

*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 Monty, Jethro, Kara and Michele are original to the authors.*

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## **"Outside Looking In"**

A Gunslinger Girl Original Story by Alfisti and Kiskaloo

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"Nervous?"

"Hell yes."

"So, she finally got her hooks into you huh?"

Michele Pagani turned toward the last speaker, shielding his eyes from the bright autumn sunlight. Unfortunately it was little more than a token gesture as glare from the white artificial marble of chiese di Dio Padre Misericordioso's terrace mostly negated his efforts. Behind him the three gracefully curving pre-cast walls that made up the bulk of the church's visual weight provided a stunning minimalist backdrop for the scores of people milling around outside it.

Adding to the almost monochrome vista was the group of former cyborg handlers, their Morning Dress composed of black wool cutaways and trousers with white shirts doing little to distinguish them from one another. The lone female in their midst only slightly broke ranks with a grey, slim-cut, two button suit.

"Monty's got a point Pagani," offered Marco Toni, motioning toward the diminutive girl. "You tying the knot was a surprise, and an expensive one at that. I don't think I had any money riding on you to be one of the trail blazers."

"Trust me, I'm almost as surprised as you are Marco," replied Michele with a wry smile.

"Surprised or no, you're making some of our lives very difficult."

"And how does Michele's getting hitched make your life difficult 'Sandro?" enquired Jethro Blacker, sidling up behind Monty and allowing one arm to snake around his cyborg.

Alessandro Ricci turned his attention to the sole remaining active fratello.

"Blacker, you managed to avoid retirement from intelligence work like the rest of us. Hence, half your luck, you retain a girl still in her teen-aged body and blessedly unmarriageable, but for those of us who have retired, we have girls whose physical bodies now match their chronological ages. Apparently once they hit their early-to-mid-twenties the female mind turns to certain things, which means Michele here gave us a whole new set of issues to worry about. I'm starting to wonder if I'm buying Petra a ring because I want to or through pure *self-defense*."

"You know it's the former."

"Of course it is Michele, but I've seen the ring you presented when you proposed. Even if I sold the smart and the apartment, I don't think I could match what you paid."

"Ricci's not joking," Monty added, "I got shown that thing, and if I didn't know where it was going it probably would have wound up with one of the better European fences."

"You wouldn't," Alessandro said.

"I might."

"Why aren't you with the bridal party anyway?"

This time it was Monty who twitched a half-smile. "What, you actually expect me to hang around Bridezilla and pass up a golden opportunity to give Michele a good ribbing?"

"I heard that!" came a hot and flustered sounding voice. "That wasn't very nice Monty! It's the *bride's* day after all and therefore it should be *perfect*! And why aren't you in a dress? This is a *wedding* and the girls should be in *dresses*."

As one the group turned to the new arrival, a brunette who, despite looking around twenty-one had her face screwed up into a pout that would have done an eleven year old proud.

Monty's face went flat, "It's in the wash, Henrietta." She deadpanned, raising her head slightly to meet the taller Henrietta's gaze.

"Aaargh! I don't have time for this! This day's supposed to be *perfect!*"

"You know," said Monty wryly, as the former combat cyborg stormed off, "I may need to retract my previous 'Bridezilla' statement; Henrietta's doing a *fantastic* job by proxy."

If the statement twigged Henrietta's still sensitive hearing, it didn't register on a conscious level as she hurried on, fervently wishing the doctors had left her with the cyborg speed to match her still enhanced senses. A million thoughts and issues whirling and bouncing off each other inside her head carried her across the threshold of the church, through the large, airy space inside and toward the choir room where the bridal party was situated. Bursting into the room those same thoughts managed to get themselves into enough of a semblance of order to break forth from Henrietta's mouth.

