

*This story uses characters and locations based on the Gunslinger Girl manga written by Yu Aida and published in monthly shōnen magazine Dengeki Daioh. The characters of Kumari/Kara and Michele are original to myself.*

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## **"Giuoco Pianissimo"**

A Gunslinger Girl Original Story by Kiskaloo

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### **Chapter One – Escape Square**

Franco experienced three emotions in a handful of seconds.

The first was fear as the Alfa Romeo 1750 GT Veloce slammed into the guardrail almost head-on. Designed to shove sliding cars back into the road, it was not engineered to take a direct hit and the steel stretched and then failed with a mighty screech.

The second emotion was exhilaration at the sense of weightlessness the car's ballistic arc imparted as it sailed out over the cliff's edge into space. The engine wailed as the tires turned faster, unbound by the friction of the road's surface. As the car started to fall, Franco went light in his seat.

The third was loss as the car banked to the left and the driver's door swung open. Without a sound, Franca slipped out of his arm and out the door, falling away towards the dark water below.

Before he could shout her name, the front of the Alfa slammed into the water and he was thrown forward, his skull ricocheting off the headliner. The windshield, already weakened from multiple bullet holes, collapsed and cold water rushed into the cabin, inundating him.

Franco turned in his seat and saw Cristiano's head bobbing facedown in the water. He turned and pushed his head back, slapping him awake. Cristiano coughed and sputtered, but took a deep breath.

"We have to get out!" Franco yelled. By now the water covered the entire hood as well as lapping over the top of the doors and he could feel the weight of the engine pulling the nose of the car down. He didn't know how deep the river was, but he didn't want to ride the car down to the bottom to find out.

Franco pulled Cristiano over the driver's seat, aided by the water level and the human body's natural buoyancy. He used his feet to force open the driver's door and half-floated and half-dragged Cristiano out after him. Moments later, the Alfa slipped below the surface with a fury of bubbles.

Franco made sure Cristiano was on his back and the two of them floated downriver, carried by the gentle current. He couldn't be sure the Agency would not have pursued them and he didn't want to be anywhere near where they'd crashed if they did.

As they floated, Franco searched the shore to either side for any sign of Franca, but in the darkness and shadows he could see almost nothing. Soon he saw lights along the shore and he started to slowly kick the two of them towards the shore. Eventually Franco found a gentle sand beach and once his feet found firm purchase he helped Cristiano to his feet and they walked out.

The cool water had lowered their body temperatures and they shivered as they emerged into the air. The cold water had also stopped the bleeding in Cristiano's wound, though he was still very weak and leaned against Franco as the former led them both to a bench.

"Wait here," Franco said.

"Where are you going?" Cristiano wheezed.

"To get us a car."

Ten minutes later, a white Lancia Y 1.2 hatchback pulled up and Franco stepped out. He helped Cristiano into the passenger seat and directed the vents blowing hot air on his body. Franco returned to the driver's seat and moved out.

"What...what do we...do we do now?" Cristiano asked, the warmth starting to dry his clothes and soak into his body.

"We need to find a place to hide," Franco said. "The Agency is going to search for the car and when they don't find us inside, they're not going to assume our bodies were carried off. The problem is, you've been sold out, and so I'm not sure if Milan is safe."

"Spl...Splügen," Cristiano wheezed.

"What?"

"Splügen. It's in Switzerland...just across the border on the...SS36," Cristiano said.

"What's in Splügen?" Franco asked.

"Safe house. In case...the government ever...came after me. There are money...weapons and a car. The Milan faction...doesn't know about it."

"Who does?"

"Only Alessio, and they killed him," Cristiano said, remembering the young girl from Florence who had put his aide's head through the bullet-resistant window of his Alfa 166.

"Okay. We'll head for Switzerland," Franco said, and headed for the highway.

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Italian State Highway 36 was more a thoroughfare than an actual divided highway. It ran through both agricultural lands and the center of communes as it wound its way north in the shadow of low mountains and through dark valleys and by quiet lakes.

There was a small border facility on the Italian-Swiss border, however while Switzerland was not part of the European Union, they were full signatories of the Schengen Agreement which allowed free and unrestricted passage of vehicles between two signatory nations. So the buildings were dark and while a camera normally identified and recorded the license plate of the car, it was out of order, which allowed the two to pass into Switzerland without notice or record.

They continued on up a series of switchbacks into the mountains, finally arriving at the municipality of Splügen. Nestled below a mountain pass that shared its name in the district of Hinterrhein in the Swiss canton of Graubünden, in winter it was a popular ski resort. While German was the predominant language, a minority did speak Italian so they could blend in.

They crossed over European Route 35 and entered the municipality proper. They followed a spur road to a complex of three chalets just off to the east. Franco stepped out and opened the garage and then drove the Lancia inside.

He helped Cristiano out of the passenger seat and into the chalet, placing him down on a leather couch. He then proceeded to close all the drapes and blinds before he turned on the lights.

Franco returned to the garage and removed a heavy-duty first-aid kit. He'd studied advanced first aid and removed Cristiano's jacket and then ripped open his shirt and pushed it back to expose the wound. Rico had intentionally aimed to miss any vital organs or major blood vessels so the damage looked worse than it actually was. Franco cleaned the wound area and applied a local anesthetic before moving in to remove the round. He then used butterfly stitches and gauze to temporarily protect the wound and helped Cristiano into the master bedroom and laid him out on the bed, covering him with a quilt.

Before he went to sleep Cristiano gave Franco the number to a private and trusted physician located in Chur. Franco called him in the morning and he agreed to come and see Cristiano that afternoon. In the interim, Franco thoroughly cleaned the interior of the Lancia and drove it to the municipality of Thusis where he ditched the car. He met the doctor at the train station and drove him back, the physician being blindfolded during the trip. The doctor properly sutured the wound and gave Cristiano antibiotics. He also left a supply of medicines and then had Franco drive him back to Thusis, Franco returning via bus.

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Cristiano operated under the (correct) assumption that the Guardia di Finanza would seize all his known assets. Therefore, he drew from his "unknown" assets, which totaled about €3 million. Franco desired to return to Italy to look for Franca, however Cristiano forbid it, noting that even if she lived, she either had been captured or was herself in hiding. They rested while Cristiano used trusted sources to secure for him and Franco new identities and try to learn who sold him out. The Agency made that search irrelevant on September 9<sup>th</sup> when they attacked a meeting of the Milan faction heads in Castelveverde, killing them all. Cristiano's sources delivered him the news the following Monday, along with information that all three of them had been killed trying to escape. At that point, he felt more comfortable in moving and two weeks later they settled into a rented and furnished apartment in Locarno in the canton of Ticino on the northern tip of Lake Maggiore. The population there predominately spoke Italian so again they could easily blend in under new identities created for them.

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Eventually, Cristiano relented to allow Franco to travel to Italy to try and determine Franca's true fate.

As Franca had done the previous month, Franco watched the farmhouse in Frascati for a day prior to making contact. The fall harvest of wine grapes was coming to a conclusion, but plenty of temporary workers still worked the fields as others destemmed and crushed the grapes.

He'd come across the border in Milan the week prior to visit the villa he shared with Franca. Finding it empty, he decided to risk coming down to Frascati.

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Dominico rode a tractor hauling a load of grapes towards the processing warehouse when a tall figure dressed in a t-shirt and jeans stepped out from behind a tree and onto the path before him.

The figure removed the dark sunglasses and it took Dominico a moment to recognize Franco behind his rough beard. Franco came forward, putting the tractor and cab between him and view of the house.

"Franco! I'd heard you were dead!" Dominico exclaimed.

"Have you heard from Caterina?" Franco asked without preamble.

"Caterina is dead," Dominico lied. "The government killed her up north over a month ago. They showed us pictures of her body. Where were you? Why didn't you protect her?" he accused.

Dominico's words slammed into Franco like a physical force, crushing his heart. Combined with the empty villa, they were patent confirmation that Franca had been killed and the government had discovered and seized their home.

Dominico's voice broke through the fog smothering his brain.

"You need to get out of here," Dominico insisted. "The government found out Caterina owned this property. They sent their goons to tear it apart looking for you both. They may still be in the area. It's not safe for you to be seen here."

Franco nodded, his features slack and his demeanor that of a beaten man.

"Take care of yourself, Dominico," he said and walked back into the fields, disappearing amongst the tall rows of grape vines.

As he watched him go, Dominico almost called out after him, but didn't. During the four months they'd stayed at the farm, Caterina had confided in him that Pinocchio was a Padania assassin and that she and Franco were notorious bombers. She explained that how after her father's death, she'd become consumed with the need to avenge him and had found Franco and compelled him to teach her to make bombs and become a terrorist. He'd said nothing, feeling it was not his place to tell her how to live her life, but he'd known her since she was a girl and it pained him to see her become twisted by revenge into a killer.

He knew Caterina loved Franco and he clearly loved her, but he believed that in lying to Franco, he was giving Franca the chance to start her life over again on a less violent and destructive path.

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While Franco was in Italy, Cristiano started complaining of chest pains and running a high fever. The doctor from Chur again made a house call, though he could not arrive until the weekend. When he did, he discovered Cristiano was suffering from a severe case of pneumonia. The doctor coordinated with a colleague in private practice in Lugano and Cristiano was taken by ambulance to a private clinic for treatment.

Franco went back to Locarno, his heart heavy with grief and hatred. As her father's death had fired the flames of revenge in Franca's heart, so Franca's death now did the same in Franco's. Cristiano also feared that without new and strong leadership, the internal faults now spreading through both Padania and the Five Republics could fracture both movements into scores of small, ineffective splinter groups unable to stand up against the government forces arrayed against them.

They both felt that the movement needed a strong leader and this leader needed to strike a serious blow against the government to make his name and draw the movement's leadership to him and heal the rifts. They both knew they could not fill this role, but they knew of someone who they thought could. Cristiano sent out feelers and when he received a favorable response, Franco boarded a plane for Egypt.

## Chapter Two – Isolani

As she rounded the corner, Franca blinked in surprise to see the Fiat Coupe parked across the way. A moment later she saw flashes of light and the windshield suddenly erupted in craters and spider webs.

The bright glare of the Alfa's headlights in the scope affected Angelica's aim, so she went for a cluster of single shots with her Steyr AUG A2 towards the driver's area. Due to their low angle, the 5.56x45mm rounds impacting the windshield mostly ricocheted or expended most of their energy punching through the laminated glass. One of the rounds did penetrate, however, and slammed into Franca's shoulder. A second one also penetrated, but yawed violently on exit and what should have been a fatal head-shot instead just grazed her skull, opening a long, but shallow, wound track along her left temple.

She vaguely heard Franco shouting at her and at the last moment she violently wrenched the wheel over, putting the Alfa up on two wheels as it screamed past the Fiat. The car fell back on to all four wheels, however Franca's vision swam and then narrowed as she drifted on the edge of consciousness. She felt Franco's arms around her and then a violent forward lurch, followed by a sense of weightlessness. For a moment, she saw stars and then cold blackness closed over her.

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Franca awoke on her back feeling cold and wet. She looked up and stars slowly flowed past her. Her left shoulder burned and her head throbbed and she found her thoughts muddled. It took her a moment to realize she was in a river, floating along with the current. She turned her head and saw thick forest extending up the cliffs. The steep cliffs extended right to the water, preventing her from finding anywhere to leave the water.

She felt something heavy bump into her right leg and she jumped, startled. She slapped the water with her right hand, her palm smacking on a hard object. It took her a moment to identify it as a log. The flush of adrenaline in her system warmed her, and she grasped out for it with her right arm, hooking it over. She did the same with her left, crying out from the pain that blossomed from her shoulder. She started kicking herself towards the shore, using her right arm to help steer and also drawing on the languid current to help carry her along.

She came around a bend in the river and felt the current start to increase. Ahead, she heard a low rumble and realized too late she was entering shallow rapids. She entered the rapids, bouncing along with the log. She tried to hold on, but the pain in her left shoulder flared and she was soon knocked off. She bounced through the rapids, her soaked clothes and boots slowing her down and saving her from a collision with the log, which rolled and tumbled forward of her. The rapids were short and soon she found herself deposited on the other end into a deep pool of still water. She slowly kicked herself towards the shore and found a sand bar. She hauled herself on it and passed out.

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"Come on, boy," the old man said to his old Labrador. The dog trotted back beside its master, who carried a small tackle box in one hand and a fishing rod in the other. Taking advantage of the full moon to do some night fishing, he now made his way back towards his Alfa 156 Sportwagon estate.

Once again, his dog rushed off and he heard it splashing in the river. The man shook his head, knowing he'd have to dry the dog off before he could let him into the car. As he came to a clearing, he saw the dog on a sandbar a few meters out into the river, standing over some form. At first, he thought it a dead animal washed ashore, but as he approached he could see clothes, blonde hair and bare arms and realized it was a human.

He set down his tackle box and rod and waded into the river. Fortunately the shallow water depth and sluggish current allowed him to maintain his footing as he waded out to the sand bar. A retired doctor, he quickly took her vitals and determined she still lived. He reached down and started to turn her over. She cried out in pain and when he removed his hand, he found it covered in diluted blood. He went to his knees and more gently flipped her onto her back. He removed a pocketknife from his belt and cut the strap of her tank top, pulling the material back. He could see a bullet entry wound above her left breast, her white bra stained a deep shade of pink from the mix of blood and water. The wound itself continued to weep blood and a small trickle flowed out from underneath her scalp. The old man removed his jacket and carefully lifted her head and upper body, running the sleeves underneath her armpits to create an improvised sling.



"I'm sorry, but this is going to hurt," he said, though he wasn't sure she could hear him. As gently as he could, he slowly dragged her off the sand bar and into the river and then on to the beach.

"Stay with her, boy," he ordered his dog, who promptly sat on his haunches. The old man shuffled as fast as his legs would carry him to his vehicle parked about 200m down and drove forward over the grass and onto the beach next to the woman.

As a retired doctor, he carried a fully equipped first aid kit. While it wasn't designed to treat gunshot trauma, it did have enough stock to allow him to clean and dress her head wound as well as staunch the bleeding from her shoulder wound. In addition, he'd added some additional medicines like wide-spectrum antibiotics and heavier-duty analgesics. He crushed these two and mixed them in with some bottled water.

"I need you to help me get you on your feet," the man said. The woman nodded slowly. Once up, he helped her to the back of his car and helped her sit on the lowered tailgate. He gave her the water and she quickly drained the bottle.

"Th-Thank...yo...you," she said, her voice slick and her words slurred. The doctor knew she was in shock and he lowered the rear seats flat, roughly laying out a wool blanket. The woman slowly fell back on to it and he covered her with a second one. He then tugged it forward from the passenger seats until she was mostly inside. He moved her legs to allow him to close the rear door then he started the engine, setting the heater to maximum. His dog lay next to the woman and the doctor placed the first aid kit in the back and then lowered the rear hatch before getting behind the wheel.

The closest major hospital was a not-insignificant distance away. The doctor himself maintained a small clinic attached to his house for the people of neighboring communes who needed general care and it contained the tools necessary to remove the bullet. Her pulse remained strong so he felt confident the bullet had not opened a major blood vessel and she was not in danger of bleeding out in the near term. He therefore decided the clinic would be the best place to take her.

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The analgesics had taken effect by the time he pulled into the parking lot of the clinic and the woman was able to proceed inside under her

own power. The doctor cut away the rest of her tank top as well as her bra and helped her lay down on the folding examining table. He administered a local anesthetic to her shoulder and in the interim arranged the necessary surgical instruments. He properly cleaned the wound and examined the wound track.

"How...how ba...bad is it?" the woman said. The doctor noticed that her breath was no longer ragged, which he took as a good sign.

"I've seen worse," the doctor admitted, though he didn't add that it had been in combat. He knew that whatever hit the woman had not been a pistol caliber, though the damage pattern looked too light to be from a high-powered rifle. He continued his examination, determining that the bullet had indeed missed any major artery or vein.

"Even with the local, you're likely to feel some discomfort," the doctor noted. "However, I don't want to give you a general anesthetic."

"I under...understand," the woman said. The doctor nodded and proceeded to remove the bullet. The woman winced and gritted her teeth, but she did not cry out.

"It's looks like a rifle round," the doctor said, holding up the bullet. "It held together pretty well, which probably minimized the amount of damage it transmitted."

When the woman didn't reply, the doctor turned to her and realized that she had fallen asleep.

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The sun streaming through the slats in the window shade fell upon the sleeping form of the woman, slowly warming her face until it triggered her to wake. She slowly rose up on the bed, finding herself wearing a large t-shirt and her underwear. Her left shoulder ached and when she pulled forward the collar on her t-shirt, she noticed a large bandage taped above her left breast.

She looked around and found herself in what appeared to be a spare bedroom based on the sparse amount of furniture and fine layer of dust on everything.

She heard the doorknob turn and saw a matronly woman enter.

"Ah, you are awake!" she said. "I will get the doctor." She turned and left, closing the door behind her. A few minutes later, an elderly gentleman entered the room wearing a white medical coat. Her recollections of the previous night were hazy, but she identified him as the man who had rescued her.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Tired. Hungry. Some slight pain in my shoulder," the woman replied automatically.

"Well all of that is to be expected," the man said.

"What happened?" the woman asked.

"I found you near the river, unconscious, last night. You'd been shot in the shoulder and almost in the head. I brought you back to my clinic and removed the bullet and bandaged your wounds."

"What?" the woman exclaimed. "Where am I? Who are you?"

"You are in my home, east of Milan. My name is Edmondo and I'm a retired doctor. I run a clinic for the neighboring communes because the nearest hospital is over 50km away. I didn't find a wallet on your person, so can you tell me your name?"

"My name is...is..." Edmondo watched her close her eyes tightly as she thought. "I don't remember," she said, her eyes showing sudden fear.

"Do you know where you live?"

"I'm a student. At Rome University," the woman said. "I mean, I was..."

"You appear to have hit your head," Edmondo noted in a calm, soothing voice. "In such cases, temporary retrograde amnesia is not uncommon. You should start to regain your memories quickly, so do not be alarmed. I will have Lia bring you some breakfast."

"Thank you, doctor," the woman said.

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Dusk had fallen outside and a lamp provided a pool of illumination as the woman sat on the end of the bed after her shower. Lia had

returned her cleaned jeans just before she left for the day, along with a borrowed t-shirt, and her boots were by the bed. She dressed and stepped outside of the room into a short hallway, which she walked down to the living room.

"Feeling any better?" the doctor asked from where he sat in a leather recliner, his dog on the rug beside him.

"Yes, thank you."

"Do you remember anything more?"

"Yes. My name is Franca and I live in Milan. Everything else is still a bit fuzzy, however," she lied. In fact, she remembered most everything now and she needed to know if she remained in danger.

"Your memories should continue to return as time progresses. I do not believe your head injury serious, however you should probably visit a hospital and have some tests run," Edmondo suggested.

"Thank you. You said I had been shot? Have you contacted the authorities?"

"No. Communications out here is somewhat iffy at the moment. A tree felled our cellular tower during the last windstorm and those snails at Telecom Italia are taking their time to replace it. They may no longer be owned by the government, but they continue to act like it," he snorted.

"Are there any public transport services in the area?" Franca asked.

"There is a bus route in the next town over, however it takes a rather meandering path to the city, requiring multiple transfers. I'd be happy to drive you to your home in the morning."

Franca shook her head. "You've done so much for me, already. I cannot impose on your hospitality anymore."

"Nonsense," Edmondo said. "You've been seriously wounded. Besides, it's nice to have someone to talk to. My wife died some years ago and since then it's just been the dog and I."

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Franca decided to stay with Edmondo for two additional days, regaining her strength. He drove her to a town that offered direct train service to Milan, buying her a ticket. He also provided her with €100. She insisted he provide her with a business card so she could repay him once she returned home.

She exited the train in the commune at Lodi and hired a cab to take her to a private secure storage facility in the industrial area of the city. She supplied her name, fingerprint and retinal scan and then a staffer escorted her to a private room. A few moments later, a panel opened and a dumbwaiter system deposited her box. She supplied three fingerprints to the reader and it opened. Inside the box were copies of her actual identity documents as well as a set of falsified ones for a "Danjette Valdemar" of Copenhagen, Denmark. Each also held €10.000 in bank notes, 50 1 oz. Canadian Maple Leaf gold bullion coins and clones of their credit and ATM cards as well as credit cards issued in Danjette's name.

She removed a copy of her actual identity documents plus the Danish ones along with €5.000 in cash. She re-entered the waiting cab and had it drive her back to the train station. She purchased a new ticket to Milan, though she exited the train at Linate Airport. She used her Danish credentials to rent a car and drove to a commune on the shore of Lake Pusiano, north of the city. She parked a block away from the villa she shared with Franco. Located on a hill overlooking the town, they'd built an attached garage so Franca could store and work on her cars as well as perform customer repair work on the side from time to time.

As she approached on foot, she didn't see anyone. This didn't surprise her, for while she knew that at least one security agency knew what she looked like, it seemed that might be all they knew. She went up to a retaining wall and removed a loose brick, reaching in to retrieve a plastic box that held a spare key to the garage.

She continued down to the back door and unlocked it. She stepped into the garage area and disabled the alarm system. While state of the art, Franca knew it could be defeated. She crossed over into the villa and climbed the stairs to the master bedroom and removed a fresh outfit from the closet, laying it on the bed. She also pulled back the carpeting on the floor and opened the embedded safe, finding the contents untouched. She removed a Glock 26 pistol in an "inside the waistband" (IWB) holster. She removed the pistol, verified the action, and then inserted a magazine. She changed out of her current clothes

into a new set. She also placed some more outfits in a suitcase and left the garage on foot, resetting the alarm and replacing the key.

While her Giulietta Spider Veloce was in the garage, she feared the government might have access to the anti-theft tracking device installed. She left the villa and made her way back to Milan. She stopped in a commune on the outskirts of the city and stopped to use a bank ATM machine and tried her personal card, finding that it worked and that her account balances appeared to be untouched. Still, she couldn't be sure that the government didn't track this, as well, so she hit Cancel and retrieved the ejected card. She and Franco maintained totally separate accounts under assumed names and neither knew anything about the other's. This prevented one of them being captured or killed from allowing the government to roll the other one up using common financial information.

She made her way to the Via Montenapoleone and visited a spa and salon to have a facial, manicure and pedicure performed followed by having her blond hair professionally (and temporarily) dyed black. When she stepped out, she both felt and looked like a new woman. She checked into a mid-level hotel on the outskirts of the city and visited a nearby Internet café. She searched through news outlets and eventually came across a story reporting that a car carrying Cristiano Savonarola, his aide, and two unnamed passengers crashed into the river with the death of all four people. She checked the obituary columns and funeral announcements, but found nothing. She also looked for news on the seizure of property or assets belonging to Cristiano, but again, found nothing.

Next, she looked for rental apartments in Parma and copied down the number of a few options. She went to a local cellular store and purchased a pay-as-you go cell phone. She used this to contact the apartment owners and scheduled a visit for the following day. In the morning, she purchased a train ticket for Parma and toured the apartments, choosing one next to a bus line and a block away from a grocer so she would not need a car. She signed a four-week lease, with an option to extend it.

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Over those four weeks, Franca continued to attempt to find out what happened to Franco, Cristiano and Pinocchio. She was greatly frustrated by not knowing who she could trust. Part of what helped keep her and Franco safe for so long was limiting the number of people who knew who they were. Before he slipped away from the

government's hounds, her uncle Angelo Marinov told her that Cristiano had been betrayed to the Agency by one or more of the other heads of the Milan faction. She tried to contact him now, but he'd buried his trail effectively. She visited the villa every Saturday, but each time she found no trace of any visitation.

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In the fourth week, she used her Danish passport and risked a train trip to Rome to look up Nino. She found him, and he passed along the rumor he'd heard that she, Cristiano and Franco had all been declared dead by the government. He also told her that the Agency had successfully killed the remaining senior members of the Milan faction at a farming villa in Castilverde, plunging the organization into chaos.

She then rented a car and to Frascati. She checked in to a small motel and that evening she scoped out her farm. She saw both Dominico and Paula, but didn't attempt to make contact with either. She was a natural blonde again, having decided to wash out the remaining dye after seven weeks rather than have the treatment reapplied.

She spent the next day on a hill across from the farm, observing it through binoculars. Dominico and Paula appeared to be acting normally. That evening, as they settled down on the terrace for dinner, she made her approach. She'd dressed in a black leather jacket, black jeans and black boots with black gloves and had her hair and face covered under a black balaclava. She carefully made her way to the terrace and came up behind the two. She kept her right hand in her jacket pocket on the Glock 26.

Paula saw her first, her eyes going wide. She dropped the platter of food she was holding, though fortunately it fell only a few centimeters to the table. Dominico saw his wife's reaction and he spun around in his chair.

"What do you want?" he challenged. "This is a working farm. We have precious little of value for you to pawn to feed your drug habit."

"I'm not here for trinkets or trifles, Dominico," Franca said. She reached up and removed the balaclava to reveal her face.

"Franca!" Paula exclaimed. She rushed forward, but stopped when she saw the stern look on Franca's face.

"Has anyone been here since Franco and I left?"

"Nobody beyond the usual deliveries," Dominico stated. Beside him, Paula nodded her head.

Franca relaxed her facial features and her body. She allowed Paula to embrace her and took Dominico's hand. Paula went to the kitchen to get another place setting.

