

3Sigma: A Bikers' Weekend

They parked their bikes in formation in the parking lot which even had a canopy. The founders and *Maestri* of the Iron Chefs, Franco and Rosa and their son Vincent who had become Prez were there on the threshold, wearing the club patches and bandannas. They greeted the top ranks of the 3Sigma, and just gave looks to the patches and all the others.

Neutrino walked in and found a large room with walls of exposed, yet carefully caulked, stone and large, heavy wooden tables covered with stridently dainty white cloths sporting floral motives.

Ancient tools and cooking implements and memorabilia of biker raids adorned the walls; the most prominent one an autographed poster of chef Veronika and Marco visiting the clubhouse after they tore to pieces the whole concept of Galactic Master Chef. At the far end of the room, behind a brick bar topped with a heavy dark wood top, stood a vast open kitchen where a few youngsters wearing cook uniforms sporting the club colors worked to prepare lunch. Rosa and Franco strode in and made them pick up the pace, while Vincent took place at another smaller round table with three seats.

The 3Sigma sat in rank order at a very long table already set with plentiful vintage flasks of wine and baskets of bread. Neutrino sat between Plasma to his left, and Giok to his right, who looked too big for the chair.

"White wine, Prospect!", demanded Plasma.

Neutrino made a face, but filled the patch's glass anyway. To his surprise, a large hand holding a flask poured wine into his own glass: it was Giok, who then raised her own glass to him. Neutrino returned the salute and drank the dry and fresh wine.

The patched servers arrived carrying big bowls of pillowy, golden and fragrant fried bites. And trays covered in a variety of cold cuts and wooden planks loaded with sliced cheeses, including the famous Gaia Purple with its veins of intense purple mold.

Neutrino maybe saw that food before, but he never tried it. He took one of the little pillows and realized it was empty inside; he tore it open and then tasted one half. It was fried bread dough, and didn't taste of much. So he choose a slice of fine-grained hard sausage and ate it with the other piece of the fried bread: now that was a great combination.

At the end of the table, he noticed Rosa offering Ali a thin slice of something that was also in front of him, a sort of very fatty bacon. He took it hesitantly, tasted it gingerly, and after a rather long time he swallowed but then shook his head.

Rosa shook hers too and deposited the plate of cold cuts in front of Cracker and Comet, who instead didn't even pretend to refuse. Ali went on pouring himself half a glass of wine and topping it with water, before taking a piece of cheese to go with his fried bread.

"Do you think Ali is still a Muslim, Prospect?", asked abruptly Plasma who realized Neutrino was looking at the scene.

He decided those were waters he wasn't going to tread:

"I don't think anything. Ali does what he does."

"And people who wanna know should just ask him, right?"

"Right on."

"More wine, Prospect."

That was enough to satisfy Plasma, for the moment. Neutrino looked towards Giok, who shrugged, poured him some wine and went on devouring a mound of food.

But the trials weren't over, for Neutrino. He noticed Franco striding from the kitchen, a plate covered with a metal cloche in one hand and a dusty, dark bottle in the other. There was no doubt Franco was coming for him. And what could be in the plate? Roast spiders? No, the Iron Chefs wouldn't steep so low, never. Rabbit head? That was a possibility.

Franco deposited plate and bottle on the table and sat heavily in front of Neutrino. The retired chef had salt-and-pepper hair and a stocky, heavysset body

"You are Neutrino, right, and you wanna become a 3Sigma, right?", he said between a statement and a question.

"Yes, and yes".

"Why a lab rat like you would want to go outlaw? You haven't blown up the lab, or messed somebody up yet, like most of your friends here did, right?"

"No, not yet. I wanted to ask out a girl from my lab, but that real dick of the son of my boss jumped in and slept with her before I could make my move."

"Ah, it's for a woman. It's always money, or power or pussy. *Tira più un pelo di figa che una coppia di buoi*, right?"

Neutrino just nodded. Was it really just about Tae Hee? After all, it's not like they were in a relationship; they barely spoke in fact. Or there was something deeper? He stood up to Micky, who most of the School loathed but rather than resisting his boorishness, they wished they could be the next Micky. And he was happy. Maybe deep down he was an outlaw, and the problem with Tae Hee was only an excuse he told himself.

