

## M/Y *BRIGHT STAR* LIGURIAN SEA

"I want you to join a *fratello* in the Agency," Renato Pisano, President of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Italy, stated.

Colonel Michele Pagani looked at his oldest friend as if he'd just asked him to jump overboard and swim back to Porta Antico, just visible to the stern from the Sky Deck of his 37m motor yacht, the M/Y *Bright Star*, as it cruised off Genoa.

Renato returned the gaze levelly as Michele finished pouring the Campari and orange vodka spritzer he'd been preparing into four chilled highball glasses. While the calendar had moved into autumn, summer refused to release its influence on the weather. A stiff breeze helped moderate temperatures in the low-twenties and whipped up white caps on the surface of the Sea of Liguria. It also provided support to the outspread wings of seagulls as they slowly circled in the clear sky scores of meters above, hoping that some of the antipasto spread out on the bar might find its way into their gullets.

"Now I know why you brought Monica and Fernando with you," Michele noted. "No offense," he added as he placed the drinks down in front of Minister of Defense Monica Petris and Doctor Fernando Bianchi, the senior medical officer of the Social Welfare Agency's cyborg program.

"None taken, Colonel," Minister Petris replied and Doctor Bianchi merely smiled.

Michele carried his own drink around the end of the bar and took the corner seat, turning to face Renato. "In answer to your request, I formally reply thanks, but no thanks. I have no interest in running around Italy hunting down terrorists with a little girl in tow."

"She doesn't have to be a little girl," Doctor Bianchi noted, indicating with a nod of his head the redhead cyborg in a two-piece bikini lounging in the hot tub at the front of the Sky deck. "In fact, the girl we have in mind for you is almost seventeen."

"Doctor, I celebrated my 45<sup>th</sup> birthday in June. How many people do you know have a sibling almost three decades their junior? Not to mention that it's no secret that I'm an only child, so suddenly appearing with a sister of any age is not going to really fly now, is it?"

"Well she's Japanese, so being part of your immediate family isn't really an option. We were thinking something like foster adoption or perhaps a university exchange student staying with you. There's also that compensated dating thing..." Renato ruminated.

"*Enjou kousai*," Michele replied. "Haven't you heard the expression 'Never date a woman less than half your age plus seven?' Well, in your case, maybe you haven't," he added with a wink to Renato.

The Prime Minister, who was often seen in the company of women who were both not his wife and significantly younger than himself, flashed Michele a friendly scowl.

"The subject's 'Compatibility Index' is at a level which makes her a perfect candidate for conversion," Doctor Bianchi stated. "We're already working to have her transferred to the SWA."

"I'm not qualified to be a handler," Michele stated.

"You've served with the Special Forces of the *Aeronautica Militare Italiana* and with the *Agenzia Informazioni e Sicurezza Esterna*," Minister Petris noted. "Your service in both fields would be both relevant and beneficial to being a handler."

"I've been a researcher behind a desk for the last four years," Michele replied. "If I was ever qualified to serve as a handler to a cyborg girl, that time has long since passed."

"Then train with her. It will improve the cyborg's bonding process with you and make her more effective, will it not, Doctor?"

Bianchi nodded his head. "The girls often develop emotional attachments to their handlers. The more time they spend together, the better."

"Can you excuse us for a moment, Doctor?" Renato asked. Bianchi took his drink and descended the steps to the Upper Saloon.

"You know I'm only thirty days from retirement," Michele observed.

Renato locked eyes with Michele.

"That's why I'm coming to you now," he replied.

Michele sighed.

"I ordered this boat a year ago, when I was accepted to the IASD. I planned to complete that one-year assignment with the High Institute for Defense Studies and then I could retire from the Service and sail around the world. And now you want me to become a rich-boy superspy, like a real life James Bond or Simon Templar. Do you understand how ridiculous that sounds?"

"Michele—"

"Seriously, I drive Ferraris and wear five-figure bespoke suits from Kiton and Caraceni. I'm as out of place in such a role as Roger Moore was in his last few *Bond* films," Michele growled.

"I'm not asking you to skulk down back alleys or blow-up Soviet arms factories, Michele. When my sons were in *medie superior* they used to watch one of those Japanese cartoons RAI would run. It was a science fiction show called Kate & July set in the future featuring two girls in bikinis that travelled the galaxy solving problems. They were called 'trouble consultants' and that is what I am asking you and this girl, whose name is Kumari Deleroux, to be," Renato stated.

"And what kind of 'trouble' do you want Kumari and I to 'consult' on?"

"We've been mildly successful in restricting the pipeline of cash that Padania and the Five Republics have been tapping into from within Italy," Monica noted. "However, that has just encouraged them to seek funds outside of Italy. For all their public xenophobia, Padania and the Five Republics Faction are privately working with the Albanian mafia along with the Chinese triads in northern cities like Milan, Brescia and Padua," Renato added. "In return for laundering money those groups generate from prostitution and drug trafficking, they get to keep a cut, which they use to fund their operations. Those gangs also help the PRF smuggle in weapons and other contraband."

"And while the Associazione del Nord claims that they have no association with the Five Republics Faction, we both know that they're as in bed with them as Sinn Féin was with the Provisional IRA," Monica

stated. "Acting as a political association gives them a sense of "legitimacy" in certain European political, intellectual and high society circles that the PRF is using to make contacts with elements outside of Italy who feel there is profit to be had in breaking up the Republic."

"And with two dozen intelligence and counter-terrorism agencies at your command, I'm your only option?" Michele asked, his voice betraying his incredulousness at what he was hearing. Italy was literally awash in counter-terrorist and counter-intelligence groups. Each branch of the military had their own Special Forces unit, as did the National Police force. Italy even had two intelligence services – one for domestic operations and one for international.

"The whole reason I created the Agency was to give me the flexibility to operate independently of all those various groups and their innumerable turf wars," Renato replied. "They all want a piece of every action because they see it as political coin they can use to advance their own interests or block the advancement of the interests of their rivals."

With so many groups, there was significant competition for resources – both monetary and personnel. Then there were also the conflicting "fields of interest" between the military and civilian units. This resulted in convoluted and unclear chains of command that hindered effective combined operations. And so many groups made for a larger and richer environment for graft and corruption to take root. The Padania Republican Faction in the north followed the tradition of the Mafioso in the south, bribing civilian and military police and officials as well as supporting the election and appointment of "pro-Padania" government officials who themselves then influenced the civilian bureaucracy and police forces they administered. An effective assassination campaign against those who could not be bribed also helped cow many others to "look the other way" or not get involved. All of this resulted in an uncoordinated and ineffective response by Rome to the threat raised by the PRF.

Monica inclined her head to the girl in the Jacuzzi.

"That Petrushka girl is a chameleon – she can be a 15-year old secondary school girl in the morning, a 20-year old *Polizia di Frontiera* officer in the afternoon, and an 18-year old service industry worker in the evening. Because of this, they require a different type of person to be their handler. Someone who can take advantage of the additional flexibility we will be putting into the cyborg's conditioning.

“The technology has advanced significantly in the past year and we’re now able to tailor traits and capabilities on an individual basis like never before. We have a combat diving *fratelli* and another is running around the world closing foreign lines of money and weapons.”

Renato motioned for Michele to refresh his drink and then leaned back in his chair, looking into the bright blue sky.

“I’ll be honest, Michele. The first tranche of handlers we hired came from military and police backgrounds with no families and few friends. They were chosen not to be active agents, but instead to be...well, chaperons, frankly. The initial cyborgs were designed to be shock troops so the handlers just needed to be there to point them at the target and recover them after they’d eliminated said target.

“These new cyborgs require more capable handlers to oversee them. Petrushka’s handler is a former spy in Public Safety, so their *fratello* perform mostly espionage and intelligence-gathering missions. We’ve started recruiting from outside of Italy where we’ve needed specific skills, but you’ve known about the program since the beginning and I need a *fratello* that knows their way around Europe and society circles to disrupt PRF activities. You’ve been working with NATO these last few years of your military career and you have contacts all over Europe, North America and Asia as well as direct experience with operating in those countries.”

“You’re not going to give me a choice, are you?” Michele asked his friend.

Renato reached into a leather portfolio lying on the bar and removed a leather binder, placing it before Michele.

“I can’t force you to do something you don’t want to, Michele. But I wouldn’t ask this of you if I didn’t feel it important and if I didn’t feel you were the right choice. Kumari is going to be a cyborg and I believe you are the best person to supervise and support her.”

Michele opened the portfolio and looked at the included picture, which showed an attractive Japanese girl in her mid-teens dressed in a red long-sleeve turtleneck sweater, black tufted miniskirt, and knee-high black leather boots. The dossier noted that Kumari’s father was Japanese and her mother French, though they were not married. Their respective occupations were astronomer and computer programmer.

Michele closed the binder and pushed it away. "I really don't want to know how she came to our attention because I know it will not be an uplifting story."

"I understand," the PM replied, but Michele wondered if his friend really did.

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**AUTOSTRADA DEL SOLE  
TIVOLI, ITALY  
FIVE WEEKS LATER**

The interchange with the A24 loomed ahead and Michele moved his Lamborghini Murciélago Roadster into the far right lane to take the exit from the A1 Autostrada. He entered the great roundabout that circled the Colle del Tasso rest area and merged into the traffic heading eastbound on the A24, the sky above the Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga National Park lightening in the early dawn. Michele drove along the A24 to the A25 and from there he took the off-ramp for Strada Statale 690, which put him heading south towards the Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise National Park. He left the state highway near the Abruzzo / Lazio border and drove along back roads until he turned off onto the long tree-lined road that led to the Social Welfare Agency facility nestled in the shadow of the central Apennines. Fall gripped the land and the deciduous trees were starting to undergo the process of abscission, scattering the road with leaves that swirled up around him.

The Agency compound was segregated into two areas: a "public" area where the main hospital complex was and a "restricted access" section where the clandestine side lived and worked.

He reached the main security gate of the "restricted access" section and checked in. He pulled into the small parking area in front of the main building and an attractive woman dressed in a blazer, tie, skirt and pumps came forward to meet him as he stepped out of the car.

"Welcome, *Colonello*. My name is Ferro Milani," the woman said, extending her right hand, which Michele took. "If you follow me, I'll take you to Director Lorenzo."

Michele followed Ferro through the building to a paneled door. Ferro knocked once and opened the door into an office.

A grey-haired man wearing glasses and a sweater sat behind a polished wood desk set before a large bookcase that dominated the wall behind him. The Director of Special Operations, Section Two rose in his chair and reached across the desk with his hand extended.

"Welcome, Colonel," Pieri Lorenzo greeted. He indicated for Michele to take one of the open armchairs in front of his desk as Ferro retreated to the wall next to the door. There was a knock on the door and Ferro opened it to allow a man with blonde hair wearing a grey suit entrance into the office.

"This is Jean Croce, my field leader," Lorenzo introduced and Michele rose from his chair to shake the offered hand. Jean settled into the other armchair, leaving Ferro to stand against the wall. "I asked Jean here to give you a brief on Section 2."

"Special Operations is charged with actively interdicting terrorist and criminal operations that threaten the security and safety of the public. This generally takes the role of sanction missions against people identified by Public Safety or other intelligence assets. We also assist Section 1 in performing protective custody, protective security and hostage rescue missions. We receive our tasks from the Minister of Defense and then Director Lorenzo and I determine which *fratelli* are tasked to carry out the mission.

"As a handler, your job will be to train your cyborg to become an effective agent and assassin. This includes firearms practice, physical training and educational instruction. We leave the amount of conditioning up to the handler, but personally I recommend you apply the medical staff's suggested dosages. It will make her more compliant and therefore easier to train and work with. In the end, she's a tool and it is best that you treat her as such. Using too little conditioning with a cyborg is like using too little oil on a tool...eventually it will rust and seize up. And that can be fatal if it happens in the field. The cyborgs are warehoused in their own residence and we converted another building into a combination residence and office for the handlers, though most also maintain a private residence off-site."

Lorenzo's phone rang and he answered it. "Yes, he's here...Okay, I'll send them over."

"Doctor Bianchi is ready for you," he noted to Ferro.

Michele and Ferro returned to Michele's car and she directed him onto the perimeter road that led to the hospital complex. They rode an elevator to the top floor and then down a hallway to stop before a door with a card reader next to it. Ferro removed a plastic identification card from her blazer pocket and waved it before a reader next to a

door. Michele heard the mechanical click of the door unlatching and Ferro opened it and stepped through into a conference room.

"Hello, Colonel," Doctor Fernando Bianchi stated from the head of the table. He rose and shook Michele's hand. "If you'll have a seat, I'll brief you on the cyborg program."

Over the next half-hour, Bianchi showed Michele a cybernetic augmentation program that constituted a level of biomechatronics that he had not thought possible. Artificial implants and advanced neurocognitive and neuromotor prostheses made from carbon fiber reinforced plastic (CFRP) and titanium with synthetic muscular systems were tied together with advanced biosensors and cosmesis. Micro-actuators allowed heightened strength and neuroprosthetics enhanced reflexes, improved visual and auditory acuity and reduced the transmission of pain impulses. It sounded more like science fiction than science fact and a good bit more advanced than when they'd first started five years ago with the girl who would become Angelica.

"The cyborgs really are incredible," Bianchi stated, the pride evident in his tone. "If they let them into the Olympics, they'd sweep Gold in every Track and Field and weightlifting event, resetting the World Record as they did so. Drill them properly and they'll own the shooting events, as well."

"Why did you ask me all those questions?" Michele asked.

"A cyborg is effectively built to order for their handler. We can adjust her height, hair, skin and eye color, physical attributes, facial features, even her handedness. In terms of personality, we manipulate the Big Five personality traits of the cyborgs, emphasizing the Conscientiousness factor and minimizing the Neuroticism factor. Normally we aim for a sense of ambiversion in terms of the cyborg's personality, however we can adjust their Openness to Experience, Agreeableness and Extraversion factors, as well, to skew them more towards what their handler desires."

"Tell me about the conditioning process," Michele requested.

"Those girls chosen as subjects have undergone significant physical and/or emotional trauma so part of the conditioning process is to suppress those memories. The human brain is like a large database and the hippocampus and median temporal lobes serve as a kind of indexing system. Through the specific application of electricity to these

regions, we can scramble that index and suppress events recorded in their episodic memory.”

“What of their families and prior life?”

“The level of memory inhibition depends on the subject. If a girl underwent significant trauma we pretty much suppress everything. For those that did not, we allow them to remember selected events if we feel it would prove beneficial. The questionnaire you filled out also helped us determine what to let them remember and what to bury. We dampen the interest the girls have in their past lives, essentially reproducing natural childhood amnesia, just having it cover a much longer period of time. With the new generation of girls we do make significant adjustments to their semantic and procedural memories to imprint information on things like firearms, tactics, languages and other usable skills. We also suppress certain emotions like fear, guilt and remorse so they can carry out their missions and not suffer any moral quandaries afterwards. And we must recalibrate the girl’s motor system and skills so that they can properly interact with the world around them post-augmentation. The cyborgs require regular dosages of the conditioning medication because of this.”

“Is it correct that this dosage is variable?” Michele asked, reflecting on Jean Croce’s earlier comments.

“There is a minimal dosage level that must be maintained in order for the girls to adjust to and cope with their prosthetics. The medication also ensures their loyalty to their handlers and the Agency. We instill within the cyborgs a strong desire to please their handlers and to think of them as very important people in their lives. With the first generation girls, we also gave them strong feelings of affection for their handlers, but we’ve eliminated that from these new generation of girls as unnecessary thanks to improvements in the general process. So no worries of being paired with a love-sick teenager,” Bianchi said with a laugh that neither Michele nor Ferro shared in.

“Anyway,” Bianchi continued in a more serious tone, “some handlers choose to apply the bare minimum levels and others choose to apply recommended dosages. To be honest, those with higher conditioning dosages are less problematic and more effective, but it does tend to make them less spontaneous and more reserved.”

He powered everything off and raised the lights.

"Are you ready to meet her?" he asked Michele.

"Yes."

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# THREE

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## MEDICAL CENTER SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCY COMPLEX

The girl awoke to darkness, but as she blinked her eyes, the ambient light leaking past the heavy curtains allowed her to make out features in her room, including a tray to her right and a chair and ottoman to her left. She felt the coarse cotton weave of the hospital sheets on her bare skin and she slowly moved her arms and legs. Using the bed controls to raise herself into a sitting position, a wooden wall cabinet came into view behind her along with a wooden table and chair to her right.

There was a knock on the door and the girl's heart leapt into her throat. Today she would meet her handler, and she was naked! Before she could call out, the door opened and a woman with light brown hair wearing a black leather jacket over a burgundy turtleneck with grey jeans tucked into knee-high burgundy leather boots entered the room, a large paper bag in one hand. Behind her came a man sporting a soul patch wearing Doctor's Whites whom she recognized as Doctor Fernando Bianchi, followed by an orderly with a tray.

"Ah, you're awake!" the woman said in a chipper voice, walking towards the bed. The soles of the woman's boots echoing off the vinyl floor sounded like thunderclaps and the girl unconsciously dialed back the sensitivity until they sounded "normal".

Though the girl had never seen her before, a spark of recognition flashed through her mind.

"Priscilla?"

"Very good!" Priscilla replied, though she knew the new generation of cyborgs was pre-programmed with the names and faces of all the staff.

"And do you know your name?" Priscilla asked.

"Kara Michelle Deleroux," the girl replied, pronouncing her first name as "CAR-ah" as opposed to the more common "CARE-ah". She'd been

told her handler had christened her, choosing the first name because it sounded Japanese (even if a Japanese person would have pronounced it "CAH-RAH") and the middle and last names to pay homage to the French half of her heritage.

"Come now, Priscilla. Kara's been out of surgery for a day now. She's already been briefed on her name and background," Doctor Bianchi noted with a smile.

Priscilla nodded and then raised the bag. "I brought you some clothes. Your handler will be here in about an hour. It wouldn't do to meet him only wearing a hospital gown!" she noted with a chuckle.

The orderly placed the tray of slices of soft fruit and a bowl of plain yogurt on the side table while Priscilla placed the bag on the end of the bed. Kara removed a shoebox with the name 'Christian Louboutin' emblazoned on it and when she opened it, found a cloth bag protecting a pair of knee-high boots in soft black leather with an almond toe and a block heel. Kara compared them to the ones Priscilla wore and they looked identical to her. She also noticed the bright red soles and Priscilla informed her that was a trademark of Christian Louboutin shoes, showing off the same soles on her own boots.

The next box, from a company known as La Perla, contained silk undergarments. The final box was quite large and contained what appeared to Kara to be a school uniform consisting of a white shirt, black jacket, red tie, checkered miniskirt and a shawl in a pattern matching the skirt.

"Thank you," Kara said to Priscilla.

Doctor Bianchi asked Kara some medical questions as she ate and, satisfied with the answers, followed Priscilla out the door. Kara slipped out from under the covers and stood on her feet, feeling a momentary bit of vertigo that quickly passed.

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Kara was reaching for her right boot when she heard a knock on the door and bid them entry. Ferro and a handsome man dressed in an immaculately tailored suit in darkest charcoal walked into the room. Kara estimated the man's height at around 185cm and the suit defined a muscular and well-toned frame. Her eyes climbed to his face and a warm feeling flushed through her system as she recognized him.

Kara pulled on her right boot and then slipped off the bed, unconsciously adjusting her weight on the 50mm heels as she presented herself for inspection.

"*Attrayant,*" the man said in a deeply rich voice and Kara blushed. The man, surprised at the reaction, mentally recalled the tagline of a future company – "More Real Than Real".

"You are my handler?" she asked with a hint of French accent. The question was rhetorical as she'd already been shown his picture and told his name.

"I am your partner," the man corrected. "My name is Michele. Michele Pagani."

"Pleased to meet you, Michele," Kara replied, putting her hands together and bowing deeply at the waist.

The man returned the bow as Ferro came forward. She opened a large manila envelope and started removing identity documents, placing them on the bed.

"As you are able to hold dual citizenship, I have secured both a French and Japanese passport for you. In Europe, use your French passport unless told otherwise by your handler since it makes it easier to travel within the EU. You are not required to carry your French or Italian identity cards, but the Italians want to see it for everything, even though you're not a citizen. Therefore, you should carry both the electronic and paper versions of the Italian one as most places are not as yet ready to accept the electronic version."

Kara took each item and placed it in the white leather clutch Priscilla had left.

"Are you ready to go?" Michele asked.

"Yes, Michele," Kara replied in almost a squeak of excitement that she mentally cursed herself for. Michele nodded and exited out into the hallway, Kara falling into step beside him.

Just before they stepped outside, Michele removed a pair of sunglasses and put them on. Kara used her right hand to shield her eyes for a moment as she stepped out into the morning sun and then started down the steps. As she descended, her eyes and head automatically

started to scan the surrounding buildings for threats. They walked into the parking lot and up to a low-slung sports car that appeared to Kara to be constructed completely of angles. The deep black paint reflected her image with almost no distortion as she walked up, and when a floating leaf alighted upon the right rear, she expected to see ripples radiate outwards.

"Why is such a pretty car named after a bat, Michele?" Kara asked and it took a moment for Michele to realize she was using the Spanish interpretation of the vehicle's name.

"Lamborghini traditionally names their cars after famous bulls, and Murciélago was one such bull. He survived 28 sword strokes during a fight in 1879 and the matador was so impressed with his performance that when he finally defeated him, he chose to spare his life."

Out of politeness, Kara nodded as if she understood. She pulled on the door handle and the door popped out a few centimeters, but no more. She prepared to give it another yank when she saw Michele's door rotate vertically forward. She lifted the door and the hydraulics took over to raise it up and out of her way. She noticed the low seating position and correlated that to the shortness of her skirt. To prevent her showing her underwear to the men in the lot, she sat down perpendicular to the seat with her legs tightly held together and the soles of her boots flat to the ground. She then lifted both legs, still together, and rotated her body ninety degrees to the left, lifting her legs over the sill of the car, scissoring her boots against her thighs. Once properly seated, she stretched out her legs and the soles of her boots sank into the deep pile carpet.

"Impressive," Michele noted. "Did they teach you that in cyborg school?"

"It just seemed...the proper way," Kara replied and Michele nodded his head.

Everywhere Kara's eyes fell she saw the finest hand-stitched black and yellow leather as well as carbon fiber finished in a piano black lacquer. She reached up and pulled down the door, which used gravity and its own weight to close securely.

Michele started the engine and the V12 barked into life and settled into a low growl that Kara felt resonate through her. He pushed a button on the center console and the car moved forward. They made a wide

turn and started down the main road leading away from the medical complex. When they reached the end of the road, to Kara's surprise Michele turned right instead of left and drove past two buildings and some open area to the perimeter road where he turned left and circled back to the main entrance and then onto the central drive which led out from the facility.

"We're not going to the dormitory, Michele?" Kara asked as they reached the end of the drive and turned onto the main road.

"No," Michele replied. "We have some things to attend to in Paris."

"Paris, Michele?"

"Yes, Paris. And Kara?"

"Yes, Michele?"

"You don't need to append my name to the end of every sentence."

"Yes, Mic—Okay."

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Nine hours later and 1500 kilometers north of Rome, the setting sun lit the bottom of the few clouds in shades of pink, orange, and red as the Murciélago Roadster exited the A6 autoroute onto the service facility just before the Francilienne ring road at the commune of Corbeil-Essonnes, about 40km south of Paris.

"My butt hurts," Kara noted as she stood next to the car, drinking bottled water.

"I probably should have brought the Fiorano," Michele admitted, though the word meant nothing to Kara.

As they finished their water, Kara noted her partner seemed nervous and unsettled. Worried about a possible threat, her own stance tensed and her attention started to concentrate on people and vehicles nearby.

"Is everything okay?" Michele asked, witnessing the change.

"You seem nervous," Kara replied. "Is there danger?"

Michele remembered the medical staff noting the cyborg's enhanced senses could be used as a crude method of detecting signs of stress through the subject's sympathetic nervous system.

"Nothing like that, Kara. I just don't like driving through Paris during the day, to say nothing of the night," Michele noted as the yellow orb of the sun hovered just over the orange horizon to the west. They would reach the city after nightfall.

"Even though I did not have a license, my parents had me drive in Paris because it scared them, as well," Kara noted in sympathy.

"And it didn't scare you?" Michele asked.

"I found it exciting, to be honest," Kara replied. "But then for a teenager, any chance behind the wheel was exciting."

"Open your hand," Michele ordered. Kara did so and Michele placed the key for the Murciélago in her open palm. "Congratulations. You're the designated driver for the rest of today's trip."

"But I don't have a license."

"Well then try not to get pulled over," Michele suggested.

"My parents owned a Peugeot compact, not a supercar," Kara noted.

"Ah, well then maybe..."

"But my boyfriend did let me drive his Clio RS a few times," Kara quickly added before Michele could reconsider and tossed her water bottle in a graceful arc directly into the trash receptacle. She opened the driver's side door and settled into the seat.

"So cool," Kara exclaimed as she ran her hands over the soft leather of the steering wheel and looked down for the seat controls, adjusting it until her feet could comfortably reach the pedals and she could see out all the windows. She then proceeded to fidget, tossing continual glances at Michele to will him to finish his water and get into the car. To prod him along she started the car and revved the engine, each press of her right boot invoking a roar that sent chills up her spine despite the heated seat back. Michele finally finished his water and walked it over to the trash, then ambled back to the passenger seat. Before he lowered his door, he briefed Kara on the basic location of the

controls. Kara nodded her understanding and exited the service facility and merging back onto the A6.

They soon found themselves in the evening traffic approaching Paris' Boulevard Périphérique, the ring road closest in to the city itself. From there, they slogged west and then north to the Port Maillot exit just past the Bois de Boulogne and onto the Avenue de la Grande Armée. Kara arrived at the end and expertly merged into the river of cars that swirled around the Étoile, ignoring the traffic cops who were purely superfluous decoration. The Étoile lacked defined lanes and therefore traffic constricted and expanded between four and eight cars wide, all of them swirling around like bits of driftwood caught in a vortex.

The Avenue des Champs-Élysées was exactly on the opposite side of the Avenue de la Grande Armée and Kara bulled her way forward, stabbing either the throttle to shoot into any opening in the swirling eddies of painted metal or the brake to prevent from running up the backside of the car ahead of her. Michele mostly stared at the faint outline of the passenger airbag cover embossed in the leather dashboard, taking comfort in that they were travelling slowly enough for both it and the seatbelt to keep him intact.

"Here it is," Michele said, pointing to a covered drive on the right. Kara pulled in under the protected porch and handed the key to the waiting valet as Michele removed the leather Louis Vuitton garment bag from the forward luggage compartment.

"Welcome to the Park Hyatt Paris-Vendôme," the bellman greeted, holding open the door for Michele and Kara. They walked forward to the Front Desk where they were checked in and escorted to the Presidential Suite on the sixth floor by the Hotel Manager.

The four stepped into a grand foyer dominated by an arcing staircase that led to the upper floor and a large wooden table with a tall flower arrangement. The bellboy carried Michele's garment bag up the stairs while the General Manager walked them through a set of double doors into a large and luxurious living room where the style followed a contemporary Haussmannien theme with mahogany and oak paneled walls, Parisian limestone and chenille silk fabrics.

"This place is amazing," Kara said.

"Thank you, Madame," the Hotel Manager said. He turned to Michele. "Chef Rouquette has selected a ten course dinner for you this evening. Shall we start the preparations?"

"Yes please. We'll have it out on the terrace."

"Very good, Monsieur."

Michele started up the stairs and Kara fell in behind him.

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Kara idly moved the toe of her right boot back and forth where it rested on the low metal railing lining the terrace outside the bedroom of the Presidential Suite of the Park Hyatt Paris-Vendôme. As she did so, the brightly lit spire of the Eiffel Tower appeared and then disappeared as the black leather occulted her view. While her facial features were strongly Japanese, the blood that flowed through Kara's veins was half French and the City of Lights spread out before her filled her heart with pride. The evening temperature hovered around the 10°C mark and she felt the chill on the bare area of her legs between the bottom of her uniform skirt and the top of her boots.

She turned her head and held up the glass of Château d'Yquem 1959, the pale red of the wine given an inner glow from the light of the candles in hurricane lamps on the table. Their light also illuminated the man across from her, highlighting his strong, handsome features. Though they had been together less than a day, he was the most important person in her life and she almost ached with the desire to please him.

"Will you please pinch me?" Kara asked.

"Pardon?" Michele replied, turning to meet her gaze.

"Will you pinch me? I think I'm still asleep and dreaming," Kara repeated. Michele smiled at her and she drained the glass and put it down. Unsuccessfully stifling a yawn, she sat up in the chair and pulled her feet off the top of the railing.

"I'm going to take a shower and then head to bed," she announced, standing up and leaving the table. Michele nodded, then reached for the phone to call Guest Services, asking them to come clear the table and perform the turndown service on the large king bed.

Kara sat on the end of the huge bed and pulled off her boots, placing them at the end of the bed, followed by removing her school uniform, which she then carried to the wardrobe. The soles of her feet registered the warmth of the heated marble floor of the atrium spa that formed part of the master bathroom as she drew a bath.

Settling into the large whirlpool tub, Kara reviewed in her mind a day that turned out to be quite different from what she'd expected. She'd been informed that her first days would be spent getting familiar with the Agency complex and then she would undergo weapons drills and physical training. Instead, this first day involved taking a road-trip to Paris - complete with a stint behind the wheel of a supercar - followed by a gourmet dinner overlooking the city at night.

Kara was familiar with the idea of a fairy godmother, but she wondered if there was such a thing as a fairy godfather?

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Michele let the Room Service people in to clean away the table while Housekeeping performed the turn-down service on the large king bed. When they left, he changed into a pajama shirt and pants and then went downstairs into the kitchen. In a small saucepan he combined an equal amount of whole milk and half-and-half, bringing it to a simmer and adding fresh vanilla extract, fine white chocolate and a generous splash of Grand Marnier liquor, whisking the concoction into a smooth consistency and then pouring it into two earthenware mugs. He loaded them on a tray and returned upstairs to the bedroom, laying them on the table next to the door leading out to the terrace.

"Cold!" Kara exclaimed as she sprinted across the carpet between the bathroom door and bed, dressed in a chemise of white silk. She dived onto the bed and burrowed underneath the duvet.

"Sorry," Michele said, moving to close the open door out to the terrace.

"This should warm you up," he added as he handed Kara a cup of the hot chocolate, which she accepted after propping herself up on pillows. She took a sip and growled in pleasure. Michele took his own cup and sat on the end of the bed, flipping through the channels on the large plasma television before settling on CNN International. Ten minutes later he turned off the television and doused the room lights, allowing Paris to shine diffusely through the sheer curtains on the windows and doors.

"Good night, Kara Michelle."

"Good night, Michele."

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# FOUR

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**PARK HYATT PARIS- VENDÔME  
5 RUE DE LA PAIX**

When morning dawned, Michele awoke first. Kara had not moved from her spot on the far side of the bed, though that might have been due to being wrapped up in the duvet like a mummy. He slipped out from under the sheets and removed his garment bag from the wardrobe, taking it into the bathroom with him. After a steam shower, he dressed in a bespoke suit of the finest merino wool from the A. Caraceni atelier in Milan.

Returning to the bedroom, he noticed Kara still asleep. The medical staff had warned him to never startle a sleeping cyborg, so he lifted up the end of the duvet and lightly brushed the soles of her feet with the tip of a pen, causing her legs to involuntarily twitch and bringing her to a state of wakefulness.

"Good morning, Kara," he greeted.

"Bonjour," she replied, stretching languidly under the covers.

"Time to get up. We have work to do," Michele ordered.

The change in Kara was as if someone had flipped a switch. She stopped stretching and sat up, pulling the duvet off her. She did a tuck-roll forward, ending up on her knees. She slipped them out from underneath her to sit on the edge of the bed, pulled on her boots, planted her feet on the floor and launched herself up off the bed, her posture one of immediate readiness.

"Kara?"

"Yes?"

Michele indicated the floor to ceiling mirror between the set of doors leading out to the terrace. Kara turned and examined her reflection.

"*Batsu,*" she cursed, blushing fiercely.

"I'll meet you downstairs," Michele noted and stepped out of the bedroom as Kara stomped towards the wardrobe closet to get properly dressed.

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Michele entered the kitchen and started grinding espresso beans and preparing the machine. Kara appeared, now dressed in the uniform shirt, the top buttons undone and the tails hanging over the miniskirt.

"An old friend of mine will be joining us for breakfast today," Michele said as he started preparing two caffè mochas. "She's an agent with the DGSE and specializes in training their female agents in etiquette, deportment, table manners and social roles."

"Gee, and here I thought I would be done with school," Kara quipped.

"We both are going to have some learning to do," Michele replied, handing over a cup.

"I want you to treat her as a friend, and do not be disconcerted if she makes physical contact with you. I also want you to follow her instructions."

"Yes, Michele."

About ten minutes later the doorbell chimed and Michele went to answer the door, Kara in tow.

"Bonjour, Amande!" he greeted. An older, attractive woman stepped in and kissed Michele warmly on both cheeks.

"It is good to see you again, Michele," she said in a crisp French accent.

"Amande, I'd like you to meet Kara Michelle Deleroux," Michele said.

Kara bowed. "Bonjour, Madame."

"Bonjour, Mademoiselle," Amande replied. She looked Kara over and clucked her tongue. "I expect that outfit has missing pieces?"

"Uhm, yes," Kara said, looking embarrassed.

"Why don't you get properly dressed for breakfast," she suggested and Kara started for the stairs.

"You can ditch the jacket and shawl," Michele called out and Kara waved her right arm in understanding as she disappeared.

"So, you're a father now?" Amande said with a wink.

"We're still figuring that out. For the moment, I'm thinking exchange student which is why I have her wearing a school uniform."

Kara came downstairs in short order, her shirt properly buttoned and tucked into her miniskirt with the tie properly done. She also had styled her hair with some thin red ribbons.

"Much better," Amande replied, but it was Michele's look of approval that mattered to Kara.

"We're going to have breakfast now and then I am going to turn you over to Amande for the day while I spend the day in the Louvre," Michele noted and Kara's smile fell, partly at the thought of missing the museum and partly at not having Michele around.

They went downstairs and had breakfast in the Les Orchidées restaurant. Afterwards, Michele bid the two ladies farewell and headed for the lobby while Kara and Amande returned to the room. There, Amande spent the next six hours teaching her how to choose outfits and accessorize for various occasions using a virtual mannequin and wardrobe on her laptop. She laid out an array of cosmetics and showed Kara how to apply them to enhance her natural beauty, to disguise her features and to make her look both older and younger than her natural age. She also instructed her in how to sit, walk and speak like a well-bred young woman. In the dining room, Amande drilled Kara in proper table manners for everything up to and including a State Dinner followed by instruction in how to serve various beverages and hors d'oeuvres in the kitchen.

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Michele returned soon after dusk fell, carrying a large paper shopping bag from the German luxury clothier Escada.

"Does she pass?" Michele asked Amande.

"With honors. She's an excellent student," Amande replied, earning a smile from Kara.

"You and I have dinner reservations at Pierre Gagnaire this evening, so head upstairs and change into this," Michele said, handing the bag over.

Kara thanked Amande and raced up the stairs.

"Well I should be going. You two have a big evening ahead of you," Amande stated and Michele escorted her to the door. As he returned, he saw Kara descend the stairs dressed in the Escada sleeveless ivory silk dress that ended above the knees along with the Christian Louboutin boots from her school uniform.

"You look lovely," Michele replied and Kara blushed furiously.

"So...do you want to drive or should I request the hotel limousine?" he asked.

"I want to drive!" Kara exclaimed.

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Behind the wheel of the Lamborghini, Kara worked her way back down the Champs-Élysées and pulled up to the front door of the Hotel Balzac. A young doorman came down the steps to open Kara's door.

"Welcome to the Hotel Balzac," he greeted, all smiles and admiring glances at both Kara and the Lamborghini. "Checking in?"

"We're having dinner at Pierre Gagnaire," Kara replied, handing over the key. She exited the car in a fluid flow of elegant motion and waited for Michele to come around the car. She put her arm in his and the two entered the lobby and made their way up to the restaurant where they were escorted to a table next to a window and Kara's head swiveled around as she took in the modern décor. Both the Chef de Cuisine and the Head Sommelier came forward to introduce themselves and explain the menu and wine list and Michele made their selections. He noticed that since being seated, Kara's eyes swept the room on a regular basis. He also sensed tenseness in her shoulders under the dress. During his initial briefing, the staff informed him that the cyborgs were extremely protective of their handlers, which at times led to them over-reacting to a perceived threat. Michele did not

wish anything like that to happen this evening, so he took preventive action.

"Kara?"

"Yes?" she said, her attention snapping back to him.

"Relax."

"Sorry," she replied sheepishly.

"There are no threats to worry about in here. Just sit back and enjoy the evening," Michele ordered and Kara visibly relaxed.

*Amuses-bouches* were brought out and Kara purred in pleasure as she tried each appetizer. The first courses arrived as a set of six miniplates, which allowed them to decide in which order to try them. After they cleared those, their main entrees arrived. Master Chef M. Gagnaire himself arrived soon after to ask them how the meal was and Kara wanted to jump up and hug him. Next to be delivered to their table was a selection of cheeses, followed by a symphony of fruits and chocolates for dessert. Afterwards, they let their meal digest with Jamaican blue mountain coffee and Cognac in the bar.

"Do you smoke?" Michele asked Kara, looking at the few patrons enjoying fine Cuban cigars.

"No," Kara replied. "Should I learn?"

"Absolutely not," Michele said.

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The valet brought the Murciélago Roadster forward and Michele moved towards the driver's side so Kara went around the front and slipped into the passenger seat.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" Michele asked as he started the car.

"Very much! Thank you," Kara replied.

Michele pulled away and turned left onto the Rue Lord Byron and drove a short distance, pulling off to park in front of an empty loading bay on the left-hand side of the street.

"Do you remember that fellow in the gray suit at the table in the corner?" Michele asked.

"Yes," Kara replied.

"In a few minutes, he will exit the restaurant through a side door on the Rue Balzac. I want you to kill him," Michele ordered.

"You got it," Kara replied, smiling at Michele's assumed jest. When he didn't respond, the smile disappeared from her face like the sun behind a cloud.

"You're serious?" she asked and Michele nodded his head. As she had done in the hotel bedroom that morning, her entire stance shifted from one of relaxation to readiness.

"You won't be with me?" Kara asked, a hint of worry in her voice.

"I would draw too much attention and would put the security detail on alert or even prevent them from allowing the target to appear," Michele replied.

"What should I use for a weapon?"

"Improvise," Michele replied. "Play to your natural strengths."

"Will the target have protection?"

"Yes, so try to use non-lethal force to neutralize them, but only if practical."

"You'll be waiting for me here then?"

"No," Michele replied. He reached into his jacket pocket and removed a key-fob. "There will be a dark blue Peugeot 206 parked on the street past the Rue de Chateaubriand. You will drive to Porte de Clichy and I will meet you there. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Michele."

"And you're comfortable doing this on your own?" Michele asked.

"Yes, Michele," Kara replied. Her primary goal was to protect him and the best way to do that was to not have him in harm's way. She also

was not about to vocalize any concerns she might have on her first mission.

“Bon chance,” Michele said and Kara exited the Lamborghini. She crossed the street to the other side and walked back, crossing the Rue Balzac and going up the far side from the hotel. As she walked up the street past the offices of the Paris Chamber of Commerce and Industry, she saw the door Michele referred to. She continued on and crossed the street to stand before the Hôtel de Vigny, keeping her head low to hide her face.

Within moments a black Mercedes-Benz S Class sedan drove past her through the intersection and towards the Hotel Balzac, the brake lights glowing as it slowed. Kara checked the street and, finding it empty, started towards the Mercedes, staying low behind the parked cars.

The restaurant door opened and a tall, well-built man in a dark suit walked out, his head swiveling around as he looked for any threats. Seeing none, he proceeded to the rear passenger door on the right-hand side and opened it. He then motioned back towards the doorway. A moment later, her target appeared, followed by a second man in the same style and color of suit as the one at the door. Kara waited until he was just reaching the back of the car when she launched herself into the street directly towards them.

She needed a little more than a second to close the five meters between them, far too little time for any of her opponents to react. She launched herself into the air, wrapping her target into a bear hug and locking her arms and legs around his frame in a vise-like grip. The impact knocked the target into the car, bending him backwards and driving Kara’s legs into the vertical part of the trunk area.

She had computed her momentum and impact point to slam him almost ninety-degrees backwards, well beyond the articulation of the human spine. As his spine shattered between the thoracic and lumbar regions, Kara gave a mighty squeeze with her arms, compressing his chest against hers, crushing his ribs, collapsing his lungs and rupturing his heart against his spinal column. The target’s head snapped back, a fountain of crimson erupting from his open mouth, falling on them both like a hot rain.

As the target’s upper body slammed into the top of the trunk, his skull hit the base of the back window as his body slid to the left along the trunk area and off the left rear quarter panel. As they fell, Kara

pinioned him to bring his lower body down first and then drive his upper body and skull hard into the ground, cracking it open. She then rolled over onto her back, using the target's body as a shield. She unclasped her legs and arms, placing the soles of her boots into his stomach area, and launched his body off her at the nearest bodyguard, who instinctively shifted to the side to miss it.

In the handful of seconds during her attack the other bodyguard recovered from his shock and drew his pistol. Kara rolled onto her knees and palms, leveraging herself up onto her feet in a crouch. She leapt one meter into the air in a pirouette, connecting the inside of her boot where the toe and shaft come together with the side of his head, knocking him flying into the side of the car, where he collapsed in a heap.

The guard at the open passenger door drew a bead on Kara and put a single 9mm round into her chest. Her armor easily absorbed it and she jumped onto the sloped trunk. The guard took a second shot at her, this one going wide as she stomped towards him across the top of the trunk and kicked out with her right foot. If she'd wanted, she could have buried the toe of her boot into his neck and separated his skull from his spinal column, but instead she timed it so the inside of the heel shattered his nose as it scraped by. The guard stumbled back against the inside of the open door, dropping his gun as both hands reflexively came to his face.

Kara leapt off the trunk onto her feet and ran down the street towards the Rue de Chateaubriand. She heard two more shots ring out, but both went wide. Unfortunately, the sound of those four gunshots had captured the attention of the valets and doormen of both the Hotel Balzak and Hôtel de Vigny and lights snapped on in the windows above the street as people looked out to see what was happening. As Kara reached the Rue de Chateaubriand, she swung right and punched the unlock button on the keyfob. She was rewarded with a flash of headlights about halfway down the street and she rushed to the car, wrenching open the door and plopping into the seat. She put the key into the ignition and started the car, putting the automatic gear selector in drive. A Renault Espace minivan trundled down the street and she waited until it past to cut out right behind it, leaving her external lights off as they both passed the intersection. Kara risked a quick glance down the street and saw that the Mercedes was pulling away in a cloud of tire smoke.

Halfway down the block she shifted into Low and allowed the Espace to reach the end of the road and turn right. She kept the external lights off until she approached the end of the street, lightly tapping the brakes as she approached the Avenue de Friedland. Seeing a gap, she floored the throttle and shot across into the westbound lanes towards the Arc de Triomphe. She entered the traffic circle, taking the second exit onto the Avenue de Wagram and looked down at the satellite navigation unit, which had been pre-programmed with her destination. She continued up the Avenue de Wagram and when the Avenue ended at the Place de Wagram, she circled around it and drove north to the Boulevard Berthier, turning right and heading across the train tracks into an industrial area in the 17<sup>th</sup> arrondissement near the Porte de Clichy stations for the Paris Métro & RER.

Kara pulled in front of a building and parked next to Michele's Lamborghini. She exited the car, climbed the concrete steps and pulled open the door, walking into a dark hallway. At the end, she saw a light and made her way forward, stepping through a door into a room to find Michele, Amande and a well-dressed man with strong, hard features.

"Are you okay?" Michele asked, concerned to see blood all over her.

"Yes," she replied. "Neither round penetrated my armor, but I do have some nice craters. I'm sorry about the dress," she added.

The man came forward. "Miss Deleroux, my name is Bob. I want to thank you for your service to your country this evening. You have eliminated a serious threat to the safety of the Fifth Republic."

"Uh, happy to be of service, I guess," Kara said, not really sure what to do. She moved over to Michele, who reached out and gave her hand a squeeze.

Amande came forward and handed a large paper bag to Kara. "There are showers through the door. Clean yourself up and change into these clothes."

Kara looked to Michele, who nodded his head. She took the bag and walked into the next room.

"She's amazing," Bob said. A DGSE team had filmed the entire action from the upper floor of the Chamber of Commerce offices. They'd also

been in position to assist and extract Kara if things had gone wrong with the sanction.

"Thank you," Michele replied.

"It is we who must thank you, Monsieur Pagani. I have wished to eliminate Monsieur Ledoux for some time now, however my superiors have prohibited me from taking action against him."

"Well I figured I owed you a favor for loaning me Amande for the day and it was a useful test for Kara."

Kara soon returned, now cleaned-up and wearing a white t-shirt emblazoned with "I ♥ Paris" and a denim miniskirt, a large grey zip-up hooded sweatshirt over her arm. She placed the bag with her bloody dress on the ground.

Bob came forward and handed Kara another Escada dress box. "A replacement for the one you sacrificed this evening, Miss Deleroux."

"Ready?" Michele asked and Kara nodded. He handed her the key. "Put your box in the trunk. I'll be out in a moment," Michele said.

"It was good to see you again, Amande. Thank you for your work with Kara," Michele said.

"It was my pleasure," Amande replied, kissing him on both cheeks.

Michele slipped behind the wheel of the Lamborghini and started it. They exited the industrial park, merging onto the adjacent Boulevard Periphérique.

"Did I do well?" Kara asked and Michele could sense a hint of apprehension and even fear in her voice.

"You did very well," Michele replied. He turned his eyes from the road to her and saw Kara's stature relax and her face beamed with pride.

As he returned his gaze to the road, a chill ran down Michele's spine, and it wasn't solely due to the wind blowing past the open top.

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After returning to the Park Hyatt, Michele ran a washrag under hot water in the bathroom, poured a drink from the bar and took a seat on the end of the bed.

Kara sat beside him, a large smile on her face. All was right in her world – she drove the Lamborghini, enjoyed a gourmet meal and her handler had praised her performance. She flopped back on the bed and kicked her legs straight out.

Michele placed his drink glass on the carpet. "Let me see your boots," he said and Kara adjusted her body to lay her legs on his lap. In the light, Michele could see faint dark specks on the black leather. He rubbed one with his thumb and saw it was blood. He took the washrag and wiped them both down.

"You need to take care of these, Kara," he noted as he pulled off first her left boot and then her right. "Not just to protect them, but also yourself. You don't want a forensics team finding dried blood on your clothes."

"Yes, Michele," she replied, her good mood falling a bit.

"And now it is time for you to head to bed."

"Do I have to?" Kara asked.

"We'll be going back to Italy tomorrow morning," Michele noted.

"Bummer. I was hoping we could do some sightseeing tomorrow."

"I know this probably seemed like a vacation, but there was a serious training component to all of it."

"I still had a great time," Kara noted as she swung her legs off of Michele and slid off the bed. She pulled off the t-shirt and undid her miniskirt, allowing it to drop to the floor before taking a step back to clear her left leg and then using her right to flick the miniskirt up and grabbing it in mid-air.

As she walked towards the wardrobe, Michele once again made a mental note to have a talk with the medical staff about Kara's modesty protocols.

Michele rose and removed his shoe polish kit from the dresser, taking it and the boots downstairs to the kitchen. He started the espresso machine and while it percolated away, he polished the soft leather. As he turned her right boot upside down, he noticed a spray of dried blood across the instep arch, dark against the trademark bright red Christian Louboutin sole. He soaked a balled paper towel and wiped it clean.

When he returned to the bedroom, Kara had fallen asleep. It seemed to Michele that in Kara's mind, nothing had happened between leaving the restaurant and returning to the hotel. And then he realized that to her, nothing really *had* happened. The cyborgs were programmed to feel no remorse or regret over killing. For Kara, crushing out the life of her target generated no more guilt than crushing an insect under the heel of the boot he held in his hand. He recalled someone in the know of the program referring to them in passing as "murder machines" and he wondered if that had just been an aspersion or an insight into their true character.

# FIVE

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## EUROPEAN ROUTE 25 EAST OF GENEVA, SWITZERLAND THE FOLLOWING DAY

"Cold?" Michele asked as they climbed into the Swiss Alps towards the great Mont Blanc tunnel.

"I'm fine!" Kara replied, trying to keep her teeth from chattering.

Michele had warned that she'd freeze in the t-shirt and denim miniskirt, but she'd merely held up the sweatshirt jacket as if it was a talisman that would render her impervious to cold. And while Michele drove at the posted limit, the wind chill from the air flowing over the open top drowned the efforts of the single heater vent on the passenger side.

"I'd stop and put up the temporary roof, but to be honest, it's so complicated that we'll be at our destination faster," Michele noted and Kara motioned forward with her right arm.

They reached the French entrance to the Mont Blanc tunnel and Michele pulled into the service station. Kara ran inside and Michele fiddled with the carbon fiber and fabric roof. Between his engineering degree and the instruction manual it took only ten minutes to figure out how to properly install it and another ten to actually put it into place. Once secured, he went inside and joined Kara, who had strategically positioned herself at a table under an HVAC vent billowing out warm air, her hands wrapped around a large hot chocolate.

