

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

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## **"Past Forward"**

A Gunslinger Girl Original Story by Chris Wallace

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The voice in her ear was insistent.

"Take the shot, Claes!" it kept demanding. "Take the shot!"

*I can't. I promised I would never be mean.*

"It's you or him, Claes! Don't let it be you! Take the shot!"

*I cannot use a gun. You said you understood. How can you ask this of me?*

"CLAES!"

"*Perdonatemi!*" Claes yelled, though her cry for forgiveness was not meant for the person who was now just steps away in front of her. She pulled the trigger and the Kimber M1911 compact pistol kicked in her hand, though her enhanced strength absorbed the recoil. The .45 ACP round slammed into the other person's forehead and blew out the back of his head between the junctures of the parietal and occipital bones. He fell backwards, the large knife in his hand clattering as it hit the cobblestones.

"Subject is terminated," Claes replied in a flat voice.

"*Capito,*" the voice said, much more softly and with compassion.

The impact of the bullet had splashed blood forward onto her face and front. She raised the gun in her right hand, taking her finger off the trigger, while she removed her glasses with her left. Blood dripped from the bridge of her glasses and she followed a drop as it rolled down the bridge and then dropped, splashing in a larger pool collecting in front of her, flowing past her boots like a river around a sandbar.

"Step away, Claes," Michele gently ordered over her earpiece. She nodded and slowly walked over towards him where he leaned against a wall.

"Are you hurt?" Michele asked as she came up.

"No," Claes said, again in a flat voice.

Michele put out his gloved hand and Claes placed the pistol in it. He put it in his coat pocket and removed a handkerchief, which he first soaked in water from a spigot next to him before wiping the blood off her cheek. She just stood as still as a statue, a distant look in her eyes. Michele blotted what blood he could see on her clothes, then washed it out in the spigot again.

"Here. Clean your glasses and your hands," he said. Claes didn't answer, but she did put out her hand to accept the handkerchief.

An Iveco Daily panel van pulled up and Ferro, Amadeo and Giorgio exited the side. The two male agents proceeded to spool out crime scene tape and string it up around the entrance to the alley and farther down. Ferro got on her cellphone and contacted the Rome territorial command for the Carabinieri and informed them of the incident and to request a small presence to keep onlookers away.

"I need an evidence bag, please," Michele requested, holding out the gun. Ferro used a pen to support it from the trigger guard and went back to the truck to bag and tag it.

"Michele!" Elenora Gabrielli yelled as she came running over, Pietro Fermi right behind her. She looked down at Michele's left pant leg and saw a large wet patch around his thigh.

"Is it bad?" she asked.

"I'll hold till we can get back to the compound," Michele said. A Carabinieri BMW F650GS motorcycle appeared and Ferro went over to talk with him.

Michele hoisted himself into the van with some effort and reached for the first aid kit. He cut a patch in his trousers and did a basic cleaning of the surface of the wound before slapping a thick gauze pad on it, followed by a cold compress and more gauze, which he then taped

down. He reached into his pants pocket and removed the key to the F430, which he handed to Ferro when she returned.

"Take her back for me, will you? I can't bend my leg enough to get in," he said. Ferro nodded.

"Go with her Claes. You know where she's parked," Michele said. Claes nodded blankly and started off, forcing Ferro to follow.

Amadeo and Giorgio snapped pictures of the body and the scene and then unrolled a body bag and proceeded to place the suspect inside. They then drew out a hose connected to a 150-liter tank and started to wash away the blood pool. They finished cleaning-up and packed everything away and headed back to the compound.

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"Okay, where's the transmission lever on this thing?" Ferro asked as she sat in the Ferrari. She'd found the seat and mirror adjustment controls and the large red "Engine Start" button on the steering wheel was an obvious clue as to its function, but she could see nothing that looked like a gear change lever.

"Press the button marked 'Auto'", Claes informed her, pointing to the console running between the two seats. "That will put it in Automatic mode so you don't need to use the shift levers behind the steering wheel to change the gears."

"Don't tell me Michele has taught you how to drive this thing," Ferro said.

"I have observed him driving," she replied.

Ferro nodded, pushed "Auto" and pulled out into the street.

"You did well today," she said to Claes, who didn't reply, instead staring out the passenger window at the scenery, though she didn't really see it as her eyes, and thoughts, were unfocused.

Ferro took the hint and didn't try to strike up a conversation, instead concentrating on the traffic as they drove back to the compound.

Kara was rocking on her heels at the entrance to the hospital, waiting for the van to arrive. She'd gotten the call from Priscilla about Michele and she'd rushed over.

As soon as the van pulled up, she wrenched open the side door, almost tearing it off the hinges as it slammed into the stops with a screech of overloaded metal.

"Easy on the equipment, Kara!" Michele scolded her.

Kara fired off questions like a machine gun. "Are you okay? What happened? Who did this to you? Priscilla said you'd been shot? Is it serious? Can you move? Are you in pain? Where are you hit?"

"Kara Michelle!" Michele roared and she snapped to rigid attention.

"I'm fine, Kara," he said, much more softly. "I took a small-caliber bullet to my thigh, but I'm not in any real danger. The doctors are going to remove the bullet and stitch me up and I'll be out in a few hours."

The look of relief on her face was conspicuous. She helped him step down to the ground and insisted he lean against her as they went to the emergency care area.

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Ferro parked the Ferrari in front of the handler's dorm and Claes walked back to her room. She removed all her clothes and bundled them up and changed into a large t-shirt and gym shorts. Her boots had blood on them so she pulled them on and walked to the laundry area. She threw the clothes into the wash and set it for cold water to prevent the blood from setting. She wet down some paper towels and used it to wipe the blood off her boots and then headed for the baths and drew a tub of hot water and soaked her body and washed her hair.

After her bath, she dried off and checked the laundry. Removing her clothes from the washer, she visually inspected them to be sure the blood had been cleaned and tossed them into the dryer.

She grabbed her watering pot and filled it from a spigot in the sink before heading to the Music Room. As she approached the closed door she heard the sounds of the piano being played. She worked the latch and pushed the door open and saw someone with long black hair

sitting at the piano, working the keys. With Angelica dead, that meant it had to be Kara. She stepped into the room and crossed over to the plants, but Kara continued playing, either oblivious to her presence or pointedly ignoring her.

As Claes leaned over to start watering, the music abruptly stopped.

"Thank you for protecting Michele," she heard Kara say.

Claes merely nodded and continued to water the plants, her back to Kara.

"I'm sorry you had to break your promise," Kara added.

"No you're not," Claes replied, still concentrating on watering the plants.

"Okay, I admit to being glad you prevented harm from coming to Michele or yourself," Kara clarified.

"Afraid he'll die on you and you'll end up a lab rat like me?" Claes said.

Anger flared in Kara like a fire. If Claes was in range she would have slapped her, but instead she clamped down on her emotions and regained her composure.

"That was uncalled for," she said.

"Cut close to home, did I? I sometimes wonder if it was such a good idea to have you all fall in love with your handlers. It seems to cause more problems than it solves," Claes noted as she passed the piano to reach her herbs, which she had brought in from the garden to protect them from the cold.

A cutting remark sprang into Kara's head, but she again bit it down.

"I honestly would have preferred you were never in that situation to begin with, Claes, but since you were, I am nonetheless thankful you took the decision you did," Kara said.

Claes didn't respond, instead moving down to the next pot.

"You're mad at him, aren't you?" Kara said.

"He knew of my promise," Claes said, her voice cold. "He said he understood it and he told me to honor it, even when it was difficult to do so. And yet, in the end, he ordered me to shoot that man."

"He pleaded with you to defend yourself," Kara snapped. "There's a difference."

"All he had was a knife, Kara. I could have incapacitated him with my bare hands. I didn't need to use a gun. I didn't need to shoot him."

"When was the last time you fought someone hand to hand?" Kara asked. "Not to mention our armor is optimized for bullets, not blades, so if he had been able to break through your defenses with the knife Michele described, he might have inflicted serious damage on you."

"Maybe," Claes replied, going back to watering. "I guess we'll never know."

Kara pushed back the bench and stood up. "Outside. Now."

"Why?"

"We're going to spar and find out," Kara replied.

"Don't be ridiculous."

"If you couldn't have easily defeated him, maybe you won't wallow in self-pity."

"You're a cyborg, Kara. He wasn't," Claes noted.

"I'm a Series 2 model. My upper body strength is inferior to yours, so if you can take me, then you could have taken him, but if you can't stop me, you might not have been able to stop him."

"Look, if this is about me insulting Michele, I apologize," Claes said.

"This is about you, Claes. I admit I don't understand how someone so intelligent and logical can bind themselves in superstition and myth. Either the person you made the promise with cared for you or they didn't. If they did not, then they wanted you to never change from some ideal they had of you and that was selfish of them and you owe them nothing. And if they did care for you, then they would not have wanted you to die to keep it now would they?"

"You don't understand..."

"I understand that you are not a coward, Claes. You were not about to just stand there and meekly accept whatever fate a piece of trash like Marcello Palumbo had decided to impose on you," Kara said, before turning and leaving the room.

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After she finished watering the plants, Claes returned to the laundry, returned her watering can to a peg on the wall, and retrieved her clothes from the dryer. She folded them neatly and carried them back to her room. As she opened the door, she let out an audible sigh as she saw Triela sitting at the table.

Triela hadn't missed the sigh and immediately noticed Claes looked more pensive than usual.

"What happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Claes replied.

"Sorry, but I'm the designated shoulder to cry on today," Triela said.

"Triela..."

"Claes, we've known each other for some time. It's pretty clear you are upset. Holding it in isn't going to help."

Claes sighed again. She put her clothes in the drawer, pulled off her boots and climbed up onto her bed where she lay on her back. She didn't want to talk about it, but if the handlers didn't already know, they would soon enough and they'd share it with their cyborgs and then she'd have more than just Triela pressing her for details.

"I killed someone today."

