

### 3Sigma: Daily Life of an Outlaw

Fabio was just getting out of the flat's door, when Neutrino emerged from his bedroom wearing only pajamas bottoms.

"Morning, mate.", said Fabio half in and half out, "I made a tart with sour plum jam, true northern Italian style. Enjoy!".

If he noticed the bandage on Neutrino's forearm, he didn't let it show.

"Morning. Thanks.", returned Neutrino managing to overcome his lips that seemed to have been glued together during the night. The other disappeared and closed the door behind him.

That's what he was, he didn't talk much, spent most of his time outside or holed up in his room and took showers in the dead of the night. Still, excluding the showers, he wasn't noisy, he cooked delicious food and almost always shared it. That wasn't a bad deal for a flatmate.

Neutrino decided visiting the bathroom had priority, but after that he went back to the kitchen with a spring in his walk and selected his preset coffee from the coffee machine. While the machine did its job, he cut a generous slice from the tart neatly placed under a cake cover. He ate tip of the slice covered in thick jam: he cut off another nice slice, put both of them on plate and carrying his coffee mug he went to have breakfast on the roof, under a gazebo. It was a day of early autumn, when the morning air had lost the stuffiness of the summer but was still pleasantly warm.

He and Fabio couldn't understand how a penthouse on top of Settler's Hill, with an amazing city view could be rented out for a nearly ridiculous price like what they paid. Then, when the first wind storm struck they realized why: it was like living inside an ancient airplane roaring through the air.

But on calm and clear days, the view was spectacular and Neutrino wanted to enjoy the most of it. In front, below, he had Union City with its regular hexagonal fractal layout, built around the central Landing Park where *Hope*, the first ever settler's ship stood as it touched down long ago with its precious load of dedicated settlers from Earth.

"Man, this tart is great!", he said to the air, and washed his mouth with a sip of coffee.

The silvery Ubuntu River sneaked through the city under many bridges, a touch of disorder in that ordered layout. At the river's mouth, soared the great robotic cranes of the seaport, busy around a handful of automated ships. And beyond the dam, the emerald green of the Central Sea dotted with another few great cargo ships sporting high-efficiency sails. Around those, at a safe distance, smaller fishing and pleasure boats sailed around too.

At his right soared the steep and wooded Beacon Peak, the very end of the Union Mountains that extended away from the coast. He took a girl up there on a date years ago, all the way on the ropeway to to the mountaintop, perfectly timed to see the sunset. Yet, despite all that setup he couldn't bring himself to try and kiss

her. Stupid gutless Neutrino. He wondered what his new friends would say to that... nothing politically correct, he concluded.

At his left, there was the curved coastal plain green covered in regular fields where sparse farms and villages stood. Union City was not a bad place to be, especially when you had your first success in your new life as outlaw, he mused. Neutrino finished his tart with some regret, then his coffee and went back inside to get ready for a day at the lab.

The university was about half a kilometer away, across the Taro Creek and up the next hill, the obviously named University Hill. Neutrino fought all the way the urge to tear it up with his motorbike, but he knew better: these days, with the vehicular transponder and AI-equipped surveillance cameras, there way no way to avoid fines. So he rode like a good domesticated citizen.

He parked in his reserved spot – the perks of being a researcher – at the Surface & Materials Science School, removed his helmet and walked inside. It was all as usual there and the people he meet on his way to the office reacted as the did other hundreds of mornings. Of course, they didn't know about his new life. He wondered how they'd react if they met his new friends. That would be fun, if he didn't care about his academic career anymore.

He took off his real leather jacket and the knee protectors, while his rider boots were comfortable enough to wear them all day long. At last, Neutrino sat at his desk, turned on the omniscreen and started his work for the day.

Or better, he tried, but failed to concentrate for more than a few minutes in a row. Then, he couldn't help but to drift back to the events of last night.

Sometimes he visualized Fungur stabbing him; sometimes he visualized himself killing Fungur instead. Then he wondered if his performance with Lara was good enough... was she really pleased, or did she just pretend to be nice?

*“Oh knock it off wussy, the 3Sigma don't do nice. If they think something, they say it. They don't care about feelings”*

Then he thought what he could have done better in front of Haber, what could have impressed him more. Did he come out as patch material, or not?

At last, he was able to get into his duties of researcher. He was working on a project for the sealing and hardening of 3D-printed metal surfaces using plasma torch. He knew it wasn't anything particularly innovative, but on Gaia they needed to be autharchic: being out of the main interplanetary trade routes, the cost of delivering hi-tech machines produced elsewhere was prohibitive. Which was strange, for the first planed to be colonized, that everybody supposedly in-the-know projected would soon rival Earth itself in wealth and power. Instead, it remained more like a museum planet, a place for parades and events, for families with young children and retirees.