"Ok, everyone's here, except Allison and Jay and *they have the cake!*" she wailed. "I can't raise either of them on their mobiles and the hostess at the Rome Cavalieri hasn't seen them either, which means they still need to get to the reception venue, drop the cake off, and then get here in under..." she glanced at the wall clock, "...three quarters of an hour. I *know* Allison's fast, but she's also carrying precious cargo and Monty's still with Michele's group and wearing a suit! Why isn't she *here* in a DRESS!?"

Two hands settled on Henrietta's shoulders, forcing her to stand still.

"Slow down 'Etta; one panic at a time. You'll give yourself an artificial coronary at this rate," said Triela, slowly removing her hands once she was certain her sister wasn't going to immediately scamper off.

"Allison will have herself, the cake and Jay in the correct places at the correct times. As for Monty..."

"...as for Monty," cut in Kara from where a hairdresser was fussing over her, "she always did get on with Michele better than she did with me, better than she did with *any* of us cyborgs for that matter. So, Michele and I decided she'd be better off on his side of the church rather than with my bridal party."

"I still don't think that it's right."

"I don't care if it's 'right' or not", chimed in another of the group, "I just want to know: what's the secret Kara? Tell me."

"Honestly Petra I'm not sure if I can," replied Kara, "at the end of the day..."

"...at the end of the day she just wore him down."

"Claes!" Ilaria exclaimed.

"What? There's only so many times you can say 'no' before it eventually becomes 'yes'," said the still-bespeckled former cyborg.

"It was *not* like that," Kara insisted.

"Hey, I used to be part of your *fratelli*, remember?" Claes retorted and Kara responded by blowing a hair out of her face, causing the hairdresser to start fussing at her again as she finished styling her hair into a bun with a small square of lace.

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The bridesmaids, under the sharp tongue of Maid of Honor Laine Brussard, helped Kara into her bespoke dress - a simple strapless design in ivory with a platinum-colored belt with pavé diamonds designed by Daniella Issa Helayel, famous for creating the dress worn by Kate Middleton on her wedding to Prince William of the United Kingdom. Around her neck she wore a Mikimoto Aria necklace of white South Sea pearls.

"Your wedding ring is going to look downright plain next to that," Petrushka noted as Kara adjusted her engagement ring. Created by Oscar Haymen Brothers, it consisted of an oval brilliant cut 24ct emerald centered in a four claw setting and bordered by eight oval brilliant cut diamonds set end to end, with an approximate total weight of 16ct, all mounted and set in yellow gold and platinum.

"It's worth is what it represents, not what it is made of," Kara replied, but nobody present thought she truly believed that. Still, they were confident that whatever Michele presented would be impressive.

A happy shriek pulled everyone's attention to the other side of the room.

"The cake has finally arrived!" Henrietta exclaimed, waving her phone in the air. She rapidly put the device back to her ear.

"Ok, you've got thirty minutes to get here Allison! You think you can make it? Yes I know a Transit Van is hardly a Mini Cooper. Just...ok, just be on time, please? This is Kara's big day!"

"Hopefully Allison didn't topple it over taking a corner too fast," Ilaria noted.

"The van or the cake?" Laine asked with a smile.

"Pick one," Alba stated.

"I don't hear any *angry* screams from Henrietta, so I think it made it," Giada finished, earning a smile from Alba beside her.

There was a knock on the door and a handsome young man in Morning Dress walked into the room. As Kara had no immediate family, she asked her "big brother", Alpha Lautani, if he would give her away.

"You look radiant, sis," he noted as she emerged from the dressing area.

"Arigato, onisan," she replied as the organ music started.

"Ready?" Alpha asked.

"Yes."

"Nervous?"

"Not at all."

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Like the building it was held in, the ceremony itself was elegant in its simplicity. The light, transparent accompanying notes of the organ flutes somehow served to intensify the atmosphere of reverential quiet. The words of the priest consecrating the ceremony followed suit, crystal clear in the vaulted space, broken only by the occasional quiet sob from the direction of the pews and sharp clack of Henrietta's shutter firing, until finally.

"I now pronounce you man and wife. You may now kiss the bride."

Michele didn't need to be told twice.

