

*These stories use characters and locations based on the Gunslinger Girl manga written by Yu Aida and published in monthly shōnen magazine Dengeki Daioh. The characters of Kara and Michele are original to myself.*

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## "Carbon-Fiber Chef"

A *Gunslinger Girl* Original Fiction Series  
By Kiskaloo

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### **Chapter One – Decisions...Decisions...**

Having completed her afternoon workout and shower, Triela walked back to the dorm room she shared with Claes. Dressed in a loosely fitted white t-shirt and blue Puma gym shorts, she saw that the door was slightly ajar so she pushed it open.

"Cooking a fish ruins it," Kara opined from behind her Apple PowerBook Titanium. She looked up to see Triela walk in and flashed her a smile and Peace Sign with her right hand.

"That's your Japanese half speaking," Triela heard Claes respond from the top bunk, though all she could see was the back of her legs as she kicked them in the air.

"My French half happens to concur," Kara shot back.

"Let me guess," Triela said. "Surprise Saturday?"

Kara nodded and Claes' head popped-up over the railing.

"If we can ever figure out what cuisine to cook, much less decide on a menu," she charged with a stern look at Kara.

The Agency cafeteria did not have a single cooking staff when it came to the dinner service. Instead, three teams rotated in from surrounding Carabinieri and Esercito Italiano (Army) facilities. Depending on which team was working, certain days of the week were either looked forward to or feared.

The best team worked Sunday through Tuesday and also Friday. The girls figured they must want to open their own gourmet ristorante because the meals they prepared were always tasty. So those days were known as "Sumptuous Sunday", "Terrific Tuesday" and "Fabulous

Friday". The only rough patch was "Mystery Monday", so noted because the staff used whatever perishables were left from the previous week.

The chef who led Wednesday's team was a big believer in the concept of "fusion cuisine" – the combining of elements of various culinary traditions while not fitting specifically into any. Sometimes it was a hit, and sometimes it was a miss, but it was always...interesting...which is why the girls had taken to calling it "Wacky Wednesday".

The last team worked Thursday and they tended to put too much salt into each dish, which resulted in everyone drinking copious amounts of water or wine with their meal. The entire staff referred to it as "Thirsty Thursday".

There was no formal dinner service on Saturday, so people either ate out or used the kitchen facilities to prepare their own meals. As such, it was always a "surprise" as to what you were going to have for dinner, based on your schedule, mood, and whether or not you wanted to (or could) cook yourself or went out. This Saturday, Claes and Kara (along with support from Michele) had decided to eat in.

"So what cuisines are you looking at?" Triela asked as she went to the closet and pulled out a change of clothes.

"Anything but Italian," came the joint reply, as if in stereo.

"How about German?" Triela asked. "I could make something for Hilshire."

Kara started typing away in a search engine while Claes grabbed a German cookbook from the pile next to her pillow.

"This pork loin recipe looks tasty," Kara noted. "Cooked on a rotisserie and served with an apricot-cherry compote. We can serve it with mashed potatoes. Sauerkraut probably won't go over big, so I'll do a sweet & sour red cabbage side. I'd need to have Michele offer advice, since he is more familiar with German cooking than I am."

"I found a 'Chicken Schnitzel Oscar'. You pound flat a breast and then stuff it with crabmeat, artichoke hearts and grated Compté cheese. You then dip it in eggwash and panko crumbs and grill it," Claes replied.

"Compté cheese is fantastic, and I use panko breading a good deal in Japanese cooking, so I can make that," Kara said. "And if we're going to fry in panko, I am going to make myself a chicken cordon bleu."

"What about the soup? The weather has been a bit chilly so I'd like something hot with a nice broth." She turned to Triela. "Do the Germans have anything like French Onion Soup?"

"How should I know?" Triela said as she hiked up her pants and tucked in her blouse before buttoning them. "I'm not German."

"No, but your handler is," Kara pointed out. "Has he ever spoken about such a thing?"

"Hilshire likes lentil soup, I know," Triela said.

"Found it!" Claes called out. "Bavarian Beer Onion Soup. They don't seem to use cheese or bread on top, however."

"We'll improvise," Kara decided. "Cambozola is a good German cow's milk cheese that will melt nicely. And bread is bread as long as it is hard enough to soak."

"Any ideas for the entrée you want to make for Hilshire?" Claes asked Triela.

"I know he likes sausages."

"Sausages...sausages..." Kara muttered to herself as she typed and scrolled. "How about a sausage platter? We could do bratwurst, weisswurst and bier sausages. Toss on a slice or two of the pork loin and the potatoes and red cabbage."

"I think I can grill a sausage," Triela noted. "And we can do up a whole bunch to re-heat for lunches during the week."

Kara smiled inwardly at Triela express even a trace of doubt about her abilities. She was definitely the "Alpha Female" of the Generation 1 cyborgs and probably of the Generation 2 models, as well. Within the Agency, she had no real equal in Close Quarters Combat, though she heard that one Army trainer had bested her when her temper got the better of her. The staff of Section 1 referred to her as "The Princess". Except Michele, who called her "Hilshire's Valkyrie" and meant it as a compliment.

"Okay, how about this for the menu," Kara offered. "Bavarian Onion and lentil soups, a green salad with honey mustard dressing, the roast pork, chicken cordon bleu, the Chicken Schnitzel Oscar and a selection of sausages. Sides will be mashed potatoes, the sweet & sour red cabbage, and asparagus with Hollandaise."

"I think we need some sauerkraut for the sausages," Triela noted and Kara nodded her acceptance. "What about desert?" Kara asked.

"Apple strudel and a Black Forest cake are both a given," Claes noted. "If we want to add some Italian flair, we should make a spaghettieis, though it might be too cold."

"What's that?" Kara asked.

"It's a German ice cream specialty that looks like a plate of spaghetti. You press vanilla ice cream through a modified spätzle maker onto a bed of whipped cream and what comes out looks like spaghetti. You then use a strawberry sauce to represent the tomato sauce and white chocolate shavings as the Parmesan cheese."

"That sounds neat," Kara said. "We'll see how the weather is on Saturday. If it's too cold, what's our backup?"

"Hilshire really likes berliners," Triela noted. "He sometimes has them for breakfast when we're on assignment if he can find a bakery that carries German cuisine."

"You're not talking about the citizens of Berlin, I take it," Kara asked, skeptically.

"Of course not!" Triela replied, hotly. "They're little doughnuts filled with jam and covered in powdered sugar. They're actually quite tasty."

Kara dived into the search engines for recipes. "Okay, that doesn't look too hard. We'll make some for Hilshire and you, at a minimum, and if the weather is cold, we'll do them instead of the spaghettieis."

"Agreed," Claes said.

## Chapter Two – Raiding the Larder...

Now that they had decided on what to serve, the next job was for Kara to identify what they had on hand and what she would need her handler Michele to get.

She slipped on her loafers and headed down to the cafeteria. Since it was Friday, the “good” team would be working, so their prep team was on site in the kitchen.

“Ciao, Abramo!” Kara greeted as walked in. She went to a cabinet and pulled out some Tupperware containers and grabbed an open-top plastic basket from a stack on the floor.

“Ciao, Kara! You going to help us out today?”

“No, Claes and I are going to cook dinner tomorrow, so I need to take an inventory of supplies.”

“What type of cuisine will you two do? French?” Nicilo asked as he fed pasta into a machine to flatten it out.

“We’re actually going to try German. Triela said she’d help us out!” Kara noted.

“I wonder if she’ll be any better than Henrietta,” Nicilo deadpanned.

“She’s getting better,” Claes informed him as she came in with a cloth shopping bag. “She helps Michele, Kara and I on occasion. She still can only work directly from a cookbook, but we’re trying to get her confident enough to experiment with ingredients and spices. Giuseppe has been a trooper when it comes to her dishes.”

“Giuse spoils her mercilessly,” Cannelita opinioned as she prepared the Marinara sauce. “He’s always asking Ghita to make some special dessert for her.”

“And yet, Ghita always does so. And she makes one for Giuseppe, as well. So who’s spoiling who?” Abramo asked with a chuckle towards the other woman. Ghita just scowled at him.

“I’ll check the cold locker while you check the vegetable pantry,” Kara informed Claes, who nodded.

Kara went into the cold room, which was divided into multiple sections. One carried meats, another fish, a third cheese and dairy, and a fourth other perishables. She went first to the meat section. Finding a pork loin and some chicken breasts were easy, but she came up blank on German sausages, which she expected. She considered some Italian and chicken sausages, but they were spiced differently than German ones, so she decided to get the real thing.

Next, she went to the seafood section. She looked for any cooked crabs, but was not surprised to find none since the shelf life was barely a week so the chefs tried to use it by Wednesday. She knew there was some frozen king crab legs from Russia available, but Kara used fresh ingredients whenever possible. So in addition to the butcher, Michele would also need to visit the fishmonger. She had more luck in the cheese section, since they had both Compté and Cambozola on hand as well as Swiss for the cordon bleu. She also verified they had vanilla ice cream and whipping cream. In the other perishables section she found beef broth and she verified they had plenty of jam and marmalade for the berliners. She put the meats in separate containers and labeled them with her name. They and a small container of broth went into a shelf in one of the industrial refrigerators that had her name on it.

"I found the panko, artichokes, potatoes, asparagus and red cabbage," Claes reported. "Obviously, no sauerkraut."

"What about the apricots and cherries?" Kara asked. Claes raised her bag.

"Excellent. The staples should be fine, so all we need is the sausages and some fresh crab.

"What kinds of dishes will you be making?" Ghita asked as she pulled some ladyfingers from the oven.

"A chicken cordon bleu and Schnitzel Oscar, plus a roast pork loin with potato salad, asparagus and red cabbage as the entrée," Claes reported.

"Are you using brown or red potatoes?" Nicilo asked.

"I grabbed the brown ones because they were bigger."

"I prefer the red ones, myself."

Claes knew better than to second-guess the "A" team, so she made a mental note to swap them out.

"And add some buttermilk. It will give them a more whipped and creamy texture," he added and Claes amended said note.

"We're going to try and make a Bavarian onion soup, melting Cambozola cheese over it. Do you know any German breads?" Kara asked.

"Germans are big on rye, I hear, but I don't think that is a good choice," Nicilo noted.

"Pumpernickel," Abramo said with a laugh, ducking the ladyfinger Ghita tossed at him.

"Don't pay him any attention," Cannelita said. "The Germans make more types of bread than anyone else. However, just use nice French-style bread. It really works the best."

"So how many courses?" Abramo asked.

"Well Germans appear to not have as many as Italians," Kara noted. "So we're bypassing the antipasto stage and using the soups and salad as a combined primo. Then the meats for the secondo and the vegetables as the contorno and finish with the dolce and caffè."

"How do Germans get so big on so few courses?" Nicilo quipped.

### **Chapter Three – Chairman Kara**

Triela burst out laughing as Masahiko Kobe, Iron Chef Italian, rose from the depths to take his place on the dais of Kitchen Stadium.