"I want to stop by my apartment in Milan and get a few changes of clothes and then we will continue on to Pisa," Michele informed Kara after she'd warmed sufficiently to allow them to return to the car. With the top in place, the interior quickly warmed and Kara settled into the seat and started to doze off. By the time they left the Alps behind and reached the Po Valley, she was fast asleep and remained so as Michele continued east on the Autostrade towards Milan. The Lamborghini exited the A4 Autostrade in the northwestern corner of the city and Michele drove around the city center, pulling off when they reached Parco Solari. The car slowed and a heavy wrought-iron gate under a

brick archway with thick ivory growing across the top of it swung inward. Michele executed a left turn and drove through the gate onto a large courtyard paved in decorative bricks toward a retracting metal rolling door.

The Lamborghini motored inside into a large open space. The floor area held a number of cars and Michele pulled past an open area and stopped. To Kara's surprise, Michele undid his seatbelt, opened the door, and proceeded to scoot himself out of his seat and onto the lower doorjamb. He engaged reverse gear and expertly backed the car into the spot.

The residence had once been a warehouse building with two floors of offices above. Michele had gutted the interior and had it completely renovated with modern sound and thermal insulation. The main floor he left wide open as a garage for his cars and they climbed the stairs to the first level of the living area where a large living room and dining room with a professional kitchen and a half-bathroom were located. The second floor above the living and dining rooms had been removed, allowing massive windows that looked out upon a Japanese garden. Along the perimeter, a brick wall and tall trees screened the view beyond.

The two of them climbed another set of stairs to the top floor and walked past a guest bedroom and office. Just before the master suite, a third set of stairs led to the roof and a large covered patio area that included a Jacuzzi and a view of the park and the spires of the Milan Cathedral beyond.

Michele placed his luggage next to the bed and sat down, patting the area next to him for Kara to take a seat.

"While we're supposed to be a *fratello*, the plain fact is that you and I will never pass as brother and sister," Michele noted. "For one thing, I am over two decades older than you. For another, you inherited your facial features from your Japanese mother."

"I'm sorry," Kara replied.

"On the contrary, your looks are an advantage. People will remember you, but I want them to think of you as an exchange student or tourist and not mentally connect you to any events the police may question them on. Few would look twice at an older man accompanying a

teenage girl in a school uniform. They will figure I am either your father or your guardian.

“However, there will be times when a school uniform will not be appropriate. Times like Paris when we’ll need to look more like a couple or dealing with other government agencies, when we’ll need to look like partners. I asked Amande to teach you how to apply cosmetics to make you look older because I am hoping that we can make you look at least 20.”

Kara nodded her head in understanding. Michele swapped the clothes out of his luggage and then she followed him back down into the garage where he approached the trunk of another two-door sport coupe, this one a deep emerald green with a tan leather interior. Kara recognized the famous prancing horse of Scuderia Ferrari on the side of the car. She opened the door and saw the words “599 Fiorano” emblazoned in black script on the seatbacks.

Michele drove due south on the A7 to the port city of Genoa and then joined the A12, which ran along the coast of the Ligurian Sea. Kara lowered the window to let in the sea air and watched the scenery flash by. They drove into downtown Pisa and past the famous leaning tower and the Piazzas dei Miracoli and Cavalieri. Michele entered the University District and pulled in front of a brick tower house. A doorman in a grey greatcoat stepped forward and opened the door for Kara.

A cold wind blowing through the narrow street sent Kara scurrying inside into the lobby of the hotel, Michele handing the key to the valet so he could take the car to the garage. Michele checked in and they were escorted to a suite with frescoes on the walls and ceiling. The small bedroom was dominated by a queen bed with alternating stripes of navy blue and gold, the short headboard pushed up against a tall window with curtains of the same pattern as the bed linens and a canopy of metallic blue silk.

“The first thing we need to do is get you another outfit to hold you over until we get to Rome and do some proper shopping,” Michele noted. They hailed a cab and drove to the Borgo Stretto, Pisa’s fashion street and also the location of the house where Galileo Galilei was born. They stepped into Emporio Armani and thirty minutes later they walked out, Kara now wearing a pair of black jeans tucked into her boots with a white long-sleeved shirt and a black trench coat. They cabbled back to the Piazza dei Miracoli and walked the main sites,

including the Cathedral, Baptistery and Tower along with the Camposanto Monumentale. The plaza was full of stalls and vendors who approached them to sell crude knock-offs of designer sunglasses and handbags, along with various souvenirs. They approached the *fratelli*, but between Kara's steely glare and two more adventurous hawkers who almost had their thrusting arms broken by the cyborg, they quickly pulled back and gave the two a wide berth. They strolled the grounds until the sun went down and then returned to the hotel to enjoy a private dinner by candlelight on the terrace overlooking the private gardens.

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"Tomorrow you will receive your weapons and instructions in how to use them," Michele called out into the living area of the suite.

"What types of weapons will I be equipped with?" Kara asked as she came into the room, wearing the new underwear and chemise she'd purchased at Emporio Armani. Once again, Michele made a mental note to discuss Kara's modesty protocols with the medical staff.

"Pistol, personal defense weapon and assault rifle," Michele replied, undoing the buttons of his dress shirt. He rose and went into the bathroom to change into his pajamas. When he returned, Kara was in bed, the duvet tucked under her chin. Michele slipped under the covers and felt an initial chill from the high-thread count linen.

"Are you going to be warm just wearing that?" Michele asked.

"I will be now," Kara replied as she scooted over and pressed her back and legs against him.

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**HEADQUARTERS  
1<sup>ST</sup> REGIMENT CARABINIERI "TUSCANIA"  
LIVORNO, ITALY**

"Good morning, Sergeant Major. My name is Colonel Pagani and I have an appointment with Major Sales," Michele said, handing forward his military credentials. Both he and Kara both wore standard woodland camouflage Carabinieri uniforms, though they wore the German Bundeswehr combat boot with the shorter shaft compared to the Italian-style of boot.

The Sergeant Major read them and immediately snapped to attention.

"Yes, Colonel!" he barked and reached for the phone. "Major, Colonel Pagani is here...yes, sir...understood, sir...yes...I'll tell him." He hung up and flagged a Corporal walking by. "Corporal Agnelli, please show the Colonel and his associate to the Armory where they are to report to Major Sales."

"Yes, Sergeant Major. This way, sirs," Corporal Agnelli requested. He escorted them to the Armory and then a small weapons preparation room where a burly man in a t-shirt and camouflage pants with a GIS beret stood waiting before a large folding table stacked with blue boxes and a large cleaning pad.

"Welcome, Colonel," he said, executing a crisp salute which Michele returned.

"Thank you for coming all the way up from Frosinone to meet us, Major. This is my partner, Kara Deleroux."

"Miss Deleroux," Major Sales said with a nod of his head. Kara nodded in return, as Michele had instructed her to beforehand.

Major Sales indicated the boxes on the table.

"Two Fabrique Nationale Five-sevenN pistols, one P90 triple-rail PDW and one F2000 assault rifle with integrated optics. We also have ammunition and cleaning kits for each. All as you ordered, Colonel."

While normally a cyborg's weapons were provided by the SWA armory and the handler oversaw their firearms training, Michele felt it was better Kara receive professional initial instruction. He learned about Major Sales from Victor Hilshire and arranged for the weapons to be shipped direct to the base.

Kara noticed that the top of each cardboard box was imprinted with the Fabrique Nationale de Herstal logo, the model number, the caliber it fired and a line drawing of the weapon itself. The pistols came in hard plastic flip-open cases.

"Kara, please un-box and field strip the others," Michele requested as he took one of the pistol boxes.

"Yes, sir," Kara replied. Using the pad as a foundation, she quickly and expertly removed the weapons from their Styrofoam cradles and started to disassemble them. In the time it took Michele to un-box and strip his pistol, Kara had done so with her pistol and PDW and was finishing the last steps on the F2000. When she'd finished with the pistol and all three long-arms, Michele ordered her to reassemble them. Again, she completed three of the weapons in the time it took Michele to do one.

"When Mister Hilshire told me that the cyborgs have an encyclopedic knowledge of firearms, I thought he was pulling my leg. But after watching that display, I see he wasn't," Major Sales commented.

"I'm no less impressed than you are, Major," Michele noted, earning them both a self-satisfied smile from Kara.

A baby-faced Sergeant appeared pushing a cart and saluted Major Sales.

"Sergeant Greco here will handle your instruction. Don't let his looks fool you; he's an Expert Marksman with both the pistol and rifle. He's also been briefed on the program," Sales added, which told Michele that Greco knew Kara was a cyborg.

"Colonel Pagani. Miss Deleroux," Sergeant Greco greeted. He and Kara moved the weapons onto the cart along with three cleaning kit boxes and multiple boxes of ammunition appropriate for each weapon. Michele and Kara both thanked Major Sales and followed Sergeant Greco to an Iveco Lince Light Military Vehicle that they boarded and

drove to the outdoor firing range, unloading the weapons on a large table.

"Has she fired a weapon yet?" Greco asked Michele as the three of them started loading rounds into the magazines.

"No, but Kara has been fully trained on all range safety and weapons handling procedures. She has also been programmed with the User Manuals for all of these arms, so you can proceed directly to live-fire exercises," Michele noted.

"Very well," the Sergeant replied.

When finished, Kara and Michele each put two of the magazines in a magazine pouch, which they clipped to their belts, followed by a holster for their pistols. All three donned hearing and eye protection and Michele and Kara advanced to the firing line. Sergeant Greco nodded to them and each stepped forward into their designated shooting box.

As this was a refresher course for Michele, Sergeant Greco signaled for Michele to fire his weapon, which he did, emptying the 20-round magazine with as many pulls of the trigger.

"Not bad, Colonel," the Sergeant Greco noted, having watched the target through high-power binoculars. "Every round landed on the target and the majority were center-mass hits."

He turned his attention to Kara. With her pistol unloaded, Kara settled into a firing stance and allowed Greco to make some adjustments to her form. Once he was satisfied, he stepped back and instructed Kara to remove a loaded magazine from her belt and insert it into the pistol. She did so followed by chambering a round and taking aim at a man-sized torso and head target 25 meters downrange.

"Shooter, ready to fire!" Kara yelled.

"Shooter cleared to fire!" Greco replied and placed his binoculars to his eyes.

Kara emptied the magazine in four sets of five round groups, ejecting the magazine when done and holstering the weapon.

"For someone who's never fired a gun before, that's quite good," Greco admitted. "Your groupings are tight and the entire cluster is center-mass".

He had Kara fire five more magazines worth of ammo, the groupings becoming tighter as she acclimated to the weapon.

"Next up is the P90," Greco stated. He showed Kara how to hold the weapon and then let her try it. Her trigger control was such that by the seventh magazine she could reliably squeeze 10-round bursts on full-auto and she quickly tightened her spread so all the rounds were center-mass hits. She followed this by acclimating herself with the F2000 through a dozen magazines worth of ammunition.

After the live-fire sessions, Sergeant Greco oversaw Kara cleaning the weapons, impressed with her already-present knowledge and ability. Kara then re-packed the weapons in their shipping boxes and loaded them on the cart. Another Corporal was flagged down to move the weapons to the trunk of the car. Michele and Kara once again thanked Major Sales and Sergeant Greco for their support and then headed back to the Autostrada and on to Rome.

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The Eternal City was in late afternoon rush hour when they arrived and Kara marveled at the controlled chaos that was daily vehicular traffic in the capital city. Between his curses and beads of sweat on Michele's forehead, Kara accurately presumed that her handler did not enjoy driving in it any more than he'd noted he felt about Parisian traffic.

Michele pulled the car into the entrance of the Hotel de Russie and parked. A valet came forward to collect the key and the two of them walked to the Piazza di Spanga, now mostly bereft of tourists due to the cold November overcast. They crossed over to the Via dei Condotti, where the stores of the most famous fashion houses of not just Italy, but also the world were located.

Michele purchased for Kara new outfits, shoes and accessories at stores including Prada, Burberry, Alberta Ferretti, Yves Saint Laurent and Christian Louboutin. The prices were eye-popping to Kara, but Michele only objected to some of Kara's style choices. At the Burberry store Michele instructed Kara to continue to wear a sleeveless pleated silk dress in a charcoal and cream check with a scoop neckline. And at the Christian Louboutin store she swapped her black "Tuba" leather

boots for a pair of knee-high "Borge" dress boots in black patent leather and 100mm heels.

When they were done, they returned to the hotel and dropped off their purchases to be placed in the Ferrari. They then proceeded to have a private dinner on the terrace at Le Jardin, the hotel restaurant. They were shown to a private table for two in a corner with views of a garden and the Piazzetta Valadier. Dusk was falling on the city and the maître lit a number of candles. Soft music played in the background and the air was filled with the sweet smell of flowers – both from the large bouquet in the centerpiece and the garden. The meal was specially prepared by the head chef and was the traditional nine courses in length.

"I could get to like this," Kara noted as she tried the wine, finding it very much to her liking.

"Enjoy it while you can. Tomorrow you will start your training regimen in earnest," Michele informed Kara. "Normally this is handled at the Agency compound by the handler and other members of the staff, but I've been out of circulation long enough that I need to brush up, as well. I also want you to receive a...broader...education than just how to storm a building and shoot terrorists. And speaking of education, you will also be attending regular classes with the other girls. I've been roped in to assist in teaching History and Science courses, so you'll see me a few times a week."

"Yay! Easy 10s!" Kara joked, referring to the Italian grading system, which ranged from a high of 10 to a low of 0. "I'll be sure to bring plenty of apples!"

It was full evening by the time they finished their coffee and petit fours. They walked back to the Piazza del Popolo and admired the Roman architecture at night under the lights and listened to the cascade of water in the fountains before returning to the hotel to recover the car and head to the Agency compound.

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# SEVEN

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**CYBORG WAREHOUSE DINING ROOM  
SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCY COMPOUND  
WEDNESDAY**

Triela, Claes, Henrietta and Rico were all clustered together at a table in the dormitory dining room having breakfast when Kara tentatively stepped into the room.

"Looks like a new one has arrived," Triela mumbled. She and Hilshire had returned to the compound from their latest mission after midnight and the lack of sleep was apparent in her speech and movements.

"She's pretty," Rico noted and then returned her attention to the bowl of oatmeal on the tray before her.

A dour expression disfigured the faces of both Triela and Henrietta. It was not vanity or jealousy that drove these emotional responses. Rather, both girls tended to not discriminate between threats to their handler of a physical nature or ability and those based on personal attributes.

"She's a sharp dresser, as well," Claes noted, consciously twisting the knife Rico had unconsciously sunk. Kara wore a white Prada stretch poplin blouse and black Prada belted stretch pencil skirt with her Christian Louboutin dress boots.

To the immediate right of the entrance door stood two long tables arranged in an "L" shape against the wall with a large buffet spread laid out upon them. Kara took a tray and plate and examined the offerings, choosing Eggs Benedict, sausages, croissant and some fruit with orange juice and milk. There were four tables with six chairs each and she started for the only empty one when an older girl with red hair dressed in a polka-dot tank top, denim miniskirt and black boots waved her over.

"You must be one of the new Generation 2 cyborgs?" she said, excitedly.

"Kara Michelle Deleroux," Kara replied as she placed her tray down. "I just arrived this morning."

"Petrushka," the girl replied. "My handler is Mister Alessandro Ricci."

"Michele Pagani is mine," Kara replied.

"Ah, the rich friend of the Prime Minister," Petrushka said. "That explains the clothes and that necklace. But then you are 'lucky number seven'. I love the outfit, by the way."

"Thank you," Kara said. "Lucky Number Seven?" she asked.

"The seventh Generation 2," Petrushka replied. "I was the first, followed by Monty, but she is rarely here. Gattonero, Soni and Fleccia arrived as a group and then Laine and then you."

Kara turned to the girl sitting at the end of the table. She looked to be in her mid-to-late teens and wore her blonde hair in a ponytail under a cowgirl hat and wore dark sunglasses even though they were inside. She wore a faded white t-shirt with the words "THE Heartbeat OF AMERICA" emblazoned across. The word "Heartbeat" was in handwritten script and underlined and to the right of the word AMERICA was what looked to Kara to be a stylized plus sign. Acid-washed denim jeans and white Puma sneakers completed her outfit.

"Yo," she said, and Kara, who thought she was an American, was surprised to hear a distinct British accent.

"Hello," Kara replied. She turned back to Petrushka.

"The girls at the other tables. Are they the first generation?"

"Yes," Petrushka replied. "The blonde with the pig-tails is Triela. Don't let her youthful looks fool you – she's the undisputed princess of Section 2 and the longest-serving cyborg. Everyone seems to defer to her, so I suggest you do the same. The girl with the long hair is Claes. She doesn't have a handler and she seldom goes on missions, which is good, because we worked together on a mission to Lake Maggiore and it almost ended up a disaster.

"The two youngest are the Croce brother's girls – Rico is the blonde and Henrietta is the tawny one. Rico belongs to Jean and he's really strict with her, so she's a bit subdued with all the conditioning. Jose,

on the other hand, seems" to treat Henrietta like a real little sister and spoils her terribly.

Brunette Gattonero, blonde Soni and redheaded with freckles Fleccia walked in, all dressed in jeans, t-shirts and sneakers. Once they filled their trays, they settled down around Petrushka and Kara and introductions began again.

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Michele parked in front of the Administration Building. He climbed the steps and checked in and within minutes Ferro appeared.

"How was Paris?" she said in way of greeting.

"Very beautiful," Michele replied.

"Jean is going to want your After Action report on Kara's sanction by end of day tomorrow," Ferro noted.

Michele nodded his head in acknowledgement. "May I impose on you to show me where my desk is so I can start?" he added.

"Indeed you may," Ferro replied. She turned and started down the hall and into a large open area with pairs of desks opposite each other divided by large bookshelves and cabinets. It reminded Michele more of a Reference Library than an office, but then he figured the only time a Handler spent any time here was performing research for a mission, so maybe they had taken that into effect when laying it out. Ferro took him down two sections to a set of desks, one empty except for a computer terminal and the other clearly in regular use, though the books and other tools were very neatly organized.

Ferro turned on the computer and had Michele verify his account credentials were working and then showed him which part of the bookcase and storage cabinets were his.

"The Supply Storage area is around the corner and in the center drawer is a catalog. An ordering application is available from the Intranet home page," she noted.

"Great. Thank you," Michele said.

"I'll let you get settled, then," Ferro said and left.

Michele settled in and started completing all the online paperwork related to the Paris mission. About twenty minutes later an attractive young woman entered the area carrying a pile of paperwork. Michele's eyes were drawn to her Yves Saint Laurent "Mondrian" day dress from the mid-1960s, its sleeveless character highlighting the length of her arms. A pair of knee-high go-go boots in white patent leather with 50mm heels did the same for her legs. Together, Michele felt they complimented her tall and thin build.

The girl placed the papers on the other desk and took a seat, starting to sort through them. She must have felt Michele's eyes on her because she turned her head and raised her eyebrows at him.

"Excuse my rudeness, it has just been a while since I've seen an original Mondrian," Michele asked. He stood up and leaned forward.

"Michele Pagani," he introduced himself.

"Monique Blacker, but most people shorten my first name to Monty," she replied.

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After breakfast, the girls assembled in the lecture hall for the morning's lessons. With Monty in the office, the five present Generation 2 girls took a row together. The Generation 1 girls, now joined by Beatrice, Chiara and Silvia, spread out across the various levels.

The back door opened and there was a loud scraping of wood on wood as the girls came to attention. Heads turned as footsteps descended the stairs and Victor Hilshire stepped to the lecture.

"Good morning, class. Please open your books to Page 123."

There was a great fluttering of paper as the girls opened their copies of The Merchant of Venice and navigated to the correct page.

"Triela, would you take the role of Salanio. Kara, you can play Salarnio, please."

Triela and Kara both stood and lifted their copies to a comfortable reading distance.

"Now, what news on the Rialto?" Triela started.

“Why yet it lies there unchecked that Antonio...” Kara continued.

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When Kara walked out of the lecture hall, she noted Michele waiting for her. They had lunch in the cafeteria and then drove to the medical center where a female member of the medical staff met them. She asked Kara how she felt and then escorted her into one of the changing rooms. There, Kara exchanged her morning outfit for a loose t-shirt, tight athletic shorts, cotton socks and Puma Ferrari sneakers and attached a “CPOD” just above her waist.

Developed by NASA the previous year, the CPOD device – about the size of a pack of cigarettes – worked as a kind of “black box for people”, monitoring and recording the vital signs of astronauts. The SWA had licensed the technology from NASA and then modified it to work with the cyborgs. As it was small and self-contained, it could track their physiological functioning throughout their normal routine and even while sleeping or during an active mission, allowing the medical staff to download and review the information up to eight hours later.

The two returned to the main room and the technician proceeded to oversee a two-hour regimen of indoor and outdoor exercises designed to test and calibrate Kara’s balance, coordination, speed, reflexes, strength, endurance and stamina. Since the cyborg’s bodies were predominately artificial, for them physical exercise and training were not really meant to enhance or maintain their physical fitness and health. Instead, they were designed to test their implants and augmentations to ensure all were operating normally.

Afterwards, Kara went with them to an adjacent building where they downloaded the data from the CPOD and also performed a battery of medical tests. When they were done, she showered and changed back into her sweater, miniskirt and boots and waited outside for Michele to arrive and pick her up for dinner.

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Monty had already left when Michele completed his own work and shut down the computer. He tidied up his desk and left the building, climbing into the 599 and driving out to the medical center.

“So how was your first day?” Michele asked as Kara settled into the passenger seat and latched the seatbelt.

"Fine," Kara replied, her mood brightening now that she was with her handler.

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As Michele backed the Ferrari 599 into the open slot next to Jose's Porsche Boxster in front of the handler's building after dropping off Kara, he saw the owner approach.

"Nice wheels," the younger Croce brother noted.

"Thank you. Your Henrietta uses the FN P90, does she not?" Michele asked.

"Yes she does."

"Kara recently underwent familiarization with hers. Would it be possible at some convenient time for you to have Henrietta give Kara some pointers?"

"Not at all," Jose said. "Henrietta is scheduled for a couple of hours at the MOUT site Friday morning. I don't know your schedule..."

"I'll make sure we are both available," Michele replied.

"Say 10:00?"

"Thank you," Michele said. He climbed the steps to his floor and turned the handle to the door to his room.

As he entered, he saw a young girl dressed in jeans tucked into black knee-high leather boots and a black sweater lying on his bed, reading a book. Her head snapped towards him and she started to lift herself off the bed.

"What are you doing here?" she accused, her face agitated.

"I could ask you the same question, young lady," Michele noted.

"This is my library," the girl replied. She pushed herself up and swung her legs under her as she moved into a sitting position.

"I see. Well it also happens to be my new quarters," Michele replied.

The girl's angry expression immediately was replaced by one of deep embarrassment.

"Nobody told me you'd been assigned this room. I'll leave immediately," she said and started to slip her legs out from under her as she reached for one of the positioned next to the bed.

"I don't believe we've been formally introduced," Michele stated.  
"Michele Pagani."

"Claes, sir."

"Pleased to meet you, Claes. May I ask what you are reading?"

"It's a libretto of the opera Tosca," Claes replied.

"You said this was your library? These are all your books?" Michele asked.

"No, sir. They were here when I arrived. I just like to read and this is a quiet spot, being away from the other girls."

"Who is your handler? I would he would be happy to speak with him to let you continue to have access to these books," Michele offered.

"I do not have a handler," Claes replied.

"You're not part of a *fratello*?" Michele asked.

"No. I help with testing new and existing cybernetic components used in the other girls."

"I see...Well I don't plan to spend much time here so please feel free to continue to use the room when I am away," Michele offered.

"Thank you, Mister Pagani, but I can make other arrangements," Claes stated.

"May I ask how long have you used this room?"

"About six months," Claes stated.

"So I take it you find it not only quiet, but also convenient?"

"Yes, sir. I share a room with Triela and she often holds tea and cake parties with the other girls, like tonight, so I come here for the privacy."

"I happen to be a heavy reader, myself," Michele noted. "Ferro offered to clear the shelves out to make room for my own items, but how about we share the space and our respective collections? And since reading is a quiet endeavor, if your own room becomes too loud during the day to concentrate, you can come here and read."

"Uh...thank you?" Claes added, a bit unsure as to how to respond, as she was naturally suspicious of people who tried to be nice to her.

"You're welcome, Claes. Can I interest you in some hot cocoa?" Michele offered as he reached down and opened one of the bottom doors in the bookshelf, removing two cups and saucers on the desk. Michele opened a bottle of water he'd taken from a small refrigerator and poured it into a kettle, putting it on a small portable heating element. He returned to the improvised cupboard and removed a container.

"This is from America, but I think you will be pleased," Michele replied as he placed a few generous spoonfuls into each cup. The water in the kettle reached a gentle boil and Michele turned off the heat and gently stirred it into the chocolate, adding a bit of half-and-half to enrich the mixture and bring down the temperature. Michele handed one of the cups and saucers to Claes, who accepted it with a thank you. She tentatively took a sip and the rich flavor assaulted her taste buds, a mild feeling of pleasure flowing from her brain through her body.

"This is excellent," Claes noted, taking another sip.

"How long do these tea parties your roommate holds tend to run?"

"Awhile," Claes admitted.

"Then why not pull off your boots and make yourself comfortable for awhile," Michele said.

---

"Kara? Why aren't you changed?" Michele demanded Monday morning when his cyborg came down the stairs of the Warehouse dressed in a red long-sleeve sweater over black denim shorts and her combat boots. Her F90 was in its canvas case slung over her shoulder and in her right hand she carried a small tactical bag, also of black canvas.

"Sorry! Breakfast ran long. My uniform is in the bag with the ammo," Kara said, blushing furiously in embarrassment.

"Okay, you can change at the site. Throw your stuff in the trunk," Michele said, returning to the car. When they arrived at the Military Operations on Urban Terrain training site, they found Jose and Henrietta standing around Jose's Porsche Boxster. Like Michele, Jose wore a suit and Henrietta had on a Burberry check shirt and black miniskirt with over the knee white hosiery and brown ankle boots with a leather strap across the front.

"I hope we didn't keep you waiting," Michele said as he exited the Ferrari.

"We just arrived ourselves," Jose replied.

Michele looked for a changing area, but didn't see one and when Henrietta went to one of the weathered wooden tables and started removing her PDW from its plastic case, Michele realized with incredulity that Jose expected his cyborg to practice in civilian clothes. As he thought about it, however, he realized that the girls were expected to fight in such clothes when in public, so it did make sense on some levels even if it ran afoul of his sense of military procedures.

"Go ahead and stay in your current clothes, Kara," Michele noted. Kara nodded and joined Henrietta at the table. They started with blank cartridges since the purpose of today was for Henrietta to give Kara pointers on how to effectively wield her P90 and pistol in an Urban Operations environment. Actual training in UO tactics would come later once Kara was comfortable with handling her weapons.

Henrietta and Kara practiced for about an hour, Henrietta showing Kara how to wield the P90 standing up and from a crouch, as well as

carrying it across the chest and over the shoulder against the back. While Michele and Jose watched from the observation platform, the two cyborgs practiced with and without silencers and other accessories like tactical flashlights and IR designators. The cyborg's eyes were able to see in a limited IR band so they used IR as opposed to laser designators since the latter were visible to the naked human eye and could allow an opponent to track back to the cyborg. It also allowed them to use IR illuminators to enhance their night-vision. After practicing with the P90, they switched to their pistols for another hour, again testing with and without silencers, flashlights and designators.

The MOUT Site offered multiple buildings in different arrangements and styles. Both girls switched to live ammunition and while Henrietta attacked the three-story apartment block, Kara went through the single story multi-room building. At the end of the sessions, the girls were covered in dust, but Kara felt confident in handling her weapon in an urban environment and Henrietta beamed under the compliments Kara and Michele offered for her assistance.

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"For your homework next Tuesday, I would like you each to write a short paper on how the murder of Aldo Moro put an end to the 'Historic Compromise' and allowed the Republican and Socialist Parties to each come to power and form the 65<sup>th</sup> and 67<sup>th</sup> governments, ending almost five decades of Christian Democracy rule," Michele Pagani noted as he wiped the whiteboard clean.

Angelica raised her hand and Michele acknowledged her.

"How short is short?" she asked.

"I would normally suggest no more than 4000 words..."

A great chorus of sighs emerged from the collective class at the thought of another "lost weekend" spent in their dorm rooms or the main library.

"...however I understand Mister Hilshire has scheduled a test for your German class on Monday and I want you all to properly study for it. So shall we say 2000 words?"

The frowns were replaced by smiles.

Michele looked at the clock, which showed five till the top of the hour.

"Dismissed," he ordered and as the other girls climbed the steps towards the exit, Kara descended and approached her handler.

"How did you sleep last night?" Michele asked.

"Wonderful. That new mattress is amazing," Kara noted.

"Excellent. It's important you get a restful amount of sleep each night, so I don't want you up to the wee hours with your peers."

"Understood," Kara replied.

"Good. Now go have lunch and I will see you this evening for dinner."

"*Hai*," Kara said and scampered up the stairs and out the door.

---

With the weekend only hours away, the physical training instructors took pity on the girls and cut them loose early, so Kara set off to find Michele. In one of the open spaces between the buildings she found him, dressed in a dark blue *keikogi kendo* jacket and *hakama*. She watched him practice *iaijutsu*, the Japanese martial art of drawing the sword and performing the initial attack moves with it.

"You know *kenjutsu*," Kara stated when Michele stopped to rest.

"Yes, I've been a student of *Tenshin Shōden Katori Shintō-ryū* for about a decade at Zanshin Dojo in Milan, though I concentrate only on the sword arts like *iaijutsu* and *iaidō*," Michele replied.

Kara noticed the thickly bundled role of a soaked rush grass *goza* mat.

"*Tameshigiri*?" Kara asked and Michele nodded. He stepped forward, drew his sword, and performed the *Tsubame Gaesji* – a sequence of four different cuts, the sword almost effortlessly slicing through the dense material, even on the final and most difficult cut.

"Now that is a blade," Kara noted, impressed.

"It was produced by Kanemitsu, considered to be the creator of the sharpest swords ever produced. Though not a direct student of Masamune, he was influenced by his style and is therefore considered one of the *Juttetsu*, or Ten Famous Students of Masumune."

"Masamune...the name sounds familiar, somehow," Kara noted.

"He was Japan's greatest swordsmith. I am honored to own one of his blades, along with one from his student Kaneuji."

"Would you teach me?" Kara asked, suddenly.

"Teach you?"

"About *kenjutsu*."

"You're interested in it?" Michele asked.

"It is important to you, so it is important to me."

"You don't need to share my hobbies, Kara," Michele noted.

"I *want* to share your hobbies," Kara said. "I want to share everything important to you. I want to *be* important to you," she added, her voice almost pleading.

"You are important to me, Kara," Michele assured her and Kara's face lit up.

"Your request might have merit, though. The doctors say I should have you play a sport or learn a musical instrument to help you get used to your prosthetics. *Kenjutsu* contains a number of choreographed movement patterns, called *kata*, which might perform the same purpose. I can also teach you *tai chi chuan*."

"I would like that," Kara stated.

"We can discuss it over dinner," Michele said, sheathing his sword.

They headed for their respective rooms to shower and change: Michele into a dark suit and Kara a black sleeveless dress over her white long-sleeved sweater and a white unadorned leather belt at the waist and her black patent leather Christian Louboutin dress boots.

With Michele behind the wheel, the 599 exited the A90 Grande Raccordo Anulare and drove towards central Rome, climbing the Monte Mario to pull underneath the portico of the Hilton Rome Cavalieri Hotel. The valet came forward to take the keys and the doorman welcomed

them into the ornate lobby dominated by three massive Giovanni Battista Tiepolo murals and the General Manager of the hotel came out from behind the front desk to welcome them.

"Welcome back, Signore Pagani," he greeted.

"It's good to be back, Mr. Milan," Michele replied. The GM escorted them to the hotel's restaurant, La Pergola.

"I hope you're hungry," Michele noted.

"I'm starving," Kara replied. Michele recalled that the medical staff informed him that the cyborgs needed a large number of calories to power their systems. He put out his right arm and Kara linked her left arm in it and the two made their way to La Pergola on the ninth floor. They sipped champagne and enjoyed carpaccio of raw lamb with reggiano and green asparagus tempura in the lounge while they waited for their table.

The maitre d' arrived to welcome both and show them to a table on the terrace with a prime unobstructed view of St. Peters. The dining room manager followed, chatting amicably with Michele for a few minutes as the two of them caught up with each other since Michele's last visit.

"You two seem pretty friendly," Kara observed after the manager left.

"I've known Umberto for years. He used to manage Alan Ducasse's restaurants in Monaco and Paris before he came here. I stay here often so over the years I have become friends with the entire staff."

The sommelier, Marco Reitano, arrived and placed both a water and wine menu on the table.

"I hear the '73 Dom is at its peak," Michele noted.

"It is indeed, sir, though I believe the '66 remains the best vintage in terms of current drinkability."

"Then we shall have the '66, Marco," Michele replied.

"Very good, sir," Marco replied and went off the cellars to retrieve it.

The Executive Chef, Heinz Beck, holder of two Michelin stars and widely-rumored to receive his third with the next release of the famous Red Guide, prepared a special 12-course meal for Michele and Kara while Marco provided a glass (or two) of a vintage both appropriate for the course and designed to not just complement each course, but also to enhance the enjoyment of consuming them.

The final course's plates were carried away and they paid their bill. As they waited for the valet to bring their car forward, Michele stifled a yawn.

"If you're tired I can drive us back to the compound," Kara offered, peeking up at him from under her bangs.

"You're fortunate to be so cute, you know that?" Michele said.

"I like to think I'm blessed with good karma," Kara replied as the car appeared and she headed for the driver's side.

Kara proceed back down Monte Mario, but instead of heading north on the Via Trionfale towards the A90 onramp, she instead went south towards Vatican City.

"Was there someplace you wanted to go?" Michele asked.

"After seeing the city at night from the hotel, I want to experience it at ground level," she said, lowering the windows to let the cacophony of sound blend with the rumble of the V12.

They looped around the Holy See and headed east across the Tiber River into the center of the city and south along the river's edge, past Circus Maximus before turning toward the Coliseum and then up the Via dei Fori Imperiali past the Monument to Vittorio Emanuele II and the Piazza Venezia.

"You really are not bothered by driving in traffic are you?" Michele asked.

"Not in cars like these," Kara replied. "Many people seem to get out of my way when I appear behind them and for those that don't, with the acceleration, braking and handling at my command it's easy to get around them."

She cut east along the Via Nazionale, past Termini Station and the campus of Sapienza University of Rome to link up with the start of the A24. Kara accelerated briskly onto the Autostrada, the V12 roaring as if in appreciation for finally being allowed to run. As the traffic and population density lowered, Kara added speed, eventually settling at a steady 160km/h as they crossed into Abruzzo.

"Want to have crab for breakfast in Pescara?" Kara asked as she joined the A25. The commune on the shores of the Adriatic Sea was famous for its seafood.

"Home, James," Michele said, stifling another yawn.

Kara nodded and when they reached Avezzano, turned onto SS690 and proceeded towards the compound.

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The following weeks alternated between physical training, firearms practice, and educational instruction. While all the girls were implanted with dictionary knowledge of Italian vocabulary and grammar, they were sent to sit with staff and in public areas to allow them to become more familiar with the colloquial form of the language. In Kara's case, Michele wanted her to sound a bit stilted to reflect her learning the language in Japan without the benefit of native speakers.

Kara studied hard and absorbed everything thrown at her. Michele provided equal measures of instruction and encouragement, but he was not reticent about pointing out her weaknesses, which only drove her to do better next time. As she became more familiar with her body, she started winning more bouts with her instructors. Her aim also consistently improved to the point that, while not the best sharpshooter amongst the cyborgs, she was often in the top quarter, usually in the top-third and always in the top-half.

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**ITALIAN MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR BUILDING  
VIMINAL PALACE, ROME  
MONDAY**

Kara slowly spun in the wooden chair inside the front entrance of the Viminal Palace, home to the Italian Ministry of the Interior and located on the hill of the same name, the smallest of the famous Seven Hills of Rome, maintaining her slow rotation with occasional kicks of her right boot on the heavy oak counter before her. Beside her, Michele softly spoke into his cellphone to Jean Croce.

That morning, Padania had called in a bomb threat and a number of the *fratelli* of Section Two were called in to assist in the search. While Padania had not offered any specifics, they were creatures of habit and rarely targeted tourist spots or public transport areas, favoring government structures. This narrowed the search area to government buildings spread across the Quirinal and Viminal Hills.

With her latest rotation, Kara glimpsed a garbage truck appear around the corner of the Via del Viminale where it intersected the Via Agostino Depretis.

On her next rotation, she noticed the truck coming straight across the intersection.

On the rotation after that, the truck had reached the Piazza del Viminale and started to climb the vehicle ramp leading to the front entrance.

Kara kicked out her foot to arrest her momentum, her body tensing. The *Polizia di Stato* guard manning the security post ordered the vehicle to stop, but it rumbled forward, smashing into the moveable anti-vehicle barrier.

Kara lanced out with her hand, grabbed Michele by the front of his belt, and yanked, causing him to pitch forward onto her and the two of them tumbled backwards out of the chair and onto the floor behind the counter, Kara rolling on top of Michele.

Michele's mind was trying to process Kara's action as the room filled with light, followed almost instantly by a loud boom. His ears rang from the sound and the pressure wave washed over him, bringing with it heat, dust and debris. He saw scores of bumps appear in the back on the counter as it absorbed high-speed shrapnel thrown out by the blast.

As quickly as the violence had been unleashed, it passed. Kara rolled off Michele and carefully raised her head over the counter as cries and groans replaced the ringing in Michele's ears. Assessing the situation and determining the threat over, Kara held out her hand and helped her handler up off the floor, allowing him to look out upon a scene of devastation.

Though the windows on the ground floor were made of toughened glass, the sheer force of the explosion that shattered them propelled the small fragments like shotgun pellets, cutting down anyone in their path. From the torn and bloodied forms he saw, he feared that many had already been killed and more might die if not quickly attended to.

When she'd tackled him, Michele dropped his iPhone. Kara found it under a desk and handed it to him.

"It was a garbage truck," Kara said.

Michele pressed the speed dial entry for Jean Croce.

"Report," Jean barked without preamble.

"The Viminal Palace has been hit with a truck bomb. Kara and I are okay, but there are casualties here and we need medical assistance."

"Understood. I can't reach the Toni *fratello*. They were near the DCPD building," Jean replied. Michele knew that the Direzione Centrale della Polizia di Prevenzione were located in a building that overlooked the security post.

"We're on it," Michele replied and hung up. "Come on, we need to find Marco and Angelica."

Kara nodded and stepped through one of the empty windowpanes, glass fragments crunching underneath the soles of her boots. She walked down the ramp towards the huge crater left by the explosion, swallowing all trace of the security post and guard. To her right, the

front face of the DCPD building had partially collapsed; it's closer proximity to the blast apparent in the damage pattern. Smoke and dust filled the air, making visibility difficult. As she reached the pedestrian crossing at the bottom of the ramp and looked across the street, she could see two bodies intertwined on the corner. She signaled Michele and dashed across the street.

"Madre de Dio," Michele said as he arrived. Marco was sitting propped up against the stand where the blast had hurled him. His glasses were missing and blood streamed down his forehead. But Michele's exclamation was for Angelica, who lay sprawled across Marco's lap. Blood soaked the front of her jacket, staining the white a brilliant crimson, mixed with the black powder of the explosion like splashed paint.

"Check Marco," Michele ordered as he went to Angelica.

"He's alive, but unconscious," Kara reported.

"Okay. You grab him while I get Angelica."

While Angelica had the body of a young girl, she weighed a good bit more and Michele struggled to gently lift her weight. For Kara, lifting the much heavier Marco onto her back was as easy as lifting a sack of feathers.

Angelica opened her eyes, but the pupils wouldn't focus. "Explosion. Truck bomb. How...how is Marco?"

"He's fine, Angelica. But you are not. We need to get you to the medical ward."

"No...must...protect Marco." Her eyes rotated wildly in her sockets. He imagined the flash overloaded her optical sensors and she was blind. She started to struggle, but weakly, allowing Michele to maintain his hold on her.

"Angelica! Stop! Marco is fine. Kara is taking him to the ambulance. You're seriously injured. Calm down!" Angelica stopped struggling. Her eyes focused on his face, but he figured she was just focusing on the sound of his voice.

"Michele?" she asked.

"Yes, Angelica. It's me. Just hold on."

"Is it raining? I feel wet," she said.

"Yes, Angelica. It's raining. We'll get you someplace dry and warm soon."

Her head turned and a smile broke out on her face. "Perro! What are you doing here?" Her eyes rolled back into her head and she slumped into unconsciousness.

A moment later, Alessandro and Petrushka rounded the corner.

"Jesus," Alessandro said.

"Where are the medics?" Michele demanded.

"On the way," Alessandro noted. Michele started to stumble under Angelica's weight.

"Petra, take over," Alessandro ordered.

"No," Michele said. "Just help me into a sitting position," he asked. Petra hooked her arms under his shoulders and helped him as he scooted his legs straight out, allowing Angelica to rest on them with her back against his chest.

"It's okay, Angelica...Help is coming...Help is coming..."

Whether she heard him, he couldn't tell, but it made him feel better, if nothing else.

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## IL FORTINO DI PUGLIA HOTEL SAVELLERTI, ITALY

Even in mid-December, the weather along the heel of Italy's boot remained mild and Kara inhaled deeply as a breeze ruffled the sheer curtains surrounding the sliding door and brought in the strong, salty tang of the Adriatic Sea mere meters beyond the patio.

They'd arrived that afternoon after a 600km drive from Rome, across Italy via the A24 to Pescara and then down the Adriatic Coast along the A14. During the five hours they'd been on the road, Michele said little and Kara silently stewed, unable to understand why her handler seemed so preoccupied with Angelica.

Before they'd left, Kara heard that the doctors had been able to repair her injuries and those of her handler; however she'd heard whispering amongst the handlers in the office that they didn't think Angelica would live much longer. She'd asked Michele, but he'd brushed her question aside, instructing her to prepare for the mission they were now undertaking.

She'd then timidly approached 'The Princess' at dinner last night, whom had informed her that she remembered Michele visiting the medical center during her conversion and training, which often included Angelica, and that he and Angelica clearly seemed to know each other.

"Shall we go?" Michele asked as he entered from the bathroom, dressed in a perfectly tailored suit.

"Yes," Kara said, sitting down on the bed and pulling on her boots. She rose and fanned the pleats of her knee-length skirt followed by adjusting her white long-sleeve sweater.

As she walked by, Michele reached out and touched her shoulder. An electric tingle flowed through Kara's body, but she fought it down and continued on into the hall and out the door.

Sighing, Michele followed her out onto the patio and down a few doors to the room shared by Alessandro and Petrushka room.

"How is your stomach?" Petrushka whispered as Kara sat next to her on one of the two double beds.

"Fine," Kara replied, her sour mood curdling a bit more at the memory of yesterday afternoon. Michele had asked her to meet him for dinner so they could discuss the mission and Kara, annoyed that her handler was spending almost all of his free time at the hospital with Angelica, opened her mouth to tell him she refused. The next thing she knew she was bent over and spewing her lunch of risotto across the tops of her €1000 boots.

Michele seemed even more surprised than Kara who, terrified at the loss of control and embarrassed at vomiting, promptly ran off, closing her ears to Michele's worried calls as her stomach dry-heaved. She found a water spigot by the side of the building and ran the lower part of her boots under the stream and then patted them dry using paper towels in the bathroom. To top off her indignity, she ended up being three minutes late for Mister Hilshire's literature class and had to face one of his lectures on punctuality.

"I've made initial contact with Matteo Amati and informed him that I have identified a financier for the smuggling operation he and I discussed last month," Alessandro reported.

"I thought we were supposed to be the good guys," Petrushka noted with a scowl.

"We are the good guys," her handler replied with his usual easy smile.

"Then why don't we just kill them?"

"Because the 'Ndrangheta does not have a defined leadership hierarchy. There is no *Don* running the entire show, like the Mafia. So there is no snake to cut the head off of. Instead, the 'Ndrangheta are more like a hydra – cut off a head, and two more sprout out as the *capo bastone* or *caporegime* just take over."

"Why are these people even a problem?" Kara asked. "They live in the South so they are not Padania."

Alessandro looked to Michele, who pinched his nose.

"Sorry. I haven't had a chance to brief her," he replied, keeping to himself the true reason – that Kara had not made herself available to be briefed.

"For the past few decades the 'Ndrangheta have been emigrating to Latin America, Canada and Australia," Alessandro noted. "When the Columbian cartels were looking for new import partners in the 1990s, the 'Ndrangheta were a perfect choice as they were already well entrenched in the North American, European and Australian markets. So they now import close to half of all the cocaine in Europe, most of it through the port city of Gioia Tauro. They make literally tens of billions of Euro and this has allowed them to buy a not-insignificant portion of the law enforcement presence in Reggio Calabria and greased many palms in adjoining regions as they need to get this product into Europe and Milan is the preferred distribution center."

Michele placed a slim carbon fiber attaché case on the bed. He ran his thumbs over an embedded fingerprint reader next to each lock, springing them open to allow him access. Inside were stacks of €100 bank notes: 100 notes per stack and arranged four rows deep and three rows across for a total of 12 stacks. Next to them were six rows of gold Krugerrands in clear polyvinyl, 100 coins per row – one row each of one and one-half ounce coins and two rows each of one-quarter and one-tenth ounce. On top of it all were thirty large treasury bills issued by the Banca d'Italia, each denominated for €10,000.

"We could have a good time with that," Alessandro noted, admiring the contents.

"Until Jean Croce hunted us down," Michele quipped as he closed the case.

"Why the different types of securities?" Petrushka asked.

"Flexibility," Michele replied. "The bearer bonds will be used for large purchases, while the cash is an initial 'seed' to pay for operating expenses and salaries. And the gold is for payment for operatives that don't use the Euro or who want maximum liquidity."

"To think that for Padania and 'Ndrangheta were smashing each other over the Straight of Messina bridge project, and now they're building one – using drug money as the cement," Alessandro noted as he slapped the case.

"I take it that they don't like each other?" Kara asked.

"The 'Ndrangheta and Padania spent the 1970s in a very tense relationship as the former were kidnapping rich northerners for ransom. Well, a number of those people were private backers of Padania and Padania didn't respond well when some of those backers ended up dead when their ransoms were not paid in a timely manner and there were some reprisals.

"When Italy joined the Schengen Area in 1997, that opened up the borders with France and Austria and the 'Ndrangheta came to Padania and offered them a piece of the action to help move product. Padania, already working with Italian and Albanian criminal organizations helping smuggle Turks into Germany, saw the money they could make and quickly let bygones be bygones and signed up."

"So what, exactly, are we doing here?" Kara asked.

"We're going to try and get our own piece of the action," Alessandro replied. "Your handler is carrying a half-million Euro, which we will use to buy into a human smuggling project one of the local *cammorista* is launching in a bid to improve his position and stature. Once we are in, we can use him to identify how drug monies are flowing into Padania and the Five Republics."

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In the room, the four changed into their personae. Alessandro became "Niccolo Baggio" through adding a black wig, mustache and beard while Petrushka put on a blonde wig and make-up. For attire, Alessandro donned a long sleeve print button-down shirt in "Italian Plum" overlaid with a beige ornate floral print worn over sand-colored lightweight chino cotton pants while Petrushka went with a black tank top with small white polka dots, cut-off jean shorts and black mid-calf flat-soled leather boots.

Michele, playing the role of "Donatello Marchetti", inserted blue contact lenses to go with the grey streaks added to his hair. He chose for his outfit items from his "informal Armani" collection: a textured one-button jacket in white, long-sleeve jersey shirt in gray with charcoal stripes and charcoal micro-fiber pants. Black Gucci leather drivers completed his outfit. Kara went with a red sweater and black denim miniskirt with black knee-high boots.

"Can we talk, Kara?" Michele asked as they started for their car.

"If I say no, I'll evidently throw up, so I guess I don't have a choice since I didn't bring a spare outfit."

"I know you're upset with me and you do have cause. And I promise when this is over I will explain my actions and myself. But I need you focused right now. Alessandro's a cool customer, but I can tell he's a bit worried about us at the moment."

"Sorry to embarrass you," Kara said, her voice tinged with false sarcasm because she really was sorry and embarrassed at her behavior. Still, Michele was *her* handler and she felt he had to understand that and when he acted differently, it hurt her emotionally.

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Despite it being very dry, climate-wise, the region of Apulia's economy placed a strong emphasis on agriculture and the low plains were covered in farmland. With Alessandro's smart fortwo cabriolet in the lead, the Ricci and Pagani *fratelli* pulled off a side road into one of those farms and before a copse of trees. Alessandro pulled next to Matteo Amati's parked Lancia Ypsilon and exited. The two embraced in the Italian tradition.

"Welcome," Amati said as Michele and Kara came forward, his eyes roaming across Kara's figure.

