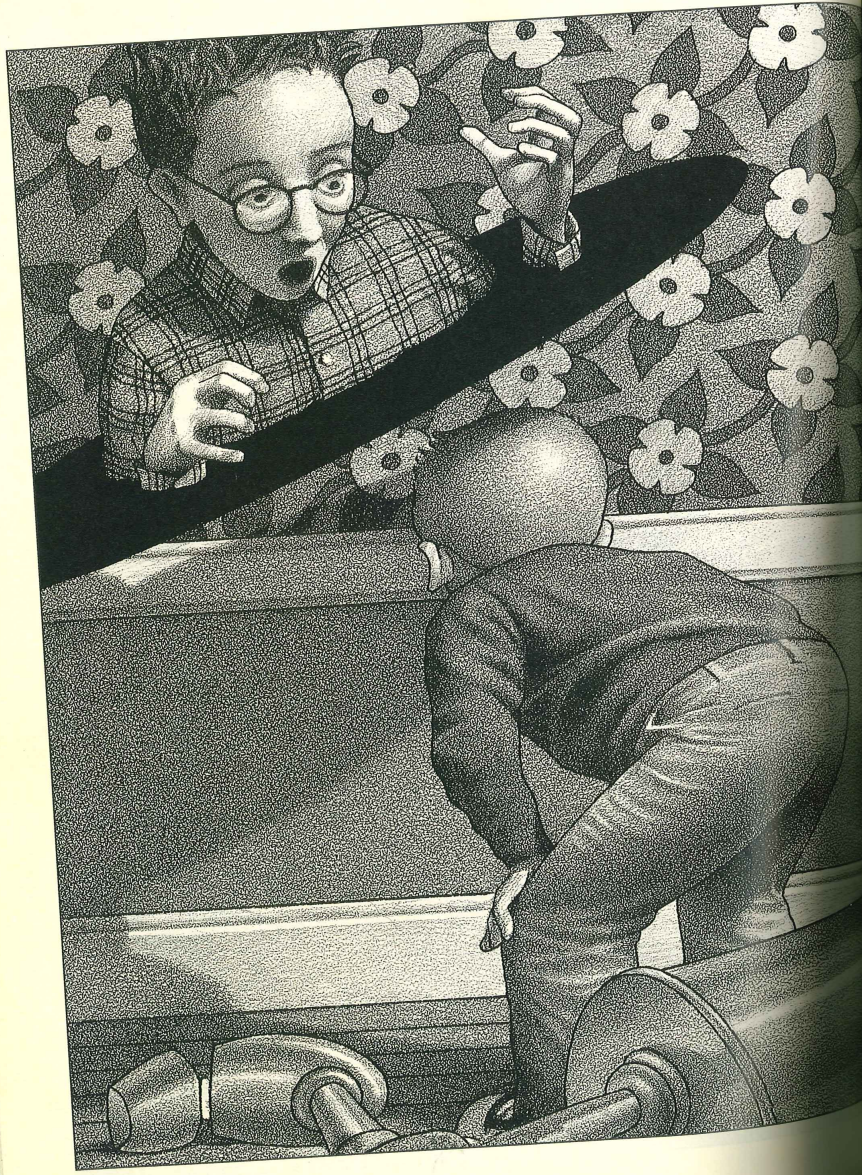
Danny and Walter helped him to his feet. He **staggered** forward as the pirate's scaly tail and lizardlike legs swung down from the hole. The robot lifted one of his claws and snapped it sharply around the creature's tail.

The Zorgon howled, jerking himself back through the hole, with the robot still attached. He thrashed and wailed, banging against the walls overhead. Then, minus one arm, the robot dropped down through the hole. The boys heard the Zorgon scramble across the roof and saw the flash of his rockets as his ship sped away.

It seemed hopeless. The robot's eyes were dark again. They'd been playing almost three hours, and their tokens rested a galaxy away from Zathura and twice that far from Earth. "We're never going to make it," said Walter.

"Sure we are," answered Danny. He handed the dice to his brother. "Me and you, together. We can do it."





Walter cradled the dice in his hand and sighed. "You and I," he said wearily. "You and I." He looked at his little brother, who was grinning.

"That's right," said Danny. "Together."

Walter rolled the dice, a one and a two. He moved his token to the only black square on the board. The card popped out. "You have entered a black hole," Walter read. "Go back in time, one hour for each mark on the dice."

He jumped up and looked around the room. "You see any black holes?"

His brother pointed to the floor. A black spot was slowly spreading under Walter's feet, like a perfectly round puddle of ink. At first Walter thought he was sinking into it, but it was the hole that was rising. He tried to run but could not feel his feet. Then, as the hole rose higher, he couldn't feel his legs, either. "What's going on?" he cried.

Danny looked below the disklike hole. "Walter," he said, "the bottom part of you is gone." As the hole rose higher and higher, there was less and less of Walter, until only his head remained. Danny tried to pull on the hole to save what was left of his brother, but his hands passed through the blackness as if it were made of smoke. His chin dropped to his chest and he began to sob.