“That...outfit...” she couldn’t get the words out between her giggles. “I...thought that...Chairman Kaga...looked ridiculous, but this...”

She, Claes and Kara were in the den, watching a DVD-R of some episodes of “Iron Chef” sent to Michele by a friend in the United States.

“You think that is funny, wait until you listen to the commentary. The English dub is hilarious,” Kara noted.

Triela looked back and forth at Kara and the television, her hand going to her chin in a thoughtful motion.

“What?” Kara asked.

“I’m just thinking...as the lead chef, you’re our ‘Chairman Kara’. We should create for you an outfit fitting of your exalted position in the kitchen.”

Kara emphatically shook her head. “No way. You are not going to dress me in a cape and sequins!”

“You’d need a professional seamstress to make something that hideous,” Claes noted. “You won’t find that style hanging on the rack.”

Triela harrumphed at a plan thwarted and the girls watched Italian chef Franco Kanthoniel lose to Iron Chef Kobe with the theme ingredient of tomato. Triela and Claes both knew Kara and Michele were big fans of the show and wanted to see what it was all about. Plus they had a few hours to kill before starting dinner. The weather for the weekend had turned cold and wet, so all outside activities planned for Saturday were cancelled.

There was a knock on the doorframe and the girls saw Michele standing there.

“Ready to go?” he asked. The girls nodded and headed to the front of the dorm, where Michele had parked his Ferrari 456M GTA. Since she

had the shortest legs, Claes took the seat behind Michele with Triela to her right.

"Nice," Triela noted as she ran her hand across the fine leather. She leaned forward between the seats. "He lets you drive this?" she asked Kara, motioning her hand towards Michele.

Kara nodded.

As the car exited the front gate, Michele disabled the traction control and blipped the throttle, causing the rear tires to fishtail on the wet pavement. He reactivated the traction control and did a quick acceleration run up to the main street followed by a hard braking, the ABS chattering away to bring the car to a stop.

"Do it again!" Triela shouted.

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Since it was a Saturday and the weather was poor, Michele recommended that they just visit the local Esselunga supermarket. He dropped the girls off in front and then went and parked the car in a remote area of the lot to wait for them. Each girl grabbed a hand basket at the front, took part of the list and started shopping.

Kara headed first to the fish section, where she found some fresh crabmeat packaged that morning. She then met Triela in the sausages section, where they went over the various options. They settled on bratwurst, Frankfurter Rindswurst and some weisswurst made that morning. They found Claes in the produce section, and they verified they had everything they needed. As they checked out, Kara called Michele who drove up front and picked them up.

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Michele dropped them off next to the loading dock for the commissary and the girls headed inside to start preparing the meal. They put the perishables into the refrigerator and started to work on preparing the vegetables and fruits. Triela asked to work on the Berliner pfannkuchens, and Kara handed her the recipe. She mixed the various dry and wet ingredients to form the dough, which she then kneaded before putting next to the oven to allow it to rise.

While she waited, she watched Kara stir in some Sauternes wine into a mixture of dried apricots and cherries, water and sugar that had been soaking for about 20 minutes.

"This needs to cook for about a half-hour," Kara noted, "and then we put it in the refrigerator to chill before we apply it to the pork."

Triela nodded and looked to see what Claes was doing. She recoiled in surprise and whispered to Kara. "Why is Claes crying?" Kara looked over and saw Claes slicing the last of five large onions. She chuckled.

"Onions sometimes make people's eyes water," she replied. Claes looked over, rubbing her eyes with a clean towel. "Can you make the sachet bag for me, please, Triela?" she asked.

Though she didn't know what a sachet bag was, she hoped Claes would give her a hint so she nodded her head.

"Put all these herbs and spices in a square of cheesecloth and then tie it up for me, please," Claes asked. She then put a stick of butter into a large frying pan to melt before starting to add the onions and sautéing them. Once that was done, she added some water and pilsner beer and brought it to a boil. Once that was done, she tossed in the sachet Triela had made plus some Maggi seasoning and a paste beef base.

"Next, we pound out some chicken breasts," Kara informed Triela. "Now, when handling raw chicken, it is very important to wash your hands, utensils and any surface with soap and hot water. Raw chicken has some nasty germs and if you are not careful, you can transfer them to other items."

Kara put out two wooden cutting boards and proceeded to open a package of four boneless, skinless chicken breasts. She wrapped each in wax paper before placing one on Triela's board. She then washed her hands and handed Triela a heavy metal frying pan.

"Now just give it a few good whacks," Kara said. "Be a bit careful of how much force you use," she added. "We're quite a bit stronger than a normal human. You want it to be about two-thirds of a centimeter thick."

Triela was a bit less aggressive than necessary for safety's sake, so it took a few extra whacks.

"I guess Rico would just use her fists," Triela joked as she took the second breast Kara put on her board and started pounding away while

Kara prepared the crabmeat, artichoke heart and Compté cheese stuffing for the Schnitzel Oscar and then piped it into four breasts.

"Done," Triela noted. "I admit that was kind of fun."

"Okay. It's time to make prepare the cordon bleus," Claes noted. She laid out the four breast fillets and sprinkled some fresh salt and pepper on each side. "Seasoning is an applied science," Claes noted. "It's generally better to have too little than too much, especially for ones like salt and pepper which can be added after cooking." She washed her hands again and removed the plastic wrap from a plate of Prosciutto di Parma and eight-month aged Emmental ("Swiss") cheese.

"You want to place one slice of cheese on each breast, followed by a slice of Parma. You then want to tightly roll it up and secure it with a toothpick. Once that is done, dip the chicken in the egg wash and roll it in the panko and place it on that backing dish."

Triela nodded and got to work. Kara brought the Chicken Schnitzel Oscar over and dipped it in the egg wash and panko, as well, putting in on a separate baking dish. When both were done, they went into the refrigerator.

"Time to start working on the cake," Kara noted.

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By six o'clock, they were ready to start preparing dinner. The Black Forest Cake was done and the oven temperature was the same as that needed to the two chicken dishes, which went in to start their cooking. Kara placed the pork loin in another oven and Claes started on the mashed potatoes. The onion soup was warm and Triela poured it into six bowls, placing a fresh slice of bread and Cambozola cheese on each. She put a tray of each into the oven with the pork to melt the cheese and then plated six salads.

"Okay, I think we're ready. Triela, you were great," Kara noted. "Thanks for your help."

"Thanks for inviting me. I had fun."

"Next time we'll see if Henrietta wants to come, as well," Kara suggested. She pulled the soups out of the oven and arranged them on another tray.

"Let's do this," Triela noted. She grabbed the salads while Kara took the soups and Claes held the door for them as they headed out to the tables.

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"Nervous?" Michele asked Hilshire as they and Patricia sat around a table laid out for a nice dinner with candles, flowers and fine china.

"I know your Kara is an accomplished chef. And Triela tells me that Claes has talent, as well," Hilshire said.

"I'm sure Triela is in good hands," Patricia noted. "And I am sure whatever she prepared will be delicious."

The girls came in and started the soup and salad service. Claes brought six bottles of Spaten Premium pilsner and noted there was plenty more in the refrigerator. Michele noted that, as a fan of French onion soup, the German version was excellent, earning him a smile from Claes. Hilshire concurred, and asked who had chosen the pilsner. Triela shyly raised her hand, and Hilshire smiled approvingly. "That's my girl," he said with pride and Triela beamed.

Kara excused herself from the table and went into the kitchen to check on the pork and chicken. She also started heating the grill for the sausages, which she'd taken out and put in boiling water to begin cooking prior to being finished on the grill. She then stuck her head out of the door and nodded, causing Claes and Triela to excuse themselves and join her in the kitchen.

"Okay, the key to grilling sausage is not turning it too much," Kara noted to Triela. "They've been mostly cooked in the water, already, so the goal now is to add the charring that gives it that extra flavor. Watch the weisswurt closest." She pointed to the white sausages. "They're going to brown quickly and you don't want them to split."

Triela nodded, focusing all her attention on the sausages as she placed them on the grill. Kara removed the pork loin and let it rest under foil while she took out the chicken dishes. Claes finalized the potatoes and completed the Hollandaise sauce for the grilled asparagus and the chicken cordon bleu.

"Is this okay, Kara?" Triela asked.

"Perfect. Hilshire will love them. Go ahead and take them off and put them under some foil."

Kara sliced half of the pork loin and put it all on a plate. She brushed it with some more of the apricot-cherry compote and put it on a cart. Claes added the vegetables and Triela put the sausages on.

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"That was wonderful," Giuseppe enthused. "I envy you, Michele," he joked. Both he and Henrietta had been walking by on their way out to dinner when they caught whiff of the meal and stopped by to investigate and were invited in.

"Indeed," Hilshire agreed. "The sausages were excellent, Triela. I am very impressed."

"Thank you," Triela said. "But Claes and Kara made it possible."

Kara's mouth was full of pork, so she could only violently shake her head in disagreement.

"Don't be shy," Claes said. "Yes, we supervised and offered advice, but you did the sausages all on your own and helped us with much of the meal."

"Yes," Kara said. "And you're going to make the berliner pfannkuchen, as well."

Hilshire's face lit up. "Berliners? I love berliners."

"What kind of filling would you like?" Triela asked her handler.

"Raspberry jam and orange marmalade are my favorites, but any type of jam is good."

"Okay. We'll bring out the Black Forest Cake first while we complete the berliners and bake the apple strudel."

"Madre de Dio, Kara," Michele exclaimed. "We won't be able to leave the table after eating all this food!"

"It was our first time making German, Michele," she replied. "We felt a variety was best so people were likely to find something they liked."

"It was all wonderful, girls," Hilshire replied. "And with so much, we were able to share with the others."

Kara tossed the strudel into the oven while Triela worked on forming the berliners, filling half with raspberry jam and half with orange marmalade and Claes heated the oil to the proper temperature. Triela cooked the berliners three at a time, and the girls sampled the first set.

"Oh that's heavenly," Kara purred as she licked the granulated sugar off her fingers. Claes nodded and Triela beamed under the praise of her sisters.

They brought out the hot strudel with vanilla ice cream and a basket of hot berliners just as Jean and Rico appeared.

"We've had dinner," Jean noted in response to Giuseppe's invitation, and everyone at the table thought they sensed a touch of melancholy in his voice as he looked over the spread.

"Then join us for some dessert and caffè," Michele invited. Rico looked at the desserts like a child at Christmas, but then Rico always looked ecstatic when she was in her handler's presence.

"Very well," Jean said. Henrietta scooted over to allow Rico to bring over a chair and Jean sat next to his brother.

"Dig in," Kara invited. "We can reheat any of the food if it has become cold."

*Authors Note: This chapter is based on the events in Chapter 11 of my story Yume no Kakeru. It is not necessary, however, to read that chapter.*

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## **Chapter Four – Fish Tuesday**

The fishes that Claes and Michele had caught in the Mediterranean arrived on the Monday evening Alitalia flight from Nice and the kitchen staff placed it in the refrigerator to keep fresh.

