

3Sigma: Road Trip

Dawn had broken already over Union City, but the clubhouse on the hills was still in the shadow, immersed in the bluish light of early morning.

"You wouldn't think bikers would gather at dawn for a ride, eh?", commented drily Plasma to Neutrino.

Who didn't reply, because he was attempting the impossible task of getting a few more minutes of sleep while sitting on his bike. He hadn't slept well a few nights in a row now, because the War Boy Fungur had become a fixed guest of his dreams and nightmares. Sometimes Neutrino killed him, sometimes he got killed. Sometimes Fungur was his friend, or brother (which he didn't even have), or some other acquaintance. And those dreams were the most unsettling, because of the suffocating sense of dread that permeated them. Was that post-traumatic stress disorder? Should he bring it up with somebody at the club, or would they laugh at him?

"We're all here, where is that bloody hippy?", lamented Cracker referring to Astro, who hadn't joined the others yet.

"Easy Sarge, he'll be here on time.", Ali chided him.

They both lived in a sort of comunitarian farm deeper in the hills; for Astro it was where he wanted to be – there, and the club. The farm was the kind of peace and love and good feelings place that didn't always fit somebody with a dark side and a burden to carry, and Astro had a pretty heavy one. The club was the place where the monsters inside could run free.

Ali's burden instead was out there in the open for everybody to see, his ghastly scarred face. He'd have lived at the clubhouse, but Comet wasn't too keen on that, so Ali lived at the commune, where his looks were at least tolerated.

While Ali was on his own, Astro had also a teenage daughter to take care of. She certainly was already self-sufficient, but Astro wasn't the one to just up and go without having a nice talk with her in the morning.

Soon Astro showed up and immediately took his position in the row of bikes. Then Haber snipped the burning tip off his cigar, pocketed the rest and gave the signal to get ready.

Neutrino wore his helmet and started his bike. The thought-controlled communication and entertainment system in his helmet quickly came online and linked with the bike's system so that he could see engine's RPM and other data in his head-up display. There he also had a satnav map, and a secure software patch that allowed for encrypted club-only communications and localization of the members with the club transponder on. And another patch, formally illegal, that could deactivate all comms and allow him to go dark, as they said. Most people out there had something like that, even if only a few ever used it.

Haber gave another hand signal and they left in the historical biker formation that hadn't changed since the first clubs formed back on Earth. Mengele rode a trike to

carry around his well-matched girlfriend, another crazy individual nicknamed Scalpel, underground taxidermist and veterinary doctor. The three Undergrads came after Nuetrino, Lara and Jade on Lara's bike and Giok on her own, because there really wasn't any space left; last of the bikers came Astro to close the formation. Then Comet followed in a family van with his wife and son.

They skirted the city, and took the country roads to Goodport. There also was a grandiose Integrated Transport Ribbon which comprised a four-lane photovoltaic highway, two heavy railroad tracks and one hypertrain track, And it just laid there used maybe at half its capacity.

But the ITR had too many cameras, sensors and whatnot. Outlaw bikers did not like that, so they used the country roads. It was slower going but much more interesting. The War Boys' territory was in the interior, on the barren clay hills of the Star Plateau; the night before Haber had the parley with Immortan Kidd and he seemed persuaded to forget about the brawl a few days earlier. With that and the distance, the 3Sigma di not need to concern much about the War Boys.

Neutrino played some electronic blues in his helmet, did not pay much attention to the club chatter and tried to keep his eyes on the road and bikes in front of him. But he couldn't; he had to keep looking at the landscape to avoid thinking again about Fungur. That was getting really heavy, he considered.

"Prospect! Watch your position!", Astro's voice rang in his helmet.

"Yes, Cap.", he replied; then gave a little gas and steered right to regain his proper position.

"Don't screw this up, man, tell Fungur to sod off", he said to himself.

Sometimes the country roads and the ITR were kilometers away, in other places the small roads had to dive under the wide polymer-concrete span of the ITR. The flattish landscape was made of wild woods and swamps still harboring the native life, and fields of the familiar Earth crops, plus some from other worlds. Hills and mountains rose at their left, while when the road climbed up some ancient, gentle ridge they could catch glimpses of sea to the right. The traffic was light on those roads, but for the most part it was farmer's tractors and trucks. However, they were usually happy to give way and let the bikers overtake.