"Claes, if you're not going to be serious, I can't help you."

"I am serious. I shot someone in the head at point-blank range. There is still blood on my coat if you don't believe me."

Triela jumped up and climbed the ladder until she could look at Claes.

"What? How? When?"

"I was with Michele. We were helping Section 1 capture a terrorist. He shot Michele in the thigh and came after me. I...I pulled the trigger and killed him."

"How did you get a gun?"

"Do you remember Elenora Gabrielli? She had a spare pistol that she gave me."

"Wait a minute. You said Michele was shot? What the hell was Kara doing?" Triela demanded.

"She wasn't there. No *fratelli* were."

"Michele picked you for a combat mission? Did he take leave of his senses?" Triela asked, incredulous.

"It wasn't his decision, evidently. Ferro ordered him to go pick up some paperwork at the Ministry of the Interior. Priscilla ordered me to report to his car and wait for him."

"*Mio dio*," Triela breathed. "I need to make us some tea."

"I don't want any," Claes replied.

"Yes you do," Triela retorted. She poured some bottled water into an electric kettle and plugged it in. Once it was hot, she transferred it to a pot with teabags in it and let it seep for a few minutes before pouring a cup for her and one for Claes.

"It's ready," Triela said.

"I told you I don't want any," Claes replied.

"Don't make me come up there and drag you down," Triela warned. She wrote "Do Not Disturb – I MEAN IT!" on a piece of paper and taped it to the outside of the door.

Claes rose and climbed down the ladder, taking a seat, a heavy sulk on her face.

"It's your favorite," Triela replied as she placed sugar on the table.

Claes' sulk deepened.

"Now, please tell me what happened," Triela requested.

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"Do you wish to come in, or stay in the car?" Michele asked after they had parked on the Via del Viminale near the Ministry of the Interior building in downtown Rome.

"I'll stay here," Claes replied. Michele nodded and left the key in the ignition so she could listen to the stereo and operate the windows. He popped the trunk and removed a briefcase and headed for the Palazzo Viminale, which housed the Ministry.

About five minutes later, the stereo was interrupted by a ringtone. Claes looked over and saw that the display screen was showing a name and number. She pushed the answer button.

"Hello?"

"Hello...Claes?" Ferro's voice came over the car's speakers. "Where's Michele?"

"He's inside the Ministry," Claes replied.

"And he left his cell in the car?"

"Apparently so," Claes replied.

"Ok. I need you to relay the following to him..."

When Ferro was done, Claes acknowledged the call and hung-up. She took Michele's phone out of the center tray and removed the key from the ignition. She locked the doors and headed inside the Ministry where she found Michele in the lobby.

"Ferro called," Claes informed him, handing over the phone and key. "She said a wanted PRF operative was sighted in the area and she wants us to assist Section 1 in apprehending him."

A moment later, Elenora Gabrielli entered the lobby and flagged them down.

"Hi, Michele," she greeted. She saw Claes. "Why is she here?" she asked Michele, *sotto voce*.

"She was assigned to accompany me," Michele replied and Elenora nodded.

"You're aware of the terrorist Marcello Palumbo?" she asked and Michele nodded. The name meant nothing to Claes, but she didn't pay too much attention to current events.

"He's here in Rome. Public Safety identified him leaving a trattoria up the street. My partner Pietro Fermi is following him from a distance and reports he's coming this way. Our orders are to capture him if possible and to terminate him if not."

"Damn it," Michele swore. "Claes, I want you to wait in the car."

"Wait, we could use her," Elenora replied.

"She's unarmed and I only have my pistol," Michele replied.

"No problem," Elenora said. She reached into her purse and pulled out a Kimber M1911 compact pistol, caliber .45 ACP.

"Elenora, she hasn't fired a gun in I don't know how long," Michele stated. "I don't think sending her out in public armed is prudent."

"Aren't you a combat cyborg?" Elenora asked Claes.

"She's not active—" Michele began to protest, but Claes put her hand out to take the gun.

"I'll do it. I remember how to shoot," she said. Elenora put the gun in her hand and Claes expertly ejected the magazine, slammed it back home, cocked the slide and deactivated the safety.

Michele knew better than to argue with Claes once she had made a decision, so he just ordered her to stay by his side. Elenora gave them the frequency of their tactical radios and Michele went back to the Ferrari to retrieve his gun and radio. He always carried a spare, which he gave to Claes.

"Subject is walking along Via Firenze towards the Via del Viminale," Pietro's voice called out over the radio.

"I'm at the Piazza del Viminale," Elenora reported. Claes and Michele walked back to the Via Agostino Depretis which ran along the front of the Piazza and headed south-east to the Via Cesare Balbo.

"Subject has reached the Via del Viminale. He is turning your way, Elenora," Pietro said. "He's crossed the Via Napoli. Wait one. Now he's crossing the Via del Viminale again. Dammit, I've lost sight of him."

Michele cursed. "Claes, run back to the Via del Viaminate and see if you can re-acquire him," he ordered and she nodded and dashed off down the street.

Michele walked up the Via Cesare Balbo to a position where he could view pedestrian traffic crossing it via the Via Torino in case he had gone that way.

"I see him," Elenora reported. "He's turning down the Via Napoli, heading southeast."

Michele informed them he was moving into position and walked back to the end of the alley. He looked down it and saw Marcello Palumbo at the far end, coming towards him. It was mostly apartments, but there was a hotel and trattoria and a Banca di Roma branch, which was closed for remodeling. Michele walked up to the entrance to the Hotel Corina and waited. When Marcello was about five meters away and there was nobody around, Michele pulled out his pistol and his credentials.

"Marcello Palumbo! You are under arrest! Put your hands on your head!"

Marcello didn't even pause, but instead dived to his right behind a Renault Clio.

"Merda!" Michele cursed. There was a load/unload zone in front of him so he had nothing to duck behind but a scooter. Marcello drew his Beretta 93R machine pistol and fired four three-round bursts at Michele, who was running across the street to get behind an Audi A4, firing his own pistol for covering fire. Marcello's fire was wild and inaccurate, but a single 9x19mm bullet slammed into Michele's thigh, causing him to sprawl forward and behind the car. Marcello rose and pulled the trigger, but the gun had jammed. He tried to clear it, but couldn't, so he threw the gun down and started running back up the

alley as people started popping out of windows and doors to see what the commotion was.

Claes appeared at the end of the alley and started walking towards Marcello, her gun hidden in the pocket of her coat. Marcello ran towards her, pulling a long knife from a sheath behind his back under his jacket.

Claes pulled the gun out and aimed it at him, ordering him to stop.

"What the? Aren't you a little young to be playing with guns?" Marcello said, slowing.

Claes again ordered him to stop, but her hand was shaking, causing the gun to track off-target and forcing her to re-acquire him. Marcello saw the movements.

"You're liable to hurt someone waving that thing around, girl," he said as he continued his approach. "Why don't you put it down on the ground, okay?"

"Shoot him, Claes!" Michele ordered, but Claes was frozen in indecision, her compulsion to obey Michele's order conflicting with her promise. She gripped the handle of the gun tighter with both hands, trying to steady it.

"Take the shot, Claes! Take the shot!" Michele ordered again. He was limping along the cars. He was too far away to risk firing his own shot, lest he hit Claes or a bystander.

Marcello stepped ever closer, moving the hand with the knife into a striking position while still talking. "Hey now girlie, you don't want to shoot anyone do you? Just stand aside and let me past."

Marcello was almost on top of her now.

"CLAES!" Michele screamed with all his might, his voice echoing off the stone and brick walls.

He heard Claes shout something and then the loud report of a pistol. Michele saw the back of Marcello's head disappear in a pink mist and he dropped like a mannequin before her, his knife skittering along the cobblestones.

"And that's how it happened," Michele said, concluding his report on the shooting. Ferro reached forward and turned off the tape recorder and removed it from the tray.

"So she froze again," Jean said, the hard edge in his voice matching the hard gleam in his eyes.

"She hesitated, yes," Michele clarified. "But she did pull the trigger, in the end."

"Something she couldn't do at Lake Maggiore," Doctor Belesario noted. He looked to Michele. "Why did she follow your orders and not Jean's?"

"You're the doctor. You tell me," Michele said.

The three were in the recovery ward, where Michele had been moved after the bullet had been removed and the wound stitched.

"Maybe because her life was in danger?" Ferro suggested.

"Her life was in danger on the boat, as well," Jean said. "Both terrorists tried to shoot her, but she still would not fire."

"As I noted at Maggiore, over time her feelings will change. When we—" He stopped as Jean gave him a sharp look.

"We should let Michele rest," Jean said with a smile Michele found quite insincere.

Belesario nodded and headed for the door, followed by Ferro and then Jean. They walked down the hall into Belesario's office.

"Sorry," the bald doctor said. "I forgot that Michele doesn't know about Raballo and Claes. To finish my thought, with her memories wiped, Claes' feelings about non-violence should be weakening. It's possible they have now weakened enough that in that situation, she was able to act."

"It is also possible she is more...receptive...to his orders," Ferro suggested.

"What are you implying?" Jean asked.

"He is the only handler I have seen spend personal time with her," Ferro said. "He took her on vacation to Monte Carlo with Kara, they work in the garden and they practice cooking in the kitchen. I also know she borrows books from his library, as well."

"Cyborgs can't bond with another handler," Jean said.

"Technically it's not impossible, just very difficult," Belesario noted. "Doctor Ziliani suggested the course of action he did for Claes because, at the time, she was almost catatonic and we didn't have another handler for her."

Ferro raised her hand.

"You're interpreting facts not in evidence," she said. "All I am saying is that she seems to have some respect for Michele. Maybe that was enough to make her follow his orders in this case."

"Well it's certainly something worth keeping an eye on," Belesario said, and Jean nodded.

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"*Mio dio*," Triela said again once Claes had finished describing Marcello's death.

"Yeah," Claes said.

"So...what now?" Triela asked.