After his meeting with Lorenzo and the Croce brothers, Michele showered and changed into more comfortable attire. He then spent the next two hours drafting his final report for the briefing tomorrow. Afterwards, he went out to the garden and collected the necessary herbs for the dishes he would be preparing for the dinner service, which would be starting in about an hour.

“Tenente,” Michele greeted Lieutenant Ilario Papaccio, the Chef du Cuisine. While the military did not use the French “brigade de cuisine” hierarchy of chef titles, the “A-team” liked to refer to themselves by them to reflect their areas of expertise.

“Good evening, Tenente Colonello Pagani,” Ilario replied. “I understand Claes caught one of the fish you will be preparing tonight?”

“Yes, the bluefin tuna,” Michele replied.

“Such a large fish caught by our little Claes. Were you not afraid it might pull her off the boat, instead?” he joked with a wide smile. His name meant “cheerful” and his disposition certainly lived up to it.

“She actually seems to have a knack for fishing,” Michele noted.

“I’m not going to be in your way, will I?” he asked a moment later.

“We will make the space for you, Colonello. Plus I am hoping to learn a few new recipes,” Abramo Molinari stated. He held the joint “title” of Saucier / Poissonier, which meant he was in charge of sautéing and all fish dishes. “We saw the fish arrive last night while we were cleaning-up so we have decided to create some seafood dishes, as well.”

“All this fish tonight, the Catholics will think it a Friday!” Baldovino Sanci, the sous-chef, exclaimed good-naturedly.

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Michele smiled and went into the cooler to retrieve the two fish. Both were still in their plastic bags so he took them out to the counter and first cut open the swordfish. He examined the trunk to ensure it was still in good shape and proceeded to cut it into steaks around three centimeters thick. He also did a separate cut, about ten centimeters thick and a half-kilo in weight, with the bone still attached.

"What do you plan to do with that cut?" Abramo asked.

"It will become a 'prime rib of swordfish'. I will pan-sear it briefly, then roast it while basting it with butter, fresh thyme and shallots. I'll serve it with a mustard-spiked béarnaise and a plate of onion rings. I could use your help, Cannelita and Nicilo."

Cannelita Balano, the Rotisseur / Grillardin / Friturier and Nicilo Valente, the Entremetier / Garde Manger, respectively, nodded their heads. Cannelita's role was to oversee roasting, grilling and frying while Nicilo oversaw the creation of hot appetizers, soups, vegetables, pastas and starches. He also managed the pantry and the preparation of cold foods, including salads, cold appetizers, pâtés and other charcuterie items.

Michele filleted the swordfish and then he and Abramo turned the fillets into steaks, Abramo making them about 3cm thick and Michele making his about 1cm thick. Michele covered the tray holding them with plastic and set them to come to a consistent temperature all the way-through prior to putting them on the grill to insure that it cooked properly.

Next, Michele removed the tuna from the bag. He checked the temperature of the fish which showed a proper 4° C and insured that the eyes were still clear.

"And what of the tuna?" Abramo asked.

"Well the fatty belly meat is too precious to cook," Michele noted. "So I will slice it off and prepare sushi or sashimi from it. As for the rest, I will remove the loins and sear them slightly on all sides before serving them with a cauliflower purée. I think I will also cut some tuna steaks and cover them with crushed, fried black beans which I will then sear and roast to rare."

"We're here! We're here!" Kara announced, Claes following behind her. "Henrietta asked to come along, as well," Kara noted. With Claes,

Henrietta, Kara and Abramo watching, Michele showed them how to prepare a tuna for the table. He first cut along the midsection of the fish's side back to the tail and then down to the dorsal fin. He then lifted the loin section and cut it free, setting it aside for further preparation. He then did the same with the flank section. He then took each section and cut the skin off the meat. He also trimmed the dark meat from the loins and then began cutting the flank pieces into steaks and the loin sections into smaller width lengthwise segments. Again, he covered them all in plastic and placed them out to come to a common temperature throughout. As for the belly meat, that was wrapped in plastic and returned to the refrigerator.

"Okay," Michele said. "Today we will be making three swordfish dishes. Two will be roasted and one grilled. Since the rib cut is so thick, it will take the longest to cook so we shall do it first."

Michele first set the oven temperature to 200° C and then started heating a large cast-iron pan. In a small pot, he melted butter and then added fresh thyme and diced shallots. Once the pan was hot, he added olive oil and spread it around. He then briefly pan-seared the "prime rib of swordfish", basting it in the butter sauce. He then transferred the entire pan to the oven and set the timer for 10 minutes.

"This next dish I learned on TV from Mario Batali. He's an American, but he studied in Italy in the Capanne region and I find many of his recipes to be very appetizing. This is called Swordfish Involtini."

Michele pulled out another large skillet, to which he added olive oil, olives, capers, red pepper flakes, pine nuts and currants. He did a quick sauté of the ingredients and then added some basic tomato sauce and a cup of 1996 Antinori, an excellent dry white Italian wine with a crisp, pear taste that would be offered with the entrees. When the mixture came to a boil, Michele reduced the temperature to allow it to simmer for a few minutes and then set it off the heat.

Beside him, Kara was combining breadcrumbs, orange zest, parsley, olive oil and salt and pepper in a bowl, which she then mixed well. Claes had a fine sense for seasoning, so Michele had her salt and pepper the thin-cut swordfish steaks. Claes and Henrietta each then spread some of the breadcrumb mixture evenly across each steak and then rolled it, securing it with a toothpick. Michele had Kara put the rolls into the skillet with the sauce while he opened the oven and basted the swordfish rib before turning it. He then took the other

skillet and placed it in the oven, as well and re-set the timer to 10 minutes.

After seasoning the fish, Claes chopped fresh parsley, rosemary and sage and minced a garlic clove. She combined them all in a bowl with olive oil and salted and peppered to taste. She then transferred the thick steaks to a plastic bag and poured the marinade over them.

"Normally you would marinate this for about three hours, but we're a bit pressed for time," Michele noted. "It will still taste pretty good," he assured.

The oven timer went off and Michele pulled out the rib and basted it again with the sauce. He also stirred the sauce the rolled steaks were in. He removed both from the oven and placed them on insulating discs, tenting them with aluminum foil.

Henrietta, under Kara's watchful eye, was just finishing reducing three cups of port wine to one cup in volume. Claes, meanwhile, removed cauliflower florets from where they had been simmering in a water and butter mixture. She placed them in a blender and had Henrietta purée them to the consistency of mashed potatoes.

Michele had placed a few cups of black beans into a fine-mesh fry basket and sank them into oil, frying them crisp in just moments. He drained them on paper towels and placed them on a cutting-board, chopping them up. He then started heating another pan.

When the wine reduction was ready, Kara took the tuna loins and seared each side just long enough to warm the flesh to the core. She took them off the heat and let them rest for a few minutes before cutting them into thin pieces. Claes took the purée and placed it in the center of two large plates and then added the seared tuna on top of it.

"Plate the swordfish dishes, please, and then take them out with the tuna," Michele stated. He took the tuna steaks and covered them in a mustard sauce. He then rolled them in the chopped black beans and seared them in the pan, followed by putting it in the oven to warm through. After that, he removed the marinating swordfish steaks and grilled them for a few minutes on each side. When that was done, he plated it and removed the tuna from the oven and sliced it extremely thin.

To the swordfish and tuna dishes, the chefs added grilled shrimp over

polenta and a shrimp and scallop provencal. The hot appetizers included stuffed calamari and pancetta and oyster crostini. Ghita Spinelli, Pâtissier extraordinaire, did her usual tiramisu and added mostacciaoli cookies and peach tarts for dessert.

"I understand you helped out?" Giuseppe noted to Henrietta. Henrietta nodded, pointing out the port wine reduction, the cauliflower purée and the rolled swordfish. Guise tried each and complimented Henrietta, who beamed like a searchlight under his praise.

"Oh that tuna is delightful," Priscilla noted as she tried the seared loin.

"Enjoy it while you can," Michele noted. "The stocks of wild bluefin tuna in the Med are almost wiped out and what is pulled up goes to Japan because they'll pay anything to get it."

"I'm surprised you did not turn any into sushi," Marco noted.

"I saved the belly, *toro*, for that. It needs a day or so to firm up properly, so I am planning to make it a snack for the UEFA Champions League final tomorrow," Michele noted.

"I thought you were an F.C. Barcelona, man?" Hilshire asked.

"Yes, and I was crushed when they didn't advance. But Milan is my home town and even if it was not, I cannot very well support the English, can I?"

All at the table vigorously nodded their heads in agreement.

"Well Roma hasn't had a winning season since 2001, anyway," Giorgio noted. "Though if I can get the girls to form a team, we could take the World Cup and..." He stopped, wilting under the combined glares of the handlers.

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**Author's Note** – *Despite the title, this is a one-shot story, hence it's inclusion in the CFC series. The title has just been stuck in my head for a few days and Elenora Gabriella knows about the cyborg program, is employed in Special Operations, and knows how to cook. So she seemed to be a logical choice to be in the cafeteria on a Saturday night.*

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## **Chapter Five – The Courtship of Kara's Handler**

The Social Welfare Agency cafeteria prepared three meals a day except for Saturdays, when they only offered breakfast and lunch. Therefore, what few staff members remained over the weekend either ate off-site or they used the kitchen to prepare their own dinners on that day.

Michele Pagani had decided to do the latter. His cyborg, Kara, was practicing at her dojo and would be having dinner with her friends after. He didn't feel like going out now and he would not be picking her up until 22:00, which meant it would be too late for much of anything but convenience food, which he did not desire. He therefore decided to cook his own dinner and he wandered over to the kitchen around 20:00.

As he expected, he was alone when he arrived. While most staff could cook, most chose not to and ate off-site. This worked for Michele. While a gregariously social person by nature, when it came time to cooking he tended to prefer to do so alone unless he was instructing.

Once he had decided to prepare his dinner, he now needed to decide what dinner to prepare. For that, he went into the larder and rooted around. He decided on Risotto alla Milanese. The usual dish served with it would be Ossobuco alla Milanese, so he headed for the meat locker.

As he exited the pantry with the ingredients for the risotto, a woman who appeared to be in her mid-twenties entered the larder. As both were trained professionals, their sudden appearance did not result in a fright for either.

"I'm sorry, I thought I was alone," the woman said.

"As did I," Michele replied. "Decided to cook dinner yourself, as well?"

"Yes," she said. She put out her hand. "Elenora Gabrielli."

"Michele Pagani," he replied, shaking her hand.

"So, what are you planning to make?" she asked, making the initial effort to break the ice.

"I was thinking of some home cooking – risotto and ossobuco alla Milanese," Michele replied. "And you?"

"I was thinking a seafood dish," Elenora replied. "I was going to see if we had any tuna steaks for tonno con pomodoro."

