

The Pirates of Pestulon

A **Space Quest**[®] Novelization
by Troels Pleimert

Based on a game design by
Scott Murphy & Mark Crowe

For Dan

for somehow talking me into partaking
in a total series novelization

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About the Author:

Danish-born Troels Pleimert, whose first name is totally unpronounceable to English-speaking people (who frequently confuse him with beings that live under bridges and scare the shit out of innocent pass-byers), spends most of his time playing computer games, writing, and drinking cheap supermarket cola. Sierra's *Space Quest* series is his undisputed favorite; an enjoyment that has since led to obsession. Being a generally productive guy with too much free time, Troels has written two previous novels about *Space Quest* (and is working on a fourth entitled *Conspiracy*), writes and maintains *The Official Space Quest FAQ*, and manages one of the largest SQ fansites on the Internet, *Wilco's Domain*. His appearance is that of a blond, geeky-looking basketball player (being 6'7 inches tall), and lives on sarcasm. Other interest includes being an amateur cartoonist and music composition. As of October 31st, 1997, he is 17 years old, and his favorite color is blue.

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The mohawk analogy on page 23 actually happened.

1

Eternity came and went as the small, white escape pod drifted silently through space. It was something it had gotten quite good at over the past indefinite amounts of time. It really meant “indefinite”; at first, it had started counting days, weeks, months and years, but after a long period of tediously watching the seconds tick away, seemingly forever, it finally decided to give hell, shut the damn thing off, and let the pilot figure out for himself where and when he’d wound up when he finally came to.

The occupant of the small craft lay inside the suspended animation chamber in the exact same position as when he had first entered. Time was frozen around him. Encased in a dreamless sleep, which could go on forever if it had to, the occupant had no choice but to rely on fate and wait for someone to rescue him.

How he’d gotten himself into the chamber, and what he’d done to appear in an escape pod in the first place; a white

escape pod at that; was not on his mind right now. Nothing was. But when he would wake up, sometime in the future, he was sure that the first thing he would think of would be what a brave and heroic job he had completed, and how utterly and egotistically proud he was of himself.

He was wrong.

The pod continued to glide across the starry backdrop. Its course had been altered many times by the automatic systems, to avoid meteor or asteroid collisions, to circumnavigate potentially dangerous nebulas and other foggy stellar anomalies, and at the same time attempt to steer him as close to a habitable planet as possible.

The cockpit of the robot-controlled garbage freighter was no bigger than that of an Earth one-man fighting aircraft. From its point of view, the pod appeared to be moving almost imperceptibly. The robot did a quick scan of the craft and saw that the craft's engines were long spent. Its logic circuits went to work, and quickly came to their conclusion about the object on the screen in front of them:

Derelict.

And, as such, a viable target for retrieval.

The gigantic, black, rectangular trash freighter altered its course slightly to accommodate the current travel plans of the escape pod, and came to a halt somewhere in front of the pod's trajectory. And there it waited, waited, waited patiently, as the pod slowly slid its way towards the freighter.

The robot waited, waited, waited patiently, contemplating at least ten billion other things that it could find to be of more interest than just waiting, waiting, waiting patiently, where watching oil congeal would rank as a definite #142.

Therefore, it was very relieved to see that the pod was now within tractor beam range.

The pod slid under the freighter, completely unaware of what was about to hit it. A small hatchway on the belly of the freighter opened and emitted a powerfully bright beam that struck the pod, engulfed it, encased it, and slowly carried it upwards. The pod's guidance systems, now completely out to

lunch and having no clue as to what to do with themselves, promptly went into spasms of frenetic shocks as they realized they weren't in control anymore, and shut themselves down in annoyance, never to awaken again.

The pod was carried by tractor beam to its designated dumping area, and with a resonant *clarrasshhh* (sort of a mix between a metallic *clang* and a *crash*), the pod hit the metallic floor. Hard.

The stutter of the pod not only rearranged the interior of the pod in a slightly more tasteful manner, but also managed to jitter the suspended animation chamber enough to activate the reviving cycle.

Next thing he knew, Roger Wilco stepped out of the sleep chamber, wondering where the hell he was.

2

Three hours later and Roger finally started panicking. He had spent these hours running around the gigantic trash freighter, trying to find somebody who would help him, and all he'd done was get himself into the mortal danger of having himself minced into neat slices.

First things first, though.

The pod itself had plunged into a deep, disconcerting silence, and regaining admission was completely out of the question. So what he had done was run around aimlessly for three hours. At first, he was confident he'd find somebody to talk to—a foreman, a worker, anybody—but he slowly, reluctantly came to the realization that the place was totally devoid of humanoid lifeforms.

The only thing he had encountered that could be considered animate would be rats. He had encountered a smaller pack of them while exploring a darker alley of the freighter's many passages and corridors. The corridors and passages

were artificially constructed—the walls consisted of high-piled trash, giving Roger the constant paranoiac feeling that they were going to collapse on him at any second.

