

Down boy, down!

Slim pickings. That was the first thought that came to Vicxa Varis' mind as she considered the list of de-confiscated personal effects she'd been so graciously allowed now that Arcona suddenly had need of her. Her S-5 blaster pistol wasn't much, but at least she was armed again with something with a bit more sting than a knife, and the few choice explosives didn't harm either. Though of course the constabulary had not been kind enough to let her walk around with a disruptor or thermal detonators in their city. Why would she be that lucky.

"Gonk!" the GNK-droid bleeted beside her as they ran towards the open doors of the Museum of Selenian History, and the wildly waving Professor Tav'ri beckoning them on. Behind them, the fighting between the important people was heating up once more as the humming and hissing of plasma blades mingled with the whining report of blasters and frenzied yells of cultists. Both Mirialan and machine were happy to avoid the violence, though they both knew it was little more than a momentary relief.

She did not consider herself much of a religious person, *but* she had delved into enough temples and ancient religious ruins to know that there were some things a blaster had a distressingly hard time killing. Unless they found a way to be rid of those self-styled 'Old Gods' by their own means, there was no telling if even driving a multicolored plasma beam through their hearts might be enough to stop them.

That was where Professor Tav'ri came in. While the fighting raged on, he'd been digging through the ancient records using a lexicon she'd found during her tomb spelunkings, and judging by the excitement glinting in his bespectacled eyes, it was likely he had found something.

"Hurry!" the Selenian urged them on. "I think I've found it!"

There were cosmic forces at work behind the scenes. Vicxa was certain of this, because every time someone uttered words to that effect in a sticky situation, she was almost guaranteed to soon be in even greater peril. Glancing over her shoulder at the bitter defence outside, her eyes locked with the 'Goddess' startlingly blue ones. They narrowed, and her lips moved. Over the din of battle, there was no making out what she'd said, but Vix didn't need to know, for the next moment a score of armored Arconan soldiers were tossed aside as an enraged six-limbed nightmare creature broke through the defenders' ranks. Its head snapped towards her and a howling roar escaped its skeletal mouth.

Why? Why did it always go like this?

Reaching the double doors, Vicxa pushed the professor back inside and barred them as best she could, which amounted to little more than melting the hinges with a few blaster bolts. It wouldn't hold the monster forever, but it might buy them a bit of time.

Professor Tav'ri looked shell-shocked, but recovered after a sharp palm to the cheek. "What did you find? Tell me there's something we can use to stop those *things*."

"Y-yes, yes!" Tav'ri replied, staggering back towards his office. "I believe there is a way, inscribed in one of the tablets laid within Alla'su's tomb. Apparently, not all of our ancestors were keen to see her return, so they thought to leave us instructions on how to—" he waved his hand, searching for the right words, "—recontain her."

"That doesn't sound permanent at all," Vix replied, nonplussed.

"It's the best I could find. And it should keep her contained for at least another decade. The longer rituals are more involved and the tablets quite fractured..."

"Ten years? That's as good as dead to me," the Mirialan replied. "What do you need?"

"Time, as much as you can give me. I need to prepare an amulet and—"

The sound of something heavy and vicious slamming against the museum doors cut the explanation short. Not that she would have needed it anyway, but professors liked to talk. Watching in mild horror at the groaning hinges as the nightmare beast tore at the double doors and tried to gain entry, Vicxa considered her options.

"Go!" she snapped at Tav'ri. "Just do what you have to do, I'll buy you as much time as I can, but I've gotta warn you, my pockets are pretty empty right now, and that thing doesn't look like it accepts credit."

The Selenian nodded and scrambled to his office, leaving the Mirialan and the GNK-droid to face off against Alla'su's favorite pet. The familiar lobby of the museum building had some decent height to it, but it was still far too constrained for her liking. She'd have to lure the beast into the main hall, but to actually finish it off she'd have to think outside the box.

"Gonk, get up to the second level and wait for my signal," she said to her droid companion.

"Gonk?" the droid warbled, confused.

"I don't know, uh, by the statue of Mo'ana?"

"Gonk?"

"It's the girl with the paddle!"

"Gonk?"

