



### **'Negative Polarity'**

“Of all the things to ruin...” Sam Roont lamented, “I don’t see how they could screw-up charbroiled chicken this badly.” He jabbed at his rubbery lunch with a plastic fork.

The general lunch hour had ended quite a while ago, but the cafeteria was still fairly full. People came for the food, but often stayed for the mess hall’s giant panoramic window, which faced the open sea. Despite the lacking cuisine, dinner was a popular time here; on a cloudless night one could almost make out the distant lights of Nash Ultima far away on the dark horizon.

Roont looked over his shoulder. “I really don’t see how you can eat that stuff at all.”

Sven Wraith, his back to the doctor, was busily tending to the remains of his meal, which were disappearing fast. He’d sliced the entire piece of chicken into small equal bits and was now downing it in an even, measured cadence.

He put his utensils down. “You could say that a life of field-duty makes you appreciate anything you can get, especially things like good, solid food.” He didn’t turn to face Roont. “If you want a genuine educational experience, try living off of ‘c-class’ rations for a month, or better yet, hook yourself up to a Raiden’s chemical-support system for a week, and then ask me about the chicken.”

Roont scoffed. “Please. Don’t patronize me with your long-winded tales of yesteryear, Wraith. When was the last time you actually ate a military ration, anyway?”

Wraith wasn’t about to start a childish back-and-forth between himself and the doctor. He didn’t say anything. As it was, he actually did know when the last time he ate a military ration was. The dark-eyed man absently rubbed his right knee as he thought about it. Those thoughts were much darker than his eyes.

“Which ship did you sabotage, anyway?” Wraith abruptly asked.

This startled Roont, who quickly looked around the large room for anyone that could have overheard this comment. He leaned in close to the RL. “Are you friggin’

nuts? You ask me a question like that and you don't even check to see who's milling around us?"

"There's no one within earshot." He replied confidently as he wiped his mouth with a paper napkin.

"How can you tell if you don't bother to *check*?"

Wraith leaned back ever so slightly in his chair. It was the closest thing to a slump in his posture that he would show in public, a rigid position for an ordinary person but, for Wraith, a slovenly display of after-dinner relaxation. "In case you didn't know, I give-off a rather uninviting aura. I like to call it 'negative polarity': people in uniform don't really like to be around me that much."

"The same way a rodent doesn't like to be around a reptile." Roont grunted. "Really, I'd always considered you to be a sparkling charmer..."

Wraith ignored the jab. "I get my privacy, and I get people to do what I want. That's one of the reasons I was chosen for the assignment here."

*It's got to be the only reason...* Roont thought. In truth, the doctor was far too self-absorbed and egotistical to feel the coldness emanating from Sven Wraith, the dark vibe that seemed to pulse from his skin like a warning beacon. "Whatever. Far be it for me to question your methods. Hopefully you're not so conceited with your own image that you'll jeopardize the project."

"It's not conceit that kills: it's pride that comes before the fall, didn't you know that? The trick is to find pride in one's works and not in oneself." He turned to face Roont for the first time. "And I will be eternally proud when we succeed, Sam. Now, which ship did you sabotage?"

"I bugged the fuel-conservation program of AGP." Roont answered. "It's the point ship now, right?"

Wraith nodded. "For the moment."

"Good. It'll be easier for your little seat-warmers to spot the defect since CRTS will be flying right behind it: AGP'll literally be pissing fluids all over CRTS's cockpit." He paused. The doctor leaned back in his chair and continued, his voice still rang with that trademark arrogance of his, but there was also a lilting curiosity as well. "I don't suppose you'll let me know why I had to do that..." he said. "Far be it for me to question the orders of the Committee, but-"

"These orders don't come from the Committee," Wraith interjected. "They're my own. All you should know is that it's part of my plan for delivering our little 'payload'. The less you know the better." He turned to face Roont again, this time with a cruel smirk on his face. "Of course, if you'd like to know..."