"I don't know," Claes said. "I've crossed a line that I do not think I can go back. I took a life in violence, Triela. But maybe it was a good thing. Now that I've so comprehensively broken my promise, maybe it's time for me to become an active member and go out on missions. With Pia, Elsa and now Angelica dead, I am sure the adults could use me."

"Claes, our mission is to kill people. Yes, you have now crossed that line and taken a life, but..."

"But what? How many people have you killed, Triela?"

"I honestly don't know, Claes. Hundreds. Maybe more. I don't keep track like Henrietta does."

"But there was a first, wasn't there Triela? And then there was a second, followed by a third. All leading up to the two you killed last week in San Severo and whomever you will be asked to kill next. You were not given the option of stopping at one. Neither was Henrietta nor any of the others. Why should I be any different?"

"Because I'm a lab rat? Something the medical staff tests until I break and then they put me back together to break me again? If I'm supposed to make the cyborgs better, why was I the last of the first generation cyborgs? Why did they not make you or Silvia the lab rat? You both were converted soon after Angelica. She would be the control and you the variable in each experiment. But no, they made both of you active agents. Then they added Silvia, Beatrice, Rico, Henrietta and all of the others as active agents."

"Kara said I was the basis for her model, but I'm stronger than she is. I can lift more than she can. I'm more durable and resistant to damage than she is. Her conditioning and programming are different than mine. What, exactly, have I provided that is incorporated in her body?"

Claes took a sip of her tea and turned to look out the window. Dusk was now falling and the lamps around the agency flickered on in response.

"I love my current life. The quiet. The privacy. The routine. But sometimes I ask myself 'why am I so different than the rest of you'? Is there something wrong with me? Was the promise really something I made with someone or is it just a manifestation of an error in my conditioning that they can't fix that makes me useless in the field? Is that why I don't have a handler? Did I have a handler, but when I was found...defective...did he get reassigned? Did he get a new cyborg? Is he walking the compound now, with another girl at his side? Could it be Michele? Is that why he's interested in me?"

"And why are they sending me out in the field now? If the promise is just a programming error, have they created a fix? Are these missions meant to be tests to see how it works? Now that I have killed, does that mean the fix worked?"

"You have been my roommate since you first arrived and it has always been this way for as long as I can remember. I never saw you with a handler and you never accompanied us on missions until last year. I don't know why you never had a handler, Claes. Or why you never

went on missions with us. I think, maybe, you're just a bit overwhelmed by what has happened and after some time to...digest it...you might feel more comfortable."

Claes shrugged and drained her tea. She reached for her boots and pulled them on and grabbed her coat off a chair back.

"Where are you going?" Triela asked.

"To digest," Claes replied.

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When he had been released, Michele left the hospital and slowly made his way along the stone bridge with the help of a cane he had borrowed. He had stopped halfway across to catch his breath as well as enjoy the sunset reflecting off the river below.

He heard footsteps approach and turned to see Claes slowly walking towards him. She closed within two meters of him and then stopped.

"I want to apologize for putting you in that situation, Claes," Michele said.

"Kara told me it wasn't your decision," she replied, looking down at her boots.

"I still ordered you to follow me."

"Well, I don't blame you."

"Thank you," Michele said.

Claes nodded and started walking, keeping her head down and eyes focused on the area directly in front of her.

"In Sydney, I told Kara that we may do ignoble things, but we do them for noble causes," Michele said as she passed him by. "What you did today was necessary. Not because you eliminated an enemy, but because you protected yourself against someone who wished you harm and also protected others from harm."

Claes stopped and looked up at him.

"I can't go back, can I?" she asked, and she suddenly looked very much like a twelve-year old girl to Michele.

"I don't know, Claes. Even without your own handler, you could still support a *fratello* with the proper training and practice."

Michele reached into his jacket and removed a folded DL size envelope. He started back towards the compound and handed it to her as she passed.

"Go ahead and open it," Michele said. "I meant to show it to you earlier, but things got in the way. We should be safe here."

Claes did so, and saw a personnel report with a 100 x 150 mm picture of an older man with a stern visage.

"Does the face look familiar to you?" Michele asked over his shoulder.

"Should it?" Claes asked as she turned to follow him.

"This isn't a fishing expedition," Michele replied. "Yes or no."

Claes stared at the picture, trying to make a connection, but nothing would come forward.

"No," she finally said as she came even with him. Michele noticed the undertone of distress in her voice.

"His name was Captain Giovanni Raballo and he was a company commander in the GIS," Michele stated. "Evidently, Jean Croce served under him for a time. He suffered a severe leg injury in a training accident in 2003 which forced his retirement. What is interesting is that they reversed that decision a year later, but I also confirmed he was the victim of that hit-and-run incident, which happened before he re-joined the GIS."

"If this is the man who taught me to shoot, why don't I remember him?" Claes asked.

"Do not be discouraged," Michele said as he started shuffling back towards the main compound. "Memory is a funny thing; doubly so when it's been played with. As long as the part of the brain that stores them is intact, memories are never truly destroyed. Even the protocols and chemicals the medical staff uses to make you forget your past just

messes up the 'table of contents' so you can't retrieve them easily. If this man was someone you knew, seeing his face may start to trigger synaptic connections that will eventually repair the corruption and allow you to recover the memories."

"I hope so," Claes said.

"Go on ahead. It's going to take me awhile with this leg," Michele noted as he shuffled along on his cane.

Claes had a vision of someone else who used a cane and words popped into her head for no reason.

"You can lean on me, if you like," she offered, repeating the words aloud.

"Thank you," Michele said.

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Claes examined herself in the reflection of a glass-paneled advertisement. She was wearing a dress, mostly black with a white middle and tied with a black ribbon around her waist. She looked down and saw tall white knee socks and black Mary Jane shoes.

*Are Kara and Petrushka playing dress-up with me again?*

Suddenly, she had an image of herself on a swing in a similar outfit. The sweet smell of flowers filled her nostrils and the warmth of the sun bathed her face. She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, but a foul smell filled her nostrils and her eyes snapped open.

She looked around and saw herself in a Metro station. She read the name and realized it was in an industrial part of the city. Graffiti was splashed on all the walls and in the distance, where the light was dimmer, she heard raucous male laughter.

Hanging from a strap on her shoulder was a pink leather purse. She looked inside and saw an HK VP70z pistol and she suddenly remembered why she was there.

She walked towards the sound and in a pool of light she saw two older teen boys smoking. They were dressed in t-shirts and jeans and one was drinking from a bottle.

"Hey! Look what we have here!" the brown-haired one holding the bottle said.

"Miss your train, little girl?" his partner replied, taking a drag on his cigarette. "That was the last one for the night, I'm afraid," he said with a twisted grin.

"Why don't you hang out with us, instead?" the other teen said, his eye leering at Claes' outfit. "When we're done, maybe we'll take you home." At this, he laughed again.

"Let me by, please," Claes said, pointing behind the teens to the other exit.

"Of course! Of course!" the brown-haired teen said. He stepped aside and Claes walked towards them. As she passed, he grabbed her and slammed her into the wall.

"Not so fast, little girl. You have to pay us a toll, first," he said. Claes could smell the alcohol on his breath and the tobacco permeating his clothes and they combined into a smell that made her nauseous.

The boy reached down and started lifting the front of her dress. Claes responded instantly, head-slammng the guy in his chest, knocking him backwards. At the same time, she violently twisted his arm, dislocating his socket and causing him to scream in pain.

"You little bitch!" his partner said, removing a switchblade from his belt. He lunged forward and stabbed Claes in the lower abdomen, though the blade only went in about halfway before it stopped.

Claes threw the first boy down and kicked the one who had stabbed her in the stomach, knocking him back. She then reached into her purse and removed her pistol. She pulled back the slide to load a round, cocked it, leveled it at the boy who had stabbed her, and shot him through the heart. The other boy with the dislocated shoulder tried to scramble away, but she walked over, put the gun to his temple, and fired.

She engaged the safety on her gun and put it in her purse, adding the casings once she had picked them up. She then grabbed each teen by the back of their t-shirt and dragged them through the pools of their own blood back to the entrance and up the stairs.

At the top, she saw Captain Raballo. His face took on a look of shock, quickly followed by disgust.

*"Idiota!"* he bellowed.

---

Claes' eyes snapped open. It took but a moment for her brain to register that she was in her bunk in her dorm and that it was still dark outside. A nightlight plugged into a wall-socket draped the furniture in weak illumination.

*Another dream...*

But she'd never had this one before. It was also the first time she had clearly seen someone to be able to identify them. Previous dreams had just been a figure cloaked in shadow with their features obscured.

She threw back the covers and rose up to a seated position. She looked over at the alarm clock on the desk and it said 03:56. She carefully crawled over to the ladder and descended to the floor, putting her feet into slippers and grabbing her sweater top and putting on her glasses before exiting the room.

The hall lights had been dimmed by half, but it still took her eyes a moment to adjust to the greater level of illumination. She went down to the bathroom at the end of the hall and relieved herself. She started back for her room but stopped as she reached the staircase. She descended and went outside, a cold wind cutting through her and causing her to wrap her pajama sweater top tighter around her.

She crossed over to the handler's dorm and climbed the steps up to Michele's room. She knocked, but wasn't surprised when there was no answer. She tried the doorknob and found it was unlocked. She slowly opened the door and saw the room was illuminated from an aquarium that he'd bought right after the New Year and computer-generated fireworks exploded on a huge LCD monitor. She looked to the bed and saw the covers were ruffled, but the bed was empty. She saw a light around the door to the bathroom.

"Michele?" she called out.

The door muffled Michele's voice. "Is that you, Kara?"

"It's Claes."

The door opened and Michele appeared, dressed in a sweater and slacks.

"Claes? It's four o'clock in the morning. What are you doing up, much less here?"

"I had another dream; a new one. I was in a subway. On a mission, I think. I was supposed to try and get past two punks, but they stopped me. One of them stabbed me and I shot them both and dragged them back to the exit. Mr. Raballo was there. He called me an idiot and then I woke up."

