

TILT

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Michael tried pushing his way through the pack of bullies, but they weren't letting him go today. One of them, an upperclassman a foot taller named Dustin, made a fist and punched Michael right in the nose. Michael fell backward to the ground, grabbing at his face. Blood trickled out of Michael's nose as he tried to apply pressure. A laugh rumbled through this corner of the schoolyard.

The year was 1987. It was August. The summer heat and humidity were miserable in this small college town in central Illinois. It was midday, and you could see the waves of heat rising from the concrete sidewalk where Michael lay.

The high school was a decent size, growing and expanding over the years as the town grew. It had just gotten a new gym extension added to the building last year. The new outdoor corner of the gym had been the perfect spot to ambush a freshman like Michael during lunch break. No teachers were around to break up the fight, if you could call such a one-sided match that.

"What was that for?" Michael asked through his blood-drenched hands. Some of the pinkish-red stuff got into his mouth as he spoke. He couldn't think about anything other than how salty it tasted.

"That was for your loser face." Dustin let out a laugh. "The answers. Now!" His pale hand unclenched and outstretched for the quiz answers that Michael had just lifted from Mrs. Shorben's desk as the lunch bell rang.

A crowd gathered around the pair. They looked down at Michael on the sidewalk, and Dustin standing over him like a gaunt giant.

Michael rummaged through his backpack, a green and brown JanSport that he had had since middle school. There were several rips in it, and the main zipper stuck. He struggled with it for a moment to get it open. He pulled out the answer sheet and handed it over to Dustin.

The numbers and equations lined the sheet for Mrs. Shorben's precalculus test next week, neatly written out in a grid. Dustin, the bully, had failed the class once and wasn't taking any chances this time around.

"I did what you asked, now hand over the money," Michael said from behind his bloody hands. A grin appeared on the bully's face. He reached into his pocket and tossed a large handful of change on the ground, making sure it scattered over the hot sidewalk and into the neatly manicured grass.

"Hey man, this isn't all we agreed on," Michael said, crawling around on the ground picking up the quarters, leaving the pennies. He wasn't going to sink that low.

“That’s all you deserve, loser!” Dustin chuckled. The other kids joined in. “Why are you wearing that cartoon shirt? I wouldn’t be caught dead wearing that in high school!” one kid said. Michael’s mom had bought the Felix the Cat shirt for him at Goodwill along with a myriad of other embarrassing clothes over summer break. It was difficult to keep a growing Michael clothed on a budget. “Your shit backpack’s ripped, loser!” another student helpfully chimed in.

Michael got up and rushed through the crowd towards the upperclassmen’s parking lot, holding back his tears. Nose still bleeding, he ran between the parked cars heading towards the corner pizza shop. His pride was hurt, but at least Dustin gave him money for some lunch. He would even have money left over for an after-school visit to the local arcade to play the games he loved, especially that one talking pinball machine featuring the great red demon named Gorgar.

Michael sat in his high school biology class. It was in a large room on the first floor of the brick school building. Half of it was reserved for desks and seating, while the other half had lab equipment and tables for experiments.

Whitney sat a few desks over. The other kids would say she was overweight. Michael wasn’t sure what that had to do with anything. He was more focused on her wonderful green eyes and long, shiny brown hair. She was beautiful, at least to Michael. He’d watch her lips move as she answered the teacher’s questions or chatted with her friends. But she was above him. She probably didn’t even know his name.

Michael sat there at his desk, head turned to the left, staring at Whitney, completely ignoring what the teacher was saying. “Michael? Can you please tell me what the powerhouse of the cell is?” Uh oh, thought Michael. He quickly turned his head towards the teacher and said, “Well...I’m not sure.”

“Please stop staring at Miss Dolores and pay attention to the lecture, or I’ll have you in detention this time.” The girls around Whitney giggled. Michael and Whitney both stared forward and turned red.

The school bell chimed, marking the end of another hot, shitty school day in central Illinois. It was at least 100 degrees at 3 PM and humid as hell. Michael walked out of the classroom with the other kids. Everyone was eager to get back home or go to the mall. He walked down the musty hallway towards one of the less-used exits. He didn’t want to run into Dustin and his gang again after the lunch break incident. He picked an exit with a hall monitor who didn’t put up with any bullshit.