The doctor quickly shook his head. He looked briefly into Wraith's iron eyes. They were cold and hard eyes, and they were eyes that contained much knowledge. He, more than anyone else, was the 'hub' of the Antipathy Project. With his job as supervisor over the R-H program, he was the working hands to the Committee's thinking brain. All practical knowledge and tactics pertaining to the project wound up coming to him. Those eyes contained knowledge indeed, and far more knowledge than any one person should have been trusted with.

Roont had no intention of sharing in *that* burden, especially if Wraith, the Committee's 'working hands', was now trying to be the 'thinking mind' as well. That could cause considerable trouble for him, and anyone else that knew the details of his

agenda. "I'm not interested in the particulars, Wraith," he said. "but out of morbid curiosity, am I now technically a party to any little criminal acts here? Besides the ones we've already committed, of course."

Wraith shook his head. "No, but I suppose that if my plan works we could be convicted of treason, maybe terrorism, that kind of thing."

"Forget I asked." Roont folded his hands behind his head and sighed.

"Of course, if everything goes to plan, if Antipathy succeeds, none of that will matter." Wraith looked back in Root's direction with his probing eyes, they were asking a question.

Roont nodded. "Everything *is* going to plan on my end. I had to rush the first sample, but I managed to put it into Miss CRTS just today." He grinned like a devilish serpent. "Man, that girl is a real spectacular piece of tail." He licked his lips as he remembered Chenine sitting on the exam table; he had the unsavory appearance of a lustful wolf. "I wouldn't mind playing the horizontal tango with her. I'll bet she screws like a mink..." His grin faded slightly as he considered the project. He was jolted back to reality as he recalled the costs involved with Antipathy (those costs weren't to *him*, of course). "Too bad that, well, you know..."

The RL ignored Roont's vulgar words. "When can we expect data?"

Roont shrugged. "I dunno. Hopefully before the SJC starts to obliterate that Mass out there."

"Not hopefully," Wraith said icily, "you *will* have results before then."

The doctor noted Wraith's sudden change in tone. He seldom barked orders as stern as that one, and it meant that whatever he was doing with the R-H's up at Epdin, it was linked with the Galilean Mass in some way. "Well, I *know* that I'll need to keep trying permutations on my current formula until we get some positive results, but we should start seeing some positive hits relatively soon..."

"And how will those 'hits' manifest themselves?"

Roont shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. Probably by negative changes in the girl's Limerence Effects. You'll likely see her Sensation Link devotion take a nose-dive, but that's just a guess..."

Wraith nodded, his hands folded in front of him and his head lowered in contemplation. "So you think there'll be initial resistance when you find the right formula?"

"That seems likely. In any event, look for her Pragma Link's statistics to drop, and sharply. I can't guarantee what it'll really look like, but you'll know it when you see it." He prodded his half-eaten chicken with derision. "Of course, nothing will happen at all until she brings her Impingement Factor up, way up, if only for an instant."

"How high, exactly?"

Roont hesitated. "Nothing under a two-point-oh will suffice. That's the minimum."

"The minimum for contact?" Wraith asked.

"In my estimation, nothing below that will be enough."

The RL nodded slowly, not responding.

"Is that a problem?" Roont asked.

"No."

Roont shook his head. "But you're aware of exactly how much abuse, how much damage, needs to be inflicted to get the number that high?"

"And how much fear needs to be felt, too. Isn't that right?" Wraith asked.

"In layman's terms, that's about right."

Wraith nodded. "I've got an idea, and suffice it to say, there's going to be an opportunity for that kind of thing to happen very soon."

"You think the SJC will put the R-H's front-and-center during the next attack, don't you?"

Wraith's words were cold and dark. "They will if they don't have a choice."

Roont didn't ask him about this cryptic response, and he didn't want to know what the RL meant.

Wraith continued "And the infection process will be the same for the *Love*?"

Roont scoffed and waved the question away. "How the hell should I know? Two snowflakes are always different, two zebras never have the same stripes, two god-damned... things, like the R-H's, they're different, too." He shrugged again. "The short answer is: look for something *remotely* similar to happen with AGP, too."