"Don't bother, Matteo. You don't make enough money to interest her," Alessandro quipped.

"Speaking of money, you have the funds?" Amati asked. Michele reached behind his seat and removed the briefcase. Matteo nodded and brought his cellphone to his face. He spoke softly for a few moments and then hung up.

"They are ready for us," he noted and started for a gap in the trees. As they passed through, two young men in overalls with prominent bulges under their leather jackets were waiting for them. Michele correctly identified them as common soldiers - *picciotti d'onore* - and for a moment he feared they might frisk them for weapons, but they merely remained standing, apparently content in the belief that they could handle a petty crook, a rich dandy and their two whores.

Ahead, two more stood to either side of a slightly older, but still young, man in a navy blue herringbone suit of worsted wool waited for them. His bearing made it clear he was the *cammorista* in charge of the *picciotti d'onore* and Amati approached him deferentially.

"*Cammorista* Barese, may I introduce to you Signore Marchetti and Baggio and their *comare*."

Both Kara and Petrushka internally bristled at being called a "mistress", but kept their expressions and body language relaxed.

"You have the money?" Barese said, his hard voice out of place with his soft face and nice clothes.

"As you demanded," Michele said. He opened the case and presented it to Barese, whose eyes widened at the sight of the bills and bullion. He nodded his head, his tongue slipping past his tight lips to lubricate them.

"Very well," Barese said when Michele re-latched the case. He turned to the guard on the left and nodded his head. Without warning, he removed a Berretta 8000L pistol from his jacket pocket, aimed it squarely at Michele, and put two rounds into his chest, the impact of the rounds knocked him backwards onto the ground.

As if teleported, Petrushka appeared in front of Alessandro. The speed of her movement threw off the other *picciotti d'onore*, who was slow to withdraw his weapon. The muzzle had barely cleared the pocket when the 9x19mm round from Petrushka's PT92 entered his forehead, scrambling his brains and dropping him like a marionette whose strings had been cut. She wheeled on the other guard and put a round through his throat, blowing out his windpipe and major blood vessels.

Kara, quick as a mongoose on a cobra, slid her FN Five-sevenN from the holster in the small of her back and dropped as she pivoted on the sole of her right boot. She fired twice at each guard by the trees, dropping them both before they had a chance to aim their own weapons. She then dropped to her knees over her handler.

"Michele!" she yelled, pulling open his jacket. The white shirt underneath showed two rough holes where the 9x19mm bullets passed through and then squashed against the custom body armor made of the same CFRP fibers that was used in the cyborgs.

"I'm fine," Michele said, coughing. "Son of a bitch that hurt!"

Kara helped him up and then went over to ensure both guards were in fact dead.

Petrushka had her PT92 aimed squarely at Barese, who stood stunned at how quickly the two girls had dispatched his security detail. Alessandro had pulled his own weapon and pressed it up against Matteo Amati's temple.

"Explain yourself," he hissed.

"I didn't know!" Amati blubbered. "I swear!"

His eyes darted to Barese.

"What the hell were you thinking? We had a deal!"

"A deal that profited you more than me," Barese spat.

While he tried to look tough, Kara and Petrushka could easily detect the undertone of stress in Barese's voice as well as read the tenseness in his body language.

"You two can decide who screwed who later," Michele growled. "Tell us about the cocaine smuggling to Milan."

"Cocaine smuggling?" Barese said, confused. "Our agreement was the smuggling of people," he added, looking to Amati.

"We don't care about some Turkish immigrants," Michele said, forcing Barese to focus back on him. "The 'Ndrangheta control the cocaine trade in Italy and ships much of the product Europe consumes. We know once it reaches Milan, Padania helps get it across the border into France, Switzerland and Austria. I want to know about that arrangement."

Barese laughed. "Do you think I would tell you?"

Michele motioned to Kara, who came forward. Barese gave a mocking smile to the teenager, but that smile missed a number of teeth a moment later as Kara's fist connected with his mouth, knocking him on his back.

She placed her boot on his arm near his wrist and slowly pressed down. Barese started to squirm, then scream as first his radius and then his ulna fractured under the pressure she applied. Kara lifted her boot slightly and moved it up his arm, then again pressed down until the two arm bones snapped below his elbow. She pulled her boot back and Barese tried to cradle his arm, tears streaming down his face.

"Should I have her start on your humerus, next?" Michele asked.

"You're all dead!" Barese said. "My brother will not stop until you're all a dozen meters in the ground!"

Michele found Barese's bravado pitiful. The *cammorista* knew he was beaten, and yet his youthful pride demanded he try and save face. He again nodded to Kara, who came forward. Barese immediately went fetal, trying to protect his arms. Kara hooked the toe of her boot under his arm and knocked it out. Barese reached out to protect it, stretching his legs. Kara shifted her position and stomped the block heel of her boot down on his knee, shattering it and sending Barese into a fresh fit of animalistic howling.

Amati pissed himself.

Michele leaned towards Barese, careful to stay out of arm and leg range, though Kara hovered nearby, ready to strike if the *cammorista* made a move against her handler.

"You know by now you will never see your brother again, Barese. The real question is how much you intend to suffer before I let you slip into that long night. I need information, and I believe you to have it. So, what will it be?"

Barese decided he'd suffered enough.

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Amati flinched as Kara's gun discharged, a crimson pool spilling out from under Barese's head. She collected the shell casing and followed Michele to his Ferrari.

"Wha-wha-what about me?" Amati said. "I swear I didn't know what Barese had planned!"

"I believe you, Matteo," Alessandro said, holstering his weapon.

"Come on, Petrushka," he added and started after Michele and Kara.

"Thank you, Niccolo!" Amati breathed. "I promise I'll make it up to you!"

"I'm sure you will," Alessandro called back.

Amati neither heard nor felt the round from Petrushka's pistol enter the base of his skull, plunging his consciousness into eternal blackness.

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"Are you really okay?" Kara asked, her previous curt manner towards Michele having evaporated when she'd seen her handler shot.

"Yeah, the armor did its job. But it still felt like I was shot," Michele replied as he slowly and carefully lowered himself into the passenger seat while breathing shallowly to nurse his bruised ribs.

Both *fratelli* decided that it would be prudent to put some serious distance between themselves and Reggio Calabria. After checking out of the hotel, Alessandro and Petrushka headed due west to Naples, while Michele and Kara drove north to Pescara.

Once safely ensconced in their suite, Kara helped Michele out of his jacket and dress shirt. She then carefully pulled the armor jacket over his head and hissed when he raised his t-shirt and she saw the two purplish welts where the bullet's energy had transferred to the skin.

"That's going to leave a mark," Michele noted as he stared at his reflection in the mirror.

"Uh, I think it already has," Kara replied.

"Order me some *fettuccine al burro* and whatever you want," Michele said as he handed her the menu.

When dinner arrived, they ate it at the table, Kara letting Michele drink most of the wine to help as a sedative.

Once everything had been cleared away, Michele went to the bed and lay down on his back, too tired to undress any farther. Kara sat on the opposite side.

"I'm really sorry. I can't believe how bad I messed up today. If that man had aimed for your head instead of your chest..." She left the rest unsaid because her mind couldn't truly comprehend such a catastrophe.

"It is okay, Kara. No real harm done. Jean is going to blow a gasket, however. Not only did we fail to secure access to the drug trade and how Padania uses it, but now we've lost a valuable contact with Amati and we have to worry about a possible vendetta with one of the 'Ndrangheta *cosche*. And I'm sorry I made you torture Barse, but I needed information and I needed him to be terrified of you so he'd give it."

"He tried to hurt you," Kara replied, her voice making Michele think that she considered the *cammorista* had gotten off light.

"When we get back to Rome I'll work extra hard to make sure I'm as good at protecting you as Petrushka was her handler."

"You did fine today, Kara. You kept your head and neutralized the threats first."

"My only thoughts were for you, but my body reacted automatically."

"Well, thank you for protecting me today," Michele said.

"Anytime," she replied with a smile. She pulled off her boots and snuggled up against him.

"Careful of the ribs," Michele said, wincing.

"Sorry."

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# ELEVEN

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**PALACIO LUDOVISI  
ROME  
FRIDAY**

"I'm still not sure this is a great idea," Kara noted to Ferro as she ran her hand along the front fender of the Titan Grey Bentley Brooklands Coupé. She wore a black wool dress with short sleeves and a scoop neck that fell a bit above the knees over a white long-sleeve turtleneck sweater and black Christian Louboutin dress boots.

"Why can't one of the other handlers...well, handle the driving?"

"We want as much protection in the car for the Chairwoman as possible and you are one of the cyborgs able to drive," Ferro replied. As was her norm, she wore a tailored suit and skirt; black boots instead of her usual pumps her one concession to the cold weather.

"How expensive is this car?"

"Around €300.000, so please try not to wreck it," Ferro replied, causing Kara to feel even more uncomfortable. She wished Michele was with her, but at least he was not spending time with Angelica.

Isabella D'Angelo appeared, her wheel chair pushed by Henrietta. The Chairwoman of the Straight of Messina Bridge Project wore a turquoise day dress with a matching hat, blue leggings and blue leather ankle boots. Henrietta wore a dark wool jacket over a blouse and miniskirt with black leggings and brown mid-calf leather boots.

"You're much prettier than my usual driver," the Chairwoman noted to Kara, who blushed at the compliment.

The first cable between each tower was to be laid the next day and a celebratory event was planned with Chairwoman D'Angelo and other dignitaries present. Due to her physical condition, the Chairwoman needed to be driven to the event and after the attempt to kidnap her the previous year it had been decided to take her new armored Bentley as it could be more easily defended.

Ferro opened the door and settled into the rear right seat. Henrietta helped the Chairwoman into the front passenger seat before going around the back and slipping into the left rear seat.

"This is like sitting in an English palace," Kara muttered as she slipped behind the wheel. Almost every surface, including the roof liner, was covered in the finest leather she had ever touched, mostly in a rich tan with contrasting black piping. The top of the dash and the outer rim of the steering wheel were covered in black leather. The polished dark stained Vavona wood of the center console, instrument binnacle and the tops of the doors glowed under their coating of lacquer. The sterling silver switchgear and chrome surrounds around the buttons and displays gleamed. Kara checked the soles of her boots to make sure they were clean, lest she drag any leaves or dirt inside to stain the grey carpeting of the finest lambswool.

"My late husband was a firm believer in English bespoke automobile craftsmanship," D'Angelo noted. "Yet he was always a Bentley man and not Rolls-Royce. I believe he, too, enjoyed the more sporting nature of Bentleys."

"It's a magnificent looking machine," Kara admitted. She turned the ignition key and pressed the Start Button. The only indication of the engine's presence was the tachometer needle rising from zero as the engine turned over and settled.

"Mobile One to Mobile Two, we're ready," Ferro said into the radio. She waited for a reply, but when none came forth, she tried again, but there was still no response.

"Did you check the batteries?" Henrietta suggested, earning her a silencing glare from Ferro.

Kara chuckled.

"Something funny, Pagani?" Ferro growled.

"No, ma'am. But when *Top Gear* reviewed this car in 2008, the presenter noted he could not get a signal out of the car on his radio," Kara replied. She'd watched the episode the night before while studying the Owner's Manual to brush up on the vehicle.

Ferro removed a combination earbud/microphone and plugged it in. She then rolled down the rear window and stuck her arm out the window.

"Mobile One to Mobile Two, we're ready," she repeated.

"Acknowledged," she added a moment later.

"Move out," she ordered to Kara.

Kara nodded and put the transmission into Drive. She pressed the throttle pedal and the three metric tons of weight effortlessly accelerated out of the Chairwoman's residence and onto the streets of Rome. Jean and Jose pulled out from their parking place on the street outside and tailed them in the former's Mercedes CL500, Rico in the back seat.

While a coupe, the Brooklands measured over five meters in length and two meters in width, requiring Kara to take extra care as she maneuvered in the tight confines of Rome's streets as they wound their way to the Autostrade network, where they settled into the right lane at a steady 150 km/h. Their destination was Reggio Calabria, a bit over 650km south at the tip of the "boot" of Italy.

"Do you need to rest, Chairwoman?" Ferro asked 90 minutes later as they approached Naples.

"I'm fine, thank you," Isabella replied. Ferro activated the radio. "We're continuing onto the A3."

"Acknowledged," Jose replied. "Remind Kara that the A3 is mostly unimproved, so the PRF might make their move there."

The two vehicles continued through Naples and connected to the A3, which would take them all the way to Reggio Calabria. The drive was mostly through industrial and residential areas through Salerno and on to Polla and then it turned into more rural and agricultural in a valley between the Pollino Mountains. Further on, the road entered the mountains and valleys of the Sila Plateau and then exited out onto the coast down to Pizzo, where it cut back inland.

At Pizzo they stopped to refuel the cars and refresh themselves, and then rejoined the A3. As they passed the Sant'Onofrio-Vibo Valentia interchange, the highway proceeded generally straight for five

kilometers before curving right and proceeding on to the great port at Gioia Tauro. Kara remained in the inner lane and as they approached a sweeping right turn, a Lancia Phedra minivan drove past them in the outer lane and then pulled in front of Kara, forcing her to lift off the throttle to fall back and give the car some space. As the Brooklands fell back, a silver mid-1990s Mercedes E420 Estate pulled alongside them on the left. Henrietta observed the windows were tinted so darkly they were nearly opaque and she focused her full attention on the car.

As the cars exited the turn onto a straight stretch of highway, the passenger-side window on the Mercedes lowered and the barrel of a Beretta PM-12S2 submachine gun swung out.

“Gun on the left!” Henrietta said and reached for her pistol. Up front, Kara stomped on the brake pedal with both feet, the Bentley’s 356mm Silicon Carbon brake rotors shedding speed. The Mercedes shot past them and a spray of 9x19mm bullets streamed through the space the Bentley’s front tire had just a moment before occupied. The gunner attempted to re-position himself, but the Mercedes’s driver activated his own brakes and this threw off the aim.

The Phedra activated his brakes, as well, but Kara returned her right boot to the throttle and pushed it into the thick carpeting. The Bentley surged forward on a wave of torque and power from the twin-turbocharged V8 engine. The Phedra attempted to move into the center of the road to block them, but Kara slammed the reinforced front of the car into the back of the minivan, caving it in and knocking the vehicle into the outer lane. Kara floored the throttle again and scraped past the minivan and out into the open. She looked in the rear view mirror to see the Mercedes pass the Phedra and barrel towards them.

“Where the hell is Jean!” Kara yelled as she hit the “Sport” button on the dash and hammered the throttle again, trying to open some distance. The two directions of the A3 bifurcated into two separate roads with a large strip of grassy buffer between them.

“I can’t get a signal!” Ferro replied. She lowered the back window and shoved the radio out just as the shooter in the Mercedes opened fire with the PM-12. The bullets fell around the left rear wheel well, but the specially armored tires resisted the bullets. Kara jukeed to the left and the shooter overcompensated and sprayed the cabin. Fortunately, the bullets literally bounced off the armored rear window, leaving small

craters, but one of them impacted with the exposed top of the radio, knocking it out Ferro's hand.

"Are you hurt?" Henrietta exclaimed as Ferro yanked her hand in. She shook her head and showed Henrietta her hand was fine.

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One hundred meters back, Jose and Jean both saw the minivan change into Kara's lane, followed moments later by the Mercedes pulling alongside. The Brookland's brake lights glowing as the car abruptly slowed and Jean saw the muzzle flash from the Mercedes, followed by that vehicle's brake lights activating and then the rear of the Brooklands squatting down as it surged forward.

Jean hammered the throttle and the CL's V8 engine propelled the car forward.

"Rico!" he yelled and lowered the left-side windows. Rico pulled her Sig SG551 carbine from the floor next to her and sprayed the Phedra as they drove past, hitting the driver and causing the car to spear to the right and nose-into the barrier, bouncing back across the road and onto the embankment.

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Kara kept her right boot planted against the floor and the Brooklands roared past 250 km/h. By divine providence or just good karma, the road had almost no traffic and Kara started to pull out a lead on the Mercedes. The divided highway came together again and concrete barriers hemmed in both sides of the roadway.

The speedometer needle was touching 275km/h as the Bentley approached the interchange with the SS182. Kara could see cars ahead and had to slow, allowing the Mercedes to close up and start firing again.

Henrietta lowered her own window and returned fire onto the Mercedes, putting four rounds into the radiator and another five into the windshield; however she was unable to hit the driver or the front shooter. She popped back inside and reloaded her own weapon.

"Shit!" Kara exclaimed, as the third in a string of four lorries ahead of her pulled out into the outer lane to start a slow passing maneuver. Kara applied the brakes and the Mercedes closed right up and started firing again, forcing Henrietta to raise the armored window.

Kara swung the Bentley hard left, catching the right front quarter panel of the Mercedes with the left rear quarter panel of the Bentley, pushing it into the concrete.

Jean's Mercedes suddenly appeared and Rico, hanging out of the window, placed a score of rounds into the back and side window of the Mercedes, shredding the two front seats and their occupants. Kara snapped the Bentley back into the inner lane and accelerated away from the Mercedes and the German vehicle veered to the right, slamming into the inner barrier and riding up on it to then flip over onto its roof, coming to rest in a shower of sparks.

Kara slowed down and Jean pulled up beside her. Ferro raised her cellphone and Jose nodded, reaching for his own.

"Is everyone okay?" Ferro asked as she dialed the number. Kara, Isabella and Henrietta all replied they were fine and Ferro reported this to Jose.

"How's the car?" Ferro asked, repeating Jose's question.

"Everything looks normal," Kara said, giving the instruments a quick scan. The lorry ahead finally cleared his brethren and pulled back into the inner lane, allowing Kara to accelerate past. The two cars proceeded south at close to double the posted limit, weaving in and out of traffic until they reached the Mieto-Dinami off-ramp, where they immediately turned into the Polizia Stradale facility.

Kara stepped out and cringed as she saw the damage. The entire left side of the car looked like someone had taken a sandblaster to the paint and the panels were crumpled. The front corner had been buckled in and partially ripped away, the bumper hanging down and the hood partially popped up. Amazingly, the headlights were still intact, though the headlight assembly had been pushed back into the fender well. She walked to the back and saw at least a dozen neat holes in the trunk area and bullet and the left light assembly had been smashed.

"Michele is going to skin me alive," she muttered.

"You saved the Chairwoman's life," Jose said as he walked up, Henrietta at his side. "I think he'll cut you some slack."

"I don't want to know what the body shop bill is going to be," Kara noted.

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Kara drove the Bentley into the garage area and the mechanics reconnected the bumper and repositioned and realigned the left headlight. They read the onboard computer, which generated no fault codes, so the decision was made to continue on to Reggio Calabria, 100km south, though now with a Polizia Stradale Alfa 159 escort.

They checked into their hotel and the security detail went into effect, allowing Kara free time, which she mostly spent in her room since Henrietta and Rico were too young to hang out with. After dinner in the hotel restaurant, she walked across the road and train tracks to the beach and watched the stars. Around 22:00 she called her handler, who was with the Prime Minister in Tokyo where the time was 07:00. They talked for about thirty minutes and then she returned to her room and went to sleep.

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The already strong security presence at the cable-stringing ceremony was increased even more and when it came time to drive back to Rome, the Bentley was protected by a phalanx of Carabinieri vehicles.

"My god, what happened?" Michele asked as he looked at the torn-up Brooklands. He'd arrived an hour prior on one of the three Airbus A319 CJ VIP transports operated by the 93<sup>o</sup> Gruppo, 31<sup>o</sup> Stormo, 1<sup>a</sup> Brigata Aerea Operazioni Speciali of the Italian Air Force.

"Somebody tried to jump us on the A3 outside of Sant'Onofrio," Kara replied.

"There must be €50.000 worth of body damage, Kara!" Michele exclaimed.

"Well it's not like I intentionally meant to crash it!" Kara shot back.

"I'm sorry. You clearly did your best and you successfully and safely delivered the Chairwoman to her destination," Michele said.

"Apology accepted," a mollified Kara replied.

"This is a really nice car. You should consider getting one," she added a minute later.

Michele didn't bother responding, but instead merely pinched his nose and shook his head.

"What?" Kara asked.

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# TWELVE

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**PIAZZA DI SPAGNA  
ROME  
MONDAY**

To anyone passing by, the attractive Japanese girl in tight jeans tucked into knee-high black boots and black t-shirt under a brown leather jacket appeared to be admiring the latest winter fashions and Christmas gift suggestions on display at the Dolce & Gabbana boutique.

In fact, Kara Michelle Deleroux used the highly reflective glass to scan the crowd behind her in the Piazza di Spagna. Trying her best to not move her head, Kara searched for the four Section One agents she knew were tailing her. She had been told they would be in plain sight, but even on a Monday in December, the sun brought the people out to have lunch near the Fontana della Baraccia and on the Spanish Steps and the list of possible targets overwhelmed her.

Kara had been dropped off five minutes earlier on the Via della Croce – an irony not lost on her as she'd stepped out of the passenger seat of Jean's Mercedes at the Condotti Palace hotel as her own handler was "unavailable" to assist in her training session today. She'd hoped the talk she and Michele shared a week ago after the Savellerti mission would have impressed upon him how she felt about his focus on Angelica, however he'd handed her off to Croce and Ricci in order to rush to the hospital at the latest mention of her condition changing.

Kara turned and started walking south towards the fountain and the Via dei Condotti, continuing to use the large windows to try and identify anyone looking out of place or paying more attention to her than what was in front of them.

She reached the CA' d'ORO galleria d'arte and took a moment to look across at the famous Babington's tea room across the way, nestled up against the Spanish Steps. She suddenly regretted wearing boots, as sneakers would have allowed her an excuse to kneel down and re-tie the laces, using the break to perform a sweep of the area in front of her. She crossed the plaza to Babington's and stepped into the famous teashop. As she stared at the over one hundred exclusive blends on

offer, Kara noticed a woman with short hair dressed in a long-sleeve turtleneck sweater and slacks looking at a tea set. What stood out in her mind was not her face or style of dress, but the Moleskine notebook festooned with colored page markers clutched in her left hand. She remembered seeing a woman leafing through such a notebook in front of the Banca Esperia SPA branch.

Kara made a purchase of a tea she'd seen Michele order once and stepped out of the shop, crossing to the Via dei Condotti and the Prada shop on the corner. Her eyes were drawn first to the red leather coat in the display window and next to a man in an average black suit who'd been staring at the same coat for five minutes. With his spiky hair and pencil mustache blending into a short boxed beard, he struck Kara as a lower-to-middle management type and someone unlikely able to afford a €3000 leather coat for a wife or girlfriend.

She continued down the most fashionable street in Rome; however the street was in shadow and that made it more difficult to use the shop windows to observe pedestrian traffic. Kara took a moment to look both ways for any traffic before rounding the corner onto the Via Mario de' Fiori and stepped into the La Perla store to look at undergarments, using a mirrored display unit to try and identify any tail. Unsuccessful, she exited the store, continuing down the street and entering a ristorante, making her way to the back where Alessandro Ricci sat at a table, a glass of wine in his hand.

"Okay, let me see how you did," Alessandro noted, holding out his other hand. Kara removed her iPhone from her pocket and placed it in his hand.

Alessandro opened the Photo app and started flipping through the pictures of people Kara had surreptitiously taken while acting as if she was looking up something.

"Well you found two of the four," he noted as he deleted the incorrect subjects. He handed the phone back to Kara and she saw one was the woman with the Moleskine notebook and the other was the guy looking at the Prada coat.

Alessandro asked Kara what tipped her off and he laughed when she answered.

"Alas, Elenora would be lost without her notebook and Pietro is about as subtle as a Padania bomb so I'm not surprised you found those two. Okay. I'll reset the other two and try again."

After an hour, Kara successfully identified one of the two remaining tails – a woman wearing jeans and a burgundy jacket, though when Kara first saw her she looked like a teenager with her hair in a ponytail and the jacket had been grey. Kara had noticed that her left Ugg boot had a distinctive black scuffmark and had used that to identify her despite the reversible jacket and change of hair style, successfully recalling Alessandro's lesson on how not to pay attention to faces, but instead look for consistent items like the scuffmark and the Moleskine notebook.

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Two hours later, Alessandro put the key into the lock of the motel room on the outskirts of Rome. Beside him, Kara stood, her body tense.

Alessandro preceded her into the room and sat down on the bed. Kara stepped across the threshold and looked around. To her right lay the bathroom area and to her left was the closet. She stepped forward into the main room, dominated by a twin bed. Against the opposite wall was a credenza with drawers and a CRT television. To the right was a desk and chair, an armchair underneath the window with a lamp behind it.

"And...time," Alessandro called, having counted off thirty seconds in his head. Kara closed her eyes and Alessandro escorted her into the closet, having her face the wall as he closed the door on her. He then ordered her to recount all that she had committed to memory in the thirty seconds she'd had to observe the room.

When Kara had given her precursory report, he pressed her to keep going and she recalled items like the number of books on the nightstand, an envelope in the desk drawer, the color of the sheets and the fabric of the armchair and the style of the lamp shade.

"Not bad," Alessandro commented.

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After testing Kara's spatial recall, Alessandro subjected Kara to memorization games. He arranged a number of items on the table and covered them with a sheet. He removed the sheet and gave Kara 45

seconds to memorize the items. Once she'd memorized the items, Alessandro increased the number of items and decreased the time allotted. Alessandro referred to it as "elongating", which he defined as pushing the envelope at both ends.

Eventually, Kara had 15 seconds to identify 25 items, ranging from a Glock pistol to a thumb drive disguised as a pen and a picture of three people (two men and a woman – one of the men bald in a muscle shirt, the other with a full head of hair and wearing a sweater. The woman had red hair and sunglasses, wearing a sports bra. At first, Kara thought it was Petrushka, but she was older) to a business card with Cyrillic text and a piece of paper with an international number (Alessandro told Kara to memorize the last eight digits, as that would be enough to identify the country code).

Alessandro made the recollection process harder by requiring Kara to wait five minutes before she could recite the list of items, discussing with her the lead story of that day's La Repubblica.

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Kara spent most of the day with Alessandro, including a late dinner at a local trattoria. Kara hoped that Petrushka was not as possessive of her handler as Henrietta was with Jose, though considering how annoyed she felt at her own handler "abandoning" her for that...*other*...girl, she would have certainly understood if Petrushka took exception.

The sun had been down for some hours when Kara exited the passenger seat of Alessandro's smartfortwo in the handler's parking lot. Compared to Michele's exotics, the 45kW 700cc engine was laughably weak, though the car's diminutive size made it very easy for Alessandro to maneuver in traffic.

She started for the cyborg warehouse, but decided she needed to have another talk with her handler so she turned around and followed Alessandro into the handler's building. She climbed the steps to Michele's floor and walked down the hall to his door. She raised her hand to knock, but instead placed it on the doorknob and slowly twisted it, finding it unlocked. She pushed open the door and saw Michele sitting on the edge of his bed. As the door continued to swing open, she saw Claes sitting in the desk chair, idly kicking her feet and an uncomfortable look on her face. Kara gritted her teeth at the sight of yet *another* cyborg with her handler, but before she could say anything she saw a look of relief wash over Claes and she scooted off

the chair, grabbing her coat off the back. She slipped her feet into loafers and as she approached Kara, leaned in close.

"Go easy on him. He's feeling really bad right now," Claes noted in a voice too soft for Michele, but clearly audible to Kara's enhanced hearing. She then exited the room, softly closing the door behind her.

Dismissing Claes' words, she stomped up to Michele and plopped onto the bed next to him, focusing on the toes of her boots as she was afraid to look him in the eyes.

"Have I failed you so badly that you no longer want to have anything to do with me?" she accused. "Did you pawn me off to Ricci so you could discuss taking Claes on in my stead?"

When he didn't respond, Kara looked up into red, tear-stained eyes.

"What happened?" she asked, her voice edged in concern at seeing her handler's emotional condition. As it had in Savellerti, all the anger left her at the site of her handler in distress.

"Angelica passed away this evening," Michele said. His normally deep voice (which reminded her of an Italian Liam Neeson) sounded hoarse and cracked. "While they were able to repair the damage to her body, unfortunately her brain could no longer handle the conditioning medication and it shut down."

"I see," Kara said. "I'm sorry, I guess?"

For a moment, Michele felt shock at the apparent indifference of Kara to the death of one of her sisters, but then he realized that their indifference to death applied not just to their targets, but also their peers and even themselves. She'd also only known Angelica for a month, where Michele had known her since she'd first come to the attention of the Agency.

"Was she really that important to you?" Kara asked, thinking back to what Triela had told her.

"I loved her," Michele replied, and Kara felt a chill run through her.

"Tell me about her," Kara said, wanting to know more about this girl who she barely knew, but who clearly meant a great deal to her handler.

"Angelica's birth name was Angelina and when I first saw her, I thought an angel had come down to Earth. She was very pretty and her smile could outshine a galaxy. She was also a quadriplegic thanks to her father."

"Her father?" Kara asked.

"He owned a factory that had fallen on hard times and the debts had piled up to the point that he faced bankruptcy and receivership. So he took out a generous life insurance policy on his beautiful 10 year old daughter and when her mother sent her out to get some groceries, he ran her down in the street with his car," Michele said, his voice suddenly seething with contained rage.

Kara had a sudden urge to hunt down Angelina's father and tear his heart out – not for what he'd done to his daughter, but for the pain and anguish her handler felt at those actions.

"Facing a life sentence for attempted murder and insurance fraud, he agreed to let the Agency become the legal guardians of Angelina..."

As he talked, Kara leaned against him to let him know he was not alone.

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# THIRTEEN

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## PRINCIPI DI PIEMONTE HOTEL TURIN 2001

Renato Pisano, billionaire media magnate and newly elected *deputato* of the "Piedmonte 1" constituency of Turin, strode on the stage to the cheers of the nearly 500 people crammed into the main ballroom of the hotel. Behind him hung the banner of the *Brillante Italia* party, which he'd founded the previous year with the help of his close friend Michele Pagani (who'd chosen the name).

The party had done well in the 2000 Regional Elections, winning Piedmont and four smaller regions (Aosta Valley, Liguria, Umbria and Molise) and winning over 25% of the available seats in Lombardy, Veneto, Tuscany, Lazio, Abruzzo and Campagna.

Pisano used this as a foundation for a run in the 2001 General Elections and with the latest set of results, his party looked to take over 200 seats. Adding the 158 seats his coalition partners were projected to take, this gave him a majority in the 630-seat Chamber of Deputies. *Brillante Italia* and their partners would also win control of the Senate of the Republic and together this ensured that Pisano would become the 24<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of the Italian Republic when the XIV Legislature took office in four week's time.

"I want to thank you all for your support! Together, we will truly make Italy a brilliant place to live and work!"

Monica Maria Petris, *deputato* of the "Veneto 2" constituency (Venice, Treviso and Belluno) and the next Minister of Defense, walked up to Michele and handed him a glass of champagne as Pisano continued his victory speech. She'd joined Alenia Aeronautica in the early 1980s and had been part of the Eurofighter Typhoon program before joining the NHIndustries program in 1992 to develop and field the NH90 Helicopter. In 2000, now as a Vice President of Finmeccanica, she managed the merger of Agusta and GKN-Westland into AgustaWestland. This brought her to the attention of Pisano, who persuaded her to leave the private sector and run for public office and become a member of his Cabinet.

“Thank you all for your support. Now, enjoy the evening!” Pisano said, waving to the crowd before leaving the stage and coming over to Michele and Monica.

“And to think back at *Statale* you just wanted to be a boy in a rock and roll band,” Michele noted with a smile, using the local Milanese term for their city’s University.

“We did it, Michele! And I thank you for your support in helping us take Lombardy. I only wish you’d run for office, as well. With the money you’ve pulled in over the past few years, I could have found a nice role for you in the Finance Ministry,” Pisano joked.

“Congratulations, Renato. Now you only need to you deliver on all of your campaign promises so you can win re-election in five years while also keeping your coalition partners happy to prevent a No Confidence vote before then,” Michele retorted.

“Well fortunately that next election will be after the Torino Games, so hopefully that will help. Maybe we should adopt their motto of ‘Passion Lives Here’.”

Renato had led, and Michele had worked on, the Candidate City bid for Turin at the 109<sup>th</sup> IOC Session in 1999, where the city was selected to host the XX Winter Olympics in 2006. This successful bid had put Renato into the public eye in a favorable way, helping the successful launch of the *Brillante Italia* party.

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*Brillante Italia* ran on a platform of turning Italy into a pioneer in advanced medicine. Significant funding – some 50 billion Euro planned over the next five years – was poured into development of a new generation of artificial organs as well as advanced robotic prostheses made of carbon-fiber reinforced plastics (CFRP) and lightweight metals like titanium. Significant effort was also placed into making prosthetics more “real” in areas like tactile information and improving the microprocessor controls and biosensor interfaces. Efforts were also expended on cosmesis to make them look and feel like actual body parts.

Italy’s major research universities received monies not only to develop and refine these new technologies, but also hundreds of millions of Euro were allocated to scholarships to encourage university students

to become doctors and biomedical engineers. These efforts also encouraged medical professionals from other countries to move to Italy to continue their work in a more permissive environment.

All of this was administered through the Social Welfare Agency, a new governmental initiative created directly under the Office of the Prime Minister and his wife, Andrea, served as director of the SWA board.

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In order to secure votes in the southern Regions, Pisano also promised to invest in those regions to help shift them from the primary agricultural background to a more industrialized one. Billions were poured into new factories as well as infrastructure improvements to get their product to market, including the formal go-ahead to bridge the Strait of Messina, expanding the container port facility at Gioia Tauro and upgrading and improving the Autostrada A3 between Naples and Reggio Calabria. The northern regions of Italy had long expressed concern, and even opposition, to the movement of their tax monies to the southern regions. The Pisano government's increase in these capital flows only exacerbated these feelings of discontent.

The Padania Republican Faction arose around the turn of the millennium. They owed their existence in part to the Lega Nord party, founded in 1991 to promote the independence or autonomy of northern Italy. When Lega Nord failed in its plans and promises, the Padania Republican Faction was born to gain by force what could not be gained at the ballot box.

The move by the PRF also ignited separatist feelings in other parts of Italy and new pro-independence groups sprang up in Lazio, Campania, Calabria, Sardinia and Sicily. These groups eventually formed a loose cooperation known as "The Five Republics Faction" as their stated goal was to break Italy apart into five autonomous republics centered around the cities of Rome, Naples and Milan, along with the islands of Sardinia and Sicily.

Both Padania and the PRF staged violent attacks against the government and an active terrorist rebellion in the northern regions was a spot of tarnish on the new Prime Minister's luster. While his coalition was currently strong enough to survive any Votes of Confidence cast against it, he did have to worry about an erosion of support within the Parliament if things grew worse.

As Prime Minister, Renato Pisano chaired the Executive Committee for Intelligence and Security Services, a collective body composed of the main political, public security, military and intelligence agency top authorities. The mission of CESIS was the coordination of all of the production of the intelligence community, with the aim to report all the relevant information collected by it to the PM.

The Italian intelligence community, both civilian and military, had been reorganized multiple times in the fifty years since the creation of the Italian Republic in an attempt to make it both more effective and more answerable to the elected government. However, within a year Pisano realized that the sheer number of law enforcement and intelligence groups within Italy had created a clear case of the old idiom “too many cooks spoil the broth” and that an unconventional enemy required an unconventional response.

That unconventional response came in the form of Pieri Lorenzo.

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# FOURTEEN

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**PALAZZO CHIGI  
PIAZZA COLONNA, ROME  
FIVE YEARS PRIOR**

Michele Pagani was escorted through the ornate halls of the official residence of the Prime Minister of Italy and the seat of the Council of Ministers that served as the Executive Branch of the Italian government.

Instead of the office of Prime Minister Renato Pisano, Michele was instead shown to a thoroughly modern conference room. The far wall was dominated by a 108" liquid crystal display with two 56" models above and below it. Before the wall of displays was a wooden table with seven plush leather seats on each side, representing the fourteen Ministers who made up the Italian Cabinet. At the far end a fifteenth plush chair was for the Prime Minister. Before each seat was a buried widescreen computer monitor, a phone, power ports and a network connection for portable computers. Along the walls were seats with fold out laptop/writing tables for undersecretaries and four rows of tiered seating in the back were available for other functionaries and staff. To the side of the wall of displays stood a podium with an embedded display, a computer keyboard, and network/power connections for a portable computer.

As Michele stepped into the room, he noticed that an older gentleman in a fine suit stood at the podium while four of the chairs along the wall were occupied by men in Doctor's Whites. At the conference table, he recognized Minister of Defense Monica Petris and Minister of the Interior Stefania Tremonte. The Prime Minister's chair swiveled around and Renato rose to greet Michele.

"Thank you for coming, Major," he said, using Michele's rank in the Aeronautica Militare as this was a formal meeting.

"Of course, Mister President," Michele replied, using Renato's formal term as President of the Council of Ministers.

Minister Petris indicated a chair next to her and Michele took a seat.

"The information you will see today is graded Top Secret Compartmentalized and is to be discussed with no one – and I mean *no one* – outside of this room," the PM noted, looking each person at the table in the eye and holding their gaze until they nodded their understanding.

"Signore Lorenzo, proceed," the PM said to the man at the podium.

"Thank you Mister President. My name is Pieri Lorenzo and I was most recently with SISDE."

The name struck Michele as one he should be familiar with and in a moment it came to him – Lorenzo had overseen the security detail for the Chief Prosecutor for Milan who had died with his wife, daughter and his oldest brother's fiancé in a car bombing that Padania had claimed credit for.

*Not surprising he's no longer with SISDE*, Michele thought. The death of Giovanni Croce had been a major shock and had awoken the Italian government to just how dangerous the separatists could be if left unchecked.

"Four months ago, I was appointed as head of Special Operations, Section Two and tasked by the Prime Minister on a very special project - a project to bring together the medical advances developed under the auspices of the Social Welfare Agency and apply them to create a 'super soldier'. I'd like to introduce Doctor Fernando Bianchi, Cybernetic Augmentation Project Director."

Lorenzo stepped to the side and a middle-aged man with a goatee and a ready smile stood and approached the podium.

"Good afternoon. Thanks to the initiatives of the Prime Minister, Italy is now the recognized leader in biomedical technology. Through the auspices of the Social Welfare Agency, that technology is being developed and introduced to the civilian population.

"However, with groups like Padania and the Five Republics Faction now in armed rebellion against the state, I believe it is time we adapt these technologies for military use..."

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"So what do you think, Michele?" the Prime Minister asked as they walked through the inner courtyard after the briefing.

"I'm troubled that this technology only works with young children. Child soldiers are something you hear about in the failed states of Africa, not a European capital."

"I know, but even the civilian side is currently limited to children between 9 and 14. This program, in addition to helping us stop the separatists, could very well advance the technology so that it can be adapted to teens and adults."

"So you're going to give the go ahead? What does your wife think about having a secret counterterrorist team operate under the cover of the Social Welfare Agency?"

"In the interests of plausible deniability, Andrea will have to be kept in the dark, of course," the Prime Minister answered.

"Good luck with that," Michele noted.

"Monica believes she can have everything ready inside of six months. Doctor Bianchi has identified a candidate for the augmentation process, a girl of ten severely injured in a traffic accident and whose long-term prognosis is terminal. I want you to be my liaison and monitor her progress and that of Section Two, in general. I trust your feedback. When the girl has completed her training, you tell me whether or not it's worth going forward to full production."

"Renato..."

"Michele, in the past two years the situation has grown steadily worse. Padania is bribing law enforcement officers and killing judges and prosecutors, making it difficult to put away the people we can catch. Things are so bad with the mafia that I may have to cut Sicily loose and let them gain their independence just to be rid of them. If I do, that's only going to embolden the Five Republic independence movements in Milan, Rome, Naples and Sardinia.

Michele nodded his acceptance. "Very well."

"Thank you, Michele."

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"Pretty impressive, no?" Marco Toni, former member of the Central Directorate for the Anti-Terrorism Police noted as Angelica, the

prototype cybernetically-augmented agent, ran a standard urban firearms training course at the Italian Army infantry training facility in Potenza, Basilicata on a warm Spring day in 2005.

"She's amazing," Michele admitted.

Angelica completed the course and jogged up to the two men. She placed her pistol in the holster on her hip and lifted the smoked safety glasses up onto her head and removed the large hearing protectors.

"How did I do?" she asked as Michele handed her a towel and a bottle of cold water. Her long hair was mostly in a ponytail, two long strands hanging to either side of her face. She wore a grey short-sleeve t-shirt with navy tactical pants and black Italian Army issue combat boots.

"You did great," Michele said and Angelica rewarded him with a smile that outshone the sun.

"Yes, very well," Marco said and she gave her handler the same treatment before downing the bottle of water. Even though she'd run the course in record time, she looked remarkably refreshed.

Michele had first met Angelica, then Angelina, in the hospital just after the initial round of surgeries to replace her damaged organs. Then there were subsequent surgeries to replace her arms and legs with cybernetic prostheses and armoring her body against small arms and rifle fire.

"She looks the same, doesn't she?" Doctor Bianchi had remarked after the final surgeries were completed and she was prepared for release.

"She looks a little older, but if I didn't know she was a cyborg, I would never guess it. What I find most surprising is that she seems totally comfortable with the idea she is a cyborg."

"We did artificially age her two years as we wanted her a bit taller and bigger to better balance the implants. As to your second observation, part of the conditioning process is to make them completely comfortable with their new bodies and to properly employ them in non-combat situations. We don't want her ripping doors off their hinges or bending items because she exerts too much of her strength."

Michele could only nod.

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Three months later, Michele found himself in the Palazzo Chigi, though instead of a conference room he was in an ornate dining room enjoying a sumptuous lunch with the Prime Minister and the Ministers of Defense and Interior.

Defense Minister Petris had already given her opinion in favor of going forward. Interior Minister Tremonte took a bit more convincing, but also concurred with Minister Petris. Now it was Michele's turn.

"Angelica is amazing, Mister President. She can lift 200 kilos like you can lift 20. I watched her run up one side of Bosco Grande and down the other with a 50-kilo pack on her back and perform a 5 kilometer dash without needing rest. Her accuracy with a pistol is near perfect, and perfect would describe her accuracy with a rifle. She could probably part your hair at 200 meters.

"So you agree we should go forward?" the Prime Minister asked.

"Using kids as weapons...but what weapons they are. Yes, I think we should go forward," Michele stated.

The Prime Minister looked to his Minister of Defense and with a slight nod of his head the cybernetic agent program was given the green light.

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Kara stood before the open closet, wearing only her underclothes. A visibly uncomfortable Michele stood beside her, though his discomfort was only partially caused by the current state of his cyborg's undress.

"Why do I have to be an exchange student?" Kara asked, looking at her plaid uniform laid out on the bed. "Why can't I just be your girlfriend?"

"Because you're 17 and I'm 45," Michele replied.

"Mr. Ricci says I can easily pass for 22," Kara retorted. "And Petrushka often masquerades as a 20-year old even though she is only 16."

"She wears a trouser suit when she does so," Michele noted. His face took on a thoughtful look. "Actually, that might work. I could introduce you as my assistant."

Kara made a distasteful face. "I don't want to dress like Triela."

"Why are you whispering?" Michele asked.

"I don't want her to hear me."

"Victor and Triela are in Naples on assignment."

"Cyborgs have good hearing."

Michele pinched his nose.

"Anyway, what's the big deal about me being your girlfriend? I thought men liked being seen with younger women," Kara opined.

"Eh..."

Kara put her hands on her hips and turned to face him directly.

"It's the sex, isn't it?"

If Michele had been drinking, he would have done a spit-take.

"Excuse me?" he gasped.

"You're uncomfortable with people thinking we're having sex because of our age difference if we were boyfriend and girlfriend."

Michele could only just stare at his cyborg.

"When my boyfriend and I first started having sex, he was 19 and I was 15. One of the girls in my class had a boyfriend who was in university. It wasn't a big thing amongst us."

"I really didn't need to hear that," Michele said, sitting down on the bed.

"How old was the last woman you took to your bed?" Kara asked.

"That's none of your business, young lady," Michele said, wishing Kara would both change the subject and put on some clothes.

"Hypocrite," she said, turning her back to him and rummaging through the closet.

"Kara, we're going to my parents for Christmas. They already fear for my eternal soul because the women I *have* taken to my bed were not my wives. I fear for their hearts if you show up in a tight t-shirt and miniskirt and start calling them 'Pops' and 'Mama'."

"And yet they'll buy the story you are hosting a 17-year old high school exchange student from Japan? I mean what happens if I have to see them again a few months later? Those types of exchange student programs only last a few weeks or months, at most."

Michele had to admit that she did have a point.

"Would it help if I said I was a devout Catholic girl who didn't believe in sex before marriage?"

"It couldn't hurt."

"And instead of a 'tight t-shirt and a miniskirt', how about I wear this?" Kara offered, pulling out a Burberry sleeveless pleated silk dress in a charcoal & cream check with a scoop neckline. She held it up against her and the hemline easily fell to her knees. "I can match it with black leggings and some flats or boots," she added.

"Okay," Michele finally relented. "Now get dressed before someone comes in on us."

Kara instead dropped the dress on the bed and hugged Michele.

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"My father's name is Nicola and he is a retired Generale di Divisione Aerea in the Aeronautica Militare. My mother, Arianna, trained as an aerospace engineer; her family founded the aircraft maker Piccolo S.p.A. and she worked on a number of Airbus civil aviation programs. My uncle Alberto now flies the Boeing 777 for Alitalia and used to be a Tornado driver in the Aeronautica Militare."

Kara nodded, committing it all to memory as they approached Milan. They took the A1 to A51 interchange and skirted the eastern side of the city, linking up with the A52 and exiting on SP58, which led into Monza. They continued on the highway, bypassing the city and driving along the eastern edge of the Parco di Monza and the famous track nestled within. He knew one of the handlers owned a bar in the area, but he'd neglected to identify whom and where.

The Ferrari 599 turned off the highway and into a mix of agricultural, residential and industrial zones and approached a private drive that led to a gated community. They checked in at the gate and proceeded on a street with six modern-style villas arranged in a very wide arc around a massive circle drive with a park area in the middle. Each villa sat on a quarter hectare, beautiful brickwork and ornamental trees screening each lot from the other. Michele pulled into the drive of the third villa and parked in front. As they exited the car, an elderly gentleman in a suit stepped out onto the front porch.

"Welcome home, son," he said in a clear, loud voice.

"Thank you, Generale," Michele replied as he approached. "I'd like to introduce you to Kara Deleroux."

"Welcome to our home," he said, warmly.

Kara put her arms together and bowed in his direction.

A large staircase dominated the entrance foyer, providing access to the upper and lower levels of the home. Nicola escorted them to a large living room that looked out onto the back porch and the grounds beyond, which included a swimming pool. An attractive woman just shy of sixty appeared from the kitchen area with refreshments. She laid them down and gave Michele a hug, followed by Kara.

"So what do most Japanese people do on Christmas Eve?" Arianna asked.

"It is celebrated as a couples holiday," Kara replied. "We spend time together at a nice restaurant and exchange gifts."

"That sounds lovely. I'm sorry we have to drag you to a boring religious ceremony."

"On the contrary, I am very interested to experience a Midnight Mass. I understand the Duomo is quite beautiful inside," Kara stated.

"The Milanese and the surrounding communes follow the Ambrosian Rite, which is a bit different than the Roman Rite we follow here in Monza, but I am sure we can muddle through," Nicolo said with a smile.

---

Like most Italian cities, Milan took Christmas seriously, putting up traditional lights and similar decorations on all of the city's public buildings, streets and squares. Not to be outdone, the city's shops raised their own elaborate displays. After Turin set a new benchmark in preparation for the 2006 Winter Olympics, Milan had raised their own game and conservative estimates stated that some 25 kilometers worth of lights were hung in late November and Kara's head swiveled about as if on bearings as she tried to take it all in.

The Cathedral made available a number of parking spaces for invited guests at the adjacent Royal Palace of Milan and this included the Pagani party and their Bentley Continental Flying Spur. They parked and then made their way to the front square and walked along a special path to the Piazza del Duomo in front of the cathedral, which was bathed in light. In the corner of the Piazza stood a magnificent Christmas tree covered in white lights.

The Cardinal Archbishop of Milan oversaw the mass and when they exited the cathedral their watches were approaching 02:00. By the time they were back at Michele's parent's house, it was closing on 03:00. They said their goodnights and Michele and Kara retired to the guest room and changed into their nightwear.

"The Italian tradition is to exchange gifts on January 6<sup>th</sup> during the Feast of the Epiphany, but La Befana decided to pay me a visit early," Michele noted, referring to the Italian witch who was said to place presents in children's stockings on the night of January 5<sup>th</sup>. He handed Kara an envelope of fine cotton paper.

Kara opened it and removed the card inside, the cover a painting of a Ferrari 599 driving by a lake. She opened it and taped to the inside was an Italian driver's license in her name.

Kara looked at the license, looked at Michele, then back at the license before looking at Michele again.

"Yes, it's a real one," Michele said.

"Does this mean I get to do most of the driving now?" Kara asked, and Michele nodded.

"I don't care what Henrietta says, you are truly the best handler," she said as she hugged Michele as tight as she dared.

---

"Merry Christmas," Arianna said with a wide smile as she greeted Michele and Kara as they entered the large professional kitchen around 10:00.