“Just pick any statue, then!” she snapped as a bolt head whizzed past her face, having snapped under the mounting pressure of the Alpha Caxquette. As the droid turned around to begin lumbering up the stone staircase upon its short, stubby legs, Vicxa took stock of a few choice locations to grapple onto, before squaring her blaster at the door.

Time seemed to move like molasses as each successive slam of the beast’s frame against the door sent tremors through the building and more bolt heads pinging off like slugs from a gun. Standing right in its path, Vicxa felt her organic hand turn clammy against the cool durasteel of her cybernetic as she did her best to steady her aim. Heart pounding in her chest, she waited for the inevitable.

The tired hinges sheared off in a catastrophic cacophony of protesting metal and crashing timber. The ravaged door halves slammed upon the polished stone floor like falling trees and the shockwaves of the impact made Vix’s first shot fly wide. The beast’s snarling face, more skull than living creature, emerged through the dust cloud of shattered stone, its glowing eyes piercing from within deep seated sockets.

The pint-sized Mirialan felt chill dread clawing at her heart as she fired a few bolts into the Caxquette’s hide, but the bright crimson plasma seemed to only irritate the creature as it shrugged off the punishment with ease. Growling, the six-limbed creature crawled forward, trailing strips of dark flesh through which living bone jutted like daggers. How anything so hideously malformed could be alive defied all reason.

It issued a piercing howl from its decaying maw, coils like entrails spilling forth from beneath its skinless muzzle. Vicxa did not need to know a thing about animals to instinctively realize what that gut-wrenching sound meant, and with a hasty click of her blaster’s ascension gun, she fired a grapnel across the lobby to make her escape.

The Caxquette moved with preternatural grace, its speed belying its massive bulk. Like dark mercury, it flowed forward with murderous intent, its gait closer to reptilian than mammal. The long barbed tail that flowed in its wake was a living thing in its own right, lashing out like an uncaged viper after the fleeing treasure huntress.

Vicxa sailed past the slavering beast upon the ascension gun’s wildly whirring drive, the sharp rush of air of its tail swipe washing over her as the appendage narrowly missed its mark. In a few heartbeats, she’d made it upon the ledge, managing to put some distance between herself and the beast—or so she thought.

Before she could raise her blaster anew to fire at the Caxquette from her fresh vantage point, it crouched down with rippling muscle visible beneath its oily black skin and pounced. Propelled by six limbs, the beast was impossibly mobile and its front limbs crashed through the second level handrails like they were but a child’s sandcastle. Shards of stone splintered in every direction, showering the shocked Mirialan with jagged splinters as she covered her face from the worst of it.

Snarling and roaring, the beast tried to clamber up, but the narrow walkway offered precious little to grip onto and its pursuit was momentarily disrupted. Vicxa was not one to look a gift bantha in the mouth, however, and sat off in a wild sprint away from the creature, snapping off a few hurried bolts as she went. The blaster shots hissed against the creature's dark hide, opening small wounds which almost instantly healed as thick ichor oozed to cover up the damaged flesh beneath. Claws grinding against stone, it managed to muscle its way upon the walkway and sat off in pursuit of its given prey, glowing eyes alight with hunger and rage.

Vicxa made it into the main hall, though barely, before turning around and snapping off a few more shots at the onrushing beast behind her. A single lucky shot found its mark, striking the glowing eye within its socket and the beast screamed in pain, lurching off balance and sliding across the polished stone floor like a scythe.

"Oh *frak*."

She had no time to jump or dodge, but she tried to anyway. Her feet had barely left the ground when she felt the beast snatch hold of her boot and yank her with it as it crashed through the railing and plummeted back down to the main floor. The impact knocked the breath out of her lungs and she felt something sharp pierce her skin even as the Caxquette ironically broke her fall.

Groggy and disoriented, she hazily became aware of one of the creature's bony spikes protruding through her flesh, but in a state of mild concussion could not quite process it. The beast itself was slowly getting up as well, shaking its head and then its spine, along with the spikes that jutted out of it. As the thing moved, tearing at her flesh, she finally comprehended the magnitude of her wound.