"Mr. Raballo?"

"What?"

"You called him 'Mister Raballo', not 'Captain Raballo'," Michele noted.

"So?" Claes asked.

"When you don't call me Michele, how do you refer to me?"

"Colonel Pagani," she replied, matter-of-factly.

"Why do you refer to me by my rank, but not Raballo?"

"I...I don't know," Claes said, her face slightly scrunching in thought. "It just comes...natural to me to refer to him that way for some reason."

"Perhaps he didn't want to be referred to by his rank. No matter," Michele said, dismissing it.

"I'm sorry for bothering you. I'm keeping you up, aren't I?" Claes asked.

Michele indicated his outfit. "I couldn't sleep. The leg is still bothering me a bit. I was about to take a drive."

"Ah. Okay," Claes said. She turned and started for the door. She waited for Michele to invite her, but he didn't. She opened the door and looked back at him. He had his finger over a button on his cellphone and he raised his eyebrows in question.

"Yes," Claes said.

Michele nodded and pressed the button before closing the phone. He walked over to the closet and pulled out a winter testing jacket for the Ferrari Formula One team. On him, it went down to his knees, so it almost reached the floor with Claes.

"A little overboard, perhaps?" Claes asked.

"I don't want you catching a cold," Michele replied. "Are those slippers going to be okay, or do you want to get some shoes?"

"Slippers are fine. What was that you did with your phone?"

"Sent a text to Jean telling him I was taking you on a drive and would be back in a bit. I didn't want him to think you'd run off in the night."

They exited Michele's room and walked down to the handler's parking lot and got into the F430. As she got in, she noticed a faint bloody boot print on the floor mat. She placed her slipper over it to block it out.

Michele started the car and drove out of the compound. They followed the A24 to the Grand Highway of the Gran Sasso and Monti della Laga National Park. The winter skies were clear in the Apennine Mountains and as they followed the old road from L'Aquila to Teramo, Claes looked out onto a landscape cloaked in snow. They pulled off at Lake Campotosto and parked in a plowed area.

"I think I am beginning to understand why Kara loves to drive," Claes noted as she listened to the soft lapping of the waves on the shore and the sounds of night birds and creatures. She looked down at her slippers with regret.

"It's an intoxicating mix, though you have to have the right car. Sandro's smart fortwo doesn't cut it, I am afraid, even if it is a convertible."

"I...I want to...to thank you, for what you've done for me," Claes said. "Not just this, but for the other things, as well. You've treated me as a person, not as some anomaly."

"You deserve no less than anyone else," Michele said. "Kara also worries about you. She doesn't know the specifics of what I am doing for you, but she has supported me in some of my searches as she is better with computers than I."

"Why would she do that?" Claes asked.

"It's the kind of person she is," Michele replied.

"You mean the kind of person you programmed her to be."

Michele shook his head. "Kara's personality, like Petrushka's or Ilaria's is their own. The only modifications the medical staff made was to instill feelings of loyalty to us handlers and to the SWA. Before she was converted, I searched her online presence to learn more about her to allow me to help ensure that as much of her original personality was retained as possible."

Sunrise was still over an hour away when they reached Teramo and connected to the A24 for the 185km drive back to Rome. Michele raised the windows, turned up the temperature on the climate control a bit, and put the car in top gear so the engine was loafing along at low RPMs. Soon enough, the warmth and steady drone of the engine had Claes nodding off in her seat.

---

"Claes, wake up," Michele said as he gently shook her.

Claes blinked her eyes a few times and then rubbed them. The sky was just starting to lighten over the mountains they had driven through.

"I drove around the GRA a few times to let you sleep, but I have to be at a staff meeting at 07:30," Michele said. The GRA – or Grande Raccordo Anulare – was the Autostrada that ran in a great circle around the outskirts of Rome. Claes looked at the clock in the car and it showed 07:16.

"You didn't need to do that," she said, flustered.

"You looked peaceful and I wasn't inconvenienced to allow you to keep sleeping."

"You really are too soft for this kind of work, Michele," she said, though no malice was in her tone.

"Probably, which is lucky I have someone as strong as Kara by my side," Michele said. "Now take a bath, get dressed, and report to the kitchen at 09:00 to help me make pancakes."

"Yes sir, *Colonello* sir," she said and hopped out of the car. She undid the jacket, tossed it on the seat, and then climbed the stairs into her dorm as Michele drove towards the main office.

---

"Where the heck have you been?" Triela demanded as soon as Claes entered their room. "I've been all over the dormitory looking for you!"

"I was out driving with Colonel Pagani, er, Michele," she replied.

"In your pajama's?" Triela asked, raising an eyebrow in skepticism.

"Triela?"

"Yes, Claes?"

"Shut up."

Triela opened her mouth to retort, but then closed it. She'd told Claes to do the same on more than one occasion when she didn't want to talk about something, and this morning Triela didn't feel like arguing. She merely nodded her head and they headed for the baths together.

---

Michele was working on his computer when iCal chimed an alarm, noting it was 15:00 hours and he had an appointment on the outdoor firing range with Kara and Claes. He unlocked his gun safe and removed the case for his Heckler & Koch VP70-M pistol. He also removed a box of 9mm ammunition and placed it in an area of the foam specifically hollowed-out to accept it.

Kara and Claes were waiting for him when he exited the handler's dorm. Kara was dressed in a black tactical jumpsuit with her Bundeswehr-issue combat boots. Over one shoulder she had slung the gun case for her XM8 rifle and over the other she carried an olive drab duffel bag with ammunition and eye and hearing protection. In her right hand she carried a dual-pistol carrying case for her and Michele's

HK P2000SKs. The whole ensemble weighed around 100 kilos, but Kara carried it as if filled with feathers. Claes wore a brown knit dress over a white sweater with black leggings and tan leather boots.

It had been a bit over week since the shooting near the Palazzo Viminale and Claes had asked Michele if he would allow her to fire his VP70-M. She'd had Triela inquire as to whether the Armory had such a gun and was informed they had, but it had been "lost" some time back. She'd held Michele's gun last year and it had seemed natural to her when she had.

They loaded everything into the back of an electric cart and drove the roughly 2km to the outdoor firing range. Kara set up some targets at 100m and proceeded to engage them with her XM8 assault rifle.

Michele placed a dozen new cans on top of a set of posts and stood back 10 meters from the closest post. He prepared his HK P2000SK pistol and fired off all 12 rounds in the clip, successfully hitting 9 of the 12 targets.

"That's pathetic, Michele," Kara commented, though her tone was light-hearted.

"Just warming up," Michele replied. He reset the cans and fired again, this time taking all 12.

He set up them up again and watched Claes first remove her glasses and then put on a pair of safety glasses. She prepared the VP70-M for shoulder firing by attaching the plastic holster, which also served as a butt-stock. She verified the weapon was set to single-shot mode, placed the butt of the stock on her shoulder and emptied the 18-round clip, hitting 4 of 12.

Michele's first thought was he was glad she'd taken her kill-shot in Rome at point-blank range. His second was she hadn't fired a gun in at least the year he'd been there, so it stood to reason she was terribly rusty and her aim was off. He also noticed that the gun tended to shake in her hand, causing her to continue to re-acquire her target.

Kara, meanwhile, fired her own P2000SK, hitting 12 of 12 from 15 meters.

"If you're pathetic, then I must be deplorable," Claes noted as she watched Kara eject her clip and go reset her targets.

"Without practice, even a Maestro loses their touch," Michele noted. Claes ejected the empty clip and inserted a fresh while Michele reset the four downed targets. Claes fired again, and this time hit six of twelve.

"You're tensing too much," Michele noted. "It causes your aim to wander, which is affecting your accuracy. You need to relax. Take a deep breath and hold it before you pull the trigger, then release it in a single, smooth motion."

Claes nodded and re-loaded both magazines from the box of bullets. Her third try was only seven of twelve, but her stance looked better and the gun did not move as much between shots.

They all fired for another 20 minutes, Michele and Claes alternating while Kara fired continuously. Claes averaged between 8 and 10 hits, but she still couldn't get all 12 cans in one clip, even firing all 18 rounds.

"Okay, let's call it," Michele ordered.

"I'd like to stay and finish this box, if I may," Claes said.

Michele checked his watch and saw dusk was due to fall within the hour.

"I want you back by nightfall," he ordered. "There is a storm due this evening and I don't want you caught in it."

Claes nodded and helped the others clean up. They headed back and left her behind.

---

Dusk formally fell at 17:40 and the rain had started to fall just before then. Just after 18:00 Michele's cellphone rang.

"Hello?"

"Michele? It's Triela. Have you seen Claes?"

"She was at the outdoor range with Kara and I earlier, but I told her to be back before dusk."

"She wasn't at dinner and her bed is still made from this morning, so I don't think she's been here."

"Ok, Triela. I'll contact Kara and find out if she's seen her," Michele said. Triela thanked him and hung-up. Michele called Kara's cell and she replied she had not seen Claes since the firing range, either.

Lightning flashed outside his window, followed by the roll of thunder. He pulled on his jacket and grabbed the keys to his F430. He dashed down the steps of the handler's dorm to his car and started it up, heading towards the firing range.

The rain was falling steadily, but there was sufficient light for Michele to see in case Claes was walking back. He drove through the open gate and into the range proper. Up ahead he saw a figure standing in the rain and as his headlights fell on it, he realized it was Claes. She was surrounded by scores of spent shell casings.

"Claes! What the hell are you still doing out here?" Michele demanded as he exited the car.

"I'm sorry, but I still can't hit them all every time," Claes replied. Her clothes were fully soaked-through and he could see her shivering in the cold. Michele removed his coat and wrapped it around her.