"Do you like meat, boy?", Franco continued.

It wasn't wise to point out the obvious fact the he was eating charcuterie, in that kind of company.

"I like meat, *Maestro*".

"I hope so, because there's a real specialty that I'd like to share with meat lovers here.", he announced, and theatrically lifted the cloche, revealing a plateful of sautéed thin strips of meat with potatoes, onions and bell peppers, covered in a glistening tomato sauce and resting in a pool of reddish oil.

"*Vecchia col cavallo*. Like the French ratatouille, but better and with horse meat. I made it myself, and that's the best you will ever eat.", Franco boasted.

Neutrino wasn't too keen on the idea of eating horse meat – it was also certainly

illegal to butcher horses on Gaia – but he knew he had to. So he helped himself to a couple of generous spoonfuls and started eating under Franco's watchful eyes. It was good, he had to admit: the meat was tender and tasty and all the flavors came together perfectly.

Franco then opened the bottle and poured two glasses of a dark red, very sparkling wine with a kinda sour aroma. Neutrino tried it too: it was fruity, slightly sour and went well with the oily food.

“This is Lambrusco from our own grapes. Nobody makes it like this anymore, not even on Earth”.

“That's a damn shame, it's a great wine.”, commented Neutrino.

“You know how I and *me' muiera* turned outlaws, boy?”

“I am sorry, you and...?”, Neutrino couldn't help himself.

But Franco took it smiling:

“My wife Rosa. We came here when Goodport was still being built and we opened a restaurant. Good food from Italy, the kind you guys are eating today, and the construction workers loved it and didn't make a fuss of little things like having only male female, and others, bathrooms. As it should be, right?”

He wetted his throat with a good sip of the red wine, and Neutrino took one too. But he went easy with the wine, he didn't want to get wasted and do something stupid.

Franco went on:

“But then, the public servants settlers arrived, and boy they were difficult. They started asking all these stupid things. Not just the ingredients' list, but also the bloody certificate of provenance of every single thing. Even the salt, can you imagine? And they wanted also the gender-neutral bathrooms and the cis-exclusive one. And the vegetarian option, and the vegan one, and the separate kitchens. But we kept going; it wasn't so fun anymore but we love our food and the restaurant was all we had to tell you the truth.”

Franco drinking another sip that was more like half a glass signaled the story was reaching its climax:

“Until I hired this *stronzetto* as kitchen helper. He was eager, and smart, and worked hard. He told me he was a vegetarian, so I didn't make much of it when he kept meat at arm's length and I trusted him, I gave him more responsibility.

Then one day I saw him messing around the pot of *ragù*. You gotta know, boy, the *ragù* is mine only. I barely let Rosa work it, and certainly not a kitchen helper.

So I pressured him, asking what the fuck he was doing with my *ragù*. He said he was just curious, he wondered what's special about it. I almost believed him, until I noticed he had a little bottle in his apron pocket. That didn't look right to me. I wanted him to pull it out; he wouldn't; I was getting angry and at last he came out: he was an activist of Anti-Carnivore League and he spiked the *ragù* with laxative. Do you get it, he poured fucking laxative in the *ragù* I took two days to make to perfection. So I beat the fuck out of him, I messed him up real bad with the ladle, the one Rosa took all the way from Earth. That one, on the wall.”

Neutrino looked: it was a big ladle, looking heavy, and now its handle was bent badly out of shape. He didn't doubt that improvised weapon could do a lot of damage.

"Then I poured a full ladle of the laxative *ragù* right in his stupid mouth. To make a long story short, we lost the restaurant and we decided fuck it, playing by these idiotic rules is for idiots.

If good food without fuss is illegal, we'll be outlaws, right? And that worked out pretty damn good!"

Franco downed another glass, and then asked Neutrino abruptly:

"I do hope you're not a vegan, boy!"

Neutrino replied with actions: he scooped up another spoonful of the meaty *vecchia* and ate with enjoyment, looking Franco in the eye.