"We thought something terrible had happened to you all when you didn't return," Dominico said. "We're used to you going off for months at a time, but those times you let us know."

"I'm sorry," Franca replied. "We ran into a lot of trouble up north and I had to lie low for a time."

"Where's Franco? And Pinocchio?" he asked.

"Dead. At least I believe so. The Agency beat us to Cristiano's. We rescued him, but Pinocchio was left behind. We crashed into a river and I was swept away from the others. "

"What do you plan to do?" Dominico asked.

"The government now knows what I look like, but they appear to know nothing else so it should be safe for me to head home. I just wanted to let you two know I was safe and see if Franco had contacted you."

Franco stayed with Dominico and Paula through the weekend, then headed back to Milan, where she purchased an apartment within the city and hired movers to move select items from the villa to the new apartment. She contracted with a charity attached to the Archdiocese of Milan to donate the remaining clothes, furniture and household items left at the villa, sending anything left over to the dump.

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As fall moved into winter, Franca spent a great deal of time reflecting as she shuttled between her apartment in Milan and the farm in Frascati. She especially thought of Nino, now retired and enjoying life with his grandchildren in a villa east of Rome. The government no longer hunted him like hounds did a fox. The Tibetan Terrier could rest and live out the remainder of his days in peace and quiet. At one time she'd called him weak, but she realized it was not his weakness, but the government's strength, that had finally run him down. She'd heard the rumors of little girl assassins and dismissed them as folly. Then



Franco told her of the pig-tailed girl in Montalcino who'd moved like lightning and shrugged off gunshots. And she remembered the blonde-haired girl illuminated in the headlights of her car and how, after both being knocked head over heels by impact with the car and being shot by Franco, she'd risen to her feet and continued firing.

Franca realized that restoring her father's name or avenging his death had both been fool's errands. The bombs she and Franco made didn't restore her father's name, only tarnished her own. They didn't avenge his death, but instead only created new death. For eight years she'd fought for what she thought was honorable and just, and now she realized that she was no less corrupted than the system she'd sworn vengeance against.

Like Nino, she eventually came to accept that which she couldn't change and decided to start her life over.

### **Chapter Three – The Italian Gambit**

Terminal 2 at Cairo International Airport contained seven gates and if two or more were being used to unload at the same time, the crowding became horrendous. Franco had chosen his LH flight because a British Airways 747-400 arrived five minutes beforehand and most of the 300 people aboard were still streaming out of the jetway and converging with the over 200 people aboard his Lufthansa A340-300, ensuring that Franco could safely submerge out of sight in a sea of humanity.

He flowed with this sea into the Passport Control area and presented his false Spanish passport and tourist visa. The passport agent scanned in the passport and stamped the visa before handing it back. Franco approached the Customs area, however the agent just looked at his rucksack and waved him through. Franco continued on and exited into the Arrivals area and stopped by a store to purchase a disposable cellular phone. As he walked out into the open, the hot desert air assaulted him as did the noise and diesel fumes of taxis and buses. He hailed one of the yellow taxis and instructed the driver to take him to the Ramses Hilton hotel. He checked in to his suite overlooking the River Nile and then placed a call on the phone.

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The sun had set some three hours prior as Franco stepped outside the hotel lobby and into the back seat of a 60 Series Toyota Land Cruiser. The mid-October temperature still hovered near 30°C and the cool air coming out of the vehicle's vents felt wonderful.

They drove out of the downtown area and crossed the River Nile to the west. Even at this late hour, the streets were absolutely clogged with cars and adherence to traffic laws and signs appeared to be voluntary. With much honking of horns and creative use of sidewalks, they continued on, disappearing into the warren of buildings and alleyways that sprawled from the left bank of the Nile to the Giza Plateau.

The dark-skinned man in the front passenger seat lifted an advanced digital radio to his lips and spoke rapidly in a language Franco could not understand, but assumed was Arabic. The vehicle made a turn and stopped in front of what appeared to Franco to be a restaurant. The dark-skinned man exited and opened the rear passenger door.

"Come with me," he said in excellent Italian. Franco exited and followed him inside. He heard the Land Cruiser drive off. Inside, wicker

chairs were arranged around wooden tables on a tiled floor. The walls were of pink stucco with pictures of famous Egyptians, Egyptian architecture and scenes of Egypt. Wooden posts and crossbeams supported an open latticework roof that helped cool the building. The African led Franco to the back where a European with blonde shoulder-length hair sat dressed in jeans and a denim shirt.

"Thank you, Aşik," the man said to the African and then indicated for Franco to take a seat across from him.

"I'd heard you were dead," Giacomo Dante stated.

"It makes things easier for people to believe that," Franco replied.

Dante pointed to a large bowl of what appeared to Franco to be spaghetti.

"It's called kushari," Dante noted. "It's tomato sauce and garlic served over a base of rice, lentils, macaroni and chickpeas. The other dish is Macaroni Béchamel. They're about as close as I can get to Italian cuisine here. The fried things are known as falafel and are made with chickpeas and fava beans."

Franco scooped some of each on his plate and took a bite. At Dante's raised eyes, he nodded his head in agreement that it tasted pleasant.

"I'd heard Cristiano was dead, as well, so you can imagine my surprise when I received a letter from him asking for this meeting. And where's your partner? The idealist?" Dante asked, pouring water from a bottle into Franco's glass.

"The reports of her death were, unfortunately, true."

Dante nodded his head in sympathy.

"I expect your...sources...have told you that the movement is effectively rudderless," Franco began. "Not just Padania, but the entire Five Republics. Greed and egos have the heads of the various factions playing against each other. And after the government took out the entire Milan faction last month, everybody ran to their holes and covered their heads."

"Despite the pettiness of some of the movement's leadership, the movement itself remains strong, even in the face of ruthless and

relentless attacks by the government. And yet they are starting to lose faith and beginning to question if they're making a difference. They need that faith restored, Dante, and Cristiano believes you are the one to do it."

"Why does he not take over himself? If his peers are all dead, he should have little problem, I would think. He could be a modern day Lazarus, risen from the dead to take command," Dante laughed, though his chuckles had no warmth.

"Cristiano is seriously ill, Dante. It is why he did not come in person to see you. Even if he wished to take control of the Milan faction, he would not be strong enough to hold on to it. You have the respect and the clout to do so, Dante," Franco said.

"I've not been living in exile because of choice," Dante shot back. "The government's dogs hounded me everywhere I went, as well. It became too...inconvenient...for the movement's leaders to protect me so I had no choice but to flee. I went to the Balkans and they even hunted me there so I continued East into the Caucasus to lose them. I've been working my way back West these past years via the Middle East and the Horn of Africa."

"Milan would accept you and protect you, Dante. You have fought for Northern Independence since you reached adulthood. Vicenza. The attack on the *Audace* at La Spezia. Kidnapping Minister Ronchi. They remember and admire you. And those who feared your popularity and shunned you are now dead. You can create your cadre of loyalists around you."

Franco leaned forward and looked Dante in the eyes.

"You were always a skilled orator, able to fire-up passions, which is why the government worked so hard to track you down and eventually forced you abroad into hiding. Now is your chance to return to Italy and take over the movement and re-light the fire of revolution. Italy's Fourth War of Independence needs a general, Giacomo. Will you accept the uniform?"

Dante leaned back in his chair and took a deep pull from the water bottle.

"Pretty words, Franco. And strange ones, at least in terms of coming from your mouth. Your partner had the fire in her belly, not you. But I

also understand that you cannot fight a war with just words. You need guns and bullets and that costs money. Something I hear has been in somewhat short supply since the government arrested Pirazzi and locked him up for the next three lifetimes.”

“Cristiano kept a few million in assets hidden in case he ever needed to escape, as well. Since he may soon not need it in this life and can’t take it with him into the next, he is ready to put a good portion of it at your disposal to help you reassert control.”

Franco leaned back and stared through the rafters to the stars above.

“After the death of my uncle, I only wished to be left alone and slowly drink myself into oblivion. Franca’s passion moved me and re-ignited in me a desire to live and a cause to fight for. When she was killed, I considered slipping back into the old ways, but her memory still burns brightly in my heart and that heart calls out for me to avenge her.”

“I understand vendetta, Franco. However, you and Cristiano are asking me to not only stick my head into the lion’s mouth, but then stab him in the ass with a pin. If it’s just killing some government officials, there are plenty of people willing to do that for some of Cristiano’s money. Why do you need me and the movement?”

“The people I want dead are not human,” Franco said.

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I, to be honest. They look like pre-teen girls, but they shrug off bullets like they were pebbles. I’ve seen them jump three meters and punch through walls. They’re expert marksmen, yet they can also kill with their bare hands.”

“Any child can be turned into a weapon,” Dante noted. “Here in Africa there are large armies composed of young children brainwashed into being brutal killers. And they make body armor for children now, plus the right amount of pain killers would allow them to continue even if shot.”

“I’ve seen the documentaries. And Pinocchio dealt death with aplomb even though he hadn’t left his teens. But these girls are different,” Franco said. “There have been rumors about them for a few years now—little girls with superhuman strength and abilities that can’t be killed. I didn’t believe them until we encountered one of them in

Montalcino. She had long blonde pigtails, wore a suit and wielded a shotgun. She moved like a mongoose and her reflexes were supernatural. And when we came to aid Cristiano in Milan, we surprised another one of them and she pulled a pistol and placed rounds on us within the blink of an eye. Franca hit her head-on with the car and I put a round through her shoulder. Yet she was back on her feet in moments and firing at us as we escaped."

The waitress brought a tray of baqlawa and a pot of strong coffee.

"Again, Franco, this is all very interesting, but if you want to slay these...dragons, I am sure there are plenty of knights available for you to hire to do so. If you like, I can put you in touch with some people here who would be more than happy to take your money and have no qualms about killing little girls in public."

"The problem is nobody knows how many there are or where they are based. They've been seen in at least Rome, Bologna, Milan, Venice, Tuscany, Naples and Sicily. What I need is something audacious and grandiose that will ensure the Agency sends as many of the girls as possible so they can be entrapped and disposed of. That event will not only allow me to extract my revenge on the people who killed Franca, but it will also allow you to make a clear statement as to why you deserve to not only lead the Milan faction, but be protected by them."

"If I come back to Milan and take control, those little girls you want dead will be trying to mount my head on the Prime Minister's trophy room wall," Dante replied.

"All the more reason to eliminate them, no?" Franco noted.

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Dante kept Franco waiting for two days before agreeing to come back to Italy, though he refused to offer any hints as to when he would do so nor where he would enter.

He did tell Franco to wire him €10.000 for "initial working capital" and added he "would be in touch". Franco agreed and headed back to Switzerland.

When he arrived, he found Cristiano's condition had worsened. The pneumonia had leaked into his bloodstream, causing bacteremia that then led to sepsis and required immediate hospitalization. Attempts to arrest the spread were unsuccessful and he began to suffer from

multiple organ dysfunction syndrome. Cristiano dictated his will, leaving all of his assets to Franco. He also granted Franco full Power of Attorney and had a video created for Giacomo Dante, informing him that he would soon be dead and that Franco had his blessing to work with Dante to bring about whatever they felt necessary. Cristiano passed away on All Hallows' Eve and Franco had him buried in a small plot on the outskirts of Milan.

With Cristiano dead, Franco now had the freedom to wage his campaign of revenge against the cyborg girls and their handlers at the Social Welfare Agency.

## Chapter Four – Analysis

Broken clouds hovered over the frazioni of Monticelli, north of the commune of Teramo in the Abruzzo region of Italy. Standing proud on the top of a 300m peak amongst rolling hills to the east of the Parco Nazionale del Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga, Monticelli and the surrounding frazione were populated mostly by locals, though the occasional adventurous tourist would hike the area and admire the splendid view of Gran Sasso.

As he navigated the winding and narrow roads in his BMW 740iL Protection, Lupa Sandrelli wished he had the augmented arm strength of his cyborg, Gattonero, who sat in the passenger seat beside him, loudly smacking bubble gum as she idly watched the landscape speed by. The car dated back to his time with the Organized Crime Investigation Group (GICO) of the Guardia di Finanza. Combating drugs trafficking, smuggling, money laundering and terrorist financing put him in contact with many unsavory people who often attempted to solve their differences with bullets and bombs. He'd have preferred something smaller, however BMW only offered the 7-Series in their "Protection" line and he enjoyed the piece of mind in having a factory-sourced option covered under a factory warranty.

On this slightly overcast Sunday afternoon in November, Lupa and Gattonero were not in Monticelli on business, but instead pleasure. Teramo held an important weeklong international photography show during October and as budding shutterbugs, both Gattonero and Henrietta had pestered their handlers to take them. The previous day they visited the large market held every Saturday and today, the final day of their three-day vacation, the two *fratelli* split up.

Jose and Henrietta took the A24 to the beaches of the Adriatic Coast while Gattonero asked Lupa to take her up into the mountains. Both cyborgs would fill their digital memory cards and then compare pictures when they returned to the compound.

Lupa pulled over by the side of the road. Because the forward windows only rolled down 15cm, Gattonero opened the door and stepped out to focus her camera on the Gran Sasso d'Italia standing proud in the distance. They then drove into the town and Gattonero snapped more pictures.

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An hour later, they wound their way towards State Highway 80 and the A24 Autostrada.

"Thank you for taking me up there," Gattonero noted as she flipped through the images using the built-in display on her SLR camera.

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself," Lupa replied. As they rounded a curve, without warning a white first generation Fiat Ducato panel van jumped out and blocked the road, forcing Lupa to stand on the brakes. The side panel slid back and a man dressed in black with a balaclava pointed a Beretta AR70/90 assault rifle at them and opened fire on full-automatic.

The 36mm thick ballistic glass erupted in craters as the 5.56x45mm NATO ball rounds slammed into it, though none penetrated thanks to the glass – and the rest of the armor – being designed to withstand the more powerful 7.62x51mm NATO round. As Lupa put the car in reverse and hit the accelerator, Gattonero opened the mapbox and removed her Brügger & Thomet MP9, an improved version of the Steyr TMP. She slapped in a 30-round magazine and armed the weapon. She lowered the window and hung the weapon out, placing 5 rounds into the shooter's chest, knocking him back. However, the ballistic vest he had under the sweater stopped the rounds and he quickly recovered to start shooting again.

The narrowness of the road prevented Lupa from performing a J-turn and as he went backwards, he overcorrected and dropped the car into a ditch, the rear drive wheels no longer able to gain traction.

"Get in back and stay down!" Gattonero ordered. She opened the passenger door and, hiding behind it, started prioritizing targets. She took aim at the shooter in the van and fired off a short burst into his head, dropping him.

Another shooter appeared behind her and opened up on her. The CFRP plate armor covering her ribs absorbed the impact, but it threw her forward into the door. She dropped down and turned, firing a burst into his center-mass followed by a shorter burst into his skull. As she advanced on the van, the driver fired on her with an Uzi chambered for .45 ACP. Again, her armor deflected the rounds and she fired back at him, hitting him in the head and killing him. She secured the area and when she determined that nobody else remained, she returned to the BMW, giving Lupa the "all clear" signal.

She checked the car and saw that all four run-flat tires remained intact. A few rounds had gone through the hood, but a look underneath showed the engine bay appeared to be undamaged. Lupa ran the on-board diagnostics and the car reported it was fine. Gattonero went to the back of the car and helped lift it to the point the rear wheels could restore traction and Lupa drove it back onto the road. He then contacted the compound and they diverted Jose and Henrietta to his location as well as deploying a police response from Teramo while Gattonero examined the van.

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From a hill a kilometer away, Aaron Cicero watched the battle unfold through a set of high-power binoculars. Beside him, another man filmed the action with a Sony HDR-FX1 HD digital camcorder mounted on a tripod.

"This sure is an expensive intelligence-gathering mission," the man with the camera noted as he watched Gattonero quickly terminate the three-man squad.

"Dante wants to know just what we're facing," Cicero replied. "According to the information Franco supplied, the Agency's girls have super-human abilities and seem to shrug off bullets."

"Sounds like a bad science-fiction movie," the man commented.

"That teenager just killed three trained gunmen and shook off being shot with an assault rifle," Cicero noted, putting down the binoculars. "You get everything?"

"Yeah."

"Then let's get out of here," Cicero said.

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Lupa and Gattonero were not the only *fratello* to be tested and observed by Aaron Cicero. They were behind the truck bomb attack against the Ministry of the Interior building that led to Angelica's death and they sacrificed some more low-level operatives in mid-December at the Piazza del Plebiscito in Naples to witness first-hand the abilities of the girl said to have killed Pinocchio.

Attempts were also made to determine just what the girls were. They launched attacks against computers and attempted to bribe workers to

gather whatever information they could. They thoroughly penetrated the public side of the Social Welfare Association and learned of the advanced prosthetic and other medical research programs they were involved in.

All of this data flowed back to Dante in Tunisia, who started to analyze it for weaknesses he could exploit.

## Chapter Five - The Elephant Trap

The ferry from the Sardinian city of Tortolì pulled into the quay at Fiumicino on the first day of 2006. Amongst the crowd of people disgorged were four men, one dressed in a blazer and slacks and the other three in leather jackets and jeans. They walked to the parking lot and a brown mid-1990s Lancia Kappa sedan.

The man in the blazer took the passenger seat and opened the map box, removing a prepaid cellular phone and dialing a number in Cairo.

"We're here," Aaron Cicero said once he heard the connection made and then ended the call, powering off the phone.

Cicero and his men had flown from Cairo into Olbia – Costa Smeralda Airport on Sardinia and then took the ferry over to help cover their tracks. Unfortunately for Cicero, Giacomo Dante needed him to be captured by the Agency so he'd leaked to people he knew had an Agency affiliation and a teenage girl with red hair and green eyes, dressed in black jeans tucked into knee-high black boots with a red double breasted wool jacket standing out front of the terminal watched the four walk to the car and get in. She made a mental note of the license plate and then jogged over to a blue smart fortwo cabriolet, slipping into the passenger seat.

As she strapped in, Petrushka made her report to Alessandro.

"Brown Lancia Kappa sedan. Italian license plate number..."

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Alessandro tailed the Lancia at a discreet distance, his espionage training allowing him to remain inconspicuous to the four men ahead of them. The vehicle turned into an older mid-range hotel in the Campo Marzio rione of central Rome. He parked around the corner in a reserved area, hanging a government parking permit in the window. He and Petrushka then made their way inside and took a seat in the lobby to wait to see where they went next.

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After his capture, and being subjected to "enhanced interrogation techniques", Aaron Cicero broke and stated that Giacomo Dante had snuck into Italy and planned to bomb the Alitalia domestic operations in Terminal A of Leonardo da Vinci-Fiumicino Airport. This is indeed what Dante had told Cicero, though it was patently untrue.

Therefore, when the Prime Minister ordered Defense Minister Petris to concentrate their focus on the airport, it pulled them out of position to have any hope of discerning or countering Dante's actual plans.

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Within the week, Dante had taken a boat from Tunis to the southern Sardinian town of Carbonia. Built under the orders of Benito Mussolini in the late 1930s to support the now closed coal mines, the town generated little tourist traffic and the high unemployment rate allowed Dante and his team to blend in and not attract notice.

"Has the ship sailed?" Dante asked.

"Yes. It left Annaba last night. They loaded the package last and it will be the first container offloaded when the ship docks at Chioggia," Barnaba reported.

"Excellent. Do we have the detonator electronics?"

"Yes. It will directly interface with the warhead controller and will allow us to manually detonate the device."

Dante nodded. He motioned to Guido who brought forward some plastic cups filled with a Sardinian wine said to help promote long life.

"My friends and comrades, within a week we will strike a great blow for Northern independence. The Italian government has chosen to take children and turn them into weapons to be wielded against us. For the past few months we have studied that enemy and learned their strengths and weaknesses. They are indeed powerful, but I do not believe they are invulnerable. Anything that bleeds can be killed and this plan will hopefully kill many of them."

He raised his cup.

"To Padania!" he shouted.

"Padania!" came the reply.

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The ropes holding the *M/V Chevaliere Ciampa* against the wharf in the Veneto commune of Chioggia creaked as they took up and released tension as the ship rode the swells. From within a shipping container

they removed a smaller crate and placed it on a smaller ship docked farther down the wharf.

Inside that container, packed in a protective cradle, lay the warhead stage of a cruise missile. Giacomo Dante and Aşik boarded the ship and sailed it up the Venetian Lagoon to the main port in Venezia Porto Marghera where they off-loaded the crate onto a small cab-over-engine truck and drove it to a rented warehouse.

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When they received the phone threat from Giacomo Dante that evening, the Interior Ministry immediately contacted the Minister of the Interior, who then immediately informed the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister then called Defense Minister Petris into a private meeting where they discussed increasing the security presence at Rome's main airport.

Giacomo Dante remained stashed out-of-sight inside a nearby hotel for the next day, awaiting the government's response. When they did not respond by dusk on the third day, after midnight they moved the warhead under cover to a small ship and motored to the docks in front of the Piazza San Marco.

A confluence of astronomical tides and strong seasonal winds meant Venice once again suffered from a severe *aqua alta* and the Piazza San Marco lay flooded under scores of centimeters of water. This allowed them to float the warhead and other weaponry next to St. Mark's campanile. They quickly overpowered the private security guards and using a block-and-tackle in the bell-tower raised the warhead to the belfry. Dante's men also prepared the campanile to repel a large-scale attack.

Once they were set-up, Dante and Aşik took the boat to the Isola Di San Clemente and made their way to the campanile of the Church of San Clemente, located adjacent to the San Clemente Palace hotel which occupied the grounds and buildings of the former Camaldolesi Monastery. They hauled a Denel NTW-20 anti-material rifle broken down across two duffel bags up the steps and settled in for the expected siege.

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As dawn rose over the city, Dante contacted the Interior Ministry and informed them a bomb had been placed in the belfry of the campanile and a list of demands would be made later that morning that if not

met, would result in the device being detonated. The Venetian Polizia Municipale closed off the Piazza and evacuated the buildings around the campanile, including the Doge's Palace, St. Mark's Basilica, the Biblioteca Marciana and the Procuratie. The official reason given for the closures and evacuations pertained to the severe aqua alta forecast for the city that afternoon.

Additional forces from the Carabinieri and Polizia di Stato arrived on site to secure the area from the public and help evacuate the residential and commercial buildings that surrounded the Piazza. The Guardia Costiera closed the canals leading to the Piazza and also the lagoon at the mouth of the Grand Canal. Also, incoming vehicle and rail traffic were stopped at the Ponte della Libertà bridge.

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The SWA compound lay in a state of frenzied activity as the sun rose over the mountains. Awoken at their apartments in the city, the handlers rushed in as their cyborgs were collected and ordered to prepare for deployment.

Information from Venice remained sketchy, though when a Polizia di Stato Eurocopter AS365 Dauphin came under attack by an FIM-92 Stinger MANPADS, the decision was made to mobilize all of Section 2. Everyone piled into the Fiat Ducato 17-seat minibus and drove to Pratica di Mare Air Base and boarded an Aeronautica Militare C-130J Hercules transport aircraft.

The Hercules lifted off and headed for Treviso Airport outside of Venice. During the hour they were in the air, Dante issued a proclamation demanding the release of Aaron Cicero and fifty other political prisoners and his intention to shoot down any aircraft approaching the Piazza. While the Stinger lacked the range to engage aircraft landing at Venice Marco Polo Airport, the Transport Ministry instituted a ground-stop and diverted incoming aircraft to other airports.

When the Hercules touched down, it taxied over to the Aeronautica Militare apron and the minibus exited the back of the plane and drove out of the base towards Venice. They were allowed across the Ponte della Libertà bridge and parked along the pier, transferring from the minibus to an enclosed sightseeing boat. Alessandro and Petrushka took the wheel and they motored to the gondola docks in front of the Museo Archeologico, docking against a temporary pier.

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Michele and Kara were in Milan when Ferro ordered them to report to Venice. They were returning from a conference in Copenhagen and had flown their Piaggio P.180 to Milan's Linate Airport that morning to collect some items from Michele's apartment. They hailed a cab and rushed back to the airport, boarded the plane and set course for Venice.

The P.180 needed less than 1000m to land, which allowed them to use San Nicolo, a small grass field located on the northern tip of Venice's Lido. Because of Dante's anti-aircraft threat they flew along the northern end of the Venetian Lagoon and along the seaward edge of the Cavallino peninsula, staying low and slow, dropping over the town of Cavallino-Treporti at nearly roof-top level as they crossed the Lido inlet and touched down.

They parked on the grass and were met by Ferro, who'd been taken over by a Carabinieri patrol boat. They walked over to the lagoon side and watched the carnage unfold in stunned silence.



## Chapter Six - Kotov Syndrome

The air temperature outside of the Piaggio P.180 as it cruised at 12,500m hovered around -55°C, but the mood inside the cabin felt even colder.

Even with the control the government held over the media, they couldn't keep a lid on the story. Thousands witnessed the Polizia di Stato helicopter being shot out of the sky and the assault on the campanile. Also, as one of the tallest buildings in Venice, it housed multiple radio transmitters. Dante successfully hijacked the RAI Radio 1 stream to broadcast his manifesto. As the government's news station, many Venetians were turned into it for information about the Aqua Alta. And the Internet allowed video and pictures taken by witnesses to these events to be distributed around the world where they were picked up by foreign news services which launched "Breaking News" reports.