Roger had been walking around for maybe half an hour when he came across a clearing. This small, circular part of the hold stood apart from the rest he had seen.

In the center stood a ship.

It wasn't a particularly nice ship, but from the exterior, it looked perfectly fine to Roger. He went around it a couple of times, looking at every angle. The ship was badly dented and scratched, indicating plenty of use and abuse in its past, but it still looked in one piece. A legend on the side read ALUMINUM MALLARD.

Roger stopped. An idea had formed. *Maybe this ship is my ticket out of here?* He climbed up on the roof of the ship, looking for a hatchway. He found it. It was like the entryway to a submarine. He opened it and climbed inside.

The realization came to him that the hatch above had been an emergency exit. The center of the rectangular passenger area was indented in the floor, and a button next to it read HATCH—it was the main exit way.

The cockpit was up front. There was one seat, a smallish viewscreen, and the front was lined with a set of controls and a joystick.

One floor panel was busted open, and something was missing inside. What was missing, precisely, Roger couldn't tell, quite logically because it wasn't there. Loose wires hung from the edges of the small compartment, clearly advertising the absence of something important.

Roger located a small diagnostic computer on the far wall. He casually flicked the on-switch, expecting to receive nothing more than an electronic sigh, or, even more likely, nothing at all. He was wrong. To his slight astonishment, the screen flared to life and began displaying technical diagrams and comprehensive layouts of the ship's circuitry.

It went through a process of checking each and every system for a couple of minutes. When it finished, Roger was

both surprised and exhilarated to find that the only thing that appeared to be preventing this thing from being in perfect flying condition (or, at least, an adequate approximation) was the absence of a warp motivator.

He guessed, quite correctly, that the open hole in the floor was where the missing warp motivator went in. Great. He knew what was wrong, how to fix it, and where to plug it in. He had a golden opportunity—a rare sunbeam of luck had shone on him, and darnit, he wasn't going for shade now. *An opportunity like this doesn't come about every day*, he reasoned.

The normal exit hatch in the floor was blocked by the freighter's floor, so Roger had to exit through the submarine-like hatch in the ceiling.

After some minor displays of acrobacy, he stepped out, wondering with a reckless air of optimism how hard it could be to locate a warp motivator in a junk freighter.

He had only been walking around for a couple minutes when it happened. Suddenly, he noticed something red glistening in the walls. Then more, and more, and after a few seconds, he felt as if a veritable army of small, red, glistening eyes were staring at him, watching, waiting.

That's when he panicked completely and ran.

He heard scurrying feet scuffling behind him. Mindlessly, he ran and ran until something blocked his pathway. He tripped, flew, and came to rest against a trash-wall. The wall shook dangerously, and for a brief moment it threatened to fall over. Roger looked ahead, but couldn't hear a thing.

He got up, tried to brush dirt off his uniform, failed, and became briefly annoyed. He looked down at the thing that had tripped him. It was a round, metallic device, with wires running out of its side, which seemed to connect inside something. Despite being detached from wherever it was supposed to be, it appeared to be generally intact. A legend on the side read BOBCO WARP MOTIVATOR MODEL X-22.

He froze for a minute. What incredible luck he was hav-

ing! After only a few minutes search, he had already come across the thing that could get him out of this freighter.

He tried lifting it, but couldn't. The damn thing was too heavy.

He kicked the thing in irritation, then spent a couple of minutes tending to an aching foot.

Then he stopped.

He heard something off in the distance. *The rats!* Apparently, they haven't given up their pursuit—they'd only regrouped and decided to attack from a different angle. He could see red eyes speeding towards him in the distance.

Desperately, he looked around, trying to find some kind of refuge, or something that could carry him to safety...

...and found he was standing in front of what appeared to be an upwards-going conveyer. It was carrying several buckets at once up to a vertical conveyer belt, suspended maybe forty meters up in the air. He couldn't see what the belt led them to, because his line of sight was obstructed by a high pile of trash.

He swiveled and saw the eyes being nervously close.

So he panicked got up on the first available bucket.

It was impossibly small, and he had trouble keeping his balance. The small bucket made several serious grinding noises as it attempted to cope with the added weight, but nevertheless maintained its position and continued its ascent.

Roger looked down and saw the ground get smaller, which made him slightly nervous. He never cared for heights. And the fact that he was standing on an uneven, impossibly small ground that was slowly, grindingly moving upwards which could result in a quick fall to his death with the slightest wrong movement didn't really help out with his frazzled nerves, either.

Even more unnerving, he couldn't see the rats anywhere. Either they'd given up, or...*they were trying for a different approach.*

But for now, they weren't anywhere in sight, which was a relaxing notion. Roger calmed visibly, turned around, and

literally felt his heart make a break for his esophagus.

