

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 Kara and Michele are original to myself.

"Graduation Day [Sotsugyō]"

A Gunslinger Girl Original Story by Kiskaloo

Claes' boots sank into the thick carpeting of the master bedroom of Michele's apartment in Milan, leaving a visual record of her pacing that morning that only served to reinforce the nervousness she felt. Through the large glass doors the city looked sharp in the crisp November air.

As she passed the dresser, she stopped to pick up a picture taken with the digital SLR camera Jose had given Henrietta for Christmas five years prior. Of the eleven girls who formed the first generation of cyborgs, Claes had been the last to join and now only she remained. A year after Beatrice and Chiara died in Venice, Henrietta fell in Torino under a hail of bullets protecting her beloved Jose. The damage to his heart at losing Henrietta proved far more grievous than the damage the bullets did to his body and when he recovered, Jose chose not to return to the Agency.

Nobody was surprised when Rico became the next cyborg to show the deleterious effects of the conditioning. Everybody was surprised, however, when Jean pulled her from active duty and allowed her to live out her last weeks in peace. Director Lorenzo accepted a position in the Ministry of Defense Secretariat and Jean went with him and Elio Alboreto became the next head of Special Operations, Section 2.

In time, Triela began to recover earlier memories. Fortune spared her the remembrance of the traumas of Amsterdam, instead images of the Sahel and the Atlas Mountains of her native Tunisia drifting through her mind like morning fog hugging a coastline. Before the effects became too severe, Hilshire took her to Tunis and other major cities, but her memories remained subtle and illusive all the way to her passing.

Claes returned the picture to the top of the dresser and continued into the bathroom where she dampened a washrag and wiped her face before she applied cosmetics and then gave her hair a quick brush. She checked her brown turtleneck sweater and black skirt for lint and

added a grey felt six-quarter cap with visor. Once content with the image of herself in the mirror, she made her way to the garage and disarmed the alarm on the pearlescent white Bugatti Veyron 16.4 Grand Sport, which Michele had chosen to replace the Gallardo Spyder.

When Michele first delivered the car and told her it would be her new “daily driver”, she’d been sorely tempted to kick him in the shin, even knowing she’d shatter his tibia. The idea of a €1.250.000 car capable of speeds over 400km/h as a “daily driver” struck her as profoundly ludicrous and another sign of what she felt at times was his habit of showing an astounding lack of common sense. However, when she took it out for the first time, she was amazed at just how docile it was around town. And with similar physical dimensions to the Gallardo, she immediately felt comfortable inside it. While she’d never told Michele, she had in fact taken the car beyond 350km/h on more than one occasion, reveling in the power at her command.

Knowing Michele was a “fresh air fiend”, she removed the carbon fiber roof panel and stored it in the special holder against the wall. She settled into the luxurious and soft white leather driver’s seat and started the car, driving into the heart of Milan and pulling up under the portico of the Park Hyatt where Michele was waiting.

“Thanks for picking me up,” Michele said.

“You know you could have just stayed at the apartment. You do own it, after all,” Claes noted as she pulled out of the hotel and crossed over to the Via Santa Margherita and drove to the campus of the University of Milan.

Today, Claes would graduate with a *laurea triennale* in *Science dei Beni culturali* (undergraduate degree in Cultural Heritage Studies). Italian universities did not generally hold a collective graduation ceremony and Claes would perform a public defense of her thesis before a board of professors, who would then grade her defense on a scale of 0-100. Each professor could also grant a single “honors” point (for a possible total 110).

While the University offered many disciplines, she’d found “Cultural Assets” appealed to her with its emphasis on literature, art and music, theater and film, history, archeology and geography. And she soon found new comrades at University, which helped assuage the loneliness.

After Michele and Kara left for Dubai in mid-2006, Claes stayed at the Agency in Rome, making occasional weekend trips to the apartment in Milan to check on it. When Henrietta died the following year, Claes began to ruminate on her own life. Since her “upgrade”, she no longer participated in medical testing and things like working in her garden or reading in Mister Raballo’s room became less and less fulfilling.

Hilshire’s parents successfully shamed him into returning to Germany for Christmas that year so Triela and Claes spent the holiday with Michele and Kara in Dubai. Afterwards, Michele and Kara flew to Japan for the New Year and while there, they paid a visit to the University of Tokyo and Kara fell in love with the campus and expressed a desire to attend classes there if possible.