While Dante didn't mention the Agency or its cyborgs, with all the professional and amateur media directed at Venice, Director Lorenzo ordered Michele to fly the surviving girls to Rome under Ferro's supervision. They boarded a Carabinieri boat and sailed across to the Lido, exiting covered in blankets to obscure their features. They rushed into the plane and Michele activated the electrochromatic shades to make the windows opaque. They quickly started the engines and lifted off towards Rome.

At the front of the cabin, Kara poured hot water into two cups on saucers at the cabinet to the left of the entry door, stirring the hot cocoa. She then took the two cups forward to the cockpit.

Michele looked up as Kara entered with the cups and saucers. "Thank you," he noted as he took one. Beside him in the co-pilot seat, Ferro accepted hers with thanks.

"How are things back there?" Michele asked.

"Quiet," Kara noted.

Michele held up his hand and flipped down the boom microphone. "134.875. India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot," he said into his headset. He reached down and tuned the radio to the new frequency. "Bologna ATIS this is India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot with you at Flight Level One-Two-Five traveling direct Ciampiano."

He flipped the boom back up. "We'll be on the ground within the hour." Kara nodded and returned to the cabin.

"I'm not looking forward to the next few days," Ferro noted in the cockpit as she looked out her side window at the Adriatic coast kilometers below.

Michele grunted in agreement. "The Croce's vendetta is getting very, very expensive. I wonder how much longer Minister Petris and Director Lorenzo can keep writing checks..."

In the cabin, Petrushka sat on her blanket on the divan across from the door. Barefoot, her clothes had mostly dried out and her boots were to the side of the divan, towels stuffed in to them to keep their shape and help dry out the inside, her socks draped over the tops.

Kara sat down next to her. "We'll be on the ground in about forty minutes."

"This was not a very good day, was it?" Petrushka asked rhetorically and Kara merely shook her head.

The final tally came up a draw: 12 terrorists killed against 2 cyborgs and 10 GIS troopers. St. Mark's would be closed for at least a week for clean-up of the debris, though the campanile would remain closed indefinitely as teams performed surveys and developed repair plans. They recovered Beatrice from under the debris and she and Silvia were placed in body bags for transport back to the compound.

In the aft section of the cabin, Triela, Rico, Henrietta and Chiara sat in the four facing leather recliners. On the folding table in front of Triela and Chiara sat a chocolate torte Michele had secured at a hotel on the Lido along with an electric water kettle.

"Michele referred to it as 'Kotov syndrome'," Chiara responded to Triela's comment about Jean's actions in Venice.

"What's that?" Henrietta asked, spooning more sugar into her tea.

"It's a term in chess, first postulated by Alexander Kotov in 1971. He posited that a player could spend so much time focusing on the goal that they don't properly consider the path to reach that goal and they

therefore end up making a rash and terrible move, often ending up costing them the game."

"That explains this mission," Triela noted, sourly.

"What do you think is going to happen?" Henrietta asked.

"I expect heads are going to roll," Triela noted. "Dante escaped. An important tourist site was bombed. We lost a number of people. And with the Olympics only weeks away, there are likely going to be fears about possible terrorism events there, as well."

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Thirty minutes later, the P.180 passed over the capital and Michele tuned one of the two radios to 122.1.

"Practica di Mare tower, this is India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot requesting approach and landing clearance."

"India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot, be advised that Practica di Mare is a military installation and civilian landings are prohibited," came the reply.

"Acknowledged, tower. Please contact Base Operations and inform them that Tennente Collonelo Michele Pagani is aboard. They should be expecting us."

"One moment, India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot." A few minutes later the radio crackled. "India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot, Practica di Mare tower. You are cleared to land on runway 13L."

Michele acknowledged the clearance and called for Kara, telling her to prepare the cabin for landing. Kara collected everything and placed it in the cabinet while Petrushka pulled on her socks and boots.

The P.180 descended and landed gently on the runway.

"India-Whiskey-Oscar-Lima-Foxtrot, contact Ground on 121.6."

Michele did so and was instructed to take the second turn-off and link with "Follow Me" truck waiting for them past the second runway. They did so and passed a line of Aeritalia G.222's and continued forward to a small parking area. Michele powered down the port engine and

feathered the left propeller while setting the starboard engine to minimal power.

An Airman came forward and knocked on the door. Kara rose and unlocked it, opening the upper half while the Airman helped drop the lower section. Nihad appeared and directed the girls to a where a black Fiat Ulysee minivan with deeply-tinted windows parked nearby with both sliding doors opened. Henrietta and Rico climbed into the third row while Triela and Chiara took the second row. Ferro followed after them and she belted herself in the passenger seat while Nihad returned behind the wheel. He started the van and headed off.

The Airman helped Kara seal up the door and she joined Michele in the cockpit. They re-started the port engine and taxied back to the runway. They departed to the south and then performed a 180° loop over the town of Aprilia to line up with Rome Ciampino's runway 33. After landing and parking in their private hangar, they waited for the valet to bring the Gallardo and then they headed for the compound.

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Michele found Claes in the music room, watering her herbs.

"Welcome back," she said automatically.

"Claes I...uh...have some bad news..." Michele said, his face grave.

"The Venice mission?"

"Yes...Beatrice and Silvia...didn't make it..."

Claes closed her eyes for a moment, then nodded her acceptance.

"Beatrice died a hero," Michele noted.

"I guess that's the best we can hope for, isn't it?" she said, turning back to her plants. "Thank you for telling me," she added.

Michele took the hint and left the room, silently closing the door behind him.

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Triela's words to her sisters on the plane proved prophetically true.

With the XX Olympic Winter Games scheduled to start in under a month, the attack raised hackles and concerns in a number of Italian Ministries, including Foreign Affairs, Economy and Finance, Interior, and Culture. In addition, the Piedmont regional government and Turin city government laid their own siege on the national government, scared that the "Venice Incident" would dampen attendance at the Games. The International Olympic Committee also sent a high-level delegation to meet with the Torino organizers and the Interior and Culture ministers both went up to show their support.

Pressure also came from within the organization as well as from without. Special Operations, Section 1 Director Giulio Draghi and Public Security Chief Reschiglian both saw opportunities to advance their own groups at Section 2's expense. The greatest outrage came from the GIS, who were effectively rendered combat-ineffective as a unit with the loss of all three of their active Sections. They felt they'd been deliberately misled as to the true situation in Venice and the firepower they'd be facing. A similar incident had occurred in May 1997 and the GIS based their response on that scenario – facing a handful of men armed with pistols – and not planned for hardened militiamen with access to military-grade anti-personnel mines and battle rifles.

In addition to the flack she received from her own juniors, Minister of Defense Petris bore the full brunt of the Prime Minister's displeasure over the debacle. She, in turn, exchanged heated words with Director Lorenzo and Jean Croce, the latter whom then walked around shooting sparks from his eyes. Lorenzo ordered the compound to effectively be in lockdown with the cyborgs restricted to quarters and the handlers forbidden from taking them out without express permission from himself.

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"What's going to happen now?" Kara asked as she lay on Michele's bed in his room at the Handler's dorm.

"I don't know," Michele replied from his work desk. "Jean and the Director really screwed up. The GIS is not going to be pleased having lost so many men and Beatrice and Silvia are literally irreplaceable. Your generation of cyborgs are not as effective as shock troops."

"I overheard Hillshire saying that Silvia's handler was leaving the Agency."

"Yes," Michele replied. "They were together for close to three years and he doesn't want to be paired with a new cyborg. He likes training young people, so he's going back to his old unit to instruct new recruits."

"What about Bernardo?"

"He hasn't made a decision, yet. It's possible he may take over Claes from me or he could follow Marco and take on another role within Special Operations."

"When I die, I want you to take another cyborg," Kara noted.

"Kara..." The exasperation in his voice, while subtle, was noticeable.

"I'm serious. When Angelica died, Marco looked so sad. Now Chiara's handler is leaving. And Bernardo no longer offers a ready smile. I don't want you to be sad like the others, so promise me you will find someone to replace me and move on."

"You are my daughter, Kara. If not by blood, then by every other way that matters. I cannot replace you because you are irreplaceable."

Kara rolled off the bed and came up behind him, wrapping her arms around him and resting her head on his shoulder, the two of them seeking mutual comfort from each other's presence.

## Chapter Seven - Generation Gap

"That is one beautiful car," Kara and Michele both said at the same time, though their respective attention lay in opposite directions as they stood on the 10<sup>th</sup> green of the Le Madione Golf Club on the northern coast of Sicily, about an hour's drive east of Palermo, and home of the 2006 Concorso Italiano, which gathered some of the finest examples of Italian exotic motoring going back to the 1950s. Here you could find cars from established marques like Ferrari, Maserati, Alfa Romeo and Lamborghini rubbing fenders with vehicles from newcomers like Pagani and Fornasari.

For Kara, her gaze gravitated to a Ferrari 599 GTB Fiorano, the newest flagship of the Ferrari motorcar stable, seeing it's first light of day prior to its global debut at the Salon International de l'Auto in Geneva. The curvaceous form clad in Gray Titanium paint over aluminum panels channeled air around the car and presented the minimal amount of resistance.

Michele's eyes also roamed over curves, here executed in steel covered in a black paint so deep that Michele thought if a leaf fell on it there would be ripples. Though the design reflected the cruder aerodynamic modeling tools of it's day, the Ferrari 365 still looked very rakish, especially with the roof off as was the case with the GTS/4 Spyder sitting before Michele.

When it launched in 1968, the Ferrari 365 GTB/4 did not exactly set the hearts of the *tifosi* aflame. Possessing an engine in the front when Lamborghini and DeTomaso had just released mid-engine cars and built on a traditional ladder-type frame, many saw the car as being a throwback to an earlier age and out of step with the times. Only later did the car, more commonly referred to as the "Daytona" in celebration of Ferrari's 1-2-3 finish at the 1967 24 Hours of Daytona, start to garner the attention, then appreciation and finally the dollars of the Collector Car market.

"It's thirty-five years old," Kara sniffed, looking at the placard, which showed it being a 1971 model.

"It's a classic," Michele replied. "It's worth well over twice that 599."

"It's still ancient," Kara quipped.

"It's younger than I am," Michele noted.

"Well you're ancient, too, but I love you anyway," Kara replied with an impish grin as she gave him a peck on the cheek. She turned back to the 599. "These are the specs of a real car. 6.0L V12. 456 kW. 607 N-m of torque. 6-speed sequential transmission—"

"And more computers than Google's campus," Michele cut in. "You don't actually drive that car, Kara. The steering wheel and throttle are just input devices, telling the car's computers where you want to go at what speed. There is no real connection between you and the car. The computers calculate the steering angle and throttle position and the rebound of the suspension and everything else. And if they think you're too reckless, they intervene with traction and stability control systems."

He turned back to the Daytona. "You *drive* this car, Kara. It requires effort on the part of the person behind the wheel. A throttle cable linkage controls how much power the V12 produces. And there is no traction or stability control to save you if you are too heavy-footed. A five-speed manual in a gated shifter with an honest to goodness foot-operated clutch means you decide when to change gears, not a computer. And look at that interior – hand-stitched fine leather...aluminum...wool carpeting."

"The 599 has leather," Kara stated, pointing to the tan and black hides wrapped around carbon fiber frames. "And it's fast. Zero to 100 in 4 seconds and a top speed of 330. The 575M gets around the Top Gear test track in 1:27 so I bet the 599 can knock at least a few seconds off that."

"God knows I've corrupted you when it comes to speed, but seriously, Kara, there is more to driving than just that. Can't you just see us cruising along the Côte d'Azur from Portofino to Saint-Tropez? I'd be leaning back with my right arm straight out on the wheel in the classic Italian driving style and my left elbow resting on the windowsill, dressed in tan chinos and a white cotton shirt with my sunglasses. You in the passenger seat in a sundress and sunbonnet, melting the hearts of every boy as we motor by at 50km/h."

"Uh...yeah," Kara said. "How about instead we both be wearing our racing suits and I'll be hunched over the wheel of the 599, right foot flat to the firewall as we tear up the Col de Turini above Nice at 150km/h, melting the rear tires, as you read me the coordinates from the sat-nav for the next turn?" she offered.



"You're just too radical, 18-year old daughter," Michele replied with a smile.

"And you're too conservative, 38-year old father," Kara shot back, also with a smile.

They grasped hands and continued on.

"You really think I'd melt boys hearts?" Kara asked as they walked on towards the Alfa Romeo area on the adjacent 14<sup>th</sup> green.

## Chapter Eight - Opening Repertoire

Now in its third year, the Concorso di Italiano Esotici drew its inspiration from the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance held on the grounds of the Pebble Beach Golf Links every summer. While January temperatures were mild in Sicily, winter was not popular "golfing weather" and the club started the Concorso as an attempt to gain business. The first year proved popular enough to bring it back and after the second year, the Il Picciolo Golf Club on the eastern side of the island suggested the two team up and promote a driving event, which this year would be known as the Tour della Esotici. Fortunately, the clear and sunny weather that blessed the previous two events returned for the third.

The Tour followed the A20 Autostrada along the northern coastline of Sicily to the commune of Falcone. There, the drivers exited the Autostrada and joined State Highways 113 and then 185. SS185 meandered along the spine of hills along a river valley until it intersects with SP7-I through the commune of Catiglione di Sicilia to SS120, which is where the Il Picciolo Golf Club nestled up against the slopes of Mount Etna. That evening a huge dinner party would be thrown for the attendees mirroring the one being held for those who chose to stay at Le Madonie. Then everyone would make their way back to Le Madonie via the A20 in the morning for the major awards, including Best in Show.

While the Concorso was open to the public for viewing, showing a car or participating in the Tour della Esotici required an invitation from the organizers. Michele chose—at Kara's urging—to bring his Enzo to the event. The organizers had him park it with other recent Ferrari supercars, including the F50, F40 and 288GTO, all of them arranged before a Ferrari FXX which held court from a raised wooden dais.

"Now that is just automotive pornography," Michele stated, pointing to a voluptuous coupe in deep metallic red paint and an even more stunning spider in pearlescent white. Female Alfa Romeo press people dressed in red tank tops and knee-length skirts with the three colors of the Italian flag down each side matched to red knee-height boots surrounded the cars, handing out bound color brochures.

"This is the 8C Competizione coupe and spider," an attractive brunette whose nametag read 'Alessia' informed Michele and Kara as she handed them a booklet. "We're considering putting it into limited production and you can leave your contact information at the table if

you would like more information.”

Michele thanked her and spent a few moments admiring the cars and then they continued on.

“You going to buy one?” Kara asked once they were out of earshot and amongst the display vehicles.

“That spider is heart-stopping beautiful, but I already have the Gallardo,” Michele noted.

“It’s probably for the better. Jeremy Clarkson says Alfa Romeos ruin your life,” Kara noted.

“That they do. But when he also notes you cannot be a true petrol-head until you own an Alfa, he is speaking Gospel truth.”

“So will you buy me an Alfa?” Kara asked.

“Don’t be silly,” Michele said. “I like you too much to do something so awful.”

Kara cocked her head askance, now totally confused.

“An Alfa is a penance you take on of your own free will, not one imposed on you by another,” Michele said.

“So true,” a female voice said with a laugh beside them. Kara turned to see a tall and very attractive blonde standing next to an immaculate red Alfa Romeo convertible, a soft cleaning rag in her hand.

“Sorry, but I couldn’t help but overhear you,” the woman said with a smile. She wore a black wool cardigan over a white cotton shirt, grey jeans that accented her legs and hips and black leather riding boots.

“You sound like a former Alfa owner,” she added.

Holding Michele’s hand, Kara felt his pulse rate quicken and his body temperature rise slightly as he looked at the woman. Michele nodded his head. “I have indeed experienced the highs and lows of Alfa ownership.”

“I’m Caterina,” the woman greeted, putting out her hand.

"Michele," he said as he took it. "This is my daughter Kara," he quickly added before she could introduce herself as his girlfriend, as was her habit as of late.

"Japanese?" Caterina guessed as she looked at Kara. "Your wife must be very beautiful to produce such a lovely young woman."

"Actually Kara is adopted," Michele replied. "I'm unmarried," he quickly added and Kara didn't miss the subtle change in Caterina's expression and body language.

Michele nodded to the car she was standing next to. "Yours?"

"She's a 1960 Giulietta Spider Veloce. I purchased her when I started University and she's been a relatively faithful companion," Caterina stated, the pride evident in her voice.

Michele came forward and admired the black leather with red piping seating, black and red leather door panels, and black leather dash top. The chrome gleamed and the lacquer on the wooden steering wheel shined.

"My first car was a 1977 Alfasud Sprint coupe that caused me much heartbreak," he noted. "The 1.2 liter engine pulled like a lame tortoise and the clutch was rubbish, but when it worked, which I admit wasn't often, it was magic, as all Alfas are."

Caterina nodded her head in agreement. "How long did you have it?"

"Six months," Michele said with a sheepish grin. "I should have learned my lesson, but I was able to get a good deal on an early model GTV6 and at that point I was hooked."

Caterina laughed, and Michele found it a wonderful sound. "Are you still an Alfa owner?" she asked.

"No," Michele admitted. "I had a good year in 1999 and purchased a Ferrari 456 and I've been a Ferrari man ever since."

"Except for the Gallardo Spyder," Kara noted.

"A Ferrari and a Lamborghini? Are you Swiss?" Caterina joked, playing on their famous neutrality. In Italy, Ferrari vs. Lamborghini passions ran deep.

"It's more that Lamborghini's current design appeals to me more than Ferrari's," Michele noted.

Caterina nodded again in agreement. "I'm sure you don't miss owning an Alfa, but do you miss driving one?"

"At times, yes. That 8C they have back there might just bring me back into the fold."

"That convertible is to die for," Caterina admitted. "I prefer the vehicles from the 1950s and 1960s, but that...that's so beautiful it borders on obscenity. Like something you'd see in the centerfold of a magazine."

"Indeed. My friend and I drove a 1949 Alfa 6C 2500 Super Sport cabriolet he owns in the *Mille Miglia* last year and he was gracious enough to let me borrow it so I could take Kara with me this year."

"Ah, last year was my first *Miglia* with the Giulietta. My late partner and I drove it, but he didn't find it as interesting." Caterina pulled open the driver's door and invited Michele to have a seat.

"It's a magnificent machine," Michele stated. "And the condition is immaculate. Are you submitting her for judging?" he asked, noting the three awards from other shows displayed on the passenger seat.

"Yes," Caterina replied. "The competition here is far too tough to hope for one of the top awards, but I'd be pleased with one of the lower categories."

"I wouldn't sell your chances short," Michele noted as he stepped out.

"Thank you. Do you have anything submitted?"

"I have a yellow Enzo, but she's a track car so she's not really in 'concours condition'," Michele admitted. "We brought her along for the Tour."

"An Enzo? 1999 must not have been the only good year you've had," Caterina noted with a smile.

"I own a technology consulting firm in Milan and I do okay for myself. As you can see, my daughter doesn't want for clothing."

Kara, wearing a €1200 dress over a €300 sweater, clipped Michele in the shin with her €1000 leather boots. Caterina tried and failed to stifle a chuckle.

"Sorry," Michele said to Kara, who merely scowled at him.

They could see the judges slowly making their way down the line of cars towards them, and Michele offered he and Kara's assistance to complete the final primping, which she accepted. They then respectfully stepped away as the judges went over the car, asking questions of Caterina as to the location of certain items and the provenance of certain pieces. Within 20 minutes they'd completed and thanked her, moving on to the next vehicle, a beautiful silver 1968 Alfa 1750 Spider Veloce "roundtail" with red leather.

"That will turn a girl's blonde hair white," Caterina noted about the judging process, though she wore a smile. "But now I get a chance to actually walk the grounds."

"We were doing the same. Forgive my forwardness, but would you like to join us?" Michele offered.

As a fellow woman, Caterina could sense Kara didn't want her to accept. However, she could also sense Michele did and she could also sense in him someone who appreciated cars the way she did.

*Sorry, Kara,* she thought.

"I'd love too," she said aloud.

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The three of them walked around for the next two hours, admiring all of the post-War vehicles, Kara commenting that Michele should buy one of the soon-to-be-released Zonda C12 F roadsters since the company, Pagani Automobili, shared his last name. Michele declined the suggestion, mentioning the difficulties Richard Hammond encountered driving his Zonda C12 S when the *Top Gear* boys went to the Millau Viaduct.

Their route eventually looped them back to the Alfa Romeo section and Caterina's Giulietta.

"Are you taking part in the Tour?" Michele asked.

"The weather is too nice not to," Caterina noted. "Perfect for a convertible."

"Yes, I should have brought the Gallardo," Michele said, a bit wistfully.

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Michele took the wheel (to Kara's mild consternation) and they set out. As the FXX's racing slicks were not street-legal, it did not partake in the Tour. Therefore, Michele's Enzo lined up third behind the black 1971 Ferrari 365 GTS/4 and a white 1966 Ferrari 500 Superfast.

State Highway 185 was a narrow, two-lane road and the cars formed a long train as they followed the winding turns and switchbacks through forest and farmland. As they passed through the commune of Novara di Sicilia, the train became a bit disconnected as civilian traffic merged in and out, though local police helped maintain the traffic flow.

"Bored?" Michele asked Kara as they negotiated a 120° sweeper followed almost immediately by a 180° hairpin that opened out onto a long straight.

"Huh? Of course not," she said, though her voice betrayed her frustration at the languid pace the two vehicles ahead of her were maintaining. He could see her right leg bouncing back and he knew that if she'd been behind the wheel, she'd have passed them dozens of kilometers back and would be attacking this road at triple digit speeds.

"Maybe instead of taking the A20 back with the others tomorrow, you should consider trying this road. Hopefully it will be light on a Sunday," Michele offered.

"Yeah," Kara agreed, a dreamy smile breaking out on her face.

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By the time they reached the SP7-I interchange at Francavilla di Sicilia, Michele's arms were aching something fierce. Even though the Enzo's steering was power-assisted, it had a heavy weight and all the corners and switchbacks and hairpins were taking their toll. The cars stopped at a large industrial park to let everyone catch up and Michele handed over the driving duties to Kara under her strict assurance that she wouldn't ride the bumper of the 500 Superfast in an attempt to get it to go faster.

The SP7-I was just a shorter version of SS-185, with plenty of sweepers and switchbacks and hairpins. True to her word, she maintained a safe and polite distance from the Superfast, though when it and the 365 GTS/4 reached the SS120 interchange, they both motioned her to pass them. Kara did so and as soon as she made the turn, she floored the throttle, the Enzo laying down two long, dark streaks of rubber as the car shimmied under acceleration. She stabbed the brakes as she entered the 90° constant radius left-hander and planted her boot in the carpet on exit until she reached the entrance to the Il Picciolo Golf Club, where she stood on the brakes, turning into the club to the claps and whistles of the public lining the approach.

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Concorso staffers directed Kara to the 1<sup>st</sup> green, assigning her the spot closest to the club house, a restored and converted farmhouse. The 365 GTS/4 and 500 Superfast came next, slowly followed by the other cars over the next hour. Guests and fans came up to the Enzo to admire it and Kara basked in the spotlight. Michele, meanwhile, walked down the line of cars until Caterina's pulled in to her spot.

"That was a glorious drive," she exclaimed. She'd placed a scarf over her head and if anything, Michele thought it made her even more attractive. She'd replaced the cardigan with a red leather jacket for the drive and she unzipped it to show a white cotton shirt.

"Indeed. The slow pace frustrated Kara, so I promised her she could drive that route back in the morning."

"Good for you. Fathers should indulge their daughters every now and then," Caterina replied, echoing a sentiment Michele himself firmly believed in.

The two of them walked back to the Enzo to collect Kara and then the three of them went towards the clubhouse area. Mount Etna loomed on the horizon, the snow cap a mix of purples and pinks in the gathering dusk. Long banquet tables had been laid out and candles, hurricane lamps and torches provided plenty of natural light to complement the artificial electric light of the building. Waiters walked the crowd with champagne and fine local wines as well as antipasto as the outside dining area was prepared on the 18<sup>th</sup> green.

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After dinner people split up into couples or small groups, some dancing, some walking the grounds, others enjoying *caffè* and *digestivo* or lighting cigars and pipes.

"Are you staying at the course?" Caterina asked as she and Michele stood near a fire pit.

"No, we're at the San Domenico Palace in Taormina," Michele replied.

"Snazzy. I'm at the Monte Tauro."

"You're like across the valley from us. We can probably wave at each other from our respective pools," Michele noted.

"That would be amusing. Uhm, would you be interested in having breakfast together?" Caterina asked. "Say 9:00 at your hotel?"

"I'd like that," Michele replied.

"Wonderful. I believe I've monopolized enough of your time this evening, so I'm going to take my leave of you so you can spend some time with your daughter."

Michele took her hand in his and kissed the top of it, then walked her to her Giulietta.

"I'll see you in the morning," Michele said as Caterina started the car.

"It's a date," she replied, putting the car into gear and motoring off.

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"You two seem to have gotten along well," Kara commented as she pulled out of the golf course on to east SS120 towards Taormina.

"Yes, she's an intriguing woman," Michele replied, his thoughts still focused on Caterina so he missed the hint of distress mixed with sadness in Kara's tone.

"She's going to have breakfast with us tomorrow morning. Her hotel is just across the way from ours."