Wraith nodded. He found it annoying that the doctor refused to refer to the Hybrids by their nicknames, but at the same time he could understand why that was so. Personally, the only way Wraith could stomach the work he had to do with the R-H's was to call them by those idiotic, saccharine nicknames. They were the products of daydreaming, lonely-heart scientists stuck in the dreary halls of Bydo Labs, and like all Raiden names, they were drenched in sloppy and mushy sentiment.

But the names made Wraith laugh, and if he couldn't laugh at any aspect of those ships, he'd likely go insane.

He suddenly longed for the smooth silky smoke of his Caribs (he never smoked them in public, and even if he did, smoking in the cafeteria was a definite no-no, even for him).

"I'm going to my office." He announced, wiping his clean-cut face with the napkin.

"Yeah," Roont stood up and stretched dramatically. "I've got some more work to do in the 'dungeon'." He took one step before Wraith called to him, with a stern voice.

"Sam." He said.

Roont looked back at the RL, he was staring at the doctor with those dark, dagger-like eyes. His legs were crossed and one arm was draped over his metal chair. He looked like the frost-faced subject of a grisly, serious portrait. His thoughts were ineffable.

"What?" Roont asked.

"The sacrifices we're making for this project... you know that they're not to be taken lightly..."

The Bydo Doctor suddenly felt a small shiver crawl over his skin: Wraith was quite intimidating when he wanted to be. For his part, Roont returned Wraith's steely gaze (but with only a fraction of the intensity) and said: "Everything will work out, Wraith. Our results will be beyond reproach; you're going to see that *nothing* I'm doing, nothing *we're* doing, will be in vain." He turned and set off down the hall in a self-important gait.

Wraith looked out at the afternoon sun. He knew that the great masters of old had an answer for that self-righteous banter:

*But of all the efforts we've done vainly  
T'were those 'gainst others stood out plainly...*

None of that mattered: he knew that Roont was right, or at least that his attitude was in the right place. Everything that happened from here on out would follow the Committee's course, even if he had to nudge some events along with his own gentle prodding.

A mess hall employee swooped past Wraith, busily cleaning tabletops as he went (the employees did not need to bus trays, as this was a military mess hall every person served, regardless of rank, was required to tend to their own trays and utensils).

"Can I get you some coffee, RL?" He asked.

Wraith accepted the gesture, holding off on retreating to his cramped office space. He sat for a few pleasant moments sipping the cheap instant sludge. It wasn't long before he was interrupted. A light tone sounded in the earpiece attached to the left side of his head. Wraith pressed a finger against the device, activating its two-way communication mode.

"Wraith." He growled.

"Sir, I apologize for the disturbance," a fresh voice from Ops beamed into his ear, the on-duty officer.

"That's alright." Wraith replied, making it obvious with his voice that it was *not* alright. "What is it?"

"You have a communication, sir." He said.

One of the RL's dark eyebrows shot up involuntarily. He wasn't expecting any communications. He was suspicious by nature, and detested surprises.

*Surely they wouldn't call over the station's main line...* he thought.

"What is it?" he asked skeptically, "Is it a coded communication?"

"No, sir. It's the Tears' Shower Squadron."

Wraith bit his lip in anger. With those pilots' disregard for protocol, it was a lot easier to do what they were doing to them.

"...sir?" the tech asked after a pause, "Will you take the call, or would you like to... relay a message?"

*In other words, tell them to 'screw off' and follow protocol...* Wraith shook his head in irritation. "No, that's alright. Patch 'em through."

There were some scratching noises on the line, then Wraith heard the whirring drone he knew so well: the hum of a Raiden cockpit.

"Explain yourselves..." he growled.

"Sorry to disturb you, Aryl," The pilot of the *Platonic Love* obsequiously apologized.

"Stow the blabbering, pilot. I *said* explain yourself."

"Aryl, we've got a group of fighters about twenty-degrees off our course, behaving in an odd manner." Storm briefly described the scene, including the squadron's odd acrobatics and presence of live-fire.

"That's not your concern." Wraith barked in response. "Do you have the package?"

"Yes." Justin replied.

"Then get back here, post-haste."

“Yes, sir, but I was wondering if you had the communication code for the Salt-o-Scots Squadron?”

