

Negative Zero

Prologue - The Legislature

Zair Flowen, in his official high director robe, made his way with his small entourage through the crowded foyer toward the senate assembly hall. He had finally reached the pinnacle of his political ambitions. He slowed his pace to acknowledge the well wishes and congratulations of various associates.

“Azten will enter a new phase of prosperity under your capable leadership,” commented the Azten imperial treasurer. Zair patted her elbow in passing.

“Good luck with your first publicly recorded meeting as high director,” said the imperial director of commerce. Zair smiled and gently squeezed his tentacle.

He stood near the special door that led to the dais of the assembly hall. Identity detectors mounted over the door scanned his entire body. Zair looked directly into the detectors so his eyes could also be scanned. “High Director Zair Flowen, do you wish to enter?” said a synthetic voice.

“I do wish to enter,” Zair said.

The detectors were apparently satisfied with his voice and the door opened. Zair, his vice director, and two security guards walked through.

He was now on the stage, with an invisible barrier between him and any would be assassins in the rest of the hall. The door closed behind them. The two guards took their position on either side behind the bench. Zair walked to the bench or desk at which he would sit. It faced out toward the assembly of corporate representatives that formed the legislative branch of the Azten empire. The assembly area formed a narrow amphitheater with tiers of stationary desks for those who attended as official legislators. On either side were seating for the mere spectators.

As the senators milled about for a couple minutes before the proceedings officially started, Zair sat and logged into his desk. The surface came alive with a network browser and various software applications. He checked the attendance with a couple taps. It looked like 99 of the 100 representatives would be present today. Excellent.

The senators settled as the moment of the session start drew nigh. Several representatives were not present physically, but the displays projected above their desk showed their busts in three dimensions. Except the New Worlds Inc. desk showed no video, as Greghol was a very private man. But Zair knew what he looked like.

Zair silently took a deep breath, turned on his microphone, and spoke the formal commencement script. “This session of the legislature of the Azten Empire of Federated Worlds shall now begin. The date is the third day of the sixth month of the year one thousand three hundred and six.”

Zair smiled and waited briefly for everyone’s attention. the projected bust of Frasier Himmik, representing Kesen Electronics Inc., was obviously watching some form of entertainment at his office on Zimvia, and seemed oblivious to the session’s proceedings.

“I have some items of business before we begin on the specific bill being presented today. I am Zair Flowen, the newly appointed high director of the executive branch of the Azten Empire, and the presiding officer of this session of the legislature. Seated next to me...” Zair turned in his seat to gesture towards his assistant, “is Cobra Jennik. She is the newly appointed vice director of the executive branch of the Azten Empire, and will be the presiding officer of many sessions of the legislature, when I am engrossed in executive matters.”

Zair paused to create a tangible break from the initial business, and tapped lightly on the desk to bring up the bill for discussion.

“Bill 1306-129 has been fast-tracked for its presentation, debate and vote, all today. You all have had an opportunity to privately study and discuss this item. Greghol of New World Metals Inc. is the sponsor for this bill. Greghol, please present your bill, 1306-129.” Zair said.

Many representatives turned their attention to the empty space above the New World Metals’ desk.

“Thank you, High Director,” said the disembodied voice. “This bill, if ratified into law, would protect citizens, and streamline the chaos surrounding the so called vigilante law. Instead of all citizens being allowed to pursue wanted criminals a bring them to justice spontaneously, this would bring order to the procedure. It would require that the interested citizen go through some brief training, have their identity confirmed, and be licensed before that can go after criminals. Additionally, they would be required to gain permission for each specific criminal they are interested in, before they began their pursuit.”

“Thank you,” Zair said. “The legislative logistics committee has allowed for an expert to research and present the verified facts that would be relevant for this decision. Ramos Kinton is the logistics manager for the imperial rangers and has collaborated with corporate and civilian criminal search projects. He will share his insight with us.”