"Lovely," Kara said, though her tone implied otherwise. She rounded the curve past the SP7-I intersection and pressed down hard on the throttle along the straight. The sat-nav showed a 180° turn composed

of two 90° left-handers and she waited till 100m before stamping on the brakes for the first one. She carried her speed through the second and floored the throttle on the exit, again standing on the brakes for the 130° right-hander and then applied full throttle on the next straight. She braked hard for the next right-hander and powered through the next series of corners and back out on the straight, and entered the outskirts of the commune of Linguaglossa at over 200 km/h.

"Kara! We're in a residential district!" Michele admonished, shouting to be heard over the wail of the V12. Kara lifted off, blipping the throttle as she downshifted, the V12 barking as it dropped in revs, the loud report echoing off the walls of the houses like a gunshot.

"Use your head, girl! Do you want to get us arrested for disturbing the peace?" Michele growled in annoyance.

"Sorry," Kara replied, though her tone carried no hint of contriteness. She slowed to the posted limit, which she maintained for the rest of the trip to the SS114 interchange and the drive up that to their hotel.

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Converted in 1896 from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century monastery of the same name, the San Domenico Palace Hotel sat on the end of a cliff overlooking the Ionian Sea. Michele and Kara were escorted to a deluxe suite with a view of the sea and Michele nodded approvingly at the high ceilings, polished old tile floors, antique furniture and prints and large marble bathroom. Kara, on the other hand, sighed quietly at the two double beds.

She sat down on the loveseat just inside the terrace and pulled off her boots followed by her socks. She then walked out onto the large balcony and went up to the railing, looking out at the lights of Taormina and the boats out on the sea.

"Sorry I ignored you this evening," Michele said as he came up next to her. He put his arm around her shoulders and she leaned up against him.

"It's okay," she replied. "Caterina is very pretty and she's much closer in age to you than I am so I'm not surprised you're attracted to her."

"But this was supposed to be a father-daughter getaway and in the end the father got away from his daughter," Michele said.

"I'm going to take a shower and head to bed," Kara said and headed for the bathroom.

---

"So how long have you and Kara been together?" Caterina asked as she and Michele ate breakfast on the patio of the hotel restaurant. Kara still slept in the room.

"About two years now," Michele replied.

"She really is beautiful. You must need to beat her suitors off with a stick."

Michele smiled, more so at the thought of such action being kinder than what Kara herself could do to them.

"Being a father, and a father of a teenage girl, has been a bit difficult at times, but overall, she's been a blessing," Michele noted.

"If you don't mind me asking, what brought you together?"

"It's your standard fairy tale – starts with tragedy and ends with happiness. She was on vacation with her parents and they were involved in a traffic accident. Her parents didn't make it and she had no family back home. I did volunteer work at the hospital and we formed a bond during her recuperation. When it came time for her release, I asked if she wished to become my adopted daughter and she agreed."

"Fairy tale indeed," Caterina noted.

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After breakfast, Michele called the room to see if Kara had awoken yet, but received no answer. He tried her cellphone, with the same effect.

"I suppose I should go upstairs and kick her out," Michele muttered.

"Let her sleep. She's young and they need it."

"Well I don't want to wait too long. We still need to get back to Le Madonie. Though with her lead foot..."

"You let her drive such a powerful car?" Caterina asked, surprised.

"She's better than I am," Michele admitted, earning him a smile and laugh from Caterina. "She's logged scores of hours at the Vallelunga circuit outside Rome and she's also a fairly decent cart driver."

"Kara races carts? So did I as a young girl. I drove at the Pista di Artana or the Circuito Internazionale di Viterbo."

"Kara uses both facilities," Michele noted.

"Small world. Since Kara can drive, if you'd like, you're welcome to come back with me now and Kara can follow along when she's ready," Caterina offered.

"I would indeed like that," Michele replied. He dialed Kara's cellphone again and left her a message stating he and Caterina had gone ahead and she should follow at her leisure.

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The drive along the coast in the open-top Giulietta invigorated the spirits of both Caterina and Michele. As they passed Messina, Caterina looked out at the test pier she and Franco had tried to drop months prior.

*That's in the past, now,* she told herself.

They were approaching the commune of Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto when a yellow Ferrari Enzo blitzed past them.

"That must be Kara," Caterina remarked. Sure enough, the brake lights glowed and the car slowed down until it came up beside them. Caterina smiled while Michele tossed her a little wave. Kara responded with a jaunty salute and then hammered the throttle, the Enzo rapidly receding into the horizon.

While she couldn't match the speed of the Enzo, Caterina pressed down on the throttle and the Giulietta accelerated to 160km/h, racing down the long straight between the Barcellona and Falcone off-ramps. Just beyond Falcone, they pulled into the "Tindari" service area for fuel and refreshments. As they arrived at the parking area, they saw the Enzo, Kara sitting against the back, surrounded by a number of young men.

Caterina stopped just past the parking spot and Kara headed for their vehicle, the young men disbursing.

"Thanks for waiting," she said, her voice dripping in sarcasm, as Michele exited.

"Would you have preferred I threw you out of bed and carried you into the shower?" Michele shot back.

"You could have chosen a less...drastic...method to wake me up," Kara noted.

"We're on vacation, so I decided to let you sleep in. Did you take care of the room and our luggage?" Michele asked and Kara nodded her head.

"I'm going to re-fuel and head out, so I'll meet you two at the course," Caterina noted. She put the car in gear and motored off towards the fueling area.

"Did you eat before you left?" Michele asked and again Kara indicated she had.

"Okay. I'm going to get some water so fire up the Enzo and we'll head off."

"Should I wait for Caterina?" Kara asked.

"I'll give her a call once we near Sant'Agata di Militello," Michele noted.

## Chapter Nine - The Maróczy Bind

"Is this blue-collar enough?" Kara asked as she came into Michele's room of his apartment. She wore a yellow t-shirt over a black turtleneck with jeans and white lace-up sneakers. In her hand she held her customized messenger bag, which held her H&K XM8 PDW.

"That's fine," Michele replied. He wore a striped button down shirt and blue chinos with white moccasins.

"Why are we even bothering dressing like this when we're driving the F430?" Kara asked.

"Because we don't have time to rent a Grande Punto," Michele said. "We'll just have to park a block or two away and walk."

They headed for the garage and with Michele at the wheel, headed for the Pioltello industrial suburb east of Milan.

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The day before, Michele received a phone call from the 'Milan Tourism Promotion Agency' informing him that one of their contacts wished to meet with them about a warehouse he claimed served as a transfer point for Padania and had been used to move the weapons and body armor used by Dante and his men in Venice. The contact claimed the warehouse currently stood empty, however Director Lorenzo felt it worth checking out. As the Pagani *fratello* maintained a residence in Milan, they were chosen.

"We should have taken the time to rent the Punto," Michele admitted as they drove down streets with cars whose average value sat well south of €20.000. They made sure to not drive within two blocks of their destination and found a parking spot a block and a half away. They exited and locked the car and then started back.

They reached the correct corner and started down the road. At first glance, the buildings appeared abandoned, their facades weather-worn and their windows thick with grime. Loose trash and leaves collected in corners and along the intersection of brick wall and concrete sidewalk. Weeds sprouted through cracks in the sidewalk and every ten meters a bare dirt square marked the grave of a former planting. Only the line of cars parked along both sides of the street gave testament that the area remained inhabited.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Kara asked, her eyes sweeping the windows and doorways.

"According to the Sat-Nav," Michele replied, his own head swiveling around as he took in the surroundings. He followed the numbers until he reached their intended address.

Michele tried the front door to find it locked. The grime on the window rendered it almost opaque, but Michele could barely make out a large open area with a few crates scattered about.

Kara walked along the front past two large roll-up doors. She noticed the padlocks on each showed signs of rust and that, along with the trash and leaves along the bottom, led her to believe that the building had not been used for some time.

Michele joined her and as she turned to tell him her thoughts she saw a flash out of the corner of her eye and fell forward, landing on Michele and driving him hard into the ground under her hundred kilo weight. The 5.56x45mm ball rounds speared into and through the first generation Lancia Zeta minivan they fell behind, raining fragments of tempered glass down on them. They heard some rounds pass through the car and impact the door behind them. Fortunately for them, the aim was ragged and the rounds went high, passing over them. Their shooter emptied his magazine and the firing stopped.

Kara rolled off of Michele to land in front of him, shielding his body with her own. She removed her PDW from the messenger bag while Michele removed his own P2000SK pistol.

"Did you see where the fire came from?" Michele asked.

"Warehouse across the street. Ground floor. Under 10 meters," Kara replied as she slammed home a magazine and cocked the weapon. She then positioned herself to look out from under the van for anyone approaching their position.

Michele looked forward and back down the street. The streets were full with a mix of small hatchbacks and sedans along with vans of all sizes. Kara swung up, took aim at one of the shooters, and drilled him through the chest with a half-second burst. She dropped back down as a second rip of gunfire lanced out, shredding the minivan even more.

"We can't stay here!" Kara yelled.

"We need to get to that Volkswagen!" Michele yelled back. Kara turned and saw the van with racks of green-tinted glass panes on either side two cars down.

"Are you nuts?" Kara exclaimed.

"Trust me," Michele said with a lopsided smile.

Kara shook her head, but rose to one knee. She nodded her head and Michele took a position similar to a runner in a starting bloc.

"Go!" Kara yelled and Michele launched himself forward. Kara rose and sent a one-second burst of fire towards the one open window on the ground floor of the warehouse, knocking the gunman back inside. She started after Michele as a short burst of fire answered in return, but again it went wild, striking the car between Michele and Kara. Kara emptied the remainder of her magazine in the direction of the bullets, but she didn't know if she hit the shooter or not.

As Michele approached the van he saw a door on the warehouse open and another shooter appear with a rifle and take aim at him. With no time to return fire, Michele went into a forward tumble and the rounds impacted the greenhouse of the Fiat Tipo 5-door hatchback and tracked with him. Michele arrested himself next to the forward tire, the strong block of the four-cylinder diesel engine effectively stopping the rounds. Michele stuck his pistol hand up over the hood and squeezed off six rounds in quick succession as Kara, crouched low, sped past him. She grabbed his left arm and yanked, almost pulling it from the socket as Michele was literally launched from his position. He stumbled ungracefully through the gap between the Fiat and the VW and landed in her lap behind the van, rolling off her. Kara continued forward to the end of the car, took aim with her pistol, and neutralized the shooter. She then scooted backwards and looked at the tall sheets of glass above her head with worry as she reached into her bag and removed a fresh magazine for her XM8.

Another long burst of automatic weapons fire rang out and they could hear it hitting the opposite side of the van, but no rounds exited the other side though Kara saw some craters appear on the glass closest to the van.

Michele wrapped his knuckles on the pane. "Laminated glass. 5.56 ball ammo doesn't penetrate very well."



"They still outnumber us and outgun us," Kara noted. She looked underneath the van, but could not see anything. She tried looking between the VW and the Fiat for the first shooter in case he was coming up the street, but saw nothing. Considering the size of the warehouse, she figured they were maneuvering within it, using it for cover.

Kara stepped out and looked around. Movement caught her attention and she turned and fired, dropping a man with a rifle. Another rifle answered and Kara shuddered as three-rounds slammed into her back. She turned around, took aim, and fired again and then dropped back down behind the van.

"Are you okay?" Michele asked.

"The jacket stopped it," Kara replied. Both wore long-sleeved leather jackets using the latest SWA ballistic armor as an inner lining and Kara had the added advantage of her built-in armor.

"You need to get to the car," Michele said.

Kara vehemently shook her head. "No, you go. I'll cover for you."

"Kara, you're faster than I am and your sneakers have better traction than my loafers. You're also better protected than I am so you're more likely to make it. Don't worry, I'll keep them at bay long enough for you to come get me."

She nodded and handed Michele her XM8 along with the last magazine. Another long burst of fire impacted the van, the rounds hitting forward blowing out the passenger window. Michele figured their opponents were moving into a better position, each firing to cover the other.

"Go now," Michele ordered.

Kara nodded, but then took his face in her hands and planted a kiss on his lips. "Don't you dare die on me," she ordered. She dashed off down the street, staying low behind the cars as she fired her pistol to draw their attention.

Flustered by the kiss, it took Michele a moment to recover, but he did, moving away from the van and taking position behind the Fiat's front.

He saw a shooter in the doorway take aim at Kara and start firing. Michele returned fire and forced him to duck back inside, but a second shooter opened up from an upstairs window.

Bullets landed all around Kara and she stumbled and went down, tumbling forward, but came back up on her feet and continued running. Michele squeezed off a one-second burst at the window and then finished the magazine off aiming at the door. He saw Kara make it around the corner and disappear.

Michele figured they'd both concentrate on him and he wasn't wrong. He slapped home the final magazine and set the XM8 for three-round burst, trying to keep his attackers from flanking him. Soon he heard the banshee wail of a Ferrari V8 and saw a red streak appear as Kara took the corner at the absolute limits of the tire's adhesion, the car violently tank-slapping as she straightened it out. She did a hard handbrake turn to spin the car around and then stood on the brakes as she hammered the throttle, laying down a thick cloud of acrid tire smoke that drifted back to obscure visibility.

Michele set the selector back to full auto and rose, firing a long burst at the shooters to get their heads down and then plunging into this concealment, concentrating on the sound of the tires and looking for the LED brake lights as bullets started to whip past him. He refrained from returning fire with his pistol, afraid the muzzle flash might give him away. As soon as he was halfway inside, Kara took her left foot off the brake and the car launched forward. The passenger door slammed closed, catching him in the shin and knee and Michele barked in pain.

The back glass cratered as rounds peppered the back of the car. Kara cut the corner too tight and sideswiped the back quarter panel of a Fiat Punto delivery van. She floored the throttle and the Ferrari tore passed in a screech of metal on metal.

"Are you hit?" Kara yelled as she barreled up the street at speeds well beyond both "safe" and "sane".

"Just my leg," Michele said, mistakenly thinking she said "hurt" and not "hit".

Kara barreled through an intersection, just missing an Iveco van that momentarily went up on two wheels as it swerved to avoid her. She slid around the corner almost sideways, causing the driver in an oncoming Peugeot to stand on his brakes and blare his horn.

"Slow down before you kill us or somebody else!" Michele bellowed as he braced himself against the door. Kara relaxed her right foot and allowed the Ferrari to slow down to a more reasonable speed.

"How are the gauges?" Michele asked.

Kara swept her eyes over the dashboard. "All nominal."

"Then head for the highway and back to the apartment."

"What about your leg?" she asked, still thinking he'd been shot.

"It hurts like hell from where the door slammed into it, but I don't think anything is broken. I'll probably have a nice bruise to show for it, however."

"I thought you said you were shot?"

"Shot? No."

"I asked you if you were hit and you said your leg," Kara persisted.

"I thought you said 'hurt'," Michele replied. "When you took off I had not fully pulled in my leg and the door slammed into it."

"Oh," Kara said, relieved.

"How about you? I saw you go down," Michele noted.

"I was hit in the arm and upper shoulder, but the armor stopped it."

As Kara drove west on State Highway 103, Michele called Jean on his cellular phone and informed him what happened. Jean acknowledged the report and said he'd send Hillshire and Triela, who were part of the *fratelli* patrolling the XX Winter Olympics in Torino. Twenty minutes later they were in the underground parking garage of Michele's apartment next to the Parco Solari.

Kara turned off the engine and Michele carefully extracted himself and examined the car. The rear tires were worn down to the cords – he was surprised they hadn't blown out on the highway. The entire right side was punched in from where Kara had clipped the Fiat, streaks of yellow paint from the van ground into the red top-coat. He walked

around back and counted seven bullet holes in the back. The right inside indicator light had been shot out as there were multiple holes in the mesh that helped vent the engine bay. The back window had multiple deep craters and gouges in it, the shallow angle and laminated construction causing most of the bullets to "skip" off rather than penetrate. Two had gone through, but were then stopped by the thick laminated acoustic glass that separated the passenger compartment from the engine compartment.

"This is going to be fun explaining to the insurance adjustor," Michele noted. "I don't want people to see the damage, so let's cover it."

Kara nodded and went to the forward luggage compartment and removed the heavy car cover which they put over the body. They then headed up to the apartment.

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"That's going to leave a mark," Michele noted as he removed his chino pants in the master bedroom. Most of his right leg sported a massive bruise from where the door had slammed into him.

"I think it already has," Kara noted as she came in. She'd removed her jacket and proceeded to pull off her tops and toss them on the bed next to him, leaving just her bra. She walked by him into the master bathroom and examined her shoulder and arm in one of the mirrors.

"It will be a couple of hours until Hillshire and Triela get here so I'm going to soak in the Jacuzzi tub for a bit," Michele noted.

"I think I'll join you," Kara noted and moved to unbutton her jeans, causing Michele to make the "time out" motion with his hands. They both suddenly burst out laughing, letting all the stress that had built up in them out. She came over and sat down next to him.

"When I went to get the car I was so scared," she admitted. "I kept thinking what if they hurt you while I wasn't there?"

Michele placed his arm around Kara and pulled her close to him, kissing her on the forehead.

"You did well, today," he told her. "You kept your head about you and you got us out alive. Thank you."

"Anytime, partner," Kara replied.

## **Chapter Ten - King Hunt**

Two hours later, Michele came downstairs into the living room. Kara was on the couch watching television, having taken her own bath and changing into shorts and a t-shirt.

"Triela called. She said they just reached the A50 interchange so they should be here in about 20 minutes."

"Okay. Did you prepare their room?" Michele asked and Kara nodded.

True to her word, just under 20 minutes later Michele's cell rang with a call from Hillshire. Kara slipped on a pair of sandals and followed Michele down to the garage area. Michele opened the gate and Hillshire's E350 wagon pulled in, Kara directing them to a spot next to the Ferrari.

The four exchanged greetings and Kara led them upstairs. As Michele invited Hillshire to the kitchen, Triela followed Kara up to the third floor bedroom.

"Do you think the bed will be large enough for Hillshire?" Kara asked, pointing to the twin bed she normally slept in.

"He usually sleeps on a queen, but the length is the same so I am sure it will be okay. But what about you?"

"I'm sleeping with Michele tonight," Kara replied. A moment later she realized how that sounded and went red. "That didn't come out right."

A sly smile broke out across Triela's face. "Hey, I know you Series Two girls are more mature with your handlers. Do try and keep the noise down, though. We are right underneath you, after all."

"Well I can move the two beds here next to each other if you and Hillshire want to make your own noise to drown out ours," Kara said, sweetly. This time, it was Triela's turn to blush red. Kara had seen Triela become more...physical...with Hillshire since Christmas in Naples and she wondered if Triela had decided it was time to let her handler know how she felt about him.

Triela lightly coughed into her hand. "Uh, this will be fine, thank you."

She followed Kara back downstairs to the kitchen where Hillshire and Michele were looking over the menu of the local trattoria.

"We're going to order in," Michele noted. "Can you two pick it up when it's ready?"

"Sure thing," Kara replied. She and Triela already had their favorite dishes memorized so once Hillshire made his selection, Michele called it in. Since the weather was pleasant, Michele and Kara set up a table for four on the front balcony while Hillshire and Triela squared away their stuff in the bedroom and Triela replaced her dress shirt and tie with a t-shirt, keeping her blue skirt.

Thirty minutes later Kara and Triela put on their shoes and headed out to pick up their order. They returned twenty minutes later weighed down with cartons of food, which they laid out on the main dining table since the table on the balcony was really designed for two.

"Jean said you two were ambushed?" Hillshire asked as they set their plates down at the table.

"At least four guys with assault rifles. We'd been sent to an address in an industrial area in the Pioltello suburb to meet a contact that claimed he had news about a PRF storage and transfer facility. We arrived to find the place abandoned and then the attack came from a warehouse across the street. Kara grabbed the car while I kept them busy. Fortunately she brought her PDW with her, otherwise we might not have made it out."

"You think it was a setup?"

"I'm starting to. They weren't professionals, based on how they handled their weapons and the tactics they employed, but they weren't common street thugs, either. Those type of people don't carry military assault rifles."

"What do you think this means?" Triela asked.

"I fear that it means our opponents may have a better idea of who we are than we have thought. In Venice, Giacomo Dante prepared himself for more than just the GIS. Anti-personnel mines. An anti-material rifle. 40mm grenade launchers. *LAW rockets*. That's all stuff you employ against hardened armored targets, not special forces infantry."

"You think they know we're cyborgs?" Kara asked.

"I think not, but they seem to know you aren't just average teenage girls and they're starting to adjust their weapons and tactics appropriately. And that worries me."

"It worries me, as well," Hillshire noted.

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When it came time for bed, Michele and Kara both changed into pajamas. While Michele normally slept on top of the covers, this time Kara noted she felt comfortable without them so Michele slipped under a light throw.

As was her way when they needed to share a bed, Kara immediately pressed her back up against Michele's and soon drifted off to sleep.

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Come the morning, Michele awoke to find Kara pressed up against his back, her left arm draped over his chest and her left leg hooked over his own and he felt her breath on the back of his neck. He sighed and rolled his eyes, then reached over to take her hand in his, giving it a squeeze. He was rewarded with feeling her stir.

"Kara?"

She gave him an incomprehensible reply.

"Kara," he said again, louder.

"Comfy," came the reply.

"I'm sure you are, but I need to get up and prepare breakfast for our guests and I can't do that with you in your current position."

With a groan, Kara untangled herself from Michele and rolled onto her back, stretching languidly.

Michele rose and leaned over to kiss her on the forehead. "Go back to sleep."

Kara followed his orders.

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The smells of breakfast cooking finally brought everyone else awake and they gathered in the dining room. Afterwards, Kara and Triela went out back to exercise while Michele cleaned-up. Hillshire was about to join him when his cellphone rang.

"Yes...What...Here in Milan? Confidence?...I understand...We're on our way." He snapped his phone shut.

"We just received a tip that Giacomo Dante is trying to escape the city in a green Volkswagen Transporter van," Hillshire declared.

"What, here?" Michele asked, unconsciously parroting Hillshire's own words on the phone.

"It was a tip called into the local Tourism Promotion Agency office by a normally reliable source so the confidence level is pretty high," Hillshire noted. While the main offices of both Public Safety and Special Operations were located in Rome, satellite offices were maintained in the major cities, including Milan, under the cover of the local "Tourism Promotion Agency". Unlike actual "Visitor Bureaus", the TPA's were not open to the general public, but instead produced and published the pamphlets handed out at the Visitor Bureaus and also maintained informational web pages.

Michele waved for Kara, who poked her head inside. "Get your shoes on and grab your pistol. We have an Operational Immediate," he ordered.

Kara rushed up into her room and threw off her t-shirt and sweats, replacing them with a polo and jeans. She grabbed her pistol case, tossing it on the bed. She opened it and removed her pistol, inserted a fresh magazine, cocked it, set the safety, and shoved it down into her jeans at the nape of her back and then slipped her feet into a pair of black patent leather loafers.

Beside her, Triela slipped out of her shorts and t-shirt, replacing them with a button-down dress shirt and slacks. She added her tie and slipped into her shoulder holster before opening a larger case, removing and preparing her own pistol, which she then placed into the holster. She also removed from the case an H&K UMP45 submachine gun. She tied the laces on her Pierre Corthay shoes and yanked her blazer out of the closet.



Both girls rushed down the stairs onto the main floor and they entered the garage. Michele tossed Kara the keys to the F430 and then removed the cover, wadding it up and tossing it in a corner. Kara started the car and backed out, allowing Michele to slide into the passenger seat before she headed for the exit, Hillshire and Triela following in the E-Class.

The report stated the van was travelling along the northern part of the "outer ring road" that encircled Milan and was likely trying to connect to the A51 Autostrade on the eastern edge of the city. Kara and Hillshire drove along the "inner ring road", turning right onto the Viale Papiniano and following it along as it changed names. Hillshire followed the road as it became the Viale Emilio Caldara while Kara turned right onto the Corso Lodi and sprinted down to the Viale Bacchiglione, following it to the Piazzale Bologna roundabout. Hillshire fought his way north up the Corso Buenos Aires, then followed it northeast to the Piazzale Loreto roundabout. Kara, meanwhile, drove directly up the Viale Romagna.

Hillshire reached the Piazzale Loreto roundabout and illegally parked on the corner, hitting his flashers. Passing cars honked in annoyance as they skirted around him and Triela climbed out of the window and stood on the seat, holding onto the luggage rack, the position giving her an unobstructed view of traffic entering the roundabout. In under a minute, a green Volkswagen Transporter (T5) panel van drove by and Triela made a mental note of the license plate as she dived back into the seat. Victor watched the van continue straight ahead onto the Via Andrea Costa and he gave chase, falling into line with two cars between him and the van. Triela called Michele to update them, and Kara suggested they pincer him at the intersection of Piazzale Francesco Durante and Viale Lombardia.

One of the cars hung a right at the next corner and the second made a left turn into an apartment complex. Fortunately, Hillshire closed the gap before they reached the next intersection and he tucked up behind the van. Triela again called Michele and they agreed that Hillshire would force the van off the road once it entered the intersection.

As they reached the Piazzale Francesco Durante, the left-hand back door of the van suddenly sprung open and a man holding an MP5 submachine gun came into view and took aim at the car. The driver jerked the wheel hard over just as the man fired, most of the rounds going wild, but two slammed into the passenger side of the windshield, missing Triela by centimeters. Hillshire violently jerked the wheel to

the right and the E350 jumped the curb onto a small pedestrian island and Hillshire steered across a crosswalk and into the left half of a triangular park that made up the Piazzale.