"Mimosa?" she offered, pointing to a silver tray with champagne and fresh-squeezed orange juice chilling in ice buckets on the sideboard. Michele prepared four in champagne flutes and handed them out.

"I hope you two are hungry this morning," Nicola stated as he transferred slices of ham to a platter.

Kara could not respond as she stood in awe of the sheer feast arrayed before them on the center island: crepes; Eggs Benedict; herb-roasted potatoes; *quiche au gruyere*; a selection of fruits with crème fresh and Mascarpone for dipping and pastries and breads.

They filled their plates and then proceeded to the dining room where they stuffed themselves silly, laughing and enjoying each other's company. When brunch concluded, Michele and his father retired to the back porch with coffee.

"She's a very pretty woman, son," Nicola noted, referring to Kara. "Quite intelligent and charming, as well. And her Italian is exceptional."

"She took part of an immersive study program with native Italian speakers in Japan when she was in high school. It gave her a strong command of the colloquial form of the language," Michele stated and Nicola nodded.

The dichotomy of this moment was not lost on Michele. The man sitting in front of him retired holding the third highest rank in the Aeronautica Militare and the position of chief of the Combat Forces Command, in charge of Italy's fixed-wing combat aircraft inventory. He held the highest of security clearances and been trusted with NATO's most closely held information. Yet his own son needed to lie to him about Kara because the senior staff at the SWA decided that his father didn't have a "need to know".

"When does she head back to Japan?" he asked.

"Her student visa is good through the end of the year at which point she will decide whether or not to renew it or return to Japan and complete her studies there. I figure we'll play it by ear when that time comes," Michele replied.

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"Take care of yourself, son. Don't be a stranger and feel free to bring Kara with you," Arianna said that afternoon as Michele and the girls made their goodbyes. She handed Michele a huge basket of brunch items for them to enjoy for dinner that evening. They waved goodbye and headed for the A1 Autostrade and Rome, 530km distant.

"I think I am going to pop," Kara noted, leaning back in her seat with her hands clasped over her stomach.

"My parents were never one to send somebody home hungry," Michele replied.

"I like them. They seem good people," Kara noted. "Thank you for

letting me play your girlfriend so I can hopefully see them again.”

“We’ll be back in Easter,” Michele noted. “And if you thought Christmas Brunch was outrageous, you are in for a shock when you see their Easter spread.”

“I’ll be sure to pack an extra stomach,” Kara noted. She reclined the seat as far as she could and settled down to sleep.

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Jean's voice blared from the radio, causing Michele to scramble to turn down the volume.

"Mobile One, this is Mobile Two."

"Go ahead, Mobile Two," Michele said.

"The target is approaching the road block area. Ensure they cannot back-track."

"Acknowledged, Mobile Two."

In the driver's seat of Michele's 599 GTB Fiorano, Kara used her superior vision to keep the tail of the Ferrari Scuderia Spider 16M in site, though the bright yellow paint made it stand out against the green pine trees that lined either side of the access road between the communes of Marchirolo and Ardena.

The convertible belonged to one Lucien Revy. Belgian by birth, his mother was widowed when he was four and she re-married to a Swiss, moving herself and Lucien to Lausanne. Both became Swiss citizens and Lucien went on to study law at the University of Lausanne, specializing in tax and corporate law. Revy now worked for one of the main backers of the Milan faction of Padania, helping him create various tax shelters and dummy corporations.

And today, Section Two of Special Operations intended to kidnap him.

"All units, two minutes to intercept. Stand ready," Jean's voice called out over the radio.

While he now lived in Lugano, Switzerland, Revy regularly crossed the border to visit his client at his villa on Lake Varese. And if he finished his official visit on a Friday, like today, he'd head to Marchirolo to pick up a beautiful young Italian woman from work at the end of her

afternoon shift and driving her home to Ardena where they would spend the weekend together.

"Close the road," Jean ordered thirty seconds later and two teams of three people spaced one kilometer apart went to work.

Closest to the approaching vehicle, Amadeo and Nihad, dressed in dirty overalls, high-visibility jackets and hardhats, dragged out folding signs with flashing amber lights noting that Road Work was in progress. They were joined by Ferro, dressed in the same outfit, a flashlight with an orange cone in one hand and a Stop sign on the end of a long pole in the other. At the junction of the road and the Via Roncate, Giorgio, Alfonso and Priscilla performed the same maneuver, ensuring that a passing motorist would not interrupt the capture team.

Revy's Scuderia entered a series of sharp esses and fell out of sight of Kara and Michele.

"Twenty seconds. Strike 1, stand by."

Hiding out of sight in the trees, Kuroneko and Soni armed their weapons under the gaze of their handlers. Once Ferro had stopped Revy, Amadeo and Nihad would pull their pistols while the two cyborgs would rush the car and subdue the lawyer and his girlfriend.

Revy attacked the esses, the track-honed suspension of his vehicle generating lateral G-forces that pitched him and his woman in their seats as he swung the wheel.

"Look out!" his girlfriend yelled and Revy's glance snapped from admiring her shapely legs to where a worker with a sign was waving a flashlight frantically. Revy applied the brakes, but as the aluminum calipers pressed against the carbon rotors the Pirelli summer tires hit a patch of black ice. In an instant, the Scuderia 16M swapped ends and the three agents scrambled out of the way as the rear of the car approached. The two cyborgs charged out of the trees, bringing their rifles to bear.

Revy successfully recovered the car before hitting the road signs. He looked to his left and saw two teenage girls with rifles rushing at him and in the door mirror he saw a Ferrari 599 approaching fast. Revy mashed the pedal and the Scuderia shot off, sending up a spray of gravel as he juiced off road to bypass the signs.

Kara saw Revy bypass the roadblock and she stabbed the throttle to give chase. She saw the tire tracks through the black ice and jiggled to avoid it, the back end lurching drunkenly as the traction and stability control fought to keep the rear end straight.

"Mobile Two, this is Mobile One. The horse has bolted," Michele reported.

"Acknowledged," came the terse reply and Michele could almost feel as well as hear Jean's displeasure. His Mercedes CL500 was parked a hundred meters in from where Giorgio, Alfonso and Priscilla stood and as he started the car Jean ordered Rico to prepare her pistol to shoot out Revy's tires.

In the 599, Kara pushed her boot to the floor, using the superior power at her command to close in on the 16M. Michele removed his Five\_seveN pistol and rolled down the window, cold Alpine air filling the cabin and plunging the temperature scores of degrees.

In the 16M, Revy saw the 599 rapidly filling his rearview mirror and a hand with a pistol coming out of the right side. Revy raced his vehicle on the weekends and his greater driving skill both successfully kept Kara from flanking him and denied Michele a clear view of his rear tires.

A bright light ahead grabbed Revy's attention and he saw a large coupe approaching at a high rate of closure. Revy positioned his car to block Kara's view of the oncoming vehicle, juking at the last moment. Kara and Jean, each seeing themselves on a collision course, reflexively slammed on their brakes and skidded past each other, their door mirrors only centimeters apart. Kara recovered and planted her boot in the carpet, but Revy had been able to gain over 200 meters on her.

Revy rounded the next bend and to his horror saw a red deer buck standing proudly in the middle of the road, a 14-point rack on his head and regal eyes locked on the approaching Ferrari. Revy flung the wheel to the left, barely missing the animal...and flying off the road into the trees.

Kara slewed the 599 to a halt and jumped out of the car, drawing her pistol, but as soon as she saw what was left of the Spyder, she lowered her weapon.

The saplings and smaller trees had given way under the weight and momentum of the Ferrari, but the larger trees had torn the nose off, flipping the car into a large tree, whose trunk refused to yield to the interloper, shearing the engine and transmission from their mounts and crushing the open passenger compartment – along with its occupants.

“Well that has not gone well,” she noted to Michele as he approached.

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“Why the hell did you let her drive?” Jean growled, his right hand crushing the empty paper coffee cup. The fog of his breath brought to Michele’s mind the smoke of a dragon.

“Her reflexes and motor control are a hell of a lot better than my own. If I’d been behind the wheel, we’d be talking to each other across our respective dashboards.”

Jean merely grunted and headed for his Mercedes.

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# SEVENTEEN

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**PISTA DI FIORANO  
MARANELLO, ITALY  
THE FOLLOWING WEDNESDAY**

Kara sawed at the wheel as she pressed her foot down on the throttle, the traction control and electronic differential helped her power the black Ferrari 458 Italia out of Turn 4 and accelerated toward Turn 5 of the Pista di Fiorano, the private test track owned by Ferrari. Driving harder and faster than she'd ever done in her parent's Peugeot 307 or boyfriend's Renault, she risked quick glances to the sides, trying to locate the 150m, 100m and 50m braking zones. The speedometer touched 170km/h as the car crossed the 100m sign and Kara stomped on the brake pedal. It took a moment for the ceramic-composite brakes to warm to operating temperature, but when they did they bit with the force of a brick wall and Kara was thrown forward into the four-point harness.

Her left hand quickly pulled back on the paddle shifter behind the steering wheel four times and she felt the dual-clutch transmission drop down four gears in rapid succession, each gear change taking only fifty thousandths of a second. As much as the sound of the engine revving with every stab of her foot thrilled her, what really sent the shivers up her spine were the flatulent burbles of the overruns each time she lifted her foot off the throttle to slow for a corner.

Kara trail-braked into the sharp 180-degree Turn 6 and started to apply power just past the apex. As soon as the back end snapped into place and straightened-out, she pressed her boot into the floor mat, her right hand triggering up-shifts just before the engine hit its 9000rpm red-line to extract all 420 kW of power. Where the V12 in the 599 GTB roared like a lion, the 4.5 L V8 in the 458 shrieked like a banshee as the car dashed to Turn 8, a 90-degree left-hander with another straight that led to the wavy Turns 9-12 complex, all of which she took as close to the limit as she dared. As she came out of Turn 12 onto the main straight, she pressed her boot into the floor mat again, willing the car past the 250km/h she'd hit at the end of the straight on the last lap.

In the passenger seat, Michele crossed himself.

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*Early that morning...*

"This is what goes for casual nowadays?" Michele asked, skeptically, as Kara came down the steps of the cyborg warehouse dressed in a variation of a Japanese *sērā-fuku* school uniform, with a white t-shirt under a cream button-down vest and loosely knotted plaid tie hanging around her neck. The t-shirt was tucked into a pleated skirt with the same plaid pattern of the tie that ended well above the knees and her black "Tuba" Christian Louboutin boots. Over the blouse she wore a long-sleeved open front sweater.

Kara's face fell. "You don't like it," she said.

"I didn't say that," Michele replied. "Though clearly I am not up on the latest school uniform fashions for young ladies."

"Petra helped me pick it out when all of us girls went shopping," Kara noted.

"Ah, that explains it right there," Michele deadpanned.

"I'll go change," Kara said dejectedly.

"You look fine."

"Your face says you think otherwise," she noted.

"What I am thinking is the old Italian proverb that God's revenge on a father is a teenage daughter," he smiled.

The *fratelli* were driven to Fiumicino Airport before dawn and boarded an Alitalia flight to Guglielmo Marconi Airport in Bologna. Arriving just after sunrise, they were met by a Maserati Quattroporte Executive GT and driver. They settled in the back and the car proceeded down the A1 Autostrada to the municipality of Fiorano Modenese and continued on to just before the border with Maranello. When they passed from Bologna Province into Modena Province Kara assumed they were going to the Ferrari factory in Maranello. When they drove through Modena, she was sure they were going to the factory. But when they exited the A1 onto the Via Pietro Giardini she became confused.

They crossed the Via Pedemontana and pulled up to the buildings in the center of a track and exited the car, which drove off. A Ferrari salesman in a tailored suit came out and greeted them.

"Mr. Pagani, welcome back," he said as he put out his hand. "My name is Giancarlo. Your vehicle is ready. If you will follow me, please, we will head to the garage area."

A golf cart pulled up and the three climbed aboard. They drove around the largest building and up to a large white garage area. Out front was a vehicle Kara had never seen before. It looked about the same length and width as the 599, but it was lower and the styling was literally sharper and edgier than the curvaceous form of the 599.

"Mister Pagani. Miss Deleroux. I present to you the Ferrari 458 Italia," Giancarlo stated. He took out a white handkerchief and used it to open the driver's side door.

The exterior color was a deep metallic black with dark grey wheels and bright yellow brake calipers. The interior was done in a mix of black and Bordeaux leather with black carpet. Aluminum accents highlighted the center dash switch area and the HVAC outlets.

"Awesome," Kara breathed. "Are we driving it back to Rome?"

"Yes, but I brought us out here so early because I signed you up for the Pilota Ferrari Sports Driving Course."

"What's that?"

"The Sports Driving Course, Miss Deleroux, offers a complete, progressive program of instruction that will provide you with a comprehensive understanding of sport driving techniques," Giancarlo stated. "You will learn in both the 458 Italia and the 599 GTB Fiorano with the Handling GT Evoluzione package and will receive instruction on the most efficient driving position, progressive accelerator and brake control, establishing precise driving lines through bends and braking and acceleration techniques. Normally the class runs two days, but as you will have private instruction, we can complete it by this evening."

Giancarlo led them to the pit area where a red 458 and black 599 GTB HGTE were parked before a string of garages.

"I thought you didn't want me to become a race driver?" Kara asked.

"I don't. But after Pizzo and Varese, I'd feel safe—I'd feel *better*, if you had some proper instruction on how to drive a high-performance sports car."

"What are you going to do?" she asked Michele.

"I'm going to exercise a few of my steeds," Michele replied. On cue, the garage behind him opened and Kara saw what looked like two 599s, though one was significantly modified.

"What are those?" she asked. Michele nodded to Giancarlo.

"The metallic white car with the red center stripe is the 599 GTO. It is a road-legal version of the Ferrari 599XX, which is parked next to it and incorporates extensive mechanical and aerodynamic modifications that make it the fastest track car currently in our portfolio."

"Do I get to drive them?" she asked Michele.

"Not until you pass the Advanced and Evolution Courses," Michele replied.

Kara turned to Giancarlo.

"How long does that take?"

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*Present Time...*

Kara completed the lap and pulled Michele's 458 into the pit lane and slowed to a stop in front of the garage area. She waited sixty seconds for everything to have a chance to settle and then she killed the ignition.

"That was awesome," Kara breathed.

As they exited, Giancarlo approached.

"Do you both find the car acceptable?"

Kara nodded her head enthusiastically, Michele concurring with less aggressiveness.

"Then if you would please accompany me back to the main building, we will complete the paperwork while your vehicle is prepared for final delivery."

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When Giancarlo handed over the paperwork and keys, Kara accepted both, handing the former to Michele and pocketing the latter in her vest pocket.

Giancarlo escorted them to the Galleria Ferrari museum and then on a VIP private tour of the Ferrari factory itself. When Michele went to visit the restroom, Kara asked Giancarlo how this day had been made possible.

"Mister Pagani is one of the 300," Giancarlo replied. Kara had a sudden mental image of Michele dressed like a Spartan warrior and her body flushed warmly.

"The 300 are the Scuderia's most important customers," Giancarlo continued in answer to the question on the tip of Kara's lips. "As such, they are extended special benefits, including the right to acquire cars like the 599XX and 599 GTO. We also try to meet their requests in other areas, like allowing you to privately take the Pilota Ferrari course and the factory tour."

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Dusk was falling by the time they completed the tour and their 458 awaited them out front. Michele and Kara thanked Giancarlo for everything he'd done and Kara pranced to the driver's side of the car and plopped down in the seat.

"Milan or Rome?" she asked as she pressed the Start button and the V8 cracked to life.

"I'd say Milan, but I imagine you're wired enough to make it to Rome," Michele said.

"Damn straight!" Kara said and used the paddle shifts to call up first gear.

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## EIGHTEEN

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### GENOA CRISTOFORO COLOMBO AIRPORT THE FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY

"Are you sure you're not Jewish?" Kara asked as they walked out of the terminal building.

"What gave you that idea?" Michele asked.

"I understand that during Hanukkah they exchange gifts on each of the eight nights."

"That's what I have heard, as well, but I still don't understand what you are implying."

"Well, you gave me my license on Christmas. And you bought a new Ferrari yesterday. Today you're going to take delivery of a new airplane. Do you wish to give me a hint on what we will be getting tomorrow?"

"A lump of coal," Michele replied.

"Diamonds are made from lumps of coal, right?" Kara asked.

As they entered the public area of the terminal, a sharply dressed woman stood, holding a sign with Michele's last name on it. Introductions were made and then she walked them out to an Alfa Romeo 159 sedan. They drove to the Aeroclub Genoa building at the northern end of the field and walked through an adjoining gate to where a sleek twin-engine executive transport plane sat, the white paint gleaming in the morning sun. Two stripes in *Rosso Corsa* – Italian "Racing Red" – stretched along the fuselage and in black letters along the base of the tail was the plane's registry of I-WOLF.

As they climbed aboard the Piaggio P.180 Avanti II, Kara saw that the plane was quite wide and tall inside. A two-place divan was directly in front of the door against the starboard wall and beside the door on the port wall was a cabinet with drawers and doors. Both were covered in burl walnut veneer. Farther aft were two sets of plush leather single seats facing each other. All of the seats were upholstered in soft

cream-colored leather and the walls were painted an eggshell white with rosewood and brass trim pieces and the carpet was a very thick natural pile that Kara's boots sank into with each step. The cockpit contained the latest avionics suite, dominated by three large vertical displays and in back was an elegant bathroom in wood and marble along with a closet.

They exited the plane and ground staff started to prepare it for departure as the three walked back to the Aeroclub building. While Michele and the Piaggio Aero representative completed the transfer of ownership paperwork, Kara noticed the rest of the club's patrons were crowded around the LCD television near the refreshments area.

The television was tuned to RaiNews and while Kara could not make out the words the talking head was saying amongst the chatter of the patrons, she saw a news scroll that stated "POLICE HELICOPTER CRASHES IN VENICE LAGOON NEAR SAINT MARK'S SQUARE...VENETIAN SEPARATISTS TAKE OVER BELL TOWER".

"Michele! I think you need to see this!" she yelled back at him.

"See what?" Michele asked, looking up from the paperwork.

Just then, his and Kara's iPhones started ringing in unison.

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# NINETEEN

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## VENICE LATER THAT DAY

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

Ferro put her head into the cockpit.

"How are things back there?" Michele asked.

"Quiet," Ferro 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," he noted and Ferro nodded and returned to the cabin. She walked to the aft section of the cabin and informed the four girls of their arrival time.

Triela, Rico, Petrushka and Chiara sat in the four leather recliners, quiet in their thoughts. Petrushka kept her blanket wrapped around her as her clothes dried. She'd removed her boots and stuffed towels into her them to keep their shape and help dry out the inside, her socks draped over the tops.

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

"What's that?" Rico asked.

"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?” Rico asked.

“I expect heads are going to roll,” Triela noted. “Dante escaped. An important tourist site was bombed. We lost a lot of people.”

“This was not a very good day, was it?” Petrushka asked rhetorically and Ferro merely shook her head. She asked if the girls desired anything, but they all declined so she returned to the divan to check on Henrietta.

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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 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 exited the cockpit and unlocked it, opening the upper half while the Airman helped drop the lower section. Nihad appeared and directed the girls to a black Fiat Ulysee minivan with deeply-tinted windows parked nearby, both sliding doors open. 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.

Kara sealed up the door and then joined Michele in the cockpit. They re-started the port engine and taxied back to the runway, departing to the south and then performing 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 retrieved their car and headed for the compound.

It was there that they learned of the deaths of Beatrice and Silvia along with most of Major Sales' command.

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Even in sleep, Michele's brain sensed a presence in his room and commanded him to wake. His eyes snapped open to find a figure with long dark hair and wearing a nightgown standing over him.

The first thought that flowed through his mind was that vengeful spirit from one of those Japanese horror films the Americans kept remaking.

"Can I stay with you tonight?" the figure asked and Michele immediately recognized the voice.

"Kara? Are you okay?"

"I don't want to be alone," Kara answered.

The idea of sharing a bed with a 17-year old girl discomfited him, however as Michele's eyes adjusted, he could see his cyborg shivering so he flipped back the duvet and scooted back towards the wall to give Kara room. She sat on the bed and swung her legs in, something cold and hard smacking Michele in the shins.

"Batsu," Kara cursed, moving her legs back out and pulling off her boots before settling back in and pressing herself up against him. Even though he could feel her trembles, she didn't feel cold.

"Are you alright?" Michele asked.

Kara answered his question with one of her own.

"Did you know Beatrice and Silvia?"

"I met Beatrice once," Michele noted. He remembered the brown-haired girl walking in on him when he was in the main kitchen experimenting with a new dish. She'd just stood there watching him, her expression impassive and her speech curt and low, as if she could speak only so many words a day and had to ration them out.

Her stomach had grumbled and Michele invited her to be a taste tester, though he never knew if she inhaled her share because she found it delicious or because she was hungry and it was food. Bernardo arrived soon after and when Michele asked if everything was all right with his cyborg, he quietly explained to Michele that Beatrice's abilities required her to be so deeply conditioned that her responses were now almost robotic.

"Being of the first generation, they were both stronger than me. And yet they were killed," Kara noted.

"As strong as you are, your bodies are not designed to survive three anti-personnel mines or an anti-aircraft shell," Michele remarked.

The loss of both cyborgs had hit the Agency like a hammer blow. Having completed so many missions, the "murder machines" had developed an aura of invincibility and immortality – an aura Giacomo Dante had comprehensively smashed that afternoon.

Watching them in action, both handlers and staff had come to understand that they employed strategies that came from a different idea of what would be considered "an acceptable loss". To a cyborg like Kara, the possibility of losing a limb to successfully carry out a mission didn't matter to her, since she could have a replacement fitted. So while Michele might try and block a gunshot with his forearm out of instinct, Kara would do so as a tactic. She knew her body could tolerate damage far beyond what her original human body could, and she played that fact to her advantage.

Many thought the cyborgs did not know fear, and until tonight, Michele had been one of them. But it was clear that the girl cuddled next to him was indeed afraid.

"No matter what they say, everyone fears dying, Kara. It's not something to be ashamed of," he said.

"I don't fear dying, Michele, especially if it is to protect you. But I would hate if my dying makes you sad." She reached behind her and took Michele's arm, drawing it across her stomach.

"Marco always looks so depressed since Angelica died and I would hate it if Bernardo's ready smile and jovial attitude will now disappear," she noted.

Michele did not know what to say, so he could only offer his presence to comfort Kara. It seemed enough, as she soon settled into a deep sleep, Michele following moments later.

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The amount of sunlight leaking through the windows told Michele he'd overslept, but fortunately Director Lorenzo had cancelled all planned activities for the day. He felt refreshed, having slept more soundly than he could remember for some time. He felt Kara's warmth seep through her nightgown and his pajamas and smell her natural odor mixed with her perfume.

Part of him wanted to just slip back into sleep, but he felt he needed to get a start to the day. The problem was how to extricate himself without waking Kara...

His dilemma solved itself a moment later as Kara stirred into wakefulness.

"Good morning," she greeted as she turned her head to face Michele.

"Good morning," Michele replied. "Sleep in if you wish, but I need to get up."

"I feel great, actually," Kara replied. She slipped out of bed and stood, stretching her legs and arms.

"Are you free for breakfast?" Kara asked as Michele rose.

"I have a morning briefing," Michele replied. "How about we do lunch?"

"That works," Kara said. She came over and hugged him. "Thank you for last night. I was feeling a little down for a while, but I'm okay now."

"I'm glad to hear that," Michele said.

"I should be getting back to my room," Kara said, pulling on her boots and then opening the door to step out into the hall.

"Hold up," Michele called. He reached into his closet and removed his trench coat. Kara draped the trench over her arm and as she rounded the corner, Monty appeared coming the other way, a small travel case in one hand. Michele noticed her suit looked a bit rumpled, her tie undone and the suit jacket unbuttoned. Also, a few stray hairs were out of her place and her facial expression implied that her sleep had been short and neither deep nor refreshing.

"Good morning, Monty," he greeted. "Just get in, I take it?"

"Yes," Monty replied. In even less of a mood to chat than usual, she continued down the hall to the spare room she'd secured the keys to and quickly ducked inside, making a mental note about what she had seen.

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**HEADQUARTERS, UNITED STATES ARMY AFRICA  
CASERMA EDERLE  
VICENZA, ITALY  
TUESDAY**

"Mister Pagani? We're almost there, sir," Laine Brussard noted as she approached the Vicenza Est off-ramp of the A4. As the only other cyborg trained to drive a car (though at 17, she was too young to have a license), she'd been tasked to ferry Michele in his Ferrari 599GTB Fiorano HGTE because she could pass for an Italian and Kara could not.

"Thank you, Laine," Michele replied as he continued to review the paperwork in the leather portfolio spread open on his lap as he had been doing since they'd left Rome.

Even though she'd been behind the wheel for over three hours, Laine did not look forward to the end of the trip. British by birth, as was her handler Clayland Stanaway, she felt a strong affinity to her "cousins across The Pond", especially when it came to their cars. Like Walter Owen Bentley, Laine felt "there's no replacement for displacement" and she admired the huge V8 engines of the American "Muscle Car" era in the 1960s. That admiration extended to owning a 1969 Chevrolet Camaro Z/28 in yellow with black racing stripes on the hood.

So 600km behind the wheel of a 366 cubic inch V12 (Laine only referred to automobile engines in Imperial numbers out of habit) had been a real treat for her, doubly so in that Michele had told her to pay no attention to the 130km/h posted speed limit to ensure they were not late. She'd seen a few police vehicles, but they just waved at her as she blitzed past them. When she'd asked Michele, he'd replied that most of the traffic police let Italian supercars drive as fast as they wanted, provided they were not doing so in a dangerous fashion.

*What a great country,* she had thought.

The off-ramp merged with SR11, which ran north into the city proper. She entered the traffic loop that branched west on the Viale Camisano and pulled into the entrance to the Caserma Ederle post. She handed

their identification to the US Military Policeman manning the open gate and once cleared, drove forward and hung an immediate right into the visitor parking area.

Both Laine and Michele wore the standard issue Winter Uniform for the Italian Air Force, though Laine had chosen the knee-length skirt more commonly worn in summer, showing off her shapely legs, with black pumps. Michele's epaulets and cuffs had the one thick and three thin stripes of a Colonel, while Laine's wore the single thin stripe of a Second Lieutenant.

An American Army Sergeant walked forward to greet them.

"Welcome Colonel Pagani. If you'll follow me, Colonel Anderson will see you," he noted, handing them both Visitors badges that they clipped to their jacket lapels.

The two SWA agents followed the Sergeant into the building and to a small office decorated with the bric-a-brac and memorabilia collected over two decades of continuous military service. The Lieutenant Colonel who rose behind the desk wore the Army Combat Uniform for the base was also home to the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade Combat Team that was currently engaged in operations in Afghanistan.

"Welcome to Caserma Ederle," Colonel Anderson greeted, indicating the two Italian officers to take a seat.

"Thank you for receiving us," Michele replied.

"What can I do for you?" Anderson asked.

"I'm sure you are aware of the terrorist incident in Venice two days ago."

"Yes, terrible. I understand you lost an entire GIS team. My brothers in arms and I offer our condolences."

"Thank you," Michele said. He slipped a picture out from the portfolio and handed it to Anderson.

"A Black Hawk helicopter exfiltrated the terrorists. This looks like one of your Special Forces models," Michele noted.

"Yes, it does look like one of the older MH-60A models used by the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, but they were retired in the 1990s and handed over to National Guard units back in the States. None have been in active service for at least a decade."

"So then there is no chance this could be one of your birds?" Michele asked.

"No. The current models are the L and K and they have a refueling probe, which the model in this picture lacks," Anderson replied.

"What about export models?" Michele asked.

"Yes, we did sell Special Operations models to the Colombians and tried to sell them to the Australians. Then there is the standard combat model that has been sold to about two-dozen countries. The Japanese and Koreans also build them under license. Mounting a minigun in them is not a difficult proposition."

"Any chance those could make it into a third party's hands?" Michele asked.

"ITAR demands that any re-sale first be cleared by us..." Anderson replied, referring to the United States' International Traffic in Arms Regulations. "...but an airframe could be reported as written off in an accident and struck from the books, which would allow it to get out into the wild. It doesn't help that they make a civilian model, as well, which can be modified for military purposes."

Michele nodded his head.

"You were not able to enhance the picture to find any identifying marks?" Anderson asked.

"Unfortunately, the crime dramas on television tend to overplay the true level of that technology," Michele replied. "Thank you for seeing us, Colonel," he added, rising from his chair.

"I'm sorry I could not be of anymore assistance," Anderson noted, extending his hand for Michele to shake.

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"Well that was a bust," Laine noted as they walked back to the Ferrari.

"It was a long shot. An avalanche of shit is rolling down hill and Pieri and Jean are trying to escape from being buried so they're sending us on snipe hunts," Michele replied.

Even with the control the government held over the media, they couldn't keep a lid on the story that unfolded so violently in the Piazza San Marco in Venice. 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.

The attack raised hackles and concerns in a number of Italian Ministries, including Foreign Affairs, Economy and Finance, Interior, and Culture. 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. This had been the first time in a week Laine had seen something other than the inside of her room or the training areas.

"So what's next?" Laine asked.

"We go home," Michele replied. "I don't want to impose, but do you mind driving? I was up most of the night and I'd like to try and nap a bit."

"Of course, Colonel," Laine replied, pumping her fist out of his line of sight and dashing to the driver's side. Once they were strapped in, she started the car and headed for the gate.

As they joined the Autostrade, Michele powered his seatback as far as it would go and lowered the bill of his uniform cap over his eyes.

"Keep the speed under 200 and the radio volume under 5," Michele requested. He removed a pair of earplugs from the center console and inserted them. Within 10 minutes, he was asleep and Laine removed her iPod and a pair of earbud speakers from one of the uniform jacket pockets, allowing her to crank Katy Perry well past "5" as she slowly pressed down on the throttle and watched the needle climb towards the 200 km/h hash-mark.

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# TWENTY-ONE

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## **PUNTA LAGNO REGIONE CAMPANIA, ITALY THAT SAME TIME**

The Mercedes E350 Estate pulled off the Via 4 Novembre on the western coast of the Sorrento Peninsula, a few kilometers south of the town that the peninsula drew its name from. A forest of trees screened the villa beyond from the road, the only marker to its presence a large gate 50 meters up the road.

Inside the vehicle, Hilshire activated the Emergency Flashers and then remote opened the rear hatch while Triela and Kara exited from the second row bench seats. They went to the back and each grabbed a large backpack, which they slung over their shoulders. Both girls wore black denim jeans and shirts under black armored leather motorcycle jackets and brown hiking boots. Hilshire wore his usual dark suit.

"Radio check," he said and both girls nodded their earpieces were working. Each then spoke into their microphones and Hilshire verified he could hear them. With that, both girls disappeared into the trees.

Ten meters in they came to a three-meter high concrete wall, the dark grey tone allowing it to blend into the shadows thrown by the thick pines. Loops of razor wire covered the top, held in place by steel supports and all the branches had been cleared a meter back to prevent someone from using them to cross over.

"Do you see any cameras or other sensors?" Triela asked, her eyes roaming across the top of the wall.

"No," Kara replied after her own search. She shrugged out of her backpack and removed a pair of armored tactical gloves that she pulled on and then zipped up her jacket before stepping back ten meters and charging forward.

Kara went into a forward flip, compressing her legs as she landed and using them as springs to launch herself up almost four meters. She flipped upside down at the peak of the jump, coming down hands-first on the top of the wall, her gloves and jackets protecting her hands and arms as she crushed the razor wire. As she landed on the wall, Kara compressed her arms at the elbows and pushed off, performing a back flip and planting her landing, arms high like a gymnast who'd just known she'd won gold.

"I'm over," Kara reported. A moment later her backpack sailed over the wall and Kara trapped it against her chest like a soccer goalie would a ball. She removed a 30m length of high-tensile cord and tied one end to the trunk of a tree before sending the other end over the wall. Though it lay across the crushed razor wire, the cord was a composite of Kevlar and Spectra, making it highly cut-resistant and Triela had no problem scaling the wall and leaping off. Kara recovered the cord and replaced it in her backpack.

"We're heading to the gate," Triela reported and the two headed south, staying within the trees. When they were in visual contact with the gate, Kara pulled out a pair of binoculars, identifying both a wireless security camera and a wireless alarm system. Triela removed a jammer from her own backpack and armed it. Nodding to Kara, she activated it and the two girls rushed the gate. Triela ripped the anchoring mechanism out of the ground and Kara leapt up the wall, knocking the transmission antenna off.

As Triela threw the gate open, Hilshire's Mercedes drove through and Kara dived into the open rear hatch, scrambling into the rear-facing aft seat. Triela pulled the gates closed and quickly followed into the back with Kara.

Hilshire drove rapidly up the private road, knowing that the security forces would quickly respond to the loss of the signals from the security camera and gate alarm system. He reached the front drive and both girls spilled out the back, Triela wielding a Heckler & Koch MP7A1 and Kara her FN P90.

Two men in suits stormed out the door, reaching for the pistols inside their jackets. Triela and Kara reached them first and knocked them out and then charged into the villa, which spread across two floors. The girls split up, Triela staying on the ground floor while Kara headed for the stairs.

At the top of the stairs Kara found herself in an open area with a bedroom to her right and dual bathrooms to her left. From there, she entered a huge granary that extended the rest of the main structure, divided into two sections. The larger housed a living room, beyond a home cinema with stadium seating and a massive projection screen. Kara carefully continued on to the adjoining section, finding an office and then the master suite.

For Triela, the ceiling extended upwards through an open second floor of the grand reception room, a sitting room to the left and a large dining room to the right. She entered the kitchen and surprised two cooks. Using her PDW, she herded them into the walk-in pantry and closed the door, confident that they would not emerge for some time. She continued on across the open-air loggia into the annex building, finding staff quarters and the security office, where Triela surprised the last guard and knocked him unconscious. Kara had meanwhile descended the stairs.

"Did you find him?" Triela asked and Kara shook her head.

"Him" was one Nikolay Andreyevich Bushuyev, formerly a Procurement Officer of the 42nd Motor Rifle Division with the North Caucasus Military District of the Russian Ground Forces and now making a nice living as a broker of weapons, arranging deals between buyers and sellers as opposed to moving the material himself.

"Well Section One swears he's here," Triela noted. They went to the garage and found both his BMW X5 and Mercedes S63. Triela removed a small automatic knife from inside her left shoe and stabbed the front tires of each vehicle to immobilize them. They then started a second search of the villa, looking in the closets and under beds, but still finding nothing.

Finally, they went out to the pool area and in the shed where the supplies were kept, they found Bushuyev huddled on the floor.

"Что вы хотите?" he asked after Triela had dragged him out and plopped him a wrought iron chair with plush cushions.

"Sei italiano?" Hilshire asked and Bushuyev just stared at him.

"Dammit. You don't happen to speak Russian, do you Kara?" Hilshire asked rhetorically.

"Мало," she replied and stepped forward. "Меня зовут Кара, и у меня есть несколько вопросов."

"Я не могу вам помочь," Bushuyev replied.  
Hilshire looked to Kara.

"I told him my name was Kara and I said I had some questions for him."

"And?"

"He said he couldn't help me..." She turned to face him. "But I know you can," she noted, staying with Italian. "I'd prefer you do so without me having to hurt you beforehand."

"You are a very pretty girl, Kara, but you are also very young," Bushuyev noted, now speaking Italian as well. "And I am trained to accept a not insignificant modicum of discomfort," he said with a smile.

Kara went to one of the folding recliners next to the pool and proceeded to twist and bend the aluminum tubes into a roughly knotted shape before heaving it ten meters across the terrace.

"I know who you are now," Nikolay said, nodding his head sagely. "The PRF has said you were running young girls against them, but I assumed it was the talk of those who imbibed too much *vino* over dinner. I also hear that your girls tend to leave bodies in their wake."

"If we wanted you dead, Nikolay Bushuyev, your lungs would be full of either your own blood or pool water by now," Hilshire said.

"I am sorry, Mr. Government Man," Bushuyev replied, now speaking Italian, as well. "I am a retired Russian businessman enjoying the warmer and drier climate Venice offers this time of year compared to back home in Moscow."

"Nikolay Bushuyev, we know you broker weapons deals," Hilshire said, taking a chair across from him. "You know what happened in Venice?" he asked.

"Да. Terrible."

"Through forensics we identified the warhead as coming from an SS-N-27 cruise missile. You'd know it as the 3M-54E Klub anti-ship missile," Hilshire noted.

"Only the Indian Navy operates that type," Bushuyev noted. "It was designed as for their new frigates in an anti-ship role."

"We think it came via the Middle East via ship," Hilshire stated.

"Ship you say?" Bushuyev asked as he rubbed his chin.

"Spill," Kara demanded.

"Almaz-Antey, the builders of the Klub, have been marketing a covert attack system called "Klub-K" composed of four missiles and a transporter-erector concealed inside a standard 40 foot intermodal container."

"Four?" Hilshire asked. "Have they sold any of them?"

"Not to my knowledge, though I have heard countries like Iran and Venezuela have expressed strong interest," Bushuyev replied.

"But this Almaz-Antey company could have built one?"

"I guess," Bushuyev said. "You must understand that cruise missiles are a bit rich for most of my client's tastes and wallets. So I'm not as plugged in as you seem to think I am."

"Well thank you for your assistance, Nikolay Bushuyev," Hilshire noted. He turned to his cyborg. "Triela," he said and the blonde girl nodded her head.

Bushuyev's face took on a terrified expression. "Wait! I thought you said you did not want me dead!"

"And I don't. But I don't want you calling anyone for a bit."

Triela ripped a pool towel into strips and tied Bushuyev to his chair and then followed after her Hilshire and Kara.

---

"I didn't know you spoke Russian," Hilshire noted to Kara as they drove back up the peninsula to the Autostrade.

"I really don't. Petrushka and Olga taught me some phrases," Kara noted.

"You could always go with the programming option," Hilshire suggested.

When Angelica was created, she already spoke Italian at a fifth year primary school level. During the time she spent undergoing her surgeries and as part of her training, Angelica received additional instruction to bring her to a seventh year level. Rico, Henrietta, Beatrice, Elsa, Silvia and Chiara were also Italian nationals and spoke the language well.

When Hilshire found Triela, she spoke Arabic. However, with the long covalence and conversion period necessary due to her injuries and need to perform a deep wipe of her memories, there was time to teach her to read and write Italian.

As the last Generation One cyborg, Claes came to the Agency from Sweden and had no knowledge of Italian. With the cybernetic augmentation process streamlined, it became necessary to develop a way to quickly teach her to be able to communicate

in Italian. While the doctors could imprint the vocabulary and grammar rules on the girl's brains as they did with basic weapons information, this resulted in very stilted speaking more akin to machine translation output.

In consultation with linguistic experts, an "immersive" language-training program was developed similar to those used by various European Foreign Ministries to train their diplomatic staffs in a foreign language. Between that and the imprinting, Claes achieved a secondary school level of fluency in the language within weeks of first waking up. This process came in handy with the Second Generation girls, a number of who came from countries other than Italy.

"I think five languages are enough for now," Kara replied and Hilshire nodded his head.

Kara natively spoke French and Japanese, spoke English quite well and her visits to Chile with her father provided her with an average understanding of Spanish. She received the standard Italian training, though Michele added his own lessons to improve her comprehension and abilities, as well as keeping her conversant in French, English and Japanese.

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# TWENTY-TWO

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## SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCY ADMINISTRATION BUILDING THE FOLLOWING TUESDAY

When Michele entered the office that morning, Monty was at her desk, head down in a pile of paperwork, her ever-present French Press almost empty. He recognized both the yellow dress she wore and the white trench hanging on the coatrack as André Courrèges designs by their mixture of natural fibers and polyurethane. Her white go-go boots both complemented her outfit and paid honor to Courrèges style, as he would often include such boots with his outfits.

Michele thought, and not for the first time, that this staff girl definitely had the style to compliment her looks. He set his espresso cup and saucer on the desk and powered up his computer, a 27" iMac model he'd purchased at the Rome Apple Store to replace the standard PC. Interoperability was not an issue, as Microsoft offered their productivity suite for OS X and most of the government applications they worked with were web based.

"Can I refresh your cup?" Michele offered Monty ten minutes later. "Or would you like something stronger?" he asked, raising his own cup.

Monty shot him a look of mild disdain.

"No thank you," she replied. "I'm not a fan of the brown colored lukewarm caffeinated tap water that infernal automatic espresso machine dispenses."

A smile broke out on Michele's face. "I'm with you there. I mean what do the Japanese know about making fine coffee?"

Monty looked at him, a "do go on" look on her face.

"I mean they have Starbucks stores there," Michele replied and Monty repressed a shudder. So far, the American chain had yet to taint Italy's shores, though she'd heard Kara mention having something called a "caramel mocha" at a place called Arnold Coffee in Milan.

"I use the espresso machine in the cafeteria and act as my own barista so I know what I am getting," Michele assured her.

"In that case, I guess I will give it a try," Monty replied.

Michele nodded and left, returning 10 minutes later with a plastic tray on which were two espresso cups and a selection of biscotti.

Monty tentatively raised the cup to her lips and took a sip.

"Acceptable," she replied, though privately her opinion of the man rose a few more points.

"I'll take that as a complement," Michele teased, earning him a deadpan look from Monty.

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Sunset lay an hour in the past when Michele closed down his iMac.

"It is T-Three time," he noted, leaning back in his chair.

"T-Three?" Monty asked.

"Tanqueray Ten and Tonic," Michele replied.

Monty looked thoughtful for a moment. "Are you buying?"

"Certainly," Michele replied.

Monty closed her computer down and filed her paperwork before rising and grabbing her coat. In the parking lot, Michele unlocked the 599 and opened the passenger door for Monty, who handed him her coat and then elegantly slipped into the deeply bolstered seat. Michele closed the door and proceeded to the driver's side, flipping the seat forward so he could hang her coat behind him. He then settled into the driver's seat and headed into the city of Sora. The Ferrari wound its way through narrow roads, crossing the Liri River and pulling into a small lot next to a building with a wooden sign proclaiming the establishment as "The Final Final".

The two of them stepped inside a rustic Italian tavern, wood beams running across the roof, stone and mortar walls and wooden plank floors. A wood-burning stove put out a comfortable blanket of warmth and Monty and Michele settled at an open table, hanging their jackets over the back of the adjacent chairs.

"Welcome back, Colonel," the silver-haired proprietor stated as he came over.

"Two Tanqueray 10's and tonic please, Paulo," Michele ordered. Paulo nodded and headed back for the bar.

"You come here often?" Monty asked.

"It came recommended by the other handlers," Michele replied. Paulo returned with two highball glasses, which he placed before them along with a menu of snacks.

"Cheers," Michele said, raising his glass. Monty idly lifted her glass and then put it to her lips. The pleasant flush of alcohol diffusing through her body relaxed her features and posture ever so slightly.

"It's been a tough nine days," Michele noted, thinking about the events in Venice and their aftermath.

"Tell me about it," Monty replied, thinking about the Amsterdam lead that had been dropped in order to rush back to Rome. And then she'd been confined to the compound ever since, trying to stay away from the cyborgs.

"One of the plus sides about all these off-compound meetings is I've been able to duck Jean Croce," Michele joked, earning him a sour look from Monty, who had not been so lucky.

"On the flip side, Renato is climbing the walls so he's not been the best of company," Michele added.

"Renato?" Monty asked.

"Our beloved Prime Minister," Michele replied.

"You're on a first-name basis with the PM?" Monty asked.

"Renato and I go back to grade school," Michele replied.

Monty immediately added this little tidbit to her mental notebook entry for one Michele Pagani.

"Lorenzo and Croce should have seen it coming, though," Monty said a few moments later as she took another sip from her drink.

"How so?" Michele asked.

"How many sanctions have the Agency's cyborgs undertaken? Hundreds? With that kind of volume, they could never stay a secret. Rumors are rampant within Padania and the Five Republics that the government is sending young children to kill them and we're now hearing reports that they believe these kids are not entirely human.

"Twelve months ago, most of our opponents were armed with 9mm pistols. Now more and more are armed with assault rifles. They are learning and adapting to us, Michele. Dante is the extreme edge of the envelope with his anti-material rifle and anti-personal mines, but you can be sure the news of his success is filtering out through the criminal and terrorist underworld. And that means more and more of our opponents are going to improve their firepower."

"The classic arms race between Offense and Defense," Michele replied.

"Exactly," Monty agreed. "We've had the advantage in both categories since we started this fight and now our opposition, unable to improve their own defense, has raised their game in the offensive category to try and overwhelm our own defensive advantage."

"And we'll need to respond with new tactics," Michele noted.

Michele and Monty nursed their drinks in silence for a few moments.

"If you don't mind me asking, how did someone with your money join a secret counter-terrorism unit that uses cyborgs? Did you have a secret desire to live like James Bond?" Monty asked after Paulo arrived with fresh drinks.

"I saw a recruitment ad in the back of Better Lairs and Hideouts and it sounded exciting," Michele replied, earning him a scowl from Monty.

"Well I had planned to be retired and sailing the South Pacific on my yacht," Michele admitted. "But the Prime Minister boarded said yacht just before I left the Air Force and twisted my arm to become a handler. So here I am, though it's been harder than I expected."

"How so?" Monty asked. While human relationships were not her strong suit, she did like to know about any *fratello* she might find herself working with.

"Kara and I have only been partners for two months, so we're still learning things about each other," Michele noted.

"Partners?" Monty asked. "I thought the proper term was *fratello*."

"She's 17 and I'm 45. She's also Japanese - well half-French and half-Japanese, but the only time she shows her French side is when she cooks or curses," Michele said with a chuckle. "Between the age and nationality differences, nobody is going to believe we're brother and sister. Fortunately she can look like she's in her early 20's with the right make-up. We've also not exactly fit the...classical definition of how a *fratello* operate out in public.

"And now all the things happening as of late have put her off balance, I fear," Michele noted. "She has not responded well to my vigil over Angelica and working with other cyborgs and without her on missions. She's also not pleased I let Claes continue to use my room as her library. She tends to nap and once or twice Kara has come looking for me and found Claes asleep in my bed."

Monty thought back to the previous week and seeing Kara in her nightshirt leaving Michele's room.

"So it's intimacy problems?" she asked

Michele responded by choking down his drink. He was about to ask her what gave her such an idea, but then he realized what he'd been saying and he remembered last week, as well.

"Kara did share my bed that night, but in the literal sense. She was feeling her own mortality after the deaths of Beatrice and Silvia and she doesn't have a roommate to talk to."

Monty nodded her head in understanding. She and Jethro often shared the same bed when on a mission, but they always stayed on their respective halves.

"The first generation girls seem very...protective...of their handler's time," Monty noted. "And they all seem to be somewhat enamored of them, though the newer girls in general don't appear to suffer as badly from the same affliction."

Michele's interest was piqued by that last comment, but he decided to not pursue it. Instead, the two of them spent the next two hours discussing political hotspots, repercussions of the Venice incident, new tactics to counter the evolving offence/defense arms race, and Michele's thoughts on the other *fratelli*.

"Time to switch to water," Michele noted. "I need to make sure I'm in a condition to take us back," he added with a smile.

Monty nodded. "I am finished, as well, so you may as well close out the tab."

Michele waved one of the servers over and handed her his card.

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"Can you drop me off at the administration building?" Monty asked as they reached the main gate. "I left something behind."

"Certainly. I can wait for you to get it and then take you back to the Handler's Annex," Michele offered.

"Thank you, but I'll be fine."

---

After dropping Monty off, Michele returned to the Annex. He tried to sleep, but thoughts of Kara and his talk with Monty kept his mind too active. He rose and dressed, grabbing the keys to his 458 Italia, hoping a few laps of the Great Ring Road around Rome would help clear his mind.

As he drove past the administration building towards the main gate, he noticed that lights still burned in one of the windows.

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## TWENTY-THREE

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The storm that had blown in overnight and stalled against the mountains had by the afternoon been pushed up and over by an influx of fresh sea air and the sun now worked to dry the soaked grounds of the Social Welfare Agency compound.

Kara ventured out and crossed the parking lot to the Handler's Annex. When she reached the third floor, she saw a pair of black leather boots with a faint ring of mud around the edges outside Michele's door and she knew Claes must be inside. She crept up to the door and listened, but heard nothing. She tried the knob and found it unlocked, so she carefully twisted it open and pushed the door in.

As her eyes swept the room, Kara saw Claes asleep on the bed, lounging in a pool of sunlight like a cat, her jeans and dark sweater soaking up the ambient radiance. Michele's chair and desk showed no sign of recent occupation, so Kara carefully closed the door.

She looked down at the boots and lifted one of them up. She turned it over and saw the Sergio Rossi logo imprinted on the sole. While Jean could easily afford a €500 pair of boots for Claes, Kara also knew he'd never spend that kind of money on her. Kara also never recalled Claes wearing them until after Christmas, before then favoring a pair of brown leather boots with a knitted fold-over panel at the top. Confirmation that Michele purchased them came from the faint scent of polish – the same scent the Christian Louboutin boots she currently wore gave off.

Kara put the boot back down with its companion and slowly walked down the stairs and outside.

---

At the same time across the compound, Michele sat in one of the chairs in Pieri Lorenzo's office.