"That actually sounds a better as a Secondo than ossobuco," Michele noted.

"Are you up for a collaboration?" Elenora asked and Michele accepted. They headed for the seafood section and found the tuna steaks. Michele also found some fresh lobster claws, crab legs, shrimp and muscles, which he put into his basket.

"I'll do a Risotto alla Chioggiotta, instead, since it is also seafood-based and it will work better as a Primo," he noted.

The risotto was the more intensive dish to prepare, so they started with it. Elenora brought a large pot of water to the boil and dropped in the lobster claws and crab legs along with carrots, onion and a bay leaf. They let that cook for two minutes and then plunged it into an ice bath for another minute to arrest the cooking process before setting it aside.

Michele heated olive oil, more onion and tomato paste and then added in arborio rice, which he cooked until it became opaque. He then added white wine and the water the lobster and crab had been cooked in until the rice was covered. He increased the heat and continued to add water from the pot as necessary to keep the rice covered. After about ten minutes, he added the muscles. Elenora had removed the lobster and the crab from the shells and chopped the meat into roughly 3cm cubes that Michele added with the rock shrimp. At that point, he kept watch over the rice as it cooked.

For her dish, Elenora sautéed sliced onions in olive oil and then added crushed tomatoes, cooking the mixture until somewhat thickened. In another frying pan, she placed the two tuna steaks to fry after first

dusting them with flour and seasoning them with salt and pepper. By the time her tuna was done, so was the risotto and they transferred them to plates and cleaned up.

Elenora put the two plates on a tray and took them out into the cafeteria while Michele headed for the wine cellar. He'd made a deal with the sommelier that if he could have one rack for his own stuff, he'd be sure to slip him a bottle now and then as well as invite him to all of Michele's wine tastings.

Elenora settled for a table by the windows, even though most of the grounds were now cloaked in darkness. A few people were scattered about, eating microwaved leftovers or cold sandwiches.

Michele arrived with a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc from a Napa Valley winery known for them. He poured two glasses and they toasted each other before eating.

"That is the best risotto of any type I have ever had," Elenora said after her first bite. "Even without the cheese, the texture is amazing. When you make your Risotto alla Milanese, please invite me."

"With a compliment like that, how could I refuse? This tuna is also very good," he added.

"It's not bad, but fresher tuna would have helped," she observed. "The chefs a few weeks back did a swordfish Involtini that was literally to die for. The fish was so fresh it must have been caught that morning."

"It was about two days old," Michele replied.

"Do you handle the provisioning as well?" Elenora said with a laugh.

"I caught it, actually, off St. Tropez; that and a bluefin tuna. I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"You cooked that meal?"

"I had help. Claes caught the tuna so she helped me prepare it."

"Claes? You mean Claes the cyborg from Section 2?" Elenora asked. As his mouth was full of risotto, Michele nodded his head.

"So you are Claes new handler?"

"No," Michele said after swallowing. "I am a new handler, but not for Claes. My cyborg is named Kara Michelle."

"Kara...Kara...The Japanese one? Part of the second series?" Elenora asked.

"That's correct. You seem familiar with our girls," Michele noted.

"I am with Section One and my partner and I investigated the...murders...of Elsa de Sica and her handler," she replied. "We learned a great deal about the program and the girls themselves. It was a hell of a way to spend the week between Christmas and New Years."

"I see. While I handled Elsa's paperwork and adoption to Lauro, their death was before my assignment to Section 2, so I didn't know them personally," he added.

"How long have you been a handler?"

"Since March."

"And do you like it?" she asked.

"I'm not sure a rational person could ever *like* overseeing a child turned into a killer," Michele said. "I treat it as a duty."

"It sounds like a stressful job, mentoring young children who are trained to be assassins. If you don't mind me asking, where were you recruited?" Elenora asked.

"I came from Public Safety. I've been part of the program, in an advisory role, since the very beginning."

"And you only recently chose to be a handler? What changed your mind?"

"Kara," Michele noted, but his tone made it clear he wasn't interested in going over the why of she and he becoming a *fratello*.

"I've been told the girls are conditioned to love their handlers," Elenora said.

"It's more a sense of making them intensely loyal, but being young girls, they transmute those feelings into love since they don't know any better. It was hoped that changing the conditioning for the Series 2 models would prevent it, but since they're teenagers, we handlers still need to wield a careful hand."

"I admit I find them somewhat frightening," Elenora said, recalling the incidents with Henrietta on Sicily. "They're so young, but they are invested with so much power and responsibility." Like her partner, she believed Elsa de Sica murdered her handler and then killed herself, as Henrietta had role-played, though they'd both kept those beliefs to themselves since they knew it would bring them nothing but grief if they had reported that back to Draghi.

"So you enjoy cooking?" she asked, changing the subject to something less morbid.

"Yes," Michele said, also eager to speak of something else. "I've been cooking since I was a young boy. My military service and employment prior to joining the Agency had me traveling all over the world, so I picked up a passion for cuisines beyond Italian."

"Ah. I have a few recipes that I keep in my notebook, but mostly of Ligurian seafood dishes," Elenora noted.

"Are you from Genoa?"

"Yes. My father came from Savona and my mother from a small village on the coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea. She taught me to cook and I keep the most special recipes. Including this one, in my Moleskin notebook."

They chatted some more over their meal and then enjoyed some panna cotta in blackberry sauce that had been left over from the lunch service.

At 21:30, as they were enjoying an espresso, Michele's watch alarm went off.

"Damn. I'm sorry. I need to go pick up Kara from her training," he said, draining the rest of his espresso.

"I should be getting home, myself," she replied. "I stayed late to file my report and paperwork. Thank you, Michele. That risotto was

excellent, though I am going to hold you to that promise to let me try your Risotto alla Milanese.”

“I will do so,” Michele agreed.

“Then it’s a date,” Elenora said as she rose and left the cafeteria.

## Chapter Six – From a Russian with Love

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"I am so sick of Italian food!" Petrushka exclaimed as she flopped back on Kara's bed after dinner. It was Wednesday, and the chefs had really experimented on the bleeding edge with their fusion cuisine – Italian-Vietnamese.

In the next bed over, Gattonero lowered the fashion magazine she'd been reading. "What's wrong with Italian food?"

"Nothing, if you're Italian. I'm Russian. I'd like to eat something from my homeland once in a while. You understand, don't you Kara?" Petrushka called out.

"Yes," Kara admitted from her computer desk where she was watching the latest DVD-R of "Top Gear" sent to her by a friend of Michele's in the United Kingdom. "Being half-French and half-Japanese, I do pine for that type of cuisine, which is why Michele, Claes and I do our special monthly meals."

"You and Claes helped Triela make that special German dinner for Hillshire, didn't you?" Petra asked.

Kara nodded her head.

"I'd like to do something nice for Alessandro," Petrushka said.

Gattonero was about to open her mouth to make a pithy comment, but a stern look from Kara stopped her.

"He's Italian," Kara noted. "Has he ever eaten Russian?"

"I don't know. He's never said anything about it and he's never asked me about Russian cuisine."

"The only Eastern European food name I know is borscht, and even then only as a joke line in one of those American 'Loony Tunes' cartoons I watch with Michele," Kara admitted.

"I would very much like to make him some пирожок, пельмени and вареники," Petrushka remarked.

"What?" Gattoneo asked, not understanding the Russian words. Kara was also at a loss, as Russian was not a language she was familiar with.

"I do not know the Italian words for it," Petrushka said. "May I borrow your computer for a moment?" she asked Kara, who nodded. She called up Wikipedia and typed in the words on the Russian page, then called up the corresponding English page since those were usually the most complete and Kara was fluent in the language.

"Pirozhki, pelmeni and vareniki," Kara said in English as she looked at the pages. She saw that they had links to recipes.

"It looks pretty easy," she said, returning to Italian. "One is baked and the other two are boiled."

"So you'll do it?" Petrushka asked.

Kara nodded her head. "I'm always up for a new style of cuisine, but you're going to have to help me prepare it."

"I can't cook," Petrushka replied.

"Neither could Triela, but she still helped make some of the food for Hillshire. You did say you wanted to do something nice for your handler."

"Okay," Petrushka said. "What do I need to do?"

"You need to pick a Saturday we both have off so we can make the meal. You then need to make sure that Alessandro doesn't have any plans so he actually comes."

"Can do," Petrushka said.

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Kara discovered that the pelmeni and vareniki could be prepared ahead of time and then frozen. Since the preparation was time-consuming, she and Petrushka spent part of one of their days off preparing a huge batch of each that they could then consume over a few months' time. The dough and fillings were different for each, so they started with one and then did the second.

"This is really hard work," Petrushka noted.

“The things we do for love,” Kara replied under her breath.

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When the Saturday they had agreed to have the meal on, Kara and Petrushka arrived between the breakfast and lunch services and staked out a corner of the kitchen. Since most of the compound staff did not work over the weekend, a reduced meal service was offered and they didn't need as many cooks.

Kara and Petrushka first prepared the dough for the pirozhki and set it aside to rise. Next was preparing the batter for the blintzes. Once that was prepared, they put it in the refrigerator to rest and started working on the golubtsi, which was a mixture of ground beef and rice wrapped in cabbage leaves, covered with tomato paste and then baked. Once they had completed the preparation, Kara wrapped it in plastic and put it in the refrigerator.

They returned to the kitchen around 15:00 after the staff had left for the day. While Petrushka rolled out the pirozhki dough, Kara started preparing three fillings: ground beef and cheese; potato, cheese and onion; and cabbage and onion. They had decided to divide the pirozhki with 50% beef and cheese, 35% potato, cheese and onion and 15% cabbage and onion. Each type had its own unique symbol made from dough on the top to identify them. Once they'd been filled, they laid them aside to rest.

Since it would take the longest to cook, they put the golubtsi into the oven. The Borscht à la Nureyev, named after the famous Russian ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev, was simmering away on the stove. They removed two large loaves of Russian rye bread that would be served with the borscht and then reduced the heat and loaded in the pirozhki to begin browning. They would turn down the heat again once that had occurred to let them finishing baking. Once they were done, Kara removed them and laid out to rest.

Kara started a large pot of water boiling and put a bag of pelmeni in, telling Petrushka to occasionally stir the pot and let her know when the majority had floated to the top, which indicated they were cooked. Vareniki could also be boiled, but some recipes said that frying them in butter was tastier so that is how Kara decided to prepare them using a large pan. The golubtsi came out of the oven and Kara covered it in foil to allow it to rest, as well.

"How we doing?" Michele asked.

"Almost there. Are the natives getting restless?" Kara quipped.

"Intrigued more than anything," Michele replied. Invitations had been extended to Section 2 staff and, not surprisingly, Olga had immediately responded with an affirmative and had even given Kara her family recipe for golubtsi, which is why Kara had added it to the menu. A number of the handlers and their cyborgs were out on assignment, but Bernardo and Beatrice had agreed to come, as did Gatonero and Yarrow and Marco and Angelica. With Olga and Angelica present, that compelled Patricia to drive in from her apartment. Even Giorgio had confirmed he would come, though he might be late since he was taking in an afternoon A.S. Roma football game.