In any case, Neutrino worked efficiently and competently and had a quite large set of samples ready to be checked with electron microscope and a series of other instruments to measure the effect of different process conditions. Today it was the day of the SEM: he had booked a full afternoon a week before, to make sure

he could process all his samples in one session. He spent the next hour checking and rechecking that all the samples were labeled correctly and the correct codes and metadata were already loaded in the university's system. Swapping just two samples was enough to mess up months of work, he knew by experience.

It was sometimes after ten when somebody rang at the door. A window opened in the corner of the omniscreen, showing the face of the person outside: it was Micky, that massive dick of the Customer Expansion Program.

Neutrino tapped the "OPEN" button in the window and the lock clicked open.

Micky strode in:

"Hey my friend, how's your day?"

"A day of work, Micky. What's the matter?", was Neutrino's unenthusiastic reply.

*"We're not fucking friends, you bastard..."*

"Today a customer is coming to see our labs. Not just any customer, it's some fat cats from the Purple Cheese Consortium!"

"And?"

"I need to show them something cool, like our SEM, to impress them and get the contract. I need the afternoon at the SEM, Jerry."

He had started thinking of himself as Neutrino the prospect, but here he was still Jerry the Geek. And Micky was trying to boss him around, as usual.

And usually Neutrino would have offered some petulant protest and then just caved in. Micky was the son on the head of department; he had been given the job of hunting and convincing paying customers. He was good looking, flashy and talkative; he offered the customers luxurious dinners and, it was rumored, enticing after dinners; he treated the instruments and the pretty students as trophies to show off, and he got contracts worth millions.

*"Haber, and Cracker... hell even Flask wouldn't spend one minute taking shit from this boor. What are you gonna do, prospect? You half killed Fungur for the club. What are you gonna do now?"*

"Sorry, Micky, I cannot help". His voice wasn't as firm and final as he hoped, but it was good enough. "I need to run all my samples at the SEM today."

"Come on Jerry, it's just a small favor for a friend! You can run your samples tomorrow, no?"

"It's today, or I will miss the deadline for the yearly project review."

"Ah the deadline... you can ask for an extension, you know? My dad will sign it off without even looking. No problem there."

Like Neutrino didn't know that asking an extension left a very bad impression with the reviewers. It was the only deadline that researchers couldn't miss.

*"And remember Tae Hee, how you were going to ask here out and he just swooped in and took her away."*

He just shook his head.

Micky was getting agitated:

"The folks from the Consortium need to see something cool, the best stuff we've got. What you wanna give them, just the same old slides? Chuck some of their precious purple mold under the SEM, and they'll be happy."

"Sorry, it's not my problem. I booked in advance following the procedure. The slot

is mine.”

Micky made a very disappointed face.

“I’ll tell you what, you can ask Chopra if she thinks you can have the slot. She’s in charge of the scheduling, right?”

Chopra was the instruments supervisor, and she was known to be a hell of a sticker; procedure was religion for her. To top it off, she didn’t like Micky at all and was very cold to his father. In practice, there was near-zero chance that Micky could get what he wanted.

“Come on, you wanna go to the boss? Where are we, in elementary school? Look Miss, Micky was mean to me! We’re grown men, Jerry!”

*“Some grown men I know would have slapped you unconscious long ago, dude.”*

Neutrino remained calm and smiling:

“The SEM slot is mine. You can try with Chopra, or you can call your dad. I’m not going to give it up.”

Micky gave him what was supposed to be a killer look, then stormed out muttering curses. A friendly look from Ali was much scarier than that, Neutrino thought, and sat back enjoying the adrenaline rush. But Micky would try to get back at him, he knew that. Still, for now he won.

While Neutrino was dealing with Micky, farther inland at the clubhouse Comet was waiting for Haber and the other officers to arrive at the urgent meeting that Haber called for. His wife Flame – old lady, as she said – was preparing for the lunch that would follow the meeting. He stood at the window, slowly sipping a Wheat Red beer.

“Will you help chopping the chillies?, asked Flame.

“Yeah, alright.”

He took a generous handful of the Scorpion Bonnet chillies they grew in the garden, washed them and threw the whole lot into the automated food processor; he selected the “spin & chop” program and let the machine do the rest.

“Couldn’t you just use a knife?”, protested Flame.

“I like eating your chili, not cooking it.”, Comet explained.

A sip of beer later, and perfectly chopped chillies dropped out of the processor’s side port, into the collecting bowl.