The vertical belt in front of him was carrying the bucketful's of trash forward to a large trash mincer. Roger saw a piece of circuit panel being torn apart with almost brutally surgical precision and spat out to an unknown destination. It didn't matter where it ended up. It wasn't where Roger wanted to go, for sure!

But shock had gripped him, and his body simply refused to react as he was thrown off the horizontal conveyer belt onto the vertical.

3

Roger's mind was reasoning, *We can't just sit around here forever and watch our doom crawl near; we are quite definitely going to get slaughtered in the most brutally and utterly disgustingly possible way! Do something! React!*

His body, however, completely failed to pick this up and was resigned to babble incoherently.

It wasn't until he was a gnat's wing from being shredded to an inconsistent mash of organic material that Roger's brain finally arrived at the conclusion that something was pretty damn amiss around here and started seriously working on the problem.

Roger found it rather strange that every nib and bit of his body started contributing suggestions as to what to do, but none of them were readily accepted, as most of them barely touched the topic of the current problem and were largely centered around the subject of food. It was as if his entire body was at work at the problem, and his own mind was being

left out of the discussion.

The whole process took less time than a standard humanoid brain would be able to percept, but at this point Roger's conscious self—that was watching his mind, as if from a third eye, trying to grasp onto the few viable solutions that might work, and disregard the tons of useless suggestions that concerned ice cream and soda—was playing everything in slow motion, and reality seemed to crumble slightly before him.

Next thing he knew he had leapt to his feet and grappled onto a support beam, hanging from the ceiling.

He looked down, and felt the shock of reality kicking in. He was hanging by his flimsy, untrained, un-muscular arms, suspended above a dangerous trash mincer that could quite literally chew him up and spit him out like a hardboiled fisherman and a tin of tobacco.

Adrenaline did its thing, and Roger pulled himself up on the support beam. Whatever it supported, Roger had no idea. But it was stretching the length of this particular garbage hold, which—from his current vantage point, now over forty meters above the ground below—he could see was rectangular, and about the size of two Olympic soccer fields, back to back*.

From here, he had a complete view over the entire hold. Almost everywhere, he could see the huge piles of trash that seemed to form passages, corridors and aisles. He could see a veritable maze of them from here.

He could skim the ship from here, in the clearing down below. It almost looked like a circular arena. The maze just sort of ended there, and went on around it, making it appear like a clearing in a dense forest. From here, it was little but a blurry speck in the distance.

The beam he was standing on proceeded to encircle the entire hold, only escaping visibility by reaching in through a suspended doorway. The doorway led into a room, which

* When push comes to shove, the sentence “the size of a soccer field” would have been equally meaningful, since soccer fields usually do not vary in size depending on what tournament is being played, but generally, adding the word “Olympic” to any descriptive sentence gives a sense of massiveness and grandeur, which is exactly what the garbage hold gives the (albeit false) impression of. It doesn't really matter, anyway; it sounds good and rolls rather nicely off the tongue, so just live with it and get on with the story.

looked like it hung from the ceiling. The room contained two identical doorways; the second one was at the far side of the first one, and spat out the beam. (Roger deduced from this that the beam proceeded in through one doorway, made a nice U-turn in there somewhere, then proceeded back out through the other.)

Roger looked around him and saw no other way to get off the beam.

Like a tightrope walker with a nervous disposition on opening night, Roger proceeded to cautiously walk down the beam, wary of each little turn or tilt the beam might decide to perform.

Once he reached the doorway, he could skim the interior of the room beyond. It was a control room. One couldn't justifiably call it a "room"; it was more a suspended platform in the middle. The walls were simply hanging from the ceiling, serving no readily apparent purpose—other than to house three garbage disposal chutes, recessed into the wall. On the outside, the chutes formed into rectangular tubes, which continued into the wall of the hold. Where they ended up, Roger could only guess. In-between the center platform and the suspended walls was the continuing beam, which made a U-turn here and proceeded out through the other doorway.

As Roger moved through the doorway, he thought he could spot movement. The center platform was almost surrounded with large computer consoles. But as he moved closer, he could clearly see someone—or something—move around in there, tending to the controls.

Closer still, he noticed it was a droid.

The droid was white, sported two mechanical arms, and a body shaped like a cheap Lego toy. It looked harmless, if not astoundingly cheap.

Then, he noticed something dangling from the beam he was currently walking on, and realized it wasn't a *beam*, but a *rail*. What was hanging from the rail was a Grabber—a one-man transportation device, fitted with a powerful magnetic grapppler on the bottom.

Roger had never really had any experience with these devices, but he gathered they would be a lot safer than *walking* on this ultra-thin rail, which swayed slightly every time he put his foot down, giving it the unnerving sense that it was about to fall out from under him. And that U-turn looked like the peak of unsafety.

