

Pinball Wizard

It was Christmas afternoon and the ship was silent except for the hiss and hum of concealed electrics and softly pumping compressors. Eustace was angry, because there were no more presents to unwrap, especially the one he'd really wanted. He looked out of the view-port into the vastness of space and made a face at his reflection. All he'd asked Santa for before they left Cape Canaveral was a toy pinball machine, and no one had brought it for him.

He clenched his little hands into fists and pounded on the glass until his knuckles ached. What did they know about Christmas? They were all grownups, and all they cared about were their stupid experiments. "Ohh, look at the radishes, they're sprouting already!" "The gyroscope is functioning perfectly, now I've added the ballast!" "Just came back from our first space walk! Fixed that pesky solar sail no problem!"

He glared at the tiny Christmas tree floating upside down in zero gravity by the bulkhead. Zero gravity was alright, kind of fun once you got over the queasiness, but it wasn't as much fun as a toy pinball machine, that's for sure. He'd played with one at Jeremy's house last year, and it had buttons to push that sent silver balls shooting around ringing bells and battery-operated lights that flashed and an LED scoreboard...it had *everything*!

At first he'd thought it was there, tethered to the tree with the other presents, but when he unwrapped the biggest box all he'd found inside was a stupid *chemistry set*! "See, it has a microscope, too, and all kinds of experiments you can do..." Experiments! Who wanted experiments? Or a jig-saw puzzle. Or a story-book. Story-book? He could order the mainframe to read him stories anytime he wanted to hear one. And it played movies for him, too. He kicked at the mound of wrapping paper and watched it flutter away.

His eyes burned with angry tears, but he didn't wipe them away. He couldn't, because he was wearing his extra-vehicular suit and helmet. He looked at the clock on the wall. Two minutes to go. Then it would be safe to take it off. Good, because he was hungry and needed to pee. He brought the chemistry set instruction manual closer to his face-plate and re-read the caution warnings for Experiment Number Seven: 'Calcium hypochlorite is an oxidiser that can create chlorine gas which, when mixed with water, can be toxic. Allow four hours to disperse if used in an enclosed environment with limited ventilation'.

The water bottle he'd used floated by his shoulder, empty. He pulled himself over to the dining hall hatch and peered through the porthole.

Everyone was dead except for him. It was his fifth birthday as well as Christmas, *so there!*

He opened the hatch and went in.

The bodies of the crew floated about haphazardly in the dining hall, illuminated by a single blinking string of festive lights. Eustace took off his suit and helmet and ordered a slice of pumpkin pie from the dispenser.

He finished the last of his pumpkin pie and burped. He nudged the Chief Engineer's body with his elbow and watched it soar across the room. It sailed into the Medical Officer's drifting corpse and sent her spinning slowly into the Math Master, who ended up bumping into the bulkhead and rebounding. Enthused, Eustace shoved another crew member on the chest and giggled as it cartwheeled into the Biology Master and bounced off of him. Before long all eleven dead crew members were ricocheting off of one another in a measured, unending, macabre dance, and Eustace crowed "SCORE!" each time they collided. He decided to order the mainframe to project a 3-D scoreboard and some flashing lights and bells. Maybe zero gravity wasn't so bad after all.