

# One-Armed Bandit

“Careful now! Don’t drop, don’t—!”

A clattering of sabacc chips spilling across the devastated casino floor filled the air, blotting out the muted sounds of crackling fires and malfunctioning slot machines. After the incident at the auction, and the ensuing hostilities between the Principate and Revenants, including the arrival of Severian military assets in orbit, most of the clients had decided to bail on the planet. That had left a considerable amount of perfectly usable credit tokens *just lying there*. Inside safeboxes and behind locked doors, granted, but still practically just in the open for the taking. It would have been a crime not to indulge.

Besides, with the casino’s restaurants closed, Vicxa felt very much justified in expanding the definition of buffet to things beyond food. Maybe she could exchange the tokens for a meal later on, that was only fair, right?

“GNK,” the GNK droid droned apologetically, inclining its boxy frame to observe the spilled chips and promptly dropping the tray that had contained them off its head. In hindsight, perhaps that had not been the best way to transport their winnings.

“That’s ok, buddy,” Vicxa comforted, patting the droid empathetically as she knelt down to scoop up handfuls of tokens from amidst the bloodstains and broken glass. “Be more careful next time, ok? If we haul enough back home, I can afford a nice oil bath for you, yeah?”

“GNK,” the droid replied enthusiastically, though not quite understanding the intricacies of monetary exchange, or how its balancing act would affect this.

“Good thing everyone’s gone,” the Mirialan continued, scooting over from pile to pile and tossing the tokens back into a bowl atop the GNK droid’s head. “Getting out would be a bit more difficult if the security had stayed around, but then again, the Hutts don’t pay them much, I reckon.”

Barely had she said so, when the muffled sounds of pressing yells and approaching blaster fire caused her ears to perk up. Beyond a set of double doors, she could see red flashes of blaster discharge, followed by a crackling of blue-white light that stung her eyes.

“Oh sithspit,” Vicxa groaned, grabbing the bowl of tokens off the GNK droid’s head and hurrying them both behind a stack of toppled slot machines. Not seconds later, the doors flung open, with a bloodied band of Revenant pirates falling back in disarray, firing their blasters wildly into the smoke-filled room beyond.

“Frak, it just fried Mifish and Truq!” a panicking Pantoran yelled, “and it still keeps on coming!”

“Get back to the ship! Ain’t no way we’re stayin’ for this. Hawee can rot in hell for all I care!” a bloodied Zabrak snarled, hefting a mean looking launcher in his hands. “I’ll hold it off, if I don’t make it, take off without me.”

The handful of pirates ran, but the Pantoran lingered, casting a worried look at the reloading Zabrak.

“Y-you’ll be ok, will you, Poril?” she managed, though it was clear she wished nothing more than to join the others in the retreat.

“Don’t worry about me, Mol.” he replied gruffly, clicking a rocket in place and raising the weapon to his shoulder. “Just go!”

Mol nodded, turned and took two paces before halting. “I love you,” she whispered over her shoulder.

Poril lost his focus, lowering the launcher and turning around to glance back at the running Pantoran. He didn’t know what to say. Neither did he see the wiry outline of a malformed humanoid emerging through the smoke and stepping into the gambling hall.

The abomination let out a terrific shriek, one that made Poril clutch his ears in pain, dropping the launcher at his feet. In horrific slow motion, he saw white tongues of lightning leap from the creature’s outstretched arm and lash out after the fleeting Pantoran, striking the girl in the back just before she could escape.

Her cry of pain pierced the crackle of otherworldly lightning, her small body slumping lifelessly in the doorway, smoking and limp.

“Noooo!” Poril roared, outraged. Drawing a vibroknife, he charged the creature with reckless abandon, throwing himself atop of it with murderous vengeance. “You killed her! You fracking piece of crud killed her!” he keened at the top of his lungs, stabbing the blade at the abomination’s chest.

It sank into pliant flesh over and over, his rage blinding him to the fact the creature seemed utterly unphased by the damage, until the knife struck one of the crystal growths protruding from its pectoral and snapped in two. The blade clattered uselessly onto the polished wood floor, the Zabrak staring stupefied at the stump still clutched in his hand.

The abomination inclined its head to look at him, bale red eyes crusted over with cancerous crystals. The wounds in its chest wept a red ichor far too viscous to be real blood, and suddenly they no longer did, with fresh growths of crystal emerging to seal the damage.

“Nnnngh, y-you bastard!” the Zabrak sputtered, suddenly realizing just how utterly doomed he was. A clawed hand swiped across his chest, almost dismissively decapitating him in a spray of arterial crimson.