With this in mind, he gingerly climbed into the Grabber's seat and grasped firmly around the joystick. Granted, this was easier than he thought. No ignition needed; no confirmation code required...since this ship was populated exclusively by droids, why bother? And the Grabber had no quarrel over moving to whichever direction Roger wanted to go, as long as the rail would allow it.

As Roger turned the U-turn in his new vehicle, he could've sworn he saw the droid flash him a red eye, but chalked it down to imagination and frazzled nerves.

It was since a small exercise in brainwork that led Roger to utilize the Grabber's magnetic grapples to pick up the warp motivator he'd tripped over during his surface explorations. Granted, he had some difficulty at first in locating the site, since everything looked so small from his new vantage point, but after searching for ten minutes or so and taking the odd pot-shot every now and then, he finally hit the jackpot. With the motivator now securely fastened to the still-active magnet below the Grabber, Roger moved on to find a place to put it.

Finding the ship proved easier than he'd thought.

After all, the thing was remarkably bigger than the small warp motivator. All he had to do now was to ease the thing into the compartment.

This proved harder than he'd thought.

After spending additional ten minutes seriously denting the roof portion of the ship, Roger finally—when he was about to just chuck the thing down and resign to *carry* the blasted device into its compartment—scored a bullseye. With a worryingly loud *clanggg*, the motivator dropped through the roof hatchway (which Roger had conveniently left open), and

landed on the interior floor.

Roger smiled to himself, then started wondering how he was supposed to get down from here.

In the end, the only viable solution that presented itself was the trash chutes he'd seen earlier. At first, some mildly horrifying thoughts of trying to outrun the conveyer belt near the trash mincer came to mind, but he quickly dismissed those. The trash chutes were his best option.

He reversed the direction of the Grabber and brought it back to where he'd originally found it; in the suspended control room. Settling the thing just in front of one of the chutes, Roger brought it to a halt. He got out, standing on the small, flat edge of the chute.

He thought he heard some movement, but when he turned around, the white robot was still working on the consoles, as he had come to expect as routine.

What he hadn't noticed was the red flash in its eye.

Roger attempted, with extreme caution, to gingerly climb in and slide down the shaft nice and easy. But this attempt was cut short when the white robot swiveled on its base, a now very recognizably lethal killer-look in its red eye-beam, and directed its full attention to the unwelcome visitor. Roger didn't know this, but somewhere, deep inside its circuitry, in the very base of its programming, the words "RODENT ELIMINATION PROGRAM INITIATED" had lit up.

Roger spun around on his heels, just in time to catch a glimpse of the robot's chest plate opening, revealing a very handy roach-eliminator: an automatic, self-serving photonic discharger.

This, and a slight, pathetic yelp, was the last Roger did before losing balance and tumbling very un-gracefully down the shaft.

When he came to, he had landed quite unceremoniously in a large pile of trash. Fortunately, this was more of the paper-variety—old magazines, paper clips, things that were probably a memo or more or less important document at some point.

He glanced around. He was in what was probably a smaller trash hold aboard the vessel. To his slight surprise, dingy lamps had been hung from the ceiling, illuminating the small room. Trash piles had been placed strategically around the room, but these were more of the pyramid-variety, given that paper doesn't stack as neatly.

The slight surprise went up several notches when he noticed that the roof was, basically, missing. A whole section of the top had corroded, leaving a bare and dark recess in the ceiling.

And from up there, somewhere, Roger could hear scurrying. The rats were up there.

Roger had never encountered rats before, and always thought they would be someone else's problem, preferably an exterminator's, but now that he had his first encounters with them—particularly this mutated, semi-intelligent, strategically annoying breed—his nerves clicked and the previous ambivalence that concerned the rodent had escalated into true fear.

He scrambled to his feet, looking around him for some kind of exit way.

There was none.

There was no door, no way out.

He clambered to the wall, staring up at the darkened ceiling, where he could see the red eyes beginning to cluster together. His breathing turned shallow, his face pale.

Before he knew it, he had also unhooked the dingy reactor, stuck in a hole in the wall, which connected all the lights in the room. The room went dark with a flash. Roger forced back a scream as a first reaction, which only came out as a muffled whimper.

In the darkness, Roger still looked frantically around the room. His eyes locked on the destroyed ceiling, where more and more red eyes were gathering. His mind was ranting, *They're watching me...waiting for me...waiting for just the right moment to—* and at that point, the thought would loop back to *They're watching me.*

His eyes were darting desperately over the roof. Then,

they fixed in the corner.

A small hatchway was up there in the corner, where a small amount of light from the trash hold above shone through a crack in the metal hatch. A fixed ladder had been provided, so that the five or six meters up to the hatch didn't present much of a problem.

Wherever it went, it was a way out!