When Michele asked why, Kara replied that Michele’s work for the Italian government and his own business interests soon meant Kara found herself alone for much of the day and she’d quickly grown bored. She also wanted to “make something of herself” beyond just being a cybernetic killing machine.

Michele pulled enough strings to animate a battalion of marionettes in order to enroll Kara into the University of Tokyo in April 2007. When the three of them got together again during Kara’s summer check-up, the two cyborgs spoke about Kara’s experience and this conversation created inside Claes a strong desire to “make something of her life” as well while she still could and she informed Michele that she wished to take him up on his offer to enter the University of Milan.

This required her to move from Rome to Milan in September, and at first it was very hard for her. She quickly realized that the education she’d received in the Agency did not prepare her for University and she enrolled in *scuola serale* and took private tutoring at the apartment in Milan on weekends. This kept her away from Triela and the others, leaving her feeling isolated and alone. She soon started meeting people at University and while she kept herself closely guarded at first, she started to open up and create a new circle of people to supplement those she’d left behind in Rome.

While her brain did show similar effects from the conditioning medication as her older sisters, it manifested itself at a much lower severity thanks to the significantly lower “maintenance dosage” they switched her to after Mr. Raballo died. Still, the cumulative effects

were slowly affecting her and her dreams reflected earlier and earlier times in her life.

Claes parked the car and as they walked into the small auditorium, her heartbeat increased as she passed the Head of the Faculty of the Humanities, which oversaw the Cultural Heritage Studies program.

"Excited?" Michele asked.

"More like nervous," Claes noted. "I'm still not the most comfortable of public speakers."

"You'll be fine," Michele said.

Everyone settled into their chairs and when it came her turn, Claes successfully and expertly defended her thesis, scoring 873 points.

Claes accepted the congratulations of her teachers and friends and then returned to the Bugatti. Michele took over the driving duties, heading east on the Viale Corsica to join the northbound A51.

"We're not having dinner at Al Sorriso?" she asked when he didn't take the Via Rombon off-ramp, but instead kept going.

"This is your big day so I booked us at Dal Pescatore."

Claes blinked her eyes furiously. Located in the rustic farm village of Runate 100km east of Milan, Dal Pescatore traced its history back a century and two generations of family ownership. Until recently, it held the honor of being the only restaurant in the entire country with three Michelin Stars.

Michele connected with the A4 and blitzed east towards Brescia at a steady 200km/h. From there, they connected to State Highway 24 and cruised to Runate. They arrived at the restaurant and Claes noticed a few Lamborghinis, Ferraris and Maseratis – all with Milan plates – parked in the lot. A valet came forward with wide eyes and Claes almost expected him to genuflect in front of the car.

The dining room had been divided into a series of small rooms to allow a more private and intimate dining experience. The owner greeted them and showed them to a table. Michele let the chef decide on the meal and the wine and her recommendations were exquisite. After

dinner they drove back to the Hyatt and then walked the few blocks up to the Teatro alla Scala where they took in a production of Giuseppe Verdi's famous opera *Rigoletto*.

"I'm proud of you," Michele told Claes as he handed her a glass of port wine on the terrace of his suite that evening.

"Thank you. I'm glad you could attend," Claes replied.

"We may no longer be *fratello*, but you're still important to me," Michele replied, causing Claes to roll her eyes, but Michele caught her small smile.

"So what's next for you?" Michele asked.

"I don't know," Claes admitted. "To be honest, I really didn't think I'd make it this far so I didn't really give much thought to a plan. Some of my friends are pursuing other degrees while others are looking for employment and still others are going to take a few months off and tour the continent."

She took a sip of port, savoring the rich flavor.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"Surviving," Michele replied. "The emptiness is still there, but..."

Claes nodded. "Do you wish they could just wipe your memories of Kara like they did mine of Mister Raballo?"

"No," Michele said. "I will miss her for the rest of my days, but I truly am comforted by the time we spent together."

Claes nodded and looked out over the terrace to the hulking black outlines of the Alps.

It had been six months since Kara's passing, and the first time Michele had returned to Italy since her funeral in the mausoleum of the monastery.

Soon after her sixth "birthday" as a cyborg, the conditioning medication finally caught up with her. She was the first of the second generation to suffer the deleterious effects, though Ilaria and Giada

would both start to degrade within months and both were expected to soon require permanent hospitalization. Kara knew what was happening before the medical staff did and she first informed Claes. Then, together, they informed Michele, who promptly started to panic, but Kara faced it without fear and the three of them together prepared.