Cracker decided to act as impromptu tour guide on the club channel:

"You guys watch out for the mustelas, they don't lood left and right before crossing the road. The mud hogs... well, they just look at you from swamps, so they're cool".

And Nutrino did indeed see quite a few mustelas with their striped black and red fur, even entire families walking along the road, eyeing the bikes suspiciously. He also thought he spotted a band of mud hogs bathing lazily in a swamp.

The trip was planned to take around three hours, but about halfway there, they stopped briefly at the place in the middle of nowhere called The Higway Inn. It had a large gravel parking lot, a vast low restaurant bar and a two-storey motel, and it catered mostly to truckers – the few that were left in the age of autonomous trucks -

farmers and bikers. Some tourists in search of authenticity also like to pop in while on the road. Still, outlaw bikers liked The Highway Inn so much that 3Sigma, War Boys, Iron Chefs, Black Devils and even the Rainbow Warriors from farther south all agreed to regard it as neutral zone, where fighting was not allowed.

They parked in formation, and Neutrino observed fascinated the process of Giok unfolding from her bike: she was no doubt all woman, but also bigger than most men in the club: something more than one meter and ninety tall, she also was born with broad shoulders and thick bones, and at young age decided to start pumping iron. Now she was a mountain of a woman, an amazon on a motorbike. When she looked his way, Neutrino averted his gaze: he didn't want to get on her wrong side – even if in fact she was a quite nice gal, for that kind of company.

He went and took a piss, then ordered a large coffee and a Volcano pastry: it promised to be filled with spicy chocolate cream, and he could use some additional wake-up. Or... he could always ask Flask for some chemical assistance. Maybe. At least, after the wake-up call from Astro, his daydreaming went down a lot.

He sat at a table with Plasma, who was in the mood for talking about escapades to Goodport.

"I went there almost every year for seaside holidays when I was a kid. Last time it was with friends for our 17th birthday.", Neutrino explained.

"Last time I went there was for the Third Fusion Progress Conference. And the whores!", he added with a grin.

Neutrino still felt kinda out of his depth, at times. In his life he only had a lapdance, for money. He had heard about the kind of stories Plasma lived in person, tho.

"Whore love scientific events, because scientists are good customers. They pay up and shut up, and if they talk back a few harsh words, at worst a slap on the face, are enough to make them behave. Now, try to do that with an outlaw, eh?", Plasma added and took a dramatic sip of his coffee stout.

"That's the way it is.", Neutrino agreed, thinking that in fact he only wanted to use real violence against one single individual. And that wasn't Fungur either. That's why he joined the club.

Lara suddenly sat next to him without even saying hello.

"Hey Prospect, what have you been up to?", she asked casually.

"Same old sciencey stuff, Undergad. And you?", he replied trying to be cool and aloof.

Plasma guffawed and concentrated on his beer.

"I've had one really interesting case of severe stipsis. A total mess, I tell you. It looked like your patry, to be honest".

But Neutrino wasn't squeamish that way, so he didn't react.

Then Lara continued in a conspirational tone:

"Heads up, most likely we'll get the dishwashing corvee after dinner. Which means, nobody will care what we do after the dishes are done."

And she left with a pinch on his thigh.

“Getting lucky tonight, mate?”, joked Plasma.

“At least I don't need whores.”, Neutrino retorted.

But Plasma had the last word:

“You don't know what you're missing, boy!”

Neutrino shook his head and went back to his pastry, which was pleasantly spicy, and the hot and rich coffee.

They had just time to finish their orders, then Cracker did a quick round calling them to leave. Some went to the fuel pumps to refuel their bikes with gas or methanol. Neutrino's bike had a fuel cell that could easily do to Goodport and back with one tankful of methanol, so he didn't have to refuel.

Then they assembled again and left for the second leg. They skirted around the city of Ceres, crossing into the quiet industrial area made more of vacant lots than working warehouses and factories.