Petrushka reported that most of the pelmeni were now floating so Kara took it off the heat and handed her a large bowl and a skimmer, instructing her to cover them with plenty of broth. They transferred the borscht to a warmer that would keep it hot. Michele moved the golubtsi from the baking dish to a large plate and then did the same with the pirozhki. Then everything was loaded onto carts and they wheeled them down to the handler's private dining room, where everyone had gathered.

"Ah, this brings back fond memories of the Motherland," Olga replied as she ate.

"Yes, it does," Michele agreed.

"You have been to Russia?" she asked him.

"Moscow and St. Petersburg," Michele replied. "For a mix of business and pleasure. I hope to take Kara to see both cities someday."

"You will like St. Petersburg, I think," Olga said to Kara. "It will remind you of Paris in many ways."

"This is very good, girls," Bernardo said. "Isn't it, Bicé?"

"Yes, Bernardo," she replied in her perfect monotone, her face remaining expressionless except for the chewing motion of her jaw.

"Quality of this sort I expect from Kara," Alessandro stated, earning him a polite smile in return. "But I am very impressed with your

efforts, Petrushka. I hope you will make this again for me some time," he added.

"Uh oh, she's smiling dumbly again," Gattonero whispered to Kara as they both looked at Petrushka.

**Author's Note:** This installment is in homage to the ED themes for the anime Toradora! Since the timeline for my stories is 2005-2006, this chapter should be considered as being out of context.

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## Chapter Seven – Salty Orange Vanilla

It was a pleasant Saturday mid-afternoon at the Social Welfare Agency compound outside Rome as Giuse and Henrietta walked along under the portico of the main building. They saw a girl half-skipping and half-dancing down the path towards them with a cloth shopping bag in her left hand.

As she approached, they identified her as Kara. They could see the two thin white wires dropping from each ear, connecting to a thicker one that disappeared into a small leather holster on her belt and both concluded she was listening to her iPod Nano. They could also hear her singing out loud.

“ORENJI iro ni hayaku naritai kajitsu KIMI no hikari wo abite...risou ya yume wa fukuramu bakari kidzuite yo nee...ORENJI kyou mo tabete mita kedo mata suppakute naita...watashi mitai de nokosenai kara zenbu tabeta...suki da yo...nakeru yo...suki da yo...suki da yo...”

As she danced past the two with a small pirouette, she pointed her finger at Giuse, smiled and winked as she said “suki da yo...suki da yo...”.

“Giuse?” Henrietta asked. “What does ‘suki da yo’ mean?”

Giuse didn’t have a strong command of Japanese by any means, but he did know “suki” meant liked or loved and “da yo” kind of sounded like “you” so he thought she might have said “I love you”. He assumed that Kara was using the lyrics of whatever song she was listening to as a joke, but he was also afraid that Henrietta might not find it funny.

“Uh, she said she liked my tie,” he replied.

“Ah,” Henrietta said. “Giuse?” she asked a few moments later.

“Yes, Henrietta?”

“You’re not wearing a tie.”

---

Kara sashayed into the kitchen, putting the bag of groceries on the counter, still singing in time with the song playing over her headphones.

“ORENJI iro wa ano hi mita yuuyake wo omoidasasete kureru...futatsu no kage ga te wo tsunaideru mitai data...ORENJI itsuka amaku naru kana sore to mo shibonjau no?”

She looked up to see Claes and Triela looking at her and she stopped singing, reaching down to hit the Pause button and popping one of the earpieces out.

“Ciao!” she sang out.

“Ciao,” Claes replied in a neutral voice.

“What do you have in the bag?” Triela asked.

“Items to bake an orange cheesecake tart,” Kara replied. “It’s Michele’s birthday so I want to make him something special for dessert.”

“You’re not making him a full meal?” Triela asked, surprised.

Kara shook her head. “We have an agreement that we eat out on birthdays so we’re going to La Pergola for dinner and drinks. This is going to be my present for him when we get back. What brings you two here?”

“Uhm...” Triela said, her cheeks turning a distinct shade of red.

Claes rolled her eyes. “She wants to make a special dessert for Hillshire, as well. Except it’s not his birthday.”

“Claes!” Triela said, her face going even more crimson. She turned to Kara. “What were you singing just now?” she asked.

“It’s the end theme to an anime I like,” Kara said.

“About oranges?”

“In a way. It’s a girl singing about a boy she likes and she uses the metaphor of an orange.”

Triela's cheeks quickly returned to normal and a smile broke out on her face.

"A girl singing about a boy she likes, eh?" she said.

Kara joined Claes in rolling her eyes.

"Anyway, I need to start preparing my tort," Kara said and started arranging the ingredients. She then headed for the pantry to collect some staples like flour, sugar and other items.

When she returned, she placed the flour, icing sugar and butter into a food processor and blended it to the consistency of clumps. She then added two egg yolks and a bit of ice cold water and continued to blend until they formed dough, which she then took out and kneaded until smooth. She then rolled it out between two sheets of parchment paper and placed the flattened disc into the refrigerator to chill for a few minutes.

"Kara?" Claes called out. "Do you have a minute?"

Kara went over.

"Does this look about the right consistency to you?" she asked, pointing to a bowl with butter and sugar whipped together.

"Yup. What are you making?"

"Marmorkuchen," Triela answered, knowing that Kara and Claes were both fluent in German.

"Marble cake...Not sure I have ever had it," Kara admitted.

"Save me a piece of your tort and I will do the same," Triela said.

"It's a deal," Kara replied and returned to her own dessert.

She removed the pastry from the refrigerator and placed it in a large flan tin which she then placed in the oven.

"How hot is that oven?" Claes called out.

"200," Kara noted.

"Hmm...This recipe calls for 180. I suppose I could adjust the cooking time."

"No worries. I need 180 for the filling. The crust will be done in 15 minutes."

"Perfect," Claes replied.

Kara cleaned the food processor and put back in her earphone. She started singing out loud again as she placed fresh cream cheese, sugar, whole eggs and just yolks, orange rind and juice, and vanilla extract into it, blending it smooth.

"BANIRA SORUTO de; BANIRA SORUTO de; BANIRA SORUTO de;  
Burning Love...AMAI dake nara; SORUTO kakemashou...dare yori mo  
motto motto watashi wo;shitte hoshii kara sarakedashitai;demo  
dekinai no keiken Nothing; MODOKASHI sugiru"

She removed the crust from the oven and lowered the temperature. She then poured the mixture into the baked crust, still singing.

"SHIRO to iwaretara; KURO datte icchau; sunao ni narenai;  
AMANOJAKU...SUKI to iwaretara; DAIKIRAI date; ureshii no ni NANI  
itte n darou?"

She popped out one of the earplugs again and walked over to watch Triela add cocoa mix into the remaining batter before pouring the batter into the baking tin on top of the existing. She then carried it over to the oven while Kara went and got her torte.

"How long does it need to bake?" Kara asked.

"50-70 minutes, but at 20 we need to cut line through the middle," Claes replied.

"Perfect. My torte will be done by then minutes so I can take it out and you can cut your cake," Kara replied, setting the timer for 20 minutes. She started to cut an orange into thin slices and make an orange rind and sugar glaze to pour over the cake when it came out of the oven.

At 20 minutes, she checked the torte and it looked ready, so she removed it. Claes took out the marble cake and made the incision before putting it back in.

They chatted idly while the marble cake cooked and the tort cooled to the point Kara could place the orange slices on top and then cover it with the syrup. She then wrapped it in plastic and placed it in a cardboard box, which she tied with a ribbon.

"I need to get dressed for dinner and put this in Michele's refrigerator for after dinner. I'll save a piece for both of you as well as Henrietta and Rico and we have it with tea tomorrow," Kara noted. She replaced the earphone and headed out the door, the start of a song on her lips.

**Author's Note:** Thanks to Iron Chef for these recipes.

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## Chapter Eight – It's a (Valen)fine's Day

"Perfect timing, Kara," Triela noted as Kara walked by the open door to the room she shared with Claes. "Henrietta scored and we're sharing in the booty."

Kara stopped and peeked her head inside to see three progressively larger heart-shaped boxes absolutely stuffed with chocolates of all kinds on the table. While Italy did not really celebrate Valentine's Day, especially after the feast day for Saint Valentine was removed from the Roman Catholic calendar of saints following Vatican II, Jose did not want to risk the wrath of his cyborg should he fail to pay her proper tribute.

"It's Godiva," Triela added. "I can't fault Jose for his tastes. Hilshire got me another bear," she noted, pointing to the latest addition to her menagerie.

A gourmet chocoholic herself, Kara entered the room and selected a handful of dark chocolate truffles.

"Thank you, Henrietta," she said.

Henrietta merely nodded, the beatific smile on her face reflecting the blissful state having received a Valentines gift from Jose put her in. Triela, Rico and Claes took advantage of this, piling pieces up before them.

"What's that in your hand?" Claes asked.

"Recipes. I need to make something for Michele for Valentines Day," Kara noted.

"Uh, it's the guy's job to get the *girl* the presents," Triela noted.

"Not in Japan," Kara replied. "The girls give the boys they like chocolate."

"That's a jip," Triela opinioned.

Kara smiled. "We get our cut a month later on White Day, when all the men we gave chocolate to are obliged to return the favor. And best of all, we're allowed to give guys we don't like cheap chocolate, but they are obligated to give us the good stuff, so we make out okay in the end."

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Valentine's Day fell on a Tuesday, which meant Kara needed to work around the kitchen staff in between the meal services. Even though she'd been invited to use the facilities, Kara did her best to stay out of the way.

Sous Chef Baldovino Sanci watched Kara start preparing her fresh pasta in the traditional Italian manner, piling wheat flour into a mound, then making a crater in the center into which she added eggs. However, when she then added melted butter, granulated sugar and cocoa powder to the mixture before she started incorporating it all with a fork, he wondered what she was up to.

Kara kneaded the pasta until smooth and then set it aside to rest. She then chopped some bananas into small cubes that she mixed with sugar and cinnamon and then popped into the oven to grill slightly, before disappearing into the Cold Room, returning with a small block of Gorgonzola cheese. She removed the warm banana mixture from the grill and placed it in a steel bowl to cool.

By now, the pasta was ready to be worked and Kara lightly dusted a board with flour and proceeded to roll it out in a long and wide sheet. She used a heart-shaped ring mold to lightly impress outlines along the bottom half of the sheet. She spooned some of the banana mixture into each of the outlines, topping them with some hand-crumbled Gorgonzola. Kara then flipped over the other half of the pasta sheet to cover the mixture, which now became the pasta filling. She used the mold to cut out heart-shaped cocoa ravioli, which she placed on a plate.