Michele leased a Global Express XRS business jet, which allowed Kara to travel between Tokyo and Rome every other weekend for tests and drug therapy trials. This allowed her to complete her degree and graduate from Tokyo University, at which point she returned to Rome and the Medical Center full-time. As the end drew near, the doctors collected her memories using a superconducting quantum interference device for research purposes and Michele and Kara said their final goodbye, she closing her eyes for the last time, her higher neural patterns on the medical LCD going dark section by section like a city grid losing power. At that point, while her artificial organs continued to function, she was "gone". Michele kissed her on the forehead and stepped away, allowing the doctors to power down her body and begin the autopsy.

They finished the Port and headed inside.

"Would you like me to stay?" Claes asked.

"Yes," Michele replied.

Claes nodded and went to the dresser, pulling out one of Michele's t-shirts. Michele went into the bathroom to change and Claes sat on the edge of the bed. She unzipped and removed her boots, followed by her sweater and undershirt. She pulled on Michele's t-shirt, noticing that it now only went down about halfway on her thigh, as opposed to her knees when she'd been a pre-teen. She unzipped her skirt and pulled off her socks, placing everything in the wardrobe and then slipping under the covers of the bed, Michele joining her in his pajama suit a few moments later.

When she drifted off to sleep, as she had done more and more, Claes dreamed of mountains of white, lakes of blue and a house with a room full of books and a trellised garden where a young girl swung amongst flowers.

Claes awoke in the morning and felt the residual warmth of Michele's body, but she could tell even before she rolled over he was no longer in the bed.

The first time she'd shared a bed with Michele had been over four years ago when they'd travelled to Sicily to kidnap Rodolfo Giafoni of the Venetian Resistance movement in the wake of the San Marco debacle shortly after she'd undergone the surgeries that created her current body. They'd originally expected to capture him in Naples, however a change of plans forced them to travel to Palermo and the hotel they stayed in only had a single king bed as opposed to the two doubles they'd booked in Naples.

Claes had spent most of that night wide awake, but Michele never moved from his side of the bed and he stayed so close to the edge that for a time Claes feared he might roll out in his sleep. Kara had confided that Michele did much the same when they shared a bed, but over the months she'd successfully been able to at least snuggle up against him at night. She claimed this was because it helped keep her warm and Claes had considered it a convenient excuse at the time, but she did notice that the bed was noticeably warmer with two people in it as opposed to just one. Therefore, the next time a mission had them share a bed, during the night, she'd scooted next to Michele and pressed her back up against his, feeling him stir as she did so.

"Claes?" Michele had asked, drowsily, as his mind hovered between sleep and wakefulness.

"I'm cold," she'd lied and she heard and felt him drift back to unconsciousness. She'd slept soundly that night.

Claes stretched under the covers and considered going back to sleep, but instead rolled out of bed and recovered her clothes. She dressed and walked out on to the terrace to find Michele sipping hot chocolate. The Alps, last night a threatening presence, now looked almost cheerful as the rising sun bathed the snow in pink and orange.

"Good morning," Claes greeted.

Michele nodded his greeting and reached for a sterling silver teapot to pour hot chocolate into a ceramic cup for her.

"Thank you," Claes stated, taking a seat at the table. "Are you heading back to Sydney today?"

Shortly before Kara passed away, the Consul General of Italy in Sydney announced his intent to retire to care for his sick wife. When Kara died, the Prime Minister asked Michele to fill the role through the end of the term this upcoming January. Australia was not quite on the opposite side of Italy, but it was as far away as he could reasonably expect to get so he agreed. With his friends in the Chamber of Senators, his confirmation was *pro forma* and within sixty days he was presenting his credentials to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Australia.

"Indirectly," Michele replied. "I'm going to spend the weekend in Paris. The Louvre just opened a new exhibition on Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese. And for the European Heritage event, the Château de Champs-sur-Marne is holding an astronomy event on their grounds."

When she heard Michele's plans, Claes bit her lower lip. Tiziano "Titian" Vecelli, Jacopo "Tintoretto" Comin and Paolo Veronese were all great painters from the Venetian school of the Italian Renaissance from 1540 to 1590. She'd been an admirer of their works at university.

Michele didn't miss the signs.

"I was going to fly, but it looked like a pretty nice drive when Jeremy Clarkson did it back in 2005 so if you'd like to come, we can take the Veyron," he noted with a wink.

"I think I can clear my schedule," Claes replied with a wink of her own.

The End