As Michael walked out of the school and down the concrete steps towards the sidewalk, he heard someone behind him. “Hey man, wait up!” It was Jeremy, his best friend. Or rather, his only friend. “I heard you got punched in the face today. Let me see.” Michael turned and showed Jeremy his bruised nose. “He didn’t hit me too hard. It stopped bleeding before lunch period was over.”

The two walked together, both knowing exactly where they were heading: the local mall, specifically the Jupiter Arcade. Michael showed Jeremy the change he scored earlier off Dustin in their less-than-ideal transaction. “Dude, this is enough for a few games at least. You’ll have to make the best of it. How’s your dog doing?”

“Max? He’s alright, still limping slightly. Mom says we can’t afford the vet bill to figure out what’s wrong.”

“That sucks, man. He was a good dog.”

“Why are you using the past tense? He’s still alive.”

The two walked past the rich people’s houses near the school. The two-story homes had porches big enough to host parties, with old oaks stretching out over their perfectly manicured lawns. Those families were so close to the life of the city. Michael and Jeremy looked on jealously as they saw some of the kids walk into those houses.

They continued down the street and came to the local mall, Square Crossing. It was one of the first indoor shopping malls in the country, shaped like a giant X, with shops lining the inside. In the center of it stood a giant whale statue made out of blue-colored concrete. Parents would bring their little kids to climb all over it, and today was no exception. The pair headed past this and hung a left to Jupiter Arcade.

Michael and Jeremy arrived at the arcade, sweating underneath their backpacks. Michael could feel the coins heavy in his pocket. There were so many things here, in this very mall, that he could buy to make his family’s life just a little bit better. If only he could save the money. But he was addicted to the arcade games. He spent every quarter on them that he found. His mom and dad argued through the night about finances. He didn’t care. He just needed another shot at the grand prizes. Another round at the pinball machine.

The arcade was dimly lit, allowing the flashing rays of light from the cabinet games and pinball machines to illuminate the space. A mural of the planets was painted on the wall behind the row of skee ball lanes. The biggest of the planets, Jupiter, the arcade’s namesake, was painted with its big eye staring over the machines like an unholy deity.

This place relieved Michael’s worries. He’d spend his entire allowance on games, chasing the high scores, getting all those tickets for the stuffed animals and plastic toys. But when it came to the one pinball machine that dispensed tickets, he would never get the high score, no matter how hard he tried. That feat was reserved for Kai — the master of the pinball machines.

Kai was a tall, lanky college kid with shoulder length, floofy blond hair. He’d strut into the arcade with his tight ripped blue jeans and heavy metal band t-shirts. He would stand at the pinball machine and work his wizardry for hours at a time.

Michael had seen Kai playing before during the summer. Quarters were stacked on the machine’s edge. His fingers flicked the buttons like he was playing a delicate song on a piano, laser-focused on the silver ball as it made its way through the playing field, or as Michael called it for Gorgar: the fires of hell.

Kai wasn't here today. He'd be here on the weekends. But his name was still ranked at the top of the pinball machine Michael was standing in front of now. Gorgar! It was the machine featuring a giant red demon standing over a warrior lifting a bikini-clad woman from a sacrificial altar. Pure heavy metal. It was the first pinball machine that could talk back to you while you played and inevitably lost. It had seven words: "**Gorgar**", "**speaks**", "**beat**", "**you**", "**me**", "**hurt**", and "**got**". It would combine these words into different phrases such as "**Gorgar speaks**" or "**me got you**". Revolutionary when it came out, it was now outdated by other more sophisticated talking pinball machines. The owner had attached a ticket dispenser to Gorgar, a rarity among pinball machines. He was hoping to get more money out of it before its eventual retirement.

Michael would take the tickets over to the prize counter. The teenage attendant, always changing and whose name Michael could never get straight, would exchange them for a stuffed teddy bear or a basket of plastic dinosaurs. Michael didn't care. He just loved the idea of putting some money on the line and winning something.

Today's attendant walked over and looked at Michael's bruised nose. He was big, huge compared to the freshman, and his name tag read Jack. "Hey kid. Got into a fight today?"

