

Reptilia Droc: Collaborator

By

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Jason Zardurn hit the floor of the dirty alley, his jaw throbbing. Jason attempted to stand when the hulking, gray skinned bahdorren followed up the first blow with a kick to his stomach. Jason rolled onto his back, coughing and spitting, and looked up at the three figures now looming over him.

The smallest of the group, a slender alien with eyes protruding out horizontally on stalks, shook his head, “Jason, Jason, I'm a reasonable being. I don't *like* hurting people. So why do you insist on making this necessary?” The alien gestured to the hulking beings on either side of him.

Jason groaned, “I'll have your money, Scarst, I swear to God. After the next wampa race, I'll have everything I owe you. With interest.”

Scarst glared at him, “You think I'm going to credit you another race, with your luck? Forget it. I've heard enough of your *sure bets*. You have until next week to square your account. Otherwise I won't have any choice; Zerse here is going to have to break something.”

The large bahdorren grinned down with a look of joyful anticipation that made Jason cringe.

“Next week, I got it,” Jason assured him.

“And don't make us come looking you, Zardurn.”

Jason sat up and watched Scarst and his muscle disappear down the alley. Clutching his stomach he staggered to his feet.

“Oh crap!” he exclaimed, checking the time on his comm.

It was long past dinner, he realized, and he already had three messages. Marie is going to kill me, he thought picturing his wife's angry expression.

Still gripping his stomach, Jason made his way out of the back alley. The streets of Nuebarii were packed with various species, personal transports, and flashing holographic ads.

After a few blocks he managed to hail a taxi shuttle and climbed in. Jason gave his address to the droid piloting the small craft, and tried to ignore the cluster of holographic ads that filled the front of the cabin.

“The Gal Zinge Corporation, uniting worlds towards a brighter tomorrow.” One of the ads chimed. It displayed the same logo Jason wore on the shoulder of his wrinkled uniform.

Looking out the window, he watched as the yellow shuttle rose high into the air and joined the traffic lanes soaring above the city. The sun was setting now, and the soft orange glow reflected off the cyclopean glass towers of downtown. Jason thought his troubles felt far away from up here. He wished it was a longer ride.

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The sun had just dipped below the skyline when he reached his apartment in the east corner of the city. He kicked at some vanta rats perched in front of the building's rusted entrance. The overhead lights flickered as he made his way down the hall to his front door.

As he entered the cramped living room, Marie stood there waiting for him. She had one hand on her hip, the other on her 6 month pregnant stomach. The look on her face told him exactly how much trouble he was in.

“Hi honey. Sorry I'm...”

“Where the hell have you been?” She cut him off.

“At the office,” he lied. “You know I have that review coming up tomorrow.”

“I called your office first. They said you left early today.”

Damn, he groaned to himself.

“You were at those wampa races again, weren't you?”

Jason plopped down on the beat-up old sofa.

“Marie, I told you, I gave that up.”

Marie walked into the kitchen. She came back with a bundle of ice wrapped in a towel.

“Oh yeah? What happened to your jaw then? Walk into a pole?”

She tossed the ice in his lap.

Jason laid the soothing ice against his tender face as Marie sat down next to him.

“I'm out Marie; I'm telling you the truth. I just... have some loose ends I need to tie up first.”

Marie looked at him wearily, having heard the *truth* too many times before.

“I hope so Jason. I can't keep living this way. Our daughter is going to be here before you know it. She needs a father who is going to be responsible, and I need a man I can count on.”

Jason took her hand and squeezed it, “I'm going to get that promotion tomorrow, and things are going to be different from here on. You'll see.”

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Jason sat in the reception area in front of his boss's office. Nervously he fiddled with his company uniform. He smoothed out the Gal Zinge logo on his shoulder, and double checked that his ID was pinned on straight. Jason looked down at his boots; they were polished to a shine.

Jason switched to drumming his fingers impatiently on the arm of his chair. Then he noticed the holographic display playing on the wall.

“Gal Zinge and you, working together to build the future,” spoke an attractive blond woman in a light blue uniform. Not bad, Jason mused to himself, looking the woman up and down. Then her image got replaced by the Gal Zinge logo and he lost interest. Just more company propaganda, he sighed to himself. They own everything for thirty light years; and they don't let you forget either.