"Get in the car right now," he ordered. Claes nodded and put the gun down on the table. Michele checked the box of ammunition and saw there were only a handful of rounds left. He shook them out into his hand and put them in the gun case along with the weapon. He then snapped it back shut and returned to the car, putting it on the floor in front of his seat before getting in. He set the climate control to maximum temperature and fan speed, aiming the ducts towards Claes. He then did a J-turn and started back for the dorm.

They parked and Michele headed for his room, ordering Claes to follow. When they got to his room, she followed him into the bathroom. Michele took his coat off her and hung it on a peg and then removed a fresh towel from a cabinet.

"I want you to undress, take a hot shower and warm up. I'll have Kara pick up some dry clothes for you, but for now this t-shirt should be long enough to cover you when you get out. There is also another towel in there, as well."

"I can just do this back at my dorm," Claes said.

"You're still shivering," Michele replied. "I don't know if you can catch pneumonia with your artificial lungs, but I don't want to risk it."

"Michele..." Claes said.

"You're the one who decided to stand in a cold rain for an hour. Now please stop arguing with me and get in the shower."

Claes nodded and Michele closed the door as he exited.

Michele called Kara and asked her to get a pair of underclothes and outfit for Claes from her room and bring it to his room. He started a kettle of water on the boil and then pulled his gun-cleaning kit out from a cabinet and opened the gun case after wiping it down. He wiped the water off his VP and then disassembled it, drying it with a rag and a can of compressed air to blow out the crevices before cleaning it.

There was a knock on his door and Kara came in with a bundle of clothes. Michele indicated the bathroom door and Kara nodded. She knocked and shouted to Claes that she was coming in to drop them off, which she did before returning and sitting on the bed.

Michele put his pistol case back in his gun safe and returned the cleaning kit to the cabinet. The bathroom door opened and Claes came out wearing a brown button-down long-sleeved dress shirt tucked into a denim miniskirt.

"Hand me your boots, please," Michele asked and Claes did so. He removed some leathercare products from his wardrobe and after drying the boots off, started working on them.

"You absolutely soaked these inside and out, so don't bother with socks when you put them on to go back to your room," he informed Claes. "Give them at least a day to dry out. Hitting the insides with your hair dryer might not be a bad idea, either. The stuff I am applying will take care of the outside so you can put them near your radiator."

"Thank you," Claes said. She took a seat on the bed next to Kara. By now, the kettle had announced the water was ready so Michele prepared three large cups of hot chocolate and distributed them.

"Why were you still shooting in the rain?" Michele asked again.

"You told me not to leave until I could hit every target," Claes said.

"I did no such thing. I told you to come home before it got dark and the rain started," Michele said. Claes looked to Kara who nodded confirmation of Michele's words to her.

"I...I..." Claes' brow furled in concentration. "I'm sorry. I must have misheard you."

"Uh huh," Michele said, his tone clear he didn't believe that. However, he let it drop.

"You've missed dinner. Do you want to go get something in town? Or I can make you something in the kitchen," he offered.

Claes shook her head. "I have some fruit in my room. I'll be fine."

The two girls finished their hot cocoa and Michele gave Claes a plastic bag to put her wet clothes in. She pulled on her boots and they could hear the squish of water as her foot pressed down on the inside of the soles. Michele gave Claes one of his spare umbrellas to use and sent them both on their way back to the cyborg dorm.

---

At the door, Kara grabbed the umbrella she had used to come over and they both stepped out into the driving rain.

"Seriously, why did you not come in?" Kara asked as they walked across the parking lot to their dorm.

"I could have sworn he told me to stay out there until I could hit all the targets with one clip. Even as I was doing it, I had this weird sense of *déjà vu*, like I had been there before in the same situation."

"Shooting targets in the rain?" Kara asked and Claes nodded.

"Who would make you do that? Even Jean's not that heartless," Kara opined.

"The water squishing around my toes feels terrible," Claes noted. As soon as they were inside, she removed her boots and wiped her feet

on the mat to dry them. They climbed to the top floor and went their separate ways to their respective dorms.

"Where the hell have you been?" Triela demanded when Claes came through the door.

"Target shooting," Claes replied.

"That I know. What about after? And why did Kara come get you those clothes?"

"I...lost track of time and ended up getting caught in the storm. Michele loaned me his shower to warm-up and get me a change of dry clothes."

"You should carry an umbrella with you. Or stick with the indoor range. This is the second time you've been caught in a rainstorm on the outside range," Triela said with a laugh.

"What did you say?" Claes said.

"I said this is the second time you've been caught out in the rain practicing at the outdoor range."

"When was the first time?"

"Uh...Hmm... You know, I can't recall, exactly. I do remember you showed up looking like a drowned rat. You took a shower, changed into your pajamas and then Jean came by, said something to you and you left with him. I was asleep by the time you came back."

"Did I mention where I went?" Claes asked.

"Not that I recall," Triela said.

"You're sure?" she pressed.

Triela shrugged her shoulders. "Honestly the image just popped into my mind when you mentioned you'd been caught in the rain. As quickly as it came, it's gone now. Sorry."

"It's okay," Claes said. She placed her wet clothes in the laundry hamper and laid her boots on their side with the tops pointing at the

radiator. She grabbed an apple and a banana from a bowl and her book from the shelf and sat down at the table to eat.

---

"Triela tells me you took Claes out for shooting practice yesterday," Hillshire commented to Michele as the two walked the breakfast buffet line in the main cafeteria the following morning.

Michele nodded as he selected some sausage links.

"How'd she do?"

"Terrible at first, but I don't think she's fired a gun in at least a year, so... Her accuracy improved as she practiced. The damn fool was practicing even in the rain. I had to go out to the range and order her back."

Behind them at the fruit station, Jean's head snapped up.

"She was out shooting in that storm last night?" Hillshire exclaimed as he scooped some scalloped potatoes. "Whatever for?"

"She claims I ordered her to, but I did no such thing," Michele noted. "I brought her back and had her take a hot shower and change into dry clothes. I just hope she doesn't catch a cold or something."

---

"I believe Claes is starting to recover her memories of when she was with Captain Raballo," Jean opened without preamble later that afternoon as he sat in front of Director Lorenzo's desk.

"Why do you say that?" Lorenzo asked.

"During the spring, she started on an oil painting of an angler by a lake. Triela asked her why she chose that subject and she said she dreamed about a man fishing on a lake. I showed her a film about alpine wildlife and she seemed to respond emotionally to the scenes of rivers and lakes. She said she felt like she wanted to cry, but couldn't. Giuseppe said she visited the indoor firing range, but didn't stay long.

"In Geneva, she asked Michele who Raballo was. She said when she visited the range, the guard at the door recognized her and said she used to shoot with a man named Raballo. I've spoken with the guard and instructed him to never mention the name again. I have passed a

private memorandum around to all the staff who work with the cyborgs to remind them to not mention his name, either."

"Has Claes attempted to find out any more information on him?"

"Not that we can determine," Jean noted. "She has not asked any staff members about it. Doctor?"

"No, she hasn't said anything to me during our examinations," Doctor Fernando Bianchi replied from a side chair.

"I don't see the problem," Lorenzo said.

"Yesterday she accompanied Michele to the shooting range, something she has not done since Captain Raballo's death," Jean reported. "And I learned this morning that she stayed out in a rainstorm practicing, something she did under Raballo's orders when they first started as a fratello. She claims it was because Michele ordered her to, but I think her memories of Raballo's order...leaked...into her sub-consciousness when she was exposed to a similar situation."

Doctor Bianchi looked thoughtful as he stroked his goatee. "It was probably bound to happen eventually," he noted. "Angelica remembered her past. Now Triela and Henrietta are, as well. Claes has been a cyborg for a shorter period of time than those three, but we were much more invasive in our procedures with her so perhaps that is catching up with her."

"She seems to be showing an interest in becoming an agent again," Jean reported. "I think it is something we should encourage, especially if she is starting to remember Captain Raballo. It could cushion the blow should she re-discover that she was once part of a fratello with him and we could use another active cyborg to replace our losses from Venice."

"Who do you recommend? Togni?" Lorenzo asked. With the death of Angelica, Marco Togni had become a normal agent within Section 2.

"I think she should pair with Pagani," Jean stated.

"Pagani already has a cyborg," Bianchi replied.

"Explain your reasoning," Lorenzo ordered.

"As Ferro noted, she seems closest to him. She's painfully polite to myself and the other handlers, but she seems to be more open around him. They went for a drive in the middle of the night a few days back. Both say it was because they couldn't sleep, but I expect they were talking about the shooting at Palazzo Viminale. They're forming a connection. I say we exploit it."

"In the past, Michele has not appreciated us trying to exploit his...connections," Lorenzo noted.

"He was new then. He's been on enough missions with Kara and the other *fratelli* that he understands what is expected of him and of the cyborgs."

"Your recommendation?" Lorenzo asked Jean.

"I recommend we have Claes start performing the full cyborg training regimen with the other girls, under Michele's supervision. That includes physical education, weapons proficiency and building-clearing tactics and training at the GIS compound. If she responds well, we can consider sending her on missions with Michele and Kara."

"Doctor?" Lorenzo asked Bianchi, who was stroking his goatee again.

"I concur. There is a rationale for having Claes do so, which minimizes the chances of push-back from both her and Michele."

Lorenzo nodded. "Jean, approach Claes first and inform her. I'll inform Michele."

---

Jean found Claes in the Music Room, playing the piano. She stopped when she noticed his presence.

"Yes?" she asked.

"The Director and I, in consultation with Doctor Bianchi, have come to the decision that we want you to try the full cyborg training regimen with your sisters."

"Okay," Claes replied.

"I've decided Michele Pagani will serve as your primary instructor, though you will likely work with Hillshire and perhaps Giuseppe since they are more familiar with your capabilities."

Claes was somewhat surprised by the choice, figuring she'd be paired with Hillshire and Triela. She assumed it was in part due to the fact the only handler she generally interacted with was Michele. She also figured it wasn't his idea, but that he'd also acquiesce to do it.

"Understood," she acknowledged.

"Do you need anything?" Jean asked.