"In the aftermath of the Venice...incident...we have identified the need for a sniper role," Jean Croce noted from where he stood beside the Director.

"Isn't that Rico's role?" Michele asked, having seen the girl carrying around a large rifle around the compound.

"Rico's Druganov is designed for accuracy, however compared to modern sniper rifles it comes up short. It's also very large, which makes it hard to conceal. And if our opponents are moving to heavier caliber weapons, than so should we. To that end, I'd like you to look into anti-material rifles, as well."

Michele tried to hide his nervousness by rubbing the back of his head.

"Is there a problem, Colonel?" Director Lorenzo asked.

"Kara's been a bit moody and withdrawn as of late. And it's been affecting her marksmanship," Michele admitted. "Admittedly, I've not spent much time with her due to all the meetings in the wake of the Venice incident. And choosing Laine to accompany me to Vincenza instead of her didn't go over too well."

"Well you should endeavor to spend some more time with her," Jean stated and Michele nodded his understanding.

---

After his meeting, Michele returned to his room. He picked up Claes' boots and carried them across the threshold into his room. The boot's owner lay on her stomach, her legs idly kicking back and forth. Michele wondered if it was from happiness at reading, or just a way for a cyborg to burn off excess energy.

*"Buon pomeriggio, Claes."*

*"Buon pomeriggio, Colonello,"* Claes replied. She saw her boots in Michele's left hand. "Ah, thank you for bringing them in. I left them out in the hall so as to not leave mud in your room."

"That was considerate of you," Michele noted. He took out a leather cleaning kit and gave them a once-over.

"I should probably get going," Claes noted when he'd finished, taking the bookmark on the pillow and slipping it between the pages. She rolled over onto her back and Michele handed her a boot, which she pulled on, repeating the process with the other. She then rolled onto her side and swung her legs out, rising into a sitting position.

"Before you go, might I impose on your time for a few minutes?" Michele asked.

Claes nodded.

"You were the last of the original generation of cyborgs, correct?" Michele asked.

"Yes. I went active early last year," Claes replied.

"And yet you were never paired with a handler?"

Claes shook her head. "I was created to optimize the artificial components used in the first generation girls so that the doctors could have a baseline to develop the ones used in the next generation."

"And Jean serves as your...chaperone?"

"He provides for my needs and oversees my education," Claes replied.

"Were you...programmed...to have feelings for him?"

"No. I respect Jean. Even fear him, a little. But there are no feelings of affection," Claes stated.

"I'm told the new generation were not programmed to feel love for their handlers," Michele noted.

"I wouldn't know," Claes replied. "Though seeing how Petrushka hangs off her handler, I'd be a bit skeptical about that."

"Ah...thank you."

"Cyborg problems?" Claes asked a moment later.

"Am I that obvious?" Michele asked.

"It happens to every handler. In fact, you're behind schedule compared to many," Claes noted.

"I don't know whether I should be pleased or worried," Michele replied. "But yes, Kara has not responded well to the amount of time I have had to spend away from her and that I've needed to work with other cyborgs instead of with her."

"Cyborgs can be very jealous," Claes noted. "I've been told," she quickly added.

"Then I guess it's a good thing she doesn't know about me taking the Blacker Girl out to drinks last night," Michele noted, removing a bottle of water from his small refrigerator.

"Blacker Girl? You mean Monty?"

"That's the one," Michele replied.

"Jethro let you take his 14-year old girl out to drinks?" Claes said, her face and voice showing her surprise.

Michele choked down his water.

"Fourteen? We must be thinking of different people. My Monty has the desk across from me," he noted.

"Monty always uses her handler's desk," Claes replied. "He's usually busy discussing intelligence with Priscilla."

"Handler? Wait a minute. Are you saying that Monique Blacker is a *cyborg*?" Michele said, his voice and face taking on the same level of incredulousness as Claes'.

"She was the second of the new generation after Petrushka," Claes replied.

"About Kara's height? Dresses like it is the 1960s?" Michele asked and Claes nodded.

"You're not pulling my leg, are you?" Michele asked, a deep sinking sensation settling in his stomach.

This time, Claes shook her head.

"Fourteen?"

"So I heard at her time of conversion, which would put her around 16, I guess. She's not very sociable and tends to keep her distance from the others when on compound so it's not like I have had an opportunity to ask."

"And in case you were thinking of asking me out for drinks, I was converted at 12 and am now 13," Claes added a moment later, the barest hint of a smile tugging at the sides of her face.

"I've evidently already corrupted one youth..." Michele noted with a smile, reaching for the Moonstruck cocoa container and Claes settled back on the bed.

---

As he wanted to check on Kara, Michele escorted Claes back to the Cyborg Warehouse. As they entered through the main doors, Michele saw Fleccia rushing down the stairs. With her red hair and freckles, Michele thought she looked more Irish than Italian.

"Hello Mr. Pagani! Claes! Are you looking for Kara? I saw her out in the back."

"Thank you, Fleccia. If you'll excuse me, Claes."

Michele went back outside and walked along under the colonnade towards the back wall. As he rounded the corner, he could see Kara hunched over her MacBook Pro, her back to him. Michele moved back a bit, out of Kara's line of sight.

Kara tapped the keypad on the MacBook Pro and music started. She wore her white Prada blouse with a ruffled miniskirt in a purple so deep it was almost black and her black Christian Louboutin boots. Kara bounced on her knees as the music continued and when the music started in earnest, she started dancing.

The song was Japanese electronica and the female singer sounded like she was on helium to Michele's ears. However, he stood mesmerized by his cyborg's performance as she bounced around on roughly a square meter of terrace, her body motions as fluid as room temperature Mercury and pure happiness on her face as she lip-synched to the words.

Five minutes later, she finished her performance and as the music faded, she went still. Michele stepped forward and his cyborg's face went from exhilaration to trepidation and she lowered her head.

"That...was...amazing. You were amazing."

At her handler's praise, Kara's head snapped up.

"When I get depressed I like to do dance covers. It makes me feel better," she admitted.

"Dance covers?" Michele asked, not familiar with the term.

"Mimicking the dance moves of computer generated or animated characters."

"I see. Well, I found your movements beautiful, dazzling, even."

"*Honto ni?*" she asked

"Yes, really," Michele replied.

"*Arigato!*" Kara cried, rushing to Michele and giving him a hug.

"Watch the ribs, Kara," Michele admonished, but instead of lightening her hold, Kara merely stopped squeezing more. She'd been programmed with the general breaking point of various human bones and sockets and her artificial hearing was sharp enough to detect any micro-fractures starting to occur. She held the hug for fifteen seconds before releasing him, though it seemed like forever to her.

"I used to post them on the Internet before I became a cyborg. My boyfriend would shoot them with his video camera."

"I was able to convince Croce to let us out tonight for dinner so I wanted to see if you were interested," Michele noted.

"Yes!" Kara exclaimed, closing her laptop and placed it in the carrying case.

---

After a pleasant dinner in Rome, they returned to the compound and to Michele's room. There, Kara showed Michele her YouTube channel and the dance covers she'd used to do. One of them was the same song he'd seen her perform today, though in this one she danced in a public park in the fall, based on the thick layer of leaves in the ground and her outfit of a black dress over a white sweater with black boots. While shot only a year prior, she looked shorter and younger due to the lack of body and facial enhancements performed during her

conversion and her hair was straight and black as opposed to the current brownish-red.

While she showed the same full-body movement and happy expression, Michele could sense that this performance looked cruder than the one he'd witnessed today, which he put down to the finer motor-control and coordination the cybernetics allowed.

"You were pretty cute back then," Michele noted as he watched the 16-year old Kumari.

"What do you mean 'back then'?" Kara said with false gruffness.

"If I said you were really cute now, would that help?" Michele offered.

"It wouldn't hurt," Kara replied with a smile as she leaned against him.

"Thank you for today. I really had a good time. And I'm sorry for how I acted on Saturday," she added.

"You were scared. I saw Henrietta the other day and it was very uncomfortable. I don't know what the medical staff did to her, but I hope it is worth it because they destroyed her personality," Michele replied.

"She was the first girl to welcome me to the Agency," Kara noted. "She always seemed bubbly and happily, but there were times I could sense that lying underneath was something terrible waiting to get out."

"Okay, Kara. It is time for you to get ready for bed."

"I didn't bring my pajamas, so can I borrow one of your t-shirts?" Kara asked with the demurest smile she could on her face.

"Out," Michele said, pointing to the door.

"But I get cold at night," Kara complained.

"Then break out that duvet I bought you," Michele suggested.

"But you're so warm. Can you get under my covers for an hour to warm things up?"

"I'm sure your sisters would love that," Michele groused good-naturedly, though his mind went back to the misconception Monty had over the last time Kara has 'stayed over'.

"Okay. Good night, Michele," she said as she slipped off the bed and headed for the door.

"Good night, Kara. Sleep well."

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# TWENTY-FOUR

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THE WESTIN EXCELSIOR HOTEL  
FLORENCE, ITALY  
LATE JANUARY

"So what can three humble servants of the Republic do for the Minister of Defense?" Senator Arturo Corelli of Milan asked from his seat on the couch on the terrace of Michele Pagani's suite. To his right sat Deputy Renato Musto of Salerno and to his left was Senator Mauro Gozzi of Rome. These three men were, in a combined way, the "fathers" of not only the Social Welfare Agency, but also of Public Safety, Special Operations and the cyborg assassin program.

From an identical couch across from them, Monica Petris leaned forward, Elio Alboreto to her left. In armchairs at the each end of the table sat Pieri Lorenzo and Michele Pagani.

"As you know, the past fourteen months have seen us lose four of the first generation girls and one handler," the Minister of Defense began in her clear, cold voice. "We've already selected the final two candidates for the initial tranche of the second generation and are interviewing potential handlers.

"In addition to those losses, there was the unfortunate accidents with the cyborg Marina and Captain Raballo, which took Claes out of operation. That's effectively half of the first generation girls out of commission, so we feel we need an additional four *fratelli* to maintain our current level of operations," Monica finished.

"We're already having difficulty hiding your current budget," Corelli noted. "Unlike the Americans, we don't have the luxury of 'black' projects we can just throw a few billion into with nobody the wiser."

"Instead of adding more cyborgs, perhaps its time to re-think how you are employing the ones you have left," Gozzi suggested. "If our enemies are upgrading their armament and changing their tactics, perhaps the continued use of the girls as shock troops is now outdated. Throwing them into the meat grinder and hoping they'll break the blades no longer seems to be a prudent course of action."

"On that we are in agreement, Senator," Lorenzo stated. "We understand we need to revise our training and our tactics in response to this new threat. We are also moving to more specialized operatives: both of Mr. Alboreto's cyborgs were trained for undersea operations and Mr. Pagani's Kara will become a long-range sniper."

"So how much money are we talking about?" Corelli asked.

Monica gave her number and all three parliamentarians went ashen. The number also shocked Michele, who knew the cyborgs were expensive, but had not realized just how expensive.

"You do realize we're still digging ourselves out of a global financial crisis," Musto noted, sourly.

"I thought these new girls were supposed to be cheaper," Gozzi observed.

"Cheaper, but not cheap," Monica replied. "This also includes the handlers, training, equipment, support, and other ancillaries for a full year of operations."

"We've funded twenty girls already," Musto noted. "Now you ask for another four. While the girls have been very effective, we have other law enforcement operations that need to be addressed and groups that require funding to do so."

"Then how about some *quid pro quo*?" Elio offered. "We loan our...services...to help with some of those 'law enforcement issues' and in return you fund the new *fratelli*."

"When Renato pitched me this job, he noted that Padania were assisting the 'Ndrangheta in smuggling cocaine from Italy into the rest of the continent," Michele added. "From what I have read, we've had damn little luck in doing anything to stop it."

"Unlike those Hollywood films, the 'Ndrangheta do not have a 'godfather' running the show from the back of some *ristorante*," Corelli noted. "Each clan controls a specific area of territory and while most remain in Reggio Calabria, a few have settled in and around Milan, investing in businesses and residential properties. Walk the streets of Buccinasco, Corsico or Assago and you'd swear you were a thousand kilometers south in San Luca or Altomonte. The food; the culture; the dress; all reflect Cambrian tastes, not Lombardian. Add in weak law

enforcement and corrupt officials and they are a nut that has been very hard for us to crack.”

“So use a bigger hammer,” a small voice called out. Everyone looked over to where Marisa’s head peaked through the door leading into the suite.

“Marisa,” Elio growled. “What did I say about you not eavesdropping?”

“It wasn’t just me!” the redhead squeaked, pulling Kara into view with a tug.

“Sorry, Michele,” the older cyborg apologized, sheepishly.

“Are we going to get new sisters?” Marisa asked with a hint of excitement in her tone.

“I’ll tell you what you’ll get if you don’t go back inside and keep in touch with the security force,” Elio ordered.

Marisa gulped and disappeared back inside. Kara waved and closed the door behind her.

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Two hours later, Kara leaned over the terrace to look out on the Arno River. She heard footsteps behind her and turned to see Michele approach in a suit.

“How do I look?” his cyborg partner asked, wearing a blue long-sleeve turtleneck sweater, black miniskirt, black leggings and black dress boots. As an accent, she wore a huge gold necklace that fell just below her chest with ebony wood triangles and bronze plates.

“I’ll have to beat the boys off you with a stick,” Michele replied, earning him a beaming smile from Kara. She fell into step beside him and they walked into the suite’s main room. Already present were Senator Corelli, wearing the bespoke suit he’d arrived that afternoon in, now accompanied by a much younger woman in a designer dress and heels, whom Corelli introduced as Fiorina.

The four of them proceeded down to the lobby where they found Elio and Monica standing arm in arm, Marisa looking a bit uncomfortable next to them in a green and blue plaid dress with black Mary Jane shoes. Director Lorenzo had returned to Rome at the end of the

meeting, along with Senator Gozzi and Deputy Musto.

"That car should be hanging in the Uffizi Gallery," Monica noted as the valet brought up Michele's pearlescent white Alfa Romeo 8C Spyder.

"That's not a bad idea since, as a sports car, its rubbish," Kara replied. "Your M3 would probably crush it on the track. Mr. Alboreto. But I do look great behind the wheel," she added, in a tone of voice as if that forgave everything. Which, Elio had to admit, it did for he understood one bought an Alfa because they were beautiful, not because they were brilliant drives.

As Monica, Marisa, Senator Corelli and Fiorina settled into Elio's white BMW M3 E90 sedan, Kara slipped behind the wheel of the 8C and Michele took the passenger seat. Kara loaded their destination into the SatNav and proceeded along the north bank of the Arno River to the Via di Bianci, turning left and passing the Piazza and Basilica Santa Croce before turning right on the Via Ghibellina and pulling up to the Ristorante Enoteca Pinchiorri.

As she exited the 8C, Kara's attention was drawn to a silver Rolls-Royce Phantom, the chauffeur standing at what she thought of as "Parade Rest" next to it. She noticed another man in a dark suit walking the grounds and she could make out the outline of his shoulder holster under his open jacket and see the earpiece communicator. The restaurant door opened and the Prime Minister appeared.

"Good to see you again, Michele," he greeted. "And you must be Kara," he added, reaching out to kiss the top of her offered hand. "She is even more beautiful in person than her picture," he noted to Michele.

Kara blushed fiercely while Michele merely shook his head at his old schoolmate. The two of them stepped inside as the PM welcomed everyone else.

The restaurant was normally closed on a Sunday, but when the Prime Minister calls for a private dining experience, the restaurant owners were not about to deny him.

"This is where Kobe used to work, right?" Kara asked her handler, referring to Masahiko Kobe from the Japanese cooking show *Iron Chef*.

"Yes, he trained here before becoming Iron Chef Italian," Michele replied.

The maître d' escorted them to a table where a very attractive young blonde in a tight black dress with a diamond necklace sat. The PM introduced her to the rest of them.

"Everyone, this is Noelia. She's a Political Sciences student at the University of Naples Federico II and I've been giving her a hands-on view of the workings of the Palazzo Chigi."

The adults politely smiled, having read the claims in La Repubblica that Noelia was in fact finishing her final year of *Liceo Classico* at a private Neapolitan high school and would not enter University until next September, shortly after her 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. Renato's control over the Italian media, while strong, was not absolute and the guards outside the restaurant were there as much to keep the paparazzi away as Padania.

While no business would be discussed over the nine-course meal on account of Noelia and Fiorina, Senator Arturo Corelli knew this was a personal thank you from Prime Minister Pisano.

While Gozzi and Musto would be instrumental in pushing through the approval in their respective houses of Parliament of the legislation, as Chairman of the 5<sup>th</sup> Standing Committee (Economic Planning & Budget), Corelli would draft the legislation that would contain the monies to make it happen.

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"Did you show the Prime Minister my picture?" Kara asked as she drove along the Arno towards the Westin, thinking back to his comment when they first met at the restaurant.

"No, he was the one who showed me," Michele replied.

"I don't understand."

"I was preparing to retire from military service and he asked me to become a handler for a new cyborg. He handed me your dossier and picture."

"Dossier? You mean my background before I became a cyborg?" Kara asked.

Michele grunted in the affirmative.

"So you know about my past life?" she accused.

"Actually I don't. I looked at your picture, but not your dossier," Michele replied.

"Why not?" she asked.

"None of you girls came to the attention of the Agency for positive reasons," Michele replied. "Some of those back stories are merely sad, but others are truly horrific. I was afraid if I knew what happened to you to bring you into the program, I might have decided to accept you out of pity."

"But if I am here only because something horrible happened to me, are you not with me out of a sense of pity, anyway?" Kara asked.

*Hung by my own petard*, Michele said to himself. Kara turned into the Piazza Ognissanti and pulled up to the front of the hotel, sparing him from digging himself even deeper.

Arturo and Fiorina excused themselves to retire to their room. Elio suggested the adults wind down at the ORVM Bar and Kara and Marisa were sent upstairs.

"I understand you used to work for the Scuderia?" Monica asked after their *digestives* were brought. She'd seen the framed team pictures on the walls of Michele's yacht when she'd been aboard in September.

"Yes, from 1995 to 1999."

"I imagine Abu Dhabi was a bit of a letdown for you," Elio noted. Ferrari driver Fernando Alonso had entered the last race of the 2010 season with the lead in the Driver's Championship, but poor decision-making by the team resulted in an early pit stop that left him mired in mid-pack and unable to advance, costing him the title by four points.

"I figured we were out of contention by mid-season, so that Fernando and the team rebounded as strong as they did for the second half was satisfaction enough," Michele replied philosophically.

"What made you want to work in Formula One?" Monica asked.

"I was at Monza in 1988," Michele replied and he saw Elio nod his head in understanding. Enzo Ferrari had died some four weeks prior to the race and in an event many point to as proof of Divine Providence, race leader Ayrton Senna crashed into a back-marker, resulting in the Ferrari cars finishing first and second.

"My late father owned a bar in Monza. When Michael and Eddie came home 1-2 in 1998, we didn't even bother closing that evening and just kept going on through the night," Elio noted.

---

When he returned to his suite, he found Kara already asleep in the king-size bed. He undressed and changed into his pajamas, trying his best to not disturb her as he slipped under the covers on his side, the silvery moonlight reflecting off the Arno River to dance around the walls and ceiling.

He felt Kara stir.

"I'm sorry, did I wake you?" Michele asked.

"Please don't feel pity for me, Michele," she replied a moment later. "While something terrible might have brought us together, I remember enough of my life before I woke up in the hospital to know I lived a pleasant and fulfilling life. I shared my heart and body with a boy I loved, who felt the same about me. I travelled the world with my father and mother as they worked their jobs and I know they loved me."

"I'm glad that your memories are pleasant ones," Michele stated.

Kara rolled over to face him.

"And since I woke up in the hospital, my life has been just as pleasant and fulfilling with you. They may call Triela 'The Princess', but it is I am the one who feels like royalty."

"Thank you," Michele replied.

"You mentioned in the car you saw my picture. So you chose to be my handler based on my amazing cuteness, right?" Kara asked, giving Michele her widest smile.

"Of course," Michele replied, returning her smile.

"Can I have a back scratch?" Kara asked and Michele nodded. Kara rolled back over and Michele gently ran his fingernails across the top of her t-shirt until she fell deeply asleep.

---

Michele's iPhone started to vibrate across the nightstand and emit a heavy electric version of the opening riff to The Allman Brother's classic "Jessica" as used by the BBC2 motoring show *Top Gear*. From where he was sitting on the edge of the bed, he retrieved the device and when he saw the caller ID, quickly slid his thumb across the bottom to answer it.

"Yes, Minister?" he said.

"Are you and Kara still in Florence?" Prime Minister Renato Pisano asked on the other end.

"Yes. We were planning to head back to Rome this afternoon," Michele said.

"Excellent. I'm giving speech at the opening of a children's neural prostheses facility at the Meyer Children Hospital in about three hours. I'd appreciate it if the two of you would accompany me. We've received intelligence that Padania might try something, so I'd be more comfortable if one of Section 2's cyborgs was beside me."

"Of course, Renato," Michele replied.

"Thank you. I'm staying at the Palazzo Spini Feroni so can you meet me here in two hours?" the Prime Minister asked.

"We will be there," Michele stated and clicked off the call after the Prime Minister hanged up.

"We have a mission?" Kara asked from where she lounged on the other side of the bed.

"The Prime Minister is going to be giving a speech in a few hours and he wants us to be part of the security detail due to some possible threats."

"I don't have anything formal to wear," Kara noted, looking down at her t-shirt, black denim jeans and wool socks.

"What about the sweater and miniskirt you had last night?" Michele offered.

"But I've already been seen in that!" Kara cried.

"By only two of the people who will be present," Michele retorted.

"I'm going to be on television, Michele! I need to look my best!"

"You looked pretty darn good last night," Michele replied.

Kara's face blossomed in a smile. "Thank you, but..."

"Okay. Okay. We'll make a run through the Via Tornabuoni," Michele sighed, referring to the Florentine street where all the top fashion houses were located.

"Arigato!" Kara exclaimed as she rose to her knees and crossed the bed to hug him from behind.

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Wearing a new A-line dress in black wool, Kara waited in front of the Prada store for Michele to appear, plopping into the passenger seat of the Alfa.

Michele followed the SatNav instructions to the Palazzo Spini Feroni.

"Nice digs," Kara noted as they pulled up front.

"It's the private home of Salvatore Ferragamo. Lucky for me I happen to be wearing a pair of his shoes," Michele noted.

A member of the PM's Security Detail gave them instructions to the parking area in back. They parked the car and were escorted by another member to the guest residence.

"Thanks for the support," the PM said. He complimented Kara on her new outfit and shortly thereafter his Chief of Staff informed them it was time to leave for the hospital.

The three of them went down to the garage and boarded the Prime Minister's armored Rolls-Royce Phantom. The head of the Security

Detail slipped into the front passenger seat and spoke into a digital radio and the Phantom started forward.

Looking through the windshield, Michele noticed a dark black Land Rover Armored Discovery 3 directly in front of them and a dark black BMW X5 Security Plus behind. Moto Guzzi California Courassier motorcycles of the Diplomatic Protection Group cleared the path in front of the convoy and kept vehicles a safe distance behind as they made their way through the city. As they passed by the Giardino della Fortezza public park, Kara settled back into the plush bench seat and closed her eyes, a serene look coming over her face.

"Don't fall asleep on us, Kara," the Prime Minister joked.

"Sorry," Kara said as she straightened up. "I like this car. It is quiet and comfortable - a nice change from the sports cars we always drive in."

"I can get you a deal on one of these," the PM noted to Michele.

"I'm just not much of a sedan man," Michele admitted.

"There is always the coupe and convertible, if you feel you must show me up," the PM noted with a smile.

"Then again, I'd be scared driving such a large car through narrow streets," Kara admitted.

"I never thought I'd hear a cyborg express fear," the Prime Minister said.

"You never saw Kara around a spider," Michele replied with a soft chuckle and Kara shot Michele a dirty look for exposing her secret fear.

"That's why I always wear boots," she quickly recovered, pressing her right toe into the soft carpet, vanquishing a hypothetical arachnid foe.

The convoy passed the Giardino della Gherardesca and Kara asked Michele if they would have time to visit the various gardens. Everyone became more vigilant as they approached the hospital entrance. They exited into the building and were escorted to the rooftop terrace, where a makeshift platform and dais had been assembled along with chairs and an area for the press to film and photograph the event.

The Security Detail kept a sharp eye at the windows of the adjacent buildings, the most likely "ambush points" having already been secured by building security. While not visible under his crisply tailored suit, the Prime Minister wore body armor of the same CFRP weave used on the cyborgs protecting his chest, arms and legs against even high-powered rifle rounds. While there was always risk of a headshot, center mass targeting was easier and it was hoped the lack of visible bulky body armor might trick a sniper into thinking he was only protected against small arms.

The Prime Minister moved to the dais, Michele and Kara taking up a position to his left. A dozen children lined up around the dais, along with the senior Doctors and hospital staff. The press began recording and the Prime Minister started his speech, reflecting on how the Social Welfare Agency continued to raise the standard of living of those suffering from physical disabilities and how they would bring new treatments to the children of Tuscany and Italy.

As the speech droned on, Kara maintained her own observations of the crowd and the buildings around her. Her eyes were drawn to a glint of light from a multi-story residential building across a train right of way and city bus lot. She squinted to make sure it wasn't just a reflection off an opening window, and again she saw the glint. While not possessed of telescopic vision, her eyesight could resolve objects with better clarity than a human eye and when the glint stopped moving and steadied, her brain quickly made the connection that she was most likely observing the reflection off of a targeting scope.

Kara turned and clumsily faked catching her foot on the edge of the platform, causing her to fall forward into Michele. As she did, she used her strength to accelerate his momentum so that he collapsed into the Prime Minister and the two of them fell over, arms flailing. A moment later, the wall behind them erupted in a burst of concrete dust as the high-powered rifle bullet buried itself into it, the crack of the supersonic shockwave arriving milliseconds later.

It took the crowd a moment to realize that someone had just taken a shot at the Prime Minister, but when they did, pandemonium broke out. Kara dragged Michele and the PM by their legs back behind the armored dais, but no second shot followed.

It took some time to settle everyone and the speech was moved inside to the main conference room, which had no windows. The press, whom were more eager to report on the attempted assassination than the PR

event, fidgeted in agitation as the PM repeated his speech, his voice steady and his countenance looking as if nothing had happened. Once he completed his speech, the press immediately broke down their gear and rushed outside to their satellite trucks to renew their on-site reporting.

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister and the Pagani *fratelli* boarded the Rolls in the underground parking garage and headed for the Westin, now with additional Carabinieri protection in the form of two Alfa 166s.

"Thank you, Kara," the Prime Minister stated.

"Jesus, Renato. You weren't kidding, were you?" Michele asked.

"Occupational hazard," Renato replied. "Hopefully I'll see a bit of a sympathy boost in the polls from that footage. Or at least push Noelia back below the fold."

"Vitorria eventually is going to cut you loose if you keep this...nonsense...up," Michele admonished, referring to Renato's second wife of 20 years.

"Oh I'm sure she has the divorce papers already drawn up. She's just waiting for her leftist friends to decide when it would be most embarrassing to me to serve them," Renato replied.

Kara did her best to be invisible as the two friends talked until the Rolls-Royce pulled in front of the Westin Excelsior and Kara and Michele bid the Prime Minister a safe journey back to Rome.

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In their suite, Kara changed out of her new dress and back into sweater and jeans, replacing her dress boots with a pair of Prada lace-up sneakers in cream leather. Michele removed his tie and exchanged his suit jacket for an Armani sweater with a dot pattern in chenille and olive against a forest green.

They hailed a cab to the Boboli Gardens and the two walked the grounds, enjoying the sun that helped moderate the temperature.

After a couple of hours at Boboli and the adjoining Giardino Torrigiani gardens, they visited the Uffizi Museum and then returned to the hotel to pick up the car and head back to Rome.

"I thought we'd take the Via Aurelia highway?" Michele offered as they started out, referring to the coastal highway that ran from Pisa to Rome. Built in 421 BC, the road has been upgraded to State Route 1 and there were plans to eventually upgrade it to a full Autostrade. Kara vigorously nodded her head in the affirmative and spent the trip with the window down and her gaze fixed on the ocean. They stopped over in the seaside commune of Follonica for a late lunch and Kara removed her sneakers and socks and ran along the beach, seemingly immune to the cold winter winds and even colder water. Kara took over the driving, wringing out the Alfa in the sweeping curves and long straights where traffic permitted, pulling into the compound after dusk.

The two said their goodnights in the parking area and headed for their respective rooms.

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# TWENTY-SIX

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**CYBORG WAREHOUSE  
WEDNESDAY**

Kara dressed for a day at the outdoor range in her tactical outfit and combat boots. Once complete, she walked over to the main cafeteria where she met Michele and the two consumed a hearty breakfast. Afterwards, they drove one of the staff Fiat Panda Cross MPVs around the back of the Armory Building and parked in front of the loading dock. Michele rang the bell and a few moments later the thick steel door rolled up into the roof and one of the staffers waved.

"Morning, Mister Pagani! We have your weapons as requested," he noted, pointing to a wheeled cart on which half a score of long rifle cases were stacked. "You'll want to let your cyborg do most of the heavy lifting," he added.

Michele nodded and Kara started to load cases as Michele verified the weapons on the list and signed for them and the ammunition. He offered to help Kara, but she noted it was under control so Michele returned to the passenger seat and waited for Kara to finish.

As the SWA did not have a dedicated sniper range, it was necessary for Kara to drive 75km south to the Frosinone Provincial Command of the Carabinieri. While the Gruppo di Intervento Speciale, known around the world by their acronym "GIS", were garrisoned in Livorno, outside of Pisa, Frosinone had been modified to serve as a training area and included an Urban Operations site and a dedicated sniper range.

Once checked in, Kara drove past the primary firing range and up a 20m high dirt hill where both an open area and a low and wide concrete wall were present. This hill had been created to reproduce the height of a sixth-story building and included different types of concrete arches that reflected the various common styles of windows in Italian architecture.

"Do we really need to fire all these?" Kara asked as she looked at the back of the Panda.

"I want you to find a weapon that is comfortable," Michele noted.

"Thanks," Kara replied, though her appreciation sounded only half-hearted to Michele.

"Try this one first, please," Michele said, pointing to a case in the second row. "This is the AMP Technical Services DSR-1 Subsonic model, firing subsonic 7.62x51mm NATO."

Kara removed the case and opened it. "Bolt action. I appreciate your faith in me."

"I considered semi-automatic, but practice makes perfect so I'm confident you'll move beyond the 'one magazine, one kill' stage soon enough," Michele noted with a chuckle.

"Says the man who can sit in a warm car while his poor cyborg cycles rounds in sleet and snow," Kara replied with a false pout.

"Whenever you're ready," Michele replied, placing on hearing protection. Kara added her own protection and proceeded to prepare the weapon for firing. She then attached a scope from Hensoldt, the military and law enforcement equipment division of Carl Zeiss Optics, and inserted the five-round magazine, loaded with subsonic rounds.

Kara and Michele both verified the range was clear and settled in. As the focus of today was just to get a feel for the various rifles, Michele would remain a passive observer and Kara would not be judged on accuracy.

"This scope is amazing," Kara noted to herself as she dialed in the target. The sniper area had 10 targets, each offset from the preceding one and 100 meters apart, allowing clear fields of fire to each. Due to the low velocity of the round, Kara focused on the target 200m away. She laid down a blanket on the top of the concrete wall and then placed the tripod on the blanket. She put the rifle to her shoulder, adjusted the position for comfort, centered the scope on the target, and fired. She cycled the bolt and fired again, repeating the process until all five bullets had been expended.

"Opinion?" Michele asked.

"I like it," Kara replied. "There is no recoil - well, no recoil for a cyborg. I also like the dimensions. It's no PDW, but it is compact for a

sniper rifle. I'll need to be pretty close to the target, but for urban operations where visual and sonic stealth is important, I think it will be excellent."

"Okay," Michele noted, making a note on the list next to the weapon.

Kara removed the scope and attached it to the next rifle – an Accuracy International Arctic Warfare Covert. Like the DSR-1, the AWC was a suppressed weapon and employed sub-sonic 7.62x51mm NATO rounds and was similarly limited to sub-300 meter engagements.

"This is a nice weapon, as well. And the larger magazine could come in handy," Kara noted. She set it aside and went for the next one.

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"Now it's time for the 'reach out and touch someone' class of weapons," Michele replied once Kara had gone through the various suppressed models.

"The first is the PGM Hecate II. It is the big brother to the PGM Ultima Ratio sniper rifle you tried earlier," he stated.

"Big brother indeed," Kara noted as she examined the 1.4 meter length and tested the 14kg weight. She slapped home a 7-round magazine of .50 BMG rounds and dialed in the SCROME LTE J10 F1 10-power sight. She squeezed the trigger and the gun barked, though the huge muzzle brake significantly dampened the recoil. The round lanced out and smacked home in a stack of cinderblocks with traumatic effect.

"Impressive. Most impressive," Kara said. She cycled the bolt and took aim again, repeating the process until the magazine was empty and the cinderblocks were a pile of dust and chunks.

"Well it certainly leaves an impression," Kara noted. "However, if were thinking of a suppressive fire mission, a semi-automatic model would probably be more effective."

"I agree. Give this one a try," Michele said. "This is the Barrett XM500. It's still in development, but if you like it, we can keep it and get manufacturer support for it."

"It's shorter and lighter than the PGM," Kara noted. "I like the bullpup design, as well."

She settled down and fired off all 10 rounds in quick succession, each round landing square in another stack of cinderblocks, gouging large craters into them.

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"And the winners are?" Michele asked after Kara had tried all of the various weapons.

"For the suppressed weapon, I want the DSR-1. And for the anti-material role, I believe the XM500 is best."

"Okay, let's set those aside and pack up everything else," Michele ordered.

When they returned to the armory, Michele filled out the paperwork to transfer the two weapons they'd selected over to their *fratello*. They then drove back to the Cyborg Warehouse and carried them up to Kara's room.

"So where should we store these?" Michele asked.

"Triela puts her shotgun in a dresser drawer," Kara commented.

"I guess we can store them upright in the wardrobe," Michele decided. Kara slid open the door to section where she hung her jackets and robe and placed both cases against the back wall.

"I need to head to the office to file my report on Florence and then meet with Jean and Director Lorenzo. I should be free for dinner so I'll text you and we can meet in the cafeteria."

"It's Wacky Wednesday," Kara noted, referring to the fusion chefs who worked the cafeteria on Wednesday and their often...unique...culinary combinations.

"Okay, let me see if I can get you an off-campus pass," Michele said.

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# TWENTY-SEVEN

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AUTOSTRADA 24  
EAST OF THE GRANDE RACCORDO ANULARE  
TUESDAY

"You've got to be kidding me," Kara sighed as she saw the Carabinieri officer step into the road and hold up a small paddle. She looked down at the speedometer and saw the needle covering the 200km/h mark.

Kara lifted off the throttle and hit the button to activate the Emergency Flashers. She then applied the brakes and pulled the black Lamborghini Murciélago Roadster off onto the shoulder, coming to a stop twenty meters ahead of the black and white Alfa 159.

In the left-hand mirror, she watched the approach of the young Carabinieri officer, looking sharp in his peaked cap, polished jackboots and white bandolier across his uniform jacket. *Kinda cute*, she thought to herself, fluffing open the top of her dress shirt and scooting in the seat to hike up the hemline of her skirt.

Kara flashed him her largest smile and the officer returned it. He then proceeded to read her the riot act for driving 70km/h over the posted limit and Kara did her best to look sheepish and properly chastised under his verbal assault. When he'd finished his speech, he asked for her identity card, license and registration.

"Of course, officer," Kara replied. She rose out of her seat and leaned behind the passenger seat to recover her leather clutch, making sure the officer could get a good look at her exposed upper thighs. She removed her identity card and license, handing them over to the officer, before retrieving the registration from the center console. The officer took them and returned to his vehicle.

"That was amazing!" the woman in the passenger seat exclaimed in Yorkshire-accented British English. "I couldn't tell if he was angry at you or reciting Act 2 of Rigoletto."

"Oh he was angry at me," Kara replied, also in English. She privately hoped her little exhibition would get her out of a citation.

Within a few minutes the officer returned. Even though she'd celebrated her 17<sup>th</sup> birthday the week before, and therefore legally was not permitted to drive, Kara's identity card and license showed her as having just celebrated her 20<sup>th</sup>. Both were legitimate, thanks to some "special paperwork", and when Michele decided to give Kara the primary driving duties, he had her added to the registration for the Murciélago and the Ferrari 599 and 458.

After returning her documents, the officer noted that he would cite her for "only" doing 35 over and that she should expect the notification of the fine in the mail within the next 90 days. He then instructed her to be more careful and returned to his car to complete the paperwork.

"So how bad is it?" the woman asked.

"He only fined me for doing 35. Still, my partner is going to skin me alive, first for being late and second for racking up a fine. And please don't mention anything about me trying to charm my way out it," Kara added.

"My dear, this pair has saved me literally hundreds of quid in dealings with the Rozzers," the woman replied with a smile and Kara felt a slight twinge of envy at how the woman's ample bosom stretched the fabric of her blouse.

Kara started the Lamborghini, waited for a break in traffic, and motored back onto the highway, making sure to stay at least 10km/h under the posted speed limit.

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Kara turned onto the long bridge leading to the Social Welfare Agency complex and after clearing the gate, pulled into a reserved parking spot in front of the Administration building. She cringed when she saw her handler and Jean Croce standing at the top of the steps, the former with a questioning look on his face and the latter sporting his usual scowl.

"Welcome, Miss Palmer," Jean stated as he approached, his smile looking fake and insincere even though it was neither. "I'm Jean Croce, Field Director for Special Operations, Section 2."

"Thank you, Mister Croce," Naomi Palmer, Targeting Officer with the British Secret Intelligence Service replied. She turned to Michele and waved.

"If you will follow me, I will take you to Director Lorenzo," Jean said and started back up the steps. Michele hung back a bit until the pair was out of earshot and then started up the stairs, Kara at his side.

"What happened?" he whispered, knowing his cyborg could hear him.

"The Carabinieri happened," Kara replied, sourly.

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Long after a country officially left Britain's sphere of influence, a large population of expatriates left behind provided a steady stream of intelligence back to the Home Country, and this axiom applied to the Arab Republic of Egypt.

Normally such intelligence would have flowed through official channels between the British and Italian Governments. However, due to the sensitive nature of the events in Venice, it had been decided to fly Naomi direct from London to present her information in person. Now seated in a chair in Director Lorenzo's office, she removed a binder from her briefcase and started her report. Also present were Michele and Elio Alboreto.

"We've learned from the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate that Giacomo Dante was recently in Egypt. We know he had compatriots who helped smuggle him out when he escaped from Egyptian custody a few years back with that attack on the patrol boat. It's possible those same people sheltered him now."

"Do we have any more on where he got the missiles?" Jean asked next.

"Five nations use the SS-N-27 and all of them have the land attack 3M-14E version. All claim that they're not missing any, but we have our doubts they completed a comprehensive inventory. Our best guess is they came either from Russia via one of the 'Stans or Algeria."

"I have a contact in the DGSE who is checking out the Algeria angle," Michele reported.

Naomi nodded. "We also made inquiries with Morinformsystem-Agat in regards to the 'Klub-K', which is a cruise missile system using four 3M-54TE missiles and a control room inside a standard 40-foot shipping container. They showed off a physical prototype at the MAKS air show

last August and while they claim to not have any orders, they have stated there has been significant foreign interest.”

“One of our agents on the scene stated that they only saw the warhead section,” Elio remarked. “The booster and cruise parts are of no use to him and would just be dead weight to carry around, making smuggling more difficult.”

“Our people agree,” Naomi concurred. “The SS-N-27 is a modular system, designed to allow warheads and propulsion sections to be interchanged. It’s possible he just purchased the warheads, or he bought the entire system and then discarded what he didn’t need.

“Alexandria is the largest port in Egypt, handling some 75% of the country’s foreign trade. There are literally thousands of cargo vessels of all types and it would not be difficult to charter one, especially ‘under the table’. The most logical scenario is that the warheads were shipped to Egypt and placed into an intermodal container before being loaded on a ship. Doing so via Algeria would have been easier, logistically, but a ship could have rounded the Arabian Peninsula and docked along one of the Red Sea ports or transited through the Suez Canal.”

“If it was smuggled through one of the ‘Stans, they could have sent it across the Caspian Sea to Russia or Georgia or even Turkey. Once on the Black Sea, it could have been sailed across the Aegean Sea and then right up the Adriatic to Venice,” Michele noted.

“Too many options,” Jean spat. “We don’t have the manpower to chase down all these possibilities.”

“We believe that Dante and his team travelled with the ship. He could have sailed directly into Venice or perhaps a smaller port like Ravenna and then either trucked it up the rest of the way or perhaps transferred it via a smaller boat. That way he could avoid a traffic stop that might have exposed his cargo.”

“Any idea where his other warheads are?” Lorenzo asked. The last briefing he had received from Public Safety believed they were still in the Middle East.

“We’re shaking the bushes across the Middle East, but so far nothing,” Naomi admitted. “This assumes they really are there and not in Algeria or Libya or even Chad.”

"Or here," Michele noted. "His chopper was last seen heading south towards Adria. 5<sup>o</sup> Stormo sent up an F-16, but didn't find anything."

The meeting continued on, branching into areas like how Dante could secure the funding to purchase upwards of six cruise missile warheads and buy or rent a military utility chopper. The Guardia di Finanza had been pouring over known and suspected Padania and Five Republics funding sources as well as trying to discover where Dante and his associates had entered the country. Those associates killed in Venice had been identified and Section 1 and 2 operatives were working to track down and collect all the information they could on them, hoping it might lead them to Dante and his sponsors.

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"So how'd you end up back with AISE?" Naomi asked Michele, using the acronym for the Agenzia Informazioni e Sicurezza Esterna, Italy's external intelligence agency and successor to SISMI, which Michele once worked for. As Naomi was not cleared to know about the true identity of Section 2, she'd been told they were part of AISE. "I thought you were going to retire?"

"That was the plan, but 'best laid plans' and all that..." Michele joked as he refilled her wine glass, the two enjoying dinner at La Pergola, the fading sun providing a golden glow over the Eternal City spread out below them

"AISE must pay pretty well. In addition to your Lamborghini I saw two Mercedes, a Jaguar, a Porsche and a Maserati in the parking lot. Even Sir Charles only drives a Jaguar," she noted, referring to the current head of the SIS.

"The advantages of a black budget," Michele joked.

"Did you ever buy that boat?" Naomi asked.

"Yes. A 37m Sunseeker; she's moored up in Genoa."

"You wouldn't happen to still be single, would you?" she grinned.

"I'm kind of in a relationship at the moment," Michele replied, also smiling.

"Kara?" Naomi asked and Michele nodded.

"She's very pretty, if a bit young," Naomi teased. She herself was eight years younger than Michele. "How long have you two been together?"

"A few months," Michele replied.

"I guess the Italians are a bit looser than us Brits about workplace romances," Naomi observed.

"There are benefits to keeping things 'within the family' when said family are a bunch of spooks", Michele noted.

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"How long have you and Naomi known each other?" Kara asked later that night in the hills to the east of the compound, trying to keep her tone conversational and not accusatory.

"We met a number of years back when I was with SMSI Division II. She was a staff analyst with the Royal Air Force at the time," Michele answered. After dinner, he'd driven Naomi to Fiumicino to catch her return flight to London. When he'd returned, he found his cyborg sitting on the stairs outside the Handler's Annex. She'd traded her business suit for jeans tucked into knee-high leather boots, a sweater and a canvas trench coat. Her telescope stood on its stand next to her.

"Were you two an item back then?" Kara asked. When Michele replied with a tired scowl, she switched gears.

"What do you think he'll do next?" she asked, referring to Giacomo Dante.

"I don't know," Michele admitted. "Assuming he really has additional warheads, he could try the same in Milan, Naples or Rome, but the military police have beefed up patrols and surveillance around major tourist and cultural sites. If I had to guess, he'll lay low for a bit and let the bees he kicked return to the hive. The Prime Minister is putting a ton of pressure on Defense and Interior to find Dante and they in turn are pressuring all their subordinate divisions – including us.

"On that note, I want us both to spend some time at the outdoor range and the obstacle course tomorrow," Michele noted.

Kara nodded, but inside she cringed. While the weather today was cold and clear, she knew a storm front was coming which would bring temperatures barely in the teens and plenty of rain.

Michele stretched, alternatively shrugging his shoulders to work out the kinks.

"So what's this about the Carabinieri?" he asked.

This time, Kara cringed on the outside.

"It was coming back from the airport with Miss Palmer. The officer cited me for doing 35 over the limit."

"I'm surprised he bothered pulling you over," Michele said. He'd been the one to tell her that Italian traffic police generally ignored supercars that were speeding within reason.

"Well that is what he cited me for. I was going a bit faster when he flagged me down," Kara admitted.

"Define 'a bit'," Michele said.

"200 in a 130," Kara said, sheepishly.

The scowl came back.

"Sorry?" Kara offered, putting on her most demure smile.

"We'll discuss this again when the fine arrives," Michele stated. He turned to where the other girls stood around both Kara's and Henrietta's telescopes. The air temperature hovered around zero, but the cold air acted as a magnifier and the stars and constellations fairly leapt out against the black background. Claes had replaced her paper maps with Michele's iPad and a GPS-enabled star-tracking program, her facial features illuminated in the glow of the display as the girls lined up for their turn behind the eyepiece.

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## TWENTY-EIGHT

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SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCY  
HANDLER'S ANNEX  
THURSDAY NIGHT

The soles of Kara's boots pounded a staccato beat as she raced up the stairs of the handler's annex and rushed to Michele's door. She flung it open and rushed into his room.

"They reconditioned her!" she cried. "I thought it was just a joke or said to scare us into behaving. But he did it! He actually did it!"

Michele, sitting on the bed, looked at his cyborg. She was in a state between distress and outright panic, tears streaming down her face as she gripped the hem of the long-sleeve t-shirt she wore over her frilled black miniskirt.

"Please don't recondition me! If I've done something wrong, I'll fix it! I'll study harder! I'll train harder! Just don't turn me into...into...her!"

"What are you talking about?" Michele demanded.

"Henrietta! Jose reconditioned her! She's...she's *different* now."

"I don't understand," Michele said.

"I saw her in the hall. She looked right through me, like I wasn't there. I said hello and she just stared at me for a moment, and then walked on towards her room. It was *horrible*, Michele. She was like a zombie in those film's Laine watches. Please don't make me like that. I beg you!"

She came forward and threw herself against Michele, knocking him back onto the bed. She clutched at his chest, tears streaming down her face.

"Kara, what are you talking about? Kara!" He fought to push her off him, rolling over onto his side and sliding her off. She clutched at his right arm, pulling it against her chest as she continued to sob. Michele

used his left hand to stroke her hair, saying soothing words to comfort her.

"Now tell me, what happened to Henrietta?" he asked.

"She's like Beatrice was," Kara said, recovering. "Unemotional. Robotic. Triela said Jose took her to the medical section for some 'treatment'. I know he did it because she made a mistake at Venice and he was hurt and he doesn't like her any more. You like me, don't you Michele?"

"Of course I like you. And I know things have been unsettling the past month, but I'm really starting to worry about you," Michele said.

"You spend so much time away from me that I'm worried you no longer want to be *fratello*," Kara replied, tears forming in her eyes again. "You abandoned me for Angelica when she was hurt. You asked for Laine to accompany you to Vincenza and sent me with Hilshire to interrogate that Russian arms dealer rather than come yourself. You let Claes use this room and even let her sleep in your bed when you're away."

Michele gently took her head into her hands and looked her in the eyes.

"Kara, I am not going to re-condition you. And I am not going to replace you. We are partners and we're going to stay partners. We have a *pactio*. But sometimes, partners have to work...well, apart. Laine went with me to Vincenza because I needed someone who could pass for an Italian. Hilshire needed support and I believed, correctly, that you were capable of providing that support. There will be times when we won't be together. When that happens, it is because it is necessary and only because it is necessary. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Kara said, wiping her cheeks with the sleeve of her shirt.

"I'll talk to Jose in the morning about Henrietta. There has been a lot of pressure coming down from above on us handlers and you know how she dotes on him. She might have just been preoccupied with her own worries and fears. I'll walk you back to your room," Michele stated, moving off the bed. Kara unfolded herself and rose to her feet. Michele put out his hand and Kara eagerly grabbed it.

"I do care about you, Kara. Never doubt that," Michele said, giving her hand a squeeze.

"Hai, *senpai*," Kara replied.

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## TWENTY-NINE

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### BORDER OF EMILIA-ROMAGNA AND VENETO NORTHEASTERN ITALY SATURDAY AFTERNOON

The A13 ran straight and true between Bologna and Ferrara and behind the wheel of his Lamborghini Murciélago Roadster, Michele Pagani took advantage of that to quickly cover the kilometers. In the passenger seat, Kara sulked at the unfairness of it all. After her run-in with the Carabinieri, Michele “grounded” her driving privileges for two weeks, and yet here he was blitzing along at well over the posted limit.

What truly annoyed her was a Lamborghini Gallardo LP560-4 of the Polizia Stradale had pulled up as they approached Florence. She’d privately smiled at the thought of him getting an even larger fine than herself, but Michele had merely pulled out his wallet and flashed something to the officer, who then not only immediately apologized for delaying him, but said he’d radio ahead to ensure he was not stopped by any other law enforcement teams working the A1 or A13.