"Yeah, some bullies jumped me over lunch period, alright? I don't really want to talk about it." Michael pulled on his loose backpack straps and didn't make eye contact.

"Kid, let me give you some advice. When I was your age, I would get picked on every day on the bus ride home over my Smurfs t-shirts." Jack pointed at Michael's Felix the Cat shirt. "They'd sit behind me on the bus and pull at my hair, throw shit at me they found on the floor. One day, I just had enough. I got off the bus at that kid's stop, picked his scrawny ass up, and pile-drove him face-first into the fucking ground. No one fucked with me after that, and I still watch the Smurfs to this day. I'll watch whatever the hell I want."

Michael tried to imagine himself picking up Dustin, let alone anyone in high school. He was still a scrawny freshman, a bit short for his age. "Yeah, thanks for the advice. I'll try to remember that."

"You should join the high school wrestling team, kid. You'd be amazed at how a few tricks can overcome your height disadvantage." Jack nodded at Michael and returned to his desk.

Michael reached into his pocket and pulled out a quarter. Twenty-five cents for a play was the going rate for three balls on the pinball machine. He slid it into Gorgar's coin slot. A silver ball popped out in front of the plunger. The first ball of the day, Michael thought to himself. He slowly pulled the plunger back, savoring every moment, and released it. He lifted and wiggled his hand as if he had just cast a spell. The silver ball raced up along the track and entered the playfield — the fires of hell. The machine welcomed Michael with an electronic "**Gorgar speaks!**"

Michael's first play only lasted a few minutes before he slipped and let the ball fall past the flippers. "**Gorgar beat you,**" the machine said with its mechanical voice. Michael hit the

front of the machine with a little too much force, causing Jack behind the prize desk to frown and give him a stern look.

Michael put coin after coin in as the hours dragged by. Sometimes his friend Jeremy would look over the machine with him when he wasn't preoccupied with skee ball or the new Pac-Man game. After many "**Gorgar beat you**" taunts, Michael was out of quarters. He looked around but didn't see Jack or Jeremy. In fact, no one was in the arcade, though all the machines were still on and chanting their preprogrammed songs in a chaotic din.

Michael shrugged his shoulders and began counting his tickets when a voice came over the machine once again. "**Need money?**" Michael was confused. He hadn't heard these words come out of the machine before. Though it still had the static of a machine recording, there was something genuine and soothing about the voice. He must have unlocked some special, secret mode!

"**Need money?**" Again, the voice was mechanical, but there was something behind those words. Something alive. The machine popped a quarter into the change dispenser. "**Gorgar make bet.**" The leaderboard cleared, and a new score appeared on it: GRG 10,000. Michael looked at the scoreboard with his mouth open, thinking for sure Jack was pranking him. But no one was around, not even his best friend Jeremy. After a few moments of disbelief, Michael inserted the quarter and began playing.

The silver ball popped out onto the plunger, and Michael pulled it back, releasing it up and curving around to the fires of hell. Michael wiped sweat from his forehead as the score rose to 4,000, 6,000, 8,000, and finally 10,000. The board locked, the flippers stopped working, and the flashing lights turned off. The sound of quarters rang out as they dispensed below the coin slot. He'd won real money this time, not just tickets. He opened the dispenser's flap and reached in, pulling out five quarters. He turned them over in his hand, checking if they were real.

Jeremy came around the corner by the new Pac-Man machine. "Hey man, it's almost closing time. You ready to get out of here? I've been out of money for a bit."

"Yeah," said Michael, thinking about how good it felt to win that money. He wondered what would have happened if he lost, but he shrugged it off. He got this shuddering feeling, like he wanted to play again and again until his fingers went numb, winning money from the machine. But he had school tomorrow and couldn't think of an excuse to stay. "Yeah... I think I'm good to go."

Michael came back to the arcade every day. Sometimes he would come with Jeremy, other times by himself. Again and again, Gorgar would enter the special mode and propose a bet when no one was around. It was a bet Michael was more than happy to take. Each time the high score would increase, and each time he'd work hard to win his quarters back. He was making a small profit off the machine.

Michael had become good at the game. Each time he won, the mechanical voice would come on with a "**you beat Gorgar**". He loved to hear the sound of the quarters ringing as they hit the bottom of the dispenser. But he felt terrible when he lost, a negative feeling that

could only be solved by playing again. Something inside him kept telling him he'd have to bet more to win more.