Ramos, a human, occupied the special witness stand between Zair’s podium and the amphitheater. He fidgeted with his electronic tablet. Zair noticed his wife Reese and young son Tomek in the spectator seats.

“Thank you High Director,” Ramos started. “The Azten empire continues to have the problem that a large quantity of our convicted criminals are never detained. For example, there are 587,493 criminals convicted to life in prison or the death penalty, who have never been captured. Restricting the numbers to these, the most serious hazards to our society, I will present the current success rate.”

Ramos tapped on his tablet and scratched his temple. “In the last full year 23,497 of this class of criminal were brought to justice by civilians. 5,871 were brought in by the meager quantity of 50 imperial rangers serving all planets empire wide. Only 318 were brought to justice by corporate enforcement efforts”.

Ramos put his tablet aside and licked his lips. “It is my professional opinion that bill 129 would drastically reduce the number of these convicts that would be brought to justice. Most civilians who would otherwise be interested would find this law too burdensome. Much of their work starts from spontaneous discovery of a criminal within their midst. If they cannot act immediately, but have to go get licensed first, the criminal would have time to escape.”

Ramos stopped and looked up at Zair. “That is my report sir.”

Zair smiled encouragingly. “Thank you Ramos. Those were interesting numbers”

As presiding officer, Zair could not vote, except in the unlikely event of a tie. But he could give his opinion. “As my opinion, the most obvious and reliable solution I would like you to consider would be to give the executive budget a higher allowance for detaining criminals. With ten times more rangers, we could outdo the civilians in criminal capture. I would recommend voting against this bill, and sending the rangers more resources. This would relieve you, the corporations of the work you are supposed to be doing in the fight against crime.”

Zair paused again. He risked offending the corporations with his last comment, but they obviously had failed in doing their portion of crime fighting in lieu of extra taxes.

“I now invite any representatives to voice their thoughts relevant to this imminent decision. Please preface your discussion contribution with your name,” Zair said.

The light on Forward Fashions Inc, turned green. She was the fastest at pressing the button for her turn. The navino stood to speak. “Samort. CEO,” she said. She slammed all four

fists on her desk. "Bill 129 could only be formed to sabotage our efforts to remove criminal elements from our society!" She slammed her fists again. "This brings suspicion to any who would vote for this bill!" The fists slammed again, accidentally hitting the button to release her turn to the next representative as she mouthed words Zair couldn't hear, and made a hostile gesture towards some other representative.

It was Houst's turn. He remained seated. "Houst, of Rock Financial Inc. Congratulations on your appointment Zair. I think it is important to remove the criminals from society. However we should also consider the safety of the civilians. Civilians die each year in attempts to capture violent criminals. With this training, they would be better prepared to proceed in a safe manner."

Dogat seemed to hesitate when her light turned green. "Dogat, of Universal Engineering Inc. Ramos' report seems to make sense to me, and he is the expert. If the goal is to remove criminals from society, this bill does not seem to help. There are other alternatives. I would even entertain the High Director's suggestion."

Frasier Himmik laughed hysterically, but stopped abruptly and stared at the camera when he realized his microphone was on, being his turn. He must of accidentally tapped the button requesting a turn. "Um, I have nothing to add at this time." He ended his turn and faced back to his entertainment. Zair wondered how long he would last a the representative from his corporation.

Greske's projected image looked tired for a plajoni. He was probably in a less compatible timezone. "Greske here." He waved a tentacle. "Representing Mountain Security Inc. Ramos' numbers seem to make it pretty clear. This bill alone, without additional plans, seems unaware of the bigger picture. I encourage you all to wait for a better bill that addresses the larger problems."

There was a long pause. Zair counted two minutes, the traditional limit.

"Thank you, those that provided input. We will now put it to a vote." Zair tapped on his desk to open the voting period. He watched his desk as the voting progressed. After the traditional sixteen minutes, the voting was disabled.

