

Jerry Rigged

By Justin Patrick Moore

Jerry was rigged.

His archnemesis Bing the Bison had torn the flexors and extensors connecting the digits of his left hand, as well as his pronator quadratus after a skuzzy backstreet pinball match a few asteroids over. After that he couldn't play pinball the way he used to, but scraped along coaching the up and coming elroys, the new wannabe players, for a few dimes between shifts bussing tables at Moldavite Diner. Living from game to game, on any money he was able to pull in from bets, challenges, or tournaments, he couldn't afford a doctor. So the muscles in his hand healed, but incorrectly.

He skimmed some old scans of even older physical therapy books and tried to get his wrists, fingers, and forearm back into shape. It was a pain. It hurt a lot. The miners who slept in the lockers next to Jerry's complained about the whimpering sounds he made at night as he put his hand through the exercises, but the locklord was an old pinball wiz himself and ignored their bitching.

Eventually he trained his left hand to do things it had never been able to do before. The muscles had grown back differently and it was like a mutation. He'd been saving spare quarters for the day he would pull back the plunger and start playing again and when he got his confidence up he started trolling the arcades. A few people remembered him, the real pinball geeks who memorized scores going all the way back to the moon. He'd had a good record and not been gone so long that they'd forgotten his face. They kept an eye on him, and started hedging bets on him when he proved his mettle once more. More money started coming his way. He moved into a bigger locker and started eating double portions of smeat and drinking craft-brewed malt liquor. He bought a blue jumpsuit and found a nifty antique Nydeko 3000 wrist computer that he wore on his left forearm.

Then he got sick, came down with a bad case of the Retching Hector. A lot of asteroid crawlers got it in those days. Really it was just a label slapped on a bunch of symptoms, a lifestyle and environment disease. Blood pressure got wacked out due to variable gravity and from eating too much the preserved food treated with chemical salts so as to withstand the rigors of space travel. The atmospheric conditions of the colonies were also horrendous, stale air clouding the engineered tubes and enclosed rooms beneath the asteroids surface tended to produce leaky guts and pale lungs. Even the UV enhanced lighting wasn't enough to stop the Vitamin D deficiency so many suffered from. Most crawlers were dosed up on high-octane rounds of supplements and

vitamins. Jerry wasn't a young man anymore, and now that he could afford to, he followed suit, changing his diet in the process. He was now eating a lot of sprout salads with flax seed oil dressing. To help ease into his new habits he opted for some elective surgery and had a small tube inserted in his middle finger. The other end came out on the top of his wrist where it connected to his Nydeko 3000. One of the spiffy things about the gizmo was that it had a built in fluid chamber. He kept his own homemade salad dressing in it (flax seed oil, apple cider vinegar, dijon mustard) so if he went out to a restaurant he could just squirt it onto the hydroponic leaves without having to eat the fake blue-cheese and high fructose nastiness they passed off as food.

By all appearances it was just another evening of flickering LED's inside the tunnels of Gopherville, the asteroid he called home. The cosmonaut terraformers were still hacking away at the atmosphere up top, tweaking the ozone, trying to grow more bacteria in the transported dirt, and eventually plant some catalpa trees. When Jerry took the elevator forty-six floors down to Mole's Arcade he wasn't expecting anything unusual. A few regulars were already scouting the crowd, looking for over exacerbated fans to scam. Cyber-genetically engineered monkeys were hawking frankenfurters, all gooey with enhanced neon catsup and grainy morsels of anchovie and sauerkraut remoulade. Jerry's stomach gurgled but he reminded himself that he couldn't eat that junk anymore.

Then his stomach lurched when he saw Bing Bison. He'd earned his name from the horn implants grafted to his head. Ever since their last encounter he'd dreaded the prospect of running into the bully again. Yet if he was going to keep playing in the pinball circuits he knew that inevitability would one day arrive, and it had.

The way they operated the competitions was like this: each contestant had a set limit of time and a set number of those cold, shiny, spherical little balls. The game ended when the player ran out of the allotted time or his balls ran out. Whoever racked up the most points was the winner.

Bison scored high, in the low three millions, but Jerry knew he could whoop him. But when he stepped up to the machine, a pinball table that had a bushido theme, its fine cherry wood lacquered with a painting of a samurai stabbing a cybernetic eight-headed dragon with a flashy kitana, he found that the button for the left flipper was all gummed up. This had the reek of Bing Bison all over it. It was no use telling the referees. They doubled as bookies and were in on the take. Low dirty tricks were the norm from players who didn't follow the wizard code.

That's what made the difference between a wizard and a mere pinball punk.

Jerry tapped a button on his Nydeko 3000 and squirted some flax seed oil salad dressing from the tube in his middle finger around the

button, lubricating it, easing up whatever foul gunk Bison had put in there. He loaded a ball in the chamber, pulled back the plunger and shot the sucker into orbit. The fingers of his left hand moved deftly, like those of a sorcerer casting a spell. Jerry played like a mad man until his time was up. He didn't even have to use his third ball.

His score wasn't high enough for him to take home the big pot that night, it went with Eldrich the Squid, but he outranked Bison and he felt just swell.

Jerry was back in the game.

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