Her scream filled the museum hall as she felt something tearing in her side. Frantic hands beat at the creature as she tried to leverage herself off of its back, momentarily cowering the Caxquette with sheer ferocity. Finally, mercifully, she managed to lever herself off the bone spike and roll off its back, yelping sharply as she fell upon the floor in a heap. White lightning flashed across her vision as she crawled away from the beast, legs limply kicking at the floor like a swimmer on dry land.

The Caxquette recovered far faster, its injuries mending as broken flesh knit back under ichorous protection and shattered bone simply regrew. It took up on unsteady feet, but growing bolder with each pace it traced after the fleeing Mirialan. Vicxa managed to prop herself up against a statue's feet, raising her blaster to squeeze off a few more shots, but her aim was wildly off mark as pain and delirium began overtaking her.

The beast lowered its head, growling like distant thunder, before leaping towards its hapless prey. Vicxa screamed in panic, squeezing her eyes shut before the end, arms raised in a vain attempt at self-preservation. The Caxquette's jaws closed shut around a tender limb, its eager tongue awaiting the taste of fresh blood—but only sensed iron and oil.

Vicxa opened her eyes, unsure how she was still alive, until she realized the beast had chowed down on her cybernetic and gotten itself entangled. Stupefied, she stared at the creature so close to her she could lean forward and nudge it, both foes unsure how to proceed. They did not need to ponder long.

“GONK!”

The sound was as monotone as ever, yet it carried with it more emotion than few things Vicxa could recall hearing as the droid launched itself off the gallery above and hurtled towards the Caxquette below. The beast, bewildered, reacted too slowly, its attempt to twist its head away confounded by the snagged Mirialan.

The next instant, the robust casing of the heavy-duty power droid slammed with full force across the Caxquette’s skull, to sickening effect. The hollow *crack* would haunt Vicxa’s nightmares for the rest of her life, as the beast’s head crumpled under the impact. Blood, brain, and viscera burst out in a fountain that coated both droid and treasure huntress in slimy drippings.

“Gonk.”

Vicxa stared at the droid with eyes wide in shock, trying to come to terms with what had just happened. “T-thank you,” she muttered, trying to get up, but feeling the snag of her arm prevent her. Unlatching the prosthetic, she regained her footing just as the GNK-droid did, fresh monster blood now splattered across its pink glitter unicorn paint job.

Turning back towards the entrance, she could see the tides of battle turning against the invaders. Maybe Tav’ri’s gambit might not be needed after all. Barely had she given birth to the traitorous optimism, when she saw Alla’su rise into the air upon tongues of lightning and unleash an expanding shockwave around her that knocked every defender off their feet. Even at this distance, she had to brace herself to stay upright, while the GNK-droid behind her warbled in alarm.

“I know, I know, but what can I do about...? What do you mean *behind me*?” She turned on her heels to look at the slain beast, only to discover the assumptions of its demise had been premature. Even as she watched, horrified, she saw its flesh begin to reknit, skull fractures closing shut and even its pinkish brain begin to regrow. Was there no way to keep this damned thing down?

In desperation, and without other options, she pulled out the only denton charge the constabulary had so graciously allowed her to keep and shoved it inside the beast’s reconstituting brain. Unnatural flesh cloyed at her bare hand as she withdrew it from the rapidly regenerating head, Vicxa shivering with revulsion from head to toe. With only a glance between them, woman and droid ran for it, finding cover behind a statue of Alla’su even as the foul beast began to twitch with life once more. It issued a whimpering snarl, as if announcing its ambition for revenge.

Vicxa would have none of it, and depressed the detonator.

The Alpha Caxquette exploded like a ruptured balloon, spraying the entire museum hall with its viscera. Scraps of bone and flesh coated the pantheon of Selenian gods, a befitting anointment of their own making as dark blood dripped from their chiseled likenesses.

“Gonk?”

“Yeah, that should do it,” Vix muttered, finally breathing a sigh of relief as she watched even the largest scraps stay limp and still. Clutching the wound in her side, she steadied herself against her plucky droid and limped towards the professor’s offices. She hoped whatever time she’d managed to buy would be worth it.