"Not at the moment. Anything I do, I'll take it up with Michele, if that is okay," Claes noted.

"Of course," Jean said. He nodded and closed the door and Claes returned to her playing.

---

On the appointed morning, Claes woke, showered and then changed into track pants, a t-shirt and athletic shoes. After breakfast she reported to Michele's room in the handler's dorm.

Michele pulled out a composite gun case and placed it on his bed. He motioned for Claes to open it and she did so. Nestled inside protective foam cut to fit the weapon was a Heckler & Koch MP5K-PDW Personal Defense Weapon submachine gun.

Michele pulled out a smaller case.

"I'll try and find another VP70M for you, but they stopped making them about three decades ago. I'd give you mine, but I'm kind of attached to it for sentimental reasons and I don't expect them to pair us together as a fratello since I already have Kara. In the interim, I've selected for you the same pistol she and I use – the HK P2000SK sub-compact chambered for .40 S&W."

"Why not 9mm like the MP5?" Claes asked.

"Better stopping power without the recoil of the .45. The SK is also more concealable than the USP compact and it's a derivative of the USP so I figure they corrected whatever flaws they found in the original."

Michele pulled out a canvas bag and removed a pair of Bundeswehr-issue combat boots, a black tactical jumpsuit, a pair of black tactical shorts and a long-sleeve and short-sleeve black tactical shirt. There were also some heavy wool socks.

"When out on the range or running the training course, I prefer that you not wear civilian clothes. For physical education sessions, what you have on now is fine. The weather is mild today so you are free to choose whichever of these outfits you like. I used the same sizes from the Geneva mission so I am hoping they fit."

Claes grabbed the shorts and shirt and went into the bathroom to change. When she came out, both looked to fit her well enough.

"Excellent. Exchange your cotton socks for wool ones and try on the boots. They'll likely be a bit tight at first, but they should get more comfortable with use."

"They feel fine," Claes noted after she had done so. She laced them up and grabbed the two cases while Michele grabbed the case for his pistol and they went downstairs. It was a tight fit in the F430's trunk, but they made it happen and got inside the car. Claes noted the bloody footprint from before was gone and figured Michele had washed the car recently.

They drove to the range, which they had to themselves at the moment. Instead of cans on posts, they used the fixed metal targets along the backstop. As with the VP70, Claes instinctively understood how to operate the MP5K, quickly loading it and setting it up to fire. She laid out ten 30-round box magazines and then put on ear and eye protection. Michele did the same, standing off to the left and behind her to watch her fire through compact binoculars. She set the gun for three-round burst, took aim, and fired off ten sets to empty the 30-round magazine.

"Not bad," Michele said. "At least half of them looked on target."

Claes ejected the spent magazine and inserted a fresh one. She again took aim and fired off ten sets.

"A bit tighter grouping this time. Go ahead and keep at it," he ordered. He then prepared his own P2000SK and fired three magazines worth of ammunition.

As Claes was firing her last magazine in the MP5K, Hillshire's E350 pulled up. Triela and Rico exited and headed for the back to grab their weapons while Hillshire and Jean started towards Michele.

Michele, dressed in "wooly-pully" and tactical pants, noted Triela was wearing a white dress shirt and tie with a blue skirt and men's laced dress ankle boots. Rico was dressed in a t-shirt and khaki pants with sneakers. Both handlers were in suits. He knew Hillshire was an ex-cop, but after almost five years of hanging around military types, Michele figured he'd get the hint on what constituted proper range wear for at least Triela, if not himself. As for Jean, being ex-GIS, Michele felt he had no excuse. As he always did, he kept his opinions on the matter to himself.

"Switch to the P2000," Michele ordered Claes and she nodded her acknowledgement.

"How is she doing?" Jean asked Michele as the latter came forward.

"Her form is good. She seems to have muscle memory for the weapon so I take it she trained with it in the past?"

"Yes. She was trained on the VP70 and the MP5K," Jean replied.

"Any other weapons?"

"No."

"Ok. I asked about a VP70 in the armory, but the Range Master said it had been lost some time back," Michele noted. "I'm going to try and get her another one, but in the interim I am having her use the P2000SK since that is what Kara and I shoot."

"I'll see what I can do about securing a VP for you," Jean noted. Triela and Rico had passed them and were setting up so Jean excused himself to watch his cyborg practice with her SiG SG 551 and Triela was using an H&K MP7A1 submachine gun.

Michele returned to watch Claes go through five magazines with her pistol. When she was done, Michele ordered her to stand down and they went over to his car. Michele removed a thermos and two cups, pouring hot chocolate into each.

"Do you feel okay?" he asked as they leaned against the front fender.

"Yes," Claes replied.

They finished their cocoa over the next five minutes, watching Triela and Rico practice. Michele placed another 10 magazines each for the two guns and had Claes fire through them, as well. As she did, Michele saw Claes shift her balance from foot to foot in-between reloads.

"Are the boots bothering you?"

"Kind of. They pinch in some areas."

"The more you wear them, the quicker they'll break in so you might want to wear them when you garden or go for walks."

"Can't I just wear normal shoes like Triela and Rico?"

"I don't know what those two are thinking. One misstep and they could twist their ankles like Angelica did."

"Angelica was weak," Claes muttered. The next thing she knew, she was being violently wrenched around by her right arm. Michele's face showed anger and his tone was harsh.

"You are never to disparage her memory in my presence! Do you understand?" he said.

Claes was too surprised to do anything but nod her head in acknowledgement. Michele released his grip on her arm.

"We're done. Pack up," he ordered.

"I'd like to stay and finish—"

"Request denied," Michele cut her off. He pointed his key fob at the car and popped the trunk release. Claes nodded and started packing up. She felt the eyes of Triela and Rico on her, but their handlers ordered them to resume their practice and they did so. When she was done, she placed the cases in the trunk and then sat in the car while she waited for Michele to finish raking the casings from her shooting into a plastic collection bin located in the ground.

Michele dropped into his seat and slammed the door. Claes expected him to do an angry burnout from the parking area, but there wasn't a hint of tire squeal and the engine never missed a beat, telling her the traction control wasn't engaging.

He drove past both the handler's dorm and the cyborg residence, pulling into a parking spot at the indoor firing range where he killed the engine and hit the trunk release. Claes took the hint and followed him out.

"Grab your weapons," he ordered. "I need to show you how to clean them."

"Yes sir!" Claes replied in a crisp tone. She was partly upset at him and she was partly afraid of him, so she decided to perform the minimum social interaction necessary with him.

Michele nodded to the man behind the glass, who tipped his ballcap at them as they passed. They entered the elevator and rode it down to the main floor. They passed through the locker room and what she called the "gun wall" where a number of long-barrel weapons and sub-machine guns hung on pegs for general practice and familiarization. There was also a floor-to-ceiling glass-fronted cabinet with a variety of pistols. Michele went to one of the lockers, typed in a code, and removed what appeared to be a fishing tackle box.

They exited and rather than turning left to head to the shooting range, they turned right to an area with a number of folding tables and folding metal chairs. It was here Michele took her, placing his pistol case and the tackle box on a table. Claes did the same and sat down next to him.

Michele unlatched the tackle box and folded out two trays. Inside, Claes saw an array of brushes, swabs, tools, rods, "pipe cleaners" and other items she could not identify. Michele removed a folded cleaning pad and rolled it out in front of him. He pulled out a slightly larger one and handed it to Claes, who did the same. He also pulled out a few drip bottles and small cans along with a number of clean and used rags.

Michele showed Claes how to clean their pistols, he going first with his weapon and then watching her repeat the lesson on her own. When finished, he then instructed her on disassembling and cleaning the MP5K. When they were done, they cleaned up and headed back to the

car. Michele dropped Claes off at the cyborg dorm and waited for her to recover her two cases and the clothes bag, telling her to ask Triela for advice on how and where to store them.

---

"So what was that all about?" Triela asked Claes after the latter walked through the door. Claes didn't need to be psychic to know Triela was talking about Michele's outburst at the range.

Claes merely shrugged, bending down to place her items on the floor.

"Did he yell at you after you left?" Triela asked.

"He didn't mention it again. He took me to the indoor range and showed me how to clean these guns. He also asked me to ask you where to store them."

"Well I use the top shelf of the drawer there. I can clean my stuff out of the one below it and you can use that one," Triela noted. "Kara said he was close to Angelica. He knew her before anyone else here did except Bianchi and the surgical team. I guess her death is a sensitive subject with him," she added as she transferred some items to the bottom drawer.

"He's big on respecting teammates. Kara once made a catty comment to me in his presence and he dressed her down rather harshly," Claes noted. She put the two cases on the floor of the drawer, covering them with the clothes Michele had bought for her. She stripped out of her shorts and the shirt and replaced them with a skirt and sweater, though she kept the wool socks and combat boots on.

"I'm going to go for a walk and try to break these boots in," she noted.

"See ya," Triela acknowledged.

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When they were not preparing for - or on - a mission, the cyborgs of Section Two, Special Operations of the Social Welfare Agency followed a general routine. There could be shooting practice, or physical training and exercise. The girls also had lectures and class time. The curriculum was equivalent to that taught in Italian *Scuole Superiori*, though instead of studying with a single *Liceo*, the girls were exposed to subjects drawn from all four primary *Licei* curricula. Their "official"

weekday ran from 10:00 to 17:00, with the mornings and evenings free.

At least one day each week was designated a “float day”, with no officially pre-scheduled events. This allowed the handlers the opportunity to instruct their girls in specific subjects or allow them the opportunity to relax or do self-study in subjects of personal interest. And since there was no dinner service on Saturday, the cyborgs often spent the evening off-compound, either alone with their handlers or in groups. Sundays were official days off for most of the staff. The handlers usually spent the day at their personal apartments in Rome and the cyborgs were free to enjoy the day as they desired.

Except for Claes...