And the silence shattered.

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"Ok, now I need the groom and the best man up, and next will be all the groomsmen so get them organized."

"Etta, haven't you taken enough pictures already?"

"No! You want to remember this right? Ok, Michele, raise your chin a little; there's too much shadow on your eyes. Mr. Pisano, lower yours. Now turn slightly to the..."

Sitting to the side, awaiting her turn to be called up for the inevitable photos, Monty reflected that deciding to let Henrietta do the wedding photography had probably not been one of Michele or Kara's more enlightened moments. Always somewhat stubborn and pushy, giving the brunette full control of everyone at a wedding for a few hours had been the catalyst for a monster to show its face. Monty's own argument with the girl over the issue had stretched for almost a week of sometimes heated emails. The eventual compromise had been struck that Henrietta would be allowed to take Monty and her handler's photos so long as the images were given only to Michele and the original files destroyed.

Kara had later pointed out that Henrietta had possibly not been so much upset at Monty's refusal to appear on camera, as she was at the stark reminder of a life she thought she had long left behind.

"Rico! Go to my bag and get the 85mm prime-lens... Which? The black Lowepro! No, not *that* black Lowepro bag, the *other* black Lowepro bag. Rico, I said *prime* lens, not zoom."

Not, that it seemed to be fazing her now.

As the afternoon wore on Henrietta scrambled to take full advantage of the golden light it afforded her. Eventually Kara, with her new husband in tow, made her way over to where Monty and Jethro were now standing, talking quietly with Jose Croce.

"Whew, she's onto family and friends now, I think I'm released until the bouquet toss," Kara noted.

"Watch out, you'll jinx yourself like that, Kara," replied Monty.

Cocking an eyebrow Kara continued, "Considering how important Henrietta considers all this I'm surprised she didn't put it on Michele for a *Hasselblad*."

"I think she considers this a trial run for her own wedding," put in Jose.

"Well, at least that should make *your* planning easier," Jethro suggested.

Jose gave a snort, "You don't know Henrietta like I do Jethro, so I'm not counting on it."

Kara reached up and patted the former handler on the shoulder, "Don't worry Jose, it's the bride that does all the worrying at a wedding. The groom just has to show up."

"Well, if that's the case I might decide to borrow *yours* to share a Tanq10 & Tonic. You know, for old times' sake," Monty put in with a sly grin.

"As long as you promise to bring him back sometime during the reception, he's all yours," Kara replied with a wink.

Monty let out a snort, conceding the point, "Don't worry, you're safe. I'm only qualified to manage *one* and certainly don't have the stamina to train another."

Beside her, Jethro made a sour face, but reached over and hooked his arm around Monty's waist, pulling her in.

"I'd take that offer for a drink if I were you Michele," he grinned, nodding in Kara's direction. "They may not have superhuman strength anymore, but with her vision and hearing your days of sneaking in during the wee-small hours are over."

"Well, you're the one who always said having a cyborg was like being married," retorted Jose, saving Michele from needing to come up with a reply.

Kara and Michele both blushed at the comment.

"Christ it's enough to make you ill."

"Look out Monty, now that I've very possibly set a trend amongst the former fratelli, I'll be using all my sniper skills to ensure that you catch the bouquet," Kara confidently stated.

"I may be no sniper but I can still dodge better than any of *your* lot could," Monty retorted.

Kara merely smiled, "It's a..."

"Oh my God! Is that the time?"

The pained exclamation cut Kara off mid-sentence as Henrietta hurried over, a large Nikon DSLR swinging wildly from her neck. She was already talking as she walked up.

"Kara, I didn't realize how much time we've lost. I think we have about ten minutes of good light left so we have to do the bouquet toss *now*. There's a bench just out the front of the church. Kara if you stand on that to throw I can use the bell tower and sky as a backdrop. Just give me a minute to change lenses."