The F430 came storming up the Viale Lombardia. The road was narrow and lined with trees and Kara swerved back and forth, standing on the horn, the brakes and the throttle as she charged forward into the Piazzale itself. She looked out her left window to see Hillshire's E350 coming towards her across the park, the all-wheel drive system allowing the car to maintain traction on the grass and dirt.

Ahead, they saw the van crawling through the intersection, a man's arm sticking out the back as he wildly fired an SMG at Hillshire's car.

"Ram them!" Michele ordered.

"Seriously?" Kara asked.

"Do it!"

Kara gripped the wheel tighter and pressed down hard on the throttle. The Ferrari launched forward and Kara and Michele both saw the man in the van's passenger seat turn towards them, his eyes going wide in horror.

As she entered the open area where the various streets converged, Kara yanked on the handbrake and violently turned the wheel. The F430 neatly pirouetted in a 180° turn and the rear end of the car smashed into the side of the van next to the sliding door. The impact energies pushed Kara and Michele into their seats, causing Michele to bang his head against the ceiling. While the airbags did not deploy, pyrotechnic charges fired in the seat belt reels to retract them as tight as possible, physically pinning Kara and Michele back into the seats. The aft structure of the F430 pushed into the van door, knocking it off the rails and bowing it in. The F430 pushed the van through the intersection and into a chain-link fence in front of a wooden barrier around a construction site. The whole thing was over in under two seconds.

"Michele? How do you feel?"

"I'll live. Secure the van."

Hillshire's E350 exited the park and drove across the intersection, narrowly missing being alternately broadsided and rear-ended, stopping next to the impact scene. Triela launched herself from the passenger seat and approached the van, pistol drawn.

Kara undid her seatbelt and exited the car, pulling her pistol out from her jeans as she did so. She stayed against the Ferrari as she closed, her eye on the right window of the van. She carefully looked in and saw that the passenger seat had been torn off by the impact and the gunman's head hung at an odd angle, telling Kara his neck was broken. She looked on to the driver and he was unconscious, blood trickling out of his mouth.

Triela looked into the back of the van, seeing the person who had been shooting at Hillshire's car lying unconscious on the floor of the van, his right leg at an odd angle. A fourth person lay against the door opposite the one the Ferrari had impacted, bleeding from a severe head wound.

None of the four looked anything like Giacomo Dante.

Kara went back to the Ferrari and wrenched the passenger door open. She then helped Michele out of the car and onto unsteady feet.

A Carabinieri Moto Guzzi California Courassier pulled up, siren wailing and lights flashing. Hillshire flashed his SISDE credentials and informed the officer that the men in the van were wanted suspects in a shooting and that they needed medical assistance immediately. A Carabinieri Alfa 159 arrived within a few minutes and helped control the crowds. Kara and Triela verified the other suspects were still alive, but didn't move them for fear of causing more injuries. It took ten minutes for the medical response van to arrive and they quickly performed triage on the injured, determining the men in back required more immediate attention. A response car arrived five minutes later and they went to work on the van's driver.

Since the EMTs wanted to check over Michele, he agreed to go back to the hospital with two of the suspects. The most injured suspect was strapped to the gurney and the other had his hands and feet bound before being strapped to one of the two side seats. Kara took the seat next to him to ensure he didn't try anything and Michele took the seat against the front bulkhead, allowing the EMT to take the swivel seat next to the gurney. The van driver was loaded into the response car.

After the ambulance and response cars left, Hillshire and Triela watched the vehicle recovery operation. The Crime Scene Investigation unit thoroughly documented the accident scene with video and photographic equipment and then the two vehicles were pulled apart and loaded on separate flatbed trucks and driven to the impound lot.

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After a quick examination, the hospital staff decided they did not need to keep Michele for observation. The three suspects were secured in an isolated section of the hospital and watched over by two Carabinieri Vice Brigadiere until they were stabilized enough for transport by military air ambulance to Rome. DNA and fingerprints were taken and expedited for verification should Dante have undergone radical cosmetic surgery. Hillshire and Triela arrived to pick Michele and Kara up and return them to the apartment. They were all relaxing on the back patio drinking Italian sodas when they heard Priscilla's voice call out "Ciao?" from the living room.

"We're out on the deck," Michele replied.

Priscilla appeared, dressed in a silk crepe top, high-waisted wool mini skirt and leather boots – all from Chloé and all in black. Claes followed behind her in a Burberry exploded check long-sleeve t-shirt and skirt with black leather boots.

Michele indicated a bar area with carbonated water and a variety of flavored syrups and Claes prepared sodas for herself and Priscilla.

Michele looked down at his watch. "You made good time," he noted.

"That car is supernatural!" Priscilla gushed, referring to Michele's new Lamborghini Gallardo. "It sure drinks petrol, however."

"Driving at close to double the posted limit likely didn't help," Claes deadpanned, causing Priscilla to blush.

"I couldn't help myself," she said. "The faster I went the better it drove so I just kept going faster."

"I know the feeling," Triela said, then caught herself. "I mean, I can *understand* the feeling." She looked to Hillshire and caught his raised eyebrow and she knew she probably had some explaining to do in the near future.

## Chapter Eleven – Mobility

By the following morning the suspects were considered stable enough for airlift and were loaded aboard an Aeronautica Militare Agusta-Bell AB212AM medical evacuation chopper. Kara accompanied them and Hillshire, Priscilla and Triela returned to Rome in Hillshire's E350. As had been expected, none of them were Giacomo Dante.

That afternoon, the sun shone down on the Milanese suburb of Carpiano as Michele and Claes walked out of the restaurant, appearing to any who cast an eye their way as father and daughter enjoying a late brunch after church services; he in a bespoke Italian suit of black and purple silk and she in a tan turtleneck, black pleated skirt and black boots. They'd driven to the restaurant to meet with the head of the Milan Office of the "Tourism Promotion Agency" for a face-to-face meeting about the alleged tip.

As they approached the Gallardo, Michele tossed an object over his shoulder in a high arc. Claes deftly snatched it from the air and found she held the ignition key.

"I was speaking with Kara and she agrees with me that you should learn to drive," Michele noted.

"Didn't we already have this discussion? I'm 12, okay, 15, but that is still three years too young to get a license."

Michele answered by tossing her a leather folio. She opened it to see a Patente B driving license issued in her name and an annoyed expression spread across her face. "Like they're going to believe this is legitimate."

"It is," Michele said. He squatted down to come eye to eye with her. Claes could see from his expression he was quite serious.

"I know you find me eccentric, even frivolous. You're a young girl and now I'm asking you, with no experience and only a basic understanding of the principles involved, to take control of a €250.000 vehicle that weighs one and a half tons and can accelerate from a standstill to 100km/h in four seconds and cruise at 300km/h. You're absolutely right when you think the idea ludicrous because why would a normal girl in her very early teens need to know how to drive?"

Claes nodded her head.

"This isn't about having fun or indulging a whim of mine, Claes. It's about survival. We are agents in a clandestine special operations unit whose mission is to interdict—which is a polite way of saying kill—people and those people never go quietly into that good night. I want you to learn how to drive because there may come a time when I need to depend on you to extricate us from a serious situation.

"When Marcello Palumbo shot me in Rome, the wound was not serious. However, if it had nicked my femoral artery, I would not have been able to operate the car and because you couldn't get me to assistance, I could have bled out if support had not been present. And when Kara and I were pinned down in Pioltello, because she could drive she could escape and return to extract me.

"Yes, if she didn't know how to drive she could have possibly sacrificed herself to let me escape, but I want her—and you—to survive, as well. And if I should ever be killed on a mission, I don't want you making a historic last stand over my corpse because you have no other choice. You get to the car and you drive to safety and contact the Agency to come get you. Do you understand?"

Claes wanted to fault his logic, but she really couldn't. Hillshire had enrolled Triela in a driving class at the start of the year and she now had her license. Triela would not say why Hillshire changed his mind about it, but when they'd returned from Naples Christmas week he'd looked haggard and she wondered if he'd been injured on a mission and she'd been unable to get him to immediate help.

"Yes, Michele. I still think this is dangerous, though."

"I intend to give you formal training at Vallelunga as I did with Kara, however there is an freighter warehouse complex just up the road with plenty of open space for you to at least start to get comfortable. Real roads will give you a better feel for how the car responds than on a smooth track with sharp bends designed to ring the last bit of performance out of the car."

Michele held out his hand and Claes returned the key fob and then settled into the passenger bay. It was a short drive to their destination and Michele slowly drove around the large loading bays, most of which were empty, as well as the wide roads that connected the buildings

and docks. He came to a stop and handed the key to Claes before exiting.

Claes followed and walked around to the driver's side, settling into the seat. Michele told Claes where to find the memory button to activate Kara's preset seating position and after a few moments with the controls Claes found a comfortable driving position. Michele closed the door and took his place in the passenger seat.

Claes turned the key and the V10 barked to life, settling down to an angry growl.

"Okay, we're not going to worry about manual shifting, so put your foot on the brake and push this button on the center console to engage the gearbox in automatic mode," Michele instructed and Claes did so.

"Now this car has a manual gearbox with an automatic clutch. So the shifts, especially at low speeds, are going to be a bit abrupt, but don't worry. When you're ready, just take your foot off the brake and press down gently on the throttle. Not too gently, however, or the clutch will have difficulty transmitting the power."

Claes took a deep breath, removed her foot from the brake, and placed it on the accelerator. She pressed down, but she misjudged the throttle resistance and pressed harder than she had meant, the car launching forward as the RPMs climbed suddenly. She felt the pedal jitter as the traction control system kicked in and she lifted completely off and stabbed the brake pedal.

"It's okay, Claes," Michele said reassuringly. "Just pretend there is an egg under your boot and you don't want to break it."

Claes nodded and tried again. The car crept forward and she could feel a shudder from down below. She pushed down harder and the shudder stopped. She reached the end of the loading area and braked to a stop.

"How do you feel?" Michele asked.

"It's not that difficult," Claes replied, which she found surprising.

"Turn it around and when you reach the end, continue on to the road. We'll just do a big loop of the complex so you can get used to the steering and suspension feel.

Claes nodded and settled into a pattern, slowly increasing her speed along the long straights as she became more comfortable with the vehicle's dynamics and how it responded to her steering and throttle inputs. She noticed the faster she went, the better the car felt and Michele informed her that this was because the air flowing over the car helped push it down onto the road, improving the tire's effectiveness.

"Okay, time to escape a mythical pursuer," Michele ordered as they started on the final leg back. "As soon as you clear the dogleg, open her up."

"What about that egg?" Claes said.

"If you want to make an omelet..." Michele replied.

Claes gripped the wheel tight and pressed her boot down hard. She thought she knew what to expect from high-speed drives with Michele and Kara, however being behind the wheel herself gave the experience a new dimension as the acceleration pressed her back into the seat. In what seemed like seconds the end of the road arrived and she pressed hard on the brakes.

"Well done!" Michele said. Claes felt pleased at his complement, which surprised her. She turned the car off, pulled out the key and handed it back to Michele.

---

At the SWA compound that evening, Claes removed the suitcase and started up the stairs, passing Kara and Triela coming down on their way to the showers.

"Our handler is mad as a Hatter," Claes noted as she passed by.

"I can't argue with that," Kara agreed, whipping her towel over her shoulder and earning her a surprised expression from Triela.

---

About fifteen minutes later Claes joined Kara and Triela in the baths.



"I take it Michele taught you to drive today?" Kara asked as Claes settled into the tub next to hers. Triela stood in the shower stall across the way, washing off body soap.

"Yes," Claes said, sourly. "I hear I have you to thank for that."

"Someday it may save his life or yours. At that point, you'll be glad you know it.

## Chapter Twelve – Promotion

In the main cafeteria the following morning, Michele loaded his plate with breakfast items and sought out a table in the crowds. He saw an arm waving to catch his attention and headed over to the table.

"Thanks," Michele said to Priscilla as he took a seat across from her and Ferro.

"How was the drive?" Priscilla asked.

"Not bad. Claes went to sleep and didn't wake up till we were almost here," Michele said.

"How is she working out?" Ferro asked.

"I admit I wish she was older," Michele noted.

"Why is that?" Ferro asked.

"Because she looks 12, she can really only be my daughter. With Kara, she can be my assistant or a fellow agent—"

"Or a girlfriend," Priscilla chimed in with a smile.

"*Anyway*," Michele emphasized, "if she was, say, a decade older then things would probably work much better, but then if wishes were horses, eh?"

---

"Colonel Pagani? A moment, if I may?" Doctor Gilliani asked as Michele exited the cafeteria.

"Yes, Doctor?"

"Forgive me, but I overheard you mentioning to Signora Milani that you wished Claes could be older. I believe we might be able to accommodate your request."

"In what way?" Michele asked.

"The goal with the new generation of girls, like your Kara, is to develop the prosthetics to the point they can be used on adults. I think it is perfectly possible to remake Claes to appear around 20."

"Remake? Exactly how much work are we talking about?" Michele asked.

"I would think a height somewhere between 165-170cm would be appropriate, so that would involve legs 10-15cm longer than she has now along with adjusting her arm length. We would also need to expand her chest, waist and hip sizes, as well. Duvalier would remodel her face and skull to reflect her being a decade older," Gilliani explained.

"That sounds like a great deal of work," Michele said, a bit concerned.

"The leg and arm work is pretty straightforward," Gilliani replied. "We can do the swap over a couple of days. The torso and pelvic work will be more involved. We can only make minor adjustments to her skeletal and musculature structure so it will be more a case of 'filling her out'. She'll probably end up being a bit weaker than she was, however she will still be stronger than Kara.

"As for the head and face, again we'll mostly just be sculpting what is already there to make her look older and more developmentally mature. Honestly, how I am explaining it makes it sound far more involved than it really is. Limb replacements are standard procedures for the girls and Duvalier performed significant reconstruction work on Petrushka's head and face to alter her appearance. It's really a straightforward procedure."

"I'll consider it, Doctor. Thank you," Michele said, excusing himself.

---

That evening after the girl's physical training session, Claes' sneakers crunched on the crushed gravel of the walkway as she approached the tree in the center of the administration building grounds. She saw Michele sitting on one of the benches and she sat down beside him, wiping her brow with her towel.

"You wished to see me?" she asked. When she'd returned from breakfast with Triela she'd found his note slipped underneath the door.

"I'm not sure how to broach this subject, so I guess I'll just be direct. You're physical age limits how I can use you. Your sisters are primarily shock troops because your age and small stature make your

opponents either ignore you or dismiss you. Combined with your augmented speed and reflexes, it also makes you harder to engage.

"Kara doesn't follow that model. Her specialty is infiltration, espionage, and intelligence gathering. Yes, she's undertaken sanction missions before, but almost always as part of a larger group that included the first generation girls. Being older, Kara can use different covers both when she works with me and when she works independently."

"And you don't have that flexibility with me," Claes noted. "Because of how I look."

"Correct," Michele said. "However, Doctor Gilliani took me aside last night and said that the medical staff believe they can make you look more like 22 as opposed to your current 12."

Claes blinked her eyes. "How?"

"They'd replace your legs and arms with new, longer models. They'd also reshape your face, head and torso to reflect your new age. It sounds like a good bit of work, but they say they can do it over only a few days because most of the hard work – the organ replacement and initial conversion – is already in place in your current body. Assuming you are even interested."

"I think I'd like to know more," Claes said.

"I'll schedule a time later this week," Michele said, pushing himself off the bench.

---

Claes, Michele and Doctor Bianchi sat before a large LCD screen that displayed a number of computer program windows. Doctor Bianchi typed some commands on a keyboard and an animation of a human figure of around 20 appeared.

Claes took a hard look at the "three measurements" and was pleased with what she saw. "How tall will I be?"

"We're aiming for 168cm," Bianchi noted. "You'll be tall for a Swedish woman of 20, but not inordinately so."

"That will make me the tallest cyborg, won't it?"

"Yes," Bianchi noted. "Triela is 162 and Kara is 165."

Claes smiled a secret smile at the thought of the two of them having to look up at *her* for a change.

"How old could you make me look?" Claes asked.

Bianchi rubbed his chin. "Probably late 20's would be the upper limit since we are restrained somewhat by how much we can adjust your torso and skull structure." He typed in some commands and the LCD display morphed to show a 28-year old Claes.

Claes looked to Michele with a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

"I know you won't marry Kara because she's two decades your junior, but if I was 28 I'd only be ten years younger, so would that be okay?" she noted with a smile.

Michele replied by putting his palm to his face.

"Are you really ready to have Kara call you 'mom'?" he asked.

Claes' face scrunched. "I hadn't thought about that. Is the conversion reversible?"

"In theory, yes," Bianchi replied. "We can refit your arms and legs, of course, however the changes to your head and torso cannot easily be reversed, though we could probably reverse much of it. You might end up looking more like your actual 15 at the end."

Claes looked long and hard at the screen.

"Do you want to think about it?" Michele asked.

"No. I want to do this," she said.

"Very well," Michele acquiesced. "What kind of timeframe are we looking at?" he asked Bianchi.

"We can start immediately. We'll keep her overnight to run some tests and calibrate her systems for the surgeries."

---

Claes slowly awoke, taking in her surroundings. The hospital-quality sheets felt abrasive against her skin and she moved her arm to whip the top sheet off of her. As she did so, she stopped, staring at the longer limb. She slowly peeled back the sheet and looked down on her new body. She rose and swung her legs off the bed, noting how they now almost touched the floor. She tentatively swung her legs, but she couldn't really feel any difference, though she knew they weighed more than her original limbs. She did the same with her arms, but they too felt mostly "right". She assumed her conditioning regimen had been modified to help her adjust to her latest cyborg body just as they had done so for her original cyborg body. She reached over and looked at her watch and learned three days had passed.

She pushed herself off the bed and almost stumbled when she took her first step. She balanced herself and slowly walked over to a full-length mirror. She realized there was a slight disconnect in how her body wanted to move and her perceptions of how she used to move. As she examined her new body in minute detail, there was a knock on the door and she called out for the person to enter.

Michele did so, then stopped when he saw Claes standing naked before the mirror. He started to back out with a mumbled apology, but she turned to him.

"What do you think?" she asked, matter-of-factly.

Michele quickly entered, two large shopping bags in one hand, and closed the door behind him before anyone in the hallway could walk by and see in. He took a moment to set the bag down and then, because he knew she expected nothing more or nothing less from him, appraised her critically.

"They did a nice job," he said. "You look 20."

"I'm making you uncomfortable, aren't I," Claes said as she returned to examining herself.

"Not the first time I've seen a naked woman," Michele noted. "Anyway, I brought you a set of new clothes." He placed the bag on the bed and removed a set of undergarments and socks, which he handed to Claes to put on. He then laid out three outfits.

"Kara and I need to head to Milan today, however when we get back we can visit the Via dei Condotti and let you pick out something more to your liking."

Claes nodded as she looked over the three options, in the end choosing the one consisting of a grey long-sleeved knit top with thin white bands at the shoulder and elbow matched with a brown and white checkered skirt. Michele removed a pair of black leather boots from a box and Claes pulled them on.

"Everything is a perfect fit," she noted as she took a quick walk around the room.

"Fortunately the doctors were able to provide me with exact measurements," Michele noted.

Claes walked up to him and presented herself for inspection.

"Acceptable," Michele noted, but Claes could see he was pleased. He handed her a finely-crafted wooden case. She opened it and saw her glasses. She carefully removed them and put them on before examining herself in the mirror.

Michele held the door for her and Claes walked out into the hallway. They started towards the exit and were passed by a young male orderly. Moments later, both of them heard the orderly release a soft whistle of admiration. Out of the corner of his eye, Michele saw the merest hint of red on Claes' cheeks.

---

When it was created, the Social Welfare Agency's offices were located in Rome on the Via del Corso, near the Palazzo Chigi, the former palace that now served as the offices of the Italian Council of Ministers. Those offices exist to this day and they remain the formal headquarters for the organization. The initial medical research was performed at local research hospitals in private facilities built for the purpose.

When the cybernetic assassin program was green-lighted, the government purchased a former nobleman's villa and refurbished it for Section 2, including offices, housing, training areas and a medical facility.

In 2005, a new complex nestled under the mountains north of Rome came online. Built on the site of a former monastery, it housed a state-of-the-art medical research and hospital facility as well as administrative buildings and lodging for families of those receiving medical treatment to stay. In addition to these public areas, a number of buildings were refurbished to serve as offices for Public Safety and Special Operations. These were located away from the hospital with security cameras to allow guards to intercept anyone straying and politely yet firmly escort them back to the hospital grounds.

Claes shielded her eyes for a moment as she stepped out into the sun, then started down the steps. As she walked, she noticed most of the men were looking at her, some trying to be discreet and others just outright staring in admiration of what they were seeing. She reached out with her left hand and took Michele's right one in it. Michele, having seen the same looks, just gave her hand a quick squeeze in acknowledgement.

The Gallardo was parked directly in front and Claes unclasped Michele's hand so he could reach into his pocket and recover the keyfob. She carefully lowered herself into the passenger seat and strapped in.

Michele dropped her off out front of her dorm and she headed upstairs with the other outfits. When she reached the door to her room, she noticed that she needed to reach down farther than before to open the knob.

Triela, sitting at the table reading a study text, looked up as the door opened.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" she said

"Triela, it's me."

Triela blinked furiously a few times, then set her book down and rubbed her eyes for good measure.

"Claes! This is amazing!" she said, jumping up out of the chair and coming up to her. "Now that I look, I can see the resemblance to your old face. You really do look like you're ten years older." She suddenly scowled and stepped back, looking at Claes from head to toe.

"What?" Claes asked.



"How tall are you now?" Triela asked.

"168cm. About 15cm more than I was."

"Will you fit in your bunk bed?" Triela asked. Claes' face took on a slightly panicked look and she climbed the ladder into her bunk. She stretched out and found that while it seemed a good bit more cramped, she could still fit on the twin-size mattress.

"I just hope with your extra weight you don't fall through the top," Triela teased, earning her a pillow in the face for her efforts.

"So I guess I need to start calling *you* 'big sister' now?" Triela asked with a grin. This earned her another pillow.

## Chapter Thirteen - The Sicilian Defense

"Kara sure looked annoyed," Claes commented to Michele as she looked out onto the azure waters of the Mediterranean from the passenger seat of the rented pearlescent white Bentley Azure convertible as it motored along the A1 Autostrada towards Naples.

"She's very...protective...of our...relationship," Michele replied. "And now that you're older than her, I think she's feeling a bit insecure about that relationship."

"She loves you and wants to be with you, Michele. All the girls are like that. So why didn't you just choose her to accompany you?"

"Because, Claes, you're part of our *fratello* as well and she needs to understand and accept that."

"It's mean."

"I suppose it is, on one level. However, you're the better match for this mission and that's more important than her feelings at the moment."

*The mission*, Claes thought. Their mission entailed acting as a couple at a grand party given by an old crone from the former Italian Royal House who exercised a significant bit of influence. While there, they would kidnap one Rodolfo Giafoni, part of the Venetian Resistance movement and the Five Republics. He'd been a founding member of Liga Veneta, but when Padania started its active struggle against the government, he left and joined them. The SWA felt sure he approved the Venice mission back in January and they'd been looking for him for months. He'd finally broken cover in Bologna and one of the Agency sources reported he'd be at the party they were heading for.

"But she's played your girlfriend before and she seems not only comfortable, but actually happy to do so."

"Unfortunately, Claes, many of the people attending the party, including her Highness, are somewhat...narrow-minded. Kara would stand out. And not in a positive way, if you get my drift."

They continued on and exited the A1 onto State Route 145 and followed it along the Amalfi Coast to Sorrento and the Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria. Built in 1834 and located in a private park on cliffs

overlooking the Bay of Naples, the hotel's guest book included the names of Heads of State and famous entertainers.

Claes stepped out of the car dressed for the pleasant weather in a short sleeve Julianne dress of cream silk with a tan leather belt and white leather T-Strap sandals. Michele wore a striped silk button shirt with navy chinos and white sneakers.

Inside the suite, Claes walked over to an upright piano with a picture on a frame sitting atop it.

"This looks like Enrico Caruso," she noted.

"It is," Michele replied. "Caruso used this suite in 1921 and they named it after him when he passed that August. A number of pieces of furniture here, including that piano, evidently belonged to him."

Claes sat down at the piano, gazing at it. A fan of the classical arts, she owned a number of compilations of Caruso's recordings originally made in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. She experimentally tried some of the keys before starting to play. She noticed the sound did not seem as large and rich as the grand piano at the compound generated, but she didn't care, relishing the chance to play an instrument owned by one of the world's most famous tenors.

Michele finished unpacking and informed Claes he was meeting an "old friend" in the bar. She stopped playing and accompanied him downstairs.

They entered the Bar Vittoria and walked out to the terrace. An arm waved to catch their attention and Michele motioned for Claes to follow him.

The owner of the arm rose slowly to greet them, putting out his hand to Michele. When he turned to Claes, she saw an elderly gentleman with white hair and whose richly tanned face struck her as a topographical map etched in leather. His brilliant white silk suit dazzled in the sun as he reached out to take her hand, lightly kissing the top before settling back into his chair, the creak of the old wood mirrored with the creak of his old bones.

"How's the Republic?" Michele asked as he took a seat and Claes sat down beside him.