Next, Kara put on another pan where she melted butter along with a sliced-open vanilla bean. She cut eight thick slices from a banana, dumping them into the butter and vanilla and started to sauté them together, adding some fine brandy to flambé them. She pulled them off the heat and retrieved a small baking sheet with a non-stick pad and placed eight ring molds on it. Pastry Chef Ghita Spinelli had melted massive bowls of dark and milk chocolate for her own desserts and welcomed Kara to pilfer what she needed, so she ladled dark

chocolate into a bowl and returned it to her station. In another bowl she beat together eggs and sugar, adding flour to the mixture before folding in the warm chocolate. She spooned the mixture into a pastry bag and piped each mold just under halfway full. She then placed a sautéed banana slice in the middle and covered the top with more of the batter and then placed the sheet in the Cold Room to chill.

Kara grabbed another baking sheet along with a silicone non-stick baking pad. She started melting sugar in a saucepan and dribbled droplets of various food coloring on the baking pad. She then poured the liquid sugar over the droplets, which turned into streaks as the molten sugar flowed over them and creating an effect similar to stained glass. She set it aside to allow it to cool.

At that point, Kara cleaned up her station and materials and stepped aside for a few minutes to drink a bottle of non-carbonated water.

"Chocolate lava cake. Always a hit with the guys," Ghita approved as she prepared to frost a chocolate heart-shaped cake.

"I saw it on the 1999 Valentine's Day Special on *Iron Chef*," Kara replied. "The theme was banana so they used banana-vanilla ice cream, but I hope Michele finds just plain vanilla acceptable."

"I'm sure it will be fine," Ghita encouraged. "Why so many, though?"

"Two are for me, and the other six are for you and the staff as a thank you for letting me work here."

"That's very kind of you, Kara," Ghita replied. "I'm sure the boys will be excited to try it."

Kara finished her water and started work on her ravioli. She heated oil in a deep pan and when it reached the proper temperature, she dropped the ravioli in, allowing them to crisp nicely before transferring them to stacked paper towels to blot the oil.

"I hope they taste better than they look," Kara said, noting the rather unappetizing look as t

"You will be serving them with a sauce?" Abramo Molinari asked. His own skills as a saucier were legendary amongst the Agency's diners.

"Yes. I know it contains pureed banana, star anise, and banana liquor, but I am not sure of the ratios," Kara replied.

"Start light with the anise and liquor, then taste it constantly as you add more."

Kara nodded and started preparation of the sauce. Abramo offered some advice on a few more liquors to add and signed off on the final product, which Kara poured into a large, shallow bowl which she then placed four of the ravioli on with their points together, like the petals of a flower.

Next, she removed two of the ring molds from the Cool Room and placed them in an oven just long enough to cook the outer shell, while leaving the core a warm liquid. She set down two plates that looked like Artist Pallets and broke the pan of colored sugar into shards that she arranged haphazardly on the plates. She removed the ring molds from the oven and transferred them to the plate before removing the molds, careful not to break the cake shell. She then added a thick scoop of vanilla ice cream, moving it away from the cake when the ambient heat started to melt it.

"It looks delightful," Ilario noted. "I am sure Michele will love it."

"Thank you again," Kara said. She placed the two plates on a serving tray and then took them to the outside dining terrace where she'd set up a table with a candle and some flowers. Michele was already present, some nice white wine chilling on ice.

By now, Kara had enough confidence in her cooking skills to feel that the meals would be good, though she still felt a little uncomfortable about the look of the ravioli dish.

"Happy Valentine's Day," she said as she reached the table. She put down the tray and removed the two bowls with the ravioli, placing one before Michele. She didn't miss the look of surprise on his face, but he quickly recovered and poured the wine. He cut into the ravioli and placed it in his mouth.

"Quite good," he decreed after a few contemplative chews. "The Gorgonzola and banana mixture complement each other and the hint of cocoa in the pasta is light enough to not overpower the dish."

Kara's face broke out in a wide smile and she attacked her own ravioli, pretty much agreeing with her handler's assessment. When they finished, she transferred the bowls back to the tray and removed the metal covers from the cakes. The ice cream scoops were verging on thick puddles, but this meant the cakes were still nice and warm and the chocolate core oozed out when they were broken open. They spooned the ice cream over the cake and enjoyed it with espresso, which Kara grabbed from the machine inside the cafeteria.

"Not the most healthy of dishes, but quite enjoyable," Michele noted when they finished. While Kara took the plates and tray back to the kitchen, Michele broke down the table setting, placing it in a large canvas bag. Kara returned with the cleaned plates, which she placed in the bag.

"Feel like a sunset walk to work off the meal?" Michele asked. In reply, Kara linked her arm in his and they headed for the nature path that wound around the compound.

**Author's Note:** Thanks to Iron Chef for these recipes.

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## Chapter Nine – Surf and Turf

Kara followed Michele into the main kitchen area at the SWA compound. While she and her handler had paid many visits to the cafeteria to consume a meal, this was the first time they would be creating one, Michele's excuse being that it was to celebrate their "three month anniversary" as a *fratello*.

"Good evening, Ilario," Michele noted to the head chef.

"Good evening, Michele," Ilario Papaccio replied, his usual cheerful demeanor present. Around him, his staff performed the final clean up for Saturday with vigor, looking forward to having the rest of the day off as they only served breakfast and lunch on Saturdays.

Because there was no formal meal service provided on Saturday evenings, most staff – including *fratelli* – ate out, but the kitchens were left open for people to use with prior clearance from the cooks. Kara marveled at the size and complexity of the facility, designed to prepare meals for scores of people at a time.

"And what's for dinner tonight?" Cannelita Balano asked as she wiped down the grills she oversaw.

"Surf & Turf' – Mishima Beef and King Crab," Michele replied, holding up a wicker basket.

"I've heard of Kobe Beef, but not Mishima," Sous Chef Baldovino Sancì noted.

"It's raised on an island in the Sea of Japan with the same name. It's genetically unique, having not been cross-bred with European breeds like the Kobe," Michele replied.

"Well I'd love to stay and try some, but my wife would skin me alive," Ilario chuckled. The staff said their goodbyes and headed home.

Michele removed a number of packages wrapped in white butcher paper and placed them on the counter. Kara started unwrapping them, revealing some massive crab legs and some well-marbled sirloins.

Her handler had recently introduced her to the Japanese cooking show *Iron Chef*, of which he was a huge fan. That morning he'd shown her Episodes 227 and 260, which featured Mishima Beef and King Crab as their respective "theme ingredients", and they were going to attempt to recreate a few of those dishes.

From the quality of the restaurants she'd visited with him, Kara knew her handler was a gourmet in the classical sense as defined in the five stages of Gastronomic hierarchy. Now she was learning he did not enjoy just eating food, but also preparing it. While not formally trained in the Culinary Arts, she learned he had taken courses at culinary schools including the Scuola di Arte Culinaria Cordon Bleu in Florence and Rome. As for herself, Kara knew how to cook thanks to her mother, but her skills and talents were not to the level of her handler.

Michele handed a sirloin to Kara and she started to cube it. Under Michele's direction, she placed it in a bowl and rubbed it with cocoa powder and a split vanilla bean. She then started to melt granulated sugar in a large pot and when Michele judged it ready, Kara placed the beef and bean into it to allow it to braise.

Kara then shifted her attention to tomatoes blanching in boiled water while Michele fed strips of sirloin into a meat grinder, mixing them with onions, anchovies, capers, Tabasco sauce, egg yolks, scallions and pepper in a large bowl. Kara removed the tomatoes from the water, allowed them to cool, and then peeled the skins and cored them. Once complete with those tasks, she then stuffed the insides with the tar-tar mixture, followed by dipping a thin slice of meat into the water to parboil it before placing it atop the mixture, capping it all off with a spoonful of caviar.

Michele took a large sirloin "brick" and seared it in a pan with olive oil, soy sauce and *awamori* – a distilled rice spirit indigenous to Okinawa the friend who shipped him the beef had included at his request. After searing it, he placed the pan in an oven to begin roasting. He then took large shavings of Japanese wood and covered the inside with a light coating of *shinshu miso* paste. He removed the beef from the oven, wrapped it in the sheets, and then placed it back in the oven to finish cooking and allow the wood to supply a smoked flavor, adding some stalks of green and white asparagus and sliced potatoes.

Kara pureed broad beans, milk and water in a blender. When done she removed small coffee cups filed with minced onions in consume gelatin that had been chilled to allow set and ladled the puree on top.

Michele used a sharp knife to cut a set of crab legs into roughly equal lengths. He then cut them lengthwise at the top and stuffed them with laurel leaves and thyme before placing them over charcoal. While those cooked, he then pulled the meat mostly from another set of legs, dusting it with crabmeat liquid he'd boiled and dried until it turned into crystals. He dropped the coated legs into a wok filled with extremely hot oil, the crab cooking in a very short time.

He removed the wood-wrapped sirloin from the oven and unwrapped the meat, carving off slices, which he arrayed on one end of two long, ovoid dishes. To this he added the asparagus and potatoes. He then added the two crab dishes on the other end, with the coffee cup in the middle.

By now the caramelized sirloin was complete and Michele placed a roasted fig in the middle of a second plate, arranging cubes of the meat around it.

Michele removed linens and cutlery from the basket, using it to set a two-place arrangement on a small table in the corner. Kara took a seat and then he brought over the plates with food, followed by two wine glasses and a bottle of Château Cheval Blanc 2000.

Michele poured two glasses and they clinked them together.

"Happy anniversary," they said to each other, then started their meal.

**Author's Note:** Thanks to Giada De Laurentiis and her show *Giada at Home* for these recipes.

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## **Chapter Ten – Breakfast for Dinner**

Saturdays were supposed to be “rest days” for the cyborgs, but for Kara, Gattonero and Petrushka, they had instead spent the morning at the Carabinieri training range in Frosinone improving their skills for a mission scheduled for the following week. They’d returned late in the afternoon dirty, sweaty...and ravenous.

As the compound didn’t offer a dinner service on Saturday, the cyborgs usually ate off-compound, but after long and relaxing hot showers, none of the girls wanted to get dressed-up and head to a crowded ristorante or trattoria. Instead, Kara suggested that they see what was available in the kitchen and just make something they could eat and then head to bed. They dressed casually and headed for the kitchen.

“This may sound crazy, but since we didn’t really have a proper breakfast, that kind of sounds good for dinner,” Gattonero noted as she pawed through the Cold Room.

“That sounds good,” Petrushka added.

“Sure,” Kara said. “Breakfast is simple and I’m not in the mood for something with a long or involved prep time.”

Kara stepped into the cold locker with a plastic basket to which she added one dozen eggs, chicken sausage, pancetta, Gruyere cheese, butter and milk. In the vegetable section, Petrushka selected a small onion and a red bell pepper per Kara’s instructions. Gattonero found and secured a box of Belgian waffle mix and powdered sugar in the dry goods area.

The three assembled in the kitchen’s main prep area.