They exited the A13 at the Boara on-ramp, which dumped them onto SS16, which they followed south to SR443, taking that road east through a succession of housing developments, farmland, and industrial parks to the commune of Adria. They switched to SR516 and drove southeast and then backtracked west across the Adige River, parking in an alley behind an apartment complex across the main street running in front of the shipyard.

“Call Vesper,” Michele stated and the Lamborghini’s audio system started dialing.

“About time,” Monty Blacker’s voice emerged from the car’s speakers.

“We’re in position,” Michele noted.

“Understood; switch to the DRs; Alpha Echo,” Monty instructed.

Michele pushed the button to open the luggage compartment and he and Kara exited the car. Michele removed a small case that held two digital radios and headsets. Both set the channel to 15 (Alpha Echo

referred to the letters A and E, which were the first and fifth letters of the Roman alphabet). Operating on the TETRA system used by EU government, emergency, transport and military services, these radios also employed end-to-end encryption in addition to the standard air-interface encryption schema, as the Agency could not be sure that Dante did not have the ability to monitor the TETRA bands.

Kara removed another case, which held two FN Five\_seveN pistols and extra magazines. She racked the slide on her own and verified it was ready to fire, placing it into a custom holster which she then slipped into her jeans behind her back, covering it with a black wool turtleneck sweater. Michele armed his weapon, placing his in a shoulder holster, which he concealed under a heavy leather jacket. Each put the radio in their left front pants pocket and connected the headsets.

"This is Monza. Comm check," Michele stated.

"Suzuka, check," Kara stated.

"Magny-Cours, check," Monty stated.

"Silverstone, check," Jethro stated.

"How do we want to play this?" Michele asked.

"I'd like to send Monty in to perform some reconnaissance, with Kara in a position to support her if she runs into non-friendlies," Jethro offered.

Michele looked to Kara, who nodded her acceptance.

"Concurred," Michele stated.

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On the other side of the shipbuilding complex, Monty pulled on a pair of tan and black two-tone driving gloves and ensured the laces of her black Dunlop Volleys were done up before donning a black flat cap. She wore what Jethro referred to as her "cat burglar outfit", designed for freedom of movement. As a practitioner of the French discipline of *l'art du déplacement* or *parkour*, Monty leveraged her innate skill with her cyborg enhancements to chart the most direct path through her surrounding environment.

"You were a little brusque with Michele, don't you think?" Jethro asked.

"Hey, they weren't woken up at oh-dark-thirty by Jean Croce and ordered to abandon their current mission to drive 400 kilometers to watch some tramp steamer docked at an abandoned shipyard," Monty snapped.

Jethro turned and busied himself in the back of the Audi and Monty immediately felt bad about taking her frustrations out on her partner. She took a moment to examine the color print of an overhead satellite shot of the shipyard, committing the location of the main buildings to memory.

"Stay safe," Jethro ordered and Monty replied with a sly smile before exiting the Audi where Jethro had parked it along the river's edge on a road beside a copse of trees behind some commercial buildings. She jogged along the road back towards the shipyard, vaulting up and over the chain-link fence surrounding the perimeter of the dockyard. She landed on the balls of her feet and yard, staying low along the brush along the riverbank as she transited the distance between the fence and the primary warehouse. When she arrived at the first building, Monty placed an ear against the corrugated galvanized iron wall and listened, but heard nothing.

Monty crossed to that adjacent building and listened, again hearing nothing. She made her way along the western end to the next building and sensed a faint pulsing high-frequency sound reverberating through the thin steel. A collection of pallets, used machines, raw materials, and other detritus were scattered between the two buildings and Monty clambered up these until she was level with a set of windows built into the upper part of each structure to allow natural light to assist illuminating the interior.

The windows were filthy, but not to the point of opaqueness. Monty looked inside the building where she'd heard noise and saw an electric forklift moving pallets stacked with crates. As it backed up, an audio alert emanated from the vehicle and Monty identified this as the sound she heard. She identified a number of men in military uniforms walking around, along with some people in civilian attire. All were working on the other end of the structure, so Monty heaved her body onto the roof and started across.

She found an air duct and removed the top, though the old steel protested with squeals and groans. When a fusillade of bullets did not crash through the roof around her, Monty leaned her body in and

extended her arm with her iPhone on the end. She swept it around, snapping pictures, cursing the artificial shutter sound the device made with each press of the touchscreen. Complete, Monty pulled herself back and continued forward to the eastern edge, where she snapped more pictures of the two trucks and the ship.

On the floor below, as the forklift drove by one of the uniformed men, sunlight flashed off the polished hydraulic rams, temporarily blinding him. Cursing, he blinked his eyes furiously and then noted a spot of light on the floor. He looked up and saw blue sky through a hole that he'd not recalled seeing there earlier. He stepped outside and looked up...

...directly into the face of Monty, who'd chosen that moment to look down.

The man shouted a warning and yanked a pistol from the holster on his hip, firing up at the roof. Monty heard his yell and saw his movement and she somersaulted back, hearing the impact of the small-caliber rounds on the overhang she'd just been standing on.

Monty raced across the roof, making a flying leap to the adjoining building and continued in the opposite direction of her infiltration point.

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As Kara approached a corner of the building farthest to the south of the complex, she heard the hard stomp of combat boots on asphalt and skidded to a halt, pressing herself against the wall. She counted off the approach based on the rising intensity of the sound. When she calculated the target was about to round the corner, she stabbed out with her left foot.

The mercenary's line of sight was already past the edge of the building when Kara attacked and therefore his first registration of being tripped involved a mix of pain in his shins and his sense of balance failing as he pitched forward and belly-flopped onto the ground, his momentum carrying him forward over three meters. His stunned senses were unable to re-orient themselves before Kara disconnected them by slamming the sole of her sneaker on the back of his neck, shattering the vertebra and rupturing the nerve bundles and blood vessels.

Kara leaned closer when she saw the large revolver jutting out of his holster. She released the catch and withdrew the weapon, quickly

identifying it as a Smith & Wesson Model 500, designed to fire .500 S&W Magnum cartridges. She stuffed the revolver back into the holster, grabbed the mercenary by his belt and carried him back to a rusted industrial refuse container, his head bouncing like one of the bobble-headed dolls she'd seen at A.C. Milan games.

Kara heaved open the top of the container and pitched the corpse into it and then returned to secure his rifle, identifying it as a Heckler & Koch G3KA4, designed to fire the heavier 7.62x51mm NATO round. She tossed it in after its dead user and continued her extraction.

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Unbeknownst to either, Kara and Monty passed each other at the middle structure, Monty rushing across the roof and Kara creeping along the ground. Both cyborgs could hear raised voices and knew the compound was coming alive with security forces. Kara, pistol in hand, peeked around the corner, only to be seen by one member of a group of three. She raised her Five\_seveN and let off a group of four shots, causing the men to scatter.

Kara sprinted for the fence, not bothering trying to climb it, instead performing a forward somersault to land on a large steel tank nearby, compressing her legs on touchdown to launch herself over the fence. She landed on her feet and scrambled across the road, disappearing into the low brush on the other side.

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As he waited, Michele fidgeted. Monty and Kara were both maintaining radio silence and neither handler felt like pestering them for information while they extricated themselves.

A shadow passed over him from behind and he would have jumped out of his seat if not for the three-point restraint and steering wheel as Monty somersaulted over the back of the Lamborghini and somehow positioned her feet perfectly to land in the passenger foot well as she used her hands on the top of the windshield to help brake her momentum and gracefully slip down into the seat.

"Where the hell did you come from?" Michele asked, too stunned to offer one of his usual pithy comments.

"Thought I'd drop in and see if you were free for a drink," Monty replied. "The skipper picked up Kara," she added as she reached behind her for her seatbelt. Once secured, she keyed the radio.

"Silverstone, this is Magny-Cours with Monza. We're in transit to Lascaux."

"Acknowledged."

"Lascaux?" Michele exclaimed as he pulled out and started driving away, his thoughts on the famous caves of prehistoric human art in Southwestern France.

"More code," Monty said. Owned by Audi, Lamborghini used the same navigation system and Monty quickly programmed in the commune of Villadose, halfway between Adria and Rovigo.

"What did you see?" Michele asked as he followed the on-screen directions towards SR443.

"Trouble," Monty replied, cryptically.

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Michele pulled in behind Jethro's Allroad at a public park northwest of the city. Jethro and Kara walked up to the Lamborghini and Monty started her debrief.

"I saw at least a dozen men dressed in combat uniforms and none of them looked Italian. They were guarding multiple pallets of what I'm guessing were weapons and other military items. I snapped some pictures on my phone."

Monty handed her iPhone to Jethro, who started examining them.

"There were civilians in there as well," she added.

"Seems like a lot of gear for a single terrorist operation," Jethro noted. "I think we might have stumbled on a run-of-the-mill weapons smuggling operation. The Albanians have been pretty active in this area."

He stopped at one and held the phone up to Michele, who saw a picture of a pallet stacked with long wooden crates stamped 'Barrett Firearms Manufacturing'."

"Shit," Michele cursed.

"What?" Kara asked.

"Five hundred Euro says those are anti-material rifles. Probably the M82 since everybody and their mother uses it, which means it should be easy to get on the black arms market if you can afford the price. A 12.7x99mm NATO round may not pack the punch of the 20x82mm round that tore Beatrice in half, but it will still easily defeat the armor of any of you girls within half a kilometer."

"That's not proof it's Dante," Jethro noted, though his own skepticism started to fade.

"No, but somehow Dante knows about the girls. Venice was proof of that. So it makes sense he is arming himself appropriately."

"Well they're going to be on the alert now," Kara noted, a bit sheepishly, the other three thought.

"What did you do?" Michele asked.

"Well I killed one of them and shot at another three," she said after taking a deep breath.

"Great," Monty said with venom.

"Hey, you were the reason they were chasing us to begin with," Kara shot back.

"Yes, but maybe they would have dismissed me as some curious teenager. Now they know cyborgs are in the area, so they're going to be on full alert," Monty retorted.

Jethro put a restraining hand on his cyborg.

"I'm going to contact Croce and get instructions," he said. He motioned for Monty to follow him and the two walked out of easy earshot.

"I'm sorry, Michele. I really fucked things up, didn't I?"

"First, language; second, no plan survives first contact with the enemy. I'd rather have you safe and our cover blown than you wounded."

Kara smiled wanly. She looked up to the senior cyborgs like Monty, and she knew her performance had not left a good impression.

"Croce is mustering the troops," Jethro reported. "Whoever it is, a weapons cache this large is something he feels we can't allow to be distributed. We've been ordered to remote observe the facility so they don't escape by boat or truck."

Kara pulled her iPad out from behind the driver's seat of the Lamborghini and called up an overhead map of the area.

"Batsu," she cursed. To the south of the shipyard, the Via Leonardo da Vinci crossed the south fork of the river, but the surrounding area was open field with absolutely no cover. It was much the same to the north, where the north fork was pinched down and crossed by a narrow bridge with an open field.

After examining the map, Jethro offered his suggestions.

"Your car really stands out, Pagani, so I think you should park in the open area west near the Via Chieppara. That will put you out of sight of the shipyard, and give you a view of where the Via Leonardo da Vinci crosses the river. I'd recommend having Kara set up shop with Monty's field glasses near this building, where the Località Amolara crosses the river. From there she'll be able to see the ship at the docks as well as any loading or unloading operations. I'm going to put Monty on the roof of that apartment complex across from the front gate and I'm going to position myself up the Località Amolara where I can watch them if they cross either at the chokepoint or the Via Leonardo da Vinci."

"That pretty much boxes them in," Michele concurred. "Any idea when the cavalry will arrive?"

"They said not to expect them much before dawn. Hilshire is on his way back from Naples and de Luca tripped down a flight of stairs and broke his damned ankle, so they're temporarily pairing Giada up with Marco. It's going to be a cold night of staking out, I'm afraid," Jethro said.

"Lovely," Kara stated.

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# THIRTY

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**ADRIA, ITALY  
JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT**

"This sucks," Kara muttered, burrowing deeper into her jacket under the awning of a storage shed for the commune's Water Department. The proximity to the river increased the humidity and as the temperature fell with nightfall, she swore she could feel the damp cold seep into her bones. Then, around 23:00, a light drizzle began to fall, making it harder for her to see what was happening at the docks.

"It's not exactly the Ritz-Carlton over here, but I'm dealing with it," came Monty's voice in her headset and with a curse, Kara realized she'd inadvertently activated the transmit function on her radio.

"Cut the chatter, ladies," Jethro's voice commanded, silencing both girls. Kara felt her iPhone vibrate in her pants pocket a few minutes later and pulled it out, seeing a text message from Michele asking how she was doing. Her handler didn't know "teen speak", as he called it, so it took him some time to type out his messages compared to the series of acronyms and abbreviations common to the "textese" she used with the her Generation 2 peers.

Kara replied she was fine and thanked him for thinking about her, then replaced the iPhone and raised the field glasses to her eyes. In addition to the drizzle, a light fog was creeping in from the ocean, some 10 kilometers to the east, slowly gliding up the river like a spectral ship and starting to kiss the dock area.

"Suzuka, report."

"Visibility continues to deteriorate, but so has the activity," Kara reported to Jethro. The people at the shipyard turned on the floodlights once night had fallen and used one of the cranes to remove the final three shipping containers and lay them on the dock. The bulk of the ship blocked her view, but Monty reported two Iveco Daily refrigerated transports in food delivery company liveries pulling into the facility shortly thereafter and they remained on-site.

After making her report, Kara listened as Monty and then Jethro give their reports, noting nothing had changed and no movement into or out of the compound detected.

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“Movement,” Monty reported, her voice showing no hint of emotion. With dawn some two hours away, the fog had well and truly settled now and visibility was measured in mere meters. While it now meant that the shipyard was now just a vague area of brightness in the distance, it had allowed the two *fratelli* to move closer. In Monty’s case, she was now behind a pair of trees directly in front of the shipyard, about 20 meters away from the front gate.

The lights over the docks suddenly went out, plunging everything into darkness. A pair of handheld flashlight beams flared into existence, whirling about as the users searched for any tripping hazards as they approached the gate. While one held his light steady, the other unlocked the gate and the two of them pushed it open with a loud squeal of rusted steel. Both men placed orange cones over their flashlights and stood to either side of the gate. The sound of large diesel engines rumbling into life came next and two sets of headlights speared through the gloom as the doors of one of the warehouses slid open.

“Two trucks are preparing to move,” Monty reported.

“Any movement on your side, Kara?” Jethro asked. As the hours had dragged on and boredom and weariness set in, even the normally security paranoid Jethro had eventually stopped using their pre-arranged codenames.

Kara had moved with the fog down the riverbank to take position directly across from the shipyard. As she looked at inky blackness, she cursed them not having handheld infrared imaging devices, as the infrared photoreceptors in her eyes were unable to penetrate the fog at the distance between her and the dock area.

“It’s totally black, but I don’t hear any other engine sounds. I don’t see any navigation lights,” she reported.

“Kara, return to Michele. Monty, tell us which way they go. We’ll try and tail them,” Jethro ordered.

Kara sprinted back to her handlers, clearing the 400-meter distance in a time that would have secured her the Gold Medal at the 2008 Olympics.

Monty watched the two trucks she'd seen pull up earlier move out, one turning left and the other right.

"Bollocks," she cursed and passed the information on to the team.

"Michele, take the one going north. I'll pick up Monty and chase the one going south," Jethro ordered. "I'll inform Rome," he added.

"Acknowledged," Michele said. He turned to Kara in the passenger seat.

"I'll watch the road, so just keep focused on the truck."

"Yes, sir," Kara said.

The truck motored up the Via Leonardo da Vinci and then turned onto the SR516, heading north.

Jethro rang them as they were passing through the commune of Cavarzere.

"What's your status?"

"We're heading north on SR516. I think they're heading for Padova or Venice," Michele replied.

"Mine is heading west on SP33. I assume they're making for the A13," Jethro reported. Michele knew the A13 led direct to Bologna.

"Croce wants us to interdict them. Is there a place where you can intercept?" Jethro asked.

"We're in farmland, so that is an affirmative," Michele said. As the call was coming over the car's speakers, Kara could hear the conversation and she motioned for Michele to pull over onto the side of the road. He did so and she opened the luggage compartment and removed a case holding her FN P90. She slapped on a magazine and cocked the weapon while Michele ended the call. He pulled back onto the road and quickly closed the distance to the truck.

"Ready?" he called out and Kara nodded.

Michele slewed into the oncoming lane and hammered the throttle. Within a second, the Lamborghini was even with the rear wheels and Kara fired off ten rounds, the armor-piercing bullets puncturing the tires. Michele applied the brakes and allowed the truck to move ahead, which started to lean drunkenly to the left as the tires quickly went flat and then started to delaminate, shedding large pieces of tread that Michele needed to dodge as they could damage the carbon-fiber nose of his vehicle.

In danger of losing control, the driver of the truck had no choice but to apply the brakes. Michele stayed directly behind him and killed his headlights, trusting in the brightly glowing brake lights ahead to gauge the distance between the two vehicles as both came to a stop.

Kara threw up the door and rushed out, PDW at the ready. She heaved herself up on the loading deck at the back of the truck. Hearing no movement inside the compartment, Kara laid her PDW on the deck and pulled off her sneakers, tossing them together up onto the roof of the truck. She then dropped back down on the ground, leaving her PDW for Michele and removing her pistol.

Kara crawled underneath the truck, moving forward. She heard the driver and passenger door open and saw two sets of legs slowly lower from the cab to the ground and start walking backwards. She lay on her belly and rolled out to the left, stopping on her back, raising her pistol, and putting three rounds in the back of her target, who had his head raised up at the roof as she'd hoped.

"Luca?" a voice called out from the other side of the truck. "Luca! Answer me!"

Knowing she only had seconds, Kara rolled onto her side and put a round through the ankle of the driver, shattering it. The man screamed, dropping to a knee and also losing his gun. She heard the bark of her P90 and the driver keeled over, dead.

Kara pushed herself up onto her feet and rushed the cab, but found it empty.

"Clear!" she called out, and jogged back to Michele, removing a small tactical flashlight and attaching it to her pistol before turning it on. Holding her PDW, he went into a covering stance as Kara tore the lock

out of the door and heaved it up, bringing her pistol to bear as she shined the flashlight inside.

“Ah...”

---

“...hell.”

Monty stared at an empty hold, bathed in cold air as the refrigeration unit chugged away. It took her a moment to understand why they left it on – it would have chilled anything inside to a common temperature, mooting any infrared sensors they might have been using.

“Well that’s a bust,” Jethro noted.

Monty didn’t bother to retort, privately incensed at being duped. Her mood darkened even more when she heard that the truck the Pagani’s had taken down also proved to be empty.

“Time to give Croce the good news,” Jethro deadpanned.

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After tossing the bodies in the back of the trucks, both *fratelli* sped back towards Adria to meet with the rest of Section 2, who were already taking position around the warehouse.

When Jean gave the attack order, the firefight was short, brutal and one-sided. The mercenary security force Dante left behind were not informed of the true nature of their opponents and quickly folded under the onslaught of Henrietta, Rico and Triela. Once the three declared the facility secure, the handlers and Section 2 support staff came forward and the search began.

Kara leaned against the passenger door of the Murciélago. There had been some hope that the presence of a security force meant that the weapons were still present, however as the cleanup progressed, it became clear that their quarry had bolted while she and Monty were attacking empty trucks. She therefore didn’t want to be anywhere near the senior Croce brother if she could help it. She looked over to where Petrushka was sleeping in her handler’s smart fortwo.

“A dirty bomb. This really raises the stakes, doesn’t it?” Sandro asked rhetorically.

"I'm more worried about the heavy weapons," Michele stated.  
"Somehow Dante learned about what our girls are and he's taken appropriate measures to successfully counter them."

Michele and Monty shared a look as both recalled their discussion over drinks a few weeks prior about how their opponents were improving their own offensive capabilities. The handlers no longer took any notice that Monty acted like one of them and not a cyborg.

"I don't think Jean fully understands that," Jethro noted. "Or he doesn't care," he added.

"Target fixation," Monty stated. "He sees his goal and that's all he can focus on."

"And I'm afraid his brother is now right there with him," Jethro finished.

As if summoned by the mention of their name, the two Croce brothers approached from where they'd been talking with Victor Hilshire.

"Well if you'll excuse me," Sandro said with a grin, heading back to his car.

If Jean was surprised to see Monty, he hid it well.

"We're setting up a field HQ in Florence at the Carabinieri Command Station near Peretola Airport. We're going to try and regain Dante's scent and then bring him to ground," he reported.

"So you believe he's here?" Jethro stated.

"Yes. The type of weapons Monty reported seeing and the presence of radiological material clinch it in my mind. Dante's *modus operandi* is terror and the psychological effects of detonating a dirty bomb at a major tourist spot like the Coliseum would be great.

"Pagani, the Director wants you to brief the government tomorrow afternoon on what we've found. Jethro, reservations have been made for you and your cyborg on the morning Meridiana Fly flight from Milan to Alexandria. Michele's contact in the SIS has run down a possible lead on the shipment Dante collected there and they're more comfortable with one of their own handling the meeting."

"It's been awhile since I worked for Her Majesty's Government and I left on less than amicable terms," Jethro noted.

"I know you still have a number of friends at Vauxhall Cross and that you play a few rounds one a year with a number of SIS station chiefs at St Annes," Jean replied, referring to Royal Lytham & St Annes Golf Club in Lancashire, England.

"You have a good memory," Jethro replied, his tone informing Jean that he and Monty would be on that flight at the appointed time.

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"What's the plan, chief?" Kara asked when Michele returned.

"We need to head to my place in Milan, clean up and swap cars. Then we're returning to Rome."

"Nice of Jean to give us a chance to rest up after our all-nighter," Kara grouched.

"You can sleep on the way to Milan," Michele offered.

"I'm okay. How about you? I know I'm supposed to be grounded, but if you want to sleep, I can drive," Kara offered.

Michele knew Kara's offer was made out of genuine concern and not an attempt to circumvent her punishment.

"Maybe on the drive back," he replied.

"Since we're going the same way, can she take over the driving duties for me?" Jethro joked.

"In that case, I'll go with Michele," Monty replied.

"When you finish making fun of me, we do have orders to carry out," Kara noted.

"The girl's got a point," Jethro said with a smile.

"Indeed she does. Why don't you two come to my place? I can make us a real meal and you can shower and wash your clothes," Michele offered.

"We always keep a few spare outfits in the boot, but a shower and hot meal certainly sound good," Jethro noted.

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"I'd heard you were loaded, but this confirms it," Jethro noted as he walked by three FIA Group C prototypes from Jaguar, Sauber-Mercedes and Peugeot arranged side by side, a giant picture of the Mulsanne Straight at the Circuit de la Sarthe in Le Mans on the wall behind them. Monty thought it a ridiculous waste of money, but she held her tongue.

Michele escorted them to the living spaces and showed Jethro and Monty the guest bedroom and bath so they could take turns showering and changing. Kara decided to soak in the bathtub in the master suite, while her outfit and the Blacker's went into the wash. Michele had stopped at the local *alimentari*, or neighborhood market, to purchase the fresh ingredients for his *fettuccine al burro*. Unlike the traditional Roman version, Michele decided to add crème to this batch, creating what was known in the United States as *fettuccine alfredo*.

Freshly cleaned and dressed, his three guests settled themselves on the roof patio and admired the view as they watched Michele make the final preparations on a side table before heaping a generous portion high in a shallow bowl for each of them.

"I like the crème," Kara noted. "It makes it richer and binds the cheese better."

"After dinner let's make hotel reservations. Something near MXP," Jethro instructed Monty, using the IATA code for Milan's Malpensa airport.

"If I may make a suggestion, why don't you just spend the night here?" Michele offered. "You can just call a cab in the morning to take you to the airport and leave the Audi in the garage."

Jethro looked to Monty and she shrugged her acceptance.

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# THIRTY-ONE

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**PALAZZO CHIGI  
ROME  
THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON**

At a steady 160km/h, the Aston covered the distance to the Italian capital city in a little over four hours. Michele and Kara exited their vehicle in front of the Palazzo Chigi and were escorted into the main reception room, where Angelina Brunetta, the Undersecretary to the Presidency of the Council, met them.

"Hello, Michele," she greeted warmly, giving him a quick hug. "Renato and the assembled ministers are waiting. If you'll follow me, please."

"Is there any woman in government you *don't* know?" Kara asked under her breath as she took his right hand in her left. Michele smiled wanly and gave her hand a squeeze.

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"Michele! Good to see you my old friend," greeted Renato Pisano, President of the Council of Ministers, though he was better known outside of Italy as the Prime Minister. He rose from behind his large desk and came around to greet them.

"And Kara. You look more beautiful with every visit," he added. Kara put on a large smile and moved closer to Michele. She looked for Noelia, but didn't see her with the staffers either shuttling in and out of the room or crowding the walls. Maybe she was still at her high school in Naples, she thought.

"You know Monica and Stefania," Renato said, indicating the Ministers of Defense and Interior sitting together on one of the large couches. He turned to a balding man with glasses and a middle-aged woman on the opposite couch. "This is my Minister of Economic Development, Luca Carini. His portfolio includes our civilian nuclear power program. And the woman beside him is Loredana Villoresi, Director of our Nuclear Regulatory Agency."

In 1987, in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster the previous year, Italian citizens approved a referendum that shutdown the existing

nuclear plants at Trino, Latina and Caorso and stopped completion of the two reactors at Montalto di Castro Nuclear Power Station.

Prime Minister Pisano and his party were strong supporters of nuclear power and with their re-election in 2007, they controlled a parliamentary majority strong enough to successfully overturn the referendum and pass a new energy bill that instructed the energy company Enel (Ente Nazionale per l'Energia eLettrica) to complete the Montalto di Castro complex and also commissioned the construction of a new nuclear plant at Trino and signed a deal with France to build four new plants based on the third generation EPR reactor design through the end of the next decade.

Renato gestured to two open chairs at the far end of the couches and Michele and Kara each took a seat.

"What were your findings?" Renato asked.

"We detected the presence of nuclear material in a shipyard at Adria and a junkyard outside of Parma. We believe Giacomo Dante has assembled a collection of radioactive material that he may be intending to use to 'salt' a conventional explosion to create a 'dirty bomb'."

"But does not the technical aspects of such a device make them unlikely to be used?" Luca asked.

"Yes. Even if the perpetrators were willing to sacrifice their lives, the amount of exposure they would likely encounter in preparation and transport would incapacitate them before they could actually deliver the device if they were using the most effective ionizing radiation materials like Strontium-90 or Cesium-137," Loredana answered.

"We found military-grade NBC suits along with decontamination equipment. We therefore believe that he may have secured something like a radioisotope thermoelectric generator, which they opened to recover the radioactive material within," Michele added. "The Soviets scattered them all over the Arctic to power automated lighthouses and other navigation beacons. When the country fell, the records were lost so nobody knows where all the damn things are."

"What would be the effects if he detonated a device?" Renato asked Director Villoresi.

"Strontium-90 is a very strong beta particle emitter. Beta particles can penetrate human skin and can damage DNA, but almost any type of physical shelter, like a building or even a car, will stop them. The main risk from Strontium-90 is when it is ingested. While the majority will be excreted in feces, the remainder will be deposited in bone tissue and bone marrow where it can cause bone cancer and leukemia. However, the actual explosion itself is the primary health risk.

"The real effects will be psychological. Such a device detonated in a population center like Rome will instill panic in the general populace due mostly to believing the threat is significantly greater than it actually would be. Some will barricade themselves in their homes while others will attempt to leave the area, swamping transportation systems and corridors. The government will be forced to respond with a large and expensive decontamination effort in order to restore public confidence," she finished.

"Psychological terror. Well that certainly fits Dante's profile," Renato spat. "So, what can we do to protect ourselves?"

"Not much, at least indigenously," Villoresi admitted, her voice strained. "We've operated under the assumption that a dirty bomb was unlikely to be detonated on our soil. Instead, our focus has been on responding to an accident at one of our power plants resulting in a release of radioactive particles into the air. We have containment and decontamination teams, but nothing on the scale necessary to respond to a 'dirty bomb' detonated in Rome or Milan."

"Can we get something from the Americans? They've been paranoid about a dirty bomb since 9/11," Monica asked.

"The American Domestic Nuclear Detection Office has spent hundreds of millions on a new generation of detection devices, but reports say they've made almost no progress," Stefania replied. "We have handheld devices, but they only work at close range."

"Are we sure he even has such a device?" Luca asked. "I mean we may be falling right into his plans and panicking over a phantom threat."

"It is possible he's using low-grade medical nucleotides to spoof us," Michele admitted. "We've been using Geiger Counters and all they tell us is if the sample is 'hot'. The lab work will identify what the substances are, but that could take some time."

"We've deployed infantry companies at all the major tourist sites, cultural areas and government facilities," Monica reported and Kara remembered the troops and armored vehicles in the square in front of the Duomo Cathedral as they'd driven through downtown Milan towards the airport.

"Perhaps we should increase security at the nuclear power stations," Luca suggested.

"We already have," Monica replied. "Each station has an infantry platoon on site and we've also deployed VBM Freccia IFVs with Spike anti-tank missiles and the SIDAM 25 anti-aircraft gun platform to supplement them."

"Very well. For the moment, we should consider this threat real," the Prime Minister stated. "I therefore want additional security at all Autostrade tollbooths and service areas. I want radiation detectors at the closest tollbooth and service area to Turin, Florence, Bologna, Milan, Venice, Naples and Rome. If we need to ask for units from our European neighbors or the Americans, do it. Dismissed."

As people rose and started for the door, Renato motioned for Michele to stay. Defense Minister Petris also held back, even as her staff headed out the door with the others.

"Do you think he has the material for a 'dirty bomb'," Renato asked Michele.

"I do, Mr. President," Michele replied.

"AISE identified that the heads of the Rome, Bologna and Genoa factions were all missing last Thursday. They re-appeared yesterday and the groups immediately dispersed," Monica reported. "Based on what you've said, we believe Dante brought the other cruise missile warheads with him into Italy and that he's distributed them to the heads of various Five Republics factions along with those heavy weapons," Monica stated.

"You think he might use the warheads as the trigger for the bombs?" Michele asked and Monica nodded.

Michele knew from Venice that a 500kg device would demolish a building. With the stone construction common in Italy, it would create

a huge cloud of dust – dust that would become irradiated with something like Strontium-90. The finer particles could be spread wide with the wind, covering a large area. It would be a public safety nightmare, but an even larger public image nightmare. The attack on San Marco had cost the Borsa Italiana almost 15% of its value and the Minister without portfolio (Tourism) reported hotel and airline bookings fell in the weeks after the attack not just at Venice, but all of Italy.

“Michele, you have contacts within NATO and the EU intelligence agencies. I don’t want to make this public yet. It would just cause more panic and erode what little confidence they still have in my government.”

“Natili doesn’t have enough votes to force a No Confidence vote in either chamber,” Michele noted, referring to the head of the largest opposition party.

“No, but my own coalition is starting to fray. If he can offer enough of them a better deal, they might back such a move in the Chamber of Deputies. I also can’t fully trust my Cabinet, especially the junior members. We need to eliminate Dante as quickly and cleanly as possible. He’s bound the factions to him and organized them into a clear and present danger to the Republic. If they do have radiological weapons and detonate them, holding the government together will be the least of our worries.”

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“Do you think we’ll get Dante?” Kara asked from the passenger seat as they drove back to the SWA Compound.

“The Croce Brothers are hunting him like a beagle does a rabbit,” Michele replied. Hilshire had informed them both of the discovery of the abandoned junkyard outside of the city of Parma. “He can run, but they’ll eventually find his burrow and dig him out.”

“And when they do?” Kara asked.

Michele answered her question with another.

“Have you ever read Watership Down?”

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# THIRTY-TWO

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HANDLER'S ANNEX  
THURSDAY

Laine Stanaway climbed the steps to the top floor and walked down the hall until she came to a door, the words MICHELE PAGANI etched into a strip of frosted glass to the right of the frame. She knocked on the door and a moment later two voices bid her entrance in Italian and Japanese, respectively.

As Laine opened the door and stepped over the threshold, her eyes performed the automatic scan they did whenever a cyborg entered a confined space. Claes lay on Michele's bed, reading a book, and at her handler's desk, Kara used his iMac.

"I didn't see you in your dorm room so I figured I'd try here," she said to Kara. Laine looked over at the iMac's display.

"What are you working on?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm editing a dance cover Michele shot in the park yesterday," Kara replied. She pressed a key and Laine saw a video of Kara dancing to some Japanese song dressed in a blouse, skirt and boots.

"That's really geeky," Laine observed and Kara stuck her tongue out at her.

"I find it helps me get used to my implants," Kara replied.

"Rationalize it anyway you want. It's still geeky," Laine retorted.

"Anyway, I came to ask you how is your tennis game?"

"Why do you assume she plays tennis?" Claes asked.

"She's half-Japanese and half-French," Laine replied matter-of-factly, giving Claes a look as if such parentage made it obvious that Kara would play tennis.

"Actually, I did before my conversion," Kara replied, sheepishly.

Claes rolled her eyes and buried her head in the pillow.

"Do you have an outfit and equipment?" Laine asked.

"No, but I can ask Michele to get me some," Kara replied.

"Just have him get you an outfit. Normal tennis rackets and balls can't stand up to our abilities so I had custom pieces made," Laine noted.

A moment later the door opened and Michele Pagani entered his room.

"Ah, Miss Stanaway, just the lady I wanted to see," he said. "You don't happen to ski, do you?"

"I'm a fit, blonde teenage girl so of course I do!" Laine replied, brightly.

Claes again buried her face in the pillow, kicking her feet on the bed for good measure.

Michele looked at Claes and then back at Laine and Kara, both of whom shrugged.

"Kara and I have been tasked with a mission at a ski resort in Albertville this weekend. I was going to consult with your handler to see if you might be able to assist."

"Clay hasn't mentioned any missions, but if I get to snowboard, I'll be sure to keep our schedule open!" Laine replied.

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The following morning Kara and Laine exited the Cyborg Warehouse. Laine wore caramel-colored mid-height boots over jeans with a grey sweater and cold-weather jacket, a scarf around her neck and a knit cap on her head. Kara wore black knee-high leather boots over heavy black leggings, a brown short-sleeve scoop-neck dress over a white long-sleeve turtleneck sweater, and a black leather jacket. Both cyborgs had a travel bag with clothes, along with ski boots and a snowboard.

A deep rumble filled the air and the girls turned to see a silver estate wagon approach and motor towards them, the noise growing louder as the vehicle closed the distance. On the grill stood the symbol for Mercedes-Benz and once the vehicle had come to a stop, the E63 and

AMG symbols on the liftgate confirmed to Laine what her ears had been suggesting.

"That is the sexiest exhaust note ever," she declared as her handler and Michele stepped out of the car.

"Enjoy it while you can," Michele noted. "The new engine is a turbo V8 and it sounds very different."

Laine looked to Michele and put on the full puppy-dog eyes look.

"So then you'll have to let me drive it, right?"

"Be my guest," Michele said, tossing Laine the keys after he'd hit the button to open the power liftgate. The two girls packed their luggage in the back and the snowboards were attached to the roof snowboard rack.

Laine slipped behind the wheel while Kara took the front passenger seat. Both girls moved their seats forward, giving room for Michele and Clayland to stretch out.

Laine started the car and revved the engine, listening to the deep growl.

"You sure you want to let her behind the wheel? We're going to be encountering snowy roads once we cross the border and this thing is rear-wheel drive," Clayland noted.

"Kara was fined for doing 200 in a 130 the other day so I've yanked her driving privileges for a week as punishment and I'd rather not drive 900km non-stop, would you?" Michele asked.

Laine lowered the back passenger window.

"While we're young, Clay!" she shouted, goosing the throttle again. Michele slipped into the right rear passenger seat, while Clayland took the seat behind Laine.

"Try and exercise some—" Clayland began as Laine used the paddle shifters to put the seven-speed transmission into 1<sup>st</sup> gear and pressed her boot to the floorboard. Over 600 N·m of torque shoved all four occupants into their contoured seatbacks as the estate flew towards the exit gate, the rear-wheel drive system fought to put down the

power. She slammed on the brakes as she approached the gate, throwing everyone forward into their safety harnesses.

“—restraint,” Clayland finished.

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For all of its ferocious power, the Mercedes-Benz 6.2 liter M156 V8 was also quite efficient, with a highway rating of 11 liters per 100 kilometers. With an 80 liter tank that meant the vehicle could drive as far as Turin before needing to refuel at a steady 100km/hr.

The low fuel light blinked on as they approached Florence, 300km north and 90 minutes after joining the A1 at Rome. They pulled into the Agip fueling bay at the Regello rest area and Clayland declared a mandatory driver change, taking over behind the wheel. Michele moved up to the passenger seat and the girls settled down in the back.

They made another pit stop outside of Turin and Michele took over for the drive across the border into France. It was dark by the time they reached Albertville and pulled into Hotel Million, a former school turned into a luxury hotel.

“I hope the name is not indicative of the prices,” Clayland noted as they unpacked.

“I’ll kowtow before Ferro when it comes time to get our expense report approved,” Michele chuckled.

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“I heard you took Monique Blacker out to drinks,” Kara stated without preamble once they’d returned to their room.

“Uh yeah, about that—”

“I’m not upset, Michele,” Kara cut him off. “Monty carries herself as someone much older than her actual age so I can understand you could think she was part of the staff.”

“I don’t know what you’ve heard, but it wasn’t a date,” Michele replied. “It was just drinks.”

“Well I should hope not,” Kara said, and for a moment Michele feared the cyborg jealousy was bubbling to the surface.

"I mean when you consider the places you've taken me on our dates, a bar seems so...lame," she added with a large smile, which Michele returned before walking to the wardrobe to hang his suit.

"But a word of advice – if you take Priscilla or Ferro out, don't let Claes know. She might look all demure, but she's almost as big a gossip as Beatrice," Kara noted.

Michele nodded...and then Kara's words snapped into place and his head snapped around to see Kara trying not to burst out laughing. Trying and failing.

"I so got you!" she exclaimed, falling back on the bed in a fury of giggles.

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Michele's and Kara's iPhone alarms both sounded simultaneously, their stereophonic trilling awaking their respective owners. Two hands shot out from under the covers, pawing on the furniture tops until they clasped around the devices, pulling them back under the covers. Two glows simultaneously appeared as they unlocked the screens and muted the alarm.

"I call first shower," Kara said, slipping out from under the covers dressed in one of Michele's t-shirts, which fell down to her knees.

"Can you light the fireplace?" she requested as she grabbed one of her own t-shirts and a pair of undergarments out of the armoire before scampering into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Michele slipped out from under the bed, dressed in pajamas. He started first the coffee maker and then the fireplace. Kara eventually re-appeared, a towel around her head and Michele headed for the bathroom to take his shower. When he exited, the two of them changed into their respective outfits for the day.

The two *fratello* had breakfast in the hotel restaurant and then checked out. They drove further into the Tarentaise Valley to the Les Trois Vallées, a massive ski region with a half-dozen interconnected resort areas. They drove onward to an area composed of private chalets with their own private runs that led into the main ski area. Michele drove along the road and pulled into a three-story chalet, parking in the garage next to Hilshire's Mercedes Estate. Once the two

arriving *fratelli* were settled into their rooms, everyone settled into the large drawing room for the mission briefing.

"About a kilometer up the road is a large chalet with two targets inside," Hilshire began. "We need to take them alive for later interrogation, but they're protected by a security force and they will certainly have staff and probably friends. Unfortunately, they will all need to be neutralized as we cannot afford to be identified and we need as much time as possible to exfiltrate the area with the 'packages'."

"Kara and Laine will be tasked with tracking them throughout the day. Triela, you'll maintain oversight of the chalet, tracking the movements of the security detail and staff. We'll plan our move this evening in the early morning hours..."

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Kara and Laine spent the day on the snowboard runs, using field glasses to keep an eye on their designated "package" as well as watching their security detail of two men. Laine's skills exceeded those of their quarry, but Kara struggled at times to keep up with both her sister and the group they were following.

Triela, dressed in a heavy jacket, jeans, and snow boots, sat on a collapsible stool in a cove of fir trees, monitoring the target chalet. Two SUVs picked up the party and drove them off towards the lodge and slopes. Four-wheel drive estates from Volvo and Subaru delivered supplies and cleaning staff.

Towards evening, the SUVs returned and deposited the people they'd picked up earlier. Triela continued to wait until she heard laughter and music and saw two couples rush across the open deck and plunge into the Jacuzzi with a splash. Convinced they were in for the evening, she extricated herself and returned back to the chalet.

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Kara slipped her feet into a pair of oversized men's Sorel Caribou snow boots. She tucked her jeans into them and then used nylon rope to securely bind the boot shaft to her legs. Beside her, the other girls did the same. Since there was no way they could conceal their approach, the goal was to disguise just who attacked the chalet. The girls added heavy jackets and special insulated gloves and started out back down the main road, which was compacted snow and ice that resisted leaving an imprint of their boots better than the deep snow drifts. Kara

carried a ski bag specially designed to hold a VSS sniper rifle, while Triela and Laine dragged sleds behind them, Triela's with a duffel bag sitting atop it.

They left the road and entered the forest. From the duffel Laine removed a pair of ITT AN/PSQ-20 monocular night vision goggles, which she and Triela attached with custom headbands. Triela used the image-intensifier option, while Laine went with thermal imaging. All three girls attached the digital tactical radios and headsets. As team leader, Triela's radio also allowed her to communicate with the handlers back at the chalet.

The girls split into two teams: Triela and Laine formed "Team Daytona" and would strike through the kitchen door, while Kara took the call sign "Team Bathurst" and would go through the front door.

"I have one guard on the grounds and one on the first floor balcony," Laine reported.

"Engage," Triela ordered.

Kara clicked her radio twice to acknowledge Triela's order. She removed the VSS and took aim at the guard on the balcony, waiting until he was between the glass windows. She centered the site on the chest and fired. The 9x39mm SP5 sniper round entered just below his jaw, tearing through his upper palate and liquefying his brain from the impact shock. Kara quickly locked on the other guard and fired. The man stopped and looked down at his chest. Her second round arrived a moment later and the man dropped forward into the snow.

Laine clicked her own radio twice, signaling that she and Triela were starting their assault. Both girls removed Heckler & Koch MP5SD3 submachine guns and carefully climbed the back stairs to the kitchen door. Triela removed a glasscutter and suction cup. Attaching the cup to the window, she cut around it and then removed the piece attached to the cup. She reached in and unlatched the door, Laine following close behind.

Out front, Kara laid her rifle on one of the sleds and rushed forward, dragging both behind her. She crouched under the windows leading to the TV room on the ground floor. Heavy light-blocking shades covered the windows, but a quick listen against them confirmed nobody was in the room. Kara removed her own glasscutter and suction cup and cut out the bottom third of the window to make an opening large enough

for her to enter. Once inside, she removed a suppressed Ruger MK III pistol and slowly opened the door. Peeking out, she saw no light and heard no movement in the hallway or from the office and bedroom down the way.

She stepped out into the hallway and signaled Triela and Laine, who were stepping out of the kitchen. All three froze as they heard a toilet flush and as they swiveled their heads like owls, Kara noticed a sliver of light from under a door midway just inside the entrance to the bedroom. Triela and Laine retreated back into the kitchen while Kara flattened herself in the hallway.

The door opened and a large man stepped out, walking into the hallway itself. Kara clamped her left hand on the back of his neck and violently flicked her wrist, overextending his atlanto-axial joint and inflicting significant trauma to the topmost cervical vertebra and brain stem, killing him instantly. He fell forwards out of her grasp, crashing onto the marble floor of the main area.

To the cyborg's augmented hearing, it sounded like a box of anvils falling to the ground and the twin sets of hard stares directed at Kara made her feel very much the rookie member of the team. Kara rushed into the bedroom and noticed two beds, one showing signs of having been slept in. Triela and Laine appeared with the body and threw it into the bed, covering it with a sheet.

Triela then signaled with her hands for them to head upstairs. She took the lead, Laine and Kara right behind her. They quickly verified that the Dining and Drawing Rooms were both empty and took the steps to the top floor. Triela and Laine both removed their own suppressed Rugers and the three girls each entered a bedroom.

Kara quietly pushed open the door of the second bedroom and did her best to approach the bed quietly. She could make out the faces of a man and a young woman, asleep in each other's arms. She compared the man's face with the mental images of the two men they were supposed to capture and did not find a match. Kara's orders in such a situation were clear, and she raised her pistol, putting a subsonic .22 round into the skull of each person. As she leaned forward to check for a pulse, she heard the muffled reports of her sister's weapons. Satisfied both were dead, she exited the room. Triela appeared in the door, motioning for Kara to follow her back inside.

"I've knocked him out. You're taller than me, so can you carry him downstairs?" she asked and Kara nodded. Triela helped hoist the drugged man onto her shoulders in a Fireman's Carry and she headed back outside. Laine appeared in the other door, dragging her target out by his legs. Triela helped transfer him to Laine's back and Triela led the way back down.

They exited through the front door and collected the two sleds, placing the unconscious forms on them. With Kara at the front of the first sled and Laine at the back of the second, Triela stood between them and used her superior strength to lift the other end of each sled. They headed into the forest, angling towards the road. Informed by Triela that they were ready for pickup, Hilshire's E350 appeared with its parking lights on, Hilshire driving using a pair of night-vision goggles to see. He stopped the car and the two sleds were loaded into the back and Triela then took the front passenger seat. The vehicle then continued on towards the bottom of the valley and the E70 highway back to Italy.

Michele and Clayland were right behind them in the E63 and Kara and Laine piled into the back. Michele executed a three-point turn and headed back towards the chalet, which had been rented for the weekend. If the bodies were discovered later that morning, they wanted to be sure that when the local authorities stopped by, they had not left early and made themselves possible suspects.

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Michele adjusted his head to turn away from the brilliant glare of the sun off the pristine white snow spearing through the window. He turned back to look out onto a glorious Sunday morning, and briefly considering getting up, but then decided he wanted more sleep and reached over and activated the control that retracted the shades until only indirect light illuminated the room.

He was starting to drift back to sleep when his mind was jolted back to wakefulness by the plaintive cries of his cyborg. The door flew open and Kara rushed in, pouncing on the bed. She crossed over him, grabbed the television remote off the nightstand, and flopped back on her butt, raising the remote and activating the large LCD television, which she tuned to CNN International where the female anchor stood to the left of a large graphic that stated "TERROR ATTACKS IN ITALY".

"Recapping our top story, a series of coordinated terrorist attacks have struck Italy. At approximately 8:00 this morning Central European

Time, a massive explosion ripped through the aviation fuel storage facility at the southern end of Rome's Leonardo di Vinci International Airport. We've also heard reports that the Royal Spanish College at the University of Bologna has been overrun and occupied by an unknown number of armed gunmen and the provincial command center in Florence for the Carabinieri, which is the military police force, in Florence has been bombed. The Italian Government has yet to release a statement, but the US Ambassador to Italy urged all American citizens in the country to remain in their residences or hotel rooms..."

Michele reached for his phone.

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# THIRTY-THREE

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## AUTOSTRADA 1 MODENA, ITALY

As they passed the “capital of engines” and birthplace of Enzo Ferrari, Kara’s gaze looked not upon the city but instead focused on the iPad in her lap as she studied the floor plan of the Spanish College.

Officially known as the Royal College of Saint Clement of the Spaniards, the school enjoyed Royal patronage from the Spanish Crown and a number of the students were from powerful and influential Spanish families. This put pressure on the Italian government to secure their safe release and this, in turn, put pressure on Michele and Clayland to devise a plan to do just that, in addition to the faculty and staff.

In the driver’s seat beside Kara, Laine followed the Polizia Stradale BMW 320d Touring, the lights and siren of the lead vehicle clearing a path as the two vehicles touched 250km/h on the straights. The police had sealed and cleared the outer ring road to allow official traffic easier access around the city center. Laine followed the BMW down the Via Saragozza to the Basilica di San Paolo Maggiore.

A Carabinieri *sergente* appeared and saluted.

“Sir, I’m Sergeant Piotti. I served under Major Sales and am familiar with Section 2’s operatives,” he stated, informing Michele and Clayland that he knew Kara and Laine were cybernetic organisms.

“To the best of our knowledge, the students and staff have all been collected into the chapel. It offers limited points of access and the windows are narrow and composed of intricate stained glass, making it almost impossible to see inside,” he reported. “We expect they have the doors protected – possibly even rigged with explosives. Our visibility into the compound is limited, but so is theirs looking out. The student housing faces the street, but thermal imaging shows no human presence.”

Michele used his fingers to zoom the overhead satellite view to show the College, the Basilica and the Via Belfiore between them.

"There's a small garden area in the back of the Basilica compound. From the roof, you can jump across on to a small balcony and then climb up onto the roof," he noted.

"These aren't exactly rappelling shoes," Laine noted as she lifted up her right leg to show her mid-height boots with a block heel.

"Deal with it," Clayland replied, to which Laine replied by sticking out her tongue.

"How about you?" Michele asked Kara, who wore leather knee-high boots, also with a block heel that was twice the height and with a smaller contact patch than Laine's.