Roger stumbled towards it, completely ignoring the many piles of garbage obstructing his way (he either climbed over them, or tried to run through them, *then* climbed over them), reaching the ladder just as he heard the scuffling of thousands upon thousands of little legs.

The rats! The rats are coming to...

He climbed up the ladder with a certain desperation, fumbled with the handle for the hatch, heard a little click when he twisted the handle, and pushed as hard as he could. The hatch lid popped out and landed neatly next to the circular hole. Not even bothering to look down, Roger scrambled up the last few steps into freedom.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Roger replaced the hatch cover, just in case the accursed rodents might try for the hatch themselves. Right now, their path of attack had been cut off—the big crevice in the roof (which was now the floor from Roger's point of view) stretched a couple of meters away, and above-ground piles of heavy trash prevented the rats from easily traversing it.

Roger began to walk towards the ship.

4

FINAL ANALYSIS: ALL SYSTEMS FUNCTIONING WITHIN ESTABLISHED PARAMETERS.

This was the final verdict, uttered by the diagnostics computer in the small ship, the Aluminum Mallard. A smile went from one ear to the other on Roger. The thing was even self-installing—he didn't even have to mess with hooking up wires or tiddling with configurations. Roger sat down in the pilots seat, satisfied and exhilarated by his own accomplishments. The navigations computer flicked on without a bother. As Roger powered up the engines, the ship began to roar and break free from its captivity in the floor. With a last strain of effort, the ship's antigrav engines pulled themselves free. The ship was ascending.

When Roger reached an altitude of five meters, he sudden-

ly came to the realization that there was nowhere to go. The ship was in good flying condition, that much was certain. But there was no exit hatch from the trash hold, no way of getting out—simply because no one would ever think of needing one.

Frustration began to mount, and in the end, Roger latched on to the first solution he could think of. *Screw it*, was his thought when he activated the front shields to the craft and began taking careful aim...

With a mighty *fffwwwwwooop!*, the Aluminum Mallard sped through the newly created hole like bubbles shoot out a newly opened bottle of champagne. Shooting at the wall created a pressure build-up so massive that the ship was literally spit out of the confines of the trash hold.

The good news was, he was free.

The bad news was, someone would undoubtedly get real pissy about the big hole in the side of their trash freighter.

Roger leaned back in the pilots seat, sighing a breath of relief. He felt really good about himself. One could argue that it wasn't much of an accomplishment to fix up a dingy second-hand spaceship. But Roger felt that, with his complete ignorance regarding technical repair works, restoring flight capability to the Mallard was quite a fulfillment.

True, he thought, his past accomplishments outweighed this. He thought of his adventures into herodrom when he had single-handedly foiled the plans of the abominably evil-minded, but stupid Sariens. He thought of when he had saved his homeplanet Xenon from the mad scheme of Sludge Vohaul, who also had a rather personal grudge against Rog.

He had no idea how long ago that was. How long had he been lying in suspended animation inside that escape pod? To be perfectly frank, he hadn't the faintest clue.

The only fact of the matter was, he was getting kind of homesick. Although time had suddenly taking a much less meaningful significance, he still had the feeling of having been away from home for far too long.

But when he activated the navigations computer and

scanned the grid, he couldn't find Xenon anywhere. Evidently, this was not his own galactic quadrant. The planets here were very unfamiliar to him. A sense of dread crept over him as he realized, reluctantly, that he was completely and utterly lost in space.

Panic gripped him momentarily as he shut down the navigations computer. Would he ever see his home sun again? Had the glance he'd cast at his homeplanet that day he was kidnapped from his position at *Xenon Orbital Station IV* been his last?

Then, he calmed himself down. All he had to do was find out which direction to go. And what's the first thing you do when you're lost?

Ask for directions.

Roger reactivated the navigations computer and started searching for any inhabited planets. The only one he could find went under the inviting name of Phleebhut, and had only one known settlement. Roger didn't care; that was one settlement enough.

Course plotted in, the small engines lit up and with a mighty roar prepared for the jump to lite speed. Seconds later, he was underway.

The gray, angular craft decloaked just a few kilometers behind. Its viewscreen depicted the Aluminum Mallard, speeding off to its destination.

The occupant of the craft glanced at the scannings.

SUBJECT IDENTIFIED: ROGER WILCO.

TARGET POSITIVE.

JUDGMENT: TERMINATE.

The android grinned menacingly as it set in pursuit course.

5

THROTTLING ENGINES BACK. ORBITING PLANET PHLEEBHUT...

This was what the Mallard's navigation computer displayed just before the engines banked, cut off, and began their circular orbit of the planet. Shortly after, the landing process commenced, and the Mallard descended into the atmosphere of Phleebhut.