"It's all fraud and forgery!" the man growled. "Paint slapped over dry rot and gilded with lies!"

"Always the optimist, Angelo," Michele said. He turned to Claes. "Claes, I'd like to introduce you to my old friend and mentor Angelo Trevellin. Angelo, this is my friend Claes."

A hotel staffer arrived and took Michele and Claes' order, returning shortly thereafter with their drinks.

"Quite a beautiful...friend...you have there," Angelo said with a flash of white teeth, causing both Michele and Claes to groan.

"Focus," Michele growled.

"So what can a harmless old grandfather do for you, Pagani?"

"Harmless. That's rich coming from you," Michele replied in a dismissive tone.

Angelo looked to Claes with a pained expression. "See how he wounds me?"

"Claes, entire cemeteries are dedicated to this antique assassin," Michele replied. He turned to Angelo. "How many corpses did you leave behind on that 'site-seeing trip' along the A14 through Emilia-Romagna?"

"Well, maybe nine or ten," Angelo noted. "But that was only because-"

Michele cut him off with a wave of his hand. "The Lady doesn't need to hear about your lame excuses."

"Actually, 'the Lady' is intrigued," Claes replied, raising her glass.

"Maybe later," Michele said, returning his attention to Angelo. "Do we have confirmation that Giafoni will be there?"

"I have good news and bad news about that," Angelo noted. "The good news is that Giafoni will indeed be at the party. The bad news is that the party has been moved."

"Moved? To where?" Michele asked.

"Sicily."

"Sicily?" Michele exclaimed.

"It seems Her Highness' lumbago is acting up and she doesn't wish to leave her estate in Sicily. So new invitations are being sent – I have yours here," he added, handing over a parchment envelope with gold leaf writing.

"She didn't change the date and time I see," Michele said sourly.

"Social calendars are quite full this time of year," Angelo noted. "Even Her Highness can't just unilaterally change a date."

"Where is the new venue?"

"She has multiple estates, but the party will be held on one along the west coast north of Trapani."

"Bloody hell," Michele cursed. They'd arrived a day early specifically to scope the location out to prepare for the kidnapping. Now they had to get to Sicily and secure accommodations.

"No need to be vulgar, Michele. There is a lady present," Angelo chuckled with a smile. "I've taken care of securing you a spot on the 15:30 ferry sailing from Naples. You'll be in Palermo by dusk and I booked you a suite at the Villa Ignea Hilton."

"I guess that's another one I owe you," Michele noted. "Are you staying in town?"

"I'm at a little place down by the marina," Angelo noted.

Michele reached into his pocket and handed over his room key. "We have the Caruso suite. Enjoy."

"Much obliged, my boy," Angelo said, tucking it into a pocket of his blazer.

"Is Giafoni still in Naples?" Michele asked.

"No. He left this morning for Sicily on the ferry after meeting with a Camorra splinter group known to be supporters of the Five Republics. They were the ones who secured him an invitation to the party and

when they told him the new location, I suppose he didn't want to stick around."

"Do we know why he wanted in?" Michele asked.

"No. While her Highness has her finger in many pots, she's never been even indirectly connected with the Five Republics or Padania. That being said, she exerts a great deal of political influence and she controls a not-insignificant fortune so she could be acting as a conduit, providing opportunity whilst keeping her hands clean."

"Hmm..." Michele said, leaning back in his chair. "Guess we'll find out soon enough."

Claes leaned forward, her eyes bright. "So tell me about these 'lame excuses'," she asked Angelo.

---

"You've lived a more interesting life than you've let on," Claes noted from the passenger seat as they drove the Bentley towards the ferry terminal. They boarded the ferry and were shown to the front of the boat. By evening they arrived in Palermo and made their way to the hotel.

They entered their suite and noted the single king-sized bed.

"I promise not to tell Kara if you don't," Claes offered.

"Deal."

---

"Good morning," Michele greeted Claes as she came awake. He placed a glass of orange juice on the side table.

"Uh huh," Claes replied drowsily as she stretched underneath the duvet. She propped herself up and drained the glass. "Do you spoil Kara like this?" she asked with a smile.

"Actually she often has breakfast in bed," Michele replied.

"Well I shouldn't let her have all the fun," Claes said, royally pointing a hand towards the menu.

---

After breakfast, Claes showered and changed into a cream cotton t-shirt and linen-blend shorts with sandals. They spent the day walking around Palermo, doing some shopping and having a pleasant lunch, returning to the hotel in the early afternoon to change. With the party being a black-tie event, Claes borrowed Kara's black silk ball gown to wear, matched with sandals in black satin and Michele wore a bespoke tuxedo.

They followed the A29 along the northern coast to Alcamo, where they took the E933 west to Trapani and then went north along the coastal road to their destination. They turned off onto a private road and approached a large gate and gatehouse. They drove up and Michele handed their invitation to a man in a suit, the clear bulge of a pistol evident under his jacket. The guard read the invitation, compared it to a list of names on a computer tablet, and returned the invitation with a nod.

They drove on down a straight road lined with tall trees. Through the gaps Claes could see tilled fields as well as olive and citrus groves as well as vineyards. The road climbed into the hills above the farmland and they eventually approached a large open paved area and parked before a palatial villa where they exited the car, handing the keys to a valet who took the car to the nearby car park.

Like all great villas, this one had a name, though Michele couldn't recall it at the moment. The main building constructed of natural stone sprawled across 5000 square meters on two floors. As they stepped inside, both admired the terracotta and marble floor.

Claes' eyes were drawn through an open door into a massive wood-paneled library with ornate leather chairs arranged around antique reading tables. They continued on into a massive living room, the walls adorned with ornate murals and frescoes and dominated on one end by a massive marble fireplace. Floor-to-ceiling windows looked out onto a well-lit terrace with pergola-covered dining area and the Mediterranean beyond.

They each accepted a glass of red wine made from the famous Nero d'Avola grapes grown in the city of Noto in the Province of Syracuse on the opposite corner of the island, and stepped out onto the terrace. A large crowd mingled on the terrace and down into the pool and garden areas, waiters flitting amongst the guests with drinks and hors' d'oeuvres. At the far end, near a magnificent stone fountain next to an equally impressive fire pit stood their host, chatting with the Cardinal

Archbishop of Naples, who wore the ordinary dress of a Prince of the Church: black cassock with red piping and buttons, red fascia and zucchetto and gold pectoral cross.

"Eminence," Michele said with a slight bow of his head as the ecclesiastical official walked past after the completion of his audience. When he'd passed, Michele leaned over and whispered into Claes' ear.

"He's a real pip, that one. They say he diverts church funds to his brother in a loan-sharking ring. He also took property bequeathed to the Archdiocese to be used as a home for retired priests and instead sold it to a developer who turned it into luxury apartments."

They placed their glasses on a passing tray and Claes placed her arm on Michele's and they stepped forward.

Though the House of Savoy had been formally abolished by Referendum in 1946, the Princess Maria Pia Elena Aldegonda Milenia Ludovica Caterina Francesca Gennara, a small woman who admitted to seventy-five years and all knew that to dispute her accounting would be to risk a summons from her lawyers for libel, continued to carry herself as if Umberto II still actively reigned from the Quirinal Palace. In appearance, she resembled a mummified eagle dug from an ancient tomb with thin hair, shrunken and leathery tan skin, eyes as black as agate and a sharp beak of a nose. Those who entered into the folly of crossing her, however, soon discovered a "curse of the mummy" fate befalling them.

As with many former royals, she had residences and holdings scattered across the peninsula, including the villa in Naples where she normally held court. She also maintained a luxury apartment in Rome for when she needed to be in the Capital, along with estates like this in Sicily, farms in the Abruzzi and agricultural holdings in both Romagna and along the Po valley.

The Princess was as shrewd in finance as she was in matrimony, turning her share of the literal "family jewels" into a plump portfolio, fattened through marriage to two wealthy husbands who, after earning their fortune, did not live to spend it, leaving that...burden...to her. And her bony finger stirred the political waters of every province in the middle of the country. A summons to her table could make or break a politician and those whose arrogance or ignorance ignited her anger found that the flame burned away money, favors and votes when it came time for re-election.



She dressed like a Roman empress and her manner would have earned a nod from some of the more tyrannical rulers of that time. She liked her whiskey from Scotland and her cigarettes from Egypt, the former served neat in lead crystal glasses and the latter on the end of a long, gold holder. She had a scandalous tongue, a dangerous memory—and a fondness for the young. Some remarked—in absolutely anonymity, of course—that she reminded them of the fictional crotchety vampires who paid richly for youthful blood.

In an earlier time, the rich and powerful came to seek her hand in marriage. Now, they came to pay their respects to her power, money and prestige. Archbishops visited to drink coffee and seek funding for churchly endeavors. Staffers from the Quirinal Palace came to offer private reports on behalf of the President of the Republic. Bankers, stockbrokers and industrialists came to pay a reluctant homage and a tribute of secret confidences.

“Your Highness, may I present his Lordship Michele Ferdici, Barone of Sedico, and the Lady Ferdici.”

While Italian noble titles were no longer recognized under Temporary Provision XIV of the Italian Constitution, they continued to be used as a courtesy by other European royal families and as an act of defiance by Italian monarchists. And with the abolishment of the Consulta Araldica in 1947, the maintenance of former noble titles, coats of arms and related matters moved under the Heraldic Office within the Office of the Prime Minister. This allowed Michele’s fictitious name and title to appear as legitimate when the Princess’ Household Staff had filed an inquiry when they could not find him listed in the privately published (but not wholly accurate) Libro d’Oro.

“Welcome,” the Princess said in a voice that surprised Claes in its richness. She’d expected something along the order of gravel being stirred in a cement truck.

“Thank you for inviting us, your Highness,” Michele said with a deep bow, while Claes provided a slight curtsy.

“And how are things in Sedico?” the Princess Maria asked.

“Well, your Highness,” Michele noted.

“It is in Veneto, am I correct?”

"It is a commune located in the province of Belluno in the region of Veneto, Highness," Michele replied. "My family's claim dates back to the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia. When Venetia became part of the Kingdom with the signing of the Treaty of Vienna at the end of the Third Italian War of Independence, His Majesty Victor Emmanuel II acknowledged the family title at that time. We maintain an ancestral palazzo on the banks of the Lago del Mis near the border with the Parco Nazionale delle Dolomiti Bellunesi."

"Fascinating," Princess Maria replied in a tone that clearly conveyed her utter disinterest. Michele took the hint and soon excused himself and Claes from her presence.

"What a delightful woman," Claes noted with wry irony. Beyond the terrace lay a massive swimming pool with a disappearing edge, looking as if the pool extended out onto the sea itself. They walked onto the lighted path running through the lush gardens and took a seat on a wrought iron bench cloaked in shadow.

"Did you see him?" Michele asked, referring to Giafoni.

"Yes. He's wearing a tuxedo with a rather brilliant blue tie," Claes replied. "When do we take him?"

"No time like the present," Michele replied. He took the valet slip for the Bentley and handed it to Claes, who dropped it in her leather clutch. She rose and left Michele behind in search of Rodolfo Giafoni.

She found him at the bar and gained first his attention and then his interest. After about ten minutes of small talk she suggested they find some place more private and she went on ahead while Giafoni went to the bar to get two flutes of champagne.

While she waited, Claes removed a perfume atomizer and a handkerchief from her clutch. She took a deep breath and then liberally soaked the inside part of the handkerchief, taking care to keep her mouth closed. When done she folded it over and placed it on the bench, closed the atomizer, and then returned it to her clutch.

When Giafoni arrived, they each drained their glass and set them down. As Giafoni made his move, Claes grabbed him and spun him around, placing her arm around him and pinning his arms against him as she covered his mouth and nose with the handkerchief. Rodolfo

panicked and inhaled deeply as a reflex, allowing a large dosage of the chemical soaked into the handkerchief and within moments his body relaxed. She held it to his mouth for a few more breaths and then removed it, placing it into a plastic bag in her clutch.

"Rodolfo?" she whispered into his ear.

"Yes," he replied, his voice a monotone.

"I'd like you to follow me to my car, okay?" Claes asked.

"Yes," Rodolfo replied.

*Damn, it really works!* Claes thought. Still in "clinical trials", to use the medical staff's euphemism, the drug she'd administered made the recipient susceptible to simple suggestions. She headed for the front and Rodolfo dutifully followed behind. She handed the slip to the valet and a few minutes later the Bentley arrived. She ordered Rodolfo into the passenger seat and slipped behind the wheel. She put the car in drive and headed out.

---

As Claes was making contact with Rodolfo, Michele headed out the front door, noting he needed some fresh air to the doorman. He walked down until he was out of sight and jogged forward to the closest citrus grove.

Claes drove up in the Bentley and came to a stop. She popped the trunk and ordered Rodolfo to put out his arm. He did so and she stabbed him with a pre-filled pen like those used to inject Insulin, though this one held a powerful sedative. She then ordered him to exit the car and look into the trunk. Moments after reaching the trunk he passed out and Michele shoved him inside, for once thankful of the car's two-meter width, which made getting him inside quick. He covered him with a dark blanket and then dropped into the passenger seat. Claes drove off, noting at the gate that her "husband" wasn't feeling well, offering the guard a knowing wink to imply severe intoxication.

When she reached the coastal road she turned left and headed back through Trapani and then south to Trapani-Birgi airport. Used by both commercial carriers and the military, Claes took the exit for the military side of the facility. The Aeronautica Militare Aviere Capo manning the gate blinked in surprise as the Bentley approached and

slowed. His first thought was the driver took the wrong turn-off, the one for the civilian side being about a kilometer farther down the road, however it didn't take the opportunity to turn around, instead coming to a stop right before the gate.

"Good evening, signora," he said as he came forward. The man in the passenger seat handed the woman a leather folio and she handed it to the Airman. He opened it and saw it identified the man as a Tenente Colonello. The Airman immediately snapped to attention and saluted.

"Buonasera, Colonello!" he barked.

"Buona sera, Capo," Michele replied. "If you check your log, I believe I'm expected."

The airman nodded, handed the folio back to Claes, and disappeared inside the guard shack. A few moments later a Sergente Maggiore came out and approached the car.

"Good evening, Colonello. Please proceed straight ahead through the roundabout to the access road then turn left and continue to the hangar."

"Thank you, Sergente."

The Sergente saluted and motioned to the guardhouse to raise the gate and Claes drove forward.

"Ah this brings back memories," Michele said as they passed buildings and open fields.

"Eh?"

"Trapani is one of the forward bases operating bases for NATO's airborne warning and control forces based at Geilenkirchen, Germany. When I was stationed there flying aboard the E-3 *Sentry* we on occasion would rotate out to this base."

"Uh huh," Claes replied. She continued on until the road ended, turning left and passing a number of empty aircraft parking pads. In the distance they saw a large hangar and as they approached, they saw a white Piaggio P.180 on the concrete apron. For a moment, Claes thought it Michele's plane, but as she pulled up she noticed a thin blue line with "AERONAUTICA MILITARE" on white letters against it.

Jean and Rico stood next to the open door and Jean leaned inside and a moment later Amadeo and Nihad stepped out and came over. Michele ordered Claes to pop the trunk and stay inside the car. He stepped out and walked over to Jean.

"Any problems?" Jean asked.

"Piece of cake. Claes did great," Michele noted. Amadeo and Nihad lifted Giafoni's limp body out of the trunk and carried him over to the plane, loading him aboard.

"Excellent. Spend a few extra days resting, if you wish. Compliments of the Director." With that, Jean turned and motioned Rico to board the plane. Claes backed the car up as the P.180 started its engines and taxied to Runway 31L and lifted off into the night.

Claes drove back to the front gate, took the onramp for a spur segment of the A29 and rejoined the E933, retracing the route back to Palermo and the hotel.

"So I guess we go back in the morning?" Claes asked and Michele identified a touch of melancholy in her voice.

"Actually, the Director invited us to take a few extra days off and I was going to ask if you didn't mind. There are some World Heritage sites I'd like to see and then maybe we could take the ferry back to Naples? I haven't seen Sorrento in ages and I'd like to look around, if that's okay?" Michele asked, correctly guessing she wanted to stay longer.

"I believe I can spare the time," Claes replied with a smile.

## **Chapter Fourteen - Connected Rooks**

Michele sat on the terrace of Caterina's farm in Frascati, watching the sun decline behind the far hills. The folds of the land were full of purple shadows, the hills were touched with gold and bronze and the rooftops of the buildings of the farm shone russet in the glow.

This was his favorite time of day – the hour between day and dusk, when the eye was rested from the harshness of the sun and the spirit was not yet touched by the melancholy of twilight.

On this final Saturday of April, Michele inhaled deeply the scent of Trebbiano, Greco and Malvasia grapes brought to him on a slight breeze. Within a few months it would be time to harvest both and Paula and her husband Dominico would hire a number of hands to help, then next would come the winemaking. Caterina employed a master vintner and he worked magic with the grapes, producing a white wine of incredible vintage.

Michele and Caterina had continued seeing each other after Sicily and both felt the relationship turning serious. They found they got along fabulously together, as they had very similar and strong interests in cars in general and Alfa Romeos in particular. She owned an auto repair shop near Ciampino Airport, though she stated she enjoyed working on older cars more than the new ones and she specialized in vehicles from the 1950s and 1960s, though she could work on everything from a 2006 166 to a 1936 8C 2900.

She'd also been a cart racer in her youth, and she and Michele both swapped stories of their experiences in carting. Like Michele, she'd found she lacked the talent to make a career out of it – doubly so being a woman – and instead turned her love of cars and racing to one of engineering, much as Michele had done.

"Dinner's almost ready," Caterina remarked as she came out onto the terrace, dressed in a robe, a towel wrapped around her hair.

"What culinary delight has Paula created for us this evening?"

"I thought we'd go with a light pasta dish and some vegetables. I have a bottle of 2004 Novello Superiore Frascati that should be at the height of readiness for drinking.

Paula soon appeared with a plate of *bucatini all'amatriciana* and *carciofi alla romana*. She also brought out the bottle of wine and the two of them enjoyed a fine meal and fine conversation.

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The weekend of the *Mille Miglia*, Caterina went to Rome to see how Michele and Kara were doing, though she purposely stayed away from the pair, allowing them to experience the event as father and daughter.

She privately smiled when she saw the final rankings with the pair having moved 123<sup>rd</sup> place at the start to 18<sup>th</sup> place at the end, mostly evidently due to Kara's determined driving.

She drove the Giulietta back to her farm in Frascati, stopping at a local market. When she exited with her purchases, she saw a tall man dressed in a sweater and jeans leaning against the car and after being together for eight years, she recognized him even with the beard and long hair.

"Franco!" she exclaimed. She set down her purchases and rushed towards him, embracing him.

"Everyone said you were dead!" she exclaimed.

"They said the same about you," Franco echoed.

"We shouldn't just stand here. Let's go back to the farmhouse. Dominico and Paula will be pleased to see you."

"No, I don't want them to know I've been here. Let's just drive around," Franco suggested. Caterina nodded and picked up her groceries, putting them in the trunk. Franco settled into the passenger seat and Caterina drove around the city on the outer loop formed of the SS215 and SS216.

"How did you escape?" Caterina asked.

"Much the same as you did, I imagine. When the car hit, Cristiano and I made our way to shore. We stole a car and drove to his safehouse in Switzerland."

"Cristiano's alive?" Caterina exclaimed.

"He passed away earlier this year from an infection," Franco answered.

"Did Pinocchio make it?" Caterina asked and Franco shook his head. They'd confirmed soon after the escape that he'd died at the house fighting the Agency's child demons.

"Where have you been these past eight months?" Caterina asked.

"Cristiano maintained significant assets that the government never found. He sent me to Africa to meet with Giacomo Dante. I've been funding his operations, including what happened in Venice. We almost killed your boyfriend and his demon in Milan in February."

"My boyfriend?"

"Michele Pagani. He works for the Agency, Franca. His 'daughter' is one of those child assassins."

"What? He's a consultant and Kara is adopted. He's also not my boyfriend."

"He's lying. He was at Venice and so was the girl. The surviving girls piled into his plane and flew back to Rome."

"I thought the Agency was using children. Kara is at least in her late teens, if not early twenties," Caterina observed.

"The Agency evidently is making older ones now. And Kara isn't the only one. We've identified at least two others, also in their late teens. Whatever modifications they are making to them appears to now be adaptable to older girls. We expect the next stage will be adults."

"Modifications? What do you mean?"

"They're not human, Franca. We don't know the specifics, but evidently they take young girls who have severe medical problems or injuries and perform surgeries on them. They're made stronger and faster than adults. And they shrug off bullets like you do a bee sting."

"They sound like zombies or something out of a science fiction or horror movie," Caterina said, shuddering.

"Oh they can die. Dante killed two of them at Venice and he took a third one down in Rome near Christmas."



Franco reached out and touched her shoulder. "Italy isn't safe for you, anymore. It's only a matter of time before Michele sends his assassin after you."

"Franco, we've been seeing each other for months. If he wanted to capture or kill me, he's had plenty of opportunity."

Franco bit down the jealousy that flared inside him. "Franca, his peers tried to kill us in Milan. It's possible he doesn't know who you are, but he's eventually going to find out and when he does he's going to send that...thing...he calls a daughter after you."

"What do you want me to do?" Caterina asked.

"Settle your accounts here in Italy and then come with me to Switzerland. I have a place just over the border. Once you arrive, we can plan our next moves."

"Okay," Caterina nodded. "Are you sure you don't want to come back to the farm?"

"No. It's better if Dominico and Paula don't know I've seen you in case the Agency finds them. They can't betray what they don't know. Just drop me off back at the store. I have a car parked nearby."

After she dropped Franco off, Caterina headed not for the farm, but for the highway. She drove south past Lake Albano and then west towards Pomezia and then on the coast. She drove down the coastal highway, letting the cool evening air clear her thoughts and doubts. She continued on down to Anzio before looking back towards Lake Albano and the farm.

## Chapter Fifteen – Zugzwang

"Kara seems to be in a foul mood as of late," Triela noted as she applied gun oil to the barrel of her shotgun on a Sunday in May.

"I think Michele and Caterina are getting pretty serious in their relationship and Kara is afraid she will no longer be the most important woman in Michele's life," Claes suggested.

"Maybe they bonded again on that race...Have you met her?" Triela asked, referring to Caterina.

"Yes. The last time Michele and Kara went to Vallelunga they dragged me along and I met her there. She's quite beautiful, I must admit. Didn't think Michele was into blondes, however..."

"What's wrong with being a blonde?" Triela asked, a hint of offense in her voice.

"Nothing at all," Claes said, quickly. "It suits her quite well. She even has blue eyes like you. Quite the beauty. She's also a bit on the tall side."

"Does she live in Rome?"

"Michele said she's from Milan, originally. She evidently owns a winery in Frascati, so that must make it easier to see each other."

Triela suddenly stopped her work.

"Triela?"

"Shh," Triela hissed, and Claes could tell she was concentrating on trying to remember something. "I'll be right back," she suddenly said, placing the shotgun on the table. She rose and rushed out of the room.

Ten minutes later, she returned with a color photograph.

"Is that her?" Triela asked. The picture was of a blonde woman wearing a leather jacket, jeans and boots getting behind the wheel of a red convertible.

"The hair style is a bit different and the sunglasses are hiding the eyes, but the facial features and such look the same. Where did you get this picture?"

"That's not possible," Triela said, ignoring Claes' question as she returned to her seat. "Angelica killed her."

"Triela, what are you talking about?"

"Remember that mission last July in Milan? Where I killed Pinocchio?"

"Yes. You went to capture Cristiano Savonarola. But those people showed up and helped him escape."

"One of 'those people' was this woman. Nobody knows her real name, but her codename was Franca and she and her partner Franco were bomb makers. They were the ones who tried to stop construction on the Straight of Messina Bridge.

"During the escape they ran into a roadblock setup by Angelica, Marco and Priscilla. Angelica shot up the car and it crashed into a river. We found the vehicle, but the doors and windows were open so the assumption was made their bodies had floated out in the current."

"Triela, it could just be coincidence," Claes noted. "Michele wouldn't date a known terrorist."

"That's the trick, Claes. Michele didn't know about them. He and Kara were still acclimating as a *fratello*. They were never brought in on any of the mission details. If he knows Franca at all, it's just as a code name. He would not have been made privy to the data we gathered on her—including what she looked like."

Triela jumped out of her chair and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Claes asked.

"To get Hillshire."

---

Michele and Kara returned to Rome Monday morning. While Kara had enjoyed driving the Alfa 6C in the *Mille Miglia*, it felt good to be back behind the wheel of the Gallardo. She approached the entry gate for the Administration Building and the guard came out.

"Colonello? The Director would like to see you immediately, sir," he said.

"Very well," Michele replied. Kara dropped him off under the arch and proceeded to the Handler's Dorm to park.

Michele entered the Administration Building and made his way to Section 2's area.

"Welcome back, Michele," Ferro greeted. "How was the tour?"

"Great. Kara had a blast. I hear *Il direttore* wishes to see me?"

"Yes. Let me tell him you're here."

She knocked on the door to Director Lorenzo's office and entered. A moment later she stepped out and motioned for Michele to enter.

"Have a seat," Lorenzo said, his tone gruff. "I've asked Jean Croce to join us."

Michele sat down in one of two chairs across the desk from Lorenzo and a young girl dressed as a maid entered with a tray and tea set. Michele accepted a cup, as did Lorenzo, who dismissed her as Jean stepped in, carrying a manila file folder.