Vicxa recoiled in disgust, crouching further behind the slot machine with hands clasped over her mouth. She felt sick. The creature, the abomination, was something she’d never seen before and though it looked to have been a person once, there was so much blood red

crystal growing out of its body she could not tell what species it might have been. It moved around in an alien fashion, lurching about on uneven legs while dragging its elongated arms behind it like a primate.

She hoped if she just stayed real quiet, it would pass along and they'd be able to make their escape. Just stay quiet. Real quiet.

"GNK?"

The sound was like thunder, though it was but an innocent whisper. She knew instinctively the level of *poodoo* she was in.

"Dank farrik..." She drew her S-5 blaster pistol and popped up behind the slot machine, the abomination already turning towards her. She fired off a trio of shots at center mass, not even bothering with warnings. This creature was a mindless killer, there would be no reasoning with it.

The abomination held out its hand and a shimmering ephemeral bubble manifested before it, the bolts splashing against its translucent surface like droplets of water. It halted, withering the storm of her blaster, but neither could she penetrate its defences. Her weapon whined in warning, the power cells overheating. For a horrific moment, she thought she saw a crystalline grin on its withered lips as it sensed her weakness.

"Frak." She dropped down behind the slot machine, turning to her companion to tell it to escape, but the GNK-droid was nowhere to be seen. "Where have you gone off to?!" she hissed as she hurriedly engaged the pistol's built-in grapnel. Footsteps crunched on broken glass, just behind her. She took aim at the gallery above and fired, the grapnel striking a decorative pillar and lodging in securely. She engaged the winch.

The tug of her pistol came not a moment too soon as a crystalline forearm slashed the space she'd occupied a heartbeat prior, the abomination screeching in anger at a kill denied. Vicxa sailed through the air towards the next floor gallery, relieved to put some distance between herself and the monster. Perhaps she could make her escape, or maybe find some way to—

*Oh no.*

Something was wrong, very wrong. She felt a *tugging* on her body, like an invisible force pulling her down. The ascension motor whined in her hands, struggling to coil in the wire against the increased resistance. Glancing over her shoulder at the abomination, it stared at her with an arm outstretched, curling its fingers and tugging back.

"Oh that is just unfair!" the Mirialan yelled as she felt herself being pulled back, the motor's protests overcome by this unseen magic. She screamed in frustration, tugging at her belt to grab something to throw at the creature when she felt a sharp jolt of pain in her right arm. She yelled as another jolt struck her, followed closely by a third, and before she knew what had happened her cybernetic tore loose, swiftly coiled away as it still clutched her pistol's grip.

Vicxa stared at the retreating limb like a drowning man losing their lifeline as she fell. Flung backwards at terrifying speed, she thought for a moment she was going to be impaled upon the creature's freshly formed crystal protrusions, but that would have been a mercy the abomination was not willing to give.

She halted in mid-air, barely a meter from the creature's face, held aloft by some mystical trickery she'd only barely begun to understand. The ravaged features of something that might have once been a Human stared back at her, eyes encrusted with tiny shards that glinted in the flickering casino lights with an insectoid quality. Its withered skin was thin, stretched over a gaunt face where sickly veins shone through around outgrowths of crystal.

It tilted its head, observing her with sadistic curiosity. She could feel the raw power emanating from it, thrumming through the air like a drum. It was sickening to behold, and all she could do was not to scream in blind panic, clutching the stump of her arm.

"J-just make it q-quick, you bastard," she hissed through gritted teeth, tears streaking down her face as blood trickled from the savaged amputation wound.

Its face twisted into an unnatural leer, eager to oblige. Pulling its crystal clawed hand back for a swipe, it relished the pain and fear it was causing, drinking deep of her suffering before—

**"GNK!"**

A hard metallic clunk snapped the creature's attention towards the source of the sound, Vicxa feeling its hold on her diminish as it lost focus. At first, it seemed confused as to where the sound had come from, before a slot machine came falling down upon it, the devious droid standing triumphantly behind it—if only mildly concussed.

The abomination fell with a terrible crash, the sound of shattering crystals making Vicxa's teeth itch. She dropped from the ground in an inelegant slump, panting hard, but trying to limp away as soon as she was able.

"Nice job, buddy, now let's go before it..."

The sound of tearing metal behind her elicited a whimper of despair, followed by a glimmer of hope as she noticed the discarded launcher lying by the decapitated Zabrak just ahead. Breaking into a hobbling sprint, Vicxa threw herself at the weapon just as the abomination curled its crystal digits through the slot machine's metal skin and tore it apart in a shower of credits. Struggling to hoist the launcher one-handed, Vicxa flung the weapon to bear and fired.