The first thing Roger noticed when he stepped out of the hatchway was the barrenness of the planet. It was like the whole planet was one giant, purple desert. Interspersed in the landscape was rocky formation, seemingly randomly formed by years of corroding winds, and small hills and valleys in the strangely colored sand. From appearances, this seemed to stretch the entire planetside.

Roger began scanning the area for that settlement, which

the guidance computer had promised it would take him as close as possible to. He couldn't see it from where he was standing.

What he *could* see was a large, cyan-colored beast. It appeared six or seven meters in height, with clenched fists the size of boulders and legs the size of tree trunks. It didn't appear to be in an entirely good mood either—it was constantly banging its huge arms up and down.

It occurred as slightly strange to Roger that the creature wasn't moving anywhere, though.

In fact, after having watched the creature swing its arms up and down in perpetual motion for a good five minutes, the whole thing seemed slightly repetitive.

Curious, Roger approached the creature, eager to investigate, while at the same time wondering if this would be a smart idea...

Meanwhile, on another part of the planet, not far from where Roger was heading, another ship touched down on the planet. Not that anybody would notice. The ship that landed was cloaked, which suited the occupant just fine—attention was the last thing he needed right now.

He opened the mechanical hatchway—which, under the invisible circumstances of his craft, had the appearance of a portal suddenly opening into another world—and stepped outside.

He knew the surroundings well. He had been here many times before. In actuality, he knew the whole quadrant really well. He'd been programmed to.

The tall killer android activated his personal cloaking device, smiling. His target was here somewhere, he knew that. And he knew where he could find him. There was only one place he could be heading.

Footprints that seemed to come out of nowhere appeared in the sand, heading in the direction of the settlement.

As it soon transpired, the beast was not a beast at all. It was,

in fact, a huge droid reproduction of a creature—the Mog—that had once roamed the planet, or so quoth the information sign in front of the statue.

Below the statue, which towered enormously above Roger, was a small building, occupying the empty space between the creature's separated legs. A flashing neon-sign advertised the place as being *Fester's World-o-Wonders*. The single window of the shop was stocked with dingy looking souvenirs and collectibles that were destined to become valuable sometime in the very, very distant future. It didn't look awfully promising.

Roger wondered to make of this. Could this really be the only settlement on the entire planet? A souvenir shop?

Tentatively, Roger approached the open doorway. The interior only served to strengthen Roger's initial opinion about the shop's appearance. Shelves and rotating display stands were stocked with postcards, novelty sunglasses, travel books with half the pages missing, and other assorted souvenir items for the weary traveler. None of it looked even slightly appealing. The entire back wall of the small one-room shop was taken up with a glass-constructed counter.

And behind *that*, the shop's owner was sitting idly on a bar stool, whistling cheerfully while probing his left ear with a small stick. His skin was a light aqua blue, his fingers had the appearance of miniature suction cups, and his face looked like it had been molded out of Play-Doh. Although Roger didn't know this, the proprietor was of a rare rhinosupial species. Offsprings of the species were produced much the same way as any organic lifeform in the universe, but once birth had occurred, the babies would climb back into their parents cavernous nasal openings, where they would continue to grow until falling out from their sheer weight (or a real good sneeze from their parental unit).

Everything the owner did served to confirm, or even emphasize these facts. Roger watched, with mounting disgust, as the owner extracted the small stick from his ear with a sickening *plopp*. Attached to the end of it was a small, yellow blob

of aural residue. The owner looked at his catch with mounting appetite, then proceeded to consume the earwax. Had Roger eaten breakfast, it would've made a break for freedom at this point.

Roger approached the counter, not sure what to make of the whole situation. "Uhm, excuse me," he began.

This served to knock the proprietor out of his trance. "Howdy there, pard'ner!" he said, with exaggerated enthusiasm. "The name's Blatz; Fester Blatz. Welcome to *World-o-Wonders*! Go ahead, have a look around of some of *the* most interesting souvenir items this lovely planetoid has to offer."

Roger was awestruck. He felt as if he was in an obscure dream—the vivid kind, where you try to cope with reality while your hairstyle has been redecorated in a purple mohawk.

"How about an Orat-on-a-Stick?" Fester offered, quickly wiping off the end of his ear-picker and displaying it proudly before Roger. Roger now noticed that the end bore the angry face of an Orat beast.*

Roger declined, as politely as he could, trying to hold on to his grip on reality.

He realized there was nothing to hold on to.

He left Fester's *World-o-Wonders*, not only carrying a wet-ended Orat-on-a-Stick, but also a pair of ThermoWeave underwear and the official AstroChicken plastic hat.

His grip on reality was forcefully given back to him, however, when the Arnoid Annihilator droid suddenly materialized out of nowhere, gripping Roger strenuously around the neck, and by all appearances had no intention of letting go.