Without preamble, Jean opened the folder and dropped it on the desk in front of Michele. "Do you know her?" he demanded.

"That's Caterina Marinov," Michele said.

"Marinov?" Jean said. He looked to Lorenzo, who nodded. Jean lifted the phone and dialed a number. "Priscilla, this is Jean. Pull the file on Angelo Marinov and bring it to Director Lorenzo's office."

"And you're seeing her?" Lorenzo asked, as Jean was on the phone.

"Yes. We met in Sicily in January," Michele replied, guardedly. "What's this about?" he added.

"Are you familiar with the bombers Franco and Franca?" Jean asked.

"I've heard of the code names in Public Safety, but that was all we had on them."

"Last March the Hillshire-Triela *fratello* encountered them in Montalcino while investigating the disappearance of an operative from Section One. That woman—" Jean stabbed the picture with his finger "—is Franca."

Too stunned to do anything else, Michele merely looked to Jean and then to Lorenzo.

"We thought she died last August along with Franco and Cristiano Savonarola when their car crashed while trying to escape our attempt to arrest Savonarola," Lorenzo noted.

There was a knock on the door and Priscilla entered, carrying another manila file folder.

"Did she ever speak about Angelo Marinov?" Jean asked as he took the folder from Priscilla.

"Who?" Michele asked.

Jean handed over the file and Michele looked at the picture of an older man with dark hair and a pencil moustache.

"I can see a resemblance to pictures of her father I've seen, but no, I don't know this man."

"He's Angelo Marinov, stock broker. Perhaps he's an uncle. He's also a senior member of the Rome faction of the Five Republics. Franca was seen exiting his office and a team from Section One captured her and took her to a safe house in Trigatoria for interrogation. However, someone came to rescue her and took out the entire team. They then left a little...gift...behind that almost took out our people, if not for some fast action by Henrietta."

Michele's mind couldn't absorb what was being presented to him.

*Caterina...a terrorist?*

"How did you find out we were seeing each other? Did Kara come to you?" Michele asked.

"Actually Triela brought it to the attention of her handler, and he brought it to our attention," Lorenzo stated.

*Claes*, Michele thought. She'd met Caterina at Valledlunga during a Track Day in April.

"Michele, we need to know where she is so we can bring her in. She might be supporting Dante."

"Don't be ridiculous," Michele spat. "If you want to bring her in, fine. But I'll handle it."

"Unacceptable," Jean said.

"I'm not going to let you have Rico shoot anyone unlucky enough to be in the same *building* she is and then beat her to within an inch of her life to get her to tell you something she might very well not know."

Jean looked livid, but Lorenzo raised his hand. "Very well, Michele. However, Jean and Rico will come. And you will bring Kara and Claes with you. We cannot afford to let her escape."

---

Michele knew all the phones in the compound were tapped and he was sure they monitored both his personal and his work phones – landline and cellular. And he was sure his e-mail was traced, as well. Which is why he'd bought a disposable cell phone to stay in touch with Caterina and others. He valued his privacy.

He therefore decided to take Kara out to an early dinner and instructed her to "practice her evasive driving techniques" she'd learned to shake off a tail. Kara did so, and if the SWA had sent someone to follow them, they were soon shaken off. As he didn't put it past Jean to stakeout every ristorante with a Michelin star in the city, he had Kara head to a sushi restaurant on the Via Degli Scipioni northeast of Vatican City.

While Kara ordered for them both, he stepped outside and contacted Franca, leaving a message asking her to meet him tomorrow afternoon at the Piazza Venezia at the intersection of the Via di San Marco and the Via del Teatro Marcello. He then walked down to the restaurant to join Kara.

---

Michele awoke with the sun in his room in the Handler's Dormitory. It had rained heavily during the evening and cloud cover hung low and leaden. Rome in late May usually was warm, with temperatures in the low to mid 20's. However as he watched the weather report after exiting the shower, the forecast trended cool and probably wet. Michele therefore chose a cotton shirt and pants with a white sport jacket.

---

After breakfast, Michele gathered Kara and Claes and drove to his apartment in Rome.

"I want you two to know that I love her," Michele said. "But I also understand that she's a wanted terrorist and we need to apprehend her alive. However, you are to treat her kindly. No roughing her up, understand? My goal is to get her to surrender peacefully and the four of us will take the Aston back to the SWA compound, with her in the back with Kara, behind Claes in the front passenger seat.

"I don't want either of you to listen to anyone, but myself. Understand? Especially the Croce brothers."

Both girls nodded their understanding.

---

By noon, Jean, Jose, Hillshire and their cyborgs had arrived, parking in the adjacent Palazzo Venezia and walking over. Jean and Rico would take to the roof of the complex, which allowed them to cover the entire Piazza as well as the Monument to Victor Emanuele II.

Michele and Kara would meet Caterina in the small park between his apartment and the Monument. To prevent any escape on foot, Claes would stand next to the fountain at the base of the Monument, whilst Hillshire and Triela stationed themselves at the church of Santa Maria di Loreto on the opposite end of the Monument and Jose and Henrietta placed themselves at the foot of the cordonata of the Piazza del Campidoglio. Unknown to any of them, at the top of the cordonata in the Piazza itself stood Franco, watching the action through a pair of binoculars. He'd followed Caterina into Rome and to this area.

Caterina approached from the other side of the monument, making her way to the park. She wore a black wool dropped lapel jacket over a paisley-print wool-blend long-sleeved dress, black sheer leggings and teal leather knee-high boots with 11cm heels.

When she saw Michele and Kara, she gave a wane smile and started for them, her right hand in her pocket.

*She knows*, Michele thought.

"Hello, Michele," Caterina said, her soft voice difficult to hear over the sound of the buses and other traffic moving by the island as they came to face to face in the center.

"Caterina—" Michele began, but her look stopped him cold.

"This is what happens when people are not honest with each other. A bomber and a government agent meet and fall in love, both keeping the realities of their lives a secret from the other, hoping that maybe, this time, things will work out okay. But of course, such an outcome is only in the movies or romance novels."

"I've worked a deal, Caterina. Surrender peacefully and you'll be treated fairly. No 'enhanced interrogation techniques' in a dark cell in a nameless building. No secret military tribunals. You'll get a fair trial in front of a real judge."

"I know you believe that, Michele," Caterina said with a sad smile. "And I thank you for trying. I knew this was a trap, but I also knew that I had to come. I thought maybe I could outrun my past, but I see its legs were too quick and I'm too tired to keep running. I've done too much evil to ever be forgiven, so at best I can look forward to spending the rest of my life in San Vittore. However, I fully expect your colleagues will drain me of everything of use and bury the husk that is left in a landfill."

"I also came to warn you that Franco's alive, Michele. He visited me in Frascati. He told me about the Agency and about Kara and Claes and the others. He wants revenge on you all. On the Agency. He's been bankrolling Dante using money Cristiano had hidden. He asked me to join him, to go back to our lives together. I told him I would, that I would see him tomorrow, but that too was a lie."

"Does he know of this meeting?" Michele asked.

Caterina shook her head. "And no, I won't tell you where I said I'd meet him. I know I'm being contrary, but I'm a woman and I'm entitled." She suddenly looked up into the trees and by reflex,



Michele's and Kara's eyes followed. It took only a moment for them both to bring their gaze back down, but when they did, Caterina had a Beretta 3032 Tomcat aimed directly at Michele's head.

In a flash, Kara's P2000SK was out and trained on Caterina's heart, but she didn't pull the trigger. The few people walking along the park scattered when they saw the drawn guns.

"God damn it, Michele, take her down!" Jean barked into the radio.

Slowly, Michele reached up with his left hand and pulled the earpiece out.

"Asshole!" Jean cursed. "Kara. Claes. I order you to shoot her right now. Aim to wound," he ordered. To his disgust, Kara also disconnected her radio.

"Do you have a shot?" he asked Rico.

"No, Jean," she replied. Michele had positioned himself to block Rico's view to the point she didn't feel confident she could hit Franca – or miss Michele.

"Caterina, please just come quietly," Michele pleaded.

"I'm sorry, Michele. Thank you for the past few months. The memories will comfort me in hell."

Caterina tensed her finger on the trigger.

The sound of the pistol going off caused everyone to involuntarily jump. Michele didn't feel an impact, but he'd heard that sometimes the shock didn't transmit the pain for a few moments. Still, he'd been shot before and he'd immediately felt it those times so with a sick feeling he realized he hadn't been the one hit.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Kara's P2000SK did not appear to have been fired. He returned his focus to Caterina and while her face remained unchanged, he noticed the light in her eyes go dim. Her arm started to sink and like a building with an eroded foundation, she slowly toppled over onto her side, landing like a bag of sugar tossed on the ground.

Michele's eyes followed her down, than rose back up to where she stood. Claes stood there, next to a tree, the barrel of her gun smoking slightly as she lifted it up and away. She'd been hidden from his view by Caterina and the tree. Michele lowered his own weapon and Kara did the same beside him. Michele's shoulders slumped and he made his weapon safe before returning it to his holster. Kara started to move towards him, but an almost imperceptible shake of his head stopped her.

"Return to the compound," he ordered, his voice almost lost in the cacophony of the city. He started walking towards the Via di San Marco and disappeared around the corner.

Kara opened her mouth to call after him, but no words would come. She turned towards Claes and marched towards her, the soles of her boots echoing like their own gunshots, her face a mask of unrestrained fury. She closed and swung her arm back. Claes squeezed her eyes shut and tensed for the hit, but it never came. She peeked and saw Kara standing before her, her chest heaving even though she wouldn't normally breathe hard even under great physical exertion. Kara lowered her arm and turned away. "Come on," she growled in a voice that sounded like two tectonic plates grinding past each other. Claes dutifully followed and slipped into the passenger seat of the Aston Martin, belting herself in. Kara did the same and turned the key to the "Accessory" position. The HVAC system started blowing cool air and the sound system re-started where it left off, Rufus Wainwright's reverent cover of Leonard Cohen's most famous song:

*Maybe there's a God above  
And all I ever learned from love  
Was how to shoot at someone who outdrew you  
It's not a cry you can hear at night  
It's not somebody who's seen the light  
It's a cold and it's a broken hallelujah*

Kara's hand froze over the Start button and she slowly pulled it away. She crossed her arms on the top of the steering wheel, leaned her forehead on them, and started sobbing.

In the passenger seat, Claes willed the tears to not come, but they did anyway.

*Hallelujah, Hallelujah  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah*

## Chapter Sixteen – Checkmate

Michele didn't return that day. Or the next. Or the day after that.

They checked his apartments in Rome and Milan, but there was no indication he'd been to either. His parents noted they had not seen him and his plane remained at Ciampino.

Marina Cassini went data diving and through credit card records discovered that Michele had taken a taxi to Fiumicino and boarded the Japan Air Lines flight to Tokyo. He'd also withdrawn a significant amount of cash in Japanese Yen. Kara told her to check the Park Hyatt Tokyo, but there was no record of him checking in there or at the Grand Hyatt Tokyo.

---

"So did you beat him up?" Ilaria asked as she walked into the dormitory room she shared with Kara.

"Beat whom up?" Kara said from the bed, where she was reading a book.

"Michele, silly," Ilaria replied.

"He's back?" Kara said, rising up off her pillow.

"Yeah, I just saw him walking into the Handler's dormitory."

In a flash, Kara leapt off the bed, almost tripping over the pair of boots at the end of the bed. She snapped them up and pulled them on before rushing out the door. She barreled down the stairs and stormed outside, quickly crossing to the Handler's Dorm and climbed the stairs to his room. She grasped the handle and pushed.

She saw Michele standing at the end of his bed, laying down a jacket. Moving forward, she grabbed him around the chest and swept his legs out from under him, spinning him to land on his back on the bed. She straddled him at the waist and hooked her legs and feet over his thighs, pinning him down. Tears in her eyes, she then proceeded to curse him in five languages.

Michele stood mute against her verbal assault and when she finished, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against him.

"I thought you had left me," Kara sobbed. "I was so afraid I couldn't focus on anything."

"I will never leave you, Kara. I just needed some time alone. And I am so very sorry I didn't leave word about where I was going and when I'd be back. I didn't mean to cause you stress."

"I'm sorry I failed you," Kara said.

"What are you talking about?"

"I failed to protect you. If Claes hadn't shot her..."

"You didn't fail me, Kara. Caterina had no intention of shooting me. Her goal was to die and that is why she aimed at me. If Claes hadn't shot her, she'd have turned the gun on you to get you to fire at her. Claes shot her to save you from being the one who killed the woman I loved."

Kara pushed herself up onto her knees and then rolled over to end up sitting on the edge of the bed. Michele went into the bathroom and returned with a damp washrag which Kara used to wipe her face.

"How about we have Berlioni's for dinner," Michele offered.

"Okay, but don't think that is enough to buy me off. I'm still very upset with you," Kara said.

---

After dinner, Michele went back to his apartment. Kara went into the bedroom, slipped off her boots and climbed onto the bed, laying her head on one of the pillow sets.

Michele sat down next to her, reached out with his hand and brushed back her bangs.

"I know you want to be more than just my daughter, but because you *are* my daughter, I care for you deeper and stronger than anyone else. You will be the most important person in my life no matter what. No lover and no wife will *ever* lessen my love for you or the fulfillment you bring my life by being a part of it. I thank God every day for allowing us to be together."

"Telling you I love you seems so...inadequate. I want to show you," Kara admitted.

"I have never doubted your love for me, Kara. Over the months we spent together during your convalescence and then the augmentation surgeries you came to own my heart. We've had our share of rough patches, but I've never regretted any of the decisions that brought us together."

"Why were you in Japan?" Kara asked.

"I went to see your mother," Michele said. He saw Kara's body stiffen.

"My mother? Is my father there, too?"

"Your father was French."

"Was?"

"He's dead, Kara. And so is your mother, at least effectively."

"Effectively?"

"She's in a permanent vegetative state due to massive head trauma in the same accident that took your father's life and put you on the path to be with me here and now. I spoke with her doctors and they say her condition is deteriorating and she's not expected to live much longer."

"Why do most of us not remember our pasts?" Kara asked.

"I'm told it's to help you bond with your handler. By making them the only person in your life, you form a strong emotional attachment to them and become more dependent towards them."

"Do you know my past?"

"Yes, I do. Do you want to know it?"

"No," Kara said, her voice strong and definite. "My past is irrelevant. All that matters is my present and future...with you."

Kara reached up and grabbed his hand, pulling him down onto the bed next to her and pressed her back up against him. Within moments, she was asleep and Michele soon followed.

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"Victory is mine!" Kara exclaimed as she speared the Aston Martin DB9 into an open parking space in the Trastevere rione of Rome the following day. As part of his "atonement", Michele sent both Kara and Claes out with his credit card to shop for some new summer outfits. He also promised them a long weekend on the Italian and French Riviera.

Michele's 39<sup>th</sup> birthday would be next month and Kara wanted to get him something, even if it was with his own money. She'd heard there were some nice antique shops in the Trastevere district so after the Via dei Condotti Kara headed there.

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While Kara and Claes shopped, a man with a 25x10x10cm clothing box under his arm walked down the sidewalk. He stepped out into the street and continued on, walking close to the line of parked cars. When he reached their DB9, he bent down to one knee and placed the box down and slid the box under the passenger compartment of the car before acting like he was tying a loose shoelace before rising and continuing on.

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"I want to run to the bakery and get some dessert for tonight," Claes noted to Kara.

"Okay, I'll get the car and meet you out front," Kara replied. Claes nodded and walked toward the end of the street.

Kara arrived at the Aston and unlocked it. She sat down and reached to close the door.

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Thirty meters away, hidden from sight by a stone vestibule, Franco removed a disposable cellphone from his jacket pocket once he saw Kara open the door and sit down. He stepped back inside the vestibule and powered on the cellphone, waiting the few moments it took for it to find a signal. He then dialed another disposable cellphone, waited for it to connect, then hung up again. He immediately hit the redial button.

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In Hollywood, a car bomb explodes in a huge gasoline fireball, leaving behind a recognizable, but impressively burning hulk.

In the real world, high explosive shreds due to extreme pressure as opposed to burns due to extreme heat. An explosion does generate a prodigious amount of heat, but that heat is transmitted into the gaseous products of the explosion reaction and the surrounding atmosphere to generate extreme overpressures.

When the bomb in the clothing box detonated under the Aston, the pressure wave it created tore into the passenger compartment, effectively vaporizing it and cleaving the car into two separate pieces, which moved away from each other, slamming into the cars in front and behind. The force of the explosion ruptured the fuel tank and atomized a good portion of fuel, which ignited in an impressive fireball. The remaining fuel spread out in a large burning pool along the street, setting fire to nearby cars.

While a powerful device, the explosive material had been arranged to take advantage of the Misnay-Schardin effect to focus the majority of the explosive force directly upward. Therefore, while the shockwave blew out store window fronts for hundreds of meters and shrapnel from the disintegrating Aston wounded scores of bystanders, compared to a conventional explosive event which vented much of its force outwards parallel to the ground, the collateral damage was mercifully light.

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Claes had just rounded the corner when she saw a bright flash in the large glass window of the store across the street from her. A nearly instantaneous moment of time later the heat pulse arrived at close to 300km/s and one-thousand of those moments later the sound and pressure wave of the event arrived, spider-webbing the window before blowing it inward in small pieces. People on the street were either knocked down by the blast or dived to the ground in fright.

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Franco stepped out onto the street to admire his handiwork. With a body and frame composed of aluminum, the DB9 burned fiercely, putting out waves of heat. He'd hoped to kill both cyborgs with his bomb, but as a pragmatic man, he knew when to accept the cards as dealt. There would be time enough to try again, he knew, as he stared directly at the second one.

A move that became his undoing as from across the way, Claes saw him and a moment later made the connection with his identity. She immediately charged towards him, reaching for her pistol.

Franco saw the cyborg girl charge towards him and he turned to run. Claes' much higher sprinting speed allowed her to quickly close the gap. She considered shooting him, however crowds were gathering everywhere due to the explosion and she feared she might hit someone. So she put on a final burst of speed and slammed into Franco, sending him sprawling onto the pavement as she pin-wheeled her arms to stay standing as she decelerated.

He'd pulled his own gun out, but hadn't time to turn and aim it at her before she knocked him down. He maintained his grip on it as he fell, however, and as he tried to bring it around Claes stamped on his wrist, her foot crushing the carpals and shattering the distal ends of his radius and ulna. Franco cried out once in pain as Claes grabbed him by the back of his shirt collar and dragged him into an adjacent alley. Even with a shattered wrist, Franco's face was a mask of pure hatred.

"You took that which is most precious from me and I have paid you back in kind many times over. I told Giacomo Dante what you are and he used that information to kill your...sisters...in Venice. And he's not alone. Your secret is out now, demon. The Five Republics knows you're not immortal and they will find a way to kill the rest of you as I just did those two back there. You can kill me, girl, but I'll die with the satisfaction that I caused you pain."

Claes lifted him up and smashed him face-first into the wall, breaking his nose and knocking him unconscious. Franco dropped like a puppet whose strings had been cut and she used her foot to push him back against the alley wall. She then pulled her cellphone out of her pocket and dialed a number.

"Michele. It's Claes. Something terrible has happened..."

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Knowing she could do nothing else, Claes waited in the alley with the unconscious Franco. Within three minutes the first police forces arrived – two Polizia Municipale on foot, followed by a Polizia de Stato officer on a BMW motorbike. Within six minutes the first Fiat Multipla medic-car arrived and the two medical staff aboard started to perform triage.



Within fifteen minutes the emergency response was in full-swing and Claes pulled farther back into the alley, hiding herself and Franco, who remained unconscious, behind a large refuse bin. She heard the wail of a racing bike's engine and turned to see a red Ducati 998S screaming towards her. The bike screeched to a sideways halt and Claes tightened her grip on her pistol, which she kept concealed behind her back. The driver, dressed in a black leather racing suit, removed his helmet.

"Michele!" Claes yelled, disarming her pistol and sliding it into the back of her jeans.

"Is that him?" Michele asked in a dead voice, but with murder in his eyes as he pointed at Franco. Claes nodded and Michele turned and unzipped the tankbag, his body position blocking Claes' view. She thought he might be going for his pistol so she stepped away from Franco, but when Michele turned, he tossed Claes a set of Kevlar hand and leg restraints.

"What happened to his face?" Michele asked.

"He resisted arrest," Claes deadpanned.

"Good girl. Truss him up," he ordered and Claes proceeded to do so.

Michele walked past her and out into the street and out of her field of view. When she'd finished, she ran to the end of the alley and saw him approaching the car, his security identification in his hand to get past the police cordon.

Another police motorcycle appeared and behind it trailed Jean's CLS500 and an unmarked Iveco Daily van. Claes waved her arms to get his attention and he pulled to a stop next to the entrance, the van coming up behind him. She saw Amadeo behind the wheel, with Nihad and Giorgio next to him. Ferro exited the passenger side of Jean's Mercedes and Rico scrambled out of the back, her hand going inside her jacket as she quickly scanned the area.

"Do you have him?" Jean demanded without preamble.

"Yes, he's back here," Claes said and Jean brushed past her, Rico in trail.

Claes swore in her mind at his indifference to Kara's death. She looked to Ferro and saw her trying to look stoic as she surveyed the scene. She turned to Giorgio.

"Check the Aston," she ordered and he headed off in that direction, flashing their identification.

Jean stood before the unconscious form of Franco. Part of him wanted to pull out his pistol and shoot him while another part of him wanted to beat him to a pulp.

"Rico, take him to the van and secure him," he ordered.

"Yes, Jean," Rico replied. She picked up Franco and tossed him over her shoulder and carried him out to the van.

"Where's Michele?" Jean asked Claes.

"He went to examine the...scene."

Moments later, Giorgio returned, shaking his head. "There's nothing left," he reported to Ferro.

"Wait for the recovery vehicle to arrive and escort it back to the compound," Jean ordered. He turned to Ferro and Amadeo. "Return to the van," he ordered. Amadeo got behind the wheel and Ferro took the passenger seat.

Jean reached into his pocket and placed the key to his CLS in Claes' hand. She looked at him questioning.

"Don't let Michele leave alone. Have the police secure his bike and then bring him back to the compound," he ordered. Claes could only nod as she watched him enter the back of the van, sliding the door behind him. Amadeo started the vehicle and with police help backed out.

Claes watched them go, then flagged the attention of a Carabinieri officer.

---

Michele walked towards the steaming remains of his DB9. An aluminum fire could not be extinguished with water, so the Iveco Grizzly fire truck had smothered the wreck in foam to deny it oxygen

and cool the metal, which had melted into some horrific modern art sculpture. Even the aluminum V12 engine block had sagged into an unrecognizable lump of material. He turned away, tears stinging his eyes, and looked at a row of white plastic legs ending just above the feet in the display box of the shop before him. He realized that they belonged to mannequins whose feet must be anchored to the display case so the explosion toppled them over, shearing them at the weakest point. He saw one of them blown half-a-dozen meters inside, lying upside down against a counter, the dress it wore falling down over the chest and head, leaving the hips and abdomen area exposed.

Michele's eye was drawn to an upper thigh sticking out from under a bowled over clothes rack and smashed acoustical ceiling tiles. At first he thought it just another mannequin, but he noticed that the thigh was flesh-colored and that the sole of the shoe was a brilliant red. It took a moment for his mind to register that the Christian Louboutin shoes Kara wore had brilliant red soles.

He rushed through the open door, flinging debris away as he crawled and clawed his way forward. He threw off the tiles and with a burst of adrenalin he heaved the rack off to reveal Kara and his heart leapt into his throat. He pressed the side of his head to her chest and heard her heartbeat and felt her take a breath. He pulled his head back and examined her. The blast appeared to have thrown her through the window and into one of the mannequins before they both crashed into a rack of clothes and then covered with the ceiling tiles. All her limbs looked to be in the proper positions and her skin had multiple slight lacerations from the fragments of tempered glass, but she appeared to have been just knocked unconscious.

Too overcome with elation to either laugh or cry, Michele lifted her up and carried her outside, staggering a bit under her 100 kilogram weight.

---

After informing the officer of Michele's bike, Claes started walking towards the remains of the Aston Martin. As she approached, she saw Michele appear in the door with a woman dressed like Kara and from the way he struggled, probably weighed as much as her.

"She's alive," Michele said as Claes rushed up. "And I think she's relatively uninjured."

"Let me take her," Claes said and Michele placed her into a fireman's carry position on her back. "Jean left me the keys to the CLS," she added.

"God bless that sonofabitch," Michele replied. "Put her in the passenger seat and drive her back to the compound. I'll follow on the bike."

They reached the car and Michele held the door open while Claes put Kara in and then strapped her down. A policeman came over, but Michele flashed his ID and noted they would take her to a medical facility. Claes started the car and drove out, followed by Michele on his Ducati.

They clawed their way out to the Lungotevere della Famesina and drove south along the bank to the Viale di Trastevere and then the Via della Magliana on to the A91 and then A90. Claes used the size of the big Mercedes coupe to intimidate people out of her way, though she herself was intimidated by Michele riding on her tail, urging her to go faster. They peeled off the Autostrada and made their way to the complex and hospital.

As soon as Claes came to a stop, the medical staff moved Kara out of the passenger seat onto a gurney and rushed her inside. Michele knew from experience that he'd get nowhere with them at this moment, so he instructed Claes to take the Mercedes back to the Handler's Dorm and he followed her.