Then the picture changed again, this time showing a park setting and a person dressed up in a comically fake lizard costume. Jason raised an eyebrow, drawn in by the odd scene. The lizard-man sported green rubber skin, googly eyes, and a long forked tongue that flopped up and down as it lumbered. Jason could even see the zipper sticking out of the back. It communicated in grunts and hand gestures, as it chased after a fleeing crowd of bystanders.

“Oh no, it's the Reptilia Droc!” a woman shrieked while clutching her baby. The whole scene

reminded him of a pre-holographic monster flick. Then a pair of green armored corporate shoulders arrived on the scene to a trumpet of heroic music. They fired a few warning shots and the reptilian parody turned tail and ran, tripping and tumbling as it went.

“The Galactic Infantry, keeping Gal Zinge colonists safe across the Outer Rim. Enroll today and become a hero,” the announcer read.

Jason groaned aloud. Who writes this crap, he wondered? The worst part, he realized, whatever marketing idiot came up with that trash, was probably making a hell a lot more than he was.

“Mr. Zardurn,” the receptionist stirred him from his thoughts. “Mr. Dressex will see you now.”

Jason burst out of his seat, and hurried to the door. Then he reminded himself to slow down and be cool as he entered the manager’s office.

As he walked through door, Jason saw Dressex. He was a volsten, a gray skinned being with four slender arms and a bald elongated head which extend back about a foot. He looked flustered, and quickly closed some holograms displayed above his desk from his previous meeting. One image in particular caught Jason's attention. He only glimpsed it for a moment before Dressex closed the file, but it appeared to be a grainy shot from a security camera. Its subject resembled the rubber Reptilia Droc costume from the ad, but there was nothing silly but this version. It seemed huge compared to its surrounding, muscular, and covered in hard plated scales. He thought it looked royally pissed off too. He considered asking Dressex about, but decided it was better to mind his own business.

“Ah, Jason. Have a seat please,” he gestured with one of his four arms to the chair in front of his desk. His voice was pleasant enough, but Jason could still detect the strain induced by the manager’s previous business. He hoped it hadn't put Dressex in a bad mood; he didn't want anything to hurt his chances at promotion.

Jason seated himself and smiled, though his nerves left the expression forced. The two exchanged small talk about the weather and each others family. Meanwhile Dressex opened a holographic file on Jason and began to scroll through it.

“Well, Jason, this should be a quick review, everything looks to be in order. Positive feedback from your supervisor. Your reports have been accurate and filed on-time. You have been marked as arriving late and leaving early without permission a few times. Be more careful about that, punctuality is important.”

“Of course, sir. Won't happen again,” Jason replied, tapping his foot impatiently below the desk.

“Otherwise, everything is satisfactory. I'm authorizing the standard three percent raise, and I'll see you in another 6 months.”

Jason almost gagged on the news, but managed to catch himself before replying.

“Uh... sir? I appreciate the raise, I really do. But I've been with this division for a few years now, and I was hoping with my experience I could move up to a supervisor position.”

“Ah, I see...” Dressex replied, folding both pairs of hands together on the desk. “Well Jason, you've been a loyal employee to Gal Zinge. We appreciate your effort and value your experience. However, while your work has been satisfactory, there is room for improvement. I just don't see the drive that is needed for leadership.”

“Oh...”

“But I will keep your request under consideration for your next review.”

“Sure. Ah... Mr. Dressex, if that's that case... is there any way I could get a higher raise? Like I mentioned, my wife and I, we've got a baby on the way. It would really help us out.”

“Sorry, Jason, I would like to help, really. But the economy has taken a hit over the last several months. Plus our mining operations on the Outer Rim have suffered a lot of setbacks from accidents and piracy. We just don't have it in the budget right now.”

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Jason downed his favorite brand of telassen ale, and looked around the bar. Still being early, there weren't many customers yet. The handful that did occupy the surrounding booths and bar stools were manly humanoid, with a few exotic species covered in fur or sporting backward jointed legs.

He checked the time on his Comm. Marie would be wondering where he was again, but he wasn't ready to face her quite yet. No promotion and a raise that wouldn't even cover next month's rent increase, he groaned.

Don't have it the budget, yeah right, he thought with disdain. Gal Zinge, one of the twelve galactic corporations, owning hundreds of star systems, I'm sure the executives are out begging on street corners.