"Well done boy! To the outlaw food!", boomed Franco raising his glass.

Neutrino raised his too and finished the *lambrusco* in one go. He risked a look towards the end of the table: the 3Sigma's top ranks were looking that way, and they had approving expressions.

Then Franco left, taking the *vecchia* with him. Neutrino looked to Plasma first, who just went "What, man?"; then to Giok who gave him the thumbs up. So that was it.

The big lunch went on for quite some time. The 3Sigma were treated with *tortelli* and *cappelletti*, then *spezzatino* and *cima ripiena* and a choice of jam tarts and a selection of wines. The wine was nearly free-flowing, and it was followed by coffee and *grappa* and a series of sour, burning liquors that Neutrino could barely remember. Somehow, he managed not to get completely smashed. But quite a few of his fellow bikers failed. The top ranks of the two clubs retired into some private room discuss high-level matters, and left the underlings to their own devices.

Then the drunk bikers' games began, and the 3Sigma being what they are, they soon got into raucous renditions of situations like oral exams at the university, laboratory mishaps and more strange incidents.

Neutrino tried to remain invisible, but after a fashion he was noticed and brought to the fore. But at least he had a good story to tell: how he cut Micky down to size a few days before. He played it up a little bit, like he suspected most of the other stories were, and everybody appreciated.

At last, the bikers decided to do what they were supposed to do but too seldom did, which was to ride their bikes. They went out on the dirt roads of the property to have improvised drag and stunt races against themselves and Iron Chefs. In the end it didn't matter much who won or lost as long as the beer and wine kept flowing. Riding bikes out on the dirt outside approved and certified tracks was forbidden on Gaia, as a number of other fun and exciting things were, but inside the Iron Chef's turf nobody was coming to stop them.

Then they got dispersed; Neutrino went around trying to shake the alcohol off

observing in fascination the work of the farming robots, their precise, essential and fast moves. He was tempted to try and mess with one of them just to see what would happen, but then managed to keep his tipsy instinct under check. He decided to rest just a few minutes under the shade of a large, dense tree, and as it happens he passed out. He woke up some time later when Fungur paid him another visit: this time he was a farm hand and unleashed a farmerbot armed with fearsome bill-hooks against Neutrino. He tried to run away and jump on his bike, and at that point he shook awake. Dizzy, thirsty and sweaty he took a few seconds to recollect where he was and why. He decided the first need was to empty his bladder against the tree, then he made back to the bike and emptied the water canteen before heading to the clubhouse while the sun was approaching the horizon in glorious colors.

Strangely enough, the only other person in sight at the clubhouse was Haber himself, lounging on a recliner at the side of the courtyard and puffing on a large cigar with a glass of what must have been a fine liquor by his side.

"Good evening Prez", Neutrino said passing by; Haber just nodded.

Then the prospect stopped, hesitantly:

"Prez...", he said turning towards the other, "What happened in the end to that War Boy, Fungur?"

"Why would you care about an enemy, prospect? You two fought, you won, he lost."

"Yes prez, I won, I just... I'm not sure how to put it, I hope I didn't hurt him more than... necessary".

Haber deep inside was relieved, even if he wasn't going to show it. In his experience, unleashing the beast was easier than controlling it. Neutrino was tougher and more able to fight than he appeared at first sight, but also had a conscience and that was good.

"Fungur will be fine, just a bit uglier than before. Not that anybody will notice.", grinned Haber.

"Now prospect take your ass the kitchen and help with dinner!", he added.

"Yes, Prez!", Neutrino replied sharply and stepped briskly away, he too relieved that Fungur wasn't messed up too badly.

Lara was there too, working hard to prep another large dinner under the direction of the Iron Chefs – and they weren't too kind to greenhorn kitchen helpers.

Still, Neutrino and Lara managed to get through the preparation and the service; this time he wasn't admitted to the hall but had to slave away providing for the others... even Lara.

At the end Neutrino had a simple and filling cook's meal with the kitchen staff and finally reunited with Lara who had been cleaning up the hall. They were exhausted, but still had enough energy for some more private and physical activities. That's the perks of being young and outlaw.

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