* An Orat beast is a dangerously violent, but not terribly smart, creature which Roger encountered while exploring the desert planet of Keron. Thought to be extinct at the time, they seem to continue to crop up in the most unexpected places. Don't believe me? Okay, then read *The Sarien Encounter*. Trust me, it'll make sense.

6

“Well, well,” said the Arnoid Annihilator droid, scrutinizing his prey with an undisguised air of contempt, “so you are Roger Wilco. The man I have been sent across the galaxy to track down. You were too easy to find. You tend to leave a trail of mess wherever you go.”

“Muhhuh?” Roger said, glaring as his captor, wondering what the hell was going on. His windpipe was taking some serious punishment, and Roger struggled helplessly like a gazelle in a lion’s maw to escape the android’s iron grip. The Annihilator decided to cut the crap and get to the point.

“I have been sent by the Gippazoid Novelty Company,” the droid announced, a red glimpse flashing across his visual scanner. “It seems that you forgot to pay for that Terror Beast mating whistle you acquired during your stay at Labion. Non-

payment is a *serious offense*,” the android said, stressing the words carefully, the killer look intensifying immensely, “and the good folks at Gippazoid are *most displeased*.”

“Uhhuhhhh,” said Roger, his face reddening. Breathing was becoming a challenge.

“With late charges, that comes to around six thousand two hundred and thirty five buckazoids. Now,” said the android, his mechanical eyes squinting, “you don’t look like you’re carrying around that kind of money to me. Would you care to prove me wrong?”

“Muhhurrhur!” Roger elaborated.

“No,” said the android coldly, “I didn’t think so.”

“Mmmhhhh,” said Roger weakly, indicating his tormented esophagus with some feeble hand gestures. The android looked as if it couldn’t care less. In truth, it had actually carefully calculated how long it would take for it to kill his captive at this rate, and had carefully timed his speech to be exactly a couple of seconds shorter than that time. He wasn’t about to reveal this fact, however.

“Now, just because I’m in such a good mood,” the Annihilator continued, “I’m going to give you a chance to run. I’m going to let you go, then count to ten, real slow. If you make it to your ship, I’ll forget I ever ran into you.” Roger liked this idea. “But if you don’t, I *dust* you like *bundt cake!*” Roger didn’t like that idea.

With that, the android released its grip. Roger fell to the sandy ground, panting and gasping for lost air. The android stood above him, towering in his full two meters height, glaring down at his puny prey. He clicked a button on his belt and vanished in thin air.

Roger could hear his modulated voice, seemingly coming from thin air: “Ten...”

A couple of seconds passed.

“Nine...”

This jittered something in Roger. He jumped to his feet and bolted in the direction of the Mallard.

Although it wasn’t visible, the android grinned a decei-

vingly mean grin. What an ignorant humanoid; not a challenge at all.

When Roger was within a fifty meters distance from his ship, he suddenly froze dead in his tracks. Right in front of him, a small, black creature was striding purposefully towards him. It was small, but its iridescent black skin seemed to pulsate rhythmically. Small, white flashes of what looked like static discharged off its pointy tail every so often. The creature looked seriously menacing.

A traumatic flashback hit Roger square in the face, and he realized what the creature was: a scorpazoid. He had encountered it a long time ago, when he had visited the Xenonian zoological center. As an experimentitious and fearless ten-year old, he had bravely opened the unprotected cage containing the scorpazoid. The only reason he survived the inevitable attack that followed was that the scorpazoid had been neutralized and did not have any electrical charges to discharge any longer. However, it still scared the hell out of him whenever he was reminded of them.

Scorpazoids were indigenous to Phleebhut—a fact that Roger was unaware of. Had he known, he wouldn't have landed on the planet in the first place.

But as it turned out, Roger flinched insanely, as if fear itself had dropkicked him in the stomach, and landed on the sandy ground. The scream that tried to escape his lips only came out as a pathetic whimpering. He watched, wide-eyed, as the small creature strode with lightning fast speed in his direction. Roger's brain had gone in neutral, and was no longer in control of anything. His reflexes took over as Roger scrambled furiously to his feet and bolted frantically in the opposite direction. The scorpazoid, having only one thing in mind, set in pursuit.

Soon, Roger found himself back at *Fester's World-o-Wonders*, sharply followed. He had hoped to seek refuge in Fester's shop, but this hope was quickly shattered when he noticed the locked door and the sign reading CLOSED, hanging

from the door. To Roger, it was like the sign spelled out, SORRY, YOU'RE DOOMED. In disbelief, he stopped and glanced at the sign. The interior beyond the door was darkened, and Fester was nowhere to be seen.

Roger looked over his shoulder and saw the quickening approach of the hell-bent creature. Roger's eyes immediately doubled in size, and with startling speed bolted for safety.