Standing precariously on the stone bench Kara made sure to single out the skinny form of Monty, who was standing at the edge of the crowd of single women arrayed across the reflective pavement. Turning her back, Kara allowed herself another quiet smile and swung the bouquet around fast, releasing it underarm. The little collection of white roses followed an almost horizontal trajectory, skimming across the heads of the other girls and catching Monty dead centre of her chest.

An "umph" issued from her as the impact skewed her tie clip and forced her to take a half step back.

"Bollocks," Monty cursed, looking at the object now resting in her hands.

As her sister cyborgs gathered around to congratulate her on her "good fortune", Kara saw fit to make her presence felt as well.

"I told you."

"Well, seeing as how it's your day and all I figured you should be allowed to have your fun," Monty deadpanned back as a pair of arms wrapped around her from behind.

"You ready to get a roll on?" said her handler, bending down to bring his head down to her ear level.

Kara's previously mischievous expression turned to one of puzzlement, "you're not coming to the reception?"

"We'd love to, but..." Jethro started.

"...we're on the 9pm out of FCO," Monty finished for him.

"The 9pm to where?"

"The 9pm to *'for me to know and you not to'*, Kara."

"Well, at least let us see you out," said Michele, walking up to join his bride. "Actually, we should probably start moving everyone along shortly. The reception is at seven and peak hour won't have quite dissipated yet."

"I'm glad you came," Kara said to Monty. "It really meant a lot to Michele and that means a lot to me."

"Just don't go making a habit out of it right?" Monty replied.

"You're always welcome in Milan, Dubai, Tokyo or Sydney," Michele replied, referring to the residences he kept in each city.

"If we're ever in the area, we'll be sure to call," Jethro replied.

"And in all seriousness, congratulations," Monty added.

Kara and Michele watched as their old compatriots walked across the lawn towards a row of multi-story apartment buildings, Jethro holding the waif-like figure of his cyborg close beside him.

"Do you think we'll ever see them again?" Kara asked, wistfully.

"I'm sure we will," Michele said, but beneath the certainty, Kara thought she heard a hint of doubt in his voice. "I think Jethro makes Monty turn up to these things, so we'll just need to wait till someone else ties the knot."

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Rounding the corner and securely out of sight of the church, Jethro turned to Monty.

"Any tails?"

"Not that I can see or hear," she replied, her breath now coming in ragged gulps. Away from the rest of the former SWA personnel a change had come over the still youthful looking cyborg. Her shoulders slumped and what had seemed to the Paganis like an intimate hold was revealed for what it was as she leaned heavily on her handler for support.

"Good."

The two ducked down a laneway, apparently seeking refuge in the dark.

"I left it just up here."

With that Jethro propped his rapidly ailing companion against a wall and turned to rummage around behind a restaurant skip, producing a folding wheelchair, which Monty sunk into with a relieved sigh.

"Thank *God* they ran out of light. I thought Henrietta was never going to finish up."

"You know, the quacks are going to be right ticked at you for this," Jethro said, concern edging his voice.

"Let `em be," Monty retorted. "I've never listened to them before and I don't see much point in starting now. Besides, it would have been a shame to ruin everyone's day."

"You're getting soft in your dotage, you know that?" Jethro said.

"Just for that, you can push me back to the car."

As the chair started rolling back toward the street a wry chuckle brought his attention back to its occupant.

"Something funny?"

"No, just amused at the irony of this; that the one person the docs can't fix is one of the group that gave them the technology to help

everyone else," Monty said. "I guess I should not have mocked Kara for her karma."

"That's life for you," Jethro replied. "Chin up, we've always managed to pull through before, so have a little faith."

Silence reigned until they reached the rental Alfa estate parked two blocks away. Jethro helped Monty into the passenger seat allowing her to settle herself while he stowed the wheelchair in the boot.

"Vauxhall Cross, Guvnor. And don't spare the horses," Monty commanded as Jethro took the driver's seat.

"Yes, ma'am," Jethro replied, starting the car and heading for the A90 on-ramp.

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**The End**