

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. While drawing from actual events, this is a work of fiction and is not meant to faithfully adhere to the actual event it portrays.

"Never Play an Ace When a Two Will Do"

A Gunslinger Girl Original Story by Kiskaloo

**SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCY COMPOUND
ADMINISTRATION BUILDING
MAIN BRIEFING ROOM
25 SEPTEMBER 2008**

Michele Pagani stepped before the podium to prepare the briefing for the three *fratello* teams tasked to possibly take part in a rescue attempt if it was launched.

"On September 19, masked gunmen grabbed five Germans, five Italians and a Romanian who had hired an Egyptian tour company, ægyptus Intertravel, to take them to Gilf al-Kebir in the southwestern corner of Egypt. In addition to the 11 Europeans, eight Egyptian guides and staff were also kidnapped. This included the owner of ægyptus, a Mister Ibrahim Abdelrahim.

"The area is known for its untouched sand dunes and well preserved prehistoric cave paintings. They were traveling in four modified late model Toyota Land Cruisers and this trip was part of a multi-day expedition.

"The following day, Mr. Abdelrahim contacted his wife and reported that all 19 hostages were safe, but that their captors were demanding a ransom of 4 million Euros. Mrs. Abdelrahim contacted Egyptian National Police. A team was deployed from the New Valley governorate capital at Kharga to the area by helicopter, but found nothing. Egyptian Air Force Scarab UAVs were launched from Mersa Matruh airbase and started combing the border areas.

"On the 23rd, the Sudanese Foreign Ministry said that the hostages were taken from Egypt into Sudan and were located some 25km inside their borders. At this time we do not know if the Scarabs found them

or Sudanese forces did. Egyptian Army units from the Southern Military Region were sent into the area via 'Humvee' and Pegaso 3046. The Sudanese stated they knew the location of the hostages, but were not prepared to mount an assault, instead tracking them with support from the Egyptians, who were using their smaller R4E-50 Skyeye mini-UAV.

"The German government has been negotiating with the kidnappers through the wife of one of the German hostages. At this time, it is not believed this kidnapping was politically motivated as the kidnappers have only demanded a ransom, now said to be in the neighborhood of 6 million Euros. They have made no other demands. Sudan claims the kidnappers are Egyptian and Egypt claims they are Sudanese, so we have no real information on their identities.

"This morning, Sudan is reporting that the kidnappers have crossed into Libya. The Libyans deny this, but the Sudanese foreign ministry says they are about 15km inside Libya. Libya has denied both Sudan and Egypt authority to enter their country and the Egyptians are not willing to send a UAV over the border to try and confirm their position independently due to Libyan anti-air assets. Sudan does say that the hostages are in good health.

"At this time, the Ministry of Defense is preparing to send elements of the 110th Raider Company of the 9th Parachute Assault Regiment to Egypt. Germany is also going to be sending at least a company of their KSK commandos and of course we'll have Egyptian and Sudanese forces present, as well.

"Claes, Triela and Rico, you all have desert combat experience from the Iraq operation back in 2003. Because of this, the Ministry of the Interior has asked the SWA to support the operation behind-the-scenes. Unlike Iraq, you will not be operating autonomously in this situation, but instead will be in contact with your handlers via satcom and HF radio. If the hostages are in Libya, none of the government forces can infiltrate the area without risking a diplomatic incident with the Libyans. And if they have returned to Sudan or Egypt, it is hoped you can track them more effectively than the Sudanese and Egyptians have and either rescue them yourselves or assist the 9th and KSK in their efforts from a distance. The Ministry would prefer we not get involved if we don't have to, but after the Prime Minister said some rather unflattering and inflammatory comments about the Italian hostages choice of vacation spot, if they were injured or killed the

political blow-back would not be pleasant. So we're the insurance policy.

"Since it would be impossible for your girls to be military personnel, the fratello handlers will be temporarily tasked to the Comando Carabinieri Ministero Affari Esteri and will be leaving for Cairo as part of the Italian diplomatic mission. As for the cyborgs, your cover will be as dependents of embassy staff. That way you can bring your weapons into the country without issue. Once there, we'll meet again in the Embassy to discuss operations. Kara and I will be going as members of the 46th Air Brigade that will ferry them to Egypt. Because we'll be known, we won't be able to accompany you on the mission proper, though we will feed you as much information as we can."