“Do I have their code?” Wraith’s lips flicked as he spoke with a fiery tone, “as a matter of fact I do, but you’re in no position to receive that information.”

“But I think-”

“You don’t think, Storm, you do, and right now you’re coming home, *now...*” Wraith sneered. “Is that clear?”

“Yes, Aryl...” the sheepish pilot responded.

“As a matter of fact, keep your eyes forward, as well: no deviations, no more playing with your sensors.” He cut the line before Storm could respond.

“Augh...” Wraith sighed as he folded his arms and brought his head back. The stiff collar of his uniform dug into his neck uncomfortably. “What folly...”

He noticed a ‘whirring’ noise behind him. It repeated itself... then again. By the fourth time there was some mumbled cursing thrown in as well. Wraith turned to see the slender profile of Laura Hayle, both her fists set upon a soft-drink vending machine in the corner of the mess hall.

“DamnitDamnitDamnitDamnitDamnit!” She muttered faster than Sven though was humanly possible. The machine took her bill with a soft ‘whirr’, then returned the crumpled note with the same noise.

“Arrrgh!” She kicked the offending unit with her black dress-shoe.

The ill-tempered brunette brushed her hair back in place, her face was blemished with an unsightly pout. Then she noticed the RL, his arm on the chair next to him, silently watching her.

“Oh, uh, RL, sir...” she said with a reddening face. Her fists were still balled for a continued assault on the vending machine, but she quickly remembered herself and shot him a disorganized, belated salute.

“At ease, Lieutenant.” Sven said with a small twist to his face: a miniscule smile, either one of cruelty or sympathy, it was debatable.

“Yes, uh, sir,” she stammered, her bright face as red as an apple. “I was just, well, you see the machine...” she gestured towards the cola machine, staring at it vindictively for one moment. She looked back at Wrath just in time to shield herself from a small plastic card, thrown by the subcommander. Laura snatched it out of midair while stepping backwards in surprise.

“Very good reflexes, Lieutenant.” Sven complimented the embarrassed girl.

“Uh, thank you, sir...” she looked over the card in her hand: a ‘chit’ card, for automated electronic purchases. She looked at Wraith quizzically.

“My treat,” he motioned with a smirk on his face. It was an odd sight, to see a genuine smile on Sven’s face. He had the kind of face that didn’t really go well with a smile: an efficient, cruel, militaristic face. The scar on his cheek only heightened his ferociousness. But he could smile, and on occasions he did just that. “You’re on duty in twenty minutes, right?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said, apprehensively. Then she added a quip with a little extra warmth: “Hence my epic quest for some caffeine.”

“Humph,” his body quaked once as one small ripple of laughter cascaded across his chest. “I can see why your coworkers call you the ‘cola-nut’.”

She grinned. Sven's silent laugh seemed to do her some good. "It's a nickname I've learned to live with. But, really, sir, you don't need to do that." She held out the card. "I don't want to impose on you..."

Sven shook his head. "My pilots are due back in an hour or so," he said, his pale grey eyes glinting, "I'd really like to have an alert duty-officer to guide them into their bays. After all, it's pretty embarrassing when my ships end up embedded in the side of the base, and that's already happened once..." he motioned to the machine.

Laura smiled in reply. She had a pretty, honest smile. "Believe me, it's a worthwhile investment." The Lieutenant swiped Sven's card, and a 12-ounce can of delicious, caffeinated cola rattled down into the tray below. "That's what I call magnetism!" she laughed as she handed the card back to Sven.

"I consider it an investment." Sven took the card. "Having to sit in Ops for eight-hours straight is torture enough, you shouldn't have to tangle with the base's machinery as well."

"Thanks a million sir, and sorry for the inconvenience!" She saluted once more; Sven returned the gesture and the slim girl shot down the hall, as fast as 'professionally' possible, although there was a definite skipping quality to her gait. She was headed for the Command-level elevators. Wraith shook his head as he watched Laura disappear. He supposed that one's 'polarity' can't *always* be negative.

And now, without further ado, he had a date with one of his precious Caribs.



T I A