The entire room was bathed in violent light, the backblast shattering a grand mirror into a thousand shards before the rocket impacted the creature's barrier and blossomed into an all-consuming fireball. Vicxa was thrown off her feet, landing roughly atop a sabacc table and tumbling end over end onto the floor. When she managed to clamber to her feet, she saw the creature's twisted silhouette against a backdrop of crackling fire—though short one of its limbs.

“Now we’re even, you *fracker!*” she spat a wad of blood on the table, her defiance bolstered.

Though hunched over and standing in the middle of a raging fire, the beast seemed unperturbed. It beheld the stump of its arm with some dull curiosity as blood trickled from the crystallized flesh, hissing as it vanished into the flames. With a simple act of will, the force field returned, banishing the flames around it in a perfect sphere. A moment later, fresh bloodied growths began to form at the wound, emerging from its tortured flesh in jagged crimson shards. The cancerous growths took shape and before the Mirialan’s eyes it had regrown the limb it lost—or at least a crude mockery of it.

“Oh that is just *unfair...*” she pined.

The abomination resumed its inexorable advance, or it would have, were it not for a moment’s pause as something kept it pinned in place. Glancing down with what appeared genuine confusion at something managing to actually hurt it, Vicxa saw one of its own shattered crystal protrusions sticking up through its foot. It screeched with inhuman anger as it tore its foot free, but this time the wound seemed more permanent as it began limping towards her.

“The only thing that can hurt it,” she gasped in sudden realization, “is itself...”

Her eyes darted across the devastated room, finding the cluster of crystals it had shed when the slot machine came down upon it. There, weapons that might hurt it, but they were well out of reach and with her terrifyingly lethal opponent between them and her. She’d never make it.

Her gaze wandered, desperately seeking another out, but finding none. Soon she would be as dead as the beheaded Zabrak, her body already broken like his knife. *Wait.* She caught a faint crimson glitter near the corpse. The broken tip of the Zabrak’s vibroblade. What had once been coated in the creature’s blood had sprouted tiny crystals, the blade tip encrusted with the cancerous growth.

She had no other option.

“Keep it busy!” she cried at her droid in desperation. The GNK unit obliged without hesitation, charging in with a reckless warble. It was swatted aside like an insect, its durasteel chassis buckled by a casual backhand blow. Still, it tried to get up and try again, droning in distress.

This time, it earned the creature’s attention as it lifted the droid in the air, its stubby feet shuffling madly as it tried to reach a foe a million times its superior. White lightning lashed out from the abomination’s hand, lapping greedily at the droid’s metal body. Sparks flew as the droid screamed, fuses blowing and capacitors popping like arteries until the light in its photoreceptor dimmed and burst.

The hollow chassis hit the floor with a heavy thud, splintering wood where it struck. Slivers of smoke like snakes coiled up from gaps rent into its durasteel skin, reeking of burnt plastoid.

The abomination lingered on the kill, sampling the sensation that was not as satisfying as an organic death, but yet...

It snapped around as if guided by some primal instinct, managing to manifest its barrier just in time to push back the vengeful Mirialan charging at it. She screamed in frustration, clawing at the barrier, before drawing a snub-nosed sidearm from within her jacket and pressing it against the protective bubble.

Vicxa depressed the trigger and her disruptor pistol spoke. The barrier collapsed with the sound of a shattering mountain, the disruptor pistol's barrel smoking hot. Vicxa discarded it in a heartbeat, drawing what remained of the Zabrak's now crystal-encrusted knife and stabbing it up past the creature's ribs and into its chest. Fingers bleeding as the same growths sliced open her tender digits, she fought through the pain and palmed the blade home with a vengeful howl.

The creature shuddered, staggering back as it tried to comprehend what had just transpired. Clawing at its chest, it tore out gouges of its own crystalline flesh before turning its burning, hate fueled eyes at the Mirialan that had caused it and—burst into a fine mist of crimson shards.

Vicxa stood on shaking legs, tears streaking down bloodied cheeks. She whimpered in relief for a moment, before limping over to the broken form of her companion. Its twisted remains were still smoking, its carapace blackened where lightning had struck it and a heavy dent buckled inward by the creature's impossible strength. She sank to her knees beside it, tracing a bloody hand across its brave body.

Soot and blood smeared across the pink unicorn someone had drawn upon it before their paths had crossed; the child's artwork now marred by violence. She rested her head against it and wept, exhaustion overcoming her.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed. "So sorry..."

Somewhere deep within, beneath the tear streaked skin, a faint diode still beat. A processor stirred.

"GNK?"