One day the game got harder. Something was off, either his aim or timing. The machine was taking all that he had. Eventually, Michael was out of money and couldn't afford the quarter play. Now, something strange happened. Gorgar proposed something new. "**Gorgar make bet. Take something precious.**"

Michael didn't know what to make of this new line from the machine. It sounded like someone was really talking to him, asking him to take a risk. But what kind of precious thing could the machine take other than quarters? Did it want him to insert more money? While Michael pondered this, the silver ball popped out and onto the plunger. It sat there motionless, shining, waiting for him. The score of GRG 100,000 appeared on top of the leaderboard.

Michael hesitated for a moment, then slowly reached forward, pulled back the rod, and released. He was in, and he didn't have to pay. It was like he had another chance at the game. He had another chance to win.

His score rose slowly, reaching 80,000 before he was down to his last play. He threw the silver ball again onto the fires of hell and worked his best to keep it afloat. But it wasn't meant to be, and the ball fell down between the flippers, ending the game just shy of 90,000. He couldn't believe what happened. He had taken the bet time and time again and usually won, but now he had just lost. How could that be with all the skill he had acquired over the past few weeks?

With that, the machine said, "**Gorgar beat you,**" and locked up. Michael made a face, wondering what exactly the machine meant by taking something precious as he picked up his backpack and collected his tickets. He went to find Jeremy, and the two of them headed to the prize desk.

Michael looked down at the tickets and felt disgusted. These tickets were for kids. He wanted to play for real money. He handed the tickets over to Jeremy. "You sure?" Jeremy asked. "Yeah, just take them. I don't need another stupid prize." Jeremy took the tickets and happily picked out a new water gun hanging up behind the prize desk. After Jeremy stuffed the gun into his backpack, the pair of them left.

Michael and Jeremy walked back towards their neighborhood. It was a small subdivision near the outskirts of town. The subdivision was a mix of older, falling-apart homes and empty, overgrown lots. It was built after the war and had seen better years. Too many of the houses had boarded-up windows.

"Hey man, what's the strangest thing that's ever happened to you?" Michael asked as they walked down the street.

"I don't know..."

"Come on," Michael prodded his friend.

“Well, one time we were visiting Gran’s lake house when I was little. They lived next to this elderly couple. The husband’s name was Jim. Well, Jim would sit in the sunroom and look out at the lake every day. I’d see him there and give him a wave. He’d wave back and smile.”

“One day I was walking back up from the lake with my mom and I waved at Jim. I saw him wave back, smile, get up, and go back inside. My mom asked me who I was waving at. I told her Jim, and her face went white. ‘Jim passed away a few days before we arrived,’ she said. But I knew I saw him, sitting there in the sunroom and staring out at the lake.”

“Oh, so a ghost?” Michael asked. Jeremy cleared his throat. “Yeah, something like that I guess. I never did see him again after that.”

The pair came to Jeremy’s house. It was a two-story house, rare in this neighborhood, but shaped like a brick. The siding had some sort of greenish mold growing on it. Jeremy turned to face Michael.

“I’ll see ya tomorrow at school.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Jeremy walked up the gravel driveway, opened the front door, and walked inside without looking back.

Michael continued on towards his own house a few blocks down, passing more empty lots and boarded-up houses along the way. He stopped at one of the empty lots and gazed out over the overgrown grass and weeds. There were concrete steps in the front yard that led to a house that no longer existed. He wondered what Gorgar meant by taking something precious from him. He turned and walked the rest of the way home.

As Michael approached his house, he saw a police car sitting out front, a white Dodge with blue stripes. The lights were off. Somehow, the police car’s lights being off made Michael’s stomach turn even more than if they were on. He raced to the front door and threw it open. “Mom?!” His mother, Elizabeth, was sitting at the kitchen table with a fat police officer with a puffy black mustache sitting across from her. A pack of tissues and a still-smoking cigarette were in the ashtray on the table. Her arms were crossed, and she was sobbing.

“What’s going on?” asked Michael. The fat police officer stared at him, his mustache motionless. His mother turned, tears in her eyes. “It’s your father, Michael. He’s just been in a car accident on the way home from work. He’s... dead.” Michael stared at his mother. “What?”