“I’m thinking a baked Gruyere and sausage omelet,” Kara suggested.

“And I want to do waffles!” Gattonero noted, proudly placing the box of mix on the counter.

"Waffles?" Kara said. Waffles, while not unknown to Italian cuisine, were uncommon. She'd encountered them first in Belgium during the Grand Prix and admitted they were very tasty.

"Okay, waffles as well," Kara agreed. "Maybe with pancetta and cinnamon?"

Gattonero nodded her head in agreement.

"Can you crack the eggs, please?" Kara asked Gattonero. "I need eight in one bowl, and four in the other." She turned to Petrushka. "Can you remove the sausages from their casing?"

Petrushka nodded and went to get a knife and cutting board.

From the spice rack, Kara removed cinnamon, vanilla extract, sea salt and pepper. While Gattonero started cracking, Kara placed a skillet over medium heat and started chopping the onions. She added a bit of olive oil to the skillet, followed by the chopped onions and the sausage. Petrushka started crumbling the sausage with a wooden spoon as she browned the entire mixture.

Kara poured some milk into the eggs and started to briskly whisk them together with a few turns of the salt and pepper grinders. She then diced the bell pepper and added it to the mixture along with some chopped fresh parsley.

The sausage and onions were browning nicely so Kara had Petrushka take it off the heat to start to cool. Gattonero brought over the Gruyere cheese that she had grated and added most of it to the eggs, which Kara then combined with the other ingredients, including the sausage and onions.

While Gattonero stirred all that together, Kara diced the pancetta into small cubes and added them to the skillet, which she put back on the heat. She then greased a baking dish and poured in the egg mixture, topped it with the remaining Gruyere, and then placed it in the oven to cook for 20 minutes.

Kara spread some walnuts on a baking sheet and added them into the oven. She then added waffle mix to the remaining eggs along with vegetable oil, water, cinnamon and salt. While she mixed everything together, Gattonero removed the pancetta from the pan and placed it

on a paper towel to cool. When it had, Kara incorporated them into the batter, as well, and handed it off to Petrushka to start making waffles.

Kara removed the toasted walnuts from the oven and let them cool. She then started a pot of fresh espresso brewing and returned to the cold locker to remove both whipping and heavy crème and then the liquor cabinet for some amaretto liqueur.

"Gattonero, you can call the boys," Kara said. Gattonero nodded and went to the kitchen phone.

Kara combined one part heavy crème to three parts whole milk in a saucepan and added the fresh espresso and amaretto liqueur, catching Petrushka's raised eyebrow.

"It's been a hard day," Kara noted, somewhat sheepishly. Petrushka merely smiled and nodded her head.

Kara placed the mixture over low heat and let it start to warm. Gattonero returned and Kara had her stir the mixture constantly, telling her to not allow it to boil. Kara started beating the whipping cream until thick, adding powdered sugar and the vanilla extract.

"Smells good, ladies," Michele noted as he entered the kitchen.

"We're ready to plate it," Kara responded. Michele nodded and pulled out two wooden trays. He added six plates, silverware, cloth napkins and espresso cups to one and carried it out. Petrushka brought over the second tray and laid out some rattan heat pads. Kara removed the eggs from the oven and placed them on the tray along with the waffles. Gattonero removed the espresso mixture from the heat and poured it into an espresso earn while Kara added the whipped crème to a chilled crystal bowl. They followed Petrushka, who carried the tray with food, out into the dining room.

"Waffles?" Alessandro and Yarrow both asked as Petrushka put the plate stacked high with them on the table.

"Feel free to pass them up," Gattonero offered as she cut the baked omelet into sixths. "More for me."

Alessandro and Yarrow both speared a waffle with forks and transferred them to their plates. Gattonero placed a slice of omelet on each plate and they dug in.

## Chapter Eleven – Thrilla from Manilla

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The low rumble of the Lamborghini Gallardo Spyder echoed off the rows of cars parked in front of the local Esselunga supermarket.

“There’s one!” Allison McDonnell noted, pointing with her arm at the open spot where a Fiat Stilo hatchback was pulling out. Kara maneuvered into position and claimed the spot in the name of the Rampant Bull.

Kara raised the convertible roof and the two Generation Two cyborgs exited the car and started for the supermarket. Kara dressed the part of a Lamborghini owner in a Prada tank top of black ribbed silk tucked into a Prada wrap miniskirt of black cotton burette secured with two metal and tortoise shell lockets, matched with black patent leather riding boots from Yves Saint Laurent.

Allison chose comfort over style, though the tight denim jeans and dark blue polo with the current Mazda “owl” logo emblazoned on the chest highlighted her form and garnered more than a few admiring stares from the young men milling out front of the store, sodas in hand.

“Thank you for helping me prepare this,” Allison said as they retrieved a shopping cart. “I’m a decent cook, but mostly with British cuisine.”

Kara bit back the comment that the British didn’t have a cuisine, instead using the joke the comedian Denis Leary said about Irish cuisine consisting of “food boiled for 18 hours straight until it reaches the consistency where you can drink it through a straw”. Allison stifled a laugh, putting up a token defense for the cooking prowess of her handler’s peers.

“I’m always interested in trying something new, though Filipino is really new,” Kara admitted.

“These recipes make it look pretty easy,” Allison commented. “Though that’s probably because they’re from people who make it all the time,” she added a bit sheepishly.

“Yes, I’ve been bit by that a number of times. The recipe give 10 or 15 minutes for the prep time and three-quarters of an hour later I’m still

slaving over the sink peeling vegetables or mixing batter,” Kara noted with a smile.

The two girls trolled the aisles, selecting the ingredients and checking them off a list they made. In a few cases they had to make “ingenious substitutes” or go with powdered as opposed to fresh, but they were successful in securing everything they needed and proceeded towards the checkout area striking victorious poses.

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After returning to the Compound, they parked near the cafeteria and hauled their booty inside and into the kitchen area. It was Wednesday, which meant “Team Fusion” was working the kitchen. The previous week they’d crossed Mongolian with Swedish and only Claes dared go back for seconds, resulting in many growling bellies in the Cyborg Warehouse that evening. They’d therefore chosen the time between the lunch and dinner service to try to replicate a meal Allison and her handler Brian had sampled in the United States.

Their *fratello* had been on a mission to gather intelligence on a trans-Atlantic criminal trade where North American cars that had been written off by insurers after severe accidents were being slapped up and shipped to Eastern Europe and Northern Africa. Normally the Agency would not care about such a trade, except that Padania groups based in Genoa and Venice were offering their services as a transfer shipper and taking a nice cut of the revenues.

Because it needed to chill after preparation, the girls started on the desert course first. While Kara was familiar with the Spanish dessert *flan*, Allison wished to make the Filipino version, which was heavier and made with more egg yolks. Kara mixed a cup of sugar and three-quarters of a cup of water in a saucepan and brought it to a boil to allow it to caramelize. She then took the caramelized sugar and poured it into oval aluminum molds, ensuring that it evenly coated the bottom of each.

Allison separated the yolk of ten eggs and then blended them together with a can each of evaporated and condensed milk and a teaspoon of vanilla. She then poured the warm mixture into the molds on top of the caramelized sugar and covered each mold with aluminum foil and placed the *leche flan* molds into the steamer.

With desert done, Kara started on the appetizer, Pork Adobo, by placing a large pot on the flame and adding a cup of cider vinegar, a

third of a cup of soy sauce, eight cloves of garlic and a fistful of freshly ground pepper. Allison opened a pack of boneless pork ribs and, after trimming away the excess fat, cut the ribs into small cubes, adding half of them to Kara's pot and stirring the boiling mixture for a moment before reducing the heat and allowing the contents to simmer.

"Do you mind if I play a little music?" Allison asked, holding up her portable music player.

"Have at it," Kara replied and Allison connected it to the portable stereo sitting on a shelf.

As she sang along, Allison began work on the main course, Sinigang na Baboy, which consisted of pork in a sour broth. She added the other half of cubed pork to another pot along with five cups of water and Tamarind powder, setting it to boil, followed by sliced Bok Choy and onion. She let it boil for a few minutes and then set the mixture to simmer. Kara rinsed a bowl of white rice in the sink and started the electric rice cooker. She then checked the *leche flan* and found it done, so she removed them from the steamer to cool before transferring them to the Cold Room to set.

After a time the pork for the appetizer was cooked through and Allison removed it from the pot and placed it on a baking sheet, putting it under the broiler to brown. When the meat had taken on a nice brown sheen, she poured them back into the pot and allowed them to simmer for a few more minutes and then started plating. She checked the pork in the other pot and found it tender, as well. She removed it from the heat and added Water Spinach, allowing the ambient heat of the mixture to cook it as she let the meal stand. The rice cooker chimed its completion of the task of cooking rice and Kara scooped it out into a serving dish, followed by the main course.

The cooking staff arrived shortly thereafter and they commented on the pleasant smell. As Allison piled everything onto two trays, Kara explained each dish. The head chef nodded his head sagely and Kara imagined that they'd see Filipino cuisine make an appearance on the menu in the weeks ahead. She grabbed one of the trays and followed Allison out onto the terrace where Michele and Brian sipped Birra Moretti pilsners.

"How close is that to San Miguel?" Allison asked as she placed the Pork Abodo on the table.

“Not bad,” Brian replied. “Close enough to work for the dish.”

The four of them dug in, Brian and Allison both declaring it a decent facsimile of the meal they’d enjoyed in the United States. Allison felt that with additional preparations, they could fine-tune the seasoning to match. When they were finished with the main meal, Kara and Allison took everything back to the kitchen and cleaned up. As Allison removed and plated the *leche flan*, Kara prepared a sterling silver coffee set with creamer and sugar, transferring the fresh-brewed coffee into an urn. They carried everything out and enjoyed the *leche flan* as the sun started to settle.

*This story was inspired by the Autumn 20x1 fratello Quarterly cover drawn by wraith11 on deviantART.*

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## **Chapter Twelve – Minimum Miles**

After morning classes, Claes changed into green shorts and a turquoise t-shirt under a blue sweater vest. She slipped her bare feet into sandals and after styling her hair in a ponytail, placed a well-worn straw hat atop her head. Outside the cyborg warehouse, she filled a blue watering with water from the spigot and started walking across the grounds towards her herb garden.

To reach her garden required her passing the larger vegetable garden Michele Pagani had started once he and Kara had arrived at the Agency. She noticed the stalks that held the tomato vines rustle and as she stepped around, she could see Michele kneeling amongst them – in his suit.

“Wash day. Nothing clean, right?” she called out.

“Eh? Oh, hello, Claes. Uh, yeah...” Michele said with a nervous laugh. “The Campari tomatoes ripened a bit quicker than I expected,” he added to explain why he was working in a suit.

“Tomorrow is Saturday,” Claes observed. Saturday was the single day that the Agency cafeteria was not staffed and therefore the kitchens were opened to anyone who wished to prepare their own meals.