While she participated in the classroom instruction, the rest of her week was mostly unstructured and separate from that of the other girls. Over the months, she had developed and followed her own schedule and routine. She also partook of a traditional *Liceo Artistico* education in both the theoretical (ie. Art History) and practical (ie. drawing sessions) sense. She also watched domestic and foreign films, which she would then write an essay about it. And she took lessons for the piano and oil painting, as well as sketching with pencil and charcoal.

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“Damn it,” Claes muttered as she knocked her book off the bunk, the bookmark slipping out when it hit the floor. She climbed down the ladder and picked it up, flipping through the pages until she found the proper location and slipped it back in.

Though normally an early riser, since adapting to the normal cyborg schedule two weeks ago, she’d been finding it harder to get up in the morning as early as she did and she was still sleepy when she finally did rise. The mornings were usually cool, but if the sun was out Claes opened the windows wide by 08:00, much to the consternation of a sleeping Triela.

This Friday the cyborgs had shooting practice in the morning, followed by physical training after lunch. Kara and Michele had gone on a mission to Bologna on Wednesday and had returned yesterday evening so she’d worked with Triela and Hillshire in the interim. While Michele was more formal than Hillshire, she found she preferred that approach.

She opened her part of the wardrobe and exchanged her pajama bottom and top for her tactical jumpsuit. She pulled on wool socks followed by her combat boots. She looked at Triela's bed and saw movement under the sheets as Triela stirred, but it appeared she wasn't yet ready to emerge so she opened the windows wider and headed for the dining room.

---

After breakfast she reported outside the cyborg dorm. Kara and Ilaria were already present. Kara was also dressed in tactical attire, while Ilaria had on a sweater over a t-shirt with jeans and running shoes.

"How was Bologna?" Claes asked Kara.

"Fantastic," Kara gushed. When she saw Ilaria's face light-up, she coughed and composed herself.

"Uh, I mean that it was successful. I think the meeting with Abati went well, so if Alessandro can seal the deal, we should have an inside contact in the mafia we can pass off to the GICO (gruppo di investigazione criminalità organizzata) to run."

"My Sandro will succeed," Petrushka said with confidence as she bounced down the steps. Though the temperature was still in the single digits, her outfit consisted of a light t-shirt, open track jacket and cut-off jean shorts with tennis socks and shoes. As she reached the ground, she wrapped her arms around her chest and stamped her feet to keep warm. Over the next few minutes Beatrice, Triela, Rico and Henrietta all arrived.

A 17-seat Fiat Ducato minibus pulled up. Jean was behind the wheel and Giuse was next to him in the front. Behind them was a pair of two seats, followed by four rows of 2+1 seating. The other handlers were in the single seats, so Henrietta and Rico took the first pair. Kara took the window seat of the next pair, across from Michele, and Claes sat down next to her. Each of the other cyborgs sat across from their handler. Jean hit the button that closed the power sliding door and they headed off to the outdoor range.

At the range, Claes fired Michele's VP70M along with the P2000SK, MP5K-PDW and G36 assault rifle at a variety of ranges, continuing to familiarize herself with the weapons and hone her accuracy.

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After lunch, Claes and Triela changed out of their shooting outfits into t-shirts and track pants and laced up their track shoes. All the girls then proceeded to run to the outdoor training area while their handlers drove beside them in a Peugeot 807 minivan.

Once they had performed their set of exercises, the girls broke up into smaller groups or individuals. Kara and Triela went over to a grassy area to practice Nippon Kempo, though since they did not have their protective gear they did not engage in full-contact blows. Claes watched them practice for a few minutes, then went over to where Michele was practicing the forms of tai chi chuan.

She came up beside him and smoothly integrated into his routine, matching Michele's moves. She'd been practicing off-and-on with Kara and Ilaria for months, so she was familiar with the basic wushu forms. Triela and even Beatrice joined in on occasion. Henrietta and Rico had tried it for a short time, but Rico was by nature a bundle of energy and she would soon grow bored with the slow and deliberate pacing and start to fidget, throwing off the others. Soon, they stopped letting her know when they were practicing. Henrietta, not wanting Rico to feel alone, also dropped out.

"How are you feeling?" Michele asked.

"Okay. Everything is working."

"The last hour is usually spent in individual or group training, but I didn't think of something for you to do. My apologies."

"Is this what you normally do while Kara is training?"

"It depends. Sometimes Kara and I will practice *kenjutsu* or *nitōjutsu* together or each of us will perform *iaijutsu* or *tameshigiri*. But when it is just me, it's this or drink coffee."

Claes understood the Japanese terms because Kara had once explained them to her. She'd tried the kata – or choreographed patterns of movements – for *iaidō*, but in general she found it more a way to hone her reflexes than meditate or relax so she'd soon stopped it. Now that she was training again, she thought that perhaps she should consider taking it back up.

The shrill chord of Jean's whistle announced the end of the morning exercises. They ran back to the compound, arriving as dinner was being served. After all the exertion, they were ravenous.

After the meal, Claes went to take a bath. Night had fallen by the time she returned to her room, so she considered reading. However, Triela, Henrietta and Rico were already present and chatting away over tea and dessert, which meant she could not concentrate on her book. Though the morning had started cold, the afternoon had been mild and the current temperature was not uncomfortably cold, so she decided to read outside. She found a bench under a light and opened her book.

After about an hour, Claes heard footsteps and saw Kara coming her way from the dorm, carrying her telescope.

"Looks like a nice night to stargaze," Claes commented.

"Indeed. Saturn is showing her rings and I should be able to see the surface of Mars," Kara replied.

"No Henrietta?"

"She's hanging out with Triela and Rico in your room. She said she'd come out in a bit."

"I'm almost done with this chapter, so when I am done I'll come by, as well," Claes said.

"I'll wait," Kara said. She extended the telescope's legs and set it down.

"So...another car, eh?" Claes asked.

"Yup. A Lamborghini, no less," Kara replied.

"I thought you said Michele didn't like Lamborghinis," Claes noted, recalling the Casino at Monte Carlo.

"Evidently they've gotten better now that Audi owns them," Kara guessed.

"He doesn't fit what one would think would be the normal profile of a handler," Claes noted. "Then again, neither does Alessandro or Bernardo."

"I think people tend to underestimate him," Kara replied. "They see him as kind of a wealthy playboy living out some kind of 'secret agent' dream."

"How much did those cost?" she asked, pointing to Kara's burgundy boots.

"€1000," Kara muttered.

"One...thousand...Euro..." Claes said, pronouncing each word slowly. "And you act surprised at such views?"

"He's a very giving person," Kara noted. "The first time he took me out of the compound was on a shopping trip to the fashion center of Rome. He bought me these boots on that trip. He must have spent close to ten grand on me that day in clothes."

"I won't lie – I really like the way I look. Yet I understand you don't need to spend the money he does on me to look good. It is just that he has his own idea of aesthetics and so that is where he takes me to shop. He likes the finer things in life and he's in a position to afford them."

"Okay. So he doesn't do this for the money. Why does he do it?" Claes asked.

"He was a soldier. He saw service in Yugoslavia and watched that country fall apart before his eyes in the 1990s. In 1984, he'd gone to Sarajevo to attend the Winter Olympics. He said the city was quite beautiful and the people warm and friendly. A decade later, he was back as a NATO soldier watching the city burn during the Siege and the people turn into pale shadows. He doesn't want to see that happen to Italy with the PRF. That's why when he was approached by Giulio Draghi, he accepted a position in Public Safety."

"So how did he end up in Section Two with you?"

"I don't know the specifics. I remember waking up in the hospital here. Evidently I'd been asleep for many months after some terrible accident that Michele rescued me from. Unfortunately, I had suffered memory loss, though over time I started remembering things. He visited me on a regular basis and he told me I was going to be 'fixed' soon, which I

discovered when I woke up from the surgeries meant I was a cyborg. Michele appeared and I knew he was now my handler.”

Claes swung her legs up, showing Kara the knee-high black leather riding boots she was wearing. “Michele bought me these for the Geneva mission. This is the first time I have worn them since that mission. They’re more stylish than the brown ones I normally wear and maybe that is part of the reason why I don’t wear them. I don’t like to stand out.”

“I may be half-French, but my features are clearly Japanese. I can do nothing but stand out. Michele told me to use that to my advantage. So by dressing like I do, people assume I’m a foreign businesswoman, not an assassin. When I meet with contacts, it looks like a ‘power lunch’, not a meeting between spies. People remember me, but they don’t connect me with events when they’re questioned by the police.”

She took another deep breath. “Shall we go set-up?”

Claes nodded her head and they headed for a secluded corner of the compound.

---

As the weeks of training went on, Claes began to think her decision to agree to a normal training regimen was a mistake. She found the constant drilling and training boring and repetitive and she missed the freedom her original routine had provided her. She often found herself tired and a bit sore by the end of each day’s training, which served as a de-motivating influence towards doing anything else. Her fellow cyborgs now felt comfortable in bringing her into their discussions about missions and such, which became another distraction from reading, music, painting or gardening.

Michele was also having second thoughts. He quickly discovered that having two cyborgs did not just double the workload, but more like tripled it. He felt his own focus start to drift and as it did, so did the focus and performance of Kara and Claes. While never at the top of her class, Kara’s marksmanship skills had started to stumble and Claes, having reached a sort of plateau, now seemed to be stuck in neutral and was not improving, even with more practice.

The two had performed quite poorly at the Carabinieri urban combat course training session at Frosinone, their entrance sloppy and their teamwork ragged. Claes had almost followed the flash-bang she threw

into a room, Triela having to pull her back. Kara failed to use sufficient force to knock a door off its hinges and it recoiled off the wall, slamming back into her and knocking her back on her ass in the hall. She'd then become entangled in the bandolier of her XM8 and it took her a full ten seconds to square it away and get back on her feet, by which time she'd been declared "combat ineffective" by the silhouette in the room wielding a plastic HK33 who would have had plenty of time to empty his 30-round magazine into her.