“See, this saves a lot of time!”

She shook her head, but didn’t retort. At that point, Comet got an alert on his hypergoggles: the security cameras had picked up somebody coming. The transponder data confirmed it was the others, pretty much on time.

“The lads are coming, I’ve gotta go down.”, Comet announced.

“You guys don’t be late for lunch, alright?”

“We won’t, nobody wants to miss your chili!”

Comet gave a quick kiss to the forehead of his infant daughter fast asleep in a robotic cot. They didn’t spare money on that one: besides all the usual robocot functions, it was also self-propelled.

Flame loaded chopped chillies and onions, spices and softened beans instead of diapers and toys in the lower level on the robocot, then she ordered the machine to follow her, and it started moving silently and smoothly on its four rubber

tracks, following Flame towards the lift. Comet instead took the stairs and stood waiting in front of the clubhouse door. The upper floor of the mansion was home to his family of four; the clubhouse took up about half of the lower floor and the rest was used for the workshop and Comet's private garage.

Haber, Ali, Cracker, and Astro arrived in a row and parked their bikes. They didn't spend too long with greetings, and moved to the secure meeting room.

"I thank you all gentlemen for attending on such a short notice. We have important issues to discuss", Haber opened.

And they knew what: the spat with the War Boys. A parley turned into a brawl, and that had to be taken care of. Of course Haber knew about it already, but this was the official discussion. As treasurer and secretary, Comet would keep a minute.

"Ali and Cracker, would let us know what happened last night?"

"I filmed the whole thing", announced Cracker.

Then he snapped the projector attachment onto his pocket communicator, and project the incident video on the wall.

After the show, Haber spent a while scratching his goatie, then continued:

"You did what you had to do, there's no doubt about it. But this also puts the club in a tight spot: the War Boys aren't going to take this lying down."

"We kicked their arses once, we can do it again!", protested Cracker.

That was the problem with people at their first tastes of using violence, Haber pondered: making them stop before they make too big a mess for themselves and their comrades.

"Careful there, Sarge, the War Boys are no joke. This is the time for diplomacy: I will call Immortan Kidd to have a meeting and resolve this."

Again Cracker and this time also Comet groaned.

"We can't just go to war against the War Boys, at least not now. They outnumber us.", explained Haber.

"We'll look like wussies, Prez.", added Comet.

"As president, my duty is to do the best interest of the club. Even if that means some of use has to swallow their pride. I will try to keep the peace, because this is the best interest of the club."

"What do you wanna tell Immortan Kidd?", asked Ali while examining intently the contents of his glass of tea.

"I'll tell him that we can just forget this incident as a misunderstanding and go back to our old agreement. They broke it first, and they can't expect to get away scot free."

He looked around the table, at the faces of his comrades.

"Do we agree?"

The others raised their hands. Comet took a few seconds to do it; Cracker hesitated even longer and finally raised his hand, but his face showed he wasn't happy about it, at all.

"Alright, second point!", Haber went on, "This weekend we'll go on a holiday: it's time to pay a visit to our friends the Iron Chefs."

They were akin and allied with the 3Sigma: a gang of disgraced F&B workers, their thing was producing and trafficking prohibited foodstuff. They had duck

pens to make fois gras and not vats of nutrients; the aged cheese on well-seasoned wooden planks and not sterile polyethylene slabs; they used fungicides to protect their grapes and bartered wine with the campagnoli up on the Obama Range for pancetta smoked on real wood chips, not the synthetic smoke. They even introduced sturgeon in the Lower Ubuntu river just to make caviar. Nobody wanted to miss a weekend with the Iron Chefs, because they provided superb hospitality.

The club cheered; even Cracker lost his sourness.

"Is this a family event, Prez?", asked Comet.

"Sure, families welcome. We're going to relax and talk a bit of business only."

"Do we agree?"

There were no dissenters this time.

"Third point. Are we still good friends with the estimable law enforcement officers?"

Public relations were Astro's territory:

"They greatly appreciated our donations to their neighborhood programs, and they regard us as good members of the community."

"Great!", commented Haber among the chuckles.

"Fourth point. Do you think our prospect Neutrino is ready for his thesis project?"

They were all for him. He was still a little awkward, they conceded, but his loyalty and dedication were out of question.

"Alright then. Ali, make arrangements for his thesis project. Comet, invite him to our weekend at the Iron Chefs, we have to see how he does with our friends."

They officially closed the meeting and moved to the bar in the main hall for aperitifs while Flames' bean chili and polenta lunch finished cooking on the open fire. She wouldn't cook it any other way.