“It’s been a few weeks since I’ve made a home-cooked meal,” Michele noted.

“If you need a sous-chef, I am available,” Claes offered.

“That would be great,” Michele said.

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“So I guess my plan to lure Michele to a romantic dinner at Enoteca Pinchiorri is out the window,” Kara noted as she added a spoonful of sugar to her coffee.

“Why do you need to drive all the way to Florence for dinner?” Petrushka asked.

"The after-dinner shopping," Gattoneo replied, earning her a scowl from Kara.

"On that basis, you'd think she'd pick Osteria Franciscana," Allison noted, referring to the top restaurant in Italy – which just happened to be across the street from the Ferrari factory.

"Driving hundreds of kilometers for a meal is pretty wasteful," Soni commented.

Kara's head snapped up and a smile broke out on her face.

"Soni, you're a genius!" she exclaimed.

"*Sono io?*"

"I've been wracking my brain on what to write for the autumn issue of fratello Quarterly, but you just gave me an idea."

As part of their English language studies, the girls created a quarterly magazine – they chose to call it fratello Quarterly – under the guidance of Jethro Blacker. Henrietta provided many of the photos while the cyborgs, handlers and staff took turns writing articles. For this issue, Kara had been tasked writing one of the articles, but she'd been hard-pressed to come up with an idea.

"Uh, glad to be of help," the blonde cyborg replied.

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"Kara, if you're not going to help prepare the meal, at least stand out of the way," Claes grouched as she removed a selection of fresh vegetables from a large wicker basket and into the sink to be washed. A smaller basket held herbs clipped and dried from her garden.

"I need some pictures for the article and I also want to see how you prepare the meal so I can include the recipes," the Franco-Japanese cyborg replied as she leaned over and snapped some photos with her camera.

"Out," Michele ordered and Kara retreated to the opposite side of the kitchen to flip open her MacBook Air and start writing copy.

Once Claes had cleaned the vegetables and herbs, Michele pulled out a large roasting pan and collected most of the tomatoes, one onion,

seven cloves of garlic, dried oregano and fresh basil. He chopped the tomatoes in half and the onions into small bits, followed by crushing the garlic cloves before smothering the concoction in virgin olive oil and mixing them together, adding a pinch each of salt and pepper. The pan then went into a very hot oven to roast for the next hour.

While Michele worked on his dish, Claes chopped a large butternut squash into quarters. After cleaning out the inside of seeds and filaments, she washed it and into another oven it went to roast for 30 minutes.

Kara swooped in to snap pictures and then recorded the list of ingredients on her iPhone before Claes chased her away with a sharp glare. She then went over to hover by her handler and used the iPhone to record video of him starting to prepare fresh pasta.

Michele formed the flour into a mound and then made a well in the middle, to which he added the eggs. Using a fork, he first beat the eggs until they were fully incorporated and then started to gradually pull in flour from around the well, incorporating the two until the eggs had absorbed all the flour they could. Michele pushed the remaining flour off to the side, adding a bit as necessary to help him knead the dough when it became too sticky.

The dough was set aside to rest and the squash removed from the oven, tested, and confirmed done. Claes set it aside to cool and Michele removed his pan from the oven long enough to stir all the contents before returning it to the heat. Kara, meanwhile, went back to her laptop and resumed typing.

Michele and Claes took a quick break before they both shifted into high gear. Claes removed the squash meat from the skin and compressed it in a towel to eliminate as much of the water as possible. She then placed it in a bowl and proceeded to manually puree it with a potato masher. Michele removed the roasting pan from the oven and allowed it to cool while he rolled out the pasta dough into thin layers before cutting into 8cm squares.

After squashing the squash, Claes added an egg, grated Parmigiano Reggiano cheese, a pinch each of salt and pepper and finished it off with finely ground amoretto cookies, mixing them into a homogenous and fairly dry concoction. She then brought the bowl over to Michele and together they spooned a small amount of filling into each square before folding them over and crimping the edges to seal them. Once

completed, they were covered with plastic wrap and placed in the refrigerator.

Kara returned to film Michele making of the Campari tomato marinara sauce. He'd removed the tomatoes and placed them into a pot to continue to cook, followed by mashing the garlic cloves and onions and adding some tomato paste he'd created the previous evening. All of this went into the pot and allowed to simmer for another 30 minutes.

"So after all our hard work, when do we get to eat?" Kara asked.

"What do you mean 'our'?" Claes asked. "I don't recall you helping out!"

"Hey! I just put the water on the boil for the pasta!" Kara exclaimed, in response to which Claes covered her face with her palm.

*This story was inspired by Giada De Laurentiis and the episode "Black and White" on her show Giada at Home.*

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## **Chapter Thirteen – Black and White**

The door to the dorm room Henrietta and Rico Croce shared flew open and crashed against the bump stop. It was a credit to the training and conditioning that both girls calmly turned to see who had intruded on their private time.

"Quick! To the kitchen! Michele's making chocolate for dinner!" Marisa Alboreto stated, her twin red pigtails swinging like pendulums on either side of her head from the momentum imparted to them from the sudden stop of Marisa's head.

"Chocolate for dinner?" Henrietta asked, her tone one of confusion and perplexion.

"Yes, chocolate! Come on! We don't want to miss out!" Marisa insisted.

The world chocolate was all Rico needed to hear. She quickly wrapped her freshly oiled CZ 75 pistol in the cloth she'd used to wipe it clean and placed it in its case before slamming the lid closed and latching it. Rico expertly slid it into storage in the wardrobe as she ran towards the door.

Henrietta rose from where she'd been organizing her photos and followed her sisters out of the dorm and into the hallway. Waiting for them was Raych, who'd been the one to inform Marisa about the special meal Michele was making for Kara to celebrate her birthday. They descended the flight of stairs to the main level, which held the dining room and a small prep kitchen adjacent. Inside the kitchen were Michele and Claes dressed in chef's whites, an array of dry ingredients and cooking machines and utensils on the counter.

"Why are you using cake flour to make pasta?" Henrietta asked as she watched Michele dip a measuring cup into the five-kilogram bag on the counter.

"Because that makes it awesome?" Marisa suggested.

"I'll add a cup of regular flour, as well, however the cake flour has less gluten so it makes the noodles lighter and softer in texture," Michele

noted. All three cups of flour went into a food processor, followed by a quarter cup of cocoa powder.

"Hey! This is unsweetened cocoa powder!" Marissa exclaimed as she looked at the label.

"This is a savory dish, Coppertop," Michele replied, using his nickname for the redheaded cyborg.

"What's that mean?" Marisa asked.

"It's not sweet," Claes replied.

This earned Michele a scowl from Marisa.

"Don't worry. There will be plenty of chocolate flavor," Michele assured her. "I buy all my chocolate products from a place in Oregon in the United States. Claes is addicted to it, so she'll vouch for it."

This earned Michele a scowl from Claes.

"Pass me the egg yolks, please," Michele asked of Claes, who'd separated them earlier to allow them to warm to room temperature. The egg whites would be recycled in a later dish.

The egg yolks were followed by a generous pinch of salt and a quarter cup of extra virgin olive oil. Michele then started the food processor to blend the ingredients together into crumbly pasta dough. Michele kneaded it together into a roughly ball-shaped form before wrapping it in plastic and placing it in the refrigerator to chill for a half hour.

During the downtime, he started preparing the white chocolate risotto. Into a pot Michele poured five cups of unsweetened almond milk, one split vanilla bean and a half-cup of sugar and brought it to a simmer. He ladled a small portion into a porcelain cup and handed it to Marisa who, after a sip, declared it sufficiently sweet. Henrietta suggested more sugar and Michele added a little more.

Claes melted butter in a large saucepan and added two cups of Arborio rice to toast it. Once done, Michele took over and started to ladle in the almond milk mixture, allowing the rice to absorb each ladle before adding another. Now free, Claes started to grate a large block of white chocolate, amassing a portion of four ounces in weight.

Once the rice was cooking, Michele removed the pasta from the refrigerator and cut it first into quarters before flattening each by hand and then rolling it out into a thin sheet. Each sheet then went through a pasta-making machine, first to flatten it even more, and then to cut the dough into even strips of fettuccine noodles.

As Michele formed the noodles, Claes finely diced eight ounces of pancetta and crisped them up. After removing the pancetta, she added three tablespoons of unsalted butter and stirred it until it was melted and frothy. She then added 10 sage leaves (harvested from her herb garden) as Michele placed the fettuccine into a large pot of boiling water.

"Michele?" Claes called, indicating the sage leaves, which were now nicely browned and toasted.

"That looks perfect," Michele observed and Claes removed them and placed them on paper towels. She then added a half-cup of thawed peas to the pan and shook the pan to ensure they were fully warmed through. After checking that the pasta was done, she removed it from the water with tongs and added it to the peas, followed by the pancetta and sage, stirring the mixture thoroughly.

Michele spooned four ounces of room temperature mascarpone cheese into a bowl and combined it with a quarter-cup of freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese and a half-teaspoon of vanilla extract. He then secured two plates from the cupboard and added a portion of the pasta, pea and pancetta mixture to each plate and topped them off with a spoonful of the ricotta/ Parmigiano-Reggiano and some grated dark chocolate.

The risotto had cooked by now, as well, and Michele stirred in the white chocolate Claes had grated earlier, adding a generous pinch of salt, as well. He prepared two bowls and garnished with three fresh blackberries and grated dark chocolate.

Finished with the meal, Michele then went to the liquor cabinet and removed a bottle of vodka, amaretto and coffee liqueur. From the refrigerator he removed a carton of half-and-half and from the freezer a silicone ice cube tray containing six large dark ice cubes. He added one ice cube to each of two rocks glasses, followed by one ounce each of vodka and coffee liqueur and a half-ounce of the amaretto. He then carefully floated an ounce of half-and-half over the top, resulting in a

“black and white” cocktail, to which he added a dusting of cinnamon to the top as a finishing touch.

“What about us?” Marisa asked.

“That’s all we need, an inebriated Marisa,” Claes deadpanned. Michele placed metal covers over one pair of dishes and bowls to keep them warm and placed them on a serving tray, followed with the two drinks. He then placed the remainder of the fettuccine dish and the risotto into serving dishes so they could be shared amongst all the girls, whom Rico was sent to inform it was ready if they were interested.

Michele took the tray and carried it up the three flights of stairs to the top level and down the hall to the corner room his cyborg Kara Michelle shared with Raych. He knocked once and pushed open the door, which Kara had left ajar at his instructions earlier. Dressed in jeans, polo and sneakers from her checkup at the medical center that afternoon, Kara’s face brightened as she saw her handler from her seat at the head of her bed.

Michele carefully placed the tray on the bed and removed the two covers, transferring them to Kara’s desk. He then handed her one of the drinks, which they both stirred with spoons to mix everything together.

“Happy birthday, Kara.”

“Thank you, Michele.”

They clinked glasses and drank to each other’s health before sharing a pleasant dinner together.