Rounding the statue's left leg, Roger espied a door, set into the leg. A plaque read DO NOT ENTER. Roger quickly questioned his ethics and moral principles, and had a speedy debate over whether his mores and developed skills of social values allowed for him to violate the wishes of the owner. Then he remembered *who* the owner was, and decided, to hell with the moral spew.

He tore open the door, which—to his amazing luck—he found to be unlocked, and jumped into the darkness beyond.

He closed the door behind him, but noticed a small amount of light still entered the room. There was a crack below the door.

And then, to his horror, he noticed the small, spider-like legs of the scorpazoid, trying to squeeze itself under the door. Roger knew it would only be a matter of time before it would succeed.

He backed away, nervously, and hit his head forcefully on something metallic. He gasped, turned around and stared at the freight elevator behind him.

Luck was playing him like a flute, he thought, as he jumped aboard the elevator pad and started to look frantically for the controls. He found them, attached to a remote control on the metal railing. He squinted his eyes, trying to read the labels, and found one he thought was labelled ASCEND. He pressed it.

There was a loud noise, followed by the uneasy grinding of gears. The elevator stuttered to life and began to ascend. Roger looked to the door and noticed that the little legs were gone. Either the scorpazoid had given up, or...

Roger's muscles tightened, and his breath refused to ex-

hale.

...or it's in here!

He looked around on the still-ascending pad furiously, searching for movement in the darkness. He couldn't find any, but his body refused to relax still. His mind was ranting, *What if it's here? What if it's waiting? You can't tell in the darkness!*

Roger's paranoia had almost escalated to unprecedented levels when the elevator reached the end destination. The trip had taken no more than ten seconds or so, but it had felt like an eternity to Roger.

The room he stepped out into was lit by a couple of fluorescent lights in the ceiling. He was staring at a large engine, which—he guessed, correctly—made the Mog statue move. Gears and cogs were everywhere, all grinding away happily. The floor was grated, and stairways led up to a second floor where, seemingly, all the controls were placed.

Roger went up the stairs, looking over the controls. They didn't interest him that much, to be perfectly honest. All he really wanted to do was stay up here for as long as it took to convince the scorpazoid that he wasn't coming down.

Mindlessly, he banged his head against a pulley, which hung from the ceiling. He mouthed a word of extreme profanity, annoyed that this was the second time in the course of a few minutes that he'd been hit over the head. He looked up and saw that the pulley encircled the room. However, all it was attached to was a hook, and it wasn't hooked up to any system, so it currently seemed to serve no purpose. He cursed again, gave the thing a slam with a clenched fist, and spent a couple of seconds tending to an aching hand.

Then, amidst the grinding of the gears, he heard a different sound. He turned and looked. To his surprise, the elevator was descending back down to the floor level. He could see the chain in the shaft moving upwards. Roger wondered if this was some sort of automatic system that brought the elevator down after a set period of time.

But then, to his horror, he saw the chain moving *down-*

wards, indicating that the elevator was *ascending* again.

Roger stood still, transfixed, as he witnessed the elevator reaching its destination again, this time transporting the Arnoid Annihilator droid. Roger's heart immediately made a break for his throat, and his breathing turned shallow.

"I see you, Wilco!" the droid chanted menacingly. "Your time...is up!"

The droid headed purposefully for the stairway and proceeded to climb them. Roger backed away nervously, and came to a halt when his back hit a protective railing, surrounding the floor. He cast a quick look down, and saw the elevator descending to floor level again. The shaft was a clear thirty meter drop down to floor level. Definitely a bone-breaking stunt in any event. Roger was trapped.

The killer android had reached the top of the stairs and was striding resolutely in his direction.

Roger looked up and saw the pulley that had previously caused him a headache. Now, he thought, it might just be his last chance at survival.

Mustering as much strength as he could in a panic situation, he grabbed the pulley and swung it forcefully at the android. The android only had enough time to flinch before it was struck hard in the face. Balance lost, the killer reeled and fell to the floor. Only, the floor wasn't there. What he landed on was a massive gear, grinding away merrily. With some extra effort, the gear managed to keep grinding, even though a load of extra-tough metal had suddenly been introduced. Had the gear possessed human qualities, it would have felt immensely proud that it had just managed to dismantle an Arnoid Annihilator droid limb from metallic limb and spit him out on the floor below, and still keep running.

Roger sat back on the floor, trying to catch the breath that was outrunning him at this point. He heard his heart and pulse joining together to perform a catchy salsa beat.

Eventually his system calmed down and Roger dared walk down the stairs and examine the android's remains. He looked over the sad pile of twisted metal on the floor. Among

the pile, he found the android's black belt. He picked it up and examined it, curiously. It was completely black, and contained only one button on it. It was the android's personal cloaking belt.

Roger pocketed the belt and stood up. Then, suddenly, there was a bright flash from the floor below, and Roger saw the elevator rise once again.

Fester stepped from the elevator.