"The voting has been completed," Zair announced. "Seventy six against the measure, twenty one for the measure, and three abstaining. Bill 1306-129 has not won the required fifty one votes and has been defeated. It seems that is the only bill today. This session is now concluded."

Chapter 1 - Young Tomek

Tomek was 12 years old, with his magnifying safety goggles on, inspecting the circuit board he had made. He had carefully glued the electronic components on the blank board. He reached up and switched the goggles to show the schematics that his father had drawn for him on the left side, and keeping the right side transparent. "Capacitor one positive lead to transistor two base," he muttered to himself.

He turned on his fine point soldering pen that he recently filled with a tin alloy stick, and waited a couple seconds for the stick to melt. He drew a metal line carefully from the capacitor lead to a transistor lead. Glancing at the schematic, he drew the next line, then several more. Sometimes he had to cover some metal lines with the pen that dispensed epoxy to make a bridge for other metal lines to cross. After an hour he had connected all the components together.

He took off the goggles and glanced around. His father was on the other side of the basement room reading something on his desk. "I'm done," Tomek said.

His father shut off his desk, wandered over to Tomek's workbench, and put on the goggles. He inspected his son's work. "It looks good," he said.

“What else can it do besides send secret audio messages?” Tomek asked.

“Nothing.”

“Then why is it so big?” Tomek held it. It was almost as big as his hand.

“Because I had you build it with discrete components, from scratch, instead of a prebuilt miniaturized store bought circuit. The best way to learn the basic principles of electronics is by learning how to build the circuit yourself,” Ramos said. He sat down on the bench.

Tomek did not look impressed with the educational philosophy, but then his eyes brightened. “So no one can intercept our messages then?”

“Well, only if they knew how you were sending them. This uses ‘Amplitude Modulation’ to send messages, which is a method nobody uses anymore. So if you keep that secret, they won’t be able to intercept it,” Ramos said. “So now should we try it out?”

“Yes!” Tomek switched it on and ran to the far end of the room. He put the circuit board against his ear. “Whisper something,” he said.

Ramos picked up a microphone connected to another piece of circuitry on the table, cupped his hand around it, and whispered “A suspicious woman is approaching. Red alert!”

“I heard it!” Tomek yelled.

The elevator doors swished open, and Reese, walked in. She was carrying a tray of food. “Is it lunchtime yet,” she asked.

“Yes!” Tomek scurried to the worktable.

Reese set the tray down on the table and set food in front of the three places, pushing aside the tools. She sat next to Ramos.

Tomek took a big mouthful of the cake with a whipped topping and a red huanta fruit on top. “Guess what mom,” he said, muffled with a full mouth.

Reese took a big bite of her sandwich and responded with an equally muffled “What?”

Ramos, not to be left out, took a big mouthful of juice and gurgled, “We made a secret message radio.”

They laughed. Ramos make a tiny mess on his shirt.

Tomek made sure his mouth was empty. “Now I can send you secret messages, and no one can intercept them.”

Reese studied the schematic. “AM radio? Is this an archaeological experiment?”

“Ssh mom, don’t give away our secret,” Tomek said.

“Let’s keep the ancient secret of alternative modulation to ourselves,” Ramos said, winking at his wife.

“And now we have to come up with good code names. Cool spy names that only we will know,” Tomek said, his mouth only partially full.

“Hmm. I will be ‘Vapor’, because I am so sneaky no one will know I am there until they are surrounded,” said Ramos.

“And I shall be ‘Stinky’, because I am with Vapor,” said Reese.

“Don’t be Stinky mom. Have a cool name,” Tomek pleaded.

Ramos snuzzled his nose in Reese’s neck and inhaled loudly through his nostrils. “Nope, you’re definitely not stinky. Sorry.” He began kissing her neck, and Reese closed her eyes and purred.

“Oh yecch! Stop that. Stop. Focus on the business here,” Tomek said, pointed against the table.