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A few days after the Frosinone training session, Claes walked into the dining room for breakfast. She helped herself at the chafing dishes and then sought out a seat. As she walked by Kara's table, she noticed her reading a book on freshwater fish species.

"Looking for new dinner ideas?" Claes asked as she set her tray down across from her.

Kara shook her head. "Michele is taking me fishing this weekend. Marco said the northern lakes are starting to thaw so the fish are ready to bite."

"Depends on the fish. Pike, for example, cannot be fished prior to April, yet the prohibition on common perch begins in April and lasts through the end of May. And at that point, black bass is prohibited until mid-June," Claes noted.

"You sound like an expert on fresh-water fish. Can I get some pointers?" Kara asked.

"I've never fished," Claes replied. "That time off the French Riviera with Michele was my first time."

"Seriously? Then how do you know all these rules and regulations?"

Claes shrugged. "I read a great deal. I must have read it sometime."

"You read a fishing rulebook? For enjoyment? You have got to get out more."

Claes responded with a sour expression.

"Anyway, Michele has decreed that we're going with Marco up to Veneto this weekend."

"Decreed?"

"He's really disappointed in how the training went. More in himself than us," Kara replied. "I think he wants to take some time to let us all relax and re-focus."

"You said 'we're', so I guess that means I'm coming as well," Claes said.

"I don't know, but if you are, I can put in a good word to try and get you out of it," Kara offered.

"No. I probably could benefit from getting out a bit. And if I can pry that camera out of Henrietta's hands, I could take some background shots to use for future paintings."

---

Friday night after practice Kara and Claes showered and changed. They grabbed their overnight bags and headed down to the courtyard where a black Range Rover was parked. Kara handed her bag to Michele to load into the back and settled into the back passenger seat, admiring the beige leather and burl walnut trim. Marco slipped behind the driver's seat and started the car. He plugged in the coordinates to the SatNav and pulled out.

"So where are we going?" Kara asked.

"Lake Ghirla," Michele replied.

"Ghirla has pike, rudd and tenches," Claes noted to Kara. "Tench can be tough to hook and when you do get one on the line, they put up a heck of a fight."

Kara and Claes settled down with books for the long drive north. It was close to midnight when they finally pulled into the Villa Castiglioni hotel. Marco and Michele each had their own rooms while Kara and Claes shared a room. They all settled in to bed and were asleep in moments.

---

They awoke with the sun on Saturday morning and showered and dressed in shirts, jeans and hiking boots. They loaded the Range Rover and drove to the shore of Lake Ghirla, a very small lake and primarily

a tourist attraction in summer and fall, filled with families. Those families didn't view the last weekend of March as a desirable time to visit so fishing could still be successfully undertaken. They set up near the mouth of the Margorabbia Brook and Marco and Michele showed the girls how to prepare and use the rods and tackle they had brought for them.

Claes took to it like a natural and Kara soon became comfortable, as well. The first few bites were quite small so they released them back into the lake, but soon Claes successfully hooked and landed a nice 20cm trout. Over the next few hours everyone had successfully landed a fish worth keeping, which they kept in a poly mesh livewell immersed in the lake bank.

Claes removed her hiking boots and pulled off her socks before rolling up her pant legs.

"Claes, that water is likely barely into the double digits (Celsius)," Marco warned.

Claes nodded and carefully put her foot in. It was quite cold, but she gritted her teeth and waded out a little bit. Fortunately, CFRP muscles didn't cramp, but after a few minutes she came out and towed off, pulling her wool socks back on, but choosing a pair of Wellington boots so she could wade out a bit with her pole. Around 13:00 they stopped to prepare their catch for lunch. Claes reached into her bag and removed a plastic case with two steel rods. She screwed the two rods together.

"What's that?" Kara asked.

"It's called a 'Wunder Boner'," Claes replied.

Marco and Michele both made strangling sounds.

Claes ignored them and grabbed one of the gutted trout. "You put the tip in the mouth of the fish..."

More strangled sounds came from Marco and Michele.

"...and press down on the fish." As she did so, the tail and spine were left attached to the top of the pole.

"Hey, that's pretty neat!" Kara said. Claes removed the bones and Kara proceeded to "wunder bone" her trout, as well.

Claes deboned the remaining fish, Marco sliced them open and Michele seasoned them and then coated them in flour before he put them in a hot cast iron skillet with some butter. He opened a German Riesling since the Italian product was both not very common and not very good. He poured a glass for everyone and they sat back and listened to the trout sizzle in the pan. Michele pulled out some disposable plates and served the fish after squeezing some fresh lemon on it.

"We probably should have cooked a side," Michele suggested.

"This is fine," Claes noted, using a plastic fork to flake off the meat. As she ate, the taste seemed very familiar to her, though she could not remember a time when she'd ever had it before.

After lunch, the men continued fishing (though they released everything) and the girls walked around the lake, snapping pictures with a camera. Henrietta had not wanted to give up her camera lest Giuseppe take her some place new to shoot pictures, so Kara brought along her compact digital camera for Claes to use to snap some background panoramas.

As night fell, Michele and Marco created a fire ring and built a campfire with wood they had brought with them. By 21:00 they decided to have dinner so they doused the flames and drove to the town that shared the name with the lake and had dinner. Afterwards, they returned to the hotel and went to sleep.

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The following morning, they drove south back down SS233 to Varese, then west on SS394 to the commune of Gavirate on Lake Varese. Thanks to efforts to reduce and remove pollution in the lake, the local fish population was starting to recover. However, all three anglers released everything they caught since they were not in a position to consume them anytime soon.

Kara's interest gravitated more towards the castles around the area, so she went off exploring the edge of the lake, which at under 9km, she could do at a nice leisurely pace. They reassembled and had lunch in town and then started back for the compound in Rome.

---

The weather remained nice the entire last week of March and Claes took advantage of it the following "float day" when Michele let her and Kara do what they wanted. She printed out the panoramic photos of Lake Ghirla and she used them to provide inspiration for a landscape, setting up her easel outside.

Around lunchtime she headed for the main cafeteria. She saw Michele and took a seat next to him.

"Everything going well?" Michele asked.

"Yes," Claes replied. "Anything interesting on your end?"

"It's such a nice day I thought I'd take the Lambo up into the Gran Sasso National Park," Michele noted.

"Kara should like that," Claes noted.

"She and Triela are off doing something," Michele replied.

"So you have an open seat?" Claes asked.

"It just so happens..." Michele noted with a smile.

---

Claes reveled in the drive along Italian State Highway 80. With the open top, she could feel the warmth of the sun on her face and smell the forest and flowers all around her as they wound their way through the mountains and past Lake Compostosto. Michele extracted all the performance from the car he safely could and the kilometers flashed by. All too soon in her eyes, they were turning onto the A24 to return to Rome. However, west of L'Aquila the Autostrade wound its way through the verdant hills and the V10 engine's roar echoed off the walls though the 10km tunnel bored through the Gran Sasso Massi and they emerged into the sun again and enjoyed still more green until crossing the A1.

At that point, they started entering the edges of the Rome metropolitan area and it was here that Claes informed Michele that she had dreamed of Mister Raballo again.

As she explained the dream, they passed the GRA and entered Rome proper. Without warning, she felt a sharp pain in her temples, her eyes closing tight reflexively.

Like a wall tumbling down or a dam bursting, a flood of images and memories cascaded into her Mind's Eye. With a sharp and loud intake of breath, Claes went rigid in the seat.

Michele heard Claes' inhalation and turned to see her stiff as a board.

"Claes?" he called, but there was no response. He could see her inhaling and exhaling deeply and rapidly, her eyes looking straight ahead and her body tense in the seat.

"Claes!" he yelled, but again there was no response.

Michele hit the emergency flashers and moved into the right lane. As they passed under a bridge, the SatNav showed an unused onramp so he pulled into the shoulder and slowed to a stop on the ramp, outside of the flow of traffic.

He turned in his seat and put his hand on her shoulder, shaking her.

"Claes! Can you hear me?"

She grabbed his wrist, but not with great force. She moved it off her shoulder and placed it on the center console of the car. She then turned and looked at him, and her face was joyous.

"I remember!" she breathed. "All of it! Mr. Raballo was my handler and I was his cyborg. He's the person I saw in my dreams, Michele! It was him! I see his face so clearly now. He couldn't move very fast, so he trained me to be able to work without him by my side, though we never went on a mission together."

Again, she suddenly sucked in her breath as still more memories broke free.

"His room! Mr. Raballo's room is my library! The books on the shelves are his! The bed I'd lay on to read them is his! All this time, and I didn't know... He used to take me fishing on the lakes up north. We'd talk for hours about so many subjects. It was our private time. Where we could talk without worry.

"And I remember the firing range. Henrietta's pistol had jammed, and she pointed the muzzle at her face. Mr. Raballo had grabbed the gun from her and knocked her against a wall. Giuseppe was furious, but

Mr. Raballo struck him with his cane, berating him for his lack of proper instruction. Henrietta grabbed a bench. She was going to smash Mr. Raballo with it. I drew my VP on her, but Mr. Raballo knocked my gun away. It went off, but the bullets hit the ceiling. I went to the hospital then. So did Henrietta. I think they changed our conditioning. I can no longer harm a handler or a fellow cyborg."

Her face fell a bit. She removed her glasses and looked at them in her lap.

"Soon after that incident he said he had to go away for awhile. He gave me these glasses and the key to his room. And we made the promise. The promise that I wouldn't use force unless on a mission. That when I had on the glasses, I'd be good."

"Then you didn't break your promise, Claes," Michele said. "You were on a mission when you pulled the trigger. You may have been wearing your glasses, but you didn't fire out of malice, but necessity. You were still the 'good Claes' Captain Raballo asked you to be."

"I know," she said, softly.

On a warm March day, in the passenger seat of a Lamborghini Gallardo Spyder, parked on the side of the Autostrada 24 in a suburb east of Rome, Fleda Claes Johansson started to cry.

And this time, the tears did come...

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**The End**