After that she went up to Michele's room and they waited together for the medical team to call.

## **Chapter Seventeen - Coffeehouse Play**

"Buy a girl a drink?" Ferro asked Michele as the latter exited Passport Control at Fiumicino Airport.

"Ferro! What are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd save you cab fare or slumming on the train," Ferro said.

"How did you know my flight?"

"I have my sources. I also know a place where we can talk without worry of being overheard."

"What did you wish to talk about?" Michele asked.

"I think you're the one who needs to do the talking," Ferro noted.

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Rather than connect on the A91 Autostrada to Rome, Ferro instead took the SS296 onramp and started driving south of the airport. She merged onto SS8 and drove to the coastal commune of Lido di Ostia. She drove right down to the water, parking in a No Parking zone and hanging a Polizia di Stato parking pass on the rear-view mirror.

They walked down a block and entered a bar, Ferro telling Michele to take a table on the second floor terrace. He did so and she appeared soon after with a tray holding two bottles of Nastro Azzurro lager and two large tulip glasses.

"Do they even let you drink in Dubai?" Ferro asked as she poured beer into her glass.

"While a Middle Eastern country, Dubai does allow public liquor consumption and it's actually known for it's nightlife," Michele noted as he did the same.

"Well at least Kara won't be bored," Ferro said with a knowing smile.

Michele tried to play dumb, but failed miserably. "Bored?" he asked.

"I hear you and Kara are leaving Section 2," Ferro noted. "And Italy," she added.

"Where did you hear that?" Michele asked, doing the same.

"I overheard Director Lorenzo and Jean Croce talking—well, arguing, really. Jean wasn't pleased."

"Jean is consumed by the death of his loved ones at the hands of Padania. He doesn't care about Italy—he cares about extracting revenge for what they did. His vendetta will never end because it requires the death of everyone connected to Padania. And their vendetta is now Lorenzo's and even Petris'. The goal now is to 'win', whatever that means, no matter the cost and no matter who is sacrificed. Lorenzo and Jean sent Beatrice and Silvia to their deaths and almost added Triela. Well, I refuse to sacrifice Kara."

"So it is true, then?" Ferro asked, though her tone was one of confirming a fact already known.

"Yes. Our last day is June 10<sup>th</sup>. Minister Petris didn't want to do it, but I successfully convinced her to make it happen. I take it she told Lorenzo and Lorenzo told Jean."

"I'm not surprised she resisted. In letting you and Kara leave, won't that just encourage the others to leave, as well?" Ferro asked.

"Jean will never leave and that ties Jose to his side. Plus, Henrietta is starting to suffer the same symptoms Angelica did before she died. I think Hillshire would consider taking Triela away, but Triela is suffering from the memory loss, as well. And she probably wouldn't leave Rico and Henrietta behind."

"So is this because you really feel Kara's life is in danger? Or is it because you're feeling self-conscious about being betrayed by Franca?" Ferro asked, deliberately using her pseudonym.

"Caterina and I betrayed each other by not being honest with each other: she because of her past and I because of my present. I can't talk with anyone about what I do. I have to lie to my family and my friends, creating these elaborate charades and personas. That takes a toll on a man's soul and psyche after awhile. Some people, like Alessandro, can lie as easily as breathing. I don't begrudge him that. Heck, at times I envy him. But it's not who I am nor who I wish to be.

"That being said, in the interest of truth, I'm doing it for Kara. When Claes called and said the Aston had blown-up with her in it, I was the

one who died, at least inside. I took the bike because it was the fastest way to get there, but I seriously gave thought to taking the A1 north and never looking back. She's become such an integral and important part of my life that not having her beside me..."

"When Priscilla finds out, she's going to find it all very romantic, I am sure. The gallant handler taking his lovely cyborg off to create a new life together," Ferro noted with a smile.

"It's not like that between us. I think of her as my daughter," Michele said.

"But she likely doesn't think of you as her father," Ferro replied. "I remember how it felt to be 18, Michele. I might not actually have understood what love entails, but I thought I did. She's also at a disadvantage due to her biology. When they converted her, they made her sterile, but they didn't take out the plumbing, so to speak. Her body is flooded with hormones telling her she's ready to reproduce and society flooded her with messages telling her sex is one of the ways you show intimacy and love towards someone she cares about.

"Kara almost assuredly desires intimacy with you and she is trying to show it by kissing you and holding your hand and being next to you. It probably hurts her to be apart from you and especially when you spent time with other women like Caterina. She wonders if you seek them out because you feel she's too inexperienced to satisfy your needs. She wants to share your bed, even if it's only in the literal sense and not the metaphorical one. And when you allow her to do so, she presses up against you at night in an effort to claim you for herself. All people are selfish to one level or another and she doesn't want to share you."

"I'm either too old for this or not old enough," Michele sighed.

"Would you like my advice as a former teenage girl in love?" Ferro offered.

Michele motioned with his drink for her to continue.

"Acknowledge her feelings for you, even as you set firm boundaries as to how far those feelings will progress. She'll respect those boundaries both because of the conditioning and because she respects you."

They shared another beer and then Ferro drove them both back to the compound.

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"Michele!" Claes exclaimed from the bed after she heard the knock and bid the person to enter Captain Raballo's old room.

"I'd like to speak with you, if I may," Michele asked.

"Uh, sure," Claes said. She closed her book and sat up on the edge of the bed while Michele took the desk chair.

"I've decided to leave Section 2," Michele informed her. "And I'm taking Kara with me."

Claes just stared at him.

"What do you mean 'leave'?" she asked after she recovered.

"You've commented on more than one occasion that I was 'too kind' for this type of work and you were right. I really am not cut out for this kind of life and I've been in over my head since I came here. When I thought Kara died, I realized how much she meant to me and I can't lose her, Claes. I just can't.

"I want to get her away from this and that means I need to get her away from Italy. I bought a place in Dubai a few years back. The building has recently been completed and it's both far enough away and close enough to Milan and Rome to serve as our new home, at least for awhile."

"But you told me without the conditioning medication, we'd die," Claes noted.

"I've made a deal with Minister Petris. The medical staff will provide Kara with conditioning medication and she will be allowed full access to the medical staff as necessary for check-ups and repair work."

"And what happens to me?" she asked, a hint of fear in her tone.

"I had Minister Petris promise me you would not be teamed with another handler, nor be re-conditioned. And you have the body of an adult now, which means you can do more than just read books from Mister Raballo's library and tend a herb garden."



"I don't understand."

"While you lack a formal secondary school education, you have followed the general curriculum of a *liceo classico* student. Therefore, while the pursuit of an actual *laurea* is impractical, you could still attend university classes and expand your knowledge."

"You're suggesting I attend university?" Claes said, her tone incredulous.

"My father is very good friends with the Dean of Admissions at the University of Milan and you would be welcome to use my apartment, since I'd prefer to leave it in the hands of someone I know and trust. Same with the Gallardo, which would allow you to commute between there and Rome to keep in touch with Triela and the other girls, as well as for medical checkups."

"This...this is all too much," Claes said, shaking her head as if to clear her mind of all the thoughts jumbling around.

"I'm sorry for throwing all this on you. But I'm not going to be here much longer and I don't have the luxury of planning everything out to the last detail. But I want you to know that you do have options, Claes, both inside and outside the Agency."

## Chapter Eighteen - Two Knights Tango

As had been done to Aaron Cicero, Section Two literally “put the screws” to Franco in order to break him and get him to talk, learning that Dante’s current base of operations lay on the island of La Maddalena, just off the northern tip of Sardinia.

Lorenzo went to Defense Minister Petris and secured the use of an MQ-1 Predator reconnaissance UAV dispatched from the 32° Stormo at Amendola Air Force Base in Foggia. It located multiple targets of interest and Amadeo and Giorgio were dispatched to check them out, along with Alessandro and Petrushka.

Using contacts and charm, Sandro identified a rental property located on a rocky outcropping in the northern part of the island, on the opposite side of Porto Massimo that was rumored to be used on occasion as a safe house by Sardinian independence and pro-Five Republics members.

They rented a 7m cabin cruiser boat in a marina in a cove down the way and sailed out to the Isolotti Barrettineli, which lay in between the two major ferry lanes to Palau from Naples and Genoa. From there, they deployed a STRIX mini UAV to watch over the area for vehicular or boat traffic.

They were soon rewarded with a 12m motor cruiser approaching from Naples. They tracked it to a small dock near the house and saw three men depart, but they were all in large hooded jackets and could not be positively identified. The information was relayed back to the Ministry of Defense and from there to Section 2. Lorenzo cleared the two Croce *fratelli* to take out the location. Alessandro and Petrushka were recalled, though Amadeo and Giorgio remained behind to keep tabs on the house.

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“Why can’t we just bomb the place with a Predator like the Americans are now doing in Afghanistan?” Triela grouched as she lugged the carrying case holding the Beretta-built version of the Rheinmetall MG 42/59 machine gun to the back of Hillshire’s E350 wagon. She placed it on the floor and shoved it forward.

“Because we don’t know who exactly is in the house and it suddenly going up in flames from an aerial attack would draw attention. La Maddalena is a popular tourist area this time of year,” Hillshire noted.

Triela shrugged. She then lifted a duffel bag with four cases of belt-fed 7.62x51mm NATO ammunition and placed it next to it, followed by the case for her H&K MP7A1, adding it to the pile.

Rico loaded the case holding her Dragunov SVD into the trunk of Jean's CLS500, followed by Henrietta with her Amati violin case containing her FN P90 PDW. Henrietta had barely slept the previous night as she meticulously cleaned her P90 and P239 to be sure they were absolutely perfect. She still felt she'd let Jose down in Venice when she'd lost hold of her P90 as well as guilty that Dante had escaped so she promised herself she'd be perfect this time.

Jean, Jose, Rico and Henrietta boarded the CL500 and Hillshire and Triela the E350 and the two cars headed to the Fiumicino ferry dock and boarded the car ferry for the 14:30 sailing to Golfo Aranci, Sardinia. They arrived a bit under four hours later and once they offloaded from the ferry, they drove north to Palau and caught the 20:30 sailing to La Maddalena.

Jean itched to head to the safe house and take it out, but they'd been on the road and sea for some seven hours and fatigue had set in. They checked into a small hotel in the town and went to sleep.

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They awoke at 04:00, roughly 90 minutes before sunrise, and returned to their vehicles. They drove along the eastern edge of the Parco Nazionale dell'Arcipelago di La Maddalena and up to the top of the island, just south of the resort town of Porto Massimo. They crossed the top and followed a side road that led to the safe house. They parked about 1 kilometer away and unpacked their weapons before proceeding towards the house under natural cover. However, as the girls all wore normal street clothes and their handlers dressed in suits, they stood out more than blended in with their surroundings.

The house's architecture was long and narrow and aligned parallel to the promontory so the windows faced the bay on either side. Rico set up her position about 500m away, choosing the tallest hill in the area so the MG3 and her SVD could cover both the front and the back as well as the beach area in case they made a run for the boat.

The other five continued forward, on the lookout for any early risers as they crept along the dunes and granite outcroppings, eschewing the main drive that led up a multi-car garage. They stopped about 50m

away and looked for motion sensors or infrared sensors, but found nothing. Henrietta and Triela continued forward, weapons at the ready.

"When you two go inside, Henrietta you go left and Triela you go right. Eliminate any targets, regardless of type. Do you understand?" Jean asked. Both girls answered that they did.

Henrietta and Triela crept around the side of the house to the back, crouching along a low stone wall facing a small garden plot. They verified their weapons were locked and loaded. Again they examined the back porch for sensor devices, but found none.

By now, the sun's rays lit the eastern horizon, though most of the house remained in darkness and shadow. They carefully stepped across the patio, the leather soles of Henrietta's loafers and Triela's brogues echoing softly off the stones. They approached a large sliding glass door and again made a check for sensors, finding none.

Triela removed a glass cutter from a pouch on her belt. She checked to ensure there was carpeting on the other side and then cut a hole 120mm in diameter, softly popping the glass inside where it bounced off the carpet. She then reached in with gloved hands to unlatch the lock, slowly opening the door to minimize the noise it made.

"We're going in," Triela noted over her headset microphone as she followed Henrietta through the open portal. Hillshire moved forward to cover the front while Jose went to the back and Jean held back to be able to support either side.

Henrietta didn't see the glass table in front of her, and she barked her shins on the edge as she stepped forward. While the inside of the room bordered on pitch dark, Triela's MP7A1 carried an infrared illuminator which allowed the infrared photoreceptors in their cybernetic eyes to see in the darkness. Unfortunately for them, it also informed Dante's men down the hall, armed with night-vision goggles that they were coming.

Almost six months of ducking Italian security forces had honed Giacomo Dante's senses and intuition. When Aşık's boat arrived, Dante noticed a flash of sunlight in the sky. He ordered his men to scan the sky with binoculars and they quickly located the UAV circling overhead. Knowing their cover had been blown, they also knew that escape would be impossible with the UAV overhead, so they instead chose to hunker down and wait for the government to come to them. They set-

up sentries to watch the road and both water approaches and they'd identified the group coming towards them as they crept through the trees.

Two hallways bisected the house, one parallel to the general plan from which the various rooms branched off of and one perpendicular, connecting the front and back entrances. As the girls approached the nexus where the two met, Triela went right while Henrietta went left. Each started down the hall. Triela was taking her fourth step when a set of forearms and hands gripping an MP5A4 popped out into the hall and opened fire. The 9mm rounds hit Triela square in the chest, knocking her back on her butt. She immediately recovered, however, and sent a stream of armor piercing 4.6x30mm rounds through the surrounding wall and into the shooter, knocking him back against the open door of the kitchen.

Henrietta charged forward, surprising the gunman with the HK53 waiting in the first bedroom for her to pass. She ducked under him and raised her P90 up and fired, stitching him from abdomen to chest, the armor-piercing 5.7x28mm rounds easily penetrating his light ballistic armor and sending him sprawling backwards.

Down the hall, Triela hopped back onto her feet and came forward. She nudged the corpse on the kitchen floor with her foot and saw one of her rounds had gone through his face and into his brain, killing him instantly.

In the bedroom, Henrietta heard movement behind her and whirled and dropped to one knee. She brought up her P90, centered on the man coming out of the bedroom across the way and drilled him through the chest with a short burst.

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When he heard the shooting, Hillshire rushed forward, kicking in the front door. He stayed clear of the door in case anybody fired at him, and then slowly came in, staying against the wall. In the back, Jose stayed outside, covering the terrace area.

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In a detached outbuilding about five meters away, Giacomo Dante had watched the Agency forces approach. Armed with an HK G3KA4 carbine, he waited for them to launch the attack on the house. When he saw the man in the front kick down the door and enter, he made a break for it, heading for the beach and the motor boat docked there.

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Jean saw the figure come out of the building and he raised his pistol, firing three rounds in quick succession. Dante's body armor absorbed the rounds, causing him to stumble, but not fall. He swung his G3KA4 and fired off a long burst, forcing Jean to drop into a crouch as 7.62x51mm NATO ball rounds slammed into the wall around him.

Dante ducked behind the house and then popped back out into the open, heading down towards the beach. Jean had picked himself back up and gave chase, stopping at the edge of the house. He took aim at Dante again and fired five more rounds, but they all went wide. Dante again returned fire, spraying the edge of the house and forcing Jean back. The movement and gunfire caught Rico's eye and she set her SVD against her shoulder and sighted on the target. She identified the target as Giacomo Dante and fired. The 7.62x54mmR round lanced out and shattered Dante's skull, dropping him in his steps.

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Inside the house, Triela checked the laundry room and garage, but found nobody. Henrietta continued to the common bathroom at the end of the hall, but also found nothing. Hillshire identified himself and stepped into the living room, quickly joined by Henrietta and Triela. They stepped out on the terrace and saw Jean and Jose standing side-by-side over a body.

Henrietta ran out to Jose, ignoring the corpse.

"Did you get him?" she asked.

"Yes, he's dead," Jose said, a sense of relief in his voice.

"I'm so happy for you, Jose!" Henrietta squealed. She dropped her P90 on the ground and hugged Jose tightly, tears of joy streaming down her face.

Rico walked up to Jean, her SVD draped over her back. "Did I do well, Jean?" she asked.

"You did marvelous, my precious *angelo vendicatore*," Jean said, reaching out to draw her to him.

"Come on, Triela. Let's leave them alone," Hillshire said, turning and walking back into the living room.

## Chapter Nineteen – Tabia

"We've had some interesting times together," Triela stated from the head of the bed as Kara finished packing her things into a suitcase at the foot.

"We have at that," Kara agreed.

"Why Dubai of all places? I've never even heard of it. I had look it up on an atlas," Triela noted.

"Michele has a new place there," Kara replied. Before that fateful 2004 day in Madrid that changed his life, Michele purchased a full-floor 1250m<sup>2</sup> apartment in the planned Le Rêve residential skyscraper planned for the Dubai Marina district waterfront. With construction of the tower having been recently completed and the interior decorators he'd hired about done working their magic, Michele decided that in the face of recent events, he wanted to put some distance between himself and Italy so they were heading to the Arabian emirate for at least a year.

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When Kara revealed Michele's plans to take her to Dubai to live, it floored Triela. She'd never imagined a life outside of the SWA, always assuming that when her time came, she'd be buried in the monastery's crypt with those sisters who had gone before her. She'd known Hillshire long enough to be able to read him pretty well, and she knew he felt regret at both his situation and hers. If Michele successfully left, she wondered if maybe they'd let her and Hillshire go...

Triela had sought out Michele to thank him for what he'd done for Claes. She'd have hated to see Claes leave with them, but she knew that if she'd stayed, she might equally have been lost to her. Without Michele's deal, she knew Claes would probably have been paired with another handler and if her new handler re-wrote her, would she have become a stranger?

As Kara and Triela both expected, Henrietta did not take the news well. She knew her youngest sister suffered from the same memory lapses she herself was experiencing and that they were causing her emotional distress, leading to a breakdown during the Venice mission. She'd been the first girl to extend greetings and friendship with Kara and even though they were years apart in age, experience and interests, they'd been close and losing another sister affected her

deeply. Still, sufficient tea and cake raised her spirits back to their normal level. Triela thought that Rico didn't seem to understand that Kara would not be coming back, instead thinking Kara and Michele were merely going on a trip. However, she didn't feel the energy to try and explain it so she let it pass for now.

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Kara laid the final item on top and closed the suitcase, the metal latches snapping closed with the sharp sound of finality. Dressed in a sleeveless ivory embroidered silk dress from Escada, she sat down on the chair and pulled on a pair of black Yves Saint Laurent patent leather boots.

"I'll walk you out," Triela said. She grabbed Kara's suitcase and started for the door.

As they stepped onto the bottom landing of the dorm, Henrietta, Rico, and Petrushka were all present to wish her goodbye.

Petrushka shook her hand, wishing her well and then heading up the stairs into the dorm. Rico also shook her hand, telling her to have fun on her "trip". Henrietta fought back tears with varying degrees of success, and Kara came forward to give her a hug. "Take care of yourself and Jose, little sister," she said. Henrietta, sniffing, nodded.

Triela stepped outside and down the steps. Out front, the Prime Minister's Rolls Royce Phantom sedan stood parked and Michele and Claes were speaking with each other. The chauffeur came forward and took the suitcase from Triela, placing it in the trunk before slipping behind the wheel.

"Ready to go?" Michele asked Kara as she came forward and Kara nodded.

"Claes, Triela. Take care of yourselves and your handlers," Michele said. Both girls nodded.

"We're going to hold you to your promise to let us come visit," Triela noted with a smile, which Michele returned. They then stepped back to join Rico and Henrietta at the foot of the stairs.

Kara waved goodbye and climbed into the back, followed by Michele, who pushed a button in the C-pillar, automatically closing the rear-hinged door.



The car turned in a wide circle and proceeded for the private compound exit. Kara and Michele both resisted the urge to turn and watch, instead staring straight ahead.

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The chauffeur dropped them off at the Emirates Airline section of Leonardo da Vinci-Fiumicino Airport. He removed their luggage from the trunk and carried it in to the First Class check-in counter then bid them a good trip.

They checked in and were shown to the lounge where they passed the thirty minutes until their flight boarded.

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When they arrived in Dubai it was just past 23:00 local. A woman in a business suit and skirt holding a sign with Michele's last name met them outside Passport Control. Beside her stood a man in a chauffeur uniform.

"Welcome to Dubai, Mr. and Mrs. Pagani," she greeted. "My name is Anisa and I have been sent by Le Rêve to escort you to your new residence."

Michele groaned inwardly at the *faux faux* while Kara beamed.

"If you will follow me, please," Anisa requested. The chauffeur lifted their luggage and trailed behind. They stepped outside and into what Kara felt was a blast furnace. A Bentley Continental Flying Spur with the motor running stood parked directly in front of them, the doors unlocking as they approached. Anisa opened the back door and Kara and Michele climbed into air conditioned comfort.

Anisa took the front passenger seat and moments later the chauffeur settled in and they started off. They exited the airport onto the E11 heading towards downtown Dubai. The city skyline lay awash in lights, glittering like thousands of precious stones spread across the dark sand.

They exited the E11 just past the American University of Dubai and proceeded towards the coast to the Al Sufouh Road and Le Rêve Tower. They quickly crossed from the air conditioned comfort of the car to the air conditioned comfort of the main lobby and approached a bank of four elevators. Anisa pressed a keycard against a reader

followed by the appropriate button and they were quickly whisked to the 45<sup>th</sup> floor. They stepped out into an entrance lobby with a door at each end. Anisa went to the left and pressed the keycard against the door. She pushed it open and they stepped into a small reception area. The chauffer placed both suitcases there and returned to the entrance lobby while Anisa, Michele and Kara turned left again and stepped into the Living Room.

Kara gasped in astonishment. Through floor to ceiling windows directly in front of her she could see a huge terrace and beyond that the dark expanse of the Persian Gulf and the Palm Jumerirah artificial islands. To her right the Burj Al Arab hotel stood like a sentinel on the shore, lit in multiple layers of color. Beyond the living room was an adjoining bar area.

Anisa took them along northern side of the apartment, through the Dining Room, Breakfast Room and massive Kitchen. They then moved to a connecting hallway past the Family Room and the fifth of five bedrooms, which had a view of Dubai Media City, the American University of Dubai and the coastline. Two more slightly smaller bedrooms lined the eastern side with yet another bedroom taking up the southeastern corner. Next to it was a library lined with an attached study with still more bookshelves. Across from the study was an office with a glass wall that could be made opaque at the touch of a button. All of the furnishings were modern Danish in the finest of leathers and woods with plenty of glass, chrome and piano black lacquers.

They walked down another connecting hall and Anisa pushed open a door into a small vestibule. "And this is the Master Bedroom," she said and once again, Kara's jaw almost dropped.

A king bed dominated the far wall and plush leather recliners with ottomans nestled against the windows. Between them in the center stood a burled walnut entertainment cabinet with a 50" LCD television that could be raised or lowered out of it. Beyond the southern windows lay the glittering Dubai Marina and the Emirates Hills 1 complex. Further down she could see the lights of Jebel Ali port and the lights of the construction crews working on the Palm Jebel Ali artificial island. A set of doors opened out onto the terrace.

"Back here is a sitting room and two dressing rooms. I take it you will be using the larger?" she directed to Kara, who nodded her head to be polite. She looked inside and marveled at the sheer amount of closet

space. The two dressing rooms and sitting room together were larger than her old room at the SWA compound.

The bathroom spanned almost 41 square meters and included a deep whirlpool tub and His and Her sinks. Beyond were a wall of vanities, a toilet and a bidet, a sauna and a shower stall whose walls were lined with computer-controlled motorized showerheads.

"If you will excuse me for a moment," Anisa stated and left the room.

"To heck with my own room. I'm sleeping with you in this one," Kara noted and Michele wasn't sure if she was kidding or not. He decided silence was the better part of valor.

Anisa returned with a silver serving tray and two flutes of champagne, which she laid on the table between the two recliners.

"Does it meet your expectations?" she asked.

"It exceeds them by orders of magnitude," Michele noted and Kara briskly shook her head in agreement.

"I am pleased you are pleased," Anisa replied. She removed a small envelope from the leather portfolio she carried and handed it to Michele.

"Inside are two digital access cards. They are programmed to take you directly to this floor so you need not press the button. It also unlocks both entrance lobby doors, as well as grants access to the swimming pool, garden, Gymnasium and Sauna, and the garage."

"Thank you," Michele said as he took the envelope. They both followed Anisa out to the entrance lobby where she handed them her card with contact information and once again bid them welcome before stepping into the elevator car and disappearing.

"How much was this place?" Kara asked as soon as the doors closed.

"I bought in during the initial offering so I paid €5 million. I understand the going rate is about €8 million now."

"I'm impressed," Kara said. "I mean being with you I've come to expect only the best, but this...this is epic."

They made their way back to the master bedroom and each grabbed a champagne flute. They exited onto the terrace and noticed that the temperature, while still quite warm, had moderated thanks to the proximity of the water and an offshore breeze. Before them, the full moon hung above the dark waters of the Persian Gulf.

Michele raised his glass to Kara. "To a brand new life," he toasted.

Kara moved next to Michele and placed her arm around his waist.

"To a brand new life together," she replied and drained her glass.

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**The End**