"I'll be okay," Kara stated and Michele placed his hand on her shoulder in reassuring acknowledgement. "Just follow Laine's lead and protect her back," he added.

"Let's go crash the party," Laine said, pumping her fist.

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"Now remember, Laine, the Spanish College is over five centuries old," Clayland explained to his cyborg. "It's also darn near sovereign Spanish territory, like an Embassy. So no hand grenades and no demolition charges, understood?"

"Okay," Laine groused, kicking at a stone with the toe of her boot. She and Kara climbed up onto the attic and exited onto the roof. Across the Via Belfiore they could see the Renaissance style balcony.

"Mind the gap!" Laine stated to Kara then took a running leap across the roof. Rather than aim for the balcony, Laine went for the roof and grabbed the edge, her lower legs carrying forward and smashing into the wall. She heaved herself up and over, roof tiles showering down onto the street below.

"So much for a stealthy entrance," Kara stated and performed her own leap, successfully making the roof, though the soles of her boots smashed tiles when she hit.

Both girls lay flat on the roof, listening for movement. Hearing nothing, they worked their way to the northern edge and lowered themselves to the roof of a long building that held the housing for the faculty and senior staff. The faculty housing and the main college

building were connected with a warehouse. They couldn't continue forward lest they risk being seen from the courtyard or the chapel. Kara held Laine's wrists as the latter slid off the edge of the roof and down to the balcony. Laine turned to face the wooden slat doors and, after seeing and hearing nothing, her instinct was to bash through them, but following her handler's instructions, she instead used her Ka-Bar tanto knife to break the lock and flung the doors open, Glock 18 at the ready.

The room was simply decorated, reflecting the occupant's lack of aesthetics more than an imposed austerity. Laine returned to the balcony and grabbed Kara's ankles as she lowered herself down from the edge.

Laine carefully opened the door and peeked out into the hallway, finding it empty. The girls crossed into the warehouse, but retreated into the shadows when they heard footsteps. A middle-aged man with a rifle slung over his shoulder approached, but his gaze remained straight ahead and he walked past the two girls. Laine slipped out behind him and planted her left hand over his mouth while with her right hand she expertly sliced open his throat. The blood fountained out...to land across Kara's jeans and boots.

"Laine!" Kara cried, trying to keep her voice down while expressing her dismay at her outfit being sprayed with blood.

"Uh, sorry about that," Laine said as she lowered the corpse to the floor. She slit the strap and removed the rifle. Even with their near encyclopedic knowledge of firearms, neither girl could immediately identify it, other than it appeared to be a large-bore bolt-action hunting rifle with a decent scope.

Laine opened the bolt and removed the cartridge.

"Is that some kind of wildcat?" Kara asked, using the term for a custom cartridge for which ammunition and firearms are not mass-produced.

"It looks like the mutant child of a .375 and .458 Magnum," Laine said. A moment later, it hit her. "This must be .458 Lott. It uses the case of the .375 Holland & Holland Magnum with the bullet from the .458 Winchester Magnum. It's the *de facto* cartridge used to put a big hole in large African game animals."

"It looks like it could put a big hole in one of us," Kara noted, a hint of worry in her voice as her mind raced back to the cache of large-caliber weapons Monty had discovered at Adria.

"Yeah. And unlike an anti-material rifle, law enforcement won't bat an eye at a fellow with a large hunting rifle as long as he has the proper permits," Laine noted. "Clearly the 'Big Bad' knows just how bad-assed we are and is compensating. We need to be on our toes."

The two cyborgs dragged the body out of sight, though the messiness of the death ensured that even police inspector Jacques Clouseau would instantly know what had happened and who had committed the deed.

"It stands to reason they're guarding the main entrance to the chapel," Kara posited. "The main building also has video surveillance, so I expect a frontal assault is out of the question."

Laine rubbed her chin, a thoughtful look on her face.

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Two Bologna faction members walked the upper *loggia* of the college, AKS-74U assault rifles cradled in their arms. Their initial focus had dulled in the intervening hours as the fears of a Carabinieri assault ebbed and negotiations dragged on over minutia. The doors to the twelve small student rooms, six to each wing, were wedged open to expose the interior and prevent any special forces sneaking in through the windows.

Each man had originally started walking in opposite directions on each wing, allowing them to keep the other in sight the entire time and offer complete coverage. However, their discipline slowly deteriorated to the point they now walked almost in parallel and spent more time looking at each other as they groused about the cold weather than around them.

"I have to take a piss," one of the men said and the other gave a limp-wristed wave of acknowledgement before turning to start his next circuit.

The man who needed to relieve himself entered one of the restrooms at the end of the gallery. As the college only allowed male students, the bathroom contained urinals and stalls with a communal shower area.

The man headed for the nearest stall so he could hang his rifle on the hook. As he opened the door, the sole of Laine's right boot smashed into his face, pulping his nose and shattering his jaw. He fell backwards on his ass and Laine leapt on him, grabbing his head in her hands and smashing it onto the tile, cracking it open like an egg, the blood spilling out like a ruptured syrup bottle.

Kara, hiding in the adjoining stall, dropped to the ground and surveyed the carnage.

"Okay, let's finish this before our handlers wonder what they hell we're doing," Laine ordered.

She padded to the door and peeked out. She waited until the other man turned and started his walk back. She rushed him, slipping the knife under his body armor and stabbing him in the right kidney and viciously slicing upward, shredding the organ and splashing blood over her own front.

"See? We match now," Laine noted.

"The word 'subtle' is not in your vocabulary, is it?" Kara asked.

"Oh, you mean subtle like a gun shot?" Laine retorted.

"We do have suppressors," Kara noted, holding up her suppressed Five-sevenN.

"That can is as long as the pistol itself," Laine commented. "I'm more likely to hit an opponent with the silencer than a bullet."

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Inside the ornate chapel, seventeen students and another two-dozen faculty members and staff sat quietly in the wooden pews. At the front, the dark-haired head of the Bologna Faction of the Five Republics stood before the ornately gilded altar, his tweed coat glowing in patterns of color from the light spilling through the five stain-glass windows above and around him.

A career academic, Clemente Biondetti's life intersected the Five Republics while a student at University of Naples Federico II. There he met a professor who showed him how Italy's ancient stone architecture was being smothered in the glass and steel of modernism

and she was prostituting her heritage and culture to appease foreign parasites.

When that professor was captured and executed (for he was never heard from again) by the government's machine children, Biondetti's fervor became fanaticism and he quickly rose to lead the Bologna Faction. And when Dante returned from exile and proved at Venice that the Agency demons were mortal, he'd quickly signed up and devised the plan to take the College, chosen because it was a foreign boil on the face of his beloved University.

Now, he waited for the climatic battle. Unlike his counterpart in Venice, Biondetti believed he had a fair chance to make it out alive. His hostages were the children of foreigners, but they were rich and powerful foreigners. That meant the Agency could not give their demons free reign and there were reports that they did not improvise well on their own. And while now an institute of learning, the college had been built in a darker and more violent time and the architecture reflected that in design features and construction that more properly resembled a fortress. But if it looked like they'd make a last stand, the Russian cruise missile warhead stored in the loading dock would level much of the building.

His 25 men were armed with a mix of assault rifles with armor-piercing cartridges, high-caliber hunting rifles designed to take down large game and a handful of sniper rifles firing the powerful 12.7x108mm bullet. All also carried revolvers and semi-automatic pistols chambered for large calibers on their hips. Ten men were with him in the chapel, two armed with sniper rifles standing guard in overlooking balconies. The other fourteen were spread around the compound, either patrolling or performing sentry duty.

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Above and to the left of the chapel, Laine and Kara finally ended their discussion by sticking their tongues out at each other. Refocusing on the mission, Kara unslung the VSS Vintorez sniper rifle strapped to her back and exited the bathroom, dropping flat on the floor and carefully crawling forward, trying to use the low shadows to help conceal her from anyone looking up from below. She identified a man with a Russian assault rifle leaning against the well in the center, his back to her. She took careful aim and fired, the hardened penetrator of the SP-5 9x39mm sub-sonic bullet tearing easily through the man's body armor – followed by his heart. She quickly tracked up and pulped the head of the man coming out of the dining area across the way.

Laine, suppressed Glock in hand, leapt over the balcony railing in time with Kara's first shot so as to land on the floor below. The two men standing guard to either side of heavy wooden doors leading into the chapel were still trying to register both her sudden appearance and the death of their comrade at the well when the subsonic 9mm rounds puréed their frontal lobes and they slid down the wall as their central nervous system shut down and their muscles went lax. Kara popped up and started sweeping the *loggia*, halting for a moment on each door and window to search for any targets. Below, Laine checked the rooms to either side of the chapel, silently dispatching two more men. She returned to the chapel doors, unscrewed the suppressor, and replaced the 10-round magazine with a 31-round one.

For her part, Kara re-shouldered the rifle and climbed up onto the railing and leapt upwards, clamping onto the edge of the roof. She lifted herself up and onto the roof, scrambling up to stand beside the circular window under the giant clock. After replacing the 10-round magazine with a 20-round unit, Kara slapped a small Alford Strip™ breaching charge to the base of the window and triggered it, shattering the window and blowing it inwards.

Kara swung the rifle into the hole and started to track for targets.

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Laine waited until she heard Kara's charge go off and then she kicked the doors open. Everyone inside had ducked when the charge went off and glass started to rain down. The two snipers in the balconies fell first to Kara's bullets, followed by Clemente Biondetti, his corpse falling back against the altar, the hand in his right pocket relaxing on the remote detonator for the warhead.

Laine's gaze fixated on anyone with a visible weapon, said gaze followed shortly by three 9x19mm rounds. Once the shots started ringing out, the students and staff went for the floor, leaving the Bologna Faction people clearly silhouetted. Within seconds, Laine and Kara had dispatched nine of the eleven members and the remaining two panicked, allowing Laine to close and literally beat them senseless.

On the roof, Kara popped a green smoke grenade and waved it over her head. This was the signal for the GIS team to breach the main door and swarm into the cloister, taking up defensive positions around the well. Two squads of Carabinieri troopers followed, securing the area to allow the GIS to start flushing out any remaining terrorists.

The two unconscious terrorists were secured and removed and the students and staff were rushed into Carabinieri Iveco VM 90 vans.

Kara crossed over to the corner and dropped down to the second level and then took the stairs down to the courtyard where she linked up with Laine and the two awaited their handlers.

To the surprise of both Michele and Kara, Clayland merely shrugged his shoulders in a "what can you do?" look as Laine stood before him soaked in blood.

"Terrorists defeated. Hostages rescued. Warhead secured. Building still standing. Pretty good, eh?" Laine crowed.

"Not bad," he noted, earning him a confident smirk from his cyborg.

"How did it go?" Michele asked Kara, but Laine cut in before Kara could answer.

"She kicked ass, Colonel. Cool, confident and deadly. She lacks my innate flair, but I'd still have her by my side any time."

"Uh, what she said?" Kara asked with a hopeful look and Michele nodded his approval.

"We need to get you two cleaned up," Michele noted.

"Maybe we can ask one of the Carabinieri if we can turn the water cannon on them for a couple of minutes," Clayland quipped, earning him a friendly scowl from his cyborg.

"There is a shower upstairs," Laine stated. "Though we'll need to get rid of that body, first..."

Clayland put his palm to his face and slowly shook his head.

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## THIRTY-FOUR

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### RECTOR'S ROOM REAL COLEGIO MAYOR DE SAN CLEMENTE DE LOS ESPAÑÓLES

"Thank you for the positive review," Kara stated as she pulled a white long-sleeve turtleneck sweater over her head, part of the ensemble Michele had brought from the Mercedes for her to change into after taking a shower.

"You and Michele look to be gelling well, but a few brownie points with your handler never hurt, no?" Laine asked as she toweled her blonde hair dry.

"I'm worried of disappointing him, so I try really hard," Kara admitted.

"That's a common fear amongst the cyborgs. Though in my case, I like to think that Clayland is worried of disappointing me. He might have won the audition, but it wasn't a slam-dunk for him," Laine said with a chuckle.

Kara cocked her head to one side, a quizzical look on her face.  
"Auditioned?"

"Most of the handlers chose their cyborg from a number of candidates. It was the same with me, however I was the one who did the choosing for both of my handlers," Laine replied matter-of-factly.

"*Both?* Clayland is your *second* handler?" Kara asked, her head again cocking to the side.

"That's adorable," Laine stated. "The boys must love it."

Kara scowled at her and Laine held up her hands.

"At the time, Section Two was choosing handlers from the military and police forces, so I followed the trend and chose someone from the Italian Special Forces. Luzio Fusco knew his shit and he drilled it all into me – firearms proficiency...special tactics...close quarters combat...the full meal deal."

"What happened to him?"

"He died during an explosives disarmament training session – evidently the dud he was working on wasn't."

Kara recoiled inside at the apparent flippancy she heard in Laine's voice at the death of her handler. She almost felt physically ill and consciously tamped down the bile rising in her throat.

"How can you say that about the person who took care of you?"

"We'd barely spent a month together, Kara. I mourned him as a colleague, of course, but we had not had enough time to bond as a *fratello*."

Kara, who'd started to bond with Michele the moment she'd first laid eyes on him and had done so completely by their dinner on the patio of the Park Hyatt Paris that same evening, didn't understand what Laine was saying. But before she could ask a question, Laine had already moved on.

"After investing so much money in me, the Agency didn't want to flush it down the drain, so they told me to pick another handler. I considered another Italian, but I'm an American girl at heart so I decided to go with 'the melting pot' metaphor and accept applications from other nationalities."

"And that is when you picked Mr. Stanaway?" Kara asked.

Laine nodded.

"Clayland Stanaway was a junior agent with the Homeland Security Investigations branch of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. After two years in the States, he was picked for the International Affairs desk and was working in Naples when I came across his resume and asked him to throw his hat into the ring. Like me, he was born in Britain, but also like me, he thinks like an American. So far, it's been mostly good."

Kara stared up at the ceiling as she tried to comprehend what Laine was saying.

*To choose one's own handler...*

Her ruminations were interrupted by a knock on the door and Clayland's voice asking if he could enter. Permission was granted and both handlers stepped into the room.

"We have new orders," Michele stated. "We're needed back in Rome, ASAP."

Clayland's cyborg held out her right hand to Michele, who had the keys to the Benz in his suit jacket pocket.

"Then you need 'The Fast Lane'."

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With a Polizia Stradale Lamborghini Gallardo LP560-4 blazing a trail, it took just under 90 minutes to reach Rome and the Palazzo Chigi – the residence of the Prime Minister of Italy and the seat of the Executive Branch of the government.

Loredana Villoresi, her face a mask of stress, met the four Agency operatives in the entrance lobby.

"Our worst fears have been realized," the Director of Italy's Nuclear Regulatory Agency said.

"New Trino is a Generation III plant. It effectively can't suffer a core meltdown due to the passive safety systems," Michele noted. "What can Dante really do?"

"It's worse than you've been told," Loredana stated, gravely.

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Unlike the White House Situation Room, which was located in the basement, the Italian equivalent sat atop the Palazzo Chigi. A large U-shaped table dominated the center of the room and against the far wall four large LCD panels arranged two wide and two high formed a wall display. The top left panel displayed a video conference connection to the Tactical Center of the Agency Compound and the right displayed a video feed from one of two MQ-1 Predator unmanned aerial vehicles orbiting the New Trino Nuclear Power Plant, built on the grounds – and foundation – of the old Enrico Fermi Nuclear Power Plant, which had been closed down and demolished in the late 1990's after the 1987 referendum. The bottom two panels were streaming video feeds of Rai Uno and CNN International.

"Michele!" the Prime Minister greeted. Michele could tell how stressed he was by the fact that he didn't flirt with Kara, instead ignoring her presence.

"I thought we were dealing with a 'dirty bomb', not a nuclear weapon," Michele stated. "Where the hell did he get one?"

"We checked the inventory at both Aviano and Ghedi Torre Air Bases and we have no empty quivers," a Generale di Brigata Aerea reported, using the American term for a stolen nuclear weapon.

"Britain and France report all of their warheads are accounted for, as well," the Foreign Minister stated.

"We're assuming it's Russian in origin. Possibly from the same supplier he received the SS-N-27 cruise missiles from," the Vice Minister of Defense noted.

"There have always been fears a tactical nuclear weapon might have been smuggled out during the chaos of the fall of the Soviet Union," Loredana noted. "However, there has never been any reports of a weapon being offered for sale and the Americans are very vigilant about such things."

"Maybe they cobbled one together from nuclear material?" the Deputy Director of the Cabinet offered. "We know the Soviets had nuclear material scattered at multiple sites in the former Warsaw Pact countries and the Americans have been helping collect and secure it."

"Building a working nuclear device is much harder in real life than it is in Hollywood," the Vice Minister of Defense stated. "It takes a large team of experts working in an advanced laboratory. Only a nation-state can realistically put one together."

"So how big a device are we looking at?" Clayland asked.

"We don't know," the Vice Minister admitted. "The smallest Russian devices are said to be the size of a refrigerator and probably have variable yields in the low kiloton range. It would be more than enough to destroy the reactor and crack the containment vessel."

"If it does, it would make one hell of a mess and with prevailing winds, fallout would make Milan, Bologna, Venice and Trieste. If the winds

shift north, Zurich and Munich could be at risk," Loredana said, the dread in her voice evident.

An Air Force General approached the group.

"Pagani, good to see you, son," he said, holding out his hand to indicate to Michele that he need not come to attention.

"Thank you, General."

"How's your father."

"Doing well, General."

The Chief of the Defense Staff nodded his head and turned to the Prime Minister.

"Minister Petris reports the commanders on scene are ready to begin the attack."

"Permission granted," the Prime Minister said.

The order was relayed and all eyes turned to the wall display. The MQ-1 display expanded to fill the top half, while the Ministry of Defense teleconference dropped down a row to replace the CNN International feed and the Rai feed was replaced by a video stream from the assembly area at a farmhouse three kilometers away from the plant.

The MQ-1 feed locked onto the main gate into the facility, identifying troops stationed on the top of the structure. Behind, they saw the heat signatures of three French Véhicule Blindé Léger light armored vehicles and three Iveco Magirus transport vehicles.

As the MQ-1 Predator prepared to engage the VBL infantry vehicles defending the front of the Turbine Room, Giulio Draghi's voice came over the speakers as he ordered one of the Puma 4x4 Armored Fighting Vehicles to charge through the front gate, the remote operators slewing the 81mm mortar turret looking for targets.

The vehicle charged up the main road towards the control room facility. Anti-material rounds fired from snipers on the roof peppered the vehicle as it closed. The Puma fired its mortar in tandem with a defender launching a Spike anti-tank guided missile and twin explosions lit up the area.

Along the perimeter road, another Puma 4x4 charged along, trailed by an Iveco Light Multirole Vehicle, the two trying to draw fire to allow the MQ-1 to identify them for engagement. And two squads of infantry approached the West and South faces of the facility, using the snow to mask their approaches, though the Southern team was forced back by heavy machine gun fire from a remote weapon station until the MQ-1 destroyed it with a Hellfire missile.

Michele leaned down next to the Prime Minister.

"Where is Dante getting the money for all this? Nuclear warhead; cruise missiles; transport vehicles; his expenditures have to be near eight figures! That amount of money should be leaving a paper trail tall and wide enough for the Guardia di Finanza to trip over even if they were blindfolded," he exclaimed.

Two seats down, the Minister of Economy and Finance, whom the Guardia reported to, glared at Michele.

"There's plenty of blame to go around," the PM stated. "I'm sure the politicians and lawyers will spend the next decade assigning it. But we have Dante cornered and the focus right now is to try and take him alive if possible, or recover the corpse if we can't."

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Everyone kept his or her eyes locked on the wall display as the battle played out. Snow started to fall, obscuring the quality of the pictures, but still no one could tear himself or herself away from the spectacle - nobody but Kara and Laine.

Both had left the Situation Room after they'd received Rico's report of Triela being gravely injured. If The Princess had been rendered combat ineffective within a handful of seconds, what chance did the others have?

Kara paced the hallway like a caged tiger, the constant flow of staffers passing by her on either side as a river would a sandbar. Laine leaned beside a window, clenching and unclenching her fists.

As she turned back towards the Situation Room, Kara saw Clayland emerge and walk towards Laine. The handler leaned in to whisper something, but Laine angrily shook her head.

"I should be there beside them, sharing the danger! Not sitting on my ass safe in a building guarded by two companies of the Republic's best soldiers!" Kara heard Laine exclaim.

"I know. But if you two can't be with them in person, at least be with them in spirit," Clayland replied.

Laine nodded, wiping her arm across her eyes. The three of them went back inside.

"Are you okay?" Michele asked as he came up beside Kara.

"Yes," she lied. Michele put his arm around her waist and pulled her close.

Special Operations Section Two had reached the main complex, which consisted of the buildings housing the Turbine and Generator Rooms. As the facility was still under construction, a large mobile crane was parked to the side of the central open area.

Suddenly, the MQ-1's camera locked on an infrared bloom as the main door leading to the generator room opened and the warm air inside rushed out.

"There's the Freccia!" an Army officer exclaimed and they saw a large armored vehicle emerge. The Agency teams scattered, firing their weapons to cover their withdrawal. The Freccia fired one of its two Spike anti-tank missiles, detonating one of the unfinished structures.

One of the cyborgs broke cover and the turret slewed to chase it, the autocannon firing a stream of 25x137mm High Explosive Incendiary with Tracer shells. Another cyborg engaged from cover with an anti-material rifle while three more rushed to the mobile construction crane, tipping it over to crash onto the IFV. The cyborgs then swarmed the vehicle, wrenching off the covers and killing the vehicle crew.

"We've secured the perimeter. Send in the choppers," Minister Petris ordered. Three MH-60L Blackhawk special operations choppers, loaned to the Italian's by the American Air Force, thundered over the main building and went into a hover. A shoulder-fired anti-air missile lanced upwards, but the targeted chopper released a shower of flares and viciously maneuvered, the missile exploding harmlessly below it.

As door gunmen sprayed suppressive fire from miniguns, the choppers went into a hover and soldiers of the 66th Air Assault Infantry Regiment, Friuli Air Assault Brigade started to rappel down.

Without warning, a red trail of tracer fire emerged from a concealed position and lanced into the side of the closest chopper, destroying the cabin and shearing the aft boom off. Without the small antitorque rotor, the forward part of the Blackhawk pirouetted into a dive, throwing soldiers and crew from the burning main compartment before smashing into the corner roof of the generator building. It pitched over and landed in the adjacent parking lot, exploding as the fuel cell ruptured.

“Field Commander Croce reports they have reached the Turbine Room. They’re preparing to storm the facility. Two cyborgs and five SRT have been injured and are being evacuated.”

With no video coverage, the assembled people in the Situation Room listened to the reports as the first assault team moved deeper into the structure and faced terrible resistance from Dante’s forces. The second team, led by Marco Toni, worked their way into the access tunnels underneath the Turbine Room as they tried to reach the control room. The tension continued to rise as the battle raged over the speakers and when Minister of Defense Petris’ voice screeched from the television, everyone but the cyborgs jumped.

“They’ve secured the device! They’ve secured the device!”

The collective exhalation of breath created a physical air current in the room.

“What about Dante?” the Prime Minister asked.

“Unknown. The situation remains fluid, but we have confirmed from Ricci’s team that he has secured the weapon,” Petris replied.

Kara heard Michele’s iPhone vibrate and he pulled it out, the look of annoyance on his face changing to surprise as he viewed the caller information. He pulled his arm away from Kara and headed for the hallway to take the call.

Kara followed at a discreet distance, though well within her listening range, but only being able to hear one side of the conversation made comprehension difficult. She turned her head when Michele ended the

conversation, but her handler walked past her and spoke with the Prime Minister. He then went to Clayland, who gathered his cyborg.

"What's up?" Kara asked.

"We have a mission," he said and walked out of the room. She fell into step beside him.

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# THIRTY-FIVE

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## SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCY COMPLEX HANDLER'S ANNEX

"It's so quiet," Kara noted as she approached the front of the building, allowing the enormous torque of the engine to advance the Mercedes forward along the parking area. The complex was normally well lit, but now only the hospital complex on the hill glowed, the rest of the buildings below looking like they were huddling near it for warmth on the cold Winter's evening.

"The Minister has sent reinforcements up to New Trino," Michele replied.

"Guess they're not worried about Dante staging an attack," Laine noted. The person manning the guard shack had been in full combat load-out, but other than him, they'd not seen anyone.

While the complex had excellent surveillance and security, it had been augmented since the attack on Venice. Unknown to the four, a four-man sniper team with both anti-personnel and anti-material rifles had tracked them across the bridge to the main gate and hastily-erected remote-controlled weapons stations on the corners of the taller buildings swung back and forth as their operators maintained a vigil against external threats.

"Drop us off and then head to the Warehouse to pack. We'll meet out front in twenty," Clayland ordered.

After exiting the car, Michele proceeded up to his room. He'd seen the light in the window from outside, so he knocked once and then opened the door.

Claes turned from his desk, dressed in a sweater dress, tights and leather boots. In her hand, Michele saw a book on wild herbs.

"How are they?" she asked.

"Dante's forces put up a determined resistance and there were many casualties," Michele replied. "A number of cyborgs were injured, Triela gravely so."

"Kara?"

"She's fine. We weren't there," Michele replied as he laid his garment bag on the bed and unzipped it, then headed for the closet.

"I see," Claes said. She leaned forward and emptied the contents of Michele's garment bag while he secured new suits and underclothes.

"Thank you," he said to Claes as she motioned for him to hand her the clothes so she could pack his bag. Michele returned to the closet and tapped his combination into a safe, followed by removing some cash and identity documents. Pulling out a pad of paper, he wrote down a phone number, which he handed to Claes along with ten €500 notes.

"What's this for?" she asked, confused.

"I have to go to Paris and I don't know when I will be back. This situation has escalated precipitously, and I don't know what the fallout will be. If things get...hairy...call that number. The person on the other end can help until I can get in contact with you."

Not knowing what to say, Claes merely nodded.

"Stay safe," she said as Michele reached the door.

"Don't lose that number," Michele replied.

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After dropping the handlers off, Kara drove along the road to the Cyborg Warehouse, passing under the archway and parking in front of the main entrance. In her room, Kara emptied her suitcase on the bed and examined her wardrobe.

Michele had informed her that she'd be taking on the persona of Sottotenente Kara Deleroux of the Agenzia Informazioni e Sicurezza Esterna, the latest name of Italy's external intelligence agency. She therefore chose a grey wool pantsuit over a white open-necked blouse and leather ankle boots. She packed four days worth of clothes and shoes into the suitcase and headed back down to find Laine hoisting her own suitcase into the back.

“Very sharp,” Kara commented, taking in Laine’s choice of a navy blue blazer and skirt over a white blouse with black pumps. Laine had set her hair into a ponytail and finished off the look with stylish glasses, earrings and a sliver cross on a black leather choker.

Laine took over the driving duties and they parked outside the Handler’s Annex to wait. Clayland arrived first and slipped behind Laine in the rear passenger seat. Michele appeared a moment later and headed for the seat behind Kara on the driver’s side.

From Michele’s room, Claes watched the lights recede and then returned to her book.

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Due to the elevated terror threat, most businesses closed early and sent their people home. Combined with a request from the Interior Ministry for people to stay off the roads and public transport, the drive to Leonardo da Vinci-Fiumicino Airport proved quick. The airport had reopened a few hours after the fuel depot attack and soon returned to normal operations.

Units of the Grenadiers of Sardinia Mechanized Brigade had been deployed around Rome and as the A91 became the Via Mario De Bernardi at the airport perimeter, Kara noticed the B1 Centauro Tank Destroyer and two Puma 4x4 APCs covering the interchange. Still more mechanized infantry were positioned at the approach to the terminal building and the off-ramp to the parking areas.

They pulled into the VIP section of the multi-level car park and crossed to the Alitalia check-in area. Armed troops from the Army and the Carabinieri patrolled the airport, but their government identification allowed them to bypass the large queues at the security stations and proceed to the lounge, where they waited to board their flight to Paris-Charles de Gaulle.

“So how hot is this ‘hot tip’ from your old friend?” Laine asked as she settled into a seat.

“And how old is this ‘old friend’?” Kara added.

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## THIRTY-SIX

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**CENTRE ADMINISTRATIF DES TOURELLES  
141 BOULEVARD MOTRIER  
XXE ARRONDISSEMENT, PARIS**

*Mid-to-late twenties*, Kara decided, as the bronze Renault Grand Espace IV she rode aboard turned off the rain-splashed streets of Paris and pulled up to the complex of buildings that housed the French Directorate-General for External Security. The four heavily tinted door windows were lowered and identity documents presented and checked before the vehicle was allowed to proceed into the underground parking area.

*And quite the looker*, Kara added sourly as the woman approached. Her short black hair worn in an asymmetric bob-cut that brought out her pale blue-green eyes. The denim jeans tucked into knee-high wedge-heel leather boots combined with a tight blouse to exhibit her shapely figure to maximum effect.

"Michele!" she greeted in English with a rich accent that Kara could not hope to match, even after ten years living in Paris herself.

"Hello, Coraline," Michele replied, also in English. The two exchanged kisses on the cheeks in the French tradition.

"Team, this is Coraline Loveau with the DGSE's Directorate of Intelligence. Coraline, this is Clayland Stanaway and Laine Brussard with the Department of Information Security."

The three exchanged greetings.

"And this is my partner at AISE, Kara Deleroux."

"Deleroux? That's a French name..."

"Yes," Kara replied in French. "My father was French and mother Japanese. As you can see, I inherited most of her genes."

"She must be very beautiful, then," Coraline stated.

"She was," Kara said.

"Me and my big mouth. I saw the reports of the terrorist attacks in the news. I was kind of surprised when you asked to pay me a visit in person."

"The situation is much more delicate than we've made public, so we have to operate with the utmost discretion," Michele replied.

"I understand. If you will follow me, please."

Coraline led everyone through a warren of corridors to a medium-sized office with a view of the outer wall and the public swimming pool across the way.

"So how do you and Michele know each other?" Laine asked as everyone removed jackets and settled into chairs, putting voice to a question that had pin-balled inside Kara's head for the past hour.

"It was 2005, was it not?" Coraline asked.

"At the NATO Interforce Intelligence Center in Brussels," Michele concurred.

"I'd been a freshly-minted Sous-Lieutenant on the staff of Général de brigade Jean-Jacques Bart. We were the first French military members to be assigned to Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe since DeGaulle had withdrawn the French Military from NATO control in 1967 and we really felt the eyes of everyone else on us.

"English kind of served as the informal *lingua franca* at HQ, but my command of it was a bit...weak. Fortunately, Michele spoke excellent French so I put myself in his care," she noted with a dazzling smile.

Kara, whose sour mood curdled more by the minute, wondered if Naomi Palmer had been part of their group, but held her questions as Coraline approached a large magnetic whiteboard that dominated one of the walls. Spread across it was a scramble of pictures, printouts, marker lines and words.

"The three primary illicit drugs consumed in Europe are, in order, cannabis, cocaine and heroin. My role within the Directorate is to track drug shipments into the Fifth Republic, specifically those that come by

sea. Marseille is the largest port in France and one of five main entry points for illegal drugs into the European Union,” Coraline noted.

“It’s impossible to keep track of all the vessels that transit through our ports, but everything is stored on computers now,” Coraline noted.

“The Government has been increasing our funding in technology, which has allowed us to start searching those stored records for patterns. Through this program I discovered two weeks ago a small cargo vessel that was making regular runs between Marseille and the Ukrainian port of Odessa over the past three months. When I ran the registry, I received a hit that the Italian AISI had identified the ship in Adria smuggling in weapons, possibly chartered from Alexandria. Additional crosschecking brought to my attention a report prepared by Naomi Palmer of the British SIS and delivered to one Michele Pagani of the Italian AISE.”

“Kara and I were part of the group that identified her in Adria,” Michele noted. “Unfortunately, they were on to our presence and led us on a merry chase and the ship snuck out under darkness.”

Kara frowned, still chafing at the memory of being given the slip.

“At the time, we assumed the vessel was trans-shipping cocaine, but that didn’t fit the general Black Sea smuggling model, which favored direct shipment from Northern African ports to the cities of Novorossiysk and Sevastopol. We tasked some HUMINT assets on our end and determined that the vessel was indeed shipping cocaine,” Coraline noted, using the acronym for HUMAN INTelligence, the diplomatically polite term for a spy. “But what we found surprising is that the vessel wasn’t *importing* cocaine to the Ukraine, but *exporting* it,” Coraline noted.

“Why is that surprising?” Kara asked.

“The 'Ndrangheta control much of the world’s cocaine trade, thanks to significant emigration to cocaine-producing countries in South America. They were heavily involved in right-wing paramilitary groups and formed strong links to the Columbian cartels, initially as a protection force and then as actual producers and shippers,” Coraline explained.

“Within Europe, the 'Ndrangheta are believed to be responsible for at least half of the cocaine imported. It doesn’t make any sense for them

to export it from the Ukraine, especially back to Italy, which is the primary *import* route into the EU via the port at Gioia Tauro."

"You think they're re-selling product?" Clayland asked. His role within I.C.E. had focused on arms and drug trafficking into the United States.

"It's possible. But if they are, they either have balls of steel or brains of rubber to operate right under the noses of the *Unione Corse*, who have taken up first cannabis and then cocaine to fill the gap made by the loss of the opium trade when they closed 'The French Connection' in the early 1970s," Coraline finished.

"Good movie," Laine noted. "Though I liked *Ronin*, more," she added, referring to the director, John Frankenheimer. Beside her, Kara nodded her agreement.

"Frankenheimer directed the sequel," Clayland stated, indicating his cyborg to shush. He turned to Michele.

"It would be interesting to know if that vessel has been anywhere else," he said.

Michele nodded. "Well we know it picked up the cruise missiles in Alexandria before it arrived in Venice."

"Cruise missiles?" Coraline asked.

"Dante imported between four and six SS-N-27 cruise missile warheads," Michele answered. "He detonated one of them in Venice and we secured another in Bologna earlier today. When the Cold War ended, a number of Soviet aircrews decided to...appropriate...their cargo aircraft in lieu of back wages and flew them off to isolated airfields in the 'Stans or the Eastern Anatolia Region of Turkey to set up shop performing transport for hire. We believe that Dante hired one of them to fly the missiles to Saharan Africa and then truck them to Alexandria where they were transferred to that ship."

"Should we tell her about the package?" Clayland asked.

Coraline's ears perked up. "Package?"

"Dante must have brought it with him on the ship," Michele observed.

"Tell me about what package?"

Michele turned and looked her straight in the eyes.

"What I am about to tell you cannot leave this room. Do you understand?"

Coraline nodded.

"Do you recall the Bujanovac Incident?" Michele asked.

"Yes, it was during the break-up of Serbia and Montenegro. A Russian fighter-bomber carrying a tactical nuclear device crashed on the outskirts of the town. The bomb detonated, killing thousands, and radioactive fallout contaminated much of the Preševo Valley, though the city of Preševo escaped the cloud. There was a huge outcry as to why a Russian aircraft with an armed nuclear weapon was in the area. Your country sent a detachment of military police there to help as part of the United Nations Peacekeeping Force."

"Evidently there was no crash," Michele informed her. "That area of Serbia is ethnically Albanian and there were concerns that the population might try to create an independent state as they did in 2001 at the end of the Kosovo War. Somehow, two ex-Soviet 'suitcase nukes' were smuggled into the area and one of them was detonated in Bujanovac, though whether that was by design or accident nobody knows. The other was evidently smuggled out of the country during the confusion by whoever Dante's benefactor is. Dante's intent was to use it to destroy the New Trino nuclear generating station, however we successfully secured it earlier today."

"Mon dieu," Coraline exclaimed.

"The Russians didn't want to admit they'd lost custody of two nuclear weapons, so they created the fake aircraft accident. American NEST teams confirmed the nuclear material was Russian, so the world bought the story," Clayland added.

"I can put in a priority request to pull all the tracking reports we have on the ship. It should be ready by morning," Coraline offered.

"Thank you. We should all get some sleep and reconvene in the morning," Michele said.

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# THIRTY-SEVEN

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PARK HYATT PARIS-VENDÔME  
5 RUE DE LA PAIX

The sun started to peek over the tops of the buildings and by 0830 had risen high enough for it's light to bring Michele to wakefulness. As he listened to the steady breathing of his slumbering cyborg, he still found the idea of sharing a bed with a teenage girl an uncomfortable one. He did have to admit that the Generation Two's ability to pass for being a young adult made such arrangements easier and he had at times wondered how the Croces handled it with their pre-teen girls or Hilshire with Triela when they operated remotely.

"To think it's been only three months since we were here," Kara had noted the previous evening as they listened to the rain splatter against the windows.

"Different times," Michele had replied.

"Everything is going to change now, isn't it?"

"Yes," Michele admitted, his statement causing Kara to move closer towards him.

In the light of a new morning, Michele reflected that everything *had* changed when the Ricci *fratello* had confirmed Dante's possession of a nuclear weapon. Michele and Clayland were now operating directly under the authority – and orders – of the Prime Minister. And those orders were to find out where Dante had secured the weapon and from whom.

And then make sure they couldn't provide him with anything else.

Michele slipped out of bed and pulled a robe over his pajamas before entering the main living area. The clouds of the evening had given way to skies of crisp azure and bitterly cold temperatures as he started the fireplace to banish the chill.

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Clayland and Laine joined them in the restaurant for breakfast and once done, they went to the lobby to await Coraline.

"Stepping up your game today, I see," Laine noted, taking in Kara's black long-sleeved sweater dress over a white lace camisole and knee-high dress boots in black leather. "Love the hat," she added.

Kara offered a wane smile as she pulled the white pillbox fur hat off her head. "You're looking good yourself," she added.

"Well I *am* in Paris," Laine in explanation of her choices of an orange sweater-poncho over a grey long-sleeve tee and black slacks tucked into black leather knee-high boots. Around her neck she wore a large silk scarf in dark grey and crème with gold banding.

A black Peugeot 308 CC pulled up to the valet and Coraline stepped out, looking stunning in a tight-fitting olive green long-sleeve turtleneck dress and brown knee-high leather boots.

"We've just been p0wned," Laine dead-panned.

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In Michele's suite, Coraline pulled out a laptop and placed it on the table. Michele ran a cable to the LCD television and a map of the Mediterranean and Black Seas appeared. A red line started to trace a path back and forth between the countries along those two bodies of water.

"This is the data we've been able to collect on the *Khazbiika*," Coraline reported. "She's a 50m coastal freighter built in 1989 at Tuzla, which is the main Turkish shipyard just south of Istanbul. She flies a Russian flag out of Novorossiysk, but her crew is mostly from the North Caucasus."

"For a coastal freighter, this vessel certainly gets around," Clayland noted as the screen continued to fill. Soon, patterns started to emerge as they saw the vessel consistently shuttle back and forth between Southern Europe and Northern Africa and from southern Italy to Turkey.

"Significant cocaine shipments arrive by ship across the Atlantic to the Ivory Coast, Liberia and Guinea-Bissau. It's dropped off the side and taken into the mangrove swamps by smaller boats, then carried by land or air up north to countries like Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and

Libya. From there it is either ferried across the Strait of Gibraltar and driven up into Europe or shipped across to ports like Galicia, Marseille, Genoa, Palermo and Gioia Tauro," Coraline explained.

"And Turkey?" Kara asked.

Coraline zoomed in on the eastern half of the Mediterranean.

"Turkey plays a central role in the heroin trade. Afghanistan is a massive producer of opium and the raw product is shipped to Turkey for processing into heroin and then smuggled into the EU via the Balkan route. Once in the EU, the Turkish Diaspora has provided plenty of conduits to distribute the product to consumers. It is currently believed that more than three-quarters of the heroin imported into the EU comes from Turkey and it looks like our friends here are not discriminatory in the drugs they ship."

"A coastal freighter is not designed for speed. For runs like Morocco to Spain or Libya to France it should be sufficient, but Algeria to Turkey or the Ukraine to Italy? That is thousands of kilometers and such a vessel would take upwards of a week," Michele noted.

"The data wizards found something interesting when they analyzed the trips," Coraline teased. "A normal coastal freighter is good for about 12 knots, which is maybe 500 kilometers a day. But this vessel appears to be able to steam at something closer to 25 knots."

"She's the naval equivalent of a bloody Q-car!" Laine exclaimed.

"Q-car?" Kara asked.

"It's a car that looks like a punter, but has the performance of a sports car," Laine replied. "Think of a Fiat Croma with a Ferrari 430 engine and gearbox installed."

"Such speed would be valuable to a smuggler," Clayland noted, earning him a nod of agreement from Michele.

"Aye. It won't outrun a patrol ship, but it can get product where it's needed quickly and look innocuous doing so," the older handler said.

"Though they don't seem to travel east of the 30<sup>th</sup> meridian," Laine noted. There were no tracks to Lebanon, Syria, Israel or the Sinai nor any to Cyprus."

"I expect they don't want to risk being boarded by the Israeli Navy," Clayland replied.

"If Dante's used this ship once, he's probably used it before," Laine noted.

"It makes sense," Clayland agreed. "They could have brought in the missile used in Venice. And the Blackhawk helicopter that extricated Dante from Venice flew in that direction."

"He could have landed it on the ship – it's wide enough of beam to put a landing pad on top of and they could refuel it to head on to another country," Laine added.

"So what's our next move?" Kara asked, feeling a bit let out of the conversation.

"Now that we know where the ship's home port is, I guess we trace it back," Michele replied.

"Know anybody in Russia?" Laine asked and when Michele nodded his head, Kara felt a knot form in her stomach.

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# THIRTY-EIGHT

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**ABOARD VQ-BHL [SERGEI IVANOVICH VAVILOV]  
TERMINAL D  
SHEREMETYEVO INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT**

Kara fidgeted in her seat as the Aeroflot Airbus A320-214 taxied off the active runway and onto the ramp. She sat on the aisle in Seat 2C, her handler and Coraline in front of her and next to each other in the window and aisle seats, respectively, while Laine held the aisle and Clayland the window across from them.

The plane came to a stop and the lights blinked, informing the passengers they could get out of their seats. Kara leapt out and positioned herself in the aisle to block the adjacent seats, while Laine stepped into the front galley entryway. Michele and Clayland rose and removed their briefcases from the overhead bins. When the forward door opened, Laine stepped out and quickly surveyed the jet bridge, then started forward towards the gate. Clayland and Michele followed, with Kara in the trailing position.

As they entered the Arrivals Area, an elegant older woman in a luxurious fur coat walked towards them, accompanied by a young man who, though he wore civilian clothing, carried himself like a military man.

"It is good to see you again, Michele Nikolaiovich Pagani," the woman greeted in a rich voice.

"The feeling is mutual, Nadia Sergeyevich Petrovna," Michele replied. The two exchanged a chaste hug.

"Friends, Nadia is with the Russian Federal Security Service. Nadia, this is my partner at the AISE, Kara Deleroux. And this is Clayland Stanaway and Laine Brussard with the Department of Information Security. The final member is Coraline Loveau with the DGSE."

Nadia smiled politely, though Kara noted her sizing up the Stanaways and Coraline. Under the Soviet structure, Nadia would have served in the KGB's Second Chief Directorate, tasked with counterintelligence

operations. A foreign intelligence operative like Clayland, Laine or Coraline would have been a prime subject for such monitoring.

"Welcome to the Russian Federation," she greeted.

"You look like you're old friends," Coraline noted.

"Yes, Michele Nikolaiovich and I have known each other for, what, fifteen years now?"

"That sounds about right," Michele agreed.

"Where did you meet?" Kara asked.

"There will be plenty of time to discuss old times," Michele noted, cutting off Kara's inquiry.

The group approached Passport Control and an officer of the Federal Migratory Service collected their passports and applied the relevant visas and entry stamps. They then proceeded to the luggage delivery area where an Aeroflot baggage handler appeared with a cart containing their bags. Nadia presented the relevant Ministry of Internal Affairs forms for the importation of firearms and ammunition to the officer working the Customs Control desk and the party was waved through and exited onto the main concourse.

"We have a car waiting outside," Nadia said.

Laine rubbed her hands together. "Man, I hope it's a ZIL-41047 or even a GAZ M13 Chaika!"

"You watch far too much *Top Gear* for your own good," Kara noted, recalling the latter car from an episode of the UK motoring show.

"Ah, *man*," Laine whined as they stepped outside and sitting proudly in the "Government Vehicles Only" section was a black GMT900 GMC Yukon Denali XL.

"Communism is dead, Miss Brussard, and so is the customer base for those types of cars," Nadia noted with a smile. "Also, the Americans and Germans offer a very nice armor package."

Everyone boarded the SUV, Kara and Laine bracketing Coraline in the third row, Michele and Clayland in the two Captain's chairs before

them and Nadia and her driver took their respective seats up front. The vehicle pulled out from the terminal and onto the road that led to the Leningradskoye Highway.

"I see Rosavtodor has been busy," Michele commented as they connected from Leningradskoye Highway to Leningradsky Prospekt, using the Russian term for the Federal Highway Agency.

"The road was expanded to twelve lanes from the MKAD to Tverskaya Street in the late 2000s," Nadia replied, using the acronym for the Moscow Automobile Ring Road. They passed the Khodynka Aerodrome and the ruins of the old Dynamo Stadium and then crossed over the Garden Ring Road.

Even with six lanes heading into the city, traffic slogged along and it took what seemed like hours to reach the end of Tverskaya Street and continued past the Bolshoi Theatre and Hotel Metropole towards Lubyanka Square and the imposing façade of Aleksandr V. Ivanov's most famous building, now the headquarters for the Federal Security Service.

Michele smiled in bemusement at the thought of how the etymology of the term 'Moscow Rules' had morphed from being a noun reference for a code of conduct spoken by intelligence officers in hushed tones in dark alleys to a verb modifier shouted by intoxicated teenagers at dance clubs.

"The place just isn't the same without *Iron Felix* holding court," Michele noted, referring to the 15-ton iron statue of Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky, the founder and head of Cheka – the forerunner of the KGB – that dominated Lubyanka Square from 1958 until it was torn down in 1991 in the wake of the failure of the August coup d'état attempt against Mikhail Gorbachev.

"You sound like a veteran of the Cold War," Clayland commented. "You and Jethro Blacker must be a riot at the bar."

"I don't think Jethro was old enough to be in the Cold War," Michele replied with a smile. "Even I came in at the tail end of it, serving a tour in the Italian Embassy in 1989-1990. Exciting times, nonetheless."

"Indeed," Nadia said, though her voice didn't carry the same tone of frivolity.

The Suburban pulled up to the front of the building and everyone but the driver exited. They signed in and were escorted through the various halls and corridors until they reached Nadia's office.

"So, what assistance can the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation offer the Republics of Italy and France?" Nadia asked with a large smile once everyone had settled.

"Is this office secure?" Michele asked.

Nadia shrugged. "We are the ones who watch the watchers..."

"Dante's back," Michele said.

Instantly, the smile faded.

"I take it he is behind the attacks across your country I saw on the news?" Nadia asked and Michele nodded.

"So Cristiano's mad dog shows his fangs once again," she murmured.

Coraline looked to Kara.

*Cristiano?* She mouthed.

*I'll tell you later,* Kara mouthed back.

"After he was thrown out of Italy, Giacomo Dante migrated to Africa and started offering his services for hire," Nadia continued. "We believe he was a mercenary during the Eritrean-Ethiopian War and we know he was helping Shamil Basayev with the bloodbaths perpetrated upon the House of Culture in 2002 and Beslan in 2004."

Michele held his tongue, his belief that the high death counts in both incidents were due to the heavy-handed assault by the FSB's own Alpha Group, who treated the Moscow theater and North Ossetia school like military objectives to be overwhelmed and subjugated as opposed to hostage situations.

"We don't know if he actually converted to Islam while working for Basayev or just found their money good, but he went to Egypt and assisted with the group behind the Sinai bombing in 2004 and the 2005 Sharm el-Sheikh attacks. When we terminated Basayev in 2006,

he made his way south through Georgia, Turkey, Iraq and then Jordan. They captured him as a possible accomplice for the 2005 Amman bombings and he was soon tied to the Egyptian attacks and they sent a patrol ship to return him to Alexandria. That ship was attacked by pirates and sunk and we assumed Dante went down with it."

"It wasn't pirates. It was Cristiano," Michele replied. "He sprung him so that he could assassinate Giovanni Croce and his family. The government tried to run him to ground, but he slipped the net and went dark until the recent attacks."

"Forgive my bluntness, Michele Nikolaiovich, but how do these attacks on Italy concern the security of the Russian Federation?"

"The weapon Dante detonated in Venice was the warhead of an SS-N-27 cruise missile. We found another in Bologna and we think a warhead was used at Da Vinci International. His followers are also armed with modern Russian assault and heavy rifles," Michele reported. "We're not sure who is backing him, but they seem to have a direct pipeline to your munitions stockpiles."

"Then perhaps you should be meeting with the Main Directorate for International Military Cooperation."

"I was thinking more the 12<sup>th</sup> Chief Directorate," Michele replied, his voice level. He saw Nadia's face blanch at the mention of the department within the Ministry of Defense responsible for all aspects of the Russian nuclear arsenal.

"What are you insinuating, Michele Nikolaiovich?"