The parents chuckled, then obeyed.

“Hmm. Ok, I shall be ‘Nothing’, because nobody notices nothing,” said Reese, finishing her sandwich.

“Cool. I will be ‘Negative Zero’, because that is even less than nothing,” Tomek said.

“Well actually,” Ramos paused thoughtfully, “negative zero would be the same as—“

Reese bumped his shoulder with hers. "Negative Zero it is. It's pronounced differently, spelled differently, so it will distinguish him from the rest of us. What else is a name for?" she asked Ramos.

"Of course. We are all set then," Ramos conceded. "We are ready Tomek."

"So now I will go on a spy mission. I will report to you my secret findings over the secret radio."

"Right now?" asked Reese. "What can we spy on at this hour?"

Tomek looked at the clock and thought for a second. "Can the radio reach as far as the park?" he asked his father.

"Yes, it should easily reach that far," Ramos nodded.

"That's right, that girl you like, Jolaney, she is usually at the park by now," Reese recalled.

"Mother! This is not about Jolaney. She's a girl," Tomek said. "I meant I was going see what color the Fraghen flowers are today."

"For practice in case the the street camera's go out?" Ramos asked.

"No, this is a practice mission to test out our new equipment." Tomek started to leave the table.

"Drink the rest of your juice first," Reese said.

Tomek gulped down his juice, grabbed the radio and leapt up towards the stairs.

"Negative Zero, remember not to get ran over by traffic," she called on the radio as he left the house.

Tomek crossed the street and held down the button on his radio. "Nothing, I have crossed the street successfully." He released the button.

He ran several blocks through the residential section, taking care when crossing each street. There was not much ground traffic today anyway.

Finally he arrived near the park. There was a tight hedge all around except at a few entrances. He approached the nearest entrance carefully, stooping down to not be seen by those within the park. He entered and crept towards the larger playground.

There she was. Tomek watched her. Jolaney was balancing on some gymnastic bars. She walked on them with no sign of wavering to keep her balance. She was a human, about his age, with long light yellow hair that fluttered lightly in the breeze. She did a front walkover trick, then leapt gracefully from the end of the bar, and flew to a higher perpendicular bar and pulled herself easily up to sit on it. She posed like an beautiful angel up there, surveying the park.

Tomek ducked so she might not see him.

"Negative Zero!" The whisper came from his AM radio transceiver. "Are you at the park?" It sounded like Nothing.

Tomek pushed the button long enough to say "Yes, I have arrived. Nobody suspects I am a spy."

"Vapor speaking. So, what color are the flowers?"

Tomek paused. Then he ran back to the park entrance.

"The Fraghen flowers are just green today," Tomek reported. Green was the most boring color because it was the color they were about one half the time. Other days they would be any of five different colors, and always synchronized with each other.

"Nothing speaking. Is Jolaney there?"

Tomek paused to simulate thinking. "I think I did notice her somewhere around here."

"Go talk to her."

"Mom!"

"I'm Nothing to you."

"Nothing!"

“Why won’t you talk to her?” Nothing asked.

“I don’t think she would be in love with me.” Tomek said. He turned to look her direction.

“Of course she’s not. And you don’t be in love with her either. You’re only twelve. That’s your problem, you think this has to be about love. Just be acquaintances today. Ask her how she is doing, tell her your name is Tomek, say something about the flowers being green today, and you’re mission will be completed, and you’ll be acquainted. It’s that easy,” said Reese.

“You don’t have to marry her until tomorrow,” said Vapor chuckling.

“No, you may marry her in ten years,” corrected Nothing. “Someone’s at the door.”

Tomek heard steps as she walked away on the fake marble floor.

Tomek considered the dare his mother gave him. He was intrigued.

“Ok. what were those three things again?” Tomek asked.

“First, ask how she is doing,” Vapor replied, “Second tell her your name—“

Tomek heard a shriek in the background over the radio, then an electrostatic discharge followed by a thud.