Michael felt the room spinning. He tried to hold on to the back of one of the chairs to steady himself. “Dead? That can’t be.” He thought back to what Gorgar told him earlier, that he would bet something precious. The pieces started fitting together in his brain. Could it be that the precious thing was the life of his father?

Michael didn’t return to the arcade for several days. He sat in his room, thinking about the future without his dad. He would cry himself to sleep every night.

School wasn't much better. Despite losing one of his parents, the bullies still harassed him. They didn't care one bit. They'd tear into his short stature, his kids' clothes, and loved to see him cry about his recently dead dad.

During biology class, he couldn't pay attention. Even gazing at his crush, Whitney, filled him with no sense of bliss. He just felt numb to the world. Part of it was his father; the other part was the lack of pinball. He'd find himself with his hands on either side of his desk, rhythmically flicking his fingers. He would imagine he was standing in front of Gorgar, beating the demon down with each throw of the silver ball for what he did.

The day of the funeral finally came. Michael and his mom filed into the old station wagon and headed for Lincoln's funeral home on the other side of town. As they pulled up, they saw Jeremy standing outside under the black awning with both his parents. Michael got out of the car and walked over to Jeremy.

"Thanks for being here, Jeremy," Michael said, scratching his head. "I can't help but think I'm responsible for this."

Jeremy looked at him like he had said the dumbest thing in his life. "What are you talking about, man? You were at the arcade when it happened."

"I know. I just..." Michael wasn't ready to tell Jeremy what he'd been doing. Making bets with a machine, gambling with a demon. He felt a wave of shame wash over him.

"Look, man, you lost your father. It's OK to be sad, but don't blame yourself for what happened. It was a pure accident. Completely out of your control!" Michael knew in the back of his head that it was anything but an accident, and that he was the cause of it.

After the visitation, the procession headed to the cemetery. They laid Michael's dad to rest in an off-the-beaten-path grave. It was in the only place the family could afford. A marker was put up at the head; the family would have to find money for a stone later. At least there was a priest there to say some nice words over the hole in the ground.

While the excavator began filling in the grave, the families piled back into their cars and headed to the church that his father had once been a member of. Michael had no idea his father was once religious. It felt odd being in this wide-open space he had not once stepped foot in and having lunch provided.

Later, Michael was sitting alone in the church's break room. He was drinking coffee for the first time, sipping it down slowly and thinking about how his dad managed to drink this bitter stuff every morning. A low, mechanical voice came from the coffee machine. "**Bet again. Or the dog gets it.**"

Michael thought about this for a while, sitting in silence in the break room. He looked at the steam rising from his styrofoam cup of coffee. Was Gorgar threatening his dog Max now? He thought he'd had enough of the machine, but this was serious. He couldn't risk losing his dog.

Something came over him then, an impulsiveness as he thought about the money he'd won from the machine during those good weeks. Something in his brain told him that he'd

already lost so much, so now it must be time to win again. This made total sense to Michael.

“Don’t hurt Max. I’ll play again, on Saturday, and I’ll beat you this time, demon.”

After calming down, Michael sat and thought. Could he actually beat the machine this time? He had nearly won the last time he played unknowingly for his father’s life, but could he risk another precious thing in his life?

Michael realized what he’d gotten himself into. He shouldn’t be gambling with machines, but he had already agreed to it and he needed a plan to win. That’s when it hit him. Kai could easily beat the machine’s score of 100,000. He needed to find Kai and ask him for advice.

Michael waited until Saturday morning and headed for the arcade. He entered Square Crossing Mall, passed the bagel shop with the long line, and headed straight for Jupiter Arcade. He saw Kai there, playing at the very pinball machine that he needed help with. Michael admired his stature, his long blond hair, and tight-fitting clothes. He was wearing a heavy-metal band T-shirt with a picture of a giant demon crashing through the stone ramparts of some castle.

“Hey, Kai, is it? I think we met a few months ago during the summer.” Kai didn’t turn to look at Michael. “Would you help me get better at pinball? I’ve got a bet I need to win.”