Neutrino discussed that with Fabio, sometimes: Gaia never fulfilled the promises of development because it was a boring, overly perfect place. The developers even used geo-engineering to minimize extreme weather events.

People wanted adventure, challenges, new and exciting things. There was a planet in another system, a tide-locked world with one scorching hot hemisphere and freezing cold one; soon it gained the popular name of Westeros. Only a narrow equatorial band, swept by ferocious storms, could sustain human life; yet the flights to Westeros were always full to capacity with people trying to make it big over there. Most failed and more than a few lived a short and miserable rest of their lives. Yet more kept coming on Westeros.

But the harshness of that world was only a fraction of the shit that happened on Discarica, the most infamous and badass world of the whole Human Expansion. There they had a vast expanse of polluted, radioactive desert spawning a stream of mutant flesh-eating monsters, and if that wasn't enough there also was the insane Naturesearch Corporation that produced lovely things such as radioactive zombie sharks. And when shit truly hit the fan, two legendary badasses known as Lemmy and Yoko were ready on call to set things straight – and that usually meant blowing a lot of stuff up with big guns. Neither the Union nor the Confederation wanted Discarica; the Charterists thought Discaricans were a bunch of nutcases and those folks themselves much preferred to be on their own, so Discarica remained totally and fiercely independent. If things on Gaia went too bad, Neutrino mused, he could just purchase a one-way ticket to Discarica and try his luck there.

At the outskirts of Goodport, they took towards the hills on road that snaked rising gently through thick woods and steep valleys. At last they reached a plateau, where a fence of sturdy wooden posts and metal netting lined the right side of the road.

At some point at the side of the road, a few meters recessed, a grand portal appeared. It was a red-brown brick structure, a wide and tall arch above the dirt

road leading off the main one. A roof with terracotta shingles topped the portal, and on the frieze large, heavy Roman letters made of rusty steel spelled out "Iron Ranch". The heavy door made of thick, dark wood studded with numerous steel nails was wide open.

But two bikers were waiting sitting on their rides at the sides of the access road, in front of the portal. They were a red headed young woman, and an older man with long white hair. Obviously, they wore patches with the Iron Chefs logo, knife and fork crossed under a skull with an apple in its mouth. The woman held up a hand gesturing the 3Sigma to stop, then she made another series of gestures that apparently meant she would ride in front of them, and her brother in arms at the back, escorting the guests to the Iron Chefs' club hall.

Iron Ranch was the completely legit front operation of the Iron Chefs. A vast property sitting on the fertile Hills of Plenty, the complex was a farm and exclusive resort and restaurant where wealthy patrons could enjoy the most fanciful and trendy locally grown and, as it happened in these days, cultured, foods.

It was in the most remote reaches of the property, in the deep wooded ravines and in caves dug into the soft tuff that the Iron Chefs had their outlaw activities. A few vetted customers could consume the outlawed foods on the property, but for the most part the goods were distributed through a chain of couriers and dealers to maintain a plausible deniability. And the money and goods from those deals were laundered in the hospitality business; cops and politicians took their slice of the cake and everybody was happy as long as the Iron Chefs didn't do something stupid like brawling in public. But much like in Union City, as long as the outlaws kept their things to themselves, the authorities were happy to look elsewhere and avoid the hassle of doing actual work.

The well-kept dirt road cut through orchards and vegetable gardens; fields and vineyards where numerous robo-farmers worked tirelessly under the supervision of a few humans. The grapes were almost ripe, the whites glistening golden, and the soft smell of drying grass filled the air. Closer to the resort, heavenly effluves wafted from the kitchens

It was a good kilometer from the portal to the luxurious central resort, and a few more hundred meters to the more farm-like club hall, secluded and isolated from the parts open to the public. A tall brick wall complete of barbed wire, cameras and floodlights circled the building; a mean-looking steel gate closed the access road; strategically placed cypresses shielded the club hall windows from cameras and laser microphones; and Neutrino was sure there were other, hidden, security measures. Bikers were positively not keen on enemies and outsiders snooping on them. After they all passed through, the sturdy gate closed behind them under the watchful eyes of the Iron Chef that tailed them.

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