As much as he wasn't looking forward to telling Marie, he was more concerned about what he was going to tell Scarst the next time he and his goons came calling. Even if he took everything out of their meager savings, it wouldn't cover his debt.

Jason sighed and took another slip of his ale.

Then he noticed a tall being dressed in a long black coat take the stool next to him. He was a sadojan, a bald headed humanoid with a slightly purple hue to his skin, and striking yellow eyes.

“Good evening,” the stranger greeted him with a smile.

The man's tone was pleasant enough, but something about the sadojan gave Jason the creeps. He gave the stranger a nod and went back to his ale.

The bartender asked the sadojan what he would like, but the man gestured he was fine. Why sit down at a bar if you're not thirsty, Jason wondered. He grew more uncomfortable when he realized the sadojan was still looking at him.

“You want something, pal.”

“Are you Jason Zardurn?” the man asked.

This got Jason's full attention. He swiveled in his stool to face the sadojan.

“Do I know you, buddy? You one of Scarst's guys?”

The sadojan held up a hand, “No, no, Mr. Zardurn. I assure you I'm not affiliated with your Mr. Scarst. However I may be able to assist in this financial matter you currently find yourself in.”

Jason eyed the man suspiciously, “Is that so? And who are you exactly?”

“Of course, how rude of me. You can call me Bellock,” the sadojan extended a gloved hand.

Jason ignored the gesture. “That's great,” Jason replied sarcastically. “And you want what from me in return?”

“Perhaps we could discuss this in private? I have a shuttle waiting out front, if you would follow me please.”

Jason turned back to the bar, “No offense, Bellock, but I think I'll pass.”

“My apologies, Mr. Zardurn. I realize this is very sudden, and you are wise to be cautious. But I'll give you four hundred credits in exchange for fifteen minutes of your time. If you choose to decline my offer, you can keep the money. No strings attached.”

Jason looked at the stranger and raised an eyebrow. Whatever the man wanted had to be illegal, he thought. But as deep in debt as he was, he couldn't say no to four hundred credits. Not when all he had to do was listen for a few minutes and say no thanks.

Jason conceded and followed the sadojan out of the bar. As they reached the curb, a small black shuttle descended from overhead and came to a stop a few inches above the street. A hatch opened up on the side and Bellock climbed in. Jason hesitated, wondering if he was making a huge mistake.

Bellock stared at him from the shuttle.

Jason sighed and climbed aboard.

The small craft rose above the buildings and headed for downtown. Jason took in the sea of lights and noted how beautiful Nuebarii looked at night. He glanced towards the cockpit, but there was a panel of tinted glass between them and pilot. Bellock sat across from him, hands folded in his lap. For a moment he resolved to eye Jason intently. Jason tried his best to look relaxed, but the man's stare did little to help ease his tension.

“Now that we have some privacy, Mr. Zardurn, allow me to get directly to the point. The Gal Zinge Corporation is aggressively expanding out into the Outer Rim territories. Your office is a central hub for these operations, filing reports between the survey teams and the board of directors.”

His debt with Scarst, and now his job, Jason really didn't like how much the stranger seemed to know about him.

Bellock continued, "I am looking for a full list of Outer Rim worlds currently being surveyed and considered for processing. I'm particularly interested in life-baring worlds planned for strip mining. And for this kind of information, Mr. Zardurn, I'm willing to pay a **great** deal of money."

Jason sat there for a moment, eye brows raised, trying to process what he'd just been told.

"Damn, I don't know... I had to sign all kinds of confidentiality agreements. I could lose my job. Hell, I could land in prison for this."

"Any agreement we make will not lead back to you, I promise."

"How do you even know who I am, or where I work?"

"That isn't important, Mr. Zardurn. What is important is you have a family to support, and a debt to square with some very unsavory people. Gal Zinge has nothing for you but excuses. I am offering you a solution."

Bellock did have a point, Jason thought, but all this intimate knowledge the sadojan possessed was only making the gnawing suspicion in his gut worse.

"What are you going to do with the information if I give it to you?"

"Observation, of sorts."

"You mean espionage, right? Who are you working for?"

"I can't tell you that. What I can say is that I am prepared to pay you a hundred thousand credits in return for a simple list of planets. Do we have a deal?"

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