Kai maintained his focus on the game. He stared at the silver ball whizzing around the playing field, flying off bumpers and flippers. “Yeah, kid, what’s in it for me?”

Michael said, “I’ve got a big bet riding on the game, and I need all the skill I can get before playing it. You’re the best in town,” Michael pointed past Kai to the scoreboard. “You’ve got to help me, man.”

Kai raised his eyebrows at this but still stared at the playing field as the shiny silver ball raced across it. “A big bet, huh? Sounds like a noble quest, kid. I’m in. Come stand here, let me show you how I play.”

Kai continued to flip the ball around on the playing field, showing Michael the important areas to hit and what to ignore. He kept playing for a while, then let Michael take a turn and showed him some more tips and tricks. Things were going pretty well. Michael was learning some new things he never realized about the game.

“I’ve got to go grab some lunch, kid,” Kai said after an hour went by. “I think you’ve got the gist of it. I’m usually here Saturday mornings if you need more help.”

When Michael was finally alone with the game, the mechanical voice rang out, **Gorgar make bet. Take something precious.** Michael felt disgusted, but he didn’t want anything to happen to the dog. He told himself that it was his turn to win. Michael said, “You’re on,” and slipped a quarter into the coin slot.

Michael played a good game. He was nearly to the 100,000 mark but was on his last ball. He was doing well, but then he saw the ball falling straight down between the flippers.

He knew what this meant. Kai had called it dead man's land. With a sudden burst of adrenaline, he smacked the table, giving the ball enough curve to hit it with the paddle. "Tilt," said Gorgar, but the score passed 100,000 as it hit the jump bumpers. "Cheater," said Gorgar. "Cheater, cheater, cheater," over and over again. The machine locked up. The flippers didn't work, and the silver ball slid between them. But still, his score was over 100,000.

Michael panicked. Shit, what would happen to his dog Max now that he had cheated? He grabbed his backpack and ran out of the arcade, leaving the tickets behind.

Michael ran along the sidewalk back to his dilapidated neighborhood. He passed by the old elementary school and baseball field, hoping that Max would still be there when he got home. He thought about his dog, his loyalty over the years. He wondered how he could have acted this way. How could he have broken his dog's trust?

Once, when Michael was in middle school, he fell and broke his ankle by a small creek that ran through the town. The pain stung, but Max was there by his side, licking his face and keeping him company while Jeremy went to find help. The dog loved the boy, and the boy loved the dog.

Michael got to the neighborhood and passed by Jeremy's house. The windows were open and the door was standing ajar on the hot summer day. He guessed that the AC must be off again. Michael just ran past to his own house. He could see it ahead. He ran through the yard, overgrown now that his dad was gone and no one was there to take care of it.

Michael threw the door open and rushed to the living room. There, laying on the ground unmoving, was Max. Michael rushed up and checked the dog's breath. Nothing. Michael checked the heartbeat and couldn't find anything. The poor shepherd must have had a heart attack.

He had cheated at the game, and it took the dog. That much was clear to Michael, and he was pissed.

One thing came to Michael's mind. He wanted revenge against the machine, in the worst way possible. He wanted the demon to feel the pain that it had inflicted upon him, but how do you take revenge against a machine? He knew that it was impossible to draw blood or tears from a machine, but maybe he could stop anyone else from falling for the demon's traps.

After Michael wiped the tears away, he got up. "Max, you were a good dog," he said to himself. He turned and walked past the white and brown flower-patterned couch across the carpeted floor. Sliding the locks out of the way, he opened the back door and crossed the backyard towards the toolshed.

He knew what he was after. He took the key out of his pocket and unlocked the padlock, slipping the rusty latch away from the door. Michael opened it towards him and stepped inside the hot, musty shed. He saw it there hanging on the wall - the hand axe. Its handle was about 18 inches long with a shiny metal head. Sharpened well. His father had used it for

splitting kindling for the fire pit. The axe would do. He tucked it into his backpack. It fit perfectly.

Michael left the shed and his home behind. He walked out of the neighborhood, past the dilapidated houses and empty overgrown lots, feeling the shifting weight of the axe in his backpack with each step. He walked down the sidewalk to town, past the baseball field and his old elementary school. Finally, he got to Square Crossing Mall and went straight to Jupiter Arcade.