"Dante had possession of a 'suitcase nuke'. A *Russian* suitcase nuke."

"Of course we developed small tactical nuclear devices, but all were far too large and heavy to be man-portable, much less fit in a briefcase," Nadia replied.

"What about Lebed's claims?" Coraline asked, referring to former Russian National Security Adviser Aleksandr Lebed, who claimed in 1997 on an American television news show that the Russian military had lost track of more than 100 suitcase-sized nuclear bombs.

"Lebed was lying to make himself look important and create lucrative

'consulting' positions with the US government and defense think tanks," Nadia proclaimed, confidently.

Michele removed an envelope from his inside jacket pocket and handed it to Nadia. She opened it and removed a 4D-size photographic print of a heavy canvas bag containing a metal box with Cyrillic writing on the side and Soviet / Russian color code for a nuclear weapon.

"And where was this taken?" she asked, her voice carefree for she knew such pictures were easily doctored.

"The control room of the New Trino Nuclear Power Plant less than 48 hours ago," Michele replied. "Dante's right-hand man was seconds away from detonating it when we stopped him."

"Impossible," Nadia scoffed.

"Call over to Znamenskiy Pereulok 19 and read them that identification number," Michele said, referring to the address where the 12<sup>th</sup> kept the registrar of nuclear weapons.

Nadia stared at the picture for a time. "It is not possible," she said again, and Kara had the feeling Nadia was hoping if she repeated it enough, it would become true.

"That I'm here is proof that it is," Michele said.

Nadia reached for her desk phone.

"Connect me with First Deputy Director Sigachev," she ordered. "Alexey? It's Nadia. I need to see you in your office immediately. We have a situation."

Five minutes later, a large bear of a man rose from behind a desk to greet them as they were escorted into an ornate room.

"Colonel Michele Nikolaiovich Pagani, may I introduce Major General Alexey Yegorovich Sigachev."

The two men shook hands and then Nadia briefed Sigachev on what Michele had told her. When she finished, he picked up his own phone and dialed a number.

"I need to speak to the Chief of the 12 GU MO," he ordered his assistant over the intercom, using the Russian acronym for the 12<sup>th</sup> Chief Directorate.

Evidently, the person on the other end wanted to debate the need to immediately connect the two parties because Kara watched his face turn crimson and his expression livid.

"Put me on the line," he snarled and Laine leaned forward to watch the fireworks.

"Whom am I speaking to? Well let me educate you on something, Mayór Lvov. This is *General-Mayór* Sigachev, First Deputy Director of the Federal Security Services, and if you do not connect me to Generál-Polkóvnik Vasilyev in the next thirty seconds I will see to it that you are manning an automated lighthouse on Novaya Zemlya!"

Twenty seconds later, his demeanor changed 180 degrees.

"Anton Nikitovich! It's Alexey Yegorovich. I have a special request for your Chief Archivist." He proceeded to read off the identification number from the warhead. "Thank you, Anton Nikitovich. I will await your call." He hung up.

"I cannot help but feel that I am humoring you, Nadia Sergeyeovich. The Directorate of State Inspection of Nuclear and Radiological Security take their role very seriously. And most Russian nuclear weapons are stored separately from their delivery vehicles under strict guard so you can rule out the Hollywood favorite of a corrupt Russian officer selling a nuclear weapon. Besides, after Afghanistan and Chechnya, any Islamic terrorist group who secured a Russian nuclear weapon would be as likely to detonate it in Moscow or Saint Petersburg as they would Washington or New York."

Nadia looked to Michele, who said nothing. Soon enough, Sigachev's intercom chirped to announce that Colonel-General Anton Nikitovich Vasilyev was calling him. The Major General answered the phone and the friendly tone of his voice quickly grew neutral, then cold, as the conversation continued. For every question Sigachev asked of Vasilyev, he answered three from the senior officer and Kara saw his hand shaking as he replaced the receiver.

"Where are you staying, Polkóvnik Pagani?" he asked.

"We have not made arrangements, as we didn't know how long we'd be staying."

"Make them now, please," Sigachev requested.

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# THIRTY-NINE

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**WINTER GARDEN SUITE  
ARARAT PARK HYATT  
MOSCOW, RUSSIAN FEDERATION**

"This is a far site better than ending up in Lefortovo's basement," Laine stated, though Kara could not help but detect a bit of actual wistfulness at being denied the opportunity to spend time in one of the most infamous prisons ever. Not for the first time that week Kara worried about her older sister.

After leaving General Sigachev's office, they piled into the Suburban and Michele instructed the driver to take them to the Park Hyatt, using his status with the chain to secure their rooms. Once everyone had settled in, they met in the Pagani's suite to discuss their options.

"Altheus and Liesel successfully tracked down Bushuyev and extracted from him one of his primary financiers," Clayland reported. "His name is Kirill Petrov and he has a son, Anton, who helps his father with the 'family business' – when he's not at the club."

"I know of both. Petrov's son is a dilettante, but the cocaine hasn't yet ruined his memory," Nadia added.

"Can you arrange a...meeting?" Michele asked, using a euphemism for having him picked up and brought to a place where they can interrogate him.

"Unfortunately, the elder Petrov is very well-connected and has...sponsored...many members of the government."

Kara looked out through the panoramic windows at the Kremlin and State Duma building. Beyond, the six story Central Universal Department Store, more commonly referred to by its initials TsUM (Tsentral'nyĭ Universal'nyĭ Magazin) stood proud over Petrovskaya Street, one of the most fashionable and trendiest places in the city.

"You said he likes clubbing?" Kara asked Nadia.

"Anton is a part owner of the Moscow franchise of the Pacha Group,"

Nadia replied. "You can see it from here," she added, pointing due South.

"I'd like to offer an idea," Kara stated.

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Four hours - and a trip to the TsUM - later, Kara and Laine dressed in their new outfits.

"Do you have any pair of shoes that *aren't* boots?" Laine asked as Kara pulled on a pair of Prada knee-high flat boots in textured ivory leather.

"Yes," Kara replied, defensively. She wore a black tank top under a sleeveless white Chloé sweater dress with a very deep scoop neck that ended about midway up her thighs. To this she added white wool arm warmers and her white fur hat.

"Your feet are going to freeze solid in those," Kara added, pointing to her pair of Dolce & Gabbana peep-toe sandals in metallic silver leather.

"I saw the weather forecast on CNN International and it said it would be 5° this evening," Laine retorted.

"That was CNN America and that's 5 degrees *Fahrenheit*," Kara informed her.

"Well, it does match my dress," she stated with a wane smile, showing off her Versace silver metallic sleeveless dress.

Both satisfied with their respective looks, they walked into the main lounge area of the suite.

"Are we sharp or are we sharp?" Laine asked the assembled adults.

"Are you going to be warm enough?" Michele asked with honest concern and both girls put their palms to their faces.

"You look like you've done this before," Clayland observed.

"You ever heard of Ibiza Rocks?" Laine asked, referring to the club on the Spanish island off the coast of Valencia and the summer-long festival of live music held at the various clubs that dotted it.

"Can't say that I have," Clayland replied, looking to Michele for support, but finding the older handler looking a bit sheepish.

"I've seen the playlists in his 599 and one of the albums was *This is Ibiza Life*. In fact, at least half of it is House, Techno and Electronica," Laine proclaimed with a large smile.

"Let's go over the plan one last time," Clayland ordered.

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Even in the sub-freezing evening weather, the young women standing in line in front of Pacha Moscow wore outfits that proclaimed anti-freeze, not blood, flowed in their veins.

While the club was within easy walking distance of the hotel, the best way to gain immediate entrance into the club was to arrive in a vehicle and as she pulled up under the glass terrace in a current Glacier Blue Bentley Continental GTC Speed convertible, Laine blipped the throttle, the W12 engine barking to announce her arrival.

In response, the valets snapped to attention and came forward, opening the door for Laine and Kara. Laine smiled at her valet and overtly slipped him a 500 Euro note. Kara did the same, discreetly, to the doorman and they were ushered inside the club. The main entrance was covered in mirrors that reflected the neon lighting. A supermodel stood in front of an acrylic podium that glowed red, the twin cherry logo of Pacha outlined in white. She smiled at the two girls as they walked past and descended the wide staircase that led to the main club areas.

Pacha Moscow had two dance floors – a larger one for headlining acts and a smaller one for more offbeat performances. Wide pathways lined with continuous leather benches, tables and ovoid chairs circled these areas for use by VIPs, along with bars where patrons and servers could secure libations. Kara found the Pop Art décor to be absolutely vulgar, but she'd heard from her handler that Moscow was filled with the nouveau riche and their tastes were, in his opinion, rather lacking. That Michele, who'd come into his millions only recently himself, was being somewhat hypocritical in expressing such an attitude did not register with Kara, who considered her handler to be as infallible as the Bishop of Rome.

As the girls started their search for Anton Petrov, Kara identified the song blasting from the speakers as the Pump Panel acid remix of New

Order's "Confusion", used in the opening rave scene of the movie *Blade*. A rave that, Kara recalled, had Russian vampires.

Unlike many clubs, who segregated the "super VIP" area off in a side area, at Pacha Moscow it was at the very bottom of the club, reached by either a wide staircase from the main dance floor or a smaller, winding staircase from one of the VIP areas. This area had ten tables arranged around a dance floor with a bar. On the floor above in the back hung the DJ area and in front was a massive LCD display and balcony for musicians. Kara looked down into that area, seeing a mass of people dancing.

"Found him," Laine stated, pointing to one of the tables where Petrov sat, surrounded by a number of busty and leggy women.

"So how do we want to do this?" Kara asked. A moment later, the Techno-Syndrome 7" mix of the title theme to the movie *Mortal Kombat* started blasting from the speakers.

"Head to the main staircase and follow my lead," Laine stated.

"This won't go well," Kara muttered to herself.

Laine sauntered through the VIP section, sliding between the writhing bodies like quicksilver on glass. Two large men secured the top of the main set of stairs to the Super VIP section, ensuring that only people with the proper bracelets were allowed access. A third man guarded the staircase from the upper level and this is the person Laine approached. She gave him a large smile and held up her right arm, clearly showing she didn't have the proper bracelet.

What she *did* have was her fist, and she moved her hand forward to smash the knuckles of the back of her hand into his face, knocking him out.

"Excellent!" the music announced.

"Why thank you!" Laine replied to the ceiling. She swung the bouncer's unconscious form into an open chair and headed down into the Super VIP section. Laine identified a number of young Russian entrepreneurs, all surrounded by their own cloud of beautiful women. The advantage of this chaos is that it pinned down the security details, limiting both their field of vision and freedom of movement.

Laine stumbled forward, playing as if inebriated. She weaved around the table and plopped down between Petrov and one of the women, pushing them aside with her weight.

"Oops!" she exclaimed, laughing. She twisted the end of a narrow eyelash mascara holder in her hands and slipped, pressing it into her target's bare arm.

Petrov did not feel the array of ceramic micro-needles penetrate his skin nor did he feel the agent being pneumatically injected into his bloodstream. Normally, this agent was the muscle relaxant pancuronium bromide and it would have quickly stopped Petrov's heart. This time, it was the powerful barbiturate sodium thiopental and even as Petrov turned towards Laine, his grip on consciousness was fading.

"Looks like I'm not the only one whose had too much to drink!" she giggled and rose up, hooking her arm around Petrov and lifting him with her. She started for the main stairs, using her strength and Petrov's body to push her way through the crowd, which closed back up behind her and stymied the bodyguards.

From above, Kara saw Laine hoist Petrov onto her shoulder and start plowing her way through the crowd towards the staircase.

"туалет посетить!" Laine exclaimed as she started up the stairs. The bouncer at the bottom shook his head and moved to block her way.

"Fight!" the voice from the speakers commanded and Kara came forward. Gripping the steel railing with both hands she lifted herself off the ground, planted the soles of her boots on the back of the bouncer at the top of the stairs and sent him flying down where he smashed into the one below, both of them tumbling into the crowd. Like bowling pins, people fell forward and scattered as the two large men knocked their legs out from under them.

Kara helped position Petrov onto Laine's shoulders in a Fireman's Carry and the two started for the staff area, working their way through the crowd like two American gridiron football linebackers through a defensive line.

They reached one of the staff doors and bulled their way through. On the other side was a girl with a metal serving tray, who jumped back in surprise at the two cyborgs bursting upon her. Kara yanked the tray

out of her hand while Laine lurched towards her, sending the girl screaming back down the hall towards the kitchen area.

“Get to the garage!” Kara yelled as she jammed the tray into the crack between the back of the door and frame, bending it so that it served as a wedge preventing the door from fully opening. It would not last long against a determined assault, but 30 seconds was 30 seconds.

Parking for Pacha was located underneath the building in a multi-story garage. There was an elevator and staircase for customer use at the front of the building and a second staircase in the back for staff. This second staircase was the one Kara and Laine descended. At the bottom, Kara ripped the handles off the heavy security door, letting it slide closed with a satisfying \*thunk\*.

Staff parking was closest to the door and beyond was the valet parking section. Kara could see one security camera, slowly rotating back and forth as it scanned the parking floor. Kara skipped along towards it, jumping to wrap both hands around it and letting her weight and strength rip it out of the housing. She then pulled a spare key fob for the Bentley out of her arm warmer and pressed the unlock button, using the flash of the headlights to identify where their vehicle was parked. As they’d hoped, the huge tip had the vehicle parked in the staff area, saving them time.

While Kara strapped in to the driver’s seat, Laine dropped Petrov’s unconscious form in the seat behind her and then slid across the back of the car to plop in beside him in the back. Starting the car, Kara raced to the end of the floor and started up the ramp to the exit. When they reached the booth, Laine buried Petrov’s face in her chest and Kara handed over a 100 Euro note and told him to keep the change. As this was four times the maximum parking rate, the man smiled widely and held the gate open.

Kara exited onto Bolshoi Cherkassky Pereulok, turning left and raising the cloth roof into place. She looped around the building and onto Nikolskaya Street where she hammered the throttle, the W12 engine launching the car forward in a chirping of tires as the traction control system worked to put the prodigious horsepower down. Kara raced to the end of the street and hung a left, heading towards the Moskva River. Laine strapped Petrov in and then applied a longer-acting anesthesia.

The Bentley motored past Red Square and over the river via the

Bolshoy Moskvoretsky Bridge, continuing south along Bolshaya Ordynka Street to the Garden Ring, which Kara followed west. She took the exit for Gorky Park and drove south to the adjoining Neskuchny Garden. There, Kara pulled into a secluded lot next to a familiar-looking GMC Yukon Denali XL and retracted the roof. Laine hoisted Petrov out of the back of the Bentley and transferred him to the Yukon, taking the seat vacated by Michele, who took the front passenger seat of the Bentley.

The Yukon started and pulled back onto Leningradsky Prospekt, Kara following behind. They joined the Third Ring highway and proceeded west across the Andreyevsky Bridge. Kara and Michele left the top down, cranking up the heaters in the dash and seats to stay warm. To their left, Luzhniki Stadium glowed brightly in the dark, signaling FC Spartak Moscow must be hosting a game. They crossed two more bridges and the American SUV exited in a cluster of high-rise buildings that the sat-nav in the Bentley identified as the Moscow International Business Center. The vehicles drove into the parking garage under a complex of two skyscrapers known as "The Two Capitals" and into two parking spots near a bank of elevators. Laine and Kara dragged Petrov between them while the handlers, Nadia and the driver formed around them.

There were four elevators: one for the lobby, another for 19-32, a third 34-47 and the fourth serving 64-70. They entered the fourth and Nadia inserted a key-card, the number 65 glowing when she removed it. The elevator whisked them upwards and into a lobby with four apartments.

"Woah!" Laine exclaimed as she stepped out of the hall into a corner apartment dominated by floor-to-ceiling windows. In the distance, she could see the Kremlin and the Moskva River.

"Moscow Tower is the tallest building in Europe," Nadia replied. "A friend of mine owns this apartment. He's out of the country so he graciously let us borrow it."

Kara and Laine took Petrov into the guest bedroom and laid him on the bed. Kara noticed a sophisticated-looking piece of medical equipment on rollers in the corner.

"...unfortunately we don't have that time luxury," they heard Nadia state when they returned to the main living area. "So we're going to have to do this quick and dirty."

Michele nodded and motioned Kara and Laine over.

"You want us to break some fingers, guvnor?" Laine asked.

"No, I need you two ask Petrov a series of questions provided by Nadia and myself over earpieces."

---

The bright light of consciousness slowly returned to Anton Petrov, replacing the blackness. His vision swam and he struggled to focus on his surroundings. He heard two female voices conversing in a foreign language and turned to see two attractive young women wearing black tactical jumpsuits. The Asian turned first, followed by the blonde, the latter looking vaguely familiar to him.

"Welcome back, Anton Kirillovich," the blonde said in accented Russian.

"Where am I?" Petrov asked, his tongue thick and mouth pasty.

"We have some questions for you. Once you have answered them, you will be let free," the blonde stated.

"How do I know you won't kill me when you're done?" he asked.

"You're death would be more trouble than it is worth," the blonde said. "But don't get the impression that means you can ignore us."

The Asian nodded to someone outside of his field of view and Petrov suddenly couldn't move his muscles. He'd been injected with a paralytic that mimicked the pain of a heart attack without the actual physical damage.

Kara and Laine were "performing" the interrogation for a number of reasons. One, their young age would confuse Petrov. And two, they could be completely neutral and expressionless. Petrov's panicked eyes as he desperately tried to draw a breath that would not come contrasted with the cyborg's, which showed no emotion.

Another injection stopped the "heart attack" and Laine moved closer.

"First question..."

---

## VICTORY PARK POKLONNAYA HILL

*I'm gleaming, sparking mata aeru you ni  
Dreaming, breathing mata aeru made  
Gleaming, sparking hoshiai i no yoru na na na na*

Through the viewfinder of the handheld HD camcorder, Michele made sure that Kara was centered against the brilliantly lit white marble facing of the Museum of the Great Patriotic War. The song playing from his iPhone's speaker ended and Kara stopped and took a bow, waving as she ran off-camera.

The "debriefing" of Anton Petrov had gone deep into the night and the clock had ticked-over into a new day when Laine and Kara had finished asking all the questions Nadia, Michele and Clayland had presented. True to the blonde cyborg's word, a mild sedative was injected into Anton's blood stream and he slipped into a deep and dreamless sleep. He would be dropped off in a secured and fashionable district of Moscow with a Blood Alcohol Level north of 0.25.

"How was it?" she asked as Michele "rewound" the digital video stream.

"You were as brilliant as the background," Michele replied. He knew Kara's dancing was at times as much therapeutic as it was exhibitionist so when she'd ask him to take her to the park to film a dance cover, he'd borrowed a camcorder and they'd been dropped off.

"That looks so much better than my recent ones," Kara agreed. "My boyfriend used to film me back in Paris, but most of the older girls think my dancing is silly so I have to use a tripod at the compound."

As they stood before the statue of St George slaying the dragon at the base of a 142m obelisk that represented the 1,420 days of the War, Kara, who still wore her outfit from Club Pacha, shivered in the cold. Michele enveloped her in his massive great coat, pulling her against him.

"How are you?" he asked. "We haven't had much time to talk as of late."

"I miss home. Now that we have Dante, maybe the tide has turned once and for all in our favor," Kara offered.

Some 24 hours had passed since the battle at the New Trino nuclear plant and they'd seen on CNN the press conference by National Security Advisor Anita Aragon where she reported that Italian forces had re-captured the facility and taken Giacomo Dante alive. Credit for the capture was given posthumously to the Croce Brothers, who were both reported Killed in Action and would be interred with military honors beside their father, mother and sister in the family plot in the Cimitero Monumentale di Milano.

Michele had spoken with the Prime Minister, who stated that a platoon from the 4<sup>th</sup> Tank Regiment of the 132<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division had left its base at Caserma Babini and travelled the 90km to New Trino to retake the plant. As for the other *fratelli* from Section 2, all the Prime Minister would tell Michele is that there had been "significant casualties on both sides" and exhorted him to keep the focus on ensuring no other weapons of mass destruction would be – or had been - smuggled into the country.

Kara heard the *Top Gear* theme and Michele reached into a pocket to remove his iPhone. With the quiet, Kara could hear both sides of the conversation and knew that Nadia was ready to pick them up. She shrugged out of the coat and started for the park exit.

---

"I just heard back from General Sigachev. It is very likely the nuclear device you recovered at New Trino was a dud," Nadia reported as the SUV pulled out of the park and headed back towards the motorway.

The initial round of questioning had concerned the nuclear device. Anton claimed no knowledge of a nuclear weapon, stating his contract was to only ship a collection of heavy weapons from the port city of Batumi in Georgia to Vlorë, Albania aboard the *Khazbiika*. No matter how much Laine and Kara pushed him, Anton continued to claim that he was never engaged to transport a nuclear weapon.

"The device has been identified as a ZBV3 155mm nuclear artillery shell. They entered service in the late 1960s and almost all were withdrawn from service by 1992 and subsequently destroyed."

"Almost all?"

"It appears that 25 had been kept and modified for use as atomic demolition devices. The official transport case with all the ancillary equipment is roughly the size of a steamer trunk, but the actual warhead could conceivably fit in a large gym bag or rucksack with a simple detonator and battery pack.

"However, these weapons were not designed for long-term field use and were very susceptible to corrosion, even in their transport case. If the physics package was a ZBV3, it was most likely inoperable and the electronics modified to make it look like it was still viable. The ZBV3 also had a maximum yield of 1 kiloton, far below that claimed by Dante," Nadia completed.

"So Cristiano and Dante were duped? That's rich," Laine remarked.

"Any idea where the weapon came from?" Clayland asked, motioning with his arm for his cyborg to be quiet.

"All of the weapons were pulled from storage in 2000 and sent to Mayak for plutonium reprocessing. An inventory have identified that all but two are accounted for," Nadia stated. "One likely cooked off in Bujanovac and the other is in your country's possession."

"So we can be sure that Cristiano doesn't have any more up his sleeve," Michele said, the relief clear in his voice.

"We will, of course, perform a full inquiry, but that is an internal matter for Russian security," Nadia noted.

Michele's iPhone vibrated and he pulled it out and navigated to the email application, which showed he had a new message from Monty Blacker.

During the interrogation of Anton Petrov, he gave up the name of a shadowy Turkish crime family called the *Vadideki Kurt*, or "Wolf of the Valley", after the steep valleys carved by the Çoruh River as it meanders through Artvin Province on the border with Georgia. The province had a prominent community of Chveneburi Georgians and the *Vadideki Kurt* worked with them and organized crime syndicates in Georgia and Russia involved primarily in drugs and sex trafficking into Turkey and from there to Europe and were regular customers of the

*Khazbiika* due to her speed and inconspicuousness.

Coraline, who'd caught an Air France flight home the previous afternoon, had responded to Michele's query that the last reported sighting of the *Khazbiika* had been the port of Batumi in Georgia. The closest asset was the Blacker *fratello* in Istanbul and Michele reached out to them to see if they were available for side trip to Georgia. As the Blacker's operated remotely so much of the time, they had developed a system to trade information back and forth with Rome via an Internet dating site. Michele had been made privy to the system after a joint mission on the French Riviera, but he'd not made use of it until now lest he draw the ire of one Monique Blacker. He clicked the hyperlink and the web browser opened and he was taken to a message in his private Inbox.

*For the last time, sod off. I didn't enjoy our 'date' and if I never hear from you again, it will be bloody well too soon.*

*M.B.*

"Damn, you honked Monty off something fierce!" Laine noted as she leaned in for a better look.

"It's a wave off message," Michele said.

"That's a brush off, guvnor," Laine noted.

"They're going dark," Clayland suggested.

"Yes," Michele agreed. "The question is, why?"

He dialed a number and placed the phone to his ear. After a moment, he ended the call and dialed a second number. A frown darkened his face and shortly thereafter he ended that call, as well.

"Problem?" Kara asked.

"I just tried to reach Ferro at both her office and mobile numbers. Both are reported as being out of service," Michele replied.

Clayland pulled out his phone and dialed a couple of numbers.

"I get the same trying to reach the mobiles for the Croce's and Hilshire," he noted.

"Maybe they're just out of range?" Laine asked.

"Ferro should be at the compound," Michele replied.

"Do we go back to Rome?" Kara asked.

"No. The trail leads to Vlorë, Albania. That's our next destination," Michele decided.

"Take us back to the hotel," Nadia ordered the driver as she pulled out her mobile.

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### CHARILAOS TRIKOUPIS BRIDGE GULF OF CORINTH

"I still say we should have chosen the Arnage Red Label," Kara groused as she drove across the nearly 3000m span that linked the Peloponnese to mainland Greece.

"We're going to see a leading light in the Albanian Mafia," Laine stated from the passenger seat beside her. "We had to come in an S-Class, though we should have chosen a V12 model."

"But it's a *Bentley*, Laine. An Old School Bentley, at that! I drove Chairman D'Angelo's and the craftsmanship was amazing."

"Kara, this car has more electronics than Akihabara," Laine retorted.

"And that makes it soulless," Kara replied. "A Bentley has soul. And passion. Even beauty."

"That's an Aston Martin, dear," Clayland noted from the seat behind Laine. Kara looked up in the rearview mirror and stuck her tongue out as she pulled down her right eye-lid.

"Eyes forward and both hands on the wheel," Michele ordered.

---

With no scheduled services until late afternoon, Michele had chartered a small business jet at Ostafyevo International Airport outside Moscow. A private airport owned by the Russian natural gas company Gazprom, it's close distance to the city center made it popular with business jet owners.

The four had flown from Moscow to Araxos Airport in Western Greece. That meant a 400-kilometer drive up the western peninsula into Albania. Kara took advantage of the lax adherence to speed limits to keep the big Mercedes north of 150km/h and within two hours they reached the Kakavijë border crossing into Albania. While not yet a member of the European Union and therefore not a Schengen Area country, EU citizens did not require a visa so the *fratelli* needed to only

show their Italian passports at the crossing point. The final 140km breezed by and they checked in to a modern hotel overlooking the port.

"It's not the Park Hyatt, but it will do for what we need," Michele noted.

"Lots of Mercedes in the lot," Laine noted, though most all were from the 1980s or 1990s.

"And the *Khazbiika* is in the harbor," Kara added.

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"Okay ladies, change into your operative wear," Michele ordered once they'd settled into their adjoining rooms. Kara and Laine exchanged their designer dresses and shoes for jeans, leather ankle boots with aggressive tread patterns and "wooly pully" ribbed military sweaters.

"This operation is a pure 'smash and grab'," Michele noted when the girls had returned. Laine smiled broadly and put up her hand to high-five Kara, who just slowly shook her head.

"Hmph!" Laine said, blowing some stray hairs from her forehead.

"We can expect armed opposition. Use whatever force you feel necessary, but we must secure Jashari alive."

Both girls nodded their understanding. They donned the ankle-length fur coats provided by Nadia in Moscow and slipped into the back seat of the S500.

---

Born 37 years ago to an Italian mother and an Albanian father in the river city of Elbasan, Arber Jashari's mixed-parentage allowed him to blend easily into the populations and cultures of both Albania and Italy. Starting in 1990, the Italian clampdown on the Sicilian Mafia had forced "traditional" Italian organized crime to seek external partners and Albania, being some 100 kilometers away, stepped up to the offer.

By the late 1990s the *Cosa Nostra* had a "head office" in Vlorë and the 'Ndrangheta, Camorra and Sacra Corona Unita were tied at the hip with the *Mafia shqiptare*. After graduating from Aleksandër Xhuvani University with a degree in Business Management, Jashari quickly found his education had more value shipping contraband with his *Mafia*

*shqiptare* cousin in Lushnjë than with shipping grain with his uncle in Elbasan. He became a member of the notorious "Lushnjë Gang" under Alfred Shkurti. Lushnjë's location on National Highway 4 equidistant between the Albanian ports of Durrës and Vlorë made it one of the primary transit hubs for contraband flowing from the Balkan States to Italy.

Jashari rose through the ranks and currently served as chief of sea transport for the Lushnjë Gang, overseeing a fleet of transports ranging from under 10 to over 100 meters that plied the waters of the Mediterranean, Adriatic and Black Seas carrying both legal and illegal cargos. He therefore maintained residences in both Albanian ports, as well as Lushnjë and the capital city of Tirana. Today, he was in his residence in the hills southeast of Vlorë and that is where the two *fratelli* intended to capture him.

As a street urchin in Oxfordshire, Laine became an expert on fleecing the swarms of tourists that visited the county town that gave the shire its name. She slipped out of the hotel into the parking lot and quickly liberated a vehicle of its license plates, specifically choosing the new format that was very similar to the European Union common plate. In moments, they'd swapped the plates on their S500 and headed out of the city and into the hills.

In the back, the girls screwed sound suppressors onto the end of their SIG Mosquito pistols and slapped home magazines loaded with .22LR subsonic rounds. Laine also had her Panther Arms PDW in case they encountered heavier resistance. The Mercedes proceeded up a series of switchbacks into scrub forest and Michele worried about getting back out. Soon they reached a small cul-de-sac with a private driveway leading up behind a gate. Laine and Kara stepped out and while the former put two 5.56x45mm into the security camera, Kara breached the gate with a small water-tamped blast-cutting charge. The two girls then charged up the drive, the Mercedes following behind.

At the end of the drive sat a large three-story Mediterranean style home. Michele swung the Mercedes around on the parking area paved in white cobblestone while Kara and Laine charged up the stairs under the front porch. Kara kicked in the front door and started up the stairs to the top while Laine went right into the living room.

Upstairs, Kara found the master bedroom, but it was empty. She turned back to the two side bedrooms and found them empty, as well.

As she rushed down the stairs, she heard the sound of suppressed pistol fire and rushed down onto the main floor, only to nearly collide with Laine, who was dragging a man into the connecting hallway by his shoulders.

"Grab his legs!" Laine yelled. "I neutralized the guards and the staff fled out the back," she added, so Kara stuffed her pistol into her belt and lifted Jashari's legs and the two headed for the door. As they came down the stairs, Michele backed the car up and popped the trunk, which opened on motorized hinges.

"Please don't let there be a fridge in the back. Please don't let there be a fridge in the back," Laine muttered as they approached.

"What?" Kara asked.

"I'll tell you later!" Laine shouted. They reached the trunk and after binding his arms and legs with large plastic ties, they stuffed Jashari inside and proceeded back down the hill and onto National Highway 8, which ran along the coast. They proceeded south, stopping at a beach hotel parking lot just long enough to put their Greek vehicle plates back on, then continued on to the resort city of Sarandë on the Albanian Riviera.

They drove onto the marina and up to a small white speedboat where a young girl with red hair in pigtails.

"Hey, Colonel!" Marisa yelled, waving at them. An older gentleman with greying hair on his head and in his beard appeared and placed a restraining hand on the younger girl.

"Stuff our guest in the front cabin," Elio Alboreto instructed Kara and Laine, whom carried the unconscious Jashari like someone who'd overindulged in alcohol.

"Have you heard from Rome?" Michele asked.

"No, but we'd been in Gioia Tauro for two days when we got your call from Moscow," the older handler reported.

"I couldn't raise anyone at the compound or New Trino," Michele replied. "And the Blacker's appear to have gone dark."

"I'm not exactly liking what I'm hearing, Pagani."

"Me neither, to be honest. Be careful."

"No worries, Colonel. He's got me to protect him," Marisa stated with a confident smile.

"I think maybe Laine and I should go with you," Clayland suggested to Elio, who nodded his head in agreement.

"Call us when you get to Tricase Porto," Michele requested.

Michele and Kara watched as the speedboat cast lines and motored out into the Adriatic. Elio advanced the throttles and the boat went on plane as the eight-cylinder marine engine pushed the boat well into double-digit knots and it soon disappeared from view.

---

Kara handled the driving duties back to Athens, completing the 500km journey in less than four hours and allowing them to just make their evening flight to Milan. Upon arrival at Malpensa Airport they boarded a hired car that dropped them off at Michele's apartment in Parco Solari.

"It's good to be home," Kara said as she pulled off her boots so as to not scuff the wood floor.

"Indeed," Michele said. He noticed the answering machine light was flashing, which surprised him, as his friends, co-workers and family knew to reach him by his mobile. He figured it was likely some phone solicitor, but just to be sure, Michele pressed the playback button and the computerized voice started its report.

*Message 1. Left 21 February at 00:31.*

"Michele...this is Claes...they're coming for us. The military. Thank you for the money and the phone number, but I've decided to stay and fight with everyone. I remember I was once a soldier, like you, and those skills have come back to me. I live a modest life, but my garden and piano and most of all the books in your...our...room are important to me and I feel compelled to protect them. Thank you for the kindness you showed me these past few months. I hope you and Kara are safe. Farewell."

*Message ends. There are no more messages.*

"What is she saying?" Kara asked.

"That everything really has changed," Michele said. "Go upstairs and pack for a week's trip."

"Where are we going?" Kara asked.

"Anywhere, but Italy," Michele replied.

Kara responded by removing her pistol from her bag.

"What?"

"Someone is on the roof," Kara replied.

Michele knew the cyborg's hearing was exceptional, but she was also now in a heightened state of response to stimuli. Nevertheless, prudence demanded they investigate and he removed his own pistol. Kara took the lead up the stairs to the second floor and then through the second set of stairs onto the roof patio.

Kara slowly turned the handle and flung the door open outwards, tumbling out afterwards to come up on one knee, her pistol sweeping the patio. Michele emerged right behind her, his pistol drawn.

"It's about time you two showed up," a female voice called out from above.

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## **FORTY-TWO**

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**PAGANI RESIDENCE  
PARCO SOLARI, MILAN**

"It's about time you two showed up," a female voice called out from above and Kara's pistol immediately snapped up towards the sound.

"That likely isn't going to do much, sister," the voice said and as Kara's eyes adjusted to the ambient light, she recognized the speaker.

"Petra!" she exclaimed, her gun immediately dropping.

"We've been staking out this place for two days," Petrushka noted as she hopped down. "Another day and Mister Sandro would probably have given up waiting."

"Where is Ricci?" Michele asked, disarming his own weapon as he stepped out onto the patio.

"He's hiding out in the park," Petra noted. She removed a mobile and pressed an auto-dial button.

"They're here. Okay." She hung up. "He's coming now."

"It's a throw-away," she added.

"Go let him in, Kara," Michele ordered and the two cyborgs headed down to the front gate. Michele checked the security system logs and while they showed no anomalies, Michele knew that did not mean nothing had happened while he'd been away.

The door to the garage opened and Kara entered, followed by Petra and then Alessandro Ricci. Michele noted cyborg and handler looked like they'd been sleeping in their car.

"It's good to see a friendly face again," Sandro noted.

"Kara, get some refreshments," Michele ordered and then turned to Ricci.

"What's happened?" he asked.

Alessandro took a seat on the couch.

"Petra and I made it to the control room. I sent her through the space underneath the raised floor and she successfully neutralized the fellow Dante had entrusted the weapon to. We contacted Ferro and informed her we had secured the weapon and regained control of the facility, to which she replied they were coming north to relieve us.

"When I saw the line of Ariete tanks and M113 APCs roll up on the security cameras, I figured they were the relief column. But then they secured the building perimeter and ordered everyone inside to surrender or they would open fire. I tried to contact Ferro, but the lines had gone dead. Our radios were also jammed, which I assume had to have been the military folks outside. Marco's team was trapped in the Turbine Building and I had no clue where Hilshire or the Croce's were.

"At that point, we thought discretion was the better part of valor so we left the nuke on the floor where we found it and beat feet out of the facility and into the woods. We hiked back to the staging area at Pobietto to find it under military control and our folks under arrest. So we continued on to the highway and hitched a ride into Casale Monferrato where we rented a car. We started south towards Rome, but we weren't sure what was happening so we hid out in Piacenza. Then we heard that they'd captured Dante alive and the Croce Brothers were dead. At that point, we drove up to Milan to wait for you to come back."

"Why me?"

"We couldn't get ahold of anyone else and Petrushka knew your address from Kara."

"What do we do about Claes' message?" Kara asked.

Petrushka and Alessandro looked to the Japanese cyborg, then back to Michele.

"Kara, why don't you show Petrushka to the guest bathroom so she can clean up and change into some fresh clothes," Michele ordered. Alessandro nodded to Petrushka and the two girls headed upstairs.

"Claes left a message on my answering machine the night of the attack on New Trino. She stated the government was attacking the compound and they were going to defend it," Michele said after they were alone.

"From the way that Councilor Aragon was talking, the government considers the conflict with Padania to be effectively over. And she's probably correct," Alessandro noted. "Now that they have used the nuclear terrorism option, they're going to lose all their public support. So the government doesn't need Special Operations anymore and if our existence ever got out into the public it would be a huge embarrassment. So maybe the government is cleaning house..."

"What are your plans?" Michele asked.

"I have enough disguises and identities to keep myself scarce until this blows over. My main worry is Petrushka. I only have a couple of weeks of conditioning medication stockpiled."

"It is the same with Kara. I know some people in Paris. I want you, Petrushka and Kara to go there. Take one of my cars and I'll return your rental."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll head to Rome and find out what's happened."

---

"I don't want to leave you," Kara said for the fifth time since Michele had informed her of the plan as she loaded her suitcase into the back of the Aston Martin DB9.

"I know, but if there is something going on, I don't want to risk exposing you to it."

"But what if you need me? I should be there to protect you."

"Kara, Renato and I go back decades. Even if there is a move against the Agency, he's not going to do anything to me. And I need to know you'll be safe."

Kara nodded and took the driver's seat, Petra and Alessandro moving into the back.

Michele leaned down and kissed his cyborg's forehead. "Take the A7 down to the Italian Riviera and enter France via E80. If anyone tries to stop you, put the hammer down and run for the border. Once you're in France, head north to Paris via Lyon and Dijon. I've loaded both Amade's and Coraline's numbers into the car."

"Promise me you'll be safe, as well," Kara said.

"I will," Michele replied with a smile. "Now go."

Kara started the engine and drove out of the garage and into the night.

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# FORTY-THREE

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U.S. ROUTE 163  
37° 0' 38"N, 110° 14' 34"W  
EIGHT MONTHS LATER

"You have reached your destination."

At the announcement from the SatNav, Jethro slowed the Infiniti FX35 and pulled off US 163. In the seat beside him, Monty's gaze traversed across "their destination" and a scowl formed. In the distance, the vast sandstone buttes of Monument Valley stretched across the horizon, but all around them lay weathered siltstone and sand, colored a vivid red or dark blue-gray by the presence of oxides of iron or manganese, respectively.

"I wonder if Michele is a fan of Missing Persons," Jethro quipped, referring to the American New Wave band from the 1980s that had a minor hit with a song titled *Destination Unknown*.

Both exited the vehicle and looked around. They'd dressed for the cold of high desert in the Autumn: Jethro in light blue Chinos and a long-sleeve turtleneck sweater while Monty had selected white pressed linen slacks and a cream fine-knit cardigan with three-quarter sleeves that left her exposed from the navel up. For headwear, Jethro had selected a cream beret and Monty a red silk scarf.

"So now what?" Monty grouched as her handler and partner placed his hands loosely around her waist. "We're at the coordinates the card indicated."

A week prior, they'd received a mysterious blue envelope with no return address - only a silver number "3" on the back and a Milan postmark. Inside was a piece of parchment glued onto a background of blue paper with a date, a time in the Mountain Time Zone of the United States and a set of coordinates. They'd spent four days debating the envelope and what to do, Monty's cautious nature overriding her curiosity and advocating they ignore it. Jethro, while also expressing cautionary concern, felt that it had been sent for a reason and if something nefarious was afoot, it was a very convoluted way to execute it.

They'd started the morning in Phoenix, having flown in the day before from London. They'd driven north to Flagstaff via the Interstate and then northeast on smaller highways to where they now were parked. Soon, running lights appeared through the heat haze clinging to the road and a black Jeep Patriot pulled up behind them.

"Sup, peeps!" Laine Stanaway greeted as she jumped out of the driver's seat dressed in red cowgirl boots, jeans, red and white check blouse tied at the waist, brown leather bomber jacket and a straw Stetson hat. Monty had always suspected her sister was a closet American at heart, and now those suspicions had been proven true.

"Are you two the source of this invitation?" Clayland Stanaway asked, holding up a blue envelope. Monty merely waved the one she and Jethro had received in response, too annoyed to speak.

The four tried – and mostly failed – to make small talk, saved by the arrival of a Range Rover Evoque.

"Why am I not surprised to see you," Monty said to the driver of the Evoque as he stepped out wearing a suit as well as a Stetson - though in his case, an original "Boss of the Plains" model made of felt.

"I see you both received my letter," Michele Pagani stated. Kara appeared around the hood from the passenger side, wearing a jacket over a white t-shirt with a denim skirt and flat black leather boots.

"You look ridiculous in that hat," Monty quipped.

"So does your handler in his Fez, but that didn't stop him from wearing it every chance he could when you two returned from Turkey, did it?" Michele shot back.

"Hey! Fezzes are cool," Jethro protested.

"I hope you have a really good reason for calling us out into the open?" Monty asked, changing the conversation. This was the first time they'd all been together since New Trino eight months prior.

"I thought we'd have a picnic!" Michele replied with a broad smile.

"Bloody hell," Monty growled.

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With the Evoque in the lead, the convoy made its way northwest on a county road to a sandy beach on the shores of Lake Powell. Michele opened the rear hatch and pulled a bottle of Chateau d'Yquem 1921 from one of the baskets while Kara arranged a set of wine goblets on a wooden tray for him to fill.

"To fallen heroes and absent friends," Michele intoned solemnly and everyone raised his or her own glasses in salute.

The final tally had been a dozen staffers, four handlers and four cyborgs lost at New Trino, including the Croce Brothers, Henrietta, Hilshire and Triela. The toll could have been much higher, but Claes' appearance at the front gate, assault rifle in hand, allowed cooler heads on both sides to end the Mexican Standoff and the Agency surrendered quietly.

Which had in fact been the Prime Minister's plan all along. Renato Pisano had been livid when he heard that General Aragon and his niece had decided to settle a personal disagreement with Monica Petris and the Agency and even more so when Monica herself had done nothing to prevent what could have been a very public firefight. In the end, General Aragon was pushed into an early retirement and rumors swirled that Monica would resign her post on the Council of Ministers as soon as a replacement could be secured.

After the toast, the handlers unloaded the baskets of food and beverages while the cyborgs laid out heavy wool picnic blankets.

"I'm kind of surprised to not see Rico here," Clayland noted as they started laying out the feast.

"She's with my mother and father up in the Lakes Region," Michele replied.

"We saw her just before we left," Kara added. "She's doing great."

While she'd escaped physically unharmed from New Trino, the loss of both her handler and roommate had visited serious emotional trauma upon the girl. Michele had literally sprung her from the Agency and his parents now watched over her. For a girl whose deepest desire was to be useful, even mundane chores like mowing a lawn or washing dishes filled her with satisfaction. And all the grand parks around Monza gave her plenty of room to frolic and play.

As she helped, Kara looked up on the cliffs and froze as the outline of a figure swam in the heat haze. She squinted, trying to confirm someone was there, but the sun had crested and she had to turn away to save her eyesight.

“What the hell is that?” Laine exclaimed and everyone tracked down her pointed hand towards the lakeshore. There, standing in knee-deep water, was an astronaut in a spacesuit. Kara immediately went for the pistol in her handbag, but Michele held up his hand.

“Everyone stay here,” he ordered. He rose and walked down to the shore, where the “spaceman” had waddled out and stood waiting. Michele approached carefully and stared into the gold reflective outer visor. He carefully reached out and lifted it up.

“I was worried for a moment you wouldn’t come,” Michele noted with a large smile. “But first, I have a question - how the hell did you get a spacesuit?”

“Isn’t it awesome! They were auctioning them on eBay!” Marisa Alboreto replied, her voice muffled a bit by the protective faceplate.

“After the end of the US manned space program, NASA started auctioning off some of their spare equipment,” a deep male voice announced from above and everyone looked up to see Elio Alboreto standing on the rocks. Kara immediately realized he was the figure she’d seen.

“That is one of the suits they used in the Neutral Buoyancy Laboratory at NASA’s Johnson Space Center,” Elio Alboreto noted, referring to the large pool where astronauts had practiced Extravehicular Activities planned for once they were in space.

“Marisa has the strength to spare, but we had to have a rudimentary metal endoskeleton installed to allow her the leverage necessary to move the suit,” he added.

“And they say you spoil Kara,” Monty deadpanned to Michele.

While Elio went to get his vehicle from behind the rocks, Kara and Laine helped their little sister out of the suit.

“So how’s Bermuda?” Michele asked after everyone had settled and

the picnic was underway.

“Frustrating,” Marisa interjected before her handler could answer. “I know I’m blessed with superhuman reflexes and stuff, but *gawds*...I cannot believe these idiot tourists! They bang around the boat with their air tanks and lose their weight belts and freak out when a fish actually decides to see what they have in their outstretched hand.”

“They’re not much better in Cancun,” Laine replied. “I have to consciously dial back my strength, but some of the blobs who book the court couldn’t deal with my volley and serve if I was a normal human.”

After delivering Arber Jashari into the hands of the Guardia di Finanza, the Alboreto and Stanaway *fratelli* had promptly come about and sped out of the harbor for Greece where they caught a plane across the Atlantic to put as much distance between them and Italy as possible.

Because of “past indiscretions”, Elio was somewhat a *persona non grata* in the United States. However, thanks to a British mother, the island British Overseas Territory welcomed him and handler and cyborg had started a small dive shop with the funds secured from mortgaging the bar in Monza, which he currently rented to another operator. The Stanaway pair had decided that the resort city on the Yucatán Peninsula offered a better chance of “operating under the radar” than Miami Beach or Los Angeles.

“Do you two ever plan to come in from the cold?” Michele asked the Blackers.

While Monty was not an avid reader – she lacked the free time, not the desire – she’d been around Michele and Olga enough to recognize the title of John le Carré’s most famous Cold War spy novel.

Jethro responded with a non-committal shrug. In Alexandria during the terrorist attacks, he’d decided at the time that discretion was the better part of valor and dropped off the grid, heading to Greece and then Eastern Europe with his cyborg by his side. They’d not set foot back in Italy since, instead receiving the necessary supplies of conditioning medication indirectly.

“Speaking of tourists, I suppose you two slackers have been on a perpetual vacation,” Monty suggested.

“We took a two-month cruise on the *Queen Mary 2* from Sydney to

Southampton," Kara stated.

"Must be nice," Monty replied.

"Hey, you log more kilometers a year than I do," Kara noted.

Jethro squeezed his cyborg's knee, stopping her planned retort.

"I can tell we're all going to have a great time in Vegas tonight," Laine noted and the hint of sarcasm in her voice did not go unnoticed.

"Just try not to rob a casino, please," Elio joked.

Jethro inclined his head towards Michele.

"I hear your time has not all been spent in relaxation."

"There were a few...loose ends...to tie up," Michele admitted. One of those had been Cristiano Savonarola, whom Dante had given up early in his interrogation. When they captured him in his house in the Ligurian Alps, the Pagani *fratelli* had been shocked at the advanced medical equipment he had secured around him.

As they ate, the discussion turned to Italy.

While there was much debate amongst the talking heads as to whether he'd actually see the inside of a courtroom, the government continued to proceed with building their case against Giacomo Dante. Because of the broadness and nature of his crimes, he would be tried in a Corte d'Assise and one Roberta Guelfi would serve on the prosecution team.

The terrorist attacks had seriously weakened tourism to Italy. Between that and the attempt to create a Chernobyl-style disaster at New Trino, the general public turned against the Five Republics. Instead of dividing Italy, they achieved the opposite, and the Republic Day celebrations that June 2nd had been the largest in recent memory.

While he'd enjoyed a large boost in the polls at first, Prime Minister Pisano was currently fighting for his political life. The European sovereign debt crisis had not impacted Italy to the level it had other nations, but the need to appease credit markets to finance a quarter-billion Euro of government bonds due to mature that year required even more cuts in federal spending beyond the €100 billion already approved. In the end, he'd forced through an austerity package worth

€35 billion, but a dozen members of his own party abstained, resulting in the package passing by a plurality and not a majority.

In a multi-party parliamentary system, when the ruling party or coalition loses their majority, they risk losing their authority and the risk of the Opposition instituting a vote of "No Confidence" increases. In an attempt to strengthen his position, Renato himself called a Vote of Confidence the following day in the Chamber of Deputies, but just enough of the "traitorous" members who'd abstained the day before cast votes to maintain the minimum majority necessary to keep him in power. Many, Michele among them, believed Pisano would soon travel to the Quirinal Palace to submit his resignation to the President.

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The convoy arrived in Las Vegas in the late afternoon and checked into the Bellagio Hotel. After dinner at Picasso, Jethro and Monty bid their farewells for the evening and headed to the Baccarat Bar while the Pagani and Stanaway *fratelli* took in a performance of Cirque du Soleil's "O" before heading to The Bank nightclub.

The clock was approaching midnight when Michele and Kara returned to their suite and prepared to turn in. They stood at the windows and looked down on Lake Bellagio, watching the final performance of the night for the Fountains of Bellagio.

"In the end, everything did change," Kara noted.

"Not us," Michele replied.

"We have a *pactio* to be together and nothing will change that," he added as he placed his arm around his cyborg's waist and pulled her next to him.

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***The End***