Tomek heard his father’s steps retreating up the stairs. He pressed the circuit board’s speaker against his ear.

“What the hell was that for?” said Ramos, from the top of the stairs.

Tomek was startled. He hadn’t spoken that harshly since a few years ago when he made a bonfire in the basement.

Tomek could hear a stranger’s voice. “You disagreed with us, we accepted that. You quit cooperating with us. We even accepted that. But now you you are sabotaging us?” Another electrostatic discharge was heard followed by another thud. Then there was some rustling.

Tomek would of yelled something, but he knew their transceiver was left in transmit mode.

Tomek started running home as fast as he could. He crossed the streets less carefully than before. He finally turned the corner and crossed the street near his house.

A man was walking towards him. Tomek slowed down to gawk at him. His face was heavily scarred near his artificial eyeball. Even the eyelids were tattered. The eye was a silvery globe with black pupil, and a red glowing dot apparently from deep within the eye.

“Don’t run with scissors kid,” said the stranger. His voice startled Tomek, it was similar to what he heard on the radio. “Or this could happen to you,” the man concluded. Then he laughed a cockeyed laugh. Tomek caught a couple glimpses of what appeared to be a tattoo of a hollow triangle on the top gum of his left front side.

The man opened the door of an air car parked near Tomek, and threw what appeared to be his dad’s locked briefcase into the vehicle, and then climbed in himself. Off he flew.

Tomek noticed he had stopped. He ran the last meters to the house charged inside. He stumbled over his mother’s legs and fell. He kneeled and examined his mother. Her eyes were open, and the majority of her neck was severely burned.

“Mother!” Tomek tried to scream, but it came out as a harsh whisper. He pressed his ear to her mouth, but heard no breath.

“Dad!” He screamed, and leapt towards the stairs. He saw him even before he got all the way to his feet. He rushed over crumpled onto his father. His neck was burned too. And his eyes were open. He buried his face in his dad’s shirt and sobbed.

After a couple minutes he leapt up and ran to the nearby communications panel. It was not working. He ran to an emergency communication console in the basement and called the municipal emergency center. He told them that his parents were dead.

Authorities came and recorded the crime scene. They took his parents away and asked him questions, which he answered. His eyes were red from crying and wiping. He wouldn’t move from his basement seat though. Nor would he release his secret AM transceiver.

Eventually a navino came down in the elevator, and toddled carefully over to Tomek on two short skinny legs, and sat next to him.

“Hello Tomek. My name is Claymore.”

“Hello,” Tomek said.

A minute went past, with hardly any movement.

“Do you have any questions about what just happened today,” Claymore asked.

“Why did that guy kill my mom and dad?”

“The man you identified is likely a particular hit man that has killed others before. It seems he kills people as his job. We don’t know who he works for, or why they sent him to kill your parents. Your street cameras were disabled.”

“Why isn’t he in prison?” asked Tomek.

“There are lot’s of criminals that are not in prison. There are not enough imperial rangers to catch them all. There are not enough people that are interested in going out there and catching them. That is dangerous work.”

“That is not the way it should be.” Tomek stifled a cry.

Claymore put two of his four arms around him. “You are right, but that is the way it is.”

“Will he come back and kill me?” Tomek looked Claymore in the eyes.

“I don’t expect so. I can’t guarantee anything.” Claymore said.

“I should change my name and address. What will happen to me?” Tomek asked, wiping his eyes on his sleeve.

“Well, there is the orphanage. It’s like living at a school with a hundred other kids. We also contacted your aunt and uncle who are willing to take you. They have an adopted boy a little older than you. Which would you prefer? You can change your mind later.”

Tomek had met the aunt, uncle and the adopted plajoni a several times before. They seemed nice enough. The school full of strangers sounded scary.

“I would prefer my aunt and uncle,” Tomek said.