Jack, the big attendant, was there, sitting behind the prize desk. He was wearing a Smurf T-shirt and baggy blue jeans. Jack gave Michael a knowing nod; he was a regular customer by now. He didn't know what was in Michael's backpack.

Michael went straight to the back row of pinball machines where Gorgar sat. He quickly slid his backpack from his shoulders and let it drop on the floor with a thud. He bent over and worked to unzip the stuck zipper. The handle of the axe stuck out from the bag. He grabbed it with his right hand. He stood, raising the axe into the air and behind his head, posed like the barbarian that Gorgar stood over on the backdrop of the pinball machine. He pulled the axe forward and let it drop on the pinball machine, shattering the glass.

Jack immediately looked over and gasped.

Michael struck it again. This time he aimed for the space between the flippers. He broke through the wooden paneling, leaving a gnarly gash. He struck it again and again, all over the playfield, splitting bumpers in two. The machine's dancing lights began malfunctioning and shooting sparks into the air.

Jack the attendant ran over. "Have you gone insane? What are you doing!? Stop it! Security, security!"

Michael didn't care. He kept on hacking away at the machine until it was beyond repair. He climbed over the machine on his knees and took a swipe at the backdrop, the picture of the demon Gorgar standing over the warrior and bikini-clad woman. He severed the demon's neck with the strike, shredding through the flimsy plastic.

He must have struck something important because the demon machine began speaking. "**Gorgar hurt, stop.**" Michael wasn't going to stop. He kept hacking away until the plastic was split into fragments and the bare wiring was exposed and severed. "**Gorgar...you... win.**"

Michael abruptly stopped, focusing on catching his breath and feeling sweat dripping down his forehead, completely unaware that Jack was rushing in for the tackle. He just felt relieved, like a weight had been lifted off of him. He swore in that moment that he would never gamble again, especially not with a demon trapped in a pinball machine.

He thought to himself, what is it that made me make those choices? The ones to gamble away my life and the ones around me. The ones that left me with so much pain and grief when I lost. He thought this to himself as Jack pounced on him, grabbing the axe away and pinning him down on the floor in a headlock.

“Just sit tight, kid.” Jack said in a calm tone as he maneuvered into one of his wrestling poses, easily pinning Michael to the arcade floor for the whole 15 minutes it took the police to show up. Jack didn’t say much during those 15 minutes, but Michael could feel his breath on the back of his neck.

The police had taken Michael to the police station. It wasn’t much of a drive, just a few blocks down from the mall. It was a small, brick building with the letters “POLICE DEPT” posted above the front windows.

The police officer just finished calling Michael’s mom at work. Michael heard her sobbing over the phone, crying about her baby. The guard asked if Michael wanted to speak to her, but Michael decided it was best to keep silent. Michael had a grin on his face, knowing he defeated the machine. He thought “no one was going to get hurt from it again”.

An hour later, once Michael’s mom’s shift was over, she drove to pick up Michael. Michael saw her park out front of the police station, the old station wagon squeezing in between the lines. She walked in and went straight to Michael.

“Michael Anderson Smith, what in the hell do you think you were doing? I had to leave work 30 minutes early, thank God Jenny got in early today, to come pick you up. You are grounded for a month. One whole month! Do you have anything to say for yourself young man?”

Michael stayed silent.

“Well that’s no way to treat your mother when I asked you a question. You are double grounded! Two months!”

“Yes, mom,” Michael said. He never got in trouble. He was no good at apologizing.

“What would your father think?”

The weeks went by. Michael went to school and walked with Jeremy over to Square Crossing Mall, though he was banned from entering the mall after his attack on Gorgar.

“I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, Jeremy,” he’d say. His heart wrenched at the thought of not being able to play anything. All he could do was say his goodbyes to his friend and continue the long walk home. At least it was fall now and the weather was cooler.

He walked past the outdoor entrances and parking lots around the mall, then past the loading docks. He saw a couple of guys lifting an arcade machine onto to the loading dock from a truck. Michael looked closer at the machine’s backdrop, and saw the familiar figure of Gorgar, the great red demon staring back at him. Michael gasped.

“It’s come back! The blasted machine has come back!”

Michael looked on, a frown on his face, knowing there was nothing he could do.

THE END