Michele turned off the overhead projector and raised the lights.

"I expect most of you have questions, but right now I don't have any answers so I'm not going to take any at this time. I found out about all this about two hours before you did, and that time has been spent preparing this initial briefing. Director Lorenzo has signed off on the mission and he chose the fratelli. Jean will have overall command as it relates to the fratelli. I am formally outside the chain for this one, since I will be under orders from the Air Force. So for now, I want you all to prepare for an overseas mission of about five days duration."

**SAN GIUSTO AIR BASE
GALILEO GALILEI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, PISA
26 SEPTEMBER 2008**

Tenente Colonnello Michele Pagani and his assistant, Ministry of Defense staffer Kara Farina, stood before the front entry door of Alenia Aeronautica C-27J Spartan MM62221 attached to the 46th Aerial Brigade, 98th Transport Group as it sat on the tarmac. A single platoon from the 110th Raider Company of the 9th Parachute Assault Regiment were in the final process of boarding from the aft ramp and stowing their gear under the watchful eye and sharp tongue of the loadmaster.

"If anybody asks you anything, point them to me," Michele told Kara. "And remember that, as a civilian, you don't salute anyone."

"Yes, Michele," she said. She was dressed in combat fatigues like the rest of them, but her epaulets and lapels were bare of rank insignia.

"Colonnello?" the Maggiore who would be commanding the plane came up, saluting. "If you and Miss Farina would like to board, we'll be ready to go shortly."

"Thank you," Michele said and indicated for Kara to climb in first. The cockpit only had space for the pilot and co-pilot so it was necessary for Kara and Michele to sit in the cabin proper, though they were as far forward as possible.

Michele checked his watch. The three fratello teams of Jean/Rico, Hillshire/Triela and Marco/Claes would fly to Cairo International via commercial airline and report to the embassy. MM62221 would fly to Cairo-Almaza Air Base, which was almost next door to the international airport and also would stay at the embassy after making a call to the Egyptian Ministry of Defense building.

The ground crew closed up the side door and loading ramp and the twin Rolls-Royce Allison AE2100-D2 turboprops roared into life. Michele and Kara were both wearing large earmuff-type headsets with active noise-cancellation to block the noise, but they felt the airframe shudder from the almost 5,000shp each engine produced.

The plane taxied out to the end of Runway 22L and leaped into the sky, climbing sharply to altitude for the flight across the Mediterranean to Cairo.

**NORTHERN WILIYAT, SUDAN
SOUTH OF JEBEL OWEINAT NEAR THE LIBYAN BORDER
28 SEPTEMBER 2008**

"Report," Jean Croce's voice barked over the earpiece.

"I see a vehicle dust cloud on the horizon," Rico replied as she peered through a pair of Carl Zeiss AG tactical binoculars.

"Can you identify anything?" He and the other handlers were in Egypt at a base camp near the border where Egypt, Sudan and Libya came

together, communicating with the girls via digital satcom and HF radios.

"Negative. It's too far out."

"Claes, launch the Raven," Marco ordered.

"Yes, sir," Claes responded. She grabbed the RQ-11 Raven mini-UAV and started the engine. With a toss, it lifted into the air and went into a pre-programmed figure-eight pattern, climbing to 1,000ft AGL. Claes activated the control software on her Panasonic Toughbook and sent the Raven off towards the dust-cloud.

"I've got a white Land Rover," she announced once the Raven had arrived over the target. "It looks like they have company behind them. I see a number of military vehicles in pursuit."

"Can you identify them?" Jean called.

Claes sent the Raven closer. "They have two wheeled axles and a fabric roof," Claes replied. She started paging through pictures of Sudanese military vehicles. "Looks like Walid APCs.""

"What direction are they heading?" Marco asked.

"Roughly towards us, if they don't change course," Claes said as she plotted the position of the Raven on the digital map. "They should pass by in about five minutes."

"Understood. Keep the Raven on them and call us when you can make a visual identification from your position," Jean ordered.

"Acknowledged."

"I count two people in front. The curtains are drawn in the back," Rico announced about six minutes later.

"Any identifying marks?" Claes asked.

"It says ægyptus Intertravel on the side," Rico replied. "It has Egyptian plates which correspond to one of the vehicles the tourists were using."

Claes called in the information to Jean.

"Can you disable it?" Jean asked.

"I'm on it," Triela replied as she tracked them through the Leupold Mark 4 scope on her M107 long-range sniper rifle. Of the three, only she had the upper-body strength to successfully operate the weapon. She was also arguably the best shot of the three. She hit the laser range finder and it reported a distance of 2000m, at the limits of the effective range of the weapon. She squeezed the trigger.

Her first round entered the engine bay. She followed with a second and the Land Cruiser slowed to a halt, steam and smoke pouring out from under the hood. The driver's side door opened and the driver exited. She held off firing and watched another person exit the right hand side and six more come out of the back. They milled around, the two in front examining the damage to the tires.

"Triela has immobilized the vehicle with no casualties. They don't look like Intertravel people," Claes reported. She had a collection of laminated sheets with the faces of some of the Egyptians and all of the Italian hostages. They had not been able to secure images of the Germans or the Romanian. "One of them is on a radio," she added.

"They're taking up defensive positions around the vehicle and unloading weapons. One has an RPG and the others look to have Kalashnikovs," Rico reported.

"Hold your fire," Jean ordered.

"They're firing on the Sudanese," Claes reported. "The Sudanese are returning fire."

"Cleared to engage the grenadier," Jean ordered.

Triela took aim at the person with the RPG and pulled the trigger. The .50 caliber bullet tore through his upper body, tossing him back against the forward left fender before he slumped down, motionless. His comrade picked up the weapon and hoisted it on his arm, but Triela's next shot went through the shoulder and buried itself in his vitals. He slumped over, landing on the weapon and covering it with his body.

"They've seen the Raven. They're firing on it," Claes reported. She instructed the plane to return to them. It scooted back, went into a near hover stall, and then dropped to the ground.

The Sudanese, protected behind armor, closed on the Land Cruiser, riddling it with bullets. Of the six remaining threats, two quickly fell to weapons fire, followed by a third and then a fourth. The final two emptied their clips and threw down their weapons, putting their hands on their heads.

"The engagement is over," Claes reported. "Six are down, two by Triela, and two more have surrendered and are being taken into custody."

"Pack up the Raven and prepare to egress," Jean ordered. "We'll meet you at Echo Bravo."

"Acknowledged," Claes said and closed the channel. Triela began to break-down the M107 for shipment, wrapping it in rags to keep the sand out until she could properly clean it back at base. Rico stood watch with her SVD, but the Sudanese took no notice of them as they slipped away from their position and vanished as if ghosts.

**NEAR TABAT SHAJARA, CHAD
29 SEPTEMBER 2008**

"They're still there," Claes reported. There had been talk of the Italians brining one of their MQ-1 Predators to track and recon the camp, but they had lacked the time so the girls were closer then the SWA wanted to allow them to keep an eye on the camp where the hostages were being held. It was located in a wide wadi whose walls were pockmarked with natural caves. They'd been brought in via helicopter from Sudan. With the conflict in Darfur, many private military industry companies were in operation and it was easier and quicker to have them clandestinely move the girls around. Money bought silence and discretion in such areas.

"I wish we could just go in and free them," Triela said. "All this sitting around is making my butt numb."

"It would look a bit suspicious if three girls charged in with guns blazing just before the cavalry arrived," Claes noted. "Besides, we wouldn't want to deny our brothers in arms their shot at glory."

"It's a shot of lead in the hostages that worries me," Triela said.

"Choppers are incoming," Jean's voice came over the headset and the girls prepared their weapons. They were too far away to actively participate in the action, but they did hold the most obvious escape route from the *wadi* should the kidnappers try to make a run for it, with or without the hostages. They soon heard the deep "whup-whup-whup" of Lycoming T55-GA-712 turboshaft engines and two CH-47D Chinooks of the Egyptian Air Force came into view through binoculars.

"I've got two Chinooks in sight," Rico said.

"Still no movement in the tents," Triela reported. "Wait. A whole bunch of people are leaving and heading for three Land Rovers."

"Are it hostages and kidnappers, or just the kidnappers?" Hillshire asked.

"Can't tell. They all look male and armed, so I am guessing it's the kidnappers."

"Can you confirm the state of the hostages?" Jean asked.

"Negative. I don't see any of them. We heard no gunfire, however. I think the kidnappers are spooked and are making a run for it. There look to be about three dozen."

"Ok. Interdict them from escaping if possible. We're relaying your info to the Raiders aboard the second chopper."

"You heard the man. Let's set up a cross-fire ambush," Triela ordered. She opened the case and started removing the M107 for assembly. Rico took up a position that gave her a clear shot with her Dragunov SVD. Claes remained with the Toughbook, taking the binoculars from Triela to continue to report what was happening.

"The Chinooks are almost on top of us. Some of the kidnappers are escaping on foot. The rest are coming your way, Triela," Claes reported.

Triela could engage at more than three times the distance Rico could, so she waited for the first truck to get much closer. When the laser rangefinder indicated 500m, she opened fire, putting three rounds into the front cab as fast as the mechanism would let her. She followed with three rounds through the grill and was rewarded with the engine seizing up.

Rico, in the interim, shot the driver of the trailing car, followed by the two companions in front with him, before moving to the middle car, which was trapped between them on the narrow track. By now, the choppers were almost on top of them and they needed to extricate themselves to a concealed area they had set-up in a cave about 300m away lest they be identified from the air.

"Come on, Claes!" Triela yelled as she lifted the 14kg M107 as if it was made of plastic. Rico grabbed the case as she went by and Claes followed behind with the laptop and communications gear.

They saw the lead chopper slow down over the convoy, which started to fire on it. The chopper lifted higher and off to the side, out of range of the AK-47s used by the kidnappers. The other chopper continued on, landing near the camp area. Troops rushed down the ramp of both and quickly took up position. Gunfire echoed across the wadi as the Egyptian and Sudanese troops engaged the kidnappers while the German and Italian Special Forces secured the camp and started to evacuate the hostages to the chopper.

The firefight was short and vicious, but the kidnappers were pinned down and soon realized the futility of continued resistance. The Egyptian and Sudanese forces detained them and secured the area while the second chopper lifted off and headed in the direction of Egypt.

"Good job, everyone," Jean noted. "Make your way back to the rendezvous point and we'll pick you up."

**GRAND HYATT CAIRO
01 OCTOBER 2008**

It had taken the girls about five hours to make their way to the rendezvous point where an unmarked indigo blue MD-530F helicopter picked them up and shuttled them through the darkness back to Egypt where they were then taken to an airport and flown to Cairo via charter. They were now resting up from the mission before returning to Italy the following morning.

"Well that was a waste of our skills," Triela grumbled as she plopped down on the couch in Michele's suite and grabbed a handful of dates.

"We were there to make sure the hostages were recovered safely and so they were," Claes noted. Rico, a croissant stuffed in her mouth, nodded in agreement.

"Exactly," Marco said. "You were there as an insurance policy in case something went wrong. And you guided the copters to the camp and helped prevent the kidnappers from escaping. You should all be proud of your assistance."

Triela harrumphed, unconvinced.

"Never play an Ace when a Two will do," Michele stated. "It applies in war equally as well as it applies in poker."

"What?" Triela asked.

"You girls are our Aces. Our trump cards," Michele said. "We're going to keep you in reserve until we really need your abilities. We could have played you in our hand out there, but it wasn't necessary for us to do so."

"Quite simply, you are too valuable to us to use recklessly," Hillshire said and Marco nodded, though Jean looked a bit annoyed, Kara noted.

"Now come on and get ready. I arranged for us to go see the pyramids